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## Voicing the Challenges of ESP Teaching: Lessons from ESP in Non-English Departments

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### Abstract

*Along with the growing practice of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in non-English departments of tertiary education, it is essential to investigate the challenges faced by ESP teachers. It can be a basis for proposing policies for the improvement of ESP practice. This study was driven by the fact that ESP classes in non-English departments are allocated limited credit hours, and the teachers are generally General English teachers with no experience and training in teaching ESP. Thus, this study attempted to investigate the fundamental challenges faced by ESP teachers in one state and four private higher education institutions. The data of this qualitative study were obtained through interviews with five ESP teachers. The interview questions were mainly concerned with the knowledgeability and competence in teaching related to subject-specific contexts, adequacy of ESP training, needs analysis, and classroom condition. The findings reveal that the evident challenges encountered by ESP teachers were: lacking knowledge on students' field of study, lacking of ESP training, lacking of proper needs analysis, large classes, and various learners' English competencies. The findings of this study suggest that policymakers (stakeholders) should pay more attention to the practice of ESP teaching, especially in non-English departments, by reforming*

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*policy in order to minimize the problems faced by ESP teachers and to improve the practice of ESP teaching.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, ESP, non-English departments.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the demand for teaching English for Specific Purposes, or ESP, in higher education has been increasing. Widely considered to be a better approach for non-English department students, ESP is generally designed to fulfill what learners currently need and what their future careers demand (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Teaching ESP is challenging because the teachers are generally English for general purposes teachers (Pei & Milner, 2016). Moreover, teaching ESP courses requires not only the teachers' English proficiency but also the mastery of knowledge in a specific field of study. Additionally, the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach in ESP classes presents a challenge for ESP teachers (Prudnikova, 2013). Thus, investigating the challenges of teaching ESP in higher education is vital because emergent issues can be used as a basis for proposing policies towards the improvement of ESP practices. Research on ESP has been primarily focused on investigating needs analysis in ESP curriculum or materials development (Aldohon, 2014; Bialik & Fadel, 2015; Boroujeni & Fard, 2013; Gass, 2012; Gestanti et al., 2019; Hou, 2013; Kazar & Mede, 2015; Kellerman et al., 2010; Özyel et al., 2012; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017; Saragih, 2014; Serafini et al., 2015; Setiawati, 2016; Trisyanti, 2009). However, little has been done to reveal the evident challenges encountered by the ESP teachers.

In the Indonesian context, studies undertaken by Marwan (2017) and Poedjiastutie (2017) had acknowledged some challenges of ESP teaching, which are students' low learning motivation, the discrepancy between reality and expectations, teachers' workload, and low quality of resources (Marwan, 2017). While in Poedjiastutie's (2017) study, both teachers' and students' readiness in ESP teaching and learning emerged as a tough challenge. However, both studies present weak evidence due to their limited research contexts. While Marwan's (2017) qualitative study involved only a single research participant in a particular university, Poedjiastutie's (2017) research findings were generated from data gathered from numerous research participants in a single university. Thus, both studies cannot represent the general condition concerning challenges faced by ESP teachers in higher education within the Indonesian context. None of these studies display recent convincing evidence pertaining to the challenges of teaching ESP in various non-English departments of tertiary education.

Due to the lack of prominent studies that explore the challenges of ESP teaching, the current study attempts to gain more evidence related to the challenges of teaching ESP in different departments of private and public universities in Yogyakarta Province. Thus, the research question of this study is: What are the actual challenges faced by ESP teachers in higher educational institutions? The findings of this study can be used to urge policymakers and stakeholders of ESP in the non-English departments of higher educational institutions to give more serious attention to ESP practice as well as to improve it.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 ESP Teachers' Required Competencies

Teaching ESP should not be taken into account as being merely similar to teaching general English courses. It demands complex tasks that teachers must carry out. As emphasized by [Luo and Garner \(2017\)](#), a novel approach focusing on the use of language for communication should be employed by ESP teachers. Furthermore, ESP teaching needs learners' active involvement to construct a learning environment useful for their current or future work. The decision to apply ESP in language teaching cannot be separated from the central roles of the teachers. Some conditions ideally should be fulfilled when an institution decides to hire ESP teachers; one of them is by equipping them with preservice training. [Bezukladnikov and Kruze \(2012\)](#) urge the significance of having adequate education on ESP teaching as there are substantial problems relating to the development of curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials. Correspondingly, [Harmer \(2001\)](#) asserts that ESP teachers need to have some training to enhance not only their language proficiency but also their content knowledge related to the subject matter. According to [Bracaj \(2014\)](#), ESP teacher training plays an essential role since being knowledgeable on the specified subject matter will contribute to the fulfillment of learners' needs. The importance of training for ESP teachers is also highlighted by some researchers (e.g. [Alsharif & Shukri, 2018](#); [Bracaj, 2014](#); [Chen, 2013](#); [Kusni, 2013](#); [Liton, 2013](#); [Tabatabaei, 2007](#); [Xu et al., 2018](#); [Zhang, 2017](#)).

