

English for Specific Purposes on Its Way

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Abstract: This article depicts that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) fluctuates, but never withers, in terms of definition and characteristics, on its way of evolution. As an approach to teaching English for those with special needs, ESP expands beyond structural and linguistic examinations of texts in order to better understand social and contextual features of genres, and moves from linguistic descriptions, on their own, to studies which aim to understand why genres are shaped as they are, and how they achieve their particular goals. Variety, context, complexity and critique will brand its future.

Key words: ESP; approach to teaching; genres

马不停蹄的特殊用途英语

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摘要: 特殊用途英语 (ESP) 虽在其定义以及属性特征上几经波折, 但发展的脚步从未停歇。为满足专业英语教学需求, ESP 跨越了语篇结构分析本身的羁绊, 将修辞的社会功能和语境功能特征纳入研究范围, 由语言自身的描述转向作为修辞现象的使然性和目标工作机制的研究。多样性、语境化、繁复性和 ESP 批评会是将来的发展趋势。

关键词: ESP; 教学法; 修辞

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I. What is English for Specific Purposes

English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain. The teaching of English for specific purposes, in its early days, was largely motivated by the need to communicate across languages in areas such as commerce and technology^[1]. This has now expanded to include other areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational

purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP)^[2].

A key feature of an ESP course is that the content and aims of the course are oriented to the specific needs of the learners. ESP courses, then, focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English. Typically (although not always) ESP students are adult learners. They are also often a homogeneous group in

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terms of learning goals, although not always in terms of language proficiency. Key issues in the teaching of English for specific purposes are how to identify learner needs, the nature of the genres that learners need to be able to produce as well as participate in, and how we can know that our learners have been able to do this successfully, and, if not, what we can do to help them to do this.

II. Definition and Characteristics of English for Specific Purposes

English for specific purposes has been defined by many writers and researchers, such as:

Mackay and Mountford indicated that the term ESP is generally used to refer to the teaching of English for a clear utilitarian purpose^[3].

Hutchinson and Waters, they defined it as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning, they added also that the term ESP implies that, it is English which is somehow peculiar to the range of principles and procedures which define that particular profession^[4].

Belcher states that ESP assumes that the problems are unique to specific learners in specific contexts and thus must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored to fit instruction^[5].

Dudley-Evans and St John modified Strevens' original definition of ESP^[6]. Firstly I will begin with Strevens. He defined ESP by identifying its absolute and variable characteristics^[7]. Strevens' definition makes a distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics:

(1) Absolute characteristics. ESP consists of English language teaching which are: 1) designed to meet specified needs of the learner. 2) related in content (i. e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities. 3) centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse. 4) in contrast with General English.

(2) Variable characteristics. ESP may be, but is

not necessarily: 1) restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e. g. reading only). 2) not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Anthony notes that there has been considerable recent debate about what ESP means despite the fact that it is an approach which has been widely used over the last three decades^[8]. At a 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans offered a modified definition.

The revised definition of Dudley and St. John:

(1) Absolute Characteristics. 1) ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner. 2) ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves. 3) ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

(2) Variable Characteristics. 1) ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines. 2) ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English. 3) ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level. 4) ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. 5) Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Dudley-Evans and St. John have removed the absolute characteristic that "ESP is in contrast with General English" and added more variable characteristics. They assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Furthermore, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.

As for a broader definition of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters theorize, "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"^{[4]19}. Anthony^[8] notes that, it is not clear where ESP courses end and general English courses begin; numerous non-specialist ESL (English as second language) instructors use an ESP approach in that their syllabi are based on analysis of learner needs and their own personal specialist knowledge of using English for real communication.

From the definition, we can see that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen simple as an “approach” to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an “attitude of mind”. This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson who state, “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”^{[4]19}. Thus, in my point of view I think the best definition for ESP is the one which defined by Hutchinson and Waters. They add that needs analysis is “the most characteristic feature of ESP course design” and classified needs into necessities, lacks and wants:

Necessities are what the learners have to know in order to function effectively in the target situations. By observing the target situations and analyzing the constituent parts of them, we can gather information about necessities.

Lacks are the gap between the existing proficiency and the target proficiency of learners.

