

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims

We begin by considering what English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is, how it developed, how it can be defined and classified, and what it can offer the learner and the teacher. We then consider the various roles of the ESP practitioner.

1.2 Overview

The teaching of English for Specific Purposes has generally been seen as a separate activity within English Language Teaching (ELT), and ESP research as an identifiable component of applied linguistic research. We believe that for some of its teaching ESP has developed its own methodology, and its research clearly draws on research from various disciplines in addition to applied linguistics. This openness to the insights of other disciplines is a key distinguishing feature of ESP which we see as underlying much of the practice and research we will describe.

If ESP has sometimes moved away from trends in general ELT, it has always retained its emphasis on practical outcomes. We will see that the main concerns of ESP have always been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation. It is often said that ESP lacks an underlying theory. We believe that a theory of ESP could be outlined based on either the specific nature of the texts that learners require knowledge of, or on the basis of the needs-related nature of the teaching. It is, however, interesting and significant that so much of the writing has concentrated on the procedures of ESP and on relating course design to learners' specific needs rather than on theoretical matters.

The study of languages for specific purposes has had a long and interesting history going back, some would say, as far as the Roman and Greek Empires. Since the 1960s, ESP has become a vital and innovative activity within the Teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language

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movement (TEFL/TESL) (Howatt, 1984). For much of its early life ESP was dominated by the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP); most of the materials produced, the course descriptions written and the research carried out were in the area of EAP. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) played an important but nevertheless smaller role. In recent years, however, the massive expansion of international business has led to a huge growth in the area of English for Business Purposes (EBP). Within ESP the largest sector for published materials is now that of Business English, and there is burgeoning interest from teachers, publishers and companies in this area.

ESP activity used to be closely associated with projects led, and usually staffed, by expatriate British, North American or Australasian teachers, often in large numbers. Projects in the Middle East, in Iran (Bates, 1978), Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Harper, 1986) for instance, are good examples (Mackay and Mountford, 1978). Local teachers seemed to play relatively small roles in such projects, and it was even occasionally argued by non-native speakers that ESP work was too difficult for them. We have always believed that local teachers' knowledge of their situations as well as their familiarity with their students' motivation and learning styles give them a potential advantage over native-speaker expatriate teachers.

ESP is part of a more general movement of teaching *Language for Specific Purposes* (LSP). LSP has focused on the teaching of languages such as French and German for specific purposes, as well as English. In many situations the approaches used are very similar to those used in ESP; some, however, place a much greater emphasis on the learning of vocabulary.

1.3 A definition of ESP

Orientation 1a

What is your definition of ESP? What aspects would you include?

We will begin by looking at three definitions of ESP found in the literature, and then give our own. The three definitions are all relatively late in time if we assume that ESP began in the 1960s, but they build on earlier definitions.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) see ESP as an *approach* rather than a *product*, by which they mean that ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material or methodology. They suggest that

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‘the foundation of ESP is the simple question: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language?’ The answer to this question relates to the learners, the language required and the learning context, and thus establishes the primacy of need in ESP. Need is defined by the reasons for which the student is learning English, which will vary from study purposes such as following a postgraduate course in an English-speaking country to work purposes such as participating in business meetings or taking hotel bookings. These purposes are the starting points which determine the language to be taught.

Stevens’ (1988) definition of ESP makes a distinction between four *absolute characteristics* and two *variable characteristics*. The absolute characteristics are that ESP consists of English Language Teaching which is:

- designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
- related in content (that is in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- centred on language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and so on, and analysis of the discourse;
- in contrast with ‘General English’.

The variable characteristics are that ESP

- may be restricted as to the learning skills to be learned (for example reading only);
- may not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Robinson (1991) also accepts the primacy of needs analysis in defining ESP. Her definition is based on two key defining criteria and a number of characteristics that are generally found to be true of ESP. Her key criteria are that ESP is ‘*normally goal-directed*’, and that ESP courses develop from a *needs analysis*, which ‘aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English’ (Robinson, 1991: 3). Her characteristics are that ESP courses are generally constrained by a *limited time period*, in which their objectives have to be achieved, and are taught to *adults* in *homogeneous classes* in terms of the work or specialist studies that the students are involved in.

