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## ON THE QUALITY AND RELEVANCE OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PRUPOSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Abstract:** *This paper is a follow up to a previous study focusing on some relevant issues faced by university teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and the USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara, Romania. It highlights the considerable role ESP and language communication play in the students’ professional training, in view of the changing global landscape. The rising focus on communication, peer feedback and other major themes will be analysed based on the preliminary qualitative results we reported earlier (Kamberi et al., 2019). By applying a qualitative exploratory approach, we investigate and further discuss the themes previously identified regarding teachers’ biases and beliefs, as well as challenges they face in providing high quality ESP courses correlated with the various fields students are majoring in at the tertiary level. It is suggested that teachers and university management take more responsibility regarding the organization and delivery of ESP courses in higher education in order to better equip professionals for the global market by looking at English as a genuine “lingua franca” across professional fields and as indispensable in virtually all areas of study.*

**Keywords:** *English for Specific Purposes; English language teaching; Tertiary education; Quality; Exploratory research.*

### 1. Introduction

Aiming to analyze the importance of ESP as one of the most highly relevant courses across professional areas and study programmes, the present research expands some initial results regarding the application of ESP at the tertiary level of language instruction (Kamberi et al., 2019). The implications of learning English have evolved tremendously in recent decades, given the waxing relevance of communication across areas of research or

professional fields and the focus on international cooperation. English is not only the *lingua franca* of the planet, but it has also become the “native language” of the so-called “digital natives” – a new and profoundly different generation of young people born in the digital age who communicate in English as speakers of “the digital language” (Prensky, 2001). The desire to become fully integrated in this digital generation has imparted a whole new dimension upon the need to be proficient in English, along with the instant

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“vulgarization” of the spoken language. The main challenge faced by higher education in this emerging context is to catch a rising tide of what could be seen, in analogy, as an “English vulgaris”, in order to impose quality standards, along with the requirements of professionalism we aim to inculcate in our students. Therefore, both the North Macedonian and the Romanian academic establishments are seeking to keep with such standards in training future professionals to be better equipped for the new working environments.

The high relevance of teaching and learning English is also enhanced by the widespread use of the Internet, the continuous technological development, as well as the globalization phenomenon generated by larger waves of human migration than ever before. As the European Union is expanding, Romania being a member state and North Macedonia a candidate, students in these countries are aspiring to make a better living by focusing on the acquisition of English language, irrespective of their undergraduate majors.

As a result of the afore mentioned developments, there is a growing interest in foreign languages, especially English and German, met by the educational goal of providing adequate communication tools for our undergraduate students. Higher education institutions take this responsibility for preparing students for the emerging globalized market, which, besides being more cooperative, is also more competitive from certain points of view. As we have argued in our preliminary study, irrespective of the students’ major, the most adapted measures to be taken in order to prepare more proficient graduates include foreign languages and intercultural communication literacy. Therefore, the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has a particularly significant role to play in the undergraduates’ future on the European common market and in our shared global environment.

For this reason, higher educational settings like the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and the USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara, Romania, have the potential to provide a range of opportunities for acquiring language skills across the core developmental areas of language teaching. This aim is carried out while also extending ESP learning access to students majoring in their respective fields and thus keeping in step with the globalizing tendencies we are currently witnessing. But what exactly does it imply to teach ESP and what are the challenges in teaching it – these are the major concerns this paper is addressing, including some suggestions on further developments.

A range of studies have been conducted throughout the past decades addressing the role of ESP in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by focusing on their respective contexts and trying to give suggestions on these developments and results. Benesch (2001), one of the most prominent researchers in our educational field, refers to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as “the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain”. This special domain is the area each particular learner is specializing in, which becomes the “specific purpose”. It is the major which dictates the focus of the respective ESP course and, correspondingly, the focus of the various groups of students is bound to change to large extents, depending on their particular needs.

The challenges posed by ESP have also generated a growing concern in the Asian academic context. Kaewpet (2011) has piloted a study in Thailand and set out to identify the learning needs of Thai civil engineering students. Interviews with fifteen stakeholders who observed the teaching and learning process helped identify the needs of the students by participating in individual interviews. The participants included civil engineering lecturers, former civil

engineering students and ESP teachers. The study revealed that understanding the learners' needs before preparing classes was an asset in providing better quality training. The findings suggest this is an effective way in which ESP curricula could be designed, with the option of providing ESP courses based on the specificities of the learners' background and knowledge of specialised content.

