The current challenges of teaching ESP

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Abstract. Although the status of lingua franca can easily be claimed by English nowadays, there are always plenty of challenges involved in the process of teaching a foreign language. The simple mastering of the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and the acquisition of general grammar and vocabulary may not be enough in some circumstances. ESP focuses on the specific needs of the learners, concentrating more on language in context and on the students’ need to acquire a set of professional skills and particular job-related functions. This paper, consequently, focuses on identifying the current challenges that teachers and students may encounter in the process of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes.

1. Some general considerations on ESP
As any other kind of language teaching, English for Specific Purposes is first and foremost based on the process of learning, a process which nevertheless addresses the needs of certain communities of learners, namely individuals interested in acquiring some professional skills and performing job-related practices. Due to its oriented focus, ESP exhibits some characteristics that differentiate it from ESL (English as a Second Language) or EGP (English for General Purposes). First, it is language in context, this fact requiring real life learning situations, scenarios that tent to replicate the specific working or professional settings the ESP students might be related to or interested in. Instead of focusing on general grammar, vocabulary and language structures, this teaching–learning intercourse stresses the importance of practicing the necessary skills one would mostly employ in their future fields of activity. In comparison with the ESL learning contexts, the ESP students’ motivational levels should thus be enhanced by their knowledge of the subject matter, their interest in the field fuelling their active participation in English classes. As Lorenzo Fiorito states, ESP “assesses needs and integrates motivation, subject matter and content for the teaching of relevant skills” [1].

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, ESP has undergone a constant process of development, defining its scope, improving methodology, shaping its objectives and orientations, and enlarging the number of course books designed to serve its purposes. Its emergence, however, was the direct result of a three-directional process [2] which began immediately after the Second World War and had as a starting point a boom in science, technology and economic activities at an international level. This fact triggered off the emergence of a community of people tied by their interest in learning English, not for the mere pleasure of knowing it, but for its utility and efficiency in handling specific job-related practices. The second reason underlining the advent of ESP was a revolution in linguistics which shifted specialists’ attitudes and attention towards real communicational language opportunities and contexts, rather than focusing on the old-fashioned formalist view on language. The last step to be
taken stressed the role of the learner whose needs and interests played an essential part in the development of future courses and syllabi.

ESP is presently taught in universities all over the world with the express purpose of preparing future specialists in various fields of activity, and it is also promoted by international corporations which organize specializing courses meant to enhance their employees’ level of English and competence in various professional areas.

2. Towards a definition of ESP
Various attempts have been made at sketching out, as comprehensively as possible, a definition of this complex subject. In their book *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*, Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John [3] define ESP in terms of absolute and variable characteristics.

Absolute traits or features, as the authors claim, include:
- ESP being designed to meet the specific needs of the learners;
- it making use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- ESP being centered on the language, skills, discourse and genres that are thought to be relevant to the above mentioned activities.

Variable characteristics, in addition to the previously enumerated ones, emphasise the likelihood of:
- ESP being related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- it using a different methodology from that of general English, in specific teaching situations;
- ESP being designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation, without excluding the possibility of being used by learners at secondary school levels;
- ESP being aimed at intermediate or advanced students, the basic knowledge of the language system being important but not compulsory, the course having the possibility to be tailored to beginners, too.

This definition suggests that ESP, instead of being a restrictive, narrowing field of study is actually a permissive, flexible one, having influenced the entire process of English teaching. Even EGP teachers nowadays are likely to be influenced by ESP methods and techniques when they choose to design their syllabi starting from learner needs analyses or to use English in real communication contexts, instead of focusing on grammar or vocabulary related activities [4], [5]. The distinction between EGP and ESP offers us a better understanding of the latter’s traits. Thus, while EGP has as an ultimate purpose *education* in general, ESP is mostly centred on *training*. The former is usually in the position of predicting with difficulty the very needs of the learners, whereas the latter is meant to be employed in specific professional contexts [6].

In trying to capture the essence of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters give a short but detailed account of it, underlining the fact that it has to be perceived as an *approach*, and not as a *product*. “ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need.”[2]

3. Current challenges in teaching ESP

3.1. Course design
One of the greatest challenges of teaching any subject is the course design. Due to the fact that the ESP students have their objectives well-defined from the very beginning, these being directly related to their practical, job-related or professionally oriented needs, the choices the teachers have to make in order to design a course should not, theoretically, be so complicated. The reality, however, is different. According to David Carver [7], [8], an ESP course should be based on three elements; first, it has to offer authentic materials, then it requires a purpose-related orientation, which means that a reasonable simulacrum of reality in which practitioners have the possibility to get involved into communicative
tasks that replicate real situations is mandatory, and last but not least, it should be defined by self-
direction, i.e. learners are to become active users.

In order to cover all the areas that might play an essential role in the process of course elaboration,
the ESP teacher should be ready to ask some questions and gather information in the field so as to
create an important database for further developments.

