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CONTENT INSTRUCTOR AS SURROGATE ESL TEACHER: A SURVEY ON PERCEPTION, KNOWLEDGE AND WILLINGNESS

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Abstract

In a normal university curriculum, students have to fulfil a minimum of 120 credit hours before they can graduate with a bachelor's degree; of these, about 6 to 9 credit hours are usually reserved for ESL classes where students are taught the necessary language skills for use within the academic ambience or for future communication in the workplace. The amount of time reserved for language instruction might not be enough to really prepare students for the rigor of real-life academic and workplace demands. It is felt that the huge amount of time utilized for content-based subjects might serve as a valuable platform for language acquisition to take place if content instructors have the necessary language skills and if they can be made to view their role as surrogate ESL instructors. This paper sets out to gauge content instructors' perception of their mastery of English, the role they can play as surrogate ESL instructors and their willingness to do so. A total of 24 content instructors from a technical university were selected as participants to provide the necessary information. Results indicate that most of the respondents perceived themselves as not apt to act as surrogate ESP instructors due to shortcomings in their language proficiency.

Keywords: ESP, surrogate teachers, content instructors, language acquisition

Introduction

A lecturer's main duty is to disseminate knowledge to his students within a classroom setting, the lecture theatre or laboratory. The main criterion for a candidate to be given a tenured position as a lecturer is to have the proper paper qualifications, the higher the better. Other criteria might include having the necessary soft-skills like leadership quality, team spirit, creativity, research acumen, and communication ability. The latter is especially essential since a lecture is meant to be delivered orally; despite the advent of technology into the classroom, human factor still plays a prominent role in lesson transmission. In most countries throughout the world, mastery of English is deemed essential for use as the medium of classroom instruction despite it being a second or foreign language. This is especially true in Malaysian universities.

Normally, within the university curricula, students have to enroll in a few English classes to help them master the language, either for academic purposes or for workplace communication. Despite the inclusion of these classes some feel that they are not enough to help students become proficient in the language. These

classes can only do so much within a limited timeframe accorded them to be really effective. In a normal university setting that requires students to enroll in a minimum of 120 credit hours to graduate, most probably only 6 to 9 credits are reserved for English classes—the rest are meant for content subjects. Imagine the potential and value these content courses have as surrogate language classes where students can stand to learn new words and new phrases, how to pronounce them and how to use them within their proper perspective where the ESL instructor might not have knowledge of. Content-based classes can also be fertile grounds for genuine academic writing to take place. Content instructors have a far more crucial role to play than just disseminating content knowledge; they can play the role of the surrogate ESL instructors if their mastery of the language is good. Hence, this paper aspires to look into the perception of content instructors' view of their mastery of the language and the role they can play as surrogate ESL instructors. It is hoped that results that accrued can be used for future planning and serve as guidelines for pedagogic enhancement that can benefit students in the long run.

In Malaysia, English is a compulsory subject in all government-linked schools, encompassing both primary and secondary levels; and at the tertiary level, allocations are made for English to be one of the core subjects to be taken by students as part of the graduation requirements. Normally, tertiary institutions require students to enroll in two to three English language courses before they graduate. Students would be required to enroll for a certain English course based on their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results or the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). These university-required English courses are either English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) in nature and passing them with at least a grade of C is compulsory. EAP and EOP fall under the general rubric of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the general aim is for the learners to use English in a particular area. In the past, the teaching of English for specific purposes was basically prompted by the need to communicate across languages in areas such as trade and technology. Hitherto, ESP has now expanded to encompass other areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for business purposes (EBP) and English for legal purposes (ELP) (Belcher, 2009). In teaching ESP courses, it would be good if ESP practitioners have both language skills and content knowledge to meet specific needs of the learners.

In ESP teaching, Stern (1989, 1992) identifies four main objectives: proficiency, knowledge, affective, and transfer. Basturkmen (2006), on the other hand, ascertains five objectives in ESP teaching: (i) to reveal subject-specific language use; (ii) to develop target performance proficiencies; (iii) to teach underlying knowledge; (iv) to advance strategic competence; and (v) to nurture critical awareness. In meeting the aforementioned objectives, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) propound that the ESP teacher has several roles to play: as a Teacher; as Course Designer and Material Provider; as Researcher; as Evaluator; and as Collaborator. Fulfilling these roles can sometimes be a bit daunting for the ESP practitioner.

Basturkmen (2010) cautions us that language instructors might be teaching an ESP course that they have little knowledge of the subject matter. In their study on the readiness level of 62 English lecturers in Malaysian Polytechnics to teach ESP courses, Sarimah and Sanmugam (2015) discovered that more than 80 per cent of the respondents say they are not ready for the task and need further training. This scenario is not restricted to Malaysia alone but occurs in other countries as well (Abdulaziz et al., 2012; Cenaj, 2015; Li, 2012; Maria Christina, 2018; Nguyen & Pham, 2016; Venkatraman & Prema, 2007). As mentioned earlier, one of the roles of the ESP practitioner is to be a Collaborator. According to Bojović (2006), subject-specific work is normally best approached through cooperation with subject specialist. Collaboration can be where ESP trainer tries to know more about the subject syllabus in an academic context or the tasks that students have to do in a work ambience. It can also comprise specific partnership so that there is some adaptation between specialist studies or activities and the language. It might involve the language teacher specifically preparing learners so that they can follow lessons in lectures or classrooms. Another option is that a specialist checks and comments on the content of teaching materials that the ESP teacher has prepared. The ultimate teamwork is where a subject expert and a language teacher pair up to teach a class such as in content-based instruction (CBI).

