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PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS OVER ESP CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR A BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME IN THE SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for higher education still occupies a dominant place in scholarly forums. It is an obvious fact that learners should be equipped with a sound knowledge of ESP in order to meet the global requirements of the academic and industrial spheres. This paper reports the findings of a larger study which explore the perception of students and teachers regarding the practice of a new ESP course module within the context of higher education in Sri Lanka. The main objective of this paper is to report the findings based on qualitative data gathered after practice of a new ESP course module for the development of an effective ESP curriculum. A quasi experimental research design has been employed in the study. A larger amount of qualitative data was gathered to support quantitative data and for the triangulation of data to meet the objective of the study. The data was collected through semi structured interviews and open ended questionnaires. The samples used a purposive sample of twenty six (26) undergraduates of the Faculty of Business Studies and Finance from a university in Sri Lanka. Also the sample consists of four (4) language teachers belongs to English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) of the same university. The findings of the ESP course module provide valuable insights in designing an effective ESP curriculum to meet the learners' needs. The findings also indicate that the existing ESP curriculum does not meet the actual needs of the ESP learners and some changes are suggested for a successful application of the ESP curriculum in terms of quality, relevance and validity. In particular, the ESP courses are to be revised and redesigned to cater to the multiple needs of the learners and parallel to the language needs of the main stream content subjects.

Keywords: ESP curriculum design, ESP course module, higher education, learners' needs.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for higher education still occupies a dominant place in the higher education sector of Sri Lanka. Universities are attempting to equip the learners with a sound knowledge of ESP in order to meet the global requirements of the academic and industrial spheres. Lack of proficiency in English among the undergraduates has been identified as a researchable major academic issue to be addressed since it has negative influence on the academic performance, employability, career development, quality and standard of English language programmes, the marketability ESP courses and interest in English language studies among the undergraduates (Coperahewa, 2009; Perera, 2013; Punchi, 2001; Kandiah, 2010). This is an issue frequently discussed since the quality of education combines with quality of teaching and learning (Munasinghe & Jayawardena, 1999). This paper reports the findings of a larger study which explores

the perception of students and teachers regarding the practice of a new ESP course module within the context of higher education in Sri Lanka. The main objective of this paper is to report the findings based on qualitative data gathered after practice of a new ESP course module for the development of an effective ESP curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this study has been developed on selected two models to suit this study. Pioneers of ESP course development have recommended a need analysis prior to commencement of any ESP course of study. Pioneers of curriculum development also hold similar views. Therefore, theoretical views of the curriculum specialists and ESP experts have been combined in developing the theoretical framework of this study.

The proposed theoretical framework is supported by three theoretical schools of thoughts. The theoretical framework of the present study is a combination of theoretical views of Tyler's Model (1949), Taba's Model (1962) and Need Analysis Approach of Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Curriculum theorists Tyler and Taba basically propose four steps in developing a curriculum: source, screens, experience and evaluation. However, the importance of having precise obtainable objects as the foundation of an educational programme was first suggested by Tyler (1949).

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METHODOLOGY

A quasi experimental research design has been employed in the study. A larger amount of qualitative data was gathered to support quantitative data and for the triangulation of data to meet the objective of the study. The qualitative data was collected through semi structured interviews and open ended questionnaires.

The samples used a purposive sample of twenty six (26) undergraduates of the Faculty of Business Studies and Finance from a university in Sri Lanka. The sample also consists of four (4) language teachers belongs to English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) of the same university. Only the students in the second academic year were selected as participants of this study since they are mature enough to comment on English language teaching and learning in the faculty.

Views were gathered from 26 respondents who follow the new ESP course module. They expressed their views in written and verbal forms on different items of the module. Qualitative data gathered was categorized in order to identify common themes, sub themes and special themes. Software NVIVO was used to analyze data. Themes emerged were categorised, discussed, analyzed and explained to measure any improvement in the students' achievements and performance. Level of improvement in ESP skills are expected to indicate the effectiveness of the lessons of the module. Sample extracts of views are presented here as it is without any alteration. Respondents have made grammatical, structural and spelling mistakes in their usage of language as being beginners. However, these mistakes do not obstruct interpreting the meaning of extracted views.

