

ESP in Saudi Arabia: A Need for Active Community

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to call for a Saudi ESP center to meet the needs of the growing demand to special English courses. English for Specific purposes (ESP) is an approach to English language teaching to which the language is taught for a specific utilitarian purposes. To cope with rapid changes in the global industry, Saudi Arabia should establish an ESP organization that serve to achieve the needs of all the members of the ESP community, act as a link between all field specialist, practitioners, trainers and students and result in producing local training programs, course designs, materials and methodologies that are necessary nowadays for the development of the country in all levels.

Key Words: English for Specific Purposes, General English, Teacher Training, ESP Community.

1. Introduction

English has become the language of the current massive global innovation in technology, economic and commerce and acquired the status of international lingua Franca. New language learners are now more aware of their goals and what exactly do they need English for. Accordingly, English for Specific purposes (ESP) has openly grown in the last decades to powerfully influence and contributes in the rising global evolution in all life aspects. ESP is widely known as useful approach of teaching English to students of science, technology, business, and management. In fact, the constant and continuous need for meeting the students' needs in this matter pressures Saudi universities and teachers to work towards producing graduates who meet and exceed the requirements of their chosen industry because they are must be prepared to be successful members of the global workforce. Unfortunately, Saudi teachers are not fully prepared to support this growth .Also, no clear or official ESP community or center is found. Therefore, this paper aims mainly to discuss this issue in an attempt to suggest solutions. In addition, it reviews the status of ESP English in Saudi Arabia and role of Saudi ESP practitioners. Additionally it endeavors to call for establishing a Saudi ESP center with exposure to Brazilian ESP experience.

2. What is ESP?

For nearly forty years, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most notable areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is seen the number of ESP courses offered for overseas students in English speaking countries. ESP has become an important part of English Language teaching.

After the Second World War, there was an expansion of scientific, technical, and economic activity on an international scale. Accordingly, appeared a demand for an international language to suite particular needs and developments in these fields, from which the growth of ESP has started. Generally, ESP is teaching English language including Business English, Technical English, Scientific English, and English for medical professionals, English for waiters, English for tourism, English for Art Purposes, etc. Therefore, it can be defined as learning a foreign language in order to perform professional skills in a set of particular functions and centered on the language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate to certain contexts. Further, ESP can be divided into two main types according to whether the learner acquires the language for academic study (EAP, English for academic purpose) or for work (EOP/EVP/VESL: English for Occupational Purposes/ English for Vocational Purposes/ Vocational English as a Second Language).The learners and their purposes for learning English can specify the major difference between ESP and EGP (English for General Purposes). ESP learners are highly motivated because their needs are clear.

They are learning the language in order to communicate professional information and to perform some particular, job-related functions. In ESP course, it is needs analysis that determines which language skills are useful for the learners and they are centered on the context. While in EGP, needs cannot be specified. It is more considered as providing abroad foundation rather a detailed and selective specification of goals like ESP. Moreover, EGP courses are mostly focused on grammar, language structure, and general vocabulary and responsible to the general language acquisition. They deal with many different topics unlike ESP courses that serve a particular discipline.

3. English in Saudi Arabia: Function and Status

Over the last century, English has had a variety of functions in the Saudi society and plays an important role in the growth of the international relations and scientific-technological advancement in the country. However, English is not recognized as a second official language in Saudi Arabia as it doesn't really perform certain functions that are necessary for communication and has no special administrative status. Consequently, it officially holds a primary foreigner language status and the great interest in English continue to arise. Currently, English language enjoys a prominent status in several sectors at all levels in the country. As a respond to the unprecedented rapid changes the kingdom has witnessed in the recent few years, English language contributes in its development in a variety of ways, including the government institutions, social establishments, and even the voluntary organizations.

English is the main foreign language taught in Saudi public and private schools and universities. It is taught as a core subject at the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels. It starts at grade four in primary public schools and at kindergarten in private primary school still the foundation year in university. After that, it becomes elective or major field of study. For students who are not English major they have to take an English introductory course. It follows that English is supposed to be the medium of instruction in many university departments such as science, medicine, engineering, technical subjects...Etc. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals can be looked at as examples. Further, English is strongly present in a big number of technical and vocational institutions for one can find that English language is always included in their curricula and the formulation of training centers to teach English to their employees.

