

The Need of Transition from General to Specific English Courses at Tertiary Level Institutions in India



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Dr. V. Vijaya Vani

Professor

CMR Engineering College, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

E-mail-vvijayavani.m@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper, *The Need of Transition from General to Specific English Courses at Tertiary level Institutions in India* attempts to map out the similarities and differences between ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and ELT/EGP (English for General Purpose) in line to show the importance and the need of ESP courses at tertiary level. The paper also focuses on the contribution of ESP to ELT and the need of shift from ELT to ESP in English language teaching and learning process.

{Key Words: ESP, ELT, EGP, similarities, differences, pedagogical shift.}

Review of Literature

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is one of the significant features in the field of English Language Teaching; and, it is an important branch of the EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) arena. In the backdrop of the expansion of various fields and branches of knowledge, it assumes the status of a significant branch in English Language Teaching (ELT). The term "specific" in ESP refers to the specified purpose of learning a particular course of English.

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The term ESP has been defined by many researchers and linguists like Macintosh, Strevens, Hutchinson and Waters. Macintosh and Strevens opine that different professionals need different kinds of English, and mention a few fields as, “English is for civil servants; for policemen; for officials of the law; for dispensers and nurses; for specialists in agriculture; for engineers and fitters”. (Halliday, Macintosh & Strevens, 1964).

Macintosh and Strevens considered ESP as English language communication course which is meant for and varies in different professional contexts. Mackay and Mountford strongly felt that, “the term ESP is generally used to refer to the teaching of English for a clear utilitarian purpose”. (Mackay & Mountford, 1978).

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Mountford considered ESP as teaching of English with clear objectives and goals. When ESP courses replace the general English courses, it is necessary to consider ESP courses in terms of their content and specific topics which are related to their optional subjects. Minyawati identified, “ESP courses are based solidly upon the need to express the facts and ideas of some special subjects after which the student should be able to read the specialized subjects confidently and speak about them fluently”. (Minyawati, 1984).

Out of many definitions given by eminent writers, the definition of Hutchinson and Waters that, “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning”. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) can be considered as the most comprehensive one.

ESP makes use of methodology and the activities of the discipline it serves by focusing on the language appropriate to these activities. The appropriate activities cater to the needs of learners' specific requirements.

Contribution of ESP to ELT

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The crispness demanded in the concepts of ESP has also contributed a new understanding of ELT. ESP has also been referred to as “applied English language teaching.” It is referred so because it is a part of English language teaching and the content and aims of this course are determined by the needs of a specific group of learners. The contribution of ESP to English language teaching can be viewed mainly under three headings; needs analysis, material design, and authenticity. These three are the central core of ESP and they created a perfect sense in ESP. These three important features of ESP can be implemented in English language teaching too.

