

## Demystifying the Disparity between ESP and EGP Methodology

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### Abstract

Methodology in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EGP (English for General Purposes) has been the main concern for many practitioners over the last few years. Many scholars and researchers would argue that methodology in ESP bear a lot of similarities with methodology in EGP. Conversely, other researchers would describe ELT methodology used in ESP as considerably different from the one adopted and adapted in EGP by virtue of the two contrasting contexts they represent. The present paper, therefore, aims at demystifying the disparity between the specificity of ESP textbooks and the conventional language teaching materials highlighting areas of similarities and differences between ESP and EGP methodologies. The paper also purports to argue the extent to which methodologies used in an ESP context can be used in the learning of any kind of English.

**Keywords:** EGP, ESP, ELT methodology, materials development, needs analysis,

## Introduction

Literature on ELT reveals that ESP has emerged not from a structural theory of language but from a functional account of learner needs. It is a sub-division of the general activity of teaching of English. Some researchers have gone further to describe it as ‘a communicative EGP’. Indeed, methodology has been generally neglected in ESP: the emphasis has been on ‘what’ ought to be taught (the content) rather than on ‘how’ it should be taught (Widdowson, 1983, p. 87). According to this scholar, there is a disparity between the specificity of content in ESP textbook and the conventional language teaching methodology which takes no account of the specific kinds of activity which learners are engaged in within their academic and occupational fields.

Since ESP embodies a wide range of other more specific purposes such as EOP and EST, it is interesting to note that different purposes require different materials and perhaps different teaching procedures. Put differently, as the waiter wants to speak and the medical student wants only to read in English, it is necessary to reconsider the materials and methodology to be used in a language classroom situation.

### 1. Clearing the ground: Methodology defined

Before delving into arguing the extent to what methodologies used in ESP can be used in the learning of any kind of English, we need first to clarify the meaning of the term ‘methodology’ and secondly to highlight points of contrast and similarities between ESP and EGP contexts. One of the well-known definitions of ‘method’ in the literature on language teaching is the one provided by Anthony (1963) who defines this concept as “an overall plan for orderly presentation of language material [, and it] is procedural” (p. 63). However, this definition, Richards & Rogers (1986) dispute, fails to provide sufficient attention to the nature of a method itself. It also fails to account for the roles of teachers and learners or how the material should be presented. Accordingly and alternatively, they defined methodology in terms of approach which provides theories on the nature of language and learning, design (specifying objectives, learning teaching activities, learner and teacher roles, and the roles of instructional materials) and procedures (dealing with classroom techniques and procedures). Sometimes, however, neither a method nor an approach is made clear; but only assumptions are made and a language teacher in a given situation is required to associate his teaching methods and techniques to some approaches which are themselves based on some assumptions, goals and objectives to be achieved (McDonough 1984; Smoak, 2003).

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching defines methodology (or method) as “the study of the practices and procedures used in teaching, and the principles and beliefs that underlie them” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p, 363). Methodology is also said to include the following:

- a) a study of the nature of language skills (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, listening) and procedures for teaching them
- b) study of the preparation of lesson plans, materials, and textbooks for teaching language skills and
- c) the evaluation and comparison of language teaching method(s) (e.g. the audiolingual method) (Richards & Schmidt, op cit).

Robinson (1991), on the other hand, refers to methodology as “what goes on in the classroom, to what the students have to do” (p. 46). It is the process of implementation and it must be sensitive to circumstances and be derived from the practicalities of the situation rather than be imposed from the outside (Crocker 1981).

For Johnson and Morrow (1981), method is defined as “some overall means of achieving the general objectives of a course” (p. 59). It is realized as a set of procedures which themselves involve the use of specific techniques.

Finally, methodology can be understood, according to Widdowson (1983), as “a set of activities designed to develop the procedural problem solving capacity of learners” (p. 107). He notes that it does not matter very much what language learners are presented with, but what does matter is how they can put it into effective use.

## **2. Differences and similarities between ESP and EGP.**

### ***2.1. Points of contrast***

The difference between ESP and EGP in language teaching and learning is best described by Widdowson (1983) who argues that:

ESP is essentially a training operation which seeks to provide learners with a restricted competence to enable them to cope with certain clearly-defined tasks. These tasks constitute the specific purposes which the ESP course is designed to meet. The course therefore, makes direct reference to eventual aims. GPE, on the other hand, is essentially an educational operation which seeks to provide learners with a general capacity to enable them to cope with undefined eventualities in the future. Here, since there are no definite aims which can determine course-design, there has to be resources to intervening objectives formulated by pedagogic theory. These objectives represent the potential for later realization and are, so to speak, the abstract projection of aims (p. 6).

To this end, we can deduce that what distinguishes ESP from EGP is the way in which purpose is defined and the manner of its implementation. In ESP, the purpose refers to the eventual practical use to which the language will be put in, while in EGP, it has to be conceived in educational terms as a formulation of objectives which will achieve a potential for later practical use. In other words, the purpose in ESP is a training concept (Widdowson op.cit). Having established as precisely as possible what learners need the language for, one can design a course which converges on that need. Similarly, while the purpose in EGP is meant to develop a general capacity of language use, in ESP it is referred to as ‘descriptive’ in sense that students need only a restricted competence.

