

# Should an ESP Course be Specific or General? A Literature Review of the Specificity Debate

Vũ Thị Thanh Nhã\*

*Faculty of English, VNU University of Languages and International Studies,  
Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Vietnam*

Received 02 July 2015

Revised 06 October 2015; Accepted 08 October 2015

**Abstract:** Subject content is an important part of ESP courses. However, it is controversial how much subject content should be integrated into course content. This paper reviews the debate over specificity of ESP courses in three ESP development periods since 1960s. It will provide ESP practitioners, course writers and managers a theoretical overview to inform their teaching and researching practices.

*Keywords:* Specificity, ESP, literature review, course development.

## 1. Introduction

As an English teaching approach, English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been popularly perceived and depicted as “a radical, modern, more scientific departure from previous approaches” [1:1]. It emphasizes the importance of learners’ communication needs in a specific academic and professional setting when developing language courses [2]. Starfield [1:1] points out that two major issues for ESP (LSP) course development are “context”, the target situations in which the learners will use the language skills, and “content”, what the learners access through language.

The question of what content should be added is, however, controversial. Some authors [2] [3] argue that ESP courses should include specific content, e.g. the specialized discourses of an academic or professional community. Other authors [4-7], on the contrary, favor generic language skills that are transferable among disciplines or professions. There is also a further group that holds a neutral view and supports both specialized discourses and generic language skills [8-10]. This debate, which has been evolving in parallel with broader ESP developments and has interested many scholars, incurs in both ESP as a whole and one of its branches, English for Academic Purpose (EAP), causing confusion for ESP practitioners. This paper will critically review the three positions of the specificity debate to highlight the development of the concepts. It

---

\* Tel.: +84466805931  
Email: nhavtt@vnu.edu.vn

will provide a theoretical framework for English language teachers in ESP course design and material developments to undertake further empirical studies in their own teaching contexts.

The following sections will trace the trajectory of the specificity debate over three periods: 1960s-1970s, 1980s, and from 1990s to present.

## **2. Specificity debate in the 1960s and 1970s**

In 1960, the term English for Special Purpose was first introduced in the Makerere Conference [11]. The word Special refers to the special needs of a group of learners, which could be identified via “detailed studies of restricted language and special registers” from “large samples of the language used by the particular person concerned.” [12:1]. This specialized focus was, in fact, one of the great attributes of ESP compared to the focus on General English at the time. Many studies were conducted to identify the special linguistic needs of learners’ target situations. Examples include Herbert [13], Ewer and Latorre [14], Huddleston [15], and Ewer and Hughes-Davies [16]. However, Starfield [1] notes that these studies were subsequently criticized for being confined to sentence level, offering unauthentic reading materials, being overly focus on forms, and overlooking the fact that lexical and grammatical structures could be found in more than one register. In response to the criticism, researchers focused on characterizing language functions and notions in one area and beyond sentence-level [17-20]. Other authors conducted whole text analysis with sample texts from the learners’ fields of study or work [17].

The underlying educational rationale for this movement was that language learning is more effective and more motivating if the program content is relevant to learners’ particular field of need or interest [21-23]. Also, the ability to use general language is not as important as the effective use in specific areas relevant to the learners’ needs and interests. Students’ needs are thus equated with the linguistic demands in their chosen field. In this early stage, an ESP course with highly specialized materials was a markedly popular choice.

## **3. Specificity debate in the 1980s**

The subsequent decade saw a new phase of thinking, where ESP was not considered as confined only to target situation language needs. It expanded its concern to the learners and the learning process in the present conditions of learning [11]. Therefore, highly specialized ESP courses became less favored than general ESP courses. Hyland [2] attributes this change to two major factors, theory-related and administration-related. Theoretically, generic ESP courses are based on the position that literacy can be “taught to students as a set of discrete, value-free rules and technical skills usable in any situation” [2: 386-387]. Regarding the administrative side, general ESP courses are “cheaper, logistically undemanding, and require less skilled staff to implement” [2: 387].

