

The Prospect of Integrating the ESP Approach in English Language Syllabus Design for the Students of the Faculty of Arts in the Universities of Bangladesh

Dr. Mahbuba Hasina

Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Currently, teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a specialized branch of Teaching English as a foreign or second language, has flourished as a pivotal part of ELT globally. The ESP movement upholds that English language courses should orientate the tertiary level learners to workplace skills that are required to enter, maintain and advance in the world of work. Accordingly, academic programmes should prepare Bangladeshi graduates to meet their future professional needs of English successfully. Particularly, for university students of the Faculty of Arts, English language courses have been designed and introduced in the academic programmes. On completion of these courses, they are expected to achieve sufficient proficiency in English so that they can competently use English to perform effectively in their practical work settings. However, when students enter different professional sectors, most of them find that they lack the required level of competence in English to perform satisfactorily in their profession. It indicates that the current English language courses taught at the tertiary level are scarcely tailored to meet the prospective professional needs of Bangladeshi learners. The proponents of the ESP movement emphasize on use of an ‘eclectic’ approach to syllabus design, which expedites syllabus designers to select and combine the requisite features of the target language in an organized and properly sequenced manner to meet the target objectives of learners. Hence, this study intended to explore the prospect of incorporating the ESP Approach in developing effective English Language courses for the students of the Faculty of Arts. Concisely, the findings of this research paper favour the significance and necessity of designing and introducing effective and practicable English language courses for Bangladeshi students of the Faculty of Arts by incorporating the ESP Approach in syllabus design.

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a proliferating field of ELT is designed to meet the specific English language needs of learners.¹ The ESP movement, in the opinion of Johns and Price-Machado, is founded on the “proposition that all language teaching should be tailored to the specific learning and language use needs of identified groups of students”.² Howatt³ recounts that the study of ESP has had a long and interesting history going back as far back as the Roman and Greek empires. Particularly, since 1960s ESP has been recognized as a vital and innovative stream heavily contributing to the advancement and enrichment of the teaching of English as a second or foreign language movement. “In the recent years ESP has become a major developmental focus in the area of...communicative syllabus design and materials production”.⁴

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and General English (GE) or English for No Specific Purposes or English for General Purposes (EGP) are two dominant approaches to English language teaching which are initiated to accomplish specific social requirements. Johns 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".⁵ Similarly, Basturkmen⁶ highlights the objectives of ESP learners. She argues that in ESP "language is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education, but to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in academic, professional or workplace environments".⁷ Robinson further adds that learners usually pursue an ESP course "because they need English for study or work purposes".⁸ She clarifies that "the general with which we are contrasting the specific is that of General education for life, culture and literature oriented language course in which the language itself is the subject matter and the purpose of the course".⁹ Conversely, ESP learners, after the identification and analysis of specific learning needs, learn "English en route to the acquisition of some quite different body of knowledge and set of skills".¹⁰

Additionally, ESP teaching approach upholds a learner-centred approach where learners' needs and goals are of supreme value. Moreover, Hutchinson and Waters presume, "One of the most important features of ESP in relation to General English is that the status of English changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other specialisms".¹¹ Thus, ESP and GE may vary in the objectives and goals of the courses, the nature of the learners, approaches to learners, the content or subject matter of the courses.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) are two major branches of ESP. Jordan explicates that EAP as a particular field of English teaching is "concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems".¹² Conversely, EOP refers to English teaching for occupational purposes which includes professional purposes in administration, medicine, law and business, and so on, and vocational purposes for in work or pre-work situations.

The fundamental requirements of an ESP course are "tailor-made courses, specific objectives, needs analysis of target learning situation, continuous feedback and formative and summative-evaluations".¹³ Munby¹⁴ emphasizes that for ESP courses the syllabus and the materials are needed to be determined by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners. Moreover, Strevens¹⁵ expounds that the aims and the context of ESP courses are determined principally or wholly not by criteria of general education but by functional and practical English language requirements of the learners. ESP courses have gained increasing relevance in the present arena of education in majority of the countries of the world because of the obvious fact that English has become a necessary tool in order to obtain a job, get promoted, and perform effectively in the working world.

