

English for Specific Purposes: The Perpetuation of the Species

Engleza de specialitate: perpetuarea speciei

L'Anglais de spécialité: la perpétuation de l'espèce

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Abstract

This article offers a short introduction to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and tries to (re)define this field still in search of an identity. It begins with a semantic decortication of the term "ESP", focusing on its implications for the research community. Furthermore, this paper examines the specificities of ESP and then it addresses the controversial question of how much specialist knowledge the ESP teacher needs. Finally, the article emphasizes the future of this discipline and its potential evolution.

Résumé

Cet article offre une brève introduction à l'anglais de spécialité (ESP) et essaie de (re)définir ce domaine toujours en quête d'identité. Il commence avec une décortication sémantique du terme anglais « ESP », en se focalisant sur ses implications dans la communauté de la recherche. En plus, ce document s'interroge sur les spécificités de l'anglais de spécialité et ensuite il adresse la question controversée du besoin de connaissances spécialisées de l'enseignant d'anglais de spécialité. Pour terminer, l'article met l'accent sur l'avenir de cette discipline et son évolution potentielle.

Key words: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), General English (GE), specialist knowledge, needs analysis, communication*

Mots clés: *anglais de spécialité, anglais général, connaissances spécialisées, analyse des besoins, communication*

Cuvinte cheie: *engleza de specialitate, engleza generală, cunoștințe de specialitate, analiza nevoilor, comunicare*

ESP is not a young cuckoo determined to eliminate all other birds from the nest that it has infiltrated; it is better seen as a recently-evolved species that best thrives in certain secluded and restricted kinds of habitat. [1]

Defining English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (or English for Special Purposes) refers to a field of activity intended to meet the specific language needs of learners of English in their pursuit of academic, professional, occupational or vocational goals. ESP focuses on the language appropriate to a specific subject field or context, and it is generally addressed to adults, usually at an intermediate or advanced level in English, having some basic notions of the language system.

Clear definitions can be found in *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*: "the term 'ESP' describes language programmes designed for groups of individuals who are learning with an identifiable purpose and clearly specifiable needs" [2] and in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*: "English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching

and learning of English for an instrumental purpose - work or study related –and embraces a great diversity of language teaching and learning situations around the world” [3].

Mackay and Mountford [4] stress the communicative function of language, while Kennedy and Bolitho acknowledge the importance of considering the learner and his or her needs as major factors influencing ESP: “In short, ESP has its basis in an investigation of the purposes of the learner and the set of communicative needs arising from those purposes” [5].

A similar view, drawing from developments in linguistics and educational psychology, is that of Hutchinson and Waters, who reject the idea of a particular kind of language. According to them, ESP should be regarded as a learning-centred approach, based on the particular needs of the learners within specific contexts, rather than a product or a methodology: “A truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the process of language learning” [6].

Why English?

It is English, spoken as a first language by 300 million people and used as a second language by many millions more, that gradually gained terrain and became the international language of communication in various fields: business, economics, trade, science, technology, diplomacy, research, sport etc.

There are voices rebelling against the monopoly of English and claiming that the domination of a unique language might seriously damage local identity, but the reality is that the need for an international language, especially due to pragmatic factors such as the increased demand for international communication from a variety of fields of activity, is more than evident. Consequently, the impossibility to hold at least partial competence in English can generate social, cultural and economic exclusion.

When analysing the acronym ESP, we must also signal the existence of another terminological variant: LSP, which stands for Language for Specific Purposes. Here, *English* is ‘taken over’ by its hypernym *Language*, in order to call attention to a more general approach to the study of languages in specialised contexts. Certain authors use the two terms interchangeably, but this is a practice that should be avoided, for fear of possible confusions.

David Crystal manages to capture the exact specificity of ESP (English for *Special* Purposes, in his terms) and respectively LSP (that he details as Language(s) for Special Purposes, also Language(s) for Specific Purposes). For him, ESP is the “name given to courses for foreigners where the kind of English taught is determined by the professional needs of the students” [7], in evident contrast with English for General Purposes (EGP) that aim at a general level of proficiency, while LSP is an “area of enquiry and practice in the development of language teaching programmes for people who need a language (or a variety of language) to meet a predictable range of communicative needs” [8].

Why *for*?

Widdowson has discussed the difference between the English *of* Business, *of* Medicine, *of* Banking etc. and the English *for* Business, *for* Medicine, *for* Banking, and so on. Although this distinction does not entail a discernible alteration, it contributes, however, to a better understanding of ESP. Widdowson suggests that, in this particular context, the preposition *of* implies the idea of an English language “fixed in advance”, contrary to *for*, in English *for* Specific Purposes, which suggests a language that “will change in manner of ways as these activities develop” [9]. Since Widdowson also believes that “native speakers have no jurisdiction over the way the language is modified to suit professional purposes”, his conclusion is that “the English language may even cede its supremacy to other languages” [10].

