An account of ESP – with possible future directions
Mike Brunton

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Special Purposes arose as a term in the 1960's as it became increasingly aware that general English courses frequently did not meet learner or employers wants. As far back as 1977 Strevens (1977) set out to encapsulate the term and what it meant. Robinson (1980) wrote a thorough review of theoretical positions and what ESP meant at that time. Coffey (1985) updated Streven's work and saw ESP as a major part of communicative language teaching in general.

At first register analysis was used to design ESP courses. A course in basic scientific English compiled by Ewer and Latorre (1969) is a typical example of an ESP syllabus based on register analysis.

However, using just register analysis failed to meet desired outcomes. Thus new courses were designed to meet these perceived failures. Target situation analysis became dominant in ESP course design as the stakeholders and employers demanded that courses better meet their needs. Technical English (Pickett & Laster, 1980) was an early example of a textbook using this approach.

Hutchinson & Waters (1987) gave three reasons for the emergence of ESP, the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics and a new focus on the learner.

Today it is still a prominent part of EFL teaching (Anthony, 1997b). Johns & Dudley-Evans (2001, 115) state that, '*the demand for English for specific purposes… continues to increase and expand throughout the world*.' The '*internationalism*' (Cook, 2001, 164) of English seems to be increasing with few other global languages i.e. Spanish or Arabic, close to competing with it.

Under the umbrella term of ESP there are a myriad of sub-divisions. For example English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and English for Medical Purposes (EMP), and numerous others with new ones being added yearly to the list. In Japan Anthony (1997a, 1) stated that as a result of Universities being given control over their own curriculums '*a rapid*

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growth in English courses aimed at specific disciplines, e.g. English for Chemists arose.'
It could be said that ESP has increased over the decades as a result of market forces and a
greater awareness amongst the academic and business community that learners' needs
and wants should be met wherever possible.

As Belcher (2006, 134) says ESP now encompasses an '*ever-diversifying and
expanding range of purposes.'* This continued expansion of ESP into new areas has
arisen due to the ever-increasing '*glocalized'* world (Robertson, 1995). Flowerdew
(1990) attributes its dynamism to market forces and theoretical renewal. Belcher (2004)
also noted trends in the teaching of ESP in three distinct directions: the sociodiscoursal,
sociocultural (See Mitchell & Myles, 1998), and sociopolitical. Kavaliauskiene (2007, 8)
also writes on a new individualized approach to learners *'to gain each learner's trust and
think of the ways of fostering their linguistic development.'*

From the outset the term ESP was a source of contention with many arguments as
to what exactly was ESP? Even today there is a large amount of on-going debate as to
how to specify what exactly ESP constitutes (Belcher, 2006, Dudley-Evan & St. John,
1998, Anthony, 1997).
Dudley-Evans and St. John attempted (1998) to apply a series of characteristics some
absolute and some variable to resolve arguments about what ESP is. This followed on
from earlier work by Strevens (1988).

Definition of ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, 4)

Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners.

2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.

3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar,
lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.

2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of
General English.

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3. 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 for learners at secondary school level.
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

This description helps to clarify to a certain degree what an ESP course constitutes. There are a number of other characteristics of ESP that several authors have put forward. Belcher (2006, 135), states that '*ESP assumes that the problems are unique to specific learners in specific contexts and thus must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored to fit instruction.*' Mohan (1986, 15) adds that ESP courses focus on preparing learners '*for chosen communicative environments.*' Learner purpose is also stated by Graham & Beardsley (1986) and learning centeredness (Carter, 1983; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) as integral parts of ESP. Lorenzo (2005, 1) reminds us that ESP '*concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures.*' He also points out that as ESP is usually delivered to adult students, frequently in a work related setting (EOP), that motivation to learn is higher than in usual ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. Carter (1983) believed that self-direction is important in the sense that an ESP course is concerned with turning learners into users of the language.

Flowerdew (1990, 327) points out that one reason ESP has problems in establishing itself in a clearly defined area within ELT (English Language Teaching) in general '*is that many of the ideas closely associated with ESP have been subsequently appropriated by the 'parent' discipline.*' He gives as an example functional/notional syllabuses which have been adopted into the mainstream of language teaching. He also includes the example of needs analysis which traditionally distinguished ESP courses from general English course design.

