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EFL Teachers' beliefs and Challenges About ESP Teaching

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Abstract

This paper focuses on EFL teachers' approaches of the pedagogy of ESP teaching, challenges, and needs of ESP teaching in Tunisia. A semi-structured interview was distributed to 20 EFL university Tunisian teachers. The results showed that Tunisian university teachers had a limited understanding of ESP concepts, and they consider it as a challenging task. Moreover, the results strongly suggest more professional training in ESP teaching.

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Introduction

ESP teaching has been perceived as an approach to language teaching which is highly linked to the learners' particular needs and domains (e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Otilia, 2015). The concern with English communication in occupational settings helps in raising the concern with research in ESP domain. Focusing on Teachers' approaches and perceptions of ESP practices had deepened the concern with the roles of ESP in EFL classrooms. Therefore, this piece of research is an attempt to delve into this focus through investigating how EFL teachers think about their practices about ESP teaching and understanding the existing approaches and challenges.

This study will answer these following research questions:

1. What do university Tunisian teachers think about ESP teaching?
2. What are the practical challenges that they face in ESP teaching classes?

Teacher thinking

One reason for the lack of interest in investigating teacher thinking/or teacher cognition in the past was, as argued by

Freeman (1996), the result of the domination of the positivist scientist paradigm in research. Defining the positivist perspective, Crotty (2003) writes,

[K]nowledge is not arrived at speculatively...but is grounded firmly and exclusively in something that is posited... what is posited or given in direct experience is what is observed, the observation in question being scientific observation carried out by way of the scientific method (p. 20).

Because teachers' thinking was believed to be inaccessible to direct observation, it was not considered "proper object of empirical enquiry" (Fenstermacher, 1976 cited in Thomson, 1984, p. 106). However, recent research on teachers (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Zeichner (1983) Shulman, 1986; Kagan, 1988; Freeman, 1990) demonstrated that teaching is more than a behavior; it is rather based on thought and action blended in a decision-making process happening in real-time. Freeman (1996), for instance, claims that "teachers are constantly involved in interpreting their worlds: they interpret their subject matter, their classroom contexts, and the people in it. These interpretations are central to their thinking and their actions" (p. 98)

Contrary to the conception of teaching as behaviour, Borg (2003) draws attention to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching-what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). Therefore, to study teachers and teaching, it is significant to collect data on these very cognitive processes and understandings mentioned by Freeman (1996) and Borg (2003). To understand teachers' behavior, researchers need to dig into their beliefs that shape their actions. Borg (2003) emphasises the idea that "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). In other words, teachers are active and rational decision-makers who act according to personal convictions and the contextual factors shaping their practice.

As early as 1968 Jackson, (cited in Clark and Peterson, 1986, p. 256) argued for looking at teacher thinking to understand teaching saying, "[A] glimpse at this hidden side of teaching may increase our understanding of some of the more visible and well-known features of the process." A complete understanding of the process of teaching cannot be reached without understanding the constraints and opportunities of the teaching process (Clark and Peterson, 1986). Descriptions of research on teacher thinking found in Clark and Peterson (1986), Shulman, (1987), and Woods (1996) can be synthesized under three categories: research focusing on teacher planning, research focusing on teachers' interactive decision making and research focusing on teachers' implicit theories and beliefs.

Teacher knowledge

Research on teacher knowledge is based on the assumption that to understand language teaching better, we need to know more about what teachers know, how they come to know it, and how they draw on their knowledge (Freeman & Richards, 1996; James, 2001; Freeman, 2001; Borg, 2003). Researchers interested in Teacher knowledge generally collect data on what teachers do and think within their life experience (Gutierrez, 1996) in order to get stories from within;

that is from the teachers themselves who reflect on their practices and voice their thoughts (Freeman, 1996).

Considerable research has been conducted in this area, and existing models of teacher knowledge base have been refined (Shulman, 1986). Teacher knowledge has been dealt with in many ways: Leinhardt & Smith (1985) distinguish between content knowledge (knowledge of content matter to be taught) versus instructional knowledge (the knowledge of conducting lessons by moving appropriately through segments). Woods (1996), for example, distinguished between declarative, or content knowledge (the "what" of teaching) and procedural knowledge (the "how" of teaching). The idea behind this distinction is that teachers not only need to know things, they also need to know how to do things.

