

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Inițial, predarea limbajelor specializate era în mare măsură motivată de necesitatea de a comunica în diferite limbi străine în sfere precum comerțul și tehnologia. Astăzi, limbajul specializat și-a extins aria și cuprinde tot mult mai multe domenii precum, academic, ocupațional, profesional, medical, de afaceri, legal, sociocultural, etc. Prin urmare, predarea limbajelor specializate devine o provocare, mai ales în lipsa manualelor, când profesorul trebuie să se manifeste și ca autor de curs, și ca furnizor de materiale și ca colaborator cu specialiștii din domeniile înrudite celor pe care le predă și nu în ultimul rând ca și cercetător.

Cuvinte –cheie: limbaj specializat, limbaj profesional, comunicare specializată, comunicare profesională, autenticitate

English for Specific Purposes or ESP refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language with the aim of enabling the learners to use English in a particular academic, professional or occupational area. It has already become an established discipline and in the last decade it was included in many higher education institutions as an important programme to university curricula. It is worth mentioning that this fact could happen due to the notable and hard work of such brilliant scholars as Sager / Dungworth & McDonald (1980), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Robinson (1989/1991), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Westerfield (2003), Basturkmen (2010), Collin-Kies / Hall & Moore (2015) and many more, who dedicated their time and effort to research and to get into the essence of this fast-developing trend as well as to identify its position in the English language teaching framework. There have been much controversy and debate on what ESP is, however some scholars could find common threads in their visions of the issue. Dudley-Evans and St. John, for instance, supported Hutchinson and Waters's view 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' [5, p.19]. Pauline C. Robinson described ESP as a type of ELT and defined it as 'goal oriented language learning'

meaning that the student has a specific goal that s/he has to achieve. According to Basturkmen, 'ESP courses are narrower in focus than general ELT courses because they centre on analysis of learner's needs'. She points out that 'ESP courses focus on work-or study-related needs, not personal needs or general interests' [1, p.3]. Apart from this, Dudley-Evans and St. John even went further and improved Strivens' absolute and variable characteristics to enable practitioners to better understand what ESP is and how to cope with it. In 1988, Strevans made an attempt to define ESP, identifying its absolute and variable characteristics. He made distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics. Ten years later, in 1998, Dudley-Evans and St. John reduced the absolute characteristics from four to three and increased the variable characteristics from two to five. Now, these characteristics are of crucial importance when determining what ESP is. Thus, the ***absolute characteristics*** state that ESP should be defined in such a way as to meet the specific needs of the learner; it should make use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; and finally, it should be centred on the language (*grammar, lexis, register*), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities. On the other hand, the ***variable characteristics*** state that ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines; it may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English and it is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level and designed for intermediate or advanced students. Nonetheless, it can be used with beginners as most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system [3, p.4-5].

These characteristics have a definite aim, to help the ESP practitioners become aware of the fact that in ESP, in comparison with EGP, the focus is primarily on specific English belonging to a particular discipline, occupation or activity, as well as on teaching the language appropriate for them. In other words, bringing to the fore the most significantly frequent structures of the sub-language taught. We have chosen to use the term ESP practitioners to refer to ESP teachers as according to Swales (1985) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) the term 'practitioner' better reflects the ESP scope and it involves much more than just teaching. Therefore, the ESP practitioners understand that they have to provide a special language course that will focus on the students' specific needs which will enable them to use English for communication in their professional fields. Achieving this, makes the ESP practitioner face unprecedented challenges as this kind of professional endeavour requires him/her to take specific steps not common to EGP. An ESP practitioner has to, first of all, conduct a needs analysis, then,

select appropriate teaching materials based on the results of the NA, after that, s/he has to get familiar with the subject knowledge and be ready to collaborate with the subject teachers to get into the essence of the subject content and only after that, to design the course. It is obvious that the ESP practitioners not only teach the language, but also conduct research, provide materials, collaborate with subject specialists, design the courses, and finally, regularly evaluate both the course to keep it up-to-date and the students. Seen from these perspectives, who then can become an ESP practitioner and what roles can s/he play in such a large scope? Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) identified five key roles that an ESP practitioner plays in his/her professional activity:

1. *Teacher;*
2. *Course designer and material provider;*
3. *Researcher;*
4. *Collaborator;*
5. *Evaluator.*

The ESP practitioner as teacher

According to most experts in the field, an ESP practitioner can be any teacher who teaches English for the profession and encourages his/her students to use their background knowledge and expertise in the subject matter along with the academic skills to deal with all kind of authentic materials in their specialism. They are those who are mainly concerned with real communication rather than formal language use. They are not specialists in the field, but a sound understanding of the subject content and flexibility will help them enormously. We will cite Pauline C. Robinson to support this. 'Being an ESP teacher is not easy. One of the prime requisites would seem to be flexibility - and a willingness to try new approaches and methods' [7, p. 96]. Therefore, it is clear that 'ESP teachers are not specialists in the field, but in teaching English, their subject is English for the profession but not the profession in English. They help students, who sometimes know their subject better than the teachers do, develop the essential skills in understanding, using, and/or presenting authentic information in their profession' [2, p.493]. In a highly specific course, the teacher is rather a language consultant than an authority on subject content and as such, the relationship is much more of a partnership where the teacher helps his/her students overcome the communication barriers and thus improve their professional communication skills. If ESP practitioners are not specialists in the subject field, do they need to learn specialist subject knowledge? Hutchinson and Waters emphasize that the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather

know something about the subject matter of the ESP materials. They also point out three things ESP teachers should possess:

