What English Language Teachers Should Know about ESP

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Abstract

This paper provides English language teachers with an essential knowledge of English for specific purposes (ESP) including its origins, development, definitions, characteristics and ESP teachers' professional development. The paper also presents a brief overview of the teaching and learning of ESP at the tertiary level in Vietnam.

Key Words: English for specific purposes, ESP teacher professional development, Vietnam

Introduction

English for specific purposes is now considered as "a very active, even 'feisty' movement" that has developed its own materials and teaching approaches and "has had considerable influence over the more general activities of TESOL and applied linguistics" (Dudley-Evans, 2001, p. 131). However, ESP in Vietnam is still in its infancy, and there has been a negligible quantity of published studies in this area. To provide English language teachers with a better understanding of ESP, this article: (1) introduces key concepts of ESP including its origins, development, definitions and characteristics, (2) discusses ESP teacher professional development, and (3) presents an overview of tertiary ESP education in Vietnam.

Key Concepts of ESP

Inception and Development of ESP

English for specific purposes incepted in the 1960s (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It is a separate branch of English language teaching (ELT) that aims to meet its learners' particular and immediate needs in the utilization of English for their specific field of study or professional life (Chien & Hsu, 2010), such as English for telecoms and information technology, English for food science, English for tourism, and English for aviation.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) enumerate three main reasons for the emergence and growth of ESP that are the demands of Brave New World, the revolution in linguistics, and the focus on the learner.

According to Gatehouse (2001), the demands of Brave New World were related to the end of World War II and the 1970s Oil Crisis. The end of World War II resulted in the rapid and enormous global expansion in science, technology and economy. This expansion generated a demand for an international language and the economic power of the USA has granted this role to English language. The series of energy crises between 1967 and 1979, with the most significant Oil Crisis started in 1973, created a massive flow of Western funds and knowledge into oil-rich nations, and English, therefore, became a big business (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The second origin of ESP is the revolution in linguistics that began when some pioneering linguists shifted the focus of language education from the description of language features to the ways in which language is used for the purpose of communication (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). These linguists argue that the use of language and particular skills varies from context to context; thus, tailoring the language and language courses to satisfy different learner needs in different conditions is necessary. As a result of increasing demands for different types of language teaching in particular domains, a lot of English language courses for science and technology students were developed in the 1960s and 1970s (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The third reason for the inception of ESP is the development of educational psychology that focuses on the learners as well as their needs, interests, attitudes and motivations to learning. As claimed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), learners have different interests and needs that exert a significant impact on their attitudes and motivations to learn and thus on the success of their learning; for this reason, "the development of courses in which 'relevance' to the learner's needs and interests was paramount" (p. 8).

Today, approximately 85% of information in science and technology in worldwide informational storage and retrieval networks is in English (Chien & Hsu, 2010), which has caused an increasing demand for ESP all around the world. Although ESP has developed at

different speeds in different countries, it has gained not only a significant place among academic circles but also "the shape of a new industry in the 21ˢᵗ century" (Rajabi, Kiany, & Maftoon, 2012, p. 262). The development of ESP is demonstrated by the existence of ESP courses at tertiary level in not only native-English speaking countries but also countries where English is taught and used as a foreign or second language. In addition, more and more educational institutions offer Master's programs in ESP or Teaching ESP, for example City University in Hong Kong, the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Egypt, and some universities in the UK such as Oxford Brookes University, Aston University, Cardiff Metropolitan University and the University of Birmingham.

Definitions and Characteristics of ESP

ESP was born to address specialized learner needs for English language learning and use. "What is essential is that students experience the satisfaction of productive language use, and through their learning experience, gain new proficiency relevant to their future occupational needs" (Yogman & Kaylani, 1996, p. 323). According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19), ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". Describing ESP in more detail, Dudley-Evans (2001, p. 132) distinguishes between the absolute characteristics and variable characteristics of ESP.

The absolute characteristics of ESP are:
- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner.
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

The variable characteristics of ESP are:
- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.

- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary-level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level.
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Today, ESP generally means the teaching and learning of English for multiple specific purposes including English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for legal purposes (ELP) and English for socio-cultural purposes (ESCP) (Belcher, 2009). In an ESP classroom, the instructor performs many essential roles such as a teacher, a course designer and materials provider, a collaborator, a researcher, and an evaluator (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998).

It is little wonder that the success of ESP courses and the growth of educational institutions have a direct and positive relationship to the improvement of ESP teachers in their professional roles. For this reason, the concept of ESP teacher professional development is worthy of discussion.

