

ESP TEACHING CHALLENGES IN AN INDONESIAN VOCATIONAL HIGHER INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the findings of a study investigating the challenges faced by an English teacher in his ESP teaching in an Indonesian vocational higher institution. The study was carried out within the framework of interpretive inquiry and the semi-structured interview was used as the instrument for data collection. NVivo 8 was employed in the study as the tool for facilitating the data analysis process. Through this approach, the teacher's ESP teaching challenges could be identified. Some solutions to cope with these challenges are also offered in the discussion part of this paper.

Introduction

This research reported in this paper highlights the findings of a study conducted with a teacher who taught English for specific purposes (ESP) at a vocational higher institution in Indonesia. The aim of the study was to report on the challenges faced by this teacher in his teaching within the context of ESP in the vocational institution.

English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesian universities can generally be classified into two kinds: ELT for general purposes (EGP) and ELT for specific purposes (ESP). Students majoring in English, often referred to as English students, are regarded as students who focus their learning on EGP. Although they, to some extent, may study English for a certain purpose, in the context of ELT in Indonesia they are regarded as EGP learners. On the other hand, students majoring in subjects other than English in their university study (e.g., science, economics, engineering) are classified as students of ESP because the focus of their English learning is more on the use of English within the specific area rather than on general use.

Although ESP has been taught in Indonesian vocational higher institutions for many years, there is little information on the challenges teachers face in their ESP teaching. Thus, there is a need for a study dealing with the issue of teaching challenges within the context of ESP teaching and learning in an Indonesian vocational higher institution.

Literature Review

What is ESP?

Until today there has not been a consensus in regard to the exact meaning of ESP. Different people may interpret ESP differently. Some identify it “as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others, however, are more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes” (Anthony, 1997, p. 1).

Stevens (1988) argues that ESP may be worded differently in terms of its definitions. But, what is important is that whoever is concerned with ESP should know that ESP is “designed to meet specified needs of learners; related to content, to particular disciplines, occupations and activities; and centered on the language appropriate to those activities, in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics” (Stevens, 1988, p. 84).

Some Challenges of ESP and EGP Teaching

Teaching ESP in a vocational university has its own challenges. Teachers, for instance, have to cope with issues, such as students’ low learning motivation (Kubanyiova, 2006; Netiksiene, 2006) and the high stake curriculum (Kitkauskiene, 2006). Learners, in Netiksiene’s view, who study general English (EGP) (e.g., learners in the English Department), tend to have higher learning motivation than those who study ESP (e.g., learners in the science department who study English for the sciences). This is likely to happen due to the fact that the EGP learners are often exposed to a more fun learning environment than the ESP learners are (Donna, 2005). With regard to curriculum expectations, it is often argued that the ESP curriculum poses higher expectations on learners than the EGP curriculum. That is, learners of ESP are not only required to get familiarized with general English vocabulary, but must also be able to demonstrate their proficiency in the language within the specific areas (e.g., science, technology, business) (Kitkauskiene, 2006). Clearly, as reflected in these notions, the learning burden of ESP learners is heavier than that of their EGP counterparts.

While the above challenges can be seen as unique within the ESP context, there are also other challenges that are shared between EGP and ESP. These challenges include, among others, teachers’ and students’ use of technology or the internet in the teaching and learning process (Al-Mekhlafi, 2004; Liu, 2005; Thomson, 2008), large class size and limited resources (Donna, 2005). These issues, in fact, frequently appear in English language teaching (ELT) research (see, for example,

Al-Mekhlafi, 2004; Kubanyiova, 2006) as the main challenges or barriers faced by teachers in their teaching.

Research Question

This study sought to answer the following research question: What challenges does an ESP teacher face in his ESP teaching?

The Study

Participants

This study was part of an ongoing research involving a number of ESP teachers in a vocational higher institution in Indonesia. The findings reported in this paper are based on the responses obtained from one of the ESP teachers, Kelvin (pseudonym), participating in the study. Kelvin has been teaching English in this institution for nearly ten years and has a degree in English language teaching obtained from an Indonesian public university. At present, he is based in the Department of Engineering and is in charge of teaching English for engineering.

The Study Paradigm

This study was carried out within the framework of an interpretive paradigm. An interpretive researcher believes that knowledge is subjective, context dependent and known through interactions between the inquirer and inquiree or participants (Plack, 2005). Also, it is the main interest of the interpretive researcher to understand the meaning that an individual makes of his or her experiences and this can be best conducted if the inquirer or researcher can become intimately involved with the inquiry (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In this study, the researcher sought to develop rapport with the participant by proposing some informal questions (e.g., hobbies) prior to asking him the questions leading to the matter under investigation. Claiming to be an interpretive researcher, I therefore disagree with positive researchers who believe that knowledge or reality is independent of those undertaking the inquiry and the inquiry context. I would also critique this on the basis that positivists, in the conduct of research, aim to search for law-like generalizations (i.e., in a statistical sense). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argue how positivist researchers can achieve their aim if “the knowledge produced is too abstract and general for direct application to specific situations, contexts and individuals” (p. 19).

