

A Study of the Applicability of the ESP Approach to English Language Course Design at the Tertiary Level to Address Bangladeshi Learners' Required Professional Needs

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ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh, competence in English is considered indispensable for international communication, educational advancement, professional accomplishment and progress in every sphere of life. Accordingly, it is considered essential for Bangladeshi higher level learners to acquire sufficient competence in English to perform efficiently in their future work settings. Nonetheless, the current English language courses taught at the tertiary level are rarely geared to the future professional needs of the learners. Hence, the need to develop and implement specialized, more focused and learners' professional needs-oriented English language courses should be explored and integrated in English language course design to ensure adequate and fruitful English education of the tertiary level Bangladeshi learners. This paper intended to investigate the applicability of the ESP Approach to English language course design at the tertiary level to meet Bangladeshi learners' prospective professional needs. A mix-method approach has been used for this study. Findings of the study disclose the necessity of re-construction of the current Tertiary Level English Language courses and establish the need to incorporate the English Language needs of the learners for prospective professional purposes.

1. Introduction

Teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a specialized branch of Teaching of English as a foreign or second language. Javid concedes that ESP is "an extremely significant branch of ELT".¹ Dudley-Evans and St John recount, "ESP is a part of a more general movement of teaching Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). LSP has focused on the teaching of languages such as French and German for specific purposes, as well as English".² The ESP movement originated from a number of coalescing seminal movements in Linguistics, ELT and Educational Psychology, and formative socio-economic developments around the world.³ Moreover, during the preamble period the concern to make language courses more relevant to learners' needs also fortified the emergence of the ESP movement. Probing into the genesis of ESP Hutchinson and Waters state:

The growth of ESP...was brought about by a combination of three important factors: the expansion of demand for English to suit particular needs and developments in the fields of linguistics and educational psychology. All three factors seemed to point towards the need for increased specialization in language learning.⁴

Though the concept of teaching English for specific purposes had been prevalent for a long time, ESP thrived as a distinct discipline of ELT predominantly in the late 1960s. Retracing the historical growth of ESP, Javid points out "From the early 1960s ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of ELT".⁵ During that period, the growth of science and technology, the increased use of English as the international language of science, technology and business, the increased number of foreign students in the English speaking countries like the UK, the USA and Australia and some other significant developments in the world economy led to the culmination of the ESP movement. With a revolutionary zeal, linguistic researchers shifted their focus from mere descriptive study of the features of language to the intricate processes of language acquisition and learning and the ways in which language is used as a medium of real life communication. Reflecting on the prominent reasons of the growing adequacy of ESP, Dudley-Evans and St. John mention that the prominent early stages of ESP were strongly correlated with "Register Analysis, Discourse and Rhetorical analysis, Skills-based Approaches and the Learning-centered Approach".⁶ In addition, Richards observes, "The emergence of ESP with its emphasis on needs analysis as the starting point in language program design was an important factor in the development of current approaches to language curriculum development".⁷

2. Statement of the Problem

Competence in English is essential for the people of Bangladesh for various occupational purposes. The type, extent and level of English required for effective performance in the leading professional sectors of Bangladesh demand special attention in curriculum design, especially for the terminal degrees so that the English courses can cater for learners' actual needs, provide a smooth transition from their academic life to professional life and ensure their effective performance in the latter. Nevertheless, the tertiary level English language courses are found to be mostly focused on the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) needs of the learners. Specifically, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses have been barely incorporated into the English curriculum of Bangladesh.⁸ Thus, a large gap could be discerned between the knowledge gained through academic education and the skills required in English in professional life. As a result, in the initial stages of professional life, and sometimes throughout the career, performance of the officials and employees suffer in Bangladesh. To remove the gap the skills required in professional life should be developed by designing and implementing effective and adequate English language courses. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate the amount, type and level of English required in different professions in Bangladesh with a view to incorporating these skills in the academic programmes at the tertiary level.

