

**The ESP teacher's dilemma**

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## **Abstract**

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Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has long been a difficult subject to handle as it has not been clear who should teach such courses. Although texts and vocabulary of a specific subject may be used for teaching and developing materials of ESP courses, many authors think that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers ought to undertake the teaching of ESP. However, EFL teachers are put in a dilemma where they should either abandon the job and allow subject teachers to do it or force their way into the class and face opposition from different circles. The present study takes up the issue and discusses the controversy; then it reveals the facts surrounding the problem citing from various research studies. This helps EFL teachers defend their position as the legitimate instructors of ESP courses.

Keywords: Dilemma, ESP, EFL, EFL teachers, Subject teachers

## **Introduction**

New insights have been ushered in language education by English language teaching (ELT). One such insight is English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This very important subcomponent of ELT has evolved its own approaches to curriculum development, materials design, pedagogy, testing, and research. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:1), although ESP has at times abandoned the currents of ELT proper, it has always been concerned with practical issues such as needs analysis, text analysis, and task-based activities to prepare the learners for their study or communication at work place.

According to Maleki (2012), regarding ESP teaching, among other issues, two very important questions have always been a matter of controversy. First and probably the most contentious issue is who should take up the job of teaching the ESP courses. The second controversial issue is how such courses should be taught (i.e. method). It has been claimed that the ELT teacher lacks the necessary knowledge of the subject content to teach scientific or business English; therefore, it is the job of the subject teacher to go in for teaching ESP lessons. However, we do not support the latter point and believe that ELT teachers are the most suitable people to design ESP curriculum, to develop ESP materials, and to teach ESP courses as well as to test them.

The purpose of the present study is to explore lines of agreement and disagreement, and to argue for the position that the ELT teacher is the legitimate and potent professional whose work does not require the subject teacher as a substitute or a complement for teaching ESP lessons.

## **An ESP history**

To attain its current state, ESP has gone through five conceptions. Authenticity was the earliest conception to emerge out of ESP materials. It is a skills-based approach to materials development and design in ESP courses. Types of ESP exercises were also based on authenticity conception (see Coffey, 1984). At this stage, materials developers took the skills priorities of students into account to create appropriate ESP teaching materials. Reading was specifically of prime importance (see Broughton, 1965; Thornley, 1964). At first, there was no differentiation between reading materials. Later, however, texts were made more specific to meet the needs of learners. Furthermore,

tasks were designed to practically match the content of the texts with the target situation.

The second conception was the conception of research or the register analysis approach. A need for research into specialized texts brought about the conception of research or register analysis. Many early ESP materials developers analyzed large corpora of specialized texts to establish the statistical contours of different registers. For example, according to Ewer and Latorre (1967), a frequency analysis of the English used by scientific writers was employed. With regard to subject, the analysis covered ten main areas of science and a large number of individual disciplines from anatomy to volcanology.

The reaction against register analysis in the early 1970's brought about the conception of text or the discourse analysis approach. This approach focused on the communicative values of discourse rather than the lexical and grammatical properties of register. Allen and Widdoson (1974) described it as the ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use rather than the ability to recognize and manipulate the formal devices which are used to combine sentences to create continuous passages of prose. As such, the discourse analysis approach focused on the way sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication and developed materials based on functions. Such functions included definitions, descriptions of experiments, classifications, generalizations, inductive statements, deductive statements, descriptions of processes, descriptions of sequences of events, and descriptions of devices.

The discourse analysis approach soon came under stack for being too fragmentary to combine these functions to make longer texts. Robinson (1981) criticizes this approach by saying that it is not clear how these functions combine to make longer texts.

The conception of genre or genre analysis approach came to make up for the shortcomings of the discourse analysis approach. It considers text as a total entity rather than a collection of unrelated units. This, as Johnson (1993) says, can be achieved by seeking to identify the overall pattern of the text through a series of phases or moves.

Due to the limitations of genre analysis, its research results were barely applied to pedagogy. In the mid-1970's, materials developers came to see learners' purposes rather than specialist language as the driving force behind ESP. The conception of need or the target situation needs analysis approach was to lead the way. Mumby's (1978) model needs analysis clearly established the place of needs as central to ESP. The target situation for which learners were being prepared has to be defined to establish the needs. An example is Chambers' (1980) assertion that needs analysis is the establishment of communicative needs and their realizations, resulting from an analysis of the communication in the target situation.

The conception of pedagogic needs analysis came to complement target-situation needs analysis. This includes three types of analysis: deficiency analysis gives us information about what target-situation needs learners lack or feel they lack (Allwright, 1982); strategy analysis seeks to establish learners' preferred learning styles and strategies (Allwright, 1982); means analysis investigates the educational environment in which the ESP course is to take place (Swales, 1989).

Finally, the attention to strategy analysis gave rise to a new generation of ESP materials based on the conception of learning or learning-centered approach. Hutchinson and Waters (1982) argue that teaching ESP is not concerned with language use, but with language learning. They continue to say that people do not learn language describing and exemplifying it, rather a truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning.

### **Discussion**

The brief review of the ESP history in the last section shows that the bulk of ESP research and course design responsibility is on the shoulders of EFL researchers and teachers. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) identify five key roles for the ESP practitioner: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator. Every one of these roles requires special knowledge and expertise which ELT teachers get as part of their training program.

