Differences between teaching ESP and English for general purposes (EGP)

In presented the typical characteristics of ESP and EGP courses. These characteristics influence the way that ESP courses are taught – those approaches and activities that are appropriate and those that are not. The characteristics are summarised and discussed below in terms of what this means for ESP teaching. From a teaching perspective, the main differences between EGP and ESP are the learners themselves, teaching methodology and classroom activities. These differences are not always clear-cut, and Campion (2016) presents an interesting account of EGP teachers moving into EAP. She emphasises the need for further research concerning these differences.

ESP learners are goal-driven

To motivate learners EGP teachers often have to work hard, including fun activities such as games, songs and puzzles. These activities can take up a lot of time for minimal gain other than the fun factor. ESP learners, in contrast, usually have common goals and are arguably more highly motivated, particularly in terms of extrinsic motivation. Cook (2002) divides communication goals as being internal or external to the classroom. ESP focuses very firmly on out-of-class communication as a goal, while in EGP classes, particularly in an EFL setting where English is not a means of communication outside the classroom, the only communication in the target language may be in the classroom.

ESP learners may have varying levels of linguistic proficiency

Usually, EGP classes are organised into language levels, starting with beginners and moving through the levels to advanced. In ESP this is often not the case. Class groupings may be made based on the students' specialisation, resulting in groups of mixed ability. ESP practitioners need to bear this in mind when selecting material and making assumptions about students' knowledge. A further distinction is that ESP classes usually begin once a certain threshold of linguistic proficiency is reached.

Focus on skills rather than grammar

Typically, EGP courses have a strong focus on grammar. This can be seen in the majority of EGP coursebooks, where grammar is often the main organisational strand in the syllabus. This can be explicit, where grammatical terms are referred to, such as the present perfect tense. Or it can be implicit, where grammar terms are not explicitly referred to. In ESP, however, needs analysis usually identifies skills which emerge from the target communicative situations. While grammar is still important, it is not considered useful to systematically work through the English grammatical system as is often the case with EGP courses.

Classroom management

EGP lessons are typically organised in stages, starting with a warm-up. Staging a lesson is considered one of the basic skills of an EGP teacher and is assessed in training and development courses. In ESP this is less usual. Generally in ESP teaching, continuity throughout the whole course is emphasised, so teachers can pick up where they left off in the previous session (Martin, 2015).

Relationship with students

The relationship between students and the teacher in ESP is likely to be different from that in the EGP classroom. Where the focus is entirely on language, as is the case with EGP, the teacher has a very high status, as he or she is the expert, whereas in the ESP classroom language per se is only part of the picture. This means the ESP practitioner is an expert in one of the areas covered in the teaching. The ESP practitioner is rarely an expert in the disciplinary field. This may influence the relationship with the students, with ESP practitioners feeling insecure because of their lack of subject knowledge. Wu and Badger (2009) reported that teachers felt a lack of knowledge reflected badly on their competence. Campion (2016) reported a lack of knowledge as the major challenge facing new EAP teachers. This is discussed further below.

Appropriate teaching methodology

As mentioned in Chapter 1, disciplines in ESP have their dominant methodologies and these may be applied to the ESP classroom. For example, medical students may be familiar with problem-based learning and business students may be familiar with a case-study approach. These methodologies can be usefully employed in the ESP classroom and are discussed in Chapter 12. In EGP the current, widely adopted methodologies are communicative-language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL). CLT emerged in the 1970s and focuses on communication – meaning and interaction – as the major aim of language teaching. TBL develops the communicative notion to reflect classrooms that focus on the use of the target language to complete meaningful tasks, which then facilitates acquisition of the language (Van den Branden, 2012).