

# The Problems Faced by the Teachers and the Students in Teaching and Learning ESP Reading Skill at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism

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## Abstract

*This paper was conducted to see the problems faced by the teacher and the students in teaching and learning ESP reading skill at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. So as to gather more believable data, the qualitative method including the author's personal observation, the discussion and interview with the students and the colleagues. The collected data revealed the teachers and students' difficulties in teaching and learning ESP reading and their causes. Based on the author's experience, the discussion and interview with the colleagues and students, the researcher gave some possible solutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning ESP reading at school.*

**Keywords**— *problems faced, teaching and learning ESP reading, difficulties, causes, solutions.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

We are living in the twenty-first century with the dominance of English all over the world in such important areas as aviation, business, commerce, technology, science, international relations and diplomacy. In accordance with the open policies to integrate in to the world community, in Vietnam, English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been gaining

an increasing importance and it has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of the teaching of English as Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL). To students, English is not only a subject in the curriculum at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism (TUCST) but also a key to help them to develop their communicative competence in English in the area they are studying.

Carrell (1981) states that "For many students, reading is by far the most important of the four macro skills, particularly in English as a second/foreign language". It is true for the students at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism because reading helps them to make extensive use of academic materials written in English and this is a good way to enable them to increase their professional knowledge in their specific or specialized fields. However, teachers and students at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism still

face some of these problems such as : the teachers' lack experience in teaching ESP, The first year students have to learn ESP when they have not learnt their major subjects. there are no training courses for the teachers of ESP and the students are not of equal in term of English level.

As a teacher, the author has conducted the final assignment entitled: "*The problems faced by the teachers and the students in teaching and learning ESP reading skill at Thanh Hoa university of Culture, Sports and Tourism*" with the hope that this assignment will contribute a small part to improve the present situation.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### An overview of ESP.

ESP has been defined by researchers as well as scholars' different views. According to Huttchinson and Waters (1987:19), ESP must be seen as an approach, not as a product. In their opinion, ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consists of a particular type of teaching material.

However, Strevens (1988) defines ESP by making a distinction between four absolute characteristics and two variable characteristics:

- The absolute characteristics are that ESP consists of ELT ( English Language Teaching ) which is:

\* Designed to meet specified needs of the learners.

\* related in content ( that is in its themes and topics ) to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and so on, and analysis of the discourse;

\* In contrast with " General English"

- The variable characteristics are that ESP

\* May be restricted as to the learning skills to be learned ( for example reading only)

\* May not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

( Source : Strevens, 1988; cited in Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998:3 )

Robinson (1991)' s definition (cited in Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998:3 ) is based on two key defining criteria (i.e. 'normally goal-directed' and need analysis) and a number of characteristics (i.e. limited time period, adults in homogeneous classes) that are generally found to be true of ESP.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 4-5) comments that above definitions have validity but also weakness, either in the definition or in the features described. They believe that a definition of ESP should reflect the fact that much ESP teaching, especially linked to a particular profession or discipline, makes use of a methodology that differs from that used in General Purpose of English Teaching. They also believe that language should be included as a defining feature of ESP.

In summary, all the above definitions show that ESP belongs to English Language Teaching (ELT). The ESP courses are performed successfully in occupational roles by an individual or group whose need is considered to be a distinguished feature from General English.

**Classification of ESP.**

ESP is divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). According to Robinson (1991), the classification of ESP is generally presented in a tree diagram as follows:

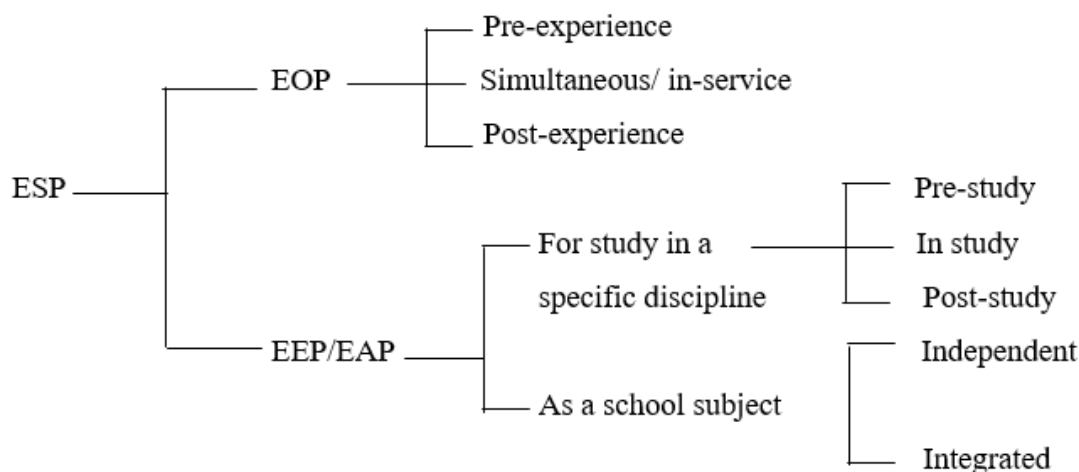


Fig.1: ESP classification by experience (Robinson, 1991:3-4)

The diagram shows a useful division of courses. Those distinction are very important and they will affect the degree of specificity that is appropriate to the course.

Dudley-Evans and St John(1998) also present the classification of ESP through a tree diagram but it divides EAP

In short, studying various ways of classifying ESP provides a teacher and overall picture of the groups of learners with whom he or she is going to work.

**Difficulties in teaching ESP.**

In the view of Robison (1991) problems in conducting ESP lessons can be encountered in a number of aspects of ESP teaching. The first one is a large class.

Another problem is that the class may be mixed of abilities. In this case, the classes are often organized to consist of students who have the same specialism. As a result, the class may be exceedingly mixed in terms of linguistic level. In Vietnam, there is a big gap in term of English between the students from big cities and students from the countryside areas, especially those who come from remote areas. However, at the different university they have to study ESP in the same classes regardless of this variety. Even when they are grouped in specialism, they are mixes in terms of their specialist knowledge. The third problem can be found in the teachers themselves. In fact, in Vietnam most of teachers come from General English teaching. Therefore, they meet a lot of difficulties

in teaching ESP. Besides, ESP students are not motivated enough to study ESP because they lack General English

proficiency.