By the same token, Tinh (2015) reported findings in the Asian context, based on a questionnaire addressed to mechanical engineers, including interviews and observations. The aim was to examine real-world uses of English as required by mechanical engineers to function effectively in various workplaces. The study revealed that all the four main language skill sets – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – were relevant for mechanical engineers to work effectively. It is important to note that even though listening and speaking skills were more important, these skills were also perceived as the most insufficiently developed ones. The study revealed that “not only realisation of sociolinguistics in terms of language skills and kinds of English language use, but also that of sociology resulted in the communication interaction between mechanical engineers and their foreign bosses, managers, supervisors, experts, customers and suppliers” (Tinh, 2015:7). The study provided clear evidence and suggestions for mechanical engineering students to better prepare their type of language training so as to be in agreement with the requirements of their later jobs.

Another notable area of research is substantiated in the Middle Eastern context. For instance, Hutchinson & Waters (1987) considered the issue of ESP from the standpoint of the need to conduct business with the Middle East. English becomes, once again, a vital means of communication and doing business, as suggested by Benesch (2001). English for Specific Purposes appears to be taking on a more important

role in higher education settings in the future and its status within the academia may further be raised by engaging with issues of struggle in classrooms and institutions (Benesch, 2001). Focusing on such issues is among the main concerns of this paper, as well as addressing the challenges faced by teachers, against the background of the enhanced role of ESP in academic institutions. The study also compares the two aforementioned universities, including some of the issues teachers here are confronted with and finally draws some comparative conclusions in terms of quality.

Furthermore, the meaning of ESP has been expanded in recent years into a range of sub-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), English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP) and so on (Paltridge & Starfi, 2013). This aspect indicates that the general umbrella of ESP currently includes more than merely specific terminology in a given domain. Each of the domains mentioned above has been increasingly specified, adding recent developments which are constantly expanding domains ever further. It remains to be seen as to the extent these expanding domains are present in the particular contexts of study, which are to be constantly updated, this being among the major challenges faced by teachers of ESP.

Bhatia et. al. (2012) regard the task of ESP teaching in the new century as “a daunting enterprise” to be conducted by connected professional communities rather than in isolated settings. They argue for a necessary shift in teaching models and practices which would fill the gap between the classroom and future professions. This could be achieved by focusing on professional expertise, on the integration of discursive competences, on disciplinary knowledge and professional training. Authors further suggest enacting a

large-scale academic shift by positioning ESP at the center of the curriculum across areas of study (Bhatia et al., 2012). Moreover, focusing on developing systemic literacy and ESP bilingualism would hopefully amount to an evolved understanding of ESP in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Aims and methods

This study examines results presented in the previous contributions focusing on teacher perceptions of ESP teaching, drawing on the investigation we conducted in a joint comparative effort (Kamberi et al., 2019). The discussion emphasizes the challenges faced by university teachers in relation to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to tertiary level foreign language learners, its role and growing influence on the professional development of undergraduates as professionals of their respective areas of expertise. The investigation reported in this paper especially looks at some challenges and perceptions of ESP teachers regarding these aspects, as well as their expectations for future improvement.

### 2.2. Settings and Participants

The paper provides follow up on the initial results of the study regarding the application of ESP in tertiary level language instruction at the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and USAMVB “Regele Mihai I al Romaniei” from Timisoara, Romania.

Here, we are aiming to compare preliminary results within contexts around the globe and suggest lines of ESP implementation and improvement in the two considered contexts. The initial study involved ten teacher participants: seven from the UT and three from USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania”, who were asked to express their perceptions on teaching ESP with respect to some of the problems they expressed

throughout their responses to the applied questionnaires. The second stage of the study consisted of the semi-structured interviews, following the quantitative section of the research, in which they were invited to discuss in more detail their specific teaching experiences.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The preliminary results were collected from a group of ten university teachers, who responded to an online questionnaire reflecting on their challenges in teaching ESP. To back up the quantitative questionnaire results, only a small number of participants (two) volunteered to discuss their teaching experiences in the second, confirmatory stage of the research. The results of their responses on the questionnaire and interviews formed the basis for the tentative conclusions derived from the study. The mixed-type, open-ended questionnaire items sought to allow free discussion of the participants’ perceptions of their teaching experience.

The instrument which contained twelve questions was sent to teachers via Google Docs. It was developed taking into consideration, according to Dörnyei (2009:102) that questionnaires may furnish three types of data concerning the respondents. Thus they may consist in several corresponding categories of questions: factual questions, behavioral questions, and attitudinal questions. Moreover, questionnaire items elicit information in a non-evaluative way, based on the respondents’ beliefs and experiences. (Dörnyei, 2009:107).

The questions invited respondents to express their perceptions on their autonomy in selecting course material, teaching facilities, equipment, etc. Questionnaires were followed by semi-structured interviews seeking to determine teacher attitudes to their teaching experience, the relative values of the two different learning experiences and

the perceived effectiveness of each method in meeting the learners' needs.

