

College of Education for Humanities

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## *Section 2 Course design*

**ESP** is an approach to teaching that focuses on meeting the needs of specific learners. Because of this focus, course design is a major and essential part of an ESP teacher's job, whereas teachers in General English often rely on pre-set textbooks or government rules. Designing a course is essentially about asking a wide range of questions—using research, a teacher's experience, and theory—to create a logical foundation for syllabuses, materials, teaching, and evaluation. These questions are the following:

- **Why** does the student need to learn?
- **Who** is involved? (The students, teachers, and sponsors)
- **Where** will the learning happen? (The benefits or limits of that location)
- **When** will it take place, and how is the time scheduled?
- **What** does the student need to learn? (The topics and the level of skill required)
- **How** will the learning be achieved? (The methods used to teach)

These questions are grouped into three main areas that depend on one another: *Needs Analysis* (Who, Why, Where, When), *Language Descriptions* (What), and *Learning Theories* (How).

## **4. Language descriptions**

In ESP, teachers use various ideas about the nature of language to design their courses. These ideas come from six main stages of development in linguistics.

### **1. Classical or Traditional Grammar**

This approach, rooted in the study of Greek and Latin, describes language by the grammatical role of each word in a sentence. While modern English relies on word order rather than the inflections (word endings) used in classical languages, this method is still a useful source for teachers. It provides the standard terminology used in syllabus design and register analysis to talk about how language works.

## 2. Structural Linguistics

Structuralism started in 1930s and was associated with linguists such as Bloomfield (1935). Also known as the "slot and filler" method, this view sees language as a collection of *syntagmatic structures* which carry the fundamental propositions (statement, interrogative, negative, imperative etc.) and notions (time, number, gender, etc.). This led to the use of *substitution tables*, where students practice patterns by swapping words within a fixed framework.

This approach created the *structural syllabus*, which organizes lessons so that simple structures come before complex ones. While this helps students learn the generative core of a language (the basic rules needed to create many sentences), it often fails to teach how to use those structures to actually communicate in real-life situations.

## 3. Transformational Generative (TG) Grammar

Noam Chomsky (1957) argued that structuralism was too superficial because it only looked at the surface structure of a sentence. He proposed that language reflects human thought through a deep level of meaning. The most important lesson for ESP here is the distinction between **performance** (what people actually say or do with language) and **competence** (the underlying rules and knowledge that allow them to do it). ESP should focus on the competence required to handle the specific performance repertoire of a student's target situation (e.g., job or study field).

## 4. Language Variation and Register Analysis

This stage recognizes that language changes based on the context of use, such as the difference between a spoken demonstration and a written workshop manual (a workshop manual is more formal and consistent). Register analysis tried to identify specific language patterns for fields like science or business to help build syllabuses. However, researchers eventually found that "Scientific English" does not have its own unique grammar; it simply uses certain common forms, like the passive voice, more frequently than other types of English.

## **5. Functional/Notional Grammar**

**Functions** are social behaviours or intentions, such as advising, warning, or describing.

**Notions** are the mental categories into which we divide reality, like time, location, and quantity.

ESP often uses a functional syllabus because many students already know basic grammar from school and need to learn how to use that knowledge for specific tasks, like "hiring a car" or "ordering a meal". While these syllabuses can lack a clear framework, a better approach views structure and function as complementary, using the formula: *structure + context = function*.

## **6. Discourse (Rhetorical) Analysis**

This development shifted the focus from single sentences to how meaning is created between sentences. A sentence's meaning is determined by two factors:

- a) the sociolinguistic context (who is talking and why).
- b) its discoursal meaning (its position relative to other sentences). In ESP, this is used to teach the stages of specific transactions, like a bank consultation, or to help students become better readers through text-diagramming (e.g., tree diagrams, etc).

