

PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *English for Specific Purpose appeared due to the awareness that general English course was not suitable for the learners' need, especially in higher education. In the teaching of ESP, the materials are focused on the learners' needs or their specific fields of study and it is assumed that they have basic language skills of general English. The purpose of this study was to analyze the problems that arise in teaching English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in higher education. The writer investigated the problems and the causes by reading many literature reviews related to the topic. The findings showed that there are five main problems in ESP. They are related to (1) teaching pedagogy, (2) the teachers, (3) the design of the course, (4) students' ability and (5) students' needs. Some suggestions are also given to solve the problems in teaching English for Specific Purpose in higher education.*

Key words: *ESP, problems, higher education.*

Background

Hutchinson & Waters (1987, as cited in Suzani, Yarmohamadi, & Yamini, 2011, p. 181) define English for Specific Purpose (ESP) as “an approach to language learning which is based on learner need.” The notion of ESP came up in 1960s and it was often associated with a special language or register. At that time, register analysis was used to design ESP course but the results failed to meet desired outcomes (Brunton, 2009). After that, target situation analysis became popular in

ESP course design. Another definition is according to Far (2008, p.3), “ESP is as recognizable activity within the broader professional framework of English language teaching (ELT), with implications for the design of syllabuses and materials as well as its presentation and then evaluation.” Based on the definitions above, it can be inferred that ESP is an English course of which the syllabuses and the materials are adjusted with learners’ desire.

In this globalization era, science and information flow heavily which finally force learners to be able to communicate in English. English for Specific Purpose (ESP) is designed to meet learners’ need. It emerged due to the awareness that English for General purposes did not meet the learners’ need. Brunton (2009, p. 2) states that “ESP has increased over the decades as a result of market forces and a greater awareness amongst the academic and business community that learners’ needs and wants should be met wherever possible.” The learners need not only the general knowledge of the language use but also the specific vocabulary in relation to their subject matter. The learners need to be exposed with the material in relation to their specific field in order to able to develop their knowledge. Moreover, Hutchinson & Waters (1987, as cited in Brunton, 2009) explain three reasons for the emergence of ESP. They are the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics and a new focus on the learner.

In the Asian educational context ESP has turned into a trend and a reality (Chen, 2011). Teaching English in higher education should be directed to the specific purpose in relation to its major. By having ESP subject, students are hoped to know the specialized vocabulary so that they are able to read and find information related to their field in English. Rasekh and Simin (2011, p. 2) assert that:

A significant aspect of language instruction at a tertiary level is learning English for a given purpose, with the specific aims of getting to know specialized vocabulary, enlarging one's knowledge of the subject matter by reading in English

and being able to use the language in the prospective profession or study areas by becoming prepared for some common situations such as carrying out higher level studies, going for an interview or conducting professional correspondence (Rasekh & Simin, 2011, p. 2)

There are many subdivisions of ESP. For instance, English for Business Purposes, English for Medical Purposes, English for Occupational Purpose, English for Computer students, or English for Accounting. These subdivisions are based on the needs' analysis to meet the significance mentioned above. Since ESP is intended for specific disciplines, the methodology used in class should be designed in such a way to fulfill the learners' need.

According to Suzani *et.al* (2011), in language teaching and learning success depends on human elements and non-human elements. Human elements are related to the teachers' role and also the learners' characteristics. The interaction in the classroom between student and teacher or students and students are also included in human elements. Textbook, syllabus, teaching aids and the number of hours are involved in non-human elements. Those factors have potential to be challenges in teaching English, especially ESP. Besides, the basic foundation of ESP, need analysis, could be one of problems in ESP. This paper discussed about the problems in teaching English for Specific Purposes in higher education/tertiary level as well as their solutions. It is hoped that by knowing some problems arising in ESP, authority, teachers and educational practitioners could reflect their own conditions and take some steps to prevent the same problem. Those who face the same problems could learn based on the suggestion given to cope with them.

Definition of ESP

Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998, as cited in Brunton, 2009 p. 2) describe ESP as below:

Absolute characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners.

