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CHALLENGES OF ESP TEACHING AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Duong Thuy Huong¹

Abstract: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed gradually to be an important area of interest for all who are concerned with the activities of the discipline it serves. It is also a learner-centered approach whose purpose is to fulfill the specific needs of target learners to satisfy either their professional or vocational demands. At the tertiary level, ESP is designed to equip students with professional skills and the language they will use in workplace context. However, institutions and universities are facing challenges involved in the process of implementing ESP teaching and learning. This paper, therefore, tries to review the literature on challenges of ESP teaching at tertiary level with the purpose of gaining better understanding of ESP current state worldwide and in Vietnam. The revealed ESP teaching challenges at the tertiary level will help universities choose the most suitable solutions to help their students to be well-equipped with specific language in their working contexts and professional skills after graduation.

Key words: English for specific purposes (ESP), teaching challenges, need analysis, curriculum design, tertiary level.

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is stated to refer to the teaching and learning English as a second language in which learner's goal is to use English in a particular domain (Paltridge and Starfield, 2016). As any other kind of language teaching, English for Specific Purposes is first and foremost based on the process of learning which addresses the needs of certain communities of learners who want to obtain some professional skills and performing job related practices. ESP is language in context, which requires real life learning situations, scenarios that tend to duplicate the specific working or professional settings the ESP students might be related to or interested in. Instead of focusing on general grammar, vocabulary and language structures, ESP teaching-learning activities emphasize the importance of practicing the necessary skills one would mostly engage in their future fields of activity. ESP students, therefore, need to develop their language competence to successfully perform real-life tasks in multiple contexts with the aim of obtaining specific or professional purposes (Fălăuș, 2017).

Thanks to the massive growth of higher education institutions ESP plays an imperative role and has found its position as an essential waypoint in the foreign language learning continuum. However, there still exists "a significant gap between implementation and assuring quality of ESP offerings, stemming from teachers' own incompetence and the lack of materials for specific contexts, as well as a lack of opportunities for ESP teachers to develop professionally and personally" (Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş, 2018).

In the Academic Training Curriculum in Vietnam and some countries, EFL and ESP courses are

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compulsory, and they follow a traditional approach of teaching and examination (Huong, 2018; Dong, 2010; Dong, 2014; Van, 2020). These courses aim at providing students with the essential knowledge and skills of the target language. After passing these courses, students are expected to achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in English. As matter of fact, the students' obsession is how to pass the examination rather than to achieve any development in the language field; on the other hand, teachers themselves concentrate on the content rather than the language skills, which the students have to gain. One possible explanation might be that ESP courses do not cover the needs of learners and workplace, and that there is a mismatch among what the learners study at universities with what the syllabus offers and what the workplace requires. (Le, 2017, Dong, 2011; Khanh, 2015; Nguyen, 2017). The challenges that institutes, universities are now facing in the process of implementing ESP teaching and learning are various and complicated. This paper, therefore, tries to review the literature on challenges of ESP teaching at tertiary level in order to get the better understanding of ESP current state worldwide and in Vietnam. The revealed ESP teaching challenges at tertiary level will help universities find out the most suitable solutions to help their students to be well-equipped with specific language in their working contexts and professional skills after graduation.

2. DEFINITIONS OF ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching since the early 1960s. Its development is reflected in the increasing opportunities and demand for its teaching in professional and academic settings and led to the growing number of ESP courses in universities. The main reasons of the origin and emergence of ESP defined by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) are "the demand of a Brave New World"; "A revolution in linguistics" and "Focus on the learners". They stated ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning and does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching materials or methodology. As for them, the main factor that distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need but rather an awareness of the need. It is no exaggeration to say that need assessment in ESP is seen as the foundation on which all other decisions are, or should be, made.

