TRANS

Evaluation and Analysis of the Current ESP Courses

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Abstract

The crucial problem encountered in teaching English for Specific Purposes at the University of Biskra and particularly at the department of architecture is first in the misconception of the term ESP and second in the application of the ESP course. Therefore, a structured interview was conducted with three English instructors who are currently teaching the ESP course in the department of architecture in order to find out their conception and; accordingly, application of the ESP course. In addition to the interview, the ESP courses, taught in this department, were analysed and evaluated precisely and objectively following the parameters of ESP teaching. Finally and based on the research findings, some very significant suggestions and recommendations were made which would hopefully help in improving the teaching of ESP in this department.

Key words: ESP/ teaching/ Analysis/ Evaluation/ Improvements.

Introduction

The study of English for specific purposes has a long history. Different scholars (e.g. Howatt 1984) suggest that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a vital and innovative activity within the Teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL) since the 1960s. The need for ESP may partly be due to the fact that ESP, as compared to English for General Purposes (EGP), is time and cost effective, relevant to the learners, successful in facilitating learning and related to content (that is in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities (Strevens, 1988).

Besides, Munby (1978) points out that while ESP is usually defined or specified by the prior analysis of learners' communicative needs, EGP is defined usually on the basis of predetermined goals set by an institution or other experts. This does not mean that EGP totally is negligent of learners' needs. It is rather to imply that the emphasis given to learners needs in ESP usually exceeds that of EGP.

Needs analysis was introduced into language teaching through the ESP movement. From the 1960s, the demand for specialized language programs grew and applied linguists began to employ needs analysis procedures in language teaching and materials preparation (Richards, 2002). Thus, to design ESP materials in particular or when talking about ESP in general, needs analysis seems mandatory to exist. It is, as scholars like Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) assume, the backbone of ESP. It is useful because „It asks questions about students' needs and wants the expectations of the institution, the features of the actual teaching situation."

Richterich and Chancerell (1987), cited in Basturkmen (1998) also strengthen this point when they say, „Not only to identify elements [needs] but to establish relative importance to find out what is indispensable necessary, or nearly desirable." As a result, it is possible to deduce that, needs analysis is difficult to be separated from the preparation of ESP courses.

However, what we can observe in the department of architecture at Biskra university is that there is not a separation between English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and English for General Purposes (EGP) when it comes to syllabuses and methodology.

Needs Assessment, which is a major component of ESP, rarely exists, and, if does, it is not systematic because it is only based on teachers' intuitions. Thus, we can say that what is taught in this department under the term ESP is typically General English (GE).

As a matter of fact, there are crucial parameters that ought to be taken into consideration when designing syllabuses such as the nature of language to be taught and used, the learners, the setting and the objectives to be realized.

1. A Brief Comparison between ESP and EGP (GE) .

1. Learners and purposes of learning ; ESP learners are usually adults who are already familiar with the English language and they learn the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and perform particular –job- related functions. In EGP classes, age of learners varies from children to adults and learning English language is the subject of classes.

2. Based on the purpose of learning, aims of instruction are identified; in an EGP class, as a general rule, *four skills are stressed equally*. But in ESP, it is *needs analysis* that determines which language skills are most needed by the students, and the syllabus is designed accordingly. For example, in order to train a tourist guide, the ESP class should promote the development of spoken skills. Another example, one who intends to work in a business administration should be trained in development of reading skills.

3. In a typical EGP class, there is concentration on *teaching grammar and language structures* (mostly in isolation). But in ESP, the focus is on *context*, to ESP, English is not taught as a subject separated from the student's real world/wishes.

Language in context **ESP** Language in isolation **EGP**

In sum, ESP assesses and analyzes needs and integrates motivation, subject-matter and content with the help of relevant language skills. For all of ESP curriculum design, it can be concluded that general English (GE) language content, grammatical functions and acquisition skills are important and dominant in curriculum development and course design .

2. Definition of Needs Analysis:

Needs analysis (NA) is assumed to be the cornerstone of an ESP course (Robinson, 1991; and Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Brown (1995) identifies the term needs analysis (also called needs assessment) as the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum which meet the learning needs of a particular group of students.

