



ORIGINAL PAPER

Classicism and Modernism: Between Antagonism and Complementarity in Teaching English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract:

The interplay between classicism and modernism in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education presents a dynamic pedagogical landscape. While classicism emphasizes structured grammar, rhetorical precision, and traditional literary texts, modernism fosters adaptability, contextual learning, and interdisciplinary approaches. This paper explores how these two paradigms, often perceived as antagonistic, can complement each other in ESP instruction. It examines the integration of classical methodologies, such as structured syntax and formal discourse, with modern strategies like task-based learning, digital tools, and real-world applications. The study highlights the benefits of balancing these approaches to develop students' linguistic proficiency and professional communication skills. Through case studies and pedagogical analysis, the paper argues that a hybrid teaching model incorporating both classical and modernist elements enhances learners' engagement and practical language competence.

Keywords: *ESP, teaching English, language competence, traditional teaching methods, modern teaching methods.*

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1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved significantly in recent decades, responding to globalized professional contexts and specialized fields such as business, engineering, medicine, and law. Amid this evolution, the pedagogical tension between classical and modernist methodologies remains a central concern. On the one hand, classicism offers time-tested structures and norms essential for linguistic accuracy. On the other hand, modernism promotes innovation, functional communication, and responsiveness to learners' specific needs. As Lăpădat (2023:253) states, “Over the years, a myriad of teaching methodologies has emerged, each with its unique theoretical underpinnings and instructional strategies.”

Rather than framing these paradigms in opposition, this paper explores the ways they can inform and enrich one another. It proposes that integrating elements of both can lead to a more robust and effective ESP curriculum, equipping learners with both the precision of classical training and the adaptability of modernist approaches.

2. Classicism in ESP: Foundations of Precision

Classicism in language instruction is historically rooted in formal education traditions that emphasized mastery of grammar, rhetoric, and canonical texts. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), classical approaches prioritize structured learning, emphasizing prescriptive grammar, syntactic accuracy, and formulaic expressions suited to formal professional domains.

In ESP courses that serve fields like law, academia, and scientific research, classical methods remain central due to their focus on linguistic precision and rhetorical control. For example, legal discourse relies on highly specialized vocabulary, fixed expressions, and syntactic structures such as passive voice and nominalization. These characteristics make the classicist emphasis on form indispensable. As Bhatia (1993) notes in his seminal work on genre analysis in professional settings, genres such as legal contracts or scientific abstracts demand strict adherence to form and register to maintain clarity and authority.

Classicist instruction in ESP may involve:

- *Intensive Grammar Instruction*: Focus on the correct use of tenses, modals, conditionals, and subject-verb agreement, especially in formal writing.
- *Syntax Drills and Sentence Diagramming*: Practice exercises to master complex sentence structures (common in scientific or technical writing).
- *Rhetorical Modes and Logical Argumentation*: Emphasis on classical rhetorical structures such as deductive reasoning, thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and Aristotelian appeals (ethos, logos, pathos).
- *Imitation of Models*: Learners study and emulate exemplary professional texts (e.g., a legal brief, research article, or formal business letter) to internalize genre-specific language norms.

These methodologies, though traditional, have pedagogical value in cultivating metalinguistic awareness and control over the stylistic features required in high-stakes communication. Widdowson (1983) points out that while communicative approaches stress fluency, they often neglect the importance of form, which remains critical in specialized contexts.

Moreover, ESP learners often need to conform to established discourse communities. Swales (1990) emphasizes that writing for academic or professional purposes means participating in a community with defined norms, where deviation from

stylistic expectations can lead to misunderstandings or a lack of credibility. Thus, classical methods help learners understand and internalize those norms.

3. Modernism in ESP: Embracing Context and Change

Modernist approaches to ESP instruction emerged in response to the limitations of rigid, form-focused language teaching. Influenced by sociocultural theory, communicative language teaching (CLT), and constructivist pedagogies, modernist models stress the importance of language as a social tool, shaped by context and purpose. In ESP, this translates into teaching that is highly contextualized, learner-centered, and goal-oriented. The globalisation of technology has significantly transformed language classrooms, offering new opportunities for language acquisition through digital tools that promote active learning and engagement (Lăpădat, 2024:135).

