1
Introduction

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section considers how different writers have described English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and identifies common themes. The second surveys areas of ESP teaching and offers a categorization. The third discusses the work of ESP teachers and the particular demands ESP teaching and course design can make on them. The final section considers ideas about the effectiveness of ESP courses with reference to empirical evidence provided by research and theoretical arguments.

1.1   Describing ESP

This section considers the question 'What is ESP teaching?'

> *What do you understand by the term 'ESP teaching'?*

The boxes below contain a selection of statements about ESP teaching by various writers. The terms 'English Language Teaching' (ELT) and 'English for General Purposes' (EGP) are used. A number of themes can be seen in these statements.

Box 1.1

The basic insight that language can be thought of as a tool for communication rather than as sets of phonological, grammatical and lexical items to be memorized led to the notion of developing learning programs to reflect the different communicative needs of disparate groups of learners. No longer was it necessary to teach an item simply because it is 'there' in the language. A potential tourist to England should not have to take the same course as an air traffic controller in Singapore or a Columbian engineer preparing for graduate

study in the United States. This insight led to the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an important subcomponent of language teaching, with its own approaches to curriculum development, materials design, pedagogy, testing and research.

Nunan (2004, p. 7)

Box 1.2

If ESP has sometimes moved away from trends in general ELT, it has always retained its emphasis on practical outcomes. We will see that the main concerns of ESP have always been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 1)

Box 1.3

ESP and General English

It is in the nature of a language syllabus to be selective. The General English syllabus is based on a conception of the kind of reality that the student has to deal with in English. For example, a General English course for teenagers will probably be written around the language-based activities of a stereotypical teenager. Finding out or even speculating on what these activities are is like taking the first step towards a needs analysis. Consciously or unconsciously, therefore, all sensible course designers must begin by trying to assess students' specific needs. ESP is simply a narrowing of this needs spectrum.

The ESP process of specialisation should not result in the complete separation of one part of the language from another. One cannot simply hack off pieces of a language or of skills and then expect them to exist independently of anything else. Every discipline refers to others and each draws on the same reservoir of language. A science student who comes to grips with the past simple passive through the description of laboratory procedures is unlikely to lock that tense into that context for the rest of their English-speaking life.

Holme (1996, pp. 3–4)

Box 1.4

In fact, the dividing line between ESP and EGP is not always clear; where do we place, for example, a course designed for a Korean businessperson who is to assume a post abroad in the near future? If the learner's proficiency level is very low, a great deal of course content will probably be of a general English type with emphasis on survival situations. Most would probably agree that the course should be classified as ESP, simply because the aims are clearly defined, and analysis of the learner's needs play an important role in deciding what to include in the course. However, we believe our example demonstrates that ESP should not be regarded as a discrete division of ELT, but simply an area (with blurred boundaries) whose courses are usually more focused in their aims and make use of a narrower range of topics.

Barnard and Zemach (2003, pp. 306–7)

One of the common themes in the above statements is that ESP courses are narrower in focus than ELT courses – 'tasks prescribed by their work or study situation' are mentioned in Box 1.2, 'narrowing down the spectrum' in Box 1.3 and 'a narrower range of topics' in Box 1.4. The statements mention learner needs. ESP courses are narrower in focus than general ELT courses because they centre on analysis of learners' needs. The statements show that ESP views learners in terms of their work or study roles and that ESP courses focus on work- or study-related needs, not personal needs or general interests. A number of specific work and study roles were mentioned including an air traffic controller, an engineering student, a science student and a businessperson. And lastly, there is mention of the fact that ESP involves analysis of texts and language use learners will encounter in their work and study situations – 'text analysis' is mentioned in Box 1.2 and 'description of laboratory procedures' in Box 1.4.

These themes are examined in detail in Part I of the book. Chapter 2 examines the role of needs analysis in ESP. Chapter 3 describes investigation into specialist texts and discourse and Chapter 4 examines narrow and wide-angled course designs as one of a set of curriculum design issues in ESP.