Wants are what the learners feel they need. Wants perceived by learners may conflict with necessities perceived by sponsors or EAP teachers and this conflict may have a de-stabilizing effect on motivation. Therefore, ESP course designer or teacher must take into account such differences in materials and methodology.

Before beginning a needs analysis, one must first answer the following crucial question, “Will the students use English at the university or in their jobs after graduation?” If the answer is no, then ESP is not a reasonable option for the university’s English language program. The university will have to justify its existence and improve the program via other means. If the answer is yes, however, then ESP is probably the most intelligent option for the university curriculum. ESP begins with some basic questions to survey what will be needed. Will students use English at the university or in their jobs after graduation? In what situations? For what purposes? What language skills will be required (reading, writing, listening, speaking, even translating)? What are the significant

characteristics of the language in these situations (lexicon, grammar, spoken scripts, written texts, other characteristics)? What extralinguistic knowledge of academia, specific disciplines, specific vocations, or specific professions is required for successful English usage in these areas?

III. Differences Between ESP and EGP

What is the difference between the ESP and EGP (English for General Purpose)? Hutchinson^{[4]53} answered this quite simply, “in theory nothing, in practice a great deal”. When their book was written, of course, the last statement was quite true. At the time, teachers of General English courses, while acknowledging that students had a specific purpose for studying English, would rarely conduct a needs analysis to find out what was necessary to actually achieve it. Teachers nowadays, however, are much more aware of the importance of needs analysis, and certainly materials writers think very carefully about the goals of learners at all stages of materials production. Perhaps this demonstrates the influence that the ESP approach has had on English teaching in general. Clearly the line between where General English courses stop and ESP courses start has become very vague indeed.

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. Instead of conducting interviews with specialists in the field, analyzing the language that is required in the profession, or even conducting students’ needs analysis, many ESP teachers have become slaves of the published textbooks available, unable to evaluate their suitability based on personal experience, and unwilling to do the necessary analysis of difficult specialist texts to verify their contents.

IV. ESP/EST in China

ESP/EST, in China, presents a different picture

for the world. Under the open-door policy in later 1970s, China sponged science and technology from all corners of the world. ESP/EST played a role more than an approach to teaching English for students of science and technology, and performed an on-line transmission of science and technology from English world. A great venture sailed on its course, in the meantime, with the open-door policy. ESP/EST, in China, distinguishes itself through integrating language learning with the learning of science and technology, which indeed helped a lot in the phase of face-lifting China by training those science men, poor in English, and those language students, poor in science and technology. The department of English for Science and Technology (EST) was founded, firstly, in Shanghai Institute of Mechanical Engineering (SIME now evolved into University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, see Lu Siyuan 2011)^[9], then nation wide. As a matter of fact, ESP/EST is no longer an approach to teaching but a discipline at universities, a venture. In ESP/EST program at SIME, professor Lu Siyuan, a path breaker of ESP/EST in China, trained his students by combining teaching materials of *A Course in Scientific English*, *The Structure of Technical English*, *Scientifically Speaking* with reading materials of *Understanding Science*, *American Men of Science and Invention*, *Inside Meaning*, *Understanding Idea*, *Concepts in Use*, *Discovering Discourse*, *Exploring Function*, *Practical Faster Reading*. A school of experts, good at language and science, have been nurtured ever since and played critical roles at various positions in China.

EST, an approach to teaching or an integration of language with science & technology as a discipline, remains a heated debate in China. Yet, more than 30 years EST practice at University of Shanghai for Science and Technology manifests that an integration of language with science and technology could be a testimony of the rapid development of ESP/EST with a new face. In fact, ESP/EST, a body with two faces (an approach to teaching and a discipline of integration), still walks firmly in China, a land full of possibilities.

V. Research Directions in English for Specific Purposes

Belcher et al.'s *New Directions in English for Specific Purposes Research* takes this discussion further by pointing to other issues that have aroused the interest of ESP researchers^[10]. One of these is the issue of disciplinary language and ESP teaching. Hyland^[11-13] in the area of EAP, for example, has shown how the use of language varies in terms of rhetorical patterns and linguistic features across disciplines, especially in their written genres, arguing that this needs to be accounted for in the teaching and researching of specific purpose genres. ESP studies have also considered contextual aspects of specific purpose genres, taking up Swales' argument^[14] for the need to go beyond structural and linguistic examinations of texts in order to better understand social and contextual features of genres (see Paltridge and Wang^[15]; Swales and Rogers^[14] for further discussion of this). Research in ESP, then, has increasingly moved from linguistic descriptions, on their own, to studies which aim to understand why genres are shaped as they are, and how they achieve their particular goals.

