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Challenges of Teaching ESP: A Review

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ABSTRACT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has gained prominence and abundant research has been conducted on issues associated with it. However, research addressing the challenges of ESP teaching and learning continues to receive extensive attention focusing on issues ranging from the most appropriate methodology to use in ESP classrooms and contents to cover for effective learning outcomes for the learners. The aim of this review paper is to give a brief overview of what ESP is all about, it also covers some issues faced by ESP practitioners while in the process of teaching. During the course of this review, the key words "ESP Challenges", "ESP teaching methodology", "ESP teacher" were used on Google scholar to search for relevant materials to the topic covering the range of years from 2012 - 2021. Twenty relevant materials were finally selected which are used for this review. This review finally concludes by offering solutions as to how these challenges can be overcome by practitioners to make ESP teaching more effective.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, ESP Teaching, ESP practitioners, ESP challenges

INTRODUCTION

ESP has been around for some time now and it emerged as a necessity that arose for the need of English in different fields of study. According to Hutchinson & Waters (1987), ESP emerged as a response to the needs of learners of language for work purposes particularly in the fields of science, technology and business after the Second World War (1937-1946). The new work demands related to a changing global society, the advances in language and linguistic focus, and the emphasis on learning needs of learners were some of the pushing factors behind the introduction of the ESP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). This brought with it great changes in the teaching of English which shifted its focus from the linguistics focus of language being an object to be described in terms of phonemes, morphemes and words, to language being viewed as a means of communication (Chalikandy, 2013). As a result, language began to be interpreted differently based on the context, the participants and the goals, and inevitably, more focus was placed on the needs of the learners and on the need to generate materials for the learners' particular needs.

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The definitions of ESP put forward by various researchers have also centered around learners' needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as a language learning approach based on learner needs. Orr (2001) claims that ESP is an intensive English language instruction intended to address the particular learning needs of a single learner or a group of learners within a defined period, within which basic teaching in general English is not enough. Borah (2016) posits that ESP is a branch of English language Teaching (ELT) and it is referred as 'applied ELT' because its aims and contents basically revolve around the specific needs of the learners. Making reference to Richards and Schmidt (2010), Laborda and Litzler (2015) defined ESP as language used in certain restricted communication styles (e.g. health documents, science-based reading, air traffic controls) that are not commonly used, and have lexical, grammatical and other language characteristics. It is evident that the definition of ESP is always attributed to the fulfilment of a specific need that aims to focus on the development of specific skills of the learners. These definitions stipulate that ESP is solidly formed based on the needs of learners to learn a language for a specific purpose.

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, ESP has undergone a constant process of development: its scope is redefined, its methodology is improved, its objectives and orientations are shaped and reshaped, and the number of course books designed to serve its purposes is enlarged (Fălăuş, 2017). Despite the extensive attention ESP received, challenges associated with ESP teaching and learning remain a subject of scrutiny, judging by the number of publications that could be extracted from the search engine Google Scholar. Interestingly, most of the articles identified by Google Scholar with 'ESP Challenges' as the search keyword are research involving non-native ESP-contexts such as Indonesia (Poedjiastutie, 2017; Marwan, 2017), Cambodia (Petraki, & Khat, 2020), Saudi Arabia (Alsharif & Shukri, 2018), and Uzbekistan (Mustafayeva, 2019), to mention a few. This suggests two obvious phenomena: one is that ESP continues to expand as an integral part of the English language learning process in various language contexts, and two, the challenges of ESP in the teaching of English are a subject that merits continuous attention. This is the aim of the paper to highlight the challenges with regards to the teaching of ESP and the possible solutions on how the challenges have been and could be tackled by ESP practitioners.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this review, the key words 'ESP Challenges', 'ESP teaching methodology' and 'ESP teachers' were keyed-in on Google scholar (www.scholar.google.com/) to search for relevant materials on the topic covering the years from 2012-2021. The search resulted in the selection of forty-two articles, of which twenty-two were considered irrelevant to the issue or methodology of teaching of ESP and its challenges which stands to be the focus of this paper. Twenty relevant materials were finally selected which are used for this review process.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

CHALLENGES SURROUNDING THE ESP TEACHING

By and large, the question whether ESP has a unique teaching methodology continues to be of interest to researchers (*cf*. Kenny, 2016). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest that ESP has taken its methodological approach from basic language teaching methods while others, including Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991), suggest differently. A relationship is seen, however, to exist between approach and methodology as both approaches and methods are concerned with language program design. While approach is language learning concepts that provide a basis for language teaching methods and principles, methodology relates to tools used in the implementing process to incorporate methods and procedures to language teaching (Northcott, 2013).

