

Available online at ijci.wcci-international.orgInternational Journal of Curriculum and Instruction 9(2)
(2017) 206–216

The Situation of ESP in EFL Economics Classes

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Abstract

ESP is defined as an approach to teaching English for any purpose that could be specified. It is concerned with what to teach in a context where learners are classified as homogeneous sharing a set of specific needs. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to explore the situation of ESP teaching and learning in a class of third year graduate students at the department of Economics, university of M'sila, Algeria. The investigator attempts to know whether the ESP approach to EFL teaching is applied in such a specific class. To this end, 49 students have been randomly chosen as a representative sample joined by their ESP teacher who is a specialist in the same department. Data has been collected through using two research instruments: a questionnaire for students, and a structured interview for the teacher. It has been, then, analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results revealed that students are exposed to a general English kind of teaching with much focus on learning economic terms and translating short texts into the mother tongue language (Arabic), and with little awareness of their academic as well as professional needs (once in a workplace). Additionally, the ESP teacher expressed his felt need for a specific "teacher training." The results could make the ESP teachers aware of what is really needed in this very context. Hence, ESP approaches should be applied to teaching English for different specialized subjects, each according to its needs.

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Keywords: English for specific purposes; English for academic purposes; needs analysis; teacher training.

1. Introduction

English language is deemed significantly important in almost every area of discipline especially in this globalised era where communications among individuals all over the world are borderless and through a variety of channels. With the globalization of trade and economy and the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, the demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is expanding, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. ESP has developed considerably during the last decades. This development facilitates the task of teaching and learning for EFL students as it narrowed the scope to teaching English according to their needs.

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As such, it indicated that the English taught to engineering students is not the English taught to business students, and the English taught for academic purposes is not the English taught for occupational purposes.

However, in a context where English is taught as a part time subject, ESP may receive a kind of underestimation. Both students and teachers are undecided about what ESP teaching and learning looks like. This may be due to the fact that most teachers are unaware of the roles held by the ESP teacher (lack of teacher training). Generally, this is a common situation of English in other departments where English is required to be taught for specific purposes. Therefore, a clear distinction should be made between ESP teaching and teaching English for General Purposes (EGP). Certainly, all students have a kind of EGP background so that it could be a reliable platform for any ESP teaching.

In Algerian universities, there is a large number of institutions in different subjects. The majority of subjects are taught either in Arabic or in French. In most of them, English is programmed to be taught as a compulsory subject for academic and business purposes. Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate the situation of English teaching and learning in third year economics classes where English is expected to be taught for specific purposes. It seeks to know students' attitudes towards learning English and if they are active participants in the process of learning, because most of the time language learning is affected by students' attitudes and motivation (Huchinson and Waters, 1987). This paper also attempts to know the role teachers play as ESP teachers concerning the teaching methodology and the selection of materials. It is believed that for some of its teaching ESP has developed its own methodology and its research draws on research from various disciplines in addition to applied linguistics – this is the key distinguishing characteristic of ESP.

2. Review of related literature

2.1. What is ESP?

ESP is a part of a more general movement of teaching language for specific purposes. If we assume that ESP began in the 60's, definitions of ESP in the literature are relatively late in time. Hutchinson and Waters define ESP as an approach rather than a product as it does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching methodology or teaching materials (1987). They further claim that ESP is based on the simple question: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? "ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reasons for learning" (p. 19).

Strevens' (1988) definition of ESP makes a distinction between four absolute characteristics and two variable ones. Concerning the absolute characteristics, ESP consists of English language teaching that is:

- designed to meet specified needs of the learner,
- related in content to particular disciplines, occupation and activities,
- centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of the discourse,
- designed in contrast with General English.

In terms of variable characteristics, ESP may:

- be restricted to the language skills to be learned, e.g. reading;
- not be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

Robinson's (1991, p. 3) definition of ESP is based on two criteria accompanied with a set of characteristics:

- ESP is normally '*goal-directed*'.
- 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.
- ESP courses are generally constrained by a *limited time period* in which their objectives have to be achieved.
- ESP is taught to *adults* in *homogenous classes* in terms of the work or specialist studies that the students are involved in.

Each of these definitions has validity but also weaknesses. Considering Hutchinson and Water's definition, Anthony (1997) noted that it is not clear where GE course ends and ESP course begins because numerous non-specialist ESP instructors use ESP approach in that their syllabi are based on analysis of learner needs and their own specialist personal knowledge of English for real communication. Strevens' 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 of 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 Strevens' definition of ESP. In respect to the absolute characteristics, their definition is that:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner,

- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves,
- ESP is centered on the language, (grammar, lexis, register) skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Concerning the variable characteristics, they claim that:

- ESP may be related or designed for specific disciplines,
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English,
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation it could 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.

