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The content and context for English teachers and learners in the English for specific purposes (ESP) classroom

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Abstract

English has become the first language contact that is predominantly spoken around the world. As it has evolved into language education, its use in schools has increased, especially in higher education which could go hand-to-hand with further professional development; therefore, the use of its specific purposes. The following paper acknowledges the common problems that professors experience when they face the use of English as a second/foreign language in the ESP field; the focus is on teacher education and the capacity of keeping themselves up to date with current and the newest information needed to produce effective lessons. Experts on the topics were tried and successfully contacted through e-mail in September 2021. Such emails say that teachers do not need to be experts on the topic, but to become experts as they go and not necessarily have a previous background in the field.

Keywords: *specific purpose, higher education, approach, previous knowledge, experience, context, and content.*

El contenido y el contexto para los profesores y estudiantes de inglés en el aula de inglés para propósitos específicos (ESP)

Resumen

El inglés se ha convertido en el primer y el lenguaje más hablado y usado para comunicarse en el mundo. Debido a su evolución educativa, su uso en escuelas ha incrementado, especialmente en la educación superior que va de la mano con el desarrollo profesional; y así pues, su uso con fines específicos. El siguiente artículo enfatiza los problemas comunes en torno a la experiencia de las y los maestros cuando se enfrentan al uso del inglés como segunda lengua o extranjera en Inglés con Fines Específicos (IFE por sus siglas en español); el enfoque se basa en la educación de maestros y la capacidad de adaptar la nueva información para clases efectivas. Expertos fueron contactados vía correo electrónico durante septiembre de 2021, donde aclaran que no se necesita ser experto, si no convertirse en uno con el tiempo.

Palabras clave: *propósito específico, educación superior, método, conocimiento previo, experiencia, contexto y contenido.*

Research synthesis

Most English teaching situations have English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) purpose; this means that people want to learn English to be able to communicate with other speakers or learners, whether they use it as their foreign or second language. However, some non-native speakers will utilize English as a resource to communicate in various ways. Some people use it for politics or governmental meetings, to arrange and agree on deals towards culture, sports, nature, and even arts. In the case of higher education students, they make use of English within their professional or academic field as they want to learn it for specific purposes. There are different definitions of English for Specific Purposes (ESP); For example, Paltridge and Starfield (2013) say that it “refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain” (p. 2), which emphasizes the idea that learners have a specific purpose for using the language in context. In the following text, I will be exploring different aspects that teachers and learners must know when giving and taking ESP classes. Some of these characteristics, and the most important ones according to many experts, must deal with the content and context of the curriculum. Nevertheless, we must also consider the experience and previous knowledge of the teacher and the students, whether the teachers are qualified to teach ESP for the purpose that the students are looking for or if the schemata (previous knowledge of the language) of the students is strong enough to successfully use the language in context and relate it with day-to-day academic or professional conversations.

Even though ESP made its early appearance in the last century, it has not been until the past decades that this approach has been studied thoroughly. In recent years, many sources and authors give and share their definitions and the characteristics to be considered in teaching ESP. To support these ideas (which are the teachers’ approach and preparation in the classroom), there are plenty of research authors whose investigations have been helpful in the process of developing a general idea of the problem of study. As part of this research, some of the experts in ESP such as Brian Paltridge and Helen Basturkmen have been contacted to give further explanation to questions, I had regarding the preparation and application of ESP classes within a medical context: ESP course for Medicine Mexican students; nevertheless, I will also focus on a more general overview of ESP. Some of the most influential and significant articles and papers will be mentioned throughout the text, as well as references and the responses received by the experts.

