Assessing English for Specific Purposes

 Written by Vivien Berry

We usually think about English language as being either focused on everyday communication, or for communication in specific situations, like business or medicine. This second type of language is called English for Specific Purposes or ESP for short.

Now you might think that ESP tests are just tests of general proficiency with some technical vocabulary thrown in, but actually, they really are quite different.

First of all, when ESP tests are developed, they’re based on something called a Needs Analysis. Before we start to design such a test, we first identify exactly what someone working in the specific context actually does in their job.

Sometimes this can be done through questionnaires but probably the best way to go about it is to observe real working situations. It’s easy to tick boxes in a questionnaire to say what you think you do but, in fact, you may not realize all the other things you do as well. Things that an impartial outside observer will notice.

The international nature of the workplace means that there has to be a common language of communication and nowadays that language is English. So, for example, the pilot of a Japanese plane, approaching an airport in Peru, will communicate with the local air traffic controllers in English. This situation has led to the development of specific purpose tests for Air Traffic Controllers. As you might expect, exactly the same is true for workers in other professions.

Perhaps the first specific purpose tests for non-native speakers of English were developed for business. Test designers identified the types of tasks that English native-speaker business employees were commonly required to perform in their everyday work-life. For example, an employee might have to take notes at a meeting in order to write a report, or to communicate with clients or colleagues over the phone, maybe even reporting back to other colleagues. Test tasks were then designed to reflect these authentic workplace contexts. When test takers later performed these tasks in an ESP test, we were able to predict how they might perform similar tasks in their job. Of course, it’s not possible to cover every type of task in all business contexts so we can only include a sample of tasks in any single test. But then this is true of all tests.

Other workplace contexts where ESP tests are commonly used include law and medicine. As you can imagine, in the different work contexts, the actual tasks will be quite different, while employees will probably need different language profiles – by this we mean they may be expected to have different levels of ability in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

A special type of ESP test is called an EAP or English for Academic Purposes test. This is the type of test you’ll need to take if you’re applying to attend a university where the language of study is English. Right now, IELTS is the best-known international EAP test. It was originally designed by the British Council to assess the ability of candidates to study in English. Of course, there are other such tests around, large scale international tests such as the TOEFL and smaller scale tests developed by individual universities for their Foundation or Pre-Sessional students.

In the same way that different jobs will require different ability profiles, we find the same in EAP. It’s not unusual for different faculties or schools to ask for very different profiles since some skills will be considered more important than others for different subjects.

As you can see, ESP and EAP tests are designed to reflect real life situations, either in work or in study. These types of tests are **precise** in that they accurately reflect a specific language use area. This means that the test tasks, the scoring system and the final test report can all be related to the specific work or study area in focus. If this link isn’t obvious, then it’s likely that you’re not looking at an ESP test at all!

As the worlds of work and study change, the need for a deeper understanding of the role of language in these areas increases. So we can be pretty sure that Assessing English for Specific Purposes will continue to play an important role in ensuring that individuals are ready to participate fully in these worlds.