

**Teaching ESP When You Aren’t a Specific Purposes Expert**

*by* *Clarissa (Reese) Moorhead*

Diverse, specialized, English for specific purposes (ESP) courses have become commonplace recently (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Short-term, precourse ESP programs geared toward graduate students are now the norm at intensive English programs (IEPs), and IEP instructors who usually teach general ESL courses are thrown into ESP because of the increasing demand.

ESP is a new world for these general ESL instructors who must do needs assessments, create curriculum, and select and/or develop materials for subjects that are often daunting (Knight et al., 2010). How can ESL instructors, regardless of their familiarity with the need-driven ESP realm, feel comfortable in these classes? The following five tips provide strategies to tackle unfamiliar ESP courses, such as Business English and Legal English, and ensure classes are manageable for instructors and successful for students.

**1. Know the Expected Outcomes**

As instructors, we are well-versed in backward design, starting with course objectives as we plan lessons. This is crucially important in the ESP world because specialized course outcomes are shaped by various stakeholders, including IEP administrators and Business School administrators and faculty, for example. To work toward identifying the outcomes, ask these questions:

* What do these groups of people want students to achieve?
* What do specific purposes (SP) faculty perceive as international student weaknesses?
* Are these precourses conditional admission requirements for students? If yes, what constitutes successful completion, and what happens if students do not meet the standards? What letter grades are considered passing?
* Will your ESP course supplement a core course or stand alone? In other words, will students be concurrently enrolled in one ESP course and one law course?
* Is the ESP course integrated skills, or are listening and speaking taught separately from reading and writing?
* How many hours and weeks do you have to take ESP students from point A to point B?
* Do objectives for the course already exist, and how flexible or broad are they? What objectives apply to all graduate international students regardless of their SPs? Should this course include information on cultural adjustment?

After finding these answers, you will have a better sense of the expectations and can move forward with planning.

**2. Do Detailed Needs Assessments as Early as Possible**

As ESP courses are specific, you must tailor them to students. Instructors should do prearrival questionnaires and diagnostics 1 to 2 weeks before the class begins, but preferably far earlier, to gather as much information about students as possible. These needs assessments may reveal student deficiencies in ESP and, therefore, result in extensive lesson plan changes. For example, instructors often mistakenly believe ESP students are SP experts and really only need E (English). In fact, while some ESP students may have been practicing law for years in their home countries, ­they may not have a strong grasp on the U.S. legal system. In addition, some students decide to study master’s degrees in fields that are new to them because they had another focus during their undergraduate studies.

In addition to getting-to-know-you questions, needs assessments should ask about student goals and include questions like, “What do you expect to gain from our ESP course?” This question helps gauge students’ attitudes. Do students believe they need ESP? If they see the course as an unnecessary requirement impeding their progress to “real” field-specific studies, you may need to alter plans.

Needs assessments should also include written and oral diagnostics. By conducting prearrival Skype or WhatsApp video interviews, instructors can save class time. Furthermore, oral interviews show “live” English encounters, rather than preplanned, rehearsed speeches. You can then plan lessons based on shortcomings observed during these interactions.

**3. Find Authentic, Often Student-Generated, Materials**

After compiling answers from stakeholders regarding international student needs, necessary materials usually become clear.

