

# FROM ENGLISH AS A GENERAL SCHOOL SUBJECT ONTO ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM FOR LEARNING SPECIFIC SUBJECTS: THE NEED TO SHIFT IN THE TEACHING ORIENTATION

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**Abstract:** The teaching of ESP so far has been dominated by the belief that linguistic mastery of English is considered sufficient to deliver the contents of the subject matter concerned. This view seems to need a critical overview for verbal communication in general, let alone in ESP, requires both proficiency in the language and the contents. This implies that English teachers in ESP need to be equipped satisfactorily in English as well as the subject matter. An ESP teacher needs to possess a double competency. With this as a framework, the teaching of ESP accordingly will need to shift its focus from English in isolation to English as medium for subject matters exchanges.

**Key words:** English as a general subject, ESP

Up to the present time, there has seemingly been a common belief in the ESP teaching practices that as far as the teacher's command of English is linguistically sound, the handling of the subject matter can be of secondary business. This is to say that the success of an ESP course is assumed to depend primarily on the teacher's good mastery of English, or that the imparting of the contents/messages under instruction follows, with the time, the teacher's mastery of language skills. As a means of communication, mastery of language skills is undeniably important, let alone in the teaching of languages for communication. However, as verbal communication implies a negotiation of meanings, of which messages are a part, the teaching of an ESP course requires that the teacher consider among other things meanings in the discourse. It is argued that language mastery is important; but the teachers' mastery of related aspects in

an ESP course should be uncared for by the ESP teachers. Both of these aspects should be accounted for, but this condition is not realized by the majority of ESP teachers. As a result ESP teachers emphasize either one not both.

The teaching practices of ESP courses adopting the inappropriate belief described above are ubiquitous. There are several possible causes. One is that the teachers do not have a clear idea what ESP is. It is also possible that they have a wrong conception of ESP. As a result, there is no clear-cut distinction in teaching practices between teaching general English and that of English for specific purposes since the distinguishing mark is heavily laid on the teaching of both particular vocabulary stocks and, to some extent, specific grammatical items. In the current global world of communication, where the need to communicate with English skillfully is forceful and varies in different work forces, this kind of teaching practice seems no longer tolerable if the functional mastery of content and language skills are of primary targets.

This paper tries to offer a view for the need to shift English teaching from a general school subject onto subject matter English or from EFL into ESP. For the purpose, several topics will be addressed in the order that follows: current trends in English instruction in the global contexts, the need to shift of the status of English teaching, ESP in practice at English Departments and at Non English Departments in Indonesia, requirements for the ESP teachers, challenges in the teaching of ESP, the teaching of ESP, and conclusion.

### **CURRENT TRENDS IN THE ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXTS**

One of the greatest challenges faced by language teachers in the classroom practices today is the rapid development of English as lingua franca for interconnected world. As a result, there exists a great demand for learning English (Parkir, 2000:14). This demand entails substantially that English is required not only for formal qualifications, but also for the effectiveness in the work places and for career advancement. This trend has led to the increase in the demands for courses that can equip clients with 'performing' skills in English specifically needed in workplace contexts.

A large number of agencies offering such courses-broadly labeled ESP here- have come up and their number grows steadily. Clients are prepared to pay good money for effective training. Teaching in the ESP sector is obviously materially rewarding (Tharu, 2000:245-246). One of the examples of the great

demand is in tourism sector. The growth of airline companies in Asia Pacific will lead to the growth of hotels, cruise ships and other related sectors which can drive the growth of the economy regionally, nationally and internationally. This growth leads to the demands of workers who are professionally able, in the sense that they are skillful and are competent in using English in their fields. The market that needs such a kind of workers is found not only in Asia but also in Middle East, Europe and United States (Official Document Reports on Job Vacancies, 2004-2005).

Another observable phenomenon in the global communication is that learners of English nowadays can learn English through various modes of learning contexts: formal, informal, and/or casual environments. These three kinds of context are now very influential in the learning of English or other fields. The formal context is obvious, where students learn English at schools: from elementary to tertiary levels of education. The environment that is indicated by the availability of computer and electronic sources facilitates learners in learning English informally so that people can learn English through their environment, which makes English grow rapidly in non English speaking countries. Or they can also take courses off the formal contexts. Casually, television or radio programs offering authentic languages are also sources of learning. More casually, computer games for children in the market, mostly imported, are ubiquitously presented in English, which also serves an important access to learning English casually. This phenomenon is similar to what Graddol's statement (1997) saying that English will grow side by side with the language spoken by the people in non English speaking countries, and native speakers are not the only source of learning English.