Problem of study

I would like to give one more definition of ESP. Helen Basturkmen is an applied To start with, linguistics researcher who has also dedicated some of her work and investigation to ESP. In her book, *Developing Courses in English for Specific Purposes* (2010) she says that “ESP courses are narrower in focus than ELT courses – ‘tasks prescribed by their work or study situation, narrowing down the spectrum, and a narrower range of topics” (p. 3); in other words, what she describes are specific tasks, content, and context based on the topics of the course. Therefore, learners must develop actions, and activities, and be placed in situations in which they will be asked to use their English knowledge in their work or educational environment. It is important to mention that ESP has little to no relationship with the personal needs or general interest of the students in the English language.

One of the first investigations found was by Wang Aiguo (2008). In his paper *Reassessing the position of Aviation English: from a special language to English for Specific Purposes*, the author states that ESP is the best way for teachers and students to be fully developed professionally in their education or work. However, he also states that even though ESP has a focus on certain topics and things to be seen during the course; for example, in the Aviation English Course there are branches in which ESP can take its approach: a) Aviation English (such as RTFE) for occupational purposes b) Aviation English for general use and c) Aviation English for language skills and linguistic study. As we can see, there are more possible reasons for which an aviator may use English. Wang says that there are internal and external factors that bring variables in the learning (besides the purpose of the learners) and that a content-based curriculum is the best approach to be used.

In a similar study, Jane Lockwood presents her article titled *Developing an English for specific purpose curriculum for Asian call* (2012) in which she emphasizes the uses of applied linguistics in the communication between non-native speakers and native speakers of the English language. During her investigation, she noticed that cultural differences affected how people interacted. The employees had to follow a script in every conversation. Because of the lack of freedom in communication, she says that most of the phone calls turned out unsatisfactorily. Therefore, she emphasizes that ESP must follow a communicative curriculum, and this should be based on cultural context as well as on content.

To continue with the discussion and get closer to the actual “problem” of ESP, The article *Developing Courses in English for Specific Purposes* (2012) by Jesús García Laborda is presented. The author narrates the importance of the student's needs, and as mentioned previously, the students have little to no interest in learning English for personal purposes, but they need to be focused on a more academic and professional environment; as a result, when planning their lessons, teachers must consider the needs analysis, investigation of specialist discourse, and curriculum planning. Donald Freeman, Anne Katz, Pablo Garcia Gomez, and Anne Burns wrote the article *English-for-Teaching: rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom* (2015) which mentions that the English to be taught need to fit the needs of the learners. The authors emphasized that managing the classroom, understanding, and communicating lesson content, assessing students, and giving feedback need to be included in the planning of the course.

It is noticeable that every professional who faces ESP needs to have all the previous knowledge to know how to come up with successful classes that will help the students fulfill their needs according to learning English purpose. As a result, the “problem” we face is that sometimes teachers and learners do not know how to approach their purpose of learning or even how to apply it in the classroom. In addition, the knowledge a professor has regarding the professional or academic field is most of the time limited. How can teachers teach something they are not experts in? For example, Are English teachers capable of teaching vocabulary or grammar topics used in all contexts of ESP? We also need to focus on the students since they are the ones who will be benefited. Students, who have barely any knowledge of the English language, do they have to be taught grammar, functions of the language, and vocabulary words from the beginning? Or do they learn them as they use them in their professional or academic learning? As you can see there are many questions about the topic.

Research questions

When we talk about ESP, many authors agree on the fact that the curriculum should be based on the context and content of the purpose of the class. Tollefson (2011) states that “Cognitive approaches to ideology [...] are best exemplified by van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach, in which a major concern is “social knowledge,” particularly social representations of individuals or groups” (p. 802) meaning that the approach to be followed when developing courses for a specific purpose should have a cognitive focus. Tollefson brings up the nature of the learning; students must base their acquisition on beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes the language has to offer, especially if that is the main objective.