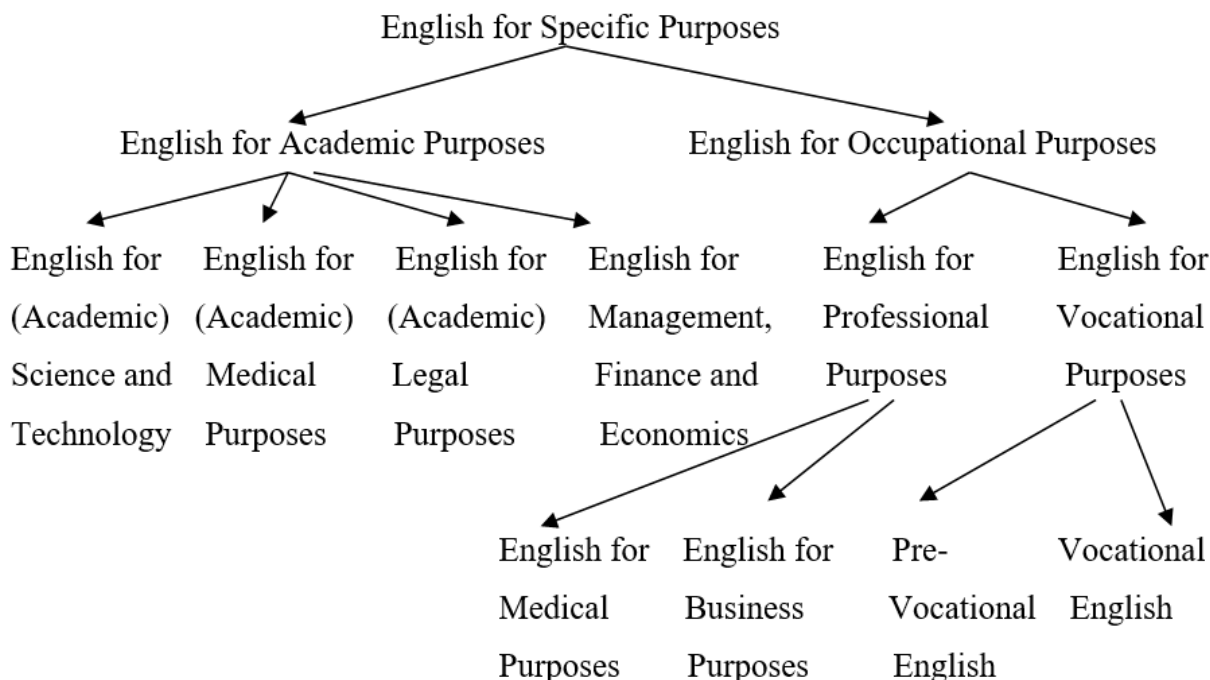


Fig.2: ESP classification by professional area (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:6)

In teaching ESP, the most constrains to the success of teaching is the limited cultural background knowledge of teachers. Many studies (Steffen et al., 1979); Carrell, 1981) have demonstrated the effect of cultural knowledge on the product of comprehension, appealing to the processes of distortion and elaboration to account for the differences between a recall text and the original text. Readers facing with unfamiliar cultural content may mistranslate or interpret the text according to their own cultural experiences.

Reading is by far the most important skill to students as they hardly have opportunity to use communicative English outside the classroom. However, they need to get access to a great number of specialized documents written in English so as to broaden their knowledge about their specialty as well as to obtain up-to-date information in their fields of study. That is very necessary in their future work. To Vietnamese students, reading is a difficult skill because English is not their mother tongue. Many scholars agreed that problems in reading for foreign learners may be caused mainly by either reading skill or readers' cultural background knowledge. In learning ESP, students' attitudes play an important role. If students have positive motivation in learning ESP, it will be the key to help them overcome the difficulties successfully.

**III. METHODS**

This research paper is conducted based on a kind of case study. The major method used in this paper is the qualitative one. The findings obtained from the author's personal observation, the discussion as well as interview with the students and the colleagues. Regarding the purposes of the study, the following research questions are put forward :

- 1, What are the problems faced by the teachers and the students in teaching and learning ESP reading skill at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism ?
- 2, What are the causes for these difficulties?
- 3, What do the teachers and students expect in terms of materials?

**IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**The current situation of teaching and learning ESP reading skill at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism**

- *Teachers and their methods of teaching ESP reading skill.*

Most of ESP teachers of Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism are teachers of General English (EG). Each of them is responsible for teaching

both EG and ESP. None of them have been trained to be the teachers of ESP or taken any courses on construction. Thus, they have to face many difficulties in teaching ESP. The lack of professional knowledge makes them not feel confident to teach ESP. This leads to unsatisfactory performance.

With respect to methodology, ESP teachers at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism have applied the Grammar-Translation method to teach ESP reading lessons as well. This method focuses on accuracy, the detailed analysis of grammatical rules available in the reading text, not on language skills. The mother tongue used mainly and the teacher plays the central role in the classroom, explaining new terminologies and translating the into Vietnamese. This makes students listen and take notes passively. Therefore, this method doesn't motivate students in ESP reading lessons. The out-dated teaching method influenced the quality of teaching and learning ESP at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism

- ***Students and their background***

English is a compulsory subject for the first year student of Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism before starting to learning their field. In fact, this is a difficulty for most students because they have not learnt their major subject. What is more, their English competence is not good, particularly the knowledge of vocabulary. Most of students find it difficult to guess new words and the content of the text. In addition to, they have limited ability to give general ideas. Therefore, they have to confront with the difficulties when discussing or reading topics related to professional terminologies and poly-semantic words.

Furthermore, most of students come from the countryside. They do not realize the importance of ESP course for their future job. Thus, they do not have any motivation in learning ESP except for passing examination and gaining qualifications.