It appears that subject teachers teach and define specialized terms in ESP classes; however, Maleki (2005) contends that ESP does not necessarily have to aim at teaching special terminology, jargon or content in a specific field of study, but as

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) put it "... it should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad discipline." It should be emphasized that ESP, a branch of ELT, is defined as the developing of teaching materials and methods appropriate for the English language learners whose main goal is learning English for a purpose other than just learning the language system (Maleki, 2008). Brown (2001), on the other hand, sees ESP teaching as an integrated skills approach where the integration of the four skills is the only plausible approach within a communicative integrative framework. These back up the idea that teaching ESP courses is the job of ELT teachers who have been trained to fill the post.

Rivers and Temperely (1978) endorsed the latter by arguing that ESP teaching is the job of a specialist in the English language. Also, Maleki (2005, 2008) and Robinson (1991) assert that ESP course should be taught by ELT teachers, and that those subject specialists interested in teaching ESP must attain the necessary qualifications in the teaching of English.

In the same vein, there has been much emphasis on the fact that ESP is a branch of ELT and that ELT teachers are the most appropriate people to teach it. An example is Nunan (2004) who considers ESP an important subcomponent of language teaching, with its own approaches to curriculum development, materials design, pedagogy, testing and research (p. 7). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) argue that although ESP has sometimes moved away from trends in general ELT, it has always retained its emphasis on practical outcomes. The main concerns of ESP, according to them, have been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in tasks prescribed by their study or work situation (p. 1).

Many authors have argued for the close relationship between ESP and ELT and for the teaching of ESP by ELT teachers as a natural product of such a close link between the two. Barnard and Zemach (2003) believe that ESP should not be regarded as a discrete division of ELT, but simply an area whose courses are usually more focused in their aims and make use of a narrower range of topics (pp. 306-7). Basturkman (2010) asserts that some teachers argue that there is a difference between teaching ELT and ESP; however, both ELT and ESP share a similar aim, that is, to develop students' communicative competence (p. 7). Ellis (1996) before Basturkman

(2010) asserted the idea that language pedagogy is concerned with the ability to use language in communicative situations; workplace or academic situations can be argued to be simply just some of those situations (p. 74). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) think that ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to certain tasks with a carrier content and real content and that its teaching methodology may not differ radically from that of general English (pp. 5-13). In the same vein, Robinson (1991) argues that methodology in ELT and ESP differ little and that it is not possible to say whether general ELT has borrowed ideas for methodology from ESP or whether ESP has borrowed ideas from general ELT. Robinson identifies two characteristic features of ESP methodology: ESP can base activities on students' specialism (but need not to do so), and ESP activities can (but may not) have a truly authentic purpose derived from students' target needs. Early (1981) refers to an interesting point in this regard:

"The ESP teacher, for the most part, does not in any straightforward sense conform to the image of a knower ... the learner will possess far more knowledge in depth in his or her own specialist field than the teacher" (p. 85).

One can find different approaches to ESP in the literature. Watson Todd (2003), for example, Watson reports six approaches: Inductive learning, process syllabuses, learner autonomy, use of authentic materials and tasks, integration of teaching and technology, and team teaching (cooperating with content teachers). Watson Todd argues that whereas the first five are also in general English language teaching, the sixth, teaching or cooperation with content teachers, is distinctive to ESP. Douglas (2000), another example, proposes a three—part model of specific—purpose language ability comprising language knowledge (grammatical, textual, functional, and sociolinguistic), background knowledge, and strategic competence (assessment of the external context and engaging a discourse domain).

Such theoretical underpinnings of ESP attest to the fact that ELT teachers, researchers, and preachers are those who have laid the foundation of ESP and are the sole people who have been entitled to teach it, have been able to extend its borders, and have solidified its position as a major field of study. Content teachers, on the other hand, have had little or no contribution to the field.

Even there are a number of criticisms against specifying ESP to teaching content to prepare students to fit into a given target situation. These are called critical approaches to ESP. They question whether the function of ESP teaching should be exclusively on helping students to adapt themselves to target situations by teaching them the language, behaviors, or knowledge to act appropriately (see Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Basturkmen and Elder, 2004). Proponents of critical approaches (see Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1997b) challenge the idea that teaching should promote the communicative norms of the target environment and lead students to accept these norms uncritically. According to Benesch (1996), a critical orientation of ESP has led to the accusation that ESP has been a force for accommodation and conservatism, that is, modifying students to suit established norms in the target environment and maintaining the status quo of those environments (p. 736). Accordingly, Benesch asserts, by seeking to prepare non-native speaker students for target discourse communities, ESP may have inadvertently endorsed practices and norms of target environments. Therefore, ESP may be in part responsible for the maintenance of norms and practices not all of which are necessarily desirable.

It appears that the only solution to the problem is to teach the language rather than the content. Various research results have shown that content teachers do not possess the necessary qualifications to teach the language; therefore, they should leave ELT teachers alone, so that they can do the job.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude the discussion of who should teach ESP courses with a few more words from other authors. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) rejected the idea that ESP is in absolute contrast with General English and claim that it can be used not only with intermediate or advanced students, but also with beginners. They also think that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Gatehouse (2001) asserts that ESP is an approach and not a subject to be taught. Its teaching resources include authentic materials, ESL materials, and teacher-generated materials. Nazarova (1996) believes that for many years ESP instruction was limited to training special lexicon and translating numerous texts which did not reflect students' interests and resulted in low learner motivation and poor participation.

In sum, the word specific that goes with the term English for Specific Purposes does not mean specialized, and the aim of teaching ESP is not to teach special terminology or jargon in a specific field of study. ESP aims at teaching the language system and at developing communication skills in English based on the learner's needs. This goal cannot be reached without the ELT teacher's taking up the job.



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