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Understanding Effective Practices in Teaching ESP to Non- English Majors: A Qualitative Study of Vietnamese ESP Instructors

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Abstract

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to students who are not majoring in English presents particular challenges in the context of global educational expectations and calls for creative instructional methodologies. This is especially important in Vietnam, where the business sector necessitates a certain level of language and professional proficiency. In a Vietnamese university, this qualitative research examines the difficulties and methods addressed by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors working with non-English majors. Based on in-depth interviews with

teachers of English for Specific Purposes, the study investigates the viewpoints, experiences, and methods used by the instructors to overcome obstacles and produce successful classes. To find recurrent themes and shed light on effective teaching strategies and challenges faced in the ESP classroom, thematic analysis was utilized. The results add to a more complex understanding of the intricacies involved in teaching ESP to non-English majors, informing curriculum development, instructional strategies, and professional development opportunities for ESP instructors.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Non-English Major Students, Teaching Practices, Instructional Strategies

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is designed to satisfy the unique linguistic requirements of students in a variety of professional disciplines, has become an essential component of English language education (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) [20]. Examining the pedagogical strategies used by ESP teachers is crucial to improving student learning outcomes and increasing teaching efficacy in light of the growing demand for English competence around the globe. The viewpoints and experiences of ESP teachers are not well documented in the literature, despite a large body of research on ESP approaches (Basturkmen, 2010; Kohnke, 2020) [25].

ESP instruction focuses on providing students with language skills relevant to their industries or professions, which sets it apart from basic English language teaching (Belcher, 2009) [3]. Because of this specialized approach, teachers must modify their methods of instruction to meet the unique language demands and goals of their students. Unique problems arise when teaching English to non-majors in the language, including differences in academic backgrounds, English skill levels, and language learning motives. To address these issues and promote successful language acquisition, it is essential to comprehend the methods used by ESP educators in this situation (Hyland, 2016) [22].

Previous research emphasizes how important it is to use task-based learning activities, learner-centered methods, and genuine materials to support language acquisition in particular professional settings (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998 [11]; Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). Nevertheless, little study has been done specifically examining the experiences of ESP teachers who interact with students who are not majoring in English. This research attempts to close this gap and offer insightful information on how to teach ESP effectively by performing a qualitative study that examines the viewpoints and methods of ESP instructors (Anthony, 2018; Kohnke, 2021) [1, 26].

This study aims to contextualize its findings within the Vietnamese educational scene, in addition to adding to the worldwide conversation on ESP pedagogy. The demand for English language proficiency among professionals in a variety of areas has increased due to Vietnam's rapid economic development and growing integration into the global market (Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2020 [39]). As educators in Vietnam work to prepare students for success in an increasingly competitive and interconnected world, they have a special interest in understanding effective techniques in teaching ESP to non-English majors (Nguyen &

Mai, 2015; Pham, 2019)^[33, 36].

Furthermore, as digital tools and internet resources become more essential to contemporary teaching methods, the role of technology in ESP training is becoming more and more prominent. By offering dynamic and captivating resources pertinent to certain professional fields, technological integration can improve the educational process (Flowerdew, 2013; Cheng, 2019)^[12, 9]. In order to address the changing demands of their students, the research will also look at how ESP educators incorporate technology into their lesson plans (Hafner & Miller, 2019)^[16].

In order to generate more successful and meaningful learning experiences, recent research highlight the need for a more multidisciplinary approach in ESP education (Gillett, 2021; Sadeghi, 2021)^[15, 37]. This method integrates language training with topic knowledge from specialized domains. This method improves the learning materials' relevancy while also better preparing students for professional situations that may arise in the real world.

Moreover, online and hybrid teaching styles have become increasingly popular in ESP education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang & Zhang, 2021)^[41]. With the flexibility and accessibility these models provide, students may interact asynchronously with learning resources and activities. This change calls for a reassessment of teaching strategies to make sure they work well in online learning contexts (Zhu & Liu, 2021)^[43].