ESP is defined through a variety of viewpoints by different scholars and linguists. Most of the definitions focus on the importance of need analysis and distinguish the three aspects of ESP which are very much connected together: the nature of language to be taught and used; the learners and the settings in which the other two would occur. Mackay and Mountford (1978) define ESP as the teaching of English for a "clearly utilitarian purpose", which is defined by the needs of the learners. These needs in turn determine the content of the ESP curriculum to be taught and learned. According to Robinson (1991) ESP is 'normally goal directed' and that ESP courses develop from a need analysis, which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly students have to learn through the medium of English.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) provide their definition of ESP in terms of absolute and variable characteristics of ESP:

Absolute features:

- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learners;

- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- ESP is centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse.

Variable characteristics:

- 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.
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
- Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

The division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics by Johns and Dudley-Evan (1998) which is influenced by that of P. Strevens (1980) is very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP and suggests that ESP is proved to be a permissive, flexible field of study, having influenced the entire process of English teaching. ESP teaching and materials are founded on the results of needs analysis which raise questions: What do students need to do with English? Which of the skills do they need to master and how well? Which genres do they need to master, either for comprehension or production purposes? (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). In general, all these absolute and variable features underline the purposeful nature of ESP as an approach that shapes itself according to the learner's needs.

All the definitions and statements at some point or another through the history and the development of the field, have contributed to clarify the scope and aim of ESP. However, we must admit that ESP is understood in a broader way than we apparently bounded to at university level, which makes more challenging in implementing ESP at tertiary institutions. Most ESP definitions focus on three aspects which have close connection together: the nature of the language to be taught and used, the learners, and the settings in which the two occur. In other words, ESP is designed for the specific needs of the learners (adults) and the teaching and learning ESP is situated in a particular context (workplace, tertiary institution...). ESP, therefore, must address the learners' needs and purpose to learn a language that will help them to best perform in their field globally.

Needs analysis should be considered as an indispensable aspect of ESP syllabus design to connect the present students' academic needs with the needs resulting from their prospective employment which involves not only students but all parties in the educational system and relevant employers as well (Romanowski, 2017). Overall, since needs analysis is directly related to the design of ESP courses, the success of needs analysis lies in the potential of its findings to inform the development of the syllabus of the ESP course in question (Basturkmen, 2010). It is important for course designers to focus on the self-perceived needs of the students by including the valid requirements and observations of other stakeholders (including the institution's requirements and the instructor's teaching experience). Therefore, the learning environment should be created to be dynamic, stimulating and responsive to the future target situations in which learners will function with the knowledge, skills and competences gained in a particular ESP course (Romanowski, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper uses document analysis and employs secondary data from extensive literature on ESP teaching at tertiary level from previous studies to sketch a panoramic view of the challenges faced by ESP stakeholders. The research is mainly based on the literature review of the subject matter.

4. CHALLENGES OF ESP TEACHING AT TERTIARY LEVEL

As mentioned in Literature Review, some characteristics of ESP by Dudley-Evans and John (1998) which practitioners should bear in mind when implementing at tertiary level:

- Teaching ESP is to meet the specific needs of learners;
- The teaching contents are related to the specific professional and career;
- Teaching ESP focuses on the language use associated with a specific professional or vocational activity.

In general, teaching ESP is not just the language teaching theory. It is a kind of practice according to the actual needs of the learners which is purposeful, targeted and practical. The need for undergraduate students to develop their proficiency in ESP skills and knowledge in the globalized world has increased due to the globalization of both the economy and tertiary education. In higher education, students require improved English skills to not only study their specialized discipline but also secure employment upon graduation, which has resulted in increased pressure on English practitioners in conducting a successful ESP class (Kırkgöz, 2014; Anthony, 2015).

ESP teaching at tertiary level poses some challenges since it focuses on the specific needs of the learners, concentrating more on language in context and on the students' need to acquire a set of professional skills and job-related functions (Fălăuș, 2017). This part of the study will review some challenges facing ESP stakeholders while implementing ESP teaching at universities.

4.1. Challenges in ESP course design and materials

Designing a course has been considered the greatest challenge of teaching any subjects. An ESP course designed for students at universities must meet the needs from ESP stakeholders since it focuses on helping students to be well-equipped with language in context, a set of professional skills and particular job-related functions. ESP need analysis is believed to be a solid foundation for a stable ESP syllabus. Therefore, designing a course for any ESP system needs a considerable amount of general English along with an integrated functional terminological language used in the targeted ESP course which is based on the needs analysis (Ibrahim, 2010).