Furthermore, [Bracaj \(2014\)](#) pinpoints some ways that contribute to ESP teachers' professionalism. Firstly, only specialized teachers (those who master content knowledge) who are ready to teach ESP can teach ESP. Secondly, ESP teachers should be well-educated or have the willingness to pursue higher education in language teaching. Thirdly, they should get general professional training as a teacher and as an educator to acquire pedagogical concepts and other aspects related to teaching and educating. Fourthly, there must be special training for either EFL or ESL teachers to understand learners' needs and what to offer to fulfill their learning needs.

Similarly, [Tabatabaei \(2007\)](#) asserts that there are several ways to make ESP teachers professionally competent. They should make themselves specialized in a particular discipline, join training to enhance their knowledge and teaching skill, and conduct ESP research. Professional competence, which is affected by teachers' motivation in teaching, is also viewed as the outcome of teachers' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses ([Suslu, 2006](#)). Recognizing their strengths and weaknesses can become an indicator that teachers care about their professional development; therefore, they will figure out to make use of their strengths and overcome their weaknesses.

[Maleki \(2008\)](#) identifies the required skills that teachers should possess, which contribute to their professionalism and effectiveness in teaching. They should have "(a) English language knowledge, (b) thorough command of course design, and (c) expert knowledge of the related field of science" ([Maleki, 2008, p. 9](#)). ESP teachers' professionalism, as uttered by [Maleki \(2008\)](#), is gained not only by knowing the English language but also by having the ability to develop the course and master the content knowledge.

## **2.2 The Pivotal Role of Needs Analysis in ESP**

It is widely agreed and has never been debated that the role of needs analysis is crucial in ESP. Hyland (2002) urges that ESP curriculum development began with assessing learners' needs. Hence, the curriculum, including the learning goals of ESP, should be designed based on learners' specific needs. Basturkmen (2010) suggests that conducting needs analysis means identifying the language skills used in determining and selecting materials based on ESP. Besides, needs analysis can be used to evaluate learners and the learning process when the learning program is over.

Similarly, Ellis and Johnson (1994) assert that through needs analysis, learners' needs in learning ESP can be described. Therefore, the role of needs analysis in the ESP course is undeniably pivotal. Ahmed (2014) asserts that to set the learning outcomes, ESP teachers rely on needs analysis. It means that learning outcomes will not be appropriately formulated if no needs analysis is conducted. As it is crucial and becomes a basis in developing the curriculum, learning outcomes, materials, and teaching activities, the absence of needs analysis can make teaching challenging.

## **2.3 Classroom Conditions**

Classroom conditions can contribute to the success of the language teaching learning process. Two typical issues related to classroom conditions are class size and students' language ability. Harmer (2001) notes that large classes give more challenges than smaller classes, such as the lack of personal attention to students, limited interaction among students, and difficulty in making smooth and effective organization. Similarly, Brown (2007) argues that to meet an ideal condition, a language class should not consist of more than twelve students. Regarding students' ability in the target language, their mixed ability in a class makes it difficult for teachers to execute their well-planned lessons (Harmer, 2001). However, both large and small classes must always have students with various language abilities and proficiencies that make teaching challenging (Brown, 2007).

## **2.4 Review of Relevant Studies**

Previous studies have brought findings that indicate various challenges faced by ESP teachers, and they are mostly related to the design of ESP courses and materials. Basturkmen (2010) asserted that designing an ESP course, which is usually only applied for a short period, is a demanding task for teachers, as they have to investigate learners' needs beforehand. A study conducted by Hoa and Mai (2016) in Vietnamese universities revealed complex problems about the practice of ESP. Three major issues related to the teachers, students, and the environment in which ESP was taught were brought to the surface. The key findings were large classes, students varied English proficiency and inadequate qualification of ESP teachers. Having many students is also found in a study by Poedjiastutie and Oliver (2017) in a private university in Indonesia. It is mentioned that putting a large number of students into one class is because, unlike state universities that are funded by the government, private universities have to finance their teaching and learning process. In other words, by having more students, the universities will make more money to keep the courses going. Hoa and Mai (2016) suggested several recommendations for some emerging

