

Readiness to Teach ESP: A Case of Polytechnic English Language Lecturers

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Abstract: This descriptive study explores the English language lecturers' readiness and training needs towards the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in Malaysian Premier Polytechnics. Data were collected from 62 lecturers through questionnaires which were then analysed to obtain the value of frequency and percentage score. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six lecturers for cross-validation purposes and the data were qualitatively analysed with initial descriptive codes assigned to the lecturers' responses. This study reveals that the lecturers are still unprepared to teach ESP courses and need training to teach these them. It aims to provide English language lecturers with the information they need for self-reflection and to equip themselves with skills required for the teaching of ESP. At the same time, it is hoped that the study would highlight the immediate need for professional development and in-service training needs to the relevant authorities in order to enhance the readiness and skills of these lecturers to teach ESP.

Key words: ESP, professional readiness, training needs, skills, lecturers

INTRODUCTION

ESP teaching is an approach in ELT that focuses on meeting student's needs. The purpose of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is to develop student's professional communication skills related to their field of specialisation. In line with the call for English in educational, vocational and occupational fields, many higher learning institutions have started offering ESP courses to cater for the English language requirements of students from various fields.

In this context, the Malaysian Polytechnic Curriculum Development Centre has designed a total of six ESP courses, namely, English for engineering and technology, English for design, English for Information Communication Technology (ICT), English for tourism and hospitality, English for digital forensics and English for business to meet student's future career needs. These ESP courses are being offered to students pursuing their degree programmes at three Malaysian premier polytechnics beginning September 2013 and the aim is to produce proficient students who are employable upon graduation. The inclusion of ESP courses in degree programmes is timely as ESP courses are designed to cater for specific content knowledge within a professional context. Consequently, since ESP is an approach to teaching and due to its specific purposes, ESP requires a teacher with special competency. Thus, teachers of General English qualifications may not have the necessary skills to teach ESP due to its special characteristics.

English language lecturers at Malaysian polytechnics are responsible to prepare students from various fields such as: Engineering, Business, Art and Design, Hotel and Catering and ICT to fill the national workforce. However, these lecturers' are graduates of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programmes and are qualified to teach linguistic knowledge rather than students' content specific knowledge. They simply acquire English language teaching qualifications and most of them have not received any training which has been systematically designed to equip them for the various roles of an ESP teacher (Fig. 1).

A study on the linguistic needs of engineering students from a Malaysian polytechnic which was carried out by Sanmugam (2013) found that a wide majority of

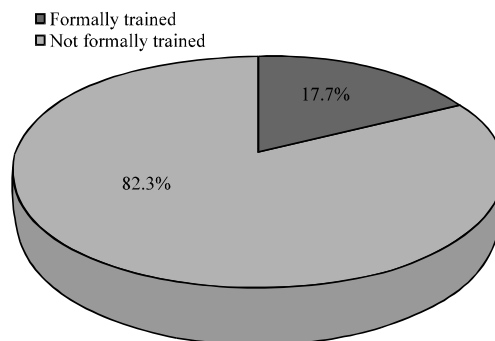


Fig. 1: Percentage of ESP trained lecturers (lectures trained for ESP teaching)

students (87.5%) agreed that English language lecturers teaching engineering students should have a special set of competencies/skills that could cater, specifically for their needs as engineering students. This finding was similar to those by Venkatraman and Prema (2007) who found that 98.9% of the students in their study agreed that English teachers in engineering colleges need a specific set of competencies, other than those of General English teachers. Thus, there is a need to identify the readiness and training needs of English language lecturers in Malaysian premier polytechnics in the aspects of ESP teaching to ensure that the teaching of ESP courses could be carried out effectively.

