

# 16 A process approach to English for Specific Purposes

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## Key words

Roles of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practitioner

Needs Analysis (NA)

Course design

Task design

## In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

How is ESP different from General English (GE)?

What are the various roles an ESP teacher has to tackle, and how are they different from the role of a GE teacher?

Why is a needs analysis essential when planning an ESP course?

What should teachers consider when designing courses and tasks?

## Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Revisiting the English Language Teaching (ELT) tree which Hutchinson and Waters used to illustrate the many branches of ELT in 1987, it is clear that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become one of the most prominent areas of English foreign language teaching and learning in the decades since its publication (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). This development is particularly linked with phenomena such as globalization, internationalization, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the growing demands of a global labour market. ESP focuses on language areas required to meet the immediate professional and/or academic demands of specific fields (e.g., Business English, English for Engineering, English for Medical Purposes). This strong focus on the target situation makes ESP a special case in foreign language teaching.

The most commonly accepted definition of ESP is provided by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), who propose absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. Absolute characteristics are always present in ESP, while variable characteristics may be, but are not necessarily, part of ESP:

### Absolute characteristics of ESP

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner.
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline that it serves.
- ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre.

### Variable characteristics of ESP

- 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 designed for learners at secondary school level.
- ESP is generally taught to intermediate or advanced learners.
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the general language system.

(Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, pp. 4-5)

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the difference between ESP and GE in theory is minor, but there is a great deal of difference in practice. In ESP teaching, learner-centredness is foregrounded. This means that learners' needs and goals have to be considered above all else. GE, on the other hand, is language-centred and focuses "on learning language from a broad perception covering all the language skills and the cultural aspects of the English-speaking community in which the language itself is the subject matter and the purpose of the course" (Robinson, 1980, p. 6).

Based on a hands-on communicative approach, ESP tasks and curricula are designed in such a way that they meet the needs of learners' academic and/or professional environments. This is in line with Hutchinson & Waters (1987), who argue that "ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but 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). Teaching ESP thus requires an in-depth understanding of specific language needs, excellent pedagogical skills and profound knowledge of learners' specific professional contexts. Together, these elements form the foundation of any ESP course.

As language specialists, ESP teachers sometimes lack sufficient background knowledge of the technical areas their learners are involved in. They may therefore

struggle to discuss highly complex subject matter in very specific professional contexts in English, even though they are proficient speakers of (general) English. In order to meet the challenges posed by a specific ESP context, teachers must have several key competences in areas such as needs analysis, lesson planning and materials design.

### **ESP in Austrian settings: *Handelsakademie (HAK)* and *Fachhochschule (FH)***

ESP has been well established in secondary commercial and technical schools and tertiary education in Austria for a long time. This chapter focuses on ESP at *HAKs* and *FHs* (see below) as each of the authors of this chapter teaches at one of these institutions.

The so-called *BHS (Berufsbildende Höhere Schulen)* sector in Austria is very diverse, comprising many different school types. For example, there is *HAK*, which focuses on subjects such as Accounting, Business Studies, and Controlling. Another type is *HLW (Höhere Lehranstalt für Wirtschaftliche Berufe)* where these subjects are also taught, but, depending on the school's specialisation, subjects such as catering and hotel business or project and event management are an essential part of the learners' education as well. *HTL (Höhere Technische Lehranstalt)*, on the other hand, specialises in technology and engineering subjects which can range from IT to mechanical or industrial engineering. *BHS* schools design their English classes with a more specific focus on professional communication than *AHS* in order to better prepare their learners for the world of work.

Usually, novice Austrian English teachers are well-equipped with all the necessary skills and tools required to teach general language aspects (e.g., grammar and pronunciation) or prepare communicative tasks (see chapter 11 in this volume). Therefore, they have little trouble teaching topics from both private and public life, such as school, family and friends, media or entertainment in a *BHS* setting. However, there are some areas where teachers definitely have to face challenges when teaching at a *BHS*, as some areas of the *BHS* curriculum differ dramatically from that of the *AHS*, for example, the focus on business-related topics in *HAK*.

General topics are, of course, part of the *HAK* curriculum as well, but there is a strong focus on business-related topics, such as the world of work, office equipment, jobs, forms of enterprise, trade fairs, corporate social responsibility and marketing (tools). For example, the subject of Business Behaviour (BB) is taught in English in one grade (each school can decide individually whether BB is taught in Eng-

lish in grade 11 or 12). The topics that are addressed in BB are intercultural competence, conflict management, dealing with customer complaints, giving product presentations, customer service and working abroad, to name just a few. Approaches to BB course design differ from school to school, ranging from using coursebooks or designing course materials to a combination of coursebooks and individually designed course materials. All of these options can be challenging for English teachers who do not have a background in business.

