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English Language Education in Vocational High Schools in Taiwan: A Study from an English for Specific Purposes Perspective

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# English Language Education in Vocational High Schools in Taiwan: A Study from an English for Specific Purposes Perspective

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#### **Abstract**

The spread of English worldwide has led to a diversity of English language needs. There is a clear need for pedagogical practitioners to be aware of and understand this trend. This is reflected in the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In the vocational education system, vocational-oriented courses are offered to prepare students for their future occupation. Specialised curricula are devised to meet the requirements of different disciplines. However, this is not the case for English language education in vocational high schools (VHSs) in Taiwan.

This study explores teachers' and students' experiences and perspectives of English education in VHSs in Taiwan. The findings suggest that Taiwanese VHSs deliver general English courses, with a wide range of topics covered in the curriculum, but there is a lack of consideration of vocational application. It seems that the general English curriculum is at odds with the aim of training students for specific professional competency. Also, specialised language learning needs and purposes are not addressed.

This paper argues that the current general English courses offered in Taiwanese VHSs are not adequate in terms of relevance and connection to students' future jobs, and proposes that a possible solution is an ESP approach, which may bridge the gap between the general English curriculum offered in VHSs, and the needs of students for their future careers.

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# Introduction

This is an exploratory study seeking descriptive and interpretive accounts of the suitability of General English courses offered in vocational high schools (VHSs) in Taiwan. The study was qualitative, involving semi-structured interviews with VHS students and teachers. There is an increasing diversity of English language needs and purposes across different disciplines and occupations in Taiwan and elsewhere. Studies have been carried out at the university level to explore and investigate English learning needs for specific disciplines and particular groups of learners. However, there seems to be a lack of such studies at the VHS level, particularly in the EFL context in Taiwan.

This paper starts by considering changes to the education system resulting from globalisation, and changes to requirements in the Taiwanese job market. Since the establishment and development of vocational education is aimed at job preparation, this study investigates the adequacy of VHS English education, regarding its ability to sharpen VHS students' competitive advantage in the fast-changing socioeconomic development of Taiwan. This focus gives rise to two main research questions: (1) What are VHS students' perspectives of, and perceived needs from, their English study? (2) What are VHS teachers' perspectives on English courses offered in VHSs and on its connections/benefits to students in terms of their future job competitiveness?

This study examines whether the current English courses are perceived to be appropriate, in terms of vocational relevance, in order to equip students for their future employment. The study serves as a preliminary fact-finding and allows an initial evaluation of English education in VHSs. Furthermore, this exploration could help VHSs review and develop their English curriculum, and potentially enhance the quality of VHS English education in respect of students' employability.

# Background and rationales for the study

The establishment and development of vocational education in Taiwan aims to deliver the manpower necessary for national and social economic growth and development, and to provide students with adequate professional knowledge and specialised skills for the job market. Different stages of Taiwan's economic development and different educational missions have attempted to fulfill the need at different stages of development. The ultimate goal of the Taiwanese vocational education system is to cultivate skills needed in the job market, and it has been modified according to the country's economic growth.

Graddol (2006) states 'almost everywhere, education systems are in a state of rapid change. Globalisation has led to a desperate race in many countries to upgrade the skills of their workforce faster than their economies are being forced up the value chain' (p. 70). English language proficiency policies in many Asian countries, including Taiwan, have adopted 'English for everyone' (EFE) as a core component in schools (Wedell, 2008), with the intention that such English provision could increase the number of English speakers and also the level of English proficiency nationally, and thus increase the nation's competitiveness globally. However, as Wedell (2008) explains, the outcomes of EFE can often be disappointing. He calls for changes to

EFE curricula so that they more closely fit existing contextual realities and priorities, thereby helping most learners feel that their English learning efforts are worthwhile.