2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English.
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

The description above showed the limitation of what ESP is. Since it is intended to meet specific needs of the learners, ESP course emphasizes on need analysis before beginning the course. It is the basic part of ESP course and can not be neglected. Richards (2001, as cited in Massouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 60) defines needs analysis as, “procedures used to collect information about learners’ need.” It starts with the question ‘why do these learners need to learn English? The awareness why the learners learn English will influence the content of the language course (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, as cited in Massouleh & Jooneghani, 2012).

Problems in Teaching ESP

Chen (2011) describes language pedagogy as the challenge of ESP in Taiwan. One main problem is the widespread opinion that there is no solid theoretical basis to support the teaching ESP. There were confrontations whether ESP should be viewed as a tool or a discipline, whether ESP should be considered a practical skill or knowledge capital

and whether ESP instructors should be “insiders” or “outsiders”. It is argued whether language teachers or subject teacher that should teach ESP. The paper concludes with the dilemma that differentiating ESP instructors into “language teacher” and “subject teachers” only continues the rigid power structures within the academic hierarchy.

Other study, for example the one conducted by Ho (2011), revealed that course designers and teachers encountered problems related to the design of the course, the task, assignments and the teaching methods. The researcher described the teaching ESP in a university in Hong Kong which emphasized on developing students’ English communication skills needed in workplace and/or in academic setting. The students were expected to learn to write and engage in spoken activities related to a number of documents over a period of 13 weeks. They should learn for example how to conduct a meeting, write an agenda, minutes, a memorandum report, a letter and a technical proposal and give oral presentation. Due to the need to achieve so many learning outcomes in a short period, the problems arose.

The other problem in ESP is related to students’ reading skill. A study conducted by Rezaei, Rahimi, & Talepaskan (2012) showed that mostly learners have problems in understanding the concepts of syntactic units in reading text. For example, they do not understand what is the concept of subordinate clause or passive forms. It has also been observed that they did not have problems in understanding the meaning so the researcher assumed that the learners have problems in the form of language. The research proved that the learners encountered problem in syntactic units. The problem arose due to the different structure of English and Persian language.

Learners and their needs in higher education are also problems in the teaching of ESP. These problems are found in the study written by Suzani et.al (2011). The data showed that the learners complained about several things. First, the inappropriate time of conducting ESP course which is offered in the lower semester. They thought they were not ready

enough for the course. Second, the class was usually too crowded so the students could not concentrate on their study. Third, it concerned with inappropriate class hours. It was claimed that class' hours were usually postponed. Fourth, summer course could reduce learners' motivation. It was due to the shortage of time and excess of specific materials. Fifth, the learners found incompatibility between their previous knowledge and ESP course they have. Sixth, most in ESP classes, the students were just required to memorize terminology. They feel frustrated for not applying them in authentic context. Seventh, the students stated that sometimes the teachers were unable to cope with unwanted problems of teaching ESP in their educational setting.

The study also discussed about problems in relation to course books and teaching materials. There are some points concerning this problem. First, the students did not know about the goals they would achieve and the materials they should prepare for exam. Second, the students felt dissatisfied with the translation method used by the teacher because they think they did not learn anything practical out of the textbook. Third, memorizing a large numbers of terminology is also shortcoming in the method. Fourth, there was not enough tie in vocabulary learning and the last is, after having exam , the learners usually soon forget the vocabulary they learn.

The next problem in the teaching of ESP could be seen from the study conducted by Alameddine (2012) in teaching business English for Arab speakers. The writer found four major problems in teaching business English. They are: (1) negative transfer, (2) the difference in writing strategies, (3) prepositional knowledge and (4) collocational patterns. Negative transfer means the use of prior knowledge in the production of L2 which results into unacceptable forms. For example, in Arabic (L1), the structure of sentence is : *verb + subject+object*, while in English the strusture is: *subject+verb +object*. The sentence become *ate Maya apple* instead of *Maya ate apple*. Besides, Arabs writing style is

filled with embellished literary style as opposed to the English rhetoric. This difference became problem for the learners.

The last study which would be discussed here is the study by Khasawneh (2010). The study investigated the academic writing problems of Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business at Universiti utara Malaysia. The study proved that students faced problems in relation to vocabulary, register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling and referencing.

