

English for Specific Purposes (ESP): A Theoretical Approach for Syllabus Design ***El inglés con fines específicos (ESP): un acercamiento teórico para el diseño de programas***

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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a very useful approach for the design of tailor-made syllabuses in varied academic and professional contexts such as polytechnic institutes, art vocational schools and military vocational schools. The theoretical foundations that lay the ground for its significance, its history, its distinguishing features, its evolutionary developmental stages, its objectives, the roles of the practitioner, the stages for its teaching and the required elements for syllabus design are discussed in this article in order to contribute to its knowledge and later implementation in the teaching of English in specific contexts. The following methods were used in this research: analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, historical-logical, observation and critical source analysis.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; distinctive features; curricular design.

Resumen

El inglés con fines específicos (ESP) es un enfoque de gran utilidad para el diseño de programas hechos a la medida en contextos educativos académicos y profesionales variados como pueden ser los institutos politécnicos, las escuelas vocacionales de arte y las escuelas vocacionales militares. Los fundamentos teóricos acerca de su significado, su historia, sus rasgos distintivos, las etapas de su desarrollo evolutivo, los objetivos, los roles del practicante, las etapas de su enseñanza y los elementos necesarios para el diseño de programas se abordan en el presente artículo con el fin de contribuir a su conocimiento y posterior aplicación en la enseñanza del inglés en contextos puntuales. Los siguientes métodos se utilizaron en la investigación: análisis-síntesis, inducción-deducción, histórico-lógico, observación y análisis crítico de las fuentes.

Palabras clave: inglés con fines específicos; rasgos distintivos; diseño curricular.

Introduction

The scientific discoveries and the technological innovations of the so-called “*Information Age*” have prompted bilingual and multilingual communications to become a meaningful aspect of modern society. The arrival of the Internet has blurred frontiers and contributed to a more interconnected society, which in time has created new communicative situations, cultural models, and varieties of language and discourse. Consequently, there has been a growing demand for foreign language courses and new approaches of teaching and learning.

In this effort, English for Specific purposes (ESP) stands out as an important and distinctive branch of English Language Teaching (ELT) that focuses on practical aspects derived from needs analysis, genre and successful communication. Its implementation in Cuba, in the context of an ever-changing education that strives for the attainment of quality, is a plausible answer to the urgent need of finding new keys for a personalized, contextualized, flexible and development-oriented teaching.

This approach of the teaching of English has gathered strength during the last decades and is now considered to be in full swing. It is commonplace in courses devised for professionals of engineering, tourism, health care, aviation, informatics and business contexts. It is utilized in the general and polytechnic education, as well –especially in vocational, commerce and services schools.

Several authors have carried out search on this topic in the international arena: Strevens, P. (1988), Hutchinson, T. and Waters, A. (1987), Dudley-Evans, T. and St. John, M. J. (1998), Johns, A. M. and Price-Machado, D. (2001), Hyland, K. (2007), Katalin, I. (2014), Minodora, S. (2015), Lamri, C. E. (2016) and Bojovic, M. (2017). In the Cuban context: Castillo, M., Corona, D., Macola, C. and Peña, J. (1997), Díaz, G. (2000), Fonseca, A. B. (2002), Ramírez, I. (2004), Pupo, S. (2006), Castro, P., González, G. and Casar, L. A. (2015), and Teruel, O. (2016).

Their theoretical and methodological contributions deal with the features and essential issues of ESP teaching, the definition of its categories, competence models and methodologies for teaching, exercises, tasks, techniques, methods and procedures, among others. These tools are very useful for the ESP teaching-learning process. Notwithstanding, we must continue to strive for finding new alternatives according to specific contents that demand a singularity that is not found in other works on this topic. In this sense it is important to continue going deeper in the specificities of this approach in order to find alternatives that meet the interest of learning English in specific contexts. The previous reflections lead to the need of continuing research on the essence of ESP, its historical and theoretical framework, and the quest for feasible ways aimed at its curricular implementation.

These are the leitmotifs that have led the authors to delve into this specialized approach for the teaching of English and constitute the definite goal of this article.