# **5. Theories of Learning**

To properly design language courses, the starting point must be an understanding of how people learn. Historically, ESP has focused too much on analysing the language itself, but the key to successful teaching and learning lies in understanding the structure and processes of how the mind observes, organizes, and stores information. By looking at the main developments in learning theory, we can better relate them to the needs of the ESP learner.

## **1. Behaviourism: learning as habit formation**

The first coherent theory of learning was behaviourism, which views learning as a mechanical process of habit formation achieved through the frequent reinforcement of a

stimulus-response sequence. This theory provided the theoretical foundation for the Audiolingual Method, which emphasized that frequent repetition is essential.

The primary exercise technique for this methodology is pattern practice, often in the form of language laboratory drills. While these drills are only one part of the whole learning process, they still have a useful role to play in modern methodology.

## **2. Mentalism: thinking as rule-governed activity**

As a challenge to behaviourism, mentalism emerged with the argument that thinking is a rule-governed activity. Noam Chomsky dismissed the behaviourist idea of "generalization" as unworkable because it could not explain how a mind with a finite range of experience could cope with an infinite range of novel situations. He concluded that a small, finite set of rules enables the mind to deal with these potentially infinite experiences. From this perspective, learning consists of acquiring rules by using individual experiences to formulate a hypothesis, which is then tested and modified to find the underlying pattern or system.

## **3. Cognitive Code: learners as thinking beings**

The view that thinking is a rule-governed activity led to the cognitive code view, which portrays the learner not as a passive receiver, but as an active processor of information.

The basic teaching technique here is the problem-solving task, which in ESP is often modelled on the learner's subject specialism. For example, a biology task might ask students to read a passage on heat transfer and then explain why humming-birds are only found in hot countries. More recently, the cognitive view of learning has had a significant impact on ESP through the development of courses to teach reading strategies. A number of ESP projects have concentrated on making students aware of their reading strategies so that they can consciously apply them to understanding texts in a foreign language.

## **4. The affective factor: learners as emotional beings**

People think, but they also have feelings, this introduces the affective factor. Learning a language is an emotional experience, and a learner's feelings toward the process can determine success or failure. A positive learning cycle occurs when an enjoyable experience leads to increased motivation, which in turn helps the learner apply their cognitive powers. Motivation is often divided into:

**a) Instrumental motivation** is the reflection of an external need. The learners are not learning a language because they want to but rather because they need to such as for selling products to a speaker of that language.

**b) integrative motivation** derives from a desire on the part of the learners to be members of the speech community that uses a particular language. It is an internally generated *want* rather than an externally imposed *need*.

In ESP, it is often wrongly assumed that simple relevance, like giving medical texts to a doctor, is enough to motivate a student. In reality, the material must also be intrinsically motivating through fun, creativity, and a sense of achievement.

## **5. Learning and acquisition**

A good ESP course should try to exploit both **learning** (a conscious process) and **acquisition** (an unconscious process).

## **6. A model for learning**

In the light of the ideas we have discussed we will now present a model of the learning process. This model provides a practical reference for the ESP teacher and course designer by visualizing the mind as a network of connections, similar to a road map. In this network:

- a)** Individual items of knowledge have little meaning in isolation. They only acquire importance when connected to the network of existing knowledge.
- b)** New connections cannot be built in a vacuum; the existing network is what makes it possible for the learner to acquire new items.

- c) Not all knowledge is equal. Learning a generative rule is like building a bridge or tunnel, it takes more effort but allows the learner to progress in leaps and bounds. For a long time, it might appear that little progress is being made; then suddenly the learner makes an enormous leap to a higher level of competence.
- d) Learning is not haphazard. A learner makes better progress by planning how to overcome specific learning obstacles.
- e) Language is a system. If a learner perceives it as a system rather than a set of arbitrary and changing obstacles, the process of learning becomes much easier.
- f) In ESP, a need to learn is often assumed, but need alone is not enough. Successful communication links require the learner to be motivated to make the journey and, most importantly, to enjoy the process of acquisition.