THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

DIFICULTĂȚILE DE PREDARE-ÎNVĂȚARE A LIMBII ENGLEZE PENTRU SCOPURI SPECIFICE

Cristina Nazaru, lector universitar,
UPS „Ion Creangă"din Chişinău
Cristina Nazaru, university lecturer,
„Ion Creangă" SPU, Chisinau
ORCHID ID: 0000-0002-6361-1875

Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged as a distinct branch of Teaching English as a Foreign/Second language approximately fifty years ago as a result of the spread of English worldwide and the necessity to meet the professional needs of people learning it. ESP means using material that responds to learners' needs and implies a level of general English proficiency, as well as knowledge of specific vocabulary. The article features, apart from basic notions on ESP, the challenges that can appear when teaching-learning English for Specific Purposes

Key-words: ESP, learners' specific needs, challenges, problems

Rezumat

Limba engleză pentru scopuri specifice (ESP) s-a dezvoltat ca o ramură aparte a predării limbii engleze ca limbă străină acum aproximativ cincizeci de ani în rezultatul expansiunii limbii engleze la nivel mondial și necesității de satisfacere a nevoilor profesionale specifice ale cursanților. În învățarea englezei pentru scopuri specifice, materialele sunt axate pe nevoile cursanților și presupun posedarea de cunoștințe lingvistice de engleză generală, dar și cunoașterea unui limbaj specific. În acest articol au fost prezentate problemele care apar în predarea limbii engleze pentru scopuri specifice, inclusiv probleme legate de cel ce predă, de cel ce învață și de mediu.

Cuvinte-cheie: limba engleză pentru Scopuri Specifice, necesități specifice, dificultăți, probleme

Teaching English for Specific Purposes is a segment of Teaching English as a Second/ Foreign language which refers to teaching the English language to university or college students, or other people learning for a career or already doing a job. It arose as a distinct component of teaching ESL/EFL as early as the 1960s when it became clear that general English did not respond to learners', employees' and employers' needs for specific vocabulary and language skills. After half a century, as English continues to dominate all the spheres of life, teaching ESP is still a priority for the English teaching community, as specific language skills are vital for the success of adult learners in various fields, such as business, media, technology, medicine, research and so on.

ESP as a distinct subset of ESL/EFL appeared as a result of multiple factors, of which according to Bojović (2006) the most important are: 1) the growth of demand for English to suit specific needs of a profession, 2) developments in the field of linguistics (attention shifted from defining formal language features to discovering the ways in which language is used in real communication, causing the need for the development of English courses for specific groups of learners), and 3) educational psychology (learner's needs and interests have an influence on their motivation and effectiveness of their learning). [3, p. 487]

Despite its rather long history, ESP does not yet have a distinct definition and the English teaching community is still not clear about what it means. Some define it simply as "the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified", whereas others refer to it as

"the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes" [2].

However, a few attempts at defining ESP were made over the past decades. Hutchinson and Waters have defined it as an approach in which "all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reasons for learning" [5, p. 19]. Salmani Nodoushan claims that "English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be defined in terms of the 'purposes' and the 'specificity' of the purposes for which the teaching of English is felt necessary" [7, p. 249]. Strevens (1988) defined ESP by identifying its absolute and variable features:

1. absolute characteristics: a) language teaching is designed to meet specified needs of the learner; related in content to particular disciplines, occupation and activities; b) it is centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, text, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of the discourse; c) it is designed in contrast with General English

2. two variable characteristics: a) ESP may be restricted to the language skills to be learned, e.g. reading; and b) not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology. [3, p. 487]

The definition for ESP was later improved and extended in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics by Dudley-Evans. As cited by Anthony (1997) it distinguishes:

Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners; 2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; 3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

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 systems. [2]

Traditionally ESP has two main subsets, which according to discipline or professional area are further divided, as cited by Bojović (2006), in the following way:

1) *English for Academic Purpose*, which involves English for (Academic) Science and Technology (EST), English for (Academic) Medical Purposes (EMP), English for (Academic) Legal Purposes (ELP), and English for Management, Finance and Economics;

