



The challenges in teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes for non-English major students

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ABSTRACT :

English for special purposes (ESP) is a compulsory subject in training programs at University level. With the inclusion of the subject in the training programs, the university aims to provide the society with qualified human resources capable of coping with the strong globalization trend in all fields. However, the teaching and learning of ESP, so that learners can use it properly and effectively in their future careers, still poses many challenges for teachers and the university. This article will examine some typical difficulties and propose some solutions to improve the teaching of ESP at a university in Hanoi.

Keywords: ESP, challenges, teaching, learning ESP

Introduction :

In the current strong trends of modernization and globalization, English is playing an increasingly crucial role in various activities, from entertainment to academia, contributing to development across all fields: science, technology, politics, economy, culture, diplomacy, and more. As one of the most widely spoken languages globally with 335 million native speakers, used as an official language in 110 countries, and with 1.5 billion learners (according to Ethnologue, 2015), English holds significant importance. It is also emphasized as a primary language of instruction in all educational institutions in Vietnam.

In addition to general English serving basic communication purposes, the demand for English for specific purposes (ESP) is increasingly high. Through labor market surveys and understanding the requirements of employers, universities are keenly aware of the importance of English in the professional activities of graduates. Consequently, they have introduced specialized English courses into their training programs. Currently, university majors with specialized English courses in their curriculum include economics, law, tourism, finance and banking, and industrial design. However, in reality, the teaching and learning of English for specific purposes in Vietnam as a whole, and at universities in particular, despite achieving certain accomplishments, still face many existing issues.

According to statistics from the Department of Higher Education, the proportion of graduates who meet the English language requirements of employers is only 49.3%; 19% do not meet the requirements, and more than 30% need further training and improvement. Therefore, it can be seen that despite the high social demand and the awareness of educational institutions about the importance of English in general, including specialized English, the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities is still limited..

Literature review :

2.1. What is English for Specific Purposes?

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the term used to distinguish it from General English (GE). It is a separate field of study introduced into English Language Teaching (ELT) in the 1960s. The biggest difference between ESP and GE lies in the learners' target and the purpose of learning English. ESP learners are typically adults who study to serve specific professional fields in the future.

Hutchinson and Waters [6] define ESP as a language approach based on learners' needs. Teaching ESP primarily focuses on how language is used in real communication, rather than focusing on teaching vocabulary or grammar rules. According to these authors, 'if language varies in different communication situations, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of specific situations and thereby build the foundation for the course... Let me know what you need English for, and I'll tell you the type of English you need to learn'. In other words, with this approach, learners need to be taught according to specialized situations mainly related to the professional environment..

Do and Cai [3] argue that ESP courses are built based on survey results and analysis of learners' needs to determine specific activities aimed at helping learners achieve their desired ultimate goals. Strevens [8] defines ESP based on two types of characteristics: absolute and variable characteristics. With

'absolute characteristics,' an ESP course is designed based on learners' needs, related to the content of specialized knowledge, professions, and specific activities. As for 'variable characteristics,' an ESP program may focus on certain specific skills, and it does not necessarily have to be taught based on predetermined methods. Dudley-Evans and St John [4] outline the characteristics of ESP as follows: (1) ESP meets the specific needs of learners; (2) ESP uses special teaching methods and activities; (3) ESP focuses on the type of language appropriate for these activities in terms of grammar, vocabulary, discourse, and learning skills.

Additionally, ESP has other characteristics such as: (1) ESP may relate to a narrow field of study; (2) ESP may use specialized teaching situations and methods different from GE; (3) ESP is typically designed for adult learners such as university students or working professionals; (4) ESP is often intended for learners who already have a certain level of language proficiency from intermediate level upwards; (5) Most ESP courses require certain language abilities.

2.2. Different types of ESP

According to Dudley-Evans and St John [4], the purpose of learning ESP is mainly related to professional fields or specific research areas of individuals. Thus, ESP can be divided into two main types: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), for example, English used as a language tool in teaching, medical English, economic English, etc., and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), for example, English for call center jobs, banking staff, service personnel, etc.

