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## Challenges Faced by the Students in Approaching Terminology in ESP Course

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### Abstract

Nowadays, with the development of globalization and economic integration, economics and the related issues have become one of the most-mentioned topics worldwide. Therefore, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been a promising branch in English Language Teaching. The purpose of ESP course is to supply learners English language used in Economics, which typically presented by terminology. While much effort focus has been put on translation of terminology, difficulties for linguistic students in learning economic terms have not been drawn full proper attention yet. By highlighting the lack of related studies in the ESP setting in Vietnam, this paper is one among the first studies on the linguistic students' learning terminology through their difficulties, causes and solutions. Thanks to a flexible combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, valid results can be yielded from the study. Questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument to identify the most common challenges in three processes of learning term including understanding, remembering, and applying. 96 fourth-year students were chosen as the participants of the study. They were classified into two groups which are double degree program students and mainstream students who major in English Language Teaching. The reasons for their difficulties were categorized into internal causes, and external ones. Solutions suggested by students and teachers were also provided in the research.

*Key words:* ESP, terminology, challenges, solutions.

### Introduction

With the globalization of trade and economy and the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, the demand for English for Specific Purposes is expanding, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. That is the true case in Vietnam; ESP has shown a slow but definite growth over the past few years. Its development is reflected in an increasing number of courses offered to students. As one of the leading universities in language training, ULIS – VNU has applied English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for the last 10 years, aiming at improving students' skill in using English as a tool to work in an international working environment and to comprehend technology transference. The course has been applied for seniors whose English competence is upper-intermediate. Their four skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking are nearly accomplished. The course-books were written by Mr. Nguyen Xuan Thom, a professor in ULIS. The texts give general background on economics' items and definitions. Besides, reading texts are followed by different exercises related to the text. The first type of exercise is definitions matching; the second type is multiple choices on text information. Translating exercises are also given to help students to apply the new knowledge. The objectives of the course are providing students with a great deal of terminology, enhancing students' ability in translating economic materials, building student's knowledge of grammar, etc. The objectives

to achieve are variable; however, the most desirable aim of students in learning and teachers in teaching this course is the acquisition of terminologies. As stated in the data analysis of Tran (2009) 70% teachers pay attention to teach terms, and 65% students want to learn terms in ESP course.

Due to the fact that term really plays an essential role in distinguishing ESP from other language branches, and forming the ESP course. As Robinson (1991:4) claims "It may often be thought that a characteristic or even a critical feature of ESP is that a course should involve specialist language (especially terminology) and content".

However, the proper attention has not been paid to this issue; students encounter many challenges in approaching terminology in the course, which could be considered a major motivation to this study. The study, therefore, intends to detect the potential problems that ULIS students encounter, to reveal the causes for such difficulties, based on which the study would propose some possible suggestions and strategies for learning terms to answer the following questions:

1. According to ULIS students, what are the difficulties they encounter when approaching ESP's terminology?
2. What are the causes of the difficulties they encounter?
3. From the students' perspectives, what are the solutions to overcome the difficulties?
4. What are the solutions to student's problems as suggested by the teachers of ESP?

### **Significance of the research**

Teachers, after going through this research will be more aware of the difficulties facing these students, and will be able to help them gradually overcome these difficulties. For educational administrators, the study would provide them with a close view into the current situation, which may then reveal some pedagogical suggestions. The findings hopefully would contribute to the improvement of students in learning terms. Last but not least, with regards to researchers who have the same interest in the topic, could find fundamental, and useful information to develop their studies.

## **Methodology**

### **Settings**

**Seniors from FELTE.** The researcher distributed 20 questionnaires via email, and came to class directly handled 50 questionnaires. The total valid respondents were 96; however, the researcher did not analyze all these respondents, randomly picked up 48 among them. 48 students were classified into two groups. The first group (G1) included those students who studied only a major of language. While the second group (G2) contained those students who studied double majors (language and economics at the same time). Students from G2 were supposed to have better economic background, as in their curriculum they certainly attended more economic courses than G1's students.

