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Introduction to ESP

1.1 What is ESP?

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) involves teaching and learning the specific skills and language needed by particular learners for a particular purpose. The P in ESP is always a professional purpose – a set of skills that learners currently need in their work or will need in their professional careers. This broad definition can be taken to include business skills, such as English for Job-hunting or Presentations, but many ESP teachers see their field as distinct from mainstream Business English. Preparation for an exam (such as the Cambridge PET or First Certificate) is not usually considered to be ESP (even though there is a particular reason for studying). ESP exams do exist, of course, but they tend to focus on the learners’ ability to function effectively at work, rather than purely their level of English.

ESP contrasts with General English, which is aimed at a very wide range of learners. It also contrasts with Business English, although there is considerable overlap between the two branches. A lawyer and a marketing executive might both benefit from attending the same Business English course, focusing on the generic skills they both need at work (such as writing an email or participating in a meeting), but they might get more from attending an ESP course in legal or marketing English respectively as this will focus more precisely on their needs.

1.2 Who needs ESP?

In theory, all learners need ESP and would benefit from a course tailored to their needs. In practice, however, there has to be a compromise where learners with sufficiently similar needs can be grouped together. This is fairly easy in the context of pre-experience courses (e.g. an English course for Media Studies students at a university), where a large number of students have similar needs, decided in advance by experienced specialists (e.g. university professors). This branch of ESP is sometimes called ESAP, (English for Specific Academic Purposes). In principle, there is a clear distinction between ESAP, which trains students for their future work, and EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes), which trains them for their current studies, but in practice the distinction is often blurred.

ESP courses can also be created for working professionals (e.g. a teacher providing in-company lessons at a law firm). In such cases, the course will not only be for the needs of a specific profession (e.g. lawyers, human resources personnel) but also for the specific organisation. Here, the ESP teacher has the opportunity to base activities on the situations and texts the professional learners actually need English for in the workplace.
1.3 How is ESP different from General English?

For teachers of General English, a key question is finding materials and methodologies which are effective for a particular class (e.g. ‘Is the approach or method I’m using appropriate for learners of this age, culture, level, first language(s) etc.’?). This question is also relevant to ESP but one other factor should also be considered: subject specific knowledge (of legal procedures, of engineering methods, of software programming etc.). By definition, the learners on an ESP course will usually know more about the subject than the teacher. This additional factor is often what makes ESP a daunting, but also an exciting, challenge. However, there are three key strategies open to ESP teachers whose knowledge of the specific subject is limited: honesty and openness, preparation and confidence.

- **Honesty and openness** are about managing expectations. ESP teachers don’t need to pretend to be something they are not. Don’t be afraid to tell your learners that you are unfamiliar with the specific subject. An important skill for any specialist is the ability to describe what they do (and why) in language non-specialists will understand: a doctor explaining a medical procedure to a patient; an engineer explaining to a client why a project cannot be completed in less than four months. You can be their starting point in developing that essential skill. Learning should be a joint process based on the teacher’s expertise in language and methodology and the learner’s subject knowledge.

- That said, **preparation** should include learning as much about the learners’ professional field as the teacher can: research before the course; careful planning of the language and problems that are likely to come up in a lesson; strategies to deal with vocabulary problems that can’t be solved during the lesson; and a commitment to learn, actively, the learners’ specialisation in order to be more prepared next time.

- Finally, ESP teachers need to be **confident** that they have the skills that will help their learners, such as knowledge of how to make learning successful, how to make language memorable, and how to motivate learners. In other words, an ESP teacher with strong methodology but limited subject knowledge may be more effective than a subject specialist with no knowledge of methodology (although of course a subject specialist with strong methodology would be even better!)
2 Needs analysis

2.1 I’ve been given an ESP class – What do I do now?

The first thing to do is to carry out a needs analysis (sometimes known as a skills audit). In some ways it may be similar to the pre-course questionnaire commonly handed out to learners on General English courses. The difference is that a needs analysis is normally more comprehensive, and includes many relevant details about the target learners and their needs and wants. If a needs analysis for each and every learner is conducted well, then the chances of delivering a quality ESP course that will satisfy its participants are very high. The findings from such a skills audit will also help the teacher to create (and update as the course progresses) an ILP (Individual Learning Profile) for each learner.