Materials and Methods

In order to carry out this research some methods were used. From the theoretical level, the methods of analysis-synthesis and induction-deduction made possible to define the research object and find out a feasible solution. The historical-logical analysis helped set up a timeline, as well as determining the most important features of the object of study according to the relevant evolutionary periods. At the empirical level, observation and critical analysis of sources were utilized to obtain information and determine the theoretical background of the object of study. All of these methods allowed the systematization of the theoretical and methodological framework that supports the proposal, as well as the assumption of the most pertinent criteria to solve the issue at hand.

Results and Discussion

The search for a widely accepted definition by the scientific community of English for Specific Purposes can pose a certain complexity, for the authors differ in their conceptualizations and there seems to be no consensus on the topic. On this issue, T. Hutchinson & A. Waters state: “*ESP is, then, an approach to language teaching in which all the decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning*” (1987, p.19). At the same time, in David Crystal’s words, it is “*a course whose context is determined by the student’s professional needs*” (1995, p. 108). Following this same order of ideas, L. Anthony deepens on its goal when he defines it as “*the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes*” (cited by Lamri, 2016, p. 1).

Authors Hutchinson and Waters (1987) opt to say what English for Specific Purposes is not and agree in seeing it as an approach of teaching. Some, like Candlin (1975), see it as a discipline within foreign language teaching; while some others, like Robinson (1991), decidedly hold that it is impossible to find a universal definition. Strevens (1988), however, defines it through absolute and variable characteristics, an idea that Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) expand on later.

All the definitions, in one way or another, reflect the essence of English for Specific Purposes and are proper for contexts and needs that are specific to certain social groups. In any case, the so-called absolute and variable characteristics of the initial definition by Strevens (1988), as well as the variable characteristics added on by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) in their re-conceptualization, are the guiding light for the practitioners of this approach. These characteristics become essential at the time of defining what a teaching based on English for Specific Purposes is and constitute the framework of reference for identifying it.

In other words, English for Specific Purposes refers to the teaching of this language with markedly utilitarian purposes, with the objective of attaining specific abilities of the language making use of real situations, so that students can use it in their future profession or understand issues related to their area of specialization. Therefore, its role consists of helping students to develop the required abilities to be used in a specific professional context and providing opportunities for developing specialist vocabulary and types of discourse related to a subject area, among other roles.

The development of English for Specific Purposes was firstly influenced by socio-economic and political factors such as the leadership of the United States after the Second World War which contributed for English to be considered as lingua franca of commerce, medicine, technology and business (Minodora, 2015).

The oil crisis of the 1970s also collaborated to enhance the need of this kind of teaching. That crisis resulted in a massive flow of capitals and western experts to the oil-rich countries. English became a business which brought about that the pedagogical profession was compelled to meet the needs and demands of English teachers and other social groups simultaneously (Minodora, 2015).

A second factor of influence was what Hutchinson & Waters referred to as a revolution in linguistics (1987, p. 6). In that moment, the linguistic studies were set to discover how language is used in real communication. One of the most determinant findings was the establishment of the differences between the spoken and the written language, what is used in a given context and what is not used, what is used in a certain communicative situation and what is not used.

All those studies led to the possibility of being able to determine which characteristics and linguistic elements distinguish a context, a situation and a specialty from another, and take those aspects as the basis for the design of a course that, among other matters, would be what differentiates a course of English for one specialty or another. Hence, the still valid aphorism: *“Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English you need”* (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 8).

The third and last factor in the appearance of English for Specific Purposes was the development of new trends in educational psychology and the communicative theories of language, which focused on the central role of the student, thus becoming the focal point of the teaching-learning process (Minodora, 2015). Concepts such as students' needs and interests took relevance. That propitiated the elaboration of courses based on what was important for the student, tailored to his needs with the underlying idea that in such way motivation and performance of the student would improve.

English for Specific Purposes is related, then, to applied linguistics and discourse analysis, pragmatics, socio-cognitive theory, communicative language teaching, the student-centered

teaching trend, rhetoric and critical literacy. It is, by all means, a direct result of the world evolution in those fields of knowledge.

