Spencer Salas, Leonardo A. Mercado, Lynn Hanson Ouedraogo, and Bernadette Musetti
UNITED STATES, PERU, AND BURKINA FASO

English for Specific Purposes: Negotiating Needs, Possibilities, and Promises

We live and work in Charlotte, North Carolina; Lima, Peru; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and Los Angeles, California. In all these locations English language teaching (ELT) professionals and institutions are increasingly in demand to design and deliver English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses tailored to specific professional and/or academic activities. Our wide-ranging projects have included (1) equipping Spanish-dominant migrant farm workers in rural North Carolina with language skills to meet critical safety requirements; (2) strengthening the academic English capacities of Peruvian public school teachers; (3) enhancing Ouagadougou International Airport passport control officials' ability to interface with international visitors; and (4) providing international legal professionals with pre-academic orientation for graduate study in law. Despite our diverse contexts, the four of us shared the experience of transitioning from highly structured, leveled, intensive English classes mostly directed toward adolescent and adult learners to the development of strategic and purposeful curricula to engage professionals and emerging professionals in English for professional purposes. Along the way, questions emerged about what ESP was, what it could be, and how it could be better realized.

Indeed, in the last four decades, ESP has evolved from a somewhat obscure subset of ELT to a mainstream, stand-alone focal point of international, interdisciplinary scholarship and practice attuned to the multiple and complex needs of a "flat world" (see Basturkmen 2010; Hyland 2007; Johns and Dudley-Evans 1991; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta 2005; Nickerson 2005; Warschauer 2000). Not without controversy, contemporary scholarship for ESP has critically examined, among other things, the complex contextual issues surrounding the conceptualization and delivery of ESP instruction (Allison 1996; Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002; Watson Todd 2003),

"authenticity" in the development of materials and curricula (Widdowson 1998), and complex ethical issues about who decides what learners need (Belcher 2004; Edge 2003; Lee 2008; Widdowson 1994). As these and other debates continue to play out, English language professionals such as ourselves are increasingly in demand to provide ESP for a variety of local, regional, national, and international contexts.

It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the history of ESP as a professional discipline or to provide our readers with a detailed description of the processes that collectively comprise ESP. Instead, our intent in writing this article is to share some of the lessons we have learned from our collective experiences in designing and delivering ESP programs as a starting point for further study, discussion, and reflection. In too many communities, ESP is often advertised as a sort of "snake oil" that will have professionals mastering English in 30 days or less. We have yet to see such promises realized in practice, and such promises, we argue, threaten to undermine the work of the larger ELT community. The central message we hope to convey is, therefore, an ethical one that we believe needs more consistent articulation in the professional literature. Namely, in designing and delivering an ESP program, ESP professionals need to commit to an ethic of transparency grounded in dialogue. What ESP programming is and how it works is a process of negotiation—especially when a program is being offered for the first time. These negotiation processes must include not only consideration of the learners' needs, but also of the structural limitations that surround the design and delivery of ESP programming and a candid assessment of the individual and combined capacities of those charged to design and deliver an ESP program.

ESP: Lessons from the field

1. Not all ESP is created equal

As we look across the scholarship, exactly what ESP is and what it is not seems to depend on which blindfolded man is holding what part of the proverbial elephant. That said, varieties of ESP can be broadly categorized as either English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational/Vocational Purposes (EOP/EVP), although the distinction between the two can be blurry at times (Hutchinson

and Waters 1987). English teaching professionals new to teaching ESP, but with perhaps vast experience in teaching English for more general purposes, often imagine ESP as vocabulary-driven instruction. As such, common-sense thinking would suggest that the difference between a non-ESP course and an ESP course might be realized through the delivery of vocabulary lists—often extensive. Such lists might be enhanced by input in the form of authentic materials in which ESP-specific vocabulary is presented in context, or closed communicative activities whereby learners put new words into practice within the context of their professional activities. Along those lines of thinking, an ESP course directed toward hospitality professionals or agricultural engineers might be the same as a course directed toward any other—except for special attention to vocabulary and its applications.

Precise professional activities such as accounting or agricultural engineering are certainly characterized by specific lexis and key words. What also distinguishes those same professional activities is how those words are put into use. Practitioners designing an ESP curriculum have to think both at the micro level (in terms, for example, of vocabulary) and at a macro level—the professional communicative tasks, the genre or formats of those communicative tasks, and the modalities through which they are enacted. Understanding the ensemble of communicative needs and how those needs are realized in a professional community of practice provides the basis of purposeful and strategic ESP instruction.