Looking at the employment aspect, it can be clearly noticed that English has become an essential requirement to attain a life career to be employed in industries, hospitals, hotels...Etc. in which an applicant should possess a certain level of proficiency in English. This indicates that the English-speaking applicants are more preferable to the hirer and that mostly zero chance for the non-speaking English applicant to have a decent job in these companies. It is concluded that a command of English opens doors to Saudi graduates to have a rewarding career. Accordingly, English is considered as one of the main significant tools that participate in the development of the Kingdom.

4. ESP in Saudi Arabia: Needs and Attitudes

ESP is essentially founded to consummate the demands of learners who needed to learn English as a loophole to science, technology and economical resources and careers. To teaching English as a foreign language, ESP is considered as a learner-centered approach. The development of world economy and technology has strengthened the position of English. As a result, the demand for ESP is constantly growing and of course, Saudi Arabia is part of this. Despite the fact, the ESP is a new concept in the kingdom; it is in demand today for the country is witnessing huge and rapid changes in all fields. Thus, to cope with the global development, English is highly required. Further, in Saudi health, engineering, business, and management colleges, ESP will be always a necessity. Undergraduate students who are preparing for careers in the global and local economy by taking courses in English that focuses on special field are in need of ESP as well. Dudley-Evans (1998) clarifies that "ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner. Moreover, Learners who need ESP are classified by Knight, Lomperis, van Naerssen & Westerfield (2010) into two groups: Learners who are in the process of developing expertise in their fields need English communication skills as tools in their training and Learners who are already experts in their fields need English communication skills as tools in their work. Obviously, our Saudi students fall into the first group. They are in the path of developing their professions that will enable them to achieve future success. They need to master all the required skills and job competences including English.

Students' attitude to learning is an important part in enhancing their progress. Gardner (1985, p.9) states that an attitude is "an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent". A number of studies that surveyed Saudi foreigner language learners of ESP revealed that students have positive attitudes towards English.

Congreve (2005), for example, surveyed 179 Saudi students enrolled at King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals and found that the majority of the students liked English which is an indicator of a source for instrumental motivation. In addition, Alhuqbani (2005), believes that ESP students tend to learn English for functional purposes to meet their job requirements. Learners' needs decide their attitudes and their attitudes toward the language greatly help in their success hence their needs should be the core of designing any ESP curriculum, program, or ways of teaching. Hutchinson et al (1987), declare that "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". Dudley-Evans & Maggie (2002), conclude that language learners started to have differed goals and needs behind learning English. The same applies to Saudi students and there should be a huge movement in ESP in Saudi Arabia to meet these goals and needs.

5. Saudi ESP practitioners: Roles and Training

The teaching of ESP has been seen as a discrete activity within ELT for it has its own methodology, teaching approach and special focused needs. To positively participate in the development of ESP in the country, an ESP teacher should not only have enough language competence, but also be able to obtain conceptual abilities and be reflective. Swales(1985) prefers using the term "practitioner" instead of "teacher" due to the multiple tasks the ESP practitioner should practice to reach an effective result. In addition an ESP practitioner, is asked to organize courses, set learning objectives, create a positive learning environment and evaluate learners' progress. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) distinguish five roles to be performed by ESP practitioners: 1) Teacher, 2) Collaborator, 3) Course designer and materials provider, 4) Researcher and 5) Evaluator.

The first role is similar to the GE teacher. Also, the ESP teacher should collaborate with the subject specialists to gain information about the subject syllabus or even with the students who are more familiar with the content. Further, planning the courses and providing their material is one of the ESP practitioner roles. To do so, ESP practitioner should be a "researcher" as well. Lastly, constant evaluation is an important factor to create a successful ESP course and again it's the ESP practitioner role to complete this duty. It is concluded that being an ESP practitioner is not an easy job and it is a real challenge. It is only very recently that GE Saudi teachers have started to think about becoming ESP practitioners. Visibly, just being fluent in English is not the only requirement to be an ESP practitioner. It should be realized that teaching in ESP is different somehow from GE teaching and more challenging because it involves much more than teaching. Thus, Saudi ESP practitioners are required to have specific subject knowledge alongside the teaching competence.

