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# INCORPORATING BUSINESS ENGLISH IN THE EFL CURRICULUM

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**Abstract:** ESP, that is, English for Specific Purposes, is an important sub-branch of English-learning, especially in today’s fast-paced and ever-changing world, where progress is key, and advances are rapid in all spheres. The term itself refers, in fact, to the study of English as an EFL or ESL, at a university level, or by already-employed people, dealing with the specific vocabulary and skills of a given field. As opposed to General English, or EGP (English for General Purposes), ESP tends to be aimed for and designed more toward adult learners, as well as to learners that have attained at least an intermediate level of proficiency.

However, besides the numerous advantages that ESP offers, both teaching- and learning-wise, there are also some issues that may arise, and that might be worth looking into in more detail, in order to maximize the teaching and learning experience. For example, learners that have been grouped together but differ in terms of their level of EFL proficiency, establishing the focus of the classes, such as whether it is going to be more grammar-oriented or more skills-focused, then, assessment issues, choosing the most appropriate classroom materials, large-sized groups, among others, are all challenges that are likely to occur, and are bound to need to be addressed and dealt with.

This paper focuses on taking a closer look at various aspects of ESP, specifically Business English, in terms of incorporating it in the EFL curriculum, the above-mentioned challenges that might be encountered, and the reasons for them, as well as the ways with which they can be alleviated, and resolved.

**Key words:** ESP, EFL, ESL, EGP, Business English

## INTRODUCTION

In this day and age, acquiring native speaker-like proficiency in English is neither a luxury nor a sign of snobbery, but rather an indispensable necessity that cannot be ignored. English is the undisputed lingua franca globally speaking, and being able to communicate in it is not only an advantage, but a prerequisite for success in any field.

This need to know English is certainly not recent, it has been so for decades and decades, yet it has never been more evident than in the present. Certainly, there have been a number of shifts in terms of the focus in the EFL

teaching and learning process over time and this is, obviously, to be expected and understood. A number of teaching methods have been central at various points, with the communicative approach enjoying its 5 minutes in the sun at the moment. The communicative approach, as its name suggests, places the emphasis on developing and improving EFL learners' communicative competence. In fact, with all the technological advancements that facilitate communication and allow people all over the globe to be connected, it is not surprising that the communicative approach is so popular at the moment (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015, 20 ff.; Gatehouse, 2001).

The world has indeed become a global village, and English has become the lingua franca that allows the villagers to communicate amongst each other and to understand each other. In fact, we have reached a stage where it is expected that non-native English speakers, of all ages and walks of life, possess a certain level of proficiency in English, with the focus now on becoming more proficient and achieving native speaker-status in various specialized registers, such as business, technology, medicine, etc.

For this reason, EFL teaching has branched out, and besides the usual and standard offer of EGP (English for General Purposes), or General English, now there is an ever-increasing demand for ESP, i.e. English for Specific Purposes. Basically, ESP refers to specialized English, and it is designed for and aimed at higher level learners, such as university students, or to already-employed people. This type of English deals with the specific vocabulary and skills of a given field, needed for the most part by adult learners that have attained at least an intermediate level of proficiency (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 9 ff.: Douglas, 1999). Thus, in this case, solid proficiency in EGP would be the required basis for an EFL learner to move on to ESP.

This paper will take a closer look at ESP, specifically Business English, teaching at a university level. In that sense, it will take a look at the advantages it offers, as well as address the inevitable issues that are present, and present and discuss possible ways to deal with and resolve them in order to maximize the teaching and learning experience for all parties concerned.

## **1. OVERVIEW OF BASIC ACRONYMS**

In the spirit of being time-conscious and showing respect to people's limited attention spans, a number of abbreviations are being used, sometimes, though, achieving the opposite effect rather than the intended one. So, to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunication, let us briefly explain the acronyms that will make an appearance in this paper. Namely, EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language, whereas ESL refers to English as a Second Language. The difference between the two previously-mentioned acronyms is in the geography, that is, it has to do with where English is being learned and

taught – if it is learned/taught in a non-English-speaking country, that is, in a country where English is not the native language, then we are dealing with EFL, i.e. the learners are learning English as a foreign language. On the other hand, if it is learned/taught in an English-speaking country, i.e. a country where English is the mother tongue, then we are dealing with English as a second language. For practical reasons, the ESL context means that the learners are surrounded by English and English speakers, thus making the learning process easier. Both of the aforementioned fall under the umbrella acronym ELT, i.e. English Language Teaching.

