

Review research paper

## THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLE OF THE ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES PRACTITIONER IN TODAY'S CHANGING SOCIETIES: VOICES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

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**Abstract.** *English is one of the most widely taught languages not only in Europe but across the globe, being the language of international communication, science and technology. It is nowadays an integral part of Higher Education curricula in many countries, as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is considered essential for the acquisition and development of students' employability skills. Simultaneously, the economic, political, social and technological developments occurring during the last decades have made the role of the ESP practitioner more complex and important at the same time. Nevertheless, issues related to the role, needs and duties of the ESP practitioners have not been adequately explored by researchers in the field. This paper focuses on the multifaceted role of the ESP practitioner stemming from the specialised needs of learners and the multiple duties they are expected to perform. More specifically, the paper reports on the results of a Technical Action Research study conducted with 24 English language educators across the globe, who wished to receive education on issues pertaining to ESP teaching methodology or update their knowledge on the latest development in ESP teaching practices. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, field notes, reflective journals, comments on an online platform and focus groups/interviews. The results shed light on the profiles of ESP practitioners, their duties and teaching contexts, the challenges they face, and their need to receive education on ESP issues.*

**Key words:** *ESP practitioner, ESP training, language educators, teaching context*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an era when amongst the most important initiatives of the European Union (EU) is the promotion of multilingualism, which helps in the preservation of democracy, transparency and accountability (Katsarova 2019), English plays a central role in strengthening students' employability skills (Rao 2016; Tevdovska 2017). English is one of the most widely taught languages across the globe, being the language of international communication, science and technology (Yano 2001). It is not only taught in schools, but it is also an integral part of Higher Education curricula in many countries with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) being one of the most flourishing areas of language education nowadays, including both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). Even

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though there is evidence that ESP made its appearance earlier, ESP started developing in the 1960s in an era of economic progress and change, because of the growing numbers of university students in the UK, USA and Australia, due to developments in science, business and technology and finally, the increasing numbers of migrants, who needed language to be able to work (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Richards 2001). This was the restless post-World War II era. Since then, ESP has been constantly developing with various LSP (Languages for Special Purposes)/ESP professional organisations being assembled, conferences and events dedicated to LSP or ESP issues being organised, and more publications focusing on LSP/ ESP topics being released. Despite these developments, issues pertaining to the role, the needs and the duties of the ESP practitioner remain under-researched and unexplored.

This paper focuses on the complexity of the role of the ESP practitioner which evolves from the specialised needs of learners and the multiple duties they are expected to perform. The paper reports on the results of a Technical Action Research study conducted with 24 English language educators working in different parts of the world, who wished to receive education on issues pertaining to ESP teaching methodology or update their knowledge on the latest development in ESP teaching practices. The results of the study provide useful insights on the profiles of ESP practitioners, their duties and teaching contexts, the challenges they face, and their need to receive education on ESP issues.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. ESP in a constantly changing world

The development of ESP through the years has been affected by the socioeconomic, technological and even political developments, and it is reflected in the publications that have been released during the course of time. A review of the literature in ESP by Dou, Chan, and Win (2023), following a semi-systematic approach, provides a historical account of the field from the early 1960s to the present. After the necessity of learning to speak English in a “new commerce-driven world” was realized, efforts to equip non-native speakers of English with the skills needed to communicate for professional purposes commenced (Dou, Chan, and Win 2023, p.02). At that time, emphasis was placed mainly on technical vocabulary acquisition, therefore register analysis had a central role to play, while later on rhetoric and discourse analysis came forth linking language form with language use. According to the researchers, in the 1908s and 1990s the diversity of ESP disciplines became even wider, and ESP practitioners were more concerned with the various target settings and the design and production of ESP materials. To this end, the contribution of experts in the different disciplines was significant, and of course ESP learners’ needs analysis processes became prominent. As the years passed, technological developments resulted in integration of technology in the ESP curricula, and intercultural communication gained the interest of researchers in the field. Amongst the developments in ESP, it is also important to include the fact that, apart from acquiring language skills, language education in general today aims at equipping students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, or transversal competencies; these are the necessary skills to enable them to become global citizens and be engaged in lifelong learning and thus succeed in their academic, professional, and personal life (University of Oxford ELT Expert Panel 2018).

