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Faculty of Letters and Languages

Didactics of Teaching ESP

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First Term

English Division

All Groups

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Definitions of ESP

There are almost as many definitions of ESP as the number of scholars who have attempted to define it. Many have tried to define ESP in terms of what it should and what it should not be, however, we would rather concentrate on finding out what ESP really means.

First, Mackay and Mountford (1978 :2) defined ESP as the teaching of English for a —*clearly utilitarian purpose*ℓ. The purpose they refer to is defined by the needs of the learners, which could be academic, occupational, or scientific. These needs in turn determine the content of the ESP curriculum to be taught and learned. Mackay and Mountford also defined ESP and the *special language* that takes place in specific settings by certain *participants*. They stated that those participants are usually adults.

They focused on adults because adults are usually *highly conscious* of the reasons to attain English proficiency in a determined field of specialization, and because adults make real use of special language in the special settings they work. They also argued that there is a close relationship among special settings and adults and the role, usually auxiliary, that English plays in those particular settings for those particular people.

Second, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider ESP as an approach rather than a product and say that the base of ESP is the question: why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? In relation to this, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:3) state, "the answer to the question relates to the learners, the language required and the learning context, and thus establishes the primacy of needs in ESP."

Third, Strevens (1988) defines ESP as containing 'absolute and variable characteristics'. According to him, absolute characteristics of ESP comprises English language teaching which is designed to meet specific needs of the learner; related in content (in its themes and topics) to specific disciplines, occupation and activities; centered on language appropriate to those

activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and so on and analysis of the discourse; and in contrast with 'General English'. On the other hand, the variable characteristics of ESP in the scholar's view state that it may be restricted to the learning skills to be learned (for example, reading only); and may not be taught according to any pre-ordinate methodology.

Fourth, Robinson (1991) accepting the primacy of needs analysis defines ESP based on two key defining criteria and a number of characteristics generally found to be true of ESP. The two criteria, she says, refer to the fact that ESP is 'normally goaloriented' and ESP courses are produced based on needs analysis (which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English).

Moreover, the general characteristics described by the scholar represent the key concepts as follows: ESP courses are taught to adults who are in homogeneous classes organized with respect to professional background or field of specialization and the objectives of the courses should be met, even if there is a limited time period.

Fifth, even if it is slightly similar with the above scholar's idea, Schleppegrell (1990) suggests that the common factor in all ESP programs is that they are designed for adults who have a common professional or job-related reasons for learning English, a common context in which to use English, content knowledge of their subject area, and well-developed learning strategies. Here it is possible to infer that the student brings to the ESP class a reason for learning and a context for use of English, knowledge of the vocational or professional field, and well equipped adult learning strategies.

However, all the definitions seem to have weaknesses. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) assert that the emphasis on content in the absolute characteristics of Strevens' may confirm the false impression held by many teachers that ESP is always and necessarily related directly to subject content. At the same time, Robinson's mention of 'homogenous classes' as characteristics of ESP may lead to the same conclusion. Strevens' definition appears to be the most comprehensive of all the four.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:4-5) have developed a complete definition of ESP which has revised the weaknesses of the above scholars and used absolute and variable characteristics in the definition as follows:

1. Absolute characteristics:

**ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;*

**ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves; and*

**ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.*

2. Variable Characteristics:

**ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;*

**ESP may use in specific teaching situations, a different methodology (the nature of interaction between the ESP teacher and the learner) from that of General English.*

**ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level; and*

**ESP is generally, designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.*

Here, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) seem to make three definitions. In the first place, they explain that ESP teaching does not necessarily have to be related to content but it should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad disciplines. Moreover, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) claim that ESP, linked to a particular profession or discipline, should make use of a methodology that differs from that used in General Purpose English teaching. That is to say, the methodology in ESP ought to refer to the nature of the interaction between the ESP teacher and the learners since the teacher sometimes becomes more like a language consultant enjoying equal status with the learners who have their own expertise in the subject matter.

Most importantly, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:4) believe that language should be included as a defining feature of ESP. While the specified needs arising from needs analysis relate to activities that students need to carry out (rather than language), a key assumption of ESP is that these activities generate and depend on registers, genres and associated language that students need to be able to manipulate in order to carryout activity.

To conclude, most definitions of what ESP is concur on three key topics: the nature of language to be taught and used, the learners, and the settings in which the teaching/learning process would occur.

These three aspects of ESP are closely connected to each other, and can be combined to establish that ESP is the teaching of specific and unique English (specialized discourse) to learners (adults in their majority), who will use it in a particular setting (laboratory, police station, hospital, etc.) in order to achieve a utilitarian goal or purpose (communicate linguistically correct), which in turn will fulfill additional personal goals (promotional, economical, etc.). What ESP specialists do not seem to agree on is what type of language

should be taught (vocabulary, register, jargon, etc.) and how to teach it (in context with content knowledge, communicatively, collaboratively, etc.) However, even though there is this agreement and discrepancy among ESP scholars, it is important to note that their many definitions are unequivocally linked to how ESP has developed since it was first spoken of in the 1960s.