

LATEST TRENDS IN ESP TEACHING

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Abstract: ESP has been around for plenty of time now to allow us to observe the evolution in both its scope and the teaching methodology employed, depending on the context where it is taught. The variety of purposes, learners and formats has certainly contributed to a diversification in approaches that teachers and trainers employ in order to achieve their most significant goal: fulfilling the learners' language needs, as they lie at the basis of teaching ESP. This paper will provide an overview of relevant literature in the field, in order to identify the latest trends and discuss how they apply to teaching ESP (specifically BE) at university level. Hopefully, it will paint a clear picture of what lies ahead for teaching professionals and how they can better adapt to the requirements of today's fast-paced, technologized world.

Keywords: latest trends; ESP; teaching methodology; BE; university students.

JEL Classification: F23, I21, I23.

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Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) took shape in the late 1960s, as a response to various factors, mostly connected with the unprecedented economic and technical expansion following the Second World War. This was coupled with a revolution in linguistics which, for the first time, had shifted its focus from describing the rules of grammar to discovering the ways in which it was “used in actual communication” (Widdowson, 1978 quoted in Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 7). Historically, ESP has been seen as part of the larger categories of ELT and LSP, with which, of course, it shares a multitude of characteristics. Nevertheless, the literature in the field provides several definitions, in various attempts to emphasize its specificities. While most theorists agree that needs analysis sits at the basis of ESP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) emphasise the fact that a big part of ESP teaching, especially that linked to a particular profession or discipline, uses a methodology that differs from the one used in General English teaching. Moreover, the authors stress two aspects of ESP methodology: “all ESP teaching should reflect the methodology of the disciplines and professions it

serves; and in more specific ESP teaching the nature of the interaction between the teacher and the learner may be very different from that in a general English class” (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998, p. 4). Twenty-five years later, this is still true, as teachers acknowledge more and more the importance of learner-led education, especially if they are job-experienced professionals (with equivalent qualifications in their field as the teacher/trainer) who have a very clear knowledge of the kind of language competence they need to perform their jobs.

In writing this paper, the aim is to go through the current trends in ESP teaching according to some of the latest literature in the field, while also making a few considerations on what that means for university students in the post-pandemic context.

Literature review

Back in 1994, Ellis and Johnson were listing the following five trends in teaching Business English as current at the time: language training v. skills training, the influence of management training, adapting teaching methodologies to the learners’ specific needs, cross-cultural awareness and growing professionalism (Ellis and Johnson, 1994, pp. 215-220). The first point emphasizes the fact that ESP teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching both language and skills. This is a reality that they must incorporate into their lesson planning, with the main focus being, of course, on language training. In terms of the second trend, the influence of management training, the two authors noticed an increased awareness in teacher development, which they predicted would continue in the future. In the case of cross-cultural awareness, they do note its potential to enrich Business English classes, but they “remain sceptical about the value of these activities in the language classroom unless they relate directly to the objectives agreed in advance by the sponsoring organisation and unless the trainers have a lot of knowledge and experience in this field” (Ellis and Johnson, 1994, pp. 219-220). The final trend that they identify essentially refers to the concept of lifelong learning, since teaching ESP requires the teacher to find a particular niche to specialise in, while also staying up to date with the needs and requirements of their learners.

A decade ago, Elżbieta Jendrych (2013, p. 43) identified the following seven new developments in teaching English for professional communication at tertiary level: (1) content-and-language integrated learning, (2) use of didactic case studies, (3) corpus studies conducted for teaching purposes, (4) more effective coursebooks, (5) extensive use of online materials and e-courses, (6) teaching writing for specialized purposes and (7) teaching cross-cultural and social skills, as a reflexion of the increasing demand from both learners and employers, who feel that a high level of proficiency and accuracy in the English language is essential and a prerequisite of success in the world of business nowadays. We notice that the last trend, teaching cross-cultural and social skills, echoes the cross-cultural awareness the previous authors mentioned almost 20 years before, which is a testament to its importance.

Five years later, Dana Poklepovic (2018) discussed the impact of current trends on Business English and, alongside the evolution of technology (and its integration in education) and the globalisation of business, she talked about the new management and leadership model affecting millennials who, although well-educated and holding academic degrees, need to develop skills necessary for managing effectively in an increasingly challenging and (culturally) diverse workplace. Moreover, she stressed the fact that

Generation Z (people born between the mid 1990s and 2010) was also entering the workforce, setting the bar even higher for the ESP teacher as these learners are significantly more digitally and language competent than previous generations. However, as companies were reducing their training and development budgets in the name of cost maximisation, Poklepovic predicted an increase in the number of distance-teaching courses. As it happens, with the subsequent health crisis starting in early 2020, everyone's predictions regarding the integration of technology into both teaching and learning have been confirmed and even exceeded. In the words of Chia Suan Chong (2021), "we realise that the events of 2020/21 might have fast-forwarded some of the trends that were already developing in our industry, but none of them come as a surprise. If anything, this serves as confirmation as to where English language teaching and learning is going and will be going in the years to come."

