

# ON TEACHING ESP AT TERTIARY LEVEL: THE CASE OF ENGLISH FOR GEOGRAPHY. PART 1

**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is to demonstrate a few activities that can make a useful contribution to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to students of geography at tertiary level. I describe case- and pronunciation-based tasks that can be used with such groups of learners at the level of upper-intermediate (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages level B2+), and illustrate them with examples. All the activities presented in this article have been used by the author with several groups of full-time students doing master's degrees in Geography at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków over the last few academic years.

**Keywords:** English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Geography students, case-based tasks, pronunciation-based activities

## 1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is not a recent phenomenon in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as it was one of its outstanding areas of activity in the 1960s. Although a lot of time has passed since then, experts provide varied definitions and characteristics of what ESP constitutes. Hutchison and Waters, for instance, state that:

ESP must be seen as an approach not as a product. ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. (...), it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? (...) ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning (1987: 19).

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) in turn define ESP in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics. The former features include:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learners;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centred on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

The latter characteristics are:

- 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 used for learners at secondary school level;
- 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 (1998: 4–5).

Although other authors have attempted to put forward a number of additional features of ESP, the definition offered by Dudley-Evans and St John seems to be sufficient to be able to clarify, at least to a certain extent, what ESP is or is not.

As far as the forces that contributed to the emergence of ESP in the late 1960s are concerned, Hutchison and Waters identify the following factors: a growing demand for tailor-made English courses in a world driven by technology and commerce, new developments in linguistics focusing on how language is used in communication which coincided with the trend towards English courses for particular groups of students, and an emphasis put on the learners and their needs (1987: 6–8).

One of the questions one may ask is how a General English course differs from an ESP course. According to Day and Krzanowski, teachers of General English have to decide what materials and methodologies are most useful for a particular group of learners. ESP instructors, however, should also take another factor into account: subject specific knowledge, because students usually know more about their specialisation than the ESP teacher, whose knowledge of a particular field is generally rather superficial. They suggest three strategies that ESP practitioners should pursue:

- honesty and openness, i.e., learning ought to be a process where teachers, being experts in foreign language and teaching methods, cooperate with their learners who feel confident in their specialised fields;
- preparation, i.e., learning about the students' specialisation that includes, among other things, pre-course research, precise planning of the problems that ESP teachers may encounter during classes, etc.;
- and confidence, i.e., ESP teachers' belief in their ability to make the learning process successful and motivate their students (2011: 7).

Finally, ESP can be divided into numerous (sub)categories, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), etc. Recently there has also been a rapid growth in

English courses aimed at specific disciplines, e.g. English for Chemistry or English for Geography.

## 2. Examples of ESP activities for Geography students at level B2+

### 2.1. Case-based tasks

The case study method has long been recognised as a supplementary teaching method and it has been used by teachers, instructors and experts in various disciplines in order to engage their students in what happens in class. “Teachers interested in involving their students more fully in classroom discussion have found that case studies can provide a rich basis for developing students’ problem-solving and decision making skills. While the curricula at business, law, and medical schools have for many years been based on the analysis of real world cases, professors in a variety of disciplines have been finding that an occasional case study can help them assess students’ ability to synthesize, evaluate, and apply information and concepts learned in lectures and texts.”<sup>1</sup> As a teacher with broad experience in conducting ESP courses at the Institute of Economics and Management, I am aware that the majority of Business English course books include case studies as part of their content, which proves that the case-based method can also facilitate the foreign language teaching process. I have tried teaching English with case studies on a number of occasions with several groups at the level B2+, and it turns out that this teaching method can also be applied successfully to teaching ESP to students of Geography.

Cases can have various formats. The easiest ones can be simple, descriptive cases where students are provided with the necessary data describing the context of the problem, including reading materials and/or statistics, and are obliged to discuss individually or in pairs/groups a set of questions prepared by the teacher. Fitzpatrick’s article called *A Brief History of China’s One-child Policy*<sup>2</sup> is an example of authentic input material that provides the learners with historical background on China’s one-child policy, which has been of particular concern to demographers over the last few decades. After explaining the most useful and problematic words and expressions, such as *populous* or *infanticide*, students may discuss the text by answering several questions related to it. The final part of the case-based session ought to focus on discussing, preferably in pairs or groups, several questions concerning the most significant implications of this policy. The list that can be used as the basis for follow-up classroom discussion is endless. Appendix 1 includes a few instances of questions concerning the fertility policy in China that students may discuss in class.

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<sup>1</sup> Teaching with Case Studies, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Fitzpatrick, 2009.

One of the assumptions of the case study method is that in such a session students ought to be asked to consider an open-ended question with a number of potential solutions (point 7 is an example of such a question!). However, we must bear in mind that such case-based tasks should not be too complex since groups of university students at the level B2+ are frequently mixed-ability classes, which implies that the learners are not homogenous in terms of their linguistic competence. It seems that more complicated cases would be appropriate for students at the levels of C1 and C2.

