

ESP at Tertiary Level: Traditional ESP or Integrated ESP?

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Abstract - The course of literature which explores the thematic approach in teaching second or foreign languages to replace pure language teaching has some influences in ESP field. ESP practitioners invariably find themselves in a dilemma situation, of whether to do away with language focused traditional ESP or should take a step forward to integrate content and language in ESP. Such issue is particularly important in Malaysian university context, a non-English-speaking country with its deteriorating English standard. This paper presents the differences between traditional ESP and integrated ESP learning. It further discusses the possibilities and inherent limitations of the approaches. This article also provides some recommendation in which limitations can be addressed and finally concludes that learners' needs and competency should determine the approach used.

Keywords- *traditional ESP; integrated ESP; content and language integration; limitations*

I. INTRODUCTION

ESP is rather ubiquitous nowadays especially at tertiary level in non-English-speaking countries. The emergence of ESP or any of its branches is basically based on three main reasons namely the demands of Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics and arising learner-focused method (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). First, societal changes such as the expansion of Science and technology as well as economic power of the United States in the post-war world resulted in the demands to learn English. Second, it is due to the research focusing on how language is used in real communication, which means learning English in a specific context pertinent to learners' needs. Specialized linguistic characteristics of different disciplines are studied and integrated into the ESP

language teaching syllabus designs (Chen, 2010). The final reason, as cited by Hutchinson and Waters (1986), is because of the focus on the method of language delivery, that is how learners acquire language and the different ways a language is acquired. Owing to this, ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent teaching approaches in the field of EFL across the world over the decades.

Over the years, new ways of teaching such as content based instruction (CBI), content and language integrated teaching (CLIL) arise. CBI has some influences in the ESP classroom as learning that is driven by content has gained support since students are able to see the practicality of language that is meaningful beyond grammar viability (Freiermuth, 2001). A content-based or topical syllabus is developed in accordance with the principles of ESP. Meanwhile, CLIL is a dual focused educational approach in which a foreign language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). Theoretically, ESP and CLIL are two separate approaches, however; in practice it is hard to disregard subject matter in an ESP course. Meanwhile, the presence of subject content is also expected by tertiary level learners (Porecka, n.d.) and this moves CLIL closer to ESP. The course of literature that emphasizes the exploration of themes or subject content in enhancing one's language ability has received much attention and the integration of content with a language is gaining popularity. Integrated learning has proven to be successful in increasing students' linguistic proficiency in several ways (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Rehorick & Edwards, 1994). There are even voices claiming the necessity of totally discarding traditional language-focused ESP teaching as

obsolete in favour of integrated learning (Tarnopolsky, 2013). For instance, Bicknell (2009) posed the question of why we should teach Business English traditionally if integrated teaching can do it much more efficiently (as cited in Tarnopolsky, 2013). Adhere to this, this paper aims to discuss the possibilities and inherent limitations of traditional and integrated ESP teaching and concludes whether ESP practitioners should do away with language-focused traditional ESP teaching or should consider integrating content and language in their ESP lessons.

II. TRADITIONAL ESP AND INTEGRATED ESP

Traditional ESP is a language-focused approach which is designed to meet specified needs of the learner, identified through needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Huchinson & Water, 1987). One of the absolute characteristic of ESP, as proposed by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) is that it is centred on the language appropriate to the activities or content pertinent to particular discipline or occupation. Although it is different from General English, ESP has inherited the patterns of word formation, syntactic, discourse analysis and other importance grammar aspects too (Choroleeva, 2012). ESP uses functional and thematic syllabus and various interactive or authentic tasks to facilitate the acquisition of the language used by the target professional group. This form of ESP, named traditional ESP, is widely used. In short, traditional ESP teaching focuses on learning the language for professional communication (Robinson, 1991) and the content is only a source from which language forms for learning are obtained and the background for acquiring those forms (Tarnopolsky, 2013). It is deemed that in traditional ESP the professional content matter has no learning value in which learners do not acquire any professional knowledge, instead it is only used as a tool or source to acquire a target language.

