# IS THERE A SPECIFIC METHOD FOR TEACHING ESP?

Nalan Kenny

Enterprise South Liverpool Academy, UK
Phone: +447917055881, E-Mail: nalankenny@outlook.com

**Abstract**. *Language learning does not only involve acquiring grammatical structure but also its function. It is important for engineering students to be able to present their ideas, exchange their opinions or follow technological developments all over the world. Most universities have been offering ESP courses besides the general English lessons to boost their confidence in this field.*
*When we talk about specific methodology, we mean all language aspects from reading complex articles to making a presentation. When we chose a method to be used in ESP classroom we should think of our group of learners and adapt one method with our teaching materials. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claimed that there is no specific methodology for ESP. The same principles apply with ELT methodology in general. So is there a specific method for ESP? How do we teach? Do we use a specific method to teach technical words?*

**Key words**: *method, technical, specific, content-base, approaches*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

ESP has been discussed in the literature in many ways, labelled as 'vocabulary teaching' or 'reading comprehension'. However, it is a different field with its own syllabus design, terminology which changes accordingly and own participants.

ESP first started to be taught in the workplace for staff development. Since the 1980s there has been a vast development in ESP. Learners' needs changed in parallel with technological development.

ESP has been claimed not to have a method. Is there any specific method for General English? In fact, there are many methods and approaches to be used in the classroom effectively; teachers choose which one to use according to our participants. For example, with a group of graduate engineers who would like to communicate in their field and follow technological development all over the world: which method would you use? Translation method, direct method, audio-visual method? Having already identified their needs, you make the curriculum according to this. This is called the eclectism approach. As a teacher, lecturer or instructor, you choose the method which is the most appropriate for your own learners. In ESP, the advantage is that participants are more likely to be motivated and ready to acquire anything the teacher will transfer.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS

Needs analysis (NA) is used commonly in ESP to find out what learners' needs are. Without the needs analysis, a successful outcome cannot be expected at the end of the course. We should know why we do NA, what kind of needs are expected to be met, how it is going to be done etc. Brown (2016) points out collecting data from learners is crucial.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that there are two types of needs analysis: a) target needs (what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and b) learning needs (what the learner needs to do in order to learn). I would add one factor to needs analysis as below:
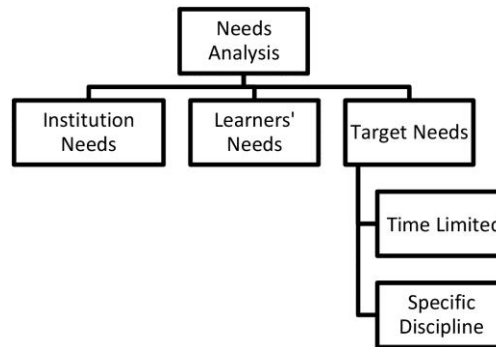


Fig. 1 Needs analysis

Needs analysis (NA) is the most important part of the ESP syllabus. This is done to find out the institution's needs, learners' needs and target needs.

NA has an important role in the process of designing and implementing ESP courses. Not only learners' needs but also institution needs and target needs can be identified. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) say: "what distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need. Needs analysis is done to find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role, to identify a gap between what learners are able to do and what they need to be able to do, to find out their previous experience in learning English".

NA gives us a good idea of what learners' needs are and helps us assess how we can meet those needs. NA can be done by using:
- Questionnaire,
- Interviews,
- Observation,
- Informal consultations with the company and the learners,
- Record keeping.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that there are two types of needs analysis: a) target needs (what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and b) learning needs (what the learner needs to do in order to learn). It is clear that learners of ESP already have knowledge of English or experience with English. However, courses can be designed at beginner level to enable the learner to improve English in his/her specified discipline without learning General English, so there will be needs analysis of language.

Richards (2014) states "the focus of needs analysis was to determine the specific characteristics of a language when it is used for specific rather than general purposes. Such differences might include:
- Differences in vocabulary choice,
- Difference in grammar,
- Differences in the kinds of texts commonly occurring,
- Differences in function.
- Differences in the need for particular skills.

Robinson (1991) comments that 'repeated needs analysis can be built into the formative evaluation process'. Needs analysis will vary especially in a heterogeneous group in ESP.

I can illustrate the points by assessing a group of my own students who underwent NA prior to my teaching them.