**Teachers of ESP.** It is highly demanding to be an ESP teacher, teacher must be not only excellent at knowledge of language but also good at economic professional knowledge. There are seven teachers in ESP division in ULIS. All of those teachers received M.A or B.A in Economics besides their M.A or PhD in linguistics. It can be concluded that they are competent at teaching ESP. Two teachers were chosen to be interviewed, who are directly teaching ESP to forth-year students in FELTE. The reason is that those teachers clearly understand the state of learning, the students' performances in-class and thus can propose some recommendations for the students to overcome the difficulties. One teacher who is highly

experienced has been teaching ESP for more than fifteen years. The other has just been transferred to ESP division.

### **Data collection instruments**

Both the quantitative and the qualitative methods were utilized in this study because these approaches are regarded by Mackey and Gass (2005) as “*complementary means of investigating the complex phenomena at work in second language acquisition*” (p.164). Accordingly, it employs questionnaires, and interviews as the instruments to collect data. These two instruments aim at finding answers to the research questions, and supplement each other in collecting data.

### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires, as defined by Brown (2001, cited in Mackey and Gass, 2005:92), are “*any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react by writing out their answers or selecting them among existing answers*” Since questionnaire can “*provide data economically and in a form that lends itself perfectly to the purposes of the study*” (Verma & Mallick, 1999:17), it is taken as one of the main data collection instruments in the research. Another reason for researcher’s choice is that this instrument has the ability to reveal a pattern among all the respondents’ answers (Gillham, 2005). The questionnaire designed for students aimed to find out the following main points:

- Their encountered problems when approaching terms
- Their perceived reasons for above difficulties
- Their suggestions to overcome difficulties

Besides multiple-choice questions, the survey questionnaires also makes use of questions which asks the respondents to score a statement according to five-point scale (*Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, not important at all*) which is adopted to reveal the participants’ perception of the importance of learning terms, and terms in their future jobs. The other questions were divided into three groups to answer the difficulties and reasons in each process of approaching terms, namely understanding, remembering, and applying process.

### **Interviews**

Along with survey questionnaire, interview is also chosen by the researcher as a valuable research instrument to examine the target population. Vaus (2002) asserted that “*in-depth interviewing can give the researcher insight into the meaning of behavior and attitudes expressed in questionnaires. This can help made more intelligent interpretations of the patterns discovered in the analysis of questionnaire data*”. A semi-structured interview will be exploited as this type of interviews could bring about in-depth information and a wide range of responses from the interviewees (Hancock, 1998:7). Based on the findings from the questionnaires, the interviews will be conducted for teachers.

## **Literature Review**

### **3.1. What is ESP?**

"ESP" stands for English for Specific Purposes. Different authors have defined this term so far. Some people described ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose than could be specified. Others, however, were more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or

professional purposes. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1997), ESP is one important branch of EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) system that functions as the main branch of English language teaching ELT. Specifically, Strevens (1988:1) stated: "ESP is a particular case of the general category of special purpose language teaching".

To sum up, ESP is "an approach rather than a product to language teaching" (Hutchinson and Waters (1987)) which the focal point is on the learner's need, and their reason for learning.

### 3.2. Terminology

There are various definitions of terminology by many linguists. According to Oxford dictionary, **term** is "a word or phrase used to describe a thing or to express a concept, especially in a particular kind of language or branch of study". The meaning of terminology can only be precisely understood when putting in a specific area.

#### Characteristics

Some main characteristics of terminology have been given by many linguists. They are:

- **Accurateness:** Terms are often used in highly logic-required fields such as: economic, science, law, medicine, etc; therefore, terms are required to be accurate. Each specific field requires its own terms, terms play the role of codes among users to convey and understand the things, the phenomenon, and the event in the areas.
- **Systematism:** Language is science which also has its own system. Terminology is a language element, therefore it must be systematic. When terms are put together in different systems and context, they convey one specific concept.
- **Internationalism:** As mentioned above, terms are special words expressing common scientific concepts.