EAP is divided into four smaller groups, including English for Science and Technology (EST) - the main group of EAP, Medical English (EMP), Legal English (ELP), and English for Management, Finance, and Economics (EMFE). However, these two types of ESP do not necessarily have to be separated, as individuals can both study and work simultaneously. Both EAP and EOP aim at the same ultimate goal, which is to serve learners in their professions, although the methods to achieve this goal may vary.

Kennedy and Bolitho [2] suggest that EOP is taught in the context where learners need to use English for work. These courses will differ depending on whether learners are learning English before, during, or after vocational training. The content of English language programs for a secretary position for someone who has never worked in this role and someone who is an experienced secretary is likely to be different.

EAP is primarily taught at educational institutions as a subject in training programs, for example, at universities. The language taught may be based on specific disciplines at a higher level where learners are currently studying, or to prepare for further study in a particular field. For international students at the university level, they may need to learn English to enhance skills such as listening to lectures, taking notes, writing reports, reading textbooks, etc.

Today, universities mainly incorporate EAP courses into their curriculum to improve academic communication skills for students. Materials for EAP courses may cater to students from various disciplines. For example, English for Economics may be tailored for students majoring in business administration, accounting, e-commerce, etc.

The difficulties in teaching and learning English for specific purposes :

With a survey of 12 instructors teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at a university in Hanoi and 150 students currently enrolled in various departments within the university, the author identified the difficulties encountered in the process of teaching and learning ESP, which can be categorized into three main types: difficulties related to the instructors, difficulties related to the learners, and difficulties related to the learning environment.

Challenges relate to teachers

Difficulties related to the instructors include factors such as inadequate training in ESP methodology, insufficient resources and materials for teaching ESP, lack of familiarity with the specific needs and interests of students, and challenges in adapting teaching strategies to effectively address the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students in ESP classes. Additionally, limited opportunities for professional development and networking in the field of ESP may also contribute to the challenges faced by instructors.

Regarding the instructors, all the teachers currently involved in teaching ESP at the university have at least 12 years of experience teaching university students. However, among them, there are new instructors joining ESP teaching, so they may experience confusion and uncertainty. In addition to teaching ESP, these instructors also participate in teaching basic English, which occupies a significant portion of their working time. Therefore, taking on the additional responsibility of ESP teaching may overload some less experienced teachers. According to Ho [5], instructors may also face difficulties related to curriculum design, exercises, and teaching methods. Thus, although the instructors are all trained from English pedagogical institutions or hold university teaching certificates, teaching General English (GE) and ESP involves certain differences. In GE, the teaching content focuses on language skills, while in ESP, in addition to language skills, it involves conveying specialized knowledge to learners. Therefore, the methods and teaching activities will differ between the two types of English.

Furthermore, instructors teaching English for specific purposes in fields such as accounting, business administration, finance, banking, e-commerce,

tourism, and industrial design are all English teachers. Accessing specialized knowledge in certain fields—such as accounting and finance—requires instructors to invest more time in research, exploration, and learning from subject-matter experts. This is also why not every teacher is ready to teach English for specific purposes immediately when assigned.

For instructors, the curriculum plays an incredibly important role as the main source of materials and enhances teaching enthusiasm. However, the current situation in universities is that for ESP subjects in major fields such as economics, international textbooks are readily available, so many institutions utilize these materials. For less common specializations, many universities do not have ready-made curricula. Consequently, the course materials largely consist of materials provided by instructors or internal printouts. In the field of economics, specializations like accounting, business administration, logistics, and e-commerce mostly use general business English textbooks without specialization. In this university, while each specialization like accounting, business administration, and e-commerce has its own materials, only the e-commerce department has a self-compiled curriculum that has been published. The other departments still rely on market-available textbooks. The finance and banking specialization uses internal materials. Compiling ESP curricula is also a challenge for universities in general. The biggest difficulty lies in the availability of human resources willing to invest time and expertise in this activity. Subject-specialist instructors have limitations in English proficiency, while English instructors lack expertise in specific fields. Therefore, compiling ESP curricula requires the collaboration of both sides.