According to Carver (1983) an ESP course is identified with three features: authentic materials, a purpose-related orientation, and self-direction. The use of authentic content materials which could be modified, unmodified in form claimed by Dudley-Evans (1998) is also considered the truly feature of ESP, particularly in self-directed study and research tasks. Purpose-related orientation refers to the simulation of reality in which learners have the possibility to get involved in communicative tasks required of the target setting. Finally, self-direction means learners must have a certain degree of freedom to decide when, what, and how they will study to become active users (Carver, 1983).

The authenticity of materials in ESP has become controversial among scholars. Most of the researchers believe that ESP materials should be authentic, up to date and relevant for the students' fields and evaluating materials for ESP is a vital skill which has been neglected by most practitioners (Bojovic, 2006; Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998; Anthony, 1997). However, bookshelves are filled with a large amount of ESP books for ESP students' which leads to the reduction of individual instructors' motivation in constructing their own course content with a focus on the learners' context and needs. When using an assigned course book, it is impossible for the materials writers to think carefully about the goals of learners at all stages of materials production (Anthony, 1997). Instead of making real analysis on ESP stakeholders' needs, ESP teachers become **slaves** of published textbooks without analyzing their appropriateness for the ESP course. Besides, the curriculum put the focus on teaching GE for students at a certain level since the leaders think that they can change from GE to ESP without any difficulties (Anthony, 1997; Đông, 2014). Toms (2004) and Skehan (1998) disagreed using a general English course book for ESP learners and this goes against all notions of learning centeredness and "the scope to adapt material to learner differences is severely constrained." In some technical universities, practitioners must design their own ESP course books since they are not available in their fields. However, the ESP syllabi can be said to be designed from what teachers have, not what students need. In other words, ESP courses were designed without asking questions to create database for further developments as stated by Fălăuș (2017), or without conducting need analysis from stakeholders of ESP (Huong, 2018).

Therefore, when designing an ESP course "the primary issue is the analysis of learners' specific needs. Other issues addressed include determination of realistic goals and objectives; integration of grammatical functions and the abilities required for future workplace communication, and assessment and evaluation" (Gao, 2007). The controversial issue is that if ESP learners can state their wants and needs, can they help design their own courses? Kaur (2007) agrees with the opinion since ESP learners take some responsibility for their own learning and feel motivated to become more involved in their learning while Skehan (1998) considers if learners are effective learners or not. However, most students at technical universities find it hard to identify what they want and need to learn in ESP while they are struggling with specialized subjects at university and do not know if they can get the right job when they graduate. ESP course designers, therefore, play a vital role in deciding what should be taken into consideration in an ESP syllabus through the in-depth need analysis from different ESP stakeholders.

4.2. Challenges from practitioners and methodology

One of the problems facing ESP teaching is the confusion of who should teach ESP: language teachers or subject teachers and what to teach in ESP: content knowledge or language skills. Tabatabaei (2007) stated under the nature and objectives of ESP pedagogy that language teachers are more suitable for ESP teaching than teachers of subject knowledge. However, language teachers have to face with the insufficiency of specialist knowledge which they are not familiar while content teachers lack language teaching methodology since there is a wide discrepancy between teaching content subjects and teaching languages. Consequently, the language teachers face "subject knowledge dilemma" during their practice, designing and developing materials for the courses (Wu & Badger, 2009). Teachers find themselves having to teach with texts whose

content they know little or nothing about. Zhang (2011) proposes collaborative teaching with both teachers of EFL and content knowledge as ESP instructors teaching one class together. Nonetheless, this approach may work in institutions where there exist both content and language teachers but not feasible and so for the time to come, the application of this "mixed" approach remains unachievable.

