

ESP Teachers' Experience in Designing and Implementing Course Materials at a Vocational Institution in Kuwait

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Abstract

The dearth of research on teachers' experiences across multiple phases of the ESP course has been highlighted by numerous researchers in the field (Alexander, 2012; Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018; Campion, 2016). The current research seeks to address this gap by examining the processes through which ESP teachers navigate the design and implementation of specific materials. The research employs a mixed-methods approach in two stages: a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews with teacher participants. Twelve ESP teachers at a technical college in Kuwait participated in this study to investigate their thoughts and feelings while designing specific materials, as well as their attitudes and reactions when implementing these materials in the classroom. The research unveils some interesting issues pertaining to the experiences of teachers involved in ESP instruction and the aspects contributing to the effectiveness of the designed materials. Significant recommendations were offered based on findings concerning the interplay between teachers' cognitions and classroom practices; teacher education and professional development programs; and the relationship between the academic environment and teacher performance.

Keywords: ESP, materials design and development, beliefs and practices, teacher education

1. Introduction

There is a broad tendency to depict a successful language teacher as being innately skilful or 'natural' in all aspects pertaining to the educational experience (Hüttner et al., 2011). This, by default, bears the critical impression that the best teachers are always those who possess the natural craft of this career and that the success of a language teaching and learning experience inescapably relies on such high levels of innate craftsmanship. This conception indeed has been contended in the ELT literature in general and the ESP field in particular (Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018; Huttner et al., 2009; Hüttner et al., 2013). In fact, several factors closely relevant to the experiences of ESP teachers during specific instruction can immensely serve as catalysts of success in their instructional journeys, providing a rationale for the current study.

When it comes to the design and implementation of materials, ESP teachers' roles as needs analysts, material designers, implementers and evaluators have been highlighted, among many other roles, in the literature (Belcher, 2006; Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Chen, 2000). This means that teachers' expectations about what the field is and what tasks and duties ESP teaching entails can be influential determinants of how they regard themselves as teachers of specific language genres and how they deal with the course as a reflection of these considerations. While research which deals with the learners' ESP needs, materials, and curriculum evaluation abundantly exists (Lee & Swales, 2006; Li et al., 2020; Lockwood, 2012), experiential research which taps into the experiences of teachers while being involved in different stages of their ESP instruction, such as material design and implementation, seems to be scarce (Alfaraj & Alkandari, 2024). In principle, materials are a fundamental pillar of the ESP learning experience, as they serve as facilitators that help learners progress from the GE to the different experiences of learning about their scientific genres. Such a shift from GE to ESP learning requires prudent, thoughtful consideration of issues such as the selection of materials and approaches to their use, to enable learners to derive maximum benefit. Considering materials as a focal factor in the course supports the idea that teachers' beliefs and enacted decisions in this domain can, in turn, help or hinder the whole-class experience, whether for themselves or their learners. As ESP courses grow in popularity in academic/vocational institutions, as well as in global workplaces, the need to probe the contextual realities that underlie such experiences becomes essential. Some seminal issues were detected in the ESP literature in this realm, which can potentially branch into multiple and critical avenues of discussion, amongst which are teacher cognition and practice, teacher education (TE) and professional development (PD), as well as institutional support for ESP teachers.

2. Literature Review

Despite the growing interest in the interplay between cognition and practice, little research input has been offered in this domain when it comes to the fields of ESP/ EAP (Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018). Individual beliefs hold the power to initiate contextual change. As such, it is just as vital to study the teaching and learning processes and outcomes as it is to examine the beliefs of the active

contributors in the course and how these beliefs are conducive to specific classroom action patterns. Whether seen as rooted and contextualised or as fluid and malleable (Borg, 2015; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Sanchez & Borg, 2014), teachers' conceptualisations of teaching can influence their readiness to receive updated instructional epistemologies. As in any domain involving human cognition, the relationship between beliefs and practices cannot be reduced to a simple bidirectional relationship. Instead, it is a 'complex network' in which beliefs, actions, reactions, and knowledge, among many other constructs, synergistically interact and are usually impacted by and impacting on their context of being (Sanchez & Borg, 2014). In the study of Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019), for example, the concept of learner autonomy was depicted differently by their teacher participants. This consequently led to variations in how teachers approached this concept in their instruction and in how they viewed their courses and learners, given their mental interpretations of autonomous learners and their rights and duties in the course. At the same time, while some teacher participants acknowledged the value of learner autonomy as a source of self-guided exploratory form of learning, they questioned its feasibility and practical application in the Saudi context due to social, policy-related, and learner-related influences.

