

Challenges of Teaching and Learning Business English in Ukrainian Universities

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Abstract

The English has been widely used and expanded with the globalization of the business world, notably ESP is considered a part of it. This study aims to seek out the challenges of teaching and learning Business English in Ukrainian universities. Considerable experience as Business English teachers at several Ukrainian universities and ongoing contact with colleagues in the professional community of ESP teachers, provides an opportunity to affirm that the results we found in the empirical study are typical for most Ukrainian universities. This assumption was also supported in the discussions with the ESP teachers from different regions of Ukraine during the British Council's "English for Universities" project (2015-2018). Data collection was done by conducting a questionnaire survey for the ESP practitioners that had the issues in teaching ESP course at the Faculty of Economics, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. The findings revealed the challenges that ESP practitioners face, particularly: difference in students' language competence, course content selection, lack of motivation, in-class hours etc. and possible solutions in overcoming the constraints in teaching. The study suggests that Business English practitioners should develop and improve practical tools for evaluation and certification of results following the requirements and further improvements should be implemented in the methodology and organization of ESP teaching, the content of the course, the course design, the development of course-books and supplementary teaching materials for each specialty.

Keywords: Business English, ESP challenges, ESP teaching and learning, the role of ESP practitioner, Ukrainian Universities

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Introduction

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) teachers have something in common with general foreign language teachers. Almost every second teacher teaching ESP course has concerns about what they are teaching, whether English for economics or teaching economics in English. Teaching ESP aims to develop students' skills of professional communication in English depending on the proficient area. Such teaching should be connected to students' particular specialization. Accordingly, the ESP includes specialized programs that are designed to develop the communicative use of English in a specialized field of work or technology (Bolitho & West, 2017). ESP is a mode to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners. Much of the work done by ESP practitioner deals with designing appropriate courses for various groups of learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1996). In its turn, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) introduced the extended definition of ESP. It provides the absolute and the variable characteristics. The absolute characteristics denote that ESP is defined to meet the specific needs of the learners; makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre. The variable characteristics represent that ESP may be related to or designed for particular disciplines; may use a different methodology from that of General English; is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level or in a professional work situation; is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students; most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

The content analysis of the related literature showed that ESP teaching is based on six elements that are significantly important constituents for a successful and effective teaching process. Needs analysis is the first and the most essential element to be focused on education in ESP contexts as it offers excellent help for the teacher to identify the skills, the competencies that need to be developed, and the objectives to attain. One more critical element in teaching ESP is a methodology that represents the essential things, which are the course material and syllabus. Correct syllabus design should have a link between the real world needs needed and the student's ability to the effective use of language. They are considered to be the necessary components that constitute the successful syllabus design.

The next important element in teaching ESP is the course design. According to the recent studies in the field of ESP (Belcher, 2012; Bocanegra-Valle, 2010; Hyland, 2006), the ESP practitioner should remember the three types of course design; language-centered course design, skills-centered course design and learning-centered approach, and that the only notion that determines the type used in a particular ESP course is learners' needs and course objectives. Material selection is another element that should be chosen very carefully for the ESP course to meet the needs of the learners and facilitate and accomplish the teaching/learning process. Authenticity and modernity in textbooks give tremendous input and sufficient output for teachers and learners. The evaluation is a continuous process in teaching the ESP and useful for the teaching process.

Reforms in the education system of Ukraine in the framework of its participation in the Bologna process set new requirements for the study of foreign languages. This contributed to the development of the "Concept of Teaching Foreign Languages" (2009) in the universities of Ukraine. The purpose of the Concept is to create the system of teaching foreign languages to meet the international standards and modern needs as well as providing students with access to practical language skills (The Concept of Teaching Foreign Languages at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, 2009). Given, the

main focus of our research is Business English as a part of the ESP course with a wide range of study programs: Marketing, Finance, Commerce, Management, Economic Cybernetics, etc. at the faculty of Economics, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. In this course, students learn English for specific purposes (Business English) and its essential goal here is to train a professional to be able to use English as the leading communication means in communicating with foreign partners in the professional field, and everyday situations. Teaching and learning ESP at the faculty is said to be specialty-oriented as it is submitted to the professional needs of the students. Students of the Faculty of Economics from different study programs are taught by specially tailored programs depending on their study program. Specially tailored teaching materials, unique methods of teaching depending on students' future jobs are developed and applied by ESP practitioners.

