

Voicing teachers' challenges in teaching ESP at Algerian private schools

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Abstract:

Given the recent proliferation and increased recognition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), numerous private schools in Algeria have initiated programmes to provide ESP training in various fields. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the pedagogical endeavour of teaching ESP poses significant challenges for teachers. This qualitative study aims to explore the challenges faced by seven ESP educators teaching at two private schools in Algiers. The study relied on interviews as a research tool to gather in-depth information on the subject matter. The findings of this study may serve as a valuable theoretical framework for addressing major issues in ESP teaching within private educational institutions.

Keywords: ESP, Challenges, Private schools, Teachers.



1. INTRODUCTION

With the growth of the world transportation rate, the effects of globalization, and the increasing demands for competent professionals with skills that meet the requirements of the 21st century labour market, ESP

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courses are gradually thriving (Papadima-Sophocleous et al., 2019; Kırkgöz, 2019). The raising awareness and recognition that English for general purposes (EGP) does not meet all learners' demands and needs have played a significant role in the proliferation of ESP. Brunton (2009, p. 2) notes that "ESP has increased over the decades as a result of market forces and a greater awareness amongst the academic and business community that learners' needs and wants should be met wherever possible." With that in mind, the teaching of ESP grabbed the attention of teachers, learners, and researchers in the field. This resulted in unprecedented growth and interest in ESP and a greater demand among learners to undertake its courses in different fields. Consequently, a multitude of Algerian private schools have started to invest in offering ESP courses to cater for the growing demands of learners. Therefore, it is necessary to determine and analyse the challenges facing ESP teachers in private schools and develop pedagogical strategies that would induce improved practices in the ESP teaching and learning process.

Due to the different tasks that teaching ESP requires, such as identifying learners' needs, constructing suitable course designs, developing appropriate materials, and conducting classroom instruction; ESP practice is considered a demanding task that necessitates a significant amount of knowledge and skills (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). This can be problematic for novice ESP teachers who lack awareness of the different challenges and issues which may hinder their performance. Besides, institutions that are unaware of the obstacles surrounding ESP practices may struggle to come up with informed decisions and solutions that ensure an effective learning experience. Considering the lack of empirical research that investigates the teaching of ESP in Algerian private schools and the obstacles therein, this paper aims to provide a snapshot of the major challenges in teaching ESP at private schools. It further attempts to voice teachers' issues in this process and presents them with a floor to provide suggestions that they deem important for a better ESP teaching experience.

The significance of this study resides in the importance and value of the insights it may generate. Having a clear understanding of the potential issues related to ESP teaching would inform teachers' practices and guide their expectations. The data presented in this paper may also serve as a solid theoretical foundation for a smooth and effective ESP teaching experience. Besides, the data can form a valuable source that private school policymakers can rely on to guide their future pedagogical decisions. It may as well serve as a starting point for further research that seeks remedial solutions aiming at the betterment of ESP teaching craft.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Definition of ESP:

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is a pedagogical approach that centres on the language learning needs and motives of learners in order to attain proficiency in the language. That means that the selection of materials, content, and instructional approaches is tailored to align with the specific objectives and intentions of the learners.

Fitria (2009) specified that ESP entails teaching English as a foreign language with the specific objective of utilising the language within specific professional fields and domains. In other words, ESP addresses the linguistic requirements of learners within a particular field of study, profession, or practical endeavour.

2.2. Characteristics of ESP

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) have attempted to elucidate the concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by categorising its features as either 'absolute' or 'variable', drawing inspiration from Strevens' (1988) definition:

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2.2.1. Absolute Characteristics

A- The purpose of ESP is to cater to the specific needs of learners.

B- ESP is predicated upon methodologies and activities that are intrinsically linked to the specific discipline it relates to.

C- ESP emphasises the linguistic appropriateness of language usage, encompassing aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, register, study skills, discourse, and genres, all within the context of a particular field.

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2.2.2. Variable Characteristics

A- ESP may exhibit associations with or be tailored to particular academic fields.

B- In certain specific pedagogical contexts, the teaching of ESP may necessitate the use of a distinct methodology from that employed in General English instruction.