The work “The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching,” by Halliday, Mackintosh & Strevens (1964) marks the official birth of ESP in the teaching of the English language. These authors consider that the term *specific* is used to refer to the varieties of the language that is used in a professional activity. M. Gotti (1991) abounds on the topic and points out the conditions for the language to be specific: emphasis on the user (didactic sphere), in the reality of reference (pragmatic-functional sphere) and in the specialized use of language (linguistic-professional sphere), (cited by Gratton, Francesco, 2009, p. 14).

In 1975 the British Council, under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, made the first attempt of classification of ESP. According to its taxonomy, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was divided into two branches: English for Science and Technology (EST) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Later on, Hutchinson & Waters designed a more elaborate classification: English for Specific Purposes was separated into three branches: English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) (1987, p. 17).

Researcher Imola Katalin Nagy splits the history and development of the “*ESP Movement*” in four phases (2014, pp. 262-272): a first phase, between the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s, in which ESP teaching focused on the sentence-level. A second phase, between the late 70s and early 80s, which started to integrate rhetorical functions and focused on grammatical forms. A third phase, in the mid-eighties, integrated the linguistic and rhetoric elements of the previous phases, as the focus was on the target situation and the oral communication the students may need in different professional contexts. That phase led to the implementation of the so-called *notional-functional curriculum*. And the last phase, which started by the end of the 80s, that shifted the attention towards the learning strategies –as a result of the influence of psycholinguistics.

In 1988, Peter Strevens (cited by Johns, Ann M. & Donna Price-Machado, 2001, pp. 43- 54) offered an overview of English for Specific Purposes and defined its main features. For that purpose he declared that it is based on the learner’s needs and does not admit waste of time, it is relevant for the learner, successful for achieving learning and more efficacious than General English.

For a definition of English for Specific Purposes, Strevens (1988) argues that it is necessary to distinguish among four absolute characteristics and two variable ones. He cites the following absolute characteristics:

1. It is designed to meet specific needs of the learners.

2. It is related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
3. It is centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, text, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of the discourse.
4. It is designed in contrast with General English.

Furthermore, he reveals the existence of two *variable* characteristics:

1. ESP may be restricted to the language skills to be learned. (e.g. reading).
2. ESP is not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology (pp. 1-2).

Both, the absolute and the variable characteristics have been the guiding light in the design of ESP curricula and its teaching throughout the years. They are specific to this approach insofar as needs are of paramount importance at the time of designing language-centered activities. For this reason, English for Specific Purposes must be seen as an *approach of teaching* or what Dudley-Evans & St. John label as “*a mental attitude*” (1998, p.11).

With this in mind, Hutchinson & Waters emphasized that:

ESP is, then, an approach to language teaching in which all the decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning. (...) ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning (1987, p. 19).

Dudley-Evans and St. John revised Streven’s definition and accepted most of his claims. They broadened the concept by adding more variable characteristics taking into consideration factors such as (a) in this approach teaching shares terms and abilities among the disciplines of study and the business activity and (b) its teaching must always reflect the underlying concepts and the activities of the discipline which is object of study. Their added variable characteristics are:

1. ESP may be related or designed for specific disciplines.
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English.
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or a professional work situation, but could be used for learners at secondary school level.
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners.
5. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners (1998, p. 4).

The difference between the teaching of General English (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), according to Hutchinson & Waters (1987), does not differ much in theory; however, there is a great deal of difference in practice. Strevens (1988) explains that this difference resides in that

ESP is based on a profound analysis of the communicative needs of the learners for an occupation or specific activity and the detailed analysis of the language of that occupation or activity. Following this same order of ideas, Donesh (2012) emphasizes on the importance of needs: *“Nowadays teachers are aware of the importance of the needs analysis and perhaps it is this that has been the greatest influence that the ESP approach has had on the teaching of General English”* (cited by Minodora, 2015, p. 2).