This transformation has further emphasized the need to update the content of instruction. “The information we provide cannot and must not be restricted to traditional structures of grammar, vocabulary and so on. We need to stay connected to an entire apparatus of updated cultural and informational references” (Lăpădat & Lăpădat, 2020:139).

Modernism in ESP embraces:

- *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)*: Learners complete real-world tasks, such as designing a marketing campaign, writing a patient report, or simulating a job interview, where language is learned in use rather than in isolation. Ellis (2003) argues that tasks foster deeper cognitive engagement and improve the transfer of knowledge to real-life contexts.
- *Needs Analysis and Curriculum Customization*: A foundational principle of ESP is its responsiveness to learner needs. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP instruction begins with understanding what the learners need English for, be it writing scientific reports, negotiating business deals, or collaborating in international teams. Modernist approaches prioritize this adaptability.
- *Authentic Materials and Contextual Learning*: Instead of relying solely on contrived textbook dialogues or outdated texts, modernist ESP incorporates authentic materials, emails, technical manuals, meeting recordings, scientific articles, which better reflect the communicative demands of learners’ target fields.
- *Digital Literacy and Multimodality*: As professional communication increasingly occurs through digital platforms, ESP instruction must also equip learners to write emails, create slide decks, interpret infographics, and participate in webinars. Modernist ESP makes full use of digital tools such as corpora, collaborative writing platforms, and mobile apps to teach both language and digital communication literacy.

Hyland (2006) emphasizes that ESP must acknowledge the "situatedness" of language, how meaning depends not just on words and grammar, but also on genre, audience, and context. In this view, modernist pedagogy aligns well with the demands of contemporary workplaces and academic institutions that value flexibility, collaboration, and real-time communication.

For example, a modernist ESP course for software engineers might include collaborative GitHub documentation tasks, peer code reviews, and agile stand-up meeting

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simulations. These tasks reflect the professional ecosystem, thus fostering functional and transferable language competence.

4. Points of Antagonism

While the integration of classical and modernist pedagogical approaches in ESP instruction holds great potential, it is important to acknowledge that these paradigms are often seen as fundamentally opposed. Classicism, grounded in formality and stability, tends to emphasize a prescriptive view of language. In contrast, modernism prioritizes adaptability, context, and learner agency. These contrasting ideologies lead to several points of tension in instructional philosophy, curriculum design, and classroom practice.

4.1. *Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism*

One of the core philosophical divides lies in the treatment of language rules. Classical approaches often adopt a prescriptive stance, focusing on "correct" grammar, standardized usage, and fixed rhetorical structures. In contrast, modernist paradigms tend to be descriptive, treating language as a dynamic system shaped by context and usage. As Widdowson (1978, p. 5) notes, traditional instruction focuses on "learning the rules of language usage," whereas modern approaches are more concerned with "learning the rules of language use." This subtle but crucial distinction lies at the heart of the antagonism: classical pedagogy aims for linguistic accuracy, while modernist pedagogy aims for communicative effectiveness. In ESP, this tension becomes apparent when, for example, teaching academic writing: should students strictly follow formal conventions (classicism), or prioritize clarity and audience expectations, which may vary across disciplines and cultures (modernism)?

4.2. *Standardization vs. Customization*

Classical ESP instruction tends to favor standardized curricula and genre templates, such as IMRaD structure in scientific writing or the IRAC format in legal writing. These models provide students with replicable frameworks that promote clarity and conformity within discourse communities. However, modernist approaches, drawing from learner-centered pedagogies, advocate for customization based on learners' goals, industries, and communication contexts. Basturkmen (2010, p. 44) observes that "tensions can emerge when teaching prespecified genre structures while also trying to encourage learner creativity and personal voice." This is particularly evident in professional writing, where genre conventions coexist with the need for innovation or branding, especially in fields like marketing or digital content creation.

4.3. *Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Learning*

Classicism often employs a top-down pedagogical structure, where language input is controlled and sequenced by the instructor. Students first learn grammar rules and sentence structures, then progress to application. In contrast, modernist ESP encourages bottom-up, inductive learning: learners engage in tasks or authentic texts and derive linguistic rules through guided exploration.

This divergence can lead to classroom friction. For instance, students with a background in classical learning environments may resist the ambiguity and unpredictability of task-based or problem-based learning. Conversely, modernist learners may find classical drills and decontextualized grammar tedious or irrelevant. As Ellis (2003, p. 9) points out, "task-based language teaching rejects the traditional PPP [Presentation–Practice–Production] paradigm in favor of a more experiential, learner-driven approach," which can challenge the expectations of both students and instructors rooted in classical traditions.

