

# Theoretical Framework & Growing Demand of ESP in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

This paper aims to discuss theoretical framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and its growing demand in Saudi Arabian colleges and universities. ESP, which emerged as an approach to English language teaching in the 1960s has become immensely useful for teaching English to students of science & technology, business and management who are pursuing higher studies in Saudi Arabian universities. ESP is equally relevant for professionals such as doctors, engineers, businessmen, lawyers, artists, factory workers and other kinds of learners who have already entered in job markets. The present study also aims to explore the challenges ESP specialists are facing in ESP teaching scenario. It is recommended that ESP students be provided with content-based textbooks which incorporate topic-based, task-based and theme-based components. Subject oriented textbook must be carried through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. It is also suggested that although teachers assigned to teach ESP courses need not be expert in the given specific domain but they should at least evince interest and gather necessary information about the specific contents prescribed in the ESP courses. This will definitely boost ESP teachers' expertise and confidence. By introducing content and task based syllabi with focused language goal for Saudi students, ESP can prove to be a catalyst for developing their language skills thereby making them more effective in their academic and professional pursuit.

**Keywords:** Business English, theoretical framework, content based textbook, activity based textbooks, professional pursuit, academic pursuit, teaching methodologies.

## 1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner -centered approach to teaching English as a foreign/ second language. It has become well known in the ELT circle, especially because English has acquired the status of an international lingua franca, and linguists have moved towards a situation based notion of language. The initial studies on "special languages" were basically on register, which developed in a Firthian environment. Following in Halliday's footsteps (Halliday, 1978), British linguists who identified 'special registers' considered them sufficient for teaching purposes to distinguish them from common language. However, as discovered later, register differences do not apply to the lexical level only, but also concern morpho-syntactic choices and textual and pragmatic organization. As Robert Phillipson (1992) points out, "English has a dominant position in science and technology, medicine, and computer, in research, books, trade, shipping and aviation. The dominant position of English is strengthened rather than weakened with the development of world economy and technology as well the widespread use of computers and the internet. The social situation of each of the sub-divisions of ESP exerts a strong influence on the linguistic strategies that are to be adopted. Therefore contextual and functional needs must be taken into account while designing ESP curriculum.

Saudi Arabia is not an exception. English is used and taught at tertiary levels of education. In fact, looking in Saudi Arabian context 'English for Specific Purposes' is much in demand today. The teachers and the students realize that in health colleges, engineering colleges & business and management colleges, ESP will be a better option, because it will equip the students with necessary information of their concerned subjects as well as linguistic competence. ESP specialists in Saudi Arabia are of the view that ESP books and the teaching materials used in ESP contexts at the kingdom must be in line with the level of the students. ESP teaching materials and the books prescribed in Saudi universities don't fully cater to the needs of the

students because they have just been managed from different sources regardless of students' level and their learning behavior. These factors affect learners and learning environment at the kingdom. Generally the learners complain that the prescribed textbooks either in one year preparatory courses or in ESP contexts are not embedded in Saudi culture, hence do not satisfy their needs. Looking into the problems there is a need to understand what learners actually need, what kind of language acquisition is actually required by the learner and what kind of teaching materials and teaching methodologies should be applied in different teaching scenario at the kingdom. There is a need to integrate General English, EAP and ESP and design new syllabi in a coherent and systematic manner, for English language teaching from secondary to tertiary levels. It is at this point the importance of ESP emerges. But before plunging into it we need to know what actually English for Specific Purposes means and how is it different from General English Courses. Dudley- Evans, T.& M. St John's(1998) extended definitions of ESP in terms of 'absolute and variable' characteristics are as follows:

#### Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners.
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
- 3: ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genres.

#### Variable Characteristics

- (1) ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
- (2) ESP may use, in specific teaching situation, a different methodology from that of general English.
- (3) 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.
- (4) ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
- (5) Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

Hutchinson et al. rightly say (1987), "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on learners' reason for learning.

#### 1.1. ESP vs. General English

General English prepares students for the kind of English they will need in everyday situations. It emphasizes the development of communication skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are also taken into account. Though the demarcation line between General English and ESP is very thin, but it does exist. When asked about the differences Hutchinson et al. (1987:53) aptly remarked " in theory nothing, in practical a great deal." In fact, teachers teaching general English concentrate more on the language in general. They aim at giving the learners a course that may satisfy their urge to know and to understand certain language but when it comes to ESP, teachers give more importance to needs analysis and material writers think very carefully about the goals of the learner.