Review of related literature: A review of related literature shows that the area of ESP has a lot of scope for development. Most research done so far focused on the ESP students' and lecturers' needs (Bojovic, 2006; Venkatraman and Prema, 2007; Chostelidou *et al.*, 2009) attitudes (Tsao *et al.*, 2008), strategies (Wu and Badger, 2009; Tavakoli *et al.*, 2013) and problems (Savas, 2009; Abdulaziz *et al.*, 2012; Saliu, 2013) in the teaching and learning of ESP but very few research is conducted in exploring the readiness of lecturers to teach ESP (Majid and Alyub, 2011), specifically in the context of Malaysia.

An ESP teacher requires special skills because of the nature of ESP which is different from General English. Consequently, Lowe (2010) lists six ESP teacher knowledge categories:

- Subject content
- Subject reasoning
- Subject relationship to other subjects
- Language of all kinds (from phonemics to discourse)
- Language skills
- Teaching skills and knowledge

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) prefer the term ESP practitioner as they believe that ESP teacher's work is beyond classroom teaching. They distinguish five key roles of ESP practitioner:

- Teacher
- Course designer and materials provider
- Collaborator
- Researcher
- Evaluator

In order for the ESP practitioners to play their roles effectively they require specific skills in order to be effective and successful in their profession. For example, as an ESP teacher they need to generate real and authentic communication on the basis of students'

knowledge. As a course designer and materials provider, an ESP practitioner must be competent in adapting and writing his/her own material to meet the ESP needs of the students while as a collaborator, he or she needs to cooperate with the subject specialist to prepare the ESP materials. The role of ESP practitioner as a researcher would require him or her to research students' ESP aims and needs to design ESP courses and write ESP materials whereas the role of an ESP practitioner as an evaluator requires him or her to test and evaluate students' progress (Sierocka, 2008).

Bojovic (2006) states that it is vital for the ESP teacher to develop certain skills to teach effectively and they are:

- Adequate command of the language that fits the class he or she is teaching
- Teaching techniques and classroom activities
- The management of learning

Accordingly, Venkatraman and Prema (2007) stress that ESP teachers should be able to make needs analysis, syllabus design, material writing or adaption, evaluation and they should receive sufficient training in ESP teaching.

Further, Savas (2009) mentions that ESP teachers should be thoughtful, willing to learn, able to work in a team, able to motivate his/her students and able to develop his/her students' critical thinking skills. Additionally, he also states that ESP teachers should be familiar with content areas and stimulate knowledge from students. However in most cases, language teachers are competent to teach linguistic knowledge rather than students' specialised content areas. Therefore, they may be inadequately prepared to teach content knowledge as they are unfamiliar with it.

Research pertaining to the perceptions, challenges and training needs has been done extensively in many countries. In Pakistan, Abdulaziz *et al.* (2012) explore the challenges that general English teachers encounter in ESP teaching. Interview sessions with 30 teachers and naturalistic observation in six ESP classes were carried out to obtain data. The results highlighted a total of 17 issues and challenges faced by the respondents mainly; student motivation, selection of content materials, classroom size, syllabus design and many more. The study provides insights for novice ESP practitioners and serves as a guide for ESP teacher training institutes.

Wu and Badger (2009) analyse the strategies of three Chinese teachers to cope with In-class Subject Knowledge Dilemma (ISKD) in maritime English classrooms. It was found that the teachers used risk taking and avoidance strategies in dealing with students' subject knowledge which they are unfamiliar with. The

reason given for using those strategies is to avoid losing face and none of them admitted their ignorance about the content due to the same reason.

In Greece, Chostelidou *et al.* (2009) identify the challenges and training needs of ESP teachers at State Vocational Institutes. A total of seventy six ESP teachers were surveyed while semi-structured interviews were carried out with a number of them to gain more comprehensive data. The study reported those respondents encountered challenges like lack of formal ESP qualifications, resources/materials and subject-discipline knowledge in teaching ESP courses. In addition, the interview data revealed that the respondents need training in terms of language teaching methodology for specific purposes and ESP syllabus. The study proposed a well organised training framework to promote the development of ESP curriculum in the context of Vocational Education and Training.