### 2.1. Pre course questionnaire

The questionnaire provides the teacher/lecturer with some information about candidates' background in studying English.

Some of my group appeared committed students of English and were still following some methods to keep their English level high. A few of them had studied English at college but they could still remember lots of things. The teacher can decide the class level based on such an assessment.

### 2.2. During the course

Learners should be encouraged to read a graded reader or anything at their level and in their field. There should not be an obligation as to how many books they should read each week; however, they can be encouraged to read as many as they can because the graded reader would help their vocabulary improve in many areas. Technical journals, magazines or articles would update their knowledge but also improve their technical vocabulary.

As a teacher, I was able to keep a record of all they were reading with a date:

| Student's name | Book's name | Start date | Finish date | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

To be able to find out whether learner's needs have been met or still need to be, it would be a good idea to have a one to one interview with each candidate in the middle of the course. The questions which should be asked include:
a) Have their needs changed since they attended the course?
b) Did the course match their needs?
c) What were their expectations now?

Richards (2001) say that different types of learners have different language needs and what they are taught should be limited to what they need. These needs are fairly specific.

**2.3. After course questionnaire**

The questionnaire after the course will show whether the learners' needs have been met and/or if their expectations changed. In my group of students, I found out that the learners felt more confident than when they had started the course and their needs had changed during the course as follows: they expected to get rises in their salaries and they wanted to get promoted. That was a successful training.

For Mackay et al (1978), when needs are clear, learning can be defined in terms of the specific purposes to which the language will be put whether it be reading scientific papers or communicating with technicians in industrial factory. Needs analysis is essential to find out not only learners' needs but also teaching materials, activities and resources. These should all be included in syllabus design before the programme/course starts.

3. Syllabus Design

Syllabus design is defined as a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learnt (Hutchinson and Waters 1987).

I define syllabus design in ESP as not only a document but also an essential guide for teachers because ESP involves limited time with a specific function of the target language and needs of learners. The ESP syllabus is derived from a detailed analysis of language features of the target situation.

In ESP, the syllabus outlines the content of what the learners will be taught, goals, objectives, materials to be used during teaching and learning, structure of grammar and skills.
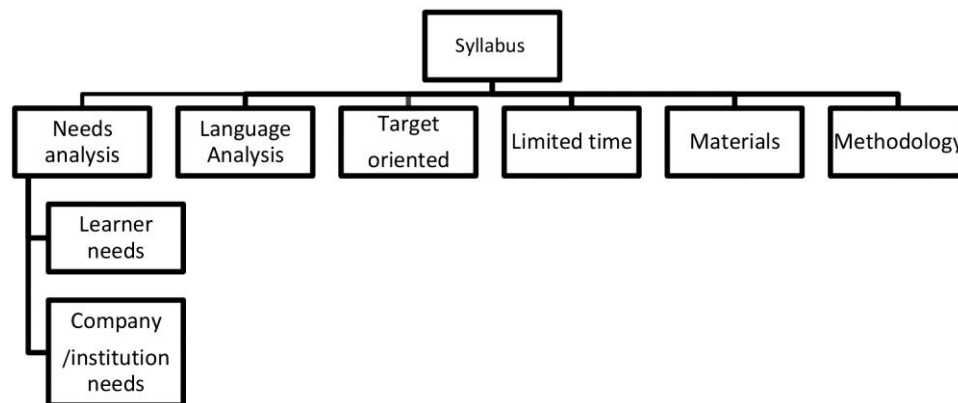


Fig. 2 Syllabus design

I have attempted to illustrate how the syllabus should be designed in Fig. 2. A syllabus design consists of six steps: needs analysis, language analysis, target oriented, limited time, materials and methodology. Before needs analysis, we cannot establish the appropriate syllabus design for learners. It should not depend on assumptions. Needs analysis first is essential and analysis of language is set in limited time and has to be target oriented. Materials and methodology should be chosen and prepared meticulously. In 1985 Swan pointed out "how to integrate eight or so syllabus (functional, notional,

topic, phonological, lexical, structural skills) into a sensible teaching programme is the real issue not which syllabus to put first."

To be able to design a syllabus for any ESP courses you need to do the needs analysis because it will help the teacher guide what to apply to the course. The teacher will be able to choose which method to be used in the course.