There are many vital questions that an ESP teacher may need to ask to deliver a course designed according to the preferences of the learners. Here is a checklist of 10 basic question sets to be included in a good needs analysis:

- Am I expected to deliver a tailor-made (custom-made) ESP course or can I adapt or modify an existing course (e.g. published ESP coursebooks such as Good Practice or Cambridge English for Engineering)?
- Who are the learners in my ESP group? Are they university students or a group of professionals employed by a specialist company? Where do they come from? How much information do I have about their age, qualifications and experience?
- Are they paying for the course themselves or are they being sponsored by their employer? If they are being sponsored, the needs analysis will need to include the expectations of both the learners and their employers.
- Do the learners in my group expect to be consulted in the process of the syllabus design (in which case the final course will be delivered through syllabus negotiation) or will they ‘delegate’ this task to me in the hope that I get it right for them?
- Are my ESP learners ‘homogenous’ in their skills or are they a mixed ability group? Does any member have a ‘spiky profile’ (i.e. different levels of ability and performance in speaking, writing, reading, and listening)? Are the learners self-aware enough to inform me of this in the needs analysis questionnaire?
- Which aspects of their professional register (that is, the particular forms of the language used in particular professional activities) do they habitually use in their everyday work? For example:
  (a) engineers need to write internal memos, reports, funding applications
  (b) nurses need to write summaries of patient records, produce prescriptions in the absence of a doctor (in approved cases), fill out specialist charts with precision and linguistic accuracy
  (c) doctors need to write academic articles (for international recognition and career progression), medical reports, internal memos.
- Does the client or the organisation who has commissioned the ESP course also have funds for the design of new materials to supplement what cannot be readily found in published coursebooks?
- Where and how will I deliver the ESP course, e.g. on the premises of a university or college, or private company, or even online? What impact will this have on the process of learning and teaching? Will the learners have enough time for self-study or homework after the classes?
- What are the learning styles and preferences of my learners (e.g. visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, ICT-oriented)?
- To what extent am I familiar with the specific subject matter (e.g. law, nursing, marketing)? Will the learners provide me with some specialist materials from their work that I can use in classroom materials?
2.2 How detailed should the needs analysis be?

The answer to this question has to be ‘How long is a piece of string?’ However, for a teacher new to ESP the advice would be: as detailed as possible (time and resources permitting). The more experience you have, the better you’ll be able to make decisions about the length and the amount of detail a needs analysis requires.

Certainly there are many good models or templates of needs analysis in ESP literature, and novices to the profession are advised to refer to, for example (see also opposite page):


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Needs analysis and evaluation

Job title ____________________________.

Length of time in current job ____________________________.

Working language of organisation ____________________________.

CURRENT USE OF ENGLISH

Do you use English in your current job? ____________________________.

If yes, is this mainly spoken, written or both? ____________________________.

How many hours a week are you likely to use English? ____________________________.

Do you use English mainly in-company, externally or both? ____________________________.

Do you use English mainly with native speakers (for example Americans), non-native speakers or both? ____________________________.

Please give details of previous English studies. ____________________________.

Please give details of extended visits / stays in English-speaking countries. ____________________________.

FUTURE USE OF ENGLISH

Do you want to improve your English for your current job or a new one? ____________________________.

Is there a particular reason for wanting to take a course at this point in your life? ____________________________.

If yes, please specify? ____________________________.

Will your future use of English be different to your current use? ____________________________.

If yes, please specify in what ways. ____________________________.

YOUR JOB

Please describe the roles and responsibilities of your job. ____________________________.

-...

From Developments in English for Specific Purposes © Cambridge University Press 1998
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2.3 How well do I have to know the subject?

ESP teachers need to remember that in order to best meet learner and teacher expectations they can get a lot of help by reading the instructions and guidance contained in the Teacher's Books (such as Good Practice) or the detailed notes in the Answer Key (in e.g. the Cambridge English for... series). See opposite page for example.