Thus, the purpose of our study is to identify the main challenges faced by Ukrainian teachers of Business English in their daily work and outline ways to overcome them at the organizational, semantic and methodological levels. The objectives of the study are: to determine the features of teaching Business English as an ESP in universities at the theoretical level; identification of the main obstacles to effective teaching in Ukrainian universities by conducting questioner survey of Business English teachers at Faculty of Economics at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv; interpretation of survey results; verification of ways to overcome the identified challenges, taking into account the forward-thinking foreign experience.

Literature Review

The concept of "communication" differs from one specialty to another, depending on the kind of human activity, and this idea is maintained in Kennedy and Bolitho's (1991). According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), ESP is defined to fit the specific needs of the student and makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves. ESP is focused on the language activities regarding grammar, vocabulary, register, study skills, discourse and genre (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). It has also been highlighted that ESP can use, in a specific teaching environment, a different methodology from that of General English.

ESP should be also understood as an approach to teaching. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stated that ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's purpose for learning. Besides, it is an approach that aims to meet the needs of particular learners. ESP includes specialized programs designed to develop the communicative use of English in a specialized field of work. In practice, much of the work the ESP practitioner does deal with designing courses for various groups of learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1996). This is primarily due to the increased motivation among students to learn ESP, notably the low level or a lack of motivation is considered in the works of researchers as a significant obstacle to mastering any type of foreign language. Thus, Oxford (1994), Schmidt (1996), Scarcella (1992) and Shearin (1994) in their numerous studies have shown that motivation plays a significant role in attaining second or foreign language proficiency. Moreover, motivation has been verified to be an essential factor for defining the success of second or foreign language accomplishment.

Business English is one of the forms of the language used for a Specific Purpose. Business English is not the same as research or political English. In times of globalization, Business English is becoming increasingly important as multinational companies need their personnel to be multilingual.

The final aim of any Business English Course is to ensure its learners to communicate with others in a business environment effectively, whether that communication is in the face to face meetings, correspondence, presentations, or other situations. Accordingly, a Business English Language Course includes topics such as Business English in reading, writing letters and resumes, business phrases, or terms of sale, advertising, and marketing aspect. As with other ESP courses, Business English includes a specific language corpus and focuses on particular types of communication in a specific context. Notably, Business English is different from other kinds of ESP owing to specific content, and general content (Ellis & Johnson, 1994).

We agree with leading researchers in ESP teaching and learning who believe that the ESP resources play a vital role in ESP and they are considerably debated in the literature of the subject. Ha думку Belcher (2012), an ESP practitioner can choose either to tailor materials or to use commercial materials published by other ESP specialists. Hyland (2006) states that materials are “the interface between teaching and learning, or the points at which the course needs, objectives and syllabuses are made tangible to both learners and teachers”. Accurate selected materials promote and support course design and is an important element of ESP teaching practice. They include not only published course books but also Internet-mediated resources, visual aids (Hyland, 2006). Such strategies as modifying materials, tailoring activities, deleting irrelevant content are the options recommended for adapting the resources to the needs of the learners (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010).

Methods

The main idea of the research was to gather from respondents as much data as possible to define the challenges that teachers come across in the ESP courses in English for Economics and come up with the solutions. As the research tools the authors choose observation, literature analysis, a questionnaire provision, and data analysis.