As the research continued, the paper *Research in English for Specific Purposes* by Brian Paltridge and Sue Starfield (2011) was located. These authors talk about certain factors that need to be considered at the moment of developing an ESP curriculum. One of the questions that we usually have is what are the factors (besides context and content) that affect the making of a successful lesson in this area. They mentioned gender, class, race, and power relationships, which are tightly connected to the curriculum. Such factors have little to no repercussions in the making of the lessons; however, the material that can be asked for students to bring, such as books, extra papers, (in the case of medicine) medical gowns, surgical tools, etc. The equipment that could be required tends to be expensive or difficult to bring to the class, which makes it difficult for the direct practice that students can have in the L2 (second language).

Basturkmen (2010) asks the following question that seems to be an enigma to all ESP teachers: “Is there evidence to show that it is effective enough to warrant the time and energy needed to set up a course?” (p. 9), which emphasizes the need to research when creating ESP courses. Some say that it is more difficult and time-consuming than regular EFL or ESL lessons. Basturkmen (2010) says that “the materials presented the students with complex information/ideas communicated through the second language. The students thus acquired information through sophisticated linguistic input and this helped them move to more advanced levels of language processing” (p.10). This confirms that the content material leads students to a better understanding of the language; moreover, students will be able to take what they learn in the ESP classroom and apply it to either their professional or academic context.

The curriculum of an ESP course must be specific and targeted to the audience. In her paper,

Needs Analysis and Curriculum Development in ESP, Flowerdew (2013) says that it is “followed by curriculum design, materials selection, methodology, assessment, and evaluation” (p. 325), which encourages teachers to make use of the adequate criteria to create their curriculums. This was not always like this. According to this author, before the 1970s, it was believed that the curriculum design of any given class was dependent on the perspective of the teacher; however, several studies from the 70s showed that the classes needed to have a structure to best reach the intake of students: this was known as the *Target Situation Analysis (TSA)*. This concept was first brought by the Council of Europe, which presented specific and targeted situations to foreign employees who needed to apply the language in their jobs. It was not until 1976 that Wilkins proposed a ‘notional-functional’ approach based on communication, focused on needs and competence; as a result, this focused on a skill-based approach.

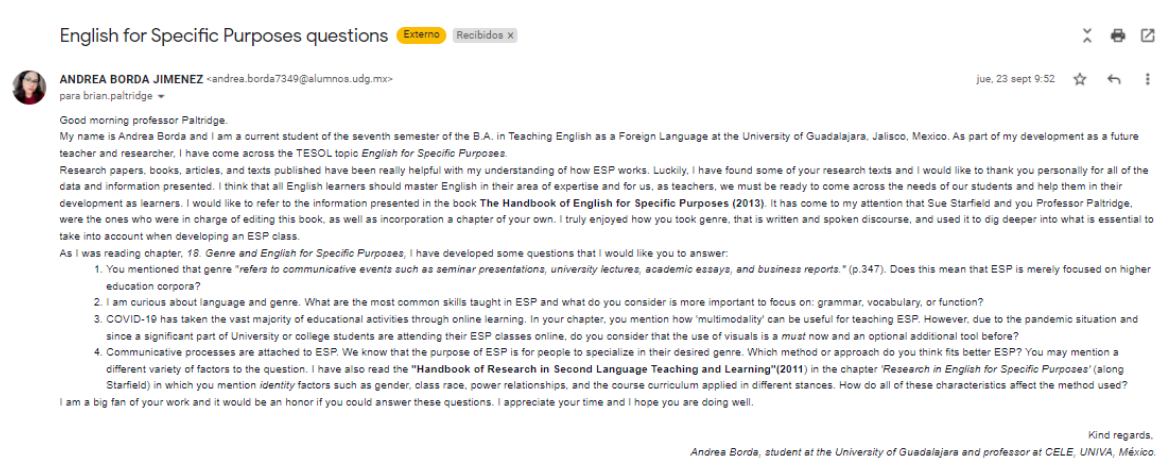
Starfield (2013) writes about traditions as part of the ESP environment. However, many characteristics relate directly to traditions and values. For instance, Starfield states the fact that pragmatics should be placed rather than critical orientation, as a result, ESP lessons must be based on a communicative approach that will give the students the necessary knowledge about culture in their academic or professional context. Nevertheless, when we talk about traditions, some questions such as a) tradition of the language b) traditions of the teachers/learners and c) traditions of the academic and professional field, arise as we try to figure out how to combine them to make them fit in a successful curriculum. Some other characteristics go beyond the specific purpose of the study and go directly with the culture of the language. Is English taught in America, Britain, or Canada? Is it from a specific region, state, or population? There are many factors to consider here.

