

A BRIEF VIEW OF THE ESP APPROACH

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Nowadays, it is not unusual for companies to complain about the standard of English language their personnel handle. Job interviews and language test results are frequently insufficient to certify the suitability of a candidate for a given job position. Unfortunately, many people are hired under those conditions. However, problems show up right after they start working. In very specific tasks, which require language accuracy, they do not do very well. Asking those workers to take more and more GE courses does not seem to make a difference. They need to be trained to use exactly the kind of language to do their tasks at work. This is what ESP is about.

ESP (English For Specific Purposes) is an approach to language learning. It started in the 1960s as a result of a revolution in Linguistics and in Educational Psychology. It is based on designing courses to meet specific learners' needs. Each course is preceded by a needs analysis, which makes it unique.

What Does An Esp Course Imply?

A) Language description

Structural functional and discourse levels are present in all communication. Rather than mutually exclusive, they are complementary. Therefore, all of them have a place in the ESP course. For example, an ESP course may require a syllabus which includes structural patterns, like: Simple present, -ing forms, present perfect, active and passive voice, etc. However, this level alone does not provide learners with the communicative use of those structures. On the other hand, an ESP course based on functions may include: Ordering a meal, making hotel reservations, asking about tour attractions, etc. Learners probably need to do this very well, but the functional syllabus per se does not give them a systematic conceptual framework. For the reasons described above, ESP practitioners prefer to describe language using structures and functions as complementary and present that language to learners in activities that involve a real world context.

In addition, discourse analysis is very valuable in ESP. For example, if we want to train learners to be efficient readers, we can design materials through which they can discover how sentences are combined in texts to create a particular meaning (see Allen and Widdowson, 1974).

B) Models of learning and the affective factor

ESP requires an eclectic approach to learning. For example, we may use a behaviorist approach to teach pronunciation, a cognitive approach to teach grammar and affective criteria to select texts.

In addition to the models of learning, ESP practitioners should be aware of the affective factor. Motivation is crucial. Nevertheless, we should not take for granted that our learners are very motivated just because of the target needs they have to meet if they want to keep their jobs. Motivation can be increased by bringing to class enjoyable as well as meaningful materials and activities to apply those materials. Once the teacher knows better the “likes” and “dislikes” of people in his/her class, those likes can be paid more attention. However, this should be done being tightly close to the course essentials.

C) Needs analysis

The aim of an ESP course is to move learners from A (current performance) to B (target performance). The needs analysis (NA) is intended to obtain information about both situations. It is an ongoing process, which classifies needs in:

1- Necessities: What the learner needs to perform effectively in the target situation. 2-

Lacks: The gap between the target proficiency and the present performance. 3-

Wants: What the learners want or feel they need.

In order to determine those needs, it is important to gather objective as well as subjective information. Objective information refers to that information that can be observable. Subjective information deals with wishes, expectations, etc. For gathering both kinds of information we can use different instruments like interviews, questionnaires, and observation reports, among others. The application of those instruments permits us to define topic areas for the needs analysis. Topic areas include: Who will be involved in the needs analysis (the target group, the audience -or bureaucracy above the language program- the needs analysts and the resource group), and what kind of information to gather.

Whatever the instruments chosen are, they should have the following characteristics: a) reliability -or consistency in the results obtained, b) validity -or measuring what they are supposed to measure, and c) usability -or facility to be applied and measured-.

D) Course design

Course design (CD) is the process of interpreting the raw data of NA in order to produce

“an integrated series of learning experiences to lead learners to a particular state of knowledge”
(Hutchinson and Waters, 2000)

Return of investment is crucial in ESP. Therefore, CD is intended to define an efficient and effective route. The first step is to set goals and objectives.

1- Goals: General statements of the purposes of the program.

2- Objectives: The “bridges” between the goals and the needs.

Goals are broader than objectives. They are focused on what the learner should be able to do when they leave the program. Therefore, they are the basis for creating specific objectives.

Also, goals should not be seen as permanent. Course design is also an ongoing process.

In order to convert goals into objectives, we have to clarify what should be taught in each lesson. Also, we can develop appropriate activities to accomplish those objectives and goals.

E) The learning-centered approach

A learning-centered approach seems to be the most effective for teaching ESP. This is because ESP practitioners recognize the complexity of the learning process. This approach is aimed to maximize the potential of the whole learning situation.

F) ESP Syllabus design

In a learning-centered approach, interest, enjoyment and learner’s involvement should influence the entire course design. The syllabus is not focussed on language features -although ESP syllabus derives from the analysis of the target situation language features-. Rather than that, before materials are started, it is much better to outline the topic areas as well as the communicative tasks of the target situation. Like this:

TOPICS	TASKS
Names of tools	expressing use and purpose
Electricity	understanding safety instructions
Pumps	describing a system
Materials	reporting experiments
Etc.	Etc.

