

## Challenges Faced When Teaching English for Specific Purposes

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**Abstract.** English for Specific Purposes is a part of teaching the English language that includes Business English, Technical English, Scientific English, English for medical professionals, etc. In other words, teaching ESP actually means focusing on meeting the specific needs of learners in terms of their professional activity or study discipline. As such and given the specificity of the teaching / learning situation, it may use a methodology that differs entirely or partially from that used when teaching General English. The teacher must at all times bear in mind the particularities of the educational situation, which, on the one hand, translate into a need for teaching language appropriate to specific activities in terms of grammar, vocabulary, register, skills, discourse and genre, and on the other hand into the need to adapt to a certain age-group and a certain language level. Moreover, there is another significant additional challenge teachers of ESP face: knowledge of the specific language structures and technical vocabulary of the domain / discipline in question, as well as a certain amount of field-specific knowledge. What is worse, generally speaking, on this kind of courses learners know more about the subject / domain/ field than the teacher. The purpose of this article is to present not only the challenges faced when teaching such courses, but also the strategies and means of making the most of this learning situation - as established by our research, as well as help teachers of foreign languages develop relevant curricula for their students.

**Keywords:** ESP course, challenges, strategies, educational situation, curricula development

### INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner-centred approach to teaching English as a second language focusing on developing communicative competence in a specific field such as Agriculture, Horticulture, Business, IT, Medicine, Engineering, etc. Although it is not a new "trend" in foreign language teaching, as its origins go back to the period between the two world wars (1930), there is still no common view on what it actually stands for and on what it can be defined as. For example, Anthony (1997) notes that there has been considerable debate about what ESP means since its "cradle days", despite the fact that it has been a widely used approach to teaching English.

As for a broader definition of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) theorize 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" (p. 19), while other authors, such as Anthony (1997), argue that it is not clear where ESP courses end and general English courses begin, as numerous non-specialist ESL 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. Debates concerning this particular learning situation have continued and are still ongoing, as one can well see in Paltridge's (2012) comprehensive overview of the origins and evolution, current research, debates and definitions of ESP.

However, the recent definitions provided by Collins dictionary ("the practice and theory of learning and teaching English for specific uses in given fields, such as science, nursing, tourism, etc") or the free Oxford English Dictionary: "the technique of teaching English to students who need it for a particular purpose, such as business dealings" highlight the specificity of this type of courses based on the corresponding restricted field of interest of the learners.

Starting from these assumptions, we decided to conduct a research study at our University, involving three languages (English, French, German) - all of them taught to the students in the first and second year of their academic training, majoring in Veterinary Medicine, Horticulture, Agriculture and Animal Breeding - in order to establish a set of principles and strategies for developing relevant curricula / syllabi. This paper presents both the challenges faced while attempting to do this, and the conclusions reached, which formed the basis of our latest curricula / syllabi and, which can hopefully assist other ESP teachers in developing curricula that would be both useful and successful for their own students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research has been carried out at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca, with the students of the Faculties of Agriculture, Horticulture, Animal Breeding and Veterinary Medicine, and involved also two other languages, namely: French and German.

We decided to base our research on the results presented by Dudley Evans and St. John (1998), who identified five key roles for the ESP course organizer:

- teacher
- course designer and materials provider
- collaborator
- researcher
- evaluator.

Therefore, our teachers were asked to play all these roles while organizing courses, determining and setting learning objectives together with the students, providing them with authentic materials, helping students become familiar with both the field-specific information and language, establishing a positive learning environment in the classroom, and evaluating the students' specific needs and progress.

Thus, the (short and long-term) learning aims had to be determined and set, and then turned into an educational programme, by selecting, designing and organizing course materials, supporting the students in their efforts, and providing them with feedback on their progress. In order to succeed in designing a syllabus with realistic aims that takes into account the students' needs and interests in the learning situation, the teachers had to first try and understand the students' potential, as well as their language and profession-related knowledge. This latter aspect represents a true and very real challenge that influences the ESP teaching-learning process to a great extent; what is more, it is also an aspect beyond the teacher's control: the students' abilities in their own professional fields can in their turn influence the learners' ability to acquire English, as this particular kind of knowledge provides the context they need to understand the English of the classroom, as in short, in an ESP class, students are shown how the field-specific content is expressed in English. Lack of profession-related knowledge may hinder their language acquisition.

Another key-aspect was to create the appropriate classroom atmosphere, encouraging learners to feel self-confident in order to communicate, with the teacher helping them build-up confidence.

The teachers were also responsible for helping students not only identify their language learning problems and find solutions to them, identifying the skills they needed to focus on and setting up realistic language learning objectives, but also for helping them realistically assess their progress.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section focuses on key issues in ESP curriculum design based on our professional experience in developing the curriculum/syllabus for students in the Faculties of Horticulture, Animal Breeding, Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, for English, as well as French and German, based also on feed-back from the students, as well as from the teachers involved.

After having developed and taught the curriculum for students in the Faculties of Horticulture, Animal Breeding, Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, we drew up a list of the most frequently encountered abilities required of our students in the specific context created for them, in which they had to talk about field-specific topics. As a result, we reached the conclusion that there are three top abilities necessary for a successful communication in a professional environment, namely:

- the ability to use the domain-specific vocabulary (the so called "technical vocabulary")
- the ability to use a general set of academic skills (such as writing an article, delivering presentations, etc.)
- the ability to use everyday language (basic words and language structures that form the basis of all linguistic interactions).