4.4. Authority of the Text vs. Fluidity of Meaning

In classical instruction, the text, whether a sample contract, academic article, or historical speech, is often treated as an authoritative model. Learners are expected to imitate and internalize its structure and style. However, modernist approaches view meaning as fluid, co-constructed by speaker, listener, and context. Swales (1990, p. 58) discusses this tension in his analysis of academic genres, noting that while genres offer useful conventions, they are also "negotiated and dynamic," and can shift across disciplines and rhetorical situations. A purely classical approach risks oversimplifying this reality, while a purely modernist one may fail to give learners clear models to follow.

4.5. Assessment Dissonance

Assessment practices often reflect the deeper antagonism between classical and modernist frameworks. Traditional ESP courses may favor exams, grammatical accuracy checks, or standardized writing tasks. In contrast, modernist ESP promotes portfolio assessment, self-reflection, and project-based evaluations. This divide raises questions about what constitutes success in ESP learning. Should proficiency be measured by flawless syntax and adherence to conventions, or by the learner's ability to perform effectively in real-world scenarios? The answer often depends on institutional expectations and disciplinary values.

5. Towards Complementarity: A Hybrid ESP Model

While classicism and modernism have historically been positioned in opposition, recent scholarship and pedagogical innovation suggest that a hybrid model, one that draws strategically from both paradigms, can offer a more comprehensive and responsive approach to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Rather than viewing these traditions as mutually exclusive, effective ESP instruction can benefit from embracing complementarity, combining the rigor of classical methods with the flexibility and contextual awareness of modernist pedagogy.

5.1. Grammar in Context

One promising strategy for synthesis is the contextualized teaching of grammar. Rather than isolated drills, grammar can be taught through genre-based instruction using authentic texts from the learners' professional fields. For instance, passive constructions, common in scientific writing, can be taught through lab reports or case studies. Similarly, conditional structures can be explored in legal contracts or business negotiations. Hyland (2004, p. 6) advocates for this blended approach, noting that "explicit instruction in grammatical forms is most effective when integrated with meaningful tasks that reflect authentic communicative purposes." This approach satisfies the classical demand for form while fulfilling the modernist emphasis on function.

5.2. Genre Awareness and Rhetorical Flexibility

Classical training often emphasizes mastery of fixed genre structures, such as the IMRaD model in scientific writing or persuasive essay formats in law and business. Modernist pedagogy, on the other hand, encourages genre flexibility, acknowledging that genres are not static but evolve based on audience, purpose, and medium.

A hybrid approach would train students to recognize core genre conventions while also developing the metacognitive awareness needed to adapt them in different contexts. As Johns (2008, p. 239) states, "ESP practitioners must help learners develop a critical awareness of genres, not just how to use them, but when, why, and how to modify them." This is particularly important in interdisciplinary or international contexts, where rigid adherence to one genre model may not serve diverse communicative goals.

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5.3. Technology as a Bridge

Digital tools offer a powerful means of reconciling classical and modernist approaches. Language corpora, for example, allow learners to study authentic usage patterns of discipline-specific vocabulary and grammar. Tools like AntConc or the BAWE (British Academic Written English) corpus can be used to explore collocations, phraseology, and genre-specific lexis—merging classical attention to form with modernist principles of learner discovery and data-driven learning. Researcher Laviniu Lăpădat describes how digital platforms “have become a powerful unifying force, encompassing the communicative energies of millions of people” (Lăpădat, 2022:83).

In addition, collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Trello, or Miro can facilitate task-based learning, allowing students to apply formal writing skills in real-world digital formats, such as project proposals, user manuals, or pitch presentations. As Gilmore (2007, p. 100) argues, “technology can scaffold learners’ understanding of both form and function, supporting a more holistic and interactive ESP pedagogy.”

We can say that traditional teaching methods often make it difficult for teachers to monitor their students’ progress, as they are unable to track their students’ learning in real-time. However, e-learning allows teachers to easily track and monitor their students’ progress through various tools and technologies that are integrated into the e-learning platforms. This benefit is particularly useful in language teaching, where progress monitoring is critical for achieving the learning objectives (Lăpădat & Lăpădat, 2024:104).