3. Literature Review

R. Khan⁹ in her evaluation of the English Foundation Courses taught to learners of thirteen departments at the Humanities faculty of Dhaka University observes that the English language course was barely found effective and satisfactory by the learners as well as the teachers. Hence, she ardently advises that the syllabus of the English Foundation Course or any other English language course/s needs to be 'revised and developed'. She puts forward that the contents of this syllabus used at Dhaka University as well as the syllabi of English language courses employed to teach learners of different universities in Bangladesh need to be reconstructed keeping in mind the needs and demands of learners. For this purpose, she proposes that a thorough needs analysis can be carried out to determine the specific English language needs of learners before modifying the syllabus.

Richards¹⁰ in his book *Curriculum development in language teaching*, states that needs analysis is a process or procedure of determining and specifying the needs for which a learner or group of learners require a target language. Needs analysis, according to him, usually includes the study of perceived and present needs as well as potential and unrecognized needs. Needs of learners may be determined by analysis of the short-term goal/s and, sometimes, by the long-term goal/s. He observes that learners' needs are often realized in terms of performance, that is, in terms of what a learner or a group of learners should be able to perform in the target language on completion of a course of study. Hence, one of the major goals of an ELT course should be to prepare learners to carry out a specific task or set of tasks in their workplace settings.

Aiguo¹¹ in a paper titled 'Reassessing the position of Aviation English: From a special language to English for Specific Purposes' studies the prospect of establishing Aviation English as an ESP specialty at aeronautical and aviation universities and higher educational institutions in China. He recognizes the importance of needs analysis for developing ESP courses for the current and potential students of aviation universities. He argues, "With the rapid growth of air industry and the flourishing Chinese economy, more and more people are working or wish to work in airports and airlines. Accordingly, English is fast becoming a requirement for professional promotion and even employment".¹² He has conducted needs analysis of the Chinese aviation students to design an integrated ESP course corresponding the Chinese context. Thereby, he intends to enable ESP learners to learn the target language effectively and to meet the required standard of English proficiency to communicate satisfactorily in the respective professional sector. Furthermore, he explores the ESP doctrine to devise a practicable approach to ESP teaching that will be more appropriate and beneficial for Chinese learners. He has found that Chinese aviation students are competent in the reading skill but they are mostly incompetent in the communication skills, specifically in listening and speaking. He suggests that deficiency of the Chinese learners in using English to communicate in work settings could be convalenced by adopting the learner-centred curriculum module

promulgated by ESP theorists and practitioners. He elucidates, "In the learner-centered curriculum module, learners' needs and teachers' teaching plans are not in conflict. The content and ways to have it performed in class are highlighted".¹³

Chaudhury¹⁴ attempts to examine the importance of identifying the specific English language needs of students of the different departments of the Faculty of Arts at Dhaka University in Bangladesh. In her study, she emphasizes the necessity of needs analysis of the tertiary level learners for course design and evaluation of the effectiveness of the current English language courses taught at the universities or other higher educational institutions in Bangladesh. She remarks that "the current classroom and teaching leaves much to be desired".¹⁵ In addition, she concurs with Khan that "there is plenty of scope for improvement in the present course that is being taught at the Humanities faculty".¹⁶

Chostelidou¹⁷ in a research paper has attempted to analyze and identify the English language needs of students of the Department of Accountancy in the A.T.E.I. of Thessaloniki, Greece. She meditates on the prospect of implementing a needs analysis approach to ESP syllabus design in Greek tertiary education. Investigating into the Greek scenario of ESP education at the tertiary level, she observes that "since the present curricular framework has not yielded the desired results and has proved inadequate in addressing the learners' needs both professional and academic, the revision of the existing ESP curriculum seems extremely timely".¹⁸ In her opinion, the currently used ESP courses have not been tailored to the needs of a target group of learners predominantly because of the absence of formal needs analysis procedures in ESP course design at the universities of Greece. She proffers that ESP courses should not only address the learners' immediate needs as a student but also attend to their long-term needs as professionals. She suggests that course designers should identify the needs of a target group of learners to develop an English language course at the higher level and introduce needs-based course design. Findings of her study reveals that "the participants have different expectations with respect to their need to use the target language, for study or professional purposes, which highlights the merits of needs analysis concerning the identification of learners' needs".¹⁹

