

# The Labyrinth of Technical English

Cristina Maria ANDREI\*

<https://doi.org/10.52744/AUCSFLSA.2024.01.03>

## Abstract:

*ESP is a complex matter to deal with for teachers as well as for students. It involves effort and commitment on both sides, a great deal of free time necessary for training, seriousness and, more than anything else, motivation; technical English is not just a long list of words to be learned by heart or complicated set phrases, it is a mix of everyday English vocabulary and conversations that are commonly met in technical contexts. Acquiring the terms in the field of expertise is vital, but only used in appropriate authentic situations may help learners get the real meaning and may help them to handle them correctly. One key aspect is to master the ability to adapt the knowledge from the class to the related work field opportunities. Useful materials are hard to create since the English teacher has no connection to the technical field, thus, a collaboration with other teachers is a positive aspect that should be taken into consideration. Students may also contribute with relevant information in the class, generating a bond with the teacher and a friendly learning environment where everybody plays a role, brings a contribution and offers support. It may be perceived as a team work coordinated by a teacher in the role of the leader. However, recently, a lot of specialised books for teaching technical English have appeared on the market, facilitating the entire teaching process.*

**Keywords:** technical English, effort, motivation, teacher support

## Designing a Course for ESP

Teaching ESP is hard work because it involves more than just basic English knowledge. Technical vocabulary is difficult to acquire and to be understood properly without being skilled in the field; thus, putting it into practice means creating a wide range of exercises that are intended to repeat and use specific terms until they become not only familiar to students, but are inherently absorbed.

Searching for real contexts and adapting them to the level of each class as well as coordinating all sorts of tasks based on the technical vocabulary present in them, needs effort, dedication and patience.

“As ESP professionals, we must be prepared to find out how language is used in real world situations and teach that language. (...) We must be

---

\* University of Craiova, Department of Applied Foreign Languages



ready to develop courses that teach authentic language from many different fields, based on accurate needs analysis and appropriate materials and methodologies. We must acknowledge the fact that much of the language that our students need will not be found in any course books or pre-packaged materials; therefore, we must be willing to prepare our own". (Rebecca Smoak, 2003:27)

The design of the course is complex and should be focused on the current needs of the students and their prospects of employment. Only this way a course can arouse the students' interest and enhance their desire to study more and to become effective communicators. Moreover, it should be dynamic, students being actively involved in a wide range of activities either individually or in teams. The language teacher has an essential role, that of leading the entire learning process and encouraging students to attain their maximum potential.

"ESP focuses on when, where and why learners need the language either in study or workplace contexts. Decisions about what to teach, and sometimes how to teach (...) are informed by descriptions of how language is used in the particular contexts the learners will work or study in. There is thus a strong focus in ESP on language as „situated language use". (Basturkmen, Helen, 2010:8)

Lately, making up a language course for specific purposes has become a lower priority than other issues. Since English has widened its horizons, in terms of becoming an international language of communication, a lot of books specifically designed to teach ESP have come out on the market. There are still areas that haven't been covered completely, especially in the case of micro specializations but work is still in progress and a wide range of materials are available for most major technical areas of expertise. Therefore, the effort of the teacher has somehow diminished, in the sense that the emphasis has switched from sketching a course to identifying the right materials, adding extra activities for developing and deepening the ones existing in the students' books.

The interest in ESP courses has increased a lot due to the demand of technical workers on the labour market and the necessity of having appropriate materials and approaches to teaching them is obvious. It is clear that technical students rely on specific terms that are commonly met in their daily work situations but basic English notions are inevitable.

„Although ESP and general English differ on many points such as vocabulary and content, ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform job-related functions." (Nalan Kenny, Linda Escobar, 2020:118)



Technical vocabulary may be rough and unattractive most of the times. Finding enjoyable activities to teach such vocabulary items is a challenge and making them even more appealing for the students seems like an impossible aim to get. Pronunciation may be difficult and the whole context may induce a feeling of anxiety. How can a teacher create a pleasant leaning environment and support technical vocabulary acquisition?