In her own general overview of where ESP is heading, Belcher (2004), suggests that ESP pedagogy is developing towards three directions; the sociodiscoursal (research done in the area of situated genre analysis and its implications for the teaching of ESP), sociocultural (relates to cases of immersion in the target situation or simulation in the teaching of ESP), and sociopolitical (the development of social awareness and other skills which learners may transfer in their broader social context). Belcher (2004, p. 177) also stresses the changes that technological developments have brought about in relation to genre studies, since new “cyber-genres” have been created.

ESP, as its name denotes, has a specialised nature. However, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 18) support, there are no “specialised varieties” of English, in other words, there are not many types of English, but there are rather different purposes for which the language might be used. Based on this view, it can be inferred that there is no specific kind of teaching methodology for ESP, but a rather adaptive one with learning outcomes and activities based on students’ specialism and purpose of learning the language; in other words, driven by students’ needs (Kenny 2016). As with the teaching of General English (GE), ESP teaching should be informed by the latest theories of language learning and language teaching, and the latest research in the field. Nevertheless, due to the fact that ESP by definition focuses on the use of language for specialised purposes, teaching ESP becomes more complicated than teaching GE and similarly, the role of the ESP practitioner becomes more challenging. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), emphasise the different, more specialised nature of interaction between the teacher and the learners in an ESP class, arguing that it could be very different from a GE class. Moreover, the wide range of domains that ESP practitioners are often requested to teach makes things even more complex. Belcher (2009, p. 2) supports this view arguing that “the ESP approach requires willingness on the part of the language educator to enter as a stranger into stranger domains – academic and occupational areas that may feel quite unfamiliar”.

The rapid progress in the ESP field, which is related to societal and technological developments, ESP practitioners’ and linguists’ on-going battle to analyse the new genres that constantly appear, and the complexity of ESP teaching make ESP practitioners’ role even more significant and multifarious. This role is being discussed in the following section.

## **2.2. The ESP practitioner**

Apart from having implications for ESP course design and implementation, the special nature of ESP, determines the profile of the ESP educator. In most cases, ESP teachers are GE teachers who enter the field of ESP without knowing what to expect and how to handle the unexpected. Even though Streven’s (1988, pp.41-42) description of the ESP teacher dates back to the late 1980s, one could easily claim that it still describes the situation of ESP teachers today. Streven describes the experience of being requested to teach ESP as shocking; on the one hand, pleasantly shocking because of the increased motivation of the learners and on the other hand, unpleasantly shocking because of the unfamiliarity and complexity of the situation.

Through the years the role of the ESP practitioner has been recorded in literature as a multifaceted one that differs from that of a GE teacher; this view was supported by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), who noted that ESP teachers are required to perform many roles and hence do much more than simple teaching; apart from teachers, they are often course designers and materials providers, collaborators, researchers and finally

evaluators. The view that the role of the ESP practitioner carries multiple dimensions is embraced in recent literature as well (e.g. Latha 2014; Chibi 2018). Despite the fact that in certain cases GE teachers may also be requested to perform multiple duties, the specialised nature of ESP courses complicates things for ESP practitioners, since in some cases, it is difficult for the practitioners to handle the needs of their learners, due to their unfamiliarity with the specific discipline. According to Katsarska (2017, p. iii) ESP practitioners are “a special breed of language teachers who have taken the road less traveled”. Furthermore, learners are usually adults and most of the times experts in their fields. Consequently, teachers have a different status in an ESP class, since they are not the only carriers of knowledge (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998), and the ESP classroom is a much more democratic place than a GE classroom, because the teacher and the learners are more or less equals, with the teacher inviting the views of learners on a regular basis. This is what Crocker (1981, p.13) had in mind, when he characterised the LSP teacher as a “learning facilitator”, rather than as the only source of knowledge in the knowledge acquisition process; they are facilitators since they work together with the learners during the learning process.

