



A qualitative inquiry into the dilemmas and challenges perceived by teachers in ESP instruction

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores six teachers' experiences of ESP instruction in order to better understand the nature of the professional knowledge needed to make use of conflict and to manage a particular teaching dilemma. The approach adopted for this study is interpretative, using the case study method. Six participating teachers were interviewed over a three month period at four universities in Taiwan. The frameworks of socio-cultural theory and grounded theory guided the data analysis. The author's intention is to show that such an inquiry can reveal ways in which those teachers' stories are telling cases that may enable others to respond and make meaning of their own experiences. Unraveling what constitutes professional knowledge in the practice of teaching is messy work, but the author hopes that when seen through the lens of six teachers' balancing act of managing dilemmas, blending practice and theory, improvising, and reflecting on these processes, some clarity will be revealed.

1 Introduction

Given the role English plays around the world, it is not surprising that a substantial and growing number of universities in non-English speaking countries have started offering English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to promote students' competency in English language in their own field of specialization, enhance their employability, and to increase their opportunities for professional mobility (Marginson & Mc. Burnie, 2004). However, ESP has developed at different speeds in different countries due to the varying needs and specifications that arise in each language-learning setting. Thus, it may not be considered a monolithic universal phenomenon (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

ESP with the focus on developing various branches of English language education is relatively new in Taiwan and most teachers do not have adequate formal training in this field (Huang, 1997). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) coined the term "practitioner" for ESP teachers since, they believe, many pivotal roles such as course designer, materials developer, researcher, evaluator, and classroom teacher should be taken on by an ESP instructor.



Therefore, ESP teaching requires a special approach to the training of the teachers who are supposed to teach English through content. It is estimated that roughly 95% of those currently teaching in the context of ESP are self-taught both in ESP and in the specific field in which they teach (Orr, 1995).

Canbay and Berecen (2012) point out that teachers' conceptions shape their instructional decisions in the classroom. "In other words, what teachers do in their classrooms is oriented by their conceptions of teaching which are derived from their beliefs including a teacher's prior experiences, school practices, and a teacher's individual personality" (Canbay & Berecen, 2012:71). Teachers form conceptions consciously and these guide their teaching throughout their careers. However, most of the literature on ESP is concerned with what should be taught and its implications for the syllabus and design of the material, with occasional forays into the role of the learner during the learning process. Research in teachers' conceptions of ESP teaching has often been ignored, with the result that research, exploring the decisions ESP teachers take in the teaching/learning process is relatively rare (Watson Todd, 2003).

1.1 Purpose

The aim of this small-scale exploratory study was to disclose ESP teachers' perceived dilemmas, both with respect to the content and nature of the dilemmas (the 'What') and to the ways of coping with them through the selection and use of strategies for their resolution (the 'How'). Here, *dilemmas* are defined as "situations which caused the beginning teachers to make a decision between two equally important choices" (Sparrow, 2000:289). The result is a predicament in which "each of the available choices ... involves a choice of negative factors as well as positive ones" (Katz & Raths, 1992:376). Resolving the dilemma is a matter of compromise and ongoing management of the conflicts (Katz & Raths, 1992). By providing opportunities for teachers to report in their own words, we might gain some insights into their understanding of and attitude towards some of these difficulties and dilemmas in ESP instruction.

1.2 Significance of the study

What is presently needed in the field of ESP is some instruction on how English teachers entering the domain of ESP for the first time can efficiently orient themselves to ESP as well as familiarize themselves with the profession of their ESP learners. This research is an attempt to assist those officials responsible for providing support to ESP teachers. This study will allow them to better identify the needs of ESP teachers, provide the appropriate in-service training and courses, including ESP teacher education development. It is also hoped that this study will provide some insight into the challenges facing those English teachers that are acting as curriculum developers of ESP instruction.

2 Literature review

2.1 The origins of ESP

The insights gained from the origin of ESP reveal three basic reasons: the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics, and a focus on the learner. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an " ... age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale...for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role [of international language] fell to English" (p. 6). Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western



money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge was English. The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:7).