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the methods, obstacles, and creative solutions used by ESP teachers to successfully teach English to students who are not majoring in the language. With an emphasis on the Vietnamese context, the research aims to provide thorough insights that can guide and enhance ESP teaching methods worldwide by looking at these elements.

2. Literature review

2.1 Overview of ESP

The term "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP) describes specialized language training created to address the unique requirements of students pursuing certain careers or disciplines. It covers a wide range of language abilities required for different specialized contexts, including academic, professional, or occupational situations. ESP places a strong emphasis on how language acquisition relates to activities and circumstances in the real world, with the goal of giving students the linguistic and communication skills they need to be successful in their chosen fields (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998)^[11]. ESP focuses on the language demands of students within particular fields or professions, as opposed to general English teaching, which usually focuses on establishing broad language competency applicable across multiple settings (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)^[20]. Because of this specialization, ESP programs may provide priority to vocabulary, grammar, and discourse patterns that are pertinent to certain areas, empowering learners to speak confidently and successfully in their academic or professional contexts (Belcher, 2009)^[3]. Furthermore, ESP frequently incorporates real materials and tasks associated with the target professions of the learners, promoting language skill development through useful, task-based activities catered to the individual requirements and goals of the learners (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013)^[34]. With its focused methodology, ESP is an essential instrument for

improving language skills and enabling effective communication in specific circumstances.

2.2 Challenges in ESP education

Many obstacles affect the efficacy and use of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) instruction. The requirement for customized curriculum design that satisfies the unique requirements of many professional domains is one major difficulty. As stated by Basturkmen (2010), creating an ESP curriculum necessitates a thorough comprehension of the discourse and language usage of the target discipline, which can be a difficult undertaking for teachers.

A further obstacle is the scarcity of qualified educators who are experts in teaching English as a second language as well as the specific ESP curriculum areas (Belcher, 2017)^[4]. Effective education requires this dual knowledge, yet many educators may lack the necessary qualifications or experience in the related professional sectors.

Another issue in ESP classes is the learners' motivation and involvement. Students' commitment to the course and their overall learning outcomes may be impacted by their varied degrees of interest in and familiarity with the English language (Anthony, 2018)^[1]. It takes a lot of work and imagination on the side of the instructor to make sure that the material is interesting and relevant for each and every student.

One more problem that needs attention in ESP is assessment. The precise language abilities needed in various professional situations may not be sufficiently measured by traditional language testing techniques. Thus, it is essential to create suitable evaluation instruments that fairly represent students' proficiency in using English for certain objectives (Douglas, 2013)^[10].

Lastly, there are benefits and drawbacks of using technology in ESP instruction. Although digital tools can improve learning opportunities and give access to real content, integrating these technologies into the curriculum successfully requires the right skills and resources (Hampel & Stickler, 2015)^[17].

2.3 Effective teaching practices in ESP

For educators to fulfill the unique requirements of students in a variety of professional domains, effective ESP teaching strategies are essential. Using needs analysis to customize the curriculum to the unique demands of students and their particular sectors is one useful strategy. A thorough requirements analysis is helpful in creating courses that are pertinent to and immediately related to the professional settings of the students, as Basturkmen (2019)^[2] highlights. Another essential element of ESP instruction that works well is authentic materials. Using real-world resources like industry reports, manuals, and case studies, according to Harding (2020)^[18], encourages students to interact with the language in a relevant and practical way, improving their learning process and better preparing them for professional communication.

In ESP environments, peer teaching and collaborative learning are also advantageous. In ESP contexts where students may have varying backgrounds and levels of competence, Hyland (2018)^[23] emphasizes that group activities and peer feedback not only promote a collaborative learning environment but also assist students learn from each other's experiences and knowledge.