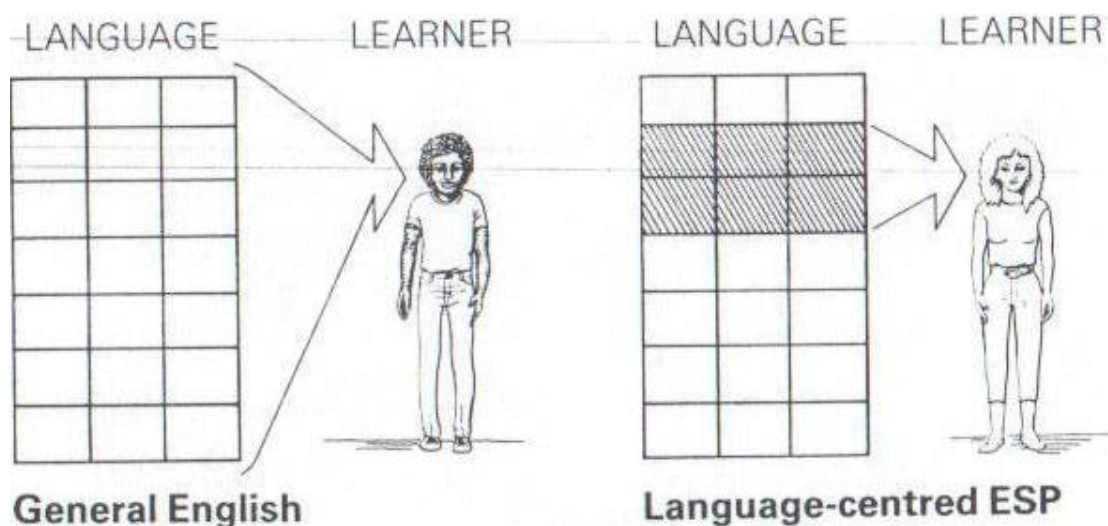
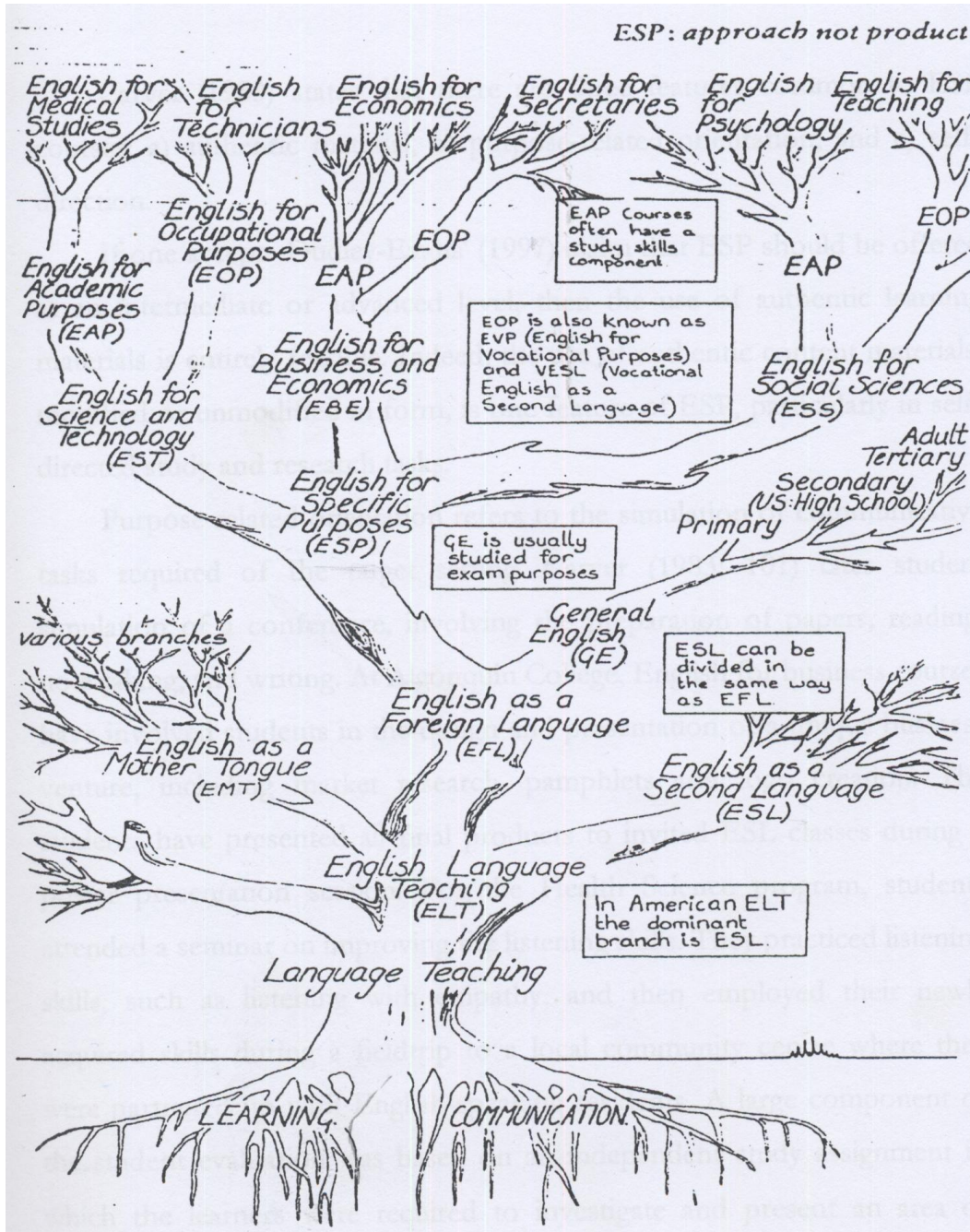


Figure 18: The learner-restricted syllabus

The concept of ESP is totally learner centered in nature. It focuses on learners’ needs and studies specifically what the learners have exactly to do with the language. It not only considers why learners learn English but also tries to find out exactly how the learners use English in their environment, be it for study or work and the problems that they encounter in their attempt to use English. That is how ESP defines needs analysis. Needs analysis in ESP focuses accurately on the problems: for what purpose learners actually use English and what problems do they have in trying to do so etc. It is only after conducting a needs analysis, the materials are developed. The course design takes place on the basis of the needs analysis. So,

it is not possible to separate the needs analysis from the course design. These two are inseparable features of ESP.

Authenticity is another dynamic feature of ESP. This idea of ESP is highly adoptable. Because at this juncture people deal with English use in real life situations and not just in some presumptuous situations of future. There is a need to use authentic models of how English is used in the similar situations by proficient users of English. The three factors; needs analysis, course design and authenticity are to be considered in ESP teaching; otherwise this concept would not yield the expected results. These features of ESP can be applied even to ELT to make it well-organized language-imparting domain. In this regard, a point can be drawn that ESP has either forced ELT to change or that somehow the changes that occurred to ELT in relation to materials development in particular occurred along with the development of ESP. Thus, ESP can be considered as a specific subfield of ELT which has the potential to influence the mother field with its varied characteristics. This idea has been illustrated below with the help of Hutchinson and Waters' ESP Tree diagram.