Hutchinson and Waters [6], for example, strongly favor general linguistic competence compared to specialized discourse knowledge in ESP courses. They argue that a native English student will be able to cope with new knowledge in any technical area of study

regardless of the fact that he/she does not have “any knowledge of either the subject itself, or the specific terms associated with it” [6: 178]. Their proposed explanation is the existence of “a basic Underlying Competence that, largely irrespective of subject, enables the student to interpret the flow of new knowledge” [6: 178]. It is this underlying competence, which is “fundamental” because it is the “starting point” of teacher and student interactions in learning new knowledge [6: 178]. In their later work [24], *English for Specific Purposes: A learner-centered approach*, Hutchinson and Water advocate a more neutral stance towards specialized materials. On the one hand, they claim that language variations for each discipline are not sufficient. They write: “There is no grammatical structure, function or discourse structure that can be identified specifically with Biology or any particular subject.” [24: 165]. Therefore, there is “little linguistic justification for having highly specialized texts” [24: 161]. On the other hand, Hutchinson and Waters [24] acknowledge the “face validity” of highly specialized texts in ESP courses, such as making learners “motivated” and the language “more relevant” [24: 161]. They conclude that the choice of ESP materials should be considered in the learning/teaching process and in relation to other factors such as the teachers’ “knowledge and competence” [24: 162].

Similarly, Bloor and Bloor [25] develop a *Common Core Hypothesis*, which proposes the existence of linguistic features that can be found in many varieties. The common core consists of skills like “summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting” [7: 43] or topics of “persuasive language” such as “expressing cause and effect” [2: 389]. The weaknesses of the hypothesis are how to identify the core and

that “it focuses on the formal system and ignores the fact that forms has different possible meanings depending on the contexts in which it is used” [2: 389].

Blue [26] supports ‘general ESP’ by separating English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) from English for Specific Purposes (ESAP). The former focuses on skills that are transferable to various academic disciplines such as listening and note-taking, reference skills, and participating in seminars and discussions. The latter, in contrast, prioritizes language and communicative needs which are stable and typical in a particular discipline (e.g. law or economics). This classification has shaped two approaches for designing EAP courses. The wide-angled (or general) approach favors EGAP while the narrow-angled (or specific) one takes up ESAP.

Unlike other authors, Spack [7] is more concerned with the administration of specialized ESP courses. She examines the situation in which English teachers have to teach disciplinary writing, specifically Writing Across the Curriculum for L1 learners and ESP writing for L2 learners. She believes that each discipline has its own conventions, “a different system for examining experience, a different angle for looking at subject matter, a different kind of thinking” [7: 38]. Therefore, she claims that teaching writing in the discipline is a demanding job because it “involves even more specialized knowledge and skills than does the teaching of the subject matter itself” [7: 38]. She concludes that it is preferable for writing to be taught by subject teachers who have “a solid grounding in the subject matter and who have been through the process themselves” [7: 40]. The “traditional” and “worthy” role for the English teacher is to teach generic issues such as “general inquiry, strategies, rhetorical

principles, and tasks that can transfer to other course work” [7: 40-41].

To summarize, in the 1980s, the concept of specificity was challenged when more attention was given to the learning situation and learners' transferable skills. Wide-angled approach was supposed to be against the narrow-angled approach of specificity, which was prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s.

#### 4. Specificity debate from 1990s to present

In the early 1990s, ESP courses were developed based on the needs of both target situation and present situation, an “integrated scope” of needs analysis [11: 1]. It is interesting that a number of studies focused particularly on registers and the discourses of different disciplines during this period [27] [1]. Starfield [1] called it a “resurgence of interest” (p.3) in register analysis due to the invention of new software. The debate of specificity, therefore, became more complex than ever. This section will discuss three dominant arguments: highly specific, generic, and combined.

