



Teaching English for Specific Purposes at Vocational Institution: Teachers' Beliefs, Practices and Challenges

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ARTICEL INFO

Keywords:

English for Specific Purposes
Teachers' Beliefs
Practices
Challenges

History:

Received (2 February 2025)
Revised (3 July 2025)
Accepted (31 July 2025)

ABSTRACT

The intention of this study is to conceive teachers' reflections regarding their experiences of teaching English for Specific Purpose (ESP) at Politeknik Aceh. Their convictions, practices as well as challenges were scrutinized in order to figure out better implementation for ESP classes in the future. Three ESP teachers were interviewed besides observing their classroom and analyzing their syllabus design. They agree that ESP is a compulsory subject in vocational institutions. The students need to prepare themselves for work life ahead, because beside communicating with local people, they surely will interact and communicate with the people from other countries globally. The syllabus was designed by the teachers adapting with the students' need and industrial growth. They constantly revise and upgrade their syllabus and teaching materials depending on current situation of the students and their work targets. The teachers encountered similar challenge in their experiences of teaching ESP, that they have to deepen their insights regarding the field of the study being taught. Surprisingly, they even exchange knowledge with the students, for example; the teachers learnt about electrical from the students whilst teaching ESP for electrical engineering students. Moreover, the most challenging tendency in teaching ESP at Politeknik Aceh is the requirement of deep understanding of industry-specific terminology and concepts. So, it is essential to regularly update materials to reflect industry advancements, incorporate more authentic and current resources, and provide professional development opportunities for ESP teachers.

INTRODUCTION

During the English learning process, many EFL students experience difficulties in expressing their ideas or feelings. It often arises due to their inability to convey their thoughts accurately and clearly, both orally and in writing. Many students still struggle to communicate in English despite learning various grammar rules. This difficulty limits their ability to communicate and lowers their confidence in using English. One main challenge affecting EFL students' English language learning is the limited vocabulary.

Global development has forced the world of education to prepare superior human resources to be able to compete with the rapid flow of globalization. Schools should educate students for jobs that have not yet

been created, for technologies that have not yet been invented, to solve problems that have not yet been estimated, because the future is undefined and unpredicted (Schleicher Andreas, 2018). Universities have the responsibility of co-creating knowledge and innovations that allow progress in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They should have the mission of educating citizens as social agents who can become leaders for sustainable development (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2022). Indonesia through the ministry of education and culture emphasize current national aim of education to produce qualified human resources whose skills are professional. The president appealed to increase in the number of vocational graduates of polytechnic who have a skilled worker certificate (Sakarinto, 2021). Free market era challenges Indonesian vocational education to train their students striving globally.

In order to meet the labor market to become more specialized and economies demand higher levels of skill, government of Indonesia increasingly encourages and invests in the future of vocational education through a widespread of funding for the improvement and advancement of vocational education in Indonesia (Marsigit, 2008). Consequently, both lower middle class and upper middle class students have equal opportunity accessing vocational education as the government supports them financially. This policy is in accordance with the concept of education that it should not only improve its quality but it has to be accessible to everyone (Rusmala, 2018).

English for specific purpose (ESP) has long been acknowledged and practiced by non-native speakers of English. “The primary goal of this endeavour is to equip learners with ESP competence/ability to function in English-mediated professional or academic encounters” (Widodo, 2016). English for Accounting, English for Business, English for Medical Education, English for Tourism, and English for Law are amongst the popular branches of ESP practiced by Indonesian students, depending on the major study they are concerning with. ESP is important because the professional and academic domains are different (Isma et al., 2023). The words and terms used in particular professional domain varies. The language of medical domain for example is absolutely different with that of tourism domain. Vocational institutions therefore insert ESP into their academic curriculum to facilitate their students the opportunity to train their English competence based on their professional career need (Vesna Prodanovska-Poposka, 2022).

Proficiency in English enhances vocational students' ability to access global information, collaborate on an international scale, and contribute to their overall competitiveness in the job market. Additionally, English proficiency opens up opportunities for further education and professional development. While the implementation may pose challenges, the long-term benefits for vocational students in terms of career advancement and global communication skills make it a valuable requirement. In the context of career paths, the importance of English varies across different industries. For example, those entering fields like international business, diplomacy, or technology often require advanced English skills due to the global



nature of these sectors. Additionally, many multinational companies prioritize candidates with strong English language abilities.

Furthermore, English proficiency is crucial for students aspiring to engage in academic research, as a significant portion of scholarly publications and resources are available in English. This proficiency becomes a gateway for students to contribute to and stay updated with global academic advancements. On a broader scale, considering the prevalence of English as a global lingua franca, students benefit from acquiring at least a basic level of proficiency. This facilitates effective communication, collaboration, and networking in diverse international contexts. For this reason, 3 English subjects taught at Politeknik Aceh: English 1, English 2, and English 3. The first one started with basic English structures and practices, the following is intermediate English class, and the last one contains ESP and TOEFL in a single subject.