5.4. Balancing Evaluation Methods

Assessment strategies should also reflect this hybrid orientation. Classical assessments, such as grammar quizzes or structured writing tasks, can be complemented by modernist tools such as portfolio-based evaluation, reflective journals, or simulations. This dual approach allows instructors to evaluate both linguistic accuracy and communicative performance.

A well-designed ESP course might include:

- A grammar-focused midterm (classical)
- A collaborative project such as a group business proposal or academic poster (modernist)
- A self-assessment or peer review component to foster metacognitive skills (modernist)

By blending assessment types, educators acknowledge that ESP proficiency involves both control of language structures and the ability to navigate real-world discourse.

5.5. Pedagogical Flexibility and Instructor Role

In a hybrid model, the instructor acts not just as a transmitter of knowledge (a classical role), but also as a facilitator and guide (a modernist role). Teachers must be equipped to shift between these roles based on learners’ needs, proficiency levels, and professional contexts. As pointed out, language learning “does not just mean memorising vocabulary or mastering phonetical, morphological, grammatical or semantic structures, it is, above all, embracing new pathways and methodologies referring to the understanding of life and culture, new visions and perspectives encompassing our national heritage, our Latin sense of belonging and more contemporarily our connection and cohesion to solid and stable European values” (Lăpădat and Păunescu, 2019:205).

According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 13), effective ESP instructors are “language experts, content negotiators, and course designers,” who balance linguistic

input with communicative output. Hybrid teaching respects this multifaceted role, empowering instructors to blend explicit instruction with student-centered learning experiences.

6. Case Studies and Pedagogical Applications

The theoretical promise of integrating classical and modernist approaches in ESP instruction finds strong support in actual classroom practice. Across diverse disciplines and cultural contexts, educators have implemented hybrid models that strategically combine the structured rigour of classical pedagogy with the contextual flexibility of modernist strategies. These cases illuminate how complementarity can enhance learner engagement, linguistic precision, and communicative competence.

In a technical English course offered at a university in Japan, engineering students were tasked with preparing written documentation for hypothetical product designs. The course began with a focus on classical grammar structures common in technical writing, such as the passive voice, hedging devices, and formal lexical collocations. Students practiced through sentence-level drills and model analysis of existing patent descriptions and lab reports. However, this classical foundation was soon integrated into a larger, task-based project in which students worked in teams to write a technical specification document and present their prototype in English to a simulated international board of investors. The grammar and lexical features previously learned were now applied in a functional, authentic context. As noted by Iizuka and Unno (2012), such blended instruction improves not only linguistic accuracy but also students' confidence in using English in professional settings.

A similar hybrid approach was employed in a Medical English course at a Spanish university. The course initially used a classicist approach to familiarize students with the rhetorical structure of case reports, clinical narratives, and diagnostic summaries. Learners engaged in close reading of sample reports, focusing on tense usage, transitions, and formal tone. Yet the course moved beyond static textual models by introducing multimodal activities in which students produced video case presentations. These required them to summarize a patient case, simulate a doctor-patient interaction, and deliver a concise, evidence-based recommendation to a professional audience. According to Gallego and Milla Lara (2020), combining classical genre instruction with multimedia and performance tasks helped learners internalize genre conventions while adapting them to real-world communicative environments, including telemedicine and digital health communication.

In India, a Legal English program developed for final-year law students integrated Latin legal terminology and traditional case brief formats (a classical component) with modern interactive activities such as courtroom simulations and podcast scripting. The classical foundation included formal instruction in modal verbs (e.g., shall, may, must) and syntactic structures typical in contracts and judgments. But rather than limiting students to imitative exercises, the course allowed learners to script and record mock legal podcasts on contemporary issues, such as privacy in digital law or environmental litigation. This modernist extension pushed students to tailor their language and tone to specific audiences while maintaining formal accuracy. As Chakravarthi (2019) argues, this kind of integration helps students develop dual literacy, both in traditional legal language and in the informal-professional register increasingly required in public legal discourse.

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These case studies reveal that the hybrid model is not merely a theoretical ideal but a pedagogically feasible strategy. They show that beginning with classical linguistic structures does not preclude authentic, learner-centered activities; rather, it can enhance them. The reverse is also true: engaging learners in meaningful tasks often necessitates a return to classical principles, such as syntactic control or genre structure, to achieve clarity and professionalism.

