

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ESP COURSE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for developing and implementing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of UEH. ESP courses are tailored to the requirements of practical language skills that are directly applicable to their academic studies and future careers.

The paper outlines key concepts in ESP, including its historical development, distinguishing features from General English, and the importance of needs analysis in tailoring courses to learner objectives. Also, it emphasizes the multifaceted role of teachers in operating an ESP program. The paper further delves into ESP materials design, advocating for developing self-designed materials aligned with learner needs. Finally, the importance of ongoing evaluation for course improvement is emphasized. By providing a comprehensive theoretical framework, this paper aims to empower SFL teachers to design effective ESP programs, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language teaching and learning at UEH.

Keywords: *framework, ESP, course development, General English, needs analysis, materials design, teacher roles, ongoing evaluation*

Introduction

To equip students with the essential English language skills for both academic pursuits and future careers, the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at UEH initiated a project to develop English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses tailored to diverse academic majors and submajors. However, this endeavor encountered significant challenges, including a lack of subject matter expertise among instructors, difficulties in sourcing appropriate materials, ensuring relevance to learners' specific needs, and aligning instruction with varying proficiency levels. A significant challenge for lecturers is their limited understanding of ESP principles and methodologies.

This paper aims to address concepts about ESP and the current status of ESP by delving into the theoretical and practical foundations necessary for an ESP program. By analyzing existing approaches and best practices, we propose a framework for developing and implementing an effective ESP training program for UEH students. Sharing insights and experiences in this paper seeks to standardize the process, reduce time and effort, and ultimately enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning at UEH.

English for Specific Purposes: An Introduction

Many English learners embark on their language study with different specific objectives. The majority begins with General English (GE), a foundational program often taught in high schools. This program is frequently used to prepare students for academic exams, as Jordan (1997) noted, or to equip learners with basic communication skills for everyday interactions. This approach has even been humorously dubbed "TENOR" - Teaching English for No Obvious Reason - by Abbott (1981), highlighting the lack of clear objectives in some English language education.

Since the 1960s, English teaching programs have undergone significant changes to better address the diverse needs of learners. This has led to the development of English courses, which are aimed at providing language instruction tailored to particular fields of study and professional contexts. Thereafter, the term "English for Specific Purposes (ESP)" was introduced, marking a significant development in language education. Recently, ESP has experienced significant growth, captivating the interest of numerous language researchers, educators, and materials developers.

According to Strevens (1988), ESP is an English program tailored to meet the unique needs of learners in specific professions or fields of study. It focuses on developing both the language skills and subject knowledge relevant to their professional area. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) further highlight additional key characteristics of ESP, including:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;(Dabong, 2019)
- 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 the 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 (pp. 4–5)

Over time, ESP has undergone significant development and diversification. It has been known by various names and has branched out into numerous specialized fields to address the specific requirements of different learner groups. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) proposed a classification system for English language programs, organizing them according to their primary 'purposes.' This classification is visually represented in the following tree diagram:

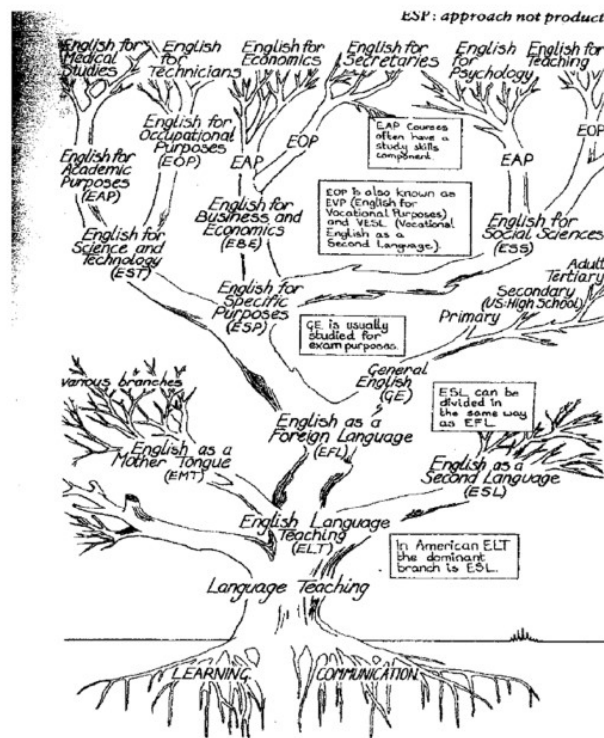


Figure 1: Models of English programs (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 17)

Hutchinson and Waters viewed ESP as an umbrella of teaching and learning English in a number of fields for specific purposes. The above diagram effectively highlights the distinctions between General English and ESP, as well as the various branches within ESP.