issues. For universities that run ESP classes, the class size should be decreased to facilitate more effective learning. Concerning ESP students, more active participation during the learning process is suggested. Regarding ESP teachers, they should seek opportunities to attend training to increase their qualifications. Although [Hoa and Mai's \(2016\)](#) study had successfully highlighted pivotal issues in ESP generated from many research respondents, it would have been more comprehensive if the problem investigation was conducted more deeply through interviews.

[Alsharif and Shukri \(2018\)](#) studied the pedagogical challenges encountered by ESP teachers in Saudi Arabian universities. Employing a mixed-method, the results of the study showcased some key issues regarding ESP teaching. The most crucial issues were the absence of training provided by employers, which resulted in the lack of readiness in teaching ESP, and also teachers' unfamiliarity with the content knowledge of students' related discipline. The findings of the study suggested that collaboration between an English teacher and a content teacher be established in order to minimize problems related to teachers' lack of linguistic knowledge on students' discipline. Collaboration with a content teacher to overcome pedagogical problems is also suggested in numerous ESP studies ([Ahmed, 2014](#); [Bojović, 2006](#); [Luo & Garner, 2017](#); [Zhang, 2017](#)). Lack of training among ESP teachers is also found in some ESP studies ([Ali, 2015](#); [Kusni, 2013](#); [Nguyen et al., 2019](#); [Pham & Ta, 2016](#)).

[Marwan's \(2017\)](#) study showed a mismatch between the curriculum and learners' language competence. It was found that in his study, what was prescribed in the curriculum could hardly be realized as learners' language ability was relatively low. In other words, the design of the curriculum is often unrealistic; thus, achieving learning objectives will be overwhelming. Although [Marwan's \(2017\)](#) study presented some crucial issues that ESP teachers faced, the context of his study was limited as it was a case study conducted in a particular college and involved a single teacher. Thus, the finding cannot be used to represent the general reality in ESP teaching.

Materials have also become a challenging aspect. A study by [Medrea and Rus \(2012\)](#), for instance, highlighted that materials, whether they are selected from commercial books or self-developed by teachers, are significant to be taken into account when running an ESP course. As picking certain resources can be costly and the level of language does not always comply with learners' ability, developing materials is also challenging in a way that it requires the teacher's sufficient knowledge of learners' discipline. [Medrea and Rus \(2012\)](#) also found that the teachers lacked knowledge about the students' field of study, so it made the ESP teaching became more demanding. Lacking knowledge of students' discipline could be seen from teachers' limited vocabulary on students' discipline.

The lack of systematic needs analysis also contributes to the challenge in ESP teaching, as found in a study conducted by [Poedjiastutie \(2017\)](#). It is highlighted that needs analysis greatly affects the selection of teaching materials. In other words, an inappropriate or less systematic needs analysis will result in a less suitable selection of teaching materials. Unsystematic needs analysis, as found by [Poedjiastutie \(2017\)](#), somehow, indicates that ESP courses might not have been well managed by stakeholders. A lack of systematic needs analysis before designing an ESP course is also found in a study undertaken by [Kusni \(2013\)](#). While [Poedjiastutie's \(2017\)](#) study emphasizes that the role of systematic needs analysis will highly determine the selection of teaching resources, [Kusni's \(2013\)](#) study asserts that course design heavily depends on it.

The studies presented above clearly indicate that the practice of ESP teaching in higher education institutions is still far from being ideal. There are complex problems in the practice of ESP as mentioned in the previous sections such as the course materials, the curriculum, teachers' lack of readiness to teach ESP, and large classes. However, the previous studies only investigated issues of ESP teaching in a single institution which may not reflect the general realities of ESP practice in higher education institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply investigate the actual challenges on the practice of ESP in various non-English departments of higher education in Indonesian settings so that policymakers can see the urgency of reforming the policy.

### 3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative method to explore the challenges faced by ESP teachers at the tertiary level. The following subsections describe the participants of the study, research instrument, and data collection and analysis.