Shulman (1987) refers to three types of knowledge: propositional knowledge, case knowledge, and strategic knowledge. He explains that propositional knowledge incorporates principles (disciplined empirical or philosophical inquiry), maxims (the accumulated wisdom of practice and important sources of guidance for practice as the theory or empirical principles), and norms (values, ideological or philosophical commitments of justice, fairness, equity, and the like that teachers and those learning to teach should incorporate and employ) (Shulman, 1986, p. 11). Case knowledge is defined by Shulman as the "knowledge of specific, well-documented, and richly described events (p. 11). Finally, strategic knowledge brings together propositional and case knowledge. It comes into play when the teacher faces new situations or problems. "It must be generated to extend understanding beyond principle to the wisdom of practice" (p. 13). In case strategic understanding is activated in the examination of rules and cases, professional judgement is called into play. Here comes the distinction between mere craft and profession.

Another research study that demonstrated the interactive nature of teacher knowledge is the one carried out by Hellgren (1988) who, in his analysis of the relationship between theory and practice in relation to student teachers, conducted a qualitative study that dealt with the different kinds of knowledge student teachers acquire by different kinds of experiences. He focused on the relationship between teacher background knowledge, and the knowledge they receive in TE, and how these sources of knowledge interact during teaching practice. The researcher argues that knowledge by experience is acquired from previous school learning experiences (know *that* and know *how*). He affirms that although knowledge by experience underlies other forms of knowledge, it has to be mediated by the knowledge received from TE. This knowledge can be expanded in TE by mediating *knowledge of that* (including subject matter, pedagogy, didactics) and *knowledge of how* (with the underlying assumptions and research methods).

Thus focusing on EFL teachers' knowledge and beliefs is crucial in understanding their orientations and assumptions in relation to ESP teaching and learning

Overview of English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

The concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) first appeared in the fields of Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT) in the 1960s. It focuses on the teaching and study of the English language to meet communication demands in either professional or academic contexts. The materials created for ESP courses, such as English language proficiency and topic material in a particular field of study, need to be in line with learners' real needs for language use in their academic work and professional endeavors (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). The main emphasis of

ESP courses offered at the tertiary level of education is on English language proficiency, including genres and linguistic structures that students are likely to encounter in the workplace in the future.

Prior to creating an ESP course, a needs analysis must be done given the emphasis on meeting the needs of certain learners. The process of creating an ESP course often includes a step in which the creators pinpoint the precise linguistic abilities the students will require. The ESP course's material is shaped and improved using the knowledge of these language abilities (Warters, 1987; Hyland, 2006). At the conclusion of the course, learners can also be evaluated using needs analysis (Warters, 1987).

Needs Analysis

In fact, the word "needs analysis" encompasses a wide range of factors, including the learners' goals and backgrounds, language proficiency, motivations for enrolling in the course, preferred methods of instruction, and the contexts in which they will need to communicate. An organized and ongoing process, a needs analysis requires teachers to modify their instruction as they gain more knowledge about their students.

On ESP, numerous investigations have been done. In fact, ESP studies from 1980 to 2018 were recently analyzed for co-citations by Liu and Hu (2021), who then grouped the investigations into eleven clusters. As stated by Liu and Hu (2021, p. 102): "ESP issues and directions, academic genres and scholarly publishing, learning to write academically, academic vocabulary and formulaic language, English as an academic lingua franca, disciplinary academic discourse, needs analysis, L1-L2 differences and English as an L2, voice and stance in academic discourse, metadiscourse in English academic writing, and citation and illegitimate source use" were all topics covered in each cluster. The authors suggested further areas for empirical literature in ESP education.

These so-called "less well trodden and new ESP territories" (p. 113) include local grammar (e.g., Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014), intradisciplinary variation (e.g., Hu & Gao, 2015), multimodal discourse, academic speech, and under-researched genres (e.g., Hu & Liu, 2018; O'Halloran et al., 2016; Zou & Hyland, 2020), ESP teacher development. In order to provide a thorough investigation into EFL teachers' comprehension of ESP instruction, the current study set out to do so.

Situations for Teaching ESP

Short English classes or training courses for professional settings (such as nursing, business, engineering, or medical) are offered through ESP programs offered by educational institutions. To meet the demands of students in various areas, the essential ideas of ESP are frequently paired with these brief training sessions. A number of empirical studies have assessed the needs of learners for their upcoming professional careers (Chamnankit, 2015; Chankasikub, 2014; Chatsungnoen, 2015; Chetsadanuwat, 2018; Chumtong, 2014; Sompung, 2014; Hiranburana, 2017).

Effective ESP education, however, seems to be a persistent problem despite the fact that several empirical research support ESP short courses. In fact, English language instruction continues to be inappropriate for students' requirements and disassociated from their particular academic fields. For instance, Anuyato (2015) conducted a study of diploma

students' opinions at a vocational school in Bangkok. Overall, the students' evaluations were positive to the extent that ESP increases English language proficiency and creative language use, as well as offers some advantages for potential professions after graduation. But some students found ESP education to be challenging and demanding, which made them feel unmotivated.