Within the scope of EFL or ESL learning, there is another distinction, or, perhaps, an extension which may branch out, and that is EGP and ESP. EGP stands for English for General Purposes, also known as General English, and as its name suggests, it is designed for learners who want to improve their fluency and accuracy in English, whether the need is work-related, for study, or just personal satisfaction. General English puts the focus on developing and improving the four main language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking. The overall aim, of course, is to help the learners achieve high proficiency in their communicative competence. The study of General English is usually seen as a long-term process, with possible intensive periods should the need arise (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015, 18). Basically, EGP marks the beginning of one's study of English, and may further encompass cultural knowledge as well, to broaden the learners' scope and take them closer to the country, or countries where it is the native language.

ESP (English for Specific Purposes), on the other hand, is more of an extension, or a branching out of EGP – focusing more on meeting the needs of higher level learners, university students, adult learners, or already-employed ones, who already possess a good basis of the language. It is designed to meet the needs of a specific target group, specializing in vocabulary and other linguistic skills needed by a certain group, in a certain field, such as Business English, the field of technology, engineering, medicine, agriculture, law, etc. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 24). This type of English study tends to be seen as more short-term, and requires learners to be relatively proficient in General English, to have a good mastery of the four main language skills mentioned above. It is an added feature to EGP, being unable to stand independently of it. It goes without saying that EGP can stand on its own, while ESP is more of an extension of it, but it clearly complements the study of General English, making it more rounded, and undoubtedly it fits the demands of the present, that people can use English worldwide not just for general communication, but for specific purposes as well.

## 2. IMPLEMENTING ESP IN THE EFL TEACHING CONTEXT

As previously-stated, in order to have quality ESP instruction, one of the main prerequisites would be a solid EGP basis. In other words, ESP learners need to be proficient in General English, and the four main language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in order to fully benefit from ESP instruction. This means that it would be expected that they have mastered the grammar and the various grammatical constructions, they have a solid stock of vocabulary, which would enable them to fluently express themselves both orally and in writing. Furthermore, they would be proficient in both reading and listening comprehension, and be able to summarize what has been read or heard. It is obvious that the aforementioned skills are intertwined and it would be difficult, if not downright impossible, to be proficient in some skill, or skills, and lacking in another, or others. General English proficiency is the cornerstone to ESP instruction (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 53; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2011; Douglas, 1999).

ESP, on the other hand, though is becoming increasingly important and sought at the moment, and knowing the versatile nature of language, and its ability to adapt to society's needs, it is no wonder that it is gradually eclipsing the demand for General English. One reason for this is the fact that English has so cemented its lingua franca status that it is no longer seen as a foreign language in non-native English speaking countries any more. We have reached the point where it is universally understood and expected that General English has been acquired. This is easier than it sounds – everything is carried out in English, especially in today's digital age, where the language of the most important media, the internet, is English. Basically, it would, nowadays, be extremely difficult to find someone with no, or very poor, English skills. Children are being exposed to English at an ever earlier age, and in the majority of cases they learn the English alphabet before they learn that of their L1. By the time they reach school age, they possess quite proficient speaking skills, with a high level of fluency and accuracy. All that they need is to fill in the blanks in terms of various grammatical explanations, but they get that in school, since English is taught as early as kindergarten, as an elective, becoming compulsory in grade one. This means children have EFL instruction, that is, EGP instruction, throughout their academic career. By the time they reach university level, their General English knowledge is, more or less, covered (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015, 73 ff.; Basturkmen, 2006, 90 ff.).

