

Major Problem Areas and Challenges in ESP *Insights from Theory and Practice*

Asma Merine

Salhi Ahmed University, Naama, (Algeria)

Abstract: By the 1960s, there was a well established movement from simply teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to meet the communication needs of a new category of people willing to learn English not for prestige or pleasure but rather as a key to success in different academic and occupational settings. Thus, this global language becomes a necessity that is highly required to be used in different domains such law, economics, medicine, etc. As a matter of fact, ESP has developed considerably in the last decades. However, it still suffers from several problems and complexities in different areas, including the areas of research, inadequate English language communicative skills, students' low English proficiency, the qualifications of teachers, teacher and employees training, inadequate teaching methodology, lack of textbooks, evaluation and so many others. Based on the mentioned problems, it can be said that the current education system still supplies students with an abundance of theoretical knowledge and not enough practical skills so that universities should deliver professional education and training that will satisfy the needs of their students once they join the workplace. In this respect, an ESP teacher or 'an ESP Practitioner' is expected to play five key roles: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator just to prepare a course that is relevant, efficient, and tailor-made to meet the learners' professional needs of their future professional careers. Achieving the previous roles successfully in the process of teaching English for Specific Purposes poses a real serious challenge for not only new but also experienced language teachers. In fact, the current study addresses one main question: what can an ESP practitioner do to bridge the gap between classroom and the profession? Furthermore, the study focuses on identifying the current major challenges that ESP practitioners face in view of the diversity of disciplines because students need to acquire special skills during their studies which should serve the needs of their future professional careers. All in all, the study will highlight a theoretical framework of some issues with implications for the integration of ESP and professional practice.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, ESP Practitioner, Professional Practice

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed technological developments in different fields including business, economic, educational, scientific and technical activities. Such great advancement made English at the fore front. In fact, there was an urgent call for a worldwide language as a means of interaction to facilitate the countless exchanges in all areas and thus to better cope with the demands and challenges of globalization. A new category of people emerged with different needs: people who want to buy and sell products abroad, mechanics who have to read instruction manuals, students who are obliged to write articles related to their fields, hotel receptionists who must communicate effectively with foreign clients, learners in different disciplines who need to be up to date with the developments in their fields (economy, medicine, computing, etc). Undoubtedly, the choice was fallen on English as it is used worldwide throughout its historical background. English becomes the most important tool for

communication and for exchanging business, ideas and knowledge among people all over the world. It is required for multiple purposes especially to be up to date with the rapid advances in the field of technology and business. Consequently, learning English becomes a must. Interestingly, the issues that are discussed above led to the emergence of a new movement in the area of English Language Teaching namely English for Specific Purposes or ESP which was strongly apparent by the 1960s with the goal of meeting learners' needs in different academic or occupational contexts.

Clearly, ESP has been experiencing an incredible growth in its role as a key to success in different settings by responding positively to the requirements of language users in both academic and occupational environments. In fact, being an ESP teacher is not an easy task. ESP teachers' qualifications have often been seen as one of the most important factors affecting the effectiveness of ESP context as they are responsible for either the success or failure of the ESP courses. Most ESP educators agree that the work of ESP practitioners involves much more than teaching. Since they are not experts in the learners' professional disciplines, they should at least have a considerable amount of knowledge of their students' fields, more experience further training, extra effort compared with being a teacher of General English. Based on the previous discussion, this paper attempts to examine the following questions: Who is the ESP teacher? What are the major problem areas and challenges in ESP?

Literature review

A. ESP Definitions

For the past several decades, there has been a great need to use English for many purposes either academically or occupationally. Consequently, there was a call for strict efforts to deliver courses in English and more specifically English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP) that would meet the needs of this new challenging world. In fact, from the early 1960's ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL today. ESP arose as a term due to the fact that General English did not meet the specific needs of learners so that ESP is mainly based on teaching English to a specific group of learners with business, scientific, technical, and social needs. In this vein, Kennedy and Bolitho (1984: 02) point out:

Given a learner or a group of learner with the specific purpose in learning English, it would seem logical in a learner-centred approach to base a course on that purpose and on the needs of the learners in his situation.