Yet, while there is a heavy concern of ESP teaching on the choice of the appropriate methodology to achieve the specific purposes, the more important focus should be on the needs of the learners and consequently, their expectations with the outcome of their learning. In other words, as an ESP program is designed based on the assessment of needs of the learners on the purposes of learning English as well as language functions with which English is required (Mustafayeva, 2019), practitioners should adapt to the learners' needs to come up with what is considered a suitable methodology for teaching ESP effectively. However, is there really a suitable methodology for teaching ESP, when there are multiple variables that contribute to the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of teaching ESP?

Kenny (2016) discussed the difficulty of handling a heterogenous class when teaching ESP. While the term 'heterogeneous' or mixed ability classes is commonly used to describe classes made up of students of different levels of proficiency, in an ESP class, Munteanu (2013) argues that the term could be misleading. Similarly, Lunina (2018) also highlights that the differences in heterogeneous classes may not only be about language proficiency and language learning ability, but also about learning experience and exposure, mother tongue, cultural background, preferred learning style, and motivation, to mention a few. Marwan's (2017) research, for example, which was conducted in an Indonesian vocational higher institution demonstrated the inconsistency between students' prior experience in English and curricula expectations had eventually affected the effectiveness of the ESP teaching. What this means is that there are no two learners who are really similar; so selecting one right technique and approach in an ESP may not be possible.

The issue of learners' language proficiency remains a challenge to ESP teachers. In teaching ESP, it is expected that students understand and are able to use English sufficiently on a general level. In other words, if learners are already at the intermediate level in the ESP classroom, they could be easily guided to achieve their target in learning English (Kenny, 2016); if otherwise, the methods adopted may not be fully effective (Alsharif and Shukri, 2018). However, ESP teachers often face the challenge of learners having language competence that is far below that of the expected level. Poedjiastutie (2017) reported a research conducted at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) Indonesia, which revealed that the ESP practitioners had to revert to teaching General English instead of ESP due to a lack of English language proficiency among the learners. In addition, Peters and Fernandez (2013) discuss the needs for ESP learners to be familiar with particular lexis relevant

for their specialized fields, on top of their the lexical needs similar to those of general English classrooms. And when learners lack the required vocabulary for ESP-related activities, the ESP teachers are faced with the decisions on which ESP vocabulary students need and thus, the integration into the lessons, which could be very challenging as the teachers are not specialists in the learners' professional domains (Costeleanu, 2019).

The unavailability of teaching materials also remains another fundamental issue in teaching ESP. Although a number of widely released ESP textbooks are now available, none of them are appropriate for the specific needs of specific students (Chalikandy, 2013). This is because the needs of a certain group of students at any specific time or place will vary from the needs of any other class of students. For example, the needs of students who want to study ESP for drafting medical reports may be different from a class of students whose needs are to concentrate on medical prescription of medications to patients (Lodhi *et al.*, 2018). In other words, although both groups of students may be in the medical field, their needs to learn the language vary and thus, the types of materials that they should work with. In the same vein, Tevdovska (2018) raises another interesting issue with regards to material selections for ESP, i.e. whether a single textbook is enough for ESP teaching or there should be a blend of different types of materials, including authentic ones. In her paper Tevdovska discusses in detail the advantages and disadvantages of both textbooks and authentic materials, but concludes that the selection of materials in ESP teaching context should be constantly given attention to as a perfect textbook or language learning material is non-existing not only in the ESP teaching context, but even for the general English teaching. Interestingly, Jones (1990) has long stated that there are no textbooks that can be referred to as ESP textbooks.

Perhaps, it is the issue related to lack of teaching materials that leads to the fact that practitioners' content knowledge remains a topic of continuing interest in the field (Cheng, 2015). Koran (2014) asserts that content knowledge is important as it certainly gives ESP practitioners the opportunity to use it for real communication and classroom activities. It therefore becomes a necessity for practitioners to be familiar with the subject knowledge of the learners so they can be able to relate better with the learners in classroom scenarios. However, most practitioners still struggle with the subject knowledge in ESP, as in any ESP teaching activity, the contents should be presented in context (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) to fulfill the needs of the learners. And since ESP practitioners are not experts in the students' professional fields, they sometimes battle with the language of the subject matter that they are not familiar with. In his review of ESP practitioners and content knowledge, Cheng (2015) mentions that many ESP teachers are unclear of the aspects of ESP teaching and learning and so they require proper training not only to teach ESP classes, but also in playing the multiple roles of designing courses and materials as well as conducting research. In brief, there are a multitude of challenges faced by ESP practitioners at developing language and communication skills of professional communication in English depending on the area of their professional field. Although the ESP practitioners' inadequate knowledge of subject matter can be handled effectively with some level of collaboration between the ESP practitioners and subject practitioners, this in itself poses a challenge because the collaboration can be hindered due to time constraints, differences in personalities, and rank related issues between ESP practitioners and the subject teachers (Koran, 2014). All in all, it is no surprise that ESP teaching and learning has

developed into an eclectic fashion (Northcott, 2013), with ESP practitioners fine-tuning methods that could better suit the needs of their learners while continuing grappling the approach to use, the contents to focus on and language aspects to include (Stojković, 2019).