To take the domain of ESP writing as another demonstration in this case, Hyland (2013, p. 240) comments that 'faculty teachers' feedback is shaped by a desire to see students write in discipline-approved ways, yet only infrequently supports students towards this goal'. While teachers' perceptions of academic writing in this study highlighted the importance of promoting awareness of the linguistic and social norms of the targeted genres, they have also referred to some ecological factors, such as learners' proficiency levels, as majorly influential. Such contextual realities subsequently influenced how teachers chose to approach their feedback-providing experience.

Therefore, the theoretical framework for the study is based on an interesting inference from both of the aforementioned examples, namely that 'context and constraints mediated the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and practices' (Basturkmen, 2012, p. 291). Beliefs can be holistically seen as 'statements teachers make about and evaluations of what should be done, what is preferable and what should be the case' (Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018, p. 15). However, teachers' classroom-related decisions are also actions, reactions, and proactions that arise from and are influenced by their exposure to their surrounding environments, as well as how they interact with such contextual realities.

On such theoretical grounds, researchers such as Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019, p. 30) urge the consideration of teachers' cognitions 'as being characterised by systems of competing forces which vie for implementational supremacy (i.e. in shaping teachers' actions)'. Teachers' enactment of certain aspects in their classrooms does not necessarily stem from their belief in the concept. Although teachers might envision a specific practical instructional scenario, these 'competing forces', sometimes ecological or historical, go under conflicts contributing to realistically steering enactment in a direction which can at times be inconsistent with what has been envisioned initially.

The above-demonstrated relationship between human beliefs and practices supports the need to investigate these beliefs in the area of ESP teaching and learning. In fact, several factors can help shape the beliefs of teachers involved in the experience of specific language teaching. A critical facet in this realm can be exhibited in the nature of teachers' ESP-related perceptions. ESP is encapsulated in the idea that 'we communicate as members of social groups and that different groups use language to conduct their business, define their boundaries, and manage their interactions in particular ways' (Hyland, 2011, p. 8). Based on Hyland's quote, it can be inferred that teachers' conceptualisations of such groups of language users, their professional community, and their linguistic and non-linguistic norms and conventions can be crucial determinants of their instructional decisions. With the constant changes in the disciplinary norms and conventions adopted in specific disciplines over time, it is difficult to accept the idea of teachers holding on to their historical knowledge of general language teaching and applying it to new and specific instructional situations (Borg, 2015), especially if these historical conceptions are derived from GE backgrounds.

This issue was showcased in the thorough work of Alexander (2012) who concluded that her teacher participants' beliefs about teaching EAP to learners of low proficiency were influenced by the lack of teacher education they were offered, forcing them subsequently and realistically to resort to their historical beliefs about general language teaching which is quite differing in terms of focus, target knowledge and required methodologies. Thus, it can be confidently argued that teachers with lacking beliefs about the fundamentals of ESP and its modern social concepts may choose to focus exclusively on the linguistic aspects of language teaching as a contingency plan to save the instructional experience, rather than familiarizing learners with the social, contextual, and critical elements entailed in the learning of their target genres, e.g. autonomy, considering audiences, level of formality and dealing with linguistically-diverse language users.

The influence of teachers' ESP knowledge and conceptions on their performance is also evident in the seminal work of Lee and Swales (2006). Similar to the 'discovery-based' approach to ESP instruction showcased by Cheng (2021), Lee and Swales (2006) attract attention to how their beliefs and knowledge of ESP have contributed to the success of the learning outcomes in raising the learners' awareness of the generic conventions they would potentially encounter in their professional futures, specifically by introducing them to the 'rhetorical conscience' of expert writers in their domains. By effectively employing corpus-based instruction, Lee and Swales (2006) reported their success in offering their learners an experience in which key aspects are accentuated in their learning journeys, such as critical thinking and judgement, autonomy, engagement, and use of corpus as a tool to enhance writing. According to Lee and Swales, teachers' knowledge of the four essential fundamentals of corpus linguistics has greatly helped in guiding their instructional agenda: *teaching about corpora*, *teaching to exploit corpora*, *exploiting to teach corpora* and *teaching to establish resources with the help of corpora* (See Fligelstone (1993) and Renouf (1997) for more information). Appraising this experience brings to the fore the essential role teacher knowledge can play in enhancing the experiences of their learners and eventually achieving a successful instructional experience.