C- ESP is usually targeted towards adult learners in tertiary level institutions or professional work environments, although it can also be tailored for secondary school learners.

D- ESP is usually designed for learners at an intermediate or advanced level. However, it is worth noting that ESP courses may also cater to non-advanced learners by reasonably incorporating fundamental language learning components.

E- Most ESP courses typically presuppose that learners possess a foundational understanding of the language system; however, it is also feasible to employ ESP courses with novice learners.

The absolute characteristics are generally present across all domains of ESP, while the variable characteristics exhibit differences among different branches.

2.3. ESP VS. EGP

The comparison of ESP and English for General Purposes (EGP) highlights certain differences in the instructional approach and the learning objectives within the scope of learning the language. EGP, also known as General English, focuses on teaching students the structural and grammatical foundations of English. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that EGP aims to improve overall communication skills. This requires equal attention to the four fundamental language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

ESP differs from EGP by emphasising learners' requirements via detailed needs analyses, which are crucial to developing individualised syllabi (Rahman, 2015, p. 24). ESP education emphasises professional language use rather than general grammar and vocabulary, which may not be relevant to students' careers or academics. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that ESP exhibits a greater degree of focus, a more targeted approach, and a stronger emphasis on utility when compared to EGP, as asserted by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998).

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), a distinctive feature among ESP learners is that they are often highly driven adults with previous English language competence. They are typically characterised by their pursuit of particular language goals and their heightened self-awareness of their linguistic demands. Moreover, within the ESP setting, the process of acquiring language functions as a tool to achieve mastery of the main subject matter. This results in heightened expectations to achieve linguistic competency within limited time periods, which stands in contrast to the more adaptable approach in English for General Purposes (EGP) education, as emphasised by Robinson (1980).

2.4. Previous Research on ESP Challenges in Algeria

There have been limited studies investigating the challenges faced by ESP instructors in the Algerian educational landscape, most of which were undertaken in the setting of higher education. The study done by Kelkoula and Ouis (2022) sought to explore the challenges encountered by ESP teachers while instructing medical students in the English language at Badji Mokhtar University in Annaba. The results of their study suggest that educators face challenges stemming from insufficient training and expertise in Medical English and ESP. Moreover, teachers complained about the lack of appropriate instructional resources and the complete absence of a designated syllabus from the Ministry, which complicated their teaching process.

In another study conducted by Ghaskil (2022) at Batna 2 University, the findings regarding various obstacles faced by ESP teachers revealed challenges encompassing inadequate teacher training and lack of subject-specific knowledge. Moreover, the absence of proper needs analysis posed further hurdles in the ESP teaching process. In addition, the lack of necessary resources and the presence of huge class sizes hinder the efficacy of teaching, while the variable abilities of learners require the use of different instructional methods.

While existing literature has addressed challenges in ESP teaching at the university level, there is a notable gap in research pertaining to Algerian private schools. It is noteworthy that individuals opting for ESP courses commonly access them within private school settings, as opposed to university contexts where such courses are often integrated into the curriculum. Consequently, there arises a necessity for research focusing specifically on ESP teaching challenges within the framework of Algerian private schools.

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3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative research study utilised an exploratory descriptive approach to investigate the challenges faced by ESP teachers in private schools. The primary research instrument employed in this study was interviews. The design was chosen with the aim of affording participants the opportunity to provide in-depth and comprehensive information regarding different issues that they may encounter within their teaching process.

3.2. Research Setting

The research was conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year, involving a sample of seven English as a Foreign Language (EFL) private school educators who possessed prior experience in teaching ESP courses. Three of the teachers were from one private school (T 1, 2, 3), while four were from another one (T 4, 5, 6, 7). The names of the private schools, located in Algiers, were withheld in order to uphold their confidentiality policies. The teachers' sample consisted of two males (T 3, 6) and five females (T 1, 2, 4, 5, 7) with a collective teaching experience span ranging between two and six years. Among the sample, five teachers possess English language degrees, while one instructor has a degree in Business and Finance (T 6), and another instructor holds a degree in Law (T 2), providing a mix of disciplines within the ESP teaching context.

