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English for Specific Purpose Courses at Private Universities in Vietnam: Perspectives of Business Students

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Introduction

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher education in Vietnam has undergone rapid reform in the last two decades because of the increasing needs of English language learners and the government to respond to the internationalised labour market (Hoang & Nguyen, 2019). This is shown in many policy documents by the Vietnamese government which require graduates from non-English majored disciplines to attain English proficiency at the B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to be eligible to graduate from university (Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam, 2008).

Pursuant to the issued policy requirements, many higher education institutions, including private universities in Vietnam have incorporated ESP courses as an essential part of the English language undergraduate programs (Le, 2020; Nguyen, 2015). Despite the innovation and effort made by the government, universities, teachers and students, research into ESP education at public universities in Vietnam indicates that many ESP courses at universities have not been effective, and ESP teachers have faced many challenges in teaching ESP (Duong, 2018). Many ESP students are not proficient in English and do not meet workplace requirements. The low ESP proficiency of graduates has contributed to the high unemployment rate in Vietnam in recent years (Hoa & Mai, 2016; Le, 2020). However, there is little information about business students' perspectives on ESP courses at private universities in Vietnam. Therefore, this study was designed with the intention to investigate the business students' perspectives on contemporary ESP courses at two selected private universities in Vietnam.

Literature Review

Overview of Teaching English for Specific Purposes

ESP is the teaching of English for any specific purpose of the learners such as business, accounting, and computer science (Anthony, 1997). Given the rapid growth of English learners around the world, ESP has



become popular for vocational and professional purposes (Lin, 2007). It was introduced in response to the English communication needs of students within a specific discipline where general English courses proved inadequate for their requirements (Andriani, 2014; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Similarly, Hutchinson and Water (1987) indicate that ESP is an approach in language teaching in which the content and method are based on the learners' needs. University graduates find ESP helpful because it provides specialist knowledge in English and improves their English vocabulary, the use of professional terminologies, and the communication skills that they need for future employment.

The widespread demand for ESP courses has led to an increase in the publication of ESP teaching materials which offer language teachers and learners various choices and quality. However, to prepare graduates with the essential and suitable skills to perform in specific work settings, ESP teachers need to select appropriate teaching materials that suit both learners and industry requirements. To satisfy such requirements, needs analysis is significant to collect empirical needs-assessment data from both learners and employers prior to designing or adapting any materials to meet the specific needs identified (Belcher, 2004). Similarly, Robinson (1991), and Bhatia (1993) argue that ESP teaching needs to refer to students' needs and job requirements, and a needs analysis should be considered before making decisions about teaching materials and approaches.

When planning an English course, particularly an ESP course, it is important for an internal triadic relationship to exist between the course content, the mandated pedagogy and the assessment procedures that test students and provide learning outcomes (Nguyen, 2017). That is, the three elements should align and support one another. In addition to the internal triadic consistency, an ESP course also needs to ensure external alignment between the curriculum and the needs of a specific workplace. The knowledge gained from ESP should respond to the workplace needs of employers (So-mui & Mead, 2000) and reflect the consistency between the ESP course and the communicative practices of a particular industry (Chostelidou, 2010).

The nature and objectives of ESP pedagogy have proved to be more suited to delivery by language teachers than content teachers (Tabatabaei, 2007). However, insufficient specialist knowledge is a major issue faced by ESP teachers, the majority of whom are unfamiliar with the specialised materials and content (Le, 2020). Therefore, ESP teachers are constantly challenged by a lack of specialist knowledge, expertise and strategies (Wu & Badger, 2009). They are also frequently responsible for the design and development of materials for courses, but their lack of understanding can lead to incomprehensible and inconsistent teaching materials (Wu & Badger, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that ESP teachers lack the confidence to teach ESP and regularly seek support from the internet, their colleagues, and other sources. Several linguists have highlighted the relevance of the genre-based teaching approach in teaching ESP programs. Hyland (2007) indicates that genre-based pedagogies enable teachers to ground ESP courses in the texts where students write in their target context, therefore, supporting learners to participate effectively in their employment context. Similarly, Nguyen (2017) confirmed that using genre-based pedagogy in teaching ESP helps bridge the gap between academic language use in the classrooms and professional practices in workplace settings.

