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PEDAGOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Samarkhodjayeva Feruza Anvarovna

Senior lecturer, UWED

fsamarxodjayeva@uwed.uz

Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved into a fundamental component of tertiary education, driven by the globalization of professional communication and the internationalization of higher education. However, the implementation of ESP curricula in university settings faces significant structural and pedagogical barriers. This paper investigates the critical challenges encountered by educators and stakeholders in university ESP contexts. Utilizing a qualitative synthesis of recent applied linguistics research and pedagogical case studies, the study identifies six primary friction points: (1) the deficit in specialized teacher training, (2) the disconnect between curriculum design and Target Situation Analysis (TSA), (3) the scarcity of authentic material resources, (4) learner motivation variability, (5) the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, and (6) the integration of emerging technologies. The article concludes by proposing a framework for sustainable ESP instruction through team-teaching models, corpus-based material development, and institutional policy reform.

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Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Higher Education, Curriculum Design, Teacher Education, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Needs Analysis.

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching targeted at developing the communicative competence of learners within specific academic or professional fields, such as law, medicine, engineering, or business. As universities increasingly position themselves as hubs for international career preparation, the demand for high-quality ESP instruction has surged. Unlike General English (GE), which focuses on broad communicative competence, ESP is axiological, centered on the specific linguistic, genre, and pragmatic requirements of a discipline (Hyland, 2018).

Despite its critical importance, ESP instruction within university settings is often fraught with systemic challenges. The transition from General English to ESP requires a paradigm shift that many institutions are ill-equipped to manage. The complexity of ESP demands that instructors possess not only advanced linguistic expertise but also a working familiarity with the specialized discourse and professional practices of their students' fields.

This paper aims to extend the current understanding of these challenges by synthesizing theoretical frameworks with practical institutional realities. It argues that the «ESP gap» in universities is not merely a pedagogical issue but a structural

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one, requiring intervention at the level of curriculum policy and teacher development.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of ESP were established in the seminal works of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). Hutchinson and Waters defined ESP as a «learning-centered approach», emphasizing that all decisions regarding content and method must be based on the learner's reason for learning. They established the primacy of Needs Analysis as the distinguishing feature of ESP.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) further refined this by categorizing the field into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). They argued that ESP teaching is defined by «absolute characteristics», specifically that it is designed to meet specific needs of the learner and makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond basic needs analysis to focus on Genre Analysis and Discourse Communities. Hyland (2018) argues that ESP must teach students how to navigate the specific «tribes» of their disciplines. This involves understanding not just vocabulary, but the rhetorical structures of lab reports, legal briefs, or medical case notes.

Basturkmen (2010) highlights a persistent issue in the literature: the «knowledge gap» of language teachers. Most ESP instructors are graduates of the humanities or linguistics and lack formal training in STEM or legal fields. This creates a reliance on intuitive pedagogy rather than evidence-based disciplinary practice. Furthermore, Belcher (2012) notes that as the demand for ESP grows, the

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pressure on these teachers to produce «authentic» experiences increases, often without institutional support.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach. It aggregates findings from theoretical literature, applied linguistics research, and observational data from higher education contexts spanning the last decade. The analysis categorizes impediments to effective ESP instruction into three dimensions: Pedagogical (classroom level), Material (resource level), and Institutional (policy level).

Major Challenges in Teaching ESP at Universities

The most immediate challenge in university ESP is the shortage of instructors who possess «dual professionalism» - competence in both applied linguistics and the specific subject matter. Many university English teachers are recruited based on their General English qualifications. When assigned to teach «English for Mechanical Engineering», they often lack the conceptual framework to explain why a specific passive voice construction is preferred in an engineering report versus a business email.

Consequently, teachers often retreat to teaching «General English with technical vocabulary», ignoring the complex rhetorical moves required in professional discourse. This superficial approach undermines the credibility of the course in the eyes of the students.

While Needs Analysis is theoretically central to ESP, it is often neglected in practice due to administrative constraints. A robust NA requires analyzing the Target Situation (what the student needs to do in the future) and the Present Situation (what the student can do now).

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In many universities, curricula are «top-down», designed by administrators or standardized across departments without consulting the specific faculties. Basturkmen (2010) warns that without continuous NA, courses risk becoming obsolete. For example, a Business English course focusing on formal letter writing is largely irrelevant in an era dominated by instant messaging and collaborative platforms like Slack or Teams.

The creation of teaching materials represents a significant workload burden. Commercial textbooks often fail to capture the nuance of local contexts or specific sub-disciplines. For instance, a generic «English for Medicine» textbook may not cover the specific doctor-patient communication protocols required in a specific country's healthcare system.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) advocated for material adaptation, but this requires access to authentic texts. Teachers frequently face copyright barriers or lack access to professional journals and internal corporate documents. Without these authentic «artifacts», students are trained on sanitized, artificial texts that do not reflect the complexity of real-world professional communication.

ESP is often viewed by students (and sometimes university administration) as a «service subject» - a secondary requirement to their core degree. This perception can lead to low intrinsic motivation.

Belcher (2012) emphasizes that motivation in ESP is linked to «perceived utility». If students cannot see the immediate link between the English lesson and their professional future, engagement drops. This is exacerbated when the content is too generic; a law student will quickly disengage from a lesson that feels like a standard grammar review rather than an analysis of legal precedent.

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Effective ESP requires a nexus between language experts and subject specialists. However, university departments often operate in «silos». The English Department and the Faculty of Law may share the same campus but rarely share curriculum planning meetings.

Without this collaboration, language teachers cannot verify the accuracy of their content. As Johns (2015) notes, this separation leads to a divergence where ESP instructors teach communicative norms that may actually contradict the current practices of the subject field.

A burgeoning challenge in the modern era is the integration of technology. With the rise of Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepL), the nature of ESP is changing. Students now have access to instant translation and drafting tools. The challenge for educators is no longer just teaching vocabulary, but teaching AI literacy - how to edit, verify, and refine AI-generated text within a professional context. Many current ESP curricula fail to address these digital competencies.

Recommendations and Strategic Solutions

To mitigate these challenges, universities must move from ad-hoc solutions to systemic strategies:

Team-Teaching and Interdisciplinary Cooperation: universities should incentivize Team-Teaching models where a language instructor and a subject specialist co-deliver lecture. Alternatively, «link courses» can be established where the ESP syllabus is directly mapped to a specific subject course (e.g., writing a report for the Legal precedent).

Corpus-Based Material Development: to solve the authenticity issue, institutions should support the use of Corpus Linguistics. Teachers can compile digital collections of texts (corpora) from the specific discipline to analyze frequency

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and usage patterns, ensuring that the vocabulary taught is statistically relevant to the field.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD): departments must provide funding for ESP teachers to take short courses in the subject matter they teach (e.g., a «Law for Non-Lawyers» seminar) to bridge the knowledge gap.

Dynamic Needs Analysis: NA should be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Feedback mechanisms should be installed where alumni and industry partners review the ESP curriculum every two years to ensure it aligns with current market demands.

Conclusion

Teaching English for Specific Purposes at the university level is a complex undertaking that sits at the intersection of applied linguistics and professional training. The challenges - ranging from teacher expertise to institutional isolation - are significant but surmountable.

The future of successful ESP lies in collaboration. It requires a shift from viewing English as a standalone subject to viewing it as an integrated professional skill. By fostering partnerships between language departments and subject faculties, and by embracing modern tools for material design, universities can transform ESP from a «service course» into a cornerstone of professional academic development.

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