

# COPING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES TO ADULT LEARNERS

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## **Abstract**

The paper is aimed at understanding the notion of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) commonly taught to adult learners. ESP is different from general English in the way that it is taught to meet students' specific needs or taught to learners of specific disciplines; thus, it has its special features. In addition, teaching English to adult learners presents several challenges that are different from other age group of learners. English teachers need to understand the characteristics of adult learners so that they can take that into consideration in order to increase the effectiveness of their instruction. This paper discusses both issues—ESP and adult learners—and the practical implications that they bring to the English language teaching context that teachers of ESP need to know.

**Keywords :** *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Adult Learners*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The term of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is categorized by Dudley-Evans (1997) into two, namely absolute and variable characteristics. In absolute characteristics, ESP is explained as an English lesson given to certain group of people to reach their initial requests. In practices, it will apply all appropriate procedures and actions in accordance with the level and age of the learners, also ESP will mainly focus on all aspects that will help learners in broadening their English skills and knowledge, e.g. sentence structure, expressions, and some others. Different from absolute characteristics, the variable characteristics see ESP as a special subject addressed to certain field or area and uses diverse approaches compared to other common English lessons. Furthermore, ESP is created to help adult learners with specific English skills

and understanding which is in line with their job. Another idea about ESP is delivered by Hutchinson et. al (1987, p.19). He explains that the student's purposes are the main motivation why ESP is built. Therefore, all topics, materials and strategies applied in ESP should be stressed on to meet those expectations. Based on the definitions from Dudley-Evans and Hutchinson, ESP can be described as a type of special English lesson established for certain points. Usually, it is designed based on learners' needs and in accordance with their field or professional activity.

The study of ESP teaching to adult learners is aimed to find out any problems that might occur in the learning process. Since the need of learning English is improving from time to time, this paper is expected to give significant contribution to all parties that take part in

English learning process, mainly the teachers and the learners. As the aim of ESP is on the learners' needs, and the learners stated here are adult learners, the article will explore the ideas of teaching ESP to adult learners, what problems might be faced by the adult learners when they take ESP classes, and what strategies best applied for minimizing the problems.

### **ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)**

Ünal (2014) in his article explained that ESP exists because of the willingness from group of people who feel that they need to build specific understanding in English rather than just English in common use. They expect something narrow and more specific which will equip them better, especially in competing in the real work in the future. For example, when they are interested in economic sector, they will need to know certain terms or words which are closely related to the field they are dealing with.

Otherwise, in this era, English does not only belong to certain group of people or tribes or nations. It belongs to all people in the world, because it has been recognized globally as a shared language—*lingua franca*—to use to communicate with people from different countries. Moreover, with the growth of international activities which things or people can move from one place to another easily, English is essential for people if they want to be involved in all international activities.

Regarding the importance of English, English educators need to establish creative ways and topics to help those people who are in

need of developing their English proficiency. Therefore, after a long way of discussions and considerations based on many aspects, they build a new method of delivering English lesson through what we call now as English for Specific Purposes. The term specific seems to guide people to think that the English delivered is truly for specific expectations from the learners, what they really want from the program, and how it can help them best in dealing with their professions.

From the background of the existence of ESP, the educators of ESP are expected to do some steps before educating the ESP learners which mostly are adult learners. One of which is by doing observation about what the real expectations from the learners so finally they decide to take ESP. By knowing their expectations, it will be much easier for the teachers to prepare the teaching learning process. All expectations stated by the learners will lead on to the expected outcome stated by both teacher and learner.

On the other hand, Stevens (in Ünal, 2014) delivers four absolute characteristics and two variables in describing ESP. According to him, the four absolute characteristics include that ESP is provided to encounter the learners' necessity, connecting the materials to individual interest, focusing on the use of the language to the learning process, and that ESP is different from those English in common sense. While the two variables mention that ESP is stressed on what materials learners are studying and what best strategy appropriately used to teach adult learners, avoiding those usually used to teach

young learners.

### **ADULT LEARNERS**

There are some definitions of adult learners proposed by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (Ontario) on Adult Education Review: A Discussion Paper (2004, pp. 2–3). According to them, people who eager to finish their study and plan to pursue further educational level, to apply for a job, to meet work expectations, to get involved in the pace of world development, and those who want to develop their personal capacity are categorized as adult learners.