There are two main types of secondary education in the Taiwanese education system: academic high schools (AHSs), aiming to prepare students for college or university, and VHSs, aiming to prepare students for a range of occupations. VHS students typically choose a specialism, such as electrical engineering, computer science, or hospitality. In principle, students who graduate from VHSs are equipped to take up employment or go on to advanced study, such as technology college or university courses. Specialised subjects are offered for different departments in VHSs, but this is rarely the case for English. In addition, the focus in VHSs is on technical subjects, with a heavier emphasis places on professional and specialised practical skills. This has consequently led to "most vocational and technological university students tend to regard English courses as a low priority... and believe the English courses contribute little to their academic and career goal' (Warden & Lin, 2000, p. 414). Similarly, Warden and Lin (2000) point out that in Asia, 'English is treated as a required subject rather than a tool for social survival' (p. 536). However, the socioeconomic position is in the process of changing. A report from the 104 Job Bank learning sector (a leading online recruitment service in Taiwan, 2004) shows that 53% of its total job vacancies require the applicants to have foreign language skills, and 95% of these jobs specifically ask for English ability. Furthermore, 88% of the industries would like to set up "English ability requirements for different positions" (Pien, 2007). This demonstrates the increasing requirement for English abilities in the Taiwanese job market.

As Long (2005) advocates, 'there is an urgent need for courses of all kinds to be relevant – and to be seen to be relevant – to the needs of specific groups of learners and of society at large' (p. 129). In the face of changing job requirements in the national and socioeconomic development of Taiwan, VHSs need to equip students with an English proficiency that can meet the new employment challenges, and enable them to compete in a competitive global market.

# General English vs. English for Specific Purposes

General English, which is traditionally taught to non-native English speakers (NNES) as a compulsory subject in schools, teaches a wide range of English applicable to generalised situations for general purposes (Orr, 1998), and focuses on the language itself i.e. the grammar (the general rules of English usage) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1989). It can lead to teaching and learning English for no specific reason or purpose (Abbott, 1981), or even for other people's, as opposed to the students', reasons (Belcher, 2009).

As indicated by research on ELT, there is diverse language use and particular subject-matter needs in different contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1989). This means that language teaching would not be adequate or efficient if it only covered generic language contents and skills without considering target language varieties and specific learners' needs (Long, 2005).

The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged to address "the communicative needs and practices of particular professional or occupational groups" (Hyland, 2007, p. 391). It focuses on the application and requirements of English in

specific contexts (Gatehouse, 2001). It does not just involve specialist language and content, but is guided by the results of a needs analysis (Robinson, 1991). For example, in his analysis of Scientific English writing, Barber (1982) found that, although language syllabus typically covered all of the English tenses, the progressive verb forms are rarely, if ever, used in scientific English writing. This does not necessarily mean that we should neglect the less frequent tenses completely. The idea behind ESP is to understand the needs and purposes of the learners, so that we can prioritise specific language competencies accordingly. This stress on the need to priortise competencies and leaners' target goals distinguishes ESP from General English (Hyland, 2002).

Therefore, an understanding of the underlying needs and purposes for engaging with language learning may help identify possible factors that could stimulate learning and strengthen the relevance of learners' English learning to their goals.

# Aim of the study

The study aims to address the question: is the General English offered in VHSs adequate to provide a comprehensive employment advantage for the students in the changing socioeconomic climate? This qualitative exploration could help determine what, if any, potential problems exist within the current system, and thus enhance the quality of VHS English education in respect of students' employability.

### Method

To achieve the research aims, answers for the following questions were sought:

- (1) What are VHS students' perspectives of, and perceived needs from, their English study?
- (2) What are VHS teachers' perspectives on English courses offered in VHSs, and its connections/benefits to students for their future job competitiveness?

The main research instrument was face-to-face semi-structured interviews, collecting teachers' and students' expectations, experience, and perspectives of the English courses, and their views on the match between English courses offered in VHSs and English required for students in the workplace.

As Stenbacka (2001) states, qualitative research is carried out 'with the purpose of generating understanding of a social phenomenon,' because 'one is interested in understanding another persons' reality based on a specified problem area' (p. 552). The semi-structured interview gave respondents the opportunity to respond in their own words, and allowed the researcher to understand and interpret plausible explanations.

Participants were 29 VHS third year students and 9 teachers chosen randomly by four VHSs in Taoyuan County, Taiwan. The sample size is limited by those who agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted individually, lasting 15-30 minutes each, and recorded with the participants' consent. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed into computer files.

