


## Teaching Aviation English: The Sweet and the Bitter


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**Abstract:** The development of the aviation industry after the COVID-19 pandemic is prompting aviation institutions to improve their courses, including English courses. A teacher who teaches English for aviation has an important role to play in adapting the teaching style to the needs of the students. This paper explored the experiences of teachers in teaching aviation English to students in the aircraft maintenance program. The participants were three English teachers from three different aviation schools in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of a fully qualitative study, and the data were analyzed thematically using ATLAS.Ti software. The findings revealed that they faced both successes and challenges in teaching aviation English, which were categorized into three areas: opportunities, feelings, and progress. The subthemes for successes were seizing opportunities, positive feelings, and good progress, while missing opportunities, negative feelings, and slow progress were the subthemes for challenges. Seizing opportunities referred to participants mastering their teaching tasks, while positive feelings referred to satisfaction with teaching, feedback from students, and enjoyment of the learning process. The sub-theme of good progress referred to the participants' better progress. The sub-themes for challenges, on the other hand, were missing opportunities, negative feelings, and slow progress. It referred to the lack of institutional support, limited knowledge about aviation and sources, while the negative feelings referred to frustration with students, technical instructors and a lack of confidence in the knowledge they had. On the other hand, participants felt that their progress was slow when they had to deal with different levels of students, which was time-consuming and related to the nature of learning and teaching aviation English. The findings would help curriculum developers and English teachers to provide an English course that meets the needs of aviation students.

**Keywords:** Aviation English, Success, Challenges, English teachers

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## Introduction

Aviation English is not only limited to the future pilot and air traffic controllers. It also refers to English that should be used by any persons who are responsible to provide services that are related to the safety of aviation such as maintenance line, cabin crew and airfield operations specialist. Aviation English is a part of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), a special English language designed specifically for aviation students and all aviation personnel to use in the workplace. It involves more jargon used among aviation personnel in terms of speaking and writing purposes to ensure smooth flight operations.

ESP is a language teaching approach, which directly deals with the syllabus, methods and activities (Hutchinson, 1987). The purpose of ESP is used for language learning based on the students 'needs and the needs of early learning. According to ESP model, which is developed by Hutchinson and Waters in 1987, there were three (3) elements which was highlighted in this model; necessities, lacks, and wants. 'Necessities' in this model refers to the type of needs that is determined by the demands of the target situations.

Meanwhile, 'lacks' in this model means the differences that exist between the target proficiency and what the target learners know. The last element is 'wants' which refers to the what the learners want to know. Teaching ESP is more challenging compared to teaching general English. It not only requires the teachers' English proficiency but also the knowledge in the specific field. Additionally, ESP teachers face difficulties when implementing an interdisciplinary approach in their classes (Prudnikova, 2013).

The voice of English teachers should be heard because they are the subject matter experts in the language to meet the needs of the students, e.g., in designing the course and selecting appropriate topics and materials. For countless years, this problem has been perceived as a phenomenon that will continue to worsen and recur frequently. This paper therefore examines the experiences of English teachers in teaching English to aviation students, particularly in the aircraft maintenance course.

## Literature Review

Although 21st century education has introduced English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English teachers still face the challenge of equipping students with industry needs and communication skills. They face the challenge of teaching unfamiliar subjects and have to deal with subject specialists. Teachers of ESP lack professional value orientation and knowledge in a particular field (Khamis et al., 2019). Knezovic (2016) found that there is a gap between the practices of ESP teachers and curriculum developers and the demands of the labor market for some elements in their curriculum. This has led them to face a dilemma in terms of subject knowledge (Wu & Badger, 2009). They should be able to interpret the curriculum and select appropriate materials based on the content and tasks used in the learning process (Alexander (2012), Bracaj (2014), and Arno & Mancho (2015).

In Malaysia context, a study that was conducted by Khamis et al., (2015) had revealed some challenges that faced by ESP teachers which are lack of guideline for specific professional values, knowledge in the specific field and lack of ESP and teaching. However, this study did not focus in any aviation area. Meanwhile, English teachers faced issues with using modules or syllabuses, as well as significant issues in their daily teaching, such as student-related issues, time constraints, limited resources, and a lack of training (Sanitah et al. 2017). Nevertheless, this study only focused on the problems and challenges of teaching ESL in vocational colleges and the participants were only selected from certain location, which is Negeri Sembilan.

