



Absence of ESP Teachers' Training in the STEM Major Universities in Bangladesh: Perceived Problems and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

The higher education context in Bangladesh includes STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medical) universities where only science major degrees are offered in the technical fields like agriculture, engineering, marine science etc. English language courses are usually offered to those universities' undergraduate level. To teach these English language (EL) courses in the form of English as Specific Purposes (ESP) Course, EL teachers are recruited. However, most of the teachers teach the courses without having any pre-service or in-service training on teaching ESP. As a result, an array of problem arises for which the teaching-learning of ESP is hampered at the concerned institutions. This study in the form a secondary research addresses this very issue and investigates the problems that occur for not providing ESP teachers training to the English language teachers by the concerned universities. Additionally, this study also offers some feasible solutions as emerged from the consulted literature to those arisen problems. The study findings may let the STEM major universities review and redesign their ESP teaching provision and at the same time make the ESP teachers aware about some handy self-development practices.

Key words: ESP Teachers' training, STEM universities, problems, solutions, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) requires the teachers to have special training and knowledge as it is not similar with teaching English for general purposes (EGP) (Iswati and Triastuti, 2021). Unfortunately, the importance of ESP teachers' training is hardly realized by the concerned academic institutions as reported by research (Askar, 2013; Ali, 2015; Pham and Ta, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2019, cited in Iswati and Triastuti, 2021). The scenario is same in Bangladeshi technical universities (universities dedicated to providing higher education only on science, technology, engineering, agriculture and marine). There English language (EL) courses are offered at undergraduate level with the expectation from the teachers that they will teach it in the form of ESP, even though the universities do not facilitate any specialised training for them. As a result, both the teachers and students experience many difficulties in teaching and learning the so-called ESP courses. This study will address the pedagogic problems arising from the absence of ESP teachers' training. With this aim, after demonstrating

the overview of the target context and the problems, relevant literatures concerned with similar problems will be referred, and then the possible solutions to the addressed problems will be proposed in the light of literatures.

2. Addressed Problems

The technical universities in Bangladesh, incorporates EL courses in its academic curriculum as per the 2010 National Education Policy of Bangladesh that emphasises English to be offered as a mandatory subject and to be the medium of instruction at tertiary level. To teach the EL courses that are expected to be ESP, teachers are recruited from English literature, Applied Linguistics or English language teaching background. At any technical university, it is the assigned EL teachers' duty to decide and design what and how to teach the ESP courses to the undergraduate students at the university. Generally, it is believed that "the teachers' preparation and qualifications determine the success of ESP" (Luo and Garner, 2017). However, in most of the cases the teachers do not join with any pre-service training on ESP and for the technical universities it is also rare to offer any special training on ESP though they run general teacher training programmes for the newly recruited teachers in all the departments. But training programmes should not be conducted only for the need of the institution, but for the special need of the teachers (Richards and Farrell, 2005) as they are the ones who work directly with students to meet their various needs. As a result, when the EL teachers are expected to design and teach an ESP programme for the their target group of science students without any clear knowledge and formal training on ESP, several vital problems arise such as –

- failing to design an ESP curriculum and course addressing the academic literacies (discipline oriented academic communicative practices and study skills (Wenger, 1998)) of science studies, thus ending up teaching a course that rather reflects the characteristics of EGP than ESP which does not fulfil the special needs of the target students
- favouring familiar way of traditional teaching methodology that is not congruent with ESP teaching (not learners' target needs oriented)
- using teaching materials that are not relatable to the particular field of science studies; hence, for not finding any meaningful purpose in studying these, students get demotivated to learn, as a result, their intentions become just to pass the course and thus miss the real purpose of learning ESP that is to be better prepared for their academic study and future career
- failing to conduct need analysis and course evaluation to better prepare the ESP courses for not having enough understanding on the importance and process of need analysis, as a consequence, the continuation of uninformed ESP teaching goes on

Though the teachers are academically qualified enough to teach the students skillfully, just because of not getting any training for ESP, they cannot achieve the outcome of teaching ESP.

This study will critically analyse relevant literatures that address the similar problems resulted from the lack of ESP teachers' training and will offer ways to mitigate the appeared problems as suggested by ESP researchers.