At the first stage of data analysis, both teachers' and students' responses were read through in order to gain an overall sense of their perspectives regarding English teaching/learning in VHSs. A coding scheme was used at the next stage of data

analysis. Teachers'/Students' responses were read through question by question in order to search for common themes and patterns across their responses to a particular question. Open and axial codings were used to develop a system of classification. Open coding gives selected sections a code, while axial coding identifies and creates coding categories and themes to sort codes into groups. NVivo 8.0 was used to facilitate data analysis. The method of coding and interpreting was checked by independent researchers to ensure consistency throughout the whole process.

# **Summary of key findings and Discussion**

<u>Research Question 1:</u> What are VHS students' perspectives of, and perceived needs from, their English study?

# RQ1. What are VHS students' perspectives of their English language study?

(1) The first set of questions aimed to extract information about the needs, reasons and motivations for learning English. The two main themes which came out of the students' responses were the recognition of the global status of English, and the potential benefit of English for their future career development. Typical statements were:

'Because it is now a universal language... If you don't learn you'll fall behind.' 'Because English has become the most widely accepted international language.'

'It is important in the workplace, very important! It also helps you to find better work.'

- (2) The second set of questions was associated with students' English learning experience in and opinions on their VHS English courses. Several points were drawn from their responses and were summarised as follows:
- (a) Repetitive content: Students feel that they keep on learning the same content that appears in junior high schools. Too much repetitive content makes students feel like they are not learning anything new, particularly with grammar. For example, one student states, 'It's like junior high English grammar being recycled.'
- (b) Traditional learning/teaching and language skill training: The content and method of teaching/learning are regimented and exam-oriented without much interaction involved. The English skill training is focused more on reading and writing than on speaking skills. However, communication skills are the skills that students would like to improve and practise more. In addition, vocabulary seems to be the main element of the English lessons, but students do not see the value of memorising vocabulary mechanically. Typical responses were:

'It's more or less for exam purpose only. And it's more about writing and reading and hardly about speaking. It's difficult for us to learn how to speak. I think school should focus more on students' speaking skill. I think the education now always focus on writing. But honestly I think speaking is much more important and practical.'

'In most of the classes, the teacher does all the talking and we just sit there and listen, and memorise words at home.'

(c) English learnt in school lacks practicality, applicability and flexibility: The content, such as individual articles and stories, is not practical enough to show students the real application of English, nor is it flexible and creative enough to show students the various and alternative expressions or ways they can use English in real life. Respondents stated that:

'Even though the stories in English textbooks contain many common words; I still feel they do not really approach our daily life conversations. I think the words and expressions we have used in daily life are different from what are presented in textbooks' stories or other forms of text content. I feel they are not commonly used in our everyday living and conversations with friends.'

'Inspirational stories, stories about helping others or success through hard work aren't helpful for improving English, but probably for other things.'

# RQ1.1. What are VHS students' perceived needs from their English study?

After looking at students' perspectives and experiences of English study in VHSs, the researcher further explored their perceived English learning needs by asking the following questions about the areas, and types of English learning that the students want to learn, and what VHS courses actually provide. The students were then asked to what extent they thought the courses fulfill their English learning needs. They were also asked for suggestions or improvements to the current VHS English courses.

The responses to the question of the areas that students wanted to learn mainly concerned subject/job-related English, with good communication skills needed. For example, students stated:

'I probably will want to learn English more if it is related to my future career.'
'Um...related to us...for example, major. It would be better if we learn about the English related to our major. Being able to communicate is important, too.'
'The more useful, practical type and commonly used English. Like conversation. Related to tourism and work.'

The data reveals that the English taught in VHSs is general English, with only the food management and tourism departments receiving additional hospitality conversational English courses. Students feel that their General English courses are neither practical nor helpful for their future job prospects, whereas students receiving additional verbal hospitality conversational English lessons express positive views on learning subject and job-related English. For example:

'I think that the content in the English class fails to meet my future requirement, which means I'm not learning at all.'

'The English in the hospitality conversation course is helpful. But the English in English classes don't seem too helpful.'

Students point out that English will become more meaningful if they can see its relevance to their specific major and their potential future career. Thus, it is not surprising to see that hospitality conversational English lessons receive positive feedback from students, as students think that it is closer to situations students might encounter in their future work. Typical statements were:

'Because the things we learned are not related to our career/major, they are very general, so I think there is no connection between the English I learn in school and the English that I will be required by my future career or job interview.'

