

# A Probe Into Collaborative Interdisciplinary ESP Teaching

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The traditional College English teaching in China increasingly fails to meet the needs of cultivating practical talents. ESP teaching offers a new insight in line with the needs and goals of talents cultivating because of its openness, practicality, interactivity, and professionalism. Based on the disciplinary nature of ESP teaching, collaboration between language teachers and discipline teachers helps settle the dilemma of insufficient professional knowledge among language experts and inadequate foreign language proficiency among discipline experts.

*Keywords:* College English, ESP teaching, disciplinary nature, interdisciplinary collaboration

## Introduction

With many occurrences like the rapid expansion in scientific, the growth of science and technology, the increased use of English as the international language of science, technology and business, and the increased economic power of certain English-speaking countries, English for Specific Purposes or ESP has emerged as a single field in the 1960s. Since the emergent years in the 1960s, ESP has become a vital and innovative activity within the Teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language movement (Stewart & Perry, 2005).

Since 1978, College English, known as the public foreign language in China, has gradually received attention from the educational authorities, and thus English teaching as a course has greatly improved. With the increasing need of cultivating applied talents in 1990s, ESP gradually became an important issue in the field of English education. Up till now, how to position General English and ESP in the reform of College English teaching remains the controversial topic. However, it is widely acknowledged that ESP may meet the needs of English learners for specific purposes in accordance with their professions or job description. More and more college English teachers are turning to the tentative probe into different ESP teaching methods, in which Collaborative Interdisciplinary Team Teaching is in close observation.

## Conception of ESP Teaching

The academic research on ESP teaching has been ongoing for many years, but its conception remains unclear (Rahman, 2015). Some scholars define that ESP is an approach to language learning based on learners' need. It means that ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material or methodology, but centers on the learners, the language required and the learning contexts based on the primacy of need in ESP. Some scholars define ESP as an enterprise involving education, training and practice with the employment of three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy and learners' specialist areas. This definition emphasizes key criteria that ESP is normally goal-directed and that ESP courses develop from a needs analysis, and is

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characterized by a limited time period for learners' objectives to be achieved and adults in homogeneous classes in terms of specialist studies. Other scholars provide their definition in a comprehensive and complicated way. Absolute and variable characteristics of ESP have been listed in an exhaustively way such as specific needs of the learner, the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines, language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate to those activities.

Thus based on the previous different definitions, the conception of ESP teaching can be summarized as the integration of English teaching into professional knowledge learning and the development of English teaching from a basic applied discipline to a communication tool in different majors and disciplines. Four characteristics of ESP teaching can be classified as the practicality of teaching objectives, the openness of teaching mode, interactivity in the teaching process, and the professionalism of teaching content (Bai, 2019). Teaching objectives emphasize the integration of language and specific course knowledge in a particular profession. Highlighting the action-oriented concept of "learning by doing" and "understanding by learning", special teaching methods are used to integrate the two with regard to the actual needs of learners in different fields and majors. ESP teaching analyzes the functional specificity of English as a communication tool from multiple perspectives such as words, sentences, grammar, rhetoric, etc., in order to facilitate learners to use English as a medium for professional, specialized, and industry-specific subject exchanges. Moreover, only by expanding basic English teaching to specialized English teaching such as chemical engineering English, mechanical engineering English, biology English, etc., can we cultivate students into versatile and practical talents.

### **Disciplinary Nature of ESP Teaching**

Radically speaking, the significance of ESP is that we communicate with members of a certain social group through language to achieve a common goal. There may seem to be no fundamental difference between ESP teaching and General English teaching, but in practice, the differences between the two cannot be ignored, among which the disciplinary nature is central. Disciplines, as the main differentiation of scientific researches and higher education, are manifested as "academic tribes" with different cultural practices and specific values, forming "academic territories" that rely on different forms of knowledge production and dissemination (Jiang, 2024). Although collaborative knowledge production has formed an interdisciplinary trend, the discipline itself still embodies specific theories, methods, technologies, and objects, providing a common symbol system, discourse practice, ideological system, value standards, research paradigms, and action plans for disciplinary members in a series of disciplinary cultural cognitive domains. These constitute the ontological, epistemological, and methodological traditions of the discipline, influencing the specific forms and paths of knowledge production in the discipline, and constraining the rhetoric and discourse practices of the discipline. That is why each discipline has unique ways of raising questions, handling literature, criticizing ideas, presenting arguments, and so on.

