

Lulzime Kamberi¹
Alina-Andreea
Dragoescu Urlica
Makfirete Ameti

ESP TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

***Abstract:**The present study focuses on teachers' perceptions regarding the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Seeking to assess qualitative aspects and the value of ESP as a subject of major relevance, the paper reports initial results from a study on the application of ESP in tertiary level language instruction at the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and USAMVB "King Michael I of Romania" in Timisoara, Romania. Applying content analysis to identify themes, biases and meaning, the research investigated teachers' perceptions on the challenges and issues of ESP teaching in English language courses.*

***Keywords:**English for Specific Purposes, language learning, higher education, language teaching, teacher perceptions, tertiary education*

1. Introduction

The widespread use of the internet and the extension of the EU are some of the major factors which have spurred the study and the relevance of English in the South-East of Europe and the wider region more extensively. What has also led to the increasing relevance of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the increasing technological development along with globalization, which has engendered larger and larger waves of migration. 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 and focus on the acquisition of English language during their undergraduate studies. Therefore, we are witnessing a growing interest in foreign languages, especially English, while tertiary education is continuously striving to provide adequate communication tools for undergraduates. Higher education institutions are responsible for preparing students in the

best possible way for the new globalized market. 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.

In this context, higher educational settings, including the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and 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, while also extending ESP learning access to students majoring in their respective fields and thus keeping up with the globalized world. 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.

¹ Corresponding author: Lulzime Kamberi
Email: l.kamberi12@gmail.com

Benesch (2012:14) states that, “English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to 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 particular domain is the area each particular learner is specializing in, which becomes the “specific purpose”. What the focus will be depends on their major, therefore, the focus of the various groups of students changes, depending upon these highly particular needs.

In a study conducted in Thailand, Kaewpet (2011) sets 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 of the course and ESP teachers. The study revealed that understanding the learners’ needs before preparing classes was an asset taking classes. The findings suggest this as an effective way in which ESP lessons could be prepared, with the option of designing an ESP course based on learners’ background knowledge of specialised content. Eighty options for the Thai context were offered by the participants, (p.106).

Hutchinson & Waters for example, (1987), have analyzed ESP as the need for business with the Middle East as a means for communication and doing business, cited in Benesch (2001). She continues by arguing on the future role of ESP in academic settings “...suggesting that ESP can carry out its stated aims more fully and raise its status within academy by engaging with issues of power and struggle that arise in classrooms and institutions” (p. x). This is the main aim of this paper, focusing on issues and the role of ESP in higher education institutions and the teachers’ struggle in teaching it. It also compares the two aforementioned universities and the

issues teachers deal with by finally making a comparison between the same.

A more up-to-date offer for ESP is provided by Paltridge & Starfi (2013), despite initially meaning “particular domain” stated previously by Benesch, they insist that the meaning of ESP has changed nowadays by expanding into more subareas like, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP) (ibid.). So, nowadays, as stated above, it includes more than just specific in a one field or domain. Each of these domains mentioned earlier has now been specified based on one domain. How much these domains are present in the contexts of the study, remains an enquiry.

The present study reported in this paper seeks to analyze teacher perceptions and expectations of teaching ESP at the University of Tetovo and at the University of USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara. The study involved 10 teachers; seven from the UT and three from USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania”. Teachers were asked to express their perceptions on teaching ESP and the while focusing on their challenges. Following an online questionnaire, they were invited to discuss their teaching experiences in a second, confirmatory stage of the study.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research aim

In an effort to improve teaching ESP at the two aforementioned Universities this study aims to analyze teacher perceptions with regard to ESP teaching. It focuses on needs analyzes, use of material and teaching strategies used in these courses.

2.2. Research questions

Based on the professional teaching interest and informed by the emerging findings reported in the brief literature review above, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

1. What are teachers' attitudes towards ESP teaching at the University of Tetovo?
2. What are teachers' attitudes towards ESP teaching at the King Michael I of Romania University?
3. What are the main challenges in teaching ESP?

2.3 The study

The study reported in this paper was undertaken with ten (n=10) university teachers in the academic year 2018/2019. Teachers responded to an online questionnaire reflecting on their experiences in teaching ESP. Following the questionnaire,

Two volunteer teachers were invited to discuss their teaching experiences in a second, confirmatory stage of the study.

The results of their responses on the questionnaire and interview form a basis for the tentative conclusions derived from this study.