### **Teacher's role in ESP**

Students that study technical English are generally adults who are „constrained’ by the job requirements or young people in search of a better perspective in their future career. Adults are not easy to deal with. They already have their personalities shaped and tend to be judgmental. Their expectations are high; they want to achieve immediate success and manifest strong commitment at the beginning. Being more aware of the implications a foreign language may have on their lives, they are willing to pay a huge amount of time and effort to obtain perceivable results. In time, the situation may change; some may see the experience a wonderful adventure on the realm of knowledge and will push their limits to attain success, others may find it too difficult to cope with, especially when the other responsibilities overwhelm them, and have the tendency to give up. Moreover, each person possesses a certain set of skills for acquiring foreign languages; some just find the process of learning languages effortless and interesting, while others may simply lose themselves in the grammar rules or may encounter difficulties when having to utter an oral speech or taking part in discussions with their peers on proposed topics. The teacher should be there for both sides but more supportive for those who feel discouraged.

“Every student has a different ability when learning a second language. Some grasp it easily and develop a sympathy to it, others struggle and have difficulties which could lead to being demotivated and lack of interest. This leads to the question what an English teacher can and has to do, in order to teach students successfully. Nowadays teachers are supposed not only to educate, but also to create a suitable environment for students”. (Keller, Tom, 2011:3)

There are a lot of tricks that a teacher could use to enhance the learning experience. They are flexible but together can create a positive environment for all the people in the class:

\* maintain your students’ interest at a high level all the time; the worst „enemy” of the teacher is „boredom”. It’s a struggle nowadays to keep students interested during classes because the temptations are high and, in the case of adults, other factors such as tiredness from work or



stress with daily lives influence their coordination and focus during lessons.

“Students get bored easily. They expect the teacher to plan her lessons so that learning becomes interesting, challenging and varied. They expect the teacher to teach in a way that is appropriate to the level being taught, and to the individuals in the class. They expect the teacher to adapt and supplement the course book being used and definitely not to rely on it as the sole resource. In short, they expect the teacher to know to teach effectively, and for the teacher to be stimulating.” (Dudley-Evans, Tony, Maggie Jo St John, 1998, p. 83)

\*provide lessons that keep the students’ attention at a high level is beneficial; make them attractive by using plenty of visuals that can help them easily associate technical words to various sketches and drawings.

\*be flexible when it comes to their professional needs; for adults, learning a foreign language is a voluntary act in most cases which is somehow connected to certain aspects such as: job requirements, a strong desire to develop themselves, a hobby (for pleasure and fun) etc.

\*be there when they don’t have enough confidence to perform tasks; many adults experience a sort of trauma when having to speak in a foreign language. Assessment is perceived with a higher level of maturity than children do, so it may be seen as a source of stress not as an indicator of progress.

\*don’t let other students in the class say malicious remarks regarding their classmates or perform any other kind of „mockery” such as: laughing at their peers’ mistakes or manifesting an arrogant attitude in the class; there is no room for making jokes on any possible attempt to use the language either in exercises or other types of conversations

\*remove any possible sign of nervousness; controlling personal emotions is a „must”; personal aspects should be left at the entrance of the class; once a teacher is in front of the class, all the eyes are directed towards him/her; a wrong attitude would generate hesitation, lack of understanding, fear of participating at activities and failure; sometimes it’s complicated to do it; teachers are not always in the mood, but, starting teaching in a friendly environment is a plus and may remove the initial bad state or may ameliorate it.

\*show that you really love the teaching job; the enthusiasm will be stimulating for the students and will induce a pleasant feeling of fulfilment; they will want to „copy” you, to become just like you;

\*focus on major mistakes and avoid error correction at every single step; this approach will hinder any sign of courage to do certain tasks; shy students will definitely block themselves and will avoid tasks in the future



\*short breaks play a major role; funny elements during a speech help to release tension and create a serene learning environment

\*try to discover the personality of your students, to understand when they are not ready to do something, when they are frustrated, when they need to be left alone, when they have a strong desire to evolve, when they feel sick or simply not in the mood. A teacher is not a psychologist for sure, but identifying some aspects in the students' behaviour may be useful for giving a different direction to the lesson.