2. Statement of the Problem

In Bangladesh, English is taught and learned as a foreign language at the higher level. The tertiary level English language courses are found to be mostly focused on the EAP needs of learners. Conversely, EOP courses or elements have been barely incorporated into the English curriculum of the country. Consequently, after entering different professional sectors, Bangladeshi graduates often face difficulties in using English for occupational purposes. Most of them find that they lack the required level of competence in English to perform successfully in their profession. It indicates that the current English language programmes used in Bangladeshi universities and higher educational institutions are barely geared to the future professional needs of learners. Therefore, English language course designers and professionals working in various universities of Bangladesh need to redress this problem. In view of that, the present study seeks to evaluate the present English language courses taught in the academic programs at the Faculty of Arts of Rajshahi University to examine how well they cater for the professional needs of English in Bangladesh. In addition, the study intends to discern feasibility and practicability of implementation and integration of the ESP approach so that effective and suitable English language courses could be designed or reconstructed to educate Bangladeshi graduates for occupational purposes.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research paper are:

- to evaluate the English language courses taught to the students of the Faculty of Arts of Rajshahi University to determine how adequately these courses address the needs of Bangladeshi tertiary level learners for future occupational purposes;
- to discern necessity and feasibility of integration of the ESP approach for designing effective and suitable English language courses for the students of the Faculty of Arts of Rajshahi University as well as other universities of Bangladesh to prepare them for their prospective professional roles.

4. Relevant Literature Review

4.1 The Principles of the ESP Approach

Regarding the principles and procedures of the ESP Approach Munby asseverates, ESP “should focus on the learner and the purposes for which he requires the target language, and the whole language programme follows from that”.¹⁶ Moreover, he points out 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. Hence, 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. Therefore, Richards avers, “Rather than developing a course around an analysis of the language, an ESP approach starts instead with an analysis of the learner’s needs”.¹⁷ In addition, Carter¹⁸ posits that an English teaching-learning programme for professional purposes should be basically concerned with transforming learners into proficient language users. In this connection, Hutchison and Waters¹⁹ proffer that all decisions regarding content and method of an ESP course should be based on the analysis of learners’ needs, both target and learning needs. Specifically, they recognize the primacy of incorporating learners’ future needs in English language course design and implementation.

4.2 ESP Syllabus Design

The proponents of the ESP movement uphold that an ESP syllabus should be devised to serve a multi-functional purpose. As ESP courses intend to cater for various language needs of diverse learners, the syllabus designers must take into consideration the different functions the syllabi aim to accomplish to ensure that the course could be appropriately developed and effectively used for teaching a target language. ESP theorists and practitioners consider the ‘eclectic’ syllabus more suitable for ESP course design. It will enable syllabus developers to select and combine the requisite skills and components of knowledge of the target language in an organized and properly sequenced manner to meet the target objectives of the learners. In a word, an ESP syllabus should be open-ended, flexible and subject to regular modification according to the changing needs of the learners.

For ESP course planning and development, Paltridge and Starfield²⁰ put forward a paradigm of syllabus design. They concede that the outcome of the learners’ needs analysis, which must be conducted before developing an ESP course, will form the core information to substantiate and materialize ESP course design. Additionally, it will serve as guidance in teaching and learning process so that the teacher is able to conduct an assessment of the learners’ achievement and, finally, an evaluation of the language course. Thus, Dudley-Evans and St. Johns encapsulate, “The key stages in ESP are needs analysis, course design, materials selection (and production), teaching and learning, and evaluation”.²¹ They argue that these elements should not be considered separate, “linearly-related activities, rather, they represent phases which overlap and are interdependent”.²² Thus, from the dynamic interactions between these elements will ensue an effective ESP course.

5. Research Methodology

The methods of data collection employed for the empirical study are – 1) Students' Questionnaire Survey, 2) Students' Interview, 3) Teachers' Questionnaire Survey, 4) Teachers' Interview, 5) Employees'/Professionals' Questionnaire Survey, 6) Employees'/Professionals' Interview, and 7) Document analysis of the English language courses. For these methods, instruments have been carefully designed and administered. Both open-ended and closed Questionnaires were used. Semi-structured Interviews were done with the learners, the teachers, and the employees/professionals. The sample of the empirical study consisted of 350 participants. For questionnaire survey, 250 students and 20 teachers of the higher level were selected from Rajshahi University in Bangladesh. In addition, 80 employees/professionals working in different districts of Bangladesh were selected. Moreover, 25 students, 8 teachers, and 10 employees were randomly selected from the same sample for interviews. A five-point Likart scale was employed to analyze close-ended questions for the empirical study. For Document analysis of the Tertiary Level English language courses, the syllabi of thirteen courses taught in the various Departments of the Faculty of Arts at Rajshahi University have been collected and analyzed.