Need Analysis and Learner Needs

Needs analysis is a crucial preliminary step in ESP course design, aiming to identify learners' specific wants, needs, and deficiencies. As Burksaitiene (2008:330) emphasizes, needs analysis is key to understanding the unique requirements of an ESP course. The insights gained from learners' perspectives are paramount, as Dudley-Evans (2001) highlights the primary goal of ESP courses: meeting learners' explicit needs. This learner-centered approach empowers learners by developing their language skills to excel in their professional or academic domains. A needs analysis can be implemented through questionnaires to identify learners' language backgrounds, preferences, and specific needs. By analyzing this data, the educators will establish clear course objectives that align with learners' goals and ensure the effectiveness of the program. Nowadays, the tasks of needs analysis are much more complex: it aims at collecting information about the learners and at defining the target situation and environment of studying ESP. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) identify eight key components in modern needs analysis. These components are organized into five primary categories, including:

1. target situation analysis and objective needs analysis (e.g. tasks and activities learners will use English for);
2. linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis, i.e. knowledge of how language and skills are used in the target situations;
3. subjective needs analysis, i.e. learners' wants, means, subjective needs-factors that affect the way they learn (e.g. previous learning experiences, reasons for attending the course, expectations)

4. present situation analysis for the purpose of identifying learners' current skills and language use;
5. means analysis, i.e. information about the environment where the course will run.

It's important to distinguish between two types of learner needs: target needs and learning needs. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987:54) explain, target needs refer to the specific skills and knowledge required for a particular purpose, while learning needs refer to the general language abilities necessary to acquire those skills and knowledge. In ESP course design, significant attention has been given to learner target needs:

the students' target English situations have identifiable elements; thus, it is the responsibility of teachers to discover these factors and to deliver courses that are suitable for their student populations.

(Johns and Dudley-Evans 1991:299)

Target needs consist of three components: necessities, lacks, and wants. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:60) highlighted the importance of the learning route from learners' "starting points" (lacks or their current knowledge and skills) to their desired "necessities or destinations" (their target needs). While target needs are crucial in distinguishing ESP from General English, the learning needs of learners should not be underestimated. In fact, in certain contexts, they may even be more important. After all, how can learners effectively reach their goals if the path they take is not carefully considered?

The role of ESP teachers

The burden of having to meet the varied needs of ESP learners and the varied requirements of ESP programs falls on the shoulders of ESP teachers. Dudley Evans & St. John (1998) prefer to use the concept of "ESP practitioners" instead of "ESP teachers" because they believe that their role goes beyond that of teachers. They are:

- As a teacher, he must create authentic learning opportunities and select effective teaching methods to meet students' educational needs.
- As a collaborator, he must work closely with other ESP practitioners, content teachers, and specialists. By coordinating with content teachers, they integrated language learning into the ESP class and set clear language-related goals.
- As a course designer and materials provider, the ESP practitioner must create or adapt authentic materials tailored to the specific linguistic and pragmatic needs of their students. They must also leverage educational resources and teaching materials to enhance their course design.
- As a researcher, they should prioritize the students' needs, goals, and interests, deepen their understanding of the subject matter, and seek out authentic materials.
- As an evaluator, they must carefully consider each stage of the evaluation process. For instance, an effective teacher must first assess students' needs to tailor the course accordingly. Throughout the course, they must monitor student engagement and response to teaching methods. After completion, they must evaluate student learning outcomes. Finally, the most critical assessment is determining how well the course addressed the identified needs of the learners.

Indeed, the significant workload associated with developing effective ESP courses often exceeds the capacity of a single teacher. That's why it is more reasonable that ESP workload should be shared and done by a group of teachers, *"each with a particular strength or preference in the total operation, who collaborate on a project"* (Martin 1992:4). Certainly, besides having somebody else with whom to share the work, ESP teachers can grow professionally through team-teaching, especially in this era of the 'knowledge explosion' and a lot of 'new literacies' (computer literacy, mathematical literacy, international/intercultural literacy) have to be acquired (Martin 1992:112).

ESP Materials Design

According to Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), it has been a materials-led movement and, until recently, part of the role of ESP teachers had been to write teaching materials to meet the needs of learners. Rozul (1995: 211) has the same idea on the matter when he answered the question of why materials in ESP were written for his freshmen students.

"... because of the real need for ESP materials that are learner-centered and that answer specific learning needs as dictated by the need analysis done. We could not simply buy books and materials of bookstore shelves. No one else could write materials for us. We were the ones who knew our students – their needs, abilities, limitations, idiosyncrasies, and expectations – and writing materials for them would simply be, in a way, a kind of a second nature to us, understanding them the way we did. "

According to Cunningsworth (1995:134), the principles applied to designing ESP materials are methodologically as the same as general teaching materials, but he supplements:

“Additionally, we might expect to see an emphasis on the development of specific skills and strategies for operating in ESP context. This can be done by the use of skill-based and task-based activities involving an element of problem-solving and drawing substantially for their content on the learner’s specialist subject knowledge and professional experience.”

