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Implementing Subject-Specific English Enhancement Courses at University: Challenges and Solutions in the Hong Kong Context

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ABSTRACT

The significant increase of EMI (English as the Medium of Instruction) courses in tertiary education in Hong Kong has led to a demand of adopting ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Approach to develop English enhancement courses for university students. Employing this approach could cater for students' language learning needs, not only improving General English proficiency but also mastering specialized English in their target field to cope with academic studies and perform profession-related tasks. While it is true that ESP courses would meet university students' expectations on tertiary English courses, its implementation in reality poses serious challenges for the teachers. For example, writing or selecting appropriate teaching materials is a critical concern as language teachers may lack of expertise in various disciplines and there may not be published ESP materials that deal with the particular domain of the target learners. Based on this, this paper aims to discuss the challenges that tertiary ESP practitioners encounter in application and what professional support is needed to help them solve the problems observed. The paper will discuss the characteristics of ESP that affect the roles of the teachers; then it will explore the challenges in course design, materials development and cooperation with subject specialists in the Hong Kong context. The last part of the paper will focus on how to support ESP practitioners to overcome the challenges to maximize the benefit of adopting ESP Approach in university English enhancement courses.

Keywords: the ESP Approach, ESP practitioners, university English enhancement courses, challenges, solutions

Introduction

The origins of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be traced back to the 1960s and its emergence was mainly due to the three reasons summarized by Hutchinson and Waters (1987): the demands of the post-war world that needs English to function as an international language for progress in different fields such as science, technology and commerce, the revolution in language education that shifts the focus from language rules to language skills for communicative purposes, and the new developments in educational psychology emphasizing the significance of learners in the process of foreign or second language acquisition. The three factors together generate the need for specialization in language learning and thus ESP has been developed and researched as an innovative approach towards language teaching.

In the situation today, English continues to dominate as the lingua franca and it is considered as the key to academic and career success. Under this circumstance, learners are expected to enhance their English proficiency to the

level that is sufficient for education or employment. However, it is found that the traditional way of English education that focuses on improving learners' general English proficiency to fulfill school curriculum requirements or pass language exams is not effective, while ESP, recognized as a multi-discipline activity (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), can cater for learners' needs.

In the Hong Kong context, the demand for ESP in tertiary English education is prominent because there is a significant increase of EMI (English as the medium of instruction) courses in subject studies at university, but when a second or foreign language is used as the medium of instruction students not only need to cope with the difficulties of the disciplinary knowledge but also the language that might be a barrier to explore the professional field. In EMI education, students' academic success largely depends on their language competence. Early English education starting from kindergarten assumes a higher proficiency of the learners in Hong Kong, but many students who have been studying General English (GE) courses for exam purposes before they enter a university are found having difficulties dealing with tertiary EMI education because their English proficiency has not reached the satisfactory level that enables them to well perform academic tasks in English such as comprehending subject readings and writing academic essays. Hence, they need effective and adequate language support to help them overcome language hurdles. To meet the needs of the students, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Approach has been adopted in the curriculum of English enhancement programmes at university.

While it is true that ESP Approach would meet university students' learning needs, its implementation in reality poses serious challenges that make tertiary language instructors reluctant to teach the ESP courses. Based on this, this paper will discuss the challenges that tertiary ESP practitioners encounter in application and what professional support is needed to help them solve the problems observed in the Hong Kong context.

Characteristics of ESP Courses & Roles of ESP Practitioners

Although ESP teachers teach the same set of language skills as General English (GE) teachers, ESP is more demanding because its characteristics imply that ESP profession involves much more than teaching. Understanding the characteristics helps teachers know what the expected tasks are in ESP teaching. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p.4-5), ESP has a series of absolute and variable characteristics:

Absolute Characteristics

- 1) ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learners.
- 2) ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves.
- 3) ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Variable Characteristics

- 1) ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- 2) ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.
- 3) ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either for tertiary institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners

at secondary level.

- 4) ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language systems, but it can be used with beginners.

This list of the characteristics identifies what ESP is and reinforces the undisputable concept that ESP is a learner-centered approach to language teaching and learning. The course content and the methodology should be based on learners' reasons for learning (Hutchison & Waters, 1997). If teachers want to achieve success in ESP courses, they must have a comprehensive understanding of the learners' wants and have a high flexibility to adjust teaching practices in accordance with the specific needs.