3. Literature Review

3.1 What is ESP

ESP is a learner-centred approach of teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) where the course contents, aims, and methods are designed tailoring to the learners' need, the language required, and the learning context to make them able to use the language in a particular domain (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Paltridge and Starfield, 2013). ESP emerged during 1960s for meeting the demand of career specific EL teaching and learning as felt that time due to the bloom in science, technology, commerce; the revolution of communicative language teaching; and the attention given to the learning psychology and individual learning differences (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Strevens (1980), and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) provide several absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. The absolute characteristics are -

- ESP is designed for learners' specific needs
- ESP follows the teaching-learning methodology and activities of the discipline it is offered for in the sense that the teaching-learning activities incorporate learners' target situations' needs i.e., academic communicative practices of the concerned disciplines
- ESP focuses on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skill, discourse, and genre that are required for the activities of the concerned discipline

The variable characteristics list the following points-

- ESP can be designed for a particular discipline
- ESP may adapt teaching methodology distinctive from EGP to be used in specific situations
- ESP is likely to be taught at tertiary level academic institutions (or secondary level school) or at professional institutions for work purpose
- ESP is expected to be designed for adult intermediate or advanced learners (can be for beginners also)

The most prominent branches of ESP are English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP) (Robinson, 1991). EAP is designed to teach English for academic needs, and EOP is designed to teach English for job-related needs (Robinson, 1991). English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) that looks like ESP, is actually its sub-branch that addresses the students' needs of a specific discipline (Flowerdew, 2016) like teaching terminologies of agriculture for agricultural science students. For ESP practitioners, it is important to know about the branches of ESP to be able to specify the scope of particular ESP Course. According to Harding (2012), in EFL contexts (like Bangladesh), the reasons of overgrowing demand for ESP are the increasing necessity of vocational language learning for employability, spread of international communication for specific needs, and learners' demand at tertiary level for learning language for practical purposes unlike the primary or secondary level that already covers learning English for general purposes.

Teaching ESP is unique as the ESP teachers encounter with many things that are uncommon in teaching EGP courses. Firstly, ESP is taught in interdisciplinary setting where teachers deal with students who know their subjects better than the teachers, and to make ESP teaching fruitful they must integrate subject knowledge and content with language teaching successfully (Lu and Garner, 2012). Secondly, ESP does not aim to teach everyday language use rather "situated language use" (Basturkmen, 2010, p.8) to achieve particular purpose like working as an agriculturist, or a pilot etc. Thirdly, in teaching ESP, pre-fixed teaching methodology, syllabus, and materials cannot be implemented at all as ESP teaching needs to be adapted continuously according to the change of learners' needs and disciplines (Ghafournia and Sabet, 2014). So, to work in such demanding environment, ESP practitioners must undertake multiple roles and responsibilities at a time as Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) rightly articulate, such as: teacher, course designer and material provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator. To perform such challenging roles, ESP teachers must be well-equipped with adequate knowledge and training on ESP as suggested by numerous studies (Richards and Farrell, 2005; Tabatabaei, 2007; Liton, 2013; Bracaj, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Alsharif and Shukri, 2018, cited in Iswati and Triastuti, 2021). In the following, some literatures are discussed elaborately to highlight the problems that arise due to the lack of ESP teachers' training.

4. Methodology

This is a secondary research (Heaton, 2004) that draws qualitative data for the study from secondary sources i.e., existing body of literature in the target subject of this study. To find relevant literature, extensive search was done using the eminent databases like Mendeley, ResearchGate, Google Scholar etc. The search was conducted to find literature in two categories. First, the literature was searched that was concerned with the problems of teaching ESP without training and second, the ones that are concerned with offering possible solutions to the marked problems. The collected data are critically read and presented in the following parts of the study.

5. Discussion of the Findings

5.1 Problems of Teaching ESP without Training

Askar (2013) in discussing the current issues of ESP in Indonesia, mentions that the offered ESP courses in the Indonesian universities are not ESP courses because they are designed by the teachers who do not have any academic degree in ESP or any in-service training on ESP, even after being recruited as ESP teachers. He (2013) adds that the ESP teachers there tend to be the less experienced ones and the ones back with a foreign degree in ESP are usually offered “high-level and challenging academic course” which gives them “more prestige” (p.42) but minimizes the chance to grow their expertise and to contribute to the field of ESP. Thus, the inexperienced, untrained ESP teachers end up approaching ESP teaching wrongly for having shallow understanding of learner-centred teaching for ESP, and inability to design appropriate ESP curriculum following ESP theories.

