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## Research Article

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# The Challenges of Teaching the ESP Courses for ESL Teachers in a Technical University

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**Abstract:** Teaching ESP courses is one of the most challenging areas for the teachers of English at the faculties in technical universities. The reasons for the challenge and the attitudes toward teaching the ESP courses by the teachers transferred from the General English program at English Preparatory School have been investigated in this study. The qualitative research design was used. There are two instructors teaching ESP courses at the technical university where the study was conducted. They submitted their consent forms. The semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data from the teachers. The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed thematically. The study demonstrates that lacking expertise in the specialized content is the main challenge. However, it does not affect the job satisfaction negatively. In addition, both teachers focus on student-centered class activities to enhance the learner's benefits from the courses.

**Keywords:** ESP, job satisfaction, student-centered, content knowledge.

## 1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a branch of Applied Linguistics that focuses on teaching and learning English for a specific field in professional life. It is based on the use of English language skills for a specific aim, in particular, to meet the users' needs. ESP is a significant subject as English is the language of science, technology, and communication worldwide. A good command of English is required as one wants to express oneself in one's profession. To be a part of the professional community about a job, one needs to use the required language skills appropriately. Furthermore, the terminology and the jargon related to technological fields are in English (Enesi et al., 2021). Graddol (1997) referred to English as “a leading-edge phenomenon” to highlight how crucial English is in the world of technology, education, economy, arts, and culture. The number of non-native English speakers is also on the increase, which means English is becoming more and more popular. The language of business turns out to be English due to internalization. “...85% of international organizations now see English as one of their working languages...” (Crystal, 2003). One needs to use English language skills so as to communicate their knowledge and expertise in the field as well as to socialize and catch up with the innovations and scientific developments in different parts of the world (Andriani, 2014; Bracaj, 2014; Enesi et al., 2021; Saraa, 2020). Therefore, learners of English want to improve their language skills aimed at a target.

It is essential to focus on the definitions of ESP done by prominent linguists in order to get a clearer picture of the key features of ESP. Although these definitions were made many years ago, the researchers still refer to them as working on the possible challenges of designing the ESP syllabi. The definition of ESP, which was done by Strevens in 1988 and Dudley-Evans and St. John in 1998, has some essential characteristics. Strevens's list has three items: The first one is that ESP is prepared in accordance with the learners' needs. The second one is that it is about the content which is based on specific job-related activities, and the third one is that ESP is based on the use of language in the activities conducted (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Strevens, 1988). Considering these two definitions, one can see the common points such as learners' needs and language use in job-related settings. It is apparent from the definitions given that ESP courses are based on the needs of the learners, which are job-related in a particular field.

Another significant point is that the language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and the main grammatical structures are in the scope of the ESP course. Therefore, it can be stated that the ESP course is shaped in the light of the learners' needs, and it has a frame constituted by the language use that is required in that specific job-related content. Thus, the focus on the significance of needs analysis in the ESP is highlighted in the studies (Bouguebs et al., 2023; Mukhtorova & Yuldo'shalieva, 2024; Rahmawati & Mar'an, 2024).

The ESP courses are generally given by English language teachers in higher education. Those teachers mainly teach General English (GE) courses, which are not shaped by the needs of the learners specifically, unlike ESP learners. The syllabus focusing on GE is ready and a coursebook is followed. However, the ESP teacher needs to be cognizant that they should prioritize the learners' needs and work on the ESP course accordingly. In addition, it is necessary to focus on language skills and grammar, which the learners will need while they work on the content. This leads us to question the roles of the teacher in teaching ESP. Dudley-Evans and St. John pointed out the roles of the ESP teacher: “teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator” (Dudley-Evans, 1997). The ESP teacher must first analyze the learners' needs before finalizing the course syllabus. The teacher at this point works as a researcher as they focus on finding the needs of the learners. Based on the needs of the learners, the syllabus is shaped. However, the teacher's work does not finish here. They need to provide the course materials. It is not so easy to find a coursebook and use it all the time for ESP courses since the learners' needs may vary, forcing the teacher to work on customizing the course. As for the teacher's role as a collaborator, it is necessary for the ESP teacher to communicate the content