To put a step further and in an attempt to define this term, Hutchinson Waters (1987:19) view ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methods are based on the learner's reason for learning." this denotes that the teacher is the responsible to analyse the main needs and motives of learners related to their field of specialization such as science, engineering and medicine.

Stevens (1988:1-2), in his turn, sustains that "ESP is a particular case of general category of special-purpose language teaching. The same principles apply no matter which language is being learnt and taught." He also adds that a clear definition of ESP needs to be based on the difference between absolute and variable characteristics. Absolute characteristics are as follows:

- ✓ Designed to meet specified needs of the learners;
- ✓ Related to content, to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- ✓ Centred on the language appropriate to those activities, in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc; in contrast with “General English”.

On the other hand, when it is classified according to its variable characteristics, ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

- ✓ Restricted as to the language skills to be learned.
- ✓ Not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.”

Later on, Strevens’ definition and classification were modified by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) in terms of absolute and variable characteristics. As a matter of fact, they removed the idea that ESP is “in contrast with General English” They justify that:

- ✓ “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 used for learners at secondary school level.
- ✓ 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”.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) ESP is an ‘approach’ rather than a ‘product’, i.e, ESP is designed to meet learners’ needs, interests, lacks and wants and it does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching materials or methodology. They declare that:

ESP must be seen as an approach not as a product. ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: why does this learner need to learn a foreign language.

Recently, Basturkmen (2006:18) declares that: “ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments and a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students”.

As far as the reasons behind the emergence of ESP are concerned, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) greatly believe that there are three main reasons that led to the appearance of ESP namely: “the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics and a new focus on the learner.”

Despite the various interpretations that are given to ESP, no one could define and describe English for Specific Purposes in a couple of sentences because the term is complicated As Strevens (1980) points out, “it is not easy to produce a definition of ESP which is simple and water weight.” Generally speaking, ESP is an approach to language teaching and learning which is specially designed for adult learners who are learning English so that they will be able to use it in different specific practical situations and fields. The key idea here is that this approach focuses mainly on the learners’ language and content-based needs in addition to their communicative abilities to function appropriately in their specific field.

B. Major Problem Areas and Challenges in ESP

As it was stated previously, there was a shift in language teaching from grammar method to a new use of language in specific situations which led to the emergence of a new trend in ELT namely ESP. This new trend has focused attention on learners' communicative needs as the starting point for course design; thus, learners will acquire knowledge in their specialties either academically or occupationally. However, it should be mentioned that ESP despite its rapid development, it still suffers from several problems and complexities in different areas, including the areas of research, inadequate English language communicative skills students' low English proficiency, the qualifications of teachers, teacher and employees training, inadequate teaching methodology, lack of textbooks, evaluation and so many others.

1. Qualifications of ESP Teachers

As a matter of fact, traditional language teaching typically focuses on developing knowledge about the language as a means of improving learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The roles of the teacher are guider, organizer, and problem solver so that he/she is the ultimate authority of knowledge in the classroom. However, the emergence of ESP imposes a new demand on the teacher as it requires the teacher to have a working knowledge of other disciplines and subjects. In this respect, the teacher is no longer the authority on subject knowledge because the students themselves may have more knowledge about the content than the teacher. Consequently, teachers became more like a language consultant, accepting equal (or even lesser) status with learners who have their own knowledge in the subject that they are engaged in. ESP teachers must fill different roles in the teaching/learning process.

To put a step further, Robinson (1991) lists the major problems ESP teachers face in their journey including: the low priority given to ESP in timetabling; a lack of personal and professional contact with subject teachers; isolation from other teachers of English doing similar work; lack of respect from students.

An ESP teacher or 'an ESP Practitioner' is expected to play five key roles: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator as he/she is also expected to use a new approach which is based on language communication, that differs from that used in EGP as it is illustrated in the following figure.