At one extreme of the specificity debate, Hyland [2] argues strongly for a highly subject-specific course. He writes: “ESP must involve teaching the literacy skills which are appropriate to the purposes and understandings of particular academic and professional communities.” (p.386). On the one hand, he criticizes the wide-angle perspectives, which he thinks, “undermine our pedagogic effectiveness, weaken our academic role, and threaten our professionalism” (p.387). He points out several reasons for this argument. For example, general ESP might not meet “students' urgent needs” (p.388) to work effectively in the discipline, due to its focus on the universal principles of

inquiry or rhetoric that remains difficult to identify. Second, it operates on a false assumption of how students learn. Students “acquire features of the language as they need them” rather than in “a step-by-step” fashion (p.388), from common core for weak students to more specific and difficult language features as students advance. Third, specialist discourses should not be left to subject specialists who “generally lack both the expertise and desire to teach literacy skills” (p.388). Last, the cost for specialized ESP, which is research-based, effective, and close to the work settings, is a value-for-money investment.

On the other hand, he confirms the existence of multiple subject-specific literacies as a strong theoretical foundation for a narrow-angled ESP approach and some related research approaches, e.g. genre study and text analysis. He writes: “Disciplines have different views of knowledge, different research practices, and different ways of seeing the world, and as a result, investigating the practices of those disciplines will inevitably take us to greater specificity” (p.389). One important feature of discipline variation he highlights that scholarly discourses are differentiated as “an outcome of a multitude of practices and strategies” of a specific community to develop arguments, instead of by “merely specialist topics and vocabularies” (p.391). As a result, he calls for the application of specific (narrow-angled) ESP courses “as far as we can” [2: 394] to assist students to learn new literacy skills and participate in a particular academic or cultural setting.

Hyland's [2] work had substantial influence on subsequent writings on specificity, especially those from authors at the other extreme of the debate such as Dovey [5]; Huckin [28] and Anthony [4], who take the

position of wide-angled approaches. For example, Huckin [28] responds positively to Hyland's 'appeal' to provide more specialized ESP. However, Huckin doubts the possibility that ESP teachers can "jump in and provide narrow angle expertise" and Hyland's ruling out of the existence of a "transdisciplinary common core of features" (p.8). He also criticizes Hyland's [2] concept of specificity as teacher-centered and "content-based" (p.9). In contrast, he proposes that "*specificity should be defined not in terms of content per se but in terms of the learner and his or her needs*" [28: 10, italic from the original]. An implication for teachers is to teach "strategies" such as "learning strategies" and "rhetoric strategies" (p. 11) and rely on students to supply specificity from their own disciplines.

Similarly, Dovey [5] advocates teaching attributes transferable from university to workplace, including "the ability to learn fast and learn how to learn" (p.396) and "the ability to communicate effectively with colleagues and managers" (p.391) in the context of the knowledge economy. She points out the limitations of the traditional discipline-specific approach, which is strongly supported by Hyland [2]. These include an assumed ability to identify and teach genres for "the relatively homogeneous purpose" [5: 388] which can be defined for any context; and a narrow concept of transferability. She explains that "transferability tends to be considered mainly from the perspective of what is transferable from generic classes to disciplinary contexts, or what can be 'reliably and usefully' transferred 'across disciplines' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 7)". It is traditionally assumed that learning and literacy achieved in academic contexts are transferable to professional contexts. In fact, it is not always the case,

because "there are clearly significant differences between the workplace-like genres produced for the purposes of assessments, and the *authentic* workplace genres" [5: 395] in terms of purpose and nature. In addition, hybrid assessment tasks "are constantly evolving, and do not settle into the stable patterns which would allow them to be classified as a genre at all" [5: 397]. She also raises the issue that traditional literacy is "almost invariably conflated with reading and writing" (p.400), which might exclude oral communication and interactions as essential social practices in the new knowledge era.

