

What is English for Specific Purposes, and how is it different to General English?

Transcript



Episode transcript

The transcript highlights words that are classified under different CEFR levels

CEFR B2 words are highlighted in **yellow**.

CEFR C1 words are highlighted in **green**.

CEFR C2 words are highlighted in **blue**.

Further information about the underlined words can be found in the show notes.

Transcript

Introduction and discussion

We'am: Hello and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council – Series Two

Chris: A podcast where we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked to English teachers around the world.

We'am: We are your **hosts** – We'am Hamdan

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In the first part of each episode we hear from a British Council project programme or **publication** about something which is being done to address this issue.

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We'am: Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide **additional** information, a glossary of keywords and links to **relevant** websites.

Sting: This is episode eight. What is English for Specific Purposes, and how is it different from General English?

We'am: Welcome to Episode Eight of Teaching English podcast and in this episode we will talk about what is English for Specific Purposes, and how is it different from General English. Would you be able to answer this question, Chris?

Chris: The thing that really struck me in **researching** this episode is just how big the field of English for Specific Purposes are. There's the main areas which we may know about: things like English for law, business English, English for oil, gas and petrochemicals, that sort of thing. Then there's less well-known areas like English for tourism, environmental English, English for fashion, and then English for Specific Purposes really **aimed at** particular jobs. So things like English for waiters, English for air traffic controllers, or English for engineers. So it was really interesting because I think ESP covers so much ground and it's really almost an indicator of where the English language ecosystem is at.

We'am: And to learn more about English for Specific Purposes. We will talk to Viviana Cortes, editor-in-chief for English for Specific Purposes Journal.

Chris: So Viviana for our listeners who may be unfamiliar with the term English for Specific Purposes. Could you say a little about what it is?

Viviana: Whenever there is a need, okay, there is going to be a reason for a specific curriculum. And it's not only ESP these days it's language for specific purposes. And in fact, the idea is that ESP is an approach to language teaching that targets the needs of the learners. It centres on the language and skills necessary to meet those needs. So English for Specific Purposes, still has the needs analysis as the essence of the curriculum design, but I also believe that ESP has evolved and nowadays, even though the needs continue to be essential and guide the curriculum design, many stakeholders contribute.

We'am: As you said, many stakeholders are being involved in the development of English for Specific Purposes. Are there any disadvantages of that, of including maybe non-educators in the design and development of these products?

Viviana: You include as many stakeholders as possible because when you triangulate data from different sources you get better results. Before you start designing or while you are designing. And sometimes, let's be realistic, you design while you are teaching, because I mean sometimes you have to design your needs analysis and implement it in the first week of classes. I also believe that something that is very important in ESP is that there is a continuous evaluation of the course, of the programme.

Chris: Do you think, Viviana that ESP compared to General English is perhaps a bit more dynamic because it has to respond to those changes, whether it's in medical English, aviation English, Legal English, whatever it may be, that it is function focussed?

Viviana: It is absolutely more function focussed because you have these needs that need to be met in many cases in a fixed period of time

Chris: and could you, perhaps Viviana, just outline some of the sort of general fields within ESP?

Viviana: Oh, yeah, I mean, if there is a need, there is going to be a context to explore okay, so, of course, we always think of English for Academic Purposes and English for occupational and professional purposes. We can think of medical English, Legal English, English for nurses, English for tourism.

Chris: Could you say a little bit Viviana maybe about the different pedagogical approaches that might be used within these different fields because on the one hand, you've got English for Islamic Studies, English for the police, English for energy. Is there a universal pedagogical approach that's used or is there very much a difference between those different areas?

Viviana: I believe that the materials are usually **authentic** materials that come from the area, from the **context** and the techniques and teaching **procedures** usually **imitate** activities that are performed in those **contexts**.

We'am: What do you advise learners who are not sure whether to learn General English or English for Specific Purposes?

Viviana: I think that many learners don't know what English just for specific purposes is, okay. I think that it's usually the other way around. It's like an **administrator** or a curriculum designer or an instructor that is called because there is a need, that is a group of learners, that need this particular skill or this particular purpose. But I think that when a learner has a very specific need for their English, that is when the ESP has to come into play.

Chris: And do you see it growing into the future, ESP, with certainly through online courses, and so on, and perhaps through things like what we've learned after the COVID pandemic, and so on, the importance of **medical** English or **medical** other language as well in the **interaction** between those different languages to understand the different terms or how they translate differently and all these sorts of things. I mean, do you see the field is a **fluid** one, is a changing one or one that will increase into the future?