It should be added that the case session concerning the one-child policy was not a separate lesson, but only a component of a ninety-minute class on population. The material about China was preceded by introducing fundamental terms used by demographers, such as ‘population density’ in ‘LEDCs’ and ‘MEDCs’ or ‘population pyramids,’ analysing factors that affect population density, and discussing a few brief reading materials containing some demographic information. The case session about China’s fertility policy took approximately 30 minutes (in fact, during the class the students also discussed another case, which was much shorter than the one described above, about the ageing population in the UK!). It was also accompanied by a listening comprehension activity based on video material. As a home assignment the students were obliged to write an academic article on China’s one-child policy, i.e., whether or not they think it is a good solution, in order to integrate writing with the China-related input material discussed in class.

The session concerning China’s demographic policy is only an example of a case that can be used with university students of Geography during an ESP course. Here are four other instances of case studies that such learners may find engaging: ‘The Stolen Generations’ (the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families in Australia between the 1910s and 1970s), ‘The Aral Sea’ (a human-induced environmental and humanitarian disaster), ‘Sustainable Transport in London’ (the cycle hire scheme and hydrogen cell buses) and ‘Tourism in Goa’ (unsustainable tourism in Goa, India).

## 2.2. Pronunciation-based activities

Most English language teachers focus on improving their learners’ command of grammar and vocabulary, practising their listening, speaking and writing skills, and allowing them to take part in functional dialogues. At universities and colleges of higher education they also teach specialist terminology and academic language to their students, especially during ESP courses, to make them feel confident in their specialisms. However, they “make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing. It is possible that they are nervous of dealing with sounds and intonation; perhaps they feel they have too much to do already and pronunciation teaching will only make things worse. They may claim that even without a formal pronunciation syllabus, and without specific pronunciation teaching, many students seem to acquire serviceable

pronunciation in the course of their studies anyway.” (Harmer, 2010: 248) Thus, one may ask the following question: should occasional pronunciation-based tasks be part of ESP courses?

Let us consider an example. In Poland Tadeusz Kościuszko is famous, among other things, for being the leader of the national uprising against Russia and Prussia after the Second Partition and who, thanks to his valiant peasant scythemen, succeeded in defeating a professional Russian army at the battle of Raclawice in 1794. However, in the USA Thaddeus Kosciusko, as he is known there, made a name for himself as, for instance, one of the heroes at the battle of Saratoga that took place in 1777, or as the engineer selected in the late 1770s by General George Washington, who was elected as the first President of the United States in 1788, to design the fortifications for the oldest American military academy at West Point. All these facts are of less importance to Geography students, who associate him with Mount Kosciusko, the highest peak in Australia named after one of the greatest patriots in the history of Poland by the explorer Paul Edmund Strzelecki in the mid-19th century. However, the vast majority of students do not know that the correct pronunciation of Kościuszko is /ˌkɔsiˈʌskəʊ/.<sup>3</sup>

In my view, students’ command of English pronunciation concerning geographical names is rather constrained. They are familiar with the correct pronunciation of the most common proper nouns, e.g., place names, but they have difficulty in articulating those more sophisticated ones. As a matter of fact, when I start an ESP course with full-time students doing master’s degrees in Geography at the beginning of a new academic year, I invariably ask them to complete a detailed needs analysis, known also as an audit analysis, to be capable of delivering a high-quality course designed to their preferences and meeting their expectations.<sup>4</sup> One of their most frequent requests included in this pre-course questionnaire is, among other things, to give them a chance to improve their knowledge of geographical names (in the overwhelming majority of cases they do not know their equivalents in English!) and their pronunciation. Thus, it would seem that being able to pronounce place names, including the names of countries, large cities, rivers, deserts, capes, etc., is a useful skill for geography students, which they frequently lack.

Quizzes are pronunciation-based tasks which I consistently use with them during classes on Physical Geography. Although the learners know the correct answers to most questions immediately, they are frequently not able to pronounce some geographical names properly, especially those lesser-known ones, such as the Euphrates (/juˈfreti:z/) or the Seychelles (/seiˈfelz/). Let us consider the following examples taken from a quiz on the physical features of Europe (Appendix 2):

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet and focus on the model of British English pronunciation. All the phonetic transcriptions are taken from Wells, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Needs analyses are recommended in a number of publications on ESP. For instance, a good template of an audit analysis can be found in Hutchison & Waters, 1987: 59.

1. What mountain chain of south-western Europe stretches from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the east to the Bay of Biscay on the Atlantic Ocean in the west?
2. This sea is located between the Greek peninsula and Asia Minor. Name this sea.
3. What's the name of the second longest river in Europe that passes through nine countries?
4. This peninsula is separated from Africa by the Straits of Gibraltar. What is it called?
5. What's the name of the archipelago in the western Mediterranean Sea lying 80 to 300 km east of the Spanish mainland?