Each definition has validity but also weaknesses, either in the definition or in the features described. Stevens’ definition is the most comprehensive of the three quoted, but can lead to a certain confusion. By referring to content in the second absolute characteristic it may confirm the false impression held by many teachers that ESP is always and necessarily related directly to subject content. Robinson’s mention

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of 'homogeneous classes' as a characteristic of ESP may lead to the same conclusion. Much ESP work is, by contrast, based on the notion of a 'common-core' of language and skills that belong to all academic disciplines or cut across the whole activity of business. ESP teaching does not necessarily have to be related to content but it should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad discipline. Thus English for Academic Purposes (EAP), whether it is directly related to the specific disciplines that students are studying or not, should make use of the essentially problem-solving methodology of academic study (Widdowson, 1983). Similarly, Business English teaching should reflect the business context in which business meetings or negotiations take place (Charles, 1994 and 1996).

We believe that a definition of ESP should reflect the fact that much ESP teaching, especially where it is specifically linked to a particular profession or discipline, makes use of a methodology that differs from that used in General Purpose English teaching. By methodology here we are referring to the nature of the interaction between the ESP teacher and the learners. In more general ESP classes the interaction may be similar to that in a General Purpose English class; in the more specific ESP classes, however, the teacher sometimes becomes more like a language consultant, enjoying equal status with the learners who have their own expertise in the subject matter. We will look at these issues in more detail in chapters 3 and 10.

In our definition we stress two aspects of ESP methodology: all ESP teaching should reflect the methodology of the disciplines and professions it serves; and in more specific ESP teaching the nature of the interaction between the teacher and learner may be very different from that in a general English class. This is what we mean when we say that specific ESP teaching has its own methodology.

We also believe that language should be included as a defining feature of ESP. While the specified needs arising from needs analysis relate to activities that students need to carry out (rather than language), a key assumption of ESP is that these activities generate and depend on registers, genres and associated language that students need to be able to manipulate in order to carry out the activity.

In our definition we use absolute and variable characteristics. Our definition is:

1. **Absolute characteristics:**

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;

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ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

2. 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 used for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Task 1b ⇄

Discuss whether, according to our definition, the following courses constitute ESP courses. Give reasons for your decision:

1. A course in remedial grammar for business people, with each unit based on a particular grammatical weakness identified by tests.
2. A course that teaches undergraduate engineering students from various branches (civil, electrical, mechanical etc.) to write reports on design projects.
3. A course that teaches reading skills to a group of postgraduate students from a range of disciplines, studying in a British university. The texts used are of a general academic nature, but are exploited to teach specific reading skills.
4. A course designed to prepare students for the Cambridge FCE examination. The course is based on a careful analysis of the contents of the test.
5. A course designed to teach social English to a group of business people. The level of the students' English is intermediate.
6. A course team-taught with a subject lecturer, that helps postgraduates of a particular discipline understand departmental lectures.

1.4 Classification of ESP

In this section we introduce and explain the many abbreviations that have been used in describing ESP, terms such as EAP, EOP, EST and EBP. ESP has traditionally been divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes

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(EOP). The classification is generally presented in a tree diagram as in figure 1.1 (taken from Robinson, 1991: 3–4).

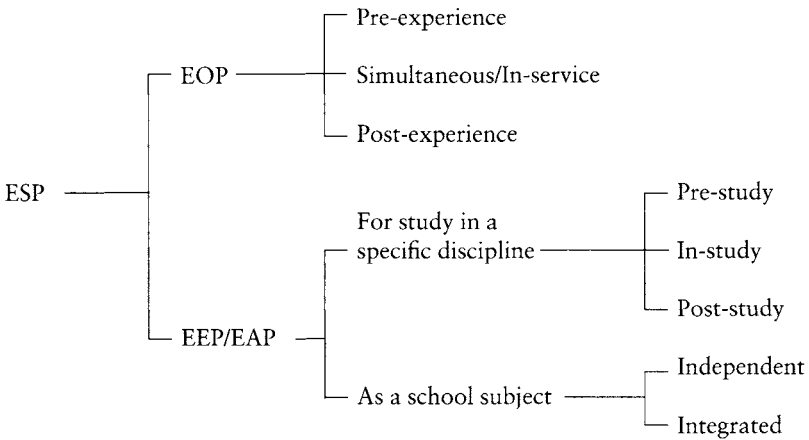


Figure 1.1 *ESP classification by experience*

The diagram has, as well as the division into EAP and EOP, a useful division of courses according to when they take place. These distinctions are very important as they will affect the degree of specificity that is appropriate to the course. A pre-experience or pre-study course will probably rule out any specific work related to the actual discipline or work as students will not yet have the required familiarity with the content, while courses that run parallel to or follow the course of study in the educational institution or workplace will provide the opportunity for specific or integrated work.

