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Difficulties in Teaching and Learning Business English at a university in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT

With the globalization of the business world, English has become increasingly widespread, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly Business English, has gained significant importance. This study explores the challenges in teaching and learning Business English at universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. Drawing on extensive experience as Business English instructors at various institutions and continuous collaboration with ESP professionals, the study identifies key obstacles that educators and students face. Data were collected through a survey conducted among ESP practitioners at the Faculty of Economics, providing insights into common difficulties such as variations in students' language proficiency, course content selection, lack of motivation, and limited in-class hours. Additionally, discussions with ESP instructors from different universities further validated these findings. The study highlights the need for improved methodologies, enhanced course design, and the development of specialized teaching materials to align with students' professional needs. Recommendations include refining evaluation and certification methods and implementing more effective strategies to enhance Business English education in Vietnamese universities.

Keywords: Business English, ESP challenges, , ESP practitioners, Vietnamese universities.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a crucial field in language education, particularly in non-English-speaking countries where professional communication skills are increasingly required in globalized industries. Business English, as a specialized branch of ESP, aims to develop students' ability to use English effectively in business and economic contexts (Basturkmen, 2010). As Vietnam continues to integrate into the global economy, the demand for proficient English speakers in business and trade has grown significantly, prompting universities to incorporate Business English courses into their curricula.

ESP differs from General English in its focus on learners' professional needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that ESP course design is based on learners' specific requirements, while Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) highlight its emphasis on discipline-specific communication skills. Business English, in particular, requires a balance between language proficiency and business knowledge (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010). However, despite its growing importance, many universities in Vietnam face challenges in implementing effective Business English programs due to issues related to curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and student engagement (Hyland, 2006).

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Teaching and learning Business English in Vietnamese universities present several challenges. Instructors often struggle with balancing linguistic content with business-related concepts, ensuring that students develop both language proficiency and industry-specific communication skills (Belcher, 2012). Furthermore, students in Business English courses come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, leading to disparities in language competence that make it difficult to maintain a consistent teaching pace. Limited access to authentic business materials, insufficient in-class teaching hours, and a lack of specialized training for ESP instructors further hinder effective Business English instruction (Anthony, 2018).

Previous studies suggest that successful ESP programs require well-structured curricula, appropriate teaching materials, and practical assessment methods tailored to students' professional needs (Hyland, 2006; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Given the growing necessity for Business English proficiency in Vietnam's workforce, it is essential to investigate the challenges faced by both educators and learners in Hanoi's universities. Identifying these challenges and exploring potential solutions can contribute to enhancing Business English instruction and better preparing students for professional communication in international business settings.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the challenges faced by educators and students in teaching and learning Business English at universities in Hanoi. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify the key difficulties encountered by Business English instructors and learners.

- Analyze the effectiveness of current teaching methodologies, course materials, and assessment techniques.

- Explore potential solutions to enhance Business English instruction.

- Provide recommendations for improving Business English curricula to align with professional and industry-specific requirements.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of research on ESP education by offering insights into the specific challenges associated with teaching Business English in a university in Hanoi. The findings will help educators refine their teaching methodologies, design more effective course materials, and implement best practices suited to business students' professional needs. Additionally, policymakers and curriculum developers can use this research to enhance Business English programs, ensuring that graduates acquire the necessary language skills for competitive global markets. By addressing gaps in Business English instruction, this study aims to improve the overall quality of ESP education in Vietnam and support students in developing the communication competencies needed for international business environments.

1.5 Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the primary challenges faced by Business English instructors at universities in Hanoi?

2. What factors contribute to students' difficulties in learning Business English?

3. How effective are current teaching methodologies, course materials, and assessment techniques in Business English programs?

