



## *Teaching English for Specific Purposes: Are ESL Teachers Prepared?*

### *Enseñanza del inglés con fines específicos: ¿Están preparados los profesores de ESL?*

### *Ensino de inglês para fins específicos: os professores de ESL estão preparados?*

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Ciencias de la Educación  
Artículo de Investigación

\* **Recibido:** 28 de abril de 2022 \* **Aceptado:** 18 de mayo de 2022 \* **Publicado:** 08 de junio de 2022

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## Abstract

The intention of this paper consists in presenting the results of a qualitative research performed to a group of English teachers. All of them must be prepared to face the different types of classes, methodologies, students' ages, and backgrounds. For instance, they should know what, how, and when to teach depending on the context they would be involved in. One of the challenges English teachers face during their practice is English for Specific Purposes training classes. As there are different perceptions about this kind of training, two main questions are analysed in this study, whether the trainers for ESP courses should be professionals or English teachers. The answers varied depending on the needs and type of training required, but most importantly, the answers emphasized on the importance of administrators and university to be involved with the collaboration and creation of teaching materials.

**Keywords:** ESP; teaching; learning; reflection; qualitative analysis.

## Resumen

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar los resultados de una investigación cualitativa realizada a un grupo de profesores de inglés. Todos ellos tienen que estar preparados para afrontar los diferentes tipos de clases, metodologías, edades y procedencias de sus estudiantes. Por ejemplo, como docentes deben saber qué, cómo y cuándo enseñar según el contexto en el que estén involucrados. Uno de los desafíos que enfrentan los profesores de inglés durante su práctica son las clases de capacitación de inglés para propósitos específicos, ESP por sus siglas en inglés. Debido a que existen diferentes percepciones sobre este tipo de enseñanza, en este estudio se analizan dos preguntas: si los capacitadores de los cursos de ESP deben ser profesionales o profesores de inglés. Las respuestas varían según las necesidades y el tipo de formación requerida pero se coincidió que tanto los administradores y la Universidad tienen que colaborar con la creación de materiales didácticos específicos.

**Palabras clave:** ESP; enseñanza; aprendizaje; reflexiones docentes; análisis cualitativo.

## Resumo

A intenção deste artigo consiste em apresentar os resultados de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada a um grupo de professores de inglês. Todos eles devem estar preparados para enfrentar os diferentes tipos de aulas, metodologias, idades e formações dos alunos. Por exemplo, eles devem saber o que,

como e quando ensinar, dependendo do contexto em que estão envolvidos. Um dos desafios que os professores de inglês enfrentam durante sua prática são as aulas de treinamento de inglês para fins específicos. Como existem diferentes percepções sobre esse tipo de treinamento, duas questões principais são analisadas neste estudo, se os formadores dos cursos de ESP devem ser profissionais ou professores de inglês. As respostas variaram de acordo com as necessidades e o tipo de formação necessária, mas o mais importante, as respostas enfatizaram a importância dos gestores e da universidade estarem envolvidos com a colaboração e criação de materiais didáticos.

**Palavras-chave:** ESP; ensino; Aprendendo; reflexão; análise qualitativa.

## Introducción

Although English for Specific Purposes is relatively new, it has always been part of the English teaching-learning process, especially in language education for high schoolers and adults. As stated by LAMRI (2016) who mentions that generally the students study this type of English course “not because they are interested in the English Language or English culture as such, but because they need English for study or work purposes” (Robinson, 1991: 2). As a result, the components, needs, the students who will attend, and the class that will be designed for this type of course are never going to be the same. It cannot be repeated because every single course will have a different requirement and for instance, a different learning outcome to achieve.

