



# What Is Teaching English For Specific Purpose?

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**Abstract:** Today, we can witness that the growing demand for teaching ESP to prepare highly proficient speakers of specialized academic and workplace English is drawing increasingly large numbers of teachers into the ESP profession. Preparing competitive students who can function effectively in their present or future work depends on a well-designed and properly conducted course of English for Specific Purpose (ESP). Designing and conducting ESP courses for students at a university level is a challenge for English language teachers since they have to face a number of tasks such as: the determining of the aim of the course, the choice of the course content, as well as the choice of suitable teaching methods and techniques that will facilitate the acquisition of technical vocabulary and language structures required for the target situations. This article presents a theoretical and practical basis for the methodology of teaching a foreign language for specific purposes. The specific aims of ESP course and the features that differentiate them from courses of English for General Purposes (EGP) will be discussed as well.

**Keywords:** English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, English for Occupational Purposes, General English, ESP teacher, ESP learner;

## Introduction

English is considered as one of the most used international languages and, according to some estimates, it is spoken (at various levels of competence) by more than 2000 million people around the globe, including native speakers (over 380 million) and those who learn it as a second/foreign language. English is

commonly known by the average native or nonnative speaker is called *English for general purposes* (EGP). General-purpose English comprises the common core of English that is shared by most of its speakers. Learning general-purposes English typically begins at home for native speakers and in the ESL/EFL classroom for nonnative speakers. When taught, EGP is presented as a linguistic system to a wide range of learners for application in the most general of potential circumstances, whereas ESP is taught as a tailor-made language package to specific communities of learners with highly specialized language needs. A simple comparison of some general and specific purposes that require general-purposes English and specific-purposes English illustrates the distinction between these two domains more clearly (see Table 1). (Thomas Orr, 2002).

Table 1. Comparison of General and Specific Purposes

<i>General English Purposes</i>	<i>Specific English Purposes</i>
To initiate conversation with a stranger	To negotiate a merger
To make a doctor's appointment	To produce software documentation
To order food at a restaurant	To engage in courtroom debate
To report a crime to the police	To announce an aircraft's position to the control tower
To read a local newspaper	To understand pesticide application instructions
To fill out a credit card application	To complete a grant proposal
To comprehend a TV news program	To read technical specifications
To address an envelope	To explain how to operate a crane
To shop via the Internet	To make a stock trade on the trading floor
To exchange letters with a friend	To write a medical prescription

Although English needed for specific academic and career purposes frequently contains large portions of general-purposes English, the nature of these specialized purposes and the tasks that are necessary to achieve them may remain unusual enough that they require special training from qualified experts who understand the context and can provide appropriate instruction. This is the job of professionals in ESP (Thomas Orr, 2002). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 53) quite simply compares English for General Purposes and English for Specific Purposes “in theory nothing, in practice a great deal”. The most important difference between ESP and General English lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English. ESP learners are usually adults who have already learnt some English language and possess some knowledge of the various content subjects which ESP teachers may not be familiar with. The ESP learners need the language in order to become equipped with professional communicative skills to be able to perform particular job related tasks. ESP focuses on language that is used in a real professional context rather than on teaching grammar structures and vocabulary unrelated to the students’ mainstream subjects.

### **What is ESP?**

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) define ESP as “an approach to language learning which is based on learner need. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: Why does the learner need to learn a foreign language? ... ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning.” Dudley Evans and St John (1998) define ESP in terms of “absolute” and “variable” characteristics.

#### **I. Absolute Characteristics**

- ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;

- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

## II. Variable Characteristics

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners; Dudley Evans and St John (1998).

The above definition is the modified definition by Strevens (1988), from which the absolute characteristic that ESP “is in contrast with General English” was removed and some variable characteristics were added. The characteristic features of this approach as underlined by these authors are as follows: a learner needs analysis, a target situation analysis, which includes the identification of the features of the chosen discipline or occupation in which the students will use the foreign language, and discourse analysis, which entails the analysis of the language

The use of these procedures aim at designing an ESP course that will prepare the learners for effective communication in situations which occur, or will occur, in their professional work and/or studies (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998, pp. 2-4; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, pp. 6-8; Johns and Price-Machado, 2001, p. 44).



