Investigating the Challenges and Instructional Approaches in Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to Undergraduates in Pakistan's Public Universities

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Abstract

English ESP has become an important aspect of the postsecondary English language education especially in countries in the developing world which use English as the primary language of commerce, as well as of learning activities at the college and university level. It has become one of the major components of academic programs providing students with language-related skills analyzed by reference to their respective disciplines. The ESP is not merely aimed at general proficiency of the language, it is concentrated on specialized vocabulary and even the specifics of the language used in different spheres of professions. The pressure is increasingly put on the undergraduate students in the Pakistani public universities to acquire their language skills specific to the fields of work in anticipation of finding job later in life. Within such competitive atmosphere, proper ESP training is critical to the development of students who can fare well in the requirements of the work place in terms of communication particularly, when the languages of interaction and instruction are English. However, there are different factors that interfere with effective execution of ESP programs. Among them, there are the lack of prepared teachers of ESP, the lack of curriculum development, lack of teaching resources, the gap between the course content and the needs of the real world. The barriers to instruction and learning institutional barriers like administrative lackadaisical attitude and lazy support policies among others also contributes to these issues.The purpose is to identify the main problems that defy teachers and learners in the ESP classroom and how the instructors cope with the issues. Among the coping skills used by teachers, adaptation of materials and interactive strategies are frequently

implemented by the former to improve the results of learning.The data will be also gathered with the help of interviews, the sample will be chosen with the help of purposive sampling approach. The sample will consist of the teachers who have first-hand experience of teaching at the undergraduate level, that is, in public sector universities, ESP. Thematic analysis will be applied on the data collected so that patterns and themes about ESP instructions are established. The results will prove useful to the body of knowledge and also benefit the practice of teaching ESP in the higher education sector in Pakistan.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Undergraduate Education, Instructional Approaches, Teaching Challenges, Public Universities in Pakistan*

1.1 Introduction

Effective communication in the academic and professional context is one of the skills that are needed in the current globalized world. ESP is distinct with general English in that it focuses in the language and communication needed in some related fields like business, finance, medical, computer studies and so many other subjects (Hasan & Qub -a, 2025). The professional communication English languages are used as a lingua franca in most countries particularly in Pakistan and India (Pun, 2023). Pakistani students encounter various difficulties on the way to forming their linguistic and communicative skills in English language (Kahtoon et al., 2019). Moreover, the students in Pakistan who do not speak English as the first language sometimes require training courses in English language at higher education institutions, as they speak English of professional sphere well. One of the concepts of teaching and studying English as a second or a foreign language is the English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is aimed at teaching English language so that the learners can use it within a particular field. In the beginning, the English teaching for special purposes was influenced by the need to have cross linguistics communication skills in an area such as business and technology (Benesch, 2001) however it has expanded to incorporate other areas like English as an Academic Purpose (EAP), English as an Occupational Purpose (EOP), English as an Legal Purpose (ELP) and English as a Sociocultural Purpose (ESCP). Individual learners ESP classes are created with reference to their individual targets and are often concentrated on the language, communication skills, and type of text (or genres) people have to use in their schools or work. The problems and challenges we look into in this study is what is faced by the instructor to teach ESP in undergraduate and what type of strategies are adopted by the instructor to overcome these problems in Pakistani university.

Over the last few years Expressive Spoken English (ESP) has turned out to be a crucial discipline in English Language Teaching (ELT) particularly in non-native settings such as in Pakistan where English is widely studied in advanced education, the field of law, business, health, and technology. When in such areas learners do not find it easy to conform to the communicative needs of their respective profession since they do not have enough exposure to English beyond academic circles and because their ESP requirements have not been adequately prepared. Additionally, the curriculum design of ESP in Pakistan is not fully developed and its implementation is not similar in the various institutions. The students are supposed to deliver technical reports, speaking at presentations, professional correspondence, and academic writing

in English. However, in most situations, they are taught by mainstream English teachers who might not be equipped with the actual knowledge of the subject or teaching experience with regard to addressing the need of these learners in terms of specialisation.

In this respect, the role of a teacher begins not only to spread the language knowledge but also to cognize the communication needs of certain disciplines and correspondingly select the focus of the teaching course. Nevertheless, a variety of restraints affecting instructors greatly includes stale content, inflexible curriculum, absence of any liaison with subject experts, and insufficient professional growth accomplishments. Such shortcomings are obstacles to the efficiency of instructions on ESP and require a strategic approach to new developments in teaching. Hence, the aim of the study is to review such classroom-level issues and see how ESP educators in the institutes of the public sector in Pakistan can deal and handle them in Pakistan.