Based on all the aforementioned, it can be inferred that ESP practitioners need to possess a set of qualities and skills that can be acquired through appropriate training, which according to Esteban and Martos (2002), will make them competent in coping with learners’ specific needs and using specialised materials. Jackson (1998, p. 151) identified several qualities and skills that the ESP practitioner needs to have in order to be successful, such as “flexibility adaptability, creativity, resourcefulness, well developed organisational and managerial/ leadership skills, effective interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills, and mature problem-solving and decision-making skills”. Along the same lines, Bigych and Matsnieva (2018, p. 470) supported that ESP practitioners need to have a series of “research and designing skills”. All these denote that ESP practitioners need to receive education that will provide them with the necessary competencies and skills. Nevertheless, only few graduate programmes prepare language educators to teach ESP.

The present paper adopts the view that the ESP educator has a multidimensional role to play in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, acknowledging the complexity of this role, this paper also takes the stance that ESP practitioners need to be well-equipped to cope with all their duties and acquire proficiency in the content area; this may be achieved with the appropriate education. All these are reinforced by the findings of this study.

### **2.3. The purpose of the study**

This study aimed at addressing the neglected need for ESP Teacher Education amongst a group of 24 language instructors, ESP educators representing different ESP fields or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, suggesting an intervention in the form of an online ESP TE programme, ReTEESP Online (Online Reflective Teacher Education Course in ESP) (Kakoulli Constantinou and Papadima-Sophocleous 2021; Kakoulli Constantinou 2021). The findings mostly related to the effectiveness of the intervention, suggestions from improvements, and what constitutes an effective short ESP Teacher Education course in similar contexts. Nevertheless, the study yielded important results pertaining to the profile and role of ESP practitioners. These results are presented in the present paper. More specifically, this paper focuses on findings related to the following parameters: a) the profiles of ESP practitioners and challenges they face with ESP teaching and b) their views on ESP Teacher Education.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed in this study was that of Technical Action Research, since the researcher acted as an “expert” or “authority figure” aiming at improving a certain situation (Grundy 1983, p.24), that is the lack of ESP Teacher Education amongst 24 language instructors, suggesting an intervention in the form of an online ESP Teacher Education programme. The study followed the cyclical, spiral processes of Technical Action Research, developing in two stages, two cycles of continuous improvement. A series of ethical considerations were taken into account, in order to protect the interests and well-being of the participants; more specifically, all the necessary measures were applied in order to obtain participants’ permission to take part in the study, and confidentiality and protection of identities were ensured.

#### 3.1. Methods

A variety of data collection tools were used during the study and both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained. At the beginning of the first cycle of the study, an online questionnaire was administered to the participants in order to obtain information regarding their profiles as language educators, their qualifications, previous teaching experience and their needs in terms of ESP Teacher Education. Throughout the first cycle of the study, during the implementation of the Teacher Education programme, data were obtained from the facilitator’s field notes, the reflective journals which participants kept, and also the comments that were posted on Google Classroom, the platform that was used for the delivery of the course. Finally, upon completion of the course, the participants reflected on their experience through focus groups or interviews. In the second cycle of the study (the implementation of the improved version of the course based on the results of the first cycle) similar data collection tools were used.

The quantitative data obtained were analysed using IBM’s SPSS 22 software, and descriptive statistics were used to talk about the results, while qualitative results were analysed thematically using NVivo 12 software for qualitative data analysis. In order to secure validity and enhance credibility, the coding process was repeated by an external researcher. Cohen’s kappa test (1960) was run to determine inter-rater reliability, and the results showed that there was substantial agreement between the two coders in both stages:  $k = 0.67$  in Stage 1 and  $k = 0.62$  in Stage 2, according to Landis and Koch’s, (1977, p. 165) agreement measures.

#### 3.2. Participants

The participants were 24 language instructors, who were selected after the researcher had placed a call on social media for participation in an international group/community comprised of ESP practitioners or English language educators in general who wished to receive TE on issues pertaining to ESP teaching. Figure 1 presents an overview of the participants in the study.