Overview of English for Specific Purpose in Vietnam

In recent years, teaching general English followed by ESP has been widely adopted in higher education in Vietnam. However, ESP teaching and learning in Vietnam, as a young and developing branch of EFL education, is still in its infancy (Le, 2014; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). Since ESP courses have been incorporated into English programs in higher education, teaching them pursuant to general English courses has posed several challenges for both teachers and students (Nguyen, 2015; Pham & Malvetti, 2012). For teachers, a lack of training and specialised knowledge has presented difficulties (Pham & Malvetti, 2012) because they are not equipped with the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge (Nguyen, 2015). As a result, they struggle to apply ESP pedagogy in their practice and resort to teaching from experience, usually in the form of a teaching approach that focuses on grammar, memorising specialist terminologies

and exercises on basic grammar rules, while neglecting the communicative aspects of the language (Hayati, 2008; Nguyen, 2011; Wu & Badger, 2009). This traditional teacher-centred, exam-driven approach to teaching and learning English has demotivated students who have become primarily focused on examinations and failed to develop the ability to communicate since most of their classroom time is spent on learning terminologies and translation (Nguyen, 2011; Utsumi & Doan, 2010). In addition, content teachers are knowledgeable in the field of teaching ESP, but many are deficient in English proficiency to deliver ESP lessons or explain the meaning of terminologies. As a consequence of their lack of training and pedagogical methodology in ESP, content teachers have resorted to teaching from experience, using traditional teaching methods that focus on grammar translation, reading and writing (Utsumi & Doan, 2010).

Other issues include the lack of standards related to ESP textbooks, limited time for ESP courses, and a scarcity of teaching materials and library resources (Le, 2020). Currently, there are no prescribed standards for ESP textbooks in Vietnam and universities are free to decide what materials they use (Utsumi & Doan, 2010). Several institutions use imported textbooks, but others assign teachers to develop teaching materials, mainly focused on grammar, reading and basic communication (Nguyen & Pham, 2016). These different approaches to course materials have caused confusion about the objectives of ESP courses for teaching language skills or specialist knowledge (Ho, 2011). Limited time for the amount of work associated with ESP courses has also been cited as an issue (Tabatabaei, 2007), given the onerous workload including the design and development of the curriculum, learner assessments and tests. The time allocated for ESP lessons is barely enough for teachers to explain new terminologies, so they commonly use Vietnamese instead of English in classes (Kieu, 2012) to speed up delivery. Limited teaching materials and library resources, as well as insufficient professional development opportunities for ESP teachers also present challenges for ESP education in Vietnam (Utsumi & Doan, 2010). Khuong (2015) indicates another problem in choosing teaching materials is that one coursebook is used for many industries, such as a business book providing general communication rather than English focused on a specialised industry. Additionally, most ESP teachers rely on coursebooks while teaching and the assessment is focused on rote learning. Nguyen and Pham (2016) assert that ESP course materials are highly technical and lengthy. These materials challenge ESP teachers' pedagogy due to their limited content knowledge.

In summary, studies have pointed to various issues related to ESP education in Vietnam. However, empirical evidence from students – the beneficiaries of ESP programs - are little known. As Ali and Salih (2013) argue, investigating students' perspectives as part of the need analysis process is a significant factor in successful ESP materials development which can help bridge the gap between learning outcomes and the labour market.

Methods

The qualitative method (Punch, 2009) was used in this study to explore business students' perspectives on current ESP courses at two private universities. A semi-structured questionnaire was used in focus group discussions to gain insight into students' perspectives on aspects of the current ESP courses including English course design, curricula, assessments, ESP teachers, teaching approaches, and the teaching and learning environment at their private universities.