4. What strategies can be implemented to improve Business English instruction in Vietnamese universities?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Literature Review chapter is a critical component of a research paper, thesis, or dissertation. Its primary purpose is to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research on the topic, establish the context for the current study, and demonstrate the researcher's knowledge and understanding of the field. This chapter is structured as follows:

2.1 Introduction

The introduction to the literature review outlines its scope and purpose. It explains how the review is organized, whether thematically, chronologically, or methodologically, and sets the stage for the subsequent discussion of theories and prior research.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework serves as the foundation for understanding the principles and methodologies underlying ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Several key theoretical perspectives inform this study.

ESP as a Learner-Centered Approach

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions about content and methodology are based on the learner's specific needs. Unlike General English, which focuses on broad linguistic competence, ESP is goal-directed and designed for learners who need English for professional or academic purposes. Strevens (1988) further distinguishes ESP by emphasizing that it is defined by the specific nature of its content, which is tailored to the needs of particular learners and occupational fields.

Needs Analysis in ESP

A fundamental principle of ESP is the implementation of needs analysis to determine learners' objectives and linguistic requirements. Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) stress the importance of conducting a detailed needs analysis to create relevant course content that addresses the communicative demands of a given profession. This aligns with more recent research by Belcher (2006), who argues that ESP instruction must be highly adaptable and responsive to learners' evolving needs.

The Role of Motivation in ESP Learning

Motivation is a critical factor influencing second language acquisition, and it plays an essential role in ESP learning. Dörnyei (2001) identifies instrumental motivation—learning a language for practical benefits such as career advancement—as a key driver for ESP learners. Similarly, Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish between instrumental and integrative motivation, noting that ESP learners are often primarily motivated by career-related goals rather than cultural assimilation. In Vietnam, Nguyen and Le (2020) explored motivation in ESP learning and found that students engaged more actively in coursework when materials were directly relevant to their future professions.

ESP Course Design and Methodology

ESP courses adopt methodologies that integrate both language and subject-specific content. According to Basturkmen (2010), ESP instruction often incorporates content-based learning, task-based learning, and project-based learning to ensure learners develop both linguistic proficiency and practical skills. Ellis and Johnson (1994) highlight that Business English, as a branch of ESP, requires specialized teaching strategies, including case studies, simulations, and workplace-oriented tasks. In Vietnam, Pham (2018) investigated ESP instruction in universities and emphasized the need to align ESP curricula with industry-specific demands to enhance students' employability.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study establishes a framework for examining how ESP instruction can be optimized to meet learners' needs in both academic and professional contexts.

2.3 Review of Key Previous Studies

Numerous studies have explored the role of ESP in professional and academic settings. Basturkmen (2010) examined how ESP instruction incorporates specialized vocabulary, discourse structures, and communicative practices to enhance learners' proficiency in specific fields. Similarly, Nickerson (2005) investigated the growing significance of Business English in multinational corporations, highlighting the need for employees to develop effective communication skills. Ellis and Johnson (1994) discussed the structure of Business English courses, which typically include reading, writing, and speaking activities relevant to business contexts. Moreover, Belcher (2006) emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate teaching materials, arguing that ESP practitioners must tailor resources to align with learners' specific needs.

In Vietnam, studies by Tran (2017) and Hoang (2019) examined the implementation of ESP programs in higher education institutions, identifying challenges related to curriculum design and teacher training. Tran (2017) highlighted the lack of industry-specific materials, while Hoang (2019) emphasized the role of authentic materials in improving ESP learners' engagement.

Internationally, Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) emphasized the importance of needs analysis in ESP course design, an aspect that Vietnamese researchers such as Le and Phan (2021) have also explored in the context of technical English programs. More recently, Hyland (2006) investigated how genre analysis could be used to enhance ESP course design, particularly in professional communication settings. His research supports the argument that understanding specific discourse features within an industry is crucial for effective ESP instruction. Additionally, Anthony (2018) explored how advancements in technology, such as corpus linguistics and online learning platforms, have influenced ESP course design, providing more interactive and personalized learning experiences.