All the studies reported above did not focus specifically on English in aviation. Moreover, many previous studies focused only on the challenges faced by teachers. However, far too little attention has been paid to teachers' experiences of teaching ESP specifically in the area of aircraft maintenance, focusing on both the successes and the challenges. Therefore, this paper explored the experience of English teachers in teaching English to aviation students, focusing on both the successes and challenges specifically in teaching aircraft maintenance students.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Question**

The objective of this study was to determine the experiences of English teachers in teaching aviation English in Malaysia. Hence, the research question was formulated to guide the writing of the study. The research question was: What are the successes and challenges of teaching aviation English in Malaysia?

### **Methods**

To obtain information about teachers' experiences of teaching aviation English in Malaysian aviation schools, this study used the semi-structured interview, which is commonly used in qualitative research and is the most common qualitative data source. It describes a good narrative of key events and provides insight into the participants' perspectives.

### **Participants**

Three English teachers were involved in this study. All of them are currently teaching English at three different aviation schools in Malaysia. They have more than 8 years of teaching experience. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve their identities. For example, DrSa is a PhD holder with 15 years of teaching experience, while MdmZue and MdmThi are master holders with 8 and 15 years of teaching experience respectively. A pseudonym is used in this study as the researcher wishes to keep the personal details of the participants confidential. According to Allen and Wiles (2016), a pseudonym is an unreal name often used by the researcher or author to protect the privacy of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analysed guided by Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis with the help of ATLAS.ti.

**Results**

The results of the qualitative study showed that teachers experienced both successes and challenges in teaching aviation English. Success can be interpreted as achieving the outcomes desired or hoped for by the participants. In this study, it refers to seizing opportunities in completing tasks, positive feelings and making good progress. In contrast, a challenge is a new or difficult task that tests participants' competence and expertise. This includes lack of institutional support, limited knowledge of aviation and also slow progress in learning and teaching aviation English. Figure 1 shows the three sub-themes for each success and challenge, which are key words in the research question.

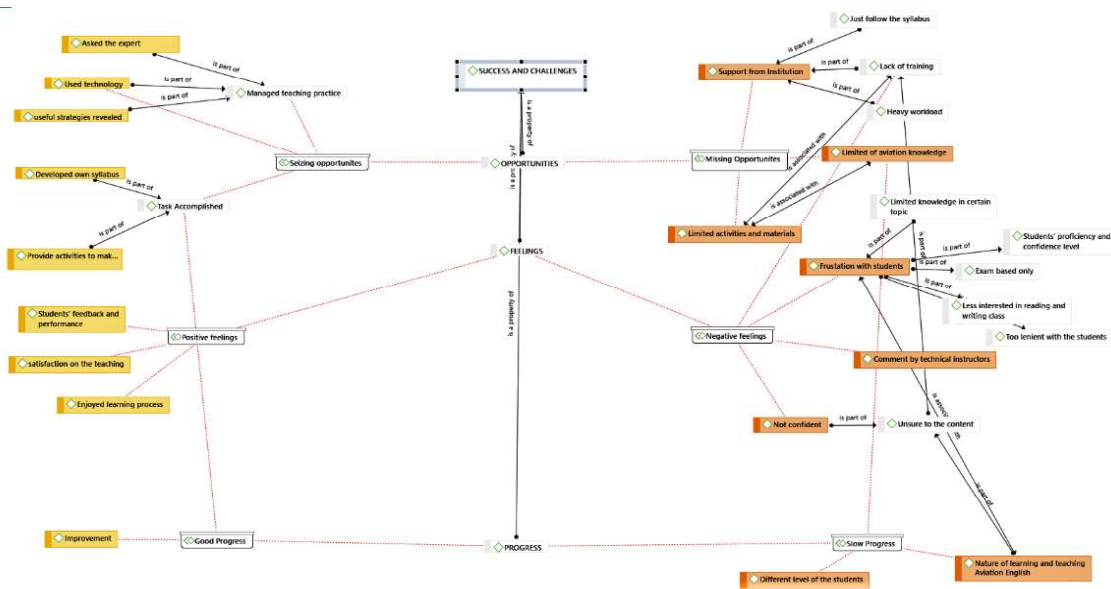


Figure 1. Three Sub-themes for Each Success and Challenge

Figure 1 is a network view output from ATLAS. ti. There were three sub- themes positioned under successes and three sub- themes for challenges in teaching aviation English. The details of sub- themes are as follows.