The rapid development of English as a lingua franca and the great demands on the skilled workers who are competent in English will gradually shift the position of English which is used to being learned as a formal school subject into the position of English as a medium of communicating messages during instructional sessions. This phenomenon happens in many of non English speaking countries, including Indonesia. In Indonesia, for example, awareness to anticipate the existence of the global phenomenon described above is also observed particularly in the Government's attempt to run bilingual pilot projects for elementary and primary education which is an actual step to realize the implementation of syllabus development across curricula (Balitbang, 2002). In the programs, science teachers from several selected provinces are trained to deliver the subject contents in English. The context described above implies

that there exists a factual challenge for all teachers in general and English teachers in particular to be competent in their major, delivery of skills and knowledge, and English. If this is so, English teachers especially need to do something to update their knowledge and to anticipate the new shift in teaching English, and English teacher colleges in general need to revisit, at least, their existing curriculum and/or vision and mission.

### **THE NEED TO SHIFT THE STATUS OF ENGLISH TEACHING**

As stated previously, English which is used to be learned as a subject will change its status to be a medium of communicating messages during the instruction. This is one of the most important features of ESP in relation to General English. In many cases this leads to lowering of status for the teacher, or at least this seems to be the teacher's view (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:164). There are five problems that EAP teacher's complaint of low priority in time-tabling; lack of personal/professional contact with subject teachers; lower status/grade than subject teachers; isolation from other teachers of English doing similar work; lack of respect from students. These all seem reflect either lowering of status or at least a general feeling of inferiority on the part of ESP teachers. However, this is not universal. To some extent ESP teachers also have a more confident stand for they are required to master not just the language but also the content. Whatever the result of a move from EFL to ESP is, it seems imperative always to make the ESP teacher more accountable to others. As a result, an ESP teacher or it is often called ESP practitioners frequently have to be a negotiator (Johns as quoted by Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). A negotiator means that ESP practitioners have to be able to make an approach to subject specialists, syllabus designers, instructional materials writers etc, so that ESP teachers will be more professional in their teaching.

This is somewhat similar to the new movement considered most actual in language teaching today, *Modern Languages across Curriculum* (MLAC), in which MLAC refers to the concern of showing how modern languages can be integrated with other subject disciplines: Mathematics, Biology, Geography, Arts, Business Studies, History, Religion Education etc. Questions of learning theory and pedagogic principle are therefore central. Issues of learning process and teaching practice do not take place in a cultural vacuum. To learn a language is to step into another world of values, senses and points of view

(Grenfell, 2002:1). This means that MLAC teachers have also to be good negotiators to other related partners.

The shift of the status of English to Teaching to ESP or to MLAC has to be anticipated by EFL teachers. There are potential constraints to implement this shift, for instance, the limited mastery of the subject knowledge, the limited materials available in the market, the willingness to be negotiators with subject specialists meaning that EFL teachers have to learn to those whose education background might be lower, etc. Therefore, EFL teachers should be sensitive in anticipating the new paradigm of English teaching. It is quite true that EFL teachers are not accustomed to teaching content courses in Science and Technology; however this is a challenge, and becoming an ESP teacher is one of the ways to update the knowledge and to take part in the teaching of English in global communication if this is well understood.

#### **ESP IN PRACTICE AT ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS AND AT NON ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS IN INDONESIA: AN OVERVIEW**

Based on the writer's observation on the teaching of ESP at several English departments, ESP as a course seems to be interpreted differently in practice. At the State University of Malang, for instance, ESP as a course is aimed at providing the students that are projected to be prospective English teachers with knowledge and skills in matters related with ESP, including theories and practices in developing ESP materials. In other institutions that also educate students to be English teachers, ESP as a course is perceived as a skill course that is designed to equip the students with English skills as used in a certain context. Thus, ESP of this kind is something like 'another major'. And this major-like course is mostly English for Tourism. Quite different from that offered at the State University of Malang, the latter choice is quite reasonable since the graduates of the institutions are also expected to be able to work at tourism sectors, besides teaching English. This kind of an ESP course is conducted mostly by EFL teachers at those departments.