Classroom-based research has also come to more prominence in ESP publications. A key researcher in this area is Cheng who discusses learner, teacher, and institutional factors that impact on ESP teaching and learning^[16]. He points to the need to better understand how learner needs and expectations are translated into learning objectives in ESP classes, as well as how ESP students interpret these objectives and use them to guide their own learning. Cheng also discusses the relationship between input materials and output activities and the criteria that ESP teachers use to judge whether their input materials are suitable for their students and the learning objectives of the course. He discusses the issue of appropriate methodologies in ESP classes as well as classroom-based assessment in ESP settings. Cheng's research helps us to understand some of these questions. There

are still, however, many questions in this area that need future research.

Identity continues to be a research interest in the area of ESP as well as the use of English as a lingua franca in specific purpose settings. Genre studies continue to attract interest, although they are now becoming increasingly more complex and multi-method than they once were. There is an ever-increasing use of ethnographic techniques in ESP research and the issue of learner needs is becoming more complex and more focused, not just on what learners need to do, but also on who they want to become^[17]. Corpus studies have continued to have an important place in ESP research and critical discourse analysis, as well as critical perspectives more generally, which have started to gain more prominence in ESP research^[18]. Research in ESP, then, while still specific, is also increasingly critical and ethnographic at the same time as it maintains its materials-driven, learner-centered and needs-responsive focus (Belcher^[2]; Dudley-Evans and St. John^[6]). ESP research has come a long way since its early days in the 1960s. It has perhaps moved in ways that early teachers and researchers might not have expected, or anticipated.

VI. Conclusion

ESP has come a long way in terms of research practices since its inception in the 1960s, but genre, a topic initiated in 1981, remains with us. In addition, other topics and methodologies have opened the way for learner-centered approaches, advocated by Hutchinson and Waters^[4], and later, by Tardy^[19]. There will probably be further interest in classroom-based research and in studies in less-popular academic locales, such as secondary and vocational schools or in regions where English is the lingua franca. Perhaps, unfortunately, for the needs of local students and international scholars, research may become more centralized in international journals, though online publications may mitigate some of these issues.

Four words may serve to summarize what the

future may bring to ESP: *variety*, in topics, methodologies, rhetorics (e. g. the visual and multi-modal), writer's stance, and what not; *context*, as the locales for research become diversified, bring to the fore the specific contexts of classrooms, businesses, online media—and in learners' cognition—*complexity*, realized through methodological triangulation, and finally, *critique*, not only of the researcher's work and pedagogies but of the researcher him/herself, through self-reflection.

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◇ 简 讯 ◇

学报(社科版)参加上海市外文学会第17次专题研讨会

2014年3月8日下午,上海市外文学会第17次专题研讨会在上海理工大学外语学院举行,上海外文学会名誉会长卢思源教授、会长叶兴国教授、秘书长汪敏豪及上海各高校外语学院的院长和代表们出席,共60多人。上海理工大学学报(社科版)编辑应邀参加了本次会议。

会议由上海理工大学外语学院院长吕乐教授主持,上海理工大学副校长刘平教授致欢迎辞,上海外文学会名誉会长卢思源教授在会上讲话,回顾了外文学会在过去二三十年的概况。会议讨论“英语类本科专业教学质量国家标准与课程建设”这一时下外语界最关心的话题,上海对外经贸大学副校长、上海外文学会会长叶兴国教授作了主题报告,围绕英语类专业教学质量国家标准进行了解读,对英语专业的发展方向进行了展望;上海交通大学外语学院彭青龙教授对这一话题予以补充;上海理工大学英语系主任祁小雯副教授与大家分享了我校外语学院在提高外语教学质量及特色化建设中所做出的努力,成效显著,令人称道。最后,大家围绕主题进行了热烈的讨论。