

Who is more qualified to teach ESP: English language teacher or content specialist teacher?

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Abstract

With the appearance of ESP in 1960's, its teaching and its qualified teacher have ever been controversial subject matters.

There are two categories of ESP teachers: English language teachers, who are familiar with the target language as a whole, and content specialist teachers, who are specifically familiar with the specialized words and texts whose reading and comprehension is the goal of most ESP courses in third world countries. English language teachers feel their familiarity with teaching methods, grammar, functions, and the language as a whole gives them the teaching edge for ESP classes. Content specialist teachers, however, feel their familiarity with the foreign country and its institutions (that might result from their studying there), the target language as well as its communicative fields will make them more qualified for ESP classes.

The present study aims to shed some light on the priority of any of the above mentioned teachers of ESP through reviewing the studies conducted in this regard.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), teacher, student, instruction.

Introduction

Since the appearance of ESP courses, the question of who is more qualified to teach these courses has created a dispute between EFL teachers and content specialist teachers. EFL teachers in Iran believe that the purpose of teaching ESP courses is to teach English, not the subject matter; therefore, ESP teaching is part of their job. However, content Specialists' point of view is that EFL instructors do not possess enough knowledge regarding the subject area, so they cannot convey the concepts satisfactorily (Safari, 2018)

Based on the writers' researches, many empirical and descriptive studies have been conducted to answer the article's title question; although, they found few articles in which the results of all such studies were studied, discussed, and summarised.

This article aims to provide a defensible answer to the title's posed question by reviewing and assessing the results of the empirical and descriptive studies conducted in the field of ESP teaching.

What is ESP?

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Quarniki (2011-2012) challenges the various definitions of ESP provided by other scholars and then summarises her research results and puts forward her own view based on her studies. This view might be more to the point than the contradictory ideas of the previous scholars. She believes that ESP is rooted in three principles: the language to be learnt and used, the learners to learn and use that language, and finally the atmosphere where the language is learnt and used. Based on these principles, ESP can be defined as teaching specialized discourse to mostly adult language learners who are to use the learnt language in specific settings (laboratory, police station, hospital, factory, etc.) to achieve a specific goal while attaining several other personal purposes.

However, what this field's scholars are not in agreement about is what kind of language must be taught as ESP (specialized vocabulary, functional and situational language, jargons, etc.) and how any of these should be taught (in a text about the target job, in conversations, through videos, etc.).

Although, there exist great contradictions among the scientists over the upcoming questions; all of the contradictory views point to the beginning and development procedure of ESP.

The History of ESP

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) introduce 4 main reasons for turning of English into the language of specific purposes:

- The first reason was an outbreak and development of vast scientific, technical, and economic activities in the international scene at the end of 1940s and the beginning of 1950s, following the end of World War II. As a result of America's playing a very serious economic role in the after-war era, the English language was used as the international language and became the new "lingua franca"¹ of commerce and education.
- The second reason for teaching English for specific purposes was the oil crisis at the beginning of 1970s. This crisis resulted in the widespread transition of Western money and science toward the petroleum exporting countries. The language used in all these transactions was English.

Both of these issues resulted in greater pressure towards English language teaching as a job because English was needed for the transaction of goods. In this period of time, learning English language was no longer solely the language teachers' concern, and it had become a necessity for the people who longed to achieve not only their actual needs, but also their goals and wishes.

- The third reason introduced for turning of English into the language of specific purposes by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) was the grand shift from prescriptive grammar to descriptive grammar. Classic linguists strongly believed in telling the people what and how is correct to say or write in any language; however, in this modern course of linguistics, revolutionary linguists took a tremendous step forward and introduced a new opinion. They believed that the linguists must only portray the way most of the ordinary people speak or write. What's more, they also argued that the correct language is the one used by the majority of the people in their routine conversations. It was after the introduction of this new trend in linguistics that the attentions were directed toward the great differences between daily spoken English and its written form. In fact, they realized that the type of language used by people changes based on the setting in which the language is used. This new discovery had linguists introduce a new idea: if the languages used in different settings are different, the method of teaching to meet the needs of the speakers in those different settings must also be different.

It was exactly at this time (the end of 1960s and beginning of 1970s) that greater efforts were made to put a proper definition for English for Science and Technology (EST) forth.

