

## **IS THE TEFL TEACHER A HOSTAGE IN ESP? AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECENT STATUS AND PROBLEMS OF THE TEFL TEACHER IN ESP**

Abdullah Aied KHUWAILEH (Jordan University of Science and Technology)

### **Abstract**

*The emergence of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) early in the 1960s was an important development that has made the task and function of ELT, in the field of ESP, more complex and sometimes insecure. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on the status and problems of the TEFL teacher in ESP, the problems which have made him a hostage to many variables and difficult conditions, rather than the king of his classroom. While the title of this article may imply negative connotations, newcomers (new ESP teachers) need not be horrified about the conditions that surround their (future) profession. We believe that tackling the problems and pitfalls that ESP teachers encounter can help to improve ESP teaching and learning. To achieve the objective of the article, we will deal with various external and internal problems that face the ESP teacher. The article will then end up with a number of conclusions and recommendations about the improvement of the ESP teacher's conditions. These recommendations may help to bring about the hope and job satisfaction for TEFL teachers in the ESP camp.*

**Key-words:** *TEFL; teaching difficulties; ESP.*

### **Resumo**

*O surgimento do Inglês Instrumental (ESP), no início dos anos sessenta, foi um grande marco que transformou as*

*funções do professor de inglês na área de ESP, tornando-as mais complexas e, por vezes, instáveis. Este artigo tem por objetivo elucidar o momento atual e os problemas do professor de ESP, que o transformam num refém de tantas variáveis e adversidades, ao invés de transformá-lo no rei de sua sala de aula. Embora o título possa sugerir conotações negativas, os recém-chegados (novos professores de ESP) não devem amedrontar-se com as condições que cercam sua (nova) profissão. Creemos que enfrentar os problemas e armadilhas que os professores de ESP encontram pode ajudar a melhorar o ensino e a aprendizagem de ESP. Para atingir os objetivos do artigo, lidaremos com vários problemas internos e externos enfrentados pelos professores de ESP. O artigo encerra-se com algumas conclusões e recomendações para a melhoria das condições dos professores de ESP, as quais ajudarão a desenvolver a esperança e a satisfação dos professores de inglês na área de ESP.*

**Palavras-chave:** *ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira; dificuldades de ensino; inglês para fins específicos (ESP).*

### **1. The status and problems of the ESP teacher**

*Being an ESP teacher is not easy. One of the prime requisites would seem to be flexibility - and a willingness to try new approaches and methods. Whatever the training that is given to an ESP teacher and whatever the situation, it is probably the case (...) that becoming an effective teacher of ESP requires 'more' experience, 'additional' training, 'extra' effort, 'fresh' commitment, compared with being a teacher of General English. (Robinson, 1991: 96)*

So wrote Robinson summarizing and describing the demanding profession of the ESP teacher. The quotation shows both the requirements and problems that the ESP teacher is bombarded with. However, these requirements and problems have not been addressed seriously in ESP literature. Apart from the work of Johns (1981), most ESP researchers have focused on other ESP areas. The same point is echoed by McDonough:

*(...) despite the explosion of ESP textbooks and supporting literature especially in students-centred areas, the ESP teacher as such has been overlooked.*  
(1985: 5)

In other words, much has been written and much ink has been expended on aspects like: needs analysis, syllabus design, production and evaluation of materials, etc. (Munby, 1978; McDonough, 1984; Hutchinson and Waters 1987). Consequently, it is reasonable to address an issue like the ESP teacher in terms of his status and problems. These problems seem to hold the ESP teacher as a hostage in this field. We will divide these problems into two categories: external problems and internal problems.

## **2. The external problems of the ESP teacher**

By external problems, we mean the problems which are imposed on the ESP teacher by those in authority (e.g., subject departments, institutions, companies, governments, etc.). These problems are likely to affect the ESP teacher's status and productivity as what is imposed on him becomes a constraint that prevents him from carrying out what he plans

to implement. The following external problems influence the status and productivity of the ESP teacher.

