

Challenges and Problems that Face ESP/ EAP Teachers inside Classrooms

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Abstract:

This paper explores the most important challenges which face ESP/EAP teachers and the solutions to these problems as investigated by many ESP practitioners. It aims, therefore, (a) to explore the perceptions of the teachers, their mode of involvement and the problems which they face, (b) to evaluate the teaching methods currently in use in the FEIT by those teachers for purposes of teacher self- and professional development and (c) to suggest solutions from the correlations results of (a) and (b) and also the related literature for raising the awareness of ESP/EAP teachers in the classroom. It is carried out within the framework of ESP.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for Academic Purposes (EAP) ; General English (GE) ; Practitioners

Introduction:

Experienced and well-qualified teachers are the great demand of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) today, because teachers' characteristics may affect students' achievements either positively or negatively. ESP "requires teachers of more advanced experience and training. It is emphatically not a quick and easy option for below-average teachers" (Stevens, 1978, 108). Therefore, the nature of the teacher who will be involved in ESP/EAP programme is a vital issue to be considered. For Midlane (2010), the world of EAP opens up potential new opportunities for teachers. He considers it a shifting to new area of teaching where job security and financial rewards may be better. However, teachers will be expected to enhance their skills and qualifications. More exploration of the topic can help us to understand it more fully from different angles and point of views. Therefore, this paper explores the most important characteristics required by an ESP/EAP teacher, challenges of the profession and solutions as investigated by many ESP practitioners.

As the main goal of this study is to examine the ESP/EAP teachers' professional skills in an ESP/EAP programme which is supposed to improve students' language proficiency, the researcher attended English classes in Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, Taiz University, Yemen (hereafter, FEIT, TU) as a non-participant observer during the year 2011. Non-participant, systematic and in-depth observations were used. Semi-structured interviews were also used to explore the teachers' perceptions, qualities and their mode of involvement.

Characteristics, Roles and Qualities of the ESP/EAP Teacher

In general, Vaughn (2001, as cited in Lin, 2007, pp.44-45) points out three important characteristics for teachers:

- a) clarity (i.e., to present information to students clearly by using some instruments, such as chalkboard, overhead projections, etc.).
- b) variability (using more than one or two teaching methods).
- c) enthusiasm (showing excitement about the topic through, for example,

facial expressions).

However, the role of the ESP teacher differs from those teaching General English (GE). Several advocates of ESP consider ESP teaching extremely varied, so for this reason they use the term ‘practitioner’ rather than ‘teacher’ (e.g. Swales, 1985; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). The reason behind that is to reflect the big scope of ESP and, as Dudley-Evans and St John say, “to emphasise that ESP work involves much more than teaching” (13). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claim that the ESP teacher should have the same qualities as the GE teacher and should possess (a) English language knowledge, (b) thorough command of the course design and (c) expert knowledge of the related field of science. In other words, the ESP teacher should have the general good teaching qualities besides the specific ones.

Typically, an ESP teacher is one who has experience in teaching English as ESL or EFL. Thus, he can exploit and adopt his background knowledge in ESP class, but with adapting them in line with ESP class, so this is flexibility or adaptability. Flexibility in ESP also means a willingness to try new approaches and methods in all stages of the whole teaching process. It is, therefore, one of the prime qualities of the ESP teacher. Jarvis (1983, as cited by Jordon, 1997) proposes eleven overall abilities and tasks needed by an ESP teacher. They start with analysing specific purpose language and situations and end with assessment of achievement of objectives. Johns and Price-Machado (2001) conclude their chapter about ESP under sub-title ‘ESP and the Future’ like this:

“There is considerable demand for ESP teachers who can perform a verity of needs assessment tasks, such as collecting authentic discourses and analysing them, making appropriate observations, and consulting various stakeholders– and then produce curricula sensitive to students and contexts” (52).

Their words summarise the tasks that an ESP teacher should fulfil in analysing students’ needs.

The ESP teacher has also to play the role of a facilitator while teaching the ESP course. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) consider this role as

“*teacher as facilitator or teacher as consultant*” (149 [*original emphasis*]). To achieve this role, Littlewood (1981) suggests a variety of specific roles which teacher may need to perform separately or simultaneously, such as classroom manager and ‘co-communicator’ (93) with the learners. This can also be achieved when the ESP teacher has some content knowledge of learners and master ability of the target language. As language is communication, teachers must develop in their learners the ability to communicate effectively in a wide range of professional and social contexts. ESP Teachers in ESL/EFL contexts can be a good model to their students by using the target language, as far as possible, when interacting with them. As a result, the crucial role of the language teacher is to provide a situation very near to a natural one.

Challenges and Problems

There are many problems which have faced the ESP teachers in the FEIT. The following challenges and problems have been derived from the results of classroom observation, the interviews with these teachers and also from the related literature. They may face any ESP teacher around the world, especially in ESL/EFL contexts.