Research questions

The current study examines teachers' answers to challenges in teaching Business English at the Faculty of Economics. Two questions guided the analysis of the survey: (1) what challenges did ESP practitioners face in teaching Business English for economists? and (2) what would they improve or change in teaching Business English at the Faculty?

Site

The site for this project was a Department for English at the Faculty of Economics at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv with twenty-two ESP practitioners. Most of them took part in the project “English for Universities” guided by the British Council.

Participants

Twenty-two teachers of the Department for English at the Faculty of Economics volunteered to participate in the teacher survey.

Procedures

The ESP practitioners were sent out a questionnaire in Google forms with the questions and with suggested answers. Anonymous completed questionnaires and the received results were analyzed.

Data collection

The ESP practitioners' answers were collected and saved in the Google forms. These twenty-two forms and the accompanying comments samples formed the data set for subsequent analysis.

Findings

The following findings are based on the Business English practitioners' answers and define the challenges and possible improvements in teaching Business English at the Faculty.

Figure one demonstrates that almost all ESP practitioners face differences in students' language competence (95%). 91% of ESP practitioners claimed to have issues with classroom management of large classes. It was satisfying to know that only 78% of teachers have problems with students' motivation. Nevertheless, 87% have significant difficulties with a lack of contact hours that can lead to a challenging situation for both teachers and students in the classroom and influence the final result in acquiring a decent language level.

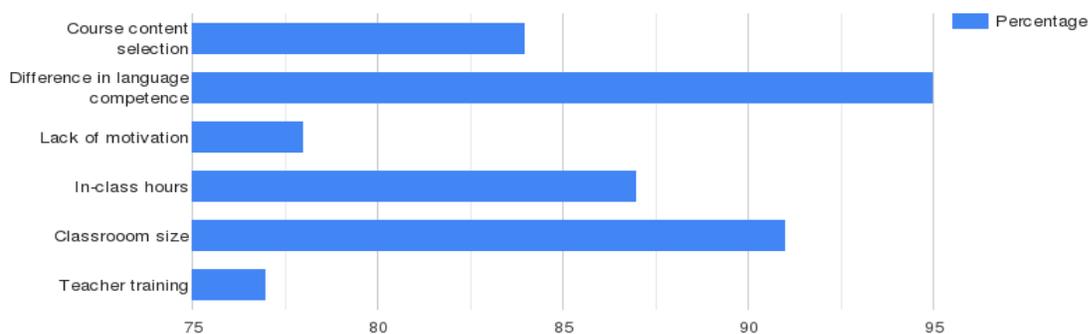


Figure 1. ESP practitioners answer about Business English teaching challenges

Only 77% of the respondents answered that they need teacher training. This can be explained by the fact that most of the practitioners had already attended the courses for ESP teachers provided by the British Council in Ukraine. It can be seen from Figure one that 84% of the respondents have a lack of cooperation with subject teachers in designing course content. As practitioners teach Business English of different majors and can be effectively solved by consulting the subject specialists of the faculty.

Course Content Selection

One of the main ESP features is that a course is defined to meet the specific needs of the learners and should involve professional language (terms) and content. Every five years the English department chooses an updated version of the main course-book of major publishing houses for all other study programs of the faculty. But it is still not clear whether this course meets the needs of the students of the different professional fields or not. Should it give a general induction in business topics? The main issue here is that there is not a unique Business course books to meet the needs of every study program. For example, is it necessary for students of the marketing program to drill the course mostly based on management issues and the same problem with the students of the finance program? How relevant is that for them and whether it meets their needs? Should each teacher use supplementary material to provide sufficient subject content depending on students' specialty? In the majority of cases ESP

teachers are not experts in the students' professional fields. And the subject of teachers' involvement in the course design is highly significant here. The lack of close cooperation and coordination between the designers of the study programs and content lecturers is a problem that still exists. The main issue in ESP teaching is to master language and subject matter. Teachers find themselves having to teach with texts whose content they know little or nothing. Besides, the ESP teacher is frequently the syllabus designer and is in charge for the teaching material and evaluation.