Now, leaving aside the cultural factors of an ESP environment, the goal of this research is to discover the teachers’ education related to the ESP classroom. How much does the teacher need to know about the specific purpose they are teaching? How about vocabulary? Grammar in context? Function? Descriptive or prescriptive language? Use? These are some of the questions that this paper tries to answer to develop a successful and efficient ESP course. To dig more into these research questions, in her paper *Teacher Education and Teacher Development* (2011), Tsuru mentions how in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, many types of research were conducted due to the inquiry of teachers teaching more than general SLA, but a theory that implies that educators can also implement a purpose (academical or professional) to their context and

content. Tsuru (2011) bases her explanation on the theory of Freeman and Johnson; she says, “it entails an understanding of not only what teachers need to know to be effective but also teachers’ conceptions and beliefs about teaching, their learning processes, their contexts of teaching, and their pedagogical practices” (p. 23) where we consider the ‘what, who, where, when, and how to teach it.

To talk about content and context, genre is one of the many characteristics that influence the development of a successful ESP class. One of the experts in this field, Paltridge (2013) in his article *Genre and English for Specific Purposes* says that it “refers to communicative events such as seminar presentations, university lectures, academic essays, and business reports” (p. 347). We have pre-established the merely and surely purpose that ESP can be only considered for higher levels of education. He also states that genre has some relationship with language and that ‘multimodality’ could be useful in the ESP classroom.

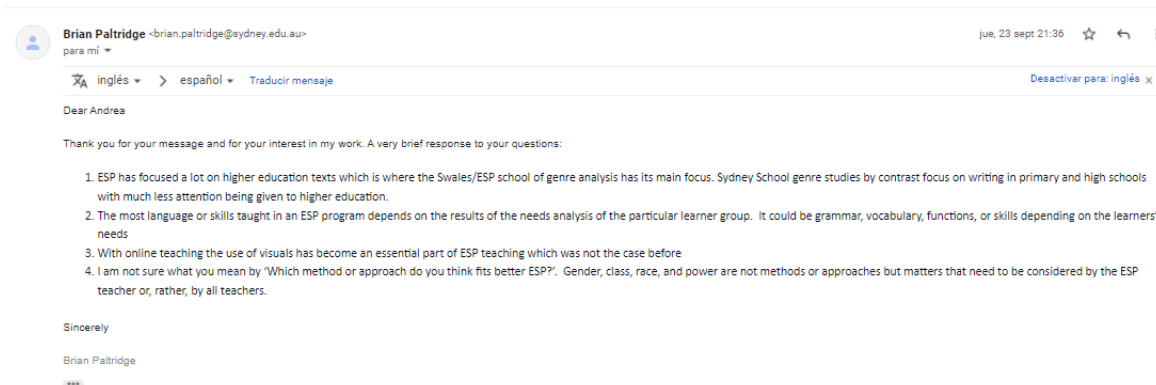
Figure 1
Email to Brian Paltridge



In Figure 1, you can observe the questions that arose as I investigated more about the genre in the ESP setup environment. Fortunately, Professor Paltridge had the opportunity to answer some of my concerns regarding the previous topics mentioned about genre. In Figure 2, Paltridge (2021) confirms that we can surely see ESP texts dedicated to higher education. Such education can go from university to college to professional field development. As a result, ESP can be seen as an approach focused on these institutions; on the other hand, it would not be the best approach