Participants in this study were 24 senior students from business disciplines at two selected private universities in Vietnam. Of those, six students were enrolled in Business Administration, five students in Business Management, seven students in Finance and Banking, and six students in International Economics. These students formed two focus groups for discussions at each private university, and there were six students from different disciplines in each focus group. Students were provided with coded numbers to protect their privacy and personal information. For example, 'U2.1' refers to University 2-Student 1 and 'U1.2' refers to University 1-Student 2.

Findings

Students' Perspectives on the Needs Analysis for ESP Courses

The results of focus group discussions with business undergraduates from the two universities indicated that ESP courses had been implemented as a part of the English programs at the two private universities. At both universities, ESP courses were implemented in the third year after the General English and Academic/Communicative English courses. Their description of the ESP courses in the two universities was presented for comparison in Table 1. Feedback from focus group discussions revealed that there had been no needs analysis prior to the implementation of the ESP program at both universities. Students were not asked for any input and did not participate in any need analysis for the ESP courses.

There was not any need analysis conducted at our universities for ESP courses design and implementation. We did not hear about that (U1.2, U2.1).

TABLE 1
English for Specific Purpose at Two Private Universities

University	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
University 1	General English. 525 hours over ten months. English was learnt along with auxiliary subjects such as music and martial arts.	Academic English. 90 hours over the first six months. In the last three months of Year 2 students joined the Business English class.	English for Specific Purpose 180 hours over twelve months.
University 2	General English. 157.5 hours over ten months. English was learnt in conjunction with other discipline subjects.	Communicative English. 247.5 hours over ten months. English was learnt together with other discipline subjects.	English for Specific Purposes 112.5 hours over seven months. TOEIC. 45 hours over the last three months of Year 3.

Students' Perspectives on the Curricula Design for ESP Courses

Vietnamese private universities are flexible to decide on curricula for disciplines available at each university. At the two private universities in this study, the curricula for ESP courses were selected in different ways. University 1 adopted imported textbooks which were prepared by authors from an English-speaking country. These imported textbooks were used to teach ESP students from several disciplines at the university such as Business Administration, Finance and Banking, Business Management. Consequently, students in the business programs did not find the content of ESP course closely related to their disciplines and did not significantly improve their English proficiency to support their future employment.

There was one set of textbooks which was used to teach ESP for different disciplines at our universities. Therefore, we did not find it much relevant to our specification (U1.1, U1.2).

In comparison, content teachers at university 2 were assigned curriculum development for ESP courses at their university. The content teachers are experts in their discipline but have limited knowledge of teaching language. They did not consult with the English language teachers while developing ESP curricula. As a result, the curricula for ESP courses at university 2 focused on English reading, writing, and grammar. Several business students found the ESP courses easy. However, they hardly communicated in English at the end of the course.

We had no idea about the curricula which was used for our ESP courses. The content teachers prepared and handed over to us prior to each lecture. The ESP lessons focused on reading, writing rather than communication (U2.1, U2.2).

Students' Perspectives on Teaching Approaches Used by ESP Teachers

At university 1, the language teachers were in charge of teaching ESP to the business students. The genre-based and communicative approaches were used to deliver the ESP lessons. In the class, students had opportunities to practice English in the form of role plays, group discussions, debates and complete tasks and assignments based on the topic they learnt. Business students have good perspectives on teaching approaches that enable them to practice English as they would use it in real employment environments. However, the language teachers at university 1 encountered difficulties in understanding and explaining the specialised words and terminologies.

We had chances to practice and improve our English proficiency in the class. However, our teachers sometimes were unable to explain the specialised words and terminologies clearly in English (U1.1, U1.2).

At university 2, the content teachers were responsible for teaching ESP courses. Although the content teachers were able to explain the specialised words and terminologies correctly and clearly to the students, they lacked knowledge and skill in teaching language. Therefore, these content teachers simply relied on the textbooks and focused on reading, writing and grammar in the ESP lessons. Business students did not have positive perspectives on the teaching approaches employed by the content teachers because they did not help students improve English proficiency, especially the communicative skills which are essential to their future employment.

