



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# The Post-communist Era: “the bloom” of ESP in Romania

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### Abstract

In the last 30 years since the Romanian revolution, there have been a lot of changes occurring at the level of acquiring foreign languages, especially English, trends which have grown hand in hand with the changing needs of the learners. More and more students in higher education as well as adults working for different international companies are becoming aware of the importance of learning English at a professional level so that they might become proficient speakers of the language. Thus, the present paper aims at discussing some of the important aspects of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Romania in the post-communist period. ESP has evolved a lot in our country, starting from its spread at the academic level and continuing with an increased demand on behalf of the professionals working for different international entities. Structured in five sections, the paper intends to present the background of ESP in general, focusing on the needs analysis of the learners, their motivational factors and expectations and continues with enhancing the language skills necessary for both teaching and learning ESP. A review of the materials and textbooks used throughout years is also brought into discussion in order to highlight how much the learning process has evolved. Of all the branches of ESP, special emphasis is offered to Business English as well as to Technical English and English for medical professionals. Undoubtedly, when it comes to ESP in general, the goal of any teacher/trainer is to select the proper materials which meet both the needs and expectations of their learners.

**Keywords:** *ESP; Post-Communist era; needs analysis; goals; expectations.*

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### **ESP – Background**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a branch of English as a Foreign Language, being perceived as an approach of teaching and learning a foreign language rather than an area of its own. The general knowledge of a language is the foundation of ESP since, on this root we start building the skills necessary to the future professional life of learners. ESP refers to the teaching and development of certain skills, specific to different areas of activity such as Business, Medicine, Technical Language, etc., its goal being the formation of professionals ready to work for multinational companies and perform well on the international market. To meet this goal, learners do not necessarily need to possess a high level of the general language, teachers and trainers being able to help them develop their skills based on an elementary level. As it happens to General English, students and learners start building their knowledge step by step, in time, focusing on their final target – that of being able to perform well in their future careers.

Throughout time, several definitions have been given to ESP, some simple, yet comprehensive, others developed, including a lot of elements to be taken into account. For example, Hutchinson and Waters define ESP as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987a: 19). At the same time, Anthony (2018), in the Introduction of the book, defines it as “an approach to language teaching that targets the current and/or future academic or occupational needs of learners, focuses on the necessary language, genres and skills to address these needs, and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general and/or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods” (Anthony, 2018: Introduction).

ESP has experienced a great evolution worldwide, starting with the 1960s, the reference year for its beginning, though it is quite difficult to mark a precise moment due to the lack of materials published in different parts of the world. There were journals, scientific papers or meetings in the past which are not known at the international level, therefore to mark a certain starting moment becomes a very difficult task to be achieved by researchers in the field. When it comes to its review, or the drawing of a certain type of evolution, the study conducted by Johns (2014) emphasizes specific periods worth to be mentioned: “The Early Years (1962-1981), The Recent Past (1981-1990), The Modern Era (1990-2011), and the Future (2011 plus), principally citing the articles in ESPJ as evidence, but drawing from a number of other sources as well” (Johns, 2014: 7).

At the same time, in the chapter called *The Origins of ESP*, Hutchinson and Waters mark its beginning at the end of the 1960s, identifying three main reasons for its emergence. First, they point out the year 1945, the end of the World War II, when people have experienced an “enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale. This expansion created a world unified and dominated by two forces – technology and commerce- which in their relentless progress soon generated a demand for an international language. [...] as English became the accepted international language of technology and commerce, it created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language – businessmen and -women who wanted to sell their products, mechanics who had to read instruction manuals, doctors who needed to keep up with developments in their field and a whole range of students whose course of study included textbooks and journals only available in English” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987b: 6). The second reason mentioned refers to the evolution of linguistics, where scientists and researchers have proved that a specific area of activity needs a specific language, valid for English as

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well. So, at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, it was established that language should be used in real communication which leads to the conclusion that it differs from one context to another. The last, but not the least important reason mentioned, refers to the developments in educational psychology which emphasize the learners and their attitude to learning. Thus, “Learners were seen to have different needs and interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning. This lent support to the development of courses in which 'relevance' to the learners' needs and interests was paramount” (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987c: 8).