On the other hand, the fundamental problem designing a topic syllabus is that the ESP syllabus designer is not a specialist in (marketing, management, finance).

Consequently, he/she is not capable to pick up which topics to include in the syllabus to provide the required terms. It is incredibly challenging for the English teacher to arrange matters in the most suitable order. The ESP teacher is not a course specialist; this can lead to misinterpretation. If a case has already been discussed in the main course, this motivates the learners and gives them confidence to communicate or discuss on the topic. Not being a specialist in a specific area, the ESP teacher cannot decide how to tailor information in terms of the subject topics. According to Kennedy and Bolitho (1984), ESP teachers do not need to learn a specialist subject understanding. They should be aware of the following: a positive attitude towards the ESP content; knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area; an awareness of how much they probably already know.

Nevertheless, some teachers can obtain a sufficient understanding of a subject to teach confidently from the subject-specific texts. But almost every ESP teacher will understand that the knowledge of a business course has barriers, and closer cooperation with the subject teacher or perhaps developing a team-teaching program is a solution here.

The Difference in Student's Language Competence

The students' level of language knowledge is essential as teachers nowadays face the challenge of working with multilevel classrooms or "mixed-ability" classes. In the ESP course, the students should have an intermediate levels of general English. Teachers have to deal with mixed-ability groups in terms of level language competence. Some students have an intermediate level of English; others – have an elementary level of English. The first group needs to improve their general English and is upset by drilling complex theoretical content of Business English. The group who feels confident has a much more powerful motivation for studying ESP. Though, if some of them do not have a good command of general English, they will spend time studying grammar, revising tenses (Davis, 1993). How can an ESP teacher deal with the group of students of different language levels? Having students with different language levels from A2 and level C1 is impossible to reach the expected level of Business English at the final exam? These controversial issues cannot be resolved only by teachers of the department. Should the students of level A1-A2 be enrolled at the university?

English is a vital tool for international communication, and a high level of English proficiency among graduates will allow them to fully and effectively participate in professional and academic life. The target level of English language proficiency among school graduates according to the current foreign language curricula is not lower than B1, still in reality, a significant number of school graduates, especially from rural areas, do not reach this level. Accordingly, students with different levels of English proficiency enter universities. This leads to the fact that weaker students cannot

acquire the required level of language training needed at the end of the university, they have difficulty using English-language resources, restrictions on international academic mobility, the inability to study courses in English. Simultaneously, students with a higher group, due to the mixed level of language competence of students and the orientation of teaching to the weaker student, lose the level of English language proficiency and at the end of their study, have a lower level compared to the level of admission. Elimination of these problems requires a level of language competence among students not lower than B1. They are setting a requirement for English at level B1 for access to the bachelor's program in the universities.

Compulsory “screening” EIT in English is essential for all applicants to establish the rank of language proficiency. Detection of a level below B1 does not deprive the entrant of the right to participate in the competition for admission to higher education in the normal mode. Such entrants before the beginning of the school year must take language intensive to achieve level B1. The control of achievement B1 takes place in a year, during the next introductory campaign. In case of failure, the student is expelled.

Language intensity is needed to overcome “language inequality” after secondary education, particularly between urban and rural entrants, and to provide access to higher education to academically able young people who have not had the opportunity to obtain language education at the appropriate level. According to research, the required number of hours of training to move to one language level is 150-180 hours (6 ECTS credits). Accordingly, entrants of level A2 need language intensity 1 month, and level A1 - for two months. It is proposed to create two-level courses of language intensives: for full-time study and distance learning at the choice of the entrant. Language intensives are provided by higher education institutions funded from the state budget (based on linguistic faculties).

