

## General Purpose ESP Program Design

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Since its conception in the 1960s, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach to language teaching and learning has long served as an alternative to general English approaches by directly addressing the needs of learners in a specific discourse community through grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre training. Unfortunately, in spite of the great efforts by many advocates of the approach, ESP is still largely misunderstood by the teaching community at large. The first problem is the word 'need.' Many teachers feel that their students *need* to learn basic grammar and vocabulary. Many learners, on the other hand, feel that they *need* to study English conversation skills, or strategies for improving their scores on general proficiency tests, such as Eiken, TOEFL, or TOEIC. If these 'needs' become the foundation of an English course, is the teacher adopting an ESP approach? The second problem is the word 'specific.' How *specific* does the discourse community need to be? Many teachers who are thinking of adopting an ESP approach worry about explaining the technical terminology of an unfamiliar discipline, such as physics, economics, or law. If a teacher does not know the characteristics of a specific discipline, is it possible to adopt an ESP approach?

Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) describe an ESP practitioner as someone who needs to perform the roles of 1) teacher, 2) collaborator, 3) researcher, 4) course designer, 5) materials provider, and 6) evaluator. Clearly, if teachers have to teach the English of an unfamiliar discipline with no available textbooks, resources, or support from other language teachers (equally unfamiliar with the target discipline), they will have to either collaborate with discipline specialists, or research the discipline themselves. Then, they will have to design their course, create materials, plan tests, and ultimately evaluate how well their students have achieved the goals of the course. For a small group of talented professionals, this may be possible. However, for designers and administrators of English *programs*, far more serious problems emerge: How many unique courses would be needed? Who would be hired to teach these courses? How would the validity and reliability of learner grades be maintained across such a wide and varying range of courses? What would be the impact on human and materials resources? How much teacher training would be needed?

In this paper, I will first attempt to answer the above questions. Then, I will propose that the ESP approach will be more successful in a real-world educational institution if it is positioned not at the fringes of program design, aimed at just a select number of advanced students in a small number of specialized disciplines, but at the center, providing the framework on which all courses are developed. In other words, ESP should not be serving just a specific purpose in a program, but instead, should provide the foundation for the entire program in general.