

On the Development of ESP Courses for Non-English Major Undergraduates and Graduates

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Abstract. This article reviews the current situation of theoretical research and practical teaching of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses in the College English program in China, examines the problems existing in both theoretical research and teaching practice, proposes several measures for further improvement, and looks forward to the future development trend of such research and of the development of ESP courses for non-English major undergraduates and graduates in China. This paper aims to provide advice for the development of ESP courses, so as to improve the teaching effectiveness of the teaching of College English, and to enable English learners in universities to truly achieve their goals in language learning.

Keywords: ESP Courses; Theoretical and Practical Aspects; Course Design; Faculty Development.

1. Introduction

The reform of the College English program has been attracting much attention since its start years ago. That is, each and every stage of the reform is under close watch by the general public. At present, higher education institutions are exploring a new model for teaching College English to non-English major undergraduates and graduates. Both the public and scholars concerned hold a similar expectation of this development, that is, the reform could go smoothly and efficiently, in order for College English learners, including undergraduates and graduates, to benefit from the reform, grow to be talents superbly equipped with both professional knowledge and a good command of English, and contribute to the construction of a new world.

2. The Necessity of the Development of ESP Courses

ESP courses in the College English program provide a means for realizing the above-mentioned goals. Consequently, the development of ESP courses is been incorporated into the reform of the teaching of College English and comes into the spotlight in academia. In the field of the development of advanced-level courses, scholars and in-practice teachers concerned are making great efforts in hopes of major breakthroughs. In actuality, based on the current literature on ESP courses, a consensus is reached by most scholars that the development of ESP courses meets the needs of the times, serves as a great opportunity for teachers' career development, and in the meantime creates a platform for students to strengthen their language skills and empower themselves to fulfill their goals in life and career.

Some scholars believe that in the context of globalization, ESP courses provide a means for cultivating talents with a global vision, a deep understanding of international rules, and great global competence [9]. At the same time, it is hoped that these talents may as well be capable of promoting Chinese traditional culture while actively participating in international events [9].

From the perspective of national language planning, it is of great necessity for higher education institutions to develop an ESP-based course system. Without exaggeration, it is a demand from the social and economic development of China, and represents the future direction of the reform of the College English program as designated in *College English Curriculum Requirements*.

Speaking of the reform of the College English program, the development of ESP courses is supposed to make up for the weaknesses of previous reforms that happened to the College English program. In the past, the teaching of EGP (English for General Purposes) had been under much

criticism from the public and scholars concerned, on such aspects as the irrelevance between the teaching of EGP and the future career paths of students, the ineffectiveness of the teaching methods, the lack of motivation among students in classroom activities, and etc. [1].

As far as students' study efficiency and future career development are concerned, ESP courses are of great help to some extent. In the process of students' language study in school, ESP courses are essential in cultivating students' autonomous learning ability, raising students' intercultural awareness, strengthening their interpersonal skills [1], and integrating their language study into their learning of their professional courses [9]. In the meantime, ESP courses may function as a guide for students to choose learning materials for language study and professional knowledge learning in correspondence to the demands of their professional fields and future careers [1], providing them with an advantage in the choosing of their future career paths.

3. The Problems with the Research on ESP Courses

Research on the teaching and the development of ESP courses in China has born numerous fruits. Nevertheless, in terms of current research on the teaching and the development of ESP courses, there exist a multitude of problems to be solved. These problems are listed as follows.

3.1 Lacking the Recognition of the Significance of ESP Courses

In fact, the general public and parties involved give insufficient attention to ESP courses, have misconceptions of the teaching of ESP courses [4], and put little emphasis on the development of ESP courses [8]. As a consequence, there is an inadequate understanding of the role of ESP courses in the College English course system [15]. Also, there are barriers for the smooth implementation of ESP courses in universities, such as the lack of opportunities for the introduction of ESP courses, the imbalance in the development of the College English course system, the existence of difficulties in the development of ESP courses and so on [15].

3.2 Theoretical Research on ESP Being not Rightly Stressed

Based on the analysis of the available literature on recent studies in this field, it is clearly seen that empirical studies on ESP courses in China are lagging behind in terms of the quantity and the quality of related studies [6]. Even in terms of theoretical research, there are a number of aspects needing to be further explored and improved, such as the limited scale of samples, the lack of analysis of social needs, the lack of research on the integration between ESP courses and information technology and so on [6].