Instrument for Data Collection

The study employed semi-structured interviews as the instrument for data collection. This technique is used as it allows the researcher to probe for views and opinions of the participants (Corbetta, 2003). Moreover, this instrument gives the researcher the opportunity to gain deep information about the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2005). The interview took place at the participant's office and was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Consent was sought from the participant prior to the interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is basically about the process of data reduction, selection and simplification (Creswell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative computer software, NVivo 8 (2008), was used in this study to facilitate the process of data analysis. With this tool, tree nodes were created to generate ideas, concepts and categories concerning the data. The tool is very useful because it helps "organize raw data and links them with memos and 'databites' where researchers can make codes and analytical notes, and then edit and rework ideas as the project progresses" (Walsh, 2006, p. 353).

Findings

From the analysis of data using NVivo 8, several themes related to the challenges of teaching ESP could be identified. These themes are students' learning motivation, the mismatch between reality and expectations, lack of quality resources and heavy workload. The findings of this study are presented under each of these themes and supported with a block of narratives from the participant's responses.

Students' Learning Motivation

Kelvin (pseudonym) admitted that most of the students he was teaching were not motivated to learn English. It was very difficult for him to transfer knowledge to these students because it was not their main intention to study English in this vocational institution. For example, during the interview, he said:

I do not know what is wrong with these students. They seem to be lack of interest to learn English. How can we teach English well if they show no sign of motivation? I think this mainly happens because they come here not for English but for learning the subject matters...So, it can be said that they treat English, despite its importance for their future life, as a secondary subject.

Having said so, Kelvin often felt distressed with his teaching and found himself trapped in a difficult situation. As he explained:

I sometimes feel useless as an English teacher here. I don't know what to do to make the students in this department become motivated to learn English. All I do now is only to perform all my tasks as a teacher and get paid for what I have done. I have tried my best efforts but the results appear to be still negative. What more can be done? I don't know myself because my voice is never heard by the decision makers.

Mismatch between Reality and Expectations

Kelvin stated that the main aim of ESP learning in the vocational institution is to make students become proficient in the use of English not only for general communication, but also for the context of English within specific areas. He gave an example that it was expected that the electrical engineering graduates could communicate with the native speakers when they work with a foreign electrical company or a local company operated by foreign workers. Kelvin was, in fact, very supportive of this expectation, but the thing that he was so unhappy about was concerning the quality of students in terms of their English proficiency background. In one interview, he commented:

I do absolutely agree that students, once they graduate, will possess two competencies: the mastery of subject field like engineering, science, or business and the mastery of English as an international language. But, my question is do we have students who are ready to master both competencies? I am not in doubt that they may be good in their subject field, but I am not sure with English. On the one hand, I am instructed to teach English at an advanced level, on the other hand, most of the students can be categorized as the novice English learners, despite their study at tertiary level, who are not ready for such learning...You know what... many of them are still even not familiar with a simple grammar...On what basis then I should teach them advanced English.

Kelvin further supported his argument by stating that “the actual condition is that there is a mismatch between the reality and expectation”. In this sense, he argued that the objective set by the institution for these students was too ambitious or it could be that the students were recruited without taking into account their English proficiency background.

Lack of Quality Resources

One of the biggest challenges, as pointed out by Kelvin, in his ESP teaching was owing to the fact that the institution did not have quality resources for facilitating

teachers and students in their teaching and learning process. He asserted that although some facilities such as internet connection, language laboratory and library were already available, their condition was far from adequate to accommodate effective ESP teaching and learning. As he explained:

That is true that we are provided with internet facility, language lab and library, but honestly speaking all of these facilities are currently not in the condition that can support us for carrying out quality teaching. With the internet for example, its connectivity is not reliable and very slow. I often get frustrated when trying to access teaching materials from the campus internet. Similarly, the language lab is also not well maintained. Some of the booths are out of use. As a result, some students do not have the opportunity to experience learning using language lab. The library also, I think, still requires major improvement. I do not think that it has enough number of books or printed journals which can be used for ESP teaching and learning.