(Hutchinson and Waters, 2000 p.92)

With this general syllabus, we have the basis for the initial selection of texts, writing exercises/ activities and others. In this way, all the factors emerging from the learning situation can be taken into account. This is a materials-generated syllabus.

- Topic syllabus:
(1- the rig, 2- fishing jobs, 3- traps and geology, etc)
- Structural/situational syllabus:
(1- The hotel staff -patterns of the verb 'to be'; demonstratives; personal pronouns- 2- The hotel staff -questions with where, prepositions- 3-Marcel in the restaurant -adjectives; 'either or', 'neither nor'- etc.)
- Functional/notional syllabus:
(1- Properties and shapes, 2- location, 3-structure, 4- measurement, etc)
- Skills syllabus:
(1- Organizing your studies, 2-improving your reading efficiency, 3- taking notes, 4- taking art in seminars, etc.)

(See Hutchinson and Waters, 2000)

G) ESP materials

We need economical as well as efficient ways to obtain our materials. So, we can follow one or all of these methods:

1- Materials evaluation: Selecting from existing teaching materials. 2-

Materials development: Writing our own materials.

3- Materials adaptation: Modifying existing materials.

Materials evaluation is the probably the best method in terms of cost effectiveness. It is to match the analysed needs with the available solutions. If we identify the areas of our syllabus which could be covered by existing materials, we might be surprised how little of the course will require new materials.

For any of the methods we choose, there are some considerations we need to take into account:

- a) The learners: Materials should be relevant to their experience and background; also to their target and affective needs.
 - b) Learning: Materials should engage learners in discovery, problem solving and analysis; also in developing specific skills and strategies.
 - c) Language: Materials should include target relevant aspects (grammar, functions, vocabulary, etc.) In addition, materials should integrate four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Also, materials should focus on use and on understanding authentic texts.
 - d) Social context: Materials should provide intercultural focus and develop critical social awareness.
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- e) Activity/task types: Materials should aim for authentic tasks, vary roles, grouping and activities.

(See Graves, 2000)

H) Methodology

A teacher who comes to ESP from GE can make use of the skills and techniques used in GE to teach ESP successfully. However, turning from teaching GE to ESP might be a little harder than it sounds. First of all, in an ESP course, the teacher should “expect the unexpected”. In other words, there are external variables which definitely affect what the teacher has planned for the whole course or even for a class. Among those variables we can mention the type of organization and the type of class. Also, the class might be very heterogeneous, very large or very small. Maybe students do not like each other or feel intimidated by other students (maybe some students would not feel comfortable to participate in class because their boss is there, or vice versa). Fortunately, experts give us some tips to deal with those situations.

a) Type of organization: When we are planning a course for company workers, for example, we have to consider that our teaching will be affected by the type of organization and relationships our students have in their workplace. Therefore, during the NA stage, we need to observe our course candidates in their everyday work environment and try to learn as much as possible about them. In this way, we can figure out “which battles will be worth fighting and save energy for the crucial ones” (Woodward, 2000).

b) Heterogeneous classes: An ESP class can be heterogeneous in many aspects: company workers with very different tasks at work among them, or workers with very different English language proficiency levels among them. Also, a class can be mixed because of age, mother tongue, academic background, personality, learning styles and many other factors. The good point about heterogeneous classes is that such a diversity makes the class interesting and challenging for everybody. However, it is difficult to meet the expectations of each learner. So, the teacher will have to make important decisions because ESP is cost-effective and finding a common denominator among learners is a must. Experts give the following recommendations about this:

- In stead of having only one syllabus for everybody in the class, we can prepare two. One will be made up of the minimum syllabus everybody should follow, and the other one will be optional and extended, according to the interest or characteristics of each learner.
- Rather than a structure-sequenced syllabus (in which each student has to know content A to be able to study content B), we can design a student-skills syllabus. In this case, we can train learners in those skills they need to improve. Also, we can design the syllabus according to

topics and focus on those topics in which most students will be interested.