6. Findings

6.1 Document Analysis of the Current English Language Courses

a) Type of the Syllabi

Findings of the document analysis of the selected syllabi of the English language courses currently used at the tertiary level suggest that majority of the tertiary level English Language courses (55 %) basically characterize the Traditional type of syllabus.

b) Objectives of the Courses

Most of the courses (62%) aim at imparting knowledge of English grammar. Whereas, some of the courses (31%) seek to develop the four basic language skills in English.

c) Components for Practice and Development of the Basic English Language Skills

i) Reading Skill

Maximum courses (77%) incorporate components for developing the reading skill. Nonetheless, components of these courses are intended to develop and enhance learners' reading skill for academic purposes. It signifies that the tertiary level learners are barely trained to learn reading for their intended professional purposes.

ii) Writing Skill

Maximum components (85%) of the selected courses concentrate on developing the writing skill of the learners. Among them, majority of components (54%) of the courses cover both academic and professional writings. Conversely, some components (31%) of the courses concentrate on developing the writing skill for academic purposes only. So, it can be inferred that teaching academic writing receives more importance than teaching professional writing at the tertiary level.

iii) Listening Skill

Most of the syllabi (62%) do not include any component for teaching and learning of the listening skill. Inversely, some courses (38%) incorporate contents for teaching listening solely for academic purposes. No course contains any item to teach listening for professional purposes.

iv) Speaking Skill

Many of the courses (54%) cover contents for teaching speaking for academic purposes. Conversely, none of the selected courses contains components for teaching speaking for professional purposes.

d) Grammar

Maximum number of courses (76%) cover contents for teaching English grammar. However, 24% components of the selected syllabi do not cover any element for teaching grammar. It implies that teaching grammar is generally given utmost priority in the English language courses taught at the tertiary level.

e) Vocabulary

Majority of the courses (62%) include elements for teaching English vocabulary. Inversely, some of the components (38%) of the syllabi do not cover any content for teaching vocabulary.

6.2 Results of Questionnaire Survey and Interview

6.2.1 Evaluation of the Present English Language Course/s from Learners', Teachers' and Employees'/Professionals' Perspectives

Findings of the evaluation of the present English language course/s from the perspectives of various stakeholders like learners, teachers and employees/professionals are discussed below:

i. Utility of the Current English language Course/s

Findings of the students' questionnaire survey and interview signify that most of the learners observe that their current English language course/s can scarcely help them to meet their future professional requirements. Likewise, Findings of the teachers' questionnaire survey and interview imply that majority of the teachers deem the present English course/s are barely helpful for preparing the learners to meet their future professional needs in English. Correspondingly, Findings of the employees'/professionals' questionnaire survey and interview indicate that employees/professionals concur that the English language course/s they have taken at the tertiary level is/are moderately helping them to perform their specific professional activities in the English language.

ii. Emphasis on Learners' Prospective Professional Needs in Developing English Language Course/s at the Higher Level

Findings of the learners' questionnaire survey illustrate that majority of the learners think that the English language course/s should be more professional needs-oriented to enable them to meet their future professional requirements efficiently. In the same line, findings of the teachers' questionnaire survey illustrate that majority of the teachers aver that the English language course/s at the tertiary level should focus on the learners' future professional needs.

6.2.2 Modifications and Reconstructions of the Present English Language Course/s

i. Modifications and Reconstructions of the English Language Course/s Expected by Learners

Bangladeshi tertiary level learners expect modifications or reconstructions of the current English language course/s. Learners deem that their English language course/s should be more practice-based to be effective. The course/s must be "more practical than theoretical" to properly cater for learners' needs of English for real life communications, particularly in the professional settings. In addition, learners expect that their English language course/s should focus more on teaching and development of their listening and speaking skills. Furthermore, they expect "a task-based, practice-oriented, communicative, and interactive classroom".

ii. Modifications and Reconstructions of the English Language Course/s Recommended by Teachers

Bangladeshi higher level teachers envision several changes and modifications in the current English language course/s. They expect to add new contents or materials to the existing list of contents and recommended materials in the syllabus to "address learners' specific English language needs" for professional purposes. They suggest that more elements should be added for developing listening and speaking skills. They further opine that in the universities of Bangladesh "proper attention should be paid to develop learners' presentation skills" to transform them into efficient users of English in their prospective work settings.