As explained above, the problem stemming from the lack of epistemological knowledge of ESP extends beyond the attitudes of teachers and learners. It also jeopardises the quality of the knowledge provided in these courses and the quality of the outcomes achieved. As confirmed by Al Hilali and McKinley (2021), treating ESP instruction simplistically as learners' transfer of knowledge from the classrooms to their potential workplaces is less likely to address the realities of these workplaces and the real nature of situations and communicative incidents that could take place there. The key here is for teachers to develop the ability to appraise their instructional experiences and the performance of their learners throughout the course, and to incorporate new ways and tools of teaching to enable their learners to reach desired outcomes. For an effective appraisal to take place, teachers need to be aware of their mental representations of specific language teaching, what they know about it, and how these mental depictions can affect their actual classroom experiences. According to Stewart (2018), teachers' decision to implement team teaching with disciplinary teachers stemmed from their belief in the importance of this concept in the ESP field, ultimately leading to a more effective ESP experience. On the other hand, Labassi (2010) viewed teachers' depictions of ESP teaching, their GE-related qualifications, and the deficiency of the discipline-related knowledge they held as among the elements contributing to a less successful experience in the Tunisian ESP project.

The above discussion points to an important issue to consider in the realm of ESP teaching: better teacher education (TE) and professional development (PD) can help enhance the teachers' conceptions of their instructional plans and their environmental circumstances, thereby improving the teaching and learning experiences. Researchers such as Abouzeid (2021) and Bradford (2016) point to the risk of lacking proper TE in specific instructional contexts as a serious issue impacting the quality of the ESP course. This is because factors such as the specific target knowledge, learners' characteristics, proficiency levels, and, consequently, teachers' expectations for their learners' outcomes can be daunting for many teachers joining the community of specific language teaching. Abouzeid (2021), for example, who attempted to measure the alignment between teachers' perceptions of specific writing and learners' actual writing samples, found that these perceptions had an impact on the evaluation of their students' writing. Teachers, therefore, need the awareness that their perceptions can influence how they approach instruction, which leads to attempting to employ appropriate methodologies to maximally attain intended outcomes. As teachers range in their levels of awareness according to their previous academic and experiential journeys (Borg, 2015), educational events that can help teachers rethink their instructional conceptions and adapt them to the benefit of their contexts seem to be obligatory. Without providing appropriate channels through which teachers' beliefs and knowledge are questioned and improved, teachers often experience a sense of a lack of belonging to their communities, which generates cases of professional solitude within their contexts (Borg, 2015; Labassi, 2010; Tao & Gao, 2018). This is indeed in addition to the under-evaluated stance of ESP as a recognised academic field in the context of Tao and Gao's (2018) study, which had promoted a sense of 'uncertainty' when it comes to defining their roles and duties as ESP teachers. If such perceptions are not addressed appropriately, both Abouzeid (2021) and Hsu (2014) identify precarious strategies that teachers can use to adapt to their situations, such as simplifying content, tasks, and materials; prioritising and excluding content; and simplifying assessment tools. Strategies like these can indeed jeopardise the quality of the epistemologies offered, their depth, and their authenticity.

To demonstrate the significance of educational opportunities on teachers' performance, on the other hand, the study of Van Ha and Murray (2021) showed how educating channels such as guided PD sessions have helped teachers change their beliefs about aspects of their teaching from being spontaneous and random to a more systematised and planned, which resulted in more effective and targeted practices. Such educational opportunities, which can enrich the conceptions of ESP teachers of their specific language teaching experiences, can only thrive in the presence of a robust institutional support system offered by the management personnel in charge of the academic institution.