A lot of specialist guidance can also be found on the Internet:

- Jeremy Day's ESP blog: http://specific-english.blogspot.com/
- IATEFL ESP SIG: http://espsig.iatefl.org/ Its bi-annual Journal called 'Professional and Academic English' contains topical ESP articles, and its three books deal with selected aspects of ESP
- IATEFL BESIG: http://www.besig.org/ Its e-mail discussion list can be useful for ESP teachers involved in teaching Business English-related courses
- The ESP Interest Section of TESOL US: http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/index.asp

An ESP teacher does not need to know an ESP topic very well to begin with. What is desirable is an interest in, and at times a passion for, a particular subject or discipline, and then the hands-on knowledge will be picked up as you go along. Some teachers of Medical English that I have met at universities in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, say that over the years they have become so familiar with various areas of medicine that they almost feel as if their medical knowledge is as good as that of the doctors they teach!

In some cases (such as at university), it might be possible for the ESP teacher to team up with a teacher of the specialist subject. Here, for example in written work, the ESP teacher can feed back on the use of English whereas the subject specialist can feed back on the actual content. Although such arrangements are rare (due to the cost and organisation) it can be worth trying to find out if it is possible in your situation.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
At the end of this unit, learners will be able to:
- greet a patient and put them at ease
- introduce themselves and their role
- ask the opening question and set the agenda for the interview

Background
Establishing rapport
Being able to establish rapport with the patient is the crux of the whole interview; indeed, the way in which a doctor receives a patient can make or break the consultation that follows. A doctor needs to treat their patient with respect, of course, but establishing rapport within the first few minutes is also about how doctors greet the patients and introduce themselves, ensuring that they have clarified their role, making sure patients are comfortable and even that the seating arrangement is appropriate (see audio 1.1).

Opening question
The next step is to understand the issues the patient wishes to address or the reason for their visit. The doctor’s opening question needs to require more than simply a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer so that the patient will express his/her story.

It should be a question that opens up the discussion, e.g. ‘What would you like to discuss today? or ‘What brings you here today?’ The patient will then produce his/her opening statement. Note that a follow-up visit might start with ‘Am I right in thinking you have come about your routine check up?’ but could then follow with ‘Is there anything else you would like to discuss today?’ to ensure that all avenues are covered – the patient may well wish to bring up other issues.

Opening statement
Opening statement is when the patient reveals the issues he/she wishes to discuss. Introducing the opening statement (which is something many doctors do) means that fewer complaints are elicited and vital signs and symptoms may be missed, possibly resulting in misdiagnosis. Instead, doctors should use active listening skills to determine the salient points of the statement in order to set the agenda for the consultation, using the verbal and non-verbal patient cues (looking upset, sounding frustrated, etc.) that determine both the physical and emotional state of the patient.

Setting the agenda
Setting the patient’s agenda, as opposed to carrying out the doctor’s agenda, is important. Based on the salient points of the opening statement, the doctor must decide on a schedule or structure to the encounter, e.g. ‘Shall we start with… and then we’ll come back to the problems you’ve been having with…’

Doctors should not forget to obtain the patient’s agreement on the agenda, e.g. ‘…if that’s OK with you?’

William Osler (1849–1919)
The celebrated 19th-century physician from Ontario, Canada, Osler, known as one of the most influential physicians in history, is still quoted today by many experts in medical communication skills. He believed students learnt best by doing and that clinical instruction should begin and end with the patient.