3.3 The Practical Development of ESP Courses Facing Many Challenges

There are various challenges faced by the development and the teaching practice of ESP courses. For teachers, there may be difficulties in practical teaching procedures. For policy makers, there are a variety of aspects of the teaching of ESP courses that need to be taken into consideration.

The first and foremost issue teachers and policy makers need to consider is to sort out the sequence in which ESP courses and other College English courses are properly lined up and taught to students [10]. The second issue is how to ensure the quality of teaching materials for ESP courses [8]. Thirdly, it is of necessity to guarantee that ESP courses are developed and taught in a scientific, formal, and systemic manner [8]. Last but not least, it is of need for teachers and policy makers to think about how to develop ESP courses to meet the needs of students and potential employers [8].

3.4 Lacking Competent Teachers for the Teaching of ESP Courses

As a result of the fact that institutions of higher learning do not take seriously the lack of competent teachers [8], and that teachers are under great pressure to accomplish the current workload, teachers have no choice but withdraw from any additional work tasks [4], let alone taking the initiative to get

involved in the development of ESP courses. At the same time, teachers themselves do not think highly of the future of ESP courses [8].

The above-mentioned situation causes many challenges in the cultivation of competent faculty for ESP courses, such as the quantity and the quality of ESP teachers being rather unsatisfactory [8], the accumulation of ESP courses-related knowledge among teachers being rather undesirable, the number of teaching methods being limited [13], and the teaching skills among teachers needing to be further improved [4] and being unable to meet the needs of the design and development of ESP courses.

3.5 Teaching Procedures for ESP Courses Waiting for Further Improvements

Generally speaking, there is much to be done for the teaching of ESP course in the College English program [4]. And there are a series of problems with the practical teaching of ESP courses. And there is little innovation taking place in the teaching of ESP courses [8]. Furthermore, students lack interest in their study [8], and have an insufficient recognition of the significance of ESP courses, for which proper guidance is supposed to be provided to students in terms of the strategies for learning ESP courses effectively.

4. Measures for Strengthening the Development of ESP Courses

In order to better enhance the research on the development and the teaching of ESP courses in the College English program, the present paper reviews recent findings by scholars in this field, and comes up with several suggestions on the development of ESP courses. That is, there are some aspects of the development of ESP courses that need to be further improved, as listed below.

4.1 Strengthening the National-level Planning for ESP Courses

The development of ESP courses in the College English program requires an overall blueprint at the national level, stipulating detailed rules for their role in the College English program, teaching objectives, teaching models, teaching methods, assessment methods and so on.

Besides, as a major party in the development and the teaching of ESP courses, higher education institutions are supposed to do their part in introducing ESP courses into their current curriculum, coordinating the work among teachers, the office of teaching affairs, and other related departments, and encouraging cooperation centering around the teaching practice, for the purpose of facilitating the development of ESP courses in the College English program.

4.2 Strengthening the Cultivation of Competent Teachers

Universities are expected to attach much importance to the cultivation of competent teachers from the perspective of both strategic planning and teaching practice [13], formulate a long-term plan for cultivating competent teachers, set up a long-term plan and a system of assessment standards for cultivating qualified faculty [9], regularly hold interdisciplinary seminars [13], and provide training sessions on the teaching of ESP courses on a regular basis [13].

Universities are supposed to make use of various ways of cultivating competent teachers [5], and recruit competent teachers from different backgrounds [9], such as encouraging College English teachers to work as ESP course teachers [1], or strengthening the cooperation between schools and enterprises so as for teachers to work in enterprises to grow to be competent teachers [13].

College English departments in universities are expected to update the teaching model, encourage senior teachers to pass on their teaching experience to their colleagues, and guide young teachers to become ESP course teachers [5].

Teachers should change their mindset on ESP courses [4, 9], and enrich their knowledge about language, professional knowledge and cutting-edge trends in related disciplines [4, 9, 12]. In terms of teaching skills, teachers are expected to take part in training sessions on knowledge concerning ESP courses, in order for them to get a better understanding of professional knowledge points relevant

to ESP courses, gain skills at using modern technologies, and further sharpen their language skills [4], with a view to enabling students to gain useful knowledge and language skills.

4.3 Updating the Course System of the College English Program

To some extent, optimizing the course system is the basis for the teaching of ESP courses, because only by improving the ESP course system can teachers effectively carry out the actual teaching activities of ESP courses. To optimize the ESP curriculum, much work is to be done in the following aspects.