Teaching specific content has had its challenges for teachers in different parts of the world (Campion, 2016; Ding & Bruce, 2017). As such, institutional support, a third crucial factor in facilitating teachers' instructional missions, can help inflect positive change in these contexts. As explained by Werther et. al (2014, p. 453), the experience of language teaching is 'more of a problem than most people dare to openly admit'.

All the above discussion threads and examples are fundamental in providing evidence for the affirmation of the significance of ESP teachers' cognitions and how they can impact their actions and reactions in their classrooms. This discussion also affirms the teachers' right to receive educational opportunities to acquire the proper knowledge to shape their instructional depictions soundly and to support the achievement of intended goals from the ESP course. Therefore, the current research seeks to explore the following questions in the realms of teachers' cognitions and practices:

1. What are the ESP teachers' cognitions towards ESP courses?
2. What are the ESP teachers' cognitions towards ESP course materials?
3. How are these ESP teachers' cognitions on ESP courses and their materials reflected in ESP teaching practices?

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The current study takes place at the College of Technological Studies, CTS, in Kuwait. This vocational college is committed to providing the Kuwaiti job market with qualified personnel in several technical fields, including chemical, civil, marine, and petroleum engineering, as well as kinetic power technology.

CTS students are required to complete four English-language courses to fulfil their graduation requirements: two common-core courses followed by two ESP courses. Common Core courses are designed to prepare students to transition to their ESP courses by providing essential academic and technical skills. This is followed by the two ESP courses, which are divided into technical reading and writing for one and technical listening and speaking for the other.

Because different courses targeting different skills can lead to ambivalence in the views provided, the current study focuses on the second ESP course: Communication Skills (ESP 171). This is a technical course focused on listening and speaking skills. The course aims to equip learners with the tools they need to function effectively in scenarios anticipated in their future workplaces. The course follows a topical format, and the themes were determined through a needs analysis conducted by a team of staff members. Topics range from occupational safety and incident reporting to technical specifications, mechanisms, and statistical reporting.

ESP171 was purposefully selected for exploration in the current study. Since the course was introduced, no textbook has been used to teach it due to the difficulty of finding one that covers all of the aforementioned technically driven topics. Therefore, the course was taught using materials compiled by a team of teachers involved in ESP instruction at the college, including audio and video materials from the internet. Teachers were then provided with the materials and asked to adhere to the overall course description and objectives, supplementing them as needed based on their students' levels or other legitimate considerations relevant to their situations. Despite this, teachers in the department still complained about the difficulty of teaching the course due to issues with the assigned materials. Teachers repeatedly highlighted its confusing nature and the instability of its materials. While adhering to the overall course plan and objectives, many teachers chose to provide different materials for these reasons.

3.2 Participants

To provide an illustrative sample that depicts the scenario in the investigated context, 12 ESP teachers constituted the sample for this study. The selection of these teachers was based on key criteria. First, teachers should have taught the target course (ESP 171) for at least two semesters to form their own beliefs about the course and generate practices that can, in turn, be critically reflected upon (Borg, 2015). Second, their experience with the target course should be relatively recent, meaning that the teacher participants were not supposed to have stopped teaching the target course for longer than a semester. This is to ensure that teachers' cognitions regarding their experience in developing and employing their ESP materials remain fresh and have not undergone subsequent phases that may not be relevant to the focus of the current study. Twelve teachers participated in the questionnaire; only ten were interviewed due to practical constraints on availability. Detailed demographic information for the teacher participants is provided in Appendix A.

The sample of teacher participants is naturally diverse in terms of academic qualifications and years of service, whether across academic service in general or within ESP specifically. As proposed by Borg (2015), factors such as years of service and academic qualifications could be key contributors to potential differences in how teachers deal with their material design and implementation experiences. More specifically, the past and present experiences of learning *a* language, learning *about* language, learning about language *instruction*, and involvement in the actual instructional experience are crucial catalysts to consider when examining how teachers' experiences are shaped in certain aspects of their instructional journeys.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Using the tenets of the mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023), data from the quantitative component, the survey, was used as a blueprint to inform the questions used in the qualitative component, the semi-structured interviews.