Anthony [4] continues to advocate for general/wide-angled ESP by critically examining the intertwined relationships of products, processes, and practitioners. She argues that the general process-oriented approach equips students with skills which are "highly valued in the modern workplace" (p.3) while the product-oriented approach towards more specialized ESP limits students' adaptability into the workplace due to the rapid evolution of the target product. In addition, the product-oriented approach puts "a great burden on ESP practitioners" (p.6) in an "idealized" (p.7) situation. As a result, in reality, ESP teachers might use inappropriate commercial ESP textbooks or completely turn away from ESP to focus on TOEFL or TOEIC preparations [4]. Although she agrees that specialist subject areas are "highly variable" (p. 10), Anthony suspects that the variations of language forms and practices are, however, sufficiently stable and "discipline-defining" (p.10) to be relayed to learners. She writes:

"A related point is that the differences between disciplines should more accurately be described as probabilistic variation in central

core elements rather than deterministic rules (Halliday, 1991)” [4:11].

Among authors of combined stance, Johns [1990, cited in 29] and Dudley-Evans and St John [10] develop Blue’s [26] concepts of EGAP and ESAP and point out situations to apply them. In the context of ESP in the USA, Johns [29] classifies EGAP for undergraduate students who are entering academia while ESAP is for graduate students with greater expertise in the field. Meanwhile, Dudley-Evans and St Johns[10] relate specificity to a continuum of learners’ language proficiency. Beginners commence with general English courses and progress to more specific courses when their English is improved. In their classification, EGAP refers to courses on “common-core language and skills that are not related to specific disciplines or professions”, followed by a more specific course type on “broad disciplinary or professional areas” [10: 9]. They also acknowledge that “the common-core EAP work makes more sense and is more relevant if it is supplemented by specific work” [10: 42]. This continuum, however, seems to have limited application as it requires students with a “certain level of English proficiency” [8: 59]. In fact, as Bloor and Bloor [1986, cited in [8], p.59-60] argue, students can acquire a common core of English through “being exposed to any variety of English”. In addition, they will be able to learn “form-function relationship in the specialist area” [8: 59]. Therefore, Basturkmen [8] suggests a modified version of the wide-angled approach, which introduces common core through a variety of English. The texts may come from a group of sub-varieties to include a “conglomerate” [8: 60], highlighting language items that are used more frequently in that variety. However, it is open for teachers and course designers to

decide which items should be included. Similarly, Clapham [9] examines the effects of background knowledge on EAP students’ reading performance. She recommends that EAP teachers should introduce general academic texts with common-core rhetoric functions meanwhile some functions require specific texts, which need to be checked for their appropriateness by the teachers.

Recently, Huhta, Vogt, Johnson, and Tulkki [30] highlight the hybrid nature of specific content in their definition of professional context specificity. They look at a learner as a whole person with complicated social roles. They, therefore, argue that traditional domain specificity, which was based on language specific features in a professional domain, fails to include communication events a learner may encounter outside their professional domain. For example, an accountant working in healthcare may need medical terms. An interdisciplinary content might be identified to meet the learner's needs in a professional context.

In summary, the specificity debate since 1990s seems to contextualize the concept of specificity to accommodate specific learners' needs. It is the learners who will determine how specific the content should be. With a diversity of social roles, the content might be interdisciplinary rather than domain specific.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussion so far highlights that it is controversial how specific an ESP course should be. On the one hand, specialized ESP (a narrow-angled or product-oriented approach) is supported for its pedagogical effectiveness, needs-based approach, and workplace

orientation on the assumption that disciplinary or occupational language variations can be identified and taught [2] [3]. However, it is criticized for its increased workload for ESP practitioners [4] [7] limited transferability [4] [5], and the unclear existence of identifiable and stable subject variations [4] [6]. Therefore, an increasing number of authors turn to general ESP (a wide-angled or process-oriented approach) which focuses on a common core of languages, generic and transferable skills and greater feasibility for ESP practitioners [4-7]. In addition, other authors attempt to maximize the strengths and compromise the weaknesses of the two approaches by listing conditions for each approach [10] and Johns (1990, cited in [29]), by integrating specialized materials into general ESP courses [8] or by identifying communicative events learners need in their professional context [30].