LESSON PLANS FOR INTERVENTION

A new ESP course module was developed based on the results on a need analysis conducted prior to the study. The course module consists of identified needs related to the learners' content subjects. The module was designed to cover lessons on language structures, rhetorical categories, language functions, language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The module was developed in order to improve the required ESP competency level of the undergraduates of Faculty of Business Studies and Finance from basic level to expected level of competency. The module was practiced as part of intervention to ongoing teaching programme in order to test the effectiveness of ESP instructions based on the business management programme.

The content of the module encompasses identified essential ESP language skills necessary for the academic communication done in English medium. After the need analysis, specific learner needs were identified related to language structures, rhetorical categories, language functions and four

basic language skills. Identified four specific language skills were incorporated into the module. ESP four basic skills encompass reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Module Development

The first step in the procedure of module development was conducting a need analysis on the ESP needs of the learners. This need analysis was done to identify the ESP needs of the learners in order to prepare instructional materials for the module. Next, teaching and learning requirements were analyzed before the identification of the objectives of the module. At the next stage, proposed module was developed in proportion to the identified the ESP language needs of the students. By the third step, reliability and validity of the module was improved using comments by Sri Lankan subject experts. The validity and reliability were obtained through two questionnaires given to the subject experts.

Responses Gathered through Open Ended Questionnaire

Views were gathered from respondents after the ESP teaching module intervention over the topics covered in the module. Respondents were attributed codes ranging from OEQ1 –OEQ 26 for the identification. OEQ stand for Open Ended Questionnaire. Responses were gathered from the open ended questionnaire over the following language skills for different lessons in order to measure the effectiveness of the ESP teaching module instructions.

Table 1. Structure of open ended questionnaire.

<i>Language skills</i>	<i>Lessons on skills</i>
Reading and writing skills	Skimming scanning and summary writing business presentations Writing business reports Writing business letters
Speaking and listening	Listening and note taking Group presentations Business report group presentations Practice of language of business letters
Improvement of grammar and vocabulary	Improvement of grammar and vocabulary through module
Any other matters	(Suggestions)

Reading and Writing Skills

Selected samples of extracts gathered from the open ended questionnaire are presented here under different items. First, a common theme which suggests some signs of improvement of writing skills emerged over the lesson on skimming and scanning. As per the theme, students show obvious remarkable achievements. The sample of common views reiterates the importance of this skill require for improving their writing skills. Lesson on skimming and scanning promotes writing skills among respondents. This is illustrated in the transcript below.

“Skimming scanning & summary writing lesson is good. it’s very important to us. Here I learn clearly. how to summary writing. I think my writing skills are improve this sessions”.
(Transcription OEQ7)

Data obtained from the respondents over the lesson business presentations represent views of respondents. They have assessed the value of the lesson in view of their future job prospective. Being management students they focus on employability in evaluating the importance of the lesson. As illustrated in transcript OEQ 7.

“It’s very important part to us because we are business management student.so we have learn it well .because is very important to our future. My presentation skills improve in this lecture”.
(Transcription OEQ7)

Speaking and Listening Skills

As per another common theme based on the views of students, it is interesting to note majority of students expressed that this lesson on note taking is very useful to them to follow lectures and take notes. Keeping clear notes is very essential skill for undergraduates since they have to refer back to refresh their memory, especially at the time of examination. Pursue of academic jargon is the title of the common theme. In the following excerpt the respondents explains...

“It is very useful for me. Note taking is very important and I like than listening. Now we can write a note very clear and short”.
(Transcription OEQ25)

Improvement on Grammar and Vocabulary

Learning grammar is an essential skill to write clearly because their medium of instruction is English. Good grammar knowledge is an inseparable tool for academic communication. Otherwise, smooth flow of academic communication is disturbed.

“Grammar and vocabulary is more important as we are doing our degree in English medium”.
(Transcription OEQ1)

“Grammar is so important for our writing therefore it is so useful. And we were able to enhance our grammar knowledge”.
(Transcription OEQ5)

It seems that there is some improvement in the vocabulary. Even though grammar lessons not adequate module encompasses some essential vocabulary.