In the case of Romania, one cannot speak about an extension of ESP at the same time with the level of Western European countries because of the political and social situation existing in our country during the communist era as well as in the first years after the Romanian Revolution in 1989. It is well known that, during the communist era, special attention was offered to foreign languages such as Russian and French, countries which were closer in relationships to our country. Russian was broadly studied in schools, especially at the secondary level, due to ideological reasons. There was an attempt of openness towards the Western culture and civilization in the late 1960s when Romania's foreign policy seemed to get closer to the democratic countries in the West but this event had no significant impact on the studying of English language in our country. Once the Revolution in 1989, Romania really shifted its attention towards the West, and so, step by step, its educational system started its curriculum reform. Specialists became aware of the need to produce highly qualified people, prepared to face the challenges of the new, democratic, western-oriented market. So, ESP gained its role both at the academic level (in university centers) as well as at the level of multinational companies which appeared all over the country. The trend went hand in hand with the need of the Romanian population to shorten the distance to the Western culture and civilization, being drawn especially by the American model. As a result, the English language has become more and more influential not only at the level of the educational system but also at the level of communication since many English words and expressions have been adopted by our native language. Once the integration of our country into the European Union, the Anglophone trend has become even more extended, making the influence of English on the Romanian language a complex process, which integrates not only linguistic but also social, cultural and commercial features. At the level of universities, once they were offered an autonomous status, they realized they needed to become competitive on the market and form future professionals in various fields of activity. ESP has become part of their study programmes, many students studying it during the first two years of faculty, others continuing the process throughout four years. Companies search for professionals in the field and, many times, the knowledge of English is a must. Therefore, especially after 2000, the acquisition of English knowledge and the improving of skills have known a real 'bloom'.

### **Learners' needs, motivations and expectations**

One of the distinctive features of ESP is the fact that it is learner-centered, that is the purpose of the teaching/training process is to meet the needs of the learners, be them students (the academic level) or adults working for different companies who need to improve their English skills in order to perform well in their careers. Long (2005) calls the language instruction of ESP a “one-size-fits-all approach” (Long, 2005: 19). Many researchers in the field were interested in students' motivations such as Gardner

(1985), Gardner and Wallace (1972), Basturkmen (2006; 2010), Nation and Macalister (2010), Huhta, Vogt, Johnson and Tulkki (2013), Brown (2016), etc. When it comes to learner's needs and how to best meet these needs, the teacher/trainer has to bear in mind that this is somehow a compulsory process which should be established from the beginning, taking into consideration the fact that these needs vary depending on age, area of study/work, the frequency of using English for communicative purposes. The needs analysis of any ESP class or group represents an essential stage when preparing to deliver such a course, since priorities are to be found and defined. The course in itself has to meet the requirements and expectations of its learners/ attendees. It has a subjective side but also an objective one which relies on questionnaires or interviews with the interested parties. The needs analysis is linked to “the core mission of preparing students to use English in their target contexts” (Hyon, 2018: 3).

ESP is considered being a general term since, according to the needs and purposes, it is divided into two main categories: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which includes different specialisations according to students' training, that is the English needed for science and technology, English for humanities or the English for social sciences, each having its own subcategories and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) which includes categories of people who work in a specific domain, like medical English or the language needed in Tourism.

Considering the latter category, “EOP may occur in different settings. It may happen in universities and training institutions or in the workplace. Needs in such settings will differ: in universities and training institutions the present-situation needs of the students will differ greatly from the target-situation needs as students are in the process of learning about the subject and need to fulfill course requirements. As the students are also likely to be pre-experienced, they will be less able to contribute to needs analysis as they have limited knowledge of the communicative situations they will experience in the workplace. In workplace ESP needs analysis can be very focused as the content field may be narrow. Typically, a workplace needs analysis involves the analysis of authentic tasks through on-site observations and ethnographic research” (Woodrow, 2018: 45).