The second key reason cited as having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Whereas traditional linguists set out to describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics began to focus on the ways in which language is used in real communication. It was discovered that a variant of English will change within the particular context in which the language is used. Therefore, if language in different situations varies, then it is required to tailor language instruction in order to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts.

The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do with psychology. Rather than simply focusing on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs became as equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking. To this day, the catch-word in ESL circles is learner-centered or learning-centered.

2.2 Definition of ESP

As with most disciplines in human activity, ESP was a phenomenon grown out of a number of converging trends of which we will mention the three most important: 1) the expansion of demand for English to suit the specific needs of a profession, 2) developments in the field of linguistics (with attention shifting from defining formal language features to discovering the ways in which language is used in real communication, causing the need for the development of English courses for specific group of learners), and 3) educational psychology (learners' needs and interests have an influence on their motivation and the effectiveness of their learning).

Definitions of ESP in the literature are relatively late in time, if we assume that ESP began in the 1960s. Hyland's statement about ESP is as follows:

“ESP's distinctive approach to language teaching is based on identification of the specific language features, discourse practices and communicative skills of target situation, and also on teaching practices that recognize the particular subject-matter needs and expertise of the learner (2002:385).”

Based on Hyland's statement, language is used to accomplish purposes, and what language concerns is communication rather than the language itself. Munby (1978) also defines ESP from a similar perspective as follows:

“ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners, rather than by non-learner-centered criteria such as the teachers' or institution's pre-determined preference for General



English or for treating English as part of a general education (p.2).”

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an *approach* rather than a *product* – meaning that it does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material or methodology. The basic question of ESP is: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? The purpose of learning English becomes the core.

Stevens’ (1988) definition of ESP makes a distinction between 1) **absolute characteristics** (language teaching is designed to meet the specified needs of the learner; related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities; centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, text, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of the discourse; designed in contrast with General English), and 2) **two variable characteristics** (ESP may be restricted to the language skills to be learned, e.g. reading; and not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology).

Robinson’s (1991:3) definition of ESP is based on two criteria: 1) ESP is normally ‘goal-directed’, and 2) ESP courses develop from a needs analysis which aims to specify what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English, and a number of characteristics which explain that ESP courses are generally constrained by a *limited time period* in which their objectives have to be achieved and are taught to *adults* in *homogenous classes* in terms of the work or specialist studies that the students are involved in.

Each of these definitions have validity but also weaknesses. Considering Hutchinson and Water’s definition, Anthony (1997) noted that it is not clear where ESP courses end and General English courses begin because numerous non-specialist ESP instructors use ESP approaches in that their syllabi are based on analysis of learner needs and their own specialist personal knowledge of English for real communication. Stevens’ definition, by referring to content in the second absolute characteristic, may confirm the impression held by many teachers that ESP is always and necessarily related to subject content. Robinson’s mention of homogenous classes as a characteristic of ESP may lead to the same conclusion. However, much ESP work is based on the idea of a common-core of language and skills belonging to all academic disciplines or cutting across the whole activity of business. ESP teaching should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the discipline.

Having all these in mind, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) modified Stevens’ definition of ESP by postulating two criteria: absolute characteristics and variable characteristics. For the absolute characters, there are three points mentioned. First, ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner. Second, ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves. Third, ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities. As for variable characteristics, they include that ESP may be related or designed for specific disciplines and use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English. In addition, ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation; it could also be used for learners at secondary school level. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners as well. As a result, ESP is centered on how to use the language instead of exploring the language itself (Zhang, 2007).



Above all, ESP is viewed as an approach to language teaching which is characterized by prioritizing learner needs as the main objective of ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Water, 1987; Hyland, 2002; Edwards, 2000; Zhang, 2007).