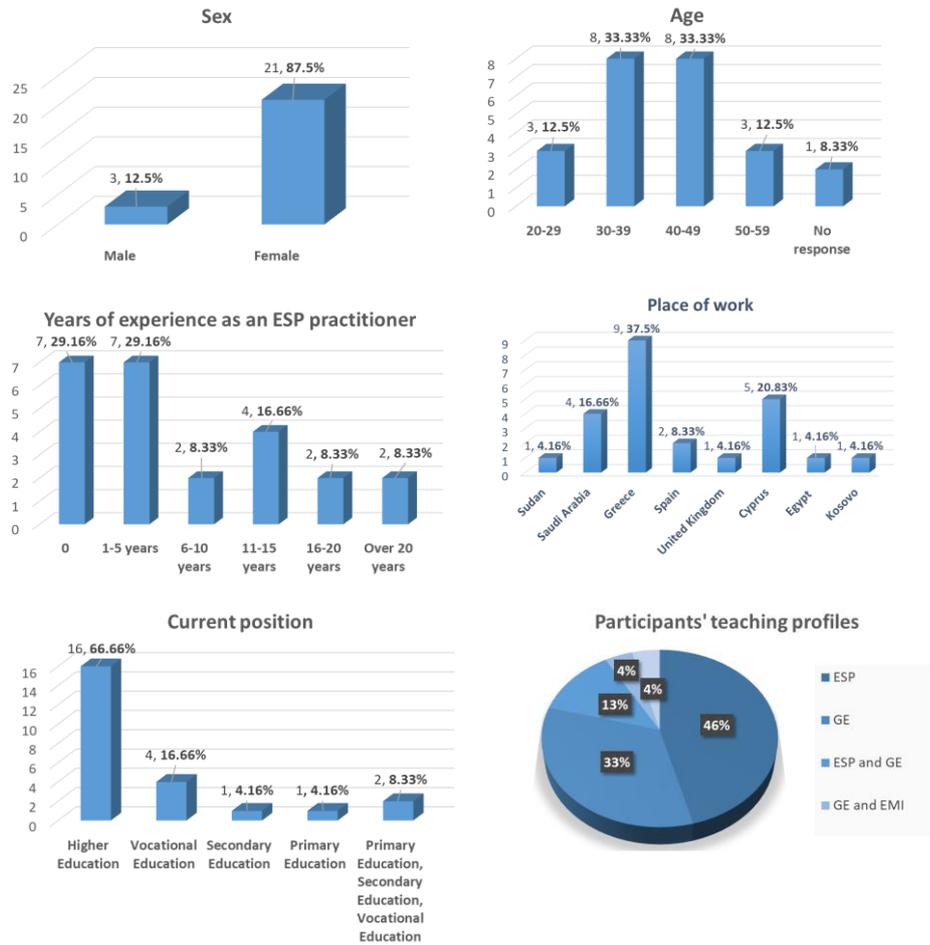


Fig. 1 Participants in the study

As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of the participants were females of 30-39 years of age and 40-49 years of age, and they were employed in Greece and Cyprus. Their common characteristic was their wish to receive education on issues related to ESP teaching; they had either received no training in ESP and/or were not satisfied with the training they received, and/or wished to develop their ESP practices/update themselves on the latest developments in ESP. The majority ( $n=14$ ) had none or little ESP teaching experience (0-5 years), while 10 participants had over 6 years of teaching experience. This shows that even experienced ESP practitioners recognised the need for ESP Teacher Education. Most of the participants in the study were employed in Higher Education; however, some of them also worked in Vocational, Secondary, and Primary Education. The majority were ESP practitioners, while some of them taught GE or GE and EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction).

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper will present the results of the study pertaining to the following parameters: a) the profiles of ESP practitioners and challenges they face with ESP teaching, and b) their views on ESP Teacher Education.

##### 4.1. The profiles of ESP practitioners and challenges they face with ESP teaching

In relation to the profile of the ESP practitioners and the challenges they face, Table 1 illustrates the complexity of the ESP educators' profession, as this is reflected in the great variety of disciplines that ESP practitioners are requested to teach. The fourth column,

