INTRODUCTION TO E.S.P.

1.1. English for Specific Purposes (E.S.P)

A. General English (GE) Vs E.S.P

➢ As the title implies, an important dichotomy is generally made between General English & E.S.P. Robinson states that: "**the general** with which we are contrasting the specific or E.S.P is that of general education for life, culture and literature orientated language course in which **language itself is the subject matter and the purpose of the course**. The student of **E.S.P,** however, is learning **English in route** to the acquisition of so quite **different body of knowledge** or set of skills". (Robinson 1980: 6)

➢ Furthermore, the main purpose of GE is the development of students' **linguistic competence** as opposed to ESP which aims at developing students' **communicative competence.** The latter is supported by Widdowson in Robinson "a concern with ESP, EST necessarily entails a concern with communicative competence". (Widdowson, in Robinson 1980: 23)

➢ In addition, what really distinguishes GE courses from ESP ones is the fact that the former is **teacher- centered**. A shift of **focus from the teacher to the learner occurs in ESP** courses because of the awareness of the centered position the learner occupies in various processes such as learning, testing, etc.

➢ Moreover, what distinguishes ESP from GE is the **awareness of needs** in the former. In fact, Robinson states that "**an ESP course […] is based on rigorous analysis of student's needs and should be tailor-made**" (Robinson 1980:13)

➢ However, other writers like Strevens, Kennedy and Bolitho admit the difficulty of drawing a line between GE and ESP. In fact, it seems **difficult to separate GE from ESP since ESP teaching begins when the learner has mastered the element essential to any language teaching**. As a result, **one may claim that GE is to a certain extent different from E.S.P.**

B. Historical Development of E.S.P

➢ Basically, when a foreign language was learnt or taught, it was considered as a part of general educational goals; in this context, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 6) write: "Previously the reasons for learning English (or any other language) had not been well defined. **Knowledge of a foreign language had been generally regarded as a sign of a well-rounded education**, but few had really **questioned why it was necessary**."

➢ Strevens (1977 in Robinson 1989: 399) argues that "ESP goes back to the **sixteenth century**, with the production of specialized vocabularies and phrase books for **diplomats, businessmen, and other travelers**." when he tried to uncover the hidden roots of ESP.

In Talking about the rise of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 5) argue that: "The English Language world got along well enough without it for many years, so why has ESP become such an important (some might say the most important) part of English language teaching?" In order to answer this question, we need to take a look at the different reasons behind the emergence of ESP.

➕ First, by the end of WWII, a new enormous expansion in scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale created a world unified and dominated by two forces: **technology and commerce which generated a demand for an international language, this role fell on English.** As English became the international language of technology and commerce, it created a new generation of learners who knew why they are learning it such as businessmen who wanted to see their products, mechanics who had to read instruction manuals, students whose course of study included textbooks only available in English. All **these and many others needed English and**

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more importantly they knew why they needed it. This development was accelerated by the oil crisis of the early 70's. This expansion at the international scale was the first reason which gave rise to E.S.P.

- The second reason was <mark>a revolution in linguistics</mark> as **the demand was growing for the English** courses tailored to specific needs, a new idea began to emerge in the study of language; traditionally the aim of linguistics had been to describe the rules of English usage that is to say grammar, however, the new studies shifted attention away from defining the formal features of language usage to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication, i.e., **language use**. (Widdowson 1978). One finding of this research was that the language we speak and write varies in number of different ways from one context to another; if language varies from one situation of use to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the bases of the learner's course. In short, the English needed by particular groups of learners could be identified by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of their specialist area of work or study "**Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need**" (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 6).

- The third reason is **the focus on the learner**; <mark>new development in educational psychology also contributed to the rise of ESP</mark> by emphasizing the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning. Learners were seen to have different needs and interests which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning.