Chatsungnoen²⁰ in a research work titled 'Needs Analysis for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for Thai Undergraduates in a Food Science and Technology Programme' explores the English language needs of Thai tertiary level learners and other relevant stakeholders to design an effective and practicable ESP course. She propounds that needs analysis should be utilized as an ongoing process within the overall process of ESP course development. She identifies that learners at Agriculture universities in Thailand suffer because of their low level of proficiency in English. Learners' incompetence in English not only incumbers their academic achievement in learning English but also will debilitate their performance in their prospective work settings. She discovers that the currently used English courses barely integrate the specific English language needs of the learners. Additionally, a mismatch of the perceptions of the learners' needs between the ESP practitioners and other stakeholders in both academic and professional contexts aggravates the gap between learners' actual proficiency and expected proficiency in English. Therefore, she proposes a redesigned needs analysis model to be applied for future ESP needs analyses in various disciplines at an Agriculture University as well as to be adapted for use in wider Thai and international contexts to develop or redevelop effective ESP courses.

Balogun²¹ who attempts to explore the Nigerian context of ESP teaching-learning practices in a research paper, argues that Nigerian students at the tertiary level may not need to learn the whole language for general purposes because they come to study at universities and other higher educational institutions after completing a course in general English. Balogun further envisioned that English language programmes at the tertiary level in Nigeria "should qualify as ESP courses where the syllabus and materials should be determined in all essentials by prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners, rather than by non-learner-centred criteria such as the teachers' or institutions' predetermined criteria ... for teaching English as part of general education".²²

4. Theoretical Developments

Paltridge and Starfield concur English for specific purposes (ESP) is concerned with teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of learners is to use English in a particular

domain.²³ Johns further explicates, “Unlike many other research areas in theoretical and applied linguistics ESP has been, as its core, a practitioners’ movement, devoted to establishing, through careful research, the needs and relevant discourse features for a targeted group of students”.²⁴ Teaching English for Specific Purposes has flourished into a focal part of English language teaching. Dudley-Evans and St John acknowledge ESP as “essentially a materials and teaching-led movement”.²⁵ According to Hutchinson and Waters, English for Specific Purposes entails teaching which has ‘specified objectives’. ESP, they illuminate, is “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning”.²⁶ In the same line, Munby avers:

ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner, rather than by non learner-centred criteria such as the teacher’s or institution’s predetermined preference for General English or for treating English as part of a general education.²⁷

Hutchinson and Waters specify, “ESP must be seen as approach rather than a product. ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material” and, to be more specific, “it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need”.²⁸ In Robinson’s²⁹ opinion, ESP involves the teaching of English to the learners who have specific goals and purposes, such as professional, academic, scientific and so on. In this context, Javid assents that the prime concern in ESP is not ‘the specific discipline’ but ‘the specific goal’ of specific learners.³⁰ In spite of some differences of opinion about the nature and scope of ESP, Javid speculates:

A vast majority of ESP proponents seems to agree that ESP is a very flexible approach to teaching English as a second language (TESL) / teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) It transpires that ESP is not limited to any specific discipline but meant for the specific needs of the learners. ESP ought logically to be integrally linked with areas of activity which have already been defined and which represent the learners’ aspiration.³¹

In short, “ESP was born and will continue to address learners’ needs and purposes to learn a language that will most likely help them to communicate in a globalized world”.³²

4.1 The Essential Features of the ESP Courses

ESP courses, Mackay and Mountford³³ elucidate, are generally designed to meet ‘a specialized aim’. The focus of ESP courses ought to be on the purpose for which learners learn a target language and not on the specific jargon or registers they learn. Strevens³⁴, one of the pioneers of ESP, mentions four absolute and two variable qualities of ESP courses. An ESP course, in contrast with a general English course, is tailored to meet specified needs of learners. It should be related in content (i.e., in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities. English language teaching (in an ESP programme) ought to focus on teaching and learning of the language appropriate to the particular occupation or discipline centred activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and so on and analysis of this discourse. Besides, Strevens mentions two optional features of an ESP course. One variable characteristic of an ESP course is that it may be restricted as to the language skills to be learned, such as reading skill only. Another variable characteristic of an ESP course is that it may not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.³⁵ Ascertaining ESP as an ‘attitude of mind’, Dudley-Evans and St. John³⁶ suggest that ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could also be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.