To obtain this competence and be qualified to play all the assigned roles of ESP practitioners, Saudi teachers should be trained to be ESP certified tutors. Otherwise, all efforts are of shallow effect and peripheral results compared to the global economic and technological evolution. In fact, one can barely find a Saudi ESP practitioner and most positions are filled with non-Saudis. In addition, the demand of ESP practitioners is strong; colleges and language institutes offers generous tax-free salaries, paid transportation and accommodation...etc. just because the Saudi practitioners are not available since s/he is not well-prepared. This reveals the negative side of not having pre-service training programs for prospective ESP teacher. Not even an introductory course to at least introduce ESP to ELT teachers. It is surprising that curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia didn't take ESP teacher education very seriously although the demand for such courses is rapidly increasing. After graduation, one cannot find a local ESP center as a resource and the community interactions are very weak and can hardly be noticed. It reflects that Saudi practitioners training is a neglected need and illustrates the vigorous need for a solution.

6. A Call for a Saudi ESP Center: The Brazilian Experience

After having an insight about the fact that ESP has a significant role and essential contribution in the Saudi international progression and that the demand for ESP is massively growing.

Moreover, the students' awareness of their goals and needs is noted and the neglected need of Saudi ESP teachers training is clarified, the establishment of a local ESP Saudi Center and narrowing the gap between the importance of ESP and the weak application of ESP is no longer an option. Labassi (2010) introduces Holmes and Celani's (2006) invitation to learn from the Brazilian ESP experience in his paper and compares it with the Tunisian case. Looking closely, the Brazilian experience is applicable to the Saudi situation as well in term of that, English is not the medium of instruction and the national language is used in classrooms in both countries.

Also, the need for English in both countries is of a special purpose only and it is not the language of real communication. In that case, learning from the Brazilian experience can be advantageous as a first step in initiating our own project. Labassi (2010) identifies the seven factors by Holmes and Celani (2006) that participated in the sustainability of the Brazilian project. First, in Brazil, they designed local ESP materials that meet the local needs of their nation. They didn't depend on any outsiders and after several gathering, the community designed their own materials which Holmes and Celani (2006) believe that it promoted the ESP practice in Brazil. Second, the same is found in developing their own methodologies and avoided any ready-made methodologies that may not well serve the Brazilian population.

Local ESP specialists worked to originate English teaching methodologies that optimize with the country's specific linguistic environment. Third, Local ESP specialists produced materials that are based on local resources. Holmes and Celani (2006) confirm that autonomy of practice is the reason behind the sustainability of the ESP project. Fourth, they formed a critical mass of Brazilian ESP teachers to promote the practice of ESP in the country. Fifth, several institutions like universities, schools and associations were involved in the Brazilian project that resulted in its development because it provided an assortment of resources and opened the door for the fruitful exchange of knowledge and experience. Sixth, endowments were given to ESP specialists to support their improvement in the field and help them in attending conferences, seminars, and workshops to widen their knowledge and reinforce the quality of their production. Seventh, they established a center for communication. Labassi (2010, p.20) indicates that "the existence of a center for ESP in the country enhanced the prestige of the discipline. Furthermore it became a viable and important area through the publication of a journal".

Sarangi and Candlin (2010, p. 17) state that "workplaces are in some sense held together by the communicative practices to which they give rise, or even, more boldly, that such communicative practices constitute the work of the workplace themselves". Establishing a Saudi ESP center will allow teachers of ESP in the kingdom to communicate and therefore create an effective ESP community. It will be a valuable source of information for ESP training and oriental data for specialists' researches. In the light of the Brazilian experience, the following can be discussed: ESP specialist in the kingdom must be aware that ESP text books must meet students' needs. The imported books will eventually demotivate students' learning process since they don't feel that their goals are achieved. Moreover, teachers are ought to investigate what kind of teaching methodologies that should be actually applied in the Saudi different teaching scenario. There is a need to design new syllabi that is fully catered to the needs of the students. Further, developing new ESP materials that adjust with the local needs are necessary. Doing so, the students will be more motivated to attain the desired proficiency in English. Also, many institutions , universities and establishments can be engaged and linked together for a better result of exchanging information and strengthen the local ESP development. All this and more can be achieved once an official local Saudi ESP center is founded hence it'll be responsible for the development of ESP in the country and serve to link all the scattered communities under one umbrella and become the destination for all the specialists, practitioners , trainers and students.

7. Conclusion

Today, English is one of the most important factors that play a significant role in the global advancement movements of science, business, technology, and industry. Accordingly, its use becomes highly contextual which highlights the unplanned birth of ESP. Not only was this but it also combined with the massive growth of ESP in all fields all over the world. Therefore, the existence of a Saudi ESP center to enrich the Saudi ESP community and help all the members will positively influence ESP in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia has its own special identity and own needs when it comes to ESP thus the need for a Saudi ESP center is not a luxury

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