Besides these above main features, terminology also acquires other features related to its culture. Thus, terminology in Vietnamese is not an exception; according to Bay, H.T. (2005) they are nationalism and popularity.

- **Nationalism:** is another core feature of terminology. "The term should be appropriate to Vietnamese people from the lexicology to the grammatical composition" stated by Bay, H.T. (2007).
- **Popularity:** Language is a means of communication which conveys the ideas, thinking, etc among people. Terms also contributes to this value of language.

### Study Results

Before the findings are presented, a glance at the students' perception towards the overall importance of learning term would reveal their motivation and attitude to learn.

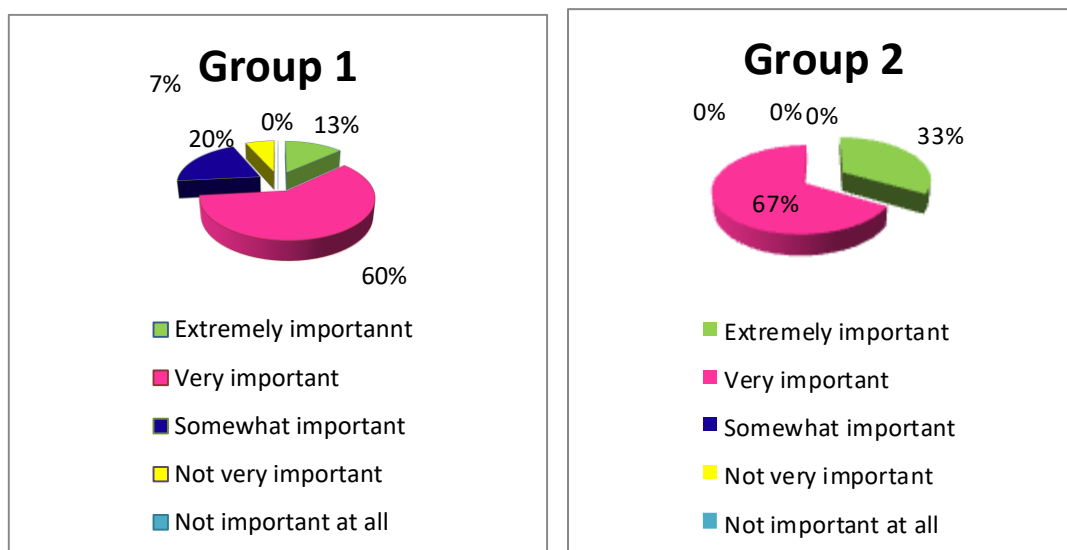


Figure 1. The overall importance of learning term in ESP course as evaluated by students.

It was very clearly seen from the collected data, high percentages of students in both groups admitted that learning terminology is very important, accounting for 60% and 67% in G1, and G2 respectively. 13% of students in Group 1 considered learning term extremely important, while this number was 33 % (nearly triple) in Group 2. Very small number of students in G1 supposed that learning term was somewhat important, and not very important. No participants in G2 negated the essence of terminology learning. Which means in general, most of the students were aware of the importance of learning term, however G2 evaluated learning term more necessarily than G1 did.

When interviewed, teacher B asserted that learning term was one of the most important purposes in this course. He explained that the aim of the course was not to train students to be economic experts. The aim of the short course just introduces general knowledge as well as basic terms in Economics to students. In term of grammar, there is no difference compared to other subjects, the most outstanding difference was terminologies. His opinion was echoed by the teacher A. Specifically, teacher A evaluated learning terms to be very important. He supposed that learning terms was similar to learning vocabulary. A learner who lacked in grammar knowledge would be hard to explain his opinions sufficiently, but without vocabulary one can explain nothing. He quoted “Without vocabulary you can say nothing”.