The study by Rajabi et al. (2012) in Iran points out that lack of ESP teacher training results in lack of readiness in ESP teaching that negatively affects students’ performance. An ESP oriented teaching methodology refers to teaching activities that are clearly linked to students’ target authentic situation needs (Robinson, 1991). So, the untrained teachers who come with very limited knowledge about the characteristics of ESP and its demand in teaching, fail to apply the expected methodology of teaching ESP for not being able to differentiate between the nature of teaching EGP and ESP course. Their study shows that the ESP training for the teachers brought a crucial change in the teachers’ belief and teaching methodologies for ESP in a way that the students who were taught by trained ESP teachers outperformed the ones taught by untrained ESP teachers. So, there is a direct connection marked between ESP teachers training and ESP students’ achievements.

A study by Abdulaziz et al. (2012) in Pakistan warns that lack of training for the ESP teachers prompts them to select inappropriate teaching materials that affect learners’ motivation, teaching effectiveness, and teaching outcome. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) assert that to make students eager to study ESP effectively, it is important to design materials according to students’ real need and goal of learning. Unfortunately, appropriate materials that are related to students’ discipline and need are not always available for which teachers need to be innovative either to adapt a material or create a new material for ESP (Smoak, 2003). However, this requires having expertise in ESP material development that may be earned from academic ESP degree accomplishment or formal ESP training. But, as Abdulaziz, et al. (2012) report, when teachers with a plain Masters degree in English Literature with no knowledge on interdisciplinary contents and materials become ESP teachers and receive no professional training in language materials development for ESP, they simply cannot produce quality ESP materials. Furthermore, in worse situations, they continue using EGP teaching materials which has no connection with the students’ actual needs.

Need analysis – the core component of ESP (Long, 2005) refers to the systematic investigation of learners’ needs to design an ESP course for the maximization of its teaching and learning (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). It is operated before beginning an ESP course to set the outcomes of the course and also at the end of the course to evaluate the learners’ learning and the teaching-learning process (Robinson, 1991). Siddique (2017) in her study in Bangladesh emphasizes the fact that to carry out need analysis, ESP teachers need to get special training as teachers’ role is crucial in carrying out the complex process of need analysis successfully. The need analysis process involves six steps i.e., target situation analysis, discourse analysis, present situation analysis, learner factor analysis, teaching context analysis, and task-based analysis (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). Besides, to conduct

need analysis, appropriate instruments should be used such as- textual analysis, observations, questionnaire and interviews, spoken or written reflections, and tests (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). Therefore, it is very unlikely for an untrained ESP teacher to facilitate the need analysis process and use the appropriate tools to identify learners' needs accurately to be addressed in an ESP course. Without the need analysis and evaluation process, ESP teaching will not be different than any other language teaching programme.

So, the main problems that occur in teaching ESP due to not having ESP teachers' training are inappropriate design of a curriculum that has no congruity with ESP, wrong approach to adapt ESP teaching methodology that hampers learners' success, unsuitable selection of ESP teaching materials that are demotivating to the learners, and inability to conduct need analysis that hinders the betterment and facilitation of overall ESP practice. These are also the problems that echo in my ESP teaching context resulting from the lack of training for the ESP teachers. The following section will present some probable solutions to the problems that are suggested by different ESP scholars.

5.2 Solutions to the Addressed Problems

As the aforementioned literature indicate the absence of ESP teacher education as a common phenomenon in the EFL contexts like Bangladesh, self-developmental practices as formulated by ESP researchers below might be an alternative way for the ESP teachers in my context to be well-equipped with required knowledge and skills for teaching ESP effectively.

5.2.1 Self-developmental Practices

Bracaj (2014) opines that ESP teachers should be recruited on the basis of that they have a specialised ESP degree or training, willing to teach ESP, and eager to pursue higher education on language teaching. As previous language teaching experience may not suffice teachers in teaching ESP in its multidimensional and multitasking setting, so having curiosity to learn more about the concerned discipline by collaborating with subject teachers; working on own strengths and weakness for gaining confidence about own roles are crucial for self-development (Bell, 2002). Sari (2018) mention that doing research and publication can be a good way to be reflective and to consolidate own understating of ESP.

To increase ESP teachers' professionalism and effectiveness in teaching ESP, Maleki (2008) prescribes three skills to be acquired which are knowledge of English language, knowledge of related field of science, and knowledge of course design. Tabatabaei (2007) also supports Maleki's (2008) propositions and further stresses that for ESP teachers, achieving their professional competence depends on their motivation to invest effort in gaining concerned disciplinary knowledge. Especially, when there is lack of institutionalised training for the ESP teachers, the teachers should be "autodidact" to arrange self-training for them to achieve their "readiness to teach ESP" (Iswati and Triastuti, 2021, p.285).