2.4 Study participants

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 10 subjects who participated in this study volunteered from the 16 teachers who responded. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 45. Females constituted 100% of the sample group (n=10) because, unfortunately none of the male colleagues responded to the questionnaire or interview.

2.5 Instrumentation

Seeking to analyze teacher perception on teaching ESP to tertiary level foreign language learners, an open ended

questionnaire containing twelve questions was sent to teachers via Google Docs. Dörnyei (2009:102) advocates that questionnaires "yield three types of data about respondents" and divides them into factual questions, behavioral questions and attitudinal questions; items in the questionnaires elicit information in a non-evaluative way, based on respondents' beliefs and experiences. The questionnaire contained a mixed type of questions but merely specific open questions (ibid.:107). They required respondents to express their perceptions on the autonomy in selecting course material, teaching facilities, equipment, *etc.* Fifty percent of the subjects responded to the questionnaire at the UT and all of them were female. 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 learning needs.

2.6 Data collection and analysis

An initial quantitative analysis of the questionnaire, applying frequency statistics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003), established a basis for the qualitative data of the semi-structured interviews with two teachers. Content analytical procedures (Silverman, 2005) were then applied to semi-structured interviews to confirm the frequency statistics previously established.

3. Results

Initial results from the quantitative section of this study suggest that there are some concerns with regard to ESP teaching at tertiary level. The first three questions of the questionnaire were factual question related to the participants' personal data. The first one required respondents to state their gender. The second question referred to the ESP teaching experience, which ranged

between three to ten years, which indicates that the majority of the participants are experienced in teaching English for Specific Purposes in various departments of the involved universities, among others Business, Law, Engineering, Sociology, Psycho-pedagogy, Agriculture, Horticulture, Tourism and Life Sciences (Biology, *etc.*).

One of the most controversial questions appears to be one asking teachers to reflect back on the difference between teaching ESP and General English. On the one side, there are teachers from Romania reporting that “Adults interested in General English are less “high-maintenance”, less demanding and not as autonomous as students interested in ESP”, while on the other side teachers from the UT believed that “students are more interested in general English. ESP students do not pay enough attention to English”.

Two questions related to material and course design received varied responses which differed between the two parties. UT majority 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 only combining ELT books with engineering ones. On the contrary, all teachers from Romania reported that they used ESP specific 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), and *English for Farm Managers* (Rata, Groszler, Dragoescu & al., 2011).

Justifying a contrary stance, some UT teachers claimed that the books were chosen based on student needs, while others admitted that the books were chosen by the institution. Romanian teachers, on the other hand, unanimously reported that their books were chosen based on year-long needs analyses in working groups in their respective departments. Given the disparity

between teachers from both universities in text choice, reporting on this question, it appears that Romanian teachers are more autonomous in their teaching; as a result, their students have more autonomy in language learning. However, it seems clear that further research with larger groups is necessary to substantiate what is really happening in the classes and how it is affecting language learning development.

One question to which both groups of respondents gave similar answers addressed the issue of extra materials used as support for the teaching process. Both groups reported using internet resources, as well as posters, pictures, grammar exercises to supplement the books. Nevertheless, Romanian teachers were more specific in their responses, by stating specifically which internet resources they use, among others, iPods, videos, or printed materials, handouts with recent publications from relevant scientific journals like *Nature*, articles from *National Geographic*, as well as “fill in blanks” and conversational activities, both following video presentations, Ted-X or documentary extracts presenting students with the latest scientific information in the form of listening comprehension.

When asked about the most difficult part for students to acquire, teachers from both universities consistently listed the specific terminology in ESP as number one, and grammar items when combined with vocabulary in context. While some added low level of English skills, others believed lack of sufficient mother tongue knowledge contributed to this deficiency.

What strategies do you use to make it easier for students to acquire these difficult parts? Romanian teacher responses suggested a wide range of strategies involving: group work, case studies to discuss, vocabulary on a certain topic, short presentations, connections to content areas, collaborating with the other teachers, games and reflexive moments regarding their difficulties, coping strategies, feedback. Teachers of the UT

listed similar activities by listing visualization, through verbally expressing their ideas, repetition, through verbally expressing their ideas, reinforce general English and then combine with ESP teaching materials. This shows that both groups of teachers use similar strategies to enhance learning, except that Romanian teachers have a stronger collaboration with their peers. This is an important aspect the study has brought to light; peer feedback and teamwork are strong assets in teacher development.