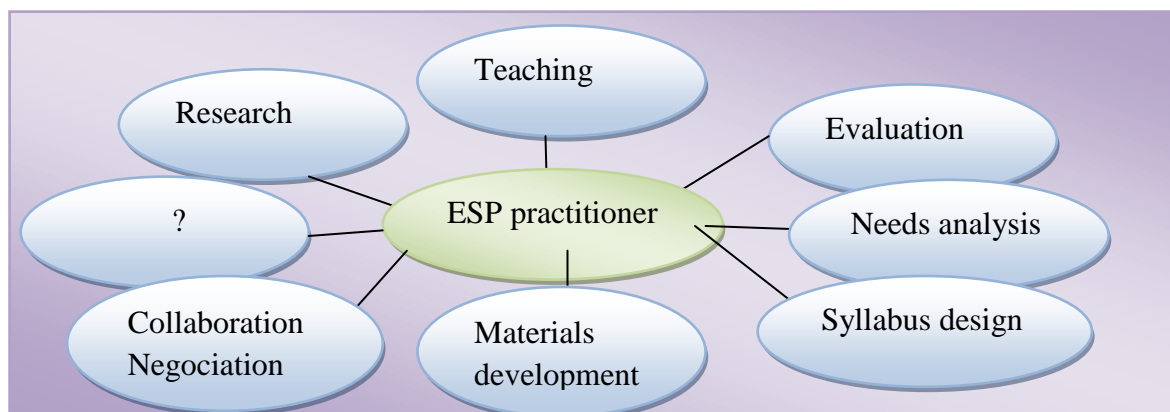


Figure 1. Role of ESP Teacher (Adapted from Dudley Evans and St. John, 1998)

In EGP context, the teacher uses the prescribed syllabus and teaches published textbooks recommended for different levels by the school authorities. However, in ESP context, ESP

teachers often have to provide the material for the ESP courses so that they should select published materials, adapt materials, or written ones. Then, ESP practitioners should evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching material used whether it is published or self-produced (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Firstly, ESP teacher is considered as the transmitter of knowledge, an adviser in both language and discourse issues and also the facilitator of the learning process through developing positive attitudes towards the learners' field of study or work. They should be flexible enough to listen effectively to learners especially to students in non-English speaking countries who need English. Moreover, he/she must focus on helping learners to:

- learn in an effective way;
- develop the most needed and required skills in their discipline;
- enhance their language strategies, attitudes and abilities for successful communication.

Another noticeable role that ESP teachers play is a course designer and materials provider. In fact, to identify the needs of a particular group, the ESP practitioner has to first conduct a process called needs analysis or in other words needs assessment. Conducting needs analysis can provide him/her with more information and ideas if the course is General or specific and which approach and methodology is appropriate to design the courses. Due to the lack of appropriate published materials, Dudley Evans and John (1998) view that the ESP teacher as a course designer and materials provider should:

- select published materials related to the field of study or work;
- adapt the already existing materials based on learners' needs when published materials are unsuitable;
- writing his/her own teaching materials when his/her own materials lack the proper authenticity;
- assess the effectiveness of the teaching material used whether it is published or self produced.

Speaking about the role of being a collaborator, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 43), collaboration is a kind of cooperation and there are three types of cooperation: cooperation, collaboration and team teaching. Cooperation is the first step in which the ESP practitioner starts asking questions and sharing ideas about the learners' subject course and tasks in order to figure out their target situation and therefore designing an appropriate program of study or work that fits learners' needs. Within the first phase, the ESP teacher may find out the subject syllabus or the tasks that learners have to carry out in a work or business situation. On the other hand, collaboration is a kind of a direct work on the part of both ESP practitioner and subject specialists, i.e. ESP teachers can develop close ties with subject teachers working together to prepare effective ESP programmes, to design appropriate syllabuses, selecting suitable materials and effective teaching and learning tasks. The most suitable way of instruction according to the results of many studies conducted by many researchers is through collaborative and team teaching activities in ESP programmes (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland, 2002; Ghafournia & Sabet, 2014). The third progressive phase is that of team teaching, which indicates that both

ESP practitioner and subject teacher work together in the same ESP classroom where each one provides his/her own experience in the field.

The term 'teacher-researcher' indicates that the teacher is also a researcher; for instance, he/she should be interested in researches and in everything that can help learners communicate effectively including: needs analysis, genre and discourse analysis, course design and materials development. Through research, ESP practitioners would keep along with developments in anything related to ESP to increase learners' motivation towards learning, reduce instructional obstacles and also to develop their linguistics and professional competences.