Hence, it is obvious that the ESP instructor ideally is a person who has expertise in a particular domain and has professional English competence. The fact what happened in Politeknik Aceh, the ESP instructors are general English teachers. They do not have the capacity understanding the domain of electrical, mechanical, information and technology, or accounting which are the major studies of the students in Politeknik Aceh. This contradiction becomes a big rock on the head of the teachers. They have to teach English in the context of engineering and accounting, yet they have no idea in specific regarding the professional territory of engineering and accounting.

Starting from the problem elaborated above, we intended to have a deeper study about ESP teachers' beliefs, practices and challenges regarding their teaching learning process at Politeknik Aceh. We tried to figure out the subject matter and curriculum, teachers' qualification, students' motivation and progress, teachers' challenges and expectations.

This paper employs Marsigit's theory of aspects that should exist in an ideal English teaching and learning environment for vocational students (Marsigit, 2008). First, students are expected to interact with one another communicate technical teaching content in English. Second, students should be given enough opportunities to develop both subject content and their English proficiency. Third, the role of the teacher is not only to facilitate the communication, but also to promote English as a tool for communication. Fourth, teachers need to encourage their students to get accustomed to speaking English at any chance. Last, teachers need to develop media and teaching supports that aid both the subject content and the use of English.

METHODS

This was a qualitative research study, applying classroom observation, document analysis and interview as techniques for data collection. The first data was gained through classroom observation. The researcher went into the ESP classroom while the teaching instruction was running. The observation was

conducted to figure out students' motivation and enthusiasm in learning ESP. This method of data collecting procedure is often used both scientists and social scientists especially to watch the behavior of research objects without interviewing them (Kumar, 2022). Syllabus documents were then analyzed to find the appropriateness and their novelty with current development of science and technology. Moreover, it also generate questions to be asked during the interview, as it is suggested that analysing files of institution can suggest research inquiries (Bowe, 2009).



Image 1. Methodological Framework

Interview is regarded as excellent method of gaining data in details (Sahoo, 2022). Interview does not only allow researchers to deeply browse their inquiry directly with the participants, but also offer unlimited words (of answers) for participants to respond the questions being asked. As a result, both researchers and participants have equal space and time to express and share their ideas. There are three ESP teachers (mentioned as T1, T2, and T3 later in this article) in Politeknik Aceh who participate in this study. All of them were interviewed in order to bring out different perspectives based on their various experiences in teaching ESP (Hotak et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Subject Matter and Curriculum

All teachers agree that English is taught as a compulsory subject at vocational institution. T1 argued that English is a pivotal skill to be mastered by vocational students because they do not only have to be able to

communicate with local people but also with foreigners. Thus, English should be taught at every vocational institution. T2 similarly said that making English a compulsory subject for vocational students is a commendable decision. English is not only a global lingua franca but also a key tool for communication in various professional fields. By making it a compulsory subject for vocational students, educational institutions are acknowledging the importance of equipping students with essential language skills relevant to their future careers.

Based on our analysis towards the ESP syllabus document, we found that there are 3 different ESP classes, each taught at different study program:

1. English for Electrical and Mechanical Engineering
2. English for Information and Technology
3. English for Accounting

Those ESP classes do not appear as single subjects but they are mixed with TOEFL lessons for 2 credit hours. So, the teachers split the syllabus into two parts: the first half semester is for ESP and the other half semester is for teaching TOEFL. So, it was only one credit hour for each part of the lesson, which is too short.

The syllabus was designed by the teachers adapting with the students' need and industrial growth. Textbooks tailored to industrial fields, supplemented by authentic materials such as industry-specific articles, case studies, and multimedia resources, contribute to a well-rounded curriculum. The key concept applied by the teachers in constructing the syllabus is to strike a balance between language proficiency development and the practical application of language skills within their professional domain, and to match the materials with students' level of ability and needs.

In terms of assessment, all teachers apply both oral and written test as student assessment. The teachers regularly assess students' progress through a combination of formative and summative assessments. This includes language proficiency tests, project evaluations, and on-going feedback. Observing improvements in their ability to communicate effectively within their specialized context, as well as their successful completion of industry-related projects, serves as indicators of their progress and success throughout the semester. Therefore, ESP is designed for students who will have experience in their disciplines and that aims to develop the students' strategic competencies (Agustina, 2014).