To investigate the needs of the learners, ESP teachers should learn how to be a "researcher" to conduct needs analysis and this is always the first task they need to deal with in ESP implementation. In addition, they need to take the role of "teacher", "course designer and materials provider", "collaborator", and "evaluator". They are expected to be a "practitioner" (Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998) more than a "teacher" to embrace the multiple roles to satisfy the demand of ESP courses.

Teacher. Similar to general English teachers, ESP teachers play the role of a classroom organizer, but they are not the "primary knower" of the course content. When the course is specifically designed for a discipline, the students may even know more about the subject knowledge than the teacher. In this situation, the relationship between the ESP teacher and the learners is perceived more of "partnership". His/her main role is to generate authentic communication based on how much the learners know about the subject knowledge. ESP teachers may also need to serve as a consultant who should negotiate with the target learners on how to best use the communication practices to meet the course objectives. In some situations, they should take the role of an advisor to help students with their language and/or discourse issues.

Course Designer and Materials Provider. Not only are ESP practitioners required to design the course but also to be the "providers of materials". They need to design the syllabus, classroom activities and assessments in the way that can meet the specific wants of the learners. Moreover, in many cases, there are not suitable materials developed already for the learners studying a particular discipline. As a result, ESP teachers need to select, adapt, and develop new materials.

Researcher. ESP teachers should be able to conduct research to understand the needs of the learners and the discourse of the texts that learners deal with in actual study or task. Needs analysis, course design and materials development need to incorporate the findings of the research.

Collaborator. It is believed that subject-specific work is best approached via collaboration with subject specialists. Thus, there is a need for ESP practitioners to cooperate with content teachers. This collaboration is important to find out about the subject syllabus in an academic context or the tasks required in a workplace and to integrate specialist studies and activities into language learning.

Evaluator. ESP practitioners are involved in various types of evaluation in the implementation process. They should evaluate students' level of achievement via continuous course assignments or examinations. They need to evaluate course design and teaching materials at different stages to ensure teaching effectiveness.

The on-going evaluation guides the teachers to adjust and improve the course so as to achieve the intended goals and objectives of the course.

ESP Application in Hong Kong's Universities

All the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong offer English language enhancement courses to students, usually by language center or English language teaching unit. As can be observed, ESP Approach is widely adopted in designing these enhancement courses which can be categorized into two types: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Since the language learning need for academic study is more prominent in an English-medium university environment, the majority of the courses are EAP including English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The former aims to teach the common-core academic skills and language; the latter linked to the specific discipline domain helps students deal with their actual subject assignments or future career tasks. Table 1.1 shows some ESP courses offered by the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Technology and Science.

Table 1.1
Example ESP Courses at Hong Kong's Universities

	EGAP	ESAP	EOP
The University of Hong Kong	-Core University English (Compulsory: 6 credits)	-Communication Course for Architecture Students -Academic English for Exercise and Health Students -Academic English for Music Students -Academic Communication for Dentistry	-English for Clinical Pharmacy -English for Clinical Clerkships -Technical English for Computer Science
The Hong Kong University of Technology and Science	-English for University Studies I & II (Compulsory: 6 credits)	-English for Communication for Global China Studies -Laboratory Report Writing for Chemistry Students -Business Case Analyses -English for Mathematics -Laboratory Report Writing for Physics Student	-Business Communication -Technical Communication for Environmental Management and Technology

At six of eight institutions in Hong Kong, students are required to study one or two credit-bearing EGAP courses such as Core University English and English of University Studies offered by the two universities. After students have acquired the basic skills of academic English from the EGAP courses, they will be taking ESAP courses that such as Academic English for Music Students and Laboratory Report Writing for Chemistry Students. The EGAP and ESAP courses have differences in specialist vocabulary, grammatical structures, genres, disciplinary conventions and expectations (Jordan, 1997, p.249-250), while both are based on the ESP approach that is to teach the target language for the educational needs of the students in EMI environment and thus the teachers should be well prepared for ESP teaching.

Challenges for ESP Practitioners

ESP Approach is based on the principle that teachers can identify the learners' language needs and carry out teaching practices that facilitate the target

learners to meet the specific needs. How successfully practitioners realize the five key roles of “teacher”, “course designer and materials provider”, “researcher”, “collaborator”, and “evaluator” is the key to the success. However, in reality, multitasking and multifunctioning poses challenges. Based on my experience and observation, this section will discuss the difficulties ESP practitioners have in course design, materials development, and cooperation with subject specialists.