Another significant study by Bocanegra-Valle (2010) analyzed various approaches to adapting ESP materials, emphasizing that teachers need to customize resources to fit learners' specific professional or academic needs. Her research suggested that modifying, simplifying, and localizing content enhances students' engagement and comprehension. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, Dang and Nguyen (2021) examined the effectiveness of blended learning models in ESP courses, highlighting the potential of combining face-to-face instruction with online resources to improve learning outcomes.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite extensive research on ESP, gaps remain in understanding how instructional materials can be more effectively adapted to meet learners' evolving needs. While Tomlinson (2011) suggests that instructional resources should be engaging and interactive, there is limited research on the integration of digital and workplace-based materials in ESP courses. Additionally, Bocanegra-Valle (2010) highlights strategies for customizing teaching materials, but further studies are needed to assess their impact on learner motivation and language acquisition.

In Vietnam, limited research has examined the long-term effectiveness of ESP programs in workplace settings. While Nguyen and Tran (2022) investigated short-term learning outcomes in ESP business courses, there is still a lack of studies assessing how ESP training influences professional performance over time. Addressing these gaps will contribute to refining ESP methodologies and improving language instruction in professional settings.

III. METHODOLOGY

The Methodology chapter outlines the research design and methods used to conduct the study. It provides a detailed account of how the research was carried out, ensuring that the study can be replicated or critically assessed by other researchers.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research design was chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by teachers in ESP courses for Economics at a university in Hanoi and to identify effective solutions. The methods used include observation, literature analysis, questionnaire surveys, and data analysis. The combination of these methods allows for a thorough examination of both numerical data and subjective experiences, ensuring a holistic understanding of the research problem.

3.2 Participants/Sample

The study targeted ESP practitioners teaching Business English at the Faculty of Economics. A total of 22 ESP instructors from the Department of English at a major university in Hanoi participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they possessed relevant experience in teaching Business English and had been involved in ESP curriculum development. Many of these teachers had also participated in various professional development programs related to ESP instruction, further enhancing their insights into the subject matter.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, multiple data collection techniques were employed:

- Questionnaire Survey: A structured questionnaire was administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide detailed perspectives on the challenges and potential improvements in ESP instruction.

- Observations: Classroom observations were conducted to assess teaching methodologies, student engagement, and the difficulties teachers encountered in delivering ESP content.

- Literature Analysis: Relevant studies, both national and international, were reviewed to compare findings and contextualize the results within the broader scope of ESP research. The literature analysis provided a theoretical foundation and helped identify best practices for ESP teaching.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

The data collected through various methods was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques:

- Quantitative Analysis: Responses from the questionnaire were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency and distribution of challenges faced by ESP practitioners. This helped in identifying major trends and common issues encountered in ESP teaching.

- Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended responses and observational data were thematically analyzed to extract key themes and patterns. This approach provided deeper insights into teachers' experiences, perceptions, and suggested solutions for improving ESP instruction.

By employing a robust research design and comprehensive data analysis methods, this study ensures a detailed examination of the challenges in teaching Business English and provides evidence-based recommendations for enhancing ESP instruction in the context of a university in Hanoi.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are based on the responses of Business English practitioners, highlighting the challenges and possible improvements in teaching Business English at the Faculty of Economics at a university in Hanoi.

4.1 Challenges in Teaching Business English

The survey results indicate several significant challenges encountered by ESP practitioners:

Challenge	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Differences in students' language competence	95%
Classroom management issues in large classes	91%
Low student motivation	78%
Lack of contact hours	87%
Need for teacher training	77%
Lack of cooperation with subject teachers	84%

The majority of ESP practitioners (95%) reported substantial differences in students' language competence, making it difficult to implement a uniform teaching strategy. Additionally, 91% of teachers experienced challenges in managing large classes, while 78% noted issues related to student motivation. A significant concern was the limited contact hours (87%), which affected both teaching quality and student learning outcomes. The lack of teacher training (77%) and insufficient collaboration with subject lecturers (84%) further complicated course design and content delivery.