### **2.1 Allotted time to ESP courses and low priority of timetabling**

This problem is present in any ESP project or programme where ESP teachers or course designers are usually required to carry out a certain set of objectives in an academic institution or company during a limited period of time. This makes the ESP teacher constrained to a certain number of teaching sessions. These sessions lead the ESP teacher to struggle to meet these objectives. Even his methods of teaching can be affected by this problem. For example, he would not be able to focus on certain aspects and rehearse what is seen difficult for students and if he does so, this influences and distorts the teaching scheme distributed over a limited and, in most cases, short span of time. Consequently, he feels tense and strained as his objectives are not implemented and, simultaneously, he can do nothing in terms of the time assigned to his teaching. In fact, we are aware that time is an important factor in both General English and ESP. However, it is a very sensitive one in the case of ESP. Phrases like: 'we want these students to be well-trained in the language of science within only three months'; 'this set of trainees will join the bank next month, so we want them to be familiar with the language of banking and business', etc. are usually stated by sponsors of ESP students. The other side of the coin is the timetabling usually given to ESP sessions. This timetabling is usually prepared by those with authority over the ESP teacher where undesirable time is usually given to these courses and good time is usually given to science

courses, for instance. The space of time usually given to ESP courses is from 8 - 9 a.m., 4 - 5 p.m. or lunchtime. During these awkward times, some students arrive late, others leave early, etc. Here again the ESP teacher can do nothing about these external problems as awkward time given to his sessions is not negotiable. In a certain Middle East university, a number of ESP teachers objected over critical timetabling. They were formally informed by their authority that: 'You exist in this university to serve at any time, and you have to serve at any time to exist in this university.'

## 2.2 ESP large classes

Perhaps good language learning is one of the subjects that may require practice and rehearsal in the classroom, particularly in the field of ESP where students are required to simulate what they will actually do in their target situation. In essence, ESP performance is a rehearsal because English to these learners is a means, not an end. Of course such a teaching situation requires a reasonable ratio of students and teachers (e.g., 1: 15 or 1: 20 as maximum). Following this proportion, group work, conversational and interactional activities, sufficient participation, etc., could be implemented. These activities are very important in adult learners' ELT or ESP situations. Ur, for example, states that:

*The first advantage of group work is of course the increased participation (...). Students who are shy of saying something in front of the whole class, or to the teacher, often find it much easier to express themselves in front of a small group of their peers.*

(1981: 7)

Jordan (1978: 26-29 and 1990: 46-54) also expresses the same point of view. Nevertheless, for purposes of saving money and time, ESP classrooms usually include more than 30 students, at least in many Middle East universities (e.g., Jordanian universities), where it seems, sometimes, difficult to carry out these activities properly in large classes. In other words, institutional and financial considerations are likely to make ESP classrooms congested or overcrowded with students. Here again this unhealthy linguistic situation makes the ESP teacher a hostage to the external problems imposed on him. The situation is unhealthy because it is difficult for the teacher to let every student participate or practice his English (e.g., speaking skills) in the classroom. In addition, in writing, this situation prevents the ESP teacher from giving the students the adequate number of writing assignments (e.g., short essays, laboratory reports, etc.) because the process of correction (with 30 or 40 students in each section: each teacher is given 5 sections, so the total number is 200 students as in the case of the ESP teacher at Jordan University of Science and Technology) will be very time-consuming and perhaps frustrating. These circumstances can negatively affect the productivity of the ESP teacher.

### **2.3 Lower status and the lack of respect from students**

In many academic institutions (e.g., in science departments at the University of Jordan) ESP courses are not graded, and they do not play a role in maximizing or minimizing students' accumulative averages. Students' performance is usually marked with pass/fail. This situation leads to the lack of respect for the ESP teacher as students usually work for tests and grades. No matter how we state our objectives, students study for tests and grades.

Accordingly, students may not regularly attend ESP sessions, they may not work seriously and hard for these sessions, etc. Of course, this external problem imposed on the ESP teacher also helps to bring down his productivity as the position of the ESP course could mirror the position and status of its teacher, at least from the students' perspective. These circumstances could obviously and negatively influence the ESP teacher's productivity and perhaps his psychology.

#### **2.4 Not paid well**

There is a tradition in education of separating Humanities and the Sciences. Languages have usually been allocated to the Humanities camp. Scientific subjects are usually considered more prestigious and important than Humanities in the Arab countries. This has been translated into deeds by offering scientists salaries which are much better than those offered to linguists (at least in Jordanian universities, for instance). In fact, the number of teaching hours is the same for both scientists and linguists, but they are paid differently. This is again a sort of prejudice and bias which may affect negatively the ESP teacher's status, productivity and even his seriousness or perhaps loyalty to the programme or project he is involved with.