Carter³⁷ postulates that there are three common features of ESP courses, which are a) authentic materials, b) purpose-related orientation, and c) self-direction. First, he proposes that authentic content materials, modified or unmodified in form, should be used in teaching ESP course/s to intermediate or advanced level learners. The Second feature, he mentions, purpose-related orientation necessitates the simulation of communicative tasks required of the target setting. Finally, he suggests, self-direction must be treated as an essential characteristic of ESP courses because “ESP is concerned with turning learners into users”.³⁸ For this purpose, ESP teachers should allow the learners a certain degree of freedom to decide when, what and how they wish to learn.

4.2 The Principles of the ESP Approach

The ESP movement is generally considered to be structured on several theoretical grounds which contribute to formation of the principles and procedures of this approach to English language teaching. Reflecting on the gradual progress and the current features of the ESP approach Ramirez encapsulates, “It has certainly been a changing but fruitful road for ESP, ... its principles and theory have been more clearly outlined and shaped by the passing of time”.³⁹ In its present stature, the ESP approach holds out some specific principles for its users, practitioners and beneficiaries. In Munby’s opinion, ESP “should focus on the learner and the purposes for which he requires the target language, and the whole language programme follows from that”.⁴⁰ He identifies this feature as a unique characteristic of an ESP course which course planners and developers ought to maintain. Moreover, he emphasises that ESP course designers need to remember that learners’ needs often vary due to the variation of the educational environment, facilities and resources available as well as their purpose, either academic or professional, of learning English. He specifies, “There should be important difference in the English course for a non-native requiring English in order to study medicine in his own country as opposed to England (when, for example, he might need English only for reading medical texts)”.⁴¹ In the same way, an English course for training learners for occupational purposes would differ considerably because of the difference of the learners’ prospective language needs in their professional life. Hence, he counsels that an EOP course “must take account of, inter alia, the environment and social relationships obtaining between him and his interlocutors”.⁴² Another important principle of the ESP approaches to language teaching is mentioned by Richards, who states that the purposes for which a specific group of learners needs a language rather than a syllabus reflecting the structure of general English should be used in planning an English course. He affirms, “Rather than developing a course around an analysis of the language, an ESP approach starts instead with an analysis of the learner’s needs”.⁴³ As a whole, “The purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in the target situation...an ESP program should be aim-directed, learner-directed and situation-directed”.⁴⁴

5. Research Methodology

In this study, the questionnaire survey method has been used to conduct the empirical investigation. The quantitative method of data collection and analysis has been employed for this exploratory study. The instruments of data collection selected for the study are – 1) Students’ Questionnaire Survey, 2) Teachers’ Questionnaire Survey, and 3) Employees’/ Professionals’ Questionnaire Survey. For the survey, instruments have been carefully designed and administered. Considering convenience and practicality of the research work random sampling technique has been employed for selecting samples. The sample of the empirical study consisted of 350 participants. For questionnaire survey, 230 students and 20 teachers of the tertiary level were selected from Rajshahi University, and 100 employees working in different districts of Bangladesh were selected from five selected sectors of occupation. Thus, data have been collected from various sources to corroborate the findings, and to ensure the accuracy, authenticity and reliability of the data.

