

THE ESSENTIAL ISSUES AND APPROACHES ON ESP TEACHING CLASSROOM

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Abstract: The research examines three critical aspects of the ESP classroom: the educators, instructional materials, and assessment tools. It reflects on publications from three decades ago regarding the ESP classroom and analyzes the recent advancements in China. Firstly, in light of the demographic shifts among ESP practitioners and the interdisciplinary nature of the ESP classroom, it is suggested that collaboration among language teachers, subject-specific educators, and industry professionals is essential. Secondly, concerning the design of teaching materials and methodologies within the ESP classroom, it is recommended that classroom activities be tailored to the needs of learners, with teaching approaches aligned with anticipated functions. This can be accomplished through the collaborative efforts of practitioners in both classroom instruction and field-based coaching. Lastly, the evaluation of ESP-related courses and student assessments at various levels is addressed, leading to the conclusion that, in addition to international ESP/EAP assessments, there is a need for localized and specialized tests that strike an appropriate balance between language proficiency and subject matter expertise, which should be implemented in the ESP classroom.

Keywords: assessment, English for Specific Purposes, material design, instruction

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged in the late 1960s as a reaction to various factors, primarily associated with the remarkable economic and technological growth that followed the Second World War. This development coincided with a transformation in linguistics, which for the first time shifted its emphasis from merely describing grammatical rules to exploring how language was “utilized in real communication” (Widdowson, 1978, as cited in Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 7). Traditionally, ESP has been regarded as a subset of the broader categories of English Language Teaching (ELT) and Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), sharing numerous characteristics with them. However, the existing literature in this domain offers multiple definitions, reflecting various efforts to highlight its unique aspects. While there is a consensus among most theorists that needs analysis forms the foundation of ESP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) underscore that a significant portion of ESP instruction, particularly that which is associated with specific professions or disciplines, employs a methodology distinct from that used in General English instruction. Twenty-five years later, this assertion remains valid, as educators increasingly recognize the significance of learner-centered education, particularly when they are experienced professionals (holding equivalent qualifications in their respective fields as the teacher/trainer) who possess a clear understanding of the language proficiency required to execute their roles. In composing this paper, the objective is to explore the contemporary trends in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction based on recent literature in the domain, while also reflecting on the implications for university

students in the context of the post-pandemic era.

Research questions

The three research questions concentrate on the three fundamental elements related to the ESP classroom: the practitioners, material design, and instruction and assessment. These elements exist in a dynamic and interdependent relationship within the ESP classroom. The practitioners exert a significant influence on both the material design and the instructional methods, which ultimately determine the assessment criteria for the course content. Likewise, the outcomes of the assessments will be considered by the practitioners, who will then modify the teaching materials and refine their instructional approaches.

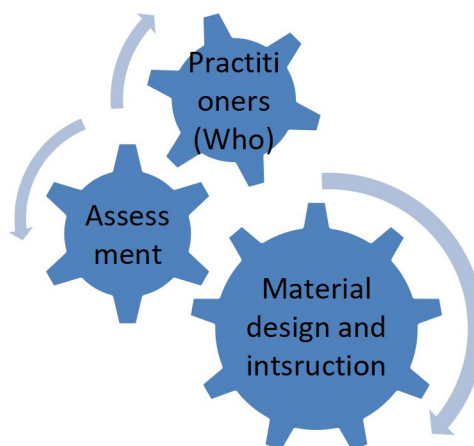


Figure1. Essential factors of the ESP classroom

ESP Classroom Issues

The fundamental elements depicted in Figure 1 of the ESP classroom have remained consistent over the decades, despite the fact that the educational and pedagogical philosophies that support classroom instruction may have undergone various transformations influenced by other fields with specific operational frameworks. We will examine the three factors in detail from a comparative and reflective viewpoint.

Who Are the Practitioners of ESP and EAP?

Considering the unique position of practitioners within an interdisciplinary context and their marginalization, the pioneers in ESP and EAP have highlighted the discomfort experienced by the staff involved, particularly language educators. Initially, the ESP and EAP courses, functionally referred to as 'Service English' (Swales, 1984) for particular disciplines, have arguably been relegated to a peripheral status, which has resulted in ESP practitioners, labeled as "Service English staff" (Swales, 1984), experiencing an awkwardly marginalized self-identity in relation to faculty teaching relevant subject courses. Furthermore, ESP practitioners have faced marginalization due to the courses being allocated less priority in university timetables, inconsistent student attendance, demotivating or skeptical attitudes from specific subject instructors, and fluctuating staff turnover. Additionally, the challenges confronting the "Service Department" (Swales, 1984), which encompasses centers or departments that provide language courses, continue to manifest with clear evidence of reduced service hours, funding shortages, and inadequate resources on a global scale. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that over the

past decades, EAP courses in UK higher education institutions have indeed facilitated overseas students in academically acclimatizing to the conventions of English language-dominant academia. Similarly, ESP practitioners encounter comparable challenges within higher education institutions.