Apart from the difficulty in curriculum development, using a curriculum for too long raises concerns about outdated knowledge, which no longer aligns with changes in the economic, social, and technological landscapes. Additionally, ESP courses emphasize the balanced development of all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, some instructors believe that focusing solely on specialized vocabulary is sufficient for students. This leads to a reality of monotonous teaching, causing students to lose motivation. In practice, in this university, English for specific purposes in computer science, finance, and law mainly focuses on vocabulary and reading comprehension skills.

In the process of developing training programs and course syllabi, surveying the needs of stakeholders before adjusting or creating new programs is a mandatory requirement. This process is crucial as it determines the content and teaching activities. However, in current practical conditions, surveys do not always accurately reflect the societal labor needs, which also affects the objectives of course components, including ESP.

Challenges relate to students

Number	Survey Content (Challenges faced by students when studying English for specific fields)	Percentage of agreement (%)
1	Limitation of vocabulary, English proficiency	55,4
2	Lack of specialized knowledge	23,3
3	The influence of the mother tongue	73,3
4	Lack of interest in the subject	43,6
5	Lack of time for self-study	41
6	Uneven proficiency levels	51,3
7	Dependency on dictionaries and lack of knowledge on how to use them	50,6

Table 1: Difficulties in learning ESP

Above are the survey results on some difficulties and obstacles of students when learning English for specific purposes (ESP), wherein the influence of the mother tongue accounts for the highest proportion (73.3%). This is a major obstacle for language learners in general and English learners in particular, not only for ESP students but also for General English (GE) students. The role of the mother tongue in the language learning process cannot be denied, as it forms the foundation of learners' conceptual frameworks and supports them in learning a second language. However, the difference between the linguistic systems of English and Vietnamese can pose challenges for learners. Students often tend to apply Vietnamese rules and structures to English expression, leading to incorrect sentence structures and word order in English.

Limited English proficiency, uneven levels of students' proficiency, and excessive reliance on dictionaries while learning ESP are obstacles with equivalent assessment rates, all above the average level. In the training programs at the university, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course is typically taught from the 4th or 5th semester onwards, with a prerequisite that students have completed General English courses 1, 2, and 3. Upon completion of General English 3, students are considered to have reached the intermediate level to study ESP. However, in reality, the proficiency levels within a class vary, and there is a certain proportion of students who lack the foundational language skills necessary for learning ESP easily, which poses a significant barrier for them.

In ESP courses, there is a considerable amount of specialized vocabulary. Over-reliance on dictionaries and failure to memorize words can make learning increasingly difficult for students. In a study on ESP learning among electrical engineering students in Japan, author Maruyama [7] pointed out

reasons why students lack vocabulary: (1) They believe they don't need to know those words because they are not common, even rarely appearing in daily life; (2) Consequently, students lack motivation to learn those words; (3) Most English teachers also cannot teach students those words because they themselves are not very familiar with specialized terminology. This is also a common issue in ESP learning at our university. The main reason students do not learn or memorize vocabulary is that those words are seldom used.

Lack of inference skills for word meanings and excessive reliance on dictionaries are also reasons why learning ESP becomes more difficult. Furthermore, not only dictionaries but also the use of translation tools like 'Google Translate' is increasingly common among students. Instead of learning vocabulary, they simply take a photo of the content, scan it using the app, and can grasp the key points in mother tongue. The skill of inferring word meanings from context helps learners remember and understand the essence of vocabulary for a longer time, enabling them to use it immediately after learning. However, this activity requires persistence and time, which learners often lack.

Many students lack interest in ESP because it is perceived as more difficult compared to General English (GE), with a higher volume of vocabulary, and the teaching methods may not be suitable. Additionally, some students fail to see the practical relevance of the subject, leading to a sense of disinterest. Regarding self-study time, in reality, besides attending classes, students allocate a significant amount of time to other activities such as part-time jobs for experience, participation in extracurricular activities, and personal activities. They often do not have the habit of planning their study time effectively, usually cramming knowledge closer to exam dates. This study approach is not conducive to learning foreign languages in general and ESP in particular, resulting in limited learning outcomes.

