

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) TEACHING

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Received:	22/3/2022	Being able to use English for professional purposes has played a vital role in the working world, so teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) has become a necessary part of vocational training programs. Nonetheless, the ESP teaching still showcases a variety of challenge per se. This paper presents the qualitative study investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of the factors affecting their ESP teaching process at a vocational college in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province. A cohort of six EFL teachers who were teaching ESP courses took part in semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analysed using the content analysis approach. The results showed that the positive factors (teaching facilities and teaching experience) supported and enhanced EFL teachers' ESP teaching, while the negative factors (students' poor English language proficiency and low level of motivation) deemed to prevent EFL teachers' ESP teaching. These preliminary findings of this study could help EFL teachers and managers realize the real problems in teaching ESP to students, and find solutions to improve the quality of ESP teaching and learning.
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NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH VỀ CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN VIỆC GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	22/3/2022	Có khả năng sử dụng tiếng Anh cho mục đích nghề nghiệp đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong thế giới lao động; do đó, việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành đã trở thành một phần không thể thiếu trong chương trình đào tạo nghề. Tuy nhiên, việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành vẫn còn nhiều thách thức. Bài báo này trình bày nghiên cứu định tính về việc tìm hiểu nhận thức của giáo viên về các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành tại một Trường Cao đẳng nghề tại Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu. Tham gia trả lời phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc trong nghiên cứu này gồm sáu giáo viên đang dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành. Dữ liệu được phân tích bằng phương pháp phân tích nội dung. Kết quả cho thấy các yếu tố tích cực (cơ sở vật chất và kinh nghiệm giảng dạy) hỗ trợ và nâng cao việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành của giáo viên, trong khi đó các yếu tố tiêu cực (trình độ tiếng Anh kém và mức độ động lực thấp của sinh viên) được coi là ngăn cản việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành của giáo viên. Kết quả sơ bộ của nghiên cứu này có thể giúp giáo viên và lãnh đạo nhận ra vấn đề thực sự trong việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, đồng thời tìm ra giải pháp nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành.
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1. Introduction

In the new global economy, learning English is no longer for its own justification but using the language in a different context with specific purposes is necessary for learners. English for specific purposes (ESP) subject, which has been associated with majors' knowledge to support learners to meet the needs of employers, has become a vital subject in educational programs [1] – [3]. To respond to the demand for high levels of English communication for specific purposes in English, ESP is one of the necessary subjects which universities and colleges have chosen to train their students to help them communicate in specific English contexts. Accordingly, the role of ESP is getting more and more attention in all fields of education. ESP subjects are designed for the learners who want to use English for their future job in a post-academic setting or for the ones who want to use it for academic purposes in a pre-occupational setting. Sujana (2015) [4] argues that the aim of ESP subjects is to provide students opportunities to use English at a certain level of English language proficiency. For this objective, the English proficiency level and the subject matter knowledge of students are the key components in the achieving goals of ESP.

The Vietnamese government highlights the goal that education at colleges and universities should help students gain profound knowledge and practical skills with the ability to work independently and creatively as well as solve problems in the field of study [5]. In the line of this direction, ESP is selected in their training professional programs of vocational education schools and colleges. The vocational schools and colleges have to keep serious eyes on the situation and focus on job-oriented training because vocational education has to change from supply-driven to demand-driven model to keep in step with the development of global industries which have an increasing awareness of technicians about ESP skills. Additionally, the General Department of Vocational Training (Ministry of War Invalids and Social Affairs) is really interested in specialized English programs for colleges and vocational schools. According to decision no. 899/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister on June 20, 2017, the targets of programs for vocational education employment and labor safety were approved in the 2016-2020 period. Different appraisal boards have been established to evaluate ESP programs for level 3 and level 4 of key international occupations (e.g., Biotechnology, Information Technology (software application), Engineering electrical installation and industrial control, Computer network administration, etc.).

Nonetheless, there are some existing factors that directly affect the effectiveness of ESP such as students, teachers, teaching methodology, materials and others [2], [6]-[8], and learners are considered as the nucleus of all activities in teaching ESP. Teachers have faced different difficulties relevant to students' poor English language proficiency, their low interest and motivation in learning and passive performance in class [9]-[12]. In addition, Savas (2009) points out that "ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures required for fluency in informal settings as EFL does" [13, p.401], but it is observed that the traditional methods (e.g., grammar translation method, direct method or structural method) have been used in ESP class. Those methods have focused only on skills and areas of knowledge in isolation, which actually means that the content of the course is limited to specific vocabulary and grammar of the chosen field. Therefore, to that void, this study aims at exploring the factors affecting EFL teachers' ESP teaching at the context of a vocational college in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research context and participants

The qualitative study was conducted at one of the vocational colleges in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province. This college is equipped with modern facilities and equipment that meet European standards and ensure good learning and practice of students in eighteen fields of Electrical Engineering, Electronics, and Mechanical Engineering, Information Technology (IT), Food

Technology, Fashion, and Accounting. Apart of specialized courses students have to take, the ESP courses are designed for second-year students. Each major has a particular curriculum and teaching materials. Students have to take at least a 5-hour class per week until the end of the course. The ESP course consists of 30 class hours in which there are 12 theoretical periods, 15 practical periods and 3 assignments in 3 periods. The final assignment is in 45 minutes with 50 multichoice questions to show how the result of course is. All majors have an inherent curriculum in thirty class periods.

