

In the Name of God

The Compassionate

The Merciful

Yazd University
Faculty of Language and Literature
English Department

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**

Title:

**The Role of Teacher's Specialized Knowledge in Teaching English
for Specific Purposes**

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2011/1390

To my mother

for her unconditional love and support

To my husband

for his understanding and generous support

Acknowledgement

Many people have provided assistance throughout the completion of my thesis. First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Golnar Mazdayasna whose academic advice and meticulous revisions provided me with guidance during all the phases of this thesis. Without her generous support and encouragement the accomplishment of my thesis would have been impossible. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Hamid Allami, for his insightful comments and guidance throughout my thesis.

Moreover, I am also indebted to all my professors namely, Dr. Rezaei, Dr. Jabbari, Dr. Fazilatfar and Dr. Mahdavirad. My thanks should also go to the students and instructors who participated in this study. Last but not the least, my sincere appreciation and deepest love are extended to my dear husband, Arash Kadivar, whose encouragement, and tolerance helped me throughout the process of writing this thesis.

Abstract

The debate whether ESP teachers need to have knowledge of the specialized field they are teaching has been an issue in the literature over the last two decades. The aim of conducting this study was to explore Iranian learners' and instructors' beliefs and attitudes concerning the role of specialized knowledge in teaching ESP classes. A seventeen item questionnaire was administered to 400 ESP learners, 40 language instructors at five universities in Iran. The data were analyzed using frequency distribution and chi-square.

The results revealed that a substantial number of respondents maintained that language instructors need to understand the technical and scientific use of English utilized in different academic books. Correspondingly, they agreed that in ESP classes the language instructor is not in the position of being the primary knower of the subject matter of the materials because language instructors have literary or language background.

Moreover, a good majority of respondents believed that language instructors code switch to L1 and translate the content into Persian when they lack specialized knowledge. Similarly, a good majority of respondents agreed that ESP teaching requires special skills to deal with specialized content. A solid majority of respondents also agreed that EFL instructors having a humanities background should become familiar with the rhetorical, discoursal, and communicative features of different texts. Similarly, a good majority of the respondents reported that teaching ESP courses requires more experience, additional training, extra effort, and a fresh commitment compared with being an instructor of General English.

Furthermore, the findings of this study also reveal that cooperation and collaboration with content specialists would help prospective and actual ESP instructors become more confident and competent practitioners. Through collaboration and cooperation they can also select appropriate content, methodology, and activities for ESP courses.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes, Language Instructor, Content Teacher, ESP Learners, Specialized knowledge.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

Over the past twenty years, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has established itself as a viable and vigorous movement within the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and teaching English as a second language TESL (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991). ESP requires the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context (Dudley-Evans, and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991).

The main concerns of ESP have always been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation (Dudley-Evans, and St. John, 1998). Robinson (1991) accepts the primacy of needs analysis in defining ESP. Her definition is based on two key defining criteria and a number of characteristics that are generally found to be true of ESP. Her key criteria are that ESP is ‘normally goal-directed’, and that ESP courses develop from a needs analysis, which “aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English” (Robinson, 1991: 3). These characteristics are that ESP courses are generally restricted by a limited time period, in which their objectives have to be achieved, and are taught to adults in homogeneous classes in terms of the work or specialist studies that the students are involved in.

The primary focus of ESP is on the learners’ target situation needs preparing them to communicate effectively in their field of study or profession (Bojović, 2006). Likewise, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a component of ESP and is formulated on the assumption that

the language syllabus must consider the eventual uses the learner will make of the language (Dudley-Evans, and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Jordon, 1997; Robinson, 1991).

Similarly, Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) believe that ESP requires methodologies that are specialized or unique. According to them, an EAP class taught collaboratively by a language teacher and a content teacher, sheltered and adjunct EAP classes, and special English classes for students in the workplace require considerably different approaches than those found in general English classes (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991). Likewise, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) believe that ESP teaching does not necessarily have to be related to content but it should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the discipline in question.