Viviana: The first thing that we see these days is that there is much more interest in speaking it because now it's much easier to collect **data**, to collect the spoken **data** and **analyse** spoken **data**. So you can **identify** trends in spoken registers that then you can transfer to the classroom. And there's a lot of interest in for example, **oral** presentations in academics to prepare for those, but also **service encounters**, so then there's more opportunity to **analyse** those genres, and so that can transfer into materials and teaching practices. Also the study of English as a lingua franca in areas that are not Business English. Because Business English has been looking at English as a lingua franca for a long time, particularly if we think of **contexts** in which English didn't used to play a **dominant** role. For example, the role of English in Polish universities these days, or for example, the need of francophone doctors to use English for conferences, conference travel but also for doctor-patient **interaction**, in cases in which English is the lingua franca.

Chris: And again, things like that becoming even more niche.

Viviana: Absolutely, because I mean, it's not like one size fits all. In ESP, the S is the specificity. The **context** is going to be very important and it's going to call for tailor-made curricula.

Chris: I guess things like web 3.0 and things like that are gonna help to **facilitate** that **potentially** as well

Viviana: I think so but I can see that in the future. Another thing that is having a lot of attention these days, is multimodal discourse analysis, also how to **exploit** social **media** in ESP. We have seen a couple of recent articles on the use of Twitter, for English for Specific Purposes in different areas. So that is also part of the new trend.

We'am: Sometimes it can be a **response** to a **crisis** in a country, for example, unemployment for youth, the British Council created a course called English for Digital Freelancers to **enable** young people to find jobs on digital platforms

Viviana: Because they **identified** the need okay, so that's the most important thing. I think that, I'm going to tell you something that sounds a bit silly, but I think that we do **needs analysis** for absolutely everything that we do in our lives. Okay, so it's like, we if we want to go grocery shopping you do like a shopping list. That's your needs **analysis**. So I really don't understand how English language programmes do not base their curriculum design on needs **analysis**, okay. So I think that it doesn't matter if it's specific or general. There should be a needs **analysis** that considers the stakeholders and the needs of the students.

Chris: Viviana, do you think then that there will be a turn away from **global** coursebooks, international exams like TOEFL or IELTS and so on those sort of very general approach...

Viviana: Of course, those standardised tests don't meet the needs for **assessment** in ESP. But **assessment** in ESP is always a topic of discussion, because it's like an **ongoing** discussion, how we can better **assess** the English in the **workplace**. And there are many good examples, okay, but it's **troublesome**, where is the line between **content** and language? And we have been discussing that for a long, long time. And I don't think that is like a **definite** answer for that. I think that both things need to be considered at the same time. So I think that the standardised tests are here to stay, they are not going to leave and unfortunately, I can see a lot of **ignorance** in many **administrations**, in which they really don't **reflect** on the fact what those tests are really testing.

We'am: So what different pathways are there for English teachers who are interested in working in more **specialist** fields?

Viviana: I think that the first thing that teachers need to become acquainted with is the **process** of curriculum design and the different **elements** of the language curriculum, particularly become very well acquainted with needs **analysis**. So how to design a needs **analysis** and how to **implement** a needs **analysis**, because once you do that and you see how easy it is to go from those results to the design of goals, **objectives** and learning **outcomes**, for your specific **context**, then you'll realise that it makes a lot of sense okay to follow that **procedure**. When working on a very specialised **context**, I think that it's **fundamental**, it's essential to get in touch with a **specialist** in the area, a **professional** in the area, workers in the area because these can become informants for your, the design of your curriculum at all levels of the curriculum, from the needs **analysis** to deciding on the materials or how you are going to teach or what you are going to teach and probably ideas on how to **assess** your students in that particular **context**.

Chris: I think one interesting thing about that is in my experience of teaching English for Academic Purposes, some academics were very useful in terms of informing on that sort of **content**. Others though, had a view of the language which was, I think, different to the present **reality** of the language which was being used. So yeah, I think it's choosing the right person, isn't it?

Viviana: That's also important, choosing the right person, but I'm mostly not always not working with only one person because when you have different people, you can compare and contrast what people are telling you. But it is **fundamental** to talk to people that are experts in their field. One of my students did a study of **medical** discourse a couple of years ago. And she had some expert informants that were essential for us, because in many cases, we couldn't make heads or **tails** out of the **expression** we were working with okay, so it's like, we could understand the meaning of the words in **isolation**, but when they were all together, we didn't know what they meant. And we were reading text in which the **expression** appeared a lot of times. But if we hadn't had a doctor, a couple of doctors, in fact, who explained what those meant to us we would be still trying to finish that study because it was impossible for us. So I mean, that's just a simple example.

Chris: Brilliant, Viviana, thank you so much for your time today. It's been **fascinating**.

Viviana: No problem.