Yang, Xu and Swales (2023) have recently conducted a bibliometric analysis of 705 articles published in the English for Specific Purposes Journal (ESPJ) across the forty years it has been in existence, in an attempt to illustrate the development of the journal (and of ESP, implicitly) in terms of the most frequently explored topics, the most highly cited articles and the references of ESPJ articles. Their research resulted in the identification of two major trends: "a significantly increased focus on the analyses of target language varieties" and "a shift from the coverage of a wide range of teaching issues in the 1980s to the primacy of writing and literacy since the 2000s" (Yang, Xu and Swales, 2023, p. 149). Even more interesting for us is the fact that, among the top ten significantly increased topics over four decades, business is the only discipline (Yang, Xu and Swales, 2023). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this can be linked to globalisation and the boom in international trade in the 1990s. Thus, English for Business Purposes (EBP) has gained popularity, both in the academia (where we can talk about English for Academic Business Purposes – EABP, for students majoring in business) and in the professional environment (for those who needed to use English at work, hence the branch named English for Occupational Purposes – EOP). Nevertheless, as Diane Belcher (2009) rightfully points out, what ultimately unites all the various branches of ESP is the commitment to help learners achieve their purpose and fulfil their language needs.

Dou, Chan and Win (2023) have similarly conducted a semi-systematic review of the relevant ESP literature from three major databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar and the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure), covering the key words "ESP development," "needs analysis," "future of ESP," "technology of ESP" and "interculture and ESP." Their aim was to follow the changes in ESP research historically, from 1962 to present day, and also identify the implications for the future based on the developments throughout the years. They conclude that needs analysis is still very much researched today, since learners' priorities have very much shifted through the years, mirroring the changes in society, and so is the use of information technology, which has been making a great impact on ESP. The growing access the technology stresses, in turn, the importance of teaching a foreign language in context, which highlights the need for intercultural competence. Thus, the authors emphasize the need for a revisit of needs analysis in the future while also recognising the importance of technological advances and intercultural communication.

In more practical terms, according to an ELT marketing and language-schools consultant, there are several digital and education trends that will impact ELT in 2023. The three main

digital trends are Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically ChatGPT, and the Metaverse (Rodriguez, 2023). The launch of ChatGPT has taken the education field by storm, prompting heated debates and calls for action from worried teachers across all education levels who fear that it will replace students' work entirely and lead to generalised plagiarism. The abrupt switch to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly opened the door for the extensive introduction of technology in the classroom, and returning to on-site activities has not automatically led to its elimination. As expected, we are now witnessing a process of hybridization in education, where the lessons from the pandemic have impacted, at least in part, both the teaching and learning processes. In terms of the education trends that will impact ELT in 2023, Rodriguez lists the following four: soft skills for employability, social emotional learning, inclusion and diversity and financial literacy (Rodriguez, 2023). Perhaps the most important one from the viewpoint of teaching ELT (and ESP specifically) is the first one, which essentially shows that there has been a shift from teaching English as a subject to viewing it as an essential tool that helps students communicate and work globally (Rodriguez, 2023). Thus, ESP becomes particularly relevant, especially at university level, as students specialise in their desired field of work.

Similarly, a leading ELT professional specialising in Business English points out that, in opposition to traditional language learning, teachers nowadays must acknowledge trends such as learning on-demand, personalised learning, microlearning, technology being mainstream rather than an add-on and there should also be an overall switch from assessing language learning proficiency to the effectiveness of communication that is actually achieved in the workplace through the use of English as a lingua franca (Frendo, 2023).

If we were to summarise the latest trends in ESP teaching according to the sources presented above, we would be able to identify two major directions. The first one is undoubtedly the integration of technology into the processes of teaching, learning, assessing and communicating, whether they occur exclusively or partially (to various degrees) through the virtual medium. At this point in time, we can neither ignore nor minimise the impact technology has had over our lives and the education process in the last two to three years. The second direction involves the further specialisation of the ESP teacher, to better suit the specific needs of the learner while, at the same time, focussing on the effectiveness of (intercultural) communication, rather than traditional language proficiency.

Considering these two main directions, the ESP teacher needs to find ways to implement any necessary changes to the curriculum and teaching methodology based on the assessment of the particular learning context. Below are some considerations regarding the implications of these trends on the teaching of ESP, specifically English for business, at university level, as we readjust following the challenges brought about by the recent global health crisis.