“Not increase grammar knowledge in this teach method. But vocabulary is increase”.
(Transcription OEQ10)

Responses Gathered through the Semi Structured Interviews

In addition to administering the open ended questionnaire, the responses of both teachers and students were gathered through semi structured interviews. Among the respondents there were four (4) teachers and nine (9) students who are involved in teaching and learning the ESP course module. They were attributed codes for the identification. Teachers were coded as Tr. A, B, C, and D. Students were coded as St 1 to 9. Abbreviation SSI stands for Semi structured Interview. Responses were gathered from semi structure interviews over the following components of the module in order to measure the effectiveness of the ESP teaching module instructions.

Table 2. Structure of semi structured interview.

<i>Topic of components</i>	<i>Sub-divisions of components</i>
A-Syllabus design	-Planning and content of the module -Matching the expectation of the learners -Identifying important areas for teaching -Practicality and usefulness of the new ESP course module -Appropriateness of syllabus design for business management studies -Exposure of learners to interact with real world, peers and teachers
B-Pedagogical application	-Flow of the lessons -Remembering lessons done in the class -Interesting, useful, technical, informative and systematic value of lessons
C- Material design and development	-Relevance and usefulness -Promoting/facilitating learner capabilities -Promotion of existing knowledge through materials -Promoting communication opportunities through materials -Attitude towards materials -Sufficient exposure to target language through materials -Promotion of outcome feedback through materials

Table 2 continued...

D- Impact of the course module	-Likeness to materials -Improvement of performance of students
E- Logistical, administrative and organizational arrangements	Availability of materials and resources
F- Future direction	Suggestions to improve the course module further

Syllabus Design

Both teachers and students have expressed positive views over the planning and content of the new ESP teaching module. They have selected presentation to cite the example for the success of the module lesson. The successful integration of all needed skills is the common theme emerged among views of students and teachers regarding the planning and content of the module. The following extract can be cited as an example for the common conception of integration of all required skills.

“Topic choice is good relevant for business students. Each lesson integrated all skills in an interesting & meaningful way. Eg. Report presentation lesson was both challenging and interesting”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.C)

Matching many areas of the syllabus with expectations of the learners is a common theme emerged from students. The syllabus covers vivid areas to cater the different needs of learners. One of the respondents among the students says it matches 100% with expectation of learners. The excerpt below shows the views of the respondent above mentioned.

“As I think our expectation match with syllabus 100%. There are so many areas under that syllabus such as writing, reading, spoken and presentations like that match with. That is why I say our expectation match with syllabus”.

(Transcription SSI.St.2)

Pedagogical Applications

Another common theme which highlights the need for integration of ESP skills for gradual flow of lessons. Both teachers and students accept gradual systematic flow of the lessons. This common theme helps us to explain the flow of the lessons of the module easily. Gradual flow of the lessons helps weaker students to catch up the lessons step by step. This theme points out necessity of systematic integration of ESP skills into lessons for uninterrupted flow of lessons. Some learners are found to be comparatively weaker. Therefore, integration of skills and gradual flow of lessons is a critical requirement to cater the needs of learners at lower level. This common theme is displayed in the following excerpt.

“The lessons were well flowing ppp style & skills integrated”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.C.)

One student is impressed by the listening lesson since chances are rare for them to expose to listening programmes in school and in the university. Differentiation of lessons in accordance with latent micro learner needs is an essential requirement to align the ESP lessons with real needs of learners. The following excerpt shows this notion of micro needs of learners.

“.....I remember listening programme because not generally English course hadn’t this case. Listening is not our school general English class have not there. In this course did listening skill programme”.

(Transcription SSI.St.1)

Materials Design and Development

The common them spring from the views of students and teachers display the materials of the module are useful and relevant for them since they address the future needs of the learners, especially industrial needs. Hence, we find that materials falls within the purview of purpose domain of the target learners. Their concern over the matter is displayed in the following excerpt.

“Of course. Because we have learnt presentation skill. Everything we need to our future in industry. Yes, this module is very useful”.

(Transcription SSI.St.4)

Impact of the Course Module

Under the impact of the course module, willingness for materials was measured by the views of the respondents. As per the common theme of teachers, colourful printouts would have been much better and attractive. The views reveal impact of adding colour for attractiveness. This theme highlights need for considering psychological character of learners in designing materials. This also suggests that materials to be designed with a colourful appearance in order to attract readers. One of the respondent stated the following.

