

## Teaching ESP to a New Technological Generation

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**Abstract:** *In the century of technological boom, young people are the factor which necessitates changes in the way of teaching. The new generation lives with and through technology. It makes young people self-confident and independent providing them with an overwhelming amount of information. The task of ESP teachers is to harness technologies and make the classroom environment challenging and motivating for students. The paper presents an overview of the recent developments in ESP under the influence of technologies and the author's experience in teaching ESP to the students of the engineering specialities at the Technical University of Varna.*

**Key words:** *Autonomy, Collaboration, ESP, Latest Developments, Learning Technologies.*

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of learning English not just for the language pre se but for the needs of the profession became popular in the 1970s when ESP appeared as a term. Hutchinson and Waters defined it as “an approach” within TEFL which “is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material” [Hutchinson and Waters 1987:19]. However, in the course of time methodologists had to admit that ESP “has developed its own methodology, and its research clearly draws on research from various disciplines...” so it was defined as a “multi-disciplinary approach” [Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:1].

Dudley-Evans and St John have presented Robinson's classification of ESP, the main subdivision being into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) [ibid.:6]. They define EOP as the specific language for “non-professionals in work or pre-work situations” and divide it into English for Professional Purposes and English for Vocational Purposes. Other classifications divide ESP into English for Academic Purposes and English for Science and Technology, English for Business and Economics, English for Medicine, English for Law, English for Engineering, etc. Today, in the century of technological boom, ESP is getting more and more specialized due to the needs and demands of learners and employers. It is not only English for Engineering, not even for Electrical Engineering but English for Electronics and further - for Biomedical Electronics; English for Information Technology, English for Computing and English for Telecommunications. Due to the ever growing and expanding business relations in the world Business English has further developed into English for Accounting, English for Banking and Finance, English for Management, etc.

As a term ESP comprises both EAP and EOP but nowadays at the pragmatic level it is frequently used in a narrower sense as a substitute for EOP and EVP. In this paper I will use it to refer to English for the professional purposes of the students of the engineering specialities at the Technical University of Varna (TU-Varna).

### DEVELOPMENTS OF ESP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

At the beginning, ESP courses were focused mainly on specialized linguistic competence. Later, apart from terminology, functional language became a priority. The introduction of the communicative approach to language teaching in the 1980s along with other approaches that developed, such as Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Integrated Language Learning (CLIL), shifted the focus of ESP to developing communicative competence in real-life professional situations.

Nowadays, the advancements of technology and communications are changing the way of teaching and learning as a whole, and languages in particular. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology (TBLTT) “expand the range of tasks with online resources, enhance the authenticity of tasks and motivation for task implementation and facilitate student

ownership of and agency in the tasks” [Lai and Li 2011:499]. The very concept of tasks has changed and can be viewed as “projects and quests so as to realize the potential technology brings to TBLT” [Ortega as cited in Lai and Li 2011:501]. We are talking about Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) where both learners and teachers acquire new roles in the teaching/ learning process.

### **THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LEARNER**

Hutchinson and Waters defined ESP as “an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning” [Hutchinson and Waters 1987:19]. The learner has always been in the center of ESP and each course has been organized around the learner’s needs. In times of globalization and in countries “with no boundaries” people attend ESP courses for different reasons: to be part of the mobile labour force, to do business, to be more competitive or to be promoted. Nowadays employers have expanded their demands on employees’ competences. The latter are expected to have not only communicative competence, in some cases, in several foreign languages, but also to be proficient in their field and capable of critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and team working, to be self-aware and culturally aware to name just a few.

ESP courses are intended for learners at intermediate and advanced level of English. Experience has shown that very few students in a group are at this level, the majority being at pre-intermediate or even beginner level. There are two groups of ESP learners: 1) adult professionals who want to learn the English language for their profession and 2) young adults in a pre-work situation who are not fully aware what language skills they are supposed to possess for their profession. The learners in the first group are competent enough in their field and they are more willing to collaborate with the language teacher in the ESP classroom than the learners in the second group.