Correspondingly, ESP teaching presents an obvious challenge to ESP instructors as they lack the specific background knowledge of the content they are teaching (Dudley-Evans, and St. John, 1998). ESP instructors are supposed to be knowledgeable in content areas as well as be able to elicit knowledge from students (Crandall, 1998). In reality, language teachers are trained to teach linguistic knowledge rather than a content subject. Therefore, they may be insufficiently rounded to teach subject matters (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Similarly, Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, (2002) rightly point out that ESP teachers have also come to acknowledge that teaching those who are using English for their studies differs from teaching those who are learning English for general purposes (EGP) only. Likewise, Selinker (1979, cited in Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998: 103) asserts that ESP instructors should increase their background knowledge of the main concepts and presuppositions of the text,

otherwise lower level features of grammar and vocabulary would be more attended. Furthermore, Bell (1996) believes that it is impossible for all ESP teachers to be specialists in their students' disciplines, but instructors should certainly be prepared to invest a significant amount of time into acquiring subject content knowledge.

Most importantly, ESP instructors should perform several roles which require both content and formal schema knowledge in a particular field of science because a language teaching program, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006), consists of three stages: (1) input, (2) process, and (3) output. The first stage includes determination of student needs, materials preparation and syllabus designing. The second stage is the implementation of the program and the last stage is the assessment of the students' performance and reorganizing the program for the following year. For this reason, the ESP teacher needs to be a course designer and material provider for the first stage. Due to the continuous changes in scientific world it is rarely possible to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material and sometimes no really suitable published material exists to meet the student needs.

Consequently, many scholars (Dudley-Evans, and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991) among others assert that in comparison to EGP, teaching ESP is more relevant, more cost-effective and more accountable.

1.2 Statement of the problem

As with any dynamic discipline, there are areas of controversy within ESP (Flowerdew, 1990). The debate whether ESP instructors require a specialized knowledge of the academic subjects of their students has been a regular issue in the literature over the last two decades (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2006). One important unresolved theoretical question is that how much, if any, subject content knowledge is required for ESP/EAP teachers to successfully prepare their learners for academic studies at tertiary level. According to Ewer (1983) many EFL/ESL instructors having a humanities background perceive difficulties while teaching ESP courses. He has grouped these difficulties as attitudinal, conceptual, linguistic, methodological, and organizational.

Since ESP incorporates both subject knowledge and language skills, language training is realized through the context of specific subject areas (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Ewer, 1983; Jordan, 1997). One of the distinctive features of most ESP contexts is that teachers often have to deal with areas of knowledge outside their primary areas of experience which is undeniably one of ESP teachers' dilemmas. Nevertheless, many teachers assigned to handle ESP courses might not receive any formal training of specialized knowledge in question. Consequently, a sense of intimidation or lack of confidence among teachers as well as detachment between the teaching and learners' target situation needs would definitely govern this realm of teaching (Ewer, 1983). Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 160) assert that ESP teachers "have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous

experience”. However, it is indisputably difficult to identify just how far ESP teachers’ knowledge should be extended.

“Students cannot develop academic knowledge and skills without access to the language in which that knowledge is embedded, discussed, constructed, or evaluated. Nor can they acquire academic language skills in a context devoid of content” (Crandall, 1994, cited in Jordan, 1997: 256). Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 60) contend that in ESP classrooms “the nature of communication is made very distinctive by the difference in the subject knowledge between the students and the language teachers.”

Correspondingly, Johns (1981, cited in Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 164), for example, lists five problems that EAP teachers complain of: low priority in timetabling; lack of personal/professional contact with content instructors; lower status than content instructors; isolation from other instructors of English doing similar work; and, finally, lack of respect from students.

Parkinson (2000) claims that basic background knowledge of the content areas of their students is necessary for ESP teachers. Histon (2004) also asserts that subject-specific knowledge is more important for ESP teachers than what they may realize in teaching ESP courses. Besides, Fraser (2003) believes that although it seems impossible for all ESP teachers to be a specialist in their students' field, teachers need to invest a significant amount of time on gaining subject-specific knowledge of their students.

The aforementioned situation poses a challenge for English teachers as they have to accomplish the difficult task of teaching ESP courses related to different specialized fields. More specifically, this study was motivated by the following research questions:

Research Questions

- 1- How important is the specialized knowledge of the English teacher in teaching ESP courses?
- 2- How can ESP teachers gain specialized knowledge?
- 3- Is it necessary for prospective ESP teachers to have training different from that of general English teachers?