The so-called *Übungsfirmen* (classroom-based models of companies that allow learners to participate in business processes) are another feature of *HAK* which presents challenges to teachers who are trained to teach GE and have little previous experience of ESP. Each *HAK* has several *Übungsfirmen* where learners in their fourth year usually work in one of the departments, e.g., the sales, purchasing, or marketing department, and even do business with *Übungsfirmen* from other schools. This may be unfamiliar territory for many English teachers.

Similarly, written business communication is a vital part of teaching English at *BHS*. In addition to preparing learners for the different text types which are relevant for the *schriftliche Reife- und Diplomprüfung* (sRDP, equivalent to *Matura* in *AHS*), which include blog posts and reports, the *BHS* curriculum requires teachers to include other writing skills, such as taking notes, creating brochures, writing job ads, writing memos, business e-mails and letters (e.g., enquiry, offer, complaint, reminder), and analysing graphs. Either coursebooks are used for this or the materials are designed by the respective teachers (see chapter 6 in this volume). This decision is normally in the hands of the English teachers at each school. Designing ESP materials is an unfamiliar task for many teachers with a background in GE and can therefore be rather time-consuming.

In order to effectively support their learners in the business-related subjects that are typical of *HAK*, teachers need thorough knowledge of subject-specific vocabulary and discourse, which novice teachers often lack. Thus, teachers have to invest a significant amount of time at the beginning of their teaching career in familiarising themselves not only with these terms, but also with the concepts related to these topics.

Like *BHS*, tertiary education has also recently seen an enormous increase in ESP classes, predominately at *FHs*. *Fachhochschulen* (*FHs*), commonly called Universities of Applied Sciences in English, are institutions of higher education which focus on vocational and professional degrees, especially in engineering, business, and health professions. Many of the degree programmes at *FHs* include mandatory English lessons that focus on the language demands of the learners' field of study, with

a view to enhancing graduates' employability on the global job market. *FH* graduates often have to function in an international workplace in which subject-specific communication skills are required. Because of this, most Bachelor's and Master's Degree Programmes include language components which have a strong ESP focus. Courses such as English for Aviation, IT Industry English, English for Scientific Purposes or Counselling Skills & Practices have found their places within the respective degree programmes (i.e., Aviation, Computer Sciences, Social Work etc.) and aim to prepare *FH* graduates for their professional lives.

ESP teachers operating in a specific department – whether it be automotive engineering or management – have to understand the needs of their learners in order to improve their international prospects and employability. This requires a certain commitment to the content of the degree programme and the willingness to remain in constant dialogue with faculty members, the industry and the learners, in order to meet an “ever-diversifying and expanding range of purposes” (Belcher, 2006, p.134). It is the ESP teacher's responsibility to enable learners to stay up to date and follow language-related trends later in their jobs.

Teaching ESP at *BHS* or *FHs* is a complex task that requires a lot of flexibility and willingness to engage with different content areas (see chapter 18 in this volume). It is therefore helpful to look at different aspects of the work of the ESP teacher.

### **Teacher roles in ESP**

Working in an ESP classroom profoundly affects the teacher's role in terms of beliefs about teaching, content development and syllabus design. According to a popular model proposed by Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), the true ESP teacher or ESP practitioner has to fulfil five key roles: teacher, collaborator, course designer/materials provider (see the section on approaches to course and task design below), researcher and evaluator. While the ‘teacher’ role is quite similar to what is found in the General English setting, the other four roles are significantly different in ESP.

The role of the collaborator is central to the work of an ESP teacher. After all, it is often the case that learners know more about a specific field or discipline than the ESP practitioner, which generates ample opportunities to collaborate and draw on the knowledge of the learners to enhance the learning experience within the classroom. By contrast, when writing a report, for example, the teacher is the expert, but their role should be that of the facilitator. Ideally, the learners should ask the questions and the teacher should then be guided by these questions in their teaching. This ensures that learners get the information they need.

ESP teachers often collaborate not only with their learners, but with experts in a specific field as well. This is especially important in their role as course designer/materials provider, to make sure that the materials provided by the teacher are relevant to learners and reflect the current reality in their field. Forms of collaboration range from jointly designing tasks to exchanging information on specialist activities and language. One of the best options would be for a subject expert and a language teacher to team-teach (which is sometimes the case at *FHs*), so that they can benefit from each other's knowledge and expertise.

Course and materials design also requires ESP practitioners to take on the role of a researcher and make sure that they are up-to-date on developments in the relevant subject area. Studying specialist publications and current research facilitates the ESP practitioner's understanding of the underlying concepts which learners need to assimilate.

Finally, the ESP practitioner must also play the role of an evaluator. This includes not only the testing of learners, but also the evaluation of courses and teaching materials. Materials should be adapted regularly to reflect the latest developments in the field, which can be quite a challenge, as many teachers struggle with a heavy workload. As a result, investing time in evaluation and research is often not given the priority it deserves.