Being an evaluator is another role of an ESP teacher. In fact, several types of evaluation can be involved in ESP courses notably evaluating the learners' achievement and development in terms of communication, assessing the ESP courses and the teaching materials and even evaluating themselves through an on-going needs analysis, evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching process. Obviously, the responsibility of the ESP teacher is not only restricted to teaching, but should extend to other fundamental roles including researcher, evaluator, course designer and materials provider.

In his part, Bell (2002) has implemented a model of 'three Cs' that ESP teachers have to consider when designing the ESP courses. The model is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Three Cs Model of ESP Teacher Performance

Features of ESP teachers	Performance
Curiosity	ESP teachers should be interested in the learners' field of study, trying to get as much knowledge as possible from their learners
Cooperation	ESP teachers should constantly consult with subject matter scientists
Confidence	ESP teachers' confidence will grow as they understand their role, learn more about the learners' field of study and work with specialists

(Adapted from Bell, 2002)

Last but not least, meaningful communication in the classroom occurs when teachers and students work in partnership in terms of knowledge and interest between them. ESP teachers have to perform various roles and they need to be good listeners, flexible enough, showing their interest in the professional activities or disciplines the students/workers are involved in addition to being great risk-takers in the teaching process to teach effectively.

2. Lack of Training

Since ESP teachers are the starting point towards effective learning, they should be trained enough to achieve their objectives and to meet learners' various needs with different styles. However, the majority are not trained enough in various professional fields based on recent studies and the role of ESP teacher has been neglected leading to a lack of qualified, experienced

and knowledgeable ESP teachers. In this respect, it should be kept in mind that training whether pre-service or in-service is of great importance to prepare skillful teachers who at least have a certain degree of specialist knowledge to deal with different learners and various learning situations because the role of teachers in any ESP context is considered as a challenging new task in comparison to the traditional roles of the general language teachers. ESP practitioners may find themselves dealing with content in an occupation or subject of study that they themselves have little or no prior knowledge of (Basturkmen, 2010). Thus, ESP experts can train ESP teachers to acquire language skills related to specific domains such as law, medicine, biology, tourism industry, banks ...etc; collaborative approach is of a great value as it is stated by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:16), “the fullest collaboration is where subject expert and a language teacher team- teach classes.”

ESP teachers can attend pre-service or in-service training before and after being hired to understand as fully as possible the nature of the language teaching and learning processes in the field of ESP. In this vein, it should be stated that according to Thomas' view (1993), ESP teachers greatly are in need to acquire three kinds of competences, namely Language Competence; Pedagogic Competence and Language Awareness.

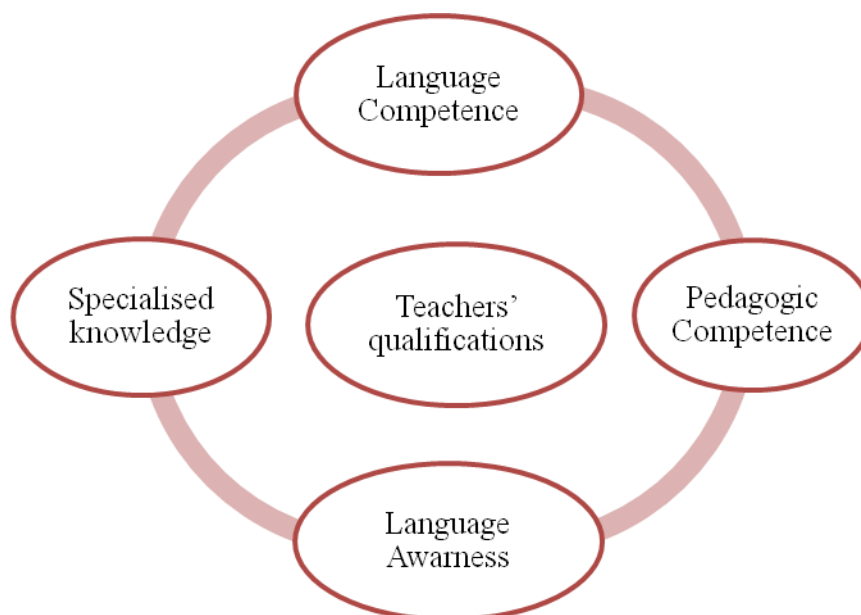


Figure 2. Teachers' Qualifications (Adpted from Thomas, 1993)

For Chien and Kao (2008: 120), a good ESP practitioner must be familiar with the learners' subject field, i.e., he/ she must possess relevant background about the specialty such as Medicine and science and technology. Otherwise, he/she will not be able to function effectively as an ESP teacher (Merine, 2020).