First of all, coordination between the preliminary courses and the ESP courses is expected to be effectively achieved. In this process, grassroots teaching decision-making departments need to comprehensively take into consideration the balance and coordination between EGP courses and ESP courses, and try their best to achieve proper positioning of these two kinds of courses and ensure these two types of courses work in harmony with each other [11], given the available teaching software and hardware. At the same time, it is also necessary to ensure that the ESP course system is able to satisfy the needs for academic development among students, including non-English major undergraduate and graduate students [9].

In addition, the teaching management department and the teaching department should cooperate with each other, so as to actively introduce non-language interdisciplinary high-quality courses, and build an inclusive course system with language courses staying at the core and other professional courses being incorporated as well [1, 2, 5]. Furthermore, close attention should also be paid to the development and use of auxiliary teaching materials [1].

On the top of that, it is necessary to lay much emphasis on the development of teaching materials. To a certain extent, teaching materials are the final product of the optimization of the College English course system, and they are the material basis for the implementation of teaching tasks. This requires teaching departments to cooperate with publishing houses to develop high-quality teaching materials in such ways as writing, developing or introducing [2, 5], to meet the needs of both undergraduate and graduate learners.

4.4 Creating New Teaching Methods and Models for the Teaching of ESP Courses

Innovating new ESP teaching models and methods is the right basis for effective teaching practice, and is the precondition for improving teaching effect as well. In order to achieve innovations in teaching models and teaching methods, efforts should be made in the following aspects.

Teaching management departments and teaching departments should work together to formulate teaching goals, improve teaching design [1], adjust and select appropriate teaching content [9], and introduce effective teaching methods [9].

In the process of teaching practice, teachers should take the initiative to make full use of modern technologies [1]. In addition to the use of teaching methods like the oral approach, the listening-speaking-reading-writing approach, the scenario simulation approach and the communicative approach, teachers are also supposed to employ such teaching methods as the lecture method, case study, the Q&A method, discussion instruction and research projects, in the teaching of ESP courses [9].

5. Measures for Strengthening the Development of ESP Courses

There is no doubt that the development of ESP courses in the College English program will involve work in many aspects. This paper believes that the development of ESP courses needs to be further strengthened in the following aspects.

5.1 Making Long-term Planning for the Development of ESP Courses

The policy makers in each university need to form a proper plan for the sustainable development of the ESP course system. First of all, it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive needs analysis,

understand the needs of different parties involved, such as the needs of globalization, the needs of the society, the needs of the labor market and the needs of language learners [5], and in particular use questionnaires and other forms of investigation to analyze the needs of learners including non-English major undergraduate and graduate students, so as to give suggestions for the development of ESP courses and formulate a proper plan for the future development of ESP courses.

At present, the teaching of College English to non-English majors in colleges and universities is carried out under the guidance of *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Therefore, colleges and universities should formulate the overall teaching objectives in line with *College English Curriculum Requirements* as soon as possible, and establish and practice a new teaching model for the College English program, with EGP, ESP, and IC serving as the main modules [2].

5.2 Updating Teaching Methods

In the process of establishing the ESP course system, it is necessary to actively innovate teaching models, deeply explore blended teaching models based on internet technology, and promote the reform of teaching methods. At the same time, a variety of teaching methods and teaching materials are supposed to be employed in the teaching of ESP courses, such as relevant corpora, MOOCs, SPOCs and micro-courses [5].

5.3 Setting up a Systemic Evaluation System for ESP Courses

An effective evaluation system consists of a system of standards for assessing the teaching effect of ESP courses and serves as the exit evaluation mechanism for these courses. A scientific evaluation system is a diagnostic tool and a measurement means for monitoring the whole process of teaching. It should be a system that involves both teachers and students, and combines summative assessment and formative assessment [14]. Of course, from the perspective of teaching achievement testing, it is also necessary to introduce social evaluation.

6. Conclusion

This paper reviews the current situation of the development ESP courses in the College English program in China, examines several problems in the theoretical research and teaching practice of ESP courses, puts forward measures for further improvements, and looks forward to the future development of the research on ESP courses against the background of the integration of education for both non-English major undergraduate and graduate students.

Inevitably, there are some regrettable aspects of this paper, such as the lack of quantitative analysis, and the unsatisfactory breadth and depth of literature review.

However, this paper hopes to put forward some ideas for the construction of ESP courses in the College English program, provide suggestions for the construction and teaching practice of ESP courses, with a view to improving the teaching efficacy of the College English program, and to ensuring that English learners can really achieve their goals in language learning, and master necessary language skills for effective communication with people across the world.

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