Lack of Motivation

The different English level affects the students' motivation. It demotivates both students with the elementary level and those with the upper-intermediate level. 78% ESP practitioners in university complain about a lack of student motivation in their classrooms and give several reasons for this. One of the reasons stated is a class with mixed abilities levels of general English the students; large sizes of groups, inappropriate syllabus designs, attendance systems, misdirected objectives of the students, lack of teachers' feedback, and some other reasons like students' unwillingness to speak and communicate because of different students' language level. Davis (1993) describes the subject-specific approach as something which motivates students to learn as it is based on students' specific needs for the future career. There are several solutions given by the Ukrainian teachers to eliminate this issue and they are: good lesson planning, bringing about a variety in classroom activities, negotiating, and describing the importance of the English language, giving individual consultation to the students and conducting pair work activities instead of group work activities. Such activities as arranging small group discussions before getting down to the real exchange of ideas could be helpful, for it will provide the students with more confidence and security.

In-class Hours

The study shows that one of the critical issues the 87% of ESP practitioners face at the Faculty of Economics is a lack of contact hours to get efficiency in teaching ESP. It is generally accepted that the

primary goal of teaching ESP is to develop professionally-oriented communicative competence to meet the needs of the students. The Concept of Studying English in Universities was designed to indicate the overall purpose of ESP teaching and learning (Concept, 2009) with the task to train students to communicate effectively in their future careers. Distribution of classroom hours is an essential factor in developing professional foreign language competence at a decent level. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2020), each student of has to achieve level B2 language proficiency. To reach the educational qualification of “Bachelor,” a student needs 7.5 ECTS credits and 270 classroom hours without individual work. Consequently, to get B2+, C1 level of language proficiency for the educational qualification of “Master,” students need 200-250 academic hours (CEFR, 2020). In Ukrainian Universities, the situation with the distribution of classroom hours for mastering ESP is not perfect.

The number of in-class hours has been regulated by the Concept of teaching foreign languages in the universities of Ukraine, and according to this document, students are provided with 5 ECTS credits for studying ESP. It should be noted that the ESP course that advances students to their profession is trained during the 1st and 2nd years of study. The limited amount of English classes in the universities only worsens the outcomes of teaching ESP to develop communicative skills and obtain the desired result and the level B2 of language proficiency. At the faculty, we face the problem with a scarcity of in-class hours or contact hours as it amounts to 5 ECTS credits during the first year of study that is 292 hours with individual work and only 136 hours in-class hours.

Integrating the European standards of the ESP teaching in universities, we deal with obstacles like a lack of classroom hours to reach the B2 level of language proficiency. English language courses must be compulsory in each year of the program. At least 10% of the total number of hours/credits for students must be allocated to English language courses. At the bachelor's level, regular English courses will focus on the ESP rather than General English (EGP). English language courses for bachelors will allow them to reach level B2 after graduation. The steps that could help to improve the situation with a lack of hours could be the following: every student should have the same amount of English classes devoted to ESP course to develop English communication skills and competences as well as to reach the target level B2. Develop and improve useful tools for evaluation and certification of results under the CEFR requirements.

Classroom Size

There are several reasons like lack of funds, saving time, lack of teaching faculty that force the administrators to combine several classes into one large group. The effects it brings, other than ineffective teaching, are lack of proper student evaluation, teacher's inability to conduct activities in the class properly and a lack of students' motivation. ESP practitioners have developed different strategies to deal with the issue of large-sized classes like asking for an extension in time duration, dividing large classes into smaller sections and arranging separate classes for them, taking help from the more intelligent students of the courses in evaluation and group work activities, taking work home, giving feedback by grouping similar issues together and assigning pair or group work activities.

Teacher Training

To motivate the ESP practitioners to be able to manage their teaching concerns with ESP, emphasis should be switched to investigating the practical training courses delivered to ESP practitioners. The

aim of any ESP program is to assess the variety of English language that the ESP learner requires, the purpose of the language required, and how specific the language is. These stated objectives will help the teacher to make necessary decisions such as determining the teaching methodology, choose materials and classes (tasks or activities) that are partly important for improving the language skills required by these diverse students. Everything that is needed is to state the aims mentioned above by considering the educator as the learner. When thoroughly analyzing these three areas, the result would be the implementation of a teacher-training course focused only on the "teacher needs."