On the other hand, integrated ESP is opposed to the traditional language-focused ESP. ESP course designs today commonly give some, if not equal emphasis on the importance of content. In integrated ESP learning, the focus shifted from learning the language to learning simultaneously both the professional content matter and the language for professional communication (Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989; Tarnopolsky, 2013). The integration of language and content in integrated ESP learning resembles CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). It is also a dual- focused educational

approach in which the target language (English) is used for teaching and learning of a non-language subject matter with the objective of promoting both content and language mastery to predefined levels (Maljers *et. al.*, 2010). In such approach, the two elements are interwoven and should receive equal importance. Integrated ESP is rather based on the second language acquisition theory whereby language is acquired unconsciously through its great exposure to the language and not through deliberate learning of the language like drilling or repeated practices. In integrated ESP course, students' attention is paid to the professional content and learned through the medium of English and this language is acquired implicitly, without students' conscious attention to the language forms (Krashen, 1982). To end this, in integrated ESP, the learning of content actually helps in learning the language whereas the language mastery facilitates students' access to professional subject matter too.

Like traditional ESP teaching and learning, integrated ESP course also offers many benefits such as use of naturalistic language learning and provide a purpose for language use in the classroom. However, there are some key differences in these two approaches. When content and language is integrated, equal emphasis is given to meaning and form. One essential feature of integrated ESP is that it does not imply preference of one over the other as both language and the content are on a continuum. In contrast, traditional ESP is language-led and language learning objectives are of primary importance. Hence, the learning objectives and learning outcomes of integrated ESP and traditional ESP distinguish both approaches. In addition to that, in traditional ESP, language is the major content of the course and the means of learning content is often adapted to the learner's proficiency level. Even though it is still context embedded, the content learnt might be reduced or simplified in order to suit the learners' competency. Meanwhile, in integrated ESP, scaffolding strategies are used to facilitate learners in mastering the content, without changing much of its professional content. In the former case, language is the content and language content leads to topic selection whereas in the latter, language is a mean to acquire both content and language.

III. POSSIBILITIES AND INHERENT LIMITATIONS

In both approaches, the quantity of exposure to target language is the almost similar because English is used as a medium of instruction. Research

on second language acquisition has shown that exposure to naturally-occurring language is necessary to ensure the achievement of good level of competence in the target language. No doubt, vast research has proved the effectiveness of ESP in raising linguistic competence and confidence among the learners. The possible difference between traditional ESP and integrated ESP is perhaps the quality of exposure. Some evidence suggests that CLIL students improve their listening, reading comprehension skills and acquiring a range of vocabulary but less on pronunciation, accuracy and complexity of written and spoken language (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Lasagabaster, 2008; Alonso *et al.*, 2008; Naves, 2009, as cited in Harrop, 2012). What these studies on CLIL suggest is that tension between language and content in integrated ESP approach might prevail too. When subject matter is emphasized equally, the chances for educators to focus on the language form such as grammar, syntax etc. is substantially reduced.

According to Choroleeva (2012), ESP teaching materials will be more productive if learners pay attention to both the language usage (knowledge of linguistic rules) and the language use (communicative abilities). If an ESP lesson focuses more on language use, it is rather risky as learners might stop paying attention to correct rules. This phenomenon is rather true in an integrated ESP lesson because being able to communicate effectively using the professional content is one of the major goals. Imagine a class discussing on a professional topic and the educator constantly disrupts students for the wrong usage of target language when he/ she is speaking, this would definitely disturb the flow of the lesson and learning outcomes regarding a content might not be achieved at the end of the lesson. In such a case, as long as learners can use the language to transmit information to a listener and interpret information received correctly, educators will mostly have to sacrifice language over the content. However, is it what a language educator wants? Educators should not forget the fact that the lack of focus on form can lead to fossilization of errors and causes a perceived stagnation of progress eventually (Harrop, 2012). Hence, the first common issue or limitation of integrated ESP syllabus design is to achieve two challenging goals and the possibility of sacrificing one over another.

On top of that, in integrated ESP, successful content learning is particularly dependent on language and conversely, enhanced language learning is dependent on content learning. If the learners are fluent or have basic language ability in English, then

educators can normally count on their learners for being able to use the language of learning whereby they do not struggle with vocabulary or syntax and undoubtedly, they can listen with reasonable understanding regarding a topic taught as well as can read and write at a minimally skilled level (Clegg, n.d.). Vice versa, learning of the content helps in learning the language implicitly especially in acquiring vocabulary or utterances useful in the learners' field. Given such, learners can learn the professional language and professional skills in one ESP lesson, killing two birds with one stone. Integrated ESP might be a better option for some branches of ESP such as English for medical professional. However, when it comes to English for tourism or English for waiters, educators should expect that most learners might come in without solid background of English.