for elementary or high schools. Then, he mentions the analysis of the ESP classroom and the outcomes that can come from it when teachers base their teaching on either grammar, vocabulary, or function (always focused on context and content) to meet the need of the purpose. Finally, he recognizes the functionality of multimodality in the online teaching of ESP as in the current situation of the year 2021, where the pandemic of COVID-19 affected how we learned and taught. Currently, there are many websites, applications, and platforms that offer additional and useful information not only to work but to provide data for the students' activities. His co-writer, Sue Starfield, was also contacted to answer the same questions asked to Paltridge; however, a response was not received. Nonetheless, the input provided by professor Paltridge was helpful and sufficient to solve the questions presented.

Figure 2
Email response from Brian Paltridge



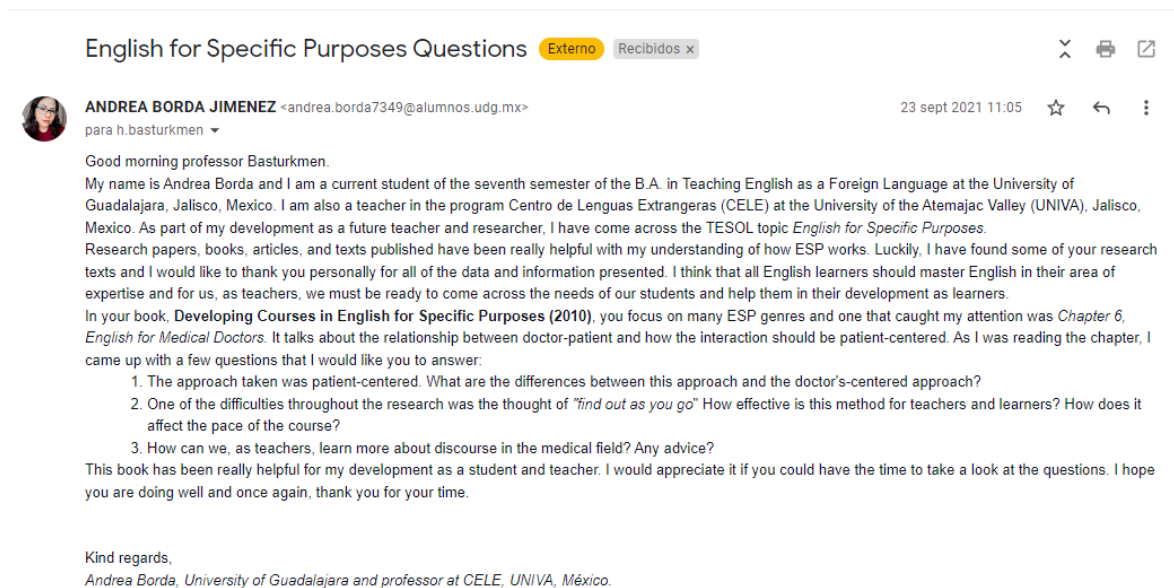
As it has been stated for the last couple of decades, ESP can be applied to any academic or professional context. There is a wide range of categories that this methodology can cover, from ESP to chefs, aviation, architecture, and business, to nursing and medical purposes. In the article *English for Medical Purposes* (2013), Ferguson highlights the importance of communication (and communicative approach) that medical staff must follow when interacting with a patient; as a matter of fact, he claims to be the main purpose of ESP, which will be the successful interaction between doctor and patient. Ferguson says that there are two types of literature within the medical field. The first one is relevant literature on English for medical purposes (EMP), which focused on improving non-Anglophone health professionals. The second relevant EMP category, the author mentions, is literature on health care communication, centered on doctor-patient communication (p. 243) in which the first one is based on the development of knowledge of

English medical terminology. As for the second one, the literature provides a prospect of communicative interaction between patient-doctor.