Furthermore, Brundage and MacKeracher (1980, p.21 – 31) in their book 'Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Programme Planning' suggest that adults have had a lot of experiences which are very beneficial to support them in their learning. Besides, they can also be more motivated when they are invited to join in designing the goals which are relevant to their needs. Others, adults also have their own expectation on how they will study. Usually they have set some strategies to assist them in studying. Based on those philosophies, then it can be drawn an ideal definition about adult learners that refer to intellectual aspects, they are adult learners who can best study well when they are treated as they deserve as adult learners, by not hurting their feeling, and by putting some related topics which are closely with their daily activities. Additionally, they also have expectation that the materials will be presented in various ways and give them opportunity to practice more and more. By doing so, they will

be more motivated in joining the learning activities.

On the other hand, Jeremy Harmer (2001, p.40) shapes another notion which defines adult learners as those who are joining the learning with their exceptional features, like they are able to imagine something unseen directly in the discussion, they own so much experiences in their life to share and that can be used as resources to teach them, they have beliefs on what procedures they might expect in their education, they set hopes towards the education they are going to face, and they have better self-control compared to young learners.

Based on some points of adult learners above, it can be deduced that principally, teaching adult learners should be greatly facilitated by their background knowledge. However, since they might be working or doing other activities at the same time, they possibly face different problems or challenges such as time management, family matters, or lacking of prior knowledge.

### **ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) FOR ADULT LEARNERS**

Deborah and Terry (2006, p.52) mention that since English nowadays has been significantly used by people in the world, especially in economics and knowledge sectors, then it needs to divine the essential of English either for general purposes or for the specific one. The general can be addressed for common communication in local, regional, or even international activity. While specific is created under consideration of fulfilling special needs

for certain group of people or learners based on their interest or job's demand.

One thing to do in the initial stage is by doing need analysis about the background of the learners; it could be their previous study or the activity they are doing at the moment. The information about the learners will be beneficial for the teachers to assign the best learning actions that are in line with the learners' life. The actions should be including public speaking, understanding scientific texts, and many others. Also, words or jargon, grammar, oral presentation or other definite materials needed in the learners' workplace or institution.

Geofry and colleagues (2003, p.187) mention that educating old students means that teaching someone with all things they have such as the maturity, long background of education, developed knowledge and thinking, persistency, vivid purposes and high stimulus to achieve the goal in a very short period of time. Therefore, teachers are supposed to avoid any strategy which will drive to any unexpected experience and make the adult learners uncomfortable and not happy.

Hence, after knowing those aspects owned by the learners, teachers should be able to maximize those aspects for the sake of the learners themselves, for example, using the enthusiasm of the learners to invite them getting involved in all studying activities. It is believed to make them having bigger opportunity to know more and also to practice a lot. Another aspect is the target that is set by the learners. Since the learners have put the targets by themselves, then teachers' burden is lighter. They just need to

create the appropriate topics and activities which will drive the learners to get it on the right way to reach targets. But, the teachers need to always remember that misapplying and mistreating adult learners might arise some problems.

### **The Challenges in Teaching Advanced English to Adult Learners**

Geofry and colleagues (2003, p.195) propose a concept that in dealing with mature learners, teachers are expected to vary the strategies and topics to deliver. Also, teachers should differentiate the learning process from the young learners. As the adult learners are equipped with their background knowledge, it should be advantages for the teachers. Therefore, the precise strategy to guide them will significantly help the adult learners to get closer to their expectations, and it will also ease the teachers in guiding them. Moreover, putting topics which are quite familiar with the learners' daily life are also a good way to lead them to the right direction.

In spite of those advantages of teaching adult learners, there are also some challenges that should be taken into account by the teachers. Despite bringing background knowledge, adult learners also carry some problems that they might face. Below, there are three terms presented by Geofry and colleagues related with adult learners' issues, namely register, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

#### **Register**

Register is a kind of language expressions or words or terms applied in certain places or area for specific purposes. Many of adult learners do not aware of the registers.

Because, previously they were only taught with the knowledge of English which are commonly used in society, or English that are used by people almost in all occasions and in everywhere. But, it could arise new problems, especially if they come to specific condition which requires specific terms or expressions. For example, when someone is dealing with engineering field, banking field, medicine field, or educational field, they will of course meet with some terms or expression which are totally different from one another.