This means that the foundation for implementing, or adding, ESP in the EFL teaching context, at the higher education level, has been laid; in fact, it has been laid in the previous 13 years of compulsory education, both primary and secondary, and it is the perfect time to introduce it in order to broaden the General English knowledge the learners already possess. It is the perfect time

to add this because it is expected that learners have covered, and have been taught, all that can be covered and taught. If nothing new is introduced at this stage, there is a very real risk of stagnation, as well as a loss of interest (Brown, 2016, 30). It is perfectly understandable that nobody wants to continue covering the same things over and over again. However, by introducing ESP in the EFL teaching and learning process, there is an obvious progression, a sign of moving forward and upward, of expanding one's knowledge and skills. And, not just expanding them, but rather, tweaking them to meet the demands of the present and future (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 79; Gatehouse, 2001).

It goes without saying that there are certainly going to be issues in undertaking something like this, and this should not be underestimated. However, it goes without saying that the advantages of introducing and implementing ESP instruction in the EFL teaching context far outweigh the possible issues that may arise, and which are bound to be resolved over time, and with some good will. Any new start is shaky, but when a new undertaking is done with positive thought, the outcome is bound to be a positive one as well. In any case, there is no way that the results will be negative.

### **3. ADVANTAGES OF IMPLEMENTING ESP IN THE EFL TEACHING CONTEXT**

As previously mentioned, the learners of ESP are for the most part adult learners, already-employed, usually university-level, and possess a solid proficiency, intermediate or advanced level, in EGP. These learners tend to have a set purpose why they are learning English for specific purposes, and are aiming to acquire a particular set of language skills in the particular discipline or field they are involved in, whether it is Business English, Legal English, Medical English, etc.

Thus, one of the advantages in this context is the fact that in most cases these learners are aware of their need to learn what needs to be learned, and as such there tends to be no issues with motivation. Generally speaking, motivation is rarely an issue when it comes to adult learners, and they tend to be very goal-oriented. This is especially the case when the learners are conscious that what they are learning is going to be of benefit for them in the near future. This concept is definitely more tangible to them than when they are younger, in secondary school, for example, and have peers to impress with the indifferent attitude (Belcher, 2004).

Along these lines, the issue of discipline has also been resolved, for, more or less, the same aforementioned reasons. Thus, the learners are for the most part motivated and disciplined, and possess a good foundation of General English knowledge, meaning a good grasp of English grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening comprehension, speaking skills, fluency, as well as

writing skills. Thus, the road has been paved, more or less, for the introduction and implementation of ESP in the EFL teaching context. Since the focus is on the teaching context, it is safe to assume that the learners we will be dealing with will not be adults in the sense that they exited the academic context, but will be university-level students, full-time students for the most part, thus, not employed (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 96; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2011).

It goes without saying that learning ESP is very important and beneficial, since English is the undisputed lingua franca at a global level. It is the language of business, trade, commerce, air traffic, etc.; it is the language of conferences, scholastics, academia, and so on. If one wishes to be understood on a wider scale, it is taken for granted that the language that will be used to achieve this will be English. Maybe the day will come when other languages will join English in this, but, at the moment, the status of English is unparalleled.

Probably the best reason for why ESP should be introduced and implemented in the EFL teaching context is the fact that it broadens the EFL learners' horizons, and it opens up new paths for them to take once they have graduated. To be honest, in Macedonia, at least, the market for English teachers has become saturated, and it will probably remain so for the next several decades. This means that every year there are a great number of EFL graduates, yet the openings for English teachers do not match the rate of people graduating. There are a number of reasons for this, such as the many universities, state and private, that have English departments, the number of high school students who decide to enroll, not least because they think it will be an easy way to a degree. The prevailing thought at this stage is: *Well, I know English; I've been learning it all my life, and so it won't be too much work for me.* Needless to say, this is absolutely not true in the long run, because once the students enroll in an English department, they do not acquire the language, but rather they learn about the language, which is completely different. In any case, those students that do continue their studies, despite realizing this later, find themselves at a crossroads after graduation. They love the language, they know about the language, but they either do not want to enter the sphere of teaching, or, if they do, it is not as easy to do so as they had previously anticipated. This may be connected to what was previously mentioned – the fact that the market has become saturated; there is simply no need for more English teachers. Because the number of English teachers is so great, and the demand for them is so little, we come to a situation where their labor is exploited, that is, they get paid ridiculously small amounts to do what they have been trained to do. It is a very sad situation, indeed, where the market dictates the demand, and that demand has been reached, and then some (Douglas, 1999; Gatehouse, 2001).