1.2   Areas in ESP

ESP teaching takes place in a number of differing contexts as shown in the following scenarios:

1.2.1   Teaching scenarios

1.2.1.1   *Alison*

Alison began her teaching career teaching French in the secondary school sector in New Zealand. A number of years later due to falling enrolments in European

languages in secondary schools, Alison started teaching English as a Second Language in a Tertiary College. She taught intermediate level learners there for some years and then began to also conduct classes for immigrants focusing on 'settling-in skills', such as job applications, dealing with administrative enquiries, and so on. One day her director of studies called her in to tell her that the college was to introduce a course called English for Medical Doctors. The students would be recently arrived immigrant doctors who needed to appear for medical registration examinations and English language tests to enable them to work as general practitioners in the country. Alison was asked to prepare and teach the course.

1.2.1.2   Derya

Derya graduated in teaching English as a foreign language in Turkey and almost immediately gained employment in one of the large state universities in which English is used as the medium of instruction. Most students at Derya's university spend a year in the preparatory school studying an intensive English language programme prior to starting study of subjects in their departments. Derya has taught on the intensive programme for a number of years. Recently, the Engineering faculty at the university expanded its doctoral programme. The faculty however realized that the doctoral students' lack of English was hampering their studies and it was decided that a special English language programme to help the postgraduate students with reading and writing engineering research reports needed to be set up. Derya, whose brother is completing his doctoral studies in the Engineering faculty, was requested to set up a suitable ESP course for the engineering students on the doctoral programme.

1.2.1.3   Albert

Albert is bilingual and was brought up in a French-speaking home in the UK. After studying French and Business at university, during which he did some part-time English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching, he was offered a job with a computer software company based in Paris. His brief was to track the daily work practices of a number of key employees at the company and offer English language assistance to them when they had difficulties using English in their work. The aim was that these key employees should eventually become independent in using English for their workplace needs. At present Albert is tracking and providing language support for one of the company lawyers, whose work involves correspondence with companies in the UK and US, and the head of finance responsible for strategy policy in both the French and UK divisions of the company.

1.2.1.4   Cathy and Louis

Cathy and Louis were completing postgraduate degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) when they responded to a job advertisement calling for teachers to work at a military defence training facility

in the US. The facility trains military personnel from various countries and aims to improve their technical and English language skills. Cathy and Louis' students were pilots. Having begun teaching at the facility, Cathy and Louis realized that the students' interest in English for its own sake was limited but they were deeply enthusiastic about their specialist areas, such as helicopter piloting. Cathy and Louis quickly set about devising content-based teaching of English in which the primary focus of instruction is on texts and activities related to the students' specialist military areas.

1.2.1.5   *John*

John studied law at a university in Australia. In his final year he began teaching ESOL part-time in order to supplement his income. He found he enjoyed it more than law and on completing his law degree, he taught ESOL full-time for three years before doing a masters degree in TESOL. For his thesis topic he decided to investigate discourse in 'problem-answer' essays' – an academic legal genre common in legal studies. After receiving his degree, John got a job teaching academic reading and writing skills in the English Language Support centre at an Asian university. Sometime later, he was transferred from the centre to the ESP Unit at the same university in order to work in an established small team that designs and teaches English courses for students in the law department. Here John feels able to combine his interest in language teaching with his knowledge of law and legal discourse.

1.2.1.6   *Estelle*

Estelle found that after teaching primary school in New Zealand for a number of years, she needed a change of direction. She wanted to work abroad and teach adults. She studied for a diploma in TESOL during which she took a course in ESP. Following her graduation, Estelle found a job in a two-year vocational college. The first course Estelle was assigned to teach was 'English for Office Management'. The course had only been running one year and Estelle was told she would need to prepare new instructional material as there was insufficient course content. The students on this course were between 18 and 20 years old and were hoping to gain employment in international companies after their return to their home countries. Alongside English, the students were studying word processing, spreadsheet and office administration.