#### **2.5 The ESP teacher is forced to be a student**

Many ESP teachers are reluctant settlers in the new territory (e.g., scientific departments, companies, etc.). They would prefer to be teaching general English, literature, and social English in the comfortable environment of ELT. Nonetheless, these settlers have been obliged by different

types of pressures to emigrate. Of course, they are hostages to the process of learning sciences as in the case of English for Science and Technology (EST). If they had wished to learn sciences, they could have started their learning after leaving their schools before they studied Humanities. That is to say, their 'needs' (to be precise, their 'musts' of learning sciences) in their ESP projects or programmes contradict their 'wants' (e.g., teaching general English in Humanities and not learning science). By 'needs', we mean requirements, and by 'wants', we mean preferences.

On the basis of these givens, ESP teachers are forced indirectly to accept the fact that they must be students of science and, simultaneously, teachers of language. Most importantly, the ESP teachers need not only learn from the subject teachers, but, bitterly, their science students could be, in many cases, their teachers. Unfortunately, when science students notice that their teacher does not master the subject matter he deals with, they probably become less confident in what he says, as experience has revealed.

The aforementioned external and imposed conditions are only some of the problems that face TEFL teachers in ESP. Perhaps there are many other external problems which emerge in different ESP situations all over the world as, in most cases, ESP situations could be distinct from each other. The important point here is that these problems, in general, could easily affect the status and productivity of the ESP teacher. We will move now to the second category of these problems, which are likely to emerge from ESP projects, programmes or teaching situations.

### **3. The internal problems of the ESP teacher**

The internal problems are used in this context to refer to the set of teaching problems that may face the ESP teacher in his classroom, preparation for teaching and the enormous responsibilities he is usually entitled to undertake.

#### **3.1 The problem of the subject matter the ESP teacher is entitled to know in the classroom**

Perhaps this problem is similar to that mentioned above concerning the process of enforcing the ESP teacher to be a student of science outside the classroom. The other side of the coin is the classroom problems that face the ESP teacher while he is teaching. In fact, one of the differences between General English and ESP is the nature of the subject matter addressed in both branches of ELT. In general English, topics, reading passages, etc. are expected to be taken from general areas, while in ESP, these elements are expected to be taken from the students' areas of studies. The students' areas of studies could be sciences, business, etc., while, as mentioned above, most ESP teachers are linguists with a Humanities background. This inevitably contradicting situation is likely to create a nightmare for the ESP teacher who is not acquainted or familiar with these subjects as he sometimes finds difficulty in understanding scientific concepts, as a case in point, which are unavoidable to the EST teacher. Perhaps the students of science need and want to learn English as a means that could enable them to pursue their higher studies. But, it must be borne in mind that English for them is not an end. Consequently, they are not ready to receive the classroom instruction of this means via an irrelevant context. In other words, they expect English to be at least contextualised in generally scientific concepts. This is

what they expect and what the ESP practitioners recommend. Robinson echoes this situation and states:

*One of the obvious differences between ESP and general ELT is that the ESP teacher will not expect to use a general coursebook organised around general human interest topics, situations, functions, etc. but will expect at least that the topic and situations that the language is linked to will relate to the students' subject specialism. (1980: 34)*

Accordingly, if the ESP teacher cannot digest well the scientific concepts dealt with in his course, a lack of communication between the teacher and the students is highly probable as experience has revealed. It is worth mentioning that what may make the problem more serious and unavoidable is that usually ESP students, who are mostly adults, try always to pull the ESP teacher towards sciences (their study areas in the case of EST) perhaps in order to be secure, whereas the teacher tries to pull them to linguistics to be secure too. Phrases and expressions like: 'from a scientific point of view, we say...', 'why in medicine we say...', etc. are usually raised by students. On the other hand, the poor ESP teacher tries to pull them to his own area of interest by using phrases like: 'from a linguistic point of view, it is...', 'we talk about language, not...', etc. In other words, each party tries to secure itself by pulling the other into its area.

### **3.2 Difficulty of team teaching**

It follows from the previous point that the ESP teacher finds himself, sometimes, obliged to consult the subject teachers on certain technical concepts in order to

operate well in his teaching. To do so, he tries to take shelter by co-operating with the teachers available in his institution. And here emerges the problem when he feels that these subject teachers are not keen and ready to co-operate with him and, for instance, to apply team teaching which has been recommended as a remedial procedure to this problem by a number of ESP practitioners (e.g., Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1980: 7-8; Swales, 1985; Robinson, 1991: 88-92).

