Teachers' Voices: Challenges in Designing ESP Assessment

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers in designing assessment instruments to facilitate student learning. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, strategically crafted to offer a comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of the perspectives and thoughts of ESP instructors. This investigation delves into the insights of eight ESP teachers, carefully selected from diverse backgrounds, each contributing to the rich tapestry of English instruction. The participants are drawn from three distinct universities situated in the East Java region of Indonesia, showcasing the regional diversity inherent in ESP pedagogy. Findings from this investigation reveal four key challenges for ESP educators in the creation of assessments, encompassing a grasp of student needs, adjusting difficulty levels, ensuring alignment with workplace contexts, and managing class heterogeneity. The findings of the research can serve as a foundation for the development of training programs or pedagical guidelines specifically designed to assist ESP teacher in overcoming obstacles in developing pertinent and efficient evaluation tools to support student learning, thereby enhancing the quality of learning and evaluation in such environments.

Keywords: *Assessment; ESP; Teachers; Challenges*

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which has rapidly evolved since the 1960s, has become a widely utilized language teaching approach worldwide. Its development is propelled by diverse needs in language teaching situations (Liu & Hu, 2021; Rasyimah et al., 2018). ESP is defined as the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language, wherein learners' focus is on using English within specific domains or scopes (Octaberlina & Asrifan, 2021; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). In this context, ESP employs methods that create learning situations mirroring real-life scenarios, enabling students to develop language proficiency relevant to their fields of expertise or comprehend English within contexts pertinent to their professions (Anthony, 2018; Dudley & St. John, 1998). With this approach, the teaching of English becomes not only a means of general communication but also a tool for achieving specific goals aligned with students' academic or professional needs. Huang & Chiu (2015) and Jonassen & Strobel (2006) assert that the most effective learning occurs in contexts that are meaningful to students. In the ESP context, meaningful contexts for students are professional or academic in nature. Consequently, accurate and relevant ESP assessments must be capable of measuring students' language

proficiency within contexts that are meaningful to them. Barrot & Agdeppa (2021) Limbos & Geva (2001) state that accurate and relevant language assessment should comprehensively measure students' language abilities, including their capacity to use language in meaningful contexts. ESP assessments that solely gauge students' language proficiency in abstract terms, without considering the context of its usage, would be less relevant and fail to provide accurate information for students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is defined as language learning that focuses on specific communicative needs, such as language for particular professional or academic purposes (Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). With the increasing demand for specific language expertise in various occupational contexts, ESP instructors face significant challenges in developing assessments that are both accurate and relevant. These challenges arise from the need to strike a balance between understanding the contextual needs of students and objectively measuring their language proficiency (Hidayat et al., 2023; Standen & Brown, 2004).

ESP instructors often encounter difficulties in tailoring assessment materials to the diverse needs of their students. ESP learning involves an understanding of specific contexts, and instructors need to design assessments that reflect authentic communicative situations (Douglas, 2012). Additionally, effective assessment requires a profound understanding of the learning needs and goals of ESP students, which often vary from one student group to another (Hyland, 2022). Apart from content challenges, ESP instructors also face technical difficulties in designing valid and reliable assessment instruments. This encompasses the selection of appropriate assessment types, such as written tests, interviews, or project tasks, as well as the establishment of clear assessment criteria (Bachman & Adrian, 2022). These challenges necessitate a profound understanding of evaluation concepts in the context of ESP. ESP instructors also grapple with time constraints when developing effective assessments. The limitations on teaching time often make it challenging for instructors to create assessments that align with the needs of their students. This can result in the use of assessment instruments that are less adequate or not well-suited to the learning context (Hyland, 2019).

The aim of this research is to investigate the challenges faced by teachers in designing assessments for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. This study makes a significant contribution to understanding the difficulties encountered by ESP teachers in crafting relevant and effective evaluation instruments to facilitate student learning. By exploring this aspect, the research provides profound insights into the specific challenges faced by ESP educators in developing assessment tools tailored to the needs and characteristics of ESP classes. The findings of the research can serve as a foundation for the development of training programs or pedagogical guidelines specifically designed to assist ESP teachers in overcoming obstacles in designing assessments that align with the requirements of ESP classes, thereby enhancing the quality of learning and evaluation in such environments.

Method

Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, strategically crafted to offer a comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of the perspectives and thoughts of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors. This investigation delves into the insights of eight experienced instructors, carefully selected from diverse backgrounds, each contributing to the rich tapestry of ESP instruction. The participants are drawn from three distinct universities situated in the East Java region of Indonesia, showcasing the regional diversity inherent in ESP pedagogy.

By employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, the research aims to illuminate the intricate nuances and varied viewpoints embedded in the experiences of ESP instructors. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives, creating a detailed narrative that captures the essence of their instructional practices, challenges faced, and innovative strategies employed in the realm of ESP education.

The geographical scope of the study, spanning multiple universities in the East Java region, adds an extra layer of complexity and richness to the data collected. This intentional diversity ensures a holistic understanding of the subject matter, considering potential regional variations in teaching approaches, curriculum design, and challenges encountered by ESP instructors.

