

Functions of ESP: Criteria to Understand What Really makes it an Approach Not a Product

Abdelkader Bensafa*

Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of English, University of Tlemcen, Algeria

***For Correspondence:** Abdelkader Bensafa, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of English, University of Tlemcen, Algeria, Tel: +213771454310; E-mail: abdelkaderamine08@gmail.com

Received Date: Sep 29, 2017; **Accepted Date:** Oct 09, 2017; **Published Date:** Oct 17, 2017

Copyright: © 2017 Abdelkader B. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Review

ABSTRACT

Regarding English and more precisely within higher education districts, a new branch is integrated namely ESP or English for specific purposes. This new discipline is fundamentally based on needs specification and thus, process adaptation, i.e., the English taught in the ESP situation should mainly be based on learners' needs in terms of skills notably: reading; speaking; listening; and writing. The aim of this paper is to synthesize the rationale behind the contribution of the different function of ESP to make it an approach not a product.

Keywords: ESP, Function, Approach, Product

INTRODUCTION

Before looking at the rationale behind the contribution of the function of ESP in making it an approach not a product, it should be mentioned here that there is not both one best way to teach foreign languages, in general and ESP in particular; nor a single best set of teaching materials. This is because teachers will vary both in their methods and techniques used while teaching and what they are intended to teach. It follows therefore, that there is no single 'magic bullet' that can be offered to support language teaching across all phases. This means that the more effectiveness is present while teaching, the more students will benefit. This is about teaching English in general, so what about ESP? This will be discussed in the following sub titles.

FUNCTIONS OF ESP

Typically, the rationale behind integrating ESP in ELT is to help language learners cope with features of language or develop the competencies needed to function in a discipline, professional practices, or work place. This led Benesch ^[1] to call for a critical approach to EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teaching. This view was supported by two main factors: first, the growing concern about the social and political implications of ESP teaching and second, the emergence of critical approaches in recent years. In sum, it is time to stand back from current practices in ESP teaching and consider the ideas and theories behind them.

In the same line with Benesch, Stern ^[2] proposes a framework for analysis to examine ESP in practice and research comprising three lines of enquiry: ideas about language, about learning, and about teaching. Here is a detailed discussion of these elements contributing in the formulation of the ESP approach and function as well.

When speaking about ESP teaching, it often takes - as a point of departure - the analysis and description of "language systems". Hopper ^[3] defines language systems as: "A set of abstract structures present for all speakers and hearers that is a prerequisite for the use of language." Based on Hopper's definition, three language systems can be seen as evidence in both ESP teaching and research. Furthermore, they represent the underlying functions of ESP. They are listed below.

Functions Related to Teaching and Research

The first function ESP is there to fulfill is teaching. In this phase, a set of systems have to be covered: the grammatical structure which includes the rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words. The core vocabulary that encompasses words frequently used and tended to be useful in a variety of situations (e.g., I, the, have, and, on, want, etc.), Patterns of text organizations, i.e., how to organize information or ideas in a piece of writing. In sum, the primary function of ESP is to describe and ensure that learners are familiar with what is perceived to be the core of English. This was in teaching, so what about research?

Believing that research is a systematic process of collecting and analysing data to increase our understanding on a specific phenomenon ^[4], and in the same line with functions of ESP, the primary concern is to identify and describe the core structures. According to Helen:

One of the major advantages of this approach to language description at a practical level is that fairly heterogeneous groups of ESP learners can be taught together; for example, English for General Academic Purpose's courses can be offered rather than English for specific academic purposes.

From Helen's argument, it is clearly seen that the set of basic structures, words, or generic patterns of text organization already mentioned above are seen to be the central underlying criteria of the ESP approach. This leads to say that having even a little knowledge about them is a prerequisite to language use regardless of specific domains. In line with these arguments, study of language use in the specific domain can come later.

Functions Regarding Language Use

In this part, our concern will be the description of language use and functional explanations of language. When dealing with the description of language use, the major focus is on the communicative purposes people wish to achieve and how language – as a means of communication- helps achieving those purposes. When it comes to functional explanations of language, Brown and Levinson ^[5] describe this fact as being:

“To locate sources outside the linguistic systems that determine how language is organized. ESP has embraced such idea.”

As stated previously, the linguistic factor is a dominant one in ESP. This is why; the functional view of language is seen from two angles: first, the different types of linguistic enquiry in ESP, descriptions of speech acts, genres, and social interaction formulas used in professional, workplace, or academic environment. Second, the attempts made to identify how words are used in particular disciplines (such as economy or law) to express discipline- specific concepts or what it is called terminology.

In sum, the ESP approach is built on an assessment of purposes needs analysis, and the functions for which English is required. In fact, as a general rule, when teaching EGP, the four skills i.e. listening; reading; speaking; and writing are stressed equally. However in an ESP context needs analysis plays a vital role in determining which of them is most needed by the student and consequently the syllabus will be designed accordingly.

In this sense, an ESP program, might, for example, emphasize the development of reading skills in students who are preparing for graduate work in business administration; or it might promote the development of spoken skills in students who are studying English in order to become tourist guides ^[6]. Now we move to examine the link between theories about language learning and ESP.