There are several factors restricting learners’ efficiency and determining their reluctance to collaborate in the ESP classes at the TU-Varna. English language courses are conducted in students’ first and second year; only marine specialities study English for the whole course of study. In the majority of specialities ESP precedes students’ acquisition of the specialized knowledge in their field and therefore the ESP classes are the place where students are first introduced to the notions, the terms, the registers and the styles they will later encounter. Another factor is the mixed abilities of the students. They are graduates of high schools of different kind varying from ordinary high schools, language high schools to vocational schools so they have different background language competence. The teacher has to select and design materials which will be of interest and use for all levels of students so that the advanced students do not get disinterested and unmotivated and the weaker students do not get frustrated.

On the other hand, the present-day students were born and have grown up in the era of technology. The new generation lives with and through technology. It makes young people self-confident and independent providing them with an overwhelming amount of information. Today the way of teaching is gradually changing so that it can provide students with a learning environment close to that they are used to. There are universities which conduct courses through CMC [Lai and Li 2011; Thomas 2010] in order to make students feel in a more natural, real-world environment with real-life tasks. Students find themselves completely immersed in the 3-D world they have created and where the medium of communication is English. What deserves our interest is that students approve and appreciate this way of learning since it provides them with the sense of anonymity which frees them from the restraints of the focus on accuracy. The results of Lai and Li’s and Thomas’s studies have shown that students demonstrated more involvement with their virtual characters and instead of being “mere observers of a language learning activity, their heightened sense of virtual embodiment gave them opportunities to continuously participate in independent ways, adopting a first person level of engagement, rather than in the few opportunities afforded by typical classroom environments...”

[Thomas 2010:4]. In addition, having all the information on the Internet, various dictionaries and other language help they produced longer continuous speech and longer writing; they became more self-confident and developed their self-correction and peer-reviewing skills.

In an ESP classroom equipped with technology students become active participants and collaborators when working in small groups. Such work enhances both their language and other skills. "It is useful to think how these new roles influence the processes and activities students conduct before, during, and after learning. For example, before learning, students set goals and plan learning tasks; during learning, they work together to accomplish tasks and monitor their progress; and after learning, they assess their performance and plan for future learning" [Tinzmann et al 1990]. Team work benefits both advanced students and those who are at a lower level of English. In many cases the former become mentors to their peers and help them use the appropriate language they need; the latter contribute to the work with ideas, knowledge of the subject matter or experience. The responsibility for the choice of topics in the syllabus does not lay any more only on the teacher. Students also take part in the negotiations for the topics they will cover on the ESP course.

### **THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

At the beginning of ESP it was considered that "ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist subject knowledge" [Hutchinson and Waters 1987:163]. Practice has shown, however, that "the ESP teachers have to understand the meaning of specialized terms, they have to know and understand the basic facts, mechanisms and processes they discuss with their students, and they have to have some rudimentary knowledge in the subject matter they teach" [Jendrych 2013:56]. This holds true especially for the ESP teachers who have to teach learners at the beginning of their specialized instruction as is the case with the students at the TU-Varna.

The present-day tendency towards modernization of tertiary education determines the variety of roles an ESP teacher has to assume: a researcher, a facilitator and a collaborator, a material evaluator and designer, a syllabi and course designer. As a researcher the ESP teacher has to be aware of all developments in Second Language Acquisition methodology and be eager for self-development. At the same time, he/she has to inevitably gain some basic knowledge of the engineering area of the students he/she teaches and be interested in the changes and developments taking place in it. As a facilitator and collaborator the ESP teacher shares knowledge and authority with students. He/she develops students' autonomy by giving students more freedom to discuss and choose the topics and the ways of accomplishing tasks and by assigning them more research work which they report in class. The diversity of sources of information provided by technology to the ESP teachers has made them material evaluators rather than material designers. At the beginning of ESP the teachers had to search for or write texts themselves, adapt them to the needs of their students and produce teaching materials. Today, there is a wide choice of ESP course books for many specialities. The problem is that they do not always serve the needs of our students and are not completely applicable to the durability of our courses, so it is necessary for the ESP teacher to select, evaluate and produce a set of materials taken from different sources and fitting the ESP courses conducted at our university. In addition, the advancements of technologies and their extensive implementation in teaching call for ESP teachers' both computer and technology literacy. It requires permanent qualification, so that they are aware of the properties of the new technologies and their applicability to the teaching methods and techniques in order to make ESP classes more challenging and motivating.