'Conversation for hospitality, because it is something related to students' major, it's more likely to be related to potential career English ability requirement.'

Furthermore, a considerable number of students show positive opinions towards rewriting English textbooks to put more focus on job-related English. For example:

'I think it would be better if textbooks were revised to prepare vocational students for future career preparation and English ability improvement. This way, learning English is more useful and helpful for us. It will increase our motivation to learn English since it is useful for our future.'

'The textbooks should put greater emphasis on workplace English without ignoring everyday English. This way, students will get more benefits (it will be more useful to students). It will be easier for students to find a better job. After all, how to obtain employment is still our priority.'

So far, this paper has looked at students' perspectives of, and perceived needs from, their English study in VHSs. Apparently, vocational high school students think that job-related English is important and beneficial in terms of increasing their competitiveness in the job market, which is aligned with students' expectation of English language mentioned earlier. However, such English courses are not provided by VHSs. Positive feedback is shown for the potential adjustment of English orientation in textbooks.

<u>Research question 2:</u> What are VHS teachers' perspectives on English courses offered in VHSs, and to what extent do the English courses benefit students in respect of their future job competitiveness?

# RQ2. What are VHS teachers' perspectives on English courses offered in VHSs?

Teachers' perspective on English education provided by VHSs reflected three types of English taught in VHSs:

- (1) The course teaches 'Everyday English', which covers a broad range of English and will somehow be useful to students. However, it does not have, in fact, much practical application for Taiwanese students.
- (2) Exam-oriented English, which is the de facto English teaching/learning focus in Taiwan.

(3) Subject/job related verbal conversational English, offered only to two departments, food management and tourism. It is believed to be more useful for students in terms of their future job competitiveness and their understanding of the real application of English learnt in school.

Typical responses to the three types of English currently taught were:

- (1) 'I don't think it has much use in the future...There are some articles, and there's some vocabulary that we don't use much in everyday life...They won't use this vocabulary and grammar much in daily conversation.'
- 'Although the editor tries hard to show the 'common' expressions used in daily life, but it really isn't used in real life.'
- (2) 'Taiwanese people strongly believe that study and academics are the best way to go, and therefore a lot of what is studied in the technical and vocational education system, whether English or other subjects, has deviated from the industry to focus on progressing through the education system.'
- 'I don't want exam to be the leading element in teaching. But this is the education environment in Taiwan, we cannot escape from this frame. I sometimes really want to teach something else, for example, conversational English and English that students need in their domain, but then those things are not in the exam. There should be a focus on this problem.'
- (3) 'The current material does not really take this (help student's future competitiveness in the job market) into consideration, except Tourism English or Hospitality English, which has textbooks that will help them more in the future.'

'I think it should target different departments, such as the Food and Beverage Departments, I think I've taught them (the English requirement for students when they enter the work field in the future), if they do end up in the Food and Beverage field, I think it is very helpful for them. As for the students in other professions, I cannot offer such guarantee. I think it does not help them too much.'

# RQ2.1. To what extent do the English courses benefit students in respect of their future job competitiveness?

Teachers' responses revealed that English in VHSs appears to be a supporting subject for advancing to further education. Also, exam-oriented content fails to provide practical and realistic English use aligned with the students' needs in Taiwan. It also fails to provide sufficient verbal conversational skill practice.

Teachers consider that subject/job-related verbal conversational English is suitable for VHS students because

(1) It gives students a higher chance to put what they learnt in school into practice, thereby increasing students' understanding, interest, and confidence of English learning.

(2) It gives students an opportunity to practice English according to their specific subject and future career, building up the connection between VHSs and the work market, increasing students' competitiveness in their future job market.

Teachers show positive views towards the potential of English courses to be either a combination of general and career English or more subject/job-oriented English.

Typical statements were:

'Some English words taught in the food and beverage department may be used in the bartending course, or specialized automobile-related English vocabulary might be seen when repairing cars, and this increases students' interest in such English. But with regard to English learning in general, many students are not that interested in learning grammar and other aspects because they may not use such knowledge in regular life. For the kids that put a lot of effort into learning English, it cannot be denied that some of them are only doing it for the sake of graduating or entering a better school.'