It goes without saying that such questions are relatively easy for students whose specialised field is Geography. However, the objective of such tasks is not to teach the students new facts concerning Physical Geography, but to teach them how to articulate, for example, mountain ranges, archipelagos or peninsulas in English correctly. In fact, the percentage of upper-intermediate students who know how to pronounce the Pyrenees (/ˌpɪrəˈniːz/), the Aegean (/ɪˈdʒiːən/) Sea, the Iberian /aɪˈbɪəriən/ Peninsula or the Danube (/ˈdænjuːb/) is rather low. Moreover, such questions also include other geographical names, e.g., the Strait of Gibraltar (/dʒɪˈbrɔːltə/) or the Mediterranean /ˌmedɪtəˈreɪniən/ Sea, and their pronunciation may also be practised with students in class.

### 3. Conclusions

The case- and pronunciation-based tasks suggested in this article are examples of activities which can be used during ESP courses at the level B2+. I have attempted to demonstrate how to use them with a particular category of learners, i.e., university students doing master's degrees in Geography, and have provided examples.

As far as the case-based method is concerned, it should be treated as a supplementary teaching method. There are numerous benefits of such tasks, e.g., students discuss authentic reading materials that provide background information about a particular case-based project, participate willingly in classroom discussions, develop their interpersonal skills (e.g., problem solving, decision making and/or team work), improve their speaking skills, etc.

As for pronunciation-based tasks, ESP teachers should bear in mind the following before embarking on them. First of all, it is impossible to make students of Geography familiar with the phonetic transcriptions of all the place names that exist, because such a list is infinite. However, they ought to be able to pronounce at least the most common geographical names correctly and be accustomed to verifying those which they need but cannot articulate properly in a reliable source. In my view, this type of task does not only apply to English for Geography. For instance, those who specialise in philosophy should be taught that Descartes is pronounced /ˈdeɪkɑːt/, whereas students of Polish philology ought to be able to pronounce Don

Quixote /'kwiksət/, the well-known literary character. Therefore, pronunciation-based exercises may also be used with students of various specialisms. Moreover, students' pronunciation ought to be practised only once in a while due to the lack of time during ESP courses (normally only lasting for sixty hours!) and the necessity to focus on developing learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in particular. Finally, such short, five- or ten-minute tasks, including carefully selected examples, frequently constitute an element of relaxation during ESP classes.

To sum up, the case- and pronunciation-based tasks described in this paper are only suggestions for teachers conducting ESP courses. I will highlight other activities that may contribute to teaching ESP at university in the next article in this series.

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## APPENDIX 1

### **Discuss the following questions concerning China's one-child policy:**

1. The one-child policy has been implemented strictly in urban areas, but it has been harder to control families living in remote rural areas. Do you think this is fair?
2. Ethnic minorities are not subject to the one-child policy. Do you think this is fair?
3. China's fertility policy has been relaxed recently, e.g., some couples can now apply to have a second child. Do you think that the one-child policy should be relaxed even further?
4. According to the 2010 census, in China men outnumber women by 34 million, which is caused by its one-child policy and a preference for sons. Birth-sex ratios are high (120 male babies for every 100 female babies born in 2010). It is estimated that the sex ratio of the population will continue to rise and will peak between 2030 and 2045, which means that 20 percent of men will not be able to marry. A surplus of 40–50 million bachelors will have negative social repercussions, including increased crime, crimes against women and the formation of gangs. What do you think the Chinese government should do about this?<sup>5</sup>
5. In China the families that comply with the one-child policy are rewarded, but those violating it are punished, e.g., they don't receive some benefits and are fined. Do you think the state has the right to punish its citizens for having more children than one?
6. On the one hand, there are already "bachelor villages" in China with huge numbers of single men having very little chance of finding partners. On the other hand, those who leave the rural areas to seek employment in cities are faced with numerous problems. Can you think of any alternatives for such men?
7. If you were Chinese and wanted to have several children, what would you do? For instance, would you emigrate?

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<sup>5</sup> This point is based on the article den Boer & Hudson, 2014.

## APPENDIX 2

1. What mountain chain of south-western Europe stretches from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the east to the Bay of Biscay on the Atlantic Ocean in the west?
2. This sea is located between the Greek peninsula and Asia Minor. Name this sea.
3. What's the name of the second longest river in Europe that passes through nine countries?
4. This peninsula is separated from Africa by the Straits of Gibraltar. What is it called?
5. What's the name of the archipelago in the western Mediterranean Sea lying 80 to 300 km east of the Spanish mainland?

## THE ANSWER KEY

1. The Pyrenees /ˌpɪrəˈniːz/
2. The Aegean /ɪˈdʒiːən/ Sea
3. The Danube /ˈdænjuːb/
4. The Iberian /aɪˈbɛəriən/ Peninsula
5. The Balearic /ˌbæɪlɪˈæriːk/ Islands