In terms of ESP teacher's role, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggested using the term "practitioner" instead of teacher to emphasize the complexity of the work one is involved in and does not only simple teaching. The five key roles for ESP practitioners can be identified as 1) teacher, 2) course designer and material provider, 3) collaborator, 4) researcher, and finally 5) evaluator. The teacher in ESP classes, therefore, is no longer a "primary knower", the authority on subject knowledge. The ESP teacher is more like a language consultant, accepting equal (or even lesser) status with learners who have their own expertise in the subject matter. The students are equipped with content knowledge, so the teacher's role is to design the course based on student's knowledge and needs with authentic updated materials. Besides, teacher also needs to work closely with field specialists, find out appropriate teaching methods, authentic and updated materials to make students interested in the course. Finally, beside evaluating students' learning progress, the evaluation of course and teaching materials should also be conducted. Consequently, the working of ESP practitioners becomes harder and more complicated which requires more skills, knowledge, and time.

According to Bingyao (2016), there are troubles in ESP teaching: ESP teachers are unable to compile textbooks, set up the courses, determine the teaching hours, and unable to form a teaching staff. There are no specific policies to improve state of ESP teaching and there is a lack of ESP professional teachers. Since the ESP teaching is interdisciplinary, professional teachers encounter barrier in the language while English teachers have professional knowledge barrier. The teaching method is not appropriate and not innovative, and they often change the ESP courses abruptly into translation courses and bilingual courses, which kill the students' interest and confidence in learning English. Moreover, ESP teachers do not create any good language environment or learning atmosphere which leads to the students' demotivation in learning ESP.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) suggest cooperation for subject-specific work such as Cooperation, Collaboration and Team-teaching. In Team-teaching, both English and subject teachers are in charge of the same ESP class and teach simultaneously. The efficacy of collaborative and team teaching has attracted interests of many researchers such as Flowerdew and Peacock (2001), Hyland (2002), Johns & Swales (2002), Warschauer (2002) and the findings reveal the complexity in ESP teaching. The research has found that neither English teachers nor subject teachers can complete the teaching task efficiently separately and that team teaching in ESP classes help improve students' competence in writing (Jordan, 1997) and reading comprehension (Mahabadi and Swilky, 1994). However, the differences in methodology, epistemology and ontology led to an inability on the part of learners to reconcile what appear to be incompatible discourses (Barron, 2003). In his opinion, team teaching does not always mean that shared methodologies and shared knowledge will lead to better learning outcomes. He recommends a constructivist approach to collaboration at both the disciplinary and intercultural levels because of its reciprocity and is open to negotiation and change. Another problem confronting the ESP teacher is that of status and role

since some subject teachers do not consider English language teaching a discipline (Barron, 2003). The role of an ESP teacher (or practitioner) is so diverse and too many in one with overload work. Therefore, this kind of cooperation still depends on contexts of institutions and universities.

4.3. Challenges from ESP learners

According to Dudley Evans and St John (1998), ESP is a learner-centered approach which is designed to meet the needs of the learners. It makes use of the methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves and is centered on the language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities. ESP learners are the “students to whom English is a foreign language” and they “find their academic subject difficult, even though in all other respects they have the background and intellectual ability to do the work” (Hajjaj, 1989; Lackstorm, 1972).

One of variable characteristics of ESP is that ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners; either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. In most universities, students start to study ESP when they are in their second or third year and they are expected to reach intermediate level of general English. With specific purposes in mind, the learners know clearly what they need to learn, and they will learn with high motivation what they find useful for their work later or at present (Saliu, 2013). The challenges of working with multilevel classrooms in terms of both level of language competence and professional competence are facing ESP teachers, which results in serious difficulties for ESP teachers to teach and for the students to learn successfully. Beside the problems of heterogeneity in language and content proficiency, lack of motivation and passive learning style are also revealed in ESP teaching literature. (Fălăuș, 2016; Barron, 1992; Khanh, 2015; Robinson, 1991; Zhang, 2011).