ESP Teacher Professional Development

In general, teacher professional development means the career progression that the teacher obtains as a result of his or her systematic and meaningful learning, experience, practice and reflection on how to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process. In particular, teacher professional development refers to any activities that teachers engage in to enrich their knowledge, to improve their skills, approaches and dispositions, and to develop an innovative insight into their pedagogy (Ghanbari & Rasekh, 2012).

In the field of ESP, a great number of instructors are experts in general English teaching and linguistics rather than the content which their students are studying; therefore, they may find themselves in a dilemma of what to teach and face themselves with little or no prior content knowledge (Basturkmen, 2010). This problem influences both native and non-native English teachers of ESP because both groups face the challenge of meeting the needs of their new environment when they move from general to subject-specific language instruction (Tatzl, 2013). It is no doubt that a good general English teaching foundation is

insufficient for ESP teacher professional development. To be able to perform well in the classroom, the ESP practitioner needs to widen his or her specialized knowledge of the related field of work or study as well as the knowledge of needs analysis, syllabus design, material writing or adaptation, and evaluation (Venkatraman & Prema, 2013), and the understanding of typical genres featured in the disciplines (Hüttner, Smit, & Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2009).

The main argument for ESP teacher professional development is that propositions in ESP theory are not easily generalized to apply to particular teaching contexts (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991). In reality, ESP practitioners themselves must develop curricular in accordance with their own analysis of the teaching situations and the learners' needs. In these circumstances, conventional theory-into-practice assumptions seem insufficient without the context-specific principles of ESP curriculum development (Ghanbari & Rasekh, 2012). ESP teacher professional development, hence, requires the teacher to not only improve their practice but also learn to theorize on that practice through a process of professional reflection, problem-solving and decision-making (Maclean, 1997; Jackson, 1998).

Tertiary ESP Education in Vietnam

Nguyen (2017) stated that the quality of English language education and training at all levels in Vietnam left much to be desired and more than half of Vietnamese university graduates were not able to find jobs in their area of specialization due to their poor proficiency in both general English and ESP.

As ESP is a compulsory tertiary-level subject in the curriculum of most Vietnamese universities, general English teachers at non-English-major universities are required to teach at least one ESP course per semester while their backgrounds are unrelated to the specialized subject matter (Duyen, 2014).

In Vietnam, ESP practitioners spend most of their in-class instructional time teaching their students terminology, grammar and translation. This means that ESP courses in Vietnamese universities have a narrow focus on developing the learners' reading and writing skills.

Vietnamese ESP instructors must learn to teach ESP by themselves because none of them has been officially trained to be an ESP teacher. Vietnamese ESP practitioners are classified into the following three groups: (1) general English teachers by nature, (2) content teachers who have a good command of English, and (3) non-teacher-trained people who have worked in the same specific field of study, know many technical terms in English, and can explain the terms' meanings regarding to their experience and job situations.

While general English teachers usually have high levels of competence in English, they are most likely to be constrained by their lack of subject-matter knowledge. As for the second group of content teachers, although they are subject-matter specialists, they are often not good at English enough to undertake the role as an English teacher. Vietnamese ESP instructors, who have not been trained as teachers, usually have less pedagogical knowledge and less hands-on experience of teaching than general English teachers and content teachers do. Very often, non-teacher-trained ESP practitioners do not follow any lesson plan in their classrooms and their only concern is to teach terminology.

A recent study in which I am a member of the research group shows that the teaching and learning of ESP in higher education in Vietnam have been hindered by (1) large-sized classes, (2) insufficient in-class instructional time allocation, (3) inadequacy of appropriate teaching materials, (4) out-of-date and exam-driven curricula and syllabuses, (5) Vietnamese students' low level of English proficiency, and (6) Vietnamese ESP practitioners' lack of commitment to their ESP teaching.

Conclusion

The need for a growing understanding of language, the process of teaching and how learning takes place has been emphasized in English language education (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). ESP is developing quickly in the present globalization era where the English language is enjoying its unrivaled and undisputed position as a Lingua Franca. This requires ESP practitioners' a good understanding of their own teaching and learning contexts and an updated knowledge of achievements in their own field.

Teachers play a crucial role in the success of education; therefore, more attention should be paid to ESP teacher professional development. There must be official ESP teacher training programs in Vietnam and any other country where ESP is taught by practitioners without prior formal training. These programs should be provided not only at the beginning of ESP instructors' career but also during their teaching life to ensure effective ESP teaching practice.

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