Chris: So many of our **listeners**, We'am, are not English for Specific Purposes teachers, but are there things that they can do to introduce some of those ideas in their classrooms?

We'am: It's very helpful to tell the students about it. At the very beginning, maybe if they are at a lower level you can explain to them what is English for Specific Purposes and how they can use it to become more **functional** in their field of work. So they don't **necessarily** have to take a course in English for Specific Purposes, but they can learn about it and, I think people coming from higher education backgrounds so fresh **graduates** will know the terms that are specific for their field, but they just need sort of a push on how to use these terms in the right **context**. So just signposting or explaining to them at the beginning of the course can be **motivating** for them.

Chris: Yeah, I think that's a good point. I think when students get to a certain level, they might think, well, why am I just learning more and more English and they want to be more what am I actually going to do with this English? And I think having more **awareness** about ESP at that stage can be really, really **beneficial**. And then it feels like there's a real value in using their English in that way.

We'am: I think it works, like for example, if you want to improve the **dialogue**, interfaith dialogue between let's say, if someone does a course on Islamic Studies and they want to develop interfaith, you know, conversation between Muslims, Christians, and let's say, Jews or other people from other **faiths**, it's a good way to know you know, the specificities of certain terms that can be a vehicle for that conversation, but you sort of need the base for it.

Chris: Yeah, I think it can be really useful for those sorts of more contentious areas or areas where if you say the wrong thing, or you go down the wrong line, or you're using the wrong words, whatever it may be, can lead to an **accidental offence** or problems so I think it can be sort of very useful in those sorts of areas.

We'am: Yes. And also not sometimes it's not just conversation, it can be also written language. I've seen some students wanting to improve their CV writing. They want to write

nice bio on LinkedIn to be able to find jobs. So teaching them certain language that can be the vehicle for that can be very useful for them.

Chris: In this episode's From the Field, we have a range of different experts in ESP specialities about the features and interesting components of their area of work.

Dominique: My name is Dominique and I'm working on aviation English. I've been working on this for 14/15 years now. I'm a linguist and because I'm also a pilot, I've been working on aviation communication, and especially how it's taught because I'm also a flight instructor, people think that English is the international language of aviation. It's not actually the case, but it's very codified. It's very structured. One of the most important things is that pronunciation that aviation English is actually codified so that we try to avoid ambiguity as much as possible. So one feature of aviation English is that you don't say three, five or nine for the numbers. You say tree, fife and niner so that its actually distinguishable. So that's one of the big differences. People learn how to speak on a radio by, while they're flying. So, it's not the best way. And we teach them you know, the basic principles, but the most important thing is not so much the lexical items or the pronunciation but it's the way the conversation goes, because one of the important thing in aviation is that we speak over the radio and it's not like the telephone. Over the radio, if you have two speakers transmitting at the same time, nobody hears anything. It's completely scrambled. So, the turn-taking in the conversation is very structured. Most people would be aware that you know, we give call signs so we would say something like Sydney Traffic and then you finish with your own call sign, which would be Blue Five Four Three, for instance. That's the way of indicating that you're starting a new transmission, and who you're talking to. You indicate that you finish your transmission by giving basically your name, and one of the things that's most difficult to teach student pilots is to actually learn to listen on the radio so that they figure out when it's their turn to speak, and it's very intimidating because if you make a mistake, everybody else on the frequency hears you. And it's high pressure and high stakes. There's a lot of information that comes very quickly. The other thing about aviation communication is that we've dropped a lot of the grammatical words. So we don't use the prepositions, especially not the prepositions 'for' and 'to' in front of numbers. There have been cases of incidents where 'for 2000' was interpreted as '42000' rather than the preposition 'for'. I should say it's very fixed, so you have a manual, you have circulars and a standard list of phraseology that people have to use. From time to time there is an update or something is changed, usually because there will have been an incident. When an incident happens or when you know, some ambiguity comes to the fore and people notice it, then the phraseology will be updated. That's not often at all. It does evolve, but not extremely quickly.