Based on the general knowledge of the language, the teacher/trainer, having previously discussed and debated with the participants, tries to tailor the course so that it covers as much from the learners' expectations. At the same time, it becomes somehow very difficult to create a course which restricts itself to the specialisation of the participants, since, in many cases, one specific domain is part of a larger one and many topics have a common core. To be more specific, I will give the example of teaching English at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. Under this 'umbrella', we find students having different specialisations – such as the Engineering of Electro-energetic Systems, Electrical Engineering and Computers or Aviation Equipment and Installations, areas which have a common ground, yet with peculiarities for each specialisation. So, especially during the first year of study, teachers choose to work with the general terminology of electrical engineering, becoming more restrictive from the second academic year. Thus, the course suits not only the needs of the students but also their general knowledge of the subject itself.

As a result of various studies on English for Science and Technology (EST), it's been shown that “The initial interest of EST teachers and researchers was on linguistic forms, with later emphasis on skills, a more recent focus has been on disciplinary

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socialization, and most recently, a critical perspective, which considers how literacy practices express societal or disciplinary power differences” (Parkinson, 2014: 155).

Different specialisations rise different needs and expectations on behalf of the students. So, at the academic level, some students are eager to develop their language skills, being focused on the acquisition of vocabulary specific to their field of study. It's the case of the technical students. For example, students who study engineering show an interest in the technical vocabulary since their target is to easily understand instructions when reading manuals or certain texts which describe processes. They feel confident once they acquire as many technical terms and especially when they are able to make their own technical presentations. They show little motivation when it comes to language in use, since the grammatical part of the language does not appeal to them if we talk about an upper-intermediate or advanced level. They consider that the use of general English at an elementary or even pre-intermediate level is sufficient for their future careers. They are able to understand and make themselves understood once the mentioned levels are reached. Yet, no matter their specialisation, it's been proved that, during the course, students may change their needs when learning the language (Nunan, 1988; Richards, 2001; Robinson, 1991).

Unlike them, the aim of the Business students is different since, in their case, they will need a better mastering of the language in their careers. They are aware of the fact that, at their future work places they will face a lot of challenges such as attending meetings (face to face or online), speaking on the phone, participating in negotiations, etc., a variety of activities which involve a higher degree of knowledge. So, here, it's not only about the business vocabulary which they are interested in, it's also about the use of English in a variety of contexts and situations. As a result, students studying Economics seem to be motivated on improving the skills necessary to them, at the same time with acquiring the needed English knowledge.

Considering an example from EOP, a special case is that of Medicine, where, due to their specialisation, students, doctors and other stakeholders have frequent contact with documents and studies conducted in English. In this case, apart from the general knowledge needed, they focus on the specific terminology which can help them better understand the cases explained. It is well known that, nowadays, most of the specialised studies in the domain are available in English and students, doctors and all the other parts involved frequently use the language to update to the latest information or to communicate their own findings to the outer world.

At the level of companies, it is well known that after 1989, a lot of social, economic and scientific changes have occurred which have lead to a constant demand of English trainings, most of them being incorporated in the purview of ESP. On the one hand, the multinational companies present in our country need English-speaking personnel who are able to fluently communicate with their partners around the world. Then, there are the Romanian companies which also have contacts with the exterior world, be it for contracts, partnerships or simply for accessing the information available on web sources which are in English. As a result, a series of companies specialised in language training have emerged, trying to fulfill the needs of companies and their personnel. In their case, special attention is given to developing the communicative skills in the foreign language. It's been proved that it is not enough for one to possess general knowledge of the language, that is grammar, vocabulary, etc., if the person does not feel confident into expressing him/herself freely and accurately. Improving communication skills becomes, thus, the target of both the learner and the trainer.

In all the above-mentioned cases, and not only, one aspect is clear: the role of the teacher/trainer is fundamental in setting the goals and reaching the target an ESP course presupposes. On the other hand, Huckin recommends teachers not to forget their role of “language experts not technical insiders” (Huckin, 2003: 16). Based on information gathered from the learners, taking into consideration their level of English, discussing and establishing the preferred methods for teaching and learning, both parties – teacher/trainer and learners embark on a journey with a specific end – that of becoming fluent speakers/users of the language.