As one of my biggest concerns has been addressed by Ferguson, many categories can go within one single purpose of the English language. Mainly, learning and acquisition should be based on sociology and the linguistic point of view (e.g., conversation analysis, micro-ethnography, and interactional sociolinguistics). Here, we can agree that the goal of the teachers is to prepare the students to interact with patients and to be able to explain themselves in the professional field of medicine in English. Things to be considered when developing a medical interaction are the following: “the role, form, and frequency of questions [...] there has also been considerable interest in the areas of the delivery of diagnoses [...], patient, and doctor narratives, and, more recently, oral examinations for medical institutions” (Ferguson, 2013, p. 244), the interaction of question-and-answer between doctor and patient, narratives and oral examinations are the main characteristics that summarize what is expected by the end of a course.

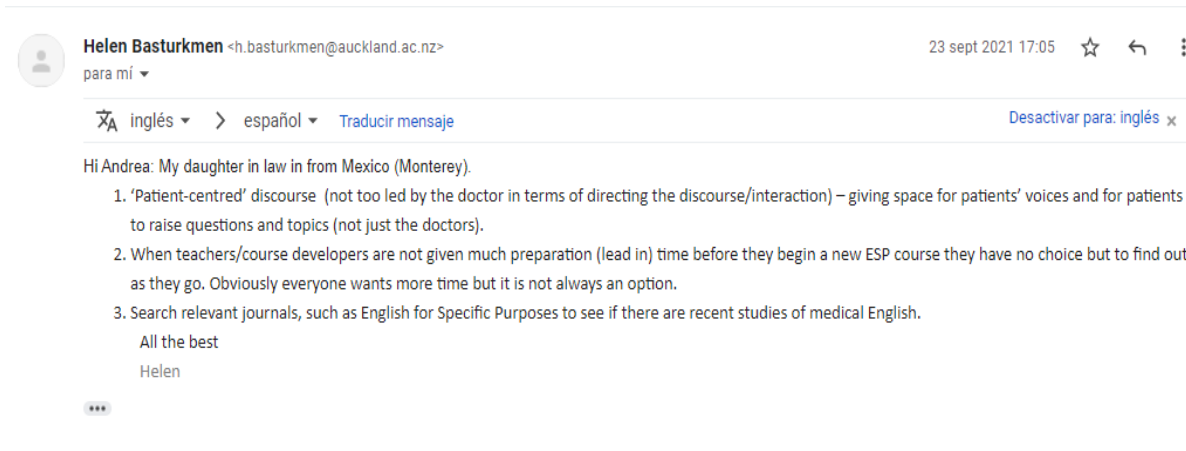
To verify these ideas, we checked Helen Basturkmen who has investigated some of these ideas in the article *English for Medical Doctors* (2010) for which I contacted her to answer some of the questions regarding the preparation and approaches/methods to be used by ESP teachers in the medical field. One of the many approaches she explains is patient-centered and doctor-centered. She also mentions that teachers learning the ESP should be *as they go* (H. Basturkmen, personal communication, September 23, 2021), meaning that there is no required guideline to follow when teaching English to medical doctors. All these concerns were addressed as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Email to Helen Basturkmen



Professor Basturkmen replied to such concerns and clarified that the patient-centered approach should be the one mainly taught in the classroom; as a result, doctors will be more qualified to focus their attention on the patient, rather than on themselves. Although the students are the focus of the class, they are expected to take that knowledge outside the classroom and apply it in their professional context. Basturkmen says, as seen in Figure 4, that unfortunately, teachers who face themselves with the opportunity to teach an ESP class have not always the needed time to prepare themselves fully for the course. The curriculum must be specific and focus on the context and content and the teachers need to adapt each class according to the framework, method, or approach to be followed. Therefore, she recommends finding new approaches, methods, activities, techniques, and ways to keep improving in the development of teaching English for a specific purpose. That is her proposal for teaching. Finally, she suggests the use of medical journals and constant consultation of research on ESP in the medical field to continue learning as teachers of ESP. Sue and Brian Paltridge also agreed on the use of digital resources to improve and use the information that students need for their learning and emphasized that this material must be realistic and as updated as possible to get the best possible results.