The inquiries to be made are:

- **Why** do the students need to learn?
- **Who** is going to take part in the process (teachers, students, sponsors, experts in the field etc)?
- **Where** is the learning process going to take place? Does the location provide any potential or impose limitations?
- **When** is it set to take place? Is there a time limit to be taken into consideration?
- **What** does the student need to learn? What aspects of the language would be more appropriate under the given circumstances?
- **How** will the learning be achieved, i.e. what theoretical background will be chosen to fuel the methodology that is meant to be used? [2]

The diagram below (Figure 1) encompasses all the elements that the above mentioned questions made reference to.

![Diagram of ESP course design](image)

**Figure 1. Factors affecting ESP course design [2]**

If we are to take these elements apart in order to analyse them, we might reach the conclusion that the challenges and difficulties posed by the ESP teaching process nowadays are not to be ignored.

In what concerns the syllabus design, teachers presently have to face the prospect of being bombarded with a great number of ready-made course books which, however, have been designed with the purpose of easing the teachers of their worries of searching for authentic materials. They offer trainers the possibility to select activities that meet the needs of the learners, but at the same time force them into becoming “slaves” of the published textbooks [4], this plethora of resources reducing “individual instructors’ motivation to construct their own course content with a focus on the
immediate learners’ context and particular needs” [9]. The implication of the above quoted points of view is that ESP practitioners should use textbooks as an alternative option, the suggested procedure being that of teachers collecting “empirical needs-assessment data” in order to create and adapt materials to meet the specific needs identified [10], these materials being selected so as to be able to “equip the students to deal with authentic examples of specialist discourse” [11].

The four main elements that should be taken into account when teachers start writing or designing their own materials are: the input, content focus, language focus and the task [2]. The diagram below (Figure 2) emphasizes the way in which they influence one another and contribute to the creation of a framework which might accommodate various aspects of the language to be taught.

![Figure 2. A materials design model [2]](image)

The input may refer to a text, a dialog, a cassette or video-recording. The content presents the information, the subject matter that both teacher and students are dealing with; language is the one that facilitates the transmission of the information and has to be appropriate for the students’ level of knowledge and expertise in handling a foreign language, while the task should be designed in such a way to offer the possibility of putting into practice the content meant to be transmitted. In order to create a more comprehensive picture, Hutchinson and Waters [2] expand the above mentioned model with two other elements, namely the student’s own knowledge and abilities (the basis on which he/she adds new layers of information and the pace at which it is internalized), and any additional input that the teacher is ready to provide in order to facilitate a better understanding and practice.

Another challenge closely related to the problem of language is the one referring to the grammatical structures and functions that are likely to be identified as specific to certain subject matters. Indeed, when designing an ESP course one usually focuses on specialized vocabulary and on those grammatical structures that seem to have a certain frequency of occurrence. However, one cannot exclusively focus on these categories. For example, in order to have a conversation on a certain technical process, a person should, first and foremost have or gain the ability to get engaged in a general conversation activity. Specialized vocabulary, exclusively related to particular subjects (for example: Biology, Chemistry, Engineering, Business, etc) is of paramount importance, but it cannot be introduced and presented as a list of words that needs to be learnt by heart. They have to be slowly ingested and digested so as to be used without any difficulty, in normal conversational contexts. In what concerns grammar and the grammatical structures to be used, one can easily reckon that certain forms are predominant in ESP, such as Present Simple (used to express general truths or laws of nature), passive constructions, If-clauses (types zero and one) and nominal/adjectival compounds, but in order to create authentic materials teachers cannot design tasks that are solely based on these structures. The proper handling of Passive Voice, for example, requires the ability to use Active Voice and active constructions, as well. The same idea is rendered by Kristen Gatehouse [8], the author
claiming that there are three abilities necessary for successful communication in a professional target setting, namely: the ability to use the specialized jargon of a particular professional circle, the ability to employ a set of academic skills appropriate for the occupational setting under discussion and the ability to use the language of everyday informal talk to get engaged in effective communicational activities such as chatting over coffee with a colleague or responding to an informal e-mail message.

Needs analysis is not unique to ESP but it is essential in helping the teacher to define “the specific sets of skills, texts, linguistic forms, and communicative practices that a particular group of learners must acquire” [12]. The students’ level of language knowledge is essential as teachers nowadays face the challenge of working with multilevel classrooms, or, if we are to use Ur’s terminology [13], “mixed-ability” classes. Students arrive in ESP learning environments with a varied background of linguistic knowledge and this leads to a new hardship, teachers getting engaged in a differential teaching process, so as to satisfy students’ needs and necessities. Penny Ur [13] identifies a set of problems that are generally defining for large heterogeneous classes. The following graphic (Figure 3) reunites them all (discipline, correcting written assignments, interest, effective learning for all, materials, individual awareness, participation) under the same umbrella.