Once again, it is obvious that English neither belongs to, as a finite product, nor encloses the language of certain specific subjects, but tries to work *for* their benefit.

Why Specific/Special Purposes?

The E in ESP might be blameless, as English ended up to be the language of international communication by historical accident, but the SP is certainly not “innocent” [11].

The analysis of the terms *specific* and *special* reveals some important aspects of the evolution of ESP and revolves around the notions of specialisation and specificity.

According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* [12] both *specific* and *special* depart from the Latin *species*, but they enter the English language in different ways and at different times: *special*, through Middle English, being an adaptation of the Old French *especial* or the Latin *specialis* (individual, particular), from the Latin *species* (appearance, form, kind, beauty), and *specific*, mid-17th century, “originally in the sense ‘having a special determining quality’”, from the medieval Latin *specificus*, from the Latin *species*.

A brief scrutiny of their modern dictionary meanings might also be appropriate. *Special*: “different from what is usual”, “designed or organized for a particular [...] purpose”, “(of a subject) studied in particular depth” [13]; *specific*: “clearly defined or identified”, “belonging or relating uniquely to a particular subject”; in Biology: “of, relating to, or connected with species or a species” [14], a meaning that can be linked to Swales’ *species* metaphor.

Back in the late 1970s, Mackay and Mounford mainly used the term *special*. They believe that “English for Special Purposes implies a special aim” [15] and that “the emphasis of the word ‘special’ [...] should be firmly placed upon the *purpose* of the learner for learning the language, not on the language he is learning” [16].

They are in fact trying to innovate at a time when the teaching of English was centred mostly on language structure and when English for Special Purposes was widely interpreted as referring to a “special language” equivalent to them with a “restricted repertoire” or “a statistically quantifiable ‘register’ defined in terms of formal linguistic properties, lexical items, collocations and sentence structures” [16].

Consequently, what they suggest is that both linguistic usage and communicative use of language should be taken into account when teaching ESP.

More than 20 years later, Gramley and Pätzold explain that the term *special* was the predecessor of the term *specific* that gained in notoriety beginning with the 1970s. They believe that “the rationale behind this is that ‘special’ implies restricted languages, while English for *specific* purposes focuses attention on the purposes of the learner, which are specific, viz. ‘to perform a task in English’” [17]. Therefore, the specific purposes should, to some extent, ‘dictate’ the selection of skills, grammar, vocabulary etc. appropriate to the user’s area of activity.

In conclusion, the current preference for the term *specific* could be seen as part of the effort to stress the importance of needs analysis and communicative competence, as far as ESP is concerned.

Personally, I feel that research in any language concerned with specific areas of activity should focus on multiple factors, analysed from different angles, in terms of special, specific, communicative, and pragmatic purposes.

How specific is *Specific*?

While teaching General English in schools involves an educational purpose and requires no immediate specific needs, ESP, usually taught at the tertiary level, implies specific aims, purposes and needs. Even if these factors do not entail a *special* language, they indicate the affiliation of the learner to a discourse community characterised, at the linguistic level, by a *genre*.

If, in 1977, Candlin thought desirable “that ‘special purposes’ involve not only specialisation in form and discourse but also in skills and tasks”, later on, the *specific* purposes of the language learner came to represent the motivational fuel in undertaking any ESP course.

Widdowson’s views represent a shift from a rigid linguistic system to a more modern approach that highlights the importance of concepts like pragmatics, communicative purpose, context, shared knowledge, and use of language. He argues that almost all instances of language use are pragmatically specific, serving a specific purpose and thus producing communication.

In this sense, English for specific purposes is what communication in English in general is all about, and indeed it was this recognition that (in my case at least) led to

the development of more general principles of communicative language teaching in the early seventies. [9]

He believes that, since a “language is regulated by the requirements of the profession” [10], in order to suit its purposes, it should change each time that these requirements change, thus becoming a Language for *Specific Purposes*.

He also argues that genres are “sets of typical features of language use in certain domains” and should not be accounted for in terms of “specific norms to be conformed to” [18]. He therefore concludes that “it will not do to be too definite (too specific indeed) in describing conventions as defining particular professional uses of language” [19].

However, there are those who believe that there is not enough research evidence to demonstrate a clear distinction between ESP and GE. .

On the contrary, those who believe in its fundamental role in the EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) arena argue that there is much more to ESP than plain language, and its distinctness becomes more apparent when stepping beyond sentence-level linguistics, taking into account elements like: discourse, pragmatics, context, shared knowledge, needs analysis, and communicative use of language.