The question as to how to get more people in ESP teaching is quite an issue nowadays. An ESP practitioner suggested that this objective can be achieved by providing teacher training programs, by offering ESP courses in the institute and making them attractive. Arranging workshops and seminars are a waste of time and money since no theory is taught in them. In overcoming the issues with ESP teaching, the following steps should be done: improvement of the methodology and organization of ESP teaching, the content of the courses, the course design, the development of handbooks, and supplementary materials for each specialty; to provide training for ESP practitioners.

To overcome the stated issues British Council in Ukraine organized the project "English for Universities" from 2015 to 2018, in which thirty-two Ukrainian universities took part. The project that enhanced the role of ESP teacher had the goal to improve the quality of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching in higher education institutions across the country. The project had a significant impact on the teachers who were trained as they adopted more needs-driven, student-centered and interactive approaches to their work. At the same time, Heads of Foreign Language departments consistently highlighted the changes in syllabus, materials, teaching and assessment stimulated by the project. Current ESP students said they were motivated to learn and found ESP classes useful (Borg, 2019).

Conclusions

This research aimed to reveal challenges that ESP teachers face, their attitudes towards learning ESP and the solutions to the stated issues. Students of the first and second years of study and teachers of the Faculty of Economics at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv were the object of the research and observation. All the interviewed teachers were the participants of the teaching process in the Business English course. Based on the literature research, and our basic hypothesis for challenges of teachers in ESP course, we created a survey questionnaire to interview ESP teachers of the Faculty of Economics, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in order better to understand, what challenges did ESP practitioners face in teaching Business English for economists? and what would they improve or change in teaching Business English at the Faculty?

The results of the study highlighted that compared with EGP teaching, ESP teaching typically presents far more difficulties. Mainly focusing on specific learner needs, concentrating more on the communicative language and needs of the students, trying to obtain a range of professional skills and essential job-related functions, and ESP is still a considerable challenge.

A detailed study of related literature, personal observations, data collected provides us with some challenges ESP practitioners face in our context, and we have offered possible solutions to overcome the barriers in teaching Business English at the Faculty of Economics at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Teaching ESP means that a teacher focuses on the material to content students'

subject field or knowledge, which should be run meeting the needs analysis. First, it is related to the course content selection. Second, it is concerned with the difference in a students' language competence. Third – the lack of students' motivation. Fourth – a lack of in-class hours and duration of the course. The fifth is the size of classes and finally is the importance of ESP practitioner training.

The first thing that needs to be considered is the need analysis. By having precise need analysis, the course designer will be able to design a suitable course intended for the special learners' needs. The second is by improving the teaching methodology and providing general English courses first before taking ESP. Finally, it is suggested that ESP teachers should have closer cooperation with the subject lecturer, perhaps developing a team-teaching program. It sets a requirement for English at level B1 for admission to the bachelor's program in the universities. There is a need of compulsory "screening" to identify the level of language proficiency for all applicants. Language intensity is needed to overcome "language inequality" after secondary education, particularly between urban and rural entrants, and to provide access to higher education to academically able young people who have not had the opportunity to obtain language education at the appropriate level. The steps that could help to improve the situation with a lack of hours could be the following: every student should have the same amount of English classes devoted to the ESP course to develop all the necessary English communication skills and competences as well as to reach the target level B2; teachers should develop and improve practical tools for evaluation and certification of results under the CEFR requirements. Improvement of the methodology and organization issues of ESP teaching, the content of the course, the course design, the development of coursebooks for each specialty and to provide regular training for ESP practitioners are the main recommendations that the authors could provide due to the results of the study interpretation, specific literature analysis and own practice reflection.

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