6. Findings

Findings of the empirical study of the learners’ questionnaire survey, the teachers’ questionnaire survey, and the employees’/professionals’ questionnaire survey are presented below:

6.1 Results of the Learners’ Questionnaire Survey

Table- 1.1

Results of the Students’ Questionnaire Survey

No.	Statements	Results	
		Questionnaire Survey	
		Mean	SD
1	You learn the English language for academic achievement	4.67	0.72
2	Do you feel that having good competence in English is important for your future occupational purposes as well as for your studies at the tertiary level?	4.32	0.97

No.	Statements	Results	
		Questionnaire Survey	
		Mean	SD
3	Your classroom instructions should focus more on the English needed for performing your future professional tasks and duties	3.58	1.22
4	More importance should be given to the teaching of listening and speaking to help you with these skills	4.15	0.89
5	Do you think your English course/s will sufficiently and effectively help you meet your future professional requirements?	1.99	1.17
6	The content of your English course/s is relevant and interesting	2.23	1.10
7	Do you feel the English language course/s should be more professional needs-oriented to enable you to meet your future professional requirements efficiently?	3.95	0.84

Analysis of the results of the learners' questionnaire survey reveals that the tertiary level students learn the English language mostly for academic purposes, specifically to achieve satisfactory grades in the examination. They think having a good competence in English is very important for their future occupational purposes as well as for their studies. They are taught English hardly to meet their future occupational requirements. They aver that their classroom instructions should focus more on the English needed for performing their future professional tasks and duties, and that more importance should be given to the teaching of listening and speaking to help learners to develop these skills. Learners think their English language course/s partly prepare them to meet their future professional requirements. The content of the English course/s is moderately relevant and interesting to learners. They observe that the English language course/s should be more professional needs-oriented to enable them to meet their future professional requirements efficiently.

6.2 Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire Survey

Table- 1.2

Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire Survey

No.	Statements	Results	
		Questionnaire Survey	
		Mean	SD
1	Do you teach English to prepare learners to perform successfully in the examination?	4.13	0.54
2	Do you teach your students adequately for their future occupational purposes?	2.09	1.16
3	More importance should be given to the teaching of listening and speaking to help your students with these skills	3.18	1.15
4	Do you believe that acquiring satisfactory competence in English is important for the tertiary level learners for their future occupational purposes besides their academic studies?	4.17	0.63
5	Do you think the present English course/s sufficiently help/s students to prepare for their future professional needs in English?	1.86	1.06
6	The contents of the English language course/s you teach are relevant and interesting to the students	2.32	1.14
7	The English language course/s at the tertiary level should focus on the future professional needs of your students	4.23	1.20

The results of the teachers' questionnaire survey indicate that the tertiary level teachers largely teach English to prepare learners to perform successfully in the examination at the completion of the course. They sometimes teach learners for their future occupational purposes. They aver that more importance should be given to the teaching of listening and speaking to enable learners to develop these skills. They deem that that acquiring satisfactory competence in English is important for learners for their future occupational purposes besides their academic studies at the tertiary level. They think that the present English course/s rarely help/s learners to prepare for their future professional needs in English.

They perceive that the contents of their English language course/s are considerably relevant and interesting to learners. Finally, they strongly believe that the English language course/s at the tertiary level should focus on the future professional needs of the tertiary level learners.

6.3 Results of the Employees'/Professionals' Questionnaire Survey

Table- 1.3
Results of the Employees'/Professionals' Questionnaire Survey

No.	Statements	Results	
		Questionnaire Survey	
		Mean	SD
1	Do you think a good command of English is essential for communicating efficiently and achieving success in your profession	4.01	0.76
2	You are required to use English in your professional life	3.56	1.07
3	You are required to write English in your occupational settings	3.81	1.24
4	You are required to speak English with others in your occupational settings	3.18	1.25
5	You are required to read English texts, documents, papers and so on for occupational purposes	4.19	1.09
6	You are required to listen to English conversations in your occupational settings	3.53	1.20
7	You think if you had a good command of English you could work more effectively and successfully	3.81	1.31
8	Do you think the English course/s you have taken at the tertiary level is/are sufficiently helping you in your specific professional activities?	2.59	1.18

Analysis of the results of the employees'/professionals' questionnaire survey shows that the employees/professionals assert that a good command of English is essential for communicating efficiently and achieving success in their profession. They are most often required to use English in their professional sectors. They are most often required to write in English in their occupational settings. They are sometimes required to speak in English with others in their occupational settings. They are largely required to read English texts, documents, papers and so on for occupational purposes. They are sometimes required to listen to English conversations in their occupational settings. Most of them concur that they could work more effectively and successfully with a satisfactory command of English. They think their tertiary level English course/s is/are moderately helping them in performing the required specific professional activities.