Looking at the mentioned above definitions, one can notice the common core principle and foundation of ESP courses which is prioritizing needs analysis before deciding about the course's content and design.

2.2. Reasons of emergence

In fact no procedures were taken paving the way for ESP to emerge as a coherent and planned final product. Rather, it was a phenomenon that grew out of a number of converging trends as indicated by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who stressed three main reasons.

First, the end of the Second World War remarked a tremendous growth and development in science and technology that dominated the globe in a large scale. Such progress generated a need for an international language. Occasionally, the United States in the post war came to power and led the international market, so that English was the looked for language. Therefore, there was a growing need to learn English by different people and for different reasons. English was no more viewed as a language of prestige and well education, rather it was the key to international currencies of technology and commerce. A new generation was then aware of its needs each according to his purpose for learning English. Doctors wanted to learn English to keep up with developments in the field of medicine; business men and women wanted English to sell their products; students needed English to read published materials only available in English.

The second reason behind ESP emergence was the revolution in the field of linguistics. The study of language shifted from describing the rules of usage to discovering ways in which language is used for real communication (Widdowson, 1978). Thus, situations of use differ considerably and the written and spoken language used differs from one context of use to another. This helped in the development of English courses designed to groups of learners each according to its context of use. In short, through analyzing the linguistic characteristics of each context, the English needed by a specific group of learners could be identified. This could be summarised by Hutchinson and Water's idea which became the principle of ESP "tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English you need" (1987, p. 8).

The third reason of emergence was the revolution in educational psychology. Learners were no more passive participants; they had their needs and interests which would effectively make relevance to the English courses. Regarding learners' needs and interests as the focus of English learning would motivate learners to be active participants in the teaching and learning process. This could be achieved once the content of the course is relevant to the learners' specific area of study. Tasks and texts, for example, should be about economics for economics students as they may be about biology for biology students and so on.

All three factors urged the need for more specialization in language learning, and hence were deemed as direct reasons for the development and growth of teaching English for specific purposes.

2.3. Main concepts in ESP

Five conceptions function as the foundations and basic principles of ESP. Swales (1990) uses the term enduring conceptions' to refer to them. As originally formulated, these five conceptions are: Authenticity, Research-base, Language/text, Need, and Learning / methodology.

According to Coffey (1984), the main consideration in ESP is that of authenticity. This inquired whether texts used for reading, listening and writing tasks reflect real life situations. Jordan (1997) argues that an authentic text will be that which is normally used in the students' specialist area: written by specialists for specialists and which is not written for teaching purposes. Even tasks are required to be authentic. That is to say, the designed tasks should concentrate on the skills and strategies required in the target situation (Morrow, 1980). Swales (1990), in explaining what is meant by the research-base of ESP, reviews the ESP literature and observes a trend towards papers that rely on some kind of data-base (textual or otherwise). The idea is that ESP programs should regard the different registers through the analysis of a large corpora of specialist texts (Ewer & Latorre, 1969). In addition, Strevens (1977) alludes to the importance of the "specific language" of ESP. that is, only those items of vocabulary, patterns of grammar,

and functions of language which are required by the learner's purposes are included in ESP. However, such statistical counters of different texts is considered a limitation. A rather text analysis should consider how sentences are used to perform communicative acts (Allen & Widdowson, 1974).

Stevens (1977) also alludes to the importance of learner needs in discussions of ESP. Scholars insisted on prioritizing needs analysis, before any other kind of analysis, as a corner stone for ESP teaching (Stevens, 1977; Robinson, 1991; Dudley Evans & St Jhon, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Finally, ESP draws on the methodology or learning theories which are appropriate to the learning/teaching situation. In other words, specific purpose language teaching is not itself a methodology. According to Stevens (1977), this characteristic of ESP makes the materials both more relevant and more interesting to the student due to the varied and ingenious exploitation of the opportunities provided by ESP settings.

2.4. Teacher training

In fact, in addition to the roles played by a GE teacher, the ESP teacher is called to play upon some different additional roles. That is why it is more preferable to call an ESP teacher 'a practitioner'. Those roles can be ranged from facilitating and guiding to analysing needs, designing courses, adapting or writing materials, and evaluating materials. This justifies how much complex and difficult to be an ESP teacher. Very often teachers feel themselves as strangers whenever they come to teach in an ESP context. Accordingly, most of them express their felt need for a training to overcome such difficulties.