According to Keller, the roles that an English teacher has to fulfil are numerous from controller to assessor and manager. He/she may be perceived as a resource, participant, investigator and role model.

### **Vocabulary in ESP classes**

Basically, the structure of an English course in ESP classes contains a great deal of general English but specific technical terms are inserted either in short authentic texts or in exercises meant to familiarize students with them and to understand how to use them correctly and efficiently. For the teacher, the hardest part is to find enough time to prepare the lesson. Getting acquainted to technical terms involves using technical dictionaries, specialized books and even the collaboration of a teacher in the technical field. The texts which are extracted from technical books should not be too long or too complicated, otherwise, the learner may feel discouraged and may form an aversion towards English. Once this opinion is created, it is extremely difficult to change it when it comes to adults. They are less „flexible” than children, therefore, the teacher should carefully insert the right „number” of specialized terms in texts surrounded by speech items that can help students work out their meaning; illustrations may be of great help for visual learners and may give useful for a proper acquisition. This is the „comprehension” stage which is followed by the „production” one which is aimed at fixing all the notions by using a wide range of exercises.

When teaching vocabulary for ESP „it is important to distinguish between vocabulary needed for comprehension and that needed for production. In comprehension, deducing the meaning of vocabulary from the context and from the structure of the actual word is the most important method of learning new vocabulary. For production purposes, storage and retrieval are significant. Various techniques have been suggested for storing vocabulary: the use of word association, (...) the use of visual images to help remember a word. (Dudley-Evans, Tony, Maggie Jo, 1998:83)

Tamara Jones in her book entitles „Fifty Ways to Teach Vocabulary” suggests a series of activities which are aimed at reviewing and



remembering the vocabulary items taught in class. She suggests that they are suitable for different ages, from children to adults and that may be exercised in pairs, in small or larger groups or individually. She gives examples of: „moving card match, shout it out, line up, vocabulary circles, spelling ball toss, line up races, surveys, the hot seat, what they said, vanishing words, flyswatter game, pick a card, memory pictures, correction relay, write it right, words on the wall, stand for your word etc”. (Jones, Tamara, 2013: 3-4).

The key aspect is to provide students with challenging activities, personalized to their English level and practised at their own pace so that they don't feel the pressure of having to memorize them at a fast rate.

### Conclusions

In a nutshell, teaching technical vocabulary in English as a foreign language is an interesting experience for the teacher as well as for students. It requires plenty of work on both sides, and more than anything, involvement which comes from having a passion for teaching (in the case of the teacher) and trying to develop in the case of students. However, it is beneficial since technical English means more than everyday vocabulary. It is like a „different” area in which it may seem complicated to approach, but once you start to know it, you may like it. There may appear situations in which both the teacher and the student encounter terms or explanations that are not familiar or that seem complicated, but that's the whole „charm”. It is hard to get bored when you have something new in front of you every day, something to discover, something to understand and to know.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Basturkmen, Helen, *Developing Courses in English for Specific Purposes*”, Palgrave Macmillan Publishing, 2010
- Dudley-Evans, Tony, Maggie Jo St John, *Developments in ESP – A multi-disciplinary approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Jones, Tamara, *Fifty Ways to Teach Vocabulary, Tips for ESL/EFL teachers*, Wayzgoose Press, 2013
- Keller, Tom, *The Various Roles of the Teacher in the English Classroom*, Open Publishing GmbH, 2011
- Nalan Kenny, Linda Escobar -editors, *The changing face of ESP in today's classroom and workplace*, 2020
- Rebecca Smoak, „What is English for Specific Purposes?”, January 2003, Volume 41, Number 1, 2003