

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

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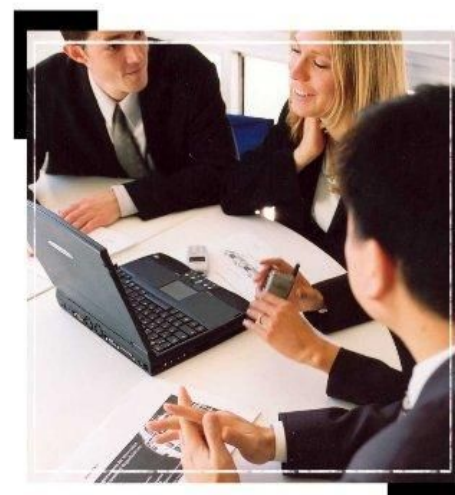
Almost every field has its own "jargon" or specialized words and phrases used in the course of everyday work. For certain fields, however, such as business, medicine, and various scientific and technical fields, this jargon can be both much more complicated and complex. And because English is so widespread, it is becoming more and more important to learn English for specific purposes. Because of this, seminars, workshops, and even entire study programs and schools have popped up to focus on Business English, Medical English, and other types of "English for Specific Purposes". Therefore, in this article we shall provide a general overview of English for Specific Purposes.

Let us start by observing how ESP (English for Specific Purposes) emerged. Two remarkable linguists, Hutchinson and Waters, offered a thorough description of ESP. What is SPE? Some people described it as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others, however, were more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes. Two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale, being the United States the most notably economic power in the post-war world. Therefore, the role of international language fell to English. Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. English became the language of this knowledge.

Hutchinson and Waters defined ESP as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning. ESP is broken down into three branches: English for Science and Technology, English for Business and Economics, and English for Social Studies, being the two former ones the centre of our article.

After having provided a brief explanation about ESP we will analyse the first type of ESP: Scientific and Technological English.

Scientific English and technical vocabulary had been growing steadily since the Renaissance. But from the 19th century on with the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying period of scientific exploration the lexicon grew a great deal. By the end of the century there was a recognizable variety of scientific English. Nevertheless, it is nowadays when this process is at its height due to the great deal of technological and scientific research concerning aspects such as the human genome or computer technological advances. Nowadays, most scientific and technological investigations are carried out in English since it is considered the lingua franca. For instance most medical conferences and



journals present their projects or discoveries in English in order to have a worldwide recognition. Therefore if English is considered the language of science all around the World, how does it deviate from Standard English?

As soon as we approach Scientific English, the first impression is that its distinctiveness lies in its lexicon, due to the great number of technical terms. But this situation should not lead us to ignore the grammatical features of scientific expressions, since they may also present a major difficulty in comprehension because of the way the sentences and discourse have been structures.

As far as lexicon is concerned, there are a lot of new words used by scientists and technicians nowadays to create new terms to define something new. Many are adopted internationally with slight variations, and many are made up from Latin and Greek roots. Those terms are known as technical vocabulary (i.e. leukocyte, diabetes).

Regarding syntactical features, scientists and technicians are greatly concerned with accuracy. Scientific and technical English is practical and utilitarian in purpose. Technological language prefers the use of impersonal sentences where the agent is not normally mentioned if it is a person. The simple present tense is used for true statements, formulae equations, and definitions of laws. The infinitive is used to express purpose or function; and constructions like "If.....then" to indicate stages in actions or arguments. Besides noun phrases present complex structures.

Consequently when less usual patterns of grammatical structure combine with a high proportion of technical vocabulary, the result is a sharp increase in comprehension difficulty. When scientific narrative is presented to the general public by professional scientists it is widely criticised for its opaqueness and impenetrability. But, from time to time, science surprises everyone by producing acclaimed exceptions of its own. That is the case of one of the best-selling scientific books of the 1980s: Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time. It was widely commended for the clarity with which it expounded fundamental ideas in 20th century physics.

Before ending with scientific and technological English, it is important to point out that for instance scientific English is subdivided in different categories such as chemistry, physics, Biology, Medicine and geology. Each one makes use of English in a peculiar way regarding lexicon and syntactic structures so when teaching them instructors must focus on different aspects.

After having dealt with Scientific and Technological English, we shall centre on Business English (also Administrative). Most business in the world is carried out in English. That is the reason why currently there is a significant upbringing of English courses and programmes dedicated to the teaching of English for business purposes.

There is a great variety of business branches: banking, travel and tourism, insurance... They use similar methods and formulae for their commercial communication, although they obviously need some specialization in the use of specific documents and lexical fields.

One of the most outstanding aspects of business English because of the frequency with which they are used is the writing of formal letters. These types of letters follow certain conventions in the layout, which clearly distinguish them from informal letters. They are divided into three main parts:

firstly, an opening paragraph, stating the reason for writing the letter; secondly, a central paragraph giving relevant information; and finally a closing paragraph concluding and thanking. Formal letters have to be written taking into account a set of presentation principles, such as the heading, opening and closing remarks, and so on. Few people will want to do business with a company that send badly laid-out letters.

Formal letters usually use a clear and precise style, with short sentences and paragraphs going directly to the point, aimed to be read quite quickly to get the necessary information. The tone is usually quite impersonal, without showing any kind of personal involvement.

Nevertheless, during the last few years, there has been a definite move away from the very formal, long-winded English that we used to find in business correspondence. The tendency now is to be much more direct. This business letters are becoming more modern and clearer in style. This is mainly due to the increasing use of faxes and e-mails in business and administrative correspondence. Many of the strict conventions of letter-writing have also been relaxed and it is quite usual to find a lot of variety in the way letters are laid out or worded. Writers often use informal expressions and forms such as contractions, whereas previously this would have been avoided.

An important branch of business English is legal English. Legal English has been greatly criticised for its opaqueness and impenetrability. Legal English has developed complex grammatical structures in order to integrate several relevant issues in a single statement. It is repetitive and contains long lists of items. Then, legal language depends a great deal on a fairly small set of grammatical and lexical features. For instance, the use of modal verbs like must, shall, or may to distinguish between obligation and discretion; and the use of pronouns like 'all, whoever' or generic nouns such as 'person' to foster a law's general applicability.

As we have observed English is such an important language that it is not only the lingua franca of contemporary world but also the language used worldwide by many specific languages such as science or business among other fields. ●

Bibliografía

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