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were five ESP teachers in the non-English departments of higher education institutions in Yogyakarta Province, Indonesia. One taught in a public university, while the other four taught in private colleges. They taught in four different departments. The detailed information about the research participants can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic data.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Background of study</b>	<b>Years of teaching</b>
Participant 1	Private	Nursing	Master's program of English Language Education	More than five years
Participant 2	Private	Chemical Engineering	Master's program of Linguistics	More than five years
Participant 3	Private	Mechanical Engineering	Master's program of English Language Education	More than five years
Participant 4	State	Geological Engineering	Master's program of English Language Education	Three to five years
Participant 5	Private	Nursing	Master's program of English Language Education	Three to five years

The unequal number of participants from state and private universities is due to the limited state universities in the province teaching ESP in the non-English departments. Moreover, among several potential respondents from some state universities, only one agreed to participate in the study.

### 3.2 Research Instrument

There are two instruments utilized in this study: 1) the researchers as a human instrument who gathered data through interviews (Saldana, 2011), and 2) interview guides. The interview guide, based on prominent theories in ESP and EFL teaching, was used to obtain data from the participants. The questions in Table 2 serve as the primary questions in the interview guide which were then developed into some other related questions:

**Table 2.** Question prompts.

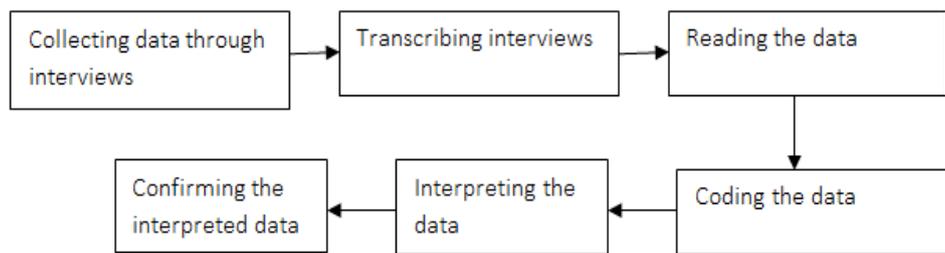
Primary question prompts	Theoretical sources
1. How knowledgeable and competent are you in teaching English related to subject-specific contexts?	Luka, 2004, as cited in Muhrofi-Gunadi, 2016; Maleki, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wahyuni & Rozi, 2020;
2. How adequate are ESP training given to you before you started teaching?	Richards & Farrell, 2005; Bracaj, 2014; Alsharif & Shukri, 2018; Inozemtseva & Troufanova, 2018; Stojkovic, 2019;
3. How was the needs analysis conducted?	Basturkmen, 2010;
4. How does the classroom condition challenge your teaching?	Harmer, 2001; Brown, 2007;

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

As this study was qualitative, the data were collected through interviews to gain insight and understanding of some fundamental phenomena related to ESP practice. The interviews did not strictly follow the guiding questions (Richards, 2009) to collect a more in-depth understanding of ESP teachers' challenges in teaching. Instead, it flowed naturally by addressing impromptu questions that were still in the area of the research problem. To avoid misinterpretation, the researchers conducted the interviews in the participants' native language (Bahasa Indonesia), yet the essential excerpts presented in this article are translated into English. The interview for each participant lasted for about 30 minutes and it was recorded using a mobile phone. A few background noises were found in the recordings, but they did not interfere with the essence of the interviews.

Upon collecting the data, the data were transcribed. The data were analyzed using Creswell's (2012) model. Each participant's transcript was read repeatedly in order to find phenomena that fit into specific themes. After themes were found, they were coded and put into themes and subthemes accordingly. The data were then interpreted. To ensure data validity, the interpreted data were confirmed to the participants (debriefing). It is a way to avoid misinterpretations. The procedure of data analysis is shown in Figure 1.

In addition to the data obtained through interviews, participants' demographic data (see Table 1) were also used to better understand the participants' professional history. Using participants' demographic data could prevent fragmentation of participants' information into detached code that might lead to failure in revealing a thorough interpretation (Tao & Gao, 2018).



**Figure 1.** Data analysis procedure (adapted from Creswell, 2012).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals several findings contributing to the challenges encountered by ESP teachers in some non-English departments of colleges. The identified themes are: teachers' perceived knowledge and competence (lack of knowledge on learners' discipline and teachers' training), lack of proper needs analysis, large classes, and learners' various competence.

### 4.1 Teachers' Perceived Knowledge and Competence

The first emerging theme found during data collection is related to how ESP teachers perceive their knowledge and teaching competence concerning teaching ESP in their department.