The survey uses a 5-point Likert scale. The questions were categorised into four sections: personal information, general perceptions about ESP171, perceptions about ESP171 materials, and teaching practices. The topics introduced in the survey were further informed by the major themes and debates reviewed in the ESP literature which can impact participants' materials design experiences such as specificity (Hyland, 2019), needs (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016), roles and identities of ESP teachers (Tao & Gao, 2018), ESP PD and TE (Basturkmen, 2017; Ding & Bruce, 2017) and genre and corpus studies (Bhatia, 2014; Huttner et al., 2009).

Salient themes derived from the teachers' survey responses were then used to guide the preparation of interview discussion points for each participant. More specifically, each teacher participant was asked to elaborate, providing examples and narratives of their own experiences to clarify the viewpoints they had expressed in the survey. This, in turn, enabled consideration of the differing experiential trajectories of each participant, uncovering their personal depictions of this experience and their impact on their classroom practices. The semi-structured nature of the interview, however, left an opportunity for the researchers to further chase any immediate issues arising from the responses of the participants (Galletta, 2013).

3.4 Research Approach and Data Analysis

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, with a preliminary quantitative phase (survey) followed by a primary qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews), for several key reasons. A review of the literature indicates that most studies in this area have employed a purely qualitative design (Alexander, 2012; Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018; Campion, 2016; Chen, 2000; Hafner & Miller, 2018). While this approach seems rational given the experiential nature of human cognition, the current study aims to examine the issue from an alternative methodological perspective, thereby enriching the body of research with a different understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Such multiple methodological lenses might reinforce the credibility of our understanding of this human phenomenon (McKim, 2017). The essence of mixed methods lies in combining quantitative/qualitative methods within the same research project in

different ways (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2016). By acknowledging the plurality of qualitative and quantitative elements in addressing the research questions, we will draw on diverse methodological approaches and employ multiple methods to better understand the investigated phenomenon.

To emphasise this different methodological lens, the initial quantitative survey was administered to teacher participants to identify the main issues pertaining to their personal experiences. These relevant issues in the design and use of materials in their ESP courses were then used to guide the main phase of semi-structured interviews conducted in the second phase of the research. In the interviews, teachers were given space to elaborate on aspects they identified as influential in their personal experiences with ESP materials, sharing their concerns and specific stories and incidents that could further justify and solidify their viewpoints. The interviews also allowed some room for additional points to be added and discussed regarding these experiences.

Thematic analysis was used to generate the findings in the current research. First, salient themes pertinent to teachers' experiences were identified from the quantitative survey to guide the interviews. Interviews were then transcribed and analysed according to the procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke and Braun (2021), given the potential of this method to 'thematising meaning' (Holloway & Todres, 2003), which can ultimately lead to the desired understanding of the investigated issues.

4. Results and Discussion

The themes identified through thematic analysis of the interviews are organised into three sections to address the study's three research questions.

4.1 What are ESP Teachers' Cognitions towards ESP Courses?

ESP teachers' cognitions regarding their materials may be based on several different belief categories, such as beliefs derived from their experiences in teaching and learning, or beliefs accumulated during their teacher education, or even beliefs adapted from the collective consciousness about their roles as teachers (Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018; Borg, 2015; Guo et al., 2019). This section presents the participants' explicitly stated beliefs.

Several themes arose during the teacher interviews concerning their cognition of the ESP courses. Lack of professional development in ESP is one of these themes. T1 states, "I can't even think of one time that I attended a professional development session," while T3 reaffirms with "Everything is changing, but we are not changing." T4 takes this a step further by explaining:

"I don't find that there are a lot of workshops in our region [...] they're always outside of the country [...] I find that being physically there is more engaging for me personally than being on a Zoom meeting. Because at the end of the day, now I'm the student, and I know what suits me."

Another observation by the ESP teachers is that the curriculum does not appear coherent or cumulative. "Usually, the curriculum should be accumulative in a way, in which there is a start point, a middle point, and an end point, where you see that there is [...] a gradual advance in the level. It doesn't show this." (T3) Another teacher also made statements like, "I had difficulty building a bridge between the aims and objectives and the materials I was given," and "And we had the specifications and benefits about the mechanism and there's graphs and statistics. One of the things I found particularly difficult was trying to tie all of those together" (T4). T5 also explains that "There's a missing gap. Those students don't know how to introduce themselves [...] you always work from the familiar to the unfamiliar."

