

# The Challenges of Teaching for English Specific Purposes in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** *English for Specific Purposes appeared due to the awareness that general English course was not suitable for the learners' need, especially in higher education. In teaching ESP, the materials are focused on the learners' needs or their specific fields of study and it is assumed that they have basic language skills of general English. The purpose of this study was to analyze the challenges that arise in teaching English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in higher education. This article is aimed at describing some of the ESP learning problems a lot of the problems from the teachers, materials production, and the error of learner assessment. In order to minimize these effects, some solutions are offered. The solutions are increasing the ability of lecturers, materials development, and the course evaluation.*

**Key words:** *English for Specific Purposes, the teacher, ESP material, course evaluation*

**Abstrak:** *Bahasa Inggris untuk Tujuan Tertentu muncul karena kesadaran bahwa belajar bahasa Inggris umum tidak cocok untuk kebutuhan peserta didik, terutama dalam pendidikan tinggi. Dalam mengajar ESP, materi difokuskan pada kebutuhan peserta didik atau bidang studi khusus mereka dan diasumsikan bahwa mereka memiliki keterampilan bahasa dasar bahasa Inggris umum. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis tantangan yang muncul dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggris untuk Tujuan Khusus (ESP) di pendidikan tinggi. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan beberapa masalah pembelajaran khususnya. Banyak masalah dari guru, produksi bahan, kesalahan penilaian pelajar. Untuk meminimalkan efek ini, beberapa solusi ditawarkan. Solusinya adalah meningkatkan kemampuan dosen, pengembangan materi, dan evaluasi belajar.*

**Kata kunci:** *Bahasa Inggris untuk Tujuan Tertentu, Guru, Materi khusus, evaluasi bahan.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Based on data obtained by Education First (EF) on English Proficiency index (EPI), Indonesia is on 32<sup>nd</sup> position out of 72 countries. The survey conducted by EF (EPI for schools) in secondary and tertiary level reveals that Indonesian learners gain slower rate improvement in English and the population is mostly dominated by learners in ages 16 to 18, This fact becomes a challenge for teachers, educators, and curriculum developers to design

qualified English Language Teaching (ELT) both administratively and practically for every educational level.

Education at the university functions to develop capabilities and shape dignified national character and civilization in order to educate the nation's life (Kemdikbud, 2012a). In addition, higher education must be able to empower students to become educated people who are knowledgeable, creative, innovative, and with character. Law No. 12 of 2012 which gives

autonomy to tertiary institutions, the curriculum development is fully handed over to campus autonomy. Study program entities and scientific associations, including professional associations, are think tanks that compile the curriculum. Certainly it will be better, if the curriculum is formulated to involve stakeholders, especially graduates.

While courses of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are introduced in higher education institutions, theoretical framework for ESP curriculum planning is still under development. Unlike general language instructors, who have fairly detailed curricula and national guidelines, ESP teachers need to construct their own goals, objectives, and learning materials. One of the main issues in ESP course development is the focus of the syllabus and content on learners' needs. (Belyaeva, A, 2015)

However, many university students do not have work experience in their field of specialization, or they do not know what language skills they might need in their future work. ESP (English for specific purposes) is commonly known as an English course for non-English majors. Hutchinson and Waters (1994) say that ESP is an approach to teaching English where things are taught and the teaching method is based on the reason why the learner wants to learn English.

ESP in the College of Higher Education (PT) is a compulsory subject for every department/study program in higher education,

as well as at the University. The credits for this course vary from 2-3 credits, and are taken in 1-3 semesters in a row with a total of 4-6 credits. At the University, ESP policy is not the same for each faculty. In some faculties ESP merges into 6-week development courses so students must work on their own English proficiency through outside courses (Kusumaningputri, 2008). However, other faculties continue to include these ESP courses on the curriculum of compulsory subjects.

The implementation of ESP courses in higher education is basically an effort to answer the challenges of one thing, namely the demands of the work world.

ESP courses provide dual benefits. First is because ESP is given when they are taking academic education in accordance with their field of interest, then students learn to use English directly in the context of their disciplines both for academic and non-academic purposes. Academic interests here are being able to read, listen, write, and talk about matters relating to the content or content of their scientific discipline. The non-academic interests are interests outside of their disciplines such as talking, reading, listening, writing things that are used in everyday life (daily needs). For example, talking with lecturers, friends, writing light reviews, listening to English news and much more.