A study to develop a set of ESP teacher competencies for English teachers in engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu, India was carried out by Venkatraman and Prema (2007). Cluster sampling technique was used to select 150 practising EST teachers from 83 engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu. Mixed-method approach using survey technique, classroom observations, interviews and content analysis was used in collecting data. The study identified 65 out of 73 competencies as needed with >80% response. These skills were grouped in two parts namely, General Competencies comprising 17 competencies and Subject-specific Competencies with the remaining 48 competencies. The developed Venkatraman and Prema's Competency Scale will serve as the basis for training EST teachers in order to teach specialised subject competently. In Malaysia, a study was carried out by Majid and Alyub (2011) to investigate the perceptions and readiness level of TESL trainees to teach English for Science and Technology (EST) in school. Questionnaires consisting structured and open-ended questions were distributed to 40 fourth year students. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Software. Based on the findings, it was found that TESL trainees have positive perception on the knowledge of EST and high interest and motivation to teach EST. However, some of them perceived that they were not familiar with the form and features of science and technology texts. It is hoped that the results could assist curriculum planners to design more comprehensive curriculum to prepare TESL trainees to teach EST.

The review of literature earlier explored the perceptions, teaching strategies, challenges and training needs of ESP practitioners. However, there is a dearth of such studies in Malaysia, specifically in the Malaysian polytechnic context. Thus, this study aims to explore the professional readiness of English language lecturers to teach ESP at Malaysian Premier Polytechnics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the survey was to explore the readiness and training needs of the English language lecturers to teach ESP. A total 80 questionnaires were distributed however only 62 English language lecturers from three Malaysian Premier Polytechnics responded to the questionnaire and returned it. Purposive sampling technique was used as these are the lecturers who would probably be teaching ESP courses as the courses are currently only offered at the premier polytechnics.

The data collection instruments used in this study are questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from studies conducted by Venkatraman and Prema (2007), Tsao *et al.* (2008), Savas (2009) and Abdulaziz *et al.* (2012). It was then modified to suit the context of ESP teaching at Malaysian Premier Polytechnics. The questionnaire consists of three sections; 1st is related to lecturers' demographic profile, the 2nd section focuses on the readiness to teach ESP courses while the 3rd section identifies the various training needs of the lecturers pertaining to the teaching of ESP.

The data collected from the questionnaire were then analysed descriptively using Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) Software to obtain the frequency distribution and percentage scores. Interview data were qualitatively analysed with initial descriptive codes being assigned to lecturers' responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the information with regard to lecturers' demographic details. From a total of 62 lecturers

Table 1: Demographic details

| Categories | Items | Frequencies | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 9 | 14.5 |
| | Female | 53 | 85.5 |
| Age | Under 30 | 11 | 18.0 |
| | 30-39 | 28 | 45.0 |
| | 40-49 | 18 | 29.0 |
| | 50 and above | 5 | 8.0 |
| | | | |
| Position | Lecturer | 34 | 55.0 |
| | Senior lecturer | 27 | 43.0 |
| | Head of unit | 1 | 2.0 |
| | | | |
| Highest academic qualification | Bachelor | 38 | 61.0 |
| | Master | 23 | 37.0 |
| | PhD | 1 | 2.0 |
| Years of teaching experience | 1-4 | 11 | 18.0 |
| | 5-9 | 18 | 29.0 |
| | 10-14 | 13 | 21.0 |
| | 15-19 | 17 | 27.0 |
| | 20 and above | 3 | 5.0 |
| | | | |
| No. of teaching hours (per week) | 5-9 | 3 | 5.0 |
| | 10-14 | 12 | 19.0 |
| | 15-19 | 44 | 71.0 |
| | 20 and above | 3 | 5.0 |