As noted in the literature review, teachers' roles range from material designers to evaluators, and teachers' expectations of the ESP teacher role influence their views on how they approach ESP courses and their responsibilities (Belcher, 2006; Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Chen, 2000). A few teachers expressed concern about ESP teachers' lack of expertise across specialisations and argued that the course should be specific to a single specialisation. For instance, T8 states, "I don't think I can successfully teach them ESP for that field unless I'm specifically only teaching people in that field." However, most teachers agree that connecting ESP materials and content to real-life and work situations greatly benefits learners (T2, T4, T5, T8). Therefore, while there is a struggle in teaching students of different specialisations in a single ESP course, this is being resolved by connecting the materials to realistic situations in both the students' personal and work lives for them to benefit from knowledge that might not be directly related to their specialisations as previously discussed in Lee and Swales (2006). This also reflects the role of ESP teachers in addressing issues arising from differences in student demographics and interests, a role that ESP teachers may learn and implement with experience, as the participants in the study did.

A notable idea here is that teacher identity is not 'a composed variable with a uniform structure' (Canrinus et al., 2011, p. 593). Professional identity is often shaped by a complex interplay between the self (intrinsic) and the context (extrinsic), and these clashes vary in intensity and yield a unique identity for each teacher. Teachers, as well as management, should be aware of this concept and employ it effectively in their teacher education endeavours. While the aforementioned themes in this section may be amenable to institutional resolution, the ESP teachers in this study have shown progress in other themes, particularly in developing their ESP courses through identity development. For example, some teachers emphasise the importance of listening skills in ESP courses, noting that they lead to better linguistic output and provide access to diverse cultural varieties of the language. T5 confirms "They need to listen [...] I think they need authentic listening material where they can see how the conversations go so they can, you know, be involved more into the conversation." Therefore, they have implemented listening skills in their ESP courses. For example, T3 refers her students to listen to the news in English for practice and explains that in class, "...there is a lot of listening [...] We work on listening and understanding every word that's been said. [...] And then try to get the pronunciation correct." T11 mentions "extra videos for the listening", and T12 mentions,

“The listening videos; we’re trying so much to add diversity of accents so they can hear it more.” Here, the ESP teachers’ identities were influenced by a belief that was realised through their classroom practice. Another theme that illustrates the interplay between the self and context in shaping ESP teacher identity is the need for collaboration. In the literature review, collaboration with faculty from the relevant disciplines is an essential factor in ESP teachers’ understanding of the nature of teaching and learning in students’ specialisations (Benesch, 2001; Guo et al., 2019; Hafner & Miller, 2018; Stewart, 2018). T2 and T10 expressed this belief and have both contacted other faculty members to arrange for the curriculum committee to continue doing so, but to no avail.

4.2 What are ESP Teachers’ Cognitions towards ESP Course Materials?

Teachers had various cognitions towards the ESP course materials. Some felt that the materials were not sufficiently specific and that the ESP courses should focus on a single specialisation rather than multiple specialisations within a single course (T1 & T8). Others felt dissatisfied with the materials because they felt unprepared, like T4, “I’m not satisfied with it because going into teaching it, it was my first time, and I didn’t find any toolkits or a textbook that was specifically designed for the course.” T4 also reaffirms this later in her interview, “I like going in being fully prepared, and the feeling that I was not prepared [made it challenging].” Others found the challenge in “*finding materials that are suitable for [the students’] level.*” (T2)

There is also a general lack of motivation to design their own materials for several reasons. One teacher explains, “I stick to the syllabus, the objectives, regardless of their [the students’] reactions” and insists, “You teach me what to teach and then I can build the system” (T1). Another teacher states, “It’s very time-consuming to find material and make up a full material that is suitable to be used for everyone” (T8). T12 explains that she started by designing her own materials, “*but it’s very difficult,*” and “*it takes so much time.*”

Although acknowledging the value of designing course materials based on a needs analysis, some teachers also noted that the materials are not designed with learners’ proficiency levels in mind. T4 explains,

“I just don’t think that the course I designed for the level of the students we have. [...] I’m teaching a student how to talk about safety, [while he] has difficulty putting a subject and a verb in a sentence. [...] I personally bring down the course level down to my students’ needs. I feel better about this because I know that this is what they are able to accomplish, but then I struggle internally because I know that this is probably not what I should be doing in an institution.”

