# CHALLENGES OF ONLINE ESP TEACHING

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*Abstract: English for specific purposes (ESP) implies teaching the English language to non-native speakers who need to communicate in a specific professional, cultural or academic setting. It is characterised by a highly student-centred approach with great emphasis on providing tuition according to students' individual needs and an increased pressure to provide fast results. It also involves very specific lexical sets and grammatical structures, an awareness of the levels of formality, and intercultural communication. Most importantly, there is the need for simulating real-life situations in order for the target language to be acquired in a relevant context, which in turn requires active participation and receiving constructive feedback in real time.*

*The demand for ESP tuition is constatnly rising in the ever-changing world of today. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most types of teaching have moved online with the use of videoconferencing and the advancement of educational technology (edtech). The trend continues long after the end of the pandemic, as people's habits and preferences have apparently changed irrevocably. There is now a large number of online English courses available, and ESP is no exception. The advantages of online learning include reduced costs, freedom from geographical and physical constraints, flexibility and the possibility of self-paced learning. On the other hand, there are numerous challenges of online learning and teaching. They include digital literacy and technical issues, reliability and validity of testing, lack of non-verbal communication, perceived isolation, reduced motivation, distractions, insufficient student engagement, challenges of providing relevant feedback, time management issues, etc. All of these challenges apply to online ESP teaching, with the addition of the lack of opportunities for real-life simulations in real time in the case of self-paced learning and the pressure to provide fast results that are manifested through measurable outcomes.*

*This paper provides a historical overview of the development of ESP and its continously increasing importance with special emphasis on English for professional purposes; a critical*

*review of the recently published literature that treats challenges of online ESP learning and teaching; and finally, it offers solutions to the stated issues and challenges. These solutions may be applicable to teaching any language for specific purposes online.*

**Key words:** *ESP, online teaching, needs analysis, communicative competence, attention span, motivation, feedback, training gap, language ego, affective domain, meta-learning strategies.*

## INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been taught online for many years; however, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt shift towards exclusively online teaching. As was the case with all types of teaching, the transition was implemented at a very short notice, which partly justifies the extent to which the initial challenges were met (Forrester, 2020). As opposed to English for General Purposes (EGP), which aims to provide general education, ESP provides training for specific professional contexts. It uses methods such as task-based learning, role plays, simulations and switching between pairwork and groupwork during activities. Therefore, it is mainly designed for relatively small groups of students.

According to Dudley and Saint John (1998), the main characteristics that distinguish ESP teaching from other types of teaching are as follows:

- It aims to meet specific learner needs.
- It employs specific methodologies and activities of the discipline that it serves.
- It centers on the language skills, discourse and genres that are relevant to the identified activities.
- It is designed for adult learners.
- It is aimed at intermediate- or advanced-level students.

These traits imply understanding learner needs and meeting them in ways that employ a variety of approaches and techniques while maintaining high levels of student motivation by catering to individual needs; creating and maintaining interest; setting achievable short-term goals; building on the existing knowledge and ensuring learner engagement and participation while paying special attention to the *affective domain*. This includes the *language ego*, the adoption of which has been found to be more challenging among adults than among children and young adolescents. Language ego issues refer to the perceived threat of adopting a new identity as a language learner and the embarrassment in front of others whenever a person makes a mistake. Virtually all authors and practitioners in the field of ESP agree that making mistakes and errors is an inevitable part of the language-learning process. It is also generally agreed that receiving immediate feedback in a neutral and friendly manner is crucial to making progress in any learning situation. The fact that ESP is aimed at adults who have attained a solid level of language knowledge implies that classroom discipline does not pose serious issues, and it can be assumed that the learners are ready to work on acquiring new skills and concepts as building blocks on top of their existing knowledge and *communicative competencies*.

## 1. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ESP DEVELOPMENT

### 1.1. The early development

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) dates back to the period immediately following the Second World War, when English became the world language of science, technology and economics as the USA was gaining economic power. The Oil Crisis in the early 1970s allowed Western influence on the oil-rich countries, which in turn created a demand for a *lingua franca* (common language) among non-native speakers of English. As a result, new teaching trends emerged that aimed to meet the learners' needs for intercultural communication, commercial transactions and information exchange (Teodorescu, 2010). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identified three factors that affected the development of ESP in the early stages. They are as follows: 1) the demands of the "Brave New World", 2) a linguistic revolution, and 3) a newly discovered focus on the learner. The latter factors were reflected in the development of contrastive discourse analysis as a methodological procedure. Great importance was given to register analysis, which implies understanding the levels of formality of a discourse. In addition, profession-related technical vocabulary was taught. As the concept of learner-centredness gained momentum, emphasis was placed on understanding learners' needs (*needs analysis*) and, consequently, course design that is based on linguistic and professional skills, functional language (phrases and expressions that are used in order to perform a particular function (e.g. "I'm not sure about that" for weak disagreement), and the context in which the learners need to perform in English.