Table 2: Readiness to teach ESP courses

| Skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| I have good grounding in English language skills to teach ESP | - | 3 (4.7%) | 7 (11.3%) | 40 (65.0%) | 12 (19.0%) |
| I have enough content-specific knowledge to teach ESP | 41 (66.1%) | 15 (24.2%) | 6 (9.7%) | - | - |
| I can teach the correct use of linguistic features like the use of action verbs, passivity, modals, etc. | - | 5 (8.0%) | 11 (17.7%) | 38 (61.3%) | 8 (13.0%) |
| I can teach different rhetorical functions of ESP English like description, definition, classification, etc. | - | 12 (19.0%) | 7 (11.3%) | 40 (65.0%) | 3 (4.7%) |
| I can teach ESP vocabulary and check learners' understanding of ESP vocabulary | 14 (22.5%) | 39 (63.0%) | 9 (14.5%) | - | - |
| I am able to carry out needs analysis | 11 (17.7%) | 44 (71.0%) | 7 (11.3%) | - | - |
| I am able to analyse and cater to students' needs in ESP classrooms | 13 (21.0%) | 38 (61.3%) | 11 (17.7%) | - | - |
| I am able to design curriculum for ESP courses | 15 (24.2%) | 41 (66.1%) | 6 (9.7%) | - | - |
| I am able to choose relevant content for ESP teaching | - | 13 (21.0%) | 37 (60.0%) | 12 (19.0%) | - |
| I am able to develop ESP syllabus | 12 (19.0%) | 40 (65.0%) | 7 (11.3%) | 3 (4.7%) | - |
| I can produce materials for language teaching from ESP texts | 12 (19.0%) | 37 (60.0%) | 13 (21.0%) | - | - |
| I am ready to use authentic materials for ESP teaching | - | 11 (17.7%) | 38 (61.3%) | 13 (21.0%) | - |
| I am ready to incorporate ICT and multimedia in ESP classrooms | - | 12 (19.0%) | 40 (65.0%) | 7 (11.3%) | 3 (4.7%) |
| I am able to make course evaluation and assessments for ESP courses | 13 (21.0%) | 37 (60.0%) | 12 (19.0%) | - | - |
| I am able to choose appropriate methods for teaching ESP like peer work, role play, group discussion, etc. | 11 (17.7%) | 44 (71.0%) | 7 (11.3%) | - | - |
| I able to carry out intensive teacher-student interaction during ESP classrooms | - | - | 14 (22.5%) | 34 (55.0%) | 14 (22.5%) |
| I am able to solve students' learning problems in ESP classrooms | 13 (21.0%) | 38 (61.3%) | 11 (17.7%) | - | - |
| I am ready to work collaboratively with content lecturers for ESP teaching | 11 (17.7%) | 38 (61.3%) | 8 (13.0%) | 5 (8.0%) | - |

Strongly disagree: 1; Disagree: 2; Unsure: 3; Agree: 4; Strongly agree: 5

who participated in the survey, 85.5% were female and 14.5% were male. Almost half of them belong to the age group of 30-39 (45%) while majority of them possess a Bachelor degree (61%). In terms of working experience most of them have working experience ranging from 5-19 years and around 71% of the lecturers taught 15-19 h per week.

Table 2 presents the lecturers' readiness in terms of skills to teach ESP courses. Generally, most of them disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are ready to teach ESP courses. Specifically, majority of them reported that they are not ready in terms of having enough content-specific knowledge and designing curriculum for ESP courses (90.3%), choosing appropriate teaching methods for ESP teaching (88.7%), teaching and checking learners' understanding of ESP vocabulary (85.5%) developing ESP syllabus (84%) and making course evaluation and assessments (81%). As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state, ESP teachers do not necessarily have to be an expert or a teacher of the subject matter but rather have a positive attitude or possess interest in the subject matter. Flexibility to change is another important quality that ESP teachers should possess in order to change from being an English teacher to an ESP teacher (Robinson, 1991).

The lecturers also perceived that they are not prepared to carry out needs analysis (88.7%) and analyse and cater to students' needs in ESP classrooms (82.3%). Additionally, the lecturers also disagreed or strong disagreed that they are able to solve students' learning problems (82.3%) and work collaboratively with content lecturers and produce materials for language teaching from ESP texts (79%). Saliu (2013) suggests that ESP

teachers should establish communication with content lecturers and encourage their students to discuss matters related to content area with their subject teachers.