Moreover, as ESP is a learner-friendly method, a teacher will be forced to adjust his or her material, terms, and type of discourse to fit a specific group of students. The customization entails not only linguistic skills but also the informed understanding of the field within contexts, of which most instructors are not equipped with, because of lack of cooperation across disciplines in the institution with respect to language departments, and other academic departments. As a result, students tend to complain that ESP courses are not useful because they deal with irrelevant issues, not industry-related materials, and do not give students much practice in industry language functions.

The perception of ESP within the institution is another aspect which makes the teaching environment of ESP difficult. The ESP in most of Pakistan State universities is underestimated, and it is considered a fluffy subject having less institutional support or grant. Teachers are supposed to create materials and design courses but with little or no training and support. Such gaps in institutions add to the classroom level problems and make the learning experience fragmented to students.

The current research ameliorates these concerns by determining the problems that ESP teachers encounter and the educative measures that they can apply to overcome such problems. The data collected through qualitative data collection will help to get real experiences of classroom operation and propose a better ESP instruction to the ESP instruction at the undergraduate level.

1.2. Problem Presented

Field of study and career are becoming increasingly more specialized these days and ESP enable learners to study the form of English they require in a given interest area. In the university level, an English language instructor usually teaches course on ESP. Such are the teachers who teach the general courses on English, therefore not serving the need of the ESP learners.

The ESP teaching fails to equip students adequately into discipline specific communication because contents are outdated, trained teachers are not available, the instructions and methods used, and lack of correspondence between the course and the professional needs. Consequently, this research looks into issues that the teacher encounters in the classroom and measures that aids them to stop these issues.

1.3. Research Questions
- What are the issues teaching ESP at undergraduate level in Pakistan public sector university?
- What are the techniques used by instructors to overcome these issues?

These research questions aim to explore both the nature of the problems and the practical solutions employed by teachers within their institutional constraints.

1.4. Research Objectives
- To identify the major issues which face by the instructors at undergraduate level in public sector university of Pakistan.
- To explore the teaching methods used by instructors to overcome these issues.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1 Review of Literature

These goals can be used to direct the research in finding exploitable conclusions that will be of help in advancing the practice of teaching and learning ESP.

English specifically purposes (ESP) is an interactive and learner oriented methodology of teaching English language. It highlights on language and communication need of students in certain field like business, medical and computer science (Ruslanovna, 2017). In this definition the role of tailoring or tailoring the instruction to the field of study or profession in which the learner practices is emphasized, in which case general English skills may not be sufficient. The changing face of ESP has demonstrated that the learning of languages is most effective when the language is put in direct relation to the communicative functions students are really going to exercise in professional life.

Thus, ESP is more than teaching technical vocabulary. However, it also implies that teacher ought to consider what kind of the English learners can expect porting in their profession and academic field. This implies that coaches have to study the objectives of learners and customize learning. As an example, a medical student needs to have an eye on case reporting and medical consultations, but a computer science student might be in need of some language skills to allow writing documentation, writing coding commentary, or even technical presentation. Such a discipline-oriented orientation renders ESP a much more specific and practical method of teaching the English language.

1.The kind of activity that would be used in ESP programs must include those that benefit the students in their reality and area (Hutchinson & Waters,1987). This is in line with the concept of needs analysis as one of the fundamental concepts in curriculum design of ESP. Needs analysis assists in finding out the exact language forms, genres and styles of communication that learners will require in their fields. Authentic tasks such as role-play, mock interviews, writing technical reports, or interpreting data tables are the examples of what ESP classes recommend to be done. Such application of real life scenario enhances motivation and relevance of the learning by the learner.

According to Alsamadani, (2017), most of the ESP classes are based on the receptive skills such as listening and reading but pay less importance to talking and writing. Lack of balance is a

common occurrence in developing countries whereby curriculum systems are seen to be inclined towards passive knowledge as opposed to active generation. Nevertheless, in a working and classroom environment students are usually required to report results, discuss issues and prepare reports- tasks that come under productive use of language.

Moreover, both teachers and students admit that the productive skills were more needed in their academic and working lives but it is still not worked out. General absence in requirements to acquire these skills culminates in a form of scholars graduated who knows a lot about their field yet can hardly communicate effectively within it. This is a serious problem in Pakistan because graduates of the universities will need to communicate with international professionals and create any written documents in English. Integration of productive skills in the ESP curriculum therefore becomes a must instead of an option to the learner.