Another useful strategy for teaching ESP is task-based learning (TBL). TBL, as proposed by Long (2016) [29], is centered around the accomplishment of significant tasks that mirror real-world endeavors. This approach promotes active learning and aids in the development of useful linguistic abilities in students that they may use in their future careers. Moreover, using technology into ESP instruction can greatly improve student learning results. Kessler (2018) [24] points out that virtual reality, online simulations, and language learning applications are examples of digital technologies that may offer engaging and dynamic learning environments. These tools not only keep kids interested, but they also provide opportunity for practice in a safe, supervised setting.

And last, it is critical that ESP instructors engage in ongoing professional development. Hutchinson and Waters (2019) assert that continuous professional development and training guarantee that educators stay abreast of contemporary pedagogical approaches and industrial developments, thereby enhancing the general caliber of education provided by ESP.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study involves six English language instructors from a Vietnamese university. They specialize in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in business-related subjects such as Banking and Finance, Business Administration, and Accounting. Each instructor has over a decade of experience teaching at the university level, catering to both English and non-English major students. Furthermore, they hold either a master's degree or a PhD in TESOL education.

Table 1: Participants of the study

Participant code (gender)	Years of ESP teaching experience
P1 (F)	5
P2 (F)	12
P3 (M)	8
P4 (M)	10
P5 (M)	3
P6 (F)	15

3.2 Data collection instruments

Interviews are a key tool in qualitative research for gaining insights into participants' thoughts and feelings (Merriam, 1988) [30]. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) [6], qualitative interviews seek to understand the participants' perspectives, uncover the meaning of their experiences, and reveal their lived world beyond scientific explanations. Consequently, interviews are often used in applied linguistic contexts (Block, 2000; Richard, 2003).

This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection due to their balance of flexibility and structure. Dornyei (2007) highlighted that this format allows interviewers to guide discussions while being open to new developments, and Galletta (2012) noted that it fosters reciprocity and allows for improvisation of follow-up questions (Hardon *et al.*, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2010). It also provides space for individual verbal expression (RWJF, 2008).

Five open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the six informants (refer to

Appendix).

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected from these interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for the systematic organization and detailed description of the data, making it possible to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [5].

First, the interviews were verbatim transcribed, and in order to fully comprehend the material, the transcripts were read several times. Subsequently, the necessary textual portions were methodically coded to emphasize noteworthy characteristics that align with the study inquiries. All pertinent data extracts were then arranged under these possible themes that were created from these initial codes. In order to make sure the themes faithfully reflected the facts, they were examined and improved. This included making sure the themes made sense and were coherent. To convey the core of each topic, it was given a distinct definition and name.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Findings

Six participants were interviewed, and the results showed a wide range of experiences and coping mechanisms for difficult situations in ESP lessons. Four main themes emerged from the study of the responses: Managing the classroom, dealing with varied English language skills of students, effective teaching practices, and ways to engage students who are not majoring in English. Subthemes were identified within these main themes to offer a more thorough insight of the methods and experiences of the participants.

Theme 1: Classroom management

Participants emphasized that in order to properly regulate conduct in the classroom, clear norms and expectations must be established. For instance, P1 said: *"It's important to establish clear rules from the very first day of class. I made it clear what I expected in terms of involvement, timeliness, and mutual respect"*.

P3 further stated: *"To prevent any misconceptions, I took care to offer paper copies of the guidelines and an explanation in plain English. I also made sure the class ran well by reminding students of these guidelines on a frequent basis, which also contributed to maintaining discipline"*.

P6 made the following statement on classroom management throughout the learning process: *"Better learning is largely dependent on effective classroom management. I establish procedures and regulations. Students are able to fully participate and accomplish their learning objectives in this well-organized and encouraging atmosphere"*.

Theme 2: Addressing varying levels of English proficiency

Participants shared strategies for addressing the varying levels of English proficiency among their students.

Subtheme 2.1: Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction was used by the participants to accommodate the wide range of student skill levels. P3 employed tiered assignments to ensure that each student was adequately challenged without being overburdened: *"I created various task types to support students with varying*

language proficiency levels. Thus, some students receive easy subjects and terms for writing assignments, while others receive harder ones. Everyone receives the ideal degree of difficulty in this way”.