1.3 ESP in Iran

As in other parts of the world, ESP has increasingly expanded, so that EAP has established itself as a considerable part of curricula for all academic fields at universities in Iran. There have been three distinct generations of ESP/EAP instruction in Iran. The first stage is mainly in association with the joint projects between Iranian universities and western academic centers (Bates and Dudley-Evans, 1975, 1976, cited in Yarmohammadi, 2005: 8). The striking example in this case is the program designed jointly by Tehran University and the University of Illinois in 1975. Its main goal was to contribute to learners' reading comprehension performances. Another marked attempt was the program conducted by Tabriz University in collaboration with British Council in

1975. The *Nucleus Series* was the outcome of this program. The program was realized in terms of a series of courses designed to meet the English language needs of the students of medicine, pharmacy, engineering, chemistry, biology, mathematics and agriculture (Bates and Dudley-Evans, 1975, 1976, cited in Yarmohammadi, 2005: 10).

The second generation of ESP instruction in Iran can be connected with a systematic movement made by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) to provide discipline-based EAP programs at all Iranian universities in 1980. The program was planned with the purpose of designing courses to fulfill the learners' needs in special fields of study and to enhance the students' motivation and interests. However, the outcome was a failure because the courses did not prove to be much different from their counterproductive general English courses in terms of instructional activities and focus of interest (Gooniband, 1988, cited in Yarmohammadi, 2005: 13). The emphasis still remained on practicing micro-linguistic aspects of reading skills. Although, the reading texts were thematically arranged for broad fields such as medicine, engineering, science, social sciences, humanities, and agriculture, they were not closely related to the learners' needs and their academic studies.

The third phase of ESP development in Iran has been moving towards higher specificity of content in EAP instruction. The program, supervised by SAMT, has resulted in the production of almost 110 volumes of so-called sub-technical and technical textbooks in different areas of specialization (Yarmohammadi, 2005). Despite noticeable improvements over the previous textbooks, the program designer (SAMT) has unfortunately paid little attention to methodological, content, evaluation, and assessment aspects of EAP.

According to Yarmohammadi (2005), ESP courses in Iran which are expected to deal with EAP do not satisfy the principles underlying ESP course design. He further assumes that since language teaching in Iran does not pursue any specific purposes it can be characterized as “language for no specific purposes” (Yarmohammadi, 2005: 4).

1.4 Purpose of the study

ESP, as the name suggests, incorporates both subject knowledge and language skills (Ewer, 1983). Many instructors assigned to teach ESP courses might not receive any formal training. ESP has increasingly been considered as an important and dynamic area within the field of ELT, because students can learn the specialized language of their future professional in ESP classes. A substantial number of language instructors who have literary background lack the confidence and expertise to teach specialized courses in English.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 158) rightly point out that ESP teachers compared with general English teachers are reluctant to teach ESP courses due to three main reasons: 1) the lack of ESP orthodoxy to provide a read-made guide, 2) the new realms of knowledge the ESP teacher has to cope with, and 3) the change in the status of English language teaching. Likewise, Parkinson (2000) claims that basic background knowledge of the content areas of their students is necessary for ESP teachers.

1.5 Significance of the study

Although ESP is not merely a matter of teaching technical vocabulary, knowledge of technical and sub-technical vocabulary is really essential for learners with specific purposes due to their frequently obvious use within the scientific texts (Fraser, 2003). In fact, ESP teachers need sufficient knowledge of technical and sub-technical vocabulary. In other words, in any ESP class, technical and sub-technical vocabulary should be taught in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, regarding the importance, complexity as well as high distribution of these specialized terms, merely a good knowledge of general English is not sufficient for ESP teachers to teach ESP courses. Consequently, ESP teachers need a full command of a wide range of vocabulary to develop an awareness of the principles and concepts of the discourse community in any discipline. Therefore, Ewer (1983) suggests that ESP teacher training programs will enable future practitioners to tackle specialized courses successfully.

The findings of this study may be used as some valuable inputs in ESP curriculum planning as well as making some deliberate decisions concerning refining, reviewing and improving the ESP instruction in Iran.

1.6 Definition of key terms

English for specific purposes (ESP): According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 1): “the main concerns of ESP have always been and remain, with need analysis, text analysis and