

# ESP Teaching: Reversal of Roles between ELT Teachers and Subject Specialists

Osama Khalifa Mohammed

**Abstract**—This paper attempts to shed some lights on one of the issues that continue to be debated among ELT teachers and subject matter specialists as to who should take the responsibility of teaching ESP. ELT teachers say that ESP teaching is just an approach to English language teaching, and therefore, it should not be seen as an independent field of study. On the contrary, subject specialists claim that ESP teaching is about teaching a large corpus of specialized texts. Moreover, they think that ESP students need to know the actual language that is used by the specialists. In order to deal with this controversial issue, this paper tries to investigate some questions, such as, is the content of ESP highly specialized and thus the ELT teacher may not be able to deal with it? Is it true that the linguistic knowledge is of no or less importance in ESP teaching and therefore, the subject specialist is more qualified to teach ESP course? “ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning”. To what extent this claim made by ELT teachers is true? Should there be any sort of collaboration between the subject matter specialists and the ELT specialists to make the teaching of ESP courses more effective? The author will try to tackle these questions in some detail in this paper.

**Index Terms**—ELT teacher, ESP, subject specialist.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ESP teaching produces many problems such as problems for learners, problems for teachers, problems of methodology and materials, and problems of assessment and testing. All these problems can be solved; however, they require better teachers and better training. In order to make a success of ESP teaching, the teachers have to view ESP teaching as a normal, acceptable challenge. Moreover, they need to understand as fully as possible the nature of the ESP teaching, they have to be able to observe and organize the learner's progress and to diagnose his problems. In addition, they have to be familiar with the widest possible range of alternative teaching techniques, they have to be aware of the learning requirements and the learner's needs. Above all, they have to possess an informed optimism and to know that success is possible; ESP teacher need to exercise professionalism based on training and experience.

Undoubtedly, the question “Who is the ESP teacher? Or who is more qualified to teach ESP?” is considered a highly controversial issue among ELT teachers and subject specialists. In this regard, some people claim that ELT

teachers do not have the essential knowledge of the subject matter, and therefore, they may not be able to express the ideas that contribute to understanding the intended learning outcomes. This argument may be supported by the fact that ESP teaching is basically built on the assessment of purposes and the functions for which English is required. In addition, ESP teaching focuses more on language in context rather than on teaching the aspects of language (i. e., grammar, vocabulary, sound system, etc.). In this regard, Dudley Evans and St. John (1998: 1) point out that the purpose of ESP course should satisfy the needs-related nature of teaching and to sort out the specific nature of the texts that learners require knowledge of. The opinion of Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 53) is that “all courses are grounded on a perceived need of some sort” in other words, it is important to understand what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation.

It could be argued that one of the major goals of ESP teaching is to develop reading skills for specialised texts and specialist vocabulary. Based on this argument, the ELT teacher may be unqualified for the job of EAP teaching. However, there is another group which strongly believes that ESP teaching is inseparable from ELT teacher's career. Therefore, ESP teaching is considered part of their teaching responsibilities and they should take care of it.

To push this discussion forward, it is worth considering the fact that the main function of ESP is to develop procedures appropriate for learners whose main purpose is learning English for a purpose as opposed to just learning the language system. In my view, there should be a sort of agreement and collaboration between the ELT teachers and the subject specialist at different levels of ESP teaching ranging from syllabus design, to textbook evaluation, and so on.

## II. NATURE OF ESP TEACHING

To give a definite answer to the question raised in this paper, (*Who is the ESP teacher?*) First, it is important to understand the nature of ESP. The of ESP can be traced back to the end of the Second World War in 1945 when the position of English language changed completely which was to play a more practical role in the scientific and economic development occurring all over the world. This new situation created a new attitude towards learning English to cope with the currencies of technology and commerce. It could be said that since the late 1980s, ESP has established itself not only as an important and distinctive branch of ELT, but has also incorporated most of the work on discourse and genre analysis, as well as the results of corpus linguistics. It could be said that ESP teaching has developed through five

different stages. These can briefly be summarised as follows:

#### *A. Register Analysis*

This was the first phase in ESP teaching, and it emerged between 1960s and early 1970s. It was mainly connected with the work of some linguists like Peter Strevens (1964) and Jack Ewer (1969). In this phase, it was assumed that ESP constituted a specific register different from that of general English. The aim of this approach was to identify these grammatical and lexical features of these registers. It could be said that the aim behind this approach was to make the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs, and to produce a syllabus which gave high priority to the language forms that the students would meet in their science studies and vice-versa would give low priority to forms they would not meet. This approach showed that there is a little linguistic justification for having highly specialized texts and in addition there is no clear relationship between sentence grammar and specialization of knowledge.