- The fourth and last reason that Hutchinson and Waters (1987) introduce for the emergence of ESP is mostly related to the psychological factors that affect ESP learning. The ESP researchers were intrigued by the varieties in the learning patterns of different people, and in the reasons that motivated people to try to learn--and like to learn--English for specific purposes. Designation of rule-governed instructional programs, based on the language learners' needs analysis and emphasising learner-centred teaching syllabi, were some of this new trend's fruits,

and still play a fundamental role in discussions about clarifying course planning in teaching ESP. The questions it asks are: who is going to learn what, in how long, and why?

The Studies Conducted Regarding the Qualified Teacher for ESP in Iran

In recent years, many Iranian language teachers have studied ESP teaching, and the results have been published in different scholarly Iranian and foreign journals. In this section, some of these studies' results are discussed.

Sadeghi (2005), after referring to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), proposed that an ESP teacher needs the same characteristics of an EGP (English for General Purposes) teacher; that is, English language knowledge, thorough familiarity with lesson plans, and specialized knowledge about the students' field of study. There is no doubt that somehow all of the specialty teachers who teach ESP lack the first and second necessities and this lack is not something that can be disregarded.

The results of a study conducted by Maleki (2006) from the medical university of Zanjan (a city in North West Iran) showed that what interrupts the students' improvement in ESP is in fact their overall weakness in general English. He concluded that the first necessity in achieving the main goal of ESP (reading and comprehending specialized texts) is to know English in general.

Maleki (2008) compared two groups of university students, each including twenty members. The results indicated that the group who were instructed by the teacher with an overall knowledge of the English language scored higher in both criteria of marks and satisfaction, directly contrasting the group who had been taught by the teacher with content-specific English knowledge.

In addition, Ahmadi (2008), one of the language teachers at Paramedic School of Shahid Beheshti Medical University in Tehran (Iran's capital), analysed the results of a survey conducted in the educational year 2006-2007. The results showed that:

1. Specialty school deans believe that ESP must be taught by content specialists, since they can teach more specialized vocabularies better than language teachers;

2. Language school deans, and even the deputy deans at non-language schools, think that language teachers can be more successful in teaching ESP, and argue that the course first of all should aim to teach the English language, while the teacher, in addition to being familiar with specialized terms, must also have a good command of language structure, grammar, and affixes. He must also be able to teach all the mentioned points, and understand the targeted texts. This is in condition that many field specialists who teach ESP may not be able to read the target texts correctly, as they just read and translate the key terms they know.

3. All of the students who were questioned regarding this matter were more interested in and satisfied with being taught by English teachers rather than content specialists.

Sherkatolabbasi and Mahdavi Zafarghandi (2012) conducted a similar study in Gilan (a city in northern Iran) and Isfahan (a city in central Iran). Their study results also showed that the most successful teachers of ESP were English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, and the most satisfied students were those who had been taught by EFL teachers; meanwhile, the least successful teachers were the field specialists, and the least satisfied students were those who had been taught by field specialists. Sherkatolabbasi and Zafarghandi (2012) concluded that the best policy in ESP courses would be benefiting from EFL teachers who are also familiar with specialized texts and specialized fields of study.

Maleki and Zafari (2014) deduced that the term "specific" that is used in ESP does not necessarily refer to sheer teaching of specialized words and phrases in a scientific or technical field. In reality, ESP aims to teach the target language system to increase the learners' communicative skills in English, in addition to emphasising the students' needs in their specialized field of study. This overall goal, without the help of a specialised EFL teacher, would seem unachievable.

Aliasin and Pouyan (2014) studied the present article's title in an empirical research study. They taught ESP to 120 accounting and management students. The students were randomly divided into two groups. One group was taught by an EFL teacher and the other by a content specialist who was familiar with English language. At the end of the course, the students were asked to fill out questionnaires regarding their ideas about their ESP teachers. Data analysis results showed that the EFL

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teacher's students were significantly more satisfied with the teacher's method of teaching and their amount of learning than the other teacher's students.

Another study was conducted by Mousavi *et al.* (2019), aiming at exploration of 300 ESP university students' perceptions regarding the most entitled instructors to deliver ESP courses in Iran. Lack of good and proper pronunciation, monotonous nature of semesters, unfamiliarity with complexities of grammar and meaning of some words except specialized ones showed the incapability of many field specialists who teach ESP, based on the students' attitudes.

The Studies Conducted Regarding the Qualified Teacher for ESP outside Iran

The number of studies conducted in the field of finding qualified teachers for ESP shows that this study field has also been very controversial outside Iran. In this section, a representative selection of these studies are discussed.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued that an ESP teacher does not necessarily need thorough command of the students' field of study and having three main qualities qualifies him/her for the duty: a positive viewpoint toward ESP in general, familiarity with the basic principles of the target field's specialized domains, and a good grasp of his/her present amount of knowledge. Based on Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it can be deduced that an ESP teacher's familiarity with the specialized field is enough for his success in his task; he does not need to be a specialist.