These results were consistent with the ones presented by Kristen Gatehouse, who also noted that only the first two of these abilities strictly relate to ESP, while the third relates to what is commonly referred to as General English.

As we found out during this research study, one of the most significant challenges faced by the teacher when developing such a curriculum/syllabus resides in making sure that all three of these abilities are successfully and relevantly integrated into the curriculum/syllabus. This can be - and is - challenging for a number of reasons: first of all, the fields in question are not intimately familiar to the teacher, the specific vocabulary they involve is quite large, and there is, of course, a limited time span for language acquisition. Nunan (1987, p.75) also recognized that issues of time, skills and support are of key-importance for teachers faced with the task of developing curricula

Moreover, the students' language background differed considerably, therefore a comprehensive needs analysis had to be carried out before anything else was set, as the curriculum itself can be very dynamic, depending on the group of learners. Generally speaking, one of the main questions that needed to be answered when developing the curriculum was how much time needed to be devoted to vocabulary and content knowledge acquisition, and how much to general and academic language skills acquisition.

Of course, when tackling this aspect the teacher needed to consider the students' language level, first and foremost. Thus, with early intermediate and intermediate students, the time devoted to developing general language and academic skills had to be significantly higher than the time devoted to the acquisition of content knowledge. In addition to this, there was one other very important aspect that had to be taken into consideration: a significant part of the field-specific terminology in the fields of study of our students is of Latin origin. In fact, Wulff (2004) argues that "We have entered the era of medical English, which resembles the era of medical Latin in that, once again, medical doctors have chosen a single language for

international communication". Of course, as speakers of a Latin-based language (Romanian), the majority of the students had no problems in understanding the Latin-origin terminology in the target language, especially after having been briefly familiarized with the issue of root words, prefixes and suffixes. In as far as this aspect is concerned, based on the feed-back received from the students of Veterinary Medicine, we could come up with the results presented in the Tab. 1.

Tab. 1

Understanding and using Latin-based medical vocabulary

No. of 1st year students	Academic year	Latin-based vocabulary			
		Understanding		Use	
		No. of sts.	Percentage	No. of sts.	Percentage
89	2009-2010	78	87%	35	39%
78	2010-2011	69	88%	30	38%
93	2011-2012	83	89%	39	41%
75	2012-2013	70	93	31	41%

The results were very similar over the years in which we monitored this aspect and also similar to the results obtained by the other teachers involved in this research, though for different fields of study. The obvious conclusion we could draw was that there was no need for the teachers to focus on actually teaching Latin-based terminology, but rather on helping students become familiar with the linguistic rules behind Latin word formation.

However, as also obvious from the above percentages, even though most of the students could understand the meaning of these words, most of them could not also use them correctly or appropriately, and, therefore, the curriculum had to be further shaped so as to include more exercises on pronunciation, spelling and actual use of these words (production skills).

One other problem faced and already partly discussed was that relating to the students' language level and to the fact that, more often than not, despite setting minimum entrance standards, teachers had to teach heterogeneous groups of students over a limited period of time (1 year as compulsory discipline, 2 hours per week and 1 year as elective discipline, 1 hour per week). Moreover, students study foreign languages in the first or first two years of their academic training, which means that their field-specific knowledge is still rather general, which, according to Belcher, can be more of a challenge to the instructor who needs to deal with information they themselves are not intimately acquainted with, as well as teach their own students not just the language but some of the concepts they are also not very familiar with.

All these aspects had to be given serious consideration when tailoring the curriculum so as to fit the intermediate language level. Naturally, this means that there were students who struggled to catch up even when it came to General English skills and who found the ESP activities to be overwhelming, while there were also some who found the activities not challenging enough and who felt that they did not make the most of the learning situation. Either case could be frustrating. One strategy that we thought could be adopted so as to reduce this problem, as it was not possible to eliminate it, was to set separate tasks for these students, depending on their language level, while individualizing their long and short-term objectives.

All these issues considered, we reached the conclusion that, despite the fact that it is not possible to produce ESP textbooks, nor is it possible to create a standard curriculum/syllabus that can be adapted to the specific group of students, it is nevertheless

possible to set certain guidelines for developing syllabi/curricula. This way, we developed a set of concepts and principles that have helped and still help us come up with what we believe to be relevant syllabi for our students. These concepts and principles which are applied in our university unitarily for all the three languages taught (English, German, French) can be summed up as follows:

1. are designed to meet the specific needs of the learners.
2. are content-related (to particular disciplines or occupations).
3. use authentic profession-specific materials.
4. can be held at intermediate and advanced language levels.

This translated into a permanent and challenging task to always produce new appropriate materials that were both relevant and useful to our heterogeneous groups of students. However, this strenuous task was rendered more accessible by the fact that the materials used in the classroom were not – nor were they meant to be – entirely teacher-generated materials, as resources included mostly authentic materials. Domains such as Agriculture, Horticulture and Veterinary Medicine provide excellent and really interesting authentic materials that can be successfully integrated into the language learning process, such as: articles, documentaries, realia, etc.

## CONCLUSION

The demand for the teaching of English for clearly stated purposes translates into a demand for a language teaching approach focusing on the learner's personal needs, on the language itself - but not as a static set of rules, but in its most dynamic form, on the language in use. Moreover, it translates into a demand for dynamic curricula that must be constantly adapted by ESP teachers to the specific needs of every group of learners. As a result of the research study conducted by the foreign language teachers of our university, our students benefit from curricula and syllabi that meet their specific needs in terms of language learning needs. Furthermore, the principles and concepts developed could prove valuable to enhance and improve further ESP curricula taught in Romanian academic institutions.

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