According to (Evans, 1997) the actions of an ESP teacher, a teacher, a course designer, a provider of the learning materials to the students and a collaborative and researcher and an evaluator is explained. Multidimensional role of the ESP instructors characterises the profession because of their fact. Unlike the normal English teaching whereby in most cases the normal course MATERIALS and textbook materials have dominated, the ESP instructor is left to his/her own devices.

The teachers of the ESP compile a syllabus based on the requirements of the learners that is, what kind of vocabulary and contents do they require. This underlines the importance of centering the instruction on learners. Educators need to find out which word forms, grammatical constructions and genres are the most common and applicable in the area of learners and their professionality. Analysis of genre and corpus linguistics are common in the design of ESP syllabuses nowadays.

ESP teachers should not only pay attention to a linguistic knowledge they should also instruct the knowledge which is connected with job specific. It is this bi-polar interest, both in language and context, which makes ESP stand out among other varieties of English teaching. Teachers usually fill the gap that exists in content knowledge and language skills and this makes the technical issues easy to understand by the non-native speaker. Thus, work with content experts is strongly advisable in the development of ESP programs.

It covers linguistics knowledge in syllabus but as the world is globalized now, we must have that soft skill such as communication in the respective profession. And this is the reason why teachers incorporate speaking and writing skills in syllabus. The consideration of such strategies of communication, as negotiation, polite refusals, persuasive writing, and professional email etiquette can help students to work in their future careers. These additions increase the applicability and viability of ESP courses.

The place an ESP teacher takes, a teacher, a designer, a provider of the learning materials to the students, a collaborator and a researcher and an evaluator is explained as per (Evans, 1997). The profession is characterised by the fact that its practices mean that ESP instructors hold a multidimensional role. Unlike the common way in which English is taught, where standard course

MATERIALS and textbooks have been the order of the day, the ESP teacher has to improvise or prepare at his/her own expense.

The teachers of ESP construct a syllabus as per the needs of the learners or rather what kind of vocabulary and materials they require. This supports the pole position of the learner-centered teaching. Teacher should determine the most common and appropriate lexical items, grammatical structures, and genres, which occur in the fields of the learners. In the study of any syllabus in contemporary ESP programs, corpus linguistics and genre analysis are frequently informative.

ESP teachers should not only concentrate their knowledge in linguistics but also impart on the knowledge that relates to job specific. These two considerations, i.e. language and context, make a difference between ESP and other types of English instruction. The teachers do tend to fill the gap between the content knowledge and linguistic skills so that the non native could learn the technical concepts. Thus, the idea of being involved in a partnership within the development of an ESP program is strongly encouraged to work with the content specialist.

Linguistics is a knowledge we cover in syllabus but in the present globalized environment we require soft skills in professional area such as communication. That is why the teachers incorporate the skills of speaking and writing in syllabus. The mentioned strategies like negotiation, writing persuasively, making polite refusals, and proper business emailing allow learners to work in their future profession quite effectively. The additions make the ESP courses more practical and relevant.

According to Anthony, (2018) unavailability of course related material is the other factor that teachers encounter when teaching ESP. In the lack of right materials, ESP teachers have to demonstrate outdated or broad resources which do not fit the objectives of students. This obstructs the value and efficiency of teaching. Institutions should make investments in their material development or adjustments to depict accuracy in linguistic and authenticity in professional terms.

There are a number of challenges to English for Specific Purposes instructors. A limited and traditional language assessment is one of the key challenges that cannot accurately gauge the development of students in terms of technical word knowledge and professional competencies (Salzinger, 2024). Their actions are often not reflected in the typical tests, i.e. writing a business proposal or engaging in a medical consultation. Evaluation within ESP should be a performance assessment, which should be practical.

Designing effective evaluation methods that can measure the highly appreciated subject specific knowledge of learners is also a challenge to the teacher (Riccardi et al., 2020). This will further increase the work burden of the teacher who will not only be expected to teach but also develop scores of valid, reliable and context sensitive assessment tools.

Moreover, it may seem quite challenging to teach students with poor English language skills, since such students might not be confident and will not possess the prerequisite skills to work with special material. Educators might be required to apply motivational tactics, differentiated learning as well as additional practice.

In most instances, ESP classes are not focused on specific academic and professional needs of the students especially individuals with professions such as medicine, science and law (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2015). Misalignment between course's substance and learner demands lowers efficiency of ESP and causes student de-motivation. It needs to be repaired with needs analysis and continual revision of the course.