Quotes from Osler include: Medicine is learnt by the bedside not in the classroom and Care more for the individual patient than for the special features of the disease. For more information, see www.medarchives.jhmi.edu/osler/biography.htm

WINNER
From Good Practice ©
Cambridge University Press 2008
3 Finding the right materials

3.1 Where can I find suitable course materials?

A good starting point is a publisher’s catalogue which these days is usually easy to find on the Internet. It is worth noting, however, that publishers sometimes put their ESP titles under the broader heading of Professional English. Comprehensive coverage is available for the following ESP areas: Engineering (e.g. Cambridge English for Engineering), Finance (e.g. English for the Financial Sector), Hospitality (e.g. Welcome!), ICT (e.g. Professional English in Use ICT), Law (e.g. International Legal English 2nd Edition), Maritime (Safe Sailing, a DVD-ROM), Marketing (e.g. Cambridge English for Marketing), Media (e.g. Cambridge English for the Media), Medicine (e.g. Good Practice), Nursing (e.g. Cambridge English for Nursing), Aviation and Air Traffic Control (e.g. Flightpath), Human Resources (e.g. Cambridge English for Human Resources), Management (e.g. Professional English in Use: Management) and Scientific Research (e.g. Cambridge English for Scientists).

If your learners have very specific needs that cannot be met by using a single coursebook, it is now possible to mix and match materials from several courses using a blended learning platform (such as www.english360.com). This also illustrates a common feature of ESP courses: that they are often taught in a blended or online environment. Some complete courses, such as Cambridge Financial English exist only online.

Finally, it is important to supplement your course with additional materials that you have selected based on your learners’ needs. For ready-made supplementary materials, many published coursebooks nowadays offer photocopiable worksheets and classroom activities online at the course website. For example, every title in the Cambridge English for... ESP series has Teacher’s Notes which include extension activities and/or additional material such as case studies which can be downloaded for free. It is therefore well worth exploring a coursebook’s site (see opposite page for examples). There are also dozens of free ESP and Business English lesson plans available at Professional English Online (http://peo.cambridge.org/).
3.2 What should I look for when choosing an ESP coursebook?

The most obvious question to ask when choosing a coursebook is ‘Does it cover my learners needs?’ things to look out for include:

- listening exercises of realistic situational dialogues in which professionals are doing their job, not just interviews with people about their jobs;
- step-by-step guidance for learners on how to cope in similar situations and role-plays to practise those skills – what to say and how to act;
- authentic texts that represent the types of documents that your learners will need to read and write in their jobs and which they are likely to have problems with;
- guidance on how to use the model texts to inform the learners’ own writing.

There are of course many other elements that can and should be included in an ESP course, but these tend to be easier to find from other sources. These might include:

- a grammar syllabus, which may come from a separate book (e.g. Grammar for Business);
- generic business skills, which may come from separate books (e.g. Dynamic Presentations);
- lists of vocabulary, which may come from online or printed dictionaries;
- newspaper articles, which may come from online news sites, etc.

Another crucial issue when choosing a coursebook is its credibility. Has the book been written by an ESP teacher who is also a subject specialist (or a subject specialist in partnership with an experienced ESP teacher)? Have the authors worked closely with professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing? Has that professional body collaborated on or endorsed the book? Is the book based on relevant and up-to-date developments within the subject area? See the opposite page for examples.

Finally, it is important to investigate the support available for teachers. Within ESP, Teacher’s Books are essential as a way of giving the teacher the expertise and knowledge to cope with difficult subjects. A good Teacher’s Book should provide background reading, vocabulary and technical explanations and pronunciation of professional terminology, as well as guidance on how to manage the lessons.
Lesson planning

4.1 How should I plan an ESP lesson?

Many teachers new to ESP wonder how they will be able to handle lesson planning in ESP classes, and are often anxious that there may be too many hurdles to overcome. Some reassuring advice is that most of the principles used in the teaching of General English are directly transferable to ESP with only minor modifications and adjustments. For further reading on the generic aspects of lesson planning, please see Mark Krzanowski’s presentation on the subject at http://tinyurl.com/esp-lesson-planning. There are similarities between lesson planning for a General English class and an ESP class. For example, you would want to consider the following elements when planning for both types of classes:

- **Class profile:** the number of learners, their age(s), preferred learning style(s) etc. (all of the elements a good needs analysis will tell you)
- **Aims and sub-aims:** an example of a specimen main aim could be: ‘To provide practice in speed reading (skimming and scanning) of specialist texts with emphasis on selecting most relevant information’ An example of a specimen sub-aim could be: ‘To improve group cohesion/group dynamics through use of communicative activities (e.g. pair work and group work)’
- **Learning outcomes:** ‘By the end of the lesson, the learners will have learnt basic strategies for speed reading when dealing with specialist literature’
- **Anticipated difficulties:** ‘Some learners may feel “resistant” to communicative methodologies, and may need more encouragement or patience on the teacher’s part’
- **Assumptions:** ‘The initial syllabus should more or less work otherwise the teacher may have to apply a “process syllabus” model and renegotiate certain parts of the syllabus with his/her group of learners’
- **Pronunciation:** ‘How will this be taught?’
- **Materials to be used:** coursebooks? audio? video? online learning?

If these seven points represent the first part of the plan, the next step (as with General English) is to draw up a grid showing the what, how and when of the lesson. See opposite page for examples.
So what are the differences in planning for an ESP class? ESP lesson plans can have the following additional features as well:

The first part of the lesson plan (the background) can include:

- The balance of, and emphasis on, various skills (e.g. in English for Aviation the focus would normally be on listening and speaking)
- The choice of and rationale for any specific vocabulary to be taught in the lesson
- What aspects of specific ESP register and genres (that is, particular forms of the language used in particular professional activities) to cover (e.g. features of report writing in English for Engineers)
- A justification of the teaching methods and approaches used. In some ESP contexts a mixture of methodologies may be more appropriate than adherence to a single approach e.g. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) but with some ‘touches’ of Grammar-Translation (two methodologies normally considered to be in opposition to each other). Some ESP classes may even require a higher-than-normal amount of T-T-T (Teacher-Talking-Time).

Occasionally you may find yourself in a situation when you need to teach an ‘expensive’ ESP course which has been commissioned by an important organisation (‘the client’) with high-powered participants (‘the customers’). It may well be that the client and the customers in such a context would expect a teacher to deliver quite a lot of input in the classes, in which case the amount of T-T-T would substantially increase.

The second part (the grid showing the what, how and when of the lesson) will be basically the same for both General English and ESP classes.
4.2 How can I teach professional communication skills?

Modern workplace communication expects well-rounded professionals who not only have an excellent command of their subject area, but who can also communicate well both with colleagues and the general public. The focus needs to be on communication, and consider both accuracy and fluency (with fluency being possibly more important than accuracy ‘at all costs’). This ability to go beyond the subject specialism and be able to communicate well in professional (and by extension ESP) contexts is called ‘soft skills’ (cf: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_skills).

A set of further answers to the question ‘How can I teach professional communication skills?’ would be:

• by creating an atmosphere in the classroom which is conducive to learning and teaching (in other words, applying the humanistic principle of ‘caring and sharing’, promoted so effectively in CLT)
• by setting a memorable context, with meaningful activities and authentic activities to enhance learning
• by applying a judicious mix of activities and techniques (depending on the level of the learners), e.g. information gap, opinion gap, role play, drilling, ‘find someone who’, pair work, group work, project work – to mention but a few
• by providing learners with meaningful models of good practice to emulate (e.g. TV or radio footage, workplace written correspondence and archived documentation)
• by identifying and reinforcing aspects of communication most relevant for a particular profession (e.g. identifying the kind of language used in professional communication internationally among pilots and air traffic controllers).
4.3 How do I deal with a low-level of English in the ESP classroom?

In the past it used to be assumed that ESP should not be attempted with low-level learners of English (say, pre-intermediate or below) as the view was that they should normally go through the basics of General English first.

At present there seems to be more flexibility exercised in the classroom in this respect, and many ESP books are aimed already at pre-intermediate or intermediate (approximately A2–B1 in the Common European Framework) learners.

In addition, given that English is a global international language, it is relatively easy for an ESP teacher to encourage low-level ESP learners to communicate in English (this could be more difficult if a ‘rare(r)’ language was taught, e.g. Farsi or Xhosa). While normally each and every class is a mixed ability one, the chances are high that at least 30–40% of learners in a given group might be expected to speak or write English better than the others. A skilled teacher may well use these more proficient learners to help the other less confident students in communicative activities such as pair work or group work. A lot depends on the culture and the context where ESP classes are held, and the willingness of students to communicate. For example, in the Middle East, most learners genuinely want to talk and communicate – the most important issue is to get them to do so in English. In other cultures, low-level ESP learners and their ability to communicate may present some problems due to the cultural norms affecting the conventions related to communication in the classroom.