Additionally, ESP teachers could discover that they are far less knowledgeable or experienced than their students in the relevant fields (Ruang & Chuenchaichon, 2016). ESP and general English opinions of ESP instructors and students at a university in Thailand were surveyed in 2016 by Ruankam and Chuenchaichon. The results demonstrated that ESP instructors were well-received by both ESP teachers and students. The students concurred that ESP teaching could improve their readiness for inter-ASEAN competition in the workplace. The survey also mentioned that ESP educators found it difficult to find opportunities to use English in their daily lives and jobs. Students also expect ESP professors to be well-versed in ESP material. As a result, the teachers ought to concentrate on honing language abilities that are linked with the ESP.

Research Methodology

A. *Participants*

A total of 20 (12 males and 8 females) university teachers who teach ESP courses at different universities in Tunisia agreed to participate in the current study. The purposive sampling technique was employed. Half of the teacher participants had received ESP training, while the remaining half had not. Nine out of twenty are MA holders and the rest had doctorate degrees. Regarding teaching experience in their subject domain, including ESP courses, approximately all the participants had more than five years of teaching experience.

B. *Research instrument*

A semi-structured interview, was used as it allows participants to “answer the question in any way they want and encourages them to do so in a relatively extended manner” (Borg, 2015, p. 496). Moreover, semi-structured interviews have been predominantly employed in educational research and are regarded as an effective instrument for scrutinising the in-depth phenomenon being studied (Miles et al., 2014). The semi-structured interview is made up of six questions in relation to the participants' beliefs and challenges about ESP teaching. The interview was piloted by two experienced teachers to check its consistency and accuracy and pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants for anonymity reasons.

Results and Discussion

A. *Tunisian University Teachers' Insights of ESP*

In Analysing the responses of the participants about “What do you think about ESP teaching?” 18 out of 20 participants agree that it is highly challenging to students and it requires specific skills that should be elaborated to meet the needs of the subjects. Also, the participants seem to be critical to the current level of students in ESP classes and they said that it is not easy to teach ESP in Tunisia. Analysis of the responses to “what marked you most while choosing ESP teaching?” indicates that 82.6% of the teachers were attracted by the language itself 8.9% of them were attracted by what they termed as “the beauty of the language itself with its lexis, difference, and mainly pronunciation”. What they perceived as the importance of ESP teaching dates back to their previous experience when they were students 82.6% of the teachers went back to ESP conception through their personal experiences and they described some hardships in learning some specific jargons.

Thus, indicating these ESP problematic issues among Tunisian university teachers provide empirical evidence to support previous studies that ESP teaching is a complex and challenging task (Javid, 2015; Nonthisong, 2015; Ruangkam & Chuenchaichon, 2016).

Teachers must survey what resources are readily available, select some units from a number of course books, adapt materials if necessary, and write their own teaching materials to suit the students' learning objectives. These tasks can be challenging because ESP teachers find themselves in situations where they are assumed to produce a course that exactly matches the needs of a specific cluster of learners. However, ESP teachers have limited time to prepare and create targeted course materials. Overall, the current results provide evidence to support previous findings showing that ESP teaching is demanding and challenging (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Javid, 2015; Jones, 1990). Selecting the appropriate methodology and evaluation materials is another essential element that makes ESP teaching more arduous and challenging. The current findings showed that ESP teachers placed more emphasis on teaching grammar and vocabulary than preparing students for chosen communicative environments. Many ESP teachers focus more on forms or accuracy than meaning or fluency in communication or speaking activities. These results remind practitioners, including teachers and educators, that ESP places emphasis on language use in authentic contexts than on teaching grammar and language structures. It has been argued that ESP teaching requires diverse teaching methods and tasks to address the various yet particular needs of specific learners. As such, ESP teachers' teaching techniques should match their students' learning styles since the learners' characteristics and the learning contexts will affect their teaching performance (Rao, 2001 and Javid, 2015). This study illustrates that ESP requires efficiently planned activities and tasks and the selection of matching pedagogical methodologies. Indeed, the current findings strongly suggest a demand for thorough, all-inclusive training for the ESP teachers' professionalisms and teaching careers.

B. Challenges of ESP Practice Identified by Tunisian University Teachers

The analysis of the open ended findings indicates that Tunisian ESP teachers are facing many practical challenges. Some of them are directly associated with the characteristic attributes of ESP. ESP teachers are not primary knowledge source of the material and the students may know more about the subject than the teachers. Therefore, as a strategy for effective communication, the teachers may draw on the learners' subject knowledge.