**USING TECHNOLOGY IN CLASS – ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

Any technology such as CD-ROMs, DVD players, multimedia, Interactive Whiteboards, PCs, Mobile phones, Tablet PCs, etc. may be used for the purposes of the teaching/ learning process and for this reason they are called “learning technologies”. They provide students with a great number of sources of information. They are interactive which increases learners’ motivation for acquiring and improving their communicative skills. Students can get immersed in real-time communication in the target language or follow their own style and pace of learning when doing written work.

The Internet provides information in the form of text, image or video on any subject. In language classes students can get on-line and have access to all kinds of dictionaries. The disadvantages of using the Internet are that there is a danger of getting distracted by inappropriate content or of getting lost in the endless set of links. The accuracy of language is often arguable since all kinds of people, not only native speakers, write in English. Access is sometimes hindered due to technical problems which may destroy a whole lesson plan based on work on the Internet, so the teacher must always be ready with a backup lesson. Many software applications for iPhones and tablets are available on the Internet for downloading which facilitate the work of students and help them overcome some language deficiencies. The problem is that many students are tempted into searching for unnecessary information and relying too much on the dictionary instead of putting some effort into the task they are assigned.

The advantages of using Wikipedia are that it provides a vast amount of information on a variety of topics, so it can be considered an authentic and reliable resource in terms of quality of information. Wikipedia is editable and students may publish additional information they have found and written themselves which will make them more interested and motivated for learning the language and improving their skills. The disadvantages are that it always needs a computer room to do work as a whole class and that the language is often too difficult for students to understand. Simple English Wikipedia [6] is a simplified version of Wikipedia with simple words and grammar which encourages students at lower level of English also to participate in and contribute to ESP classes.

We can say that the TU-Varna is well-equipped for the purposes of teaching about technology and engineering through technology. Many lecture halls are equipped with multimedia, so students can attend lectures in the form of a presentation or deliver one themselves. Earlier, in language classes, oral presentations were a means of assessment at the end of the semester and many students showed reluctance to speaking in public. Now oral presentations gain more popularity; students get used to preparing and delivering presentations in language classes. Oral presentations are assigned as individual or group work during the semester not only as a final assessment when students become active participants in assessing their peers’ work.

At the TU-Varna there are ten computer labs intended for small groups of ten and usually used with foreign students at the preparatory classes for diversifying General English classes, for looking for information, for illustrating a point or for additional language practice. The university library has a computer room which can be used for class work with groups of 30 students. Besides, last year a Virtual Reality laboratory was equipped at the university as part of the program “New Electronic Forms of Education at the TU-Varna”. It is intended for teaching and learning, research and practical training. What makes this laboratory closer to life is that it combines the mutual work of teams of students and lecturers from different specialities and different departments, thus providing students with the life skills they will need in their future career. It has not been used for language purposes yet, but it provides the ESP teachers with immense opportunities to raise students’ motivation for learning the language through learning by doing. This will make classes more challenging and more modern, even more “real”. Students will find themselves in a real professional situation so that they will be able to use and practice the language they need for solving professional problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

The “technologization” of the world inevitably leads to “technologization” of education. The generation we are teaching today was born and has been growing up with technologies all around it. Universities in the world and in this country try to attract both local and overseas students by improving the learning environment through technology and enhancing the quality of education.

The changes in the character of present-day learners necessitate changes in the way of teaching. Along with the Communicative Approach, a set of other approaches – CALL, CLIL and Task-Based Approach to Language Learning and Teaching with Technology – are extensively used in ESP. The new Virtual Learning Environments provided in language learning require new roles from both learners and teachers. The learners are active participants and collaborators and share knowledge and responsibility with the teacher in the choice of topics and the way of accomplishing tasks. The ESP teacher is a facilitator, a material evaluator and designer and a person who has harnessed technology to make the learning environment more real-life and close to the learners’ world.

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