Hussin (2002), a clinical ESP instructor in an Australian School of Nursing charged with helping to prepare aspiring immigrants for the workforce, describes how she initiated a target situation needs analysis with a variety of stakeholders to develop a three-month ESP for Nurses curriculum based on the main language tasks and language skills that the future health care providers would need to be successful in the field. The resulting skills inventory included areas of informational use of English in interactions with patients and their families (such as offering reassurance) and in interactions with colleagues (completing routine forms, charts, and instructions). The skills inventory also documented interpersonal uses of English that the nurses would

need (such as expressing empathy). In another example, Boyd (2002) describes a three-week intensive English for Business program at a large university in New York City for three distinct types of Business English learners (business professionals, undergraduate pre-professionals, and pre–Master of Arts in Business graduate students). The program combined thematic units with language-centered business case studies—narratives of executive decision making that become the basis for student interactions and learning.

ESP professionals are more than English language experts for their potential clients. Indeed, ESP practitioners must be ready to become journalists, researchers, and detectives, even mediators. Certainly, ESP needs analyses are informed by data drawn from multiple sources. Data collection might include interviews with professionals in the field, employers, and employees, along with observation of participants' daily professional routines and the language tasks they engage in, as well as examination of the language that mediates their professional activities. Rigor, relevance, and authenticity are enhanced by the use of language artifacts, which might include legal briefs, court transcripts, audio of transcripts, and videotape of deposition statements in a course for international legal professionals. Likewise, a course for public utilities professionals or pre-academic training for environmental engineering students may include the

gathering of water-quality samples and their analyses or the use of global positioning equipment and software to detect groundwater and project precipitation. A program for public safety officials might include meetings with local, regional, and national agencies to learn about their respective responsibilities and the actual shadowing of public safety officers during their daily routines.

A big piece of ESP, therefore, is identifying and prioritizing the various genres, language tasks, and modalities of communication that characterize a particular community of practice (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). One visual way of conceptualizing content and tasks across language modalities for a given purpose is adapting the innovative and flexible strategy known as RAFT: Role, Audience, Format, and Topic (Santa 1988). The idea behind RAFT is that professionals in any field have a repertoire of specialized language from which to draw. For example, ESP practitioners can use the RAFT schema in Figure 1 to differentiate practice and assessment for specific purposes and language goals.

The RAFT example in Figure 1 underscores how context determines language in use by professionals in the field of public safety. Factors that shape the language a public safety professional would draw from include who is speaking to whom (role/audience); the medium or format for that interaction, be it a face-to-face interview or a fax; and the topic of the

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
Public safety professional	Interviewee— English (only) speaking tourist in your country	In-person interview	Gathering facts to solve a crime and take next steps in a protocol (e.g., a tourist is reporting a crime or perpetrator of a crime)
Public safety professional	Self	Reviewing database and reading file; documenting "priors"	Establishing context and profile
Public safety professional	Police and others who will access database in future	Written police report based on data collected in interview	Documenting facts and describing outcomes
Public safety professional	Embassy personnel	Telephone call and subsequent fax transmittal of completed official document	Notification of foreign embassy regarding status of citizen

Figure 1. RAFT example for the field of public safety

interaction or desired outcome. In a non-class-room setting, public safety professionals' facility with the language of their occupation develops through an apprenticeship with that community of practice. As a result, ESP practitioners designing a curriculum would want to simulate the various contexts that a specific professional encounters and raise ESP learners' awareness of how those contexts mediate their interactions.

2. ESP methods are strategic, purposeful, and context specific

As a discipline, TESOL has struggled with the notion of method—often driven by larger paradigms of teaching and learning. In terms of pedagogical methods, because of the goal-directed nature of ESP instruction, ESP practitioners commonly stress the achievement of those goals over the specific method or methods by which they are achieved. To that end, ESP practitioners have taken what Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001) describes as a "post-method" stance—that is, one borrowing liberally and purposefully from a variety of approaches with a focus on results.