T11 also shares this experience with T4: “*I feel guilty of lowering the material for their needs [...] I feel like it’s wrong, but this is what I’m doing.*” T12 also explains, “I teach them on their levels. I try to bring them up, but I’m not raising the level to the roof and telling them to jump. [...] I know their level. I don’t dumb it down, but I won’t make them jump.”

In the study by Canrinus et al. (2011), teachers’ motivational levels varied considerably depending on their expectations for their teaching roles, and those who lacked knowledge of their roles were either less motivated toward their profession or sceptical about it. On the other hand, some teachers noted that relating to students and having a sense of fun motivates both teachers and students. T2 purposefully tries to have fun while teaching. “I keep making jokes. [...] I enjoy it, and then sometimes I would look for stand-up comedy things that I can incorporate.” T12 also believes in this; “I remember we put [...] ten minutes of comedy show in the beginning of class, and the students had so much fun. They laughed so much that they wanted to learn, and they would answer questions, and they would talk about the different accents.” T8 emphasises the importance of earning the students’ trust; “...if they can trust us, and they know that we want what’s best for them, [...] they’ll actually try harder.” T8 also mentions, “The more I work to raise their belief in themselves, the more they work.” These statements that the teachers made about what should be done, as well as the actions they have taken based on these beliefs, are also an example of how identity is developed through the interplay between the intrinsic self of the teacher and the surrounding context they are teaching in (Basturkmen, 2012; Basturkmen & Bocanegra-Valle, 2018).

4.3 How are These ESP Teachers’ Cognitions on ESP Courses and Their Materials Reflected in ESP Teaching Practices?

According to Karimi et al. (2016, p. 12), ‘HE teachers often tend to expend more effort and show perseverance even under adverse conditions’. As such, this sense of self-efficacy can help teachers overcome, or at least mitigate, the problems or obstacles encountered in their instructional contexts. Examples of this can be seen in this section.

In the previous section, the ESP teachers’ cognitions that came to the surface included the need for greater specificity in the ESP course and its materials. This is reflected in ESP teachers’ practices of asking their learners to bring in materials from their specialisation courses (T3) and in teachers’ insistence on and provision of authentic communication situations for their learners (T2, T5). T8 gives learners a way to have a “personalised dictionary”: “I tell them, everybody get a notebook. Keep it in your pocket, and anytime you go someplace, if you don’t know the name of something in English, write it down and then come and ask me.”

As Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018, p. 25) also note, authenticity and real-world tasks were integral to the teachers’ syllabi. Some teachers also encourage the authenticity and transferability of skills. They advise their learners to watch the news in English or use an online dictionary (T3, T4), to pass on resources they can use after graduation (T3, T4), and to plan field trips to future workplaces so that learners are exposed to authentic workplace language (T5). Lee and Swales (2006, p. 72) assert that the role and degree of learners’ involvement in their own learning journeys are essential to the success of their instructional experience. Highlighting their readiness to explore into their disciplinary genres, intrinsically motivated, highly literate in technology and statistics, the authors assert that ‘Take even one of these positive attributes away, and the outcomes might have been different.’ While learner involvement is a challenge for ESP teachers in this study, it remains an area of focus.

A study by Huhta et al. (2013) finds that sufficient knowledge of Micro (learner needs), Meso (workplace needs), and Macro (societal needs) levels leads to a more extensive and better-informed ESP syllabus. The majority of participants in this study have revised their syllabi and advised their learners to undertake more tasks across these three areas of knowledge. However, as implied in previous research like Alfaraj and Alkandari (2024, p.97), ‘the difficulties that ESP teachers face can be resolved by a number of collaborations. These include collaborations with ESP teachers within the department (especially those who teach the same courses), with scientific discipline teachers, and with the ESP learners’ future workplaces. These collaborations should result in familiarising ESP teachers with the required contextual skills as well as addressing learner needs and customising materials that attend to those needs.’ Such collaborations would contribute to the ESP teacher’s knowledge, which, in turn, contributes to a better-informed ESP material design process and syllabus.