Therefore, teachers should provide different English expressions that will be used only in certain situation. But, by introducing register to students, it does not mean that the teachers only delivering it without informing them how to use it. They also need to show them the correct examples on how to use it in the right context or occasions.

Here are some examples of register/ words used in banking. *Bad check* is used to express that there is no sufficient funds in the account. *Bad credit* is an expression when the bank is doubtful to lend some money to certain customer because of his poor history in paying his debts. So, it is going to be risky to give another loan to this person. In the opposite, there is *establishing credit* expressions, which means that the bank is fully confidence to give loans to someone because he has good story in paying his debts. There are also some expressions known by people but have different meaning when they are used in banking. For example, interest. In general English, interest means a feeling of curiosity, awareness, or concern to something.

But, in the bank perspective, interest means some amount of money paid by customer to the bank as additional money because the customer borrows some money from the bank. Another example is principal. As people know that principal commonly means chief, leader, or main, but in the banking world it is described as the total money borrowed or invested, not including interest or additional service charges.

### **Vocabulary**

When teaching adult learners, people tend to think that adult learners surely have a lot of vocabulary in their mind. But, that idea might be wrong. The range of vocabulary are quite big and divergence. Otherwise, the problems related with vocabulary can be divided into two; they are register and the ignorance of the connotation use. Register, as has been mentioned above, closely related with the use of special words or expression for certain circumstances. While the ignorance of connotation use can be described that adult learners usually carelessly misuse some vocabulary. When they mean to express their ideas, they use different words that those are for different contexts.

To deal with those two issues, there are some options can do, such as using dictionary, varying the reading materials, and giving individual extra reading assignments. Also, introducing the right use of the vocabulary they have learnt into native/ original context, which means that how actually those words or expressions are used by native which English is as their mother tongue. By knowing it, it will guide the learners to use it accurately in their daily activities, and to respond correctly to all



sentences coming from other people. Absolutely, by knowing more vocabulary, the learners will have high confidence to speak or to write, and it will cause them keen to practice more and more as they think they can do it.

### **Pronunciation**

There are so many learners in high level seem to have very good pronunciation when they are talking. In fact, not all of them can do that. But, in this part, rather than just driving the adult learners on how to pronounce the words perfectly or at least a bit like native, Geofry and colleagues more stress it on how to speak fluently. They can be guided to focus more on the tone, tempo and tension which was probably ignored by the learners on the previous learning experiences. Moreover, giving more and more practices to the learners will also bring significant result, especially in pronunciation term. One thing needs to be considered by teachers is that do not put too much stress on the grammar and vocabulary to adult learners, because while they are pushing to those things, they will feel overwhelmed and it will arise a new problem. Teachers need to consider that the adult learners only want to practice. They do not need to study in detail about how to produce sentences structurally correct. They might think that that phase has passed. All they need to learn now is only how to use English in their practical use, not more than that. So, giving them some functional practices will make them more motivated, and step by step it will help them perfecting their pronunciation even when they happen to realize it.

### **ESP FOR ADULT LEARNERS : CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS**

Effectiveness in teaching relies heavily on how well the teacher understands the characteristics of his/ her learners and how well the he/ she could implement his/ her understanding in the classroom practices. As described above, adult learners have several characteristics that could potentially turn into problems in teaching when not addressed appropriately. In addition, some problems commonly faced by adult learners in learning second/ additional language as explained by Geofry and colleagues have also provided insights that requires special attention. In this section, some principles to teach adult learners effectively is discussed, taking into account their characteristics and the potential problems they may encounter in learning second/ additional language.

Initially, the characteristics of adult learners is a set of issues that could easily turn into problems when not attended properly, however, when they are taken into consideration and are addressed appropriately, they can actually serve as the strength of adult learners. For example, adults learn best when new information is presented in a various modes and experiences, and that they have certain expectations about things they want to learn and how they learn it. This could be a problem if the teaching and learning design uses only monotonous methods such as lecturing or student-presentation most of the time. However, such characteristics could be best employed by

negotiating the curriculum with the students to brainstorm the designs of activities they want to do to learn certain targets in learning. For example, after the need analysis was conducted, students could be asked to brainstorm and propose certain ideas for classroom discussion, or they can actually be involved in the presentation of materials, but in a way that extends beyond the conventional student presentation; thus, they would be encouraged to present certain materials using unconventional ways that would be new and, supposedly, enjoyable for everyone in the class.