P4 made sure that every student could advance at their own speed by offering extra help to those with lower competence levels: *“I provide word lists, grammatical advice, and more practice assignments that are specifically tailored to each student. I assist each student one-on-one in class, offering advice and criticism so they may advance at their own pace. In this manner, all students, regardless of ability, can achieve well and get better at the language”*.

Subtheme 2.2: Peer support

To improve learning, participants mediated peer support systems. Peer tutoring was arranged by P5, when advanced students assisted their colleagues, strengthening their own knowledge and fostering a cooperative learning atmosphere: *“I allow my students to critique one another's writing. They improve their writing and critical thinking skills as a result. It's great to watch them support one another's language learning efforts and maintain motivation”*.

P6 organized study groups so that students may benefit from one another's knowledge and aid in each other's language growth: *“Students improve their English when they work on activities in small groups. They also pick up communication and collaboration skills. It's entertaining to see how working on projects together inspires them to learn English”*.

Theme 3: Successful classroom activities and methods

Participants shared specific classroom activities and methods that have been successful in overcoming various challenges.

Subtheme 3.1: Interactive learning

The use of interactive learning activities was emphasized as a useful strategy for keeping students interested. Through the use of role-playing games, P1 helped students improve their speaking and listening skills by having them practice language skills in simulated real-world circumstances: *“Students practice speaking and listening in class as they role-play real-world scenarios, such as handling money or doing business. They learn more effectively and become more adept at using the language in everyday contexts thanks to this practical method”*.

P2 included debates to provide students a chance to hone their English argumentation and critical thinking abilities. P2 explained that students' ability to argue and think critically in English is improved via debates. They gain the ability to politely converse with others, defend their positions, and voice their ideas.

Subtheme 3.2: Technology integration

Technology integration in the classroom was thought to promote collaborative learning. P3 employed virtual platforms for group projects, allowing students, irrespective of skill level, to collaborate, exchange ideas, and gain knowledge from one another. P4 added audio, interactive slides, and films into the instruction: *“Lessons are made easier to learn by adding examples and images through the use of multimedia. Multimedia enhances the learning experience and engages students, whether it is used as an introductory video for a course or as a comprehension assessment tool”*.

Theme 4: Strategies for engaging non-English major students

Engaging non-English major students in ESP courses posed unique challenges, which participants addressed with various strategies.

Subtheme 4.1: Relevance to their field

The significance of connecting language proficiency to students' future jobs was underlined by the participants. P1 directly connected language proficiency to the future employment of students by assigning accounting students to work on financial statements: *“For instance, I assign projects like financial statement preparation to accounting students and marketing strategy drafting to business students”*.

P2 made classes more relevant to students' industries by using terminology particular to their sector: *“I teach vocabulary and expressions to my students that they will require in the workplace. I assist students in learning the terminology they'll need for their vocations, whether it is technical phrases for IT engineers or financial ones for aspiring bankers. They will be more equipped to communicate at work and succeed in their careers as a result”*.

Subtheme 4.2: Interactive and fun activities

Engaging students required making the learning environment enjoyable and participatory. P3 added games to the courses to increase student participation and make learning fun: *“Engaging in games, quizzes, or role-playing activities while studying keeps students engaged and aids in their retention of the material. Students participate more and retain more when learning is enjoyable, which enhances their whole learning process”*.

P4 employed narrative strategies to hold students' attention and enhance the recall of the material: *“Telling stories enhances the learning experience in the classroom, whether it is through personal narratives, myth discussions, or reading stories from literature. By connecting ideas to real-life stories, students remember better and understand more. Storytelling makes learning feel alive and keeps students involved”*.

Subtheme 4.3: Building confidence

Enhancing students' self-assurance in using English was a primary goal. P5 encouraged students to participate and take chances with their language usage by offering positive reinforcement: *“I make sure my students are comfortable speaking in English. I provide a friendly environment where students are encouraged to participate in debates and activities and are commended for their achievements. In order for them to speak English fearlessly and develop into better communicators, I want them to feel secure and appreciated.”*

P6 provided students with more challenging tasks that helped them develop their abilities and self-assurance: *“I provide them easy activities that progressively become harder. They become more assured and prouder of themselves as they do each assignment. In doing so, they pick up new abilities and feel good about learning English”*.