For example, in some cases, extensive use of L1 in the ESP classroom—something many practitioners in English for Basic Communicative Purposes would balk at—might be perfectly acceptable if the use is purposeful. An ESP paradigm may actually support the systematic, judicious use of L1 in language courses to communicate meaning and content, particularly when it comes to the explicit learning of vocabulary (e.g., L2 word cards with L1 translations or bilingual dictionary use by lower-level learners) or having students get familiar with content as they prepare to engage in a task for fluency development. Yet, at the same time, there is a clear need to maximize learner exposure to and use of the L2 within what is normally perceived as a very limited period of time. In the end, when contemplating method, ESP practitioners must establish a balance that leads to a learning experience found to be fruitful and productive by all the stakeholders involved, most especially the students. To enhance the ability to achieve desired outcomes, practitioners should be able to resort to a broad repertoire of instructional strategies and practices that harmonize with learner needs, expectations, and interests.

Largely with adult learners in mind, ESP also stresses opportunities for self-study and

practical applications. Depending on the needs analysis, explicit grammar instruction may or may not be embedded in an ESP syllabus. Likewise, any one or more of the distinct skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing may or may not be addressed. For these and other reasons—again linked to expectations and outcomes—it is important for practitioners to decide in advance whether they want to require a specific level of English for Basic Communicative Purposes as a prerequisite for ESP instruction. Additionally, the traditional semester format may not be feasible when the learners are working professionals. More flexible, concentrated instruction with concrete objectives and measurable deliverables is appropriate for ESP situations, as a semester format might become a roadblock for professionals. Creative alternatives that incorporate learner choice in scheduling and in delivery formats, including online resources for additional learning and practice, are helpful. The greater the flexibility, the more amenable the learning experience will be to the needs of working professionals.

In terms of materials, practitioners have many options. Some would argue that textbooks themselves—targeted toward a commercial audience—contradict the very notion of ESP. We argue that, depending on how specific ESP is, textbooks might or might not prove to be too general for the contexts in which participants find themselves. Again, understanding the needs and expectations of our learners will play a vital role in determining the appropriateness of the materials under consideration and arriving at the best possible choice for the course at hand. There must be a close correspondence between what learners wish to get out of the ESP experience and what the textbook has to offer. For comparative analysis purposes, a list of learner needs could be devised along with their respective weights as identified by the standard needs analysis. Then the textbook could be reviewed to determine to what extent it meets those needs.

But even when we believe we have found the right materials, a significant degree of customization is perhaps the best course of action. Considering that we find ourselves in a highly technological 21st century, practitioners should seek out complementary resources on the Internet for learning, practice that ties into the

content, and input our learners expect. If we were developing a Business English course for advanced-level learners, for example, we may want to find and use authentic texts and artifacts related to employee motivation, effective leadership, competitive and strategic advantage, and the countless number of other topics that may be of interest to our target learners. Whenever possible, we encourage course designers to maximize the opportunities afforded us by a connected world in which we are able to create virtual communities and interact across time and space using tools like Facebook and Skype. YouTube and TeacherTube are additional resources that allow us to access communities of professional practice for ESP and to offer the kind of authenticity of experience that is often difficult to simulate in a traditional classroom setting alone. ESP in general can engage technology and popular culture in creative ways with Twitter tweets, live video with music and voice, and more.

3. ESP takes time and sufficient needs analysis to make sense

Even though needs analysis is a defining element of ESP and critical to the overall success of any ESP course, in many instances it is a step that is undervalued and rushed through. Experience has taught us that once a decision has been made by sponsors to commit employees to an English training program, too often stakeholders fall victim to the rush to get the ball rolling. ESP professionals need to be ready to pull back on the reins and guide clients and students through the necessary pre-training steps of needs analysis and course design.

Ideally, because of the amount of time involved in the needs analysis and syllabus design, professionals hoping to engage in ESP should work in teams and in stages. For example, one team might actually engage in data collection, while another might be charged with data analysis, a third with syllabus design, and yet another with course delivery. In the example of a request for an ESP course to equip Spanish-dominant migrant farm workers with language skills to ensure their physical safety, a "needs analysis" team might conduct a series of interviews with management and workers to understand what they perceive as critical safety requirements. Those initial conversations would be supplemented by the team's participant obser-

vation in the field with specific attention to how those critical safety requirements play out through language. With data in hand, the same team or another team might then examine and inventory the language needed to improve the workers' safety. Finally, the original team, or a third team, would take that analysis of language and develop a syllabus for a course that meets those goals.

ESP professionals should be realistic and transparent with the client about the time and costs involved in the needs analysis and course design steps. Rushing through and/or skipping over essential pre-training steps can often occur because an instructor or course designer is afraid of being honest about the work that must be front-loaded onto a project or because learners are anxious to get started. However, experience has too often proven that whatever instructors or course designers shortcut on the front end will inevitably lead to students being shortchanged on the back end of the training experience.