7. Discussion

The empirical study elucidates that teachers, students and employees/professionals aver that acquiring satisfactory competence in English is very important for the tertiary level learners to perform successfully in their respective work sectors. It asserts the importance and necessity of English in the context of Bangladeshi work settings. The analysis clarifies that the existing English language courses taught at the tertiary level are moderately useful for addressing the needs of the learners for future occupational purposes. The higher level English language courses are mostly focused on the EAP needs of Bangladeshi learners. The study signifies that EOP courses or elements have been barely incorporated into the English curriculum at the tertiary level. Hence, the study revealed that the tertiary level English education along with the twelve years English education as a compulsory subject at the previous levels of education barely equip Bangladeshi graduates with adequate English competence necessary for effective communication in the work settings. Precisely, the syllabus of the English language course should be upgraded at the higher level. It needs to be developed or modified in accordance with the

intended professional needs of Bangladeshi learners. The course/s should focus on teaching them the specific skills, elements and uses of English necessary to perform successfully in their professional life. The English language course/s must incorporate sufficient components to develop their communicative skills in English. The course/s should teach the future employees/professionals of Bangladesh the techniques of effective communication through using English. Accordingly, the tertiary level teachers should focus on the required occupational needs of learners in addition to their academic needs while teaching an English language course. Furthermore, the study indicates that it is crucial to link language study to the future uses of the target language. Analysis of learners' needs and specification of the English language requirement in any particular profession are necessary to ensure suitability and relevance of the contents of the tertiary level English language course/s.

8. Suggestions

On the basis of the theoretical developments in the ESP Approach and the research findings of this study, a number of measures could be recommended to bring about effective changes and improvements in English language course design and implementation at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

First and foremost, the ESP approach should be integrated in English language course design at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Precisely, the EOP course/s should be developed and taught to the tertiary level students to help them meet their future professional needs successfully. Accordingly, it is essential to incorporate needs analysis in the English language course design procedures at the tertiary level in Bangladesh because the purposes for which learners need a target language should be properly addressed in designing an English language course. A thorough needs analysis of the tertiary level learners will provide the course designers with valuable guidelines for designing a goal-oriented, interactive, problem-solving and beneficial English language course for the learners.

Moreover, tailoring proper and fruitful English language courses necessitates identifying and incorporating EOP contents and elements as well as EAP components and items in the courses. To meet this end, course developers should not only focus on current the academic needs of the tertiary level learners of Bangladesh but also pay equal importance to catering for learners' future professional needs.

In addition, in accordance with the principles of the ESP approach, learners should be placed at the centre of the language learning process at the tertiary level. With proper guidance and encouragement of their teachers the learners are expected to develop autonomy and play the role of dynamic contributors to the learning process. They must be trained to participate actively in the language learning tasks and activities. So, the tertiary level teachers should render learners with the required freedom to consider and the responsibility to decide most of the significant matters concerned with their learning procedures in the classroom as well as implementation of the syllabus in their academic setting.

Furthermore, the ESP movement uphold a flexible approach to teaching and learning a target language. It emphasizes that a language syllabus must not be eternally preset or inflexible. Hence, a professional needs-oriented English language course should not be static, rather it should be flexible. It should be formed and recreated in accordance with the changing needs of learners and contexts of learning the target language.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, the study ascertains that academic programmes should prepare Bangladeshi graduates to meet their future professional needs of English successfully. Effective performance in the professional sectors should be our guiding principle for English curriculum design at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Hence, most of the presently used English language courses should be modified and restructured to address the professional needs of the learners. Furthermore, this analysis discernibly illustrates that designing new occupational situation-based English language courses for diverse

disciplines at the tertiary level in Bangladesh is very crucial at the present time. This issue deserves and requires significant attention, investigation and endeavor of the English language course planners and developers of Bangladesh. ELT experts and practitioners of Bangladesh need to focus on the necessity of crafting and integrating diverse communicative functions in an English language course consistent with the future occupational needs of the tertiary level learners.

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