Figure 4
Response from Helen Basturkmen



Finally, Belcher says in *The Future of ESP Research: Resources for Access and Choice* (2013) that those interested in the ESP approach for English language teaching, mostly value the construal of the learner; this covers its centeredness, commitment to the learner's needs in context or target situations (p. 535) which states that as per usual, English teachers do not only teach a language but all its culture, used in context seen from a pedagogical view, discourse, approach in communication, etc. Belcher encourages teachers to do more research (just as Basturkmen) because we (as teachers) will be our main source of investigation and sources to look for ways to improve and understand better the ESP teaching methodology. One of the many suggestions authors have enhanced is the use of written, spoken, and digital resources in discourse. One of the research questions asked is: what are the materials that will facilitate the teachers' and students' use? According to the authors discussed, the use of research done by ESP experts, actual conversations in the professional fields, different approaches, and methodology will be essential to start working on the development of successful and prepared ESP teachers.

Future development

In conclusion, the answer to the questions has been addressed with general and specific answers. Based on the deep investigation that has been done, the answers to the research questions are clearer now. For instance:

- *how can teachers teach something they are not experts in? If an English teacher has minimum experience*

in the medical or nursing environment, is he or she capable of imparting vocabulary or grammar topics used in a certain context? The answer is yes. As suggested by many experts of ESP, this is an approach that cannot be fully studied at a certain time or even follow the same patterns every time. There are always new techniques, methodologies, and approaches teachers can use with their students to test how good or bad they fit into their learning. As for the knowledge of the teacher, this will be dependent not on how much they know, but on how they teach it and all the tools they use to successfully get to the students' purpose of learning. We have seen that the best approach to teaching ESP, in the case of English for medical doctors and medical purposes, is to consider different factors. Nevertheless, this teaching should be based on a communicative outcome. It is stated that the main reason why students wish to learn ESP for medical purposes is to be able to communicate with patients.

- *students, who have barely any knowledge of the English language, do they have to be taught since the beginning grammar, function, and vocabulary words? Or do they learn as they use them in their professional or academic learning?* The answer depends on the approach teachers use (the best one being patient-centered) and that this approach should always lead to successful communication between speakers. All of the extra vocabulary and 'fancy' words can be seen as a 'plus' in learning.

English for specific purposes has many advantages in higher education and it has been said to become the best approach within professional and academic education and teaching. Some of the questions that some can have about ESP are the following: what is the benefit and how can ESP be applied to the English classroom? ESP is mainly focused on the learning of English for a higher educational or professional purpose. As previously stated, most of the ESP courses are taken by students who are dealing with a professional career and are required to speak a second language (English in this case); moreover, English will not be seen as a second or foreign language, but as an opportunity for speakers to communicate efficiently in an English environment. On the other hand, ESP has a disadvantage that not many people are happy with. As an example, most researchers and teachers of ESP in the classroom agree that this approach should only be used after a certain age or academic level. This means that younger learners cannot fit into the category of this approach. If we take a group of kids and teenagers, there is little to no purpose in teaching

them something specific when they are not sure where they want to use the language. Younger students and adult learners who want to learn English usually do it to have a second or foreign language in their life; on the contrary, older students who look for an English course, do it for an academic and professional purpose that will open educational and job opportunities. It is important to highlight the fact that students who look forward to learning English, have no personal interest in the language, rather as an obligation or a development opportunity. Lastly, ESP has been considered the most successful approach in higher education English learning. In such a way, students can focus on what they need to learn and how to use it for further use. It is also well known that a bilingual/multilingual person has a wider field to develop personally and professionally; changes and offers seem to come easier to them.

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