Course Design

The starting point of ESP course design is to identify the needs of the learners. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), learner needs include target needs and learning needs. Target needs refer to necessities (what the required language skills is for learners communicate effectively in the target situation), lacks (the gap between what the learners know already and the required language competence), and wants (the learners’ subjective views of what their needs are). Learning needs refer to the conditions of the learning situation such as the resources available, the learners’ background, and their motivation towards the target language learning. Both target needs and learning needs should be taken into account in ESP course design, but carrying out such a comprehensive needs analysis is a time-consuming and complex project.

In particular, when the resource available is limited and the target classes are comprised of learners who are studying various disciplines, identifying the learner needs becomes even more challenging (Bhatia, Anthony, & Noguchi, 2011). ESP practitioners in Hong Kong’s universities are often burdened with heavy teaching loads and the groups they are assigned to teach are usually mixed with learners studying different disciplines, such as Global China Studies, Music, Creative Arts, Physical Education, and Liberal Studies. Clearly, different background of the learners creates difficulties in identifying the specific needs of the learners for course design. In the end, teachers make most important decisions about course design and teaching practices without well consideration of learners’ needs. This is one of the reasons why some ESP courses are found ineffective.

Materials Development

To meet the specific needs of the learners, ESP practitioners are required to take the role of “materials provider”: selecting materials that is available, adapting it as necessary and supplementing it when the existing materials is not suitable (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). It is an ideal situation if ESP practitioners can select some textbooks that they assume will suit their students and this is the common practice, but the reality is that the ESP textbooks published in the market are often designed for native students but not second/foreign language learners and they only target the popular domains such as business, science and engineering while other disciplines are not addressed. If the materials is not appropriate for learners’ proficiency level and not relevant to the specific domain, it cannot function well as the learning support to close the gap between the existing knowledge and new information. Under this circumstance, ESP practitioners need to modify the selected textbooks and produce in-house materials.

Another problem in materials development is that ESP practitioners must deal with specific disciplinary knowledge. This is seen as one of the greatest challenges because many of them have little prior experience and limited knowledge of the target field and the technical complexity of the authentic academic texts make difficulties to comprehend and use in teaching. Hutchinson

and Waters (1987, p.163) argue that ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist knowledge and what they need is “a positive attitude towards the ESP content”, “a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area”, and “an awareness of how much they probably already know”, but a lack of knowledge of the learners’ domain cause problems when integrating authentic texts and tasks in ESP teaching. Especially, when the course is ESAP, the difficulty of coping with the subject content is even higher and thus requires more time and effort of the practitioners to digest and integrate in the materials.

Cooperation with Subject Specialists

As a collaborator, ESP practitioners are expected to cooperate with subject specialists. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p.42) suggest three levels of cooperation: cooperation, collaboration, and team-teaching. At the first stage, ESP practitioners take the initiative to collect information of how English is used in the content courses and what the expectations of the departments are. Via the discussion with the content teachers, they may find out about the conceptual and discoursal framework of the discipline. They may understand the basic underlying principle. Moving to the second stage “collaboration”, language teachers and subject teachers are expected to work together outside the classroom to prepare students for particular tasks. This collaboration is very helpful to select and develop the course materials that should be at the right linguistic level for the target learners and parallel with the subject course. The third stage of cooperation is “team teaching” that language teachers and subject specialists work together in the classroom to help students improve their language proficiency and solve the problems in the profession field.

In practice, cooperation with subject teachers is restricted and always difficult to proceed. ESP teachers are working for language center or English language teaching unit, a separate and independent service department. Generally, they have little personal or professional contact with subject teachers. Even when language teachers and subject specialists are assigned to meet for the development of ESP courses, the interaction between the two parties is limited to the first stage of understanding the expectations of the department and collecting authentic texts used in related subject studies. After this, the communication is ceased due to many reasons. In addition, it is found that subject teachers are sometimes passive to this cooperation because they feel that they do not carry the responsibility of helping students with English, which makes the cooperation difficult to continue and extend to the next stages.

Solutions for ESP Practitioners

To overcome the challenges observed, ESP practitioners must be well trained and supported by the institution.