Chen's (2000) self-training model for ESP teachers that involves an action-research based teacher-training curriculum can be effective for ESP teachers' self-training. Within this framework, the ESP teachers are allowed to practice their theoretical assumptions of ESP in classroom teaching with a view to coming up with the understanding on what worked well for them. So, by following a systematic reflective, problem-solving, and decision-making process, they can enrich and theorise their teaching practices of ESP.

Additionally, Swales' (1988) framework of interdisciplinary approach of ESP programme can be followed that includes three types of activities for ESP teachers' education. These are- cooperation activities (consultation between ESP and content teachers to find out learners' academic and linguistic needs), collaboration activities (ESP and content teachers working together to formulate a syllabus and teaching-learning practices), and team-teaching (both teachers teaching together in same the classroom to teach the target materials) (Swales, 1988). While the cooperation activities can be done personally by the ESP teachers, collaborative activities and team-teaching can only be done with the support of the concerned institutions and that is the point where institutionalised training should take place.

To mention, the novice ESP teachers might be enthusiastic in approaching the self-developmental strategies for being more concerned about establishing their profiles as skillful ESP teachers. On the contrary, the senior ESP teachers might not favour the idea of self-training to change their teaching practices at this secure stage of their career, especially when there is no monitoring from the authority. Therefore, official ESP training programmes as featured below could be more effective for both group of teachers to make them aware of and motivated to these self-developmental practices.

5.2.2 Providing Professional Training

As “ESP teachers have to take heavier responsibilities than EGP teachers” so for them “the necessity of administrating useful teacher-training programs and workshops is crucially felt” (Ghafournia and Sabet, 2014, p.7). Northcott (1997) emphasises to add practical dimensions to the in-service ESP teachers’ training as the traditional theory-into-practice ESP training programmes cannot address the context-specific problems of ESP teaching.

In support to that, Boswood and Marriott (1994) argue that in ESP settings, learners’ needs greatly vary, so restricted training sessions that administer mainly theoretical aspects of ESP might not be sufficient for ESP teachers to perform well in real instructional situations. So, Ghafournia and Sabet (2014) rather advocate for offering professional workshops for ESP teachers as in workshops they will get a platform to exchange and expand their knowledge on ESP teaching strategies, problems and applied solutions in a formal and broad way. The authors also recommend that in such workshops, the ESP teachers should be introduced to different types of genres of different disciplines and should be trained how to analyse them to be able to teach them effectively in their classes. Sari (2018) who supports the idea of providing workshops for ESP teachers, also extends that seminar and conducting short courses as part of ESP teacher education can be useful for them.

The concept of team-teaching can also be incorporated and practiced in the training programmes as team-teaching has a great impact on the improvement of ESP teaching practices as suggested by many studies (Mahala and Swilky, 1994; Jordan, 1997; Owl, 2003; Bahous, 2007, cited in Ghafournia and Sabet, 2014). By practicing team-teaching in training sessions, ESP teachers can gain skills and confidence on how to combine interdisciplinary knowledge in teaching ESP which is the main essence of ESP teaching.

Since almost all the technical universities in Bangladesh already has a well-established training centre with sufficient resources and they usually cater various trainings to the faculties of the university, incorporating specialised ESP teachers training will not be difficult if they can realise the importance and nature of ESP teachers training. The universities can invite ESP experts from home and aboard to scaffold the ESP teachers in gaining ESP expertise through trainings and workshops to enhance their efficiency in teaching ESP to the agricultural science students.

6. Conclusion

Based on secondary analysis of qualitative data, this study has documented the problems that are caused by the absence of ESP teachers’ training in the STEM major universities in Bangladesh and also offers some plausible solutions in the light of the existing literature. The findings may help the concerned technical universities in Bangladesh and abroad to perceive the importance of providing ESP teachers’ training to their EL teachers and may get ideas about types of remedies they can offer to such problems. Besides, the concerned ESP teachers working at STEM universities may get benefitted from the self-development practices for the betterment of their own teaching job.

However, as this study is solely based on secondary data, so the all the problems and solutions mentioned regarding ESP teachers’ training may not be relevant for many contexts. Most importantly, the highlighted problems that occur due to not having ESP teachers’ training in the STEM universities are only the general ones. So, further research can be conducted particularly focusing on a specific teaching context to find out more grounded realities of the addressed issue.

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