Almost all the colleges and the universities of Saudi Arabia have the provision of one year English language preparatory programme which may be called general English but the kind of books and the teaching materials needed in health colleges ,engineering colleges and management colleges should be contextual and relevant to what the students of ESP really need for. The teaching materials should be designed after confirming the levels and the needs of the students. If teaching materials don't fulfill the immediate needs of the students, this will cause lack of motivation. Hence there is a need to prepare new

syllabi and new books with contents based not only on foreign culture but also on Saudi culture. Such syllabi can definitely increase the motivation of Saudi learners and hence desired proficiency in English as well.

### 1.2. Different Phases of EAP

From its early beginning in the 1960s, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has undergone several phases of development. Its first phase was the phase of register analysis largely focused on the scientific and technical English. The assumption was that certain grammatical and lexical forms were more frequently used in scientific and technical writing than in General English. As a result, materials produced under the banner of register Analysis concentrated on a restricted range of grammar and vocabulary instead of language use and communication. This led to the rhetorical and discourse analysis. The aim was to develop the knowledge of how sentences were combined in discourse to make meaning and to identify organizational patterns in texts which then formed the syllabus of the EAP course. The next phase is the analysis of the study skill and the analysis of the learning needs. This is a learning centered approach. It involves considering the process of learning and students' motivation, working out what is needed to enable students to reach the target.

## 2. Different Branches of ESP

ESP is divided into 3 branches: English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBE) and English for Social Studies (ESS). Each of these branches falls into two categories: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) English for Vocational Purposes (EVP). An example of EAP for the EBE branch is "English for Economics" where as an example of EOP for the EBE branch is "English for Secretaries"

David Carter (1983) classifies ESP into three types: English as a restricted language. English for Academic and Occupational Purposes, and English with Specific Topics. Carter's second type of ESP is further developed by Robert Jordan (1997) into two branches of ESP: EOP and EAP. Then EAP is divided into English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). Robinson's (1991) family tree of ESP divides it into EOP and EAP/ EEP (English for Educational Purposes)

As one part of EBE, Business English can also be divided into EAP and EOP aspects. However, the research based on Business English for ESP is still in its infancy in Saudi Arabia. It is only very recently that ELT practitioners have started thinking to introduce Business English. They are forwarding proposals to introduce ESP in professional and vocational courses in the colleges and universities at the kingdom. They think that one year preparatory course for English is not enough to improve learners' proficiency in English. There should be continuation of English language teaching in the form of ESP setting in Saudi Arabian colleges and universities. For example, community colleges in Saudi Arabia are running professional and technical courses. Introducing ESP in such colleges will be very productive in improving proficiency level of the students who are pursuing associate degree courses. They will also perform well later in job markets if their communication skills are up to the mark.

To carry out the above key roles, ESP practitioners in the kingdom are required to have language teaching competence and specific subject knowledge. For a BE teacher, language teaching competence includes English knowledge (grammar, lexis, syntax, rhetoric, style and etc.). Besides, he must have high level of language competence and the knowledge of recent methodologies for the teaching of English as a foreign or second language. It has generally been thought in ESP scenario that the teacher doesn't require specialized academic knowledge of the learners' major subject of study. This is because it focuses on developing language and study skills and not on the academic subject itself. But it will be more result oriented if teachers of ESP also gather necessary information about the subject areas of ESP learners.

### 2.1. English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

English for Academic Purposes involves teaching students to use language appropriately for study. As EAP has the broad aim of helping learners to study or research in English, it covers a wide range of academic communicative practice including:

- (1) Pre-university, undergraduate and post-graduate teaching (from materials design to lectures and

classroom activities.

- (2) Classroom interactions (tutorials, feedback, seminar discussions etc.)
- (3) Research genres (journal articles, conference papers , grant proposals etc.)
- (4) Student writing (Assignments, exams, dissertations etc.)