The debate also reflects the dynamic evolution of some important concepts such as common core, disciplinary variations, transferability, and transferable skills. However, there are various sources of confusion. Firstly, these studies use mixed examples and draw arguments from either ESP or EAP, which might be invalid or irrelevant to both. Even though they are closely related, EAP differs from ESP in terms of its target situation, the academic environment instead of the workplace. Thus, it is likely that EAP teachers are more experienced than students who are taking an EAP course prior to their disciplinary subjects, which is not necessarily the case for ESP.

In addition, the particular contexts of the ESP courses in the studies tend to be ambiguously addressed. In fact, Dudley-Evans and St John [10: 35] point out four different contexts in which ESP courses could be

implemented in relation to students' first language and their experience in English medium environments. These features, as they argue, might influence the research focus and problems addressed in EAP. For example, in English-speaking countries, the focus of EAP courses is "the academic language" and "study skills" related to the main skills such as academic reading or writing [10: 36]. In contrast, in ESL contexts, it is shown that EAP students have a mixture of needs for taking English-medium courses and developing communication skills for work (Williams, Swales & Kirkman, 1984 as cited in [10]). In addition, the common-core study skills courses seem to be less motivating to students in ESL situations who have high language proficiency (Chukwuma et al, 1991; Monsi et al, 1995; and Obah, 1993 as cited in [10]). Starfield [12], therefore, suggests using subject-specific courses to motivate students in the ESL educational setting. Meanwhile, in EFL situations, many EAP courses prepare students to adjust from the national language medium at secondary level to English medium at tertiary level. Students have "a much lower level of English" and the subject course might be delivered in "a mixture of English and the national language" [10: 39].

Finally, several of these studies lack empirical evidence to support their arguments. Few studies have been done to find out which approach is preferred and why it is selected from the teachers' and students' perspectives. Dovey [5], for instance, admitted that her proposals "raise questions rather than attempt to provide answers by way of empirical research" (p.389). Even Huckin [28] who emphasizes the centrality of learners' needs fails to introduce students' voices into his arguments.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to seek empirical evidence of how ESP practitioners interpret the concepts in their local practices. Various factors should also be considered such as the overall purpose of the language program, students' language proficiency, outside-the-classroom language, the length of the course, and resources (teacher and expertise). It is essential that the course implementers, such as teachers and students, hold a shared meaning of course specificity to ensure the alignment of goals and classroom practices [31] and students' interest.