**Theme 1: Successes in teaching Aviation English**

The subthemes of successes in teaching are seizing opportunities, positive feelings, and good progress. The details of the success subthemes are like below.

### *Success- Seizing opportunities*

The participants managed to conduct the lessons with the help of experts such as the technical instructor and the industry representative. They took the opportunity for discussion and guidance from the technical instructors, some of whom had previously worked in industry.

*...Sure, I did that (asked questions) with persons from industry as well as technical lecturers....(DrSa)*

Participants in this study also tended to use the technology facilities in order to assist them in carrying out their teaching tasks. The development of technology nowadays enables users to find information quickly and easily. Moreover, it can provide higher quality results. For example, participants used this type of tool when they had problems understanding a particular jargon and were unsure of the exact pronunciation.

*...Normally, I look up the material on the internet. If I couldn't ask the engineer (technical instructor), I would look it up on the internet... (MdmZue)*

Apart from that, the participants were also able to come up with some useful strategies for teaching. They learnt new things and strategies to achieve the learning outcomes of teaching and to implement their teaching practise. For example, they directly asked students about the current technical modules they had learnt to connect to aviation English, and prepared examples and activities related to aviation to promote students' engagement in class. In addition, the teachers also discovered strategies that were effective for teaching their students, such as activities involving project-based learning and teamwork.

*.... I would say communicative... teaching and learning methodologies, and I prefer students to be more hands-on and involved in a variety of projects. They so enjoyed doing things together and functioning cooperatively in groups. They dislike reading and writing exercises that are typically done alone. It's a little stressful. So, a lot of teamwork.... (MdmThi).*

In the same sub-theme, they were able to develop their own curriculum to meet the needs of the students. As content developers, they used the opportunity they had to improve the content of the curriculum, change and provide materials, lesson plans or even the tests if they did not meet their expectations.

In summary, they took the opportunity to implement their teaching tasks by questioning the expert, using technology and finding out some useful strategies for their teaching process. They also used the opportunity to accomplish tasks such as developing the curriculum and providing activities for their class.

### *Success- Positive feelings*

In this study, participants also experienced positive feelings when students responded well and performed well

in class. When students responded well, teachers also expressed satisfaction about their teaching practise with enthusiastic words such as "very nice", "fun", "wow" and "successful".

*.... Because I gave them a choice the last time, let's pretend they choose to bring the mock up to the class. Yet, if you can't, you'll have to make your own mock up. They did it based on a real mock-up of an aeroplane. Very nice... (DrSa)*

Meanwhile, the teachers also expressed their positive feelings as they too learnt aviation English gradually. They reported that they made efforts to meet the students' needs and abilities by connecting with the real learning situation, e.g. by going to the aircraft hangar and workshop for visual learning.

*....The student would be giving a presentation based on what they found in the workshop and hangar, so we had to be at the hangar and the workshop.... (DrSa)*

In general, these positive feelings can be divided into three situations experienced by teachers: when students give feedback and are satisfied with their performance in class, when they are satisfied with the teaching and when they enjoy the learning process to understand the aviation area.

#### *Success- Good Progress*

Many participants pointed out that they generally felt a good progress, starting from the first year of teaching Aviation English to the current year. This good process of aviation knowledge enhancement is gradually getting better to meet teachers' expectations and students' needs. Most of them frequently used the words "improved", "more confident" and "better".