The second advantage is for the preparation of the workforce. As we all know, now English is an absolute requirement to find

work. Many job interview sessions require TOEFL or use English as an introduction. This happens because companies prepare themselves to be able to compete more globally, especially in the current free trade era. Not only in interview sessions, but in carrying out work assignments at the company, English cannot be released. Examples are the work of receptionists, marketing, customer service banks / companies, technicians, programmers, journalists, lawyers, and others. The ESP courses they took when they were in their undergraduate study at the same time could have a dual role in preparing them to get off-the-job skills for the sake of their work. ESP's unique characteristics, namely the goal that adapts the needs of learners is very suitable to support the achievement of this dual role.

Dual benefits that can be provided by ESP courses will be achieved maximally if the challenges of implementing ESP can be overcome, at least can be minimized. As for the challenges, the challenge from the teacher, material, the error for the assessment.

## **2. THE DEFINITION ENGLISH SPECIFIC PURPOSES.**

ESP is defined as “*an approach*” to language learning, “*not a product*” (Hutchinson and Waters 1987,p. 19); it has begun to emerge as a significant factor in the study of the target language, where attention is focused on the ways it is actually used in real communication within communities, rather

than simply focusing on teaching vocabulary and language rules in isolation (Hutchinson & Waters,1978). One significant discovery, according to Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 7-8 , was in the ways that spoken and written English vary. A simple explanation for this idea is that “if language varies from one situation of use to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the basis of the learners’ course...Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” (Hutchinson and Waters,1987, p.7-8). In other words, this approach aims to teach English needed for specific situation that mainly relate to academic or occupational contexts. Teaching repertoires are negotiated and developed to fit learners’ goals as well as those of stakeholders (Bhatia et al.2011). To make this point clearer, Dudley-Evans and St John’s, 1998, p.4 description of ESP, “*Absolute Characteristics and Variable Characteristics*” also helps to clarify to a certain degree what an ESP course constitutes.

*Definition of ESP (Dudley-Evans, 1997)*

### **Absolute Characteristics**

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners.
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

### **Variable Characteristics**

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English.
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

The definition Dudley-Evans offers is clearly influenced by that of Strevens (1988), although he has improved it substantially by removing the absolute characteristic that ESP is "in contrast with 'General English'" (Johns et al., 1991: 298), and has included more variable characteristics. The division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics, in particular, is very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP. From the definition, we can see that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen simple as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson et al. (1987,p.19) who state, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all

decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) interpret ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to the content and methods are based on learners' reason for learning". It is obvious to presume that ESP targets particular needs to study English and afterwards focuses on the distinct objectives required to achieve proficiency in the language. As a result, ESP attempts to convey knowledge regarding linguistics in relation to the particular context. ESP automatically determines that there are needs exclusive to particular students in respect to the specific business environment.

ESP focuses on learners' that Ahmad (2012) emphasizes ESP as learner-centered approach if it is compared to EFL or ESI teaching. Albassri (2016) conclude that ESP can be "...seen as applied General English where specific subject matter such as engineering or technology is taught in English to students who have qualifications in these fields, but who feel they need to improve their English before enrolling in further studies or entering the workforce" (p. 48). Tahir (2015) adds, "ESP is a relatively new discipline within Applied Linguistics that bids a new learner-centered approach to English language teaching whose methodology is based on the specific needs of the learner." Students' needs become necessary to be considered by teachers or lecturers before a class or course began. In line with it, a study

conducted by Khaferi and Khaferi (2011) on ESP proves that stakeholders, students and Lecturers are confident of ESP is very significant for students' career development. Admittedly, ESP is very crucial to be implemented in specific area of learning due to its specification that covers the students' needs.

In developing teaching materials, the first thing to do is to identify the components of teaching materials. There are several development models offered by several experts. But apart from that all, it should be understood that there are three important principles as disclosed by Hutchinson & Waters (1987) in developing teaching materials that can be done by a material developer, that is 1) choosing existing materials / available by evaluating (2) self-written teaching materials (material development), 3) adapt / modify existing teaching materials (material adaptation). Of the three alternative development of teaching materials, writing teaching materials is the most ideal ESP learning practice criteria. This is one of the key distinguishing features between the ESP and EGP approaches. On the other hand by developing the teaching materials themselves will further increase the awareness and sensitivity of ESP teachers to the aspects that support and succeed in achieving the effectiveness of the learning process. There are several principles that can be used in order to construct ESP Hutchinson & Waters (1987). First, a good teaching material should stimulate the learner.