Graham (1987) emphasized the direct correlation between any student's general English ability and his/her success in understanding specialized texts.

Spack (1988), referring to some of his students, introduced the students' weakness in general English as the main source of their struggle with comprehending specialized texts.

Robinson (1991) insisted that the most important characteristic of a good EFL teacher is his flexibility, which lets him to be an ESP teacher when necessary. This characteristic of an EFL teacher allows him to cope with different groups of learners when needed. What can be inferred from this assertion of Robinson (1991) is that the best ESP teacher is one who, in addition to language knowledge, possesses specific qualities such as flexibility and the skill of coping with different educational situations.

Many other researchers, such as Marshall and Gilmour (1993), also believe that the main problem preventing the students from understanding specialized texts is not related to their not being accustomed to specialized terms, but rather that they are weak in the foreign language in general, and are therefore lacking general words. This hinders their understanding of the target specialized texts. However, content specialists claim that they are more qualified to teach ESP courses, as they know a higher number of specialized words and believe that students need to learn these terms in order to better deal with the specialized texts of their fields.

Antony (1997) believes that since content specialist teachers come from a background unrelated to the discipline in which they are asked to teach, they are usually unable to rely on personal experiences when evaluating materials and considering course goals. Therefore, many of them are forced to use published textbooks available, which may be quite unsuitable for the class environment.

Anthony (2007), a teacher of ESP in the EFL Teaching Centre of Engineering and Science at Vaseda University in Japan, believes that ESP courses are not successful unless they are taught by EFL specialist instructors. He also insists that the best method for EFL teachers to succeed in teaching ESP is to try to go along with their students in learning, because the students might be more knowledgeable in some specific areas, and in that way they can cooperatively help each other to succeed the best in the fulfilment of the course goals.

Quarniki (2011-2012) suggested that the main purpose in most ESP courses is to familiarize the learners with specialized texts and help them to better comprehend such texts in their study fields which is totally a wrong procedure to follow. However, this exactly is the same method used in most Iranian ESP courses.

Adnan (2014), a teacher at Basrah University of Iraq, stated that teachers need to know three things to be successful in teaching ESP courses: English language knowledge, English language teaching methods, and knowledge of the specialized field of study. She then argues that most of content

specialist ESP teachers know nothing in the first and second areas, because they have not been instructed in this regard and are only familiar with their own scientific area of work. She believes that lack of knowledge and instruction in the first two fields, enfeebles such teachers and doesn't let them to be as successful as EFL teachers for whom overcoming their weaknesses in the third area is not such a hard labour depending on their other strengths.

Andriani (2014) analysed and classified the studies conducted in this field and divided the problems into five groups:

1. Teaching method
2. Teacher
3. Lesson plan
4. Learners' language ability level
5. Learners' needs.

Regarding a qualified teacher of ESP, she agreed with Anthony (2007) and believed that the teacher who can overcome the five mentioned problems most successfully is a specialist EF/SL teacher who can guide the students in their struggles with ESP.

In their article, Simpanen and Uutila (2014) turned to the topic of ESP qualified teacher and after referring to different articles in this area, concluded that there exists no doubt that ESP must be taught by an EFL teacher who is familiar with the specialized field. They thought that even if the teacher is not familiar with the target field, he can ask for the student's cooperation or the class can be taught cooperatively by both an EFL teacher and a specialist lecturer.

According to an article written by Zhaojun Chen (2016), Learning grammar can improve the student's skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and accordingly, improves ESP learning in general. Therefore, a teacher who can guide ESP learners' attention to grammar and design grammar learning tasks that help them to learn ESP, will be much more effective in delivering this discourse.

Also, Hoai Anh Pham and Binh Thanh Ta (2016) stated that ESP instruction should integrate four language skills and be conducted mainly by language instructors. However, cross-disciplinary joint teaching may be a better policy to undertake. In addition, subject knowledge of ESP materials should be at a basic level at least.

Conclusion

According to the discussed study results, and after reviewing many other studies whose final conclusions are supportive of and similar to the mentioned articles' results, it is realized that, without any doubt, the best teacher of ESP is an ES/FL teacher. Specialized teachers cannot be proper instructors of the course just because they are able to speak or write well in English in the specialized field. The writer could not find any articles to contradict this conclusion; however, further studies might shed more light on the unidentified angles of this controversy; as a result, additional studies with new designs, instruments and samples are recommended.

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