1. Lack of ESP experience. The whole teaching process in the FEIT is still teacher-centred, where only the teacher asks and the learners answer, and there were not communicative tasks. The teachers still use traditional teaching methods, so there were no pairs and groups work. As a result, the lectures of second year students have been reduced from three hours to two hours only. Moreover, like a GE teacher, an ESP teacher is not an ideal or typical user of the target language in the target situations. In many EFL contexts, as Johns and Price-Machado (2001) point out, the ESP teacher “is not a native-speaker of English; this, too, will influence the type of ESP curriculum designed” (46).

In the FEIT, the teacher of the first level did not realise the importance of ESP, so he was not able to fulfil students’ needs or even to discuss them, when they wanted to discuss. He himself considered the course completely GE. His mode of involvement, therefore, was very low with ESP/EAP

aspects, but it was high with general topics. The teacher of the second level, on the other hand, had some orientation about ESP and students' needs, as he was teaching in some private medical institutions and had a good experience, as he is an inspector. His mode of involvement was also good in comparison with the first year teacher. Nonetheless, he was still using traditional methods of teaching and less subject-specific materials. Therefore, he did not bring a great change to the teaching situation.

2. The large classes; and most of English classes were placed in bad slots of the timetable, such as Thursday afternoons, or afternoons of other days after two or three specialised classes.
3. The students' little motivation and low proficiency of English.
4. 'In-class Subject Knowledge Dilemma' (ISKD) or ESP teachers' dilemma (Wu and Badger, 2009). One of the most controversial aspects related to an ESP teacher is to what extent s/he should know the students' specialism. Unlike GE teacher, s/he needs some knowledge of, or at least access to information on, whatever it is with which students are professionally involved, for instance, engineering, physics, economics, etc. Wu and Badger contend that one of the distinctive features of most ESP contexts is that "the teachers often have to deal with areas of knowledge with which they are not completely familiar. This is what we call ESP teachers' dilemma" (20). Johns and Price-Machado also assert that contextual ESP content and communication are two main challenges faced by an ESP teacher, so s/he should be context- and student- sensitive.
5. Anti-science bias, along with the difficulty of mastering the specialised language itself, the ESP teacher may have an anti-science bias, as a result of his/her earlier literature-oriented background, so this may affect the relation with the students (Ewer & Hughs-Davies, 1971).
6. The cooperation and collaboration with content or specialised lecturers- may be faced with many challenges in the parts of attitudes of both parties, which can be described as 'suspicious' and 'hostility' (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).
7. There is no a huge amount of ESP materials, and there is a general accord

that global solutions or course books can never meet local needs, since every context is unique. What is specific and appropriate in one part of the world may not be elsewhere.

8. The belittled status of ESP teachers. It is one of the main problems which face them. Many ESP practitioners address this problem in their literature. To name but a few, Robinson (1991) states that college EAP teachers seem to be particularly concerned about status, although “status, pay and conditions” (82) are problems which concern all teachers all over the world. This problem, as Johns and Dudley-Evans (1980, quoted in Fanning, 1993, p. 165) put it, is that “most of the English staff are part-time and paid only for actual hours spent in the classroom”. Besides, the question of status comes to the fore when problems such as timetable clashes, room bookings, the use of equipment, etc. (Jordan, 1997) are disputed between ESP teachers and content lecturers.

Solutions

This section presents interrelated suggestions of solutions which can help the ESP/EAP teachers in the FEIT and in any other context to overcome the aforementioned and other problems. Stervens (1988, as cited in Robinson, 1991, 96) suggests that “becoming an effective teacher of ESP requires *more* experience, *additional* training, *extra* effort, a *fresh* commitment, compared with being a teacher of General English” [*original’s italics*].

Training. One of the solutions presented to upgrade the ESP teachers’ qualities, and to develop their professional competence and skills is training and only training. It can help them to be competent ESP teachers. It will also contribute to the rising of the status of the EAP teachers. Many ESP practitioners highlight the importance of training in bringing change to ESP teachers (e.g., Robinson (1991); Hutchinson & Waters (1987); McDonough, 1984). More recently, Finney (2002) claims that “the aim of teacher-training courses must be to develop teachers who are researchers, not just technicians and deliverers of the syllabus” (77). Robinson identifies three main training needs of the ESP practitioners: “in ways of describing language ... in teaching

language and ... in designing language courses” (p.1).

Teacher training can take many types, such as pre-service courses for new graduates and in-service courses for experienced teachers, so GE teacher can be an ESP teacher through in-service training courses. Kennedy (1979, cited in McDonough, 1984) maintains that trainee’s characteristics determine training courses. These characteristics are “experience of teaching EFL; training in EFL; experience of teaching ESP; native/non-native speaker of English; knowledge of science and technology”(135).