The real difficulty that an ESP teacher faces lies in the gap between the learners' knowledge of the special subject and the teachers' unfamiliarity with it. That's why they strongly need to be well trained in various professional domains that require special expertise to effectively teach ESP courses and to bridge the gap between the classroom and the profession.

3. Inadequate Teaching Material and Resources

Another challenge that ESP teachers may encounter in teaching ESP is the lack of adequate teaching materials in practice. Actually, materials play a vital role in foreign language teaching in general and ESP in particular because they provide language input exposure and motivation and therefore facilitating the learning of the language (Merine, 2020). They can exist in different forms: textbooks, workbooks, texts, activities, etc. For Richards et al. (2002: 322), “materials may be linguistic, visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic, and they may be presented in print, audio, or video form, on CD-ROMs, on the Internet or through live performance or display.” Further, Hyland (2006: 89) indicates that ESP materials may also include audio and visual aids, computer- and/or Internet-mediated resources, real objects, or performance.

Actually, some key-parameters should be taken into consideration in the selection of suitable materials such as the learners’ needs, interests, lacks, wants and level, the objective of the course, the availability of materials, and the time constraint.

Unfortunately and based on many researches, many ESP teachers are not good researchers and several ESP materials do not consider the realities of ESP classroom and this may lessen learners’ interest in what they are learning. It is worth mentioning at this level that according to Gatehouse (2001), “ESP developers are not provided with ample time for needs analysis, materials research and materials development.” Generally speaking, it is not an easy task to get appropriate and effective materials in ESP. Many scholars state that there are three possible ways of ensuring the alignment of course design and teaching materials: materials evaluation, materials development, and materials adaptation.

Due to the significance of materials selection, Swales (1980) declare that ESP teacher’ ability should be also assessed according to his/her capacity and experience in materials productions and selection. Therefore, ESP teachers must select materials that fit their learners’ needs taking into account learners’ age, their linguistic background and their level as well.

Conclusion

As a matter of fact, ESP practitioners must look forward improving learners’ communicative skills for ensuring the effectiveness of the courses on one hand. On the other hand, teachers should level up their competencies especially in terms of the English mastery in various fields. The present research provides fresh lens for viewing briefly the major problem areas that may face ESP practitioners including qualification of ESP teachers and inadequate teaching materials. To this end, training was proposed as the best solution to all problems mentioned before. The need for regular English trainings is crucial to improve the quality of the teaching process in terms of selection of materials, evaluation, designing courses and so on, to acquire new pedagogical knowledge, to be familiar with specific concepts and situations, better methods, content-specific terminology, and for improving the needed skills of the learners toward more effective and competent rendering of learning.

Pre-service or in-service training is a continuous process which is based on the identification of present needs of the teachers for furthering their performance and job satisfaction. Pre-service or in-service training is significant to supply the ESP teachers with a working knowledge in the areas they are engaged in and to respond positively to the demands of their learners’ needs. The need for such training should be focused on producing the 21st century ESP teachers who are expected to play different roles in comparison to General English

teachers and who are expected to bridge the gap between classroom and the profession. Moreover, it must get more attention for ESP practitioners to be well equipped with new specialist knowledge and skills to face new challenges of their learners especially in terms of English communication in a particular discipline. To do so, ESP teachers can work together with subject teachers to gain much more knowledge and experience. Moreover, both national and international conferences can offer the opportunity for teachers from different universities to share and exchange ideas about how to teach effectively and how to select materials appropriately. In addition to pre-service and in-service training, self-training is another useful tool for teacher development.

All in all, it is of great importance to enhance the professionalism of those ESP teachers who can contribute in the success of the learning process of particular group of learners who are learning English for different purposes either academically or occupationally. Through training courses, ESP teachers will translate theory into practice in a language programme to meet the new challenges to guide the learners towards higher standards of communication and self development through an integrated and systematic way.

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