**Question 2: How do you evaluate the usefulness of learning terminology in this course for your future job?**

G1’s students are trained to be English teachers, 13% of whom considered learning term not very important to their future career. Some of them, which accounts for 27% found that learning term was important to some extends. However, a greater number of them (53%) thought that learning terms was very important to their future jobs. ESP courses have just appeared in Vietnam since 90s. Thanks to the development of economy, the demand for English teachers for economics also increases. In addition, as teacher A shared that regarding to students who are trained to be teachers, learning terms is still important to their future job, because a vast amount of updated information daily is in economic area, so undoubtedly terms become a necessary instrument to acquire knowledge outside. Students who do not know terms would be difficult to access the source of economic news. More than half of G1’s students might be aware of this issue, and they more concern in learning terms. Even 13% of them believed that learning terms in this ESP’s course is extremely important for their future job.

Meanwhile, those students from G2 who take part in double degree program wish to have more chances to find jobs related to banking, financing, or business administration, not only restricted to language, and education. Therefore, they need economic terms to perform well in future working environment. None of them chose options D and E (Not very important and not important at all). Majority of G2's students agreed that learning term was very important for their future jobs (67%), and 27% of them considered that it was extremely important to learn terms for future jobs.

**Question 3: When approaching terminology, you would find most challenging in...**

The column chart below shows the differences in the students' difficulty in approaching term. From the G1's viewpoints, the most difficult in approaching term is item A (understanding terms) (66.7%). 3 students among 15 informants from G1 who accounted for 20% selected option B (Remembering terms). The figure for applying terms is 13.3%.

Compared with the G1 in which almost all students encountered the difficulty in very-first process of approaching term (understanding), the shares of difficulty in understanding terms and applying terms among G2's informants are nearly equal 47%, and 40% respectively. The difficulty in remembering terms in G2 perceived the lowest percentage of respondents (only 13%).

In their second degree, students in G2 have chance to take part in some economic courses which certainly provide them with basic economic knowledge. Thanks to that, G2's students find less challenging in understanding terms than G1's students do. However, the frequency of using or practicing these terms in their lesson, or their-interested career cause them more obstacles than those in G1 who merely get acquainted with economic terms in an very general ESP's course. To the learners, this course is simply an introduction to the very enormous field of English for Economics.

It seems that both teachers agreed that understanding is the most difficult process for students to approach terms. According to teacher A, the first consciousness is very important to determine the happening of next two processes (remembering and applying). In addition, teacher B also found that applying was no least difficult than understanding. For students in Translating and Interpreting division, sometimes they have to work with economic materials/texts, while students in English Language Teacher division have no opportunity at all except their ESP periods.

understanding, remembering, and applying. In each process, the results are going to be presented below.

**Question 4: It is difficult to understand terms because of...**

It was apparent from the graph that each specific option A, B,C, D was perceived its difficult by the same percentage of students (recording 33.3%), while there was only one student (6.7%) claimed that s/he had no difficulty related to term's features. The result reveals that generally, no special feature of terms can be the most challenging for G1's student to understand terms. To give explanation for their choice, teacher A reasoned that it was not the matter of features which affected the process of learning terms, it was the matter of known or un-known terms. Being a teacher or a student, the difficulties when approaching a new-term are the same, teacher and student both have to find out what the term is. However, teachers who are more knowledgeable and experienced would find the answer more quickly. Teacher B added that all these listed terms' features were difficult for students, but the least challenging feature among them was terms used in rare and specific case. He further clarified that this course did not train economics students, and did not supply too specialized knowledge, so this type of terms was not introduced to students.

Differently, a large number of G2's student found term refers to discrete conceptual items the most challenging to understand (60%). Only 27% of students found it difficult in understanding old terms with new sense. 47% of G2's students consider high-accurate, rare and very specific terms difficult to understand.

It is not hard to understand this result, conceptual terms often refer to ideas or concepts, and they have no physical referents. Therefore, they are not easy to be illustrated by images, or items, and require the deep understanding beneath the cover of language. Question 4 was designed to investigate the type of terminology hard to understand, the following question will focus on the reasons for the difficulty.