- ❖ As a consequence, the growth of ESP was possible by the combination of these **THREE** important reasons according to Hutchinson & Waters (1987)

   C. Definitions of ESP

Before giving the various definitions of ESP, it is worth considering the ESP acronym; formerly ESP stood for English for **SPECIAL** purposes and was supposed to suggest special language or restricted one (Robinson, 1980). Within a period of ten years the 'S' of ESP changed its meaning and E for **Special P became** E for **Specific** P. The latter was related to the learner's purposes defined according to their specialties or immediate/future needs, hence, **special** has been established **definitely** as **specific**.

- Owing to its rapid development since 1960, ESP has been given various definitions. As far as <mark>MacKay and Mountford</mark> are concerned ESP "*is generally used to refer to the teaching of English for a clearly **utilitarian purpose**, this purpose is usually defined with reference to some **occupational requirement** e.g.: for international telephonic operators, or **vocational training** programmes e.g.: staff, programmes or some **academic or professional study** e.g.: engineering*" (Mackay & Mountford 1978:2) This statement means that ESP involves a <mark>specific purpose</mark> for which English learning is required; this purpose depends on the learner's <mark>requirements which can be vocational, occupational, professional or academic</mark>.

- ESP is best defined by <mark>Robinson (1980: 13)</mark> as follows: "*an ESP course is **purposeful and is aimed at a successful performance** of **occupational, educational roles**, it is based on rigorous **analysis of students' needs** and should be **tailor-made**. Any ESP courses may differ from another in its **selection of skills, topics, situations and functions**; it is likely to be of **limited duration**, students are more adults*". Robinson's definition seems complete since she covers **students'** <mark>purposes</mark> and <mark>needs</mark>, **the skills to be taught, the contents** and finally <mark>the age</mark>. She advocates the rigorous <mark>needs' analysis</mark> for designing an appropriate syllabus.

- <mark>Hutchinson and Waters (1987:19)</mark> also see that ESP is "**an approach** to language learning: which all **decisions as to content and method** are based on **the learner's reason for learning**". According to them English in an ESP situation is a <mark>means more than an end</mark>, moreover, the <mark>learner's needs</mark> and reasons for learning dictate **the selection of the content and method.**

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- For Coffey ESP is defined as being "intended to be of clear and particular **usefulness to the student**, his actual **needs** having been a subject of **careful analysis** there is **no special language** only a principle of **selection from the language to meet the purposes defined**." (1984: 2) In this statement, Coffey claims that the **language used in ESP is not special but involves a choice within the language** to match the learner's **purposes**; this criterion also gives importance to **needs' analysis**.

- ❖ The four definitions are different to some extent but share some features and emphasis on **the identification of the learner's needs**, this leads to think that **the learner has the lion's share in ESP teaching and learning**.

As it has already been mentioned, Robinson's definition is complete since she does not neglect any feature; to this effect, she (1991: 2) writes that "**students study English not because they are interested in the English language or English culture as such but because they need English for study or work purposes.**" In other words, the acronym ESP is used to refer to English that is taught not as "**an end in itself but as an essential means for a clearly identifiable goal**." (Mackay 1978: 28).

d) Characteristics of ESP

Strevens makes a distinction between "**four absolute characteristics**" and "**two variable characteristics**" of ESP.

 In fact, the **absolute characteristics are the necessary features to identify ESP** and are as follows:

- ✓ ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner.
- ✓ It is related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
- ✓ Centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc and analysis of its discourse.
- ✓ ESP is in contrast with General English.

Whereas, the **variable characteristics may be, but are not necessary in the whole process in particular situations.** They consist on the fact the **ESP may be but is not necessarily**:

- ✓ restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only)
- ✓ not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

At a 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans offered a modified definition which is highly influenced by Strevens "one but with some differences". As for **absolute** characteristics, he states that:

- ✓ ❏ ESP is defined to meet the specific needs of the learner.
- ✓ ❏ ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
- ✓ ❏ ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Concerning the **variable** characteristics, Dudley-Evans states that:

- ✓ ❏ ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- ✓ ❏ ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.
- ✓ ❏ ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.
- ✓ ❏ ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
- ✓ ❏ Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

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❖ **In few words, Dudley-Evans has removed Strevens' absolute characteristic that "ESP is in contrast with General English" and added more variable characteristics. He asserts that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Furthermore, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.**