Another area of debate within ESP concerns the role of methodology. Widdowson (1983, 87) has argued that '*methodology has generally been neglected in ESP.*' However today there are so many various courses under the ESP umbrella that it is impossible to

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discuss this question, clearly different methodologies have to be used according to the course design and goals and outcomes of those courses.

What is an undisputed fact is that any ESP course should be needs driven, and has an '*emphasis on practical outcomes.*' (Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998, 1). Therefore needs analysis is and always will be an important and fundamental part of ESP (Gatehouse, 2001, Graves, 2000). It is *'the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course.*' (Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998, 122). Needs analysis evolved in the 1970's (See Munby, 1978) to include 'deficiency analysis', or assessment of the 'learning gap' (West, 1997, 71) between target language use and current learner proficiencies. However, since the 1980's there has been debate if gathering expert and data driven '*objective*' information about learners is enough (Tudor, 1997). Nowadays there is increasing focus on looking at learners' subjective needs, '*their self-knowledge, awareness of target situations, life goals, and instructional expectations*. (Belcher, 2006, 136). There is also an increasing focus on '*appropriate perspectives on language learning and language skills.*' (Far, 2008, 2).

Certainly though ESP was a driving force behind needs analysis as Richards (2001) says, '*The emergence of ESP with its emphasis on needs analysis as a starting point in language program design was an important factor in the development of current approaches to language curriculum development*.'

There is another aspect of ESP courses that is debated widely, that is how broad or narrow a focus should the course have (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, Flowerdew, 1990). Should a course focus on subject area content exclusively and a set list of target situations or skills (narrow focus) or set out to cover a range of skills and target events (broad focus) perhaps even beyond the immediate perceived needs of the learners. Carter (1983) identified one type of ESP as English as a Restricted language. An example cited by Gatehouse (2001) is air traffic controllers, another example was hotel waiters. However I do not agree with the second example, hotel waiters could be expected to use language not just in a restricted range. Clearly for certain types of courses the focus can be narrow. Kaur (2007) found that students were very happy with a narrow focus as they felt no time was wasted during their course. Mackay & Mountford (1978) point out that

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knowing the restrictive language of their target situation would not enable them to function outside of that narrow context. This then is a key issue, do students actually want a narrow focus, and if so, does it not limit their English progress? I believe this issue will become increasingly important.

Jasso-Aguilar (1999) examined how perceived needs of Hotel maids in a Hotel in Waikiki failed to meet the expectations of the learners' themselves. Stapa & Jais (2005) examined the failure of Malaysian University courses in Hotel Management and Tourism to meet the wants and needs of the students with a lack of skills and genres covered in their courses. Therefore it is clear that needs analysis must include the students input from the beginning of a course design. Stakeholders, institutions and employers often perceive wants and needs differently from students.

Recently new debate has arisen as to the authenticity of materials within ESP. Bojovic (2006) believes that material should be authentic, up to date and relevant for the students' specializations. Although the fact that ESP should be materials driven was set out long ago by Dudley-Evan & St. John (1998). This has driven a need for instructors to evaluate their course books more closely to see just how suitable a match they are for their students. Evaluating materials for ESP is a vital skill which as Anthony (1,1997,3) states *'is perhaps the role that ESP practitioners have neglected most to date.'* Zhang (2007) set out a series of steps to evaluate materials used in class. Brunton (2009) evaluated a modern ESP course book designed for Hotel workers using these criteria.

Ironically it is the very success of ESP that has given rise to this debate, and perhaps failure of recent ESP courses. Bookshelves are filled with a large amount of books designed for ESP students', this plethora of material thus reduces individual instructors motivation to construct their own course content with a focus on the immediate learners' context and particular needs. Anthony (1997b, 3) states that *'materials writers think very carefully about the goals of learners at all stages of materials production.'* Clearly this will not happen when using an assigned course book. Gatehouse (2001, 10) believes that there is a value in all texts, but goes on to say that *'curricular materials will unavoidably be pieced together, some borrowed and others specially designed.'* Anthony (1997b) had a very negative view of teaching from ESP

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course books believing that teachers were often 'slaves' to the book or worse taught from textbooks which were unsuitable. Toms (2004) strongly argued, especially against using a general English course book for learners with specific needs stating that the '*course book has an ancillary, if any role to play in the ESAP syllabus.*' Finally Skehan (1998, 260) argued that using course books goes against all notions of learning centeredness with regards to the individual stating '*the scope to adapt material to learner differences is severely constrained.*'