Consequently, ESP is not only a question of teaching sets of specific features of language usage and use suitable for particular areas of activity, it is not only a way of teaching students how to communicate effectively in the language which assists them in attaining their professional purposes, but it is also about responsibility, moral issues and power.

The ESP teacher

Should the ESP teacher acquire subject-specific knowledge? This is yet another controversial matter among linguists and teachers. Most ESP researchers claim that this is not necessary and even if it would be a desirable goal, in reality, it is a rather hard to achieve, if not an unfeasible objective.

More recent teaching techniques include tandem or team teaching with specialists from the subject area and tight collaborations with the corresponding departments.

What often comes as a frustrating constraint for the ESP teacher is the attitude of some learners who can sometimes pressure them into believing that they have to assume an expert status in the corresponding field in order to be able to teach the appropriate language.

In the end, it is vital to remember that the ESP teacher is, after all, an English language teacher, and he or she is not there to teach specialist knowledge.

Preservation vs. perpetuation of the species

Meriel Bloor, in her article *English for Specific Purposes: The Preservation of the Species (Some notes on a recently evolved species and on the contribution of John Swales to its preservation and protection)* [20] makes use of the term *preservation* when talking about *species*, a metaphor used by Swales [1] in referring to ESP, because she thinks that we cannot really contribute to the development of a species. Therefore, in her view, our role is to continue to preserve this legacy, as Swales did, by protecting it from all its “predators” [1].

Let us now define in detail the terms *preservation* and *perpetuation*, by paying attention to their connotations.

Preservation, according to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, denotes “the action of preserving something” and “the state of being preserved” [21], while the verb *preserve* means: “maintain (something) in its original or existing state”; “keep safe from harm and injury: a place for preserving endangered species” [22].

Perpetuation, is defined by *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as “the action of perpetuating something” [23]. The verb *perpetuate* sometimes comes charged with negative connotations: “make (something, typically an undesirable situation or an unfounded belief) continue indefinitely” [24].

As far as *The New Oxford Dictionary of English on Historical Principles* is concerned, the second meaning of the verb *perpetuate* (“continue or extend without interruption”) is obsolete [25]. It comes as a personal challenge to revive this particular meaning for the purposes of this article.

Nonetheless, *Webster's New World Dictionary* is offering a more optimistic definition of *perpetuation*: “to make perpetual; cause to continue or be remembered; preserve from oblivion” [26].

Presently, let us go back to the dichotomy *preservation/perpetuation*. The first term suggests continuation without change, the second, implies indefinite continuation, which makes the first one look rather static, while the second seems more dynamic.

When I first chose the term *perpetuation* in order to explain my point of view in relation to the development of the ESP, I was neither consciously aware of all its connotations nor persuaded that a semantic and etymological/historical analysis would be relevant to our discussion. Later on, after looking up the word in several dictionaries, the revelation of its negative connotations made me doubt about my choice of the word. However, after a short period of reflection, I decided that I could not have found anything better to illustrate the actual tendency in ESP.

As far as the negative connotations of the word *perpetuation* are concerned, maybe they should not be dismissed entirely, because, after all, ESP is under attack!

On one side, there are those who doubt that ESP is sufficiently significant in order to take a proper place in the EFL perimeter, those who would rather prefer a *fossil* to a *species*, and on the other side, there are its defenders, who have worked hard to maintain it in perpetuity

During its evolution, every species has to adapt to various climatic changes and needs to affront numerous dangers. Its vitality comes under scrutiny and its usage is often tested under difficult conditions. Coming to talk about climatic changes, we could consider the diverse currents, theories and movements that ESP came to be exposed, like for example; register analysis, communicative use of language, diverse learning theories like behaviourism, discourse analysis, target analysis, corpus analysis etc. They all contributed (some continue to do so) to the perpetuation and evolution of this *species*.

As far as I am concerned, I think that we should not only try to preserve the *species* from extinction, like Swales, Bhatia, Bloor, and many others have done, but also to *perpetuate* it. After all, ESP deserves a better place on the linguistic ‘evolutionist’ scale.

Nowadays, ESP has reached a certain maturity and “has become more academically respectable”, a reality statistically demonstrated by the increase in citations activity in ESP research, “on the basis that the more references a paper has, the more academic it appears” [27]. Additionally, exchanges with other disciplines, like sociology, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics, are more frequent and productive.

As a conclusion, I believe that ESP, even if it has proved self-surviving capabilities, it still needs to be preserved, protected, and *perpetuated*. I would even venture beyond these ideas: it needs progress, development, evolution, which can only be achieved through extensive research.

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