3.3. Research Tools

This study relied on interviews as a main research instrument; the interview is a face-to-face interaction wherein an individual solicits information from another individual (Merriam, 2009). Interviews are a useful tool for gathering information in situations where direct observation of participants' practises is not feasible. They afford participants the opportunity to provide in-depth personal information (Creswell, 2012).

The study utilised a semi-structured interview approach, which involved a set of initial questions aimed at gathering personal information from teachers in addition to inquiring about the main challenges they encounter in their ESP courses. Additional follow-up questions were asked to further explore their perspectives whenever deemed appropriate.

4. Research findings

4.1. ESP teaching context at private schools

Prior to delving into the difficulties and challenges surrounding the instruction of ESP in private schools, it is important to establish a comprehensive understanding of the instructional process of teaching it. According to the participants, ESP classes are usually conducted in a one-on-one format, tailored to the specific needs and requests of individuals, while sometimes ESP groups, comprising from four to eight students, are launched regarding a specific field. These classes are designed to cover a predetermined number of hours. It is also possible for companies to mandate ESP courses for their employees, prompting teachers to arrange these courses within the company's workplace.

The teachers revealed that the fields that are most in demand for ESP courses are business, banking, medicine, and pharmacy, in addition to some scientific specialities. It has been noted that companies typically require a combination of EGP and ESP courses. While two instructors (T 1, 5) from the two different schools acknowledged regularly receiving subject-specific textbooks during their ongoing ESP courses, the remaining five teachers indicated that they, for the most part, were responsible for generating their own instructional materials.

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4.2. ESP Teaching Challenges

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4.2.1. Lack of Training

All of the seven teachers reported that the lack of training was a major issue since they found the process of teaching rather confusing and sometimes overwhelming. For instance, in response to a question about whether the teachers were able to comfortably and efficiently teach ESP, all of them reported that they could teach ESP but not perfectly; in fact, teacher n°2 indicated that “ I think teaching ESP would be much better if we had actual trainings about it, I mean, training would make it easier for teachers to choose the right materials, do needs analysis the right way, or prepare the course in a good way”. This shows that teachers deem trainings to be helpful which affirms Baracaj’s (2014) note, which holds training as a crucial part that helps familiarizing teachers with the demands of their roles while teaching ESP and further enhance their pedagogical skills, including curriculum design and conducting needs analysis.

Additionally, four of the teachers with English language degree (T 1, 3, 4, 7) have reported that their ESP courses at university were not useful enough in teaching them how to actually teach it. For instance, teacher n°1 has reported “I think that ESP lessons at university are just theoretical and do not allow teachers to learn how to actually teach ESP”. Teacher n°7 noted, “the ESP courses that I have taken at university deal only with conceptual things that must be remembered, but they did not show us how to make the needs analysis or choose the materials, so they did not prepare us to teach ESP”.

4.2.2. Students' Inadequate Level and Lack of Engagement

One of the major challenging elements that was identified throughout the interviews was the fact that students were not equipped with the necessary skills in general English, which hindered their ability to actively participate in and grasp ESP courses. All of the teachers asserted that most of their ESP students lacked basic skills in EGP, namely basic grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. This presented a challenge for them to delve into some advanced ESP courses that incorporate specialised terminology relevant to their specific field. Therefore, all of the teachers stressed the importance of equipping students with fundamental English language training prior to engaging them in ESP course. Teacher n°5 declared that “in ESP classes, we expect a learner who is ready to learn actual ESP courses; someone who, at least, has a B2 level so that you as a teacher can focus on teaching English specific to the field without feeling that you should go over the basics”. Teacher n°2 claimed that “when I first came to the ESP classroom after preparing a lesson on the specific subject, I found out that students were lacking in their general English level; it was impossible for them to engage in ESP lessons before going over the basics ... I found myself teaching them EGP for the major part before tackling actual ESP lessons”. This highlights the importance of guiding students to undergo placement tests in order to assess their need for preparatory training in EGP if it is needed. Iswati and Triastuti (2021) declared that within a classroom with an apparent mixed level, teachers would find difficulties in determining the appropriate difficulty level and kinds of lessons that stimulate the students' interest.