Data analysis consisted of a combined method of data collection. Quantitative data derived from the analysis of the questionnaire by applying frequency statistics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) helped establish a basis for the qualitative study of the semi-structured interviews. Content analytical procedures (Silverman, 2005) were then applied to the semi-structured interviews to confirm the frequency statistics previously established.

The preliminary results from the quantitative section of the study suggested that there are some concerns with regard to ESP teaching at tertiary level. The comparative exploratory study indicated some differences, as well as similarities between the two study groups: Romanian and North Macedonian respondents. These will be elaborated in detail below.

Respondents from both universities are experienced teachers, the majority having been trained in teaching ESP in various departments of the involved universities: Business, Law, Engineering, Sociology, Psycho-pedagogy, Agriculture, Horticulture, Tourism and Life Sciences (Biology, *etc.*), among others.

When teachers were asked to reflect back on the difference between teaching ESP and General English, participants from Romania reported that "Adults interested in General English are less "high-maintenance", less demanding and not as autonomous as students interested in ESP". On the other hand, participants from the UT assessed that "students are more interested in general English. ESP students do not pay enough attention to English". Both groups of respondents disapprove of their students' decreased interest in ESP and the relatively lower value they attach to this highly relevant subject. This is an indication to urge curricula designers to take immediate action in finding ways to convince students of the contrary.

Mixed responses were received on material and course design between the two parties. The majority of UT respondents reported using general English language teaching books, such as *English Files*, with only two respondents reporting that they employ ESP books for business and one teacher combining ELT books with engineering material. On the contrary, Romanian teachers unanimously reported that they use ESP text books, such as *Business Benchmark* or others designed and created by themselves: *English for Agricultural Engineers* (Dragoescu & Coroama, 2016), *English for Genetic Engineers* (Rata & Dragoescu, 2009), *English for Farm Managers* (Rata et al., 2011), *etc.*

Nonetheless, this could be an isolated case, considering the small sample of participants in the study, as responses came only from a small number of teachers from Romania. If more teachers from various academic settings had responded to the questionnaire, results might differ, which may further be developed in future research. As reported in our preliminary study, some UT teachers claimed that the books were chosen based on the students' needs, while others admitted that the books were chosen by the institution. Romanian teachers, on the other hand, reported that their books were chosen based on year-long needs analyses in working groups conducted with peers within their respective departments. One strategy for applying needs analyses is using student journals in the form of reflections as suggested by Kamberi (2010), which also have the potential to contribute to autonomous learning (Kamberi, 2013). Another strategy for promoting autonomous learning is encouraging the use of Blogs (Kamberi, 2015).

Given the disparity between teachers from both universities with regard to the selection process of textbooks, it appears that Romanian teachers are more autonomous in their choices and in designing their teaching materials; as a result, their students have

more autonomy and flexibility in language learning, which is a positive aspect. However, further research with larger groups would be helpful to investigate how what is really happening in the classes might affect language learning.

Participants gave similar answers regarding extra materials employed besides textbooks to support the teaching process. Both groups reported using internet resources, as well as realia, posters, pictures, grammar exercises to supplement the books, especially when these are above or under the level of a particular group of students. Romanian teachers also specified some of the Internet resources they prefer to use (e.g. Ted-X lectures on specific topics), as well as printed materials from recent publications extracted from relevant scientific journals like *Nature*. These are redesigned according to English learning methods (e.g. gap filling or word formation exercises on the text), followed by conversational activities on the videos or documentary fragments presenting students with the latest scientific information in the form of listening comprehension (Kamberi, et al., 2019).

The specific terminology of ESP was considered the most difficult part of ESP learning and language acquisition by both parties in the comparative investigation. Terminology, as well as grammar items when combined with vocabulary in context, were reported to represent the main barrier in ESP learning. While some respondents also added the low level of English speaking skills, others mentioned the lack of communication skills in general.

The item of the questionnaire requiring teachers to list the strategies they use to make learning easier for students was given similar responses by both groups. For example, Romanian teachers suggested a wide range of strategies, such as group work, case studies and discussions including vocabulary on given topics, drawing on specific content areas, games and feedback on their difficulties and possible coping

strategies. Teachers of the UT also mentioned similar activities, listing visualization and repetition, which reinforce general English and then combine these with ESP teaching materials. This shows that both groups of teachers use similar strategies to enhance learning, with Romanian teachers displaying a stronger collaborative tendency with peers. This is an important aspect highlighted by the compared analysis, as peer feedback and teamwork are highly relevant assets in teacher development.