- 1) *a positive attitude towards the ESP content;*
- 2) *a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area;*
- 3) *an awareness of how much they probably already know [5, p. 163].*

Dudley-Evans and St. John believe that ESP teachers, despite not being specialists in the field, remain classroom organizers who have clear objectives for the class and a good understanding of the carrier content of the teaching materials and this is exactly what makes ESP a practical discipline with the main focus on helping students to learn [3, p.13-14].

Considering these things and taking into account the fact that most ESP teachers have been trained for general English teaching, it is obvious that while dealing with ESP, these teachers have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience, i.e. they have to work with texts/ materials whose content they know little or nothing about [5, p. 160], and then this brings up another important question. How can an English teacher meet such a challenge? The best solution would be ESP Training which provides ESP teachers with the necessary knowledge and tools to deal with their own students' specializations as well as teach them how to switch from one ESP discipline to another without spending months on getting started. As it has already been mentioned, ESP has become an established discipline taught in most higher education institutions, therefore training ESP teachers should be imperative in this transition from EGP to ESP.

The ESP practitioner as course designer and material provider

Due to the fact that ESP focuses mainly on teaching specific language and communication skills, ESP course design include a stage, usually the first one, in which the developers identify what specific language and skills the learners will need. This is important information to collect as it will help the ESP practitioners determine what content to include into the ESP course. This stage is known as Needs Analysis (NA) and is an important and fundamental part of ESP course design. It should be also noted that according to the best practices, the ESP practitioner tailors the course only after conducting NA. The most widely known work on needs analysis is considered John Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1987) which consists of a range of questions about key communicative variables like topic, participants, medium, etc., to identify the target language needs of any group of learners. However, there have been many improvements into NA since then and now, most experts agree that in order to get a good picture of the learners' needs, it is recommended to use different types of NA as they

complement each other and provide better chances to make the right decisions. As soon as the NA establishes the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the course, the ESP practitioner has to design the course and provide materials appropriate to the learners’ needs. At this stage, the ESP practitioner faces another challenge, the lack of suitable materials. A general problem typical of ESP materials is that the published materials are not always relevant to the needs of their learners and in this case, the ESP practitioner has to create his/her own materials to match the learners’ needs and expectations. However, the ESP practitioner is not a writer of materials, but rather a provider of them. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John, a good provider of materials should be able to select appropriate, authentic and real-life materials from what is available. The selected materials should stimulate, motivate and serve as useful instruments for developing the specific language and communication skills that the ESP learners need to meet the challenges and demands of the labour market. At the same time, the ESP practitioner should be creative, ready to modify, and supplement, where it is possible and needed, the activities in such a way as to suit learners’ needs and the course objectives. S/he may extract an out-of-date carrier content or replace a mechanical activity with a new one whose focus is on real content. S/he may as well, use the authentic materials that learners can provide, adapt them and in this way, provide variety [5, p.173-177]. Another challenge that an ESP practitioner encounters is the inadequate subject knowledge and s/he has to be ready to take up the role of the learner her/himself. Hutchinson and Waters are of the opinion that as course designer, the ESP practitioner has the power to influence the programme and the materials in order to accommodate his/her own capacities. So, if the teachers are unable to operate highly specialized texts effectively, they should not use them. Their competence is an essential ingredient in the teaching-learning process and must, therefore, be able to influence such matters as the choice of texts’ [5, p. 162]. If we analyse the actual situation in the republic of Moldova, in the case of teaching ESP to university students, the first problem that arises is that the first-year students lack the knowledge of specialism in their native language and often times, the English teacher finds him/herself in the position of explaining different specific-related issues, depending on the ESP course, even though s/he is not a specialist in that field. S/he simply has to be well-prepared, know all the materials s/he brings to the class and be open to learn new things together with her/his students. Consequently, to help the ESP practitioners overcome most of these challenges, the authors of *Effective Practices in Workplace Language Training: Guidelines for Providers of Workplace English Language Training Services*, selected the best practices in ESP and combined them into a set of guidelines which represent clear instructions on

what practices and how to apply them in the design, delivery and evaluation of an ESP course. A good example of how this works can serve Westerfield's adaptation given below:

Best Practice # 3. The ESP practitioner creates a flexible curriculum design.