Skills which were reported unsure by the lecturers in terms of readiness are to incorporate ICT and multimedia (65%) use authentic materials (61.3%) and choose relevant content for ESP teaching (60%). The reasons provided by the lecturers are the lack of exposure in using ICT or multimedia software in teaching as the facilities such as the language labs and internet services are quite limited at the polytechnics.

The aspects which the lecturers agreed or strongly agreed being ready are to have good grounding in English language skills (84%), carry out intensive teacher-student interaction (77.5%) and teach the correct use of linguistic features (74.3%). As a language teacher, understandably these aspects are not considered as an issue for these lecturers.

The teaching of ESP courses at Malaysian Premier Polytechnics should not be left to chance. In order to successfully implement the teaching of ESP courses, the professional readiness and needs of the lecturers should be addressed. This is important because it will influence the way they look into the issue of teaching ESP and these will surely affect the way they teach the modules and later will definitely affect the nature and quality of instructional activities and the students' performances.

Figure 1 reveals the fact that about 82.3% of the respondents have not received formal training for ESP teaching while the other respondents reported that they either studied ESP as a subject during their graduate studies or attended a short course at a local university during the time when Malaysian polytechnics offered ESP

Table 3: Training needs for ESP teaching

| Aspects of ESP training | Not needed | Less needed | Needed | Rank |
|---|------------|-------------|------------|------|
| ESP theory | 6 (9.7%) | 41 (66.1%) | 15 (24.2%) | 9 |
| Developing oral skills | - | 34 (55.0%) | 28 (45.0%) | 8 |
| Content-specific knowledge | - | 6 (9.7%) | 56 (90.3%) | 1 |
| Discourse analysis | - | 21 (33.9%) | 41 (66.1%) | 7 |
| ESP vocabulary | - | 13 (21.0%) | 49 (79.0%) | 5 |
| Teaching methods/techniques | - | 9 (14.5%) | 53 (85.5%) | 2 |
| Material selection and development | - | 12 (19.0%) | 50 (81.0%) | 4 |
| Course design | - | 18 (29.0%) | 44 (71.0%) | 6 |
| Needs Analysis | - | 9 (14.5%) | 53 (85.5%) | 2 |
| Deriving syllabus items from needs analysis | - | 6 (9.7%) | 56 (90.3%) | 1 |
| ESP lesson planning | - | 13 (21.0%) | 49 (79.0%) | 5 |
| Testing and evaluation | - | 10 (16.0%) | 52 (84.0%) | 3 |

courses (English for Technical and Commercial Purposes) for diploma students. It is also important to highlight that all the six interviewees reported that at present there were no refresher course, workshops or seminars given to enhance the lecturers' ESP teaching skills.

A comparable scenario was reported in other countries in the world. A study conducted by Abdulaziz *et al.* (2012), reported that 66% ESP teachers in Pakistan did not receive any formal training for ESP teaching meanwhile, Li (2004) stated that China is facing shortage of well-trained teachers for Business English Teaching. In addition, Li (2004) suggested these teachers bear more responsibilities compared to a language teacher or a content teacher. Further, Venkatraman and Prema (2007) reported in their study that the English teachers appointed in Engineering colleges in the State of Tamil Nadu, India are Master's degree holders in English language and literature and they have not received any formal in-service training programmes to teach EST (English for Science and Technology) courses.

This subsection presents the analysis on training needs of premier polytechnic English lecturers to enhance their readiness to teach ESP courses. As reported in Table 3, the lecturers perceived that they need training on almost all aspects of ESP teaching, specifically on content-specific knowledge and deriving syllabus items from needs analysis (both 90.3%), teaching methods and needs analysis (both 85.5%), testing and evaluation (84%) and material selection and development (81%). Training for aspects of ESP lesson planning (79%) and course design (71%) were also required by the lecturers. However, majority of them regarded training in the aspects of ESP theory (66.1%) and developing oral skills (55%), as less needed for them to teach ESP courses.