## References

- [1] Starfield, Sue. "Historical Development of Language for Specific Purposes." In *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* edited by Carol A. Chapelle, 1-6: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013.
- [2] Hyland, K. "Specificity Revisited: How Far Should We Go Now?" *English for Specific Purposes* 21, no. 4 (2002): 385-95.
- [3] Paltridge, Brian. "Systems of Genres and the Eap Classroom." *TESOL Matters* 1, no. 12 (2000).
- [4] Anthony, Laurence. "Products, Processes and Practitioners: A Critical Look at the Importance of Specificity in Esp." *Taiwan International ESP Journal* 3, no. 2 (2011): 1-18.
- [5] Dovey, T. "What Purposes, Specifically? Rethinking Purposes and Specificity in the Context of the 'New Vocationalism'." *English for Specific Purposes* 25, no. 4 (2006): 387-402.
- [6] Hutchinson, Tom, and Waters, Alan. "Esp at the Crossroads." In *English for Specific Purposes*. Corvallis: Oregon State University, 1980.
- [7] Spack, R. "Initiating Esl Students into the Academic Discourse Community: How Far Should We Go?" *TESOL Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1988): 29-51.
- [8] Basturkmen, Helen. "Specificity and Esp Course Design." *RELC Journal* 34, no. April (2003): 48-63.
- [9] Clapham, Caroline. "Discipline Specificity and Eap." In *Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*, edited by John Flowerdew and Matthew Peacock, 84-100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [10] Dudley-Evans, T., and M.J. St John. *Developments in Esp: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- [11] West, Robert. "Needs Analysis in Language Teaching." *Language Teaching* 27, no. 1 (1994): 1-19.
- [12] Starfield, Sue. "Cummins, Eap, and Academic Literacy." *TESOL Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1994): 176-79.
- [13] Herbert, A.J. *The Structure of Technical English*. London, England: Longman, 1965.
- [14] Ewer, J. R., and G Latorre. *A Course in Basic Scientific English*. London, England: Longman, 1969.
- [15] Huddleston, R. *The Sentence in Written English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- [16] Ewer, J. R., and Hughes-Davies. "Further Notes on Developing an English Programme for Students of Science and Technology " *English Language Teaching* 26, no. 1 (1971): 65-70.
- [17] Lackstrom, J.E., L. Selinker, and L. Trimble. "Technical Rhetorical Principles and Grammatical Choice." *TESOL Quarterly* 7 (1973): 127-36.
- [18] Munby, J. *Communicative Syllabus Design*, 1978. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- [19] van Ek, J.A. *Systems Development in Adult Language Learning: The Threshold Level*. Strasbourg: The Council of Europe, 1975.
- [20] Wilkins, D. *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- [21] Brindley, G. "The Role of Needs Analysis in Adult Esl Program Design." In *The Second Language Curriculum*, edited by R.K. Johnson, 63-78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- [22] Flowerdew, Lynne. "Needs Analysis and Curriculum Development in Esp." In *Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*, edited by B. Paltridge and S. Starfield, 325-46. West Sussex: UK: Wiley -Blackwell, 2013.
- [23] Nunan, D., and Clarice Lamb. *The Self-Directed Teacher: Managing the Learning Process*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [24] Hutchinson, Tom, and Waters, Alan. *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- [25] Bloor, M., and T. Bloor. *Language for Specific Purposes: Practice and Theory*. Dublin: Trinity College, 1986.



- [26] Blue, G.M. "Individualising Academic Writing Tuition." In *Academic Writing: Process and Product*. *Elt Document 129*, edited by P.C. Robinson, 1988.
- [27] Paltridge, Brian. "Afterword: Where Are We Now and Where Have We Come From?" In *English for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice*, edited by D. Belcher, 289-96. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- [28] Huckin, Thomas. "Specificity in Lsp." *IBÉRICA* (2003), <http://www.aelfe.org/documents/text5-Huckin.pdf>.
- [29] Robinson, Pauline. *Esp Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. Edited by Christopher N. Cardin, *Language Teaching Methodology*. London: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- [30] Huhta, Maratta, Karin Vogt, Esko Johnson, and Heikki Tulkki. *Needs Analysis for Course Design: A Holistic Approach to Esp*. Edited by David R. Hall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- [31] Mahboob, Ahmar, and Namala Tilakaratna. "A Principles-Based Approach for English Language Teaching Policies and Practices." California: USA: TESOL International Association, 2012.

## Khóa học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành nên có nội dung chuyên sâu hay phổ quát? Tổng quan về ý kiến tranh luận xung quanh kiến thức chuyên ngành trong ESP.

Vũ Thị Thanh Nhã

*Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, ĐHQGHN,  
Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

**Tóm tắt:** Kiến thức chuyên ngành trong các khóa học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (ESP) là một vấn đề đáng lưu tâm. Tuy nhiên, hiện vẫn còn có nhiều tranh luận về mức độ kiến thức chuyên ngành nên được cho vào các khóa học ESP. Bài viết này sẽ tổng quan lại cuộc tranh luận về mức độ chuyên ngành trong ba giai đoạn phát triển của Tiếng Anh chuyên ngành từ khi ra đời năm 1960. Bài viết sẽ cung cấp cho giáo viên, người xây dựng chương trình và các nhà quản lý một cái nhìn tổng quan về lý thuyết để áp dụng vào công tác giảng dạy và nghiên cứu của mình.

*Từ khóa:* Nội dung chuyên ngành, ESP, tổng quan, xây dựng chương trình.