Usually, subject teachers are busy. Besides, some ESP teachers, applied linguists and practitioners overgeneralise and suggest that team teaching could benefit both the ESP teacher and the subject one. Robinson states:

*(...) there are many ways in which the subject specialist may benefit and, as a result, the student too (...)* the subject lecturer receives feedback on how well he has been communicating with his students. (1991: 92)

Naturally, no one can deny the benefit of team teaching to students and ESP teachers. However, we cannot fail to notice that the issue could be seen from a different perspective when it comes to the subject teachers and its practical side. As mentioned above, subject teachers could be busy on the one hand, and could not be in need of linguistic directions and orientations via team teaching on the other hand. For example, as most Middle East university subject teachers, at least in sciences, are graduates from U.K. or U.S.A., it is highly probable that their command of English is high, which does not make them keen about the technique of team teaching. The rejection of team teaching by subject teachers could raise a problem to the ESP teacher who feels

frustrated. This problem leaves the ESP teacher in a helpless situation in his classroom.

### 3.3 Enormous responsibilities without training

Perhaps the ESP teacher has always been overloaded with a multiplicity of responsibilities, requirements and performances. It has become a convention in ESP to rely on the ESP teacher to perform a number of difficult and time-consuming activities. In other words, he needs to be chameleonlike. He must be a teacher, course designer, materials evaluator and producer, needs analysis specialist, student of science and sometimes a statistician.

Ironically, the ESP teacher is required to perform all these activities and tasks thanklessly as people assume that it is his natural duty to carry out these tasks. Hutchinson and Waters, for example, argue that:

*It will be clear (...) that the ESP teacher's role is one of many parts (...). It is likely that in addition to the normal function of a classroom teacher, the ESP teacher will have to deal with needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation and evaluation. (1987: 157)*

Blue also argues:

*Of course, one of the functions of the ESP teacher will always be to teach ESP to groups of students. Consequently, he will probably need to develop certain areas of expertise and to familiarise himself with some other subjects (...). Another important*

*function of the ESP teacher (...) is the production of learning materials. (1981: 62-64)*

In fact, our view is that each of these requires a particular training. Each one of them is very time-consuming. The question is how it happens that the ESP teacher who comes from a general English background is required to perform these enormous and complex tasks without prior training. And if he is allowed to do training (whether it is in-house or external training), how would he find the time to do so? All these circumstances may create internal complex problems that not only make the ESP teacher tense, but also affect his productivity.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that ESP situation could be a distinct world in itself. Therefore, it is probable that, apart from these problems, many others could emerge in other ESP situations.

#### **4. Conclusion and recommendations**

The above discussed external and internal problems show how the ESP teacher is overloaded thanklessly with different tasks and functions, how his profession is surrounded by different and various disciplines unknown to him and how he is deprived of the necessary elements that help him to operate well in his career (e.g., training, reasonable payment, etc.). All these conditions and many others make his job difficult and affect his productivity, or at least the standards of his performance.

Accordingly, it is time for the ESP teacher's superiors, directors, employers, etc. to realise that he is a human and not

a machine. The ESP teacher should not be dealt with as a hostage that has no word or a machine that could be operated by a remote control. People on the spot should understand his limited human capacity if they are looking for a good standard of teaching.

We believe that if we require the ESP teacher to help us and teach ESP students successfully, we should first help him in order to be able to help others. Consequently, a number of remedial recommendations could improve his status, free him from his captivity, and make his standard of teaching as helpful as possible to ESP students. In general, the following two recommendations may contribute to solve a number of the ESP teacher's problems addressed above.

First, the ESP teacher's performance could be improved by offering him the appropriate in-house and external training. This activity is very necessary for most ESP teachers, particularly the newcomers or settlers in the field of ESP. Both the in-house training and the external-training could be interrelated and contribute to each other in achieving the same objective of improving the ESP teacher's performance. For example, if a number of the ESP teaching staff in a certain situation are to be trained overseas, not only could their performance be improved, but the other teachers' performance could benefit a great deal from these trained teachers, if the in-house training is to be held, where trainees could reveal their experiences to others. Training through simulation could also help. Internal regular seminars or workshops also help in ESP teacher-training. However, both types of training should take different forms and focus on various activities. For example, teacher X could be trained on the concept of 'needs analysis', teacher Y could be trained on the concept of 'materials production', teacher Z on 'materials

evaluation'. This coloured and multilayered training generates a very useful and able team of ESP staff where the members complement each other to make up a fortified front against invading and intruding concepts and challenges of sciences (as in the case of EST situation), new methodologies and techniques of teaching, different types of ESP courses, increasing demands required of ESP staff, etc.