The above scenarios illustrate some of the diverse contexts in which ESP teaching takes place. They illustrate the divide between teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) – Derya and John (who both work in a university setting and teach English for study-related purposes), teaching English for Professional Purposes (EPP) – Alison, Cathy and Louis and Albert (who teach English to doctors, pilots and company executives respectively), teaching English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) – Estelle (who teaches English for office managers). We see that ESP can be classroom-based, or, as in Albert's situation, on-site workplace-based. The work histories of Derya and John show that they were first

involved in teaching English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) – their work in the Language Preparatory School and Language Support Centre respectively and then were involved in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESAP). Estelle's teaching experience would be with groups of students who had never worked as office managers (pre-experience ESP), Alison's would be with students who had worked as doctors in their home countries but were not working any more (post-experience ESP), whereas Albert, Cathy and Louis would teach learners who were actually working in their professions at that point in time (during-experience ESP). Figure 1.1 shows the areas of ESP teaching and Figure 1.2 illustrates ESP course timing in relation to the learners' work or study experience.

Branch	Sub Branches	Example
English for Academic Purposes (EAP)	English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)	English for academic writing
	English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)	English for law studies
English for Professional Purposes (EPP)	English for General Professional Purposes (EGPP)	English for the health care sector
	English for Specific Professional Purposes (ESPP)	English for nursing
English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)	English for General Occupational Purposes (EGOP)	English for the hospitality industry
	English for Specific Occupational Purposes (ESOP)	English for hotel receptionists

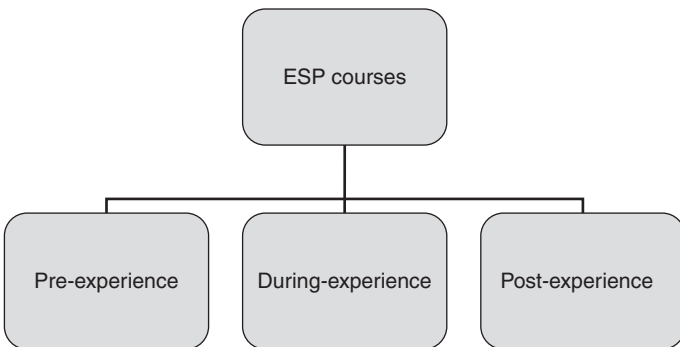*Figure 1.1*   Areas of ESP teaching

Figure 1.2   ESP course timing in relation to work or study experience of learners

1.3   Demands of teaching ESP

As well as illustrating the diverse areas of ESP teaching, the above scenarios illustrate the demands ESP can pose for teachers. Teachers may find themselves dealing with content in an occupation or subject of study that they themselves have little or no prior knowledge of, as we see in the cases of Derya and Cathy and Louis. Some, such as Albert, may find themselves working alone in an on-site environment. They may find they have far less knowledge and experience in the subject than their learners as in the case of Alison and Albert. In the above scenarios we saw that only John was dealing with a subject he had specialist knowledge in and was working in an experienced team of ESP teachers. Derya had a helpful 'insider-expert' relative to help her understand the situation and needs of her learners, but not all teachers have such contacts. Cathy and Louis were fortunate in working together, but some ESP teachers find themselves working alone without colleagues to 'sound off' ideas for course and materials design.

So how prepared are teachers for teaching what often is a challenging new task? Master (1997a) reviewed the state of ESP teacher education in the US and found that at that time there were no ESP-track MA TESOL programmes although one university was in the process of building one, and a handful of universities had a course in the topic. Howard (1997) surveyed UK universities and found that three offered MA programmes that specialized in ESP and a good number offered a course in the topic. The City University of Hong Kong at this time offers an ESP-track MA and a number of other universities around the world offer MA courses as part of their MA TESOL programmes. However, only some teachers who come to work in ESP have received such formal training. In the above scenarios we saw that ESP was part of the formal professional education of only Estelle and John.