teacher to make their ESP course syllabus more efficient for the learners. If the content teacher and ESP teacher work collaboratively on the ESP course syllabus, learners will benefit from the course more (Ghafournia & Sabet, 2014). The language skills and the course content cannot be considered separate entities. The ESP teacher and the content teacher should work on the course design and the materials regularly so that the learners' progress can be observed and evaluated together. Therefore, the ESP teacher is required to shoulder a multi-faceted task throughout the course. At this point, the ESP teacher needs to focus on both linguistic knowledge they need to teach and the knowledge of the job-related specific world. Also, the content of the ESP course is related to real-life communication skills (Abdumalikovna, 2024; Jendrych & Wisniewska, 2010.; Maftuna & Qizi, 2023; Tuzlukova et al. 2020). The teacher must know the English proficiency level of the learners as the learners will be engaged in the job-related contexts cooperating and collaborating. The language structures and grammar take place in the syllabus; however, the soft skills such as communication skills and the 21st century skills play a significant role in the professional life, so the teacher needs to integrate them into the course syllabus. Because the content of the course is based on the field or the job. The learners need to use the content, terminology, or communicative skills related to the professional setting the field requires. Thus, the ESP teacher needs to design the syllabus with interactive activities and tasks to create a communicative classroom where learners work in groups or pairs to do tasks such as job interviews, elevator pitches, negotiation at a meeting, or delivering a poster presentation. Also, individual writing activities such as CV and cover letter writing are some real-life scenarios the ESP teacher should provide for the learners to practice (Sarifa & Jabeen, 2024). As the course is designed to meet learners' needs, the ESP course is learner-centered, which enhances learners' motivation (Hutchinson & Waters, 2010).

The ESP teacher has to face challenges arising from the nature of the ESP course. The teacher is required to design the ESP course syllabus based on the learners' needs. Then, they are responsible for preparing the course materials, which will guide the learners in using the language skills in real-life settings to practice communication skills that are related to the field in alignment with their needs. This means that the ESP teacher, different from the ESL teacher, will have to spend more time and energy to perform various roles as a teacher to motivate the students for the course. The ESP course is not only related to business life and the content about a specific profession. It is also related to the appropriate usage of language skills. It should be considered that the ESP course aims to develop the learners' competence in using the language skills in a given content, which can be possible with a learner-centered approach supporting task-based activities in the class (Bui, 2022). The ESP teacher can have the dilemma of providing feedback for the content or the language used. It is important that the mission of the ESP teacher is not to teach the terminology about the field through lecturing. The focus is to teach learners how to use language skills effectively in a given content related to real-life communication settings.

The present study examines the challenges of teaching the ESP course by ESL instructors in a technical university in light of the multi-faceted nature of the ESP.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the challenges you have had teaching the ESP course so far?
2. What measures do you take to deal with these challenges?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used in the present study. A qualitative research design was used in the study because what experiences the participants have about the subject is important to get information about their own interpretations. Also, it allows the researcher to investigate their

feelings and opinions about the subject more deeply. A qualitative research design enables the researcher to understand a subject or a process by gathering data from people through observations, interviews, and case studies (Merriam, 2002).

## **2.2. Participants**

Two instructors working at a technical university who have been teaching ESP courses to second-year and third-year students at the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Engineering for two years participated in the interview.

## **2.3. Data Collection**

The data was gathered through the semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams, and the interviews were recorded. The instructors submitted a consent form. Two questions were asked to them: What difficulties have you had so far in ESP classes? What do you do to deal with these difficulties?

The semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection instrument due to the fact they are more flexible, which can enable the participant to make some suggestions or share some related topics during the interview. Also, the answers to the questions may go on with examples and justifications based on the interviewees' experiences (Karatsareas, 2022).

## **2.4. Data Analysis**

The interviews were analyzed thematically. First, emerging codes were identified and then major themes with sub-themes were presented.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. General Inclination in Terms of Research Design, Educational Context, and Study Context**

The analysis of the data revealed the following themes and sub-themes related to the research questions:

#### *3.1.1. The lesson preparation*

Findings from the participants' interviews revealed that one of the challenges of teaching the ESP courses is related to the lesson preparation which can be divided into two sub-themes: Content and time constraints.