Assessment and evaluation, some of the most important aspects in verifying the success of both the learning and the teaching processes, were targeted in question ten. Both universities use similar grading criteria, especially end-of-term examinations required by the institutions, among others, and adding a few extra components such as mid-term exams, presentations, attendance, and participation in small group projects. Only one Romanian teacher reported that “continuous assessment represents 75% of the final grade”. Universities have their specific sets of criteria for evaluation which teachers have to follow and there is only a certain degree of freedom in this respect.

Another important aspect discussed in the study refers to the learning outcomes. Teachers were asked to suggest any strategies that would improve the ESP teaching experience. One response from a UT teacher and supported by others stated: “Teachers who teach ESP need to continuously attend seminars on the specific English courses to be updated with the process and innovations as well”. Another one was, “More resources”. Also, one Romanian teacher stated: “We try to contact persons who already work in a specific field and invite them to courses, so that students get in touch with the requirements of the job market”. Another participant suggested that “It would be easier to establish a database with people who are willing to come and spend some time with students at least once every two months”. Other desirable skills

participants mentioned were: “Inspiration, creativity, enthusiasm”. In agreement with UT staff, one Romanian respondent mentioned the need for “A specific software which I would use to integrate all skills and to structure information”, as well as more material for experiential learning.

Despite the general agreement on the institutional support, it appears that teachers from the USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” are more self-critical by including collaboration, enthusiasm and creativity as important components of successful teaching. This is also corroborated with the responses to the final question of the survey in which UT teachers did not have anything to add, while teachers from Romania added collaboration on a larger international scale as a prerequisite for (self)-development.

In summary, despite the small number of participants involved in this study and the minor differences in their responses, there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that members of both institutions are attuned with similar issues pertaining to their specific field of teaching – English for Specific Purposes. The most significant differences between the two study groups appear to revolve around teacher and learner autonomy and self-esteem, which are probably in relation to one another.

Secondly, the qualitative phase of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2005; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) which enabled teachers to discuss their ESP teaching experiences in a free way. This subsequent part of the study confirmed the previously discussed results, the most distressing of which were the lack of technological support and the lack of motivation for professional language among students. Romanian colleagues also raised the issue of cooperation and collaboration with peers, which we have already started to accommodate by carrying out this joint research. Nevertheless, with such a small stage two sample of teacher respondents, it is

difficult to reflect on the results at this stage of the study.

#### 4. Conclusion

Recognizing the small sample participating in the study, it is a substantial barrier to meaningful quantitative interpretation of the data from the study at this point. While data analysis from the quantitative and qualitative sections of the study suggests that there may be some significant differences in teacher perceptions of both groups, it appears likely that EU countries are better equipped and supported with better training conditions by their institutions. Romanian teachers, though participating in a smaller number as compared to those from North Macedonia, tend to be more autonomy oriented and therefore, focusing on autonomous learning and teaching, free collaboration and international cooperation. Seemingly, UT teachers are still clinging to more traditional aspects, probably correlated to student lack of motivation and general EFL skills. The explanations for these results could be further corroborated with the non-EU position and visa requirement until as late as 2012. Citizens from North Macedonia (FYROM at the time), were denied free access to EU countries and the mandatory visa was difficult to obtain. In consequence, teachers from the FYROM had little or no chance to participate in international conferences or seminars, which was a retrograde aspect making peer collaboration and cooperation with colleagues from EU countries impossible.

As identified in the qualitative section of the study, the lack of teacher training and motivation across the UT sample, as well as lack of specific training for teachers of ESP have probably contributed substantially to these results. Content analysis of interviews conducted in stage 2 of the study indicates that teacher attitudes and expectations across both groups display some differences, but more similarities. One common issue raised

by both target groups is the lack of student interest and their diminished perception of the relevance and role of ESP, considered an optional and thus negligible subject in the curriculum. It may be suggested that both groups of participants develop activities as suggested by Dragoescu Urlica et al. (2019). A final relevant suggestion would be stronger collaboration on an international level (Dragoescu Urlica et al., 2018). This would lead to higher effectiveness in advancing a desired interdisciplinary approach to education, which would not be limited to the disciplines of ESP.

Taking into consideration the results of our preliminary study, as well as the suggestions derived from the literature review, we may highlight the need of modulating ESP training practices so as to bring the classroom more in line with the future professional life of the students.

Also, following the example of Romanian

peers participating in our study sample, the application of needs analyses in target focus groups might enable ESP teachers to adjust their approach to particular cases and thus better meet the students' needs.

Future research we plan to undertake in collaboration will address the potential for quasi-experimental and mixed methodological research designs conducted over an extended period of time and with a larger sample, including students, to confirm factors identified as potentially influencing the quality of ESP teaching and learning. Applying aspects identified as pivotal – quality, specificity, speciality, and purpose, will hopefully contribute to improved perceptions of ESP and to a new approach to education, relevant not only to teachers, students and universities but to ministries of education and other stakeholders as well.

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