Unlike EGP, the starting point for curriculum development in an ESP context is an analysis of learners’ needs rather than a linguistic analysis. Needs analysis may allow teachers to get insights into students’ interests and objectives. It may also provide them with data for evaluation and accountability (Richards 1984, cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 18). Interestingly, students are involved in materials production which is not necessarily the case in EGP.

Similarly, some ESP courses or syllabi, unlike other ELT or EGP syllabi, are usually determined in advance of teaching and ad hoc analysis, referred to as “priori syllabi” (Richards and Rogers, op.cit.).

Another difference between ESP and EGP lies in the nature of the approach adopted. McDonough (1984) maintains that research in EGP can be carried out without any direct or immediate reference to specific context of teaching and learning, while research in ESP takes its impetus from particular issues and situations. Also in an ESP context, the teacher has to consider his students needs, unlike the EGP teacher who may have a set of ‘cooked material’ made available for him/her not only to implement in a language classroom but also to cover in a limited time-span. In this respect, one may claim that EGP may be considered as a top-down approach whereas ESP may be described as a bottom-up approach in which the teacher starts from students’ needs before considering other issues such as course design, methodology or evaluation; all of which may not necessarily be considered by the EGP teacher (Popescu, 2010; Boson, 2016).

In ESP, for both theoretical and practical reasons, learner training should begin at the same time as the language learning itself. Assuming that methodology is the same in both contexts (ESP and EGP), as Mackay and Mounford (1978) argue, we may suggest that the English used in the Anglophone West Africa, for example, is the same as the one used in the Arab-speaking Middle-East. In the former, English is used as a medium of instruction, communication in business, government and education, whereas in the latter, it plays a more restricted role as a subject in the school curriculum and as a medium providing access to technology and science. Therefore, such differences in orientation may have considerable effects on ESP teaching methodology (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984; Gloria-Lo, Yi-Hsuan, 2012).

In the same vein, Rogers (1986) views that stating that methodologies in both contexts are the same is like claiming that the teacher-centered approach is similar to the learner-centered approach. In the former, the teacher is the expositor and the student is the listener, while in the latter, the teacher and the students are in a more co-operative position. The student is no longer that passive learner but an active one who takes a principal part in the learning and teaching process (Popescu, 2010).

Following Huckin (1988), the difference between ESP and EGP may reside in what he refers to as ‘academic’ and ‘real world-problems’, and as he asserts:

The former are usually neatly laid down for the students by the professor, they are usually well-defined, and usually have one correct answer. Real world problems, by contrast, are often disordered, ill-defined, and open to many possible solutions, none of which may be totally correct (p. 66).

This researcher views that the hall mark of ESP instruction is its attempts to appeal more directly to the students’ interests outside the English classes than is normally the case in traditional ESL/EFL instruction.

A further difference between ESP and EGP can be seen in the use of 'team teaching'. While ESP is widely open to team teaching, EGP hardly, if ever, makes any use of it. To make this clear, if an ESP teacher lacks the technical knowledge that would be appropriate to a particular simulation, engineering students for instance, he would presumably turn for assistance to a faculty colleague or an industry colleague who can provide him with the technical information necessary to set up his simulation. The English teacher, then, can make sure that each student is required to take part in the communicative task, can monitor each student's performance and can provide corrective feedback after the game is over (Morena, 2014).

As far as content is concerned, ESP focuses on instructional processes and not on any specification of language content. Process-oriented alternatives include task-based and process-based syllabuses. However, the content in EGP is, most of the time, a content-oriented approach which has dominated language syllabus design for many years first in the guise of a structural syllabus and later in the guise of a functional- notional syllabus (Nunan 1988).

Some scholars argue that ESP fits best with the communicative approach but not with more traditional methods, namely the audiolingual method or the grammar translation method or situational language teaching which are structurally based methods. In fact, over the last few decades, there was a shift in the objectives of ELT from mere mastery of the structural elements of the language to communicating effectively and appropriately in that language. This has been the case whether one belongs to the EGP community or to the ESP one: the major objective has been to develop learners' communicative competence. To this end, some similarities could be traced between the two disciplines, especially as far as approach to teaching and learning is concerned.

### ***2. 1. Similarities between ESP and EGP***

Regardless of what has been said about the differences between ESP and EGP, the methodology that has been applied in ESP contexts can also be used in EGP contexts. They both use the same concepts and approaches. One such concept is authenticity. It has usually been stressed that the use of authentic materials in language classes would serve learners needs and help them engage in the learning process. Morrow (1980) states that learners, within an ESP context, are required to use the same skills and strategies as would be required in the target situation. We can argue that the same holds true for an EGP context; as Richards (2006) points out:

Since the advent of CLT, textbooks and other teaching materials have taken on a much more "authentic" look; reading passages are designed to look like magazine articles (if they are not in fact adapted from magazine articles) and textbooks are designed to a similar standard of production as real sources such as popular magazines (p. 21).