*....As time passes, I believe it is critical to ask around. Now that I will be in my fifth year at this school, I am extremely certain that even when my students or colleagues and I am having a normal conversation, I can relate to them or clearly comprehend what they are talking about.... (MdmZue)*

All participants showed gradual changes and improvements compared to the first year of teaching English

#### **Theme 2: Challenges in teaching Aviation English**

The sub-themes for challenges were missing opportunities, negative feelings and slow progress. The details of the sub-themes for challenges are as follows.

#### *Challenge- Missing opportunities*

On the contrary, participants felt that they encountered challenges when they missed opportunities for support

from the institutions in which they work. Firstly, one of the participants stated that English teachers were not adequately trained while they need to develop the right methodology and teaching materials.

*....Previously, we had English for Technical Purposes and English for Commercial Purposes, but now it has changed to general English, which is communicative English. So we no longer receive that type of training.... (MdmThi)*

When asked about strategies to select the content her students need, she added that she has to follow the curriculum given by the institution as it is compulsory for teachers in class. It seems that she did not have the opportunity to research and develop her own curriculum based on the students' needs.

*In terms of the content, I strictly stick to the syllabus, but in the end, we must follow it because it is a requirement... (MdmThi)*

In addition, the participants felt that they did not receive support from the institutions due to their heavy workload. They did not have enough time to prepare the activities and materials for the classes because they had a tight schedule.

*I sometimes talk with Madam Kay (her colleague) , and seek her advice on many topics. At one point, having to teach all the programs made me feel quite stressed. Technical English, Aviation Business, Pilot Program, and KV are also included....*

Moreover, the sources and textbook for the maintenance section were very limited, unlike the English lessons for pilots and the air traffic control program. Therefore, they felt that they missed the opportunity to better prepare their students.

*.... Because aviation English textbooks are highly pricey and not readily accessible. So, I usually google the information.... (MdmZue)*

In addition, teachers have also missed the opportunity due to their inadequate knowledge of aviation, which may affect their teaching, and their sense of insecurity about certain aviation-related issues.

*.... It would be a little tough for me to remember if I tried because you didn't have any experience in aviation or teaching English for a particular reason. since I used to teach the common English language in general, such as grammar. After that, it would take time for the transition from standard general English to aviation English... (DrSa)*

The interviews revealed that teachers missed their opportunities due to inadequate institutional support in implementing the curriculum, lack of training and heavy workload. They also missed opportunities because they

had limited knowledge of aviation and limited sources such as activities and materials.

#### *Challenge- Missing opportunities*

Participants' challenges also parallel their feelings. Their feelings were negative when they faced challenges in the form of frustration with students and people around them like technical instructors and when they lacked confidence in their skills and knowledge. Teachers reported negative feelings such as frustration with students because of their skills and confidence and the attitude of students being less interested in literacy lessons.

*.... They seem uninterested in writing and grammatical rules, in my opinion. They, therefore, gave those less attention. But we have writing assessments as part of our curriculum and testing. I have no idea why they didn't like writing at all....(MdmThi)*

They also complained that students viewed the assessment of English subjects as only exam-based and not as lifelong learning. From this qualitative interview, it showed that the teachers were confronted with the students' attitude in the classroom, the negative comment from the technical instructor regarding their efforts, e.g. the exam papers that contained questions unrelated to their field. All this affected their confidence when teaching in the classroom.

#### *Challenge- Slow Progress*

Although good progress such as improvements has already been mentioned, participants also told us that they experienced slow progress. They saw it as a challenge that learning aviation English took a lot of time to encourage the students to excel.

*....If, let's say, it weren't for teaching, I might not have been able to become familiar with aviation. Since students were being taught the contents, there was a need to know about aviation. So it came... I suggest that it took longer... slowly, or in another word, depending on needs.... (DrSa)*

This teacher (DrSa) also pointed out that the different level of the students was one of the reasons for the slow progress. It was in the nature of mastering the English language in aviation, because she had to try different methods until she found the most successful approach or activities.

*....As I have stated, try and error. Make a postmortem. We examine the topic here, I suppose. I frequently asked the other teachers about this particular batch. To compare with the performance in my class... (DrSa)*

In summary, the participants made slow progress because they needed more time to find the best approach, materials and activities to teach. They used the 'trial and error' approach or did a follow up because they had different groups and different levels of students. They also admitted that it could be the nature of ESP itself, because even a teacher learns ESP.