Another element that should warrant consideration is that students should assume an active and engaging role within the learning process in ESP courses. In many instances, learners are commonly regarded as possessing greater expertise within a particular domain. Consequently, it is imperative that these learners assume shared learning responsibilities and adopt a peer role in the learning process. During the interviews, Teacher n°5 asserted that “the successful ESP class is a collaboration between teachers and students in

building a smooth and comprehensive lesson". Moreover, teacher n°7 reported that "students should be prepared to do their own research and be autonomous in ESP classes; if the teachers do the whole work in the classroom, the teaching will not be as efficient as it should be". It is thereby crucial to adopt a student-centred approach to teaching ESP by granting students more responsibility and driving them to take an active role.

4.2.3. Lack of Knowledge in the Subject fields

A major fundamental question that has been a subject of debate was raised while conducting this research is: should ESP be taught by the subject teacher or by the English educator? (Daoud, 2000). In light of this predicament, four out of the five instructors who hold degrees in English asserted that a lack of substantial knowledge regarding the subject matter can give rise to numerous challenges when it comes to determining the significance of instructional materials or effectively imparting technical concepts. As an illustration, teacher n°1 said "sometimes it is really difficult to find the right word that is specific to the field when asked by students; one time a student asked me what is the equivalent of 'محضر قضائي' (*judicial officer*) and how can I explain his roles in English and did not find an immediate answer to that". Additionally, teacher n°3 asserted that "the lack of knowledge about the field can be really intimidating; in fact, sometimes I wonder if the courses I have chosen for my ESP classes are good or important enough"

Alternatively, the two teachers possessing degrees in Business and Finance and Law reported fewer difficulties in preparing a course plan in their respective fields. In fact, they argued that their educational background affords them the ability to provide more precise explanations and address any ambiguities pertaining to matters within the field of study. To illustrate, teacher n°6 reported: "let's take the example of a term like « le turnover » in Business which means in the regular French context the rate of change in personnel in a given company ... however in English, the same term refers to

how many sales you make in a certain time frame”, making the point that such knowledge would be helpful in better explaining the ESP lessons.

Teachers lacking experience in the field may easily overlook these specific technical details. Teacher n°7, an educator with an English degree, argued that “I think it is important for English teachers to collaborate with experts in specific fields to design an ESP syllabus and clarify ESP courses”. The same perspective was endorsed by the other four teachers with English degree.

4.2.4. Designing the Materials and Selecting the Textbook

The task of locating appropriate instructional materials for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged as the most problematic challenge among all participants. All of the teachers claimed that, while sometimes standard textbooks were provided to them by schools, they were usually the ones responsible for procuring teaching materials. Furthermore, according to all of the teachers, even when textbooks are accessible, they often prove to be unsatisfactory or fail to align with the proficiency levels of the students. Teacher n°3 “I think that the number one challenge for me is finding an available and suitable material ... or when students are not satisfied by the material presented to them”. Moreover, teacher n°4 affirmed the problematic task of finding the right material by noting that “Finding the materials and selecting it is really the most challenging part for me as an ESP teacher”. This aligns with the work of Andriani (2014) which reported that a significant number of ESP textbooks do not effectively engage students due to their predominant emphasis on reading and vocabulary exercises.

4.2.5. Lack of Schools' Support

Throughout the challenging task of teaching ESP, it is important for private school administrations to recognize the impediments facing their teachers, and to provide adequate resources and support. Teacher n°2 asserted that “the administration should prepare a suitable teaching setting for ESP teachers to use, like investing in modern teaching materials, providing

textbooks, or organizing trainings for the teachers”. Teacher n°7 said that “it is important to have good administrative support while teaching ESP because it is much more demanding in its nature”. Another element that all teachers expressed dissatisfaction with is the fact that the remuneration for teaching ESP is equivalent to that of teaching EGP, which according to them, is unjust. In one of the teacher’s n°2 statements it was said that “I think that the administration is not aware of the kind of challenges and hurdles that ESP teachers go through, and I think that having a salary similar to the regular EGP classes is a bit demotivating and makes me want to stick to EGP classes instead”. Hence, a compensation package that appropriately acknowledges the exertions and difficulties encountered by educators can serve as a source of motivation and encouragement, thereby enhancing their overall efficiency and performance.

