Professional English in the European Context: The EHEA Challenge
English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Special Purposes is a multidisciplinary subject that lends voice to many and different teaching and research fields nowadays.

Its origins go back to the 1960s, when general English courses did not meet learners’ or employers’ demands. At first, register analysis was the only source provided for the design of ESP courses. Nevertheless, using just register analysis did not achieve what they set out to do, and new proposals were launched to overcome perceived failures. Target situation analysis then became the guiding objective in ESP course design.

Three main trends can be found responsible in the birth of ESP: the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics and a new focus on the learner (Hutchinson / Waters 1987). Today, ESP is still an outstanding branch of EFL teaching, and the demands and expectations placed on it continue to increase and expand throughout the world.

The definition of ESP has not been free of controversy. From the outset, the term ESP was a matter of discussion on the grounds of what exactly ESP was. Nowadays, it is still in contention as to whether we can specify exactly what ESP should consist of. ESP is in fact an umbrella term encapsulating a wide range of subdivisions: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Professional Purposes (EPP), or English for Medical Purposes (EMP). These are just a few examples, and numerous others, often new ones, are frequently being added to the list. Luckily, an increasing interest in ESP has emerged as a result of market forces at the same time that the academic and business community has become more conscious of the fact that learners’ needs and wants should be met wherever possible.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:4) attempted to apply a series of characteristics – some absolute and some variable – with a view to resolving arguments about exactly what ESP is. The absolute characteristics concern ESP as defined to meet specific needs of the learners; ESP making use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves and ESP being centred on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. The variable characteristics cover the following: 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 for learners at secondary school level; and most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

These descriptions separating the absolute from the variable help to clarify to a certain degree what an ESP course might consist of, nevertheless, they are not the only ones and other authors have also put forward a series of characteristics closely related to ESP. Thus we infer in particular that ESP can be concerned with a specific discipline but is not necessarily so, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be simply seen as an “approach” to teaching or what Dudley-Evans (1998) describes as an “attitude of mind”. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 19) come to a similar conclusion when stating that “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning”.

The ESP question stimulates many focuses of debate with respect to the role of methodology, curriculum design or material design, to mention but a few.

Although methodology was a neglected area in ESP in the 80s, today its importance is beyond question. Clearly the course design, goals and outcomes of the particular courses call for different methodologies to be used. Likewise, what is certainly beyond question is the absolute necessity for any ESP course to be needs-driven and to have an emphasis on practical outcomes; therefore, needs analysis plays an important, even fundamental role in ESP. Especially noteworthy is another aspect of ESP courses that has been widely debated, that is the question of how broad or narrow a focus the course should have.

There is no doubt that materials play a significant role in ESP teaching. First and foremost, they should be authentic, up-to-date and relevant for the students’ specializations. The fact that ESP should be materials-driven was put forward long ago and has consequently posed a need for instructors to evaluate their course books more carefully to see how suitable they are for their students. ESP practitioners should be well aware of the relevance that evaluating materials has for ESP courses, which, unfortunately, has been somewhat neglected to date. Materials need to be consistent and to have some recognizable patterns.
They are to help students learn language strategies. Materials also have to have a very purpose-related orientation which, besides being an essential component of any material designed for specific purposes, also promotes motivation.

Regarding curriculum development, the main concern of the authors has to do with ESP course design. It is of outstanding interest to bear in mind that course goals should be realistic; otherwise the students would be de-motivated. ESP courses need to take into account a twofold type of language, that of a “common core” of English language as well as a variety of specific discourses and genres focused on students’ needs. These courses can be said to have an advantage over general English courses, in that they can pursue more precise aims. It is well-known that when designing a curriculum or a syllabus it is essential that the students’ target English situations can be identified with great clarity. Thus once the elements have been revealed, the process of curriculum design can proceed.

Today the debate is moving towards the area of negotiated syllabi. This raises the question as to whether learners can state their wants and needs, and then whether they can help design their own courses. Though the experience may be rewarding and motivating, there are voices (Skehan 1998:262) against negotiated syllabi, particularly if the learners do not know how to be “effective learners”. It should not be forgotten that syllabus design entails a very complex process and that even a successfully designed ESP course may have a mismatch between skills.

In this ESP scenario we have outlined, professional and academic languages deserve special attention from us, as they are the keystone of any ESP teaching and have been the focus of innumerable research studies. To start with, the terms “languages of speciality” and “professional and academic languages” can be used indistinctly. The first term has the advantage of being more brief; the second one, that of being more descriptive. Independently of the term we prefer to use, these languages share at least six identifiable features which result in six other defining guides which are clearly research-oriented (Alcaraz 2007: 7). In short, they are the following: Lexis, which better fulfils the symbolic function of the language, forming the core of the specialized language in which it is necessary to analyze its etymology and stylistics, its neology and particular arrangement. Morpho-syntax, involving very
idiosyncratic syntactic and stylistic tendencies that can be marked by very long noun phrases, or the excessive use of hypotaxis, which can turn out to be what is known as “infractuosity”. Discourse, which depicts discursive preferences, characterized by certain types of discourses such as the explanatory one, the descriptive one, etc. Communication, which requires the use of certain types of strategies and communicative skills. Professional texts, a few professional, specific and unmistakable genres, such as in the case of law, judgment, contract, etc in legal language. Differentiated cultural frame, determined by the epistemological community to which one belongs and the cultural background one comes from.

ESP is today more vibrant than ever with an amazing on-going number of terms needed to satisfy the requirements collected under the ESP umbrella. A series of trends have been put forward by Martin Hewings (2009) that clearly describe the promising outlook for ESP over the coming decades:

Internationalisation. It seems most likely that ESP research and practice will continue to spread geographically. With increasing globalization and mobility of the world’s workforce, the demand for specific courses will not decrease but only rise.

Specialisation. No doubt more specific contexts will be analysed, reflecting the increasing specialisation of ESP courses.

Discourse analysis. The influence of genre analysis, corpus analysis and systemic functional linguistics on the whole ESP business shows no sign of declining, and research, using their general approaches and analytical techniques, seems to have an increasing relevancy to ESP.

English as an international language. The growing use of English as a means of communication in interaction between non-native speakers seems likely to have a major impact on the kinds of ESP programmes we provide and the type of research needed to underpin those programmes.

Growth of Business English. The rapid growth of courses in business English around the world is well documented and reflected in the increasing percentage of publications in this area. This tendency, particularly at university levels, is likely to demand and feed into research on business communication.
I would like to end the present overview by highlighting that all these ESP trends have certain features in common which make them distinctly recognizable (see Graves 2000): an increasing focus on learners, their immediate and future wants and needs; a move toward negotiated or process-orientated syllabi; a continued focus on individual learning, learner-centeredness, and learner autonomy; a move away from ESP course books towards a more eclectic approach to materials; a continued high emphasis on target situation and needs analysis, and, following the course delivery, a more objective approach to evaluation and assessment of the course.