#### *B. Discourse Analysis*

In this stage, the main assumption was that the difficulties which the students encounter arise not so much from a detective knowledge of the system of English, but from unfamiliarity with English use. For that reason, the main concern of an ESP course was to identify the organizational patterns in texts and to specify the linguistic means by which these patterns would then form the syllabus of the ESP course. The pioneer of this school was Henry Widdowson, (1974).

#### *C. Target Situation Analysis*

The aim of this movement was to take the student's existing knowledge and set it on a scientific basis, by establishing procedures for relating language analysis more closely to learners' actual needs. This theory assumed that the purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation, that is, the situation in which the learners will use the language they are learning, then the process of the ESP course design should follow by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out a through a analysis of the linguistic features of that situation. John Munby (1978), made a significant and an outstanding contribution to develop this theory in his famous book *Communicative Syllabus Design*.

#### *D. Skills-Centered Approach*

This approach aimed at considering the thinking process that underlie language use. The fundamental concept of this assumption is that underlying all language use there are common reasoning and interpreting processes, which regardless of the surface forms, enable us to extract meaning from discourse. Therefore, the main concern should be on the underlying interpretive strategies, which enable the learner to cope with the surface forms.

#### *E. A Learning-Centered Approach*

Briefly, this approach goes up against all of the phases discussed above, that they all based on descriptions of language use but the main concern in an ESP course should be the language learning and not the language use.

All in all, ESP teaching should be seen not as any

particular language product but as an approach to ELT which governed by specific reason for learning. In this regard, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) theorize that ESP teaching has generally been seen as a separate activity within ELT, partly because it has developed its own methodology, and partly because it rests on disciplines other than applied linguistics, particularly second language teaching. This openness to the insights of other disciplines, however, should not lead us to forget that ESP is an essential component of ELT, retaining its emphasis on practical outcomes stemming from needs analysis, genre analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively. In this regard, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that needs analysis is considered the most characteristic feature of ESP course. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of two types of analysis: the analysis of target situation needs and the analysis of learning needs. The former, is concerned with the language use and the later involves the language learning theory or the way people learn the language. As a matter of fact, ESP can simply be seen as an 'approach' to language teaching. One way to characterize ESP from general English is the concept of register analysis which makes the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs. It can be argued that the ultimate aim of this process is to produce a syllabus with high priority to meet the learners' academic and professional needs.

### III. CONTROVERSY OVER ESP TEACHING

Having considered the nature of ESP in the previous section, three different views as to who possesses the qualification to teach ESP, would be introduced in this part of the paper.

First, there is a traditional viewpoint in language learning saying that studies of languages are usually classified as humanities. For that reason, some people argue that English language teachers often lack of science knowledge and experience, and therefore, they are not qualified to deal with science subjects. Moreover, the subject specialist, with an adequate mastery on English teaching, is more competent than ELT teacher to teach ESP course. This view assumes that the subject specialist is much more familiar with the technical terms and the subject matter of the students' field of specializations. According to Coffey (1984), "authenticity is the main idea behind ESP exercise typology and is a skills-based approach to materials development and design in ESP courses". Moreover, he argues that materials developers should take the skills priorities of students into account to create appropriate ESP teaching materials. In other words, the most important aim of ESP teaching is to help students understand the specialized texts of their ESP textbooks, and since there are many technical terms, notions and topics in these texts, they should be taught by the teachers of the same specialty and not by ELT teachers who are not sufficiently familiar with those terms and topics. Furthermore, this group argues that the ELT teacher cannot turn to linguistics in the hope of finding practical solutions to the problem that they will meet when teaching ESP course. Some linguists, for example, Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989: 1) assert that 'contextualising ESP class is not enough and that the basis of ESP teaching should be the

authentic texts that the students have to handle'. In short, this view can be summarized in three points: first, language has to be taught and learned for functional or communicative purpose, and not for a general education purpose. Second, the materials have to be authentic and based on the needs of the learners. Third, the materials have to be designed into syllabuses that would help the learners develop the communicative competence in the shortest time possible.