For many ESP teachers, formal TESOL training has been very largely concerned with general ELT. Some might argue that there is little difference between teaching ELT and ESP. Both ELT and ESP share a similar aim – to develop students' communicative competence. Ellis (1996) describes language pedagogy as 'concerned with the ability to use language in communicative situations' (p. 74). Workplace or academic situations can be argued to be simply just some of those situations, a part of the whole. Many ELT courses are based on the principle that language course content should be related to the purposes for which students are expected to use language after all.

Yet there are important differences between teaching general ELT and ESP. Cook (2002) distinguishes between external and internal goals for language teaching. External goals can be related to the uses of language outside the classroom – being able to get things done in the real world, such as being able to buy groceries or provide medical information. Internal goals relate to the educational aims of the classroom – improving attitudes to speakers of other languages, promoting thinking skills such as analysis, memorizing and social goals. ESP teaching

is generally understood to be very largely concerned with external goals. In ESP the learner is seen as a language learner engaged either in academic, professional or occupational pursuits and who uses English as a means to carry out those pursuits. External goals suggest an instrumental view of language learning and language being learnt for non-linguistic goals. In a general ELT situation, goals are generally linguistic (such as, development of oral competence or a wide vocabulary, or ability to use a wide range of grammatical structures). In an ESP situation, it is understood that the learner would want to achieve 'real world' objectives, objectives requiring specific linguistic competencies. For example, students on an English-for-nursing course may want to 'complete patient records' appropriately or 'interact with patients' in ways that reduce patients' stress. In this situation, language development is seen as the means to the ends but not as the end in itself, and the learners can easily become de-motivated by language course content that does not appear directly relevant to their real world objectives. The ESP teacher/course developer needs to find out what the language-based objectives of the students are in the target occupation or academic discipline and ensure that the content of the ESP course works towards them.

ESP focuses on when, where and why learners need the language either in study or workplace contexts. Decisions about what to teach, and sometimes how to teach (see Dudley-Evans and St Johns, 1998) are informed by descriptions of how language is used in the particular contexts the learners will work or study in. There is thus a strong focus in ESP on language as 'situated language use'. Although there are exceptions, general ELT tends to focus at least in part on language usage (the underlying systems of the language). This does not mean to say that ESP is exclusively concerned with use and general ELT with usage, it is a matter of degree.

Tudor (1997) points out that an important distinguishing feature of ESP is that it deals with 'domains of knowledge which the average educated native speaker could not reasonably be expected to be familiar with' (p. 91). In other words, what is focused on in ESP courses is not part and parcel of the communicative repertoire of all educated native speakers as in the case of general English teaching. So, for example, in teaching English to a group of nurses, course content might involve items such as medical terminology, patterns of nurse–patient interaction, written genres such as patient records, items that are not in the communicative realm of those outside nursing fields. This distinction also holds in the case of EAP teaching that deals with subject-specific matter, ESAP, such as English for Legal Studies or English for Biology Studies. It does not hold as well in the case of EGAP. The great majority of ESP teachers will themselves be graduates and have considerable experience in academic texts and skills. They are less likely, however, to have conscious knowledge of them. For example, if an EGAP course focuses on academic speaking skills, the teacher may have good ability himself/herself to speak in academic contexts but is

likely to have only a tacit understanding of the skills or features of language use involved. To design and teach a course in academic speaking, the teacher will need to have an explicit understanding of those skills, such as presentation and discussion skills. Because of the focus on either an area of knowledge that is outside the communicative repertoire of all educated native speakers or on making explicit skills that educated native speakers have only tacit awareness of, teaching ESP makes additional demands on the teacher. The ESP teacher needs to learn how to design courses in a conceptual area that one has not mastered and develop the ability to analyse and describe specific texts. In other words, extra demands are made on the teacher.

A further demand faced by ESP teachers comes from the fact that ESP courses often run for a limited period of time as needs and circumstances change. We saw in the scenario about Alison that the numbers of overseas-trained doctors who had immigrated to New Zealand warranted an ESP course being set up at that point of time. However, the English course for medical doctors Alison set up is unlikely to run indefinitely. Immigration patterns and government policy change and the impetus to provide such a course may end after a couple of years. In the scenario featuring Derya there had been a recent increase in the number of doctoral engineering students who needed English-language support. But this situation may not continue. In coming years, fewer doctoral students may wish to study engineering in the university. Or, if the number of prospective doctoral students continues to rise, the university may limit entry to students who already have very high levels of communicative ability in English and the ESP course may come to be seen as redundant.