### **Teaching resources**

The reform of the Romanian society after the political and social changes which occurred in the period after 1989, led to a series of reconsideration of the educational system as well. The academic life changed in time due to the movements of the educational system in the European Union. Universities, and thus faculties, became autonomous so, they modified and adapted studying programmes in order to align them to the European demands. The curriculum was reformed in order to produce professionals who are able to be integrated on the international markets. According to the needs and motivations of students, each faculty has the freedom to integrate ESP in their programme, most of the faculties integrating this subject as a compulsory one during the first two years of academic studies. There are, of course, specialisations which continue the studying of ESP throughout their entire academic years since their students will use the language at a large level in their future professions. Yet, the most common pattern is that of acquiring ESP knowledge during the first two years of studying.

The features of each specialisation, together with the demands existing on the local, national and even international markets offer enough linguistic criteria for the teacher to create and work on a specific syllabus which meets the above-mentioned needs. The selected contents together with the used methodology need to be adapted to this syllabus. The teacher faces the challenge of selecting and adapting materials in the domain, rely on textbooks issued from prestigious publishing houses in the field and even work on in-house materials to provide the necessary knowledge and help students in the quest of becoming efficient users of the language. So, “Many ESP teachers have direct involvement in designing courses and materials as published courses and materials tend not to be directly relevant to the needs of their specialised groups of learners. However, studies of how ESP teachers develop such materials have been scarce” (Baştürkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018:14). The purpose is to create a vivid atmosphere in the class, to increase students' interest in this field and use, as much as possible, authentic texts and situations to ease the future integration of students on different markets. When it comes to authenticity, it is recommended to use the texts available in the specialised magazines to improve the reading skills and audio extracts from radio shows, interviews, video recordings in the field to improve their listening skills.

At the same time, “In a study by Ajideh (2009), he aimed to present the influential role of teaching methodology and learning strategies as a result of teaching and curriculum reform in his article. He intended to highlight the differences between ESP and General English study through stating that although choosing language specification and teaching content is necessary for ESP course, instruction on learning strategies which leads to autonomous learning should be considered as fundamental for ESP course” (Kashef, Pandian & Khameneh, 2013: 93).

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With regard to the present textbooks and materials on the market, one can easily observe a tremendous change in the quality of the teaching resources. First, the option of selecting textbooks from prestigious international publishing houses, such as Cambridge, Oxford or Pearson Longman, which have issued specialised materials for the studying of English for different specialisations, and secondly, the work of teachers/ body of teachers specialised in ESP who have created in-house textbooks specially adapted to the needs of the students they work with. In the past, these resources, especially the in-house ones, were rather dull, focusing on vocabulary explained into the mother-tongue, on translation from English into Romanian and vice versa, without any authentic input for the improving of listening or speaking skills. Nowadays, the textbooks offer a balanced integration of reading, listening, writing and speaking skills, all based on original input, i.e. the use of authentic materials.

Out of the numerous materials available on the market, I will pause on two examples of textbooks, of different specialisations, which represent a great extra resource to be used in class. First, in terms of Technical English, precisely English for Engineering, my attention was drawn by the Cambridge Professional English series called *Cambridge English for Engineering* (2008) which focuses a lot on the possibility of students to speak in English, through activities which request descriptions and discussions on the presented topics. Language is introduced in context, texts offer a variety of topics relevant to the field of activity while listening materials rely on authentic discussions or interviews. A lot of real-like situations are presented to the learners, pushing them into imagining the situations and making them speak on the subject.

Considering the realm of Business English, the series *Market Leader* of Pearson Longman (various editions from 2000 on), is a great example of how ESP works at different levels of knowledge. The series includes textbooks ranging from the elementary level to the advanced one. It is a blend of business vocabulary, authentic input and language focused on levels which develop all the skills necessary to the future specialist in the field. A difference needs to be mentioned in comparison to textbooks specialised in technical English. In the case of Business English, special emphasis is offered to the improvement of writing skills, since this area of Business presupposes a lot of instances where students face the challenge of dealing with written pieces such as e-mails, reports, action minutes or summaries.