ESP teachers may discuss the problem of ready-made materials. There is a real lack of such materials and if some are available, do they really fit for newly emerging groups of learners? Sometimes, it is even required from ESP practitioners to create and design materials to meet students' needs. This could be highly demanding especially for novice ESP teachers. Therefore, bringing texts from the target situation to classroom settings may help for teaching and learning purposes. What matters for the ESP teacher is to provide specialised texts to ensure the use of authentic materials.

Another problem is that of coping with knowledge of the subject matter. Put briefly, does the ESP teacher need to understand the subject matter of ESP materials? To give a direct answer to this question, the ESP teacher should not become a subject matter teacher, but rather an interested student of the subject matter. This could create a meaningful communicative atmosphere and motivate students to interact with their teacher, and motivate even teachers to pick up knowledge about the subject matter. Considering the mentioned-above difficulties, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that:

ESP teachers cannot turn to linguistics and psychology in the hope to find answers to problems that they will meet. Rather, they need to distil and synthesize, from the range of options available, those which best suit the particular circumstances. To do so requires an open mind, curiosity, and a degree of scepticism. ESP teachers need to arm themselves with a sound knowledge of both theoretical and practical developments in ELT in order to be able to make the range of decisions they are called upon to make. All ESP teachers are in effect pioneers who are helping to shape the world of ESP. (p. 160)

In short, there should be a provision of pre- and in-service teacher training focusing on the encountered difficulties in ESP teaching and learning. This could be through seminars, workshops, focused-courses etc.

3. Method

Burns and Grove (2001) state that “descriptive designs help to identify problems in a current practice with a view to improve outcomes” (p.248). The purpose of a descriptive study is to describe and explore real-life situations and to provide information of the elements as they occur. Therefore, the study in hand opted for the descriptive method to provide a clear vision on the situation of ESP teaching/learning in LMD economics classes, university of M’sila, Algeria, during the academic year 2012-2013.

The participants are 49 students who have been chosen randomly as a representative sample with their teacher who is a specialist and English teacher at the same time. The informants belong to different classes but they share the same ESP teacher. Accordingly, the results obtained from the representative sample could reflect the whole population.

Data were collected using a questionnaire for the 49 informants, and an interview for the ESP teacher. The questionnaire was administered to collect data about the students’ personal background, schooling background, and the situation of English teaching and learning. It seeks also to describe the students’ attitudes and motivation towards the ESP class.

The teacher as well was interviewed to describe his background and qualification, his background concerning the ESP course, the students’ background of the ESP course, the teaching materials used for ESP, and the students’ attitudes and motivation towards the English course.

4. Results

4.1. Students’ questionnaire

The informants are 49 students distributed as 16 males and 33 females, aged between 19 and 26 years old. All students had studied English for at least eight years, those who

repeated the year at the middle or secondary levels, and those who studied more than one specialty at university had the chance to study English for a longer period. Thirty-seven students declared that they had studied English for a period of ten years. Eight students had studied English for nine years. Three students had studied English for eight years, and only one student had the experience of studying English for twelve years.

Concerning the number of years of English learning at university, The majority of students gave the same answer that they had studied English at university for three years; those who declared that were forty students. Six students stated that they had studied English at university for two years. Two students had the experience of four years, and only one student had studied English for five years.

When asked about their motivation to learn English, the majority (82%) of students expressed their positive attitudes to learn this subject. Concerning learning English for specific purposes (economics) and how it could help them in their future jobs, students gave different answers. Some of them argued that learning English for Business Purposes would help them to better communicate in future workplaces. They stated that the business world urges communication whether via writing or speaking. Others reported that they were not sure that learning English for Business Purposes would help them in their future job. They argued that though English is said to be the language of business, most enterprises and companies in Algeria still use French language whether to communicate or to write their documents. Some students stated that learning English would increase their chances to travel abroad and make businesses there. They thought that being competent to speak English well may facilitate the task of communicating with English people and hence, their chances to get a job would increase.

As far as the number of hours devoted to learn English, the majority of students (79%) declared their dissatisfaction with the allotted timing. Only few students (21%) thought the number of hours was enough.

Concerning the content of the course, students reported that it focused more on terminology related to their subject matter area. 77.56% were not satisfied with the content of the ESP course. Students encountered different difficulties in different language areas: vocabulary 12.24%, Grammar 20.40%, listening 22.44%, speaking 4.08%, reading 18.36%, writing 22.44%. They declared that the ESP course should cover different language aspects so that it could meet different needs.

The informants were also asked about the interaction with their teacher. 55.11% of them were happy with the way their teacher interacted with them, and 16.32% declared that they were sometimes satisfied while 28.57% disliked the teacher's method of interaction. In the same line, when asked whether they enjoyed pair and group work, 55.20% of the students preferred to do so while 44.90% responded negatively.