Functions towards Learning

Although explicit discussion of learning has been limited in the ESP literature, ideas about learning can be inferred from the course and materials designs developed and the types of research undertaken. We will divide this part into: ideas about the conditions needed in order for language learning to take place and the process through which learning is understood to occur.

Two ideas about the conditions and how these ideas are reflected in ESP teaching and research are as follows: the first idea (acculturation). The theory of acculturation can be broken down to include a few different topics; these include learning a new language, immersion, assimilation, and integration. Moreover, the concept is based on social considerations and is premised on the idea that ESP learners need to be enclosed social proximity or contact with their discourse communities ^[7].

The second idea (input and interaction): It has been hypothesized that input which is comprehensible and interaction which has been modified best facilitate second language acquisition. Since the classroom is one of the few places where comprehensible input and modified interaction are made available, and since the teacher is an important source of input, this paper suggests that it is essential for ESL teachers to analyze what actually has gone on in their own language

classrooms. Furthermore, is based on linguistic considerations and rests on the argument that provision of sufficient linguistic input opportunities for interaction are prerequisites for language learning^[8].

However, language learning does not occur because learners enjoy conditions favorable to learning; it occurs as a result of learners engaging in cognitive processes and mental activities. When it comes to perspectives about learning process can be divided into two explanations: inter-mental and intra-mental. The former explains language learning as resulting from the cognitive processes of individual learner. The later, as resulting, forms the social activity of learner^[9].

Speaking about the inter-mental perspective - also known as information processing - it offered a view of learning as an individual mental activity composed of simple processes which take time and practice, and through practice there is a development from controlled to automatic processing^[10]. While the inter-mental perspective - also known as activity theory - offered a socio-cultural view of learning. It also offered a view of learning as shaped and constructed by the goals of the learners by suggesting that it is the learners who determine what they will learn and the same instructional task or activity is typically used by different learning objectives, and thus that the learner learns different things from them.

Another point should be mentioned here which is content- based approach. It is an approach related to language teaching and ESP which can be linked to information processing perspectives of learning. Advocates of this approach argue that language is best learned through the process of learning disciplinary or technical subject content^[11]. It views the target language largely as the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than as the immediate object of study^[12].

From all what has been said above, one can say that ESP is a student-centered rather than teacher- directed teaching method (Haines, 1989). But: Where is the role of the teacher clearly seen? How does it fit in the learning process? What are the responsibilities of the teacher? Are there specific methodologies in ESP teaching? What are the objectives of teaching ESP? All these questions will be discussed in what follows.

A teacher who already has experience in teaching English as a second language (ESL) should recognize the ways in which his/her teaching skills can be adapted for the teaching of ESP. As an ESP teacher, you must play many roles: you may be asked to organize courses, to set learning activities, or establish a positive learning environment in the classroom, and to evaluate student's progress. To do so, ESP has certain methodologies to use.

The discussion of those methodologies was coined by Stern^[7] to refer to an overriding methodological principle covering a wide variety of classroom techniques and procedures at the planned level of teaching. We have the predominantly input; input – to-output; predominantly output, and output to input.

Two of the above mentioned strategies are input-based. The first (predominantly input) is linked to the idea that learning occurs through students being exposed to samples of language use^[13]. The second (input-to-output) is linked to the idea that learners need first notice language forms and features, and then use them in their own production^[14].

On the other hand, two are output-based. The first (predominantly output) is linked to the idea that learning occurs through students struggling to communicate and being pushed to reach their linguistic ceilings^[15-17]. The second (output-to-input) is associated with the idea that learners are ready to acquire new language when they have experienced a whole (a lacuna) in their repertoire and are offered a solution to that problem in the form of feedback^[15].

Regarding the objectives behind teaching ESP, there is a variety of objectives in that process.

The first is to reveal subject-specific language use which is linked to the linguistic knowledge objective and, to a lesser extent; the cultural knowledge objective^[8].

The second is to develop target performance competencies which can be described as an approach focused on developing the ability to perform the activities of an occupation^[18].

The third is to teach underlying knowledge or competencies which is term used by Hutchinson and Waters to refer to disciplinary concepts from the students' field of study.

The fourth is to develop strategic competence which acts as a “mediator” between external situational context and the internal language and background knowledge needed to respond to the communicative situation^[19].

The last is to foster critical awareness which means that ESP teaching should work to encourage the learners - who became members of the target environment - to change the target situation to better suit their needs. Thus, ESP teaching should help students realize that target demands may be up for negotiation and that they have a role to play in taking action to help this come about^[20].

To conclude this part, one can say that if the ESP community hopes to grow up and flourish in the future of ELT, it is more than necessary that the agents and practitioners understand what ESP actually represents. Only then, new members can join with confidence to collaborate with the existing ones for the sake of carrying the practices which have

brought ESP to the position it has in EFL teaching today. The following part will examine an important element in any ESP situation i.e., the process of an ESP course design as well as the underlying criteria in that process.