An overview of the origins of ESP illustrates the important role of ESP in English language teaching (ELT). In this study, by “English for specific purposes” (ESP), I refer to the wide area that concentrates on all aspects of the specific-purpose teaching of English, and encompasses the academic (EAP) and vocational /occupational (EOP) frameworks (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

2.3 ESP teachers

Many teachers assigned to teach English for Specific Purposes are unprepared to handle the genres their students study. Although it is perceived that the lack of specialized knowledge of content is the main hindrance to teaching ESP effectively, the ESP literature (Strevens 1988; Swales 1988; Pholsward & Allen, 1988) as well as insights from genre studies (Swales, 1988; Freedman & Medway, 1994), and schema theory (Cohen et al., 1988) reveal that difficulties may be caused instead by unfamiliarity with professional genre forms and discourse conventions, their purposes and functions, as well as the values systems that underlie the discourse in various fields.

In addition to the routine tasks of a language teacher, the ESP practitioner may be required to deal with administrative, personnel, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, curricular, and pedagogical issues that may be unfamiliar to ELT teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1990; Koh, 1988; Robinson, 1991; Waters, 1994).

The situation of most new ESP teachers can be more adequately described by a comparison with Bizzell’s (1986) description of the dilemma faced by basic writers entering college: basic writers experience a clash of dialect (Standard and non-Standard English); new ESP teachers experience a clash between standard English and technical English. Basic writers experience a clash of discourse forms (academic discourse and popular/non-academic discourse); new ESP teachers experience a clash between literary and scientific/technical discourse forms. Finally, basic writers experience a clash of ways of thinking (academic world view and home world view), while new ESP teachers experience a clash between inclinations to value imagination and emotion and the pragmatic/objective/unemotional demands of a technical/scientific world view.

Some ESP researchers emphasized possessing English language teaching knowledge more than possessing subject knowledge when it comes to becoming a qualified or competent ESP teacher. For example, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stated that ESP teachers needed to possess a sound English language teaching (ELT) knowledge to be able to make a series of decisions, but do not need to learn specialist subject knowledge as long as they met the following three requirements: (a) a positive attitude towards the ESP content, (b) a knowledge of fundamental principles of the subject area, and (c) an awareness of how much they probably already know. Yet, Hutchinson and Waters’ proposal is not entirely supported by some ESP researchers or studies (Kuo & Ung, 2008). The question, therefore, of how far ESP teachers’ knowledge should extend is not an easy one to answer.

Differing from the two aforementioned discrepant perspectives regarding how much subject knowledge and practical experience a qualified or competent ESP teacher should possess,

Richards (1996:281-2) points to the importance of understand teaching “from the inside”, i.e. of the “need to listen to teachers’ voices in understanding classroom practice” in order to be in a position to “understanding teaching on its own terms and in ways in which it is understood by teachers.” While some efforts have been devoted to studying ESP, the voice of the ESP teacher in the classroom has largely gone unheard.

3 Methodology

Since the aim of this study is to disclose ESP teachers’ perceived challenges and dilemmas, it was designed as a naturalistic, interpretive inquiry. The research did “not attempt to manipulate the research setting” (Patton, 1990:39), but rather, to elucidate the internal dynamics of relationships and situations. Hence, qualitative methods, with their capacity to emphasize contexts, meanings, and individuals’ interpretations, were adopted. More specifically, the research involved case studies of six ESP teachers with the researcher in the role of ‘participant-as-observer’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

3.1 Participant

The study employed purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) and criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The participants of this study are four female and two male English teachers teaching ESP courses at four technological universities in Taiwan. They had been teaching ESP for a few years. None of the interviewees had received ESP pre-service training. The reason for including experienced ESP teachers from different teaching environments was to allow for a variety of dispositions on teaching, as well as working conditions (which was found to influence the deployment of teaching strategies; Kremer-Hayon & Tillema, 2002). Table 1 presents some information about the participants.