“Charts were color printouts, materials could have been better presentation”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.C)

As a special theme it was found that teaching materials contain curiosity. They contain most of the learner friendly features such as curiosity, variety, attractiveness and interest. This notion is in parallel with the conception of students regarding the same matter. We can conclude that materials have a commendable impact over the learners because they arouse curiosity among the learners. The materials exhibit uncommon features which is the uniqueness of ESP materials. As shown in the following excerpt a respondent exhibit the peculiarity of the materials.

“The materials contain all these qualities. The texts, graphs and the visual aids used are uncommon thus, they are use curiosity & develops interest in the learner”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.D)

Logistical, Administrative and Organizational Arrangements

Based on the common theme emerged from the views of students and teachers, it can be concluded that there hadn't been a notable issue regarding the availability of various resources for the practice of the module. Vivid teaching materials were given to students on different occasions. There were sufficient resources available for a conducive learning environment for the practice of the ESP module. In the following excerpt a respondent explains

“No problem with the resources. There were so many materials and also refreshment”.

(Transcription SSI.St.2)

Suggestions for Future Directions

Based on common themes of teachers, the module can be further developed by making lessons compact, adding variety of activities, making appearance attractive and adopting latest materials. These themes suggest avenues for further improving the ESP module to align with the target level of learners. Following excerpts show some comments indicated by the teacher.

“Syllabus lessons are too lengthy. Try to make it a compact one”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.A)

“Make the appearance more attractive”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.A)

“Latest materials should be used”.

(Transcription SSI.Tr.B)

CONCLUSION

The findings of the ESP course module provide valuable insights in designing an effective ESP curriculum to meet the learners' needs. The findings also indicate that the existing ESP curriculum does not meet the actual needs of the ESP learners. Therefore, some changes are suggested for a successful application of the ESP curriculum in terms of quality, relevance and validity.

By designing most demanded useful lessons, such as skimming and scanning, academic performance of learners can be improved to a greater extent. It is easy to improve the confidence of learners through practical lessons such as business presentations and report writing. These lessons give hands on practice to the learners which will be required for future prospective employment in the industry and academic needs. Respondents prefer for more lessons, like note taking, which have practical value since they address direct academic needs. Majority of learners are interest in learning grammar to improve their productive skills, in particular writing for examinations and keeping clear lecture notes.

It is possible to improve the effectiveness of ESP syllabus designs to a satisfactory level if the focus is laid on cohesion, integration of skills and relatedness of lessons to content area of study of learners. If an ESP syllabus addresses specific critical academic needs of the learners and wider society, effectiveness can be further improved. ESP lessons should be technical, informative and systematic in order to assist learners, in particular the weaker ones. Furthermore, the relevancy of lessons can be improved by aligning them with the needs of the target community. Allocation of adequate time is a necessity for any ESP course to improve its effectiveness.

Moreover, effective ESP materials which focus on industry and learners needs promote independent learning. Materials that fit with psychology of learners increase self-motivation of learners. ESP discourse that matches with the needs of the target community develops positive attitude among learners. Appearance of materials may be improved with by adding colourful pictures, charts and diagrams. Adding more grammar lessons are necessary to increase the impact of the course module on learners. Notable improvement of performance can be observed after treatment with new ESP course module since it fills the gap in the skills competencies. Effectiveness of ESP instructions can be further increased by integration of new technology like multimedia. However, addressing multiple learners' needs of learners is the key to ensure effectiveness.

Implications

The ESP courses are to be revised and redesigned to cater to the multiple needs of the learners in parallel to the language needs of the main stream content subjects. Productive skills of learners to be improved by amalgamating new technology into ESP courses. Employable useful practical lessons that address specific critical academic needs should be designed in order to inculcate positive attitude among learners. Adequate time to be allocated to expose the learners to technical informative systematic learning materials. Sufficient grammar items to be incorporated in to the ESP materials to increase the impact of ESP materials. The cohesion, integration, relatedness and appearance of materials to be given due attention while filling the gap in the existing syllabus. Independent leaning should be encouraged through new technology in order to improve effectiveness of ESP materials.

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