Table 1 ESP disciplines taught by participants in the research

Fields	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Business	15	14.7%	75.0%
Mechanical Engineering	8	7.8%	40.0%
Computer Science	8	7.8%	40.0%
Hotel and Tourism Management	7	6.9%	35.0%
Electrical Engineering	7	6.9%	35.0%
Communication	7	6.9%	35.0%
Nursing	4	3.9%	20.0%
Civil Engineering	4	3.9%	20.0%
Shipping	3	2.9%	15.0%
Agricultural Sciences	3	2.9%	15.0%
Accounting	3	2.9%	15.0%
Biochemistry-Biotechnology	3	2.9%	15.0%
Fine Arts	2	2.0%	10.0%
Environmental Science	2	2.0%	10.0%
Finance	2	2.0%	10.0%
Multimedia Studies	2	2.0%	10.0%
Law	2	2.0%	10.0%
Architecture	2	2.0%	10.0%
Medicine	2	2.0%	10.0%
Management and Finance	1	1.0%	5.0%
Information Technology	1	1.0%	5.0%
Informatics	1	1.0%	5.0%
Home Economics and Ecology	1	1.0%	5.0%
Dietetics & Nutritional Science	1	1.0%	5.0%
Academic Writing	1	1.0%	5.0%
Psychology	1	1.0%	5.0%
Physiotherapy	1	1.0%	5.0%
Fashion	1	1.0%	5.0%
Banking	1	1.0%	5.0%
Philology	1	1.0%	5.0%
Chemistry	1	1.0%	5.0%
Physics	1	1.0%	5.0%
Materials Science	1	1.0%	5.0%
Furniture Design	1	1.0%	5.0%
English for University Staff	1	1.0%	5.0%
Total	102	100.0%	510.0%

which presents the percentage of cases, refers to the numbers of ticks each discipline/field got by the participants in the study, in other words, how many times this response was selected by the participants. According to the table, the most common ESP course among the ESP practitioners who participated in the study was English for Business, followed by English for Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science. Among the most common courses were also English for Hotel and Tourism Management, English for Electrical Engineering and English for Communication. These results confirm how difficult the variety of disciplines makes ESP practitioners' profession (Katsarska 2017). The table also proves that ESP has developed through the years, with more ESP disciplines being created, as science and technology are progressing (Dou, Chan, and Win 2023).

Concerning the ESP training participants in the study had received in the past (Table 2), according to their responses to the questionnaire, almost 60% of the participants had received some form of ESP training, while the rest had received no ESP training at all. The participants that had received training in ESP had done so as part of their BA or MA studies, through a combination of BA/MA/PhD studies and seminars, conferences and lectures on ESP, seminars, conferences and lectures on ESP solely or in-service training. This shows that despite the complexities of the profession very often ESP practitioners are language teachers with no specialised education or little specialised education in ESP teaching (Campion 2016). Having in mind the rapid developments in the field, the need for lifelong learning and continuous professional development (CPD) becomes of utmost importance.

Table 2 Participants' previous training in ESP

Received some sort of training in ESP from:	
▪ BA/ MA studies	N=5, 20.83%
▪ A combination of BA/ MA/ PhD studies and seminars, conferences and lectures	N=5, 20.83%
▪ Seminars, conferences and lectures on ESP solely	N=3, 12.5%
▪ In-service training	N=1, 4.16%
	<b>N=14, 58.33% (TOTAL)</b>
No ESP training	<b>N=10, 41.66%</b>

Regarding aspects of the teachers' teaching contexts, data revealed mainly challenges that they faced in their teaching. Similar challenges were reported in literature in the field (Esteban and Martos 2002; Bojović 2006; Latha 2014; Chibi 2018). More specifically, a common challenge that many teachers faced was lack of resources, especially technology resources, and funding (n=4, 16.66%). This was expressed by teachers from Greece, Spain and Egypt and was mainly the result of the recent global economic crisis. Teachers from Greece talked about the educational reforms that were taking place in the country at the time, and their constant uncertainty about the future. With regards to Egypt, a teacher also stressed that in the Middle East things were worse than in Europe, and the opportunities for CPD were very few, therefore he expressed his deep appreciation for the opportunity for development that he was given through this course and the need for more support of ESP practitioners by stakeholders.