During the 1980s, ESP was no longer restricted to the United Kingdom and the USA as it gained international recognition as an academic discipline, and numerous studies were published and disseminated globally. The range of ESP topics was extended to cover English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Educational Opportunity Programmes (EOP) and their numerous sub-branches. The traditional generic approach to course design was challenged and gradually replaced by specific target setting in language learning, which in turn resulted in the design and production of ESP-oriented teaching materials in order to enhance the development of ESP courses (Hewings, 2002). The focus shifted to the learning process, and it encompassed the learners' existing knowledge as a starting point, as well as the various student learning styles (Dudley-Evans and Saint John, 1998). During the 1980s, the focus of ESP was on skill specificity, course and material design, and the role of the teacher as a facilitator and a source of information (Ramirez, 2015).

### 1.2. The modern ESP

Since 1991, there has been an explosion in the number of published academic research papers, reviews and material designs in the field of ESP. Needs analysis remains at the core of course design; however, it has become increasingly complex. In addition

to assessing learners' communicative needs and deciding on the optimal approaches and techniques that are required to fill the *training gap* (the difference between the initial student knowledge and ability and the desired final outcome), modern needs analysis aims to gather information from many dimensions of the students' experience; this can fall into the objective context as well as the ESP learning environment (Otilia and Brancusi, 2015). Information can be gathered from tests, questionnaires, interviews and observations in order to discover the situations in which the newly acquired language will be used, its objectives and purposes (e.g. negotiations), the type of communication that will be required (e.g. written or spoken, formal or informal), and the level of proficiency that will be required (Abucklaish, 2014). However, tailoring a course to meet the initially identified learner needs does not guarantee success and effectiveness of a language course; needs analysis should be an ongoing process which requires catering to students' preferences, personal interests and learning styles in order to establish and maintain student motivation (Pazoki and Alemi, 2020). Another crucial factor in maintaining student motivation is providing meaningful learning experience. In addition, interesting and up-to-date role plays and simulations have become proven ways of achieving communicative competence. Cultural awareness and intercultural communication also lend themselves to engaging and interactive language learning.

## 2. CHALLENGES OF ONLINE ESP TEACHING

Online learning  can be synchronous (in real time), asynchronous (self-paced, using recorded materials) or blended (a combination of the first two types).

The challenges of online ESP teaching and learning lie at the intersection of general challenges of ESP teaching and the three types of online learning.

### 2.1. Digital literacy and technical issues

It is easy to assume that adults in the professional or academic world possess the latest equipment, a strong internet connection and a high level of computer literacy. However, that is not always the case. Technical and network issuees can cause glitches in video streaming, and complicated learning platforms may be difficult to navigate. This can add to the frustration that foreign-language students already feel due to the non-exact nature of language learning.

The solution would be offering tutorials and comprehensive guides related to the technology that is going to be used during the course, where teachers can help students familarise themselves with the learning platform. Alternative solutions can be suggested in cases where fast and secure broadband connection is not available. This may include public libraries, schools and university campuses. In addition, learning sessions can be recorded and made available to students who have missed the class or need extra time for revision.

## 2.2. Reliability and validity of testing

Cheating during online tests and exams has become a common practice recently. As a result, teachers are often not provided with accurate information and insights into the training gap than needs to be filled. Moreover, students may be placed into groups with an incorrect level of proficiency, which can cause numerous issues and impede the learning process for everyone involved.

In addition to improving the invigilation of testing the listening, reading and writing skills, adequate amounts of time should be allocated to testing speaking. This could provide opportunities for gathering relevant information related to the training gap. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-supported speaking tests are being developed and piloted around the world; they can be adapted to perform needs analyses as well. The process will take some time, and teachers need to be consulted at every step in order to ensure relevance.

## 2.3. Lack of in-person interaction

Human beings are social animals. Physical presence in the classroom helps create a good working atmosphere that cannot be replicated through virtual means. Non-verbal communication can convey signals that are essential to needs analyses and interpersonal relationships. Body language and facial expressions allow the teachers to provide personal attention to each student's immediate needs and manage clessroom dynamics. This is especially important during classroom activities, where supportive eye contact and body language can help students break down psychological barriers and enhance their confidence and fluency.

The advancements in edtech are taking e-learning to the next level through the development of learning activities that are supported by Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality media. Until these advancements become widely used and affordable, online teachers should show their face to their students and insist on cameras and microphones being switched on throughout the lessons. This can help all participants pick up various non-verbal signals.