Heavy Workload

The issue of workload seemed to be a serious problem confronted by Kelvin in his ESP teaching. Because of this, he had difficulties in keeping a balance between his intention to serve quality teaching and the time he had to prepare for such teaching. On average, Kelvin was assigned between 24 to 36 hours a week in every semester. With this time allocation, he usually had to stand in front of a class for around 6 hours a day.

I think I have been assigned too much workload (between 24 to 36 hours a week). I hardly have time to browse the internet in an attempt to search for quality teaching materials. So, what usually happens is that I reuse the materials that I have been using for many years although I realize that some of them are out of date and no longer relevant for the current situation. It is poor condition, isn't it?

Kelvin also explained that what is currently practiced in the institution with regard to teachers' workload, in fact, violated the existing rule where a teacher should teach no more than 12 credit hours a week or an equivalent of 12 hours of face to face teaching. He explained that this condition might occur because there was a lack of ESP teachers in the institution.

Discussion

Based on Kelvin's responses, it is clear that ESP teaching in this vocational higher institution is somewhat problematic. Some of the problems reported such as low motivation, poor proficiency and lack of quality resources in fact corroborate the

findings of previous studies (Kitkauskiene, 2006; Netiksiene, 2006). Meanwhile, the issue of large class size as reported in Donna's (2006) study was not encountered in the current research. This is likely due to the fact that class size in this institution is normally not big where, according to Kelvin, there are only around 20 students or less in every class. Consistent with Kelvin's claim, I would also argue that such a class size can be considered relatively fine for accommodating the effective delivery of ESP. Despite the absence of this issue in the findings, this study identified two other matters that are unique to this institution. They are the issues of workload and teaching approaches. Each of the issues encountered in this study is discussed in this section and followed by the presentation of solutions for the given problem.

Firstly, the lack of motivation in learning experienced by ESP students in this context could be triggered by a number of factors. To find out what the actual factors influencing learning motivation are, thorough observation needs to be carried out. The teacher in this context could be right that students' learning focus (i.e. subject matter) might have interfered with their interest to learn English. However, he could not be conclusive without proof of what the real causes are. Finding the actual factors which cause the decline of students' learning motivation is crucial because it will help him identify appropriate strategies to overcome the problem. Kubanyiova (2006), once again, reminds us of the importance of motivation in ESP learning and she argues that the success of ESP learning "does not depend on students' cognitive ability alone, but it is also influenced by their learning motivation" (p. 1).

Should the teacher, after completing his observation, find that learners' lack of motivation to learn ESP is due to their lack of concern towards English, efforts need to be made to convince them about the importance of English for their professional life. Efforts in this sense can also mean ongoing action where the teacher keeps reminding their students on many occasions. If possible, all of this should be supported with evidence from the field to further convince the learners. Importantly, the teacher's focus should not be limited to such efforts only, but they should, at the same time, self-reflect about their teaching. In this regard, he needs to identify whether there are any parts of his teaching procedures which could lead to students' lack of learning interest. If he finds any, he should work hard then to improve.

Secondly, the mismatch between reality (students' English proficiency background) and (curriculum) expectations can be considered an urgent matter that needs fixing. This problem can be seen as a double-edge sword. On one hand, students should be taught what they need, particularly, in terms of their language needs. That is, the lessons provided to them should be within their competency range. How can a toddler be taught to ride a motorcycle if he still does not know

how to ride a bike? Or how can a five-year old pupil be taught to do academic writing if he still does not know how to write simple correct sentences himself? These analogical questions may be appropriate to be used as the representation of this issue. On the other hand, the curriculum formulated by the institution requires the students' completion, of their studies, to be proficient in English both for general and specific use. In this sense too, the curriculum cannot be deemed wrong because it is not possible for it to be made like an elementary school curriculum. The ideal solution to this problem is that this vocational higher institution should plan to accept students who can only meet a certain English proficiency standard (e.g., TOEFL certificate with a score of not less than 525). Nevertheless, this policy can also lead to another new problem. This problem is that the institution may not have enough students. Or the case might be that some of the departments will find no students who have such qualifications. A result of this problem is that the institution may not have enough funds to support its operations including paying teachers' salaries. So, again this matter is a dilemma for either side. Another alternative solution could be with the assignment of different expectations or standards for students. For this purpose, students need to be grouped according to their ability. For instance, students with poor English competency are put within one class and are assigned teaching materials that suit their English needs. Similarly, students whose English is good are put together and taught English according to their level. However, this policy too is not without consequences. The institution, for instance, may need to adjust their teaching and learning system to accommodate this learning solution. But, compared to the previous so-called 'ideal solution', the latter proposal is more feasible. Certainly, there is still room for other alternative solutions to this problem. It is important to note that whatever the solutions are the students should not be sacrificed for the sake of the institution's prestige. Thus, to prevent such from happening, all the solutions offered should be discussed with all parties concerned, including students' representatives wherever possible.

