

EXPLORING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

ANALIZANDO EL INGLÉS CON FINES ESPECÍFICOS

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Recibido: 05/03/2013 - Aceptado: 23/04/2013

Resumen: Inglés con Fines específicos (IFE, por sus siglas en español) es un enfoque para la enseñanza del inglés, centrado en el desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas en disciplinas, ocupaciones o roles específicos; en otras palabras, IFE comprende la lengua especializada que necesitan los estudiantes. Este artículo presenta un breve resumen de Inglés con Fines Específicos. Primero se exponen diferentes definiciones y aspectos generales acerca del tema, para luego examinar sus características particulares y los materiales.

Palabras claves: IFE (Inglés con Fines Específicos), necesidades del estudiante, inglés especializado

Abstract. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to English teaching that focuses on developing communicative competence in a specific discipline, occupation or activity; in other words, ESP involves language needed for specific learners. This article presents an overview of ESP; it first presents different definitions and general aspects about the topic, and then particular characteristics and materials are examined

Keywords: ESP (English for Specific Purposes), learners' needs, specialized English

Introduction

English teaching has currently acquired great importance; there are different institutions and authors working on its development. Accordingly, many strategies and methodologies to help its comprehension have been applied, but a lot of them have focused on grammar structures that hinder the real function of the language: communication (Richards, 2006, p. 6). Consequently, nowadays new methods and approaches have been adopted, and some of them make an emphasis on content teaching, especially the information that students are interested in or that they will acquire, which encourages students to learn the language (Madrid & García, 2001, p. 114). That is the case of English for specific purposes (ESP), which is focused on teaching English for students with specific goals, occupations or fields of study; this approach tries to give the students the language they will need on their professional or working life.

Taking the previous ideas into consideration, the objective of this paper is to review the information and positions that different authors claim about this subject, with the purpose of identifying characteristics and some important aspects about ESP teaching.

Methodology

For literature review and collecting information, some data bases such as Profile, International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, Dialnet, Erik and Ebsco were consulted, which helped to find different documents, books, and articles written in Spanish and English, that expose and explain important aspects about ESP including definitions, characteristics, benefits, teachers and students roles, among others.

Around fifty documents were found, but just twenty of them were chosen to write this paper. These documents were analyzed and studied in order to select the most important or relevant information.

ESP: an overview

There are different views or definitions about what ESP is; Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) defined it as an approach for preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation. As we can see, for the authors the importance of an ESP course is focused on the use of language to develop specific tasks, while some others researchers such as Day and Krzanowski (2011), present the relevance of ESP not just on the language use, but also on the skill development. They claim that “ESP (English for Specific Purposes) involves teaching and learning the specific skills and language needed by particular learners for a particular purpose” (p. 5). To summarize these two

perceptions, it is possible to define ESP as an approach to English teaching that focuses on developing communicative competence in a specific discipline, occupation or activity; in other words, ESP involves language needed for specific learners.

Thus, taking into account that an approach is a set of related principles dealing with the nature of language and language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), “ESP is considered an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as content and method are based on the learner's reasons for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987 p. 19). Then we can say that ESP is not a method, but a set of different methodologies, strategies and techniques to satisfy students' language needs.

In regards to the origins of this approach, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it is important to mention the three main reasons that made possible its development; the first reason was the demand of a new world with the interest of learning English based on an instrumental motivation, because what people really wanted was to learn a language for using it as a means of communication in their professional life. The second reason was due to a revolution in linguistics, which was focused on determining the language features needed in a specific situation to design a special language course. The last one was centered on the learner; in this point of view, ESP has an important aspect in a language process, which is motivation, due to the fact that working based on learners' specific needs encourages them to learn faster.

Characteristics

When designing and teaching ESP courses, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that it is necessary to take into account five stages that characterize their development. The first one is the Register Analysis, which is related to the specific grammatical and lexical features that the course syllabus should include, based on the target context. The second stage is the Discourse Analysis; this is focused on the usage and the mining beyond sentences; in other words, the use of sentences according to the situation. The other one is the Target Situation, the identification of activities, context and skills in which the learners will be using the language. The identification of skills and strategies is the fourth stage, which is related to the thinking processes that underlie language use. Finally, there is the learning centered approach that is a matter of how people learn to do what they do with language; in other words, what people do with language learning.

Furthermore, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, pp. 4-5) present a list of aspects that characterize ESP, making a division in two groups according to its 'absolute'

and 'variable' attributes.

Absolute characteristics are those that always have to be taken into consideration when designing and implementing ESP courses.

Absolute characteristics:

- ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner.
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

The variable characteristics, as the name suggests, may or may not be present in all ESP courses; however, they are taken into consideration because they are required when designing a course for a specific discipline.

The variable characteristics are seen in five points:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation.
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Types of ESP

According to Donesch-Jezo (2012) and Bilokcuoğlu (2012), there are two types of ESP; one of them is English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which prepares learners for using language related to specific subjects or majors in foreign or bilingual universities. It provides students with academic skills which allow them to study more efficiently, and provides content knowledge in the process of developing those skills. The other one is English for Occupational or Professional Purposes (EOP/EPP), which prepares learners to the use of language for a particular profession or job situation. Regarding the skills, EAP is usually focused on reading and writing, while EOP generally focuses on speaking and listening skills.

Materials

When developing a language teaching process, it is really important to take into consideration some aspects that help teachers to organize the course and give them the basis for class planning. In ESP courses content, task and teaching strategies are part of this relevant group, but one of the most important is material selection, given that materials are a way to bring the real context to the classroom and connect what happens outside, with the class development.

In this respect, Tomlinson (1998) states that in language teaching, materials are “Anything which is used to help to teach language learners. Materials can be found in the form of a textbook, a workbook, a cassette, a CD-Rom, a video, a photocopied handout, a newspaper, a paragraph written on a whiteboard: anything which presents or informs about the language being learned” (p. xi).

According to Nunan (1988), there are different types of materials and different ways to use them. The most common group is known as commercial material, which is created with the purpose of teaching. This kind of material is usually adapted to students' levels and course requirements, and it also gives teachers the sequential order of the course and sometimes certain important elements such as lesson plans, task and even evaluation, leaving teachers with little opportunity to use their creativity.

Another way that teachers use to support their classes is by creating their own material. They usually study analyze and evaluate good commercial materials to create some new. This is a good strategy since teachers can include and present what they want to their students in order to achieve the course objective.

Sometimes it is not necessary to create new material, but just to adapt an authentic one. Authentic materials are those that have been produced for several communicative purposes different from teaching a language (Nunan, 1988). Some examples are newspapers, movies, television shows or programs, processes instructions, real conversations, among others. These kinds of materials could also be used in a language teaching-learning process, since it is a good strategy to bring the real context to classrooms. In ESP courses, authentic materials take an important role because through them the target situation is presented to the learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, English for specific purposes is an important and convenient approach to teach English, because it gives the students the language knowledge that they need for their professional or working life. Besides, it

encourages them to learn English, given that it complements their formation, offering them the skills to perform in the workplace using a second language.

For ESP, it is so important to consider the learners' necessities and characteristics, because every single student is different; thus, teachers have to attend several learning styles, multiple intelligences and study habits. Therefore, tasks design, content and material implementation is crucial to get desirable results.

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