ESP AS AN APPROACH

When it comes to ESP as an approach, one can say that it focuses on language centered in both theory and practice. This leads to say that giving a definition of ESP establishing a context about how it is seen; at the present time; in relation to the rest of ELT branches is more than a necessity. According to Hutchinson and water ^[21,22]: *“In the time honored manner of Linguistics, we shall represent the relationship in the form of a tree”*. They represent some of the common divisions that are made in ELT.

When looking to the top of the ELT tree, it shows the different branches at which individual ESP courses take place. This level is mainly divided into two types of ESP:

For the requirements of academic studies the English needed is either: EOP, (English for Occupational Purpose), EVP, / English for Vocational Purpose, and VESL (Vocational English as a Second Language).

EAP: English for Academic Purpose aiming at preparing individuals for work place as well as training.

This was about the top side of the tree; concerning the down, and at this level, the main concern is the nature of ESP courses related to a specific domain or area of interest (specialized courses). Here, three categorizations can be recognized: EST (English for Science and Technology), EBE (English for Business and Economics) and ESS (English for Social Sciences).

The last level to speak about is that ESP is just one branch of EFL (English as a foreign language) and /ESL (English as a second language). These two last formulate the main branches of English language teaching in general or what is referred to as EGP (English for general purposes. Now- and since we are talking about a tree- automatically it needs to be nourished. This is why communication and learning serve as the main roots without which that tree cannot survive.

Now, if someone tends to look at the analogy of a tree mentioned above, he or she will figure out what ESP is not about. The following criteria denote that idea.

ESP is not just a matter of science words and grammar for scientist and so on. When we look at the tree, there is actually much hidden from view inside and beneath the tree although we know the leaves and the branches. They are supported by a complex underlying structure. The point is we need much more communication than just the surface features of what we read and hear and also we need to distinguish between performance and competence in relation to what people actually do with language and the range of knowledge and abilities which can enable them to do it.

ESP is not different in kind from any other form of language teaching. It is based on the principles of effective and efficient learning. Even though the content of the learning is different; the processes of learning should be different for the ESP learner than for the general English learner.

ESP is not a matter of teaching "specialized varieties" of English because the fact that language is used for a specific purpose. There are some features which can be identified as "typical" of a particular context of use, and which, later on help learners to be prepared to meet in the target situation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude with, one can say ESP is a different form of ELT for the simple reason that it is an approach not a product. This idea is stressed by the fact that it (ESP) is based on learners' need with no emphasis on a given methodology or a particular type of teaching material. In addition to this the linguistic factor dominates both the origins and development of ESP where the focus is mainly on the nature of specific varieties of language use depending on both needs identification and analysis.

REFERENCES

1. Benesch S. Needs Analysis and Curriculum Development in EAP: An Example A Critical Approach. *Tesol Quarterly*. 1996;30(4):723-738.
2. Stern HH. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK; 1983.
3. Hopper P. Emergent Grammar. *Annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*. 1987;13:139-157.
4. Leedy PD, Ormrod JE. *Practical Research: Planning and Design*. 9th Edition. Pearson Publishing, upper Saddle River, New Jersey, USA; 2010.

5. Brown P, Levinson S. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England; 1987.
6. <https://www.usingenglish.com/articles/teaching-english-for-specific-purposes-esp.html>.
7. Schumann J. Research on the Acculturation Model for Second Language Acquisition. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 1986;7:379-392.
8. Stern HH. *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK; 1992.
9. Mitchell R, Myles F. *Second Language Learning Theories*. Arnold publication, London; 1998.
10. McLaughlin B, Heredia R. Information-Processing Approaches to Research on Second Language Acquisition and Use. In: Ritchie WC, Bhatia TK. *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Academic Press, San Diego, USA; 1996:213-228.
11. Hyland K. *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Longman Kasper, London; 2000.
12. Brinton DM, Snow MA, Wesche MB. *Content-Based Second Language Instruction*. Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston, USA; 1989.
13. Krashen S. *Fundamentals of Language Education*. Laredo Publishing Company, Torrance, CA, USA; 1992.
14. Scott H, Scott J. ESP and Rubik's Cube: Three Dimensions in Course Design and Materials Writing. In: Swales J, Mustafa H editors. *English for Specific Purposes and the Arab World*. Aston University, Birmingham, England; 1984.
15. Swain M. Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development. In: Gass S, Madden C editors. *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Newbury House, New York, England; 1985:235-256.
16. Swain M. Focus on Form through Conscious Reflection. In: Doughty C, Williams J editors. *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England; 1998: 64-81.
17. Swain M and Lapkin S. Interaction and Second Language Learning: Two Adolescent French Immersion Students Working Together. *Modern Language Journal*. 1998;82:320-337.
18. Funnel P, Owen J. Delivering and Measuring Competence. In: Saunders D, Race P (Edition) *Aspects of Educational and Training Technology*, Kogan, London; 1992:27-32.
19. Douglas D. *Assessing Languages for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge University Press, New York, USA; 2000.
20. Hamp-Lyons L and Hyland K. EAP: Issues and Directions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. 2002;1(1):1-12.
21. Hutchinson T, Waters A. *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London; 1987.
22. Hutchinson T, Waters A. *English for Specific Purpose*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai, China; 2002.