Adams-Smith (1989) claimed that an ESP course prepares “a good learner” who “is not necessarily the one who comes top in the English class, but rather the one who performs successfully in concurrent and subsequent English-medium subjects” and these subject-oriented needs of the specific learners should be the main focus of ESP. Learners’ age, attitudes, learning strategies and motivation are also the areas of interest of researchers. ESP learners are defined as adult learners at tertiary level or for workplace situations. These adults have a strong educational background but have weaknesses in English. Robinson (1991) considered “adults” as goal-oriented learners are self-directed and autonomous who do not want to learn English for social or cultural reasons, but they usually follow a utilitarian goal to learn it for their well-defined occupational or academic needs. These adult learners have better learning behaviors in comparison with pre-adults or adolescents who are dependents and strictly supervised by their teachers or parents. This well-defined goal-orientated behavior of ESP learners increases interest and motivation (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). It is suggested that ESP learners should be actively involved in the process of the choice of the content materials, curriculum development and teaching methodology to ensure maximum commitment and motivation of the program participants. ESP course contents should be kept flexible to accommodate learners’ recommendations and ESP teachers should be aware of the learners’ needs as not to introduce irrelevant materials to the course (Adams-Smith, 1989; Saliu, 2013; Javid, 2013).

In most universities, ESP learners are expected to reach at least intermediate level in English competence before attending an ESP course. This characteristic, however, becomes a serious

obstacle in implementing ESP teaching at tertiary level since there is a great discrepancy in students' English proficiency among foreign languages, socio-science, and technical universities. The number of credits for General English and ESP courses and the "quality" of fresh students varied among universities. Most technical universities in Vietnam spend only minimum credits for General English and ESP, ranging from 6 to 8 credits for General English and from 2 to 4 credits for ESP (Huong, 2018). Technical universities are now struggling with looking for solutions to improve students' general English competence without changing their Training Curriculum and currently this "mission" remains impossible (Đông, 2011; Hải, 2011; Hoa, 2016; Huong, 2018).

As mentioned in literature review the role of ESP at tertiary level institutions is to equip students with related-to-work skills using English in professional environment. In other words, ESP is interdisciplinary which requires both professional and language knowledge. In ESP, "language is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education but to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in working environments" (Basturkmen, 2014). ESP learners, therefore, should be informed what they need to learn to satisfy requirements from workplace, what they must do in their future job. Consequently, the cooperation, communication, understanding, supporting among ESP stakeholders such as experts, leaders, teachers, students, employers become imperative and the gaps between ESP teaching at universities with requirements from workplace should be bridged.

5. CONCLUSION

English is a language; therefore, the teaching should focus on cultivating students' ability of applying English. ESP follows this principle which refers to a specific profession or related disciplines, setting up English courses according to the learner's particular purpose or the specific need. Therefore, ESP courses are imperative in higher education and it is also the requirements of social progress and education reform, the demands of the market, the needs of integrating with the world education in the future. Offering ESP courses at tertiary level is imperative to fulfill the demands of supporting a well-educated workforce to society in the era of globalization and knowledge-based economy.

Challenges in ESP teaching at tertiary level have become imperative due to the requirements from development and diversity of global economy and society. Issues in ESP teaching differ among universities worldwide ranging from geographical locations, policies, perspectives, which should be carefully studied and implemented to make it suitable for each university's context. Development and innovation in implementing at universities consists of a variety of factors which need to be closely linked together. In other words, content teachers, language teachers, learners (not only students but those who are sent by companies as well), graduates, employers should be actively involved in the process of the choice of the content materials, curriculum development and teaching methodology to ensure the authenticity, reliability and practices of the ESP curriculum at universities. The decision of choosing content teachers or language teachers to teach ESP should be carefully considered based on the context, characteristics of the university.

ESP should be considered a "must" at tertiary education. However, the traditional English teaching in higher education needs to be reformed and adjusted and established the new concept which makes "the students as the main learners, teachers as the leading" integrating into the

international education and stepping into the future together (Javid, 2015). The challenges in ESP teaching may vary from different universities and any solutions given should be suitable and feasible to the state of each university. Then, teaching and learning ESP at university will become more effective and fulfills partly the requirements from workplace.

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