## Discussion

As reported earlier, participants experienced both successes and challenges in teaching English to the aviation students. They experienced success when they took opportunities to implement their teaching tasks, when they had positive feelings and when they made good progress. In contrast, they experienced challenges when they missed opportunities because they did not receive enough support from the institution, had limited knowledge of aviation, had negative feelings and made slow progress.

In terms of success in teaching aviation English, the teachers in the interviews agreed that they were able to fulfil their teaching responsibilities in the classroom, including preparing the activities and materials and developing the curriculum for the students. They took advantage of the opportunities available to them by consulting experts such as technical instructors and people working in the industry. At the same time, they used the internet to find all the information they wanted to know. By completing the teaching tasks, they were able to point out the useful strategies that are effective and can attract the attention of their students in the class. In the interviews, the teachers also commented positively on their students' performance and were happy to see their good progress in enhancing their knowledge of aviation English. It can be said that the teachers were motivated to use different strategies and methods to prepare lessons and meet the students' needs. The classroom and the teaching-learning process are more effective when teachers are motivated. A successful classroom and excellent learning outcomes depend on an engaged teacher. Motivation spurs people on, helps them focus and contributes to their ability to perform well over time. There is a link between teacher motivation and the motivational strategies teachers use, which in turn affect student motivation and English achievement (Bernaus et al., 2009). Therefore, any change in the education system that promotes teacher motivation can affect students' educational achievement.

Meanwhile, the research findings of this qualitative study also revealed several challenges categorised under three sub-themes: lack of opportunities, negative feelings and slow progress. On the sub-theme of lack of opportunities, teachers admitted that they were not adequately supported by the institutions in which they work. They had to cope with a heavy workload, were provided with the English as a Foreign Language curriculum, which was compulsory to follow, and did not receive sufficient ESP training. There was no adequate training to prepare teachers for the change in curriculum that affects teaching practise (Iswati & Triasuti, 2021; Sanitah et al., 2017). Inadequate training will certainly affect the teaching and learning process.

In this study, teachers also frequently mentioned their limited knowledge of aviation and inadequate sources of English aviation subjects. All these affect their confidence in teaching the subjects, which relates to the second sub-theme of challenges: negative feelings. They also expressed their frustration with the students' performance in class and the subject teacher's negative comments. Teachers are under pressure to show that they are "intellectually capable" of mastering the subject matter in order to overcome their inferiority problem (Melles et al., 2005). The experts acknowledged that the challenges facing English teachers were very serious and warned

of the implications for teachers' classroom practise as outlined by Benesch (2001). They needed skills that related to the learning of their student pilots and facilitated practises related to aviation, as well as meeting the demands of future flight personnel in the workplace.

Finally, the last sub-theme on the challenges of teaching aviation English is slow progress. Teachers felt that learning and teaching aviation English was not part of their area of expertise. Teaching is not only part of a planned task for the teachers, but also an ongoing process that takes place throughout the time the teacher is at the facilities and interacting with the students. In order to understand the context of aviation, the teacher has to go through a long process of mastering it and incorporating it into the lesson. The different language levels of the students, which forced the teachers to follow a 'trial and error' approach, also contributed to the slow progress.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching experience is clearly linked to student success over the course of a teacher's career. This study provided a new perspective on the experiences of English teachers in aviation that was previously unexplored. The findings of the study were also crucial for researchers at ESP, as the issues raised formed the basis for future research and offered insights into the important success and challenges of teaching English to aviation students. All stakeholders, including teachers, technical educators, legislators, higher education institutions, and industry players, need to exchange ideas, take appropriate action, and share best practices to meet industry expectations.

## **Recommendations**

This study used a qualitative technique with semi-structured interviews to get a complete picture of the case. Generalisability of industry players' views on workplace communication skills was not the intended aim of this study due to the small number of participants. Moreover, this study mainly examined communication skills in the aviation industry, specifically in aircraft maintenance.

Future research should examine workplace communication skills with a larger sample size, both qualitatively and quantitatively. More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of university courses that emphasise communication skills from an employer's perspective to meet industry needs.

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