Second, the status of ESP teachers could be improved if the employers of these teachers co-operate well with them in terms of teaching overload, large classes, etc. The employers should reduce his teaching load if he is to do other jobs than teaching (e.g., materials preparation or evaluation). Otherwise, carrying out these jobs would be at the expense of the quality of teaching and perhaps the quantity (e.g., productivity).

On the other hand, the status of the ESP teacher could be improved if he is paid well at a rate similar to that of his other colleagues in other departments. This point is important for making the ESP teacher as active and loyal as possible to the ESP project or programme he is involved in. In addition, there should be a sort of co-operation between the employers of the ESP teachers and the employers of the subject teachers (as in the case of EAP: English for Academic Purposes) to motivate the latter group to respond to the requests of the ESP teachers for technical consultation. This situation helps in making the communication channels as smooth and wide as possible between the ESP teachers and their students. Perhaps this objective or recommendation might be achieved if formal, official and serious correspondence is to take place between the superiors of both groups of teachers to frame their problems and to facilitate the ESP teaching process.

As far as the ESP courses are concerned, their status may mirror the status of their teachers. Therefore, they should not be dealt with as a grey area. That is, these courses should be looked at as needed courses and, consequently, they should be graded, or not needed courses and, as a result, they should not be taught. This could be detected by holding 'placement tests'. If placement tests reveal that students need them, then they should be dealt with as compulsory ones (as in the case of Jordan University of Science and Technology). Accordingly, students will have to attend them regularly and perhaps they could be scheduled at appropriate times where students benefit a great deal of them.

To sum up this point, a needed ESP course will be dealt with seriously and appropriately by both the institution's or company's administrations and the students involved. If it is not needed, it is highly probable that the ESP teacher feels silly in front of his students who will consider such a course as a waste of time. All these conditions may reflect the status of the ESP teacher. To solve the various problems of the ESP teacher and to improve his position, the radical changes, suggested above, need to be implemented.

Finally, it is hoped that this article will motivate other researchers, ESP practitioners and applied linguists to proceed in digging in this neglected area. More research on the causes of these problems and their different types is needed. The rationale for such studies is, as mentioned above, that the ESP teacher should be helped in order to help others who really need him.

## References

- BLUE, G. (1981) Self-directed learning system and the role of the ESP teacher. *ELT Documents 112. The ESP Teacher: Role, Development and Prospects*. London: The British Council, pp.58-64.
- HUTCHINSON, T & A. WATERS (1987) *English for Specific Purposes: a Learning-Centred Approach*. Cambridge: CUP.
- JOHNS, T. (1981) Some problems of a world-wide profession. *ELT Documents 112. The ESP Teacher: Role, Development and Prospects*. London: The British Council, pp. 16-22.
- JOUNS, T. & T. DUDLEY-EVANS (1981) An experiment in team teaching of overseas postgraduate students of transportation and plant biology. *ELT Documents 106. Team Teaching in ESP*. London: the British Council, pp. 6-16.
- JORDAN, R.R. (1978) Motivation in ESP. *Modern English Teacher*. **6**.4: 26-29.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1990) Pyramid discussion. *ELT Journal*. **44**.1: 46-54.
- MCDONOUGH, J. (1981) Introduction. *ELT Documents 112. The ESP Teacher: Role, Development and Prospects*. London: The British Council, pp 5-6.
- MCDONOUGH, J. (1984) *ESP in Perspective: A Practical Guide*. London: Collins.
- MUNBY, J. (1978) *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: CUP.
- ROBINSON, P.(1980) *ESP (English for Specific Purposes)*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1991) *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. Hamel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.
- SWALES, J. (ed.) (1985) *Episodes in ESP*. Oxford: Pergamon.

UR, P. (1981) *Discussions that work*. Cambridge: CUP.

*Abdullah Khuwaileh is interested in Applied Linguistics; he works on the design of EFL and ESP courses, and has co-authored ESP coursebooks, some of which are used at Jordan University of Science & Technology.*