	Gender	Age	Highest degree	Years of ESP teaching	ESP course
T1	Female	38	Ph.D.in TESOL	4	Business English
T2	Male	56	M.A. in Professional Writing	6	English for Hospitality
T3	Male	32	M.A. in Translation	3	English for Tourism
T4	Female	28	M.A. in TESOL	3	Business English
T5	Female	40	Ph.D. in Media & Communication	5	English for Health Beauty
T6	Female	45	M.A. in TESOL	8	English for Nursing

Table 1. Background information of participants

3.2 Data collection

Data collection was based on in-depth interviews (Kane et al., 2002), which were intended to explore in an open-ended manner the topics of the dilemmas experienced, as well as focus on the strategies of coping with dilemmas. At the beginning of the 2010 fall semester, a background interview with each of the teachers was conducted. The purpose of this interview was to obtain basic background information about the participants and to understand their initial views on ESP teaching. An appointment for an interview was made with each participant, and an interview package was given in advance. The package consisted of a cover letter stating the purpose of the study, an informed consent form, and a list of interview questions. A semi-structured follow-up interview with each of the teachers was conducted at



the end of the semester. They were designed to elicit reflections and descriptions of how each teacher carries out their ESP instruction.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were coded through constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:101-116), which refers to a process of repeated sifting through the data to distinguish similarities and patterns of reference in the transcripts of the interviews. Analyses of these similarities and patterns gradually led to an evolving coding system for the categories. This repetitive process continued until coherence and a saturation of understanding the data were accomplished.

4 Findings

The findings show that several alternative ways exist for coping in an instructive manner with subject knowledge dilemmas in the ESP classroom. Teacher tensions came from additional demand in subject knowledge and special classroom skills, ESP assessment, heavy workloads and inadequate teaching preparation, lack of confidence, training and experience, and a number of dilemmas appeared between English and ESP instruction. In this study, all these tensions and dilemmas are grouped into one big category, because they are all related to teaching demands and changes. The teachers reported these problems together with a number of perceived reasons and suggested coping strategies, as described below.

4.1. Challenges in developing ESP teaching skills

The participating teachers reported that they had made a wide range of mistakes in their early ESP teaching practices as illustrated below.

- T1: I had added ESP elements too much at the beginning and designed tasks which were too abstract and complicated.
- T6: I found out that I set problems which students did not have enough prior knowledge to tackle.
- T2: I didn't give students enough instructions for the tasks and developed materials that did not match their interests.
- T3: I used words which were too difficult to understand and allocated unsuitable roles to students in group work.

In analyzing their mistakes, the teachers found that they had overlooked certain factors or wrongly estimated student abilities or classroom situations before taking actions. They mainly attributed these mistakes to their inexperience in ESP teaching, their lack of training and preparation, and their underestimation of the difficulties of ESP teaching, or overestimation of their students.

However, in the teachers' responses, there was obvious evidence that they were learning from their own mistakes. In nearly all reported cases, they seemed to know what mistakes they had made and had proposed (or hinted) possible methods for improvement. They included adding in more examples, more warming up, simplifying their worksheets, using more daily-life materials, tailoring their tasks to students' interest and abilities, differentiating learning into high and low levels, and developing their teaching in a progressive way. On the whole, they did not express too much stress in this technical level of reflection. To many of them, it was only a matter of experience. In fact, the teachers seemed to be quite positive about this learning process, and had confidence in overcoming this transitional problem.



Quite unexpectedly, only three teachers in this study reported that they had difficulties in assessing ESP learning of students. Participants' comments on the test development process shown below provide insights into their experiences of ESP assessment.

- T1: Usually in the school environment many test papers have to be drafted in a short period of time, in the midst of other work, and so tailor-made subtests are used together with subtests produced by publishers, and the main consideration of test design is the content, format and level of difficulty.
- T5: It has been an isolated task for me to set an ESP assessment at my school as we seldom discuss with the colleagues or seek for their advice.
- T2: The greatest problem I had and this is spite of my having taught ESP courses for six years now, was in trying to estimate the approximate difficulty of items.

They were mainly concerned about its summative assessments, instead of formative ones. In their reports, participants made the point that test development in their schools is often a solitary task, with little thought given to test specification: tests are essentially cut and pasted from existing sources; and little moderation takes place. In general, little attention is given to issues of reliability and validity.