1.4   Effectiveness of ESP

Given that ESP teaching makes additional demands on teachers and course developers in terms of investigating needs and designing courses that may only run for a relatively short time, it seems legitimate to ask whether teaching ESP is effective. Is there evidence to show that it is effective enough to warrant the time and energy needed to set up a course?

Empirical investigation into the effectiveness of ESP teaching has been limited (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991; Master, 2005). This has also been the case in EAP (Gillet and Wray, 2006). It is easy to understand why this is so. There are few situations in which an experimental study comparing a group of learners provided with an ESP-oriented course and one with similar learners provided with a general English course would be possible. There are few empirical studies investigating the effectiveness of ESP in workplace training, due in large part to issues of confidentiality in corporate culture and also time and cost constraints in ESP management (Kim, 2008, p. 16).

Master (2005, p. 109) lists a number of questions concerning the account-ability of ESP including:

- Do ESP/EST (English for Science and Technology) programmes work?
- Are they more effective than previous programmes aimed at general language proficiency?
- If so, in what ways are they more effective?
- Can the expense be justified?
- Are there any unintended or unforeseen outcomes resulting from the use of any given ESP programme?

The two studies described below relate to the second of these questions posited by Master (2005): Are ESP programmes more effective than programmes aimed at general language proficiency?

Kasper (1997) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effects of academic courses linking the content of intermediate level English as a Second Language (ESL) courses to mainstream courses such as psychology in a US college setting. The study aimed to provide evidence to support the use of 'content-based' ESL instruction. In the study one group of ESL learners received ESL instruction which included a content-based reading class. In the reading class the students read selected passages from five academic disciplines, language acquisition, biology, computer science, psychology and anthropology, which were disciplines the students were most likely to study in the college. The students in the non-content-based group used a reading textbook with a range of topics (not related to specific academic disciplines). The study found that content-based instruction impacted positively on the students' academic progress and success. Kasper (1997, p. 310) explained this result saying that the students focused on gathering information/ideas from the content-based materials. The materials presented the students with complex information/ideas communicated through the second language. The students thus acquired information through sophisticated linguistic input and this helped them move to more advanced levels of language processing.

A further study in a college setting is reported in Song (2006). Like Kasper (1997), Song compared the academic performance of two groups of ESL students enrolled at the same point of time in their first semester of study. One group received one semester of content-based ESL instruction and one group received non-content-linked ESL instruction. Song tracked the progress of the two groups through their academic records. Both the content-linked and non-content-linked ESL courses aimed to help students develop academic literacy in English. However, the content-based instruction also aimed to integrate ESL study with disciplines in the college. It therefore included assignments and topics from the disciplines and provided opportunities for the learners to participate in social and academic events, such as lectures by faculty or guests. Song found that

students receiving content-based instruction achieved better results in their ESL course and subsequent ESL courses as well as better long-term academic success rates than those who received non-content-based ESL instruction.

Theoretical arguments can be made as to why ESP courses should be more effective than general ESL courses. It can be argued that because ESP courses cater to students' interests and needs, they are more likely to engender high levels of motivation. It can be assumed that students will be more interested in topics and texts related to their work or study areas. If students are more motivated, then learning is more likely to occur. It can also be argued that ESP courses are more efficient because they have more limited aims than general ESL courses. Because ESP courses are based on needs analysis, the learning objectives are more highly proscribed than would be the case in general ESL courses. Thus it is not surprising that learning outcomes may be perceived more favourably. Limited and highly specified aims are more likely to be achievable.