Curriculum development is another important issue in ESP. Bloor (1998) discussed issues related to ESP design similar to the work of Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) who set out a detailed summary of ESP course design. Richards (2001) wrote a detailed account of the history of ESP course design. Xenodohidis (2002) states that '*the goals should be realistic, otherwise the students would be de-motivated.* Chen (2006) stresses the importance of an identification of a 'common core' of English language needs as well as a diverse range of discourse and genres to meet 'specific' needs. However, as back as 1980 Chitravelu (1980) spoke about having a 'core' of language in an ESP course. Anthony (1997a) thought that '*one of the main controversies in the field of ESP is how specific materials should be.*' In this context he was talking about team teaching with a general English teacher. He argued that a lack of specificity from course books leaves the instructor with no choice but to design materials that are appropriate for the students.

Gatehouse (2001) successfully integrated general English language content and acquisition skills when developing the curriculum for language preparation for employment in the health sciences. In an ESP course for employees at the American University of Beirut, as described by Shaaban (2005), the curriculum development and course content also focused on a common core for the learners.

It is agreed that when designing a curriculum for ESP students in the field of EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) that learning tasks and activities have '*a high surrender value*', meaning that the students would be able to immediately use what they learned to perform their jobs more effectively (Edwards, 2000, 292). Designing the course based around this belief increases the students' intrinsic motivation which should

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aid their learning (Gardner, 2000, Walqui, 2000). McCarten (2007, 26) states '*making vocabulary personal helps to make it more memorable*.' So again ESP courses have an advantage over general English courses. Indeed Hutchinson & Waters (1987) believed that all decisions as to content should be based on the learners' rationale for learning. When designing a curriculum or syllabus Johns & Evans (2001) suggest '*that the students target English situations have identifiable elements.* Thus once the elements have been identified the process of curriculum design can proceed. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998, 171) state that materials need to be '*consistent and to have some recognizable pattern*.' This is to aid students' learning strategies (Oxford, 2000, Oxford & Crookall, 1989, Skehan, 1989). Materials also have to have a very purpose-related orientation which Gatehouse (2001) believes is an essential component of any material designed for specific purposes. Having a clear purpose behind materials also promotes motivation (Dornyei, 2001). Gao (2007) sums up issues of ESP course design in her paper about an ESP course for business students in China, '*when designing an ESP course, the primary issue is the analysis of learners' specific needs. Other issues addressed include: determination of realistic goals and objectives; integration of grammatical functions and the abilities required for future workplace communication, and assessment and evaluation.*' Today the debate is moving towards the area of negotiated syllabi, if learners' can state their wants and needs, then surely they can also help design their own courses? As Kaur (2007) says, '*When ESP learners take some responsibility for their own learning and are invited to negotiate some aspects of the course design…..they feel motivated to become more involved in their learning…*' However, Skehan (1998, 262) discusses the process approach toward course design and warns against negotiated syllabi if the learners don't know how to be '*effective learners*.' Williams & Burden (1997) set out a list of learning strategies and skills that teachers should develop in students' to enable autonomous and more independent learning to take place.

It should not be forgotten though that even a successfully designed ESP course may have a mismatch between skills. As Ping & Gu (2004) found out on researching a technical communication course in China, in their summary they found that students technical reading and writing skills had increased but their ability in speaking had not.