Chris: I'm Chris Moore founder and managing director of Specialist Language Courses, we work in medical English, in particular, working with education institutions, but also healthcare employers around the world. So medical English is a rapidly growing base in the sense that healthcare is a very internationalised world and in English is really the lingua franca. During the pandemic, that kind of internationalisation really accelerated because research news, drug therapies, everything was being done in English, the language itself reflects the technical society of the healthcare so in terms of symptoms, diagnoses, treatments, so the vocabulary is very much very common among healthcare professionals, but not so common among us as language teachers, so our teachers have to really get to understand the space

quite quickly when they're working with healthcare, both students and **professionals**. So the world of **medical** terminology is a very big one. In terms of the way that language is used, **clinical** communication does have its own demands. So if you're a doctor or a nurse, and you're working with patients and their families, the kinds of stresses that you're under in order to deliver what can be very difficult news in a way that lands right is very difficult for a first language speaker let alone if you're doing it in another language. If we look at the kind of **global** healthcare **workforce**, you see how mobile it is. So you go to any hospital in London, for example, there are doctors, nurses, **pharmacists**, you name it from every corner of the world, and they're all working in English. And they're all communicating in English on quite **complex** subjects in quite a high-stress, high-**stakes** situations and therefore they need the language to do that. The language and the communication skills. So communication skills, in a sense of giving information or **gathering** information or eliciting information, whatever it happens to be, is also a **fundamental** part of **medical** English. So a lot of work that we do is around that kind of **functional** side of language, as well as teaching grammar, and the kind of building blocks of vocab and so on. I mean, grammar is an interesting one. I mean, there's a real need for accurate grammar when you're working in healthcare. So, you know, writing a piece of research, you've got to get it right, it's a very high-level piece of work and to do it in English, in your second language is hard. So we build in that kind of thing, so grammar, **academic** English, but very much within a healthcare **context**. And so you've got to look at what's happening in those spaces. And that's got to be then **reflected** into the lessons. So the teachers that we work with you most of them do not have a **medical** background. I mean, a small number do so x nurses, x doctors and that's great. But those that don't really have to kind of get under the skin of the subject and that has its challenges. And so we find that the English teachers who work with us stick with us, they really enjoy the work that they do, but it does take a while to get on top of the language and to understand the kind of, again, we come back to **clinical** communication to understand the **scenarios** that their students are working in. And if you're a **pharmacist** its going to be different to being a nurse, it's going to be different to being a doctor going to be different to being a GP or a **consultant**. So it is important to get under the skin of that and we spend quite a lot of time working with our teachers in order to support them to do so.

Amna: My name is Amna, I taught a course on ESP, to MA students, and also **supervised** some of my student's research on different ESP topics. I also wrote a book on English for Islamic Studies. The book is not only **targeting** students who study Islamic studies but also people who work in the field. Like Imams who work in English-speaking countries, and need to use English to address their congregations or audience. So the book contained language, which these people need to use, conversational language and also some grammar items that they need to use for speaking and for writing. The book English for Islamic Studies also contains a glossary with some of the most important terms that people need to use in speaking about Islam and their meaning. First we translated the terms and then we explained the words. The problem was some of these words don't have English **equivalent**. So we had to use the same word, if it doesn't have an **equivalent** but we explained the meaning of the word. And these words are used in the book. The text discusses different topics **related to** Islam and we use these terms and these words in these texts and there is a lot of vocabulary work in the book as well.

We'am: English for Specific Purposes, as we have seen in the report can offer a **structured** way for learners to learn a language in different fields. It can be for healthcare workers, for Imams, as we have seen and aviation and it could be an easy way for learners to look at things or to learn because it offers the **functional** side of language as **opposed** to maybe the grammar or the lexical side of language. What do you think Chris?

Chris: Yeah, I think that was really interesting point that came out what came through in those short **extracts** was about the codification, the **scripts**, the **functions**, the reasons for using those particular words or those particular **grammatical structures**. I think one other thing that really I thought about there was how difficult it must be for students of English for Specific Purposes to move between those different registers because they can't talk like an air traffic controller in their everyday lives, but also, when they're working as an air traffic controller, they can't use general English as well. So they really have to move between those different areas. I think that can be quite challenging, and quite demanding for students but also quite demanding for teachers as well.

We'am: Yeah, and I think for **professionals** who don't have enough time maybe to study a language from A to Z it offers maybe a shortcut for them because they already have the knowledge. You know, they have the vocabulary and expert knowledge in the field. So they just need those **functional** phrases to make it more **communicative** for the audience. In my experience, I've seen lots of **professionals** for example, sometimes doctors enrolling in general English courses, which can be sometimes time-**consuming** for health workers. So going to English for Specific Purposes, I think they are given just a platform or the space to use that language in a setting that they think is most useful.

Chris: And I think it can be more **motivating** as well as a result because as you say, if a doctor goes to a general ELT course they might think after a few sessions, well, why am I here? What's the point of me being here? I'm not learning anything that I need for the work that I'm doing. So it can help with that sort of **validity** of the course for particular users because they see from the very start from lesson one, the reason for why they're learning this particular type of English...

Thank you for listening to Episode 8 of Teaching English with the British Council, in our next episode we look at how the ELT **sector** can become fairer for all teachers. Until then, goodbye.

We'am: Goodbye!





**This episode was produced
for the British Council by:
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