Ready-made solutions to perceived problems with low-level ESP learners may not exist, but sample activities which may work include short presentations (e.g. ‘Who I want to be in the future and why’), games (‘Find someone who ...’) and simple guided questionnaires.

One solution is to use good classroom speaking practice from a General English coursebook (such as English Unlimited Elementary) and try to transfer the format into specific ESP context (the topical Teaching Speaking by the British Council: http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/train/training-object/teaching-speaking-video-series might be helpful here).

ESP is already the subject of curricula in post-16 education (e.g. the ESP books published by the Ministries of Vocational and Technical Education in the Middle East). In many cases, speaking (and listening) is not included in these books. If so, local and international teachers are advised to look at how this is approached in successful ESP publications and transfer the frameworks into other ESP contexts.
5 | Assessment

5.1 How do I evaluate students on an ESP course?

This all depends on your aims for the course, which in turn goes back to your original needs analysis. With some ESP courses, the aims are subjective and learner-led, so in many ways the assessment is related to their performance in the workplace: Do they feel better able to perform in the situations that they identified at the start of the course as their needs? Have they learnt useful skills and language that they can use in their work? Are they more confident or sophisticated in their use of English at work?

If you need to provide an assessment of progress, or if you feel it would motivate your learners to study harder, here are some ideas which can be used to test how much they have learnt, either as an end-of-course assessment or throughout the course as continuous assessment:

- choose some of the situations identified as priorities in the needs analysis, and ask learners to perform a role play or simulation of that situation (in a role play, learners play a 'character', in a simulation, learners are themselves in an imaginary situation). Examples would include a nurse admitting a patient to hospital or a lawyer advising a client. Make sure all learners have a chance to play their own part (e.g. a nurse in the role of the nurse, not the patient or a lawyer in that role, not the client), and only assess them on that part of their performance.

- set regular writing assignments during the course, designed to simulate the type of writing the learners will have to do in their jobs, and assess them on such criteria as professionalism, successful communication and impact on the target reader.

- keep a note of vocabulary covered during the course, and come back to it at the end with a matching task (words to definitions), gap-fill (fill in the blanks) or sorting exercise.

- keep a note also of other important language topics covered during the course, including grammar structures, dependent prepositions, writing techniques and useful phrases.

If you need a more objective assessment of their end-of-course level of English, you could use a past paper from a General or Business English exam such as IELTS or BEC. The advantage of this approach is that you can measure their reading and listening skills very accurately as well as their deeper knowledge of the structure of English. The disadvantage, of course, is that the exam will have little relation to the course you have completed. However, if an aim of your course is to raise the learners’ general level, such exams may be a good way of assessing their progress.
5.2 Are there any exams for ESP?

It is important to distinguish between exams of subject knowledge, such as university course exams, and exams focused solely on candidate’s level of English in the context of their professional needs. Exams which try to measure both subject knowledge and English level at the same time may fail to measure either.

Two of the best-known ESP exams are the International Legal English Certificate (ILEC) and the International Certificate in Financial English (ICFE). Both of these exams are organised by Cambridge English (previously Cambridge ESOL) (www.cambridgeesol.org), part of Cambridge Assessment. These exams are objective, reliable and internationally recognised. Cambridge English has created the exams with highly respected and experienced professional partners to ensure that the exams really meet the needs of the professionals involved: TransLegal, the world’s largest firm of lawyer linguists, and ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants), the global body for professional accountants.

Both ILEC and ICFE are aligned with the Common European Framework for Language (CEF), reflected in the three passing grades (B2 pass, C1 pass and C1 pass with merit). This allows them to be compared directly with thousands of exams for English and other languages. See www.LegalEnglishTest.org for more on ILEC and www.financialenglish.org for more on ICFE.
References and further reading


Cambridge English

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