Besides, most of them tend to depend so much on the textbooks and the teachers. This dependent habit of learning is an obstacle to their acquisition of ESP as well as to the teachers' methodologies.

- ***Materials utilized in teaching and learning ESP.***

In teaching and learning ESP, materials can be classified into textbooks that are written by the experts who have a lot of experience and expertise in the field and are available in the markets and in-house materials that are written by the ESP teachers in the school. The published materials are very useful for students but they are often criticized for not meeting students' specific needs. On the

contrary, the in-house materials believed that they are likely to more specific and appropriate than published materials and have greater benefits because the writers of in-house materials are often teachers who understand well the situation of teaching ESP and their students' level.

The materials used in Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism is in-house materials which is designed by the teachers who has not much experience of teaching ESP before. Therefore, the effects of teaching and learning ESP is not high. The course book does not contain various types of exercises, the contents of texts are not interesting and does not cover the students' specific needs of the major field. That is the reason why the ESP reading lessons do not often motivate student. In the other words, the present course book at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism has not satisfied both the teachers and students.

### **The causes of difficulties in teaching and learning ESP at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism**

From my personal observation, interview teachers and discuss with the colleagues and students, I recognized that the sources of difficulties in teaching and learning ESP reading fell into two categories: external and internal. The internal causes come from teachers themselves. The external ones are from the materials and the students.

- ***From the materials.***

The materials used at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism is in-house materials which is designed by the teachers who has not much experience of teaching ESP before. The students' level of General English is limited while the system of the grammatical points in the course book is complex, for instance, too many complex sentences with relative pronouns, passive sentences, conditional sentences and comparison sentences, etc. Therefore, most of the students when being asked responded that they had difficulties in understanding and using verb tenses and forms in reading materials. Besides, the materials doesn't contain many unfamiliar topics so the students rarely encounter unfamiliar topics. Furthermore, the content as well as vocabulary does not meet the students' needs of the major fields in the future so the reading lessons does not motivate students. The information obtained from the discussion with teaching staff also confirms the materials does not give frequent and sufficient practice of vocabulary and grammar. Thai is the reason why the reading lessons is less effective

- ***From the teachers.***

In learning English, especially ESP teachers occupy a very important role. If the teachers are not good

enough, they will not be able to perform perfectly teaching activities. Most of teachers at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism trained to teach General English. They do not have much experience in teaching ESP. All the teachers in the school admit that they do not have time to read the knowledge relate to the topic they are teaching. They can not give clear explanation to professional topics even in Vietnamese. The discussion with the students showed that most of students do not please with the teachers' attitude and knowledge of the construction. they often ignore the explanation of vocabulary or sentences related to students' major fields. The teachers' lack of professional knowledge make them not confident in teaching ESP. The teachers' knowledge and attitudes make a great contribution to difficulty in teaching and learning ESP.

- ***From the learners.***

It is recognized that most of students who are studying at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism are not good at learning English. They are not only weak for General English but also lack both linguistic and background knowledge about the topics they are reading in the materials, particularly ESP vocabulary. That leads to the students' passive learning style in the reading lessons. Through my personal and discussion with the colleagues revealed that the students depend too much on the teachers. The majority of the students expect the teachers to translate the terms or texts into Vietnamese to understand without discovering themselves before going to the class. This passive learning habit and the lack of learning motivation make the reading lessons boring and not effective.

**The possible solutions to improve the present situation.**

- ***Improving teachers' knowledge and teaching methods.***

It is really misconception that teacher needs to be an expert in the subject matter. He or she is not teaching business strategies nor good management practice, nor economic theory. And English teachers' responsibility is to train students to communicate in English about the subject they study. The English teaching staff at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism has the limitations in teaching ESP. If urgent, short training courses on the related professional knowledge should be held to equip the teachers with basic fundamental knowledge of the specialized subject. These can help the teachers to be familiar with the course books, understand the subject matter and build up confidence to handle the specialized content.