Question ten referred to assessment and evaluation of ESP courses. It appears that both universities use similar grading criteria. Among others, mid-term exams that are required by the institution and adding a few components supporting them, these include, presentations, attendance, participation and small group projects. Only one Romanian teacher reported that "Continuous assessment represents 75% of the final grade". It appears that universities have their set criteria for evaluation which all teachers have to follow.

Another important question included in the study is the one related to learning outcomes. It requires teachers to suggest any strategies that would improve ESP teaching. One response from a UT teacher and supported by many 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: "I 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". While another even suggested, "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". While a third one stated "Inspiration, creativity, enthusiasm", were desirable skills. Agreeing with her UT teacher, 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 supported in the final extra question of the survey in which UT teachers had nothing to add, while teachers from Romania added collaboration on a larger international scale as a requisite for success.

In summary, despite the small numbers involved in this current study, and the minor differences in their responses, there appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that teachers, of both institutions, an EU and a non-EU country are attuned with similar issues related to teaching English for Specific Purposes. These relate to lack of technological support, lack of student interest or motivation, lack of language skills (Native language and foreign language), assessment and use of supporting material. The most significant differences between the two study groups appear to be teacher and learner autonomy and self-esteem.

As previously stated, the second, qualitative, phase of this study involved semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2005). Following the stage 1 online questionnaire, respondent teachers of both universities were invited to discuss their ESP teaching experiences in a second, confirmatory discussion. Two of the 10 teachers agreed to take part in stage 2 interviews.

The responses of teachers were similar to those identified in the questionnaire. For example, they confirmed that there was lack of technological support, in their opinions; the most important issue was student lack of motivation at the UT which might be implied for teachers as well. Contrary to their Romanian colleagues, they never raised the

issue of cooperation and collaboration with peers. Nevertheless, with such a small stage 2 cohort of teacher respondents, it is difficult to suggest meaningful results at this stage of the study.

4. Conclusion

Sample size is recognized as a substantial barrier to meaningful quantitative interpretation of the data from this study to this point. While analysis suggests that there may be some significant differences in teacher perceptions of both groups, it appears likely that EU countries are more equipped and supported with training by their institutions. They seemed to be more autonomy oriented therefore, focus on autonomous learning and teaching, collaboration and cultural components, like international collaboration, UT teachers are still clinging to more traditional issues, like student lack of motivation, and English language skills. In consequence, it is suggested that UT teachers might benefit from applying needs analyses with their students (Ellis and Barkhuisen, 2005) with the aim of identifying the importance of their needs and expectations.

As identified, in the qualitative section of the study, lacks of technological support, teacher training and motivation, across the UT sample, as well as lack of training for teachers in teaching ESP have probably contributed substantially to these results. Content analysis of stage 2 interviews suggests that teacher attitudes and expectations of teaching ESP in both groups have some differences but many similarities. It is suggested that teachers from the UT

improve teaching ESP by following their Romanian peers and applying needs analyses to meet student expectations. In this way, on one side students would get what they are seeking; and on the other teachers would improve their teaching by adjusting it to their learners' needs and expectations.

Another, suggestion for UT teachers would be to bolster stronger collaboration locally as well as internationally (Dragoescu Urlica et al., 2018). This would lead to higher effectiveness in ESP areas and to the creation of more coherent "value-added courses" (ibid.:3). One suggestion to achieve this would staff mobility. The European Union (EU) provides facilities and various opportunities for teachers to move between EU and non EU countries with a variety of programs. Teachers from both universities, but not only, are encouraged to apply for international mobilities. This way "optimal communication" (Dragoescu Urlica et al., 2019:4) is likely to take place in effect.

In conclusion, before substantial expenditure is made to issues related to ESP teaching, future research in this area needs to 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 potentially affecting ESP teaching and learning. The growing body of research available internationally supports aspects identified in this paper and seems likely to shed light on future pedagogical approaches.

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Lulzime Kamberi

University of Tetovo,
Tetovo,
North Macedonia,
l.kamberi12@gmail.com

Alina-Andreea

Dragoescu Urlica

USAMVB "King Michael
I of Romania",
Timisoara,
Romania
andreadragoescu@yahoo.com

Makfirete Ameti

University of Tetovo,
Tetovo,
North Macedonia,
