

The Facilitating Role of ESP Courses for Computer Engineering Purposes

Ekaterine Pipia

International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia, Email: ekapipia@ibsu.edu.ge

Behcet Celik

Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq, E-mail: behcet.celik@ishik.edu.iq

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Abstract: The role of ESP courses to provide learners their specific needs in foreign language has been well recognized. ESP courses focus on the needs of the learners; therefore, they can help with achieving special requirements that are relevant to learners. This study aims to define ESP through putting forward its contributions to learners. And the main goal of this study is to put forth the use of ESP in computer Engineering.

Key Words: English for Specific Purposes, Need, Needs Analysis, Specific knowledge

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has played a prominent role in EFL teaching since the early 1960s. ESP is “essentially a training operation which seeks to provide learners with a restricted competence to enable them to cope with certain clearly defined texts” (Widdowson, 1983, p.6). Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as “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). ESP is based on the idea that all language teaching should be designed to the language needs of learners (Johns & Machado, 20001). In ESP courses the needs of the learners are given priority, learners will stand a better chance of enhancing their knowledge in the target language in their fields. Wright’s (1992) definition of ESP is “language learning which has its focus on all aspects of language pertaining to a particular field of human activity, while taking into account the time constraints imposed by learners” (adapted from Ibrahim, 2010, p. 201).

ESP is as Robinson (1991) puts it “goal-directed”, and the principal focus of ESP is on the needs of the learners, and it enables the learners to communicate effectively in their professional work (Bojovic, 2006). It allows learners to enrich their vocabulary knowledge related to their areas. ESP will motivate learners to succeed more in their areas, and consequently will lead to achievement in the career. ESP provides learners necessary skills they need in the foreign language to function effectively in their professional work.

ESP has become popular due to special requirements, technical vocabulary, text, communication or interaction knowledge (Harding, 2007). Graddol (1998) is of the opinion that traditional English teaching does not help learners with improving their competitiveness. Traditional English teaching focuses on development of basic language skills, and aims to enhance language proficiency of learners. Therefore, employment needs of learners cannot be met through traditional English teaching. Learners need to know English for specific purposes to become qualified employers.

Characteristics of ESP and EGP

Traditional English and ESP often differ as language is presented to learners for different purposes. Widdowson (1983) states important features of English for specific purpose (ESP) and English for general purpose (EGP) as:

EGP:

1. the focus is often on education;
2. as the learners' future needs are impossible to predict, the course content is more difficult to select;
3. due to the above point it is important for the content in the syllabus to have a high surrender value.

ESP:

1. the focus is on training;
2. as English is intended to be used in specific vocational contexts, the selection of the appropriate content is easier;
3. it is important for the content in the syllabus to have a high surrender value, most relevant to the vocational context;
4. the aim may be to create a restricted English competence.

The Principal Features of ESP

Compared to general English ESP focuses on specific needs of the learners. ESP gives more attention to specific linguistic knowledge and communication skills necessary to achieve specific purposes for a specific profession (Orr, 1998). Similarly, Lowe (2009) stresses the significance of specific learning needs in ESP. In ESP courses learners have more opportunities to improve their language level, as language is presented to them according to their specific needs.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that the development of ESP has been influenced by three factors:

- Attention to learners' need
- New ideas about language
- New ideas about learning

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that ESP differs from traditional English in that learners are aware of their needs in ESP courses. Since language learning is based on learners' needs in ESP courses, language learning process can be carried out through developing new ideas and strategies. So as to understand the contribution of ESP courses to language learning, it is useful to bear in mind the following features.

Stevens (1988, p.1-2) defines ESP by making a distinction between its absolute and variable characteristics as:

- a) Absolute characteristics:
 - designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
 - related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
 - centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
 - in contrast with General English.
- b) Variable characteristics:
 - restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only)
 - not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Dudley-Evans, (1998, pp. 4-5) through developing the definition of Strevens mentioned above, defines characteristics of ESP as:

I. Absolute Characteristics

- ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

II. Variable Characteristics

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- 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;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners

In order to perform some professional tasks, the use of needs analysis is helpful in ESP in that it determines which language skills will help learners to develop their language proficiency. As Dudley-Evans & St John (1998, p.121) mention “needs analysis is the process of establishing the *What* and *how* of a course”. Therefore, the needs of learners in a specific field are determined by needs analysis. There is link between needs analysis and ESP. Robinson (1991, p.7) stresses the connection as “needs analysis is generally regarded as critical to ESP”.

Long (2005) stresses the use of needs analysis in ESP courses, and argues that needs analysis will provide professional and personal information about learners. Once background information about their learning experiences, and attitudes towards foreign language, ideas about their language proficiency, needs in the target language is obtained, it will be easy to design an ESP course for them.

The Use of ESP in Computer Engineering

Gaur (2008), states that traditional English language teaching will not be useful for the learners who need English for specific reasons. It is inevitable that learners of English in the computer engineering field

must have a good command of spoken language, written language, and technical terminology. ESP courses in this field should be designed to meet job requirements. Splitt (1993) suggests that learners need to develop their communication skills to work with other people effectively. Learners' fluency will help them share their new ideas with their colleagues. Those who have the ability to communicate well are able to produce positive results, since they will work with the team with ease. Language proficiency in terms of writing and speaking hold an important place in ESP courses, because they will help learners achieve their workplace requirements. Riemer (2002) emphasizes the importance of communication in workplaces, as they will contribute to decision making and teamwork positively. Riemer concludes that "knowledge and technical knowhow are clearly important, but these must be presented with an excellent standard of communication skills particularly oral" (2002, p.94).

If a well-designed ESP course book has been decided upon, learners will have great opportunity to develop their language proficiency; in particular, their specific needs in their fields. Foreign language learners of computer engineering will stand a better chance of improving their level of English through ESP courses. Rather than enhancing their general English knowledge, it is more useful to provide them specific English to meet their job requirements.

Despite the strengths of ESP in Computer Engineering, there are some difficulties. According to my own experiences ESP course books do not always meet the needs of learners. If the course book doesn't meet the level of the learners it can result loss of interaction between learners and tutors which could become a significant weakness. Even if they are designed for ESP courses, they still hide General English course behind their title. But as ESP teachers we should always keep in mind that "Teachers can therefore be assured that course books from reputable publishers will serve them well, if properly selected and used. I used the word serve advisedly because course books are good servants but poor masters" (Cunningsworth, 1984, p.1). For professional development language proficiency is indispensable. Comprehension of technical terms will lead to coming up with new ideas, and presenting the ideas fluently will bring about accomplishment.

Conclusion

Traditional language teaching does not focus on a specific field because the content is very comprehensive. Learners are unable to study their specific needs in traditional English courses. As ESP gives attention to a specific field rather than educating learners in the target language in general, learners have an opportunity to improve their language level in a specific field. In addition to high level of oral skills, computer engineering students need to understand terms relevant to their field. ESP courses are able to provide learners with the skills they need in computer Engineering.

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