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General English or English for Specific Purposes: A Personal Reflection

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Abstract

Time changes. We change. Everything around us constantly changes. Needs change knowingly or unknowingly. Nothing is permanent. So do teaching methods and strategies of English to non-native speakers in an age of constant changes. Thus, universities, language centres and publishing houses often organise conferences, seminars, and workshops to envision new ways and methodologies for effective English teaching and learning in line with shifting perceptions, needs and developments worldwide. In the academic field, thesis after thesis is produced yearly on language teaching methodologies and strategies to find innovative approaches in language teaching and learning and meet the shifting needs of the constantly globalising world and job markets in the 21st century.

Key Words: English for specific purposes, general English, reflection

1. Introduction

When I was at secondary and high school, and even at university, I studied **General English** decades ago. It may be the common way of teaching a foreign language since I was unaware of it then. Later, I gradually learned that this kind of teaching aims to help students attain the basic language skills and vocabulary needed to communicate effectively in everyday situations, such as understanding and using simple phrases and sentences, engaging in basic conversations, reading and writing elementary texts, and developing listening and comprehension skills. While teaching **General English**, teachers typically strive to teach and enable their students to acquire specific language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, writing, listening, and speaking in and outside the classroom. Depending on the level of the students, the curriculum may focus on basic or more advanced language skills, including topics such as socialising, making requests, giving opinions, expressing emotions, discussing current events, and writing emails or reports, even though there are still concerns whether or not we have achieved such levels at the secondary level and at the university level in Turkey because we are unable to see such improvements and language competencies when students start their university education. I regret to say that we cannot teach a good foreign language at the secondary level of education. Of course, we witness a few exceptions depending on the vision of some school directors and

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teachers, yet what I have seen and experienced around me is something we cannot accept today. Although our secondary schools teach English from the second year of their primary school education onwards, most students' language level and competency need to be improved when they come to the university. For many, it is a pity that it is the same when they graduate from the university. You may ask me, "Why do not you teach English properly"? You are right. I am not talking about English programmes but the programmes where the language of instruction is Turkish and where students take general English. Of course, there may be many reasons behind this failure, and if the authorities ask us, we can tell them the solutions as much as possible. Yet, the first essential thing is that our schools and universities must develop a good solid language policy, which I have not seen so far. It is very simple. Schools and universities must decide which level and competency of language our graduate students will have and how they will achieve it. Then, they must focus on the point to realise this policy with well-projected and achievable outcomes by having experts analyse why we have failed in foreign language teaching and learning, re-considering and re-assessing the causes of failure fairly and then what should be done to get out his vicious circle; otherwise, we will continue to deceive ourselves.

Anyway, let us come to the main point. **General English teaching** can be delivered in various formats, such as classroom teaching, online courses, private lessons, or language exchange programs, as many are mainly practised today. Teaching methods and strategies can also vary, depending on the instructor's approach, vision and creativity, as well as the student's needs, motivations, ambition and learning capabilities. Also, as most English teachers apply, this kind of teaching and learning may include communicative language teaching, task-based learning, grammar-translation, or audio-lingual methods.

If you ask me about the benefits of teaching and learning **General English**, it is helpful because it enables learners to communicate in daily conversations or in a field that does not require language and vocabulary specialisation. But when it is related to a particular field or area, **General English** still needs to be improved. For example, I attended the English preparatory programme at one of the prestigious universities in Turkey. I completed the English foreign language preparatory programme in the fifth place. Yet, I initially needed help when I started studying literary works. The need was not necessary because I studied and learned **General English** but because I did not study and learn English specifically for the literary field. I was unfamiliar with the literary vocabulary and terms, which play an essential role in understanding the context and meaning of a literary text. Having a good vocabulary and being knowledgeable about basic terms of a particular subject makes learning and comprehending easy; it eventually motivates language learners. Learning, reading and understating the texts in a specific field become joyful and exciting; ultimately, it makes the texts for the students more accessible and manageable by causing language learners to go beyond the visible meanings of words and texts and get new meanings. This may lead the students in such a particular programme and subject to be good critical thinkers.

However, I am a little old-fashioned because I have noticed that English teachers and experts have already envisioned a new method and strategy in the pace of General English in language teaching – **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**. It may be because of shifting perceptions in language teaching and learning and the demands of diverse 21st-century markets that constantly emphasise professionalization and knowledge-based language competency where the knowledge and competence of **General English** remain insufficient.

