

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES TODAY. IN CONVERSATION WITH BARRY TOMALIN



Dear readers,

Today we have invited an internationally recognized language teacher, cross-cultural trainer, university lecturer, author and Director of the International House London Business Cultural Trainers Certificate, Barry Tomalin, to share his views on teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The questions were prepared and asked by Chief editor, I.P. Tverdokhlebova. On behalf of the editorial board we express our sincere gratitude to professor B. Tomalin for his collaboration and in-depth extended answers to the questions.

***From a historical retrospective when did the ESP trend appear?
What new aspects did it bring along to language training?***

Barry Tomalin: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) developed in the teaching of General English as an international language as early as the 1970s. A subset of English as a foreign language (EFL) or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), ESP developed as the adaptation of English to particular environments, mainly professional. ESP is itself a general term and has morphed into a range of specialised applications, such as English for immigrants, English for academic purposes and English for specific interests, such as tourism, the hotel trade, hospital staff and, wherever English is needed, as a means of international professional communication.

ESP is distinguished from General English by its specialist emphasis on English vocabulary and usage appropriate to a specific profession or job. Achieving a degree of general fluency in a foreign language is obviously important but it is also necessary to be able to 'talk the talk' of a particular industry or profession to communicate successfully and that means learning to understand to a degree and teach its specialised vocabulary and the use of language to foreign learners of English.

What are the reasons for the growing interest in ESP nowadays?

Barry Tomalin: We live in a global economy where, partly thanks to the World Wide Web, and international trade, the demand for ESP has grown exponentially. As more and more communication takes place via information and communications technologies (ITCs) English has developed as the leading online language. It doesn't have the most native speaker users. Mandarin Chinese is the leader followed by Spanish and then English. But English has the greatest number of international users, currently estimated at 1.132 million speakers or 15% of the world's population. Therefore, it is now recognised that in international business communication English is the most common language. As Nicholas Ostler wrote in 'Empires of the Word', 'English allows access to the world's executive club'. This does not mean that other languages are not important. Speaking a foreign language is all important in building good relations with business partners and clients in other countries so that is why a number of education systems specify two foreign languages as part of their education curricula.

In what way does the methodology of teaching ESP differ from teaching General English?

Barry Tomalin: The basis of General English and ESP is the same. We are all teaching and learning the grammar, vocabulary and standard pronunciation of the new language and can be tested at the different levels of the Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages¹ by language testing organisations such as Cambridge Exams, ESOL Princeton and IELTS. Over 11,000 business and professional organisations around the world accept IELTS test scores as a qualification in English language skills in the workplace. So General English is important.

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

² <https://www.ielts.org/about-ielts/ielts-for-work>

However, ESP adds another dimension to General English. It focuses on specialisation on the situations encountered and the language used when English is the required means of communication. As an Abidjan, West African based project manager said to me, 'I need to know how native speakers in my company actually say things.' That's where ESP comes in.

As a general English teacher, this poses some problems. I'm a general English teacher and I may not be familiar with the business of the student I'm teaching. Also the students I teach represent different professions and industries. How to talk about one industry without demotivating all the other students in my class?

Like many of my colleagues I used to say 'I'll provide the English, you supply the technical knowledge.' The key thing is to encourage our students to talk about their work experience and the problems they have encountered, listen carefully and help them explain things correctly in English. I found that as I got more experienced at teaching business English I learned more about the industries I was working with and could give better support to my students.

One of the first priorities for an ESP teacher is get to know your students and find out their real needs. I would spend the first part of any session asking my students what they need to know and what situations, as specific as possible, have caused them trouble? You don't talk *at* them. You encourage them to talk *to* you. I call this **Need to Know** and before any company training seminar I send out a pre-seminar questionnaire asking participants what their responsibilities are, their key markets and three things they want to be able to do by the end of the seminar. This provides me with a relevant agenda for the seminar and indicates what they need to talk about and what language they need to use.

For teachers working in areas such as tourism and hospitality management and general business there are an increasing number of textbooks available to help with the specialist language. You can supplement these by looking online for videos and articles on the area you are teaching. A 'mixed media' approach using audio-visual aids as well as text and 'acting out' and role playing is very valuable. Another valuable tool is case studies and 'critical incidents' (mini case studies). However, it is important to make sure that the case studies you select are relevant to the business and the country or regions your students are dealing with. Otherwise, they might dismiss the case study or critical incident as irrelevant.