Practical considerations on the current trends in esp teaching at university level

The pandemic has certainly left an imprint on the recent approaches to ESP teaching. Three years after its debut, with the world having gone back to on-site activities, the integration of technology in learning and teaching on a large scale has not quite been implemented at our university, although the national legislation has been modified to allow for a higher percentage of online activities in the case of distance learning programmes (the initial

meeting and the final evaluation must take place on-site). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the pandemic context, after the forced transition to online activities, both students and teachers seem to have developed a distaste for technology-mediated interaction, but there is no denying that its role in education has certainly been strengthened. There are now more employees working remotely on a permanent basis and conferences being held exclusively online or organised as hybrid events, because the flexibility provided by the use of technology in such situations has been proven to work well for everyone involved.

In the Business English classroom, the return to on-site activities brought an improvement in communication (the new channels used during the pandemic have remained open) and the opportunity to learn from the experience of the past couple of years, while looking ahead at what comes next in the field of ESP teaching.

Implementing the process of needs analysis in relation with the specificity of English as a lingua franca in the post-pandemic world may lead to some interesting conclusions. The 2023-2024 academic year has marked a premiere in my academic career as lecturer at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași. There are two international students (from outside of Europe) enrolled in the programmes that I teach English to: one is specialising in Management at undergraduate level and the other is studying Economics and international business at master's level. The Erasmus exchange programme at our university has, of course, been implemented for many years, with no shortage of international students spending a semester or two here, while attending regular or tutorial type courses. However, this is the first time I have had the pleasure of working with international students as part of regular full-time courses, and although the limited number does not justify any generalisations, it has allowed me to form an opinion on the current direction of ESP teaching at university level. If nothing else, the pandemic seems to have opened more channels for communication and encouraged movement towards obtaining an international education, while potentially working remotely at the same time (my master's student is currently working remotely for an American company outsourcing its operations to her native Central-American country). As previously shown, a lot of specialists in the field of ESP were predicting that the extensive use technology will take over as the leading trend (either for teaching, learning or overall providing easier access to education or even revolutionising the classroom as we know it through the use of AI and virtual reality). However, what has not been stated as clearly is what seems to be an increased interest in studying internationally (on-site, not remotely!), which may be the result of increased visibility of education institutions, together with a stronger desire to travel after a period of severe restrictions and the appeal of newly-available possibilities of combining remote activities (such as work) with studying abroad full-time.

In terms of analysing the students' needs with regard to preparing for or using English at work, the recent years have brought changes here as well. According to my students who are currently employed, the pandemic has increased usage of English as part of their daily activities as there was more interaction with other nationalities while also providing opportunities for finding work internationally (due to the prevalence of online activities). This has led, in turn, to the necessity of acquiring new skills, such as creating a video CV, managing videoconferences or negotiating with foreign partners, all in a foreign language and mediated by technology. Thus, the Business English teacher is now faced with preparing students for a world of business that is conducted both online and offline, with skills overlapping but also with new challenges arising every day. Using English as a lingua

franca guarantees its dynamism, but this puts a lot of pressure on the ESP trainer, who needs to be constantly up to date with the requirements of the business world (or any other field they specialise in), if they want to best prepare learners for the work they have to perform. Consequently, we might witness teachers further specialising in an area of ESP, as they try to balance language teaching with learning the specific skills required in that field, so that the content is relevant to the learner. Ellis and Johnson (1994) pointed out that language training should remain the main focus, but even the language content (mostly vocabulary, but not limited to it) used in a particular field may not have been covered during the teacher's initial training, which highlights the need to permanently be up to date with the developments in their area of ESP.

Conclusions

This overview of some of the current trends in ESP is certainly not exhaustive and it goes without saying that some trends have more staying power than others. Predictions can also be confirmed or disproved, but it is generally beneficial to be aware of trends so that one can learn from them and adapt to the current realities. English for Specific Purposes encompasses a variety of fields, so it is particularly important in this case to be aware of what is new both in the general sphere of language teaching and in the specific domain one is focussing on (i.e., business, finance, marketing, law, medicine etc.).

As we have seen, the two main directions ESP teaching is moving towards involve the use of technology and further specialisation, while keeping the learners' needs in mind and constantly adapting to the requirements of the job market. Conversely, one must not forget the fact that education and teaching must still rely on planning and predictability and, in this particular case, the focus should remain on language competence, so changes on a large scale do take time and effort. But, as is the case with teaching intercultural competence for instance, the first step is awareness, and knowledge of the current trends can only be beneficial to one's professional development.

Teaching ESP to university students can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of implementing the new trends. The number of learners is usually very large, their language level is not uniform and most of them are pre-experienced. Technology can certainly help with communication, assessment and access to resources, but it can also act as a barrier to direct interaction and personalised learning. In terms of the second future direction identified above, further specialisation cannot occur until students themselves choose a career path that enables them to better define their learning needs. Thus, the teacher must be prepared to provide a general overview of the topics and areas ESP covers, so as to point out its specificity and then assist learners with their individual language competence requirements when the need arises. Moreover, as the number of international students continues to increase at our institution and elsewhere, the importance of intercultural competence as part of the ESP courses cannot be overlooked.

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