Participants

The meticulous process of participant selection for this research was conducted with a deliberate application of purposive sampling, a method chosen for its strategic alignment with the study's objectives. The criteria for inclusion were thoughtfully defined, requiring prospective participants to possess a minimum of five years of experience in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), hold a master's degree in English language studies, and exhibit a demonstrated proficiency in the design of ESP assessments.

Purposive sampling, with its intentional selection based on specific characteristics, served as a means to ensure the inclusion of participants who not only met the outlined criteria but also brought a wealth of experience and expertise to the study. The prerequisite of a minimum of five years of ESP teaching experience was established to capture the insights and reflections of instructors with a substantial pedagogical background, while the requirement for a master's degree in English language studies added a layer of academic rigor to the participant profile.

Furthermore, the stipulation that participants should possess experience in designing ESP assessments was a key criterion designed to hone in on educators with a specialized skill set. This criterion aimed to encompass participants who had engaged in the practical application of their knowledge, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and intricacies involved in the design and implementation of assessments tailored to the specific linguistic needs of their students.

The selection of eight ESP instructors from three diverse universities in the East Java region was a deliberate choice intended to ensure a comprehensive representation of experiences and perspectives across various academic contexts. By drawing participants from different institutions, each with its unique academic culture, curricular nuances, and student demographics, the research sought to capture a broader spectrum of insights into the challenges faced by ESP instructors.

Data Collection

The principal method employed for data collection in this research was the in-depth interview, a carefully chosen approach designed to elicit a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the perspectives and thoughts of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors, particularly with respect to the challenges encountered in the domain of assessment design.

The selection of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method was informed by its inherent ability to delve deeply into the lived experiences, beliefs, and reflections of the participants. This methodological choice was driven by the recognition that assessments in ESP carry a unique set of challenges, and the intricate details of these challenges are often best uncovered through the rich narrative accounts provided by the instructors themselves.

By engaging in one-on-one in-depth interviews with the selected participants, the research sought to establish a dynamic and open dialogue, creating a platform for the instructors to share their experiences, insights, and perceptions in a detailed and unrestricted manner. This interactive approach was instrumental in fostering a deeper connection between the researcher and the participants, enabling the exploration of the multifaceted nature of challenges in ESP assessment design.

Data Analysis

The researcher has opted for a qualitative analysis approach in scrutinizing data obtained through a series of in-depth interviews with eight English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors. This approach has been chosen to delve more profoundly into and carefully comprehend the qualitative aspects underpinning the views, experiences, and perspectives of the instructors regarding ESP instruction. By employing qualitative methods, the researcher endeavors to delineate and synthesize interview data to identify thematic patterns, understand the intricacies of the learning context, and explore nuances and meanings that may elude detection through quantitative analysis approaches. Through this approach, the researcher aspires to present a comprehensive and in-depth portrayal of the experiences of ESP instructors, serving as a foundation for the development of contextual understanding and improvements in ESP teaching and learning practices.

Result

This study involves in-depth interviews with eight English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors from three different universities, with the primary objective of elucidating the challenges they encounter in the development of ESP assessments. The interview process is conducted meticulously, allowing the instructors to intricately articulate their experiences, challenges, and perspectives concerning the formulation of ESP assessments.

Understanding Student Needs

Comprehending student needs poses a predominant challenge for ESP instructors in designing ESP assessments. The process of delineating individual needs within the context of English for specific purposes necessitates a profound engagement with each student's background, experiences, and career aspirations. Given that students come from diverse industries and specific fields, ESP instructors must ensure that the formulated assessment instruments reflect these highly varied needs. Additionally, adaptations to the terminology and specific expertise within each industry sector constitute a primary concern, requiring instructors to possess a deep understanding of these aspects to design assessments that are both relevant and effective. Thus, the ability to devise adequate assessments at the ESP level relies not only on a grasp of language but also demands an insightful understanding of students' work contexts, enabling assessment outcomes to accurately depict their language proficiency applicable in practical work environments.

"One of my main challenges is accurately understanding the specific needs of students in their respective fields. Each discipline has different demands, and designing questions that align with their comprehension levels and needs is a challenge in itself." (L1)

"Understanding the specific goals of students in learning English for specific purposes can sometimes be complex. I have to tailor my assessments to align with students' needs and career goals, which occasionally requires additional research and deeper understanding." (L5)

"I often encounter difficulties in identifying the specific needs of students and adapting assessment instruments to reflect relevant skills within the context of their careers. This necessitates a profound understanding of the students' industry or field of work, which is not always easily obtained." (L8)

Adapting the Level of Difficulty

Adapting the level of difficulty of questions to align with students' proficiency levels is a distinct challenge faced by ESP instructors in designing ESP assessments. In an effort to provide relevant and meaningful evaluations, instructors need to consider the variation in individual abilities within their classes. This process requires a deep understanding of the language proficiency and needs of each student, ensuring that the formulated questions encompass a diverse spectrum of abilities.