4.2 Discussion

The study's conclusions point to a number of useful tactics and methods that ESP instructors employ to meet the various and demanding demands of their students. These

tactics are consistent with the body of research on the most effective methods for ESP and language instruction. This discussion part will provide a deeper grasp of the practical implications for ESP teaching by tying our findings to theoretical frameworks and earlier research.

This study's findings about the value of cultural sensitivity and clear classroom management are consistent with those of Harmer (2015) ^[19], who highlights the necessity of organized learning settings and culturally sensitive instruction. Group projects and the application of explicit rules are consistent with Harmer's (2015) ^[19] claim that well-defined classroom management techniques are necessary to provide a productive learning environment.

Tomlinson (2017) ^[38] further emphasizes that two useful tactics for addressing different levels of English competence are differentiated education and peer assistance. The use of tiered assignments and extra assistance mechanisms by P3 and P4 is in line with Tomlinson's (2017) ^[38] differentiated teaching ideas, which encourage assigning activities at multiple levels to address the requirements of students with varying backgrounds. The peer support tactics utilized by P5 and P6 are consistent with the social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978) ^[40], which highlights the significance of social interaction in the learning process. Scaffolding is made possible by peer tutoring and study groups, which let students benefit from and encourage one another.

The literature has provided enough evidence of the efficacy of technology integration and interactive learning in ESP programs. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) ^[28], who emphasize the advantages of communicative activities in language learning, P1 and P2's usage of role-playing games and discussions is justified. P3 and P4's usage of technology integration is consistent with Chapelle's (2003) ^[7] research on the benefits of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) for student cooperation and participation.

As stated by Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) ^[13], it is essential to engage non-English major students through relevance, engaging activities, and confidence-building tactics. P1 and P2's attempts to connect language proficiency to students' future employment are consistent with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) ^[20] focus on the applicability of ESP material. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby's (2006) ^[42] claim that playful activities may greatly boost language acquisition by lowering anxiety and increasing motivation is supported by P3 and P4's use of games and storytelling. According to Krashen's (1982) ^[27] emotional filter theory, which holds that language learning is facilitated by a low-anxiety setting, fostering student confidence is essential for language acquisition. P5 and P6 practice this.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the complex tactics used by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers to deal with the difficulties that arise in a variety of classroom environments, such as students who are not majoring in English and who have different academic backgrounds and English proficiency levels. The study emphasized the effectiveness of many crucial approaches, such as using effective classroom management practices to create a favorable learning atmosphere and tailoring the curriculum to the individual requirements and preferences of the students. Furthermore, the results underscored the significance of utilizing differentiated instruction techniques to cater to students with

different skill levels, cultivating peer support networks to promote cooperative learning, incorporating interactive educational activities to boost involvement and interest, and utilizing technology to streamline the learning process.

The study also emphasized the value of confidence-building techniques in enabling students to speak clearly and successfully in their fields of study. These results also highlight how crucial organized, inclusive, and culturally appropriate teaching methods are for ESP students.

The development of inclusive learning environments that promote a sense of belonging and respect for different viewpoints should be given top priority by ESP educators, according to pedagogical implications, and they should also make sure that instructional materials and activities are customized to the individual needs and interests of students.

The study also emphasizes the need for continued investigation into the long-term efficacy of these tactics, their suitability in a variety of educational settings, student perspectives and experiences, the incorporation of cutting-edge technologies, and opportunities for professional development for teachers. Future studies can further our understanding of good teaching techniques in ESP and guide the creation of pedagogical strategies based on empirical data by pursuing these directions. In the end, this study highlights how crucial dynamic and contextually appropriate teaching strategies are to maximizing ESP education and encouraging students to achieve their full potential.

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