Many implementing organizations and institutions, such as British Council give teacher development a central role in their activities. For example, as part of its global vision for English, the British Council has launched the programme ‘Project English’ in India and Sri Lanka (Sen, 2009). The main aim of this programme is that every teacher and learner of English in the world will have access to skills, ideas, and materials they need from UK by 2010. The British Council is also committed to train, directly or indirectly, 75,000 English teachers in India till 2013. Furthermore, the Indian edition of *English Teaching Professional*, a magazine for English teachers in the UK, has been launched in November 2008. The magazine will reach 500,000 teachers across India by 2010 (ibid).

Davies (2006) and Robinson consider large classes a common problem in ESP and ELT worldwide, and the solution to it, according to Robinson, can be through “both political and economic change at government level” (83).

Hutchinson and Waters consider motivation as one of the most important characteristics of any learner, in general and ESP learner, in particular and in the development of ESP itself. It is also a more common and worldwide problem not only in GE, but also in ESP (Robinson). More communicative activities and authentic interesting materials will be helpful in increasing students’ motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider selection of appropriate teaching materials as one of the most important characteristics of ESP in practice. They suggest that “The medicine of relevance may still need to be sweetened with sugar of enjoyment, fun, creativity and a sense of achievement” (48). Furthermore, there is a need to

entertain the learners to enhance learning and their motivation.

To get a solution to ISKD, Stervens (1988, as quoted in Robinson, 1991, 84) recommends: "Become familiar with the language of the subject and refers to the 'educated layman'". In discussing this point, Robinson also suggests some key variables which should be born in mind, like students' experience in their specialisation, the sponsors' requirement from the teaching of the ESP course and the availability of help to the ESP teacher, etc. Hutchinson and Waters state that ESP teachers "have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience" (160), but not learn specialist subject knowledge. At the end, the ESP teacher is aware that s/he is a language specialist and not a subject expert. S/he "should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather an interested student of the subject matter"(163).

Getting assistance and help from the other parties or stakeholders of teaching process, viz., students and specialised teachers will increase the relation with students and overcome anti-science biasproblem. Johns and Dudley-Evans (1980) associate the relationship between the student, the subject teacher and language teacher as three angles of a triangle, in which "each needs a certain type of assistance and feedback from the other two" (141). Swales (1985) express this relationship in the following schematic triangle.

Figure 1. *A schematic triangle of parties of the teaching process in ESP (Swales, 1985, 138)*

Subject-teacher

Language-teacher Student

Cooperation, in some way or another, with content specialists will, in turn, help the ESP teacher to get more orientation to the students' specialism, to discuss the difficult specialised points which s/he may face, to facilitate the teaching process inside the classroom and to overcome the suspicion and hostile of the two parties. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggest three levels of cooperation, viz. Cooperation, Collaboration and Team-teaching.

Cooperation means that “the language teacher taking the initiative in asking questions and gathering information about the students’ subject course, how English fits into their course and what the department and students see as priorities”. In collaboration, the language and subject teachers work together outside the classroom “to prepare students for particular tasks or courses”. Team teaching refers to “the actual working together in the classroom of the subject and language specialists” (4245-). All these will also contribute to the rising of the status of the EAP teachers.

In the materials issue, ESP teacher should take a reasonable decision from a number of options: whether to use a published textbook or design in-house materials, whether to adopt a content or a skills approach, whether materials should be process- or product- oriented, whether they should be authentic or simplified, and how he can contextualise them properly (Kuo,1993). Dudley-Evans (2001) argues that ESP is a “material-led field” (135). This means that ESP teachers prepare most of the materials for their particular situation. However, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) recommend that “adapting and modifying materials can be a better route than writing something completely new” (221). In many cases “less adaptation and supplementation would be necessary if the textbook had been selected more carefully” (McGrath, 2002, 4). ESP teachers are also encouraged to implement information technology (IT) with all its facets and breakthroughs, such Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in teaching these courses and to collect and analyse authentic language for and in their classes for developing their expertise and materials.

Finally, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) highlight the question of the status of ESP teachers in tertiary institutions several times in their book. They suggest that team teaching, contacts with subject area faculty and “the possibility for research into disciplinary communication” (42) often help to raise the status of ESP specialists in the eyes of academia.

Conclusion

To sum up, the English teachers in the FEIT did not understand what students' needs were, they also lacked suitable materials and familiarity with disciplines, and they were totally unfamiliar with the tasks of teaching the language. They were most of the time not aware what departments they were teaching. Accordingly, the aforementioned solutions and strategies have been suggested to prevail over difficulties of learning ESP, present a good quality of teaching and make the ESP programme more sensitive to the learners' needs and interests. They are applicable and workable to all ESP/EAP teachers in all ESL/ EFL contexts.

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