#### 4.1.1 Lack of knowledge of learners' discipline

Teachers' perceived knowledge and competence to their lack of knowledge of learners' discipline and their limited competence in teaching ESP for the target discipline. The data are as shown in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 1: "I was afraid when the first time I was teaching because the field, nursing, is very unfamiliar to me". (P5, A1)

Excerpt 2: "I had to learn about medical terms and procedures which I never knew before. Firstly, I was repressed, afraid to make mistakes". (P1, A1)

Excerpt 3: "Having a limited vocabulary on content knowledge, geology, is the toughest thing. The vocabulary is specific. That is the challenge". (P4, A1)

Excerpt 4: "I was overwhelmed because there are a lot of materials in Mechanical Engineering to deal with. The vocabulary is quite difficult. Many words have different, specific meanings when we translate them. For example, in the word *sifat* in English, we usually say characteristics. However, in Mechanical Engineering, we call it properties". (P3, A1).

Their lack of knowledge of learners' discipline indicates that their different study backgrounds result in the struggle to learn a new area of study. Although knowledge is mostly referred to as terms or vocabulary of the related field, to a great deal, it affects teacher's anxiety and stress in teaching as they mentioned "repressed", "afraid",

“overwhelmed”, and “difficult”. Teachers’ lack of knowledge of learners’ discipline is in line with a study conducted by [Medrea and Rus \(2012\)](#). Contrastingly, some researchers have asserted the importance of mastering specialty knowledge to be a professional ESP teacher ([Bracaj, 2014](#); [Maleki, 2008](#); [Pradhan, 2013](#)) in addition to their teaching competency and English language proficiency.

Inadequate knowledge in the subject matter can bring negative feelings for teachers, and eventually affect the teaching-learning atmosphere. It will not be conducive as teachers feel insecure and not confident during their teaching performance. This condition can be seen in the statement uttered by Participants 1, 3, and 5. Feeling insecure over one own limited knowledge will be a stumbling stone during teachers’ teaching. If this challenge continues to occur, learners will likely lose trust in their teachers. This situation should be prevented by ensuring that teachers are equipped with sufficient content knowledge in the related field. Moreover, there should be ample, realistic period given to ESP teachers before their teaching period is commenced so that they are well prepared. In order to deal with this problem, cooperation should be held between English teachers and specialty teachers ([Ahmed, 2014](#); [Bojović, 2006](#); [Luo & Garner, 2017](#); [Zhang, 2017](#)) to complement each other and to minimize the gap in the lack of teachers’ content knowledge of the subject matter. In addition, being aware of having limited knowledge on the subject matter can turn to be positive as it will stimulate and motivate ESP teachers to learn new things outside their field.

#### 4.1.2 Lack of training on ESP

Another aspect that contributes to teachers’ perceived knowledge and competence is the lack of training, especially ESP teaching. Contrasting with earlier studies ([Alsharif & Shukri, 2018](#); [Inozemtseva & Troufanova, 2018](#); [Richards & Farrell, 2005](#); [Stojkovic, 2019](#)) which highlight the importance of training, the participants claimed that there was no training, moreover ESP training before beginning to teach.

Excerpt 5: “ESP training? No, there was not. When I first joined the institution, no training was given. On the contrary, I was the one who had to improve the system to be ideal”. (P1, A2)

Excerpt 6: “Training was organized twice by the university for all lecturers. It is about the socialization of the new curriculum. My department never organized it. No training for ESP”. (P2, A2)

Excerpt 7: “No training was given when I first joined the faculty member. As a result, I was in a kind of confusion since I had to learn a lot about Mechanical Engineering, especially its vocabulary, which carries specific meanings”. (P3, A2).

Excerpt 8: “I attended some workshops organized by my faculty, but it was not intended for language teachers, let alone ESP teachers. They were for all lecturers of various subjects. So, very general”. (P4, A2).

Excerpt 9: “No training was specifically given to ESP teachers. There was only briefing”. (P5, A21)

Participant 1 admitted that the absence of training provided by her institution otherwise gives her an unexpected additional role as she has to be responsible for improving the existing system. The fact addressed by Participant 1 is entirely unanticipated. She did not expect that as a newly recruited teacher, she would be assigned to manage the program and change the system. It seemed overwhelming.

Similarly, having no prior training in a new field results in “confusion”, as lamented by Participant 3, indicating that she felt unsure of what to do. Meanwhile, concerning Participant 5, it seems that the absence of training was substituted with a briefing that she considered as being inadequate as she mentioned: “...only briefing”.