Basturkmen (1998:2) defines needs analysis as „*the identification of difficulties and standard situations by observation of participants functioning in a target situation in conjunction with interviews and questionnaires*". She further says, „*Language needs analysis are most often used where the learners in selected situations face very similar difficulties*." Moreover, Richterch and Chancerell (1987) as quoted in Basturkmen (1998:2) assert that „*the aim of needs analysis is not only to identify elements but to establish relative importance, to find out what is indispensable necessary or merely desirable*."

As for the instruments, questionnaires and interviews are two commonly used instruments for needs analysis. They allow the needs analyst to explore people's opinions of needs, difficulties and the importance of language skills and areas.

3. Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Data.

First, we are going to analyse the interview conducted with the ESP practitioners at the department of architecture to find out how they understand and consequently teach ESP.

3.1. Analysis of the interview:

The instrument the researcher employed was a structured interview with three (03) English instructors who are currently teaching the English course at the department of architecture. It consisted of questions that were carefully thought out and selected in advance. The researcher used the interview in order to gather valuable information that might not be gained through other types of instruments.

3.1.1 The ESP Teacher in the Department of Architecture:

Regarding the ESP teacher in the architecture department, we have noticed that he or she belongs to one of the following two categories: either he or she is a teacher freshly graduated in general English or he or she is a teacher who has probably taught general English but is not fully aware of the ESP concepts. This aspect is important enough because it states the situation of the language teacher and more specifically the profile required for achieving such a function. The dichotomy of a novice teacher of general English and an English language teacher with a limited experience of ESP may make us deduce that it is difficult to reach a valuable level of attainment. The way that the language teachers are chosen to be sent to the department of architecture to teach ESP is not regulated by any scientific prerequisites.

When the language teacher is pursuing his or her activities, he or she realizes progressively the difficulty of his or her role. Specialists in ESP have provided suitable definitions of the

profile of an ESP teacher. According to Dudley-Evans (1998), the ESP teacher or ESP practitioner is a 'teacher', a 'collaborator', a 'course designer and materials provider', a 'researcher' and finally 'an evaluator' altogether.

When we want to check these definitions in our case study, we can see that the profile of the language teachers sent to the architecture department does not always obey to the features of such definitions.

4. Analysis of the Courses Taught in the Department of Architecture:

In addition to the interview, the courses, which are currently taught in the department of architecture, are analysed in accordance with the requirements of ESP teaching.

In teaching ESP certain fundamental questions should be addressed:

1) How extensive should the ESP vocabulary be and which type of vocabulary needs more emphasis?

2) What grammatical constructions should be emphasized?

3) What is the purpose of giving texts from the discipline?

4) Which of the four skills should be given more importance in English for Academic Purposes (EAP)?

5) How skills are taught?

After a close analysis of the data in hands we observed the following:

-More focus is given to the teaching of technical vocabulary.

-The grammar taught is very general and not purposeful.

-Carrier content, which is the subject matter of an exercise, and real content, that is the linguistic content, which is present in the text, are taught separately.

-Examples and activities are taken from everyday life.

– Students are given only some reading activities.

– Total absence of teaching the other skills (Listening, Speaking, and Writing).

4.1. Vocabulary

What we can notice in the teaching of vocabulary at the department of architecture is that more emphasis is given to the teaching of lists of technical or specialized vocabulary. However, vocabulary should be taught only in context, never in word lists to be memorized with dictionary definitions. Concrete instruments/tools or pictures should be used instead whenever possible to introduce new words. The vocabulary taught should be words which are useful for the students in the situations in which they encounter English.

The English language teacher ought to concentrate on teaching the „sub-technical" vocabulary which covers a whole range of items which are neither highly technical nor obviously general in the sense of being every day words. Examples of the terms or specific vocabulary that is frequently used in technical/specialized writing are: contain, increase, combine, approximate etc.

Therefore, teachers should not give long lists of technical words each week since it consumes too much time and he/she will probably not do it well. ESP teachers should see that dictionaries for specialized fields are readily available and play an important role in the description of the specific language usage; they have to focus on useful words that are present in the reading and listening passages students are working with.

4.2. Grammar.

There are many misconceptions about the role of grammar in ESP teaching. It is incorrect to consider grammar teaching as outside of the remit: grammar is taught as being a part of whole texts; it is within readings, discussions and lectures rather than separate from them. Therefore, grammar is not a separate entity which students need to memorize knowledge of but rather needs to be viewed within the context of language use.