A cohort of six conveniently sampled EFL teachers (4 females and 2 males) with teaching experience from 2 to 10 years took part in this study. They had a bachelor of art in language teaching, and they were all experienced in teaching ESP courses. They were currently teaching English for car technology, English for welding, English for electrical engineering, English for food process, and English for IT.

2.2. Research instrument

This study employed the semi-structured interview for data collection. The interview consists of five main questions aiming to collect information on the factors affecting EFL teachers' ESP teaching. The interview questions were designed based on the research purpose, and they were designed in English, then translated to Vietnamese.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Prior to the official interview, the interview questions were piloted to two teachers who had similar characteristics to those in the main study. The official interviews were conducted once the pilot phase was complete. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so as to make sure that all interviewees felt free in expressing their opinions without any language barriers. Each interview lasted from 20 to 25 minutes and was recorded for later analysis.

The collected data was analysed using the content approach. Six interviewees were coded as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6. This study employed different ways to make sure the qualitative data analysis valid and reliable. First, when the findings were found, they were sent back to participants for confirmation. Second, the intra-rating was carried out, and the convergent results were set at least 90%.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

The results show that the factors affecting teachers' ESP teaching are found two groups, namely positive and negative factors. The former includes teaching facilities and teachers' teaching experience, while the latter consists of students' language proficiency and their motivation.

3.1.1. Positive factors

Teaching facilities

The most direct positive factor for EFL teachers' ESP teaching practice of is the facilities of the school. The majority of respondents felt that their lessons were more interesting due in part to the teaching equipment that the school has equipped in classrooms.

"The usefulness of smart device such as smart televisions and high-tech device help me apply new methods and fascinate student's attention to my lectures. (T6)

An additional example is from T3:

"With the modern facilities in classrooms, they enable me to design interesting and engaging lessons." (T3)

Another teacher added that "one of the factors which directly affects her ESP teaching is the teaching context, especially modern facilities." (T4)

Another teacher also gave her opinion on the importance of teaching facilities.

“...the actual equipment and software programs in the workshop will not be compatible with equipment and software presented in the textbook, such as the older version, so I must update and explain more to students.” (T5)

In addition, she commented that the school has done its best to provide a good environment for their teachers.

All in all, a good working condition supports EFL teachers to create an active learning environment. Students can be attracted by interesting lessons through modern equipment, they will feel comfortable in class.

Teaching experience

Furthermore, the other significant positive factor, which is teaching experience, was found. Although one of six participants mentioned in his interview, the others understood the role of teaching experience in their teaching career. A specific example is as follows:

“...teaching experience strongly affects my teaching ESP. A teacher has many years of teaching English that is not enough. ESP needs more knowledge of subject matter than skills, so ESP teachers will use their experience to get higher results. Besides, they also apply in different classes with different levels”. (T2)

He also shared more teaching experience, and he indicated the strength of an experienced teacher.

“When I was a young teacher, I stood in front of the class full of enthusiasm. I spent time explaining everything and shared a lot of references. However, my students were sleepy in my class, and my students’ performance was not quite good. After that, I realized that I chose the wrong method. In the next semester, I chose activities that students could participate in after introducing and explaining new lessons in detail. Consequently, students had paid attention in my lectures and they learned how to explain something from him more effectively.” (T2)

Everything considered that experienced teachers had more effective ways to solve professional problems as well as pedagogical situations. The teachers who participated in the interview spent at least one year in teaching ESP, so they were quite confident when they answer the interview questions about the factors affecting their teaching. None of the responses related to teaching style or problem-solving pedagogical situations.

3.1.2. Negative factors

Students’ poor English language proficiency

All interviewed teachers believed that their students’ English skills were poor, which is why they usually kept silent in ESP class. The results of the study revealed that the English language proficiency of students was quite low, and they lacked vocabulary and subject knowledge. Hence, EFL teachers had to spend more time finishing tasks and encouraging them to interact with classmates. One of the interviewees shared:

“On the first time I went to ESP class, my students just kept silent. While I was talking, they seemed to listen to him, but when I asked a question, they also kept silent and looked at me. Suddenly, one student spoke a Vietnamese answer “we did not understand, although we tried to listen carefully. At that time, I realized that I spoke English too much, so I could not understand anything. The next time, I translated Vietnamese after English during class time. On the other hand, there were some students who interacted with me while the others still kept silent. Once more time, I thought I should choose another teaching method. I had given words to words, phrases to phrases, and from easy sentences to complex sentences. I also designed more games to attract students in class. Finally, I realized my students were more active and interactive in my class.” (T3)