As a result, a number of EFL graduates end up disappointed, and frustrated, unable to figure out where to go from the unenviable situation they are finding themselves in. Or, they might go into teaching, and, once that first wave of enthusiasm wears off, find themselves burned out. Once again, there is disappointment and frustration, and regret at the years spent studying. One way to alleviate this would be to broaden EFL learners' options, and broadening their options means offering them more choice, and preparing them to take different paths after graduation. This is where the advantage of having ESP in the EFL teaching curriculum comes in (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 158; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2011). If learners have had the opportunity to take Business English, for example, they will be prepared to move in a direction where they might make use of that knowledge. In addition to the business vocabulary they have been equipped with, they will also know how to write various business letters, and business correspondence in general, they will be equipped with business etiquette, with useful information on cultural differences in business situations, dealing with job interviews, preparing and carrying out business presentations, etc. (Brown, 2016, 155 ff.). All this knowledge will certainly come in handy to them if they wish to take a different path; they are proficient in General English, and they have the added advantage of having ESP, in this case, Business English, knowledge (Belcher, 2004). It is said that knowledge is power, and the more you know, the better your chances for success.

Thus, incorporating ESP into the EFL curriculum will be an example of interdisciplinarity at work; and one of the key concepts of this day and age is precisely that – the concept of interdisciplinarity, of putting together two or more disciplines in order to have a better rounded profile. It helps to avoid being limited, and being locked in a no-win situation, or in a situation where something is done for a lack of a better alternative (Basturkmen, 2006, 105 ff.).

#### **4. ISSUES TO CONSIDER**

Doubtless, incorporating ESP in the EFL teaching environment provides numerous advantages and benefits to EFL learners, both short-term and long-term. However, as with anything, there are some issues that need to be addressed and resolved so that they do not expand and become unmanageable. In terms of the issues, they might be of the type that we may have no or very little control over, such as funding, decisions made by various higher bodies in the sphere of education, etc. Then, they may be issues we may have some control over, connected to such things as class size, scheduling, student selection, subject status, and so on; and, finally, they may be issues we (should) have control over, such as course syllabus, classroom materials, assessment methods; teaching methods and strategies, teacher autonomy,

conducting learners' needs' assessment, etc. (Gatehouse, 2001; Krzanowski, 2009).

It is of vital importance that any possible hurdles are foreseen on time, and resolved in a timely manner, so they do not grow out of proportion and impede the learners' success and achievements. In terms of the first, and to some extent, second group of issues, those that are most likely out of our control, and, for the most part, we, as educators have no direct impact on, these are all issues that are mainly decided by other bodies in the education sector, and are influenced by a great number of other factors, not the least politics. We can certainly do our best to bring attention to them, but we must also not allow ourselves to lose our focus, and keep our sights on the bigger picture (Anthony, 1997).

In that sense, we can focus more of our energy on those things that we can change and influence, such as deciding on an appropriate course syllabus, choosing appropriate classroom materials, deciding on the type of assessment methods that will be employed, our teaching methods and strategies for optimum success, and so on.

## **5. STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF ESP IN THE EFL**

In order to meet the needs of the students, it is of vital importance that a needs' analysis assessment is carried out, as well as an assessment of learners' level of proficiency; that there is transparency in terms of assessment, syllabus, etc.; that clear and creative teaching methods and strategies are used; that there is interdisciplinarity in terms of skills that are developed and improved; that students are involved as much as possible (as equal partners in the teaching and learning process, rather than subordinates); that various setbacks are anticipated and dealt with, among others (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, 144, Graves, 1996).