The ESP Tree- Hutchinson and Waters 1987:17

It was identified that in the real world many ESL instructors/ESP developers are not provided with ample time for needs analysis, material search and course development. Johns is also of the opinion that many books which are meant to be considered as ESP books are not suitable for being directly used for ESP teaching. The best solution

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suggested by Johns was that a resource bank of pooled materials should be made available to all the ESP instructors.

The Transition from General English to Specific English Arena

Many ESP experts do not agree that there is difference between General English and Specific English but experts like Lorenzo states that, "ESP students... have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job related functions" (Lorenzo, Fiorit, P 43) According to him the difference between ESP and General English lies in the purpose of learning English and its focus of language learning.

ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. It covers subjects varying from accounting or computer science to tourism and business management. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners.

ESP is distinct to General English in terms of levels of language learners' competence; the learners of ESP already have some basic skills in English and their purpose of learning is to master English communication skills and professional skills while General English is offered from basic level. Hence, ESP focuses more on language in context while General English focuses on grammar and the structure of language. If the assumption that a difference exists between General English and Specific English is agreed upon, ESP needs a broader view. When Hutchinson, Tom, Waters and Alan were asked to express their view regarding the difference between General English and Specific English, they comment in their book, *English for Specific Purposes: A learner-Centered Approach*, "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal". (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

But eventually, some communicative English books were published with activities related to real life communication as the major content. They illustrated that ESP influenced the

General English courses. Wright is of the opinion that General English is concerned with English proficiency needed to carry on everyday life such as, “universal topics are socializing, shopping, traveling, and eating out, tele phoning friends...So when one learns a language, one must be exposed to linguistic items relating to these universal topics. His is the task of a general English course”. (Wright, 2009).

The topics advocated by Wright for learning general English are important components of authentic material which is one of the important features of ESP. It should also be remembered that it is not only the material but the approach too is important in an ESP context. Anthony expresses his disappointment on the approach of ESP teachers as, “rather ironically, while many General English teachers can be described as using an ESP approach, basing their syllabi on a learner needs analysis and their own specialist knowledge of using English for real communication; it is the majority of so-called ESP teachers that are using an approach furthest from that described above”. (Anthony, 2008).

Anthony’s observation in the year 1997 found no dissimilarities among ESP and general English courses as ESP courses are based around some textbooks which lack close look at learners’ needs or wants. Anthony was perceptibly not satisfied with the nature of ESP text books. Strutt also holds a similar opinion as he stated that his text book, *English for International Tourism* does not require specialized knowledge; and, while commenting on the nature of his book, he states that, “it is not technical or over-specialized in nature.” (Strutt, 2003). If any writer comments on his own textbook that it is not really specific or technical, then it is not appropriate to describe such book a book for ESP. The missing of clear transition from the general into ESP fields has been noticed by many a critic. Donna also did not find distinction between general English and ESP courses when she states: “Business English has much in common with general EFL”. (Donna, 2004). From the statements of experts, it can be said that the distinction between ESP and general English is not yet clear. If there are any differences between General English and Specific English courses, they may not be considered owing to the demand for highly organized English teaching across the world. Though many critics expressed their dissatisfaction over the blurred line between the General English and Specific English courses, the research in ESP did produce very fruitful results and succeeded in categorizing ESP into various branches.

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The difference between general English and ESP courses do exist but mastering general English is necessary to learn ESP courses. General English helps learner to perceive learning easier when they attempt to learn new knowledge and will fill up the gap in sub-technical English. According to Kennedy and Bolitho “scientific English uses the same structures as any other kind of English but with a different distribution”. (Kennedy& Bolitho,1984). As a consequence, at the sub-technical level, learners could easily deal with sub-technical contents with the help of General English knowledge.

The difference between ESP and GPE (general purpose English) can be mapped out in terms of the specification of objectives; the objective is corresponding to aim that is a training operation and deals with development of restricted competence in the case of ESP. While, in GPE objective is not corresponding to aim but it leads to aim that is an educational operation and deals with development of general capacity. Hence ESP would be more beneficial than that of EGP courses.

The empirical studies conducted on the efficacy of ESP courses demonstrate that ESP courses cater to the interests and needs of the students; they are possibly prompted with high levels of motivation and drew students' interest towards topics and texts related to their work or study areas which proves that high levels of motivation certainly facilitate learning. The limited aims of ESP courses make learning possible as the courses are based on particular needs.

ESP courses are more advantageous as the learner-centered approach of these courses make learning as the act of construction of meaning, and teaching as the act of guiding, scaffolding and facilitating learning.

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