Furthermore, ESP practitioners should recognize that both ESP and EAP have garnered increasing attention from scholars and have gained acknowledgment across various academic and professional fields due to the theoretical and practical contributions arising from numerous conferences and seminars held worldwide (Cheng & Anthony, 2014).

In conclusion, the pedagogy of ESP and EAP, characterized by interdisciplinary or interdepartmental collaboration, requires joint efforts from a “teaching team” that includes both language instructors and subject-specific educators. The pioneers of ESP instruction, who dedicated themselves to enhancing learning effectiveness decades ago, advocated for cross-sectional collaboration by consistently sharing insights with subject teachers, negotiating, and co-supervising the teaching content (Jordan, 1984). Consequently, ESP and EAP practitioners with linguistic academic expertise are primarily expected to take on the role of providers of learning materials and facilitators of knowledge acquisition (Swales, 1984), guiding students through learning strategies supported by subject lecturers.

Ultimately, we suggest that the group of ESP practitioners should be broadened to include specialists from various professional sectors in business. As illustrated above, the collaborative interaction among language instructors, subject matter educators, and professional experts allows language teachers to gain a deeper understanding of students’ learning requirements and the expectations of subject teachers regarding ESP courses, as well as the linguistic characteristics pertinent to specific fields. Furthermore, professionals with specialized knowledge can also participate as ESP practitioners, as these individuals are typically well-informed about the latest advancements in their respective industries and professions. This involvement is likely to enhance the needs assessment, course development, and instructional strategies. Consequently, instruction within ESP classrooms is more likely to align with the specific requirements of various disciplines and professions, significantly enhancing learning effectiveness.

What and How Will They Teach?

The ESP curriculum distinctly differs from that of EGP, as the former is designed to address the increasingly diverse and specific needs of learners, which is considered a crucial step in the creation of course materials and syllabi.

A debate exists regarding the authenticity of classroom instruction in relation to the domains of target language use in professional settings. It has been observed that the extent to which ‘classroom discourse’ interacts with “target discourse” (Swales, 1984) during course design significantly influences varying levels of learning effectiveness.

Consequently, when developing courses for the ESP classroom, the adoption of authentic materials is limited by physical space and resources; thus, the materials utilized in the ESP classroom must at least be pertinent to the target language use tasks in the workplace. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that the course design of the ESP is governed by a cyclical process that necessitates ongoing efforts in needs analysis, which requires practitioners to investigate the actual needs in business and industries, as was demonstrated by those pioneering researchers and educators over three decades ago (Jordan, 1984). In terms of the teaching methodologies employed in the ESP classroom, the pragmatic aspect of the ESP involves

increased field work conducted by language instructors and learners within the specific industries, along with regular interactions with experts and professionals across various sectors of the business field. Consequently, the design of courses for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) necessitates collaboration with experts in relevant fields, alongside the delivery of these courses in partnership with faculty and staff from pertinent disciplines. These are the challenges we must confront regarding the content and methods of our teaching, both now and in the future. Additionally, as depicted above, priority will be given to methodology and technology concerning instructional approaches. For example, computer-assisted language learning and instruction emerged over three decades ago, aiming to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching, which was expected to have a significant impact on language education, learning, and assessment as noted in the editorial overview of the book. The earlier forecasts regarding these technologies are manifesting in contemporary ESP and EAP classrooms, where rapidly advancing technology equips both learners and educators with a vast array of big data and internet-based software that claim to enhance learning and teaching outcomes. Indeed, on one hand, these technologies, characterized by artificial intelligence, are transforming the means of learning and knowledge acquisition for today's language learners, potentially ensnaring them with an ever-growing array of devices and gadgets; on the other hand, these innovative teaching trends, marked by multimedia interactive learning and instruction, are significantly reshaping the cognitive landscape of understanding and communication. It may not be surprising that in the near future, fewer individuals will exert effort to learn foreign languages, as the seemingly ubiquitous applications will assist them in navigating linguistically in environments where foreign languages are necessary. Conversely, the technologies that render individuals passive in their cognitive activities by freeing them from the need to decode language through rigorous mental effort may ultimately diminish their mental acuity in managing multiple languages. For instance, the increased accessibility to corpus-based resources