Teachers' Beliefs about Their Qualification

Being asked about their qualification, T1 was high in confidence by saying, "why not, it's only about vocabulary. As long as I master the vocabulary regarding the field of study, I can say I am qualified." Similarly, T2 demonstrated, "the combination of my academic background, specialized knowledge, on-going professional development, and practical teaching experience positions me as a qualified educator for teaching ESP. I am enthusiastic about leveraging my skills and expertise to empower students with the language proficiency needed to excel in their chosen vocations." T3 however stated, "I can help my students to cope their English needs, but



most of the time I asked my students to explain to me the meaning of certain terminologies, words or phrases in Indonesian language before I found their translation in English. So, I would say I'm not that qualified, but I'm grateful for teaching ESP because it gives me chances to enrich my insight beyond my field of study."

Based on the quotes from the interview script, it could be understood that the teachers are struggling and are challenged for teaching ESP classes. Despite the confidence showed by T1, she mentioned that she had to know the words which were beyond her field of study before teaching ESP. These types of problems faced by teachers in ESP classes are referred to as teacher-related difficulties (Fitria, 2024).

Students' Motivation and Progress

Students' readiness and motivation in learning ESP can vary. The difficulties associated with students, including demographic characteristics and demands of learning ESP, English proficiency background, differences between languages, lack of vocabulary, reliance on the dictionary, and lack of skills in utilizing the dictionary, especially for ESP terms (Fitria, 2024). Understanding that they come with diverse backgrounds and experiences, T1 found her students were highly motivated at the beginning of semester. Grammatical challenges made the spirits of students weakened. However, it is very easy for her students to understand and master the terms taught in ESP because they are appropriate to their respective fields of expertise.

T2 assess her students' readiness through pre-course evaluations and discussions. Motivation often stems from showcasing the real-world relevance of language skills. She integrates practical tasks, industry-specific projects, and collaborative activities to engage students, fostering a sense of purpose and connection between language learning and her students' future careers.

Similarly to T1, T3 encountered her students are well motivated and enthusiastic for studying ESP, but she often saw confused faces each time the discussion went into grammatical matters. At the end of the class, she found that the students knew the words and terms but could not use them in meaningful grammatically correct sentences.

Teachers' Challenges in Their Teaching Practices

Certainly, the first and most significant challenges in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of industries and professional fields. For example, adapting to industry changes: the content and language needs of various professions are subject to constant change due to advancements in technology, shifts in industry trends, and emerging terminology. Staying abreast of these changes and updating the ESP curriculum accordingly can be demanding. Ensuring that the material remains relevant and aligns with the current demands of the industry is crucial for effectively preparing students for their future careers. Suherman and Kertawijaya argued that teachers' limited subject knowledge is one of the main challenges in teaching ESP (Suherman & Kertawijaya, 2023). A similar research correspondingly mentioned

need analysis as the core challenge faced by ESP teachers that they need to adjust the lesson plans with the current situation of industries, which in turn involves many parties and takes lots of time (Ahmed et al, 2023).

Secondly, the diverse student backgrounds: ESP classes often comprise students with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and levels of familiarity with the subject matter (Suherman & Kertawijaya, 2023). Addressing these differences and tailoring instruction to meet the varied needs of students can be challenging. Striking the right balance between accommodating diverse backgrounds and maintaining a cohesive learning environment is a constant consideration.

Third, industry-specific terminology: teaching ESP requires a deep understanding of industry-specific terminology and concepts. The challenge lies in effectively imparting this specialized language to students who may not have prior exposure to the field. Breaking down complex terminology while ensuring accuracy and relevance can be a delicate balance (Iswati & Triastuti, 2021).

Fourth, varying language proficiency level: students in ESP classes may possess different levels of English language proficiency. Some may be advanced English speakers, while others may be at a basic level. Addressing these differences and providing adequate support to bring all students to a common proficiency level within the specific domain requires careful planning and implementation of differentiated instructional strategies (Suherman & Kertawijaya, 2023).

Fifth, the integration of authentic materials: incorporating authentic materials, such as industry reports, case studies, and professional communication samples, into the curriculum is essential for creating a realistic learning experience. However, identifying, selecting, and integrating these materials in a way that enhances language learning without overwhelming students can be a challenging task (Fitria, 2024). The teachers also experienced difficulties in finding proper materials for teaching ESP. For example, trying to search resources for teaching English for accounting, what they found is English accounting book, it discusses accounting in English. In fact, what the teachers tried to find was the book containing English lessons in the context of accounting.

Sixth, balancing language and content: ESP classes must strike a balance between language instruction and the delivery of content related to the students' specific field. Ensuring that language skills are developed alongside the acquisition of domain-specific knowledge requires thoughtful planning and integration of language objectives into the overall curriculum.

Seventh, technology integration: the use of technology in various industries is ever-expanding, and ESP courses must reflect these advancements. Integrating technology into the curriculum effectively, keeping it up to date, and ensuring that students are equipped with the digital literacy skills required in their professions present on-going challenges (Rachmawati & Fadhilawati, 2024). In addressing these challenges, continuous professional development, collaboration with industry professionals, and a commitment to staying informed



about advancements in both language instruction and specific professional fields are essential for providing high-quality ESP education.