We also need to consider how new members of disciplines, professions and vocations learn the ways of communicating in them. According to a theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is social and involves participation in a community of practice. According to this theory when people first join a community they are on the outer borders of it and learn from the periphery. As they become increasingly competent they can move towards the centre of the community. A community of practice can be described as a group of people sharing common concerns, problems and interests and who increase their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting with each other (Wenger, McDermot and Snyder, 2002). Wenger et al. give examples of such communities of practice – engineers who design with a particular type of electronic circuit and who find it important to get together to compare designs and soccer mums and dads who use game times to share advice about parenting. The groups may not necessarily work together or meet on a daily basis but they do interact because they find it useful to do so:

> As they (members of the group) spend time together, they typically share information, insight and advice. … They may create tools, standards, generic designs, manuals, and other documentation – or they may simply develop a tacit understanding that they share. … Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5)

Communities of practice develop knowledge and act as repositories of it and are the ideal place to learn community knowledge (Wenger, 1998).

Pre-experience ESP learners cannot generally learn from within their targeted community of practice. Perhaps they feel that they do not have the language skills to work or study in the target community of practice as yet or

perhaps they are excluded from it until such time as they have requisite language or communication skills in place. ESP courses offer them a middle ground between general English classes and actually being and learning in the target community. They involve the learners in the study of communication in the target community as a means for them to gain knowledge of it. This study could be in the form of reading texts produced in the community or studying patterns on interaction and language use employed in it. ESP courses can also try to offer some social links to the target community of practice. For example, in the study conducted by Song (2006), content-based instruction included contact with the target community (lectures with guest speakers and social events).

ESP courses can offer during and post-experience ESP learners time out from their work or study in their actual community of practice to work on specific aspects of ways of communicating, ways they may not have been able to acquire firmly in situ.

1.5   Summary

This chapter has shown that ESP has both variable and constant features. Its variability stems from the range of areas for which ESP courses are developed. These range from the relatively general (for example, academic English writing courses) to the highly specific (for example, English for hotel receptionists). Its variability also stems from the differing relationships ESP learners have with their target community of practice – in some cases learners are already working or studying, or have already worked or studied in their target workplaces or disciplines, and thus have knowledge of their specific ways of working. In other cases, learners may not have entered their targeted communities and have little understanding of what work or study in these communities involves. And finally, the variability in ESP stems from differences in how familiar ESP teachers are with the target disciplines, professions and vocations and their specialist discourse.

As for constants, the discussion of ESP in this chapter has shown that ESP almost invariably involves discussion of learners' needs and in viewing learners primarily in work- and study-related roles. ESP courses of necessity require a narrowing down of language and skills that are to be taught. In order to teach that language or those skills, ESP courses almost inevitably make use of texts and draw on descriptions of language use and communication from the target communities of practice and disciplines.

1.6   Discussion

1. Which areas of ESP or EAP do you currently teach or envisage teaching in the future? What background knowledge do you already have that helps or could help you in this?

1. Absolute characteristics
   - ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
   - ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and the activities of the discipline it serves;
   - ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.
2. Variable characteristics
   - ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
   - ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
   - 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 used for learners at secondary school level;
   - ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Figure 1.3   Definition of absolute and variable characteristics of ESP
Source: Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), pp. 4–5

2. The studies by Kasper (1997) and Song (2006) offer a response to Master's (2005) question about whether ESP courses are more effective than general ESL courses. Suggest a study to address another of the questions posed by Master. What information would you collect and whom would you ask?
3. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, pp. 4–5) offer a formal definition of ESP in Figure 1.3. This definition specifies three absolute characteristics, characteristics which are always present. It specifies four variable characteristics, characteristics which are often, but not always, present.

   Consider the ESP or EAP courses you have taught or envisage teaching in the future. Which of the 'variable characteristics' were/will be present or absent?
4. What communities of practice are you in? How did you/do you learn about the ways of communicating in them? Are you on the outside of any communities of practice that you would like to become a member of? If so, how could a language/communication class or specialist help you gain the knowledge you might need to participate in the community?
5. Do you think ESP courses should try to forge actual links between students and members of the target disciplines or communities of practice? Why or why not?

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