The second view, in this discussion says that in all ESP courses, it is the language that must be taught and not the subject matter, and since language teaching is a kind of science and has its own specific knowledge and principles such as teaching methodology, language testing phonology, sentence and vocabulary structure, grammar, etc., therefore, every ELT teacher must be adequately aware of these basic principles. Moreover, they claim that ESP teaching should be seen as a whole teaching/learning process. It could be argued that just being fluent in English is not the only requirement to be a competent ESP practitioner. Moreover, this group thinks that the subject specialists even with good mastery on English, as they are unaware of these fundamental principles of language teaching, often fail to teach the language well. Their job tends to be merely translation of the specialised technical terms and texts. Further point to consider here is that teaching ESP to undergraduates specialising in different fields such as medicine, Engineering and business should go beyond the teaching of just a number of technical terms and notions. ESP teachers should concentrate on improving the students' linguistic competence (sound, semantics, and syntax), and undoubtedly, the study of these components fall within the scope of ELT teachers' tasks and not the subject specialists'. It is thought by some theorists, for example, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that the most important aspects of communication in academic contexts are common to all disciplines and that ESP teaching should not be concerned with teaching 'specialised varieties' of English but with the common feature. In fact, there is a strong belief among ELT teachers that any ESP teacher is basically trained first as general English teacher, yet they feel that they sometimes need to teach specialised English in different fields in a totally different way. Although the ELT teacher is qualified to be an ESP practitioner, yet care should be taken and he should admit that he faces the biggest challenge of his career. Definitely, the ELT teacher is not required to become a scientist in his work. Rather he is required to extend the range of his professional activities into a new kind of Language Teaching. In addition, there is a gap between the learner's knowledge of the special subject and the teacher's ignorance of it. To overcome this difficulty, the ELT teacher is advised to pretend he understands the subject he teaches.

From the author's point of view, I strongly believe that ESP teaching involves a close liaison between the subject specialists and the ELT teachers. It is assumed that the ELT teacher can only be capable to deal with ESP effectively if he or she has the active co-operation of subject teachers. Moreover, the ESP teacher may also have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience, and he needs to understand the

subject matter of ESP materials. In other words, the job of ESP teaching should be carried out collaboratively by the ELT teachers and the Subject specialists. In this regard, Dudley Evan and St John (1998) assert that this kind of teamwork can be categorized into three levels: co-operation, collaboration and team teaching. Co-operation here refers to gathering of information from the subject department about the content of the course, the tasks required of students, the expectations of that respective department and its related discourse community about the nature of communication in the subject. As for collaboration, it involves the mutual working of the ELT teacher and the subject specialist. That is to say, they work jointly outside the classroom to devise specific activities and tasks in ESP class that run concurrently with the subject specialist to help the students to cope with the course. As far as the team-teaching is concerned, the ELT teacher and the subject specialist act simultaneously in the same classroom. It is worth mentioning that, the team-teaching approach can be especially advantageous in teaching the productive skills (listening and speaking) where the role of the ELT teacher is to prepare the material for the session in co-operation with the subject specialist and to run the session, while the role of the subject specialist revolves around monitoring and giving advice to clarify points about the core of the subject and to evaluate the students' responses and contributions in the discussion. Furthermore, the subject specialist should also be consulted in constructing the examination questions. According to Flowerdew, J. & M. Peacock (Eds.) (2001), "the role of the language teacher is that of the intermediary seeking to interpret on behalf of the students what the subject teacher meant in his or she lecture or in an examination question".

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up this discussion, the paper reviews three different viewpoints as to who is more qualified to take the job of ESP teaching. These three views have been discussed in some detail in an attempt to contribute to the long-debated issue among those who are involved in ESP teaching. The paper also tries to underline that an ESP course is relevant to the student's subject of specialization and therefore it should meet the actual needs of the students. The writer of this paper assumes that the ELT teacher is qualified enough and he or she possesses the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with ESP course if he or she receives some training and orientation. In other words, he should be aware of his students needs, should have a good knowledge of syllabus design and materials writing. The role of the subject specialist is a very significant one though and it should not be neglected in ESP classrooms. Thus a sort of co-operation between the ELT teacher who implements the course and the subject specialists who acts as a monitor and advisor of the ESP session should be considered more appropriate. To sum up the discussion, the ELT teacher can be an effective ESP practitioner as he/ she gains in experience and receives specific training with the assistance of the subject specialists.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge and extend my heartfelt thanks to his Excellency, the President of Jazan University, Professor Mohammed Al-Hayazie for his vital encouragement and support. I would also like to thank Dr. Barakat Makrami, the Dean of the Preparatory Year and the Director of English language Centre for his understanding and assistance.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] D. M. Brinton, M. A. Snow, and M. B. Wesche, *Content-based Second Language Instruction*, New York: Newbury House, 1989.
- [2] T. D. Evans and M. J. S. John, *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- [3] B. Coffey, "State of the Art: English for Specific Purposes," *Language Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 2-16, 1984.

- [4] J. Flowerdew and M. Peacock, *Research on Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [5] T. Hutchinson and A. Waters, *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- [6] J. Munby, *Communicative Syllabus Design*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1978.



**Mr. Khalifa** is a member of TESOL, Sudan. Active member at Jazan University. A member of the Examination Committee, Syllabus Committee. Coordinator of English at school of Business, JU, KSA