Students' Perspectives on Assessments in ESP Courses

The results of focus group discussions with business students at university 1 showed that in the first year the tests and exam content was relevant with what they learnt in class. However, from year 2 until the final exam, new content, and knowledge which they had never learnt in class was added to the tests and exams. Therefore, the business students found it difficult to complete these sections.

We found several questions in the tests and exams new and difficult to complete because we never learnt before (U1.2).

Unlike the language teachers at university 1, the content teachers at university 2 mainly required business students to complete tests and exams which focused on reading, writing, and grammar. The test content, in some cases, was similar to the tests they had done before. The easy tests and exams had demotivated business students during studying ESP.

Several tests and exams had similar and easy questions. We had no difficulty to complete these tests and exams well (U2.1, U2.2).

Discussion

ESP courses have been implemented as part of the English programs at universities, in Vietnam in the last two decades. Despite the innovations and efforts made by the government, universities, and ESP teachers to improve the quality of ESP education at higher education institutions, there have been issues

related to the internal and external alignment of the ESP courses in Vietnam. Findings from this study investigating students' perspectives from two selected private universities initially helped to confirm existing issues in ESP education and contributed new insights into designing and delivering ESP courses in Vietnam.

Firstly, the findings show that the lack of students' and industries' needs analysis has resulted in inappropriate design of curricula for ESP courses. Because of this lack of need analysis, participants of the study did not find the ESP courses relevant to their disciplines and not supportive to their employment contexts. Several ESP students, as a result, reported distraction and discouragement from learning ESP in class. These issues are aligned with findings in other ESP teaching contexts such as Taiwan (Wang, 2019), Turkey (Kazar & Mede, 2015) and Indonesia (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017). The findings of the current study highlight that there is a critical need for curriculum designers to consider a proper needs analysis in designing effective ESP courses.

The study findings also revealed students' concerns regarding teacher competence in teaching ESP courses at university. Participants of this study had opportunities to study with both language teachers and content teachers who were in charge of delivering ESP courses. The findings show that both language teachers and content teachers were perceived as having difficulties due to the lack of language teaching skills and discipline knowledge. Also, regarding pedagogical practices, the study showed a mismatch between the content and assessment in ESP courses from the students' perspectives. This resulted in their disappointment and reflected the ineffectiveness of ESP courses in the selected institutions in Vietnam. These findings support previous studies in similar contexts which reported students' expectations for authentic tasks from teachers (Kazar & Mede, 2015), suitable learning materials and teacher-student collaboration in ESP courses (Khoirunnisa et al., 2018). Professional development appears to be important in equipping ESP teachers with suitable teaching and assessment methods to make ESP lessons a success (Whitehead et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The research findings from this study show that there exists an internal misalignment between curricula design, mandated pedagogy, and assessment of the ESP courses at the two researched universities. Therefore, it is essential for curriculum designers to perform a needs analysis prior to course design and to include the result of needs analysis from both industry and ESP learners in designing and teaching ESP. This will help to ensure internal triadic alignment between the course content, the pedagogy and the assessment procedures as well as external alignment between ESP courses and the requirements of the employers. The ESP curriculum should be tailored to match the purposes of specific disciplines. Both language teachers and content teachers need further training to ensure the quality of ESP lessons.

The study had a number of limitations that need to be considered. The qualitative research design had a small sample size which was generated using the convenience sampling technique. Hence, the findings may not be generalised to a larger population. Future studies may need to consider a more vigorous research design with a larger sample size to yield findings that can be generalised. In addition, data were collected from private institutions only while public institutions were excluded from the study. These two strands of institutions may bear distinctive features in terms of curricula, enrolment criteria and standard outcomes. Therefore, it would be significant for future studies to investigate the differences in students' perspectives in different types of institutions so that the implications may be more applicable to a larger context.

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