English for Specific Purposes is a part of English Language Teaching, and ESP has several subdivisions as well. The needs and characteristics vary from language level, age of students, trainers’ preparation, learning outcomes, evaluation, teaching materials and resources for teaching. All of these aspects are explained by Basturkmen (2006). The book detailed that for example, there is still a need to train ESP teachers as there is still a wide spectrum of possibilities and courses to cover. The needs students must fulfil in order to understand fully the class is also a must. The English level of each student must be upper intermediate and above, as an ESP class does not intend to teach grammar or basic English vocabulary. (Costeleanu, 2009)

There is a huge difference between teaching general English and applying an English for Specific Purposes approach in a class. First, it is important to understand that in order to take an ESP course, the students’ English level should be higher than regular ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, because the main goal of an ESP course is to develop other skills than learning a second

language. It is important to emphasize that the main purpose of planning an ESP course is to develop communication skills. There would be technical and special vocabulary, texts, articles, oral practices, writing forms, and other types of components that would differ from a regular English course. Now as teachers, if a colleague wants to adopt an ESP posture it is highly recommended doing lots of research first. There is not a single course that is the same as the other. All these courses vary, and they are applied according to each group's needs. It could be the case, for example, that a company may want to expand its operations outside Ecuadorian borders, so they must train their staff in the language they need. But there is not only the training, the candidates for this ESP course must have an advanced domain of the target language, also, they must have experience and skills related with the job they are about to perform overseas. In this case, the teacher is preparing an EOP or English for Occupational Purposes course, in which the instructor will help the company train its staff in specific occupational (mostly) communicational skills.

To be specific, English for Specific Purposes is divided in two spectrums. The first one is teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which relates directly with the domain of teaching a second language, but this will serve for students who are specializing in a specific field of study. E.g.: Teaching technical English for adults studying a major in law. Another example could be to plan and execute a program to teach English to medical students. Under this first spectrum, students who are enrolled in this type of English Course must be between and intermediate-advance level of "general" English, because all the class would be taught in English and the content does not reflect correcting grammar mistakes, misspelling errors, or any other type of a regular second language class. On the other hand, there is the second division which states for English for Occupational (Professional) Purposes (EOP) which are courses specially designed to train a specific group of professionals, who already graduated or are just in the middle of a specialization course. For instance, an English course for a certain group of engineers from a specific company is an example of EOP. Another example is to teach an English Business course for a company board in charge to expanding the brand into English-language speaking countries. The characteristics of this second spectrum are different as the design and plan comes from a specific need. The resources and materials needed for this special kind of courses must be developed with the company's own documents and records.

## Methodology

This research was based using mainly qualitative inquiry as a research approach (Creswell, 2013), the intention of this study was to sought answers to the following research questions:

- Do teachers really need to be part of the professional field to teach that specific class in English?
- To what extent do English language teachers are prepared to teach ESP?

The sample represented a group of 52 English teachers from zone 5 and 7 (Ecuador's division) who had to answer these two questions. Relevant answers were recorded and transcribed to perform crossed-out comparisons and grouping them among relevant opinions characterized in common traits as well as descriptions.

## Analysis and Results

All of this information comes from the different reflections done by interviewers. Thoughts and perspectives were analysed, and they became shared characteristics which collaborated in looking for answers to the questions generated by researchers.

The first analysis was marked as Subject Specificity in ESP. Answers to this topic responded to the guideline question: Do teachers really need to be part of the academic field to teach that specific class in English?

Participants revealed that there should be a relationship between the teacher's specialty and the level of English students must have. This is illustrated by the following extracts:

“As a doctor, communication skills are mandatory. Doctors need to say exactly what is happening with patients as well as reporting to higher levels staff. For this reason, a doctor should definitely be able to speak clearly, use the specific vocabulary related to his field of expertise, and be able to communicate (in writing), report, notify, inform, give instructions, etc in the target language he is working on. For that reason, medical students, for example, would be more motivated if a doctor would teach them a specialty course in English language.”

Other participants mentioned that there is not necessary to be a professional in the area. Other aspects are more important that that, such as administrator's involvement in their staff self-training spirit. Participant 21 expressed the following:

“Now, as a professional it is also important to emphasize the involvement of administrators and other personnel related to the elaboration, planning, and execution processes of having an ESP

course. As a professional I would emphasize the importance towards self-actualization and the needs this institution has in order to prepare not only a professional staff, but also an updated, state-of-the-art individuals that they would apply this new knowledge into productive results.”

