

Thai EFL Undergraduate Learners' Needs for English for Specific Purposes

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Received February 13, 2022; **Revised** March 15, 2022; **Accepted** March 23, 2022

Abstract

The needs and interests of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students have been at the forefront of English teaching and learning in recent years, including teaching English for various purposes at all undergraduate and graduate levels. This study looked into the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) language requirements of a group of Thai EFL undergraduates studying at a Thai university. Data was collected using a closed-ended questionnaire. Most students preferred to study both ESP and EGP (English for General Purposes) parts in an ESP course, with a 3:4 ratio for ESP to EGP since both would complement each other. The focus of ESP sessions should be on strengthening English communication skills and deepening student knowledge of technical terminology and expressions and critical topics in certain professional specialities. The study's implications remind EFL teachers to value learners' needs, and conduct needs analyses before giving an ESP program or course.

Keywords: EFL undergraduates, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), Learners' Needs

Introduction

The MHESRI (The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation) is currently in charge of Thai tertiary education. Teaching standards in several academic fields have been devised to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in all Thai higher education institutions. The criteria for English language teaching require undergraduate students to demonstrate a satisfactory level of English proficiency using the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) or equivalent assessments. Undergraduate students should additionally learn a particular type of English relevant to their topic of study. The standardized CEFR guidelines contain the standards for general English learning outcomes.

Course material is largely chosen by English departments, language institutes, or other responsible entities providing English courses for higher education universities in the option of specialized English (also known as English for Specific Purposes, ESP).

One of the principles of communicative language education, according to Brumfit (2001), is to identify learners' needs and interests. Individualization of the teaching and learning process is the result of this. A personalized approach to student learning can improve language learning efficacy, implying that assessing learners' needs should include general and specialized English instruction. In the case of English for Specific Purposes courses at the university level in Thailand, a requirements analysis could also assist course providers or developers determine learners' particular language needs at the course level, which often reflects the content subjects the learners are learning. Learners' genuine needs for such ESP courses would thus be met regarding ESP course construction or revision.

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has gained much attention recently, especially since English has become the international language of business, technology, and communication. EFL students want to learn English for a variety of reasons. Some people learn English because they believe it will help them in their careers. In contrast, others need it to interpret texts and process the tremendous amount of information available on the Internet and in cyberspace. The needs and interests of such students might influence their motivation to learn English. According to Dudley-Evans and St. Jones (2012), ESP is English for specific goals that can be stated, such as academic or professional study. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1993), ESP is not a specific sort of language or methodology but rather a method of studying English that is tailored to the needs of the students. Basturkmen (2010) further says that ESP is no different from other types of language instruction. Professionals or learners with some essential English skills could benefit from ESP.

The characteristics of ESP lie in two dimensions. The first is absolute, and the other is variable. The fundamental characteristics ensure that English is designed to meet the specific needs of the learners, so the content has to be based on particular disciplines, occupations and activities. However, the variable characteristics focus mainly on improving learners' specific skills based on their needs, such as speaking, listening, reading or writing and using the teaching methodology suitable to learner ability and learning objectives.

Because most ESP courses presume basic mastery of English language systems, the ESP curriculum is best suited for intermediate or advanced students. It can, however, be used with beginners in practice. It is critical to undertake a requirements analysis for ESP to determine the individual needs of learners. Grammar, lexis, register, skills, and discourse deemed appropriate for various disciplines, occupations, and hobbies are included in language-centred ESP courses. The ESP approach and operations are distinct from the EGP (English for

General Purposes). Learners in the ESP program are frequently from the same school, institution, or workplace.

Research Design

The study's primary purpose was to identify the ESP language needs of a group of Business English students at an international university in Thailand. The following research questions guided it:

1. How do the students use ESP and general English outside of the classroom?
2. How much should course design reflect ESP (English for Specific Purposes) principles compared to EGP (English for General Purposes)?
3. What would be the main emphasis of ESP classes offered at the university?

The study was conducted voluntarily among 18 Business English majors while studying an ESP course and other subjects at the university in one academic semester of 15 weeks. The students had at least passed three EGP courses and were perceived to have been at a B1 language proficiency level. The research instrument was a short small-scale self-administered questionnaire with five close-ended questions. The data were analyzed descriptively to derive means and standard deviations.

Results

Use of ESP outside of the language classroom

From the summary of student responses, it was found that the students reported using ESP almost exclusively in the language classroom with almost no chances of applying the ESP content knowledge gained in other content subjects. For Business English students, the curriculum requirements reflected their needs. However, they would prefer to have around 75% of the course hours (approximately 34 hours from 45-course hours) devoted to ESP and 25% (around 11 hours) to EGP. If incorporated systematically in an ESP course, a combination of ESP and EGP in such proportions would be ideal. Both may complement each other well and help EFL learners gain intended learning outcomes of learning English for life and professional purposes.

Use of General English outside the language classroom

Students are found to utilize general English in various situations, including the use of colloquial English. Their use of English for General Purposes is based on both receptive and productive activities. Receptive activities are browsing the Internet, reading various materials found, listening to music, and watching online and offline movies. Productive activities are

singing English songs, conversing casually with international students, writing emails for contact, posting in English on Facebook and other social networking platforms, and communicating with other Thai and non-Thai classmates when doing group work or discussions). There are numerous opportunities to communicate in English orally.

The main focus of ESP classes

Most students indicated that the main focus of ESP classes should be developing oral communication skills and enriching their knowledge of specialized, technical vocabulary or jargon in the fields concerned. Although the students are aware of the need to use ESP for oral communication, EFL university students need ESP for various purposes, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In other words, all four general English skills.

Some students also pointed out that it is essential to develop oral communication skills that will enable them to function well in actual English-speaking environments. Smoak (2003) emphasizes that ESP instruction and learning should be based on real situations and students' needs, both content and task-oriented. Chovancová (2014) points out that learner needs and wants are crucial for increasing the students' motivation. Moreover, according to Alsamadani (2017), ESP needs analysis, including learning benefits, is vital to identifying learners' essential requirements or needs and determining the edges in which they lack skills. Instructors and course designers should also seek information from stakeholders, enabling them to address the actual learning targets effectively.

Conclusion

The students in question prefer ESP courses that incorporate both ESP and some EGP education over ESP-only ones. Furthermore, these students employ ESP far too infrequently to contemplate teaching and studying ESP-only courses.

As seen by a large number of participants, the value of ESP throughout a language course increases when the course design incorporates applicability in other academic areas. In the case of English for General Purposes, the EFL students should be encouraged to participate in a variety of oral communication tasks and have opportunities to interact with various forms of literacy, new media, and English varieties that are fast becoming common in an English as a Lingua Franca world. Overall, needs analysis and benefits of learning both EGP and ESP courses have to be given first priority when it comes to course expected learning outcomes as well as course design.

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