'Students are more interested in conversational English in these specific domains, or specialised automobile-related English, because they may use such English in their other professional courses.'

'I think it'd be very good if vocational high schools integrated occupational English into their courses, not very professional English but work related English, according to each department. It can be said that English is currently no longer seen as a professional ability but a basic ability; it's the most important foreign language. So I think it's a key skill that each young person who will enter the workforce should have.'

However, teachers pose concerns about:

- (1) The possibilities for students to change direction in the future, which makes teachers unsure of how useful career English is to students.
- (2) The wide range of professions which make teachers unsure of how much specialised English and verbal conversational skills are required in students' specific major and what should be the focus.
- (3) Whether English will be needed for the majority of VHS graduates. Typical statements were:

'There is a difficult point, because you cannot forecast what road the student will take in the future, therefore we can only use the present textbook and focus on its contents when we teach.'

'What I'd like to ask is if schools designed English courses according to the needs of the future workplace, and the students didn't use regular English textbooks and therefore didn't learn such basic English, if a student should choose not to follow in the career path he's studied for, might the English he has learned in high school then not be so useful to him.'

# Conclusion

In conclusion, the English education offered in VHSs has been criticised for the domination of exams and a lack of consideration of the English practices appropriate to the occupational settings into which VHS graduates tend to be recruited. It seems that the general English curriculum provided by VHSs is at odds with the aim of training students for specific professional competency. Specialised English language learning needs and purposes are not addressed, for example, VHSs students' perceived needs for verbal conversational English in the workplace.

With the focus on specific English applications and requirements for particular learners in specific contexts, and with the stresses on prioritising specific competencies, this study suggests that an ESP approach may be a better alternative to General English in VHS contexts, so that students' perceived needs from their English courses and specific reasons for learning English are addressed. An ESP approach may also bridge the gap between the general English curriculum offered in VHSs, and the preparation of students' future job competitiveness. Arguably, whilst teachers raised concerns about subject/job-related English (see p. 13), this appears to contradict the provision of specialised curricula for different disciplines.

ESP is currently used in vocational language training programme for refugees and asylum seekers, and also by businesses. Within the standard educational framework, ESP is mainly offered at university level, with General English prevalent at the school levels. Numerous ESP studies have been conducted at university level (e.g. Crosling and Ward, 2002; Kaewpt, 2009), and the vast majority of the development of ESP and its pedagogical practices is carried out at this level (Hyland, 2002). This comes from the idea that the instruction of ESP is built on learners having a solid background in General English (Orr, 1998), and that learners would find it difficult to study ESP without this. Indeed, Marshall and Gilmour (1993) point out that many learners' problems of reading comprehension are mostly due to the shortage of general English words, not the lack of technical words, and this situation is even worse for NNES.

This perception has led to ESP being adopted mainly at the university level, while General English is the standard English language education provided in junior and senior high schools. However, there are arguments against the practice of reserving ESP primarily for higher education, particularly for VHSs.

Firstly, General English has been criticised that it tends to teach either too much of the language and skills that learners do not need, or too little that learners do need (Long, 2005), as mentioned earlier in Barber's analysis of Scientific English writing (see p. 4).

Secondly, VHSs provide specialised curricula to meet the requirements of different disciplines, but this is not the case for English. The provision of specialised topics presupposes a need for developing specialised fields of comprehension and training, however, General English does not provide the specific vocabulary and language skill required to complement this specialised knowledge. ESP, however, focuses on students' target goals and the need to prioritise specific competencies, and is 'centred on the language and activities appropriate to particular disciplines, occupations and activities and required by particular learners' (Hyland, 2002, p. 386).

Thirdly, countering the argument that secondary level students are not ready to learn ESP as they do not have the relevant general English, Widdowson (1984) puts

forward the idea that language learning happens when the learning suits the learners' needs and purposes. Also, as Hutchinson and Waters (1989) claimed, 'the clear relevance of the English course to learners' learning needs would improve the learners' motivation and thereby make learning better and faster' (p. 8). The focus should be on learners' English language learning needs.

However, as an ESP needs analysis is not just based on learners' perceived needs; further study should be carried out to determine the actual English needs for VHS students in their chosen career. More research is also needed to investigate the potential benefit of the ESP approach to the VHS sector.

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