Saragih (2014) states that needs analysis is vitally important in designing teaching materials for English for Specific Purposes (p. 59). Therefore, after gathering enough data regarding learners’ needs, wants, and wishes this intended course syllabus was made including selected materials and technologies. Those issues and the importance of self-designed materials are stressed further as Orr (1998) argues:

“One of the most time-consuming activities for many ESP programs is the preparation of appropriate teaching materials. Few materials sold in bookstores fit the specific needs identified in a needs analysis. ESP textbooks, for example, must appeal to consumers in a wide variety of contexts to turn a profit. Consequently, the best course of action is to find as much prepared material as possible that genuinely meets your students’ needs, and then supplement it with materials you design yourself.”

When/wherever possible, ESP practitioners should consider the use of technology/varied media. YouTube, Social Networks, and diverse Websites on the Internet are great sources to be exploited in ESP courses. Video is a great language teaching and enhancement tool. It greatly enhances the learner’s motivation as it shows that they are doing something useful and relevant to real life in their language classes, very much opposite to the demotivating tasks of learning boring grammar rules or long vocabulary lists, usually for no real purposes at all.

The growing access to the Internet has paved the way for data searches, retrieval of texts of various interests, and various levels of proficiency to accommodate students’ needs and likes. Besides, the LMS system brings about another benefit: LMS simplifies the sharing of teaching and learning resources among teachers and students. This powerful tool enables learners to access learning materials at their convenience, fostering independent learning and collaboration. It provides instant feedback for both teachers and students and can be used as an alternative form of assessment and as an indicator of students’ linguistic progress over a period of time. As a result, LMS has become an indispensable platform for any subject.

In today's globalized economy, students require more than just fluency in language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They need to develop effective communication strategies that will be recognized and valued by their future international colleagues. Both students and professionals seek English language learning materials that are specifically designed to meet these needs and that can be assessed using internationally recognized standards. This raises questions about the efficacy of existing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbooks. To what extent do these textbooks align with students' needs, and how well do they prepare both students and professionals for authentic workplace communication?

Writing materials is, unavoidably, a matter of trial and error. Hence, all writers, both newcomers and experienced ones, need a ground in writing materials to cut down some of the risk involved. In this process, Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) claim that teachers must be able to select materials appropriately from what is available; be creative with what is available; modify activities to suit the learner’s needs; and supplement materials by providing extra activities. The materials, on the other hand, should above all be significant as a source of language, as a learning support, for classroom motivation and stimulation and for reference.

Evaluation in ESP

Evaluation is often seen as the final phase of course design. Nonetheless, it's far from the end of the process. In reality, assessing a course's effectiveness is crucial for its continuous evolution and enhancement.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:144-156) distinguish between two primary types of evaluation: learner assessment and course evaluation. In ESP, learner assessment, similar to EGP, aims to evaluate learners' performance, aims to evaluate learners' performance at specific junctures within the course, such as the beginning, middle, and end. This is typically accomplished through the administration of various language tests designed for different purposes, including placement, achievement, or proficiency assessments. By regularly assessing learners' progress, ESP teachers gain valuable insights into individual learning needs and can evaluate the overall effectiveness and appropriateness of their teaching methods and materials.

Course evaluation, on the other hand, aims to “assess whether the course objectives are being met”. The overall course evaluation can be carried out through questionnaires, checklists, rating scales, interviews, observation, discussion, records, assessment, and should be as objective as possible to make any modifications, if necessary, to the course, the materials, and so on. Thus, even though learner assessment and course evaluation are two distinct forms of evaluation which serve different purposes, “they both have a similar function of providing feedback on the ESP course”, and should therefore be considered an integral part of the course design process, not something that is grafted on at the end.

Course evaluation, on the other hand, aims to assess the achievement of course objectives. This comprehensive evaluation can be conducted through various methods, including questionnaires, checklists, rating scales, interviews, observations, discussions, record reviews, and assessments. To ensure objectivity and inform potential modifications to the course, materials, or delivery, it's crucial to employ a diverse range of evaluation techniques.

While learner assessment and course evaluation are distinct processes with separate purposes, they share a common goal: providing feedback on the ESP course. Therefore, both should be considered essential components of the course design process, integrated from the outset rather than added as an afterthought.

Conclusion

This paper offers a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework for understanding key ESP concepts and practices. Emerging in the 1960s to address global communication needs, it is still very necessary to have more detailed descriptions of ESP courses designed and implemented for particular teaching contexts. This paper underscores the importance of tailoring ESP instruction to learners' specific needs within specialized contexts. The central role of the ESP teacher in effectively meeting these needs is highlighted, emphasizing the required skills and expertise. Additionally, the paper advocates for ongoing evaluation as an integral part of any ESP course improvement.

It is hoped that the insights presented in this paper will empower teachers with a more comprehensive understanding of ESP practices. By applying these theories to practical ESP programs at UEH, teachers can enhance their confidence, foster a positive learning environment, and ultimately improve teaching effectiveness.

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