2) *English for Occupational Purposes* including English for Professional Purposes (English for Medical Purposes, English for Business Purposes – EBP) and English for Vocational Purposes (Pre-vocational English and Vocational English). [3, p. 488]

Hutchinson and Waters came up with a 'Tree of ELT' and have divided ESP into three branches: (1) English for Science and Technology (EST), (2) English for Business and Economics (EBE), and (3) English for Social Studies (ESS) – each of which is further broken down into the two sub-branches of EAP and EOP. [5, p. 16] The latter are "differentiated in

the light of Cummins' (1979) conceptions of Cognitive Academic Proficiency vis-a-vis Basic Interpersonal Skills" [7, p.249], which refer to a language proficiency required to make sense of and use academic language and the language skills used in the everyday informal language with friends, family and co-workers respectively.

Citing Carver (1986), Bojović lists three main features characteristic of ESP courses:

(a) authentic materials, the use of which "modified by teachers or unmodified, is common in ESP, especially in self-directed studies or research tasks."[3, p. 483]

(b) purpose-related orientation, which has to do with the simulation of communicative tasks making students ready for real life target situations; and

(c) self-direction, which refers to that aspect of ESP which turns language 'learners' into language 'users'; when the teaching of learning strategies and the encouragement of self-regulated learning become predominant.

Problems with ESP

Considering the widespread opinion that there is no solid theoretical basis to support the ESL, including the difficulty with defining what ESP is, the exact understanding of what it includes, how and when it should be taught, ESP has posed many challenges for both scholars interested in it and the teachers directly involved in doing it.

One of the challenges refers to the process of English teaching as to when General English stops and Special English begins. Some authors suggest (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) the presentation of the whole of ELT should be on a continuum that runs from General English courses, at elementary and intermediate levels to very specific ESP courses as students advance into learning English.

Studies also reveal the problem of course designing, tasks, assignments and teaching methods. Another question is what qualifications the teachers need to deliver such courses. Bojović notes, "since ESP courses are of various types, depending on specific scientific field or profession, and have specific features, teachers teaching such courses need to play different roles and acquire certain knowledge." [3, p. 489] Other challenges include the ones referring to the learner, namely lack of necessary language skills and specific competences.

Over the years, research on ESP has identified three major groups of difficulties regarding the teaching and learning of English for specific needs: (1) difficulties related to students; (2) difficulties related to teachers; (3) and difficulties related to environment and others.

Student-related difficulties refer to demographic characteristics and demands of students, level of proficiency of learners, poor vocabulary, and lack of language skills.

Demographic characteristics and demands of learning English for specific purposes of students. Citing Suzini et al. (2011), Hoa and Mai (2016) note that "the students' demand for ESP is not met adequately" [4, p. 155]. This happens mainly because of the following reasons: 1) students are not ready for ESP courses; 2) ESP classes are often too large/big; 3) students realize that ESP is too different from general English; 4) ESP teaching methods are still passive; 5) ESP teachers' qualification is inadequate. Apart from that, Hoa and Mai remark, "most students are used to the traditional teaching and learning methods. This results in the fact that students are timid and passive when they take ESP courses; and do not find

ESP important for their future job." [ibid] Thus, the motivation for learning of each student in part and the overall learning environment of class are affected.

English proficiency is another factor that negatively influences ESP. Within the same university and same departments, as well as among different universities and departments, students may have different levels of proficiency depending often on the institution they graduated and the residential area they come from.

Lack of vocabulary. Since much of the vocabulary that learners of ESP have to learn and memorize deals with specific terminology, some of which is hardly ever used, students rarely encounter the words in context and in their daily lives and often feel unmotivated to learn them or frustrated for not applying them in authentic context.

Poor reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. A study conducted by Rezaei et al (2012) showed that learners mostly have problems in understanding the concepts of syntactic units in reading text, deriving from the different structure of English and first language. Lâm (2011) points out reduced writing skills, which derive from the incompetence to organize ideas, poor vocabulary, grammar and spelling. [4, p. 156]

Moreover, listening and speaking skills are rarely practiced in class, as in most of ESP courses time is spent on vocabulary, reading texts and writing documents.

