

ESP TRAINING IN THE ERA OF EMERGENT BILINGUALISM

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Abstract: The changing context and demands of Vietnamese workplaces have fostered the need to rethink ESP training at the tertiary level in Vietnam in recent years. Traditionally, ESP has been defined as a needs-based approach aimed at equipping learners with occupational linguistic resources for their future career. However, this approach tends to view ESP learners as homogeneous users of English and fails to take into consideration the evolving linguistic profile of learners. Drawing on the concept of emergent bilingualism, this paper conceptualizes ESP learners as multilingual individuals who possess dynamic and integrated linguistic resources; thus, course designers as well as ESP teachers should see learners' prior linguistic knowledge as an advantage rather than the barrier to learning. The paper also looks at how this shift affects the competencies of ESP teachers in tertiary education. It argues that ESP teaching requires more than just pedagogical competencies; in fact, possessing interdisciplinary awareness, needs analysis, engagement with multilingual communication practices, and a reflective attitude are also essential. Integrating emergent bilingual perspectives into ESP education may help deliver courses that are more responsive to increasingly international-multilingual workplaces.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, emergent bilingualism, multilingualism, ESP teacher education, professional communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

As students in Vietnam start learning English in primary school, by the time they enter university, many have developed a relatively strong command of English. As a result, learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) appears to be more practical and beneficial than continuing with general English. The reason is that ESP courses help prepare students for their chosen career; they also reduce time, money, and family resources by focusing on the language competencies that are directly relevant to students' profession rather than a wide range of general topics. Furthermore, many youngsters now choose to learn two or three foreign languages to enhance their employability; they do not want to invest all their time and effort in mastering only a single foreign language. At the same time, Vietnam's rapid economic development and integration into international markets have created different requirements and expectations regarding soft skills and language competencies for new graduates. Foreign investment from countries such as South Korea, Japan, China, and so on has contributed to the emergence of multilingual workplaces where employees regularly interact with colleagues and clients from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In these contexts, effective communication often requires more than just proficiency in English but also the ability to negotiate meaning across different cultures, religions, and professional practices.

Therefore, there is a need to reconsider how ESP courses are designed and delivered in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Within the new context, ESP course designers should be aware of learners' evolving linguistic profiles and develop courses that support the development of communication competence, emphasizing the effectiveness of communication rather than strict adherence to linguistic norms. ESP teachers should be aware of changing needs and expectations so that they can better facilitate students' learning. This paper seeks to identify the impacts of the changes and, from that, withdraw the main competencies and professional qualities expected of ESP teachers in responding to these pedagogical and contextual challenges in Vietnamese higher education.

II. CONTENTS

2.1. Traditional View of ESP and ESP Learners

Since its first years as a distinct field of language education back in the 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been primarily identified as an approach to language teaching that responds to learners' needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued, "ESP must be seen as an approach, not as a product. ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning that is based on the learner's needs. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: "Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language?" This initial purpose then leads to further analysis of learners' characteristics, their language requirements, and their learning contexts. In other words, in ESP, learners' reasons for learning serve as the starting point for needs analysis and can be a decisive factor in selecting the content and methodology of the course (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Early ESP scholars emphasized that course design should be based on a systematic analysis of learners' target situations such as tasks, genres, and functions (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). After Munby, other ESP scholars proposed that a wider understanding of learners is essential to designing courses effectively. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) extended needs analysis to include learners' existing language skills, motivation, learning needs, and contextual considerations. As a result, ESP was guided towards a learner-centered approach. And recently, the concept of emergent bilinguals has reframed English learners. According to scholars, English learners should be viewed not as deficient L2 users but as individuals with developing and evolving multilingual repertoires (García & Kleifgen, 2018). From the perspective of emergent bilingualism, ESP learners are not merely English users but multilingual individuals who can resort to their full linguistic repertoires to achieve communication goals (García, 2009). Nevertheless, the underlying assumption of ESP courses remained quite consistent: the primary purpose of ESP is to equip learners with linguistic resources so that they can function effectively in specific domains.

Nguyen et al. (2022) suggest that communication in globalized settings requires a high degree of flexibility. They illustrate this point with the case of Vietnam's import-export sector: people in this sector communicate using particular genres and terminology, and English becomes the lingua franca among multilingual staff members. But this English is often flexible, with truncated forms and occasional derivations from standard linguistic standards. (Nguyen et al., 2022).

ESP learners are often seen as people who need English in order to acquire discipline knowledge, to join professional societies, or to accomplish responsibilities at work. English is taken for granted as the major linguistic resource for accomplishing these aims, and little thought is given to other languages in the design of ESP syllabi and training. Thus, traditional ESP frameworks tend to view learners as users of the English language, rather than as individuals with wide and dynamic language repertoires. Meanwhile, García claimed that learners who use more than one language should not be seen as incomplete users of a second language but as emergent bilinguals who are actively developing and using multiple linguistic resources. ESP research has also highlighted the diversity of learners' linguistic backgrounds and the need to recognize them as multilingual users rather than homogeneous English learners (Belcher, 2006).

2.2. The Concept of Emergent Bilingualism

García (2009) introduced the term "emergent bilingual" in lieu of deficit-based terms like "English Language Learners" (ELLs) and "Limited English Proficient" (LEP). García believed that students should be labeled according to the linguistic resources they have, not what they lack. The new term means "their family and community language practices are seen as educational resources." This perspective shifts the focus away from language deficiency and toward language potential. These transitions also focus on the dynamic and relatable process of how people acquire bilingual/multilingual competencies over time. García & Kleifgen (2018) argued that "teachers of emergent bilingual students are challenged to provide rich affordances that will encourage students to use suitable language features." Furthermore, central to this perspective is an asset-based view of language learning. García & Kleifgen (2018) also urged educators to "recognize and respond to the intertwining of two phenomena: the increased linguistic diversity of learners and the proliferation of new resources for learning owing to the rise of digital technologies." Indeed, learners may have accumulated linguistic knowledge prior to formal training through social media and the internet. Consequently, educational practices should seek to leverage learners' existing socio-linguistic knowledge rather than suppress or ignore it.