That is why at the time of designing an ESP syllabus one of the most important steps is needs analysis. In connection with this particular line of thought, Basturkmen (2010) observes:

Needs analysis in ESP refers to a course development process. In this process the language and skills that the learners will use in their target professional or occupational workplace or in their study areas are identified and considered in relation to the present state of knowledge of the learners, their perception of their needs and practical possibilities and constraints of the teaching context. The information obtained from this process is used in determining and refining the content and method of the ESP course (cited by Minodora, 2015, p. 3).

On the basis of these ideas it is possible to state that needs analysis is the cornerstone of English for Specific Purposes. According to Munby (1978), *“if a group of learners’ English language needs can be accurately identified and specified, this can be used to determine the content of a language programme that will meet these needs”* (cited by Minodora, 2015, p. 3).

Once needs are identified, the objectives, topics and texts are delimited. Among the multiple alternatives of coursebooks and other online resources designed for that purpose different authors recommend their use as long as they serve the specific needs of the learners. However, they also admit that at the time of introducing them into the specific contexts, the very action of pulling them out of their original contexts and trying to land them on the specific contexts makes them lose authenticity. For that reason it is emphasized that the topic of authenticity must be centered more on the transferability of strategies or activities than in the oral or written texts taken out of the original contexts (Johns & Price-Machado, 2001, p. 47).

The role of the ESP practitioner is defined through five roles, according to Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998): teacher, collaborator, course designer and material provider, researcher, and evaluator (cited by Minodora, 2015, p. 3). As a teacher, he has to create learning opportunities to generate an authentic communication and select the appropriate teaching methods to meet the educative needs of the students. As a collaborator, he must work side by side with other ESP practitioners and subject specialists.

As a course designer and a material provider, he must create his own materials and/or adjust the authentic materials utilized in his professional area and benefit from educative resources and

teaching materials. Let's not forget that the goal of any ESP syllabus is to sort out the specific linguistic needs, as well as the pragmatic ones, of the students as they are readied for given contexts in the language. As a researcher, he must be concerned with the needs, goals and interests of the students, improving his knowledge on the teaching object and looking for authentic materials.

And finally, as an evaluator, the ESP practitioner must take into account the stages of the evaluation process. For instance, he must assess students' needs before designing the course. He must assess the effectiveness of the response of the students to the teaching methods while the course is being taught. And he must assess the results of the students' learning after the course has finished; but most importantly, he must evaluate how well the needs of the learners were met.

In a general sense, it is possible to generalize that English for Specific Purposes goes around the idea that language is used in a particular manner within the social groups where people belong. It deals with communication, more than language, and the forms in which texts are created and utilized; rejecting the autonomous perspective of teaching to focus in the communicative practices of real people in real contexts (Hyland, 2007).

The main objective of teaching-learning from this perspective is based on learner empowerment to get information, develop cognitive and strategic competences, on the basis of the formation of a critical attitude. In order to achieve this, the stages of the learning process through this approach are delimited. Dudley-Evans & St. John asseverate that these stages are "*the need analysis, the course (and syllabus) design, materials selection (and production), teaching and learning, and evaluation*" (1998, p. 121). Course design in ESP, consequently, is a result of the dynamic interaction of these elements that at the same time represent phases and are interdependent among them.

Hutchinson & Waters define the syllabus as a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learned (1987, p. 80). It is also considered an instrument by which the teacher can achieve a certain coincidence between the needs and the aims of the learners, and the activities that will take place in the classroom (Yalden, 1987, p. 86). In other words, it is a teaching device to facilitate learning (Nunan, 1988, p. 6).

In connection with this, Robinson points out that it serves as a guideline and context of class content (1991, p. 34). Basturkmen (2006, p. 21) exemplifies the definition by means of the standard perspective of a syllabus proposed by Penny Ur in 2002. She supports the idea that it consists of a global list of content items (words, structures, topics) and process items (tasks, methods). Also, she mentions as its fundamental characteristics that a syllabus is an ordered document (easier, more essential items first). She adds on that it is explicit, public, may indicate a time schedule, may indicate a preferred methodology or approach and may recommend materials.