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As we enter the next decade it can be seen from this discussion that ESP continues to evolve along several distinct paths. All these branches however, share something in common; an increasing focus on learners', not just their immediate wants and needs but future wants and needs as well. A move toward negotiated or process orientated syllabi with students' actively involved with their courses. A continued focus on individual learning, learner centeredness, and learner autonomy. A move away from ESP course books towards a more eclectic approach to materials, with an emphasis on careful selection of materials to meet learners' wants and needs. A continued high-emphasis on target situation analysis and needs analysis, and following the course delivery a more objective approach to evaluation and assessment of the course (Graves, 2000).
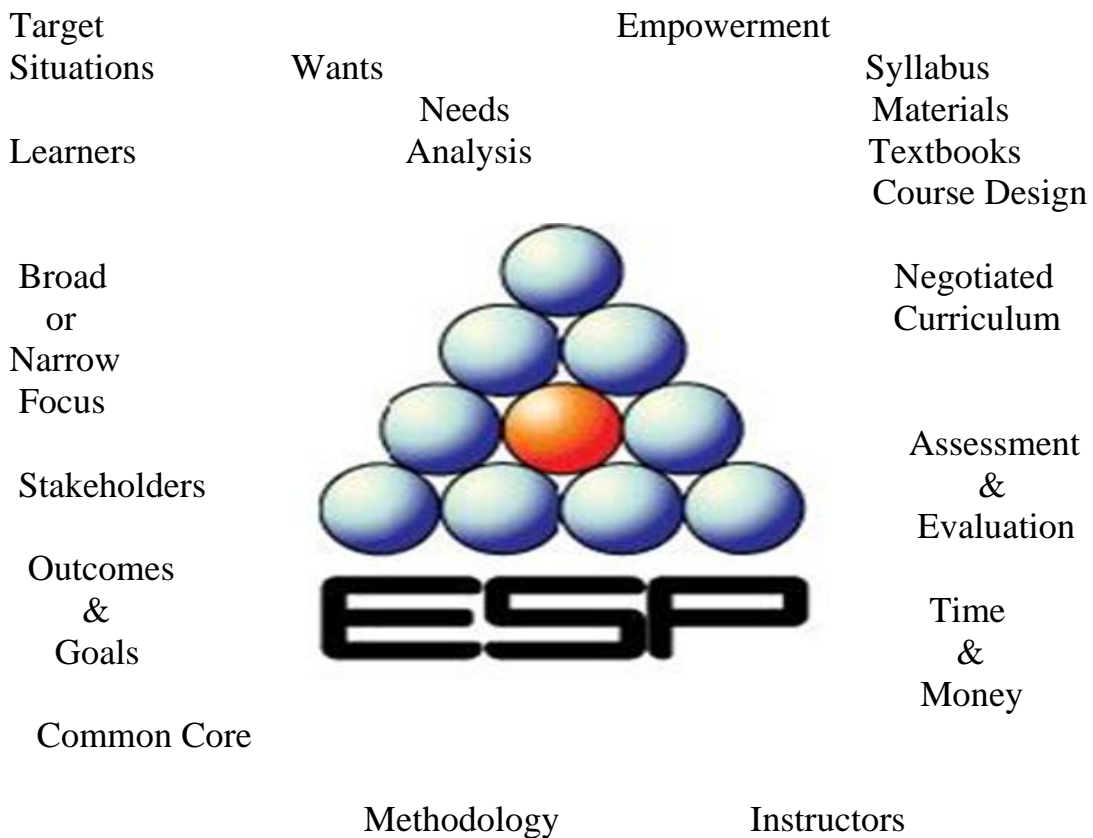
Certain aspects of ESP continue to have debate, as to best teaching practice, for instance whether the course should be narrowly focused, just on immediate students needs. What could be termed a restrictive syllabi or a broader focus that also teaches skills and situations and hence vocabulary and grammar outside of the needs analysis. It is also open for debate whether students should be allowed to choose the narrow focus approach. On paper it might seem like a worthwhile approach but I would argue it does not empower learners' and rewards them for sticking to '*what they know best'*. Thus even in a negotiated syllabus, it is the teacher's choice to broaden the English skills and abilities of the students' beyond what they or involved stakeholders feel is necessary for them.

ESP is today more vibrant than ever with a bewildering number of terms created to fit the increasing range of occupations that have taken shelter under the ESP umbrella. It seems with increasing globalization and mobility of the world's workforce that the demand for specific courses will not decrease but only rise. As newer emergent economic powers arise e.g. India, Dubai, Malaysia, and Eastern Europe this will fuel demand for worker's to have good command of English for their workplace. It is hoped that stakeholders and learners also realize that English should be used for social purposes, as a means of empowerment and self-expression and not restrict themselves too narrowly to just a few target situations.

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Finally by looking at the diagram below we can see that designing and implementing a successful ESP program is no easy straightforward task. Rather it is a juggling act with the ESP practitioner forced to make several choices along the way from start to finish of their act. There are so many variables to contend with it is not surprising that ESP courses can end up being very different from the original perceived design.

Juggling the ESP Balls

Target
Situations   Empowerment
                Wants   Syllabus
                    Needs   Materials
Learners   Analysis   Textbooks
                                             Course Design

Broad   Negotiated
  or   Curriculum
Narrow
 Focus
                                             Assessment
Stakeholders   &
                                             Evaluation
Outcomes
   &   Time
 Goals   &
                                             Money
Common Core

            Methodology   Instructors

Brunton (2009)

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