It is important to remind the university/workplace that there are always target needs and goals each of these places have set for the future, and part of these goals definitely is having their staff/students be updated. On the other side, I would have a reflection with authorities for identifying the “wants” and “lacks” of the institution/university and based on those needs, I would design a training course suitable for them.

The above paragraphs express what most interviewees felt. They reflected that it is good to have a professional who knows the language to teach a specialty course, but it is not the most important. There are other factors that are more relevant. Quality can be measured not only in the instructor’s attributes but also in the form administrators and/or universities use their resources to adequate an ESP class for a specific group of professionals, all of them with specific needs and specific characteristics.

ESP research is mandatory before even planning an ESP course. In order to identify the needs, wants, and lacks for a specific group of people research must be performed. Part of this previewing research would be the development and application of questionnaires, interviews, discussions, etc., in such a way the need of a specific training course would arise.

On the other hand, in order to plan and create the syllabus for that ESP, another type of research must be done. In this case, as there is not a perfect group that fits this specific class, the trainer should complete it with real documents, letters, minutes, or any other target documentation that would be part of the teaching section of this especially designed trained course.

Talking about strengths and weaknesses while teaching English for Specific Purposes and any other class related to this topic, it is important to emphasize that when teaching an English for Academic Purposes there are already syllabus and approved programs, and most of the time there is a specific book that we should cover. That means that there is enough bibliography and teaching materials to plan a course. However, one weakness in this matter could be the repetition of topics, grammar structures and vocabulary applied for each class. This might represent a tendency of having topics running in circles every semester, without considering the appropriate application in real scenarios.

When having the opportunity of teaching an English of Occupational Purposes course, there are other factors that may be considered by professionals (who are not teachers by profession) as

disadvantages or weaknesses. Teaching materials, for example, can become a real headache. Usually, these types of courses are notified to the teacher in a short notice, and it represents little or no time to plan the activities and resources appropriately. However, if the instructor knows where the resources may come from, he will be finding real documents to add to the class resources book. On the other hand, this weakness can become a real advantage at the moment of creating/planning the course. The same lack of a course book can end in the compilation of a resource booklet to continue working with it in future courses.

The research interview had a second part marked as: English language teachers' perceptions of ESP and ESP-related issues. Answers to this topic responded to the second research question: To what extent do English language teachers feel prepared to teach ESP?

One of the interviewees shared her experience as an ESP class instructor:

“Considering materials and my own experience as an ESP and ESL teacher I think that the ideal approach for me is adapting materials. I like to look for updated information, pics, graphic organizers, video, tools, etc., with the intention of using them by adapting them with the program. I really consider this as a plus for my classes as my students are not only learning a subject, but also, they are learning new technological information and skills. Finally, I understand that formal tests are part of a program. However, I think that the tests must be related to the communicative approach and evidence the real knowledge acquired and not only general communication matters. The impact of a well elaborated test is one part of teacher's and student's personal feedback. Also, the results would be a guide for stakeholders not only as evidence of results but also as back up information to support future research evidence.”

To sum up, the previous ideas are a representation of English for Specific Purposes classes. All these thoughts came from years of teaching experience and from being a trainer for ESP courses. The information, activities, readings, discussions, and interviews with the teachers on this program have reinforced the answer that pre-service teachers do not have a real preparation on how to develop an ESP course. ESP as a subject has more research and practice to come, there are still needs to cover this subject. ESP as a subject in the curriculum does not mean pre-service teachers are prepared to teach one.

90% of participants agreed that ESP as a subject for pre-service teachers is just a brief summary of theory, characteristics, planning analysis and suggestions. Still, it does not represent their students will be ready to teach immediately. Over the years, with practice and experience, ESP practice has

definitely helped to develop ESP classes, and these ideas will come to administrators, course creators, universities, colleges that will receive the impact of a well-designed class for a determined group of people, all of them with one objective: develop a new specific skill in English.

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