Other ideas to deal with special characteristics of adult learners are presented by Levine (2001), which will be detailed as follows. First, the fact that adult learners are independent/self-directed in their learning should be addressed by, for example, avoiding treating them like a child, calling them by name (e.g. by using name tags), giving them space and opportunities to learn at their own pace and learn with each other. Second, adult learners have already had rich life experience to base their learning; in this case, English teachers could provide wide opportunities for them to share their experiences to each other, connect ideas learned with students' real experiences, try to understand the students' experiences in order to be able to see their attitude and employ only the good experiences while avoiding the bad ones, all done in English. Third, adults only interested to learn about things that are relevant to them; thus, when learning English, teacher should avoid assumption that all learners want to learn

the same things, and provide opportunities for them to share about why certain concept is useful or not useful for them.

Fourth, adults are interested in information that could help them to solve their current problems; therefore, in teaching English, teachers could, for example, do some problem-solving activities in which they can share each other's problems along with its solutions. Fifth, adults are interested in practical information that they can directly apply in their lives; therefore, in teaching them English, teachers could try focusing on practical issues that may be relevant to them, some of which could be drawn from the need analysis. Finally, adults learn only based on their intrinsic motivation, thus, instead of offering them rewards (e.g. stars) like what commonly done when teaching children, teachers could find out what their learners really valued on and use it appropriately in teaching to improve their motivation.

As for the problems related to register and vocabulary, Geofry and colleagues (2003) suggested some strategies that could be applied in increasing the effectiveness of English language teaching. First, to attend to the problems of register, one thing teachers should pay attention is students' feeling of appropriateness. They need to be motivated by driving questions on new words or expression that they never met before. Usually, they will be given some clues or situation which they might find those words or expressions. Of course, it will take time to train them with certain feeling or sense so that they can guess in what context those

expressions are appropriately used. Moreover, the gap knowledge between learners also needs to be considered. Therefore, providing informal English different from the general standard which has been known by learners can be an option.

For the vocabulary problem, it could be addressed by several ways. An alternative way to do it is by providing some reading materials which contain idiomatic terminology and structures e.g. drama script, movie script or other conversational transcripts. Next, initiating some interrogative sentences which lead learners to understand the meaning of the new words, letting them to store it in their mind about the meaning and in which contexts those words can be best used. Later, since exercise is absolutely essential, learners are asked, for example, to rewrite the reading materials in correct form and making new conversation by applying the new learnt words. The more practices given gradually from easy to more challenging one, it can help learners to master better understanding on new words they just learnt and know when to use it and in what context they can use it.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper discusses the notion of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) commonly taught to adult learners. As explained in the introduction, ESP is different from general English in that it refers to both the teaching of English that meets learners' specific needs and also the teaching of English designed for specific disciplines. Learners of ESP is commonly adults who have already had specific interests in the

types of English they want to learn, for example, that related to their area of work or disciplines of knowledge. As the learners are adults, the notion of adult learners and their special characteristics need to be taken into account when teaching ESP. There are a number of adult learners' characteristics, for example, adults have valuable life experiences, they learn best when they are actively involved, they learn best when the content is personally relevant and when the information is conveyed using various modes. In acquiring second/ additional language, especially in learning ESP, adults may face a number of problems such as in terms of register, vocabulary and pronunciation problems.

These problems and the unique characteristics in adult learning require special attention from ESP teachers in order to address them appropriately. For example, teachers could expose students to rich authentic materials to raise their awareness about the problems in register, vocabulary and pronunciation, and thus making them more motivated to learn better. In addition, the characteristics of adult learners, which could turn into problems when not attended properly, could actually be used as their strengths if appropriately addressed, such as by using various modes to deliver information, by employing their own experiences in the teaching and learning process and many others. For ESP teachers, understanding the features of ESP and the characteristics of adult learners could be the first step towards the provision of appropriate instruction, which should be trained and perfected along with the time.



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