### **The role of a Needs Analysis (NA)**

NA is considered to be a cornerstone of ESP (see for example Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). As Hyland (2006) explains:

[a] needs analysis refers to the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to course design: it is the means of establishing the how and what of a course. It is a continuous process, since we modify our teaching as we come to learn more about our learners [...]. Needs is actually an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate in. Needs can involve what learners know, do not know or want to know, and can be collected and analyzed in a variety of ways (p. 73-74).

In other words, in order to determine the proper content, methods and materials for an ESP course, it is not only the teaching environment that has to be analysed, but the teaching / learning objectives and the target situation as well. A NA can take

many forms and needs to be adjusted depending on the specific situation. Language tests, observations, questionnaires, surveys and interviews are just a few examples of tools used to conduct a NA.

In addition to an initial NA, further analyses can be conducted during and even after a period of instruction, in order to gain an even clearer picture of learners' specific needs. In fact, such an ongoing needs analysis is of utmost importance, since it "is the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of learners within the context of the particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation" (Brown, 1995, as cited in Brown, 2016, p. 4). The aim of a NA is not only to determine the current situation, but also to identify tasks that learners might one day perform in the L2.

After it has been decided what information should be gathered and why, the ESP teacher has to decide when, from whom and how this should be done. Once all the information has been collected, the teacher has to analyse the data. Belcher (2006) explains that an ongoing NA process yields various kinds of data which, when interpreted properly, allow the teacher to meet the needs of learners. The findings have to be converted into communicative events by designing appropriate teaching units and activities. Finally, the efficacy of the ESP instruction has to be evaluated and changes have to be made in order to optimize the processes and approaches used.

For example, a teacher might hand out a questionnaire to gather information on their learners' interests and goals at the beginning of an ESP course. At various points during the course, this could be followed by observations that help the teacher to determine learners' level of English and/or interviews about the situations in which learners are likely to use English in their professional lives. The information gathered in these ways is then used to design tasks that meet learners' needs. For example, if the teacher finds out that learners have trouble expressing themselves spontaneously, but their goals include making small talk with business partners, it is clear that learners need help developing their oral fluency. Thus, once enough relevant data has been gathered, the ESP teacher can start developing effective activities and tasks.



## Approaches to course and task design

Course design is based on the results of the NA, the ESP teacher's approach to the syllabus and methodology, and the use of existing and new materials. It is a dynamic process, as the course needs to respond to developments in research and feedback from learners.

Richards (2001) establishes the different steps of this process: developing a course rationale; describing entry and exit levels; and choosing course content. Having outlined the ESP course objectives, the teacher then designs specific tasks. This can be quite time-consuming due to the complexity of the subject matter and the lack of proper materials in the form of coursebooks and pre-defined chapters. As Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) explain: "ESP practitioners often have to plan the course they teach and provide the materials for it. It is rarely possible to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material, and sometimes no really suitable published material exists for certain of the identified needs" (p. 14).

Designing tasks usually involves three stages: choosing suitable published materials, adapting these to the specific courses taught and writing new materials when nothing suitable exists (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). At *FHs*, more often than not, the latter is the case, whereas for *BHS* many coursebooks are available for teaching English and Business English (e.g., *Focus on Modern Business*, *Focus on Modern Business Communication*, *Business in Context*, *Focus on Farm Management and Home Economics*, *Context@HTL*, *Best Shots*, *English Unlimited*). However, based on our experience, we have observed that even those teachers who use coursebooks supplement them with articles, short texts and video clips to enrich the learning experience for their learners. When choosing appropriate visual or written material, it is essential to keep learners' level of English in mind. If the materials are too difficult, some learners will definitely feel lost or frustrated and sometimes even withdraw from doing the task.

According to Widdowson (1984), ESP courses should be planned with a process-oriented approach in mind. Such an approach

accepts from the outset that the language data given to the learner will not be preserved in stone intact but will be used as grist to the mental mill. Hence the language content of the course should be selected not because it is representative of what the learner will have to deal with after the course is over, but because it is likely to activate strategies for learning while the course is in progress (Widdowson, 1984, p. 198).

For example, learners should not be presented with ready-made lists of subject-specific vocabulary in an ESP course. Instead, they should be given the opportunity to practice the skills they will need to find relevant vocabulary when they need it once they use English in their professional lives.

Another consideration which is of utmost importance, especially at the secondary level, is to design tasks that relate to learners' everyday lives. This is particularly tricky in the area of business communication because the experience of writing an enquiry, a reminder or a complaint is often alien to learners, who are still in full-time education. One way to spark their interest in such writing tasks is to design tasks around products they are interested in, such as the newest iPhone model, headphones or video games.