"Since I am not familiar with the subject content, I have to be more flexible with my students." (Ahmed)

"Learning from my students is very natural and I am not bothered because this is a natural process in the EFL classroom while dealing with ESP teaching." (Ali)

As depicted in the excerpts below, the analysis showed that some content teachers are still facing problems with the English language. These teachers are unable to facilitate communication in their language classes.

To overcome some communication problems some participants have resorted to their past learning experience when they were students. This has been approached in the literature as a natural practice and many teacher educators have noticed the powerful effect of the implicit models in teachers' future practice and acknowledging Lortie's idea that we teach as we have been taught. For instance, Kennedy (1990) acknowledges that "teachers acquire seemingly inedible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake" (p. 17). This shows the power exerted by the apprenticeship of observation in shaping teachers' teaching ideas and practices along their professional life, and hence the role to be played by TE on acting on teachers' implicit theories and beliefs.

Others have mentioned their challenges in opting for the appropriate course. For example

"I am not confident to teach and I don't really know what to teach. So, I end up teaching vocabulary and grammar in ESP class." (Samia)

In line with previous studies (Basturkmen, 2006; Todd, 2003), the analysis of this study suggests that the cooperation between language teachers and content teachers may be necessary for ESP classes regarding the specific features of the ESP methodology. It has been highlighted in the literature that activities used in ESP reflect learners' specialist domains (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

The findings showed the existing challenges faced by ESP teachers in planning and designing their courses. The burden faced by them is the outcome of the shortage in providing suitable ESP materials. Previous studies such as (Tsao, 2011) have highlighted the challenges faces by ESP teachers in designing appropriate courses for various students.

Another challenge faced by the participants lies in the course evaluation. For example:

"I don't really know how to design speaking tasks for my ESP class even though I know subject content very well. Also, I have no idea how to assess my students' speaking abilities." (Ahmed)

Additionally, the participants highlighted their challenges with doing needs analysis in ESP context. This is in line with previous studies suggesting that needs analysis consists of multiple tasks, including "necessities", "lacks and "wants" (Duddley-Evans & St. John, 2011)

These tasks represents an extra burden to ESP teachers in Tunisia. This issue was highlighted in the following excerpts:

"In needs analysis, I have to do a lot of things. I have to learn more about the facilities, the teaching methodology, etc. I also spend lots of time preparing course syllabus and materials for my students' needs." (Kalthoum)

"In my ESP class, my students' English language proficiency levels are widely different. I think. This made it more difficult for me to prepare my lessons for my class." (Marwa)

These results reflect the existing challenges of ESP teaching among the Tunisian University teachers. The findings suggest ESP teachers' improvement for targeted professional knowledge in ESP area. This is in line with Shulman's (1986) "model of professional learning" comprises seven categories to describe teachers' professional knowledge: *knowledge of content* "the amount and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher" (p. 9). The teacher needs not only understand *that* something is so, but the teacher must further understand *why* it is so, *general pedagogical content knowledge* "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interest and abilities of learners, and are represented for instruction" (Shulman, 1987, p. 8), *knowledge of the curriculum* "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interest and abilities of learners, and are represented for instruction" (Shulman, 1987, p. 8), *general pedagogical knowledge* includes knowledge of learners and learning, general principles of instruction, classroom management, and the aims and purposes of education (Shulman, 1987) *knowledge of the context*, *knowledge of learners* and learning, *knowledge of educational goals and aims*.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of the current study offer educators and practitioners useful knowledge about ESP teaching. First, the results revealed a moderate understanding of ESP among Thai university professors. The findings also showed that ESP pedagogy involves more than just teaching; it also calls for the involvement of a researcher, a course planner and material provider, a course assessor, a content instructor or expert, and a number of other crucial components. Together, these factors present a barrier for ESP teachers because they must carry the additional burden of teaching language and certain subjects while also lacking the necessary training. Consequently, ESP instructors, especially those who work in Thai higher education, need to have a high degree of training in both language and subject-matter instruction.

Additionally, the results of this study have some instructional ramifications. First, ESP language teachers must be adaptable and pursue professional development for ESP instruction; they are not required to be specialists or subject matter experts. A language teacher, a subject teacher or expert, a researcher, a course planner and material provider, and a course evaluator are the five crucial ESP elements that the current study offers educators and researchers. To deal with instructional challenges, ESP teachers must be appropriately equipped with each of these components. The study of the unique demands of the learners should be the first step in ESP courses. The language abilities needed are determined by the demands of the learners and their intended use of the language, which has an impact on the planning and design of the course.

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