A very interesting study was lead by M.<sup>a</sup> del Carmen Lario de Oñate (2007) from the University of Cadiz, Spain, referring to a number of sixty-five Business English textbooks published between 1963 and 2006, drawing attention on the evolution and organisation of textbooks throughout time. As presented in the article, textbooks have evolved in terms of formats with current complete packages for students, teachers and even self-study formats, they are designed for interactive use, being more visually appealing, with a different organisation, i.e. “starting the unit with a warm-up activity to elicit vocabulary, introduce the topic, and heighten learner awareness and interest has been gradually incorporated since the 80's being nowadays an essential section. Texts have been shortening and, frequently, draw on authentic sources chosen to motivate students with little or no exposure to the business world” ( Carmen Lario de Oñate, 2007a: 26). The study also shows the trend of current textbooks to use the practical communicative method with vocabulary presented and tested in context. Concerning content it's been observed that, apart the long-term topic of management, marketing, advertising, etc., “cultural awareness has been progressively introduced into Business

English coursebooks since the 80's. The assumption behind is that learning about other cultures, attitudes and behaviours will enable students to develop competent international careers, and this knowledge, together with the suitable linguistic competence, will prepare them to communicate effectively in the business environment” ( Carmen Lario de Oñate, 2007b: 27).

Therefore, due to the present situation worldwide, the opportunity to access international and on-line resources, the task of the teacher remains a very important aspect of the ESP course. He/she needs to select the proper materials, out of a variety of sources, materials which ease the process of language acquisition for their students. The aim remains unchanged: that of meeting the desires and needs of the learners and help them in their voyage to become professional users of English.

### **Language skills for teaching and learning ESP**

The present section does not intend to fully demonstrate the features and approaches of teaching and learning language skills of ESP, yet, due to their importance in the process, they couldn't be left overlooked. The aim of any language course, be it of General English or ESP, is to enhance the development of language skills necessary to the learners. Teachers/trainers need to identify “the specific skills the group of language learners will need” (Basturkmen, 2010: 15) and focus on those where students prove a lack of competence. One skill cannot eliminate the others in the order of importance, especially in ESP where we deal with future professionals who will use these skills all the time in their careers, all the four skills having the same importance in the formation of the individual. Productive skills (speaking and writing) as well as receptive skills (listening and reading) are intermingled during a course, of course, not in equal amounts and not at every session of training. Some courses or parts of them rely mostly on reading and speaking skills for example, while other sections offer priority to listening or writing tasks and activities. The purpose is for the teacher to try to integrate the practice of all these skills since they will be present in their future professional requirements.

At the same time, these skills are part of learning tasks and activities, which integrate them and, it is the role of the teacher to make sure that one task involving a certain skill naturally leads to another, so that learners have a smooth process in acquiring them. Tarnopolsky uses the term “naturalness of transitions from one learning tasks to the others connected with developing skills in different target language communicative activities” (Tarnopolsky, 2012: 180).

Though teaching grammar or focusing on grammar skills is not the target of an ESP course, “Where students have grammatical difficulties that interfere with the essentially productive skills of speaking and writing, or the essentially receptive skills of listening and reading, it is necessary to pay some attention to those difficulties. How much priority is paid to grammatical weakness depends on the learners' level on English and whether priority needs to be given to grammatical accuracy or to fluency in using the language” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998: 74).

Teachers have to make sure that the tasks chosen involve the practice of all essential language skills, they are graded according to the level of students and, they are motivating for the learners to try to solve. The aspect that shouldn't be forgotten is the authenticity of the input which ease the process of understanding native -like language. “[...] it is of vital importance to assist learners to 'elbow' their way through the



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disheartening experience of the 'real' language by giving them enough cues, so that the sense of achievement outstrips the sense of failure” (Georgieva, 2015:21).

### Conclusions

All in all, ESP is perceived as an approach of teaching and learning a foreign language, with a great evolution worldwide, which marked the extension on the Romanian territory after the Revolution in 1989. Once the integration of our country into the European Union, we can speak about a real 'bloom' of ESP in our country. One of the distinctive features of ESP is the fact that it is learner-centred, that is the purpose of the teaching/training process is to meet the needs of the learners, be them students (the academic level) or adults working for different companies who need to improve their English skills in order to perform well in their careers. Different specialisations rise different needs and expectations so, in order to have a successful teaching act, these are to be established from the beginning. The task of the teacher remains a very important aspect of the ESP course. He/she needs to select the proper materials, out of a variety of sources, materials which ease the process of language acquisition for their students. The aim remains unchanged: that of meeting the desires and needs of the learners and help them in their voyage to become professional users of English.

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