Besides the fundamental knowledge of the specialized subject, the teachers at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism should change teaching methods appropriate in ESP classroom. The grammar-translation methods create a passive habit of learning reading for the students. In the reading lessons, the teachers should create several activities and ask students to participate in the tasks given. The information from the discussion with the students indicated that they enjoy working in pairs work or in small groups during the lesson. Therefore, it is said that cooperative learning is an effective type of learning, especially ESP knowledge. Working in pairs or groups not only make students more active but also help them to learn much more from the other students in the class. However, this method requires teachers have much time to get closer to students and create various types of activities to motivate students in the ESP reading lessons.

The limitation of the course book is also the barrier to improve teaching methods. So it is necessary for teachers to work in groups to exchange their experience in teaching ESP. They can share their lesson plans to find the best activities and choose appropriate supplementary materials as well s teaching method that are suitable for their students' level of English.

One different useful tool of teaching ESP teachers can apply is Internet. The Internet have a lot of resources and materials which can help teachers develop their knowledge of the specialized subject. They can share your ideas and knowledge with the other teachers around the world. What is more, it is advisable for the teachers to attend and observe their colleagues' lectures to have experience from the reality.

- ***Developing the materials.***

As mentioned above, the ESP materials used at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism is in-house materials which is designed by the teachers who has not had any experience in teaching ESP. Therefore, the limitation of the course book is unavoidable. To help students to overcome this, the teaching staff should share their opinion to adjust or adapt the present books in line with meeting the students' needs of their major field as well as their level. It is necessary to give the students more activities during the reading lesson. Besides, further grammar exercises should be added to help students understand the new grammatical points and how to use them. The topics for reading should be adapted to be more interesting, especially familiar to the major field of the students. The teachers can find authentic materials from the Internet to supplement the course book. This will help

update information and create the students' interest in learning reading skills.

- **Promoting students with a variety of reading strategies.**

Students is one of the elements that causes the difficulties in teaching ESP. To motivate students in the ESP reading lessons, the teachers have to help them have the efficient strategies of learning ESP such as: skimming, scanning, predicting, inferring, wording-building and recognizing organizational pattern. Then the teachers should give the students a various types of reading to practice.

With reference to skimming skill, it is important for teachers to help the students know the way to get overall ideas of the whole text as well as the main ideas of each paragraph.

For the consideration of scanning, the teachers should help students to pass quickly over irrelevant information and focus on only the information wanted.

"Predicting skill" enables students to make prediction on the basis of the title, subtitle, linguistic context or non-linguistic context such as graphs, tables, diagrams, maps and their knowledge of the topic. This skill not only activates their mind but also gives them a strong motivation to the next step of the lesson.

"Word-building skill" helps students work out the meaning of many unknown words or phrases without a dictionary, and hence, to some extent, may have fewer difficulties in ESP reading such as : using structural formation and using context clues.

## V. CONCLUSION

ESP is a subject at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. This research paper was conducted to discover the difficulties as well as the causes of the difficulties of teaching and learning ESP at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism. From the reality of the problems, the author suggests the possible solutions to help the teachers and the students overcome the problems faced by them.

The findings from my personal observation, the discussion with the students and the colleagues revealed that the causes of the difficulties in teaching and learning ESP at Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism come from both teachers and students such as: the teachers and students' lack of specialized knowledge, students' insufficient general English and construction terminology as well as reading skills. Besides, the difficulties can be ESP material or syllabus.

Based on myself experience, discussion as well as interview with my students and colleagues, the author has proposed some suggestions to improve the teachers' professional knowledge and methodology, develop or adapt the materials, motivate students in learning ESP reading lessons.

Nobody can deny that reading skill is one of the most important ones in teaching and learning English in general and ESP in particular. In case of Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism, there are a lot of problems faced by the teachers and students in teaching and learning ESP reading skill. Therefore, studying on the ways to improve the students' reading skill is very necessary. However, there exists be obviously limitations to the study, for example, the limited knowledge in the study of reading skill on the part of the writer. The researchers or scholars can study more effective techniques to teach and learn ESP reading skill in high schools, colleges, universities or Vocational Secondary schools. Further studies of the topic, if possible, should cover the different factors that affect the students' reading such as motivation, anxiety, etc.

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