Syllabuses can be synthetic or analytic (Long & Crookes, 1993, pp. 11-12), grammatical, lexical, grammatical-lexical, situational, topic-based, notional, functional-notional, mixed or “*multi-strand*”, procedural or process (Ur, 2002, pp. 178-179), based on goals and objectives, competencies, standards, tasks and follow a comprehensive approach (Nunan, 1988, pp. 55- 65), among others.

All these types of syllabuses go through the evolutionary development of the English language methodology and their comprehension is very useful when determining what to do. Notwithstanding, the authors agree with Benyelles in that “*no syllabus can bring positive results on its own because of the variety of students’ needs*” (cited by Lamri, 2016, p. 16).

This author suggests that the syllabus should include a combination of grammar items, lexicon, language functions, situations, topics and tasks relative to different skills. This perspective is labelled as an *eclectic syllabus* –also mixed or comprehensive approach according to Nunan (1988) and Ur (2002). In this type of syllabus all the elements are intertwined and synchronized. Besides, it contributes to the achievement of a greater comprehensibility of the teaching-learning process for both students and teachers. Consequently, it is recommended to assume the eclectic syllabus in order to achieve better results in the introduction of ESP –without overlooking the relevant role played by the context when using this approach.

The aforementioned authors define the types of syllabuses and offer some definite illustrations of their contents. However, the theoretical-practical know-how required for the design of an ESP syllabus is hard to come by in the specialized literature and its specificity in certain contexts makes it even more complex to extrapolate into other teaching contexts. A model that could be useful to implement, without excluding others which may be equally valid, is offered by Castillo, Corona, Macola and Peña (Corona & Terroux, 1997, pp. 25- 49), who argue and exemplify exhaustively the four stages of an operational model proposed by R. Mackay of Concordia University of Montreal, Canada. They are as follows:

1. Information gathering stage
2. Developmental stage
3. Formative evaluation (or qualitative) stage
4. Summative (or quantitative) evaluation stage

Basically, the information gathering stage aims at identifying the students’ professional or occupational communicative needs. It defines the special purposes in terms of the use to which English will be put. Structured interviews and questionnaires can be used.

The developmental stage starts with an analysis of the students’ academic or job needs. That is, the use of the language as such. The ESP specialist must describe the language in terms of specific

functions and notions. From this description, teaching points are selected and sequenced. They will become the basis for developing the teaching materials, which are no other than the specific texts and language samples altogether. In this stage specific methods are utilized and all types of methodologies may be used as long as they are appropriate.

To reach a better effectiveness of the syllabus, it is suggested to conceive it from the perspective of the communicative, development-oriented approach upheld by the scientific language teaching community. On this approach, Corona *et al* (1997) specify:

As a part of the communicative approach, ESP does not advocate any particular method, but takes advantage of the different techniques and procedures provided by all the preceding approaches. Once the specific language tasks to be carried out by the learner have been established, the teachers elaborate their method on the basis of what methodology is appropriate. Special purposes and special contents lead the teacher to a special method. (p. 37).

Lastly, the evaluation of the syllabus includes the stages of formative and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation has to do with the systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed materials and their modification from the feedback of both students and teachers. In the summative stage the entire course is evaluated and the material and procedures are adapted in concordance with the results obtained.

All things considered, for designing an ESP syllabus, from the needs of the students that we have already determined, specific objectives (topics or teaching points) are declared. After that, the texts and reading tasks are determined, as well as the methods of evaluating the syllabus and the students. These last two aspects are revised continually throughout the course.

Conclusions

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach that takes particular importance in academic and professional contexts. Its development has been influenced by the historical and linguistic changes, the new trends in educational psychology and the communicative theories of language. It is fundamentally defined by means of its absolute and variable characteristics. It starts from the analysis of the students' needs, their attitude towards learning and the stimulation of language strategies. All of them are precise aspects to be taken into consideration for syllabus design.

In the Cuban context, this approach of teaching allows both attaining the students' specific needs and meeting the social demands. An adequate career guidance, which always takes place either implicitly and/or explicitly in an ESP course, will always take into account the harmonious conjunction of personal and social factors at the time of educating the personality of the students for

the achievement of the conscious self-determination of their professional interests at the time of choosing a profession or consolidating their motives of election.

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