Discussion

Based on the studies presented above, problems in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) could be categorized into five broad problems. They are (1) teaching pedagogy, (2) the teachers, (3) the design of the course, (4) students' ability and (5) students' needs.

In teaching pedagogy, it involves the unclear theoretical basis of ESP whether ESP should be viewed as a tool or a discipline or whether ESP should be considered a practical skill or knowledge capital. Besides, teachers sometimes are trapped in teaching English for General Purpose. In relation to this problem, the authority of the institution should make clear standard of the teaching of ESP in higher education. Moreover, teachers sometimes only ask the students to memorise terminologies in the subject field. This could make students feel stressed since they did not use it authentic context. Jendrich & Wisniewska (2011) argue that a task is a tool that makes language teaching more communicative. They propose how to design tasks to make teaching more meaningful for learners. One of the tasks is a group project by taking advantage of technology. They further argue that students enjoy interacting with peers and engage willingly in meaningful communication.

The second problem is concerned with teachers. It is in relation to identity crisis of the teachers. There is an argument about who should teach ESP, whether it is language teachers or subject teachers. Language teachers sometimes do not understand the material fully, so they will get

difficulty in explaining the content of for example reading text. Meanwhile, the subject teachers sometimes have language problem which will block them in teaching English for Specific Purpose. Anthony (2011) argues that the best position to teach the learners are non-specialist ESP practitioners. He further explains that “the target products that learners require can vary dramatically and evolve rapidly over time, especially after the learners enter the workplace” (Anthony, 2011, p. 3). So it is better to train the learners in the processes of observation, recording and analyzing text since it will result in skills they need in the real world.

The third problem is about the design of the course. Sometimes there are too many materials to be mastered in a very little time. The design of the course should be made in such a way to cover this problem. As has been stated at the beginning that need analysis plays an important role in ESP. Therefore, before designing the course, the authority should conduct needs analysis first in order to know what is students’ goal. Dudley- Evans and St. John (1998, as cited in Songhori, 2008) offer comprehensive concept of needs analysis which include environmental situation, personal information about learners, language information about learners, learners’ lacks, learners’ needs from course, language learning needs, professional information about learners and how to communicate in the target situation.

The next problem deals with the students’ ability. Authority should avoid conducting ESP course in earlier semester. This will lead to unsuccessful course since the students have not mastered their subject fully, let alone to understand their subject in English. This is not in accordance with the learners’ need which should be considered first. The authority should also consider the time and also the amount of workload of the students. It is useless to have too many materials but there is not enough time to cover all the materials. It is better for the authority to take the most important parts of the material which meet the learners need to be designed in ESP course.

The last, the studies explained before have proved that learners encountered problems in reading, vocabulary, writing and grammar. It happens due to the lack knowledge of basic language use so they encounter problems in ESP which focus more on content. In relation to this, cultural differences which lead to negative transfer sometimes become factor of unsuccessful ESP course. Teacher should pay attention to teaching methodology in order to be able to help the learners to be succesful in ESP course.

Conclusion

Teaching of English for Specific Purpose is necessary in higher education due to the demand in academic setting or workplace later on. Teaching ESP means the teacher focuses the material to content of students' subject field or knowledge which should be run based on the needs analysis. This lead to several problems in the teaching of ESP. There are five major problems found by the writer. First, it is related to teaching pedagogy. Second, it is concerned with the teachers. Third, the design of the material also becomes challenge in ESP. Fourth, it deals with students' ability which cover their basic knowledge about language use. The last is students' need which sometimes is not fullfilled by ESP course.

Some practical suggestions are explained in coping with the poblems that arise in ESP. The first thing that need to be considered is the need analysis. This is the basis of teaching ESP or it can be said that it is the foundation. By having clear need analysis, course designer will be able to design suitable course intended special for the learners. The second is by improving the teaching methodology. Memorizing terminologies is not a good way for succesful learning. It should also be included in authentic context so that the learners will easily absorb the knowledge. Students prior knowledge related to basis language use should also be taken into consideration. For example by providing general English course first before taking ESP. Finally, It is suggested

that more studies are conducted in order to know more about the ways to cope with the problems that happen in the teaching of ESP.

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