When considering the issue of tests feeding into a more formative feedback system, where the quality of the test informs the teacher and the teaching process, T6 makes the insightful point that:

“After teaching ESP, I realized that setting a test paper is not an easy task. Instead of testing what is easy to test, we have to construct test that we really can discover how successful the learning experiences had been for the students rather than to show in what respects they were deficient. In this way, it is hope that learners might be motivated towards future learning experiences. Thus, as a teacher, we have to be carefully plan and construct our test items. [A test] should also provide useful feedbacks for teachers to moderate our teaching and improve our teaching in the long run. “

No concrete suggestions for improvements in this area were found in the teacher responses.

4.2 Dilemmas participants reported

During their ESP teaching the teachers in this study faced a number of dilemmas that could be categorized in the following three areas:

- *pedagogical arrangements*
- *teacher role*
- *teaching style*

Each of these dilemmas is outlined in the upcoming sections and explicated along with examples from the situations and related interviews. They are discussed separately, yet are in fact related in complex ways that reflect the complexity of the teaching situations.

4.2.1 Dilemma in pedagogical arrangements

Apart from making some obvious mistakes in their teaching practice, the teachers also reported several pedagogical dilemmas, including in their time use, managing classroom discipline, providing guidelines, responding to student mistakes, coping with student differences and designing ESP activities. First, as teachers lacked teaching time, they faced



dilemmas in allocating adequate time to various classroom activities, and, in a wider sense, between teaching for English learning and teaching for subject content. Second, they were puzzled about how restricted the tasks should be and how detailed the instructions should be. At the beginning of the tasks, they found that if they gave too few instructions and examples, students might feel lost and did not understand the tasks. However, if they give too detailed guidelines, there was no challenge for the students. As commented on by T4,

It is important to provide instructions (the thinking frame) to students. But, how restricted should the frame be? If the frame is too strict, it may restrain students' thinking. If it is too loose, students may feel puzzled.

These ESP teachers often did not have sufficient background experiences to work in a learner-focused mode, even when they wished to do so. Hence, they found themselves facing the dilemma of having to choose between what they knew they could make work and what they felt inadequate to implement but which they felt might be a more effective approach. A similar teacher dilemma appeared in how to deal with structured teaching such as demonstration and lectures in the clinical area which interfere with the student's role as part of the work force in busy units. T6 indicated:

When teaching Medical English Conversation myself, I found it very difficult and I found the literature in this area not very helpful. It mostly dealt with 'teachable moments' without explaining how the teacher can ensure that she is there when the teachable moments occur.

Another teacher dilemma was how to cope with students' individual differences. Working with mixed-ability classes presented the teachers with numerous problems related to choice of overall goals, curriculum content, teaching strategies, and classroom management. In particular, a recurring dilemma that was mentioned within interviews was: "Do I concentrate on the less able students and ignore the rest, or should I aim for the middle range?" T2 reported that at the beginning, he made the task very challenging and expected it to stimulate student ESP learning. However, he finally found that the low ability students could not cope with it. Student differences in ESP tasks were great. How to take care of different ability groups might be a difficult question in ESP teaching. Generally, the teachers' initial resolution to the dilemma was to start everyone on the same task and then work more closely with the students having difficulties. The remainder of the class had to cope on their own, or if they were at the more capable end of the spectrum, they had to find something else to do when they finished.

The last dilemma found in this study was in designing ESP teaching. An example was noted by T5:

"When designing ESP teaching, I would try my best to align with the textbook so as not to affect the teaching progress. What pain and effort it costs to move students and get them really interested in studying their own practice. However, this restrained the design of the ESP activities and limited their possibilities."