Nikolaos Katsaounis and Ulrich Steinmeier in an article entitled *Languages for Special Purposes in Medicine and Healthcare in times of the Covid-19 pandemic*

(ICC Journal Volume 3 Issue 1³) stressed the importance of usage-based teaching. This means focus on the working environment of the language used not the general environment. It requires learning more about the situations people actually find themselves dealing with and the language they use to do so. Katsaounis and Steinmeier show how this can be applied to the Medical, Pharmaceutical and Nursing areas of Healthcare in Germany. The same principles apply to English.

³ www.icc-languages.eu

The methodology of teaching very much focuses on encouraging students to express themselves by finding out what situations they typically have to deal with, how they deal with them, what they say and what they do, listening and then helping them to say it better. This may involve grammar and vocabulary training as well as pronunciation practice but the key is experience first and teaching second. This is English in situations as applied to ESP.

One of my most important methodological skills is how to use critical incidents. Critical incidents are short case studies (5 or 6 lines long) and present a situation for discussion where things are difficult or have gone wrong. I read out the situation and ask the participants what went wrong and what they would Integrate advise.

Then I explain how the problem was actually solved using the **MBI** Process by Maznevsky and Di Stefano⁴. **MBI** stand for **Map, Bridge and Integrate** and has six questions. Under Map, there are two questions, OBSERVE (What did they do?) and COMPARE (What do I normally do and how is it different?). Under Bridge there are another two questions, EMPATHISE (Why did they do it? What do they think of me?). The final stage is INTEGRATE. The final two questions are ADAPT (How should I adapt my behaviour?) and REFLECT (What have I learned and what will I say, do?) and THINK differently in future? This is a tremendous activity and can be used many times in a classroom period or course and is a great way of getting ESP students talking.

⁴ Lane H.W., DiStefano J.J., Maznevsky M.L. International Management Behavior. Blackwell Pub. – 2014. – 528 p.

What is the ratio between teaching productive and receptive communicative skills?

Barry Tomalin: This is a difficult one to answer. There are certain productive skills that are really useful for ESP students and these are question asking skills. Not just how to ask a question-word question (eg. Where do you work?) or an open question (Do you work in the factory?) but how to ask questions politely for information and clarification, how to ask follow-up questions etc. An important receptive skill, especially in a factory, office or construction site, for example, is how to read signs and then ask questions if the meaning or warning is not clear. If you are in a management position at any level, it is important to know how to give instructions clearly and ask for questions.

I would argue that students need both receptive skills to understand what the person they are dealing with is saying (plenty of listening practice using authentic material where accessible) and plenty of practice in summarising what people have said to check it is correct and asking questions and explaining your opinion in the foreign language.

One specific receptive skill I teach on ESP programmes is **Active Listening**. A Moroccan trainee once said to me in a class on effective communication, 'I understand what people say to me in English but I don't understand their

feelings.' As the Russian proverb says: *'One should not hurry to reply, one should hurry to listen.'*

Active Listening helps you do both, using a technique called **FACE**. FACE is an acronym. Each letter stands for, **F** (Focus), **A** (Acknowledge), **C** (Clarify) and **E** (Empathise). How do you do this? You focus by giving your full attention to the speaker and not interrupting. You acknowledge by using expressions such as 'uh,uh' to show you are listening and interested. You clarify by asking questions that encourage the speaker to continue what they are saying using expressions such as, 'What happened next' and finally you show empathy by saying things like 'That's wonderful!' or 'How awful!' depending on the situation described. In class I get the students to work in pairs. One student chooses a subject and talks about it for a minute and a half. At the end I say 'Stop' and ask the student how they felt about their partner. Did he or she really listen, did they interrupt, did they show empathy?

Then I teach FACE and get the listener to be the speaker and choose their own topic. The first speaker is now the listener and uses FACE. After 90 seconds I call 'Stop' and ask them how they felt about the second conversation. Invariably, they feel the second conversation was better as the listener was more attentive and empathetic. Active Listening and the use of FACE is a really valuable technique in international conversation as well as in your own language.