#### *3.1.2. Content*

The participants pointed out that they do not have much information about the content and the jargon related to the fields. The first interviewee mentioned, "I do not have enough technical knowledge about the content and the jargon, so I must study a lot before the class". Similarly, the second interviewee said, "I think I do not have enough knowledge about the content", which causes her to study the content in a detailed way before the class. She mentions this as the only challenge about the ESP course she has been teaching.

#### *3.1.3. Time Constraints*

Another sub-theme related to the lesson preparation mentioned as a challenge is time constraints. However, the first interviewee considered this a challenge. He mentioned, "Preparing

for the lesson takes too much time as I always have to do extra studies and make preparations for the content.”

#### *3.1.4 The Emotion Labor*

The findings from the first interviewee revealed that emotion labor is another challenge with the sub-themes: gaining learners’ respect and feeling alienated.

#### *3.1.5. Gaining learners’ respect*

This is also connected with the importance of studying job-related knowledge in lesson preparation. The first interviewee said, “If I ask for respect from the learners, I need to prepare for the courses well; otherwise, they will not be respectful”. Knowledge about the lesson's content and designing activities and the material for that week causes tension for the teacher. He is aware that he needs to be ready with all these; otherwise, he, as a teacher, may not be considered as an authority for the course. This causes “emotion labor” for the ESP teacher, resulting from the dilemma arising from their different roles and the integration of the language use into the content according to learners’ needs (Nazari et al., 2024).

#### *3.1.6. Feeling alienated*

Another challenge the first interviewee mentioned is the feeling alienation. He said, “I am aware that learners have discussions about the technical subjects with their lecturers at the department. I cannot do this, so I feel as if I were an outsider”. This feeling is a source of stress for the teacher. This shows the significance of collaboration between ESP and content teachers. If there is a collaboration when preparing the course design and the materials, the feeling of alienation will be less, which is beneficial for the efficacy of the ESP courses. The learners' practical needs are challenging for the ESP instructor as it requires specialized content areas (Rahmawati & Mar’an, 2024).

#### *3.1.7. Measures*

Findings from the participants reveal that they have two strategies to deal with the challenges they face: student-centered activities and detailed lesson preparation.

#### *3.1.8. Student-centered activities*

When the interviewees were asked about their measures to overcome the challenges they point out, they mentioned the student-centered activities in the lesson. The first interviewee said, “I make the learners do pair work and group work to enhance their communicative skills, so I work on improving their soft skills, which I know better than the content-based terminology.” Technical knowledge and expertise in the field (hard skills) and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, ethics, problem-solving, and critical thinking need to be integrated for a successful professional life and personal growth (Lavrysh, 2016).

The second interviewee mentioned that she uses reading texts which are based on architecture, culture, and arts related to the ESP course she has been teaching. She added, “Group work and discussions are some of the activities I use since I want to create a student-centered lesson where we (learners and she) learn from each other cooperatively.” The second interviewee stated that teaching the ESP courses was enjoyable, although there were challenges. He said, “It is very good to learn new things”. ESP is a different field for English language teachers teaching general English, which means there is much more work to do and explore for the teacher.

#### *3.1.9. Detailed lesson preparation*

Findings from the participants show that detailed lesson preparation is required to present a fruitful ESP course to the learners to enhance a beneficial learning environment. The second interviewee also explains that informing the learners about the preparations related to the lesson content that the teacher made before coming to class is essential. She says, “They (learners) need to know I learn the terminology in the text by studying and to some extent I can explain it. I think it is helpful to create a bond with learners.” When she is ready for the lesson in the class with her explanations and terminology, she and learners can exchange information about the subject. She mentions, “They (learners) explain the terms differently compared to my explanations, for example. Because they are on the site (for architectural projects) and they use their experience to explain the technical terms.” She points out that this causes the roles to change in the class from time to time. Learners explain the terms to her to clarify the content.

When the second interviewee was asked about the measures she takes to deal with the challenges, she said, “I work a lot on the course design and the materials, so I believe it requires more effort than any other English course. That’s why the teachers giving ESP courses should not be in a rotation frequently.”