The teachers were puzzled about the extent to which they should restrain the design of the ESP activities by the subject content. If they choose ESP activities that focused on the subject content, it might facilitate content learning, but reduce the effectiveness of the ESP teaching. How to teach English and subject content together, not at the expense of each other, is another unanswered question. On the whole, not too many teachers explicitly expressed their



dilemmas in pedagogies, and most of them did not suggest any method to cope with these dilemmas. Reflected from the teachers' responses, they showed more frustration and worries about the pedagogical dilemmas than about the teaching mistakes they made due to their lack of experience. It seems that technical mistakes are easier to handle than such pedagogical dilemmas. In most cases, the pedagogical dilemmas were related to the dilemmas in teacher role, style and values, which are discussed in the following paragraphs. Among all these teachers, only one suggested seeking a balance as a strategy to cope with the dilemma. T2 offered a different coping strategy –he highlighted the need to have gradual transition in the change process, from controlled imitating activities to open-ended free-expression activities. To a certain extent, teachers' coping strategies were related with their perspectives. Some teachers might take a dichromatic view, struggling between two extremes, whereas others might consider ESP teaching reform as a kind of balance or transition process.

4.2.2 Dilemma in the teacher's role

Each profession socializes its members differently with regard to role, values, and practice. There may often be the tacit assumption that one's beliefs about the teaching and learning process are shared with others working in the same educational environment. Some teachers expressed tensions and dilemmas in their teacher role, teaching style, educational value and ethical choice. T3 described his teacher role dilemma in this way,

When teachers are conducting thinking activities, . . . the students should be allowed to discuss loudly, think in an unconstrained way and make mistakes. Teachers should not be in a hurry to correct their mistakes. This is the most difficult. This is also my largest struggle and conflicts in my ESP instruction. As a teacher, I should correct students' mistakes as soon as they make them. But when I do so, it may hinder their ESP learning. It is really not easy to strike a balance. . .

This teacher seemed to be struggling between a knowledge-transmitter role and a facilitator role in his ESP teaching. The following excerpt from T6 also supports T3's view.

With the medical English you need to cover so much of it is just vocabulary and the concepts behind the vocabulary. There is a time limit. It's not easy to do demonstrations/brainstorming. You feel like you have to work through the material/units quickly, so you have to modify the instruction.

It seemed that some of the teachers experienced role dilemmas between traditional ELT and ESP instruction.

Below are some of the statements about the role of "language" versus "subject" in the team teaching ESP classroom:

T4: "...the content basically drives the language instruction. My partner expected me to be able to find language activities that will coalesce with what she is trying to teach in terms of content. She leaves it up to me to decide what a particular group of students needs at that time. She doesn't in any way enter into those decisions. She thinks she shouldn't be usurping my role. "

T5: "For me content is important, but it seems to me language is more important. At some point, my content partner was saying that content should be the priority, so we were arguing for each other's position."

T4 and T5 revealed major differences in their partner's assumptions about language/content



priorities in the classroom, while T6 below points out the potential dangers of such distinctions.

T6: [A problem is] “a sense of territoriality – I’m the language teacher and this is my area and you’re not supposed to cross this boundary. And this is your area, content, and so you shouldn’t expect us to cross each other. I think this kind of rigid boundary between content and language gets in the way of getting things done. ... because when you start thinking “well, this is my stuff and I want to see it work,” ... as if it’s a competition for who is the better teacher. This kind of ego involvement is in the way of actually serving the students. “

The following comments show less of a concern about the distinction between language and content, suggesting that there isn’t a clear distinction (T1), or students are typically unaware of it (T2).

T1: “In this class ... the language is so integrated with the content it’s very difficult to draw a clear line. “

T2: “As the language person, I am very conscious of my need to defer to the content person when an issue about content comes up, when it’s really explicit. And I think my partner does the same when an issue of language comes up, but for the most part I think the students are unaware of that kind of division.”

It is not an easy job for them to handle subject-specific ESP courses. Spack (1988) illustrated the severity of this dilemma by saying that “even when they collaborate with content teachers, [they] find they have little basis for dealing with the content. They therefore find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being less knowledgeable than their students” (Spack, 1988:30). These statements underline a significant difficulty for the majority of the ESP teachers who have minimal or no knowledge of the specific subject areas.