How relevant is the phenomenon of culture to the students of ESP? How culturally-charged should be the ESP training?

Barry Tomalin: Once regarded as a 'nice to have', knowledge of international business culture is now regarded as a 'must have'. Why? Because as business has globalised managers are increasingly aware of the differences in attitudinal and organisational styles between organisations around the world and need to learn about them.

These differences are partly the result of national attitudes and practices but can also vary by region and by the user's personal experience. Therefore, it is important to learn the key cultural drivers and how they manifest. The core drivers are **Client expectations** (What do I expect of the people I deal with?), **Communication style** (How does my communication style vary from my client's and how do I need to adapt it?) and **Behaviour** (What is the organisational style of the business?).

In my work I break it down to cover five areas which I term **ECOLE**. Ecole in French means school but here it is an acronym for the key business culture areas we need to take into account. **ECOLE** stands for **Expectations, Communication, Organisation** (Time, Teams and Routines), **Leadership** (Management style and how decisions are taken) and **Etiquette** (showing respect, dress code, gift giving and hospitality). You can read more about this in *World Business Cultures: a Handbook* by me, Barry Tomalin, and my colleague, Mike Nicks.

There are many well-known deals which have broken down because of a failure of cultural understanding between companies involved resulting in huge losses of money and even company failure and unemployment.

Therefore, I regard it as essential in working with any students to find out what markets they are dealing with and how the cultures of those markets (e.g.

Australia) might be different from their own and how they need to adapt their own management and communication style. It is no accident that the question I am most commonly asked by my business clients is *'How do I avoid causing offence?'*

What advice can you give to practicing English language school teachers if they want to upgrade their professional English within the area of their students' interests, i.e. hotel administration, landscape design, logistics or ecology, as it is always time consuming to acquire professional knowledge but the time of the school year is limited?

Barry Tomalin: There are three areas of knowledge teachers can study which will be helpful: The business, the methodology and the culture. To learn about the business download information about the business, its core products and its international work. This will give you a brief but clear idea of the business's focus, product base and international markets. This is an excellent basis you can build on with your students or clients, getting them to explain in more detail and tell you what their involvement is.

To learn about methodology and get materials go online and look for articles, videos and reports on the business that you can read or view. Again, note down questions that need clarification and ask your students, providing an opportunity for conversational exchange.

On general methodology I have added a few publications at the end of this piece that may be helpful.

To learn about the market and the culture go online and enter the country name and the words *business culture* (e.g. Russian Business Culture. There you will find helpful information about business attitudes and business styles held by different markets. One very useful factual guide is the CIA World Factbook⁵. This will give you useful statistical information on population, main cities, religion, exports and import partners etc.

⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>

Dear Barry, your book 'Key Business Skills' is highly successful and is in great demand in Russia. Many teachers use it in class and in private tuition. I have been using it for years in my Business Communication courses with students (future teachers and future engineers) at Moscow City Teacher Training University and Moscow State University for Geological Prospecting. Your methodology of systematic and concentric focus on four key skills proves to be positively efficient. Such approach empowers learners with relevant competences for their future real-life business communication. As the author of this famous publication – 'Key Business Skills' – do you believe there are key skills in ESP?

Barry Tomalin: In 'Key Business Skills' I identified four key areas of international business communication, all of which ESP students need to master. The four areas are Presentations, Meetings (how to lead them and how to participate effectively, including virtual meetings), Negotiations and Networking (how to build good working relations). Teachers should include each of these in any ESP curriculum, with special focus on the requirements of the students. Each section of the book presents models of how to make successful international presentations and respond effectively to questions, how to run a meeting and the importance of an agenda and how to interrupt politely and intervene in a

meeting; (something that non-native speakers can find very difficult), how to negotiate effectively with clients of different nationalities and, finally, above all, how to network and show interest in a business client's or partner's background culture and culture. As a Korean business colleague once said in a seminar, 'Get the relationship right, and business follows as day follows night.'

These are my thoughts on teaching ESP and the role of culture and communication in teaching. Lots more to say and many more techniques to offer but that remains for another article or book. Enjoy your ESP teaching!

FOLLOW-UP READING

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