Likewise, when speaking about ESP courses in non-English-speaking countries like Malaysia, few factors should be considered. The first factor which cannot be underestimated is that students in non-English-speaking countries often enter their first university year with a level of English that is not high enough for integrated learning. This seems true in Malaysia as the level of English competency among undergraduates is considered low. Most learners are still learning English at tertiary level and if they are learning the language in the same lesson with the new subject concepts, the desired learning outcomes will not be accomplished. The learners might find it hard to read or talk in a language they do not master, not to say on reading or talking on unfamiliar topics. Ultimately, integrated ESP which supposedly improves motivation will demotivate them instead. Furthermore, insufficiency of professional knowledge might even aggravate the situation if learners' English proficiency is underdeveloped. Generally, students in the first or second year of university studies do not know much of their future profession and neither are they greatly exposed to the specialized knowledge of their discipline. Hence, integrated learning which requires acquisition of language for professional communication and learning of professional knowledge simultaneously may prove too hard for them because content difficulties are superimposed on language (Tarnopolsky, 2013). Therefore, another limitation of integrated ESP program is that it might not be effective among learners of lower English proficiency or learners without specialized knowledge

IV. RECOMMENDATION

Looking at the inherent limitations of the seemingly sound integrated ESP learning, ESP course designers as well as implementers must be aware of such drawbacks. Although integrated ESP is a fad nowadays, educators in Malaysia should also take into consideration of students' basic language abilities, which are deemed to be deteriorating recently. Perhaps, a traditional ESP can solve the problems aforementioned by being a preparatory ESP course. It is vital in the early period of students ESP training that learners improve their English as they need to be aware of the language form, realize some fundamental linguistic peculiarities and not to get the ideas about the content matter. But when learners have acquired the basic language ability, there should be a gradation of difficulties and an integrated approach would be a better option. Similarly, traditional ESP should play its role first since students are not greatly exposed to the professional knowledge in their first or second year. Once the learners have mastered the subject matter, integrated ESP lesson will be more effective as learners can use the knowledge of content to enhance language learning. Therefore, ESP practitioners should consider some external factors which might influence the conditions of learning among students and design the ESP programme accordingly.

Apart from that, for ESP practitioners such as curriculum developers, implementers or evaluators, the ratio of content to language instruction should be their concern, depending on the learners' needs. Given the multifaceted and dynamic nature of language learning, ESP practitioners must tailor the language lesson according to learners' needs. If the learners come in without solid background of English, educators should emphasize the form instead of the meaning. Form-focused instruction is encouraged because it would help learners to notice the form in the input, perceive the difference between input form and their own conception of the form and this allows them to use the target-like use of the form (Jarvinen, 2009). Some grammar is learnt implicitly and some learners need explicit teaching to be learnt. Thus, educators cannot only expose the learners to the language use (meaning) without teaching them the language usage (form), by making assumption that all learners can learn the language implicitly. Even though it is content based, language form cannot be ignored. Besides, the weightage between content and language is a major issue in ESP course assessment. If the assessment stresses more on the content, surely the learners will start ignoring the language form. Thus, the learning objectives or outcomes of an ESP

course should be clearly defined and should tailor to the learners' needs.

V. CONCLUSION

Integrated ESP as an alternative model of ESP teaching has the potential to address some shortcomings of traditional ESP. It is hoped through the integrated teaching; learners are more motivated to acquire both the language and subject matter through a meaningful context. However, it also has inherent limitations. The difficulty of its content can leave the weak learners very vulnerable if language activity provided is insufficient for linguistic development. In conclusion, of whether to select traditional or integrated ESP, it significantly depends on the learners, as stated by Stevrens (1988) regarding the absolute characteristic of ESP: ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learners. Finally, ESP practitioners must not forget the fact that the purpose of the ESP course is the mastery of English and not only the professional content.

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Biography



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She works in a secondary school in Kuala Perlis, Perlis as an English teacher since 2009. She teaches both lower forms and upper forms. Being a part timer in one local university, she also has the experience teaching ESP-related courses. Her works mainly focuses on fluency and accuracy of English language.



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