Other challenges :

The learning environment plays a crucial role in contributing to the teaching and learning outcomes. Particularly for practical subjects like ESP, the class size should be carefully considered when planning the curriculum. An ESP class at our institution typically consists of 30-40 students, with classes exceeding 40 students not being overly crowded compared to other universities. However, the ideal class size for a language class ranges from 20-25 students to provide learners with more opportunities for practice and teachers to provide personalized guidance and correction when needed. Additionally, having smaller class sizes can help mitigate the challenges posed by differing proficiency levels among students.

Fundamentally, the teaching resources are relatively comprehensive. However, due to the nature of ESP, which can be prone to monotony, having full technological support can make teaching and learning more engaging.

Recommendations :

Regarding the instructors, especially for specialized English courses, apart from enhancing language skills, teachers need to invest time and effort in self-studying specialized knowledge related to their teaching subjects to make their lectures richer and more confident in delivering information to learners. Each department usually has specialized faculty members, and seeking advice and guidance from them to enhance the content of ESP lectures can be very beneficial. Furthermore, the institution can organize short courses to improve ESP teaching methods, thus enhancing the teaching capacity of English teachers. Additionally, short-term courses on specialized knowledge should also be considered to improve the quality of instructors.

To overcome the boredom in classroom sessions, in addition to self-improvement and enhancement of teaching skills and knowledge, teachers need to know how to develop their ability to apply various technological tools and resources flexibly, proactively, and proficiently in their lectures. This also helps teachers save time in the classroom, allowing for more interactive and practical activities. Furthermore, the passivity and lack of motivation of learners can also stem from unmet learning needs, which lies in the lack of needs analysis before designing the curriculum. According to Burksaitiene [1], needs analysis is crucial in building ESP courses, as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the teaching context, including the learners - the most important subject of the program. Based on this data, the program objectives are detailed to meet the learners' desires. Therefore, needs analysis should be viewed as a critical and essential stage in the course design process. The course objectives should reflect both the societal needs for the workforce - something that students may not fully grasp. Thus, teachers play a vital role in explaining and clarifying to help students understand the importance of the course for their future careers in a specific manner.

For classes with mixed proficiency levels, teachers need to understand the capabilities of each student to divide them into groups logically, where students can learn and support each other without feeling lost. Additionally, given the specialized nature of English for specific purposes, the content will be more challenging and different from basic English. Therefore, creating a friendly, familiar learning environment with a comfortable atmosphere is crucial to help students feel more confident in showcasing their abilities.

In relation to the learners, besides helping them understand the importance of the subject, creating conditions for them to feel more comfortable in interactions in the classroom, it is essential for students to have strong self-study and research abilities. Students cannot achieve the course objectives by only attending class for four hours a week. Self-study helps students remember what they have learned, supplement and reinforce difficult concepts, and improve their own proficiency. Developing study planning skills and allocating time wisely will enhance the effectiveness of self-study activities.

For the institution, integrating classroom learning with an online Learning Management System (LMS) will enhance student activity management. This system should be maintained even when there are no online lectures. Teachers can utilize many features and applications of the system for teaching, such as assigning and submitting assignments online. The system can automatically track students' submissions, saving teachers time and effort. Quick assessments can also be conducted on this system, providing immediate and accurate results. Additionally, the LMS serves as an excellent repository,

providing organized and clear reference materials, effectively supporting students in self-study.

Conclusion :

Teaching and learning ESP at the university level, to achieve effectiveness and quality, and to meet the individual needs of learners, especially those of the job market, require thorough research into the learners' needs, the needs of employers, curriculum design, teaching methods, learning activities, to meet the objectives of the course. Additionally, instructors must continually seek to improve both their ESP teaching methods and their specialized knowledge to ensure effective teaching and learning. The role of the teacher is also reflected in guiding students, helping them understand the purpose and objectives of the course, the importance of the knowledge and skills they are learning for their future careers, aiming to enhance students' motivation to learn.

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