UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

LECTURERS' PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) TESTS FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Thesis submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Applied Language Studies)

Academy of Language Studies

April 2019

ABSTRACT

Developing English language tests is one of the specific routines undertaken by language lecturers as essential part of course requirements of assessing the achievement and abilities of language learners. This qualitative study via interpretive-phenomenographic approaches on fourteen English language lecturers teaching ESP courses at eight universities offering engineering programmes aims to investigate their practices of developing ESP tests, examine the aspects governing their practices and determine the extent to which the practices and the tests developed meet recommended ESP models. The research questions guiding this study investigate the lecturers' test development practices, probe their reasons for adopting the practices and explore whether the practices reflect current testing practices, current factors considered, testing constraints or challenges faced and personal testing views upheld. Interviews were conducted to explore the practices of developing tests for the ESP courses and it also probed factors considered, guidelines followed, challenges encountered and beliefs upheld by the lecturers. All interviews were recorded; transcribed, coded and analysed for emerging themes. Case studies on six lecturers at two universities were also undertaken to further probe contextual factors via the lecturers' self-reflection on their test practices and triangulated information from documents analysis of ESP course outlines, examination guidelines and test papers. The findings unearthed complex realities of lecturers' practices where they have to grapple with issues at systemic or macro level in the engineering programmes and their attempts to address challenges engulfing the ESP testing tasks are guided by existing ESP knowledge, longstanding beliefs and views on language testing that present varying degrees of conformity, ingenuity and divergence when juxtaposed to best practices in ESP testing. Underneath these realities are issues of students' lack of English proficiency, Outcome Based Education buy-in and mismatch of ESP course content and delivery with students' actual needs. Prevalent at the lecturers' workplaces is the work in silos symptom lacking in relational agency with engineering colleagues and stakeholders in obtaining authentic input on language specificity for the ESP courses. Despite top-down regulations and guidelines introduced to enhance governance and quality academic practices, the lecturers still have to mitigate the challenges in developing ESP tests. Albeit being adept at executing routine testing tasks, the lingering issues create a certain degree of uncertainty among the lecturers whether the ESP grades obtained by the students via the tests reflect their actual language abilities and skills attained. The study suggests that successful ESP test practices are linked to the awareness of the ESP principles within the contextual realities that surround the ESP courses, the lecturers, the students and the academic fraternity. An integrated multi-dimensional framework incorporating an institutional language policy called Collaborative ESP Testing Implementation Framework (CETIF) is also recommended for the successful managing of ESP matters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of the Study

Within the vast literature on higher education, assessment is often placed at the centre or the pinnacle of the domain which is at the heart of student learning. Rowntree (1987) believes that the realities of an educational system are inevitably manifested via its assessment procedures, which must be thoroughly studied. The researcher believes that it is essential to study this phenomenon as academic grades received by undergraduates must be an accurate reflection of their attainment of the abilities relevant to the field of study they are pursuing. It could also be observed that this demand for reliable academic grades to prove actual abilities possessed by university graduates as well as to meet the expectation of employers has become increasingly prevalent in presently robust economic landscapes. This indicates that assessment practices have equally important roles in education as the essential component after teaching and learning and how tests are developed has significant bearing in the whole educative process and warrants further scrutiny

In this study, realities on language education also require scrutiny of lecturers' practices in developing test materials particularly in the context of English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP) for learners in specific field of study and profession like engineering. This is because the application of ESP concepts in engineering studies in the 21st century serves as an essential platform where authentic target workplace language use and language tasks could be simulated and trained for engineering students and all these must also be incorporated in the assessment components such as tests. Furthermore, ESP courses taught to university students provides them with essential exposure to the nature of English language and communication during academic studies in the engineering programmes and to actual language used during real workplace communication tasks. This however, does not come without constraints and challenges. ESP courses taught to university students serve as essential exposure to the nature of English language and communication during academic studies in the engineering programmes and to actual language used during real