EAP is an educational approach and a set of beliefs that is often contrasted with General English courses: The starting point for EAP is the learner and their situation rather than the language. Secondly many EAP courses focus more on reading and writing, where as many General English language courses concentrate on speaking and listening. EAP courses tend to teach formal, academic genres rather than the conversational and social genres taught in general English courses. According to Gillett and Wray (2006), EAP is a practical branch of ELT in which the role of the EAP lecturer is to find out what the students' need, what they have to do in their academic courses, and help them to do this better in the time available.

## 2.2. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)

English for Occupational Purposes includes the acquisition of English to get on far better with professional life such as English used by doctors to communicate with patients, researchers & scientists who want to publish their scientific achievements in reputed journals or present their papers in international seminars, and engineers who want to accomplish their tasks in English. ESP further fits in with several other disciplines and consequently micro languages such as English used for nurses and pharmacy, English used in Natural sciences, physical sciences and computer sciences. In addition, unprecedented scientific and technological advances such as heart by-pass surgery, gene transplant; cloning and electronic mail have opened up new frontiers of knowledge. It has in turn led to the creation of new technological semantic fields, each with their specific lexical structures which are increasingly more specialized and complex.

The entire aforesaid scenario enriches the scope of ESP in Saudi Arabia. It offers better opportunities to the universities of Saudi Arabia to analyze the needs of the learners and design ESP courses which can improve the professional expertise of Saudi doctors, engineers, teachers and nurses who are in the job but lack the ability to speak and write English with ease. By acquiring specific English they will become more proficient in their professional careers.

## 3. Needs Analysis & Syllabus Designing

Needs analysis is the starting point of both, EAP and EOP course design and teaching. On the basis of this the EAP& EOP specialists or course designers can specify course objectives which lead to an assessment of the resources available and the use of the appropriate syllabus and methodology. This will lead to an evaluation of the course in terms of its effectiveness. In common with most language teaching , EAP&EOP instructors teach vocabulary , grammar and the four skills( listening, speaking, reading and writing skills including pronunciation) but usually try to tie these to the specific needs of students; for example, a writing lesson would focus on writing essays rather than, say, business letters. Similarly, the vocabulary chosen for study tends to be chosen on the basis of needs of the learners.

Needs analysis is the process of establishing what and how an ESP course should be designed. Dudley-Evans (1998) & Brain (2001) opine that before the advent of Munby's model, EAP course might have been based mainly on teachers' intuitions of students' needs. Today however, EAP literature is replete with descriptions of methodology and outcome of research into learner needs around the world. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) classify needs into necessities, lacks and wants. 'Necessities' are what the learners have to know in order to function effectively in the target situations. By observing the target situations we can gather information about necessities. 'Lacks' are gap between the existing proficiency and the target proficiency of learners. 'Wants' are what the learners feel they need.

## 4. Approaches to needs Analysis

Under the umbrella of needs analysis, various approaches have been integrated. Target –situation analysis, present-situation analysis and learning situation analysis are just a few of them. Target situation analysis proceeds by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out rigorous tasks such as linguistic features and knowledge requirement of that situation. (Gatehouse, K.2001). The best known framework for

target-situation analysis is devised by Munby, (1978). After operating with this framework, we can obtain a profile of students' language needs and convert them into a "communicative competence specification" from which a syllabus is drawn up. (Jordan, 1997) Present –Situation analysis: ascertains students' language proficiency at the beginning of the course. Learning –Situation analysis is the route with present situation analysis as the starting point and the target situation analysis as the destination. The target analysis situation is thus not only the indicator of what is useful in learning situation. Needs, potentials and constraints of the learning situation must also be taken into consideration. (Lin, Tianhu, 2001).

#### 4.1. Learner Assessment & material Development

Learner Assessment & material Development are very significant in ESP setting and more so in Saudi Arabian societies. A placement test should be given to the students before they get enrolled in the college or the university for higher education. This test will determine the proficiency level of the students. Then they could be grouped in different sections according to their proficiency levels in English. This assessment will also facilitate designing the accurate ESP syllabus and accurate ESP teaching materials for Saudi students pursuing technical or vocational courses in Saudi colleges and the universities. A number of tests are available in EAP for evaluating learner performance. Placement tests, achievement tests and proficiency tests are three basic types of assessment which could be applied to Saudi students.