4.4 Discussion

The teachers of the study echo the experiences of teachers in studies such as those of Werther et. al (2014), Dearden and Macaro (2016) and Cots (2013) pointed to the additional workload imposed on them as exerting a profound impact on the quality of their teaching, especially when considering that teaching specific genres requires more than merely focusing on lexico-grammar aspects. For some teachers, such as the participants in Cots’ (2013) and Labassi’s (2010) study, they felt thrown into the new situation of having to deal with a new, instructional disorganised context, leaving them with limited time, resources, and support to navigate their way through the course and to discern the nature of specific teaching. Such scenario, in turn, can result in the teachers’ choice to adopt practices such as trial and error, teaching ESP from a general (purely linguistic) angle, resorting to L1 for confirmation of comprehension or opting for language and content simplification among other practices, even if these practices were counter to their beliefs of the core nature of ESP teaching and learning (Borg, 2015; Champion, 2016; Karimi et al., 2016; Steckley, 2020). More specifically, such practices are attempts to mitigate the potential negative impact of teachers’ lack of methodological and theoretical knowledge in these specific teaching domains, or a reaction to contextual realities (e.g., a lack of institutional support). Whether collaborations with teachers from the scientific disciplines (Benesch, 2001; Hafner & Miller, 2018; Stewart, 2018), or reciprocation of knowledge between ESP teachers locally and internationally (Champion, 2016; Chen, 2000; Tao & Gao, 2018), providing and facilitating the teachers’ involvement into communicative channels through which teachers can understand the nature of their target disciplines and the nature of the teaching and learning experiences in their domain has been proven to be crucial for a more effective instructional mission.

5. Conclusion

The study reaffirms the bidirectional influence of the ESP teacher’s intrinsic self and the surrounding teaching context on ESP teaching practice, material design, and implementation. In instances where the ESP teachers in the study could act on the beliefs they expressed, they did; in cases where the responsibility lay with the institution, they expressed those beliefs with a sense of helplessness.

The research outcome emphasises the importance of tailoring ESP courses to the specific needs and expectations of teachers with varying levels of experience. While the pedagogical strategies appear well-received by experienced ESP practitioners, the overall course design and materials may require reevaluation to better address the concerns and preferences of this demographic. Another outcome of this research also emphasises the importance of understanding the dynamic interplay between experience, expectations, and pedagogical preferences in shaping the overall assessment of ESP courses. Without providing adequate educational and awareness-raising opportunities for teachers to transition from their general beliefs about language teaching and learning to their new, specific fields, methods that can be detrimental to the educational experience are very likely to prevail in their contexts. This necessitates preparing teachers to be lifelong learners who persist in their study of their target disciplines and the pedagogies that best support the attainment of the learning outcomes.

The study’s results reiterate the experiences of teachers reported in other studies. Therefore, the transferability of ESP teacher struggles in designing and implementing ESP materials is unquestionable. Future research could conduct in-depth investigations of ESP teachers’ decision-making processes throughout the teaching of an ESP course. Insight into beliefs, actions, and reactions could help further understand how ESP teacher identity is developed through an ever-changing belief system and contextual factors. This could contribute to practical problem-solving that could improve the ESP teacher experience globally.

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Authors’ contributions

Both researchers were responsible for the study design and revision. Both researchers were responsible for the discussion and revision of the whole article.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Demonstration of the demographic information of the teacher participants

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE RANGE	ACADEMIC QUALIFICATION	TOTAL YEARS OF ELT	YEARS OF TEACHING ESP
T1	Male	33	MA in Linguistics	4	4
T2	Female	38	MA in TESOL	5	5
T3	Male	59	MA in TESOL	25	25
T4	Female	35	Masters in TESOL	10	4
T5	Male	53	PhD in curriculum development	28	20
T6	Male	31	MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL	3	5
T7	Female	38	PhD in Applied Linguistics/Language Education	8	8
T8	Male	41	MA. In English Language and Education	12	12
T9	Female		MA in Applied linguistics/ TESOL	13	10
T10	Female	43	PhD in Education	20	16
T11	Female	38	MA in English language education	4	4
T12	Female	23	MA in TESOL	10	4