![Figure 3. Teaching problems in large heterogeneous classes](image)

The age of the students is also important, classes being presently made up of adults ranging in age from 18 to 50 or more. This fact can bring about serious consequences upon the way teachers organize their instructional process, due to the fact that “people of different ages have different needs, competences and cognitive skills” [14]. For those that have just graduated from high school or secondary school and choose to continue their studies at an academic level, the process of learning would not be a huge challenge. The difficulty appears for the other categories of learners who might have lost the initial ability to study, in time. According to Jeremy Harmer [14], adult learners can exhibit some traits that can easily make learning and teaching problematic. Thus, they might be critical of teaching methods, being sometimes reluctant to engage in role-playing activities, or scenarios that might put them in an uncomfortable position; they may feel anxious or under-confident about learning a language and sometimes worry about their intellectual capacities. All these elements must be thought over carefully when engaging in the process of course elaboration, always keeping in mind the fact that ESP focuses upon learning strategies rather than teaching techniques.

3.2. The role of the teacher
The ESP teacher plays an essential part in this complex equation due to the fact that the scope of ESP goes beyond the limits of teaching. As far as Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John are
concerned [3], the term “practitioner” is preferred to the term “teacher” due to the complexity of the work one is involved in. In their view, the ESP practitioner has to embody five roles, namely: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator [3].

All these defining features are put together to create a composite picture of what the ideal figure of the ESP practitioner should look like. The person under discussion is first and foremost a teacher whose main purpose is to help students to learn. The techniques and methods employed are not too different from those used in the case of teaching General English; the only difference lies in the knowledge of the content to be taught. In this specific case, the teacher is no longer the “primary knower” of the carrier content of the material” [3], the students, in many cases, being more accustomed to the subject to be taught, their only flaw residing in their lacking the ability to use English to express their knowledge.

By getting engaged in a needs analysis process, the ESP practitioner becomes aware of all the necessary elements and materials that are meant to be included in the future course, whether he/she chooses to design a syllabus by themselves or make use of the textbooks available, supplementing the given activities with extra materials.

As collaborators, they have to rely on help and guidance coming from various sources. One source is represented by the students. They know exactly what they want to achieve, their goals are very well defined and their knowledge of the subject matter might be an essential asset in the course development. Another source might be the collaboration with specialists in the field, these being able to offer assistance and guidance in what concerns the specialized books and materials to be used.

As researchers, the ESP practitioners should be ready to stay in touch with the latest advances in the subject matters they are teaching (Science, Technology, Economics, Business, etc.) and to incorporate the findings in their course design.

The last role is that of an evaluator. From this position the teachers should always check the attainment of the targets set out at the beginning of the course. They administer tests and evaluation activities “to assess whether students have the requisite language and skills to undertake a particular academic course or career” [3], their final goal being that of quantifying how much learners have gained from a course.

According to Hutchinson and Waters, ESP teachers are “all too often reluctant dwellers in a strange and uncharted land” [2], the difficulties they have to face being grouped in three categories:

   a) the lack of an ESP orthodoxy to provide a ready-made guide;
   b) the new realms of knowledge the ESP teacher has to cope with, and
   c) the change in the status of English Language Teaching.

The very lack of orthodoxy can be translated into the teachers’ need to constantly search for and turn to various theses and researches in linguistics and methodology in order to find the proper ways to structure and organize their courses. This hardship they have to endure transforms them into “pioneers who are helping to shape the world of ESP” [2]. The new realms of knowledge make reference to teachers having to master subject matters that are beyond their field of expertise. They need to use texts and materials that focus on concepts they might not be familiar with, or get engaged in activities that they are not accustomed to. Consequently their working effort is double. The last category which focuses on the changes that affect the status of English Language Teaching places the ESP practitioners in the position of being negotiators, too. They have to cooperate with sponsors, specialists or experts in the field and even students who might usually have clear-cut expectations concerning the content of the lessons to be taught, the structures of the activities they are going to engage in, and the achievements of the course in general.

4. Conclusions

In comparison with teaching EGP, teaching ESP usually poses a lot more challenges. Focusing on the specific needs of the learners, concentrating more on language in context and on the students’ need to acquire a set of professional skills and particular job-related functions, ESP remains a major testing experience for every teacher in charge of it. Although it is said to be a learning-centred approach, this
fact requiring the joint effort of both, teachers and learners, as a practitioner, one needs “an open mind, curiosity, and a degree of scepticism” [2]. The emphasis on learners’ wants and interests, and learning autonomy does not diminish the role of the teachers; on the contrary they need to subject themselves to a continuous process of adaptation and evaluation in order to meet the requirements imposed by the subject they are teaching. They need to design courses keeping in mind the nature of the particular target and learning situations they are to deal with, at the same time juggling professionally with the requirements imposed by working with large heterogeneous classes.

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