Another approach which seems to be the concern of ESP materials is the learning-centered approach, and according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 14), "we cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying what people do with language would enable someone to learn it. A truly valid approach to ESP would be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning." This is, in fact, in line with the principles of CLT which focuses on how learners learn a language, which is a characteristic of both ESP and EGP.

Process-based approaches, including content-based and task-based as well as product-based approaches be it text-based or competency-based are all attributes which are associated with CLT. English language teaching in general and ESP in particular adopt these approaches in an attempt to help learners develop the skills related to language learning and also those related to their own discipline of study.

Given this state of affairs, following Robinson (1991), one can argue that, considering methodological options available in ESP, they can also be available in EGP, and as he states: “Developments within the communicative approach, in particular, have been realized by both EGP and ESP and it is impossible to say who has borrowed from or influenced whom, or whether there have simply been separate but similar developments” (p. 47). Indeed, most activities developed within the CLT tradition can be adopted for any language teaching and learning context, be it general or specific. Simulations, role plays, jigsaw, information-gap, information-gathering, and other activities can all be used in classed adopting the communicative approach.

In this regard, Huckin (1988: 44) asserts that “methodologies of ESP conform to the same model of language learning and teaching process as does any other form of language teaching. That is to say, the basic teaching activities are the following:

- shaping the input
- encouraging the learners’ intentions to learn
- managing the learning strategies
- promoting practice and use”.

Also, when trying to define the ESP teacher, Strevens (1988) has not made any distinction between the ESP and the EGP teacher. For him, an ESP teacher is almost always a teacher of general English who has unexpectedly found himself required to teach students with special needs. This may imply that any teacher of EGP may become a teacher of ESP and the opposite is true (Gálová, 2007; Popescu, 2010).

### 3. Overall remarks

One may assert that ESP and EGP show more similarities in methodology rather than differences. Indeed, ESP, as Jo McDonough (1984) argues, is not totally different from other areas of language teaching. Any methodology is dominated and determined by the content. The selection of methodological techniques can be related to three areas: **a) context**: those features of general background likely to influence learning and teaching styles, **b) learning environment**: the psychological factors of the learning group and its members and **c) content**: those characteristics of the language system and its purposes relevant to the learning system and its implementation to achieve identified outcomes with a stated environment and context.

However, since ESP materials are most of the time related to adult learners, it is unlikely for the teacher to use methodologies that can be used with only young learners. In other words, the teacher cannot assign some roles which may seem childish for adult learners. For instance, it would be inappropriate or rather inconvenient to introduce some aspects of the audiolingual method as, for example, drilling or mechanical repetition in an ESP context that

determines and requires the use of some specific activities appropriate to that context. Therefore, using, for instance, choral repetition in the ESP language classroom with some adult students reading for an MA or PhD in business or medical English, may result in what we may call “Learning shock”. Hence, teaching methodology should match students’ interests and needs as well as their level of maturity, which are all more clearly defined. The teacher’s task in ESP programs is to teach language, and the text content must be significant to the students. Moreover, the adult learner needs the linguistic skills by which he/she can read, speak, and understand the target language. He/she is not, unlike the ELT learner, interested in values, beliefs which can be incorporated in the term culture (Larouz, 1996).

The interest of an ESP course is in its outcomes. That is the reason why it places absolutely no constraints upon a method of implementation. In other words, there is no necessary content or methodology for an ESP course since the only criterion for course evaluation should be whether what is used works (Crocker, 1981, p. 9). In the course of teaching, teachers need to be eclectic. Sometimes, they must be teacher-centred, other times student-centred, sometimes concerned with the subject matter and still other times concerned with the process.

In methodology, Richards & Rogers (op. cit.) suggest that regardless of orientation, there are three underlying components:

- a) A linguistic dimension which justifies which aspects of language will be taught,
- b) A psycholinguistic dimension which includes an account of the processes underlying learning, and
- c) A teaching dimension which relates to learning experience and tasks and to the role of teachers, learners and materials in the learning system.

McDonough and Shaw (1993) also acknowledge that although simulation is often seen as being central to ESP situations, the task can be related to the learner’s actual or intended occupation. It clearly has its place in the language learning classroom, be it for general or specific purposes. On the other hand, Sturtridge (1977) claims that simulations which are first developed from mainly an EGP perspective can be applied considerably in ESP contexts where simulations are meant to enhance language skills rather than the outcome. Problem-solving, task-based learning, role play and stimulation, case studies, and oral presentations which are particularly associated with powerful ESP situations could equally be used in a general language course and it is difficult to assert that these tasks are ESP- specific and, therefore, have no place in EGP contexts (Popescu, 2010). Any of these tasks will not affect the teaching and the learning process in a general context. Put it differently, using group problem solving, information exchange activities and/or improvisation in any methodology of language teaching would not affect the total teaching and learning operation as long as aims and objectives are set in advance.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed, one may assert that what distinguishes EGP from ESP is the way purpose is defined and the manner of its implementation. Goals, aims and objectives may be different but methodologies used to achieve those goals may not. Equally important, it is the context of

learning that determines the teaching methodology to be adopted in that situation. An ESP teacher may find it easy to teach in an EGP context but the reciprocal relation is not always necessary true.

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