**The Characteristics of ESP**

There have been many attempts to identify the characteristics of ESP. Most of these studies are based on absolute and variable factors due to the fact that “the division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics, in particular, is very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP” (Anthony, 1997).However, we can find in the literature four major definitions that can be considered as the most important landmarks in the process of studying ESP.

**1 Hutchinson and Waters’ View**

In “English for Specific Purposes” (1987), Hutchinson and Waters lay out the following characteristics of ESP:

1. ESP is an approach rather than a product which means it doesn’t call for a particular kind of language, teaching materials or methodology.
2. ESP is related to learners’ needs, the language required and the learning context. Learners’ reasons for learning English determine the language to be taught.

**2 Strevens’ View:** Strevens’ (1988) definition of ESP distinguishes between four absolute characteristics and two variable characteristics.

The absolute characteristics consider ESP as:

1. designed to meet the specified needs of the learner.
2. related in content (in themes and topics) to specific professions, disciplines occupations and activities.
3. centred on language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, vocabulary, discourse analysis and so on, and analysis of the discourse.
4. in contrast with ‘General English’.

The variable characteristics are:

1. ESP may be restricted as to the learning skills to be learned, such as writing or reading.
2. ESP does not have to be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

**3 Robinson’s View**

Robinson (1991) seems to be on the same wavelength with Hutchinson and Waters as she admits the primacy of needs analysis in defining ESP. Besides, her definition of ESP is grounded on the one hand, two key defining criteria common to all ESP programmes, as well as, on the other a number of characteristics that are likely to occur.

The key defining criteria of ESP set by Robinson are as follows:

(a) ESP is “goal-directed”, i.e., a means rather than a subject studied for its own sake. In other words, learners do not learn the English language for the sake of it but because they need to use it.

1. ESP courses develop from a needs analysis which “aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English” Robinson (1991:3)

Robinson (1980) also identifies the following characteristics as being particular to ESP.

1. ESP courses are generally constrained by a limited time period, in which their objectives have to be achieved. (b) ESP courses are taught to adults (c) ESP courses are taught in homogeneous classes in terms of work or specialist studies that the students are involved in.(For example, all employees in a company may be required to study English, they will have the shared knowledge and values of the company, but have different jobs to do). (d)ESP courses may include specialist language and specialist activities

Robinson (cited in Dudley-Evans, 2001) suggested in her first overview of ESP (1980) that limited duration (i.e. an intensive course of a fixed length) and adult learners are defining features of ESP courses.

However, in her second survey (1991) she accepts that a significant number of ESP courses are not of limited duration (e.g. a three-or four- year programme as part of a university degree).

Besides, she admits that ESP can be taught at school even where English is not the pupils’ first language. She also assumes that though ESP is generally taught to intermediate or advanced students of English it can also be taught to beginners.

**4 Dudley-Evans and St John’s View**

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) build up their own ‘characteristics of ESP’ apart from the work of the three researchers mentioned earlier. For them each definition has validity but also weaknesses, either in the definition or in the characteristics described. However, they see that Stevens’ definition is the most comprehensive of the three quoted.

Nevertheless, they criticise it, and consider that Strevens’ reference to content as a characteristic of ESP can lead to confusion as it “may confirm the false impression held by many teachers that ESP is always and necessarily related directly to subject content” (1998:3). They believe that ESP teaching should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad discipline. For example, Business English teaching should reflect the business context in which business meetings or negotiations take place (Charles, 1996).

Dudley-Evans and St John also criticise Strevens’ idea which suggests ESP to be in contrast with General English. They assume that ESP course methodology should combine General English principles with ESP course methodology and subject specific activities. Thus, General English courses should not be in contrast to ESP courses, as Strevens proposes.

Moreover, Robinson’s mention of “homogeneous classes” as an exclusive feature of ESP is also criticised by Dudley-Evans and St John as leading to the same false impression, i.e. the restriction of the teaching of ESP to homogeneous classes only.

Thus Dudley-Evans and St John see the absolute characteristics of ESP as follows:

1. ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner.
2. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
3. ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres and associated language that students need to be able to manipulate in order to carry out the activity (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:4)

The variable characteristics are:

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English.

By methodology, here Dudley-Evans and St John refer to the nature of the interaction between the ESP teacher and the learners which is different from that in General English class. Therefore the use of a distinctive methodology is a variable characteristic of ESP as Dudley-Evans (2001) clearly illustrates it:

“The ESP teacher needs to bear in mind and exploit if possible this specific subject knowledge, which leads to classroom interaction and teaching methodology that can be quite different from that of General English; however, in some situations-e.g. pre-study or pre-work courses where learners have not started their academic or professional activity and therefore have less subject knowledge-teaching methodology will be similar to that of General English.” (Dudley-Evans, 2001:132)

1. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either a tertiary-level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level.
2. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system , but it can be used with beginners (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:5)

The definition Dudley-Evans and St John offer is clearly influenced by that of Strevens (1988), although they have improved it substantially by removing the absolute characteristic that ESP is "in contrast with 'General English'" (Johns and Dudley-Evans , 1991: 298), and have introduced more variable characteristics.

From the definition, it is clear that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to target a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen simply as an “*approach*” to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an “*attitude of mind*”.

This conclusion echoes that made by Hutchinson and Waters (1987:19) who state that "ESP is 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 a recognizable activity of English Language Teaching (ELT) with some specific characteristics. Dudley-Evans and St. Johns‟ tried (1998) to apply a series of characteristics, some absolute and some variable, to outline the major features of ESP.

**Absolute Characteristics:**

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners;

2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;

3. ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genre appropriate to these activities.

**Variable Characteristics:**

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;

2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;

3. 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;

4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.

5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems, but it can be used with beginners.

(Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998:4)

It is obvious that the absolute characteristics are specific to ESP because learners‟ needs are of central importance when designing language activities. Concerning the variable features, ESP courses can be designed for a specific group using definite teaching methodology, nevertheless, all learners‟ categories and disciplines can be concerned with ESP. For that reason ESP should be seen simply as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans and St. John illustrate as an 'attitude

of mind'. Similarly, Hutchinson and waters‟ (1987:19) stated that, "ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".