Assessment strategies must also be aligned to the ESP syllabus. That is to say, an ESP course should not conclude with a multiple-choice test about grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Rather, in ESP situations, we suggest course designers consider more authentic assessment formats—such as language-in-use portfolios that document the individual's capacity to use language for the sorts of professional functions that will be expected of that individual. If we keep in mind the RAFT example for developing public safety professionals' language for specific contexts, an assessment strategy ought to reflect the various contexts that the professional might experience. In-class performance-based assessments and problem-solving tasks related to the kinds of activities the learners are likely to engage in as part of their professional work and interactions will make the course more meaningful and better test the learners' ability to apply what they have learned to real-life situations. When developing the instruments we wish to use, we must decide which skills, processes, or knowledge we want to assess and then determine the ways in which student achievement can be gauged more effectively so that it leads to "the information we need to gain about the students we serve" (Bailey 1998, 2). Alignment between what participants do in coursework and the

assessment technologies that measure their achievement is accomplished through purposeful syllabus design. Many options exist as to what form the ESP syllabus might take.

- One approach might be to generate a series of representative professional communicative tasks from the needs analysis and provide participants with multiple opportunities for focused practice and feedback. We can again study the RAFT example of the public safety professional and see that a communicative task syllabus approach would be shaped by the interaction formats such a professional typically encounters: a face-to-face interview, the written composition of a report or complaint, etc.
- A syllabus for the same course might follow a series of professional topics. For public safety, professional representative topics for an ESP syllabus might include gathering facts, collecting evidence, questioning witnesses, etc.
- Alternatively, the course might be structured around scenarios or situations that the professionals will encounter in their daily routines (as in Figure 1).
- Yet another design might focus on practice with the exemplary genre the professional might encounter—such as writing an invitation or completing a certain type of request or report specific to a professional discipline.

Whatever format the syllabus takes, again we emphasize that the assessment should be in sync with that particular structure. An effective way to go about course design and assessment is to "backward plan": make decisions in the beginning of the planning regarding what will count as acceptable evidence of having met learning outcomes, and then proceed with planning such that students will gather the necessary knowledge and skills they need to demonstrate that learning. For example, in an ESP course for Spanish-dominant migrant farm workers, a syllabus might move backward from the goal of ensuring that the workers have the language to understand various safety labels—and are able to communicate and/or enact correct safety procedures based on their understanding of the labels. With that final assessment in mind, the ESP course designer constructs a syllabus or program of study. In many instances, an assessment of a particular learning outcome can be of various types, thus adding relevance, interest, and choices for students as appropriate (Tomlinson and McTighe 2006).

Negotiating needs, possibilities, and promises

At the conclusion of a seminar in 2010 with veteran English teaching professionals in Ouagadougou, one participant recounted how she had taken on an ESP Business English project with great enthusiasm. Initially her students, who were working professionals, were excited about the course—which, she explained, she taught as she had taught any other, with a balance of grammar and communicative activities. Little by little, the busy professionals stopped attending, and she asked some of them why. Their response was that they did not find the course relevant to their needs. Her story was one that we too had experienced in our transition from English for Basic Communicative Purposes to ESP—and we suspect that our readers here will recognize or even have experienced the same sort of disappointment she felt. It does not have to be that way.

In surveying ESP curricula, we found some stark variations in the extent and depth to which ESP programming actually reflects the language in use of a community of practice—for a variety of reasons. Often, ESP is introduced at the tertiary level as a degree requirement for large numbers of students—some with no knowledge of English whatsoever, others at various levels. In our own practice, we have found it useful to think of ESP as a continuum of possibilities, and, we encourage readers to do the same. On one end of that continuum, ESP is tailor-made to address the short- and long-term professional communicative development of individuals—with clearly defined and authentic objectives and ways of reaching those objectives that mirror the sorts of targeted professional language interactions that the same participants are striving to achieve. On the other end of the spectrum, an ESP course might be identical to, for example, any other communicative language course except for a few thematic readings and targeted vocabulary. Regardless of where in the spectrum of possibilities an ESP experience falls, it is critical that ESP professionals articulate that position with clar-

ity—without pretending it is something more or less than what it is.