As many English teachers recommend and practice, **(ESP)** is a new method and strategy among many others in language teaching and learning. I am sure English language experts and teachers have used this method for decades and know much better than me concerning ESP's benefits and advantages. However, as a man of English literature, I am not too far away from the field. Hence, I want to share my experience, observation and understanding concerning **ESP** and how it is essential today in various professions and job markets worldwide.

Background

ESP is a subbranch of English language learning methods designed not only to meet the specific needs of learners who want not only to use English for academic or professional purposes but also to meet the requirements of diverse professions and markets because professionalism and specification have become prevalent in many areas of needs in the 21st century. For instance, today, we are talking about English for business, English for Law, English for Medical studies, English for Engineering, English for religious studies, English for leadership and so on. Each program and each field require its own vocabulary, its own understanding and knowledge of concepts because one can only be an expert in some fields. In addition, it is also seen in the field of translation and translation studies. One cannot translate well in every field, even though s/he knows and speaks English well. It demands vocabulary, contextual understanding, and knowledge of the basic terms of a specific program and field. Thus, the translation from English to another language and vice versa will not be better and more precise with proper meanings. It is with this perception that the heads of different fields and academic programs often ask the directors of Schools of Foreign Languages at the universities: “Please teach our students the vocabulary and terms of our program, have them read and understand the texts related to our programs because they do not understand our lectures, as well as course books and articles in the field because of lack of field-based vocabulary and understanding.” These requests indicate the need for programs because a lack of proper understanding of the contexts of courses and reading materials may demotivate students and lower the quality of education.

I will briefly summarise some advantages of teaching ESP, depending on my knowledge and experience. Other colleagues may add many more to these views. First, the **ESP** curriculum, courses and teaching materials are planned to be appropriate to the specific needs and interests of the learners, as well as the need and interests of diverse professions outside. This means that learners can focus on essential language skills for their academic or professional purposes and jobs they already have or plan to occupy later. **ESP** courses and teaching materials are more practical, enjoyable, exciting, and valuable than general English courses and teaching materials since they supply language learners with the necessary language skills, vocabulary, and knowledge they need for their specific fields or programs.

Another advantage of **ESP** is that it takes students beyond the mechanical learning method of **General English**. It makes them enjoy what they study because its curriculum and teaching materials are prepared and applied to meet their specific needs and goals. Language learners can see the direct application of their language learning to their future professions or academic pursuits. This makes students more engaged and motivated to study, learn, and understand, leading to faster and more effective learning outcomes.

Also, **ESP** courses and teaching materials are more helpful than general English courses because they focus on the language skills, vocabulary, and terms essential for the learners’ specific fields. This means learners can achieve their language learning goals more quickly and efficiently than in a general English course because **ESP** courses are designed to teach the learners what they need to know and how to apply their language skills in their field, saving time and resources.

ESP courses and teaching materials can also help learners develop their professional skills and competencies in their own specific fields. By studying and learning English for their fields, learners can obtain the language skills, vocabulary, and knowledge necessary to advance their professions or succeed in their academic activities. **ESP** courses can help learners become more confident and competent in their field, increasing job opportunities and career advancement.

Also, English has become the lingua franca of international communication in today's globalised world. **ESP** courses can help learners communicate effectively with colleagues, clients, and business partners from different countries and cultures in specific fields. By developing their English language skills in particular areas, learners can become more competitive in the global job market and succeed in a globalised business environment. For example, having checked international recruiting agencies, we

see that they seek English teachers with specific English backgrounds, such as English teachers with medical experience, English teachers with business background and English teachers with computer background and so on. Having English language competency in a specific field may serve the language teaching policy of schools that aim to teach English in a particular area to meet the requirement of a specific job market because the school wants to act in line with the outside demand. In this sense, teaching English is commercialised, yet this is the reality. The same is also valid for international translation recruitment because translation agencies recruit English translators to do translations in specific fields for their customers.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, **ESP** seems essential in language teaching and learning today because it is relevant, encouraging, and efficient for the students and outside demands. Thus, it helps learners develop their professional skills and prepares them for a globalised world concerning diverse job markets. **ESP** courses provide learners with the necessary language skills, vocabulary and understanding for their field, making them more confident and competent professionals.

In conclusion, **the International Journal of English for Specific Purposes (JOINESP)**, a free, international, peer-reviewed, biannual (June & December), electronically published open-access journal, will fulfil this mission and academic gap by publishing original research “articles that enhance the understanding of English language learning and teaching processes for specific purposes in both EFL and ESL contexts.” I firmly believe that **JOINESP** will be successful and contribute enormously to ESP for academic fields and professions.

I wish **JOINESP** success in its publication life.



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