García and Wei (2014) argue that multilingual students can possess an integrated repertoire of linguistic resources that they use strategically for effective communication. Scholars and educators, therefore, should not measure language proficiency separately for each language. ESP training should take into consideration how learners use their integrated linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, solve problems, and participate in social and professional activities. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Vietnamese context, as in contemporary ESP training, Vietnamese learners may have engaged with information, technology, and communication across multiple languages. The profile of university students also appears to be increasingly consistent with the description of emergent bilinguals. Most students begin learning English at an early age and accumulate years of exposure to the language prior to higher education. For recreational purposes, many students may even have self-studied other languages such as Korean, Japanese, or Chinese.

This evolving learner profile raises important questions for ESP education. Traditional ESP models generally assume that learners require specialized English to perform academic or professional tasks; these models also emphasized accuracy and adherence to norms and structures. However, if today's university students are better described as emergent bilinguals, ESP may need to expand its definition of specialized English proficiency. ESP programs should be designed to tap into the linguistic repertoires that learners bring to the classroom so that they can facilitate learners' professional communication and practices in the future.

2.3. Implications for ESP Teaching

This paradigm shift has profound impacts on ESP training, marking a transition from the conformity of native speakers' norms towards a common code for communicative effectiveness among professionals.

Firstly, the issue of linguistic ownership and the creation of domain-specific standards have become a key question. Widdowson (1993) argued that professional communities such as scientists, researchers, and business practitioners should have ownership rights to the varieties of English they use. These communities produce their own contextually acceptable knowledge and practices, thus producing endogenous 'standards' that are consistent with their own institutional goals.

Furthermore, ESP training should be aware of the remarkable tolerance for linguistic innovation observed within certain fields. When viewing ESP learners as emergent bilinguals and users of dynamic linguistic repertoires, the role of ESP teachers needs to be redefined as well. In traditional ESP approaches, the responsibility of teachers was mainly to teach discipline-specific vocabulary, grammatical structures, and communicative patterns that are relevant to certain professional domains (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). ESP teachers are no longer just transmitters of specialized knowledge of the language but facilitators, curriculum designers, and mediators between language, content, and professional practice. Ideally ESP teachers should know learners' language and understand their cultural and educational contexts. From that, teachers should be able to provide an attainable model for learners, and there is no need to insist on native speaker standards. Teachers should also be aware of how different varieties of English have developed and how they differ phonologically, lexically, and culturally. The ESP materials should be developed from locally contextualized resources such as seminar recordings, staff training videos, and authentic manuals. ESP materials should better reflect the communicative needs of the professional or academic communities in which students will work. Another important aspect of ESP teacher competence is pedagogical flexibility, especially concerning materials development and adaptation. The shortcomings of ESP textbooks, especially in emergent areas like fintech, e-commerce, and cybersecurity, mean that teachers have to develop or adapt materials from authentic sources. And such a process requires not only the skill to adapt raw materials but also critical thinking skills to evaluate the authenticity, relevance, and appropriateness of the inputs.

In addition, ESP teachers need to develop an understanding of multilingual communication practices in contemporary workplaces. Take Vietnam as an example; now that new graduates are likely to work in multilingual environments involving English, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages; communication is rarely monolingual. Therefore, ESP teachers should be able to acknowledge and, where appropriate, make use of students' existing linguistic resources rather than enforcing strict English-only practices. This transition requires a broader understanding of communicative competence, and the approach should be flexible and adaptive rather than purely norm-referenced.

Furthermore, ESP teachers play an important role in developing learners' transferable skills. Beyond linguistic accuracy, contemporary ESP instruction should support learners in acquiring skills such as negotiation, intercultural communication, collaboration, and digital communication. Therefore, ESP teachers contribute not only to language development but also to learners' broader professional preparedness.

Finally, ESP teachers need to develop reflective and adaptable professional identities. The rapid changes in language use, workplace practices, and learner profiles mean that the teaching of ESP cannot be based on fixed methodologies or static course designs any longer. Instead, teachers need to continue to reflect on their own teaching practices, keep up with disciplinary and communicative trends, and adapt their teaching accordingly. This reflective orientation is especially important in contexts where ESP frameworks are being developed and where local institutional constraints require a continuous negotiation between theory and practice.

III. CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that the changing linguistic and professional landscape in Vietnam requires a reconceptualization of both ESP learners and ESP teaching practices. While traditional ESP frameworks have primarily focused on equipping learners with linguistic resources to function in certain professional domains, recent changes in Vietnamese workplaces and ESP learners' profiles suggest a need to move beyond a monolingual view of communicative competence. More specifically, emergent bilingualism defines learners as multilingual people who strategically utilize their integrated linguistic repertoire to accomplish communication goals in various contexts and not simply incompetent English users operating within a closed linguistic system.

In conclusion, this paper argues that analyzing ESP through the lens of emergent bilingualism not only changes how we see learners but also calls for a more dynamic, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive model of ESP training. Thus, the enhancement of teacher education and standards in these areas is essential to make sure that ESP provision in Vietnamese higher education is relevant and responsive to the demands of twenty-first-century professional communication.

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