Slightly different from the other participants, Participants 2 and 4 claimed that they got training but not specifically intended to prepare them to teach ESP. The fact that Participant 4 teaches in a renowned public university might indicate that as a government-financed university, training has been allocated as an essential agenda for the sake of human resources. Likewise, training (although very general), as claimed by Participant 2, could be organized since she is teaching in a well-established private university. However, it should be noted that still, the general training does not adequately accommodate them to be well prepared in teaching ESP. The training does not equip them with knowledge and methodology in ESP teaching of particular disciplines. This reality contrasts with [Richards and Farrell \(2005\)](#), who urged that training should be aimed to fulfill not only what the institutions need, but also what teachers need. The claims conveyed by Participants 2 and 4 imply that ESP in non-English departments of either private or public university is given less attention concerning the teacher professional development. Inadequate professional development opportunities are apparent; thus, leading to teachers’ low perceived knowledge and competence in ESP teaching.

The fact that ESP teachers lack training in ESP is concurrent with previous studies in various ESP contexts ([Ali, 2015](#); [Hoa & Mai, 2016](#); [Kusni, 2013](#); [Muhrofi-Gunadi, 2016](#); [Nguyen et al., 2019](#)). Additionally, Participant 5 urged the need for training due to the importance of having “standard” teaching.

Excerpt 10: “I think regular training is needed so that new teachers can have the same standard in teaching”. (P5, A22).

As uttered by Participant 5, her expectation for training indicates the need to have a standard in teaching, although it is not explained what this standard means. A standard could mean equal competence in teaching, a way of eliminating labels of “good” and “less good” teachers that can create a gap. By having a standard, it is expected that less experienced teachers can teach as competent as more experienced ones. This finding supports previous studies that acknowledge the importance of standards. It has been addressed by [Forde et al. \(2016\)](#), who emphasize that professional standards refer to tasks, skills, and knowledge required for practitioners.

Similarly, [Wahyuni and Rozi \(2020\)](#) urged that a particular standard of competencies is essential for teachers so that the broad goals of national education can be achieved. Training for ESP teachers should be aimed not only to enhance teachers’ knowledge and understanding of teaching methodology but also to equip them with adequate knowledge on the relevant subject matter. When an institution does not provide training, it often becomes teachers’ responsibility to ensure their readiness to teach ESP, at least by being an autodidact. As suggested by [Ali \(2015\)](#), ESP teachers may integrate self-training and training programs to enhance their knowledge and competence.

## 4.2 Lack of Proper Needs Analysis

The next emerging challenge is the lack of proper needs analysis. All participants admitted that there is no proper needs analysis conducted in their institutions. Some excerpts are exhibited as follows.

Excerpt 11: “No systematic needs analysis was conducted as the institution just provided the curriculum and named the course”. (P1, A3)

Excerpt 12: “In the Geology Department, everything becomes the responsibility of each teacher. The university just provided the curriculum and learning outcomes”. (P4, A3)

Excerpt 13: “Needs analysis? My department just leaves everything to me about the English subject. I did a diagnostic test in the first meeting to identify students’ competency”. (P3, A3)

The excerpts shown above indicate that the participants’ institutions did not conduct needs analysis properly by involving the respective teachers. As a result, ESP teachers are often given an unrealistic burden of designing the syllabus and selecting teaching materials by themselves, without their institution’s involvement. Without needs analysis, teachers develop the syllabus and teaching materials not based on previously obtained information that portrays what learners and the institution exactly need and want.

The lack of needs analysis, as found in this study, signals that the ESP courses implemented in the institutions mentioned above are questionable in terms of their characteristics, as mentioned by [Dudley-Evans and St. John \(1998\)](#). It is stated that one of the fundamental characteristics of ESP is its purpose of fulfilling learners’ needs ([Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998](#)). The absence of needs analysis postulates that learners’ actual needs are not adequately identified. Thus, whether the formulated learning goals can accommodate learners’ needs are questionable. Interestingly, Participant 2 stated that the absence of systematic analysis through collaboration between the teacher and stakeholders is because the educational background of the program coordinator is not related to language education or teaching.