'What is the difference between the ESP and General English approach?' Hutchinson et al. (1987:53) answer this quite simply, "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal".

## 4. METHODS AND APPROACHES

Dudley Evans and St John (1998) claimed that the strength of methodology is the way in which language learning and subject learning approaches can be integrated. They proposed two approaches: case studies and project work. They have stated that case studies integrate knowledge, skills, theory and any experience, especially in law, medicine, engineering and business. The only issue with case studies is the knowledge of the ESP teacher in the subject that he/she teaches. Because, as Dudley states in her book, an ESP teacher should not teach content as he/she will not have sufficient knowledge of the content. I would suggest that the ESP teacher should work with the subject teacher if he/she does not have a subject background and assess the project together. In project work, learners assimilate the information unlike the case studies. Dudley-Evans and St John state that project work can be rewarding but a highly risk activity.

According to Richard and Rogers (1982): "All language teaching methods operate explicitly from a theory of language and beliefs or theories about how language is learned." In 1995 Brown listed five approaches: classical approach, grammar-translation approach, direct approach, audiolingual approach and communicative approach. He also adds cognitive approach in 2016. Brown points out:

*"Those approaches are important to understanding what and how students need to learn English. They are also crucial to understand what our bosses, colleagues, and students are thinking, that is, understanding which of these approaches are dominating how various groups of stakeholders and individual stakeholders are thinking with regard to what and how students need to learn."*

I am not sure that we could list the approaches we could use in ESP as Brown listed above. I can argue that there is no specific approach but adaptive one as I mentioned before. Robinson (1991) argues that "methodology in English language teaching (ELT) and ESP differ little and that it is not possible to say whether general ELT has borrowed ideas for methodology from ESP or whether ESP has borrowed ideas from general ELT." Robinson identifies two characteristic features of ESP methodology:
- ESP activities can be based on students' specialism,
- ESP activities can (but may not) have truly authentic purpose derived from learners' target needs.

These two characteristic Robinson identified can be applied in a homogeneous group to meet target needs which are set up before the course starts. I believe that it would be difficult to implement activities on learners' specialism in a heterogeneous group as each learner would have a different target and different needs. We should try to answer the questions: How can we implement activities in a heterogeneous group? What are the disadvantages? To implement activities in a heterogeneous group will not be as simple as

doing so in a homogeneous group. The first thing which should be done to apply the activities is to find out what all specific fields have in common.

Bernard and Zemoch (2003) claimed that ESP is not an approach, a method or a technique. "The only feature common to all types of ESP course is the selection of the content and teaching approach according to the perceived needs of the learners." The notion of 'there is no best method' shows the importance of variations in the teaching context that influences what is best (Prabhu, 1990).

When I was asked to organise an ESP course for workers who were going to train in Japan for the new system in the Cold Mill, I visited them in their workplace and found out what they did in their daily routine. That gave me an idea what to teach, but company asked me to teach some certain functions of the target language according to the company's needs. The company knew where they were going to place the staff after the training and what they specifically needed to learn. The company wanted me to teach a few certain instructions such as how to read manuals which was full of instructions without asking their chief.  All the learners were at different levels; some had never been taught English, but others were at B1 level.

When I was teaching ESP to another group of engineers (a homogeneous group), I used the content-based approach (CBA) as they were all from different departments and different branches of engineering, such as civil engineer, mechanical engineer, electronics engineer and electrical engineer. In most CBA courses, the syllabus is derived from the content area, and these obviously vary widely in detail and format. Richard and Rodgers (1996) say that it is typically only CBA, following the theme-based model, in which content and instructional sequence are chosen according to language learning goals.

In CBA there are many activities. Stroller (1997) lists the activities as follows:
- Language skills improvement,
- Vocabulary building,
- Discourse organisation,
- Study skills,
- Synthesis of content material grammar.

'It is the teaching of content with little or no direct effort to teach the language separately from the content being taught' (Krahnke 1987:65).

Claims made for the advantages of courses based on content-based syllabus include that:
- They facilitate comprehension,
- Content makes linguistic form more meaningful,
- Content serves on the best basis for teaching the skill areas,
- They address learners' needs,
- They allow for integration of the four skills,
- They allow for use of authentic materials.
  (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Mohan 1986)

During the course I taught, the learners were encouraged to prepare a presentation about their daily routine or the products they made in the company. What method is chosen depends on learners' need and the institution's or company's needs. There is no specific method but there will be a method you can chose which is best for your own learners. Not only does it depend on needs but also expectations.