Teachers' expectation for better future ESP classes

The teachers expect that Politeknik Aceh should add a few credit hours for English subject, especially for ESP, because English is a skill that should be trained intensively for better outcome. One credit hour for ESP lesson is definitely insufficient. It is better to separate between TOEFL and ESP, they can be taught at different semester or in the same semester but as different subject.

One of the teachers suggests that ESP teachers sit in students classroom for certain time to familiarize themselves about the field of study. For example, English teacher joins the Industrial Automotion Course, sitting in the classroom as a student in order to gain insight into the field of science being studied. Thus, they have a foundation in compiling the material that will be taught in the ESP class.

The case that the teachers of ESP at Politeknik Aceh have lack of proficiency to teach the subject is not surprising, similar things also happened to other vocational institutions in Indonesia. The result of a research subjected to English teachers of a vocational high school in Majenang – Middle Java indicated that the teachers have no basic knowledge and experiences to teach English for vocational students which is specified on the students' program and major (Mulyiah & Aminatun, 2020). However, upgrading teachers' professionalism is inevitable (Nugroho, 2018). Teachers' proficiency contributed to the level of above 50% to students' motivation of learning English (Septiani et al., 2021). Moreover, the skills of teachers can increase the students' interest (Gultom et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to upgrade and refresh teachers' competences in ESP which include major related content, their pedagogical competence (teaching skill) and professional competence through professional development program for teachers.

One of the solutions that could be administered to solve motivation problem of the students faced by ESP teachers of Politeknik Aceh is by emerging online learning media for the students. They could find virtual assistants to assist their learning ESP, more and more the learning process could be more interesting and fun on the internet. (Zhang, 2014) argued that vocational college English classes should be expanded from traditional classroom to online education and social media. He added, "the online classroom and rich social media can attract the attention of students." It is expected that students could be motivated to be actively engaged in the environment of English learning through media online. Creating enjoyable atmosphere in class would increase students' engagement and motivation to study (Indasari et al., 2024).

Further, a study at MAN 1 Bandar Lampung examined the strategies used by English teachers to overcome the challenges of online teaching through the Madrasah E-Learning Platform (Putri & Sari, 2021). This case study involved four teachers as participants, with data obtained through questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The analysis was conducted through data collection, reduction, presentation, and

conclusion drawing. The results showed that teachers implemented strategies such as asynchronous learning, the use of alternative media, effective lesson planning, delivering content via video conferencing, clear task instructions, appropriate assessment, and providing both verbal and written feedback. These strategies helped maintain student engagement and improve their online English learning outcomes.

Furthermore, a need analysis of vocational students had been conducted in Medan, Sumatera Utara of Indonesia, they found that the students majoring Industrial Machinery Engineering who were the objects of the research, are lacking knowledge about the significances and objectives of ESP (Natsir et al., 2022). The questionnaires notified that the majority of the students prefer General English subject rather than ESP. Regarding the students of Politeknik Aceh, even though we cannot ensure their familiarity with the importance and intentions of ESP, it is worth considering by firstly disseminating the roles and functions of ESP for their future education as well as career growth.

Last but not least, the support from the institutions as well as collaboration between ESP teachers and specific discipline teachers are primary in integrating ideal ESP classes. They might conduct teacher training for ESP teachers as well as supporting in purchasing ESP books for both teachers and students. As mentioned in a related research that a number of ESP teachers admitted their disappointment as they have very limited access to participate in teacher professional development programs since their institutions provide no support (Suherman & Kertawijaya, 2023). Thus, the support from institution will surely enhance teachers' preparedness in running ESP classes (Emilia, 2024). Moreover, institution should promote collaboration between specific discipline teachers and English teams in making syllabus to reach a Content-based Instruction Approach (Chaovanapracha & Champakaew, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that it is very essential to regularly update materials to reflect industry advancements, incorporate more authentic and current resources, and provide professional development opportunities for ESP teachers. Continuous improvement is essential in ESP subject. To enhance curriculum and practices, it's important to regularly update materials to reflect industry advancements, incorporate more authentic and current resources, and provide professional development opportunities for educators. Flexibility in adapting teaching methods based on student feedback and industry trends ensures that the curriculum remains effective and aligned with the evolving needs of students in vocational fields. By addressing these aspects, the ESP curriculum can be refined to better meet the demands of the ever-changing professional landscape, providing students with a comprehensive and tailored language education that prepares them for success in their specific fields. The limitation of this research is that it only involved lecturers as the participants. Further research involving both teachers and students would contribute to gain various points of view regarding ESP classes at Politeknik Aceh.

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