7. Discussion

Findings of the empirical study reveal that the tertiary level English language courses are found to be mostly focused on the academic needs of Bangladeshi learners. EOP courses or elements have been barely incorporated into the English curriculum at the tertiary level. The current

English language courses are scarcely useful for addressing the needs of the learners for future occupational purposes. These courses mostly fail to prepare Bangladeshi graduates properly for the English proficiency required for their intended professions. Learners perceived that the higher level English language course/s barely focus on teaching them the specific skills, elements and uses of English necessary to perform successfully in their professional life. The employees and professionals discerned that the tertiary level English language courses have hardly trained them the techniques of effective communication in English. The employees and professionals perceived that the higher level English language course/s need to focus more on improving the employees'/professionals' fluency in speaking. The listening and speaking skills required adequate importance in their English language course/s. Learners expect that their future professional needs should be addressed adequately and incorporated in the English language course/s. The English language course/s should be more professional needs-oriented to prepare them for performing their intended professional roles successfully. Teachers deemed that the syllabi of the English language courses should be upgraded. The syllabi must be developed/modified in accordance with the intended professional needs of Bangladeshi graduates.

8. Recommendations

On the basis of theoretical discussion and findings of the study, the following means and measures are recommended to bring about constructive changes and improvements in the design, reconstruction, implementation as well as evaluation of the English language courses in the universities of Bangladesh:

- English language courses at the tertiary level should be designed or reconstructed in accordance with the changing needs of Bangladeshi learners and their contexts of learning the foreign language. Course developers should design suitable and effective ESP courses corresponding the Bangladeshi context. Particularly, occupational needs-oriented EOP courses will enable Bangladeshi learners to meet the required standard of English proficiency in the respective professional sectors.
- Needs analysis should be incorporated in the English language course design procedures at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The target needs as well as the present needs of Bangladeshi tertiary level learners should be thoroughly analyzed to develop suitable and effective professional needs-oriented English language courses.
- Course developers need to choose a suitable syllabus type for English language course design at the tertiary level. As an ESP syllabus must be open-ended, flexible and subject to regular modification according to the changing needs of the learners, the 'eclectic' approach to syllabus design can be utilized for ESP course design.
- The tertiary level English language syllabus should focus on learner outcomes in terms of proficiency and performance, and the goals must be relevant to the perceived needs and interests of the learners. The long-term needs and short-term wants of the higher level learners must be identified and specified, and properly attended by the course developers for effective and feasible syllabus design and implementation.
- The ESP Approach upholds a learner-centred approach to English language teaching. Accordingly, the Tertiary level English language courses should promote self-direction in Bangladeshi learners to train and transform them into efficient users of English in their professional sectors.
- Course designers need to explore the ESP doctrine to devise a practicable approach to English language teaching that will be more appropriate and beneficial for Bangladeshi learners than the currently used teaching system at the tertiary level. The teaching system and procedures must focus on the needs, goals and motivation of the learners. In addition, learners' standpoint towards learning the target language and their learning strategies should be specified and properly addressed in the language learning process.

- For implementation of the ESP Approach and effective English language learning at the tertiary level, the teaching learning facilities of the academic setting need to be enhanced and upgraded. Inclusion of modern teaching-learning aids in the classroom, and formation of English language labs are essential for ensuring learners' constant and continuous practice, and facilitating successful language learning.
- Syllabus planners need to maintain correlations between education policy and syllabus design. They should make provision for both future social role as well as individual development of Bangladeshi learners. Specifically, the Position-oriented education policy, which is accountable to the 'measures of utility', can help us to direct focus of the English language courses intended for the higher level learners towards meeting manpower needs and serving the socio-economic well-being of Bangladesh.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the tertiary level learners, teachers as well as the employees and professionals have found their English language courses moderately appropriate and effective for future professional purposes. They are more interested in goal-oriented ESP courses, which can help them to enhance their knowledge and skills in English and to acquire required English proficiency to perform their prospective professional duties and activities successfully. The study indicates that the current English language courses have been scarcely tailored to the needs of Bangladeshi learners preponderantly due to the absence of formal needs analysis procedures in English course design at the universities of Bangladesh. The tertiary level English courses should address Bangladeshi learners' long-term needs as professionals. The occupational needs of the tertiary level learners are very vital and these should be incorporated in the current English language courses. Therefore, course developers working at various universities of Bangladesh should focus on developing and teaching "tailor-made" ESP courses that can cater to the occupational needs as well as the academic needs of learners. Therefore, Bangladeshi course designers must welcome innovation in syllabus design when it is necessary and beneficial for the target group of learners. Innovation in course design should be endeavoured by thorough analysis of the learners' present needs and target needs, and investigation of practical relevance of an English language course. The ESP approach should be incorporated in English language syllabus design for the students of the Faculty of Arts in the universities of Bangladesh.

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