Overall, this course was successful at the end of 8 months' work on both sides. Learners changed their attitude about the way to learn English and enjoyed it. Their vocabulary expanded by reading authentic materials and they managed to communicate with their colleagues in other countries with short conversations.

In the ESP classroom, information is usually transferred by reading a text or preparing a presentation which involves at least two skills. Therefore, it is appropriate to use an integrated skill approach (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). In project work, unlike case studies, students find and stimulate the information. Motivation is higher. Dudley-Evans and St John point out that project work starts in the classroom and moves outside the classroom. I agree that project work needs more time and details, and encourages learners to research and pay attention to details.

## 5. SPECIFIC METHOD OR 'APPROPRIATE' METHOD?

Every learner has a different attitude towards learning. The most important key is to find the 'appropriate' method rather than 'specific'. The syllabus, content and how to present lesson separate ESP from general English learning. In the ESP classroom, learners are more likely required to be at intermediate level to be able to achieve their target. Therefore, learners are guided, observed and differentiated in ESP classrooms rather than teaching the target language word by word.

Language learning is not only acquiring grammatical structure but also its function. It is important for engineering students to be able to present their ideas or exchange their opinions or follow the technological development all over the world.

Most universities have been offering ESP courses besides general English lessons to boost learners' confidence in this field. Hutchinson and Waters (1990) stated that for language learning *relevant* knowledge is not enough for learners to make things meaningful but should be used and every language learner is communicatively competent in one language, but does not know the special terms or specific forms of the language. Shortly, speaking the language does not mean you *know* the language. Knowing language means to be able to have a good command of language. Everybody speaks one language but how many of us actually have a good command of mother tongue? Everybody has different vocabulary span because of their life style and how much and what they read.

When we talk about specific methodology, we mean all language aspects from reading complex articles to making a presentation. When we chose a method to be used in ESP classroom we should think of our group of learners and adapt one method with our teaching materials. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claimed that there is no specific methodology for ESP. The same principles apply with ELT methodology in general. It can be arguable whether there is a specific methodology for ESP; my experience is that knowing General English methodology does not make a teacher successful in techniques that the teacher implements in the ESP classroom. For example; if the teacher is not familiar with such specific subject matter as the blast furnace or power station, he will not be able to want to prepare his own material for this matter. It is not always possible to find what material you want to use during the course/programme in the course book. In ESP courses, the teacher has to put in more effort than in General English courses. As I mentioned in section 2, to find the appropriate or competent method we have to do 'needs analysis' for learners' and institution's benefits.

6. CONCLUSION

I tried to look into methods for ESP. However, generally, it is advisable to accept 'there is no best method' as Prabhu said in 1990. It is to accept that methods and approaches vary according to needs analysis, including types of learner, expectations, demand, time, and what field it will be presented in.

In ESP any method can be chosen to be used in the classroom according to the context, learners, and needs analysis, teaching standard and learning abilities. The issue is how we will implement the method we chose because of ESP's specific content and learners. I can say the difference between EFL and ESP teaching is that ESP teachers need to integrate the content and the language.

REFERENCES

Barnard, R. and Zemoch. D. 'Materials for specific purposes'. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. London: Continuum. 2003.

Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A. and Wesche, M. B. *Content-based Second Language Instruction.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers. 1989.

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

Dudley-Evans, T., St John, J. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*. CUP Cambridge. 1998.

Hutchinson, T., Waters, A. *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-centred Approach*, CUP, Cambridge, 1987.

Krahnke, K. *Approaches to syllabus design for foreign language teaching.* Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics/Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.1987.

Mackay, R., Mountford, A. *English for Specific Purposes*. London, Longman. 1978.

Prahbu, S. "There is no best method-Why?" TESOL Quarterly, Vol 24 No 2 (1990) pp. 161-176

Richards, J. *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*, CUP, Cambridge 2004.

Richard, J., Rodgers, T. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, 3rd edition, CUP. Cambridge. 2014.

Robinson, P. *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. Hemel Hempstead Prentice Hall International. 1991.