Both participants pointed out that they love teaching ESP courses. For instance, the second interviewee mentioned, “She loves teaching the ESP course because I always learn new things, and it gives me job satisfaction.” Similarly, the first interviewee said, “It’s fun to learn new vocabulary and subjects for me when preparing for the ESP courses.” They consider the challenge of not being cognizant of the field-related content as an opportunity to explore new dimensions in their teaching experience. Teaching ESP courses satisfy them. The second interviewee pointed out that the rotation of teachers in ESP courses should be done frequently as there is a great amount of effort in the course.

#### 4. Conclusion

ESP is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field where learners study the content related to their fields with the appropriate integration of English language skills. Needs analysis constitutes the core of the ESP course as the course is designed in line with learners’ needs. Therefore, ESP learners are believed to be more motivated since the course has been designed according to their needs (Kenny, 2016). However, the ESP teacher needs to meet learners’ expectations from the course, working on issues varying from preparing needs analysis to integrating the language structures to be used in specialized content.

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the challenges of teaching ESP at an English-medium technical university and the strategies to deal with these challenges. The data for the study was collected through a semi-structured interview with two instructors teaching the ESP courses at the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Engineering.

First, the study's results demonstrated that insufficient knowledge about the content is the main challenge for an English teacher responsible for teaching ESP courses at a technical university. The ESP teacher must spend more time working on the content to prepare classroom activities and the language structures related to the lesson. Not having enough knowledge about the content in teaching ESP courses is considered as one of the most common difficulties for a teacher. For instance, Demirdöken (2021), in his study pointed out that the teachers had low self-efficacy from time to time in teaching ESP Aviation English course due to lack of field-related knowledge and expertise in aviation. The various roles the ESP teacher needs to have, from needs analyst to the course designer, are challenging for the teacher. The ESP course also involves the terminology in the field to some extent; for that reason, teaching vocabulary is a significant part of the ESP curriculum (Sarifa & Jabeen, 2024). The ESP teacher needs to know to what extent learners have knowledge about the vocabulary and terminology related to the field. It should not be assumed that

learners are equipped with an abundant amount of terminology and will significantly help the teacher in the class. This is also an essential factor causing stress for the ESP teacher before the class.

Second, the results of the study pointed out that training would be helpful in opening new perspectives for teachers teaching the ESP course. The teachers taking part in the interview have never had training in teaching ESP. The ESP teacher turns out to be training themselves by analyzing the learners' needs and then preparing the course materials accordingly. According to a research study about teacher training in the field of teaching ESP courses, teachers participating in the study pointed out that training workshops improved their teaching practice (Ouarniki & Turki, 2024). Based on the curriculum ESP teachers prepare, they conclude with a set of rules for teaching the ESP course. However, the critical point is the context where teaching occurs. The ESP teacher must be involved in different teaching stages varying from decision-making to critical thinking in practicing the ESP, which constitutes the theory they need. Therefore, action research is recommended for self-training in teaching the ESP course (Chen, 2000). As action research requires reflection throughout the process, it will enable the teacher to get an insight into their teaching journey, which will improve teaching skills.

The interview participants pointed out that they used a student-centered approach in the ESP courses. They consider this approach as a strategy they use in order to cope with the challenges the ESP courses bring about. The ESP learners will use what they learn in the course in their fields in real life. Therefore, the ESP class needs to be learner-oriented, supported with classroom discussions, pair work, group work, or individual activities such as writing a memo or a feasibility report. Instead of lecturing where learners are listeners and the teacher is the source of information, engaging learners in the lesson by cooperating with each other and the teacher enhances the learners' competence in using the target content with the required language skills. The ESP teachers lack expertise in specific content terminology, so they collaborate with learners to gain insights, which alters the roles within the classroom.

The present study revealed that the ESP teachers participating in this study consider teaching ESP courses as an opportunity to improve themselves in their profession. They noted that ESP opens new professional horizons, indicating high job satisfaction. That's why teaching the ESP course can be considered "exciting, intellectually stimulating, and professionally and personally gratifying" (Belcher, 2009). It shows that they put effort on the ESP courses they teach; that is why they are pleased with teaching the ESP courses although they do not have any training about the field; they were just transferred from the General English courses at English Preparatory School. It seems that they entered the world of ESP as strangers and the more they explore the more interested they become, which justifies their positive attitude towards the ESP courses they have been teaching despite the challenges.

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