Good material does not teach, but good material will encourage learners to learn. Therefore, good material should contain, interesting texts, fun activities that can involve the thinking process of the learner and provide space and activate the learner to use their knowledge. Secondly, good teaching materials should help organize the teaching-learning process by preparing a learning path that is rich in variation and structure of language that systematically can learn the learner maximally. Third, good teaching materials should represent the perspective of language characteristics and learning. Fourth, good teaching materials also represent the nature of learning activities. Fifth, good material should have an important function in expanding the repertoire of teaching practice by introducing relevant new techniques, and finally good material should provide a model of correct language usage and relevant to the learning context.

Broadly speaking, ESP is divided into two, namely EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). If the purpose of EAP is to learn English for academic purposes and needs, then EOP is learning English for work goals and needs and training. (Orr, 1998) added that ESP was actually built on the basis of EGP (English for General Purposes) and was designed to prepare English learners used in certain disciplines and occupations in order to achieve certain goals. The teaching of English for specific purposes, in its early days, was largely

motivated by the need to communicate across languages in areas such as commerce and technology. This has now expanded to include other areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP). (Belcher, 2009)..

Since it is intended to meet specific needs of the learners, ESP course emphasizes on need analysis before beginning the course. It is the basic part of ESP course and cannot be neglected. Richards (2001, as cited in Massouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 60) defines needs analysis as, “procedures used to collect information about learners’ need.” It starts with the question ‘why do these learners need to learn English? The awareness why the learners learn English will influence the content of the language course (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, as cited in Massouleh & Jooneghani, 2012).

### **3. THE CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ESP**

The first challenge is to lie in the teacher. ESP teachers in universities generally have several characteristics, namely teachers who are young or new (junior lecturers) and less experienced (Alwasilah, 2000). ESP teaching at the University also still faces this challenge, namely where the teaching load of ESP courses

is given relatively recently by lecturers (1-5 years of lecturer recruitment). New teachers face many challenges, namely teaching adaptation in universities, ESP teaching adaptations that should be different from EGP, as well as teaching assignments in faculties / departments where teachers are very high (14-28 credits per semester) (Kusumaningputri, 2008).

New teachers naturally experience teaching difficulties because teaching, in college, may be new to them. Pedagogic, emotional maturity, the length of time needed to prepare for teaching in a department that is different from their knowledge, requires a less trivial preparation. In addition, most young teachers also do not know the character of ESP courses that are actually different from EGP. This affects the material, learning objectives, and methods taught which in turn will lead to ESP learning not being on target. The third challenge faced by teachers is excessive teaching load. In addition to teaching ESP, the instructors are also lecturers at the Faculty of Literature and the Teaching and Education Faculty who teach various subjects in their respective faculties. Very high teaching burdens result in the achievement of ESP learning goals not optimal because the teacher is too tired, so the quality of learning becomes a bet.

The second challenge is the material. The fact is that some commercial textbooks available on the market do not match the needs of learners that vary from college, every school year, and each class (Anthony, 1997). In

addition, the existence of the material is also not balanced. For some departments/study programs commercial textbooks are very easy to find because of a large target market. Examples are economics, law, agriculture, medicine, and others. But there are also departments/study programs that have difficulty finding textbooks on the market such as the History Study Program, Indonesian Literature. Furthermore, alternative variations of textbooks are still rare.

The issue of material availability is important because of two things. First, it is because most teachers do not have time to prepare material because of the excessive teaching burden and lack of information about ESP characteristics. Secondly because the existence of textbooks for learners is actually an impression that ESP learning is carried out seriously, and not just for sweetening the curriculum. For teachers, textbooks also act as the main source, teaching inspiration, even the curriculum itself (Garinger: 2002). In Indonesia, and of course at university, the availability of material is a serious challenge, especially when the reading material provided by the teacher sometimes fails to reflect the learning objectives. This if left unchecked will result in ESP courses being increasingly underestimated by the learners themselves because of the lack of seriousness of teaching which can result in low motivation to learn because learners do not know the use of these materials for them both when they were in college or when they were off college/work they will later.

The third challenge regarding curriculum law no. 12 year 2012 which gives autonomy to tertiary institutions, the curriculum development is fully handed over to campus autonomy. In learning, the curriculum is a teaching guideline designed according to the vision and mission of the department, faculty, and universities where the learners are located. The curriculum reflects the learning objectives that are built in such a way and in line with the needs (needs) of learners so that they can produce competent graduates. The curriculum of ESP courses at the University has not been clearly stated. This is because most teachers do not know the vision and mission of majors or study programs and faculties where ESP is taught so that ESP instructional design per department/study program has not been realized. Need analysis is rarely done so that ESP's objectives are not on target. (Kusumaningputri, 2008)

In addition, the curriculum policy concerning ESP type is not clearly determined; whether to accommodate ESP or EGP. Policy makers must immediately make decisions about the appearance of learning English at the university. So far, English has been given to students under the name ESP, but the contents reflect EGP. This decision is very much related to the vision, mission of the department, faculty, and university and the readiness of the support of facilities, infrastructure, as well as the English language lecturers.