Other challenges mentioned were teachers' constant effort to enhance students' motivation (n=4, 16.66%), the different levels of students (n=4, 16.66%), difficulties in finding appropriate material (n=4, 16.66%), and students coming from diverse cultural and

linguistic backgrounds (n=3, 12.5%). Teachers also stressed the difficulty of balancing the divergent learning needs of students (n=3, 12.5%), with one of the teachers emphasising that often the beliefs that learners have regarding their needs are very different from the course designer's/instructor's. Moreover, teachers from Greece raised the issue of having large audiences in their courses, which made the lesson less interactive and more lecture oriented (n=2, 8.33%). The same teachers also mentioned lack of communication amongst ESP practitioners in Greece and lack of events related to ESP organised in the country. One teacher also said that some colleagues failed to realise the importance of CPD and lifelong learning. Others (from Egypt and Greece) also talked about how "certificate-bound" their countries were, in the sense that any CPD opportunity had to result in a certificate in order to be officially recognised. Other challenges mentioned by the teachers were students' reluctance to accept innovations (e.g. the flipped classroom) (n=2, 8.33%), difficulties faced in the teaching of certain terms that needed specialised knowledge (e.g. music terms such as sharp (#), flat (b)) (n=1, 4.16%), and failure to keep up with updates in the field (n=1, 4.16%). Finally, one teacher also mentioned the daily workload of an ESP practitioner (4.16%), while other teachers stressed time constraints (4.16%), and being asked to teach ESP in very short notice with no preparation (4.16%).

#### 4.2. Language educators' views on ESP Teacher Education

As far as participants' views on ESP Teacher Education is concerned, as Table 3 illustrates, language instructors wished to attend an ESP Teacher Educated course mainly to improve their teaching methodology, develop professionally, improve their syllabus design skills and share ideas with colleagues in the field. In their comments on Google Classroom participants stated that they wished to become members of a network of ESP practitioners that would provide them with the opportunity to exchange ideas on issues pertaining to ESP (n=8, 33.33%), and that they also wished to upgrade their knowledge on ESP. This is in line with Bojović's (2006) ideas on the importance of networking with other ESP professionals around the world, as most of the times ESP practitioners feel isolated and lost. The fourth column, which presents the percentage of cases, refers to the numbers of ticks each reason got by the participants in the study, in other words, how many times this response was selected by the participants.

Table 3 Reasons for attending an ESP teacher education course

Reasons	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Improvement of teaching methodology	22	22.7%	91.7%
Professional development	21	21.6%	87.5%
Improvement of syllabus design skills	16	16.5%	66.7%
Sharing ideas with other ESP educators	14	14.4%	58.3%
Networking	13	13.4%	54.2%
Self-esteem increase	6	6.2%	25.0%
Employer satisfaction	2	2.1%	8.3%
Promotion	2	2.1%	8.3%
Salary increase	1	1.0%	4.2%
TOTAL	97	100.0%	404.2%

In relation to their expectations from the course, similar responses were provided. More specifically, eight language teachers (33.33%) stated that they expected to learn new things and develop their ESP teaching methodology, become part of a network of teachers where they could learn new things from colleagues (n=5, 20.83%), and also learn about the latest developments in the ESP field (n=5, 20.83%). Furthermore, teachers expected that the course would help them to develop professionally (n=5, 20.83%) and also plan their courses and their lessons more effectively (n=4, 16.66%). One participant stated that she expected to learn more about ESP assessment methods (4.16%) and another about the latest ESP material released (4.16%). Generally, the need for more ESP Teacher Education opportunities was expressed by the participants throughout the study. This need is also stated in other research studies conducted in the ESP field (Basturkmen 2010; Kakoulli Constantinou and Papadima-Sophocleous 2022).

## 7. CONCLUSION

As described in the literature and as this study shows, the role of the ESP practitioner is multidimensional and complicated nowadays. Apart from the multiple duties, ESP practitioners face challenges that relate to their own educational contexts and realities, despite the fact that many of the challenges faced are universal. Consequently, their needs are growing; the need for ESP teacher education that focuses on a variety of topics that supports ESP practitioners in their own contexts is now more prominent than ever. It needs to be lifelong and built on contemporary theories of learning and the latest developments in the field, including research in emerging technologies, which have a major role to play in education nowadays. This kind of teacher education can be offered in the form of formalised undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, but it could be offered also outside the bounds of formalised Higher Education in the form of online courses that foster creation of communities of practice (CoP) that favour collaboration and exchange of ideas between practitioners.

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