- Learners with lower linguistic aptitude do not want to feel segregated or undervalued, of course. So, one way to integrate them is to prepare activities which not only involve topics related to their tasks at work, but also topics related to general knowledge, using cognates, translations and paraphrase. It is very important to remark here that the teacher needs to design and practice many communications strategies to help learners to improve their language use taking advantage of the subject matter they have. If we design task-based lessons, instructions should be so clear for learners that using L1 to ask for clarification is totally unnecessary. As experts say, “learners may use L1 because they have not built up the output processing abilities to perform the tasks demanded of them. That is the task demand them to produce language beyond their capacity” (Van Patten, 2003).

c) Very large or very small group teaching:

- In very large classes, main problems are noise, restricted space, not enough materials for everybody, few opportunities for students to have individual attention and practice, etc. Attracting students attention is not a matter of speaking loudly. Teachers need to establish and practice crowd control techniques and explain them to students. Something we can do in this case is to prepare many group-work activities. Also, some activities may require one-to-one encounters of students with different classmates.
- In one-to-one or very smalls groups, the main advantage is that authentic conversations can be held and learners can have a good balance o instruction and practice. So, students’ speaking time should be increased as much as possible. Error correction should be done in a very appropriate way, so that learners do not feel threatened by a teacher who constantly “judges” their talk. (Woodward 2000).

A material’s sample within a proposal

Target population: Hotel and tourist students

Level: Lower intermediate

After the first contact with students and their sponsors, some topic areas were determined as having a common denominator among students. Topics were grouped in units. The following is an example of a unit.

Unit 1: At the front desk

Tasks at work:

- 1- Attending to people at the front desk
 - Making reservations over the phone
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- Attending to people at the front desk
 - Attending to customers' complaints
 - Helping guests to make an appointment with a doctor
 - Giving recommendations to guests about what to do and see in town

Worksheet one: Making reservations over the phone

Good evening, Hotel Palmas, can I help you?
Yes, please. I'd like to reserve a room for November 10 to 14.
Yes, sir. 10 to 14. Do you want single or double?
Double, please. My wife and I will be on honey moon.
Great. We have a special offer: 10% off for honey moons.
That sounds fine. We would like a room with a nice view to the nature, please.
No problem. We would give you a good one.
Do you want an all-inclusive package?
Yes, please. Also, one-day tour for a couple of times during our stay.
So, a double room, all inclusive for four nights. May I have your name and address, please?
It's Mr. David Brown. 2468 Apple street, St Louis.
Thanks, Mr. Brown. Would you confirm the booking in writing before November 10?
Sure. I'll do it. Can you tell me how much the room will be?
Four nights, all inclusive, ten percent off, plus two one-day tours. That will be 876 dollars, sir.
Thanks.
Good Bye.

Worksheet two:

Mrs. Amy Murphy phones Hotel Amistad.
She wants to reserve a single room for her boss for three nights from tomorrow. He wants bed & breakfast and airport shuttle at the end.
Her boss' name is Mr. John Jenkins, 4026 Tucson.

Materials:

Worksheet 1, cut into pieces

Worksheet 2

Cassette recording of dialogue in worksheet 1

Procedure:

A) Prediction:

1- Play the first line of the dialogue

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- 2- Elicit from learners: What is the topic going to be about, what the caller wants, what the conversation might include. Introduce new vocabulary.
 - 3- Play the tape through. Learners will check their predictions. Also, they will ask about new vocabulary.
 - 4- Learners will listen to the tape once more.

B) Reconstruction:

- 5- Divide the class into pairs and give each pair the cut up dialogue.
- 6- Learners will sort and put the dialogue back together.
- 7- Monitor your learners and provide help. Do not give them the answers.
- 8- Learners will listen to the tape again and check their answers.
- 9- Play the tape again. One line at the time. Learners will repeat in chorus.

C) Practice:

- 10- Ask your learners to write on each strip who is speaking: receptionist or caller.
- 11- One member of each pair will take the caller's pieces and the other the receptionist's pieces. They will read the dialogue.
- 12- Ask "callers" to turn over their pieces -they can't see them-. Pairs will do the dialogue again. Then, "receptionists" will turn over their pieces -callers will turn theirs back-and pairs will do the dialogue again.
- 13- Collect the receptionists' parts. Learners will write the receptionist's part of the dialogue using the caller's parts as cues.
- 14- Learners will role play their new conversations.
- 15- Give out worksheet 2. Students will make the dialogue for the new callers.

Analysis:

Time: Teacher will establish the time devoted to this activity based on his/her knowledge of the class and the available time.

Skills: Listening is hard. Learners will probably need extra listening practice. Many activities to improve listening comprehension are presented in Mendelson and Rubin (1995). Teacher needs to make decisions based on what is essential for each skill.

Strategies: Negotiation of meaning is probably one of the most useful strategies to use here. Also, learners should be trained to use different words to say something they want, when they do not remember the exact terms.

(Adapted from Hutchinson and Waters (2000. P.138)

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