In practice, English for Tourism perceived as ESP at those departments becomes reading classes, in that the teachers teach students from the point of view of language skills, language components, vocabulary and language learning without paying attention to what actually is the essence of the content of the reading text. This is quite natural possibly because of the limited knowledge of the EFL teachers concerning what ESP should actually include.

The same phenomenon also happens in most non English departments. Almost all non English Departments offer English to their students. Some elaborate this kind of English close to ESP as a skill course; others offer English which is close to general English. In the former case, ESP as a skill course that the departments offer can vary in contents depending on the department. Thus, there is English for Agriculture, English for Economics, English for Tourism etc. The condition is even worse because the number of students is even greater than that at the English Department, and most students are less serious in taking the course. They regard English as a non main subject so that English is considered less important. They can pass subject examination without a knowledge of English (Robinson, 1991). This attitude of course influences the teacher in teaching ESP at non English Departments. The teaching of ESP at non English departments is considered so much less interesting and less challenging that not many EFL teachers are interested in teaching English at non English departments.

However, the case is a bit different in some non English departments such as Tourism, Secretary, Public Relations, Intercontinental Relation where English becomes the language of the medium of instruction for some subjects to express concepts and ideas in their fields. In these departments English is a medium of instruction so that students have to master English if they want to get better positions in the internship or in the workplace later. In these departments ESP teachers have to learn more on the subjects. At the low level, for instance, students do not need to learn more on contents, and the emphasis can be more on language skills and language components. However, at higher level the knowledge of content for ESP teachers is a must. Without this approach, the teaching learning process based on my personal experience will benefit students little and the students will easily get bored.

Nevertheless, challenges are also observed. In those departments, though English becomes the language of the medium of instruction for some subjects to express concepts and ideas in the students' fields, pitfalls occur in the way the contents are delivered in English to students. One is that need analysis is so superficial that the teaching practice tends to go back to the teaching, mostly, of reading skills.

In short, it can be stated that ESP in practice tends to be interpreted differently. As a result, the teaching practice of ESP is based on that interpretation, which in most cases does not include in-depth analyses. Teaching reading skills in most ESP classes, particularly in non English departments is observed.

### **CHALLENGES IN THE TEACHING OF ESP**

There are many aspects that seem problematic to the teacher in teaching ESP. The problems are among others large classes which are common in ESP classes, even the number of the students are sixty to seventy students. The class is also mixed in ability in the sense that some students are good at language some others are good at content. Their attitude toward language is also different. Some are positive and others negative. The next problem which is also the problem in EFL teaching is motivation because the students see no value of their ESP course. Another problem relates to status, pay and condition (Johns as quoted in Robinson, 1991). In addition to this, ESP teachers typically lead an uneasy existence housed in curriculum unit which exists on the margin of the academic world. It is not a situation which is conducive to a strong sense of professional identity. Rivers (as quoted Robinson 1991) urged that ESP/EST teachers be approached by systematically by well-trained, or self-trained, specialized teachers, otherwise it will not gain the respect of specialists in other areas of foreign-language departments. The training for business and industry is also a problem. Participants are very busy, the learner is often distracted by his own work problems which may seem more important to him than the course (Johnson as quoted by Robinson 1991).

Hutchinson and Waters (1981:162) listed the difficulties posed by ESP teachers in comprehending subject matters. These are as follows:

- 1) There is a tradition in education of separating the Humanities and the Sciences. Languages have usually been allocated to Humanities camp;
- 2) Many ESP teachers are reluctant settlers in new territory. They would prefer to be teaching Literature and Social Sciences;
- 3) Considering the scale of ESP revolution it must be admitted that little effort has been made to retrain teachers or at least to allay their fears;
- 4) The general attitude in ESP seems to be to expect teachers to conform to the requirement of the target situation;
- 5) Many of ESP teachers feel alienated by the subject matter they are expected to teach. Science and Technology, in particular are seen as dull, boring, complicated, incomprehensible and confusing.

The discussion above implies that several challenges are posed by ESP teachers. These can be non technical or/and technical ones. The non technical ones include large classes, students' motivations, attitudes, and others leading to a non-conducive learning atmosphere; whereas the technical ones are con-

cerned with the sufficient mastery of subject matters. These are probably the causes that underlie the ineffectiveness of ESP classes.