Teacher-related difficulties refer to lack of quality textbook, qualification of teachers, and lack of theoretical framework to support ESP

Quality of lectures and textbooks. For most ESP courses now materials are designed to develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. However, quite a big number of textbooks still follow the mistaken approach that "a good vocabulary is enough for students", and so many "textbooks developed by teachers do not bring students much interest because of focus on only reading skills and vocabulary exercises" [4, p. 156].

*Qualification and Teaching Methods of teacher*s. These teacher-related challenges include: lack of special teachers' training and qualification in ESP, teaching method differences, and lack of specialized knowledge as most such courses are taught by people who majored in English non-related to a specific domain. Teachers often face the problem of having to develop course curricula, materials for the course and exams. The latter makes learning efficiency assessment not accurate.

Lack of Theoretical framework to support teaching English for specific purposes. Another big problem is that there is no theoretical framework to support teaching ESP. Hoa and Mai underline that "there are many mixed opinions on whether this subject should be considered as a compulsory subject in the curriculum or should be considered as a skill or practical knowledge to help students become more confident with their knowledge after graduation". [4, p. 156] Citing Chen (2011), Andriani refers to "confrontations whether ESP should be viewed as a tool or a discipline, whether ESP should be considered a practical skill or knowledge capital and whether ESP instructors should be "insiders" or "outsiders" [1, pp. 33-34]

The last set of difficulties in Teaching ESP related to environment and others include:

- *lack of teaching materials,* ESP documents often being developed by teachers with no specialized knowledge (so the quality of those materials is not high), or, on the contrary, ESP materials are at too high level compared to students' proficiency;
- *classes with too large student number*, especially when there is difference in students' proficiency; and
- *heavily focused examinatio*ns.

Apart from the classification presented above, Andriani (2014), with a focus on teaching ESP in higher education has categorized the problems associated with teaching ESP into five broad groups: teaching pedagogy, the teachers, the design of the course, students' ability and students' needs. [1, p. 36]

Teaching pedagogy, according to the author, involves "the unclear theoretical basis of ESP" Besides, she notes "teachers sometimes are trapped in teaching English for General Purpose" and suggests that "in relation to this problem, the authority of the institution should make clear standard of the teaching of ESP in higher education." [ibid]

The second problem regards teachers, namely - who should teach ESP: language teachers or subject teachers? Andriani claims that the former "sometimes do not understand the material fully, so they will get difficulty in explaining the content", whereas the latter "sometimes have language problems which will block them in teaching English for Specific Purpose" [1, pp. 36-37]

When referring to the problem of course design, Andriani notes the importance of "the authority" conducting needs analysis before designing courses to know "what is students' goal".

The last two problems deal with the students' ability and needs. The author warns against "conducting ESP courses in earlier semesters", which will result in "unsuccessful course since the students have not mastered their subject fully, let alone to understand their subject in English." and teachers paying attention to "methodology in order to be able to help the learners to be successful in ESP course". [1, pp. 36-37]

In the Moldovan educational context, ESP has turned into reality. Ixari (2015) notes that, "The Education Reforms in our country have promoted various achievements in the field of education. Among these Teaching English for specific needs in universities has had a primary role." [6, p. 4] Teaching English in higher education has been directed to the specific purpose in relation to the pursued major. By having ESP subjects, students are expected to not only know the specialized vocabulary and be able to read and find information related to their field in English, but also to use the language in the prospective profession.

Moreover, ESP has produced major changes in secondary vocational and professional English teaching in Moldova with the development of new Curricula for English "Limbă Engleză pentru Învățămantul Profesional Tehnic". According to the new curricula "students in technical, professional and vocational secondary schools will study English in order to be able to communicate in their professional domain and carry out job-related operations". [8]

Teaching English for Specific Purpose is necessary both in higher education and secondary professional education due to the demand and the necessity of using English in academic settings or workplace later on. ESP causes some problems related to teachers,

students, environment and others. In coping with the problems that arise in ESP a few things must be done, including: 1) the need analysis that help design suitable courses; 2) improved teaching methodology; 3) the use of authentic context; 4) providing general English courses before taking ESP.

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