The challenges mentioned above must be found a solution for the good and progress of various parties. Good synergy between universities - students - and stakeholders is needed. The synergy carried out can be in the form of attention to the development of ESP materials or textbooks for various departments/study programs at the University. The development of textbooks is seen as one solution given the character of ESP courses that are always unique; it is not the same between one department/study program with another, even though the majors/study programs are the same but for learners in different regions/institutions of higher education as a result of different vision and missions of different institutions and faculties.

In addition, material development is also very helpful for ESP teachers. This is attempted to at the same time provide an overview of the characteristics of ESP courses that are actually different from EGP. The material or textbooks developed are expected to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching so that it is target-oriented and helps ESP teachers to adapt to ESP teaching models and high teaching load.

In what semester will ESP courses be given should also be considered by the curriculum designer. This is because ESP courses require at least intermediate or intermediate levels. The provision of ESP courses in the initial semester (1-2) is less able to help the achievement of the target level of

English learning remembering learners who are on average at the level of the final beginner-beginner. In addition, their knowledge of majors/study programs, the characteristics of their majors/study programs is generally also inadequate at the beginning. Learner understanding of the fields of their majors is very necessary and has a great relationship with the successful learning of ESP courses. The more they know things related to their field of study, the more they are literate about the interests of ESP courses for academic skills and their future study. This happens because learners increasingly understand and believe that ESP provides practical benefits for them so learning motivation can be boosted. Therefore, ESP should be given when students are in semesters 3-6.

The fourth challenge is that most ESP teachers do not know how to make the right assessing for their ESP students. The teacher is a resource that helps students identify their language learning problems and find solutions for them, find the skills they need to focus on, and responsibility for making choices that determine what and how to learn. (Maria. A, 2006)

The teacher will function as a source of information for students about how they progress in learning their language. Assessment is about getting to know our students and the quality of their learning. When dealing with developing teachers the assessment must be quite clear about that goal. There have been

identified several assessment objectives that can be paraphrased as follows: assessing mastery of essential skills and knowledge; measure improvement over time; diagnosing student difficulties; evaluating teaching methods; evaluate the effectiveness of course; motivate students to learn.

It should not be forgotten how strong judgment affects students, especially if it is where their future can depend. This influence may be positive or negative and even dangerous. For many students, passing the exam at the end of course is their main motivation. Thus, judgments about decisions about future students must be made (summative assessment) must be kept separate from assessments that are in the interest of students in terms of guiding their studies further (formative assessment). In dealing with summative assessment, every effort must be made to ensure that all judgments are fair and based on appropriate criteria.

Oral assessment, structured practical assessment or self-assessment are some of the other methods that can very well apply to ESP student evaluations. Practical or performance-based assessments include interviews, oral reports, role plays, describing, explaining, summarizing, retelling, paraphrasing stories or text material, and so on. Oral assessment must be carried out continuously to monitor understanding and thinking ability.

Many successful teachers use the KWL chart (what I know / what I want to know / what I have learned) to start and end the learning unit,

especially in social sciences and science. Before the unit, this strategy allows the teacher to gain awareness about the background of student knowledge and interests. After that, this helps the teacher assess the content learned. The usual KWL diagram is developed as a class activity or individually. For students with limited English proficiency, charts can be completed in the first language or with illustrations.

Testing, or assessment, is always considered the usual way of measuring students' achievement in a foreign language. New requirements for proficiency in ESP suggest development various ways to evaluate student performance. Traditional and new methods must be used together to achieve the best results.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

University policy on ESP courses must also be clear, at least on two points. First is the commitment to improve the quality of graduates through mastery of English. Trust in the English learning model using the ESP approach is needed by holding workshops and training on ESP.

Second is motivating and bridging the coordination of ESP instructors with teaching content courses (according to the areas of interest of each department / study program). This is very significant to ensure the quality of learning and the meaningfulness of ESP so that it fits with what students want and need. In addition, instructors may not be assigned to teach ESP in various departments / study

programs each year to make it easier for teachers to adapt to the new field of environmental studies. Changing the field of study every year can hamper the progress of ESP teaching.

It cannot be denied that every learning always faces various challenges. Likewise, studying ESP courses at the University. challenges include aspects of teaching, material and assessment. But solutions to these challenges can be pursued through the development of books and the seriousness of esp teacher teachers, and the support of effective university policies.

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