4.2 Discussion on Language Competence Differences

The variation in students' language proficiency levels significantly impacts the effectiveness of ESP courses. Some students possess an intermediate level of English, while others struggle with basic language skills, making it difficult to achieve the expected learning outcomes. This disparity leads to frustration among both students and instructors. While higher-level students may feel unchallenged, weaker students struggle to keep up with the course material, causing a lack of motivation in the classroom.

One potential solution is the implementation of a compulsory English placement test before admission, ensuring that students meet at least a B1 level proficiency. For those below this level, intensive language courses should be provided before they begin their ESP studies. This would help bridge the gap and create a more balanced learning environment, ultimately improving overall student performance and motivation.

4.3 Discussion on Motivation and Classroom Engagement

Motivation plays a crucial role in language learning. Mixed-ability classrooms tend to demotivate both lower-level and higher-level students, as weaker students feel overwhelmed, and stronger students may not feel adequately challenged. Ukrainian educators suggest that good lesson planning, varied classroom activities, and individual consultations can help address this issue. Encouraging interactive learning through small group discussions, pair work, and subject-specific content can also boost student engagement.

4.4 Discussion on Contact Hours and Course Design

The study reveals that the limited number of in-class hours is a major barrier to achieving the desired level of Business English proficiency. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), achieving a B2 level requires approximately 270 classroom hours, but current university programs provide only 120 hours (3 credits). This discrepancy hinders students from reaching their potential.

A solution to this issue could be increasing the number of English courses in the curriculum and integrating ESP throughout all four years of study instead of just the first two. This approach would ensure a continuous development of language skills aligned with students' professional needs.

4.5 Discussion on Teacher Training and Collaboration

ESP teachers often lack specialized knowledge in business-related subjects, making it challenging to provide industry-relevant content. While teachers do not necessarily need in-depth expertise in business, they should have a foundational understanding of key concepts. One solution is the introduction of teacher training programs focused on ESP methodology and interdisciplinary collaboration. Workshops, joint lesson planning with business faculty, and access to specialized learning materials would greatly benefit instructors.

4.6 Summary of Findings and Recommendations

The findings highlight the complexity of teaching Business English in an ESP context. Key challenges include disparities in student language proficiency, large class sizes, limited instructional time, and inadequate collaboration with subject experts. To address these issues, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish a minimum B1 entry-level requirement: Implement placement tests and intensive preparatory courses for students below B1.

2. Increase contact hours: Expand ESP instruction across all four years of study to ensure continuous language development.

3. Enhance student motivation: Incorporate diverse teaching strategies, interactive activities, and personalized learning approaches.

4. Improve teacher training: Provide targeted training programs for ESP instructors to develop subject-specific knowledge and teaching strategies.

5. Promote interdisciplinary collaboration: Encourage cooperation between ESP practitioners and subject specialists to ensure relevant course content.

By implementing these measures, universities can significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of ESP courses, ensuring that students acquire the necessary language skills for their professional careers.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges faced by both educators and students in the teaching and learning of Business English at universities in Hanoi. Key difficulties include disparities in students' language proficiency, limited in-class hours, insufficient teacher training, lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, and low student motivation. These issues hinder the effectiveness of Business English instruction and reduce students' ability to develop the necessary language and professional communication skills for the global business environment.

To address these challenges, universities should implement structured placement tests, increase contact hours for Business English courses, and integrate ESP instruction throughout students' academic programs. Additionally, providing targeted training programs for ESP instructors and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between language teachers and business faculty can enhance the relevance and quality of Business English instruction. Motivational strategies, such as interactive teaching methods and real-world business simulations, should also be incorporated to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on ESP education by offering practical recommendations for improving Business English programs in Vietnamese universities. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of these strategies on students' professional success and investigate the role of technology-enhanced learning in Business English instruction. By continuously refining teaching methodologies and course designs, universities can better equip students with the language proficiency and business communication skills needed in today's competitive global market.

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