In terms of the needs' analysis assessment, there is no question how beneficial and helpful this is for a successful outcome. Namely, it is always vital to see exactly what the needs of the learners are, and then to tailor, as much as possible, of course, to them. There are ways how to differentiate and group together the learners' needs, and even slight 'deviations' are acceptable, since they will result in broadening the learners' knowledge. In the EFL context, there will most likely not be extreme differences in terms of the learners' needs, as these are learners who are, more or less, looking long-term and have no special or fixed agenda at present. Thus, a balanced curriculum covering a variety of skills will no doubt have a positive outcome (Basturkmen, 2006, 165 ff.; Anthony, 1997).

Another important segment is that of carrying out an assessment of the learners' proficiency. This, like the needs' assessment analysis, is vital in that it allows the teacher to make a fitting selection of appropriate classroom activities and materials. It also allows the teacher to see if there are any segments from General English that need to be revisited and revised. This does not have to mean textbook grammar definitions; rather, they can be included in various ESP reading comprehension texts, or other exercises. Any exercise can be adapted to fit the needs of the learners, as long as the level of difficulty is appropriate. Furthermore, in the revision itself, a number of other things can be covered, such as vocabulary practice and building, revision of tenses, various grammatical constructions, among others.

Furthermore, in terms of the assessment of the learners' proficiency, despite the fact that these learners would be expected to have a reasonable level of proficiency, for example, a B2 according to the CEFR, it is always helpful to have a more accurate picture of a certain group's proficiency. This ties in with being able to tailor the course, and, specifically, the course materials, to the learners' level. In that case, if the majority of the group is at a higher level of proficiency, it would allow the teacher to work with them at that level, since it would be a shame, and a waste of time for the students, to have the necessary basis, yet be assigned work that is not challenging enough, and, thus, boring.

Assessment on its own tends to cause learners anxiety and stress, despite being just one segment of the teaching and learning process. It goes without saying that the issue of assessment is beneficial both to learners and teachers, yet, since it tends to be seen by the learners as a punitive measure, it is of vital importance that it is, at least, transparent. Assessment, unfortunately, has acquired a bad reputation, and in many cases it is not used as a tool and means of measuring the learners' acquisition and knowledge, as well as the efficiency of the classroom materials, and the teaching strategies and techniques employed. In any teaching and learning context it is extremely important that the issue of assessment gets the recognition it deserves, and one of the ways with which this can be achieved is by making it as transparent as possible (Gatehouse, 2001; Anthony, 1997). This means that the learners, besides being aware of the course syllabus, and the course aims and objectives, are also made aware of how they will be assessed, and the clearer and more transparent this is, the better for everyone involved. This will also indirectly deal with the issue of seeing assessment as a means of punishment, as something that can be used to deal with other classroom issues, such as discipline, homework completion, regular attendance, and others (Krzanowski, 2009). Thus, if the learners get a precise division of how marks will be allotted, this will help to avoid various unpleasant situations in the long-term. This transparency in assessment, and grading, should be carried out at all levels, such as tests, homework

assignments, projects, presentations, papers, etc. (Graves, 1996). Despite the different types of assessment that exist, what is important is that the assessment is objective and transparent, without any surprises to the detriment of the learners. It goes without saying that the ultimate aim and objective in the teaching and learning process is acquisition of knowledge, and assessment should be utilized as a tool in achieving this.

Apart from the transparency that needs to be present in terms of assessment, there also needs to be transparency and clarity in terms of the course syllabus, as well as the course objectives and aims. Although this is obviously not set in stone, and is open to some changes, overall, there should be nothing major, as the learners need to have a certain sense of stability. This ties in with the needs' analysis assessment, as well, as with the learners' level of proficiency assessment, as all these aspects are connected (Basturkmen, 2006; Krzanowski, 2009).