## **Types of ESP**

There are two main areas in ESP: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which prepares students for studying in foreign universities, and English for Occupational/Professional Purposes (EOP/EPP), which prepares learners for functioning in a particular profession. It covers subjects ranging from engineering, law, medicine or computer science to tourism and business management. According to Carter (1983) ESP has two areas: English for Academic and Occupational Purposes. In the 'Tree of ELT' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), ESP is broken down into three branches: a) English for Science and Technology (EST), b) English for Business and Economics (EBE), and c) English for Social Studies (ESS). Each of these subject areas is further divided into two branches: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). An example of EOP for the EST branch is 'English for Technicians' whereas an example of EAP for the EST branch is 'English for Medical Studies'.

### **What is the role of ESP teacher (practitioner)?**

According to Dudley Evans and St John (1998) the role of the teacher or ESP practitioner should as being: 1) Teacher, 2) Collaborator, 3) Course designer and materials provider, 4) Researcher, and 5) Evaluator. The first role as “teacher” is the same as that of the General English teacher. It is the necessity for performing of the other four roles by the ESP teacher that makes for the difference between these two types of teaching. In order to meet the specific needs of the learners and adopt the methodology and functions of the target discipline, the ESP practitioner has to acquire the knowledge of the particular scientific discipline with which he or she is dealing, and understand the problems faced by the professions connected with that discipline. To achieve these goals, collaboration with field specialists and with those who are being taught on the course and who may well be more familiar



with the specialized content of materials than the teacher, may well prove to be helpful. ESP teachers do not have to possess the specialist knowledge of the subject matter, but noticing that the students have already gained this knowledge, the teacher may ask them for clarification of some terminology and definitions of some concepts, creating, in this way, a real communicative situation. ESP practitioners are often required to design courses and prepare teaching materials. The ESP practitioner's role as "evaluator" is related to his or her conducting an ongoing evaluation of the students' progress and the effectiveness of ESP courses.

### **What is the methodology of ESP?**

In teaching ESP the choice of teaching methods and techniques depends primarily on the students' linguistic and communicative needs, on the specificity of the texts (discourse) used in the present and target situations, on the students' learning methods and strategies, and on the context of the specific language teaching. From among the various contemporary didactic methods available, the choice of a content-based and a task-based language teaching approaches would seem to be the best ones for ESP courses, and exercises, such as those involving problem-solving, simulations, observations, role-plays, case studies, discourse analyses should reflect real situations and cases which the students encounter or will encounter in their everyday work (Richards and Rogers, 2001; Nunan, 2004). In the article "What is English for Specific Purpose?" written by Rebecca Smoak (2002) addressed valuable ideas based on her own experiences as an ESP practitioner: **"ESP is not teaching lists of technical vocabulary", "needs analysis should include observations of the language use in context" and "materials should be appropriate and authentic"**. In teaching of vocabulary, better effects are achieved by the acquiring of whole lexical phrases rather than individual words. Students analyze the subject-specific texts that they are required to read or to write.



Teaching materials should provide appropriate patterns such as reports, instructions, descriptions, formal letters, etc., which will enable them to produce discourses adjusted to their own specific socio-cultural context. For the production of cohesive texts and for their perception, it is important to understand and use logical connectors such as moreover, however, therefore, structures of “cause and effect”, and in spoken texts the use of discourse markers, such as “well”, “oh”, “right”, “I mean” (Dudley Evans and St John, 1998).

### Conclusion

The investigation of the special characteristics of teaching of a foreign language for special purposes carried out in this article, showed that its methodology is directly related to three main factors: to the learners’ needs, to their target situation, and to the language used in real situation. Teaching ESP should be based on a functional syllabus, the purpose of which should focus on developing communicative competence in the area of the target profession. Teaching ESP is a challenge to the teacher, who should possess the knowledge not only of language teaching methodology, but also of their students’ needs. Moreover, the ESP teacher should be flexible in undertaking decisions and remain open to the suggestions and opinions from the students as well.

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