Thirdly, the issue of quality teaching and learning resources can also determine whether or not the curriculum's (teaching and learning) objectives can be well achieved. Liu (2005) has noted that quality English learning can only be achieved if teachers and students have access to quality resources. The reliability of Internet services, an issue raised by Kelvin, is one of the important resources that needs attention. Its availability can have a massive positive impact on students' learning. Distance and quality learning or teaching materials are no longer barriers now. But, a very important question that needs to be asked is 'Are the institution's leaders aware of this?' If they are, they will make every effort to ensure teachers and students can benefit from using it. Similarly, although teaching and learning materials can now be accessed from the internet, the existence of the library is

still necessary. Therefore, printed books and journals should be made available for teachers and learners. As with e internet facilities, the library too needs to be managed professionally. A large enough budget should be allocated to procure quality books and journals to facilitate teaching and learning. Another resource, the language lab, should also be well taken care of so that it can be effectively used to accommodate the teaching and learning of ESP courses.

Finally, with regard to the workload, there has been a long debate about it. This problem is, in fact, not only experienced by the ESP teacher of this vocational university alone, but also by many other teachers throughout the world regardless of the subject they teach (see Currie et al., 2002; Dixon et al., 2007). In fact, around fifty percent of teachers across the globe, in Dixon, Scott, & Dixon's view, are assigned a heavy workload. In response to this, Easthope and Easthope (2000) warn that a heavy workload is a serious threat to teachers' professionalism. They point out that it is very difficult for teachers to deliver quality teaching if they do not have enough time for good preparation and to undertake professional development owing to the unreasonable teaching tasks. There is no other way to deal with this matter except that the institution should assign a reasonable workload to ESP teachers. It is interesting to note, based on Kelvin's responses, that what is assigned to teachers in this institution has violated the government's policy. In fact, it has been outlined in the policy that teachers should not teach more than 12 hours a week. In my understanding, 12 hours teaching is reasonable for teachers because with this amount of time, they still have the opportunity to do other useful activities to support their teaching such as undertaking quality teaching preparation, conducting research and participating in professional development activities. Besides, it also still allows them to maintain a balance between their personal and professional life.

Implications of the Results on ESP Teaching and Learning

As the results of this study have revealed, factors such as motivation, curriculum expectation and students' English proficiency, learning resources and teachers' teaching load have a significant influence on the quality of ESP teaching. These four factors require serious attention from the stakeholders, particularly school administrators and teachers. Teachers, for instance, should also, in addition to their subject matter teaching, make efforts to help improve students' motivation to learn. In other words, they need to create a fun atmosphere in the process of ESP teaching and learning. Once again, as previous studies as well as this research have suggested, ESP learning will not be effective if students are not motivated to learn.

In addition, the school administrators need to ensure that students are taught

what they need, not only in terms of the teaching and learning content, but also with respect to the level of difficulty. In short, the learning expectations need to be adjusted with students' English proficiency levels. In other words students need to be placed in ESP classes according to their level of proficiency or the level of English as required by the institution. By so doing, a win-win situation, effective for ESP teaching and learning, can be generated. Also important to be noted is that ESP teaching and learning will not be effective if teachers are assigned a heavy workload and also do not have the support of quality learning resources. Both factors are crucial and need to be seriously considered by the school administrators. In short, ESP teaching and learning can be successful if teachers have a reasonable workload and are supported with quality resources.

Conclusion

This paper sought to reveal the challenges faced by an ESP teacher in an Indonesian vocational higher institution. The study was carried out within the framework of interpretive inquiry and semi structured interviews were used as the means for data collection. Data were analyzed through the identification of nodes or themes using NVivo 8 software.

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the findings reported in this research are based on the responses provided by one of the English teachers in charge of ESP teaching in this institution. As a result, the information it has presented may not necessarily reflect the voices of other ESP teachers in the institution. Thus, there is a need for further study which can involve all ESP teachers in the institution. Students learning ESP in the institution can also provide useful information regarding the process of ESP teaching. Due to time and budget constraints, their voices could not be heard in the present study. Therefore, further inquiry which can take students' voices into account is essential.

Further research which investigates other issues related to ESP teaching in the institution is also a possibility. Issues such as ESP teachers' identity and factors influencing successful ESP teaching can be explored. Finally, the present study was carried out within the framework of interpretive or qualitative inquiry. The findings (and analysis) it reports might be subjective and are not generalizable. Thus, there is a need for more objective further research looking at a similar issue conducted within the framework of a positive paradigm (i.e., using a quantitative approach).

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