5. Discussion

This research highlights the challenges reported by private school ESP instructors which may affect their instructional performance and the effective delivery of ESP courses. The reported sense of insufficiency in teachers’ readiness to teach ESP may stem from universities’ deficiency in training future teachers and preparing them to teach it practically. This is further aligned with previous research that emphasises the absence of training and the inadequacy and shortcomings offered by several universities regarding ESP (e.g, Ghaskil, 2022). As a result, it is essential for educational institutions to provide specialised training programmes for ESP teachers, with a focus on conducting needs analysis, developing instructional materials, and using content-specific pedagogical approaches.

ESP instructors highlighted the problem of students' deficiency in basic English skills, which hinders their understanding of the specific target material courses and their ability to actively engage in class. This underscores the need to use placement tests as a means of identifying students who may benefit from preparatory or pre-course EGP sessions (Iswati & Triastuti, 2021). Moreover, there is a growing need for student-centred approaches in

ESP classrooms, which aim to foster authentic and contextual learning encounters and harness students' specialised knowledge via collaborative learning.

Another notable obstacle that has been identified is the lack of subject-specific knowledge among English educators, which impedes their ability to choose appropriate materials and provide accurate technical explanations effectively. Although subject matter specialists may encounter fewer challenges in the design of ESP courses, it is recommended to rely on a collaborative strategy that incorporates the expertise of subject matter experts and English language educators in the joint development of ESP courses (Bracaj, 2004; Daoud, 2000).

ESP instructors particularly emphasised the difficulty of obtaining suitable instructional resources, since they noted a lack of suitability and appropriateness in conventional ESP textbooks. This sentiment resonates with findings from Andriani (2014) and Suzani et al. (2011), who similarly concluded that most ESP textbooks lack engagement and relevance. Consequently, teachers are prompted to create tailored materials in collaboration with subject-specific experts to better meet students' needs and interests.

Moreover, there was a notable observation of dissatisfaction among educators about the assistance provided by private school administrations in the context of ESP teaching. These issues included inadequate allocation of resources, absence of training opportunities, and unsatisfactory compensation. Schools are thereby invited to acknowledge the distinct requirements of ESP instruction and are prompted to provide resources and teaching materials. Furthermore, providing competitive remuneration packages that recognise the particular difficulties encountered by ESP instructors might assist in motivating ESP teachers

Consistently with previous studies (e.g., Missoum, 2023; Ghaskil, 2022; Kelkoula & Ouis, 2022, etc.), the findings of this research reaffirm the

challenging nature of teaching ESP, notably in the Algerian context. The same hurdles found at the higher education level apply to the private school sector. The persistent nature of these challenges highlights the pressing need to explore efficacious remedies. As such, future research could explore the effectiveness of various teaching methodologies in ESP classrooms.

6. Conclusion

With the increasing prominence and expansion of ESP teaching, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of learners seeking to study it, leading to a growing interest among private schools. Teaching ESP can present significant challenges, particularly for inexperienced and novice educators who have not received adequate training in the field. Hence, it is of utmost significance to determine the challenges faced by educators in private schools, given the limited extent of research conducted in this particular domain.

This study thus conducted interviews and in-depth analysis to highlight and examine the challenges encountered by seven ESP educators in private schools. The findings revealed that one of the most significant challenges is the selection and development of research materials, primarily due to the lack or unsuitability of textbooks for student use and the lack of teachers' knowledge about what material is best suited for the given context. The inadequate level of students and the absence of proper level analysis prior to ESP classes can result in the inclusion of underqualified students who require a review of fundamental language skills. The absence of adequate training poses another significant challenge, as numerous educators may encounter confusion regarding the appropriate methods and procedures in ESP teaching. The research also pointed out the difficulties associated with the technical aspects of the disciplines and underscored the significance of collaborations between English educators and subject-specific teachers. Finally, the provision of administrative and financial support was also emphasised as a means to enhance the teaching experience.

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