The specific disciplinary culture not only permeates the cognitive structure of members of the discourse community, but also relates to the ways of knowledge production and dissemination, and even affects the content and methods of specific disciplinary education and teaching. It can be seen that different disciplines construct discourse communities with their collective consciousness of knowledge paradigms and discourse conventions, and strengthen unique communication mechanisms and default rules in this socialization process, thereby generating a high degree of identity recognition.

The disciplinary nature is central in ESP teaching as it aims to guide students to understand and master rhetorical behaviors and language resources in the specialized context, and highlight the differentiated

characteristics of the target discourse community on this basis, thereby improving students' genre and rhetorical awareness, enabling them to understand communication purposes and disciplinary culture, join the target community, and build their academic identity (Coxhead, 2011). In a sense, ESP teaching is not to teach English merely but to cultivate professional talents.

### **Interdisciplinary Collaboration of ESP Teaching**

Collaboration between language teachers and professional teachers is crucial in ESP teaching because the necessity of the interdisciplinary collaboration is related to its teaching objectives and content. The wide range of purposes and contexts in which English is used has made ESP an eclectic discipline (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). The conception of specific literacies acquired in the context of the discipline creates a difficulty for ESP teachers, who must provide access for their students into a discourse community of which they are usually not members. For example, humanities-trained writing tutors may give inappropriate advice to engineering students. However, professional teachers, themselves L2 English speakers, always see no value in a process approach to writing, having been educated through the grammar-translation method although they are ashamed of possible grammatical errors. Under such circumstances, discipline and ESP teachers can work together and collaborative approaches have become a key element in ESP methodology.

Collaboration between language teachers and discipline teachers can take various forms. From the perspectives of language teachers, the interdisciplinary collaboration may engage in informal cooperation with relatively loose relationships, regular close communication outside of class, and joint classroom teaching. From the perspectives of discipline teachers, the interdisciplinary collaboration may be illustrated that discipline teachers are informant providing language teachers or students with background knowledge so as to understand the materials used in the course and related professional activities, that discipline teachers are consultants assisting language teachers in selecting authentic texts and teaching tasks, and that discipline and ESP teachers engage in more direct and in-depth cooperation such as joint teaching (Grey, 2009).

Collaboration between English teachers and professional teachers helps to improve teaching abilities, expand knowledge, broaden horizons, and enhance innovation by designing rational teaching activities, selecting authentic and authoritative teaching materials, and promoting teachers' professional development. However, although interdisciplinary collaboration is beneficial for ESP teaching, this collaboration, especially the joint teaching model, is a complex process that requires dealing with numerous difficulties and challenges. The reasons for conflicts and frustration caused by cooperative teaching include teachers' diverse personalities, experiences, teaching philosophies, and teaching styles, unwillingness to adjust their roles according to the actual teaching situation, unfamiliarity with each other's professional content, teaching and evaluation methods, and unclear division of labor (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). In addition, due to its own characteristics, ESP has become an industry that serves other professions, and a service-oriented role often makes ESP teachers feel that their status is relatively low.

### **Conclusion**

The research on the collaborative interdisciplinary ESP teaching between language teachers and discipline teachers is rare while collaboration with disciplinary experts has been a key element in overseas ESP methodology. With the interpretation and illustration of the concept and disciplinary culture of ESP teaching, it is obvious that the professionalism, openness, practicality, and interactivity of ESP teaching, once implemented

in teaching practice, may enhance students' cross-cultural communicative awareness and skills, thus greatly promoting students' comprehensive English literacy and ability, which is more conducive to the cultivation of practical talents and meets the demand of the country and society for talents in the new era. To face such dilemma of insufficient professional knowledge among language experts and inadequate foreign language proficiency among discipline experts, the collaborative interdisciplinary ESP teaching is a good option.

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