Similarly, other interviewees stated:

“...most of my students were ranked as beginners, and their absorbing abilities were quite slow. Hence, I had to prepare her lesson carefully and choose easy activities to attract them.” (T6)

“I think the student's level affects my teaching ESP. If I go to a class with students who can use English fluently, I can apply various activities for them to explore their majority’s

knowledge. If my students have a low level, I have to spend more time helping them to do exercises.” (T1)

Students’ low level of motivation

Students’ motivation in ESP learning is one of the biggest concerns that interviewees mentioned. Interviewed teachers shared that some students came to their classes without any purpose. They did not know what to learn, how to learn, and why to learn. Here are the most obvious opinions:

“...students with low motivation will ignore her lesson, so any methods and activities are useless”. (T5)

“I only teach English for IT. Moreover, in the IT industry, English is widely used. If my students do not know the importance of English in this major, they will encounter many problems. Therefore, I also shared that she had introduced the need and objectives of a subject before starting the first lesson. In addition, I often change teaching methods to help students recognize the importance of the subject and feel more comfortable in class.” (T4)

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study have indicated that EFL teachers’ ESP teaching was both positively and negatively affected. It seemed that EFL teachers’ ESP teaching were supported by the teaching facilities and their teaching experience. When it comes to the teaching facilities, EFL teachers could perform their teaching well because this vocational college was well equipped with different types of teaching facilities. This finding confirmed the results in the previous study implemented by Corcoran et al. (1988) [14] who admitted that a good condition could attract the teacher’s attention and help them work more effectively. Similarly, Savage (1999) [15] and Stewart and Evans (1997) [16] confirmed that teachers could work more enthusiastically and responsibly thanks to the assistance of teaching aids. Furthermore, EFL teachers recognized the importance of teaching experience in the teaching ESP process. Within this study, all EFL teachers had experience at least one year in teaching ESP courses, so they felt confident in delivering ESP courses to their students. Borg (1998) [17] explains teaching experiences are about teachers’ beliefs about students, knowledge of the subject matter, curricula, school, materials, classroom management, instructional activities and so on. These experiences must be drawn from the practicing process, they are not limited to the knowledge of teachers. Therefore, the teaching experience can support and facilitate teachers’ teaching process.

Regarding the negative factors, the findings of this study revealed that student-related factors were the big challenges EFL teachers had to face. They are students’ poor English language proficiency and their low level of motivation which deemed to directly affect teachers’ ESP teaching practices. One of the plausible explanations for students’ poor English language proficiency is due to the fact that the students in this research context were non-English major students and studying at vocational college. To put it simply, those students may pay much attention to their specialized courses rather than English, and they may not consider English as an important part for their future jobs. That is why their English language proficiency was not high. With respect to student’s low level of motivation, as discussed above that when students considered the low status of English in their study and future job, they may not be highly motivated in learning the ESP courses. ESP courses can be more challenging to students’ low level of English language proficiency, which may result in low level of motivation. This finding is supported by Bracaj (2014) [6] who has asserted that the importance of student’s motivation can bring the success to the teaching course. This is strongly confirmed by Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) [18] and Masgoret and Gardner (2003) [19] who have stated that students’ motivation is the instrument that is relevant to their language achievement.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the factors that affect EFL teachers' ESP teaching, and the findings showed that both positive and negative factors were confirmed. Positive factors (teaching facilities and teachers' teaching experience) could support and enhance teachers' ESP teaching practice, while negative factors (students' poor English language proficiency and their low level of motivation) could hinder teachers from teaching ESP courses to their students.

From such findings, some pedagogical implications are drawn. First, ESP is regarded as an essential subject in vocational school. Although vocational students need to intensify skills more than languages, ESP can be beneficial for vocational students to be able to approach their majority terms in English, and connect to new and modern working environments in the world through dominant articles in learning materials. Moreover, ESP helps students function well in a workplace or an educational setting in which English is used as a medium of communication by simulated activities in lessons. Second, regardless of the fact that ESP is one of the obligatory subjects in the training program of all professions, it has the fewest number of class lessons (about 2 or 3 credits for ESP courses). Therefore, there should be more credits for ESP courses, which can help students absorb the ESP knowledge. Third, as found that the student's English language proficiency and their motivation were viewed as negative factors, the teaching methods have not been effective in ESP classes. It is suggested that students' English language proficiency should be improved at a basic level so that they can meet the requirements of ESP courses in terms of English language proficiency. Additionally, students should be made aware of the importance of ESP courses which can be of importance in their future job.

The current study was conducted as qualitative study, so it generated some limitations. This study is not qualitative research design employing only one research instrument. Additionally, the number of participants was only 6 EFL teachers. Therefore, the future study may be conducted with the mixed methods design with different types of research instruments (e.g., questionnaire, class observation) and a larger number of participants so that the findings can be generalized to similar contexts.

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