### **REQUIREMENTS FOR THE ESP TEACHERS**

The question is then who will be the ESP teachers? This answer seems simple: the EFL teachers or the General English teachers. However, the simple question is not as actually simple as its answer. EFL teachers experience a shock, and the shock is the feeling of welcome and unwelcome because the teacher training is more likely literature than in language. For non-native speakers, they have competence in English but have doubts about students' area of subject matter. Many native speakers also share their fear; others may welcome ESP because they have qualifications or a strong interest in another discipline (Strevens as quoted by Robinson, 1991).

This illustration shows that being an ESP teacher can lead to have an uneasy experience if s/he is not equipped sufficiently with the students' area of subject matter. So, who will be in the roles of an ESP teacher? There seems to be several central qualities an ESP needs to have. First, s/he should have such personal attributes as enthusiasm, the ability to develop and administer a course, work rate, rapport, and a knowledge of students' world are equally as important as the ability to write teaching materials or perform a Munbyan needs analysis. Next, s/he should have an open mind. Also, s/he needs to have an interest in the learners' language and a readiness to respect the students whether adults or near adults. In addition, s/he needs to have chosen a demanding profession about which the students may know a great deal more than their English teachers. Besides, being an ESP teacher, he or she is a language teacher in industry; and fluency in foreign language. Finally, s/he has the flexibility to change from being a general teacher to being a specific purpose teacher (William, 1981; Smith 1989; Lavery, 1985; and Heyneman as quoted in Robinson 1991).

The knowledge that is required by ESP teacher is that ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist subjects in-depth. They require three important things: 1) a positive attitude towards the ESP contents, 2) a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area, and 3) an awareness of how much they probably know of contents. In other words the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of subject matters, but rather like enthusiastic students interested in knowing more about subject matters. If this condition is met sufficiently, no



wonder that many ESP teachers are surprised of how much knowledge of the subject matter they 'pick up' by teaching the materials or talking to students (Hutchinson and Waters, 1980:163).

### **THE TEACHING OF ESP**

Before conducting teaching-learning processes, some important points have to be taken into considerations so that the process can reach optimum results. Donough (1984) identifies two important points of the range of approaches in language and language learning: *on-line* research and *off-line* background research. In the *on-line* research it means that there need to be studies associated with particular projects at any stage, for example, needs and situation analysis in relation to the subject areas of specific group of students, types of learner's assessment. *Off-line* background research points are work on general theories of self-access learning, to balance the plethora of self access materials, provision of more solid professional reference materials for ESP practitioners, resource banks of text materials, bibliographical material, test items, test types and styles of teaching activity.

There is nothing specific about ESP methodology. The principles which underlie good ESP methodology are the same as those that underlie sound ELT methodology. Similarly at the level of techniques the ESP teacher can learn a lot from General English practice. The teacher who has come to ESP from General English can be usefully employed classroom techniques and skills acquired in General English teaching. They should not think that a whole methodology should be learnt. Three approaches that follow: a language-centered approach, a skills-centered approach, and a learning-centered approach should be accounted respectively (Hutchinson and Waters, 1980). The difference lies in the restricted repertoire, the purpose of learning the language and that ESP is frequently associated with an occupational, vocational, academic or professional requirement. Needs should be clear, so that learning aims can be defined in terms of these specific purposes to which the language will be put, whether it be reading scientific papers or communicating with technicians (Mackay and Mountford, 1979:3).

An interesting teaching mode in the ESP has been proposed by Johns and Dudley-Evans (1980) referred to as team teaching, which is further explored by Robinson (1991:88-91). In such a kind of teaching practices, several teaching formats are proposed such as 'two teachers together', 'subject-language inte-

gration' – both of which emanate from Britain, 'LAC (Language Across Curriculum) methods', 'co-operative teaching' – which originate from North America.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The article has discussed several points related with ESP teaching in the current world. The need to shift of EFL teaching is clear though it still becomes strategic issues. However, in the global communication which makes the world closely interconnected, the use of English as lingua franca, and the rapid development of ESP needs and teaching indicate the need to shift. Another critical issue is MLAC in which the purpose is to integrate English with other subject disciplines. The issue and the development are dynamic in the sense that English teaching as other disciplines experiences a new paradigm as other disciplines do. When this new trend is anticipated positively in advance, English learning and English teaching will significantly contribute much more to the advances in science and technology for human beings' welfare, which in turn will facilitate humans' search for better and happy lives.

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