All in all, for the ESP practitioner, learning along with learners is essential, as increasing their knowledge in the subject matter is crucial for the success of their courses. If learners' needs are met and their interests are taken into account, this increases their motivation and willingness to participate actively when doing the tasks and activities.

## Practical applications

### Example 1 – BHS

**Goal:** learners will invent a product; learners will use subject-specific language; learners will present their product; learners will give feedback on presentations; learners will become aware of Dos and Don'ts for presentations

**Activity:** product presentation

**Rationale:** to prepare learners for real-life presentations in their future professional careers

**Pre-knowledge:** presentation phrases, as required for the sustained monologue part of the mRDP (*mündliche Reife- und Diplomprüfung*)

**Level:** CEFR B1+ and above

### Procedure

1. The teacher tells learners to get into small groups (three or four learners in each).
2. Learners are asked to invent a product of their choice.

3. The teacher instructs learners to think about the target group, size, shape, features, colour, price of their product.
4. In their small groups, learners decide if they want to use PowerPoint, Prezi, a poster, etc. to give their 3-5 minute presentation.
5. During the presentation, each group has to take notes on the presentation of another group.
6. In their small groups, learners write a comment about the presentation (length, use of presentation phrases, content and one useful tip for future presentations).
7. Learners post comments for each group on a learning platform for the whole class to read.
8. Every learner must read all comments on the respective presentations to gather ideas for Dos and Don'ts for giving presentations.
9. In the next class, the teacher or a learner collects Dos and Don'ts on the board (or alternatively, in a Word document using a data projector).
10. Lists of Dos and Don'ts are posted on a learning platform for the whole class to access.

This activity could also be done with prompt cards depicting various products that are handed out to the small groups.

### **Example 2 – FH**

**Goal:** learners will read articles from their field of study; learners will summarize articles orally based on notes; learners will write and perform a podcast; learners will revise important vocabulary and expressions in the context of their study programme; learners will give feedback to their peers

**Activity:** creating a podcast

**Rationale:** to reflect real-life language use in the context of learners' field of study

**Pre-knowledge:** advanced reading skills; familiarity with podcasts

**Level:** CEFR B2+ and above

### **Procedure**

1. Learners should pick one article (related to their field of study) from a list and read it carefully. Then learners have to summarize the article.

2. Once step one is completed, learners form groups of max. 3 people (who have chosen different topics) and discuss briefly the most interesting issues in their articles and their relevance for society as a whole or for themselves.
3. In the respective groups, learners decide on the article they found most interesting and prepare to create a podcast session on it. They have to take the chosen article as a starting point. (Podcast requirements: length 4-6 minutes, learners are asked to make use of the vocabulary revised in the current semester and are further encouraged to have a lively discussion in their podcast.)
4. Every group member should now read the article chosen by the group to get more insight into the topic.
5. In the next step, learners have to decide on the points they want to make and the topics they want to address in their podcast.
6. In addition, learners have to consult the guidelines for creating podcasts (materials to be found on the learning platform). In their groups, learners have to assign roles: host, special guest etc. They also have to determine the interviewees who they want to invite onto their podcast. Finally, learners are asked to give their podcast series a name.
7. Once the set-up is clear, learners are invited to prepare their text for the podcast session.
8. Before finalising their texts for the podcast, learners are asked to pick 5 words / phrases / collocations they find especially useful in their article. These words form the basis for a 'Words of the Day' activity on the learning platform.
9. As a follow-up assignment, learners should record their podcast at home (e.g., on a smartphone) and should upload their file to the learning platform

### **Follow-up activity:**

Learners listen to at least 3 podcast sessions created by their classmates and post one forum entry on "Words of the Day" or the content of the podcast session.

## **Activities and questions for reflection**

1. Which of the roles of the ESP practitioner would you personally find most challenging? Why?
2. Design a Needs Analysis (NA) task for an ESP course in a content area of your choice.

3. Are there any aspects of course and task design for ESP that you consider particularly challenging?

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## Suggestions for further reading

- Brown, J. D. (2016). *Introducing Needs Analysis and English for Specific Purposes*. Routledge.

This book is essential reading for both pre-service and in-service teachers as it provides a theoretical and practical guide for curriculum development in ESP. Personal reflection exercises and examples of real-world applications of needs analysis in ESP can be found as well.

- Hafner, C. A., & Miller, L. (2018). *English in the Disciplines: A Multidimensional Model for ESP Course Design*. Routledge.

This book shows how fundamental principles of ESP can be adapted to new contexts of learning in the digital age. Examples of teaching materials and learning activities are provided. A new model for ESP course design concludes the book.

Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (Eds.). (2013). *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*. Wiley-Blackwell.

This handbook gives a comprehensive overview of the history and different areas of ESP research, ESP and language skills, ESP pedagogy and methodologies.

## **Commentary on reflection questions**

**1. to 3.** Your answers to the reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection in the area of ESP.