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# What Degree of Specificity for ESP Courses in EFL Contexts?

A Preliminary Case Report for the Degree in Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health

## Abstract

The aim of this note is to offer a preliminary discussion of ongoing research on the grade of language specificity necessary for the ESP syllabus designed for the degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health at the University of Messina, Italy. The present discussion originates from the perspectives presented by Hyland (2002), advocate of strict adherence to specificity issues in course design, and Huckin (2003), the proponent of a milder view. These opinions are contrasted with a learning context wherein English is a university subject read by freshmen in an environment where all lectures are given in the national idiom. The degree of specificity necessary for this EFL context accounts for learners' needs in terms of vocabulary, grammar and rhetorical patterns to access discourses, practices and conventions pertaining to their actual studies and to the world of work. In EFL settings, this can mean that specificity results from a compromise between different pedagogical points of view.

**Keywords:** language specificity, English for specific purposes, English as a foreign language, higher education.

## 1. Introduction

The keystone of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses is teaching language with a focus on the specific communicative needs and practices pertaining to a given

community. In Higher Education (HE), this implies that ESP teachers' efforts have to concentrate on helping learners to function in academic, professional or workplace settings (Basturkmen, 2006: 17). In such instances the concept of specificity covers the specialized vocabulary pertaining to the university disciplines first and to the profession later, together with their respective reading and writing conventions.

A drawback of specificity rests on time constraint (Basturkmen, 2006:18), which compels educators to design narrow or wide angle syllabi, according to time, the pre-existing language abilities students possess, and their present and future needs.

Any discussion on specificity should consider the perspectives brought out by Hyland (2002) and Huckin (2003), which up to now represent the most exhaustive views on the issue. Hyland calls specificity the distinguishing trait that makes the difference between ESP and General English (GE) courses (Hyland, 2002: 386). ESP, in fact, aims at defining, planning and teaching topics peculiar to a given field of study (*ibid.*), for example source analysis in the humanities or lab report writing in chemistry. This educational requirement is threatened by a trend towards more generic skills. "De-specification" gains ground among administrators because of budget cuts (*ibid.*: 387), but is subscribed to even by some language specialists (*ibid.*: 392). Such a tendency has paved the way toward "remedial approaches" that limit ESP activities to the simple mastering of a set of rules (*ibid.*), thus undermining the long-lasting research tradition which is the cornerstone of ESP teaching (*ibid.*: 393).

A slightly different view on specificity is found in Huckin (2003). In his paper he subscribes to Hyland's perplexity regarding the wide angle course design which hinders learners' appreciation of the distinct features of specialized discourse (Huckin, 2003: 3). In the meantime, he argues that too strict an adherence to specificity can lead to "undesirable prescriptivism" and to excessive teacher centeredness (*ibid.*: 10), resulting in students' 'de-motivation' (*ibid.*: 5). He suggests certain rhetorical and textual strategies be taught (*ibid.*: 11), although students should stake the claims on the didactic criteria pertaining to their educational needs (*ibid.*: 17). This action would allow learners to take control of their own education, leaving ESP teachers in the role of facilitators as "language experts [and] not technical insiders" (*ibid.*: 16).

## 2. Specificity and EFL contexts

The perspectives on specificity discussed by Hyland and Huckin have their own face value as they stem from well defined contexts. Both authors, in fact, work in countries where English is the national or second language, or where it is the official idiom of lectures. In such cases learners (be they English as a second language or English as a foreign language speakers of English) are given great linguistic exposure, with all the related benefits to language acquisition every expert knows.

The situation in English as a foreign language (EFL) countries, where university education takes place in the national idiom is different. Therefore, specificity can be influenced by other factors, like the position ESP classes have inside the whole university curriculum and the proficiency learners already have in the target language (TL).

The question regarding the position of ESP courses within HE programmes can affect learners' motivation if classes are allocated to "unsuitable timetable slots" (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998: 38) or if the ESP course is scheduled in the freshman year and students will read foreign literature for their final project work (ibid.: 40). This situation undermines active participation in ESP classes as the delayed needs cannot be fully understood by all freshmen. In such cases, students will gain little or no benefit when lectured on and trained in, say, report writing in English without prior introduction within content lectures.

The second problem, that of students' proficiency in the TL and in their disciplines, can guide teachers' approaches towards the degree of transferability of competences from lectures to the academic or the workplace context. Learners' expertise in the foreign language, in fact, should not be underrated if teachers want their ESP courses to be for all, or to avoid, on the students' side, the feeling of working on something "too far over their heads" (Stryker and Leaver, 1997: 307).

In the light of the issues presented above and to discuss how the ESP syllabus object of this note was developed, a brief description of the Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health is necessary to contextualize the learning situation from which the present discussion arose.

### 3. The degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health

The degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health is an interfaculty course (Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Biological Sciences, Pharmacy, Economics, Law, Political Sciences) that was established in the academic year 2007 at the University of Messina, Italy, under the auspices of tertiary education reform promoted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research.