DISCUSSIONS AND POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATIONS TO ESP TEACHING CHALLENGES

It is obvious that the role of an ESP practitioner is more than teaching; Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) use the word "practitioner" instead of "teacher" to demonstrate that ESP involves much more than teaching. The ESP teacher has a multifaceted role to play and that is based on the needs of the learners. It is the practitioners' duty to first analyse the needs of the learners, then come up with appropriate materials and methods to teach the learners of ESP (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Chalikandy (2013) further posits that every ESP practitioner at least, among other things, needs some level of competence in developing materials and also needs to have a creative imagination on how to make do with the materials available and should also possess the ability to become 'a supplier' of suitable materials for lessons. Other than that, every ESP practitioner should be able to adapt the materials in accordance to the needs of the learners and supplement classroom teaching and learning activities with extra materials (Novita, Mustafha, & Sundayana, 2019).

In terms of the language barrier, Marwan (2017) points out that the ideal solution to this problem is that institutions should have certain requirements on the English language proficiency level of the students prior to enrolment into the university. In other words, students should have proof of the required English language proficiency, such as results in TOEFL or IELTS examinations before admittance. This means that students who want to learn ESP courses should already have some level of proficiency in English. While this move seems logical, it poses another challenge as it would limit the number of student enrolment and at the same time deny any consideration for ESP in general. Marwan (2017) suggests that students with poor English skills should perhaps be given a basic background of English training before moving to an ESP class. Similarly, Poedjiastutie (2017) suggests that General English still can be included in students' curriculum to support ESP teaching. Méndez & Pavón (2012) however recommends native speaker communication assistants and ESP practitioners collaboration to tackle this issue.

The issue of collaboration for ESP practitioners is actually one that needs to be researched more on as there is no clear cut way of handling the issues that arise from the lack of it. However, Chamberlain (1980) points out that it is important for the ESP practitioners and the subject practitioners to realize what their position and attitude are in learning and working from each other (cited in Ahmed, 2014, p. 20), not only about the interest of the learners, but also what they can both gain by working with each other. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) also propose that collaboration between an ESP teacher and a content teacher be distinctly defined so as each of them can focus on their specialty. While the ESP practitioner focuses on English skills, the content teacher can focus on professional skills of the learners; in this way, both can make out time on how to work on achieving a common goal.

Any effort of collaboration, however, could pose technical challenges. Esteban & Martos (2002) agree that the issue of collaboration with subject practitioners is difficult to put into action and suggest that students themselves should be considered as collaborators. ESP practitioners can work with students based on the students' knowledge of their specialization. Nonetheless, clearly in this effort students must have certain levels of competency and proficiency in English to be able to share their knowledge in their given fields with the ESP practitioners. In fact, in Alemi and Pazoki's (2020) research, it was the students that urged more cooperation between applied linguists and content specialists to eliminate the problem of ESP contents in ESP classrooms.

Ahmed (2014) suggests that ESP practitioners undergo training that can provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to deal with the specializations of their own students, and so there will be less requirement for collaboration. Rajabi, Kiani, and Maftoon (2012) investigated the underlying effects of an ESP in-service teacher training program on the beliefs and instructional practices of Iranian ESP teachers as well as students' achievements. They concluded that there was a significant difference between the achievements of students who enjoyed trained ESP instructors in comparison to those who received untrained ESP instructors, underlining the merits of continuous attention on training ESP practitioners (Nezakatgoo, & Behzadpoor, 2017). As Hutchinson & Waters (1987) put it, if ESP practitioners do not need to learn specialist knowledge, they are required to have three things: "a positive attitude towards the ESP content; knowledge of fundamental principles of the subject area; an awareness of how much they probably already know" (p. 163).

ESP makes use of other content subjects' methodology and according to Chalikandy (2013) this is the strength of ESP methodology as it integrates approaches to language learning and thematic approaches to learning. With experience in material development, ESP practitioners can also be able to know when to improvise, especially where learners' lack of proficiency comes into play. ESP is therefore content-based and task-based and making use of content-based and task-based instruction is quite useful (Chalikandy, 2013). Video disk, CD-ROM, Internet, e-mails and machine aided language learning are used in a typical ESP class and also role play, playing a real game simulation in an ESP classroom can make it easy for learners to learn.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that ESP remains increasingly important to the future development of English language teaching, and ESP practitioners should be prepared with all challenges that come with the teaching and the other related tasks that come with ESP teaching as discussed above. This paper has provided a review of the challenges associated with the profession, and some ways to overcome the challenges. Perhaps the most significant realization is the requirement to continue researching the appropriate methods and approaches in teaching ESP as well as finding the right balance between teaching students the contextual language needed for them to be able to fulfill the specific academic or job-related functions and the amount of subject specialist contents that an ESP practitioner should have to ensure outcomes relevant to the required competencies in students' particular fields.

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