## 2.4. Isolation

Learning from home can be lonely, especially in the case of asynchronous learning. Pairwork and class discussions are not included in such programmes, which affects student engagement, motivation and the rich learning opportunities that collaborative activities provide.

As a solution, it is possible to organise virtual group activities outside the virtual classroom using chats, discussion boards or cloud tools for collaboration. Regular check-ins should be scheduled in order to set a time frame which self-paced learning lacks. This can alleviate the sense of isolation, provide students with a temporal structure and improve

their motivation. In the case of synchronous learning, it is possible to coordinate activities that require students to respond verbally. In addition, groups can be split into chat rooms and given a task on which they will report to the whole group. This will increase student interaction and speaking time and create a sense of belonging to a group.

## 2.5. Distractions and time management

There are numerous online and offline distractions that can cause students to lose focus, such as social network notifications, noise and commotion around them. Recent studies reveal that the average *attention span* (the length of time for which a person is able to cencentrate) of an e-learner has dropped to only 8.25 seconds. While online learning allows flexibility, it requires good time management skills and other *meta-learning strategies* (understanding how you learn and applying that knowledge to improve your ability to learn).

In order to help students deal with distractions and develop good time management skills, teachers can ask them to mute all notifications during the lessons, find a quiet place to complete their tasks and inform the people around them about their daily schedule. Acquiring and employing meta-learning strategies such as understanding learning styles, writing to-do lists, periodic surveys and setting deadlines for task completion can also help, as well as time management apps such as Slack or Trello. However, there is no better remedy for distractions than making the lessons fun and engaging.

## 2.6. Lack of student motivation

Online learners tend to start their courses enthusiastically, but they lose interest as the course progresses. The lack of face-to-face interaction results in declining focus and engagement, and the lack of the teachers' and peers' physical presence removes the urgency to complete tasks. This can lead to procrastination ant the loss of focus and motivation.

Setting clear short-term goals and introducing praise or recognition for task completion and active participation can increase students extrinsic motivation. Setting up meaningful activities that reflect the students' personal interests, creating rapport and making the classroom come alive and the lessons enjoyable for students trigger the intrinsic motivation. This is an art, which teachers perfect with practice and experience. In addition, breaking up long sessions with interactive activities such as quizzes, games and polls will keep students engaged and motivated.

## 2.7. Challenges of giving appropriate feedback

Meaningful and personalised feedback is essential to a language learner's progress. However, the communication that takes place in a virtual classroom is often structured and asynchronous rather than spontaneous and organic. Without non-verbal cues, it is

difficult to provide students with the reassurance which they need when they are uncera-tin about their performance or the criteria for a classroom activity. This results in poorer performance and retention.

In addition to tools such as ChatGPT, edtech offers solutions such as using audio and video formats when sharing feedback and incorporating peer feedback into the course-work. It is essential that feedback is clear and actionable – this means that each point can be acted upon, which in turn sets achievable short-term goals. These goals will enhance learner motivation, together with the reassurance from the teacher that they are on track.

## 2.8. Classroom dynamics

ESP groupwork relies heavily on task-based learning, simulations and role play, which often requires changing the size and members of the groups. It is essential to set up collaborative activities in a timely and effective manner, as any misunderstood in-structions can result in the loss of precious classroom time and cause confusion among students, which is detrimental to the learning process. In a traditional classroom, teachers can move through the physical space and monitor pairwork on groupwork while acting as a resource and a facilitator and offering support in terms of content, activity flow and student confidence and fluency.

Google Classroom allows online teachers to split the class into breakout rooms; however, these rooms cannot be live streamed or recorded at present. By contrast, Zoom allows the instructors to join different rooms and broadcast messages into them, close sessions and regroup the students. The smooth setting up of activities and encouraging students along the way remains the domain of a human teacher.

## CONCLUSION

Improving specific communicative competencies in a foreign language is a complex process, which requires an interdisciplinary teaching approach. Online ESP teaching faces additional challenges; the solutions include the use of technology in addition to adapting traditional teaching techniques to suit the virtual environment.

Galaczi (2023) contends that, although recent advancements in edtech and AI-sup-ported learning can enhance online learning and teaching, technology may never be able to replace human teachers as the providers of the social and emotional aspects of learning. Morover, it cannot be entrusted with the selection of didactic approaches and classroom management. However, edtech is developing at an unprecendented rate, and it will most likely continue to enhance both the learning and teaching experience.

Asynchronous and blended online ESP teaching increasingly rely on AI; however, synchronous online ESP teaching remains people-centred and benefits from edtech in-novations that help bridge the current gaps in personal interaction, needs analysis, timely and effective feedback, distractions and classroom dynamics.

Due to the pressure on ESP to provide fast results, it has been at the forefront of language teaching development as a whole, and it has greatly influenced teaching practices beyond the scope of language teaching and learning.

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