Teacher Training

Many ESP teachers have not received sufficient ESP training before they are assigned to teach. As Chen argued (2000), the two problems ESP practitioners face is the lack of teacher training programs and the dissatisfaction with traditional theory-into-practice training models. Also, most ESP frontiers’ education background is mainly concerned with general English Language Teaching (ELT) but not ESP (Master, 1997; Howard, 1997; Basturkemen, 2010; as cited in Ahmed, 2014). Some people may argue that general ELT education experience should

enable a teacher to conduct ESP teaching practices well because both ELT and ESP aim to enhance students' communicative competences. It is also agreed by many researchers that ESP teachers have the same qualities as general English teachers including having English language knowledge, thorough command of the course design, and expert knowledge of the related field (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Sadeghi, as cited in Maleki, 2008). However, the reality has clearly shown that ELT experience does not guarantee success in ESP courses. Teachers need in-service training to provide them with adequate knowledge and skills to deal with the specific needs of the learners and to realize the expected roles.

First, teacher training can help the frontiers gain an in-depth understanding of ESP related issues and raise the awareness of their roles in ESP application. They will know what they have to do with their job and how to perform successfully. The training can give some systematic guidelines of how to design an ESP course and a framework of how to select and develop teaching materials. It also can invite veteran ESP practitioners to share their tips on how to conduct effective teaching practices. The sharing should not be limited within the English team but across the institutions as the development of ESP in some universities is more mature than the others. In addition, self-training (Master, 1997) via a process of professional reflection, problem solving, and decision-making can be included in teacher training. Finally, teacher training should help the practitioners to establish a positive attitude towards ESP and to understand that being flexible to adjust based on students' needs is significant to success. Teacher training is important for ESP success. It will not only prepare the teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills but also enhance their confidence in ESP teaching.

Support from Institutions

As it is observed, the expected connection between language teachers and subject teachers is weak, which is one of the challenges for ESP practitioners. If an institute encourages collaboration between the language support unit and academic departments and offers a strategic plan of how to make this type of collaboration as a regular practice, it will help to make "cooperation" move to "team teaching". It will also convey a message at university that language teachers and subject specialists should work together for helping students to reach the proficiency level that is required for academic studies in EMI tertiary education and the involvement of both parties are vital for students' academic success.

In addition to encouraging collaboration between departments, institutes can increase the academic communication between each other. As mentioned, some universities have more experience in ESP application and may have faced similar problems and found the solution; thus, the communication will benefit the inexperienced university to tackle the related problems such as how to optimize the allocation of the limited resources and how to conduct a large-scale needs analysis.

Teacher-Student Cooperation

One of the challenges for ESP practitioners is that it is difficult to identify the learner needs when teaching a class comprising of students studying different disciplines. Promoting teacher-student cooperation and letting learners play a more active role in the process can help to solve this problem. Learners can be invited to identify a couple of authentic texts and tasks in their study field that they think challenging to comprehend and perform. They can highlight the language difficulties in different aspects and express their priority and preference on what to

be included in the course. This step is to understand the target needs: “necessities”, “lacks” and “wants” but learners’ judgment instead of language teachers’ or content teachers’ judgment is considered first. Based on this information, ESP teachers can summarize the common language hurdles identified by the students, consult related subject teachers, and finally make better decisions on language input, skills and topics covered in the syllabus. This teacher-student cooperation not only helps to identify the specific needs of the learners but also contribute to a close partnership between teachers and students.

To summarize, the barriers for the ESP practitioners show the conflict between what they are expected to do and the reality. To overcome the challenges, teachers need sufficient training and institutions should make an effort to create a favorable environment by encouraging collaboration between departments and teacher-student cooperation.

Conclusion

As Phillipson (2009, p.37) claimed, “Internalization means English-medium higher education.” When Hong Kong’s universities are promoting English-medium instruction for being “international”, ESP that focuses more on language in a specific context than on teaching and learning of grammar or grammatical structures is adopted to meet students’ language learning needs in an EMI tertiary environment. However, if the challenges ESP practitioners encounter in reality cannot be overcome, ESP approach will not be as effective as expected. To resolve the observed problems, ESP practitioners need teacher training and the support from the institute. Although the discussion is limited to the Hong Kong context, it confirms the research result that ESP teachers’ needs of training and support should be addressed. Only are the obstacles of the teachers removed the course effectiveness can be ensured and the learners can benefit most from the adoption of ESP at university.

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