English for Academic Purposes has opened up a new world for ESP specialists, whether they attempt to design and teach EAP courses or carry out research into this particular area. So far as the material development is concerned, if the existing materials fail to fit the target goal, the ELT practitioners will have to develop their own ESP course materials. Developing innovative material is very vital for Saudi students. Relevant teaching materials will be immense source of motivation for the students. This will improve their proficiency level. Hence this is advisable to design and prescribe books keeping in mind the level and the immediate needs of the students. Besides, there is a need to develop teaching materials according to different levels of the students in the schools, colleges and the universities of the kingdom. The concept of General English, EAP and ESP could be well integrated in order to prepare the teaching materials for all levels of Saudi students.

#### 4.2. Challenges & Role of ESP Practitioners

Dudley- Evans, T. & M. St John. (1998) describe the true ESP teacher who needs to perform five different roles (1) Teacher (2) collaborator (3) course designer and materials provider (4) researcher and (5) evaluator. The first role as a teacher is synonymous with that of the General English teacher. It is in the performing of the other four roles that differences between the two emerge. The ESP practitioners must work closely with field specialist. According to the definition in English for Specific purposes (Tom Hutchinson and Alan Walters, 1987-CUP), ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reasons for learning.

The learners have different learning backgrounds from secondary to doctorate or post doctorate levels and the needs vary from segment to segment. Therefore after identifying a target situation to explore the need for a specific segment at the college, the learners have to be identified. The learners' potential, their skills, knowledge, aptitude, time and technological resources need to be analyzed thoroughly. With these data in mind, ESP practitioners should design course materials best suited to the levels of the students of Saudi Arabia. ESP is a goal oriented language teaching and this goal could be achieved only by the ELT practitioners. The only practical way in which they can understand the notion of special language is as a restricted repertoire of words and expression selected from the whole because that restricted repertoire covers every requirement within a well defined context, task or vocation.

To have subject knowledge for ESP teaching is a big challenge for ESP teachers. It is generally thought that an instructor/ teacher must have a working knowledge of the conceptual framework of the subject. Although the teacher might evince interest in business, but h/she need not be expert in business context area. But this is also true that although s/he is not a subject specialist but to some extent if he is familiar with the specialized area of business, he will definitely be more productive. This way the ESP practitioners will have the expertise and confidence to teach business specific contents, especially with the increase of business contents in BE textbooks. One possible solution is team teaching or collaboration between language teacher and subject teacher. Besides, task based approach, content based approach and case study methodology

approach should be tried and explored in Saudi Arabian universities. Here ESP teaching should be carried on by the collaboration of content teacher. They can carry out ESP teaching scaffolding each other; the former provides the latter with methodology of language teaching while the latter makes the content meaningful, helping the ESP teacher learn content knowledge. Fluency in academic English is an inevitable skill for an ESP teacher to be successful, because ESP teaching requires particular and sometimes special skills, such as dealing with input, handling skills work, answering questions on terminology, and listening to lectures and research presentation and seminar skills training.. Therefore the main barrier to student and teacher in comprehension of texts or in a collaborative teaching in ESP settings in general is the lack of subject knowledge. Language content and subject content of a given text, namely its surface structure and deep structure of it in Chomsky's (1965) terms, and content and formal schemes in terms of Anderson's (1984) Schema Theory are inseparable. For this reason the ESP teacher is supposed to have not only the knowledge of grammar but also content knowledge of the field.

## 5. Conclusion

As we see that the ESP is a new concept in Saudi Arabia the role of ESP teachers will also come as a challenge. Their role as a teacher will expand from teaching to a course designer, researcher, evaluator etc. They will have to aim at giving a language that can be learnt for immediate use. They should aim at developing programmes that could help them in culturing the learners into the professional community. Hence it is the urgent need to develop and design appropriate and relevant ESP courses for Saudi students who are pursuing higher courses in health sciences, Engineering and Management courses in Saudi universities.

ESP practitioners are faced with greater challenge in business English, engineering and medical English. Self training is essential for ESP teachers. They need to know the subjects area and innovative methodology to teach EST courses in Saudi Arabia. Though in Saudi Arabia ESP is still in infancy but its future is bright. To make it flourish, ESP practitioners need to make the entire community know what ESP actually represents. They have to come up openly with differences ESP holds to General English. The language centers of Saudi Universities should take up a lead role and come up with different curriculum which could cater to the needs of different learners. With all these efforts ESP will definitely grow.

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