4.2. Teacher's Interview

The teacher is a full time teacher, a holder of a 'Magister' degree in Economics and whose teaching experience is about 7 years at the Department of Economics. He is also a part time teacher of English in the same department. Concerning teaching Economics, the teacher reported that he had the experience of 7 years while his experience in teaching English was that of 4 years. the teacher declared that he had no experience or training in teaching ESP before his current position as he stated that he had acquired knowledge on economics and business English through reading whether from books or from the Internet. The teacher expressed his total confidence with the subject matter which is economics. Concerning ESP, he felt that he was not that confident and he expressed his felt need for a training as he claimed that it would be helpful for both teachers and students.

When discussing the use of materials, the teacher announced that no syllabus nor materials were provided by the institution. Rather, he selected and adapted a course book as he thought it was appropriate for ESP courses. He viewed the content as appropriate to meet his students' needs because it was about their specialty. During the course, the teacher reported that he gave priority to teaching the reading skill with much focus on terminology related to economics.

The teacher declared that the ESP class was not that effective to prepare students for using English in their future jobs. This was due to the fact that students lacked a kind of background in English. The teacher viewed this lack of background as a black whole which hindered the students to interact and develop their learning.

The teacher suggested that we should re-think of the position of English in our universities. He believed that learning English urges itself as it became an obligation. He added that fluency and accuracy are important to survive in the world of business and economics. He strongly believed that students should spend a whole year learning English without learning any other subject besides. He viewed that students' failure in English was due to lack of background. As a solution, he insisted on training novice ESP teachers before inviting them for that big task of teaching ESP. In addition, he related students' future professional success to effective academic learning.

5. Discussion

The data obtained from both tools confirmed that the majority of students were motivated to learn English. This situation should be regarded by the teacher as a motivating factor to involve learners to become active participants. Both students and teacher were aware about the importance of English for future professional success. Therefore, the teacher should orient the content of the course to the students' target needs after providing a careful analysis. "Even students who are tired and preoccupied and apparently uninterested in English can become highly motivated if the need for

English in their works is made clear to them and if they are treated as partners in the business of learning" (Donna, 2000, p.3).

One of the main causes of students' weak performance in English was that no enough time was devoted to learn this subject. Being the language of business nowadays, English urges itself to be learned for longer periods. Hereby, both students and teacher expressed their dissatisfaction with the time allocated for English learning. One hour and a half per-week is not enough to deal with the different language areas.

Though students expressed their interest to learn the different language skills, the content of the course was based on the teacher's intuition without any consideration to the students' present or target needs. Students as well declared that they faced difficulties in all language areas. Eventually, the teacher should undertake ongoing evaluation to assess students' level and identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The teacher should revise the way he interacted with students as not all of them enjoyed his method. He should encourage students for pair and group work through providing motivating tasks. In short, the provision of a teacher training could be the best solution to positively change the situation of ESP teaching and learning in economics classes and in similar contexts where English is taught for specific purposes.

6. Conclusions

The present paper provides a clear picture of the situation of ESP teaching and learning in economics classes where English is taught as compulsory subject for one hour and a half per-week. The findings showed that the teaching of ESP is not different from that of general English. The methodology is the same and the role of the teacher is only that of a provider of knowledge. Being an expert in the field of economics, the teacher adapts a ready-made material as he believes it is suitable for students. Needs analysis, which is the corner stone in ESP, never exists but rather it is based on the teacher's intuition.

ESP teachers in Algerian universities share a list of problems which make them to feel underestimated. Johns (1981) lists five problems that the ESP teachers complain of: low priority in timetabling as it was confirmed by this papers' findings, lack of personal and professional contact with subject teachers, lower grade than subject teachers, isolation from other teachers of English teaching ESP in different classes, and lack of respect from students (as cited in Hutchinson & Water, 1987, p. 164). This may create a feeling of inferiority from the part of the ESP teachers and demotivate them to do a great job.

Accordingly, it is high time authorities and curriculum designers thought of the situation of ESP teaching in Algerian universities. They should reconsider the status and grade of ESP teaching and learning to cope with the ongoing emerging needs, demands, and developments in the ESP field.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Prof. Dr. Said Keskes, for his always helpful, well-reasoned feedback which has pushed this pile of words into some semblance of a shape. Special thanks go to all the EDOLAS teachers who taught the courses with passion and dedication. My endless thanks and gratitude go also to my teacher, Mr. Mosbah Rafik who came very close to fulfilling the role of a co-supervisor.

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