Another typical tree diagram for ESP, which divides EAP and EOP according to discipline or professional area, is shown in figure 1.2.

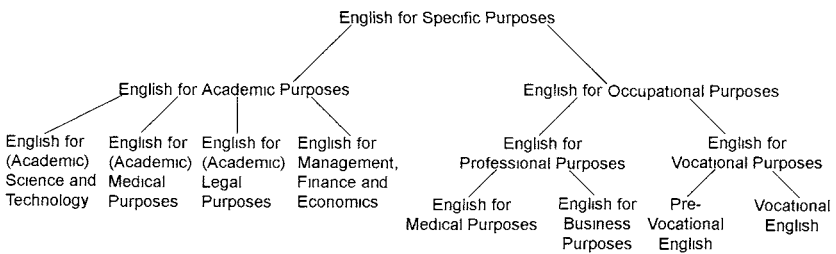


Figure 1.2 *ESP classification by professional area*

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In EAP, English for Science and Technology (EST) has been the main area, but English for Medical Purposes (EMP) and English for Legal Purposes (ELP) have always had their place. Recently the academic study of business, finance, banking, economics and accounting has become increasingly important, especially on Masters in Business Administration (MBA) courses, but, as yet, no specific acronym has become established for such courses.

The term EOP refers to English that is not for academic purposes; it includes professional purposes in administration, medicine, law and business, and vocational purposes for non-professionals in work or pre-work situations. We may thus distinguish between studying the language and discourse of, for example, medicine for *academic* purposes, which is designed for medical students, and studying for *occupational (professional)* purposes, which is designed for practising doctors.

This classification places English for Business Purposes (EBP) as a category within EOP. EBP is sometimes seen as separate from EOP as it involves a lot of General English as well as Specific Purpose English, and also because it is such a large and important category. A business purpose is, however, an occupational purpose, so it is logical to see it as part of EOP.

Within English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) there are two sub-sections: *Vocational English*, which is concerned with the language of training for specific trades or occupations, and *Pre-Vocational English*, which is concerned with finding a job and interview skills. It also deals with succeeding in a job through an understanding of employer expectations and policies (Anne Lomperis, personal communication).

A distinction should also be made between common-core English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Blue, 1988a). The same distinction can be made between English for General Business Purposes (EGBP) and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1996). We discuss the differences in chapter 3 (EAP) and chapter 4 (EBP).

Reflection 1c

Into which categories of figures 1.1 and 1.2 would you place courses that you have taught?

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The use of classification trees creates a number of problems by failing to capture the essentially fluid nature of the various types of ESP teaching and the degree of overlap between ‘common-core’ EAP or EBP and General English. The ‘common-core’ English and semi-technical vocabulary taught in many English for General Academic Purposes courses could well be extremely valuable in the teaching of what might be referred to in General English as ‘factual description’. Similarly, the detailed focus on reading skills, such as ‘establishing main points’ or ‘inferring meaning from context’ that form a major part of EAP courses, can just as validly be taught as part of an intermediate to advanced General English course. Business English can also be seen as a ‘mediating language between the technicalities of particular businesses . . . and the language of the general public’ (Pickett, 1989), which puts it in a position between General English and specialist English.

We therefore suggest that an additional perspective can be gained through the presentation of the whole of English Language Teaching on a *continuum* that runs from clearly definable General English courses through to very specific ESP courses. Figure 1.3 illustrates this continuum. It seems that positions 2 and 3, which are towards the centre of the continuum, have much in common and it is only the overall context of the programme that decides whether a given course is classified as ESP or not. An advanced secondary school level course that includes a focus on, say, listening skills will be seen as General English as the course itself has the aim of teaching English as part of a broad educational process. However, a similar component taught as part of a pre-sessional course for international students about to embark on a postgraduate course taught in English in an English-speaking country will be seen as ESP because it is part of a focused course with a specific time period with clear and specific objectives. The teaching material might, in fact, be quite similar, but the teaching methodology is likely to be different.