Most studies focus on ESP teaching for postgraduate level, advance learners, and how to support weak students in ESP classes. There is a lack of research on specific difficulties which face is faced by undergraduate students in business department at Kohat University of Science and Technology. And also we investigate the strategies which is used by teachers to overcome the challenges.

This highlights a specific research gap that this study aims to address. By focusing on the undergraduate business department in a Pakistani public university, this research contributes original findings that can inform context-specific ESP pedagogy and policy.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

- This research is conducted using a qualitative research design and tries to find possible issues, which teachers and students experience when they take English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in their undergraduate classes at public sector university in Pakistan. The use of qualitative research is especially appropriate in the given study because it will make it possible to explore more deeply the experiences, perceptions, and strategies of participants in the setting, which is natural to them, i.e. academic. It dwells upon human behavior, attitudes and social process, and they are vital in pursuing educational phenomena like learning and teaching language strategies.

- Research Design

- This research took an exploratory qualitative research study. Its main objective was to have a rich, detailed and contextualized information about the issues being faced in ESP teaching and learning and how these dubious challenges are being addressed by the instructors. The undergraduate field of teaching ESP in Pakistan is still under researched, moreover, in the context of public universities and that is why an exploratory qualitative research method would help the researcher to unearth new areas and ideas, which might have been left out due to quantitative tactics.

- Sample and sampling technique

- The study participants are undergraduate students (of the Business and Social Sciences departments of Kohat University of Science and Technology) and ESP instructors. Purposive sample technique was employed to recruit the participants because their data will be relevant and in-depth having an experience of ESP course. The sample will be composed of 6 to 8 ESP-teachers and 12 to 15 ESP-students who are still in their study or finished it recently. This sample size supports a wide-ranged but workable data collection and analysis.

• Data Collecting Methods

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and they provided the necessary flexibility to aware the participants of their opinions and at the same time maintain consistency of interviews. Interview questions were to address the following main areas:

• The particular issues that teachers have to deal with when it comes to the planning and the implementation of ESP courses

• The perception of students on effectiveness of ESP courses and difficulties in their learning

• Instruments that instructors apply to overcome language and content-related difficulties

• Accessibility and applicability of instructional resources, evaluation instruments and school resources

The interviews were either face-to-face and via the Internet, according to the convenience and availability of individuals. All interviews were audio-recorded and took about 30-45 minutes by consent of the participants.

Apart from interviews, classroom observation was conducted where it was possible, to make better insights of how the classes operate, student participation and the teaching methods used in real-time. What aided in triangulating the data collected by interviewing people was the use of observation notes.

Chapter 4: Analysis of data

The chapter provides an in-depth examination of a qualitative data which were primary produced through semi-structured interviews of ESP instructors and undergraduate students in the public sector universities of Pakistan. Data were organized in meaningful categories using thematic analysis. It was in order to understand what problems teachers and learners have in ESP classrooms and which approaches are used by instructors in order to deal with these concerns properly.

As can be seen in the analysis, there are some recurrent themes of the analysis which are highlighted below.

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4.3 Theme 3: Poor Mastery of English Language by the students

One of the greatest challenges both instructors and the learners claimed was the poor language base of the learners. There were a lot of students in ESP courses who did not have even elementary knowledge of English. Consequently, they struggled to stay on when technical terms or professional jargons were used.

One of the instructors said:

The students are hardly able even to make a simple paragraph in English. It is extremely difficult to introduce specific terms of the field when they have not even mastered the simplest.

The weakness did not only impact the classroom progress but also did not encourage students who were not quire active when it came to speaking processes. The findings made during visits to classrooms proved that students tended to stay quiet during discussions and communicated in their first language even more, which further reduced the possibilities of the practice.

4.4 Theme 4: Motivational and classroom involvement

The other issue that was raised severally was the unmotivation of the students. In most cases, ESP classes were considered not so important by the many learners as compared to the core subject courses they had. In others, the students did not attend classes on regular basis or have been passive at all activities, just to secure the attendance status.

One of the students said:

Our lectures are not that useful, to be honest we come to class. The majority of the time it seems like normal English, nothing special regarding our topic."

Other instructors claimed that the teaching method characterized by lectures and textbooks reading as well contributed to the absence of student engagement. Those tasks that were not practical and interactive made the students lose interest. This meant that classroom activities should be more task-oriented and real world like as they could develop knowledge of language as well as confidence.

4.5 Theme 5: Adaptive Strategies Used by Instructors

Despite the above challenges, many instructors demonstrated creativity and flexibility in overcoming classroom limitations. One of the strategies involved designing their own content based on real-world documents like emails, CVs, and case studies relevant to the students' academic fields.