4.2.3 Dilemma in teaching style

Apart from change in their teaching role, the teachers also found that they were facing the tensions of changing teaching styles. One struggle of teaching styles was between an “all-knowing” and “all-answering” style and an open-minded and co-constructing style. In this study, the teachers expressed difficulties in accepting their own limitations in front of their students. T5 frankly reported that, in an open classification exercise of skin care products, she forbade her students to choose a classification which she herself did not know. However, in her reflection, she was aware that students should be given freedom to choose in this kind of tasks. To improve, amazingly, she suggested that teachers should gain rich knowledge and thorough understanding of the topic before they guided students in this kind of open-ended tasks. Very similarly, T6 expressed,

The lesson preparation (of ESP teaching) is more difficult because teachers need to collect a lot of materials in advance so as to answer the different questions raised by students.

Certainly, an “all-answering” style would exert extra tensions on teachers in ESP teaching. For a teacher who has already been used to this kind of “direct” teaching, what feeling would she/he have when waiting for students’ slow responses in ESP learning? T1 said,

“in designing the fast food restaurant games, some groups wrote down their ideas



quickly... However, some groups were quite hesitant. (They) wrote and then rubbed out again and again. Their progress was so slow. I was quick-tempered and could not help giving them hints... “

It might be quite difficult for ESP teachers to change from a dominating and quick style to a patient and “waiting” style. This study revealed that, in ESP teaching, teachers experienced tensions in changing their teaching style, especially for those teachers whose original style was quick, dominating, strict, critical, all-knowing and all-answering. Teachers experienced dilemmas between the ESP teaching style and the traditional Chinese teaching style.

5 Conclusion and implications

This study reveals that teachers experienced tensions in seeking/developing teaching skills, time, energy, training and confidence for ESP teaching, and also faced dilemmas in changing their pedagogies, roles, and styles. These tensions and dilemmas were found to be highly related among themselves, and they were also related with resources, student learning, cultural and school factors. Among them, the ESP assessment, resources allocation, and success in ESP teaching were found to be highly related. In analysis, all teacher dilemmas mainly originated from the discrepancies in the traditional and ESP education. Though the dilemmas are highly related, they are distinguishable from each other. Pedagogical dilemmas are the struggles in making pedagogical arrangements for seemingly opposite or competing demands (e.g. between giving detailed guidance and leaving room for free exploration). Role dilemmas are the conflicts between two different teacher roles, e.g. knowledge transmitter and ESP facilitator. Style dilemmas refer to the difficulties in adopting two kinds of teaching styles or changing from one to another, for example, from quick to patient, skeptical to accepting, etc.

In establishing a personal pedagogy of ESP education, ESP teachers are faced with numerous dilemmas. Developing strategies for dealing with dilemmas calls for a high level of professional thinking as it involves weighing alternatives for action and deciding on the one that best meets specific needs (Windschitl, 2002). Dilemmas may be a useful trigger for an ESP teacher’s thinking and acting, but they may also frustrate, present difficulties and impede the course of teaching. Consequently, it appears that the study of ESP teachers’ dilemmas is apt to enrich professional knowledge and serve as a basis for a pedagogy to improve the teaching of ESP (Loughran & Russell, 1997). The professional dilemmas that ESP teachers recognize and resolve might reveal how they succeed in connecting their views on ESP teaching to their actual teaching (Lampert, 1985). It is therefore of interest to gauge these professional dilemmas in order to understand what governs the relationship between conceptions of ESP teaching and actual teaching itself.

The identification and elaboration of the dilemmas and difficulties faced by the teachers of ESP courses suggest three main points concerning teacher education and related research:

- The impact of English teacher education programs needs to be examined, particularly with regard to ways to bridge the gaps between ESP instruction and prevalent classroom practices.
- In pre-service ESP teacher education, teachers need more opportunities to examine the inherent complexities and conflicts of ESP teaching alongside a wide array of potential resolutions and their related advantages and disadvantages.
- More mentoring or other forms of support are needed by beginning teachers as they



‘survive’ their initial placements and the many challenges they face in ESP curriculum planning and implementation, classroom management, and personal professional self-esteem.

- Teachers’ perceptions of their students’ behaviors had a strong influence on pedagogical beliefs and practices, yet this has not been an area of focus within the research literature on teacher beliefs.



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