## **6. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SURVEY, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

A survey was conducted orally among a total of 25 freshmen, sophomores and juniors studying at the English Language and Literature Department, at the "Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology in Skopje. The question they were asked was: *How useful do you feel an ESP course, such as Business English, would be to EFL majors?*

The conducted survey was more of an informal nature as it was carried out orally, and at this stage, only 25 students were asked. This was done for the reason that the author of this paper wished to simply test the waters, if you will, and to see whether the answers obtained would correspond to their expectations. The students' answers were expected to be overall positive, which was, in fact, the case. The majority of the students asked answered that they felt it would be (very) useful for such a course to be offered and implemented at the Department, for a variety of reasons.

Below are some example responses from the students themselves:

- For me, it would be very useful, especially Business English; I plan to continue with master's studies in either Marketing or Human Resources...;
- It will be helpful for us when we do specialized translations; we won't have to struggle so much with the specialized terminology;
- After I graduate, I'm going to continue my studies abroad, and I'll be doing something to add to the degree I'll already have;
- As long as the classes are not too time-consuming, it'll be useful;

- Maybe we can take out some other classes that are not so useful for us, and add this in our studies;
- It sounds interesting, but unless other courses are cut from the curriculum, I probably won't take it; it would be too much work;
- I don't see myself teaching, so this will be a great way to open up other job possibilities for me;
- Today, nobody is really looking just for experts in English grammar or English literature, and this will help me become more well-rounded;
- I plan to continue with postgraduate courses in a related field, and this will help me because I will be prepared better;
- I think this field is becoming increasingly important in today's world, business, marketing, trade, and such, so it will be great to have something like this which will give us an added advantage over the others;
- Business and technology are the most promising in terms of jobs today; very useful;
- I'd definitely take this course, not because I plan to look for a job in a different field, I want to be an English teacher, but I just think that it would be a fun course, and different from the usual ones we have to choose from.

As can be seen, most of the responses, if not all, are positive ones, welcoming the idea, and being very open and receptive to the potential addition of a new course. There were some doubts in terms of whether a new course would increase their work load, but, then, there were suggestions as to how that issue could be alleviated (for example, by making changes in terms of some already-existing courses, either by reducing the number of classes or by reducing the course curriculum, to make it more student-friendly).

It is worth noting that even those students that were not outright supportive of the introduction of an ESP course were not downright against its introduction; rather they voiced some concern over the increased work load they might be faced with, and suggested ways with which that could be alleviated so as for this to be possible. Furthermore, it becomes evident from the respondents' replies that they would be most interested in an ESP course in the sphere of Business and/or Legal English, as well as in the sphere of IT and computer science, which is not surprising bearing in mind the significance of these fields in our modern-day society.

## 7. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, incorporating Business English in the EFL curriculum will, ultimately, be of great advantage to the students, not just in terms of broadening their overall knowledge and English competence, but also in terms of equipping them for life outside the academic environment, that is, getting them ready for real life, once they leave the university walls. It is always a good idea to prepare students more broadly, in other words, to enable them to move in different directions upon graduation, so that they have a solid foundation which they can expand. The concept of interdisciplinarity is key nowadays; the trend is to avoid limiting oneself to just one skill, but rather to utilize all the resources available, and to create something that can easily and seamlessly adapt to new trends and situations (Krzanowski, 2009; Anthony, 1997).

The phenomenon of globalization has made the field of business, just like that of technology, enjoy an unprecedented rise, and it would be foolish not to do anything proactive in making the most of it. In fact, English majors are at an advantage here because they already possess a solid foundation in EGP, and they can now use that in adding to their knowledge by enhancing it with an ESP.

Certainly, like with anything, there are issues that need to be taken into consideration so that it is not entered into blindly, thus resulting in potential problems that could have, and should have been avoided. However, these are not insurmountable, as long as there is the will to ride out the possible issues, and keep focus on the advantages (Graves, 1996).

Recommendations-wise, it would be good for the survey to be carried out with more students, and on a more formal note; thus, instead of it being carried out orally, it can actually be paper-based, which would allow the respondents to provide longer replies, which, in turn, would allow for a more detailed analysis. This is the direction, which is, in fact, intended.

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