Excerpt 14: “As far as I know, a needs analysis was not carried out before beginning the ESP program since the program coordinator’s background education is from Chemical Engineering”. (P2, A3)

The educational background, which is not related to English teaching, answers a question of why needs analysis for ESP courses is not conducted adequately in institutions as addressed by Participant 2. As the program coordinator’s educational background is not language teaching or education science, he might lack knowledge of pedagogical theories and principles, including the importance of needs analysis. To fill this gap, she initiated to survey students’ needs and wants. However, she gained very little information since the students, who were still in the first semester, could not clearly state what they needed in learning ESP. This evidence is in line with [Anthony \(2009, as cited in Bhatia et al., 2011\)](#), whose survey to determine students’ needs in learning could only obtain information on what students wanted to learn, not on their needs. In short, it is not easy to gather direct information from students to identify not only their wants but also their needs. Moreover, when it is not done systematically. A

vague statement uttered by Participant 5 below regarding whether or not needs analysis was conducted implies that she does not see needs analysis as her responsibility.

Excerpt 15: “I do not know about needs analysis, whether there was one or not. However, I am sure that the decision to use the existing coursebook is based on careful consideration”. (P5, A3)

Although needs analysis might have been conducted in the context of Participant 5, she was not involved in it, which indicates that the needs analysis (if any) was not appropriately carried out. Unlike the other participants who had to prepare the teaching materials by themselves, Participant 5 was lucky enough that her institution already provided the coursebook.

Despite the importance of needs analysis before the ESP program is designed, it is surprising that the five participants admitted that there was no proper needs analysis conducted by the stakeholders (the institution, the policymaker, and the curriculum developer) along with the respective teacher. Finding related to a lack of systematic needs analysis in ESP supports previous studies conducted by [Kusni \(2013\)](#) and [Poedjiastutie \(2017\)](#).

As a result of no systematic needs analysis, Participant 3 furthermore explained that she had to design the syllabus by herself. Having no prior knowledge and training related to teaching English for Mechanical Engineering students, she used her common sense in designing the syllabus and materials. No negotiation was made on what should be put in the syllabus. This fact contrasts with [Antic \(2007\)](#), as cited in [Ahmadvand et al., 2015](#)), who urges that the development of an ESP syllabus must be based on learners’ needs and interests.

Lack of ESP needs analysis in non-English departments illustrates a fundamental issue that needs to be seriously considered. The decision to run the ESP program is made without a thorough consideration, which should be based on sound pedagogical principles. It is because those who are in charge (i.e., head of the department or program coordinator) have no (or limited) pedagogical knowledge, especially in language teaching. Their majors are not in language teaching.

### **4.3 Large Classes**

The following challenge is related to the classroom condition, which is large class size. The excerpts are shown below:

Excerpt 16: “Ideally, there should be a placement test. A language class should be smaller, with 2030 students at most. However, we cannot find an ideal situation in any university due to many considerations. For example, the more classes, the more teachers are needed. Consequently, more teachers mean higher cost”. (P4, A4)

Excerpt 17: “The next challenge is the large classes. As many as 120 students are divided into two classes. There are around 60 students in one class, with 100 minutes of contact. Thus, it is not easy to communicate with them and to achieve the learning outcomes”. (P5, A4)

Excerpt 18: “The classroom is over capacity as there are 45 to 50 students. It is not ideal for them. It is too big”. (P1, A4)

Excerpt 19: “The most prominent problem in Mechanical Engineering is large classes. There are around 40 to 50 students, so individual work is difficult to be executed because it is time-consuming. Therefore, I usually assign group work unless during the test”. (P3, A4)

Almost all participants face the same problem of having a large number of students in a class. This fact broadly supports Harmer (2001), who states that large classes expose challenges that are not found in smaller classes. As lamented by Participant 4, the financial issue that causes the policy to have a large number of students in a class might imply that money is a big issue that her institution has to deal with carefully. The issue concerning the institution's financial capability, which affects the class size, accords with Poedjiastutie and Oliver (2017) and has also been claimed as being common in Brown (2007). Budgeting has caused many universities to have larger classes since smaller classes will require more teachers. The more teachers are hired, the higher cost they will take. It might also be speculated that in a state university where Participant 4 works, it is not because of the financial reason that causes big classes, but due to mismanagement. Lack of principal knowledge on managing a foreign language class will result in treating that class similar to those of other subjects, in which a large number of students are all right.

Inconvenience during the teaching learning process is sure to occur when the room is overcapacity. This dismaying fact portrays the insufficient attention for ESP courses organized by non-English departments in higher education. In contrast with Brown (2007), who contends that an ideal language class should not consist of more than a dozen students, ESP classes usually consist of many students (40 students or more), making it not ideal for the teaching of ESP. This condition will eventually affect the achievement of the learning outcomes. In addition, it limits teachers' options in deciding the type of classroom activities. A class with too many learners will not support individual work, as addressed by Participant 3, especially within a relatively short teaching duration (a hundred minutes per session). Therefore, teachers cannot freely decide or modify the task due to time considerations.