Practice 3.1: determine initial performance goals;

Practice 3.2: conduct a communication task/ language analysis for each performance goal;

Practice 3.3: determine specific, measurable enabling objectives for each performance goal;

Practice 3.4: sequence course goals and conceptualize content.

The ESP practitioner as researcher

The necessity to keep the course up-to-date and aligned with students' needs, interests and expectations makes the ESP practitioner a dedicated researcher. As a course designer and material provider, the ESP practitioner has to develop original materials to include into the course and it is here that his/her role as researcher becomes fundamental. His/her research is very important as it will result in providing the classroom audience with appropriate material background. It is worth reiterating that, in order to identify students' needs, interests and expectations, ESP practitioners have to conduct different types of NA and then analyse all this statistical data to determine what content to include in their courses. Apart from this, not being specialists in the subject matter, they face the difficulty of determining which topics to include to provide the required terminology. Therefore, they have to carefully look at and exploit the new forms of the English they are going to teach in specific contexts and then, when collecting the materials, they should keep into mind that the selection should be done taking into account all aspects of language, including terminology, structural, grammatical and communicative aspects of the language. It stands out that the lack of subject knowledge is not an impediment, but another force that drives the ESP practitioner into doing research and thus enabling him/her to keep pace with the latest trends in the field and thus using the latest findings in his/her teaching.

The ESP practitioner as collaborator

According to Dudley-Evans and St. John, subject-specific work is often best approached through collaboration with subject specialists. They even mention three possibilities through which this can happen: cooperation, collaboration and team-teaching. Cooperation takes place when the ESP teacher finds out about the subject syllabus in an academic context or the

tasks that the students have to do in a work or business situation. Through collaboration, some integration between specialist studies or activities and the language is achieved. It can happen reciprocal, meaning that, on the one hand, the subject teacher checks and comments on the content of the teaching materials that the ESP practitioner has prepared and, on the other hand, the language teacher specifically prepares the learners for the language of subject lectures or presentations some time before they take place. The fullest collaboration is where a subject expert and a language teacher team-teach classes. An illustrative example of such collaboration is business trainings where the language teacher together with the business trainer work together to teach both the skills and the language related to business communication [3, p. 15-16].

Most of the ESP researchers agree that collaboration is an important part in ESP and it can be, not only between language teachers and subject teachers, but with sponsors and students alike. Students, very often know exactly what they want and aim at achieving their goals. Taking into consideration their needs and their knowledge of the subject matter can help the ESP practitioner develop a learner-centred ESP course. When the programme is carried out in the workplace, for instance, the ESP practitioner is placed in the position of being a negotiator with the sponsors/ stakeholders.

The ESP practitioner as evaluator

As evaluator, the ESP practitioner's task does not differ much from that of the EGP teacher. In fact, ***test purpose, test taker characteristics and the target language use situation*** remain the same, be it EGP or ESP. However, the instruments used in ESP assessment are usually defined more narrowly to reflect the specific area of the language. Therefore, when preparing the assessment, the ESP practitioner should bear in mind the following: (1) the specific context may vary the language use, (2) this specific language is very precise, and (3) there must be interaction between the specific language and the specific background knowledge. At the same time, as evaluator, the ESP practitioner's main task is to regularly evaluate the students, the teaching materials and the course to keep the course up-to-date and engaging. Students' evaluation is done to assess how much they have learned from the course. However, according to Westerfield, 'Best practices in ESP assessment focus on what learners need to be able *to do* in the target language. Therefore, instead of turning only to paper and pencil tests to measure students' knowledge of language, ESP teachers devise ways to assess student progress *authentically* – that is, can students actually perform the tasks stipulated in the course curriculum' [9]. Evaluation of the course design and of the teaching materials is recommended to be done during and

at the end of the course to assess if the learners are able to apply in practice what they have learned, i.e. how well they perform in their discipline-specific class or on the job, and to identify the problematic aspects which might need more practice.

To sum up, over the last decades, ESP has become an essential sub-field of English as a Foreign Language focusing on developing students' skills of professional communication in English depending on their specialism. As such, it has motivated the transition from EGP to ESP in most academic settings and this fact has greatly enhanced the employment opportunities for many university or college graduates. However, teaching ESP is not an easy task especially due to the fact that the scope of ESP goes far beyond the limits of teaching and thus, it poses serious challenges for every teacher in charge of it. In addition to this, the roles identified by Dudley-Evans and St. John make the ESP practitioner's professional activity even more difficult as together with the roles, the number of challenges increases. However, an ESP practitioner can overcome most of the challenges if s/he has a positive attitude towards the ESP content, is flexible and willing to try new approaches and methods, and is ready to take up one more role, that of a learner, and learns the fundamental principles of the subject area s/he is going to teach by reading specialized literature, observing the subject lessons and consulting with the subject teachers. ESP training would be an ideal solution for the ESP teachers from the republic of Moldova. However, no opportunities are given in this regard, and the ESP teachers can become familiar with the ESP theory and methodology by doing research and by learning-by-doing.

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