This undergraduate course focuses on the study of food and human nutrition, food production and distribution, economics, marketing, Italian and European regulations, Mediterranean food-and-wine traditions, regional and niche products (University Website, English version). The course intends to train experts in food production storage and distribution, quality evaluation and control, hazard analysis, and in food-related fields like catering, gourmet journalism, niche-food agents or manufacturers' representatives, working in Italy with foreign customers or abroad.

The programme runs over three years. The curriculum is shaped around a model consisting of foundation, distinctive, cognate and optional disciplines (like general, organic and inorganic chemistry, food chemistry, economics, management, biology, zoology, food analysis, food processing, just to name a few). The syllabus – apart from lectures - is developed around problem-based activities, case studies and seminars. A compulsory placement experience, in Italy or abroad, intends to widen professional skills in the field and be the basis for the final project work.

The general HE curriculum for this degree, as can be inferred from the outline given above, is shaped around the idea of the “new vocationalism” in higher education courses (Dovey, 2006). This trend aspires to provide learners the right balance between discipline-based theory and workplace practice, stressing that the idea of “knowledge how, rather than knowledge about” (Dovey, 2006: 390). Emphasis in the original is much more useful in present day university education. The foundation of this kind of “vocational” HE course tries to respond to the requests of a globalised world where competitive experts need to operate in varying and varied market-driven working contexts.

The English language classes are allocated in the first year, and are given a total amount of 52 contact hours. Proficiency in English, as outlined by the university board, is targeted at the B1/B2 level of the Common European Framework, for written and spoken skills, respectively.

Considering the explicit linguistic requirements, together with the already specific overall learning context, the pedagogy behind the ESP course had per force to re-define the idea of language specificity. The ESP syllabus had, therefore, to consider three different issues: 1) the acquisition of written and oral discourses, practices and genres pertaining to the food-and-wine remit; 2) the allocation of ESP classes in the freshman year; 3) the learners’ group, heterogeneous by a linguistic point of view in terms of GE skills.

The first issue had to help learners grasp basic knowledge to be later used in the world of work. The second question, the allocation in the first HE year, had to consider how to plan activities in terms of genres and topics to be met by students in the whole HE period of study, or beyond. The last issue, that of the group homogeneity, had to account for activities perceived as motivating even by the less linguistically proficient students.

Keeping these important educational issues in mind, the following section will briefly sketch how these questions were put into practice.

## 4. The ESP syllabus outline

The degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health follows the credits-bearing scheme and the English module was given a "3+2" credit form. This double partition offered the chance of shaping contact hours in two different sections: the first fraction was organized around lectures, whereas the second dealt with workshop activities.

Lectures were further split into two main intertwined "sub-genres". The first concentrated on contrastive grammar and language exploitation activities, while the second revolved around technical vocabulary acquisition. Workshops were devoted to academic and workplace oral and written conventions.

To meet these multifaceted learning aims and to offer the widest specific instruction possible in the limited amount of time granted by the university board, the most suitable approach was to design a syllabus revolving around language topics and food-and-wine themes.

The chosen language items were, for example, the use of the tenses, such as the future to discuss expected results in food analysis assay, the simple present and past tense forms to present food processing methods or ways of preserving it (e.g., by the use of additives and preservatives), the passive voice to explain wine-making operations or to identify lab analysis procedures. Another item was the order of multiple qualifying adjectives to describe food specifications, or countable and uncountable nouns, and the difference between a count form of a noun and its non-count form; for example, the distinction between wine and wines, or water and waters.

The same topics and themes model was employed for technical vocabulary acquisition by considering issues like food storage, food spoilage and deterioration or plant-growing. Technical vocabulary activities privileged terms of Latin and Greek origin cognate to Italian forms (e.g., enzyme graphically close to the Italian *enzima*), and other technical words (e.g., assay, or shelf life) already in the Italian food-and-wine vocabulary as loans.

The workshop section pivoted on the writing conventions likely to be found along the academic study period, or to be used for the final project work, such as case reports or research articles. It also accounted for discourse practices pertaining to the workplace, like reports, food descriptions and presentations, food specifications, or issues already encountered in other lectures, like quality evaluation, how to read labels or how to describe quality products.

Oral presentation skills were also accounted for, and learners practiced description of a local quality product or a preserving method to the ESP teacher and to the whole group acting as hypothetical customers.

## 5. Conclusion

As can be inferred from the previous pages, many different issues concur, and co-occur, to shape the type of language specificity necessary for the degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health. Considering the EFL context, the university regulations, the linguistically non-homogeneous group of students and the limited amount of time, priorities had to be set to devise the syllabus.

The course is at present in its third year and it is too early to see whether the syllabus will require re-shaping. Any evaluation should, in fact, consider different factors like a longer period of observation, together with students' satisfaction in the long run; i.e., after their placement period abroad, or, better, after their access to the world of work.

Returning to the question presented in the title, for the degree in Mediterranean Food-and-wine Sciences and Health specificity results from a balance between the demands originating from the local context (in terms of educational requirements, class allocation and amount of contact hours) and the learners' need to approach genres (e. g., the research article, the case report or food-and-wine oral presentation skills) not met in their secondary school education or to be encountered later than ESP classes on their HE route and their long distance necessities.

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