The finding concerning large ESP classes in non-English departments of tertiary education corroborates earlier studies (Hoa & Mai, 2016; Hou, 2013; Kusni, 2013; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017). It would be frustrating and ineffective to teach ESP with a large number of learners in one class. On the other hand, organizing smaller classes of ESP indeed requires more teachers, more space, and more money. Nevertheless, if this can be realized, there will be more benefits. The teaching learning process will be more effective because learners will gain more opportunities to practice using the language. Teachers can give more attention and assistance to learners, particularly those whose language proficiency is still low. They will also have more options to select and modify the desired activities. Eventually, the teaching learning process will be more effective, and the learning outcomes can be achieved.

#### **4.4 Learners' Varied English Competence**

Another challenge dealing with classroom conditions is the learners' varied abilities in English. Mixed ability classes have always been an issue contributing to the difficulty in teaching language (Brown, 2007). The participants address that fact as follows:

Excerpt 20: "In the class, usually the students' abilities are mixed. Some students study English for the first time, yet a few students surpass the others, for example, their TOEFL score is >500, and they can speak in English. The gap is real". (P1, A5)

Excerpt 21: “There are high achiever students, and there are ‘slow’ students”. (P5, A5)

Excerpt 22: “They are mixed students, from competent to beginner students in one class”. (P2, A5)

The more challenging fact is that, as voiced by most participants, learners have various English abilities, from the low level of learners until those with high English competency. Students’ mixed abilities have brought a noticeable gap in the learning process, as complained by Participant 1. The fact that ESP classes consist of students with heterogeneous language capabilities concurs closely with some earlier studies (Gatehouse, 2001; Hoa & Mai, 2016; Tsou & Chen, 2014). Thus, selecting materials that suit students’ varied abilities will not be easy because the teacher has to consider not only its degree of difficulty but also its potential to generate learners’ interest to learn. This fact supports evidence from Medrea and Rus (2012), which emphasizes the difficulty of selecting suitable materials to fit learners’ competence.

Learners’ mixed abilities, as pointed out by Participant 4, is due to the absence of placement tests to identify and group students based on their actual competence. One way to anticipate learners’ varied competence is by conducting a pretest to group learners based on their competence. However, conducting a pretest for ESP learners is not without a challenge. It will be time-consuming and costly because it deals with administering a large number of learners. It also demands a thorough preparation: what kind of assessment tool will be used, how to measure the results, and how many levels are needed to group the learners? Thus, it often becomes discouraging unless the institution is very determined to do so. It might be one reason why a pretest for ESP classes is not conducted in non-English departments. The other reason is that it is hard to find a measuring instrument for ESP classes. So, there are usually no leveled classes for ESP. However, if the pretest seems impossible to organize, a pre-course can be given to equipping learners with the necessary language skills. They will encounter fewer problems during the ESP course, and the teacher can anticipate their mixed abilities. Recognizing learners’ language proficiency before the ESP course is worthwhile for teachers, as they will be able to foreshadow the selected materials which are suitable for learners’ proficiency.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The practice of ESP in non-English departments of either private or state universities suffers from issues that remain to be unsolved. This study has brought some ‘chronic’ matters to the surface that long have not been adequately handled and solved. Some realities related to ESP practice, i.e., lack of knowledge on learners’ discipline, lack of teachers’ training, lack of proper needs analysis, large ESP classes, and learners’ varied language competence, indeed become a stumbling block for the advancement and growth of ESP practice in general, especially in higher education.

The issues found and discussed in this study should become a wake-up call to policymakers and stakeholders to reform ESP practices in many higher education settings. The disparity between the teaching of ESP in non-English departments and the teaching of other subjects has a caveat to reform policy and regulation, which is directed towards giving equal attention for all taught subjects in higher education, regardless of their weighing credits. Concurrent with this, Yu and Liu (2018) suggest that stakeholders should initiate reform at a university level since they can provide

funds and management support. The findings in this ESP study evoke realities that numerous issues call for attention from those who should step in to take action.

However, as this study involved a limited number of participants and universities in a province, this may not represent the general condition of ESP practice in a broader context, be it nationally or globally. Thus, a broader context of the study is highly suggested to gain more convincing evidence.

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