

## The notion of ESP and its distinctive characteristics

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### **Abstract**

The article deals with the issue of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) revealing its different features described by a number of scholars. It expresses various reliable judgments on how to differentiate ESP courses from other similar ones, what constitutes absolute and variable characteristics of the term, what aspects to be considered while organizing these lessons, as well as specifications of its sub-divisions.

**Key words:** ESP, learners' needs, absolute character, variable character, language skills, authentic materials.

Possessing its own characteristics and specifications teaching ESP which stands for English for Specific Purposes has grown as a discrete and inseparable part of teaching English. ESP is oriented to a specific field including terminology or knowledge of English within the scope of that sphere. It should be stated that although it is a specific part of teaching English, scholars hold different opinions about the definitions of ESP. To illustrate, Munby (1978) defines ESP as "courses where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner". This explanation is quite concise as it is considered one of the early definitions, and it suggests ESP courses are organized according to learner's needs. In other words, learners are exposed to an English course in which they themselves put the course objectives forward. Other scholars, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider ESP to be an approach rather than a product. They claim that ESP is not restricted with certain teaching materials or methodology; however, it focuses on a primary goal of learning English: what is learning process intended for? Robinson (1991) also defines ESP in this way that "purposeful and aimed at the successful performance of occupational or educational goals. They are based on rigorous needs analysis of students, needs should be, tailor-made". Robinson makes an emphasis on two important aspects of ESP: firstly, it is "goal-oriented" (any ESP course sets precise goals to reach at the end of the course); secondly, it is mostly limited in terms of time. Therefore, an ESP practitioner is required to develop a course taking into consideration both students' needs and a period during which fore set goals to be achieved. Limited time of attaining intended goals is highlighted in this explanation though it patently supports the above

mentioned definitions by concentrating on one of the crucial aspects of ESP, needs analysis. Agreeing with these definitions, another scholar, Streven (1988) puts it more clearly, to be more precise, he firmly believes in a wide gap between absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. Absolute characteristics of ESP can be perceived as coincidence of the course with learning needs, learners' potential involvement in a certain sphere of activities and study of lexical units only pertaining to that area. Variable characteristics merely possess language skills (they dictate that one of the language skills (e.g. writing) takes priority over others during ESP courses), and they are not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology. Holding almost identical opinions with other language experts, one of the profound scholars in ELT, Kennedy Bolitho also puts his ideas forward stating that the most primary characteristics of ESP is an investigation of the purposes of the learner and the set of communicative needs arising from those needs.

All of these statements give a clear image of how ESP courses should be arranged as well as what aspects need to be considered while dealing with them. However, a full definition is illustrated by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) who added some detailed characteristics to Streven's definition. According to the scholars' explanation, absolute characteristics of ESP should bear the following features: a) ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner; b) ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves; c) ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities. Alongside with absolute characteristics, variable ones are also provided by Dudley-Evans and St John just like Streven's definition: a) ESP may be related or designed for specific disciplines; b) ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English; c) ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation; it could be used for learners at secondary school level; d) ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners; and e) most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Although ESP possesses a number of subdivisions concerning its peculiarities, it has traditionally been divided into two main areas according to when it takes place: 1) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) involving pre-experience, simultaneous/in-service and post-experience courses, and 2) English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) for study in a specific discipline (pre-study, in-study, and post-study) or as a school subject (independent or integrated). Pre-experience or pre-study course will omit any specific work related to the actual discipline or work as students will not

yet have the needed familiarity with the content. The opportunity for specific or integrated work will be provided during in service or in-study courses.

It should be stated as each ESP course has its own peculiarities and distinctive characteristics, scholars pool diverse opinions concerning specific characteristics of ESP courses. However, one of those language experts, Carver (1983) states that there are three characteristics common to ESP courses: a) Authentic materials (the use of authentic learning materials is possible if the claim is accepted that ESP courses should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level); b) Purpose-related orientation which refers to the simulation of communicative tasks required by the target situation. The teacher can give students different tasks to simulate the conference preparation, involving the preparation of papers, reading, note-taking, writing and etc; c) Self-direction which means that ESP is concerned with turning learners into users. For self –direction, it is necessary that teachers encourage students to have a certain degree of autonomy – freedom to decide when, what, and how they will study. For high-ability learners it is essential to learn how to access information in a new culture.

Although other suggestions have been made by many scholars, characteristics of ESP illustrated by Carver are considered to be elaborate so far. It includes most essential features of ESP courses including authentic materials in fact. Nevertheless, his opinions about usage of authentic materials are opposed in some cases because authentic materials are not always preferable for classroom usage as they make demands on learners' cognition in terms of degree of difficulty. Therefore, it is firmly believed that authentic materials should be brought into ESP classrooms after a careful selection by instructors.

Summing up all above mentioned assumptions, it can be stated that ESP is a specific part of general English in which courses are organized in accordance with learners' needs. The participants play a great role in organizing lessons, setting objectives and determining approaches for the lesson. In essence, ESP courses are conducted at different academic institutions to improve learners' language proficiency in specific areas.

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