The training needs of the lecturers somewhat correlates with their readiness to teach ESP courses. These lecturers have specified that they are not ready in terms of having enough content specific knowledge, carrying out needs analysis, analysing and catering to

students' needs in ESP classrooms, developing ESP syllabus and making course evaluation. Thus, it is important to study the readiness and the needs of these lecturers as it will surely affect the way they teach ESP courses and consequently it will leave an impact on the nature and quality of their instructional activities and the students' performances. Results from the interviews found that all six interviewees expressed that they need adequate training with regard to understanding students' specialised content. As Lecturer B stated:

I feel insecure to go into my class as I have no technical knowledge and I can not understand subject specific texts. Technical terms are difficult to be explained. I fear teaching my students the wrong thing (B3)

Oladejo (2005) cited in Tsao *et al.* (2008) defined a qualified ESP teacher as a person who has:

- Good linguistic and communicative competence in the target language
- Familiar with subject area
- Professionally trained in teaching

While the English language lecturers in this study have no problem with the first and third criteria, it was found that they lack knowledge and seriously need training in terms of students' content specific knowledge.

In addition, training on conducting needs analysis and materials development was also stressed by the interviewees. Lecturer D explained:

I understand that researchers need to take account of students' needs and develop materials accordingly but I do not know how to go about it. We were not given any specific training and I just rely on the course book and outline provided by the curriculum development centre. I am not sure whether it meets my students' needs specifically (D4)

In addition, lecturer A enlightened that it is difficult to identify and cater to students' needs due to large classrooms and class heterogeneity. According to Belcher (2004), ESP pedagogy demands its practitioners to carry out realistic needs assessment, create or adapt materials to meet students' specific needs and cope with unfamiliar subject matter. Needs analysis is known as the key concept or cornerstone of ESP (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) and it is regarded as a complex process which needs special attention and adequate training for ESP teachers (Chostelidou *et al.*, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that majority of English language lecturers at premier polytechnics perceived that they are still unprepared to teach ESP courses, specifically in the aspect of content-specific knowledge, syllabus and curriculum design, ESP vocabulary, needs analysis and evaluation and assessments. The study also found that many lecturers perceived they still need more training in preparing, themselves to teach ESP courses especially in the area of content specific knowledge, teaching methods/strategies, needs analysis and evaluation and testing.

The purpose of introducing ESP courses at Malaysian Premier Polytechnics are to cater to students' specific needs for future occupational roles. It is important for ESP lecturers to establish collaborative and co-operative efforts with content lecturers of various disciplines in order to come up with materials and syllabus. Such trans-disciplinary collaboration will be able to provide ESP lecturers with a basic understanding of students' content specific knowledge.

ESP teachers should also have flexibility and interest to work with their students in terms of adopting suitable content pertaining to their students' field of study. This will enable the lecturers to be aware of the learners' needs and to incorporate relevant materials in their teaching.

In addition, ESP lecturers could incorporate ICT and multimedia aids like video clips related to students' specific content in their teaching as it has the potential of improving both lecturers' and students' engagement and motivation. Ibrahim (2010), suggests ESP practitioners to integrate modern technologies according to students' needs to increase their motivation. In addition, he also suggests the use of World Wide Web for various activities to expose ESP learners to different experiences and techniques.

The study also suggests that there is a need for teacher training and development, particularly in ESP teaching. Certificate training in ESP teaching could be considered for the lecturers. Apart from that the lecturers themselves should be confident and ready for challenge and change when teaching ESP courses. They are expected to have a positive attitude to accept the challenges and develop their skills.

Although, the study was limited to sixty-two lecturers from three premier polytechnics in Malaysia, further studies can be undertaken using respondents from other polytechnics or community colleges across the country for more conclusive findings. Furthermore, since the research samples were only focused on lecturers, future study may be conducted on the perceptions of the students in learning the newly developed ESP courses.

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