Finally, we believe that ESP needs analyses should be participatory—honoring and involving the perspectives of those on the receiving end of coursework. Yet we recognize that stakeholders are not always on the same page in terms of what they hope to get out of an ESP course. The owner of a mid-sized North Carolina farm might request an ESP course for migrant workers with the goal of ensuring their safety. However, the same migrant workers might see an ESP course as a means of developing their conversational proficiency in English. For this very reason, contradictory expectations need to be renegotiated in advance of course design and delivery.

Conclusion

To reiterate, as individuals and colleagues working in ESP, we have learned a number of important lessons in the field: not all ESP is created equal; ESP methods are strategic, purposeful, and context specific; and ESP takes time and sufficient needs analysis to make sense. In contrast to much of the practice and scholarly literature, perhaps one of the most important lessons we have learned is that ESP is not simply about learners' needs. ESP also depends on the possibilities of ESP professionals who need to be honest about their own limitations—especially in terms of the time and effort they are able to commit to the needs analysis, syllabus design, and course delivery and what they can and cannot deliver. Constraints of time, budget, space, English proficiency levels, and other factors complicate what ESP can be. Potential ESP practitioners must decide how and to what extent they will meet the challenges that ESP demands and communicate those possibilities to stakeholders. A positive ESP experience largely depends, we argue, on ESP professionals' ability and willingness to recognize and negotiate needs, possibilities, and their own promises with a commitment to an ethic of transparency. With honesty and thoughtfulness, ESP will continue to be a tool for local, regional, and national development in a global era.

References

Allison, D. 1996. Pragmatist discourse and English for Academic Purposes. *English for Specific Purposes* 15 (2): 85–103.

Bailey, K. M. 1998. *Learning about language assessment: Dilemmas, decisions, and directions.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Basturkmen, H. 2010. *Developing courses in English for Specific Purposes.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Belcher, D. 2004. Trends in teaching English for Specific Purposes. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24: 165–186.

Boyd, F. 2002. An ESP program for students of business. In *English for Specific Purposes*, ed. T. Orr, 41–56. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Edge, J. 2003. Imperial troopers and servants of the Lord: A vision of TESOL for the 21st century. *TESOL Quarterly* 37 (4): 701–709.

Hussin, V. 2002. An ESP program for students of nursing. In *English for Specific Purposes*, ed. T. Orr, 25–39. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Hutchinson, T., and A. Waters. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. 2007. English for Specific Purposes: Some influences and impacts. In *International handbook of English language teaching*, ed. J. Cummins and C. Davison, 391–402. New York: Springer.

Hyland, K., and L. Hamp-Lyons. 2002. EAP: Issues and directions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 1 (1): 1–12.

Johns, A. M., and T. Dudley-Evans. 1991. English for Specific Purposes: International in scope, specific in purpose. *TESOL Quarterly* 25 (2): 297–314.

Kumaravadivelu, B. 1994. The postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 28 (1): 27–48.

——. 2001. Towards a postmethod pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly* 35 (4): 537–560.

Lee, E. 2008. The "other(ing)" costs of ESL: A Canadian case study. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 18 (1): 91–108.

Louhiala-Salminen, L., M. Charles, and A. Kankaanranta. 2005. English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies. *English for Specific Purposes* 24 (4): 401–421.

Nickerson, C. 2005. English as a lingua franca in international business contexts. *English for Specific Purposes* 24 (4): 367–380.

Santa, C. M. 1988. *Content reading including study systems: Reading, writing, and studying across the curriculum.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

Tomlinson, C. A., and J. McTighe. 2006. *Integrating differentiated instruction and understanding by design: Connecting content and kids.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Warschauer, M. 2000. The changing global economy and the future of English teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 34 (3): 511–535.

Watson Todd, R. 2003. EAP or TEAP? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 2 (2): 147–156.

Widdowson, H. G. 1994. The ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 28 (2): 377–389.

———. 1998. Context, community, and authentic language. *TESOL Quarterly* 32 (4): 705–716.

SPENCER SALAS is an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics/TEFL at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

LEONARDO A. MERCADO, originally from Queens, New York, is the Academic Director at the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (ICPNA) and has been an ESL/EFL teacher, teacher trainer, program administrator, and certified language proficiency tester for more than 18 years.

LYNN HANSON OUEDRAOGO is the Director of the American Language Center of the U.S. Embassy in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. She has been an EFL teacher and program administrator for over 15 years and a teacher trainer for 8 years.

BERNADETTE MUSETTI received her MA in TESOL from the Monterey Institute of International Studies and earned a PhD at the University of California Davis. A long-time ESL instructor, she is currently an Associate Professor and the Director of Liberal Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California.