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| **Problems Reported by Specific Purposes Professors** | **ESP Instructor Response** | **Suggestions** |
| Students struggle with basic, discipline-specific vocabulary. | Prioritize this and ask if professors can share wordlists. | * Try to get access to texts for the course and pull words that you think would be challenging and useful for international students.
* Read publications in the field, such as [*Business Insights: Essentials*](https://www.gale.com/c/business-insights-essentials)*,* [*Harvard Business Review*](https://hbr.org/), or [*The Wall Street Journal*](https://www.wsj.com/), or legal case studies to pull potentially challenging vocabulary.
* Students can also be responsible for reading articles in their disciplines and pulling a given number of challenging vocabulary words to teach the class. This will lead to a more comprehensive list.
* Quizlet or other online sites can be used to share wordlists with one another and study them.
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| Students are lacking critical analysis skills. | Make critical thinking and persuasion focal points. | * Legal English students can examine the outcome of a case and critically analyze whether they believe the jury or judge made the correct decision. They can go a step further to compare and contrast what happened in a similar case in their home country and persuade their classmates which country made the correct ruling.
* Business English students could research competing companies in the same sector, and then analyze financial statements and annual reports in order to persuade their classmates where to invest their money.
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| Students aren’t comfortable in classroom environments that involve impromptu discussion. | Incorporate lessons with unplanned question and answer sessions when students don’t know what’s coming. | * Assign role-play jobs on the spot for legal English students to act as judges, prosecutors, and other courtroom roles where they need to think on their toes and ask questions to one another.
* Give business English students an ethical, debatable business situation and have them discuss among themselves with no time to think beforehand.
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| Students need to pop their international bubbles and work on group projects with native-English-speaking students. | Make students aware of this request and the value of diverse perspectives and discuss group work strategies. | * It may be challenging to have this actually happen in the ESP class, where native speakers aren’t present. Having a professor from their discipline be a guest speaker and explain how some international students do not take full advantage of their time in the United States because they don’t venture beyond their national groups could really hit home.
* Volunteer native English speakers could also be used as mock participants in a business meeting or as jury members to show international students how native English speakers could raise questions they hadn’t thought of in their singular culture groups. These volunteers could be aspiring ESP teachers or even campus volunteers who could receive certificates or volunteer hours.
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| Students don’t know major U.S. companies. | Discuss Fortune 500 companies and their sectors to increase student familiarity. | * Databases such as *Business Insights Essentials* can be useful when introducing students to these companies. Students could research various Fortune 500 companies and explain to their classmates information, including sector, products, successes, and more.
* At the start of class, use warm-up time to discuss current events of various companies in order to target which major companies students are still not aware of.
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| Students plagiarize, either intentionally or unintentionally. | Discuss academic ethics, paraphrasing, summarizing, and citations in field-specific styles. | * Most universities have a publicized honor code or honor council. These documents and by-laws could be read as a group and discussed.
* English for academic purposes materials on paraphrasing and summarizing are widely available and can be slightly tweaked to better fit the ESP group.
* Citations vary by discipline, so consult research guides for various fields or reach out to librarians or professors in various disciplines.
* Teaching the basics of citations through tools such as Google Scholar can be valuable and eye-opening to ESP graduate students who did their undergraduate studies in their home countries.
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Needs-assessments also provide a plethora of materials. Written diagnostics can lead to lessons on targeted grammar points. Video interviews can be recorded and used to teach pronunciation lessons based on mistakes. While working on diagnostics, incoming ESP students will often exchange flawed emails with instructors, which can lead to lessons on email etiquette.

For authentic interactions, you can recruit guest speakers from the community. For example, practicing American lawyers could speak about their paths to where they are today. A few business professors could be on a professor panel in which Business English students could ask for academic and career advice.

During project work, encourage self-inquiry, so students’ work aligns with their goals. Keep in mind that Legal English students are often going to divide into specializations, such as entertainment law or international arbitration. Therefore, have students select vocabulary words or landmark cases from their specializations to teach classmates.

**4. Teach Yourself, but Only to a Point**

Don’t expect to be the smartest person in the room. ESP is new to you. Some ESP students have been lawyers in their countries for years before they are in your Legal English ESP class. Teach yourself to the point that you don’t feel completely lost. You don’t need to get a JD, but you need to know the meaning of JD and other abbreviations. (JD, by the way, stands for juris doctor degree, and you may have to teach your students that a lot of legal vocabulary is, in fact, in Latin, not English.)

To teach yourself, use people and resources around you. Ask friends who are lawyers to clarify the different types of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). If you have access to textbooks for students’ core classes, read them. If you know what students are reading, you will be better prepared. If professors in the SP discipline are open to classroom observations, jump on that opportunity. Observations can help highlight areas where students may be culturally or linguistically lost.

Despite all of your studying, be realistic. You don’t need to be an expert, but you need to feel comfortable standing in front of the room.

**5. Be Honest and Adapt**

On the first day, tell students honestly, “I am an English teacher. I am NOT a lawyer, businessperson, *insert SP discipline here*.” Be clear that even though you are not a lawyer, you know legal basics (after your study sessions), but you won’t know everything. Tell students that there will be times when all of you will learn together, and that’s okay. You are the English expert and SP guide. SP experts are professors in students’ core courses; your goal is to make those courses more manageable.

Being honest allows you to adapt when confrontations arise. If students disagree about an SP topic that is over your head, have peers moderate the discussion. You can assess students’ persuasive techniques and English abilities, while their peers can evaluate them from an SP perspective.

As ESL instructors, we are actors, thinking on the spot, doing a little improv and adapting lessons flexibly. This is amplified in ESP where a seemingly innocuous question may become the entire lesson for the day.

**Conclusion**

It is exceedingly important for TESOL instructors to show they can teach in diverse settings. Adding ESP to a CV demonstrates versatility and adaptability. Try to embrace the ESP challenge. Though you may never feel fully prepared to jump from general ESL to ESP, by following these steps, you will be far more likely to swim than sink as you dive into the ESP experience.

**References**

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