The internal causes are to do with students themselves. The external causes are to do with materials and the teacher. The results are calculated by percentage.

The solutions in the above chart can be classified into two big groups including the long-term solutions and short-term ones. While long-term measures are those that take time to acquire, short-term ones are basically the immediate strategies used to approach term.

Regarding to the long-term measures, the effective solution chosen by over 76.7 % of the students is "widening their background knowledge". The highest rated solution is highly correlative to most students' difficulties in understanding terms.

More than half of the students reckoned that preparing lesson at home would help reduce the difficulties they had to cope.

"Receiving teacher's guideline and explanation" received the lowest rate from only 30% of the students. Low as it was, this number proved to be relevant to the results of question 5 and 7. Teacher as an external factor was not the main reason for student's difficulties; hence, they play small roles in helping students to overcome their difficulties.

The practical solution "practicing more exercise in-class, and at home" was proposed by 33.3% of the population. It should be reemphasized that respondents were all senior students, who would be very busy with a lot of tasks preparing for their graduation. They certainly did not want to receive more exercises.

In the interviews, the teachers also suggested some recommendations for students to overcome above difficulties, which can be categorized and synthesized as follows:

**a. In the student's position.**

Teacher A claimed that certainly no one can help students but students themselves. Today, it is easy to access available resource of information on the Internet, books, newspapers which supply abundant amount of terms. Students need to approach term in relationship with its context to fully understand it. First, students can read in foreign language, and then study in Vietnamese writing. It was highly advised students to actively search for economic news or information. Nothing can replace hard work. "God will save those who save themselves". Self study is the only and the best solutions.

Teacher B suggested widening background knowledge should be the most practical technique. Students should spend more time updating the socio-economical issue all around, not waste time listening to music or watching films online. They could take up watching news program, a valid and reliable source of information. The habit of watching is also beneficial when students go to work, their observation certainly set up a base to approach issues quickly.

**b. In the teachers' position.**

The most favorable solution teacher can give to create more supportive environment for students is integrating case-studies, role plays in ESP's periods. The solution is not only feasible for teachers, but also useful for students.

### Findings and Suggestions

In the finding sections, some recommendations or the suggested solutions were provided for the students to better approaching terminologies. This part would go one step forward in giving some suggestions for more effective learning.

Widening background knowledge is not an overnight process. Student should take up the habit of updating, and collecting news or information regularly from TV, specialized newspaper, comic, etc.

Teachers in the interview expected high level of autonomy from students when students rely too much on their teachers to get information. To overcome this situation, teachers may create groups and require them to submit detailed sources and useful techniques in learning terminology.

It is also advisable for teachers to create favorable conditions in class for students to learn terms. Besides giving sufficient explanation, illustrating by examples or practicing exercises on textbooks, other activities such as role-play, case-study, simulation or discussion should also be integrated in ESP period, Teacher B proposed. Because all those types of activities will maximize the opportunities for students to be in an economic environment.

Case study is defined in Macmillan Dictionary as “a piece of research that records details of how a situation develops over a period of time”. It seems to be a creative and dynamic teaching method, because it creates communicative situation and puts students in real-life economic circumstances. Students can take the part of employee, employers, interviewee, and interviewer in simulation to practise term use.

Or teacher could design cases for student to discussion or make decision. This activity will provide a good opportunity for students to gather and share economic information.

In addition, reading reflection may be an effective activity to be applied in ESP course to improve learning term. Each week, teacher assigned one or two students to select an economic article to read and prepare for mini-presentation. The student will have to introduce, present on the article for about 30’ at the beginning of the lesson. Economic information, events, issues and terminologies in the article should be focused, and further explanation or clearance should be supplied if doubt or confusion raised in classmates. The student should also pay attention to terms in the article: highlight learnt terms to revise, and introduce new term to class. This activity not only consolidates learnt terms, but also widens background knowledge.

In a word, self-study is important for students to better approaching terms; however teacher can be a guide for the most suitable method, and technique to find reliable economic information.

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