Furthermore, these applications demonstrate the importance of scaffolding, a concept central to both classical and modernist pedagogies, albeit in different ways. Classical instruction scaffolds through graded grammar instruction and controlled practice, while modernist instruction scaffolds through real-world tasks and feedback cycles. When used in tandem, these techniques provide multiple entry points for learners and help bridge the gap between knowing about the language and using it effectively in context.

The success of these hybrid models also hinges on institutional support and teacher training. Instructors must be comfortable navigating both classical and modernist pedagogies, adapting them based on learner needs, discipline-specific norms, and technological access. In this regard, professional development programs that focus on genre theory, digital pedagogy, and ESP course design are essential to sustaining hybrid innovation in ESP classrooms.

7. Conclusion

The pedagogical landscape of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is marked by the ongoing interplay between two influential paradigms: classicism and modernism. While often framed as ideologically and methodologically opposed, this paper has argued that these approaches need not exist in antagonism. Instead, they can be integrated into a complementary model that draws upon the strengths of both: the structural discipline of classical instruction and the contextual responsiveness of modernist pedagogy.

Classicism offers indispensable tools for building linguistic precision, rhetorical coherence, and genre awareness, particularly in professional and academic fields where miscommunication carries high stakes. At the same time, modernism brings a necessary flexibility to ESP, promoting learner autonomy, authentic engagement, and adaptability to rapidly changing professional environments. When blended, these approaches can create a dynamic, layered form of instruction that respects both the codified traditions of language use and the communicative realities of the modern world.

The hybrid model described and exemplified in this paper supports the development of ESP learners who are not only accurate but also agile in their use of English. It allows them to internalize formal conventions while being able to modify, negotiate, and innovate across diverse discourse communities. Through pedagogical examples from fields such as engineering, medicine, and law, it is evident that this dual orientation enhances both learner outcomes and instructional efficacy. To this end, “The media today is perceived as an essential component of the modern world” (Lăpădat and Păunescu, 2015:270), making its integration into ESP curricula both relevant and necessary.

In practical terms, this means acknowledging the obstacles learners face. As Stoian (2021:149) observes, “learning a foreign language can be challenging due to the fact that in the first stage, the learner will automatically try to connect the syntax of the new language to the set of grammar rules that exist in his mother-tongue.” These cognitive tendencies require instructors to scaffold learning with both structure and flexibility.

Education is one of the most important factors that define society. It represents the starting engine for all the activities that run within each society (Stoian, 2019:126). Language instruction, therefore, cannot be seen as isolated from broader social goals and must support the development of culturally aware, communicatively competent individuals.

Moreover, “the educational environment confronts us with problem solving situations as a matter of priority” (Bărbuceanu, 2022:183), and teachers must be ready to address them with diversified strategies. As Burtea-Cioroianu (2022:137) argues, “the teaching methods need to be alternated to keep alive the attention and interest of students in online courses.” These insights further bring forth the importance of teacher adaptability in diverse instructional contexts. After all, “different learning styles clearly show that each learner has distinctive characteristics for the appropriation of knowledge” Scorțan (2021:142), hence any effective ESP model must embrace learner diversity and offer differentiated instruction aligned with individual needs,

Crucially, successful implementation of a hybrid model requires thoughtful curriculum design, informed teacher training, and institutional support. Instructors must be empowered to act as both language experts and adaptive facilitators, guiding learners through structured linguistic input and meaningful communicative practice. Moreover, assessment methods must reflect this dual goal, measuring both the command of language form and the capacity to perform in specific communicative contexts.

As ESP continues to expand in scope and complexity, particularly in a globalized and digitally mediated world, a hybrid approach rooted in both classical rigor and modernist innovation offers the most effective path forward. This synthesis not only resolves longstanding pedagogical tensions but also aligns with the evolving demands of learners and the professions they seek to enter. Ultimately, the interplay between classicism and modernism in ESP is not a battleground, but a fertile space for creative and transformative teaching.

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Article Info

Received: May 8 2025

Accepted: May 25 2025

How to cite this article:

Lăpădat, M. M. (2025). Classicism and Modernism: Between Antagonism and Complementarity in Teaching English for Specific Purposes. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 86, pp. 58–68.