The use of the continuum also clarifies the nature of more specific ESP work. At position 4, the work is very specific in terms of the skills taught, but the groups themselves are not homogeneous groups from one discipline or profession. When we talk of engineers, scientists or doctors, we are talking about broad groups: individual members may have quite different needs and backgrounds. So, on the one hand, detailed attention will be paid to a skill such as report writing, or particular features of language and/or discourse of, say, a business meeting, but, on the other hand, great care has to be taken in choosing the actual skill or skills to focus on and the contexts in which to do so. For example, some doctors will need to read and write medical journal articles, others will need oral skills for talking to patients. A group of

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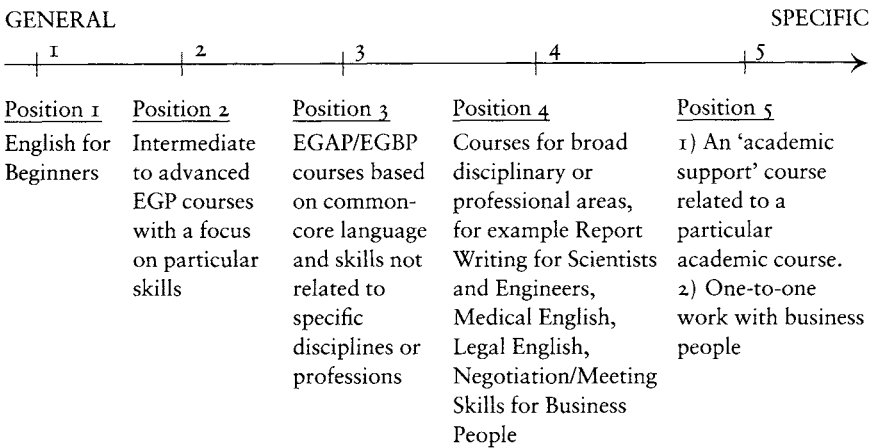


Figure 1.3 Continuum of ELT course types

engineers from a variety of branches such as civil, highways, electronic, chemical and mechanical will probably not take kindly to materials that use contexts from just one branch of engineering. Teaching material prepared for such groups needs contexts that are acceptable and understandable to all branches.

It is only in position 5 that the course becomes really specific. The course can be geared to the specific needs of the target situation and of the individuals concerned, and can make extensive use of authentic material in their own subject area. It is a key feature of such courses that the teaching is flexible and tailored to individual or group needs as they arise.

This discussion leads to the inevitable question: does a precise classification really matter? Undoubtedly, any attempt at classification leads to overlap and potential confusion, but in our view it is important to make the attempt to define and classify what we mean by ESP.

1.4.1 Specificity and motivation

There are clear advantages in setting up an ESP course where students have specific needs. Strevens (1988) summarises the advantages of ESP with the following four points:

- being focused on the learner's need, it wastes no time;
- it is relevant to the learner;
- it is successful in imparting learning;
- it is more cost-effective than 'General English'.

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The implication of these claims is that ESP teaching is more motivating for learners than General English. Generally speaking, this is true; the focused nature of the teaching, its relevance and cost-effectiveness ensure that its aims are widely accepted by learners. Opinions about specific work, however, vary. Many learners are hungry for material and advice that will help them with their specific course or with particular skills related to their course. Thus, for example, team-taught courses, where the language teacher works together with the subject lecturer to help international students understand actual lectures on postgraduate courses, appear to be highly motivating (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1980). Similarly, academic writing courses that give specific guidance about the writing of essays and dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1995) are extremely popular in British universities.

When the context is an English-as-a-Foreign-Language situation, motivation for more specific work may be much smaller. It is not uncommon to hear in such situations the cry that students are looking for a change in the English class from reading about the topics that make up their subject courses and are looking for a little variety. As Crofts (1977 cited in Swales, 1980: 67) argues 'when students are very familiar with a topic, they will be bored with any treatment of it as something not familiar . . . When they do not have the knowledge that is assumed to be known in a particular treatment of a topic given in the ESP materials, they will be unable to cope with the topic in the intended way without the help of the ESP teacher or some other source of information'. Crofts goes on to suggest that EAP material should concentrate on material that is parallel to the main subject course, but is not actually part of it; in other words, topics that could have been included in the main course, but were not.

The main conclusion here is that motivation in ESP has a profound effect on the question of how specific the course is. High motivation on the part of learners generally enables more subject specific work to be undertaken; low motivation, however, is likely to lead to a concentration on less specific work. Specialists in either academic or occupational contexts who need English for specific tasks will be impatient with an ESP course that does not address their difficulties with those tasks. Other students who are studying English because it is on the timetable of their institution or who have been sent on a course by their company and who do not have specific, immediate and clearly definable needs may be demotivated by more specific work and may be more motivated by ESP work that falls more towards the centre of the continuum outlined in figure 1.3 (p. 9).