Unfortunately, it is the case of ESP teachers at the department of architecture who teach grammar by presenting the structures separately, and then giving activities to practise. However, with growing weight of evidence showing that language is best taught in context there is a strong case to be made for students learning grammar from texts i.e. the text is the starting point and the source of the language to be learned. The advantage of focusing on a structure or structures in an authentic text is that it enables the students to see these structures functioning in a genuine context.

The important first stage is to work through the text so that learners are familiar with the meaning: the students should understand the message, the vocabulary, and the general

meaning implied by the constructions before starting to work on grammar analysis. The point of focus will depend partly on the text itself (what features of the grammar are particularly well exemplified in this text).

The authentic text is likely to employ a wide range of structures of varying complexity and may refer to past, present, future time and make use both active and passive voices. Therefore, ESP teachers should focus on teaching the grammar that will help learners in their academic year and even professional career.

4.3. Content.

Through the analysis of data obtained from this department, we noted that ESP teachers teach the carrier content and real content, separately which does not fulfill the requirements of teaching content in ESP.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state: "*In ESP, any teaching activity, whether its aim is to teach language or skills, is presented in a context.* (p. 11)

So, an authentic topic is chosen to function as the context, as a vehicle to carry the real content, which may be certain language forms. For example, in a lesson on building a solar-powered home, to teach the language of steps in a sequence, the task of building such type of houses would function as the *carrier content*, while the language of sequence is the *real content*.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) say that the job of the ESP teacher is to teach the „the real content" and leave the carrier content to the specialists, but rather use it just as a vehicle to teach different language points.

As a matter of fact, one can summarize the appropriate parameters as follows:

– the real content should be taught through the carrier content;

– the texts should not be taught separately; and

– exercises, activities should be taken from the text „Carrier content".

4.4. Skills.

Regarding the teaching of skills in this department, we can observe total absence of their incorporation within the ESP course. The only skill that is given little attention is the reading skill and it is taught by asking the students to read a given text aloud. Of course this is not purposeful.

Reading should be considered as the primary channel through which the students will progress in English after the course is over. A good reading programme provides instruction in the skills required at various levels of reading, along with plenty of practice in this skill, which can only be developed through extensive and continual practice.

General Recommendations for Improvement.

After analysing, interpreting and evaluating the actual taught courses, obviously it is necessary to propose some suggestions for improvement.

1. Teachers should concentrate on the learner's interaction (student-centered) rather than lecturing and overwhelming the course with exhaustive list of words and boring grammar exercises.

2. Not only an acceptable experience in EFL is needed but also a sufficient training in ESP is required as well. Adapting from general to specific English should be understood and accepted by most language teachers when they move to peripheral departments and scientific subjects. Thus, the English language department should pay more and more attention to this aspect. This is done by giving a certificate in ESP teaching.

3. The teacher is required to use needs–analysis to assess his students' preferences and wants from this ESP course, according to which s/he will be able to serve his students' needs and becomes more successful in delivering his/her course.

4. ESP practitioners should teach all the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, emphasis will vary from situation to situation. It is needs assessment that decides which of these skills should be emphasized in a given ESP class. But, no skill should be taught in isolation.

5. The most important quality the ESP teacher needs is flexibility. Flexibility means changing from being a general English teacher to being a specific purpose teacher.

6. The ESP teacher does not need to be an expert in the vocational area his students study or work in. He needs to have some understanding and interest of the subject area.

7. The ESP teacher is advised to meet with other ESP teachers whom he can discuss with and benefit from their experience.

8. It is high time the architecture department started recruiting qualified ESP teachers who will design suitable courses that would better serve the students' needs.

Conclusion

To conclude, the ESP teacher should be aware of his or her own role in the teaching-learning process. This is why it seems appropriate to consider a set of specified criteria imposed upon the language teachers by their own institution when they intend to implicate in an ESP enterprise. These criteria, in fact, should be considered as prerequisites so that the language teacher would be successful in performing his/her task.

Limitations of the study

This study concerns a limited population, fourth year students of architecture at Biskra University, and can; therefore, be generalised only if the same results are obtained by other researchers conducted under the same circumstances and research protocol. This population has been chosen for two main reasons: the availability of material and data to be analyzed and the importance of ESP at the architecture department.

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