"Adapting the level of difficulty of questions to align with students' proficiency levels is a challenge. I want to ensure that the questions are neither too easy nor too difficult, thus providing an effective learning experience." (L2)

Maintaining Relevance to Workplace Conditions

Preserving relevance to workplace conditions is a central challenge faced by ESP instructors in designing ESP assessments. In the effort to equip students with language skills pertinent to the demands of the professional world, instructors need to consistently ensure that the assessment instruments created reflect current dynamics and industry requirements. This challenge not only necessitates a profound understanding of industry developments but also requires skills in anticipating potential changes in the workplace.

"Maintaining the relevance of questions to workplace conditions in specific fields often proves challenging. I strive to enable students to directly apply their knowledge in their future work environments." (L3)

Addressing Class Heterogeneity

Mitigating class heterogeneity poses a significant challenge for ESP instructors in designing ESP assessments. In ESP classes, students often come from diverse backgrounds, industries, and varying levels of expertise. The primary challenge is to ensure that the assessments formulated reflect and accommodate this wide spectrum of abilities. Instructors need to design assessment instruments capable of understanding and evaluating students' language skills at various levels without compromising accuracy or relevance to individual work contexts. Adjusting the level of difficulty, determining the assessment focus, and providing meaningful feedback to each student become complex tasks in the face of class heterogeneity.

"ESP classes are often heterogeneous, with students having different backgrounds and levels of expertise. My difficulty lies in designing questions that can accommodate these differences so that all students can derive maximum benefit from ESP learning." (L4)

"Given that our students come from various industries and specific fields, identifying individual needs and crafting assessment instruments that encompass all relevant skill aspects becomes a challenge requiring a highly structured approach." (L6)

"In formulating ESP assessments, I often encounter difficulties due to the diversity of students' backgrounds. Some students may come from technical sectors with specialized terminology, while others may be from the healthcare field with different communication needs.

Understanding this diversity and integrating it into assessments requires special attention to ensure that evaluation results reflect the true abilities of students in the context of their work." (L7)

Discussion

By engaging eight ESP instructors from three universities in Indonesia, the researchers sought to investigate the barriers faced by educators in planning assessment instruments for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Utilizing individual in-depth interviews, the researchers gathered data.

The results of this study indicate that there are four challenges for ESP instructors in crafting ESP assessments, including: understanding student needs, adjusting the level of difficulty, maintaining relevance to workplace conditions, and addressing class heterogeneity. Among these challenges, two of them, understanding student needs and addressing class heterogeneity, emerged as the most dominant.

Understanding student needs and addressing class heterogeneity pose significant challenges in developing ESP assessments. The learning process in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes involves students with diverse backgrounds, both in terms of industry, occupation, and language proficiency levels. ESP instructors face difficulties in fully comprehending the individual needs of each student and effectively devising assessments that are relevant to their work contexts. Adapting the level of difficulty, focus, and assessment format to align with varying skill spectrums can be a complex task. Careful attention to individual needs and the implementation of diverse teaching approaches can help overcome heterogeneity in ESP classes, making the assessment process more accurate and beneficial (Anthony, 2018; Brown, 2016; Moattarian & Tahririan, 2014).

Meanwhile, adjusting the level of difficulty and maintaining relevance to workplace conditions pose distinct challenges in the development of ESP assessments. These difficulties arise because ESP instructors need to ensure that the assessments crafted reflect a level of complexity commensurate with students' language abilities, while remaining pertinent to the evolving demands of the professional world. Assessments that are too easy may not accurately reflect true proficiency, while assessments that are overly challenging can create unnecessary barriers for students. In this context, the matter of relevance becomes crucial, as assessments must mirror the actual conditions and needs of the workplace. Hutchinson & Waters (1987), in their work on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), underscore the importance of integrating authentic elements from the work environment into assessments, which can help maintain relevance and accuracy in assessments aligned with workplace needs.

Conclusion

This study explores the obstacles confronted by educators when formulating assessments for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Findings from this investigation reveal four key challenges encountered by ESP instructors in the creation of assessments, encompassing a grasp of student requirements, adjusting difficulty levels, ensuring alignment with workplace contexts, and managing class diversity. Notably, among these challenges, understanding student needs and addressing class heterogeneity emerged as the predominant issues. This research plays a pivotal role in enhancing comprehension of the hurdles ESP teachers face in developing pertinent and efficient evaluation tools to support student learning.

For the further researchers, it is recommended that researchers broaden the scope of their sample and research context by involving English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructors from diverse geographical locations and occupational contexts. Enlisting such variation in participation will likely

yield more representative findings and offer a more comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by ESP instructors. Furthermore, consideration should be given to examining the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders involved in curriculum design for ESP or those supporting its implementation. Understanding their perspectives can significantly contribute to comprehending the dynamics that may influence the effectiveness of ESP instruction. Moreover, to achieve a more holistic perspective, the research should also incorporate the viewpoint of students in the analysis. Analyzing the difficulties faced by students in understanding and mastering the English language in the ESP context can provide valuable information regarding the efficacy of teaching methods and curricula employed.

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