While the integration of technology in language learning and teaching has led to transformative changes in the methodologies employed for acquiring languages, and it is certain that this influence will persist in the future, it remains essential for practitioners in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to adhere to the processes involved in the acquisition of affective cognition while implementing contemporary technologies in their pedagogical approaches. Another significant transformation observed over recent decades from a global standpoint pertains to the geographical transition of EAP instruction from inner-circle English-speaking nations to outer-circle and extended-circle English-speaking regions. This shift is evidenced by the growing number of non-native English EAP practitioners dedicated to providing EAP instruction in countries where English is not the primary language. Consequently, the collaboration between non-native English lecturers and native language specialists in the fields of EAP and ESP instruction represents a new paradigm that will facilitate the relocation of EAP and ESP teaching from English-speaking countries to those where English is not the native language.

Moreover, the demographic characteristics of EAP learners have evolved compared to previous decades, when the majority were primarily EFL learners pursuing postgraduate degrees in English-speaking countries. Currently, undergraduate students seeking bachelor's degrees make up the predominant group of EAP learners, with a significant number of them studying in non-

native English-speaking countries or regions, particularly evident in the context of ESP/EAP instruction in China (e.g., Cai, 2015; Cheng, 2016). Thus, the collaboration between non-native English-speaking EAP or ESP educators and their native English counterparts in providing instruction to younger learners in non-English-speaking regions signifies a novel advancement in the methodologies of EAP and ESP teaching.

How Will They Evaluate the Course and Assess the Students?

Evaluation and assessment are often overlooked components that receive consistent minimal academic focus within the realms of ESP and EAP research. This oversight was recognized over 30 years ago (James, 1984) and continues to be a concern that remains inadequately addressed by scholars in the contemporary global research landscape (Hamp-Lyons, 2011; Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons, 2015). It has been posited that the pressing requirement for dependable proficiency assessments to identify and evaluate students' learning needs was not met decades ago, during the nascent stages of EAP and ESP assessment. Presently, we appear to have a broader array of options for EAP or ESP testing. However, the availability of numerous large-scale international language assessments in EAP (e.g., IELTS Academic, TOEFL, Pearson English Test Academic) and ESP (e.g., BEC, BULATS, TOEIC, etc.), which are purportedly grounded in well-structured and technically validated language testing theories and methodologies, does not imply that there is no ongoing necessity for localized and subject-specific EAP or ESP evaluations.

Theoretically, ESP practitioners are expected to adopt various roles, including that of course evaluator and learner assessor, necessitating that language educators enhance their competencies and knowledge regarding language assessment in general, and specifically concerning ESP and EAP evaluation (Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons, 2015). From a pedagogical standpoint, the development of an evaluation framework for EAP and ESP courses to measure the extent to which these courses have successfully met learning outcomes and fulfilled teaching objectives will continue to be a significant concern. Concurrently, learner assessments based on EAP and ESP, designed to provide indicative evidence of the credibility of specific courses, will merit attention. As illustrated in Figure 4, learner assessment and course evaluation within the ESP classroom do not fundamentally differ from other educational contexts.

Moreover, the framework for assessing EAP and ESP remains inadequately defined and insufficiently represented in the literature on assessment (Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015). This area requires more focused investigation based on a diverse array of specified language courses to create tests that are constructed with more precise representatives, typically exemplified by local or specified assessment tools as depicted in Figure 4. In terms of course evaluation, Figure 4 demonstrates that the fulfillment of the syllabus and the impact of the course, which can be gauged through end-of-course surveys regarding learners' behavior and motivation, will provide a reliable indication of the effectiveness of ESP courses. Ultimately, while the initial phase of ESP primarily concentrated on material design driven by needs, the subsequent phase is chiefly concerned with classroom teaching approaches and pedagogical issues. It can be posited that we are entering a global phase for the teaching and assessment of ESP and EAP, as evidenced by the increasing number of institutions across various countries or regions that are developing localized and more discipline-specific ESP and EAP courses and assessments, particularly in East Asia (Cheng & Curits, 2010).

Conclusion. By investigating the critical issues associated with the ESP classroom, reflecting on classical publications that began circulating over three decades ago, and exploring the latest advancements in China, we can affirm that the evolution of ESP instruction regarding material development, teaching and research methodologies, publication accessibility, and cross-border communication has elevated the prominence of ESP within broader academic discourse. At the same time, with respect to those pioneers in this field who paved the way for ESP instruction and assessment, we can assert that contemporary practitioners still urgently require the commitment and innovative spirit demonstrated by earlier educators, in an effort to advance the field.

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