For example, one instructor explained:

"I asked students to bring samples from their subject—business memos, emails, proposals. We analyzed them together, and that helped create more interest."

Other teachers relied on multimedia tools such as videos, podcasts, and online articles to make lessons more engaging. Group discussions, peer presentations, and role-play activities were also used to develop speaking and writing skills. These methods, although implemented informally, helped students understand the practical use of English in professional contexts.

4.6 Summary of Emerging Patterns

The overall analysis indicates a clear mismatch between student needs and the available teaching resources in ESP classrooms. Teachers struggle with content limitations and lack of institutional support, while students face language proficiency issues and low motivation. Despite these obstacles, some instructors have made sincere efforts to adapt their teaching strategies through context-based and student-centered approaches.

The key themes discussed in this chapter form the basis for the next chapter, where these findings will be discussed in the light of existing literature and conclusions will be drawn.

Chapter 5: Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Key Findings

Based on the detailed analysis of interviews and classroom observations, several important findings emerged regarding the challenges and strategies of teaching ESP at the undergraduate level in Pakistan's public sector universities.

1. Lack of Subject-Specific Knowledge Among ESP Teachers

Many English instructors are trained in general language teaching but are assigned to teach ESP in highly specialized fields such as business, medicine, or law. This mismatch leads to a lack of confidence in handling technical vocabulary and disciplinary content. Teachers often feel unprepared to answer field-specific questions or provide authentic materials.

2. Inadequate and Non-Specialized Teaching Materials

There is a critical shortage of curriculum-specific, authentic ESP materials. Instructors often resort to outdated textbooks or generic ESL resources that do not align with the professional communication needs of students. The absence of structured, field-specific syllabi results in poorly targeted instruction.

3. Weak Language Proficiency of Students

A significant number of students enrolled in ESP courses lack the basic English skills necessary for academic and professional communication. Many struggle with reading comprehension, writing coherence, and oral fluency. This deficiency hinders their ability to engage with specialized content and participate actively in classroom tasks.

4. Low Motivation and Passive Classroom Behavior

Students tend to perceive ESP courses as secondary to their core subject courses. This perception, combined with monotonous teaching methods and a lack of contextual relevance, leads to reduced motivation and minimal class participation. Students often prefer to communicate in their native language and shy away from speaking tasks in English.

5. Adaptive and Creative Teaching Strategies

Despite institutional challenges, some instructors have adopted practical strategies to make their lessons more effective. These include using authentic texts from the students' disciplines, designing task-based activities like email writing or mock interviews, and incorporating multimedia content. Such practices have shown positive outcomes in student engagement and skill development.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the effectiveness of ESP teaching in public sector universities in Pakistan:

1. Professional Development for ESP Teachers

ESP instructors should receive specialized training that includes exposure to subject-specific knowledge, industry communication practices, and needs analysis techniques. Workshops, certifications, or collaborative teaching with subject specialists can help bridge the knowledge gap.

2. Development of Field-Specific ESP Curriculum

Universities should develop structured ESP syllabi in collaboration with subject departments. These syllabi must include relevant vocabulary, discourse types, and communication tasks aligned with the real-life professional demands of each discipline.

3. Creation and Distribution of Authentic Teaching Materials

It is essential to provide instructors with access to authentic, field-specific teaching resources such as technical reports, proposals, emails, meeting transcripts, and case studies. Developing in-house material banks and digital repositories can support teachers in contextualizing lessons effectively.

4. Bridging the Proficiency Gap

Before beginning ESP courses, students with low English proficiency should be offered preparatory or foundation courses focusing on general English. This will ensure that they possess the basic language skills required to benefit from ESP instruction.

5. Use of Interactive, Task-Based Methodology

Teachers should adopt more interactive and student-centered techniques, such as project-based learning, simulations, role plays, and peer presentations. These approaches increase student participation, motivation, and practical language use.

6. Assessment Reforms

Current assessment methods should be revised to evaluate not just grammar and vocabulary, but also field-specific communication skills. ESP assessments should include performance-based tasks such as report writing, oral presentations, and professional email writing.

7. Institutional Support and Collaboration

Departments must support ESP instructors through collaborative planning, regular meetings with subject specialists, and shared goal setting. University administration should prioritize ESP in funding, teacher hiring, and resource allocation.

Conclusion

The study highlights that while the teaching of ESP in public sector universities of Pakistan faces notable challenges, there are also opportunities for meaningful improvement. With adequate training, resource development, and institutional commitment, ESP programs can be transformed into effective platforms that equip students with the professional communication skills needed for success in their careers.

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