Content-based instruction, which is based on the Communicative Language Learning Approach, is one of the well-known approaches to language teaching and content instruction which involves both subject and language teachers teaching the same subject. The three most common types of CBI are the Sheltered Model, the Adjunct Model and the Theme Based Model (Brinton, 2003; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Littlewood, 1981).

Coltrane (2002), however, recognized the “territorial challenges” that can result from inclusive co-teaching. He states that ESL teachers may unintentionally adopt the role of “classroom paraprofessional” as it can be problematic for some teachers to have an equal playing field of collaboration. Creese (2002) explored collaboration between ESL and content teachers and witnessed subject teachers demonstrating control and possession of their subject area while the observed ESL teachers did not show similar sense of ownership of language objectives in the content area classroom. She also noticed that ESL teachers were not really teaching their own language content but were rather accelerating learning. This is certainly not desirable.

Therefore, we need to look at the issue from another perspective. We can look into the possibility of making content-based classes as a platform where language acquisition takes place where the subject specialist can teach content materials and also aspect of language peripherally, to assume the role of the surrogate language teacher. But this would depend on his language proficiency and readiness to do so.

In the early eighties, Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen developed the Natural Approach to language teaching and distinguished between language learning and language acquisition. According to them, learning involves formal instruction and new knowledge or language forms are represented consciously in the learner's mind, frequently in the form of language rules and grammar, and the process often involves error correction. Acquisition happens in an environment that requires

meaningful interaction and meaningful input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Many papers have been written and researches were done to elaborate and substantiate on the duo's claims (Ibrahim, 2013; Ibrahim & Asrar, 2007; Liu, 2015; Matamoros-González, 2017; Mendoza, 2016; Sam, 2016; Shiela Mani, 2016). The corollary here is, in a content classroom where students are following a lecture in English on a subject within their field of specialisation, any reference to elements of language will occur within an environment where there are meaningful interactions and this then becomes meaningful inputs. In a formal ESP classroom, sometimes the language instructor is teaching elements of language which, to students, can seem somewhat contrived and out of their actual context and they would not see their relevance; but if students see elements of language occurring within an environment where they are being used in their proper context, then there is a greater chance that they will internalize the new information and use it correctly rather than they being taught about it in the language classroom. Two areas in which content instructors can help students with aspects of language are the meaning of words and pronunciation. Take for example the use of the word "inert". A language teacher might know the meaning of the word and can give examples of how it is used in the general context but might not be able to give a good example within the engineering context. It all depends on how much knowledge he has of engineering matters. But an engineering lecturer when talking about the "inert" quality of a substance will be able to do so with great precision in his lecture and he will be able to show examples within their proper context as well. This is a matter of acquisition and the use of meaningful input. If the engineering lecturer is able to pronounce the word properly then student will learn how to do it aptly. If the lecturer's command of grammar is good then he can talk about parts of speech as well. But this, to a large extent, would depend on the willingness of the content instructors to act out the role of the surrogate language teacher and his perceived state of readiness.

Method

Twenty-four lecturers teaching content-based courses were chosen from Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) to complete a specially designed questionnaire. These lecturers were attending a one-week English Language course in order to be given full tenure as lecturers at the university. It is assumed that since they are attending an English-language course then they would see the relevance and the importance of teaching elements of English to students incidentally while teaching their own subject matter. Some of them are completely new to teaching and some have been teaching in other universities prior to joining Universiti Malaysia Perlis. At UniMAP, most courses are taught in English due to the presence of international students who are enrolled in engineering or business-related courses. The questionnaire is divided into four parts: Part 1-Demographic; Part 2-use of English by content specialists in the workplace and its perceived importance; Part 3- content specialists' perception of their language proficiency; and Part 4-content specialists' awareness and willingness to act as surrogate language teachers.

The questionnaire is 4-pages long including introductory notes and has a total of 25 items, some of which are not applicable to all respondents depending on whether their answer to a certain question is a "Yes" or "No." The questionnaires

were manually distributed at the end of the course and respondents were given ample time to respond. The instrument was designed to be completed within 10 or 15 minutes by the respondents. Data were tabulated manually and descriptive statistics was used to discuss findings in the discussion section.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 below shows the job title, gender, qualifications, number of years teaching in university and main area of teaching / specialization. The results accrued from respondents' answers to Part 1 (Q.1-5) of the questionnaire.

Table 1 Demographic data of respondents

Job title:

Lecturer (11) Senior Lecturer (13)

Gender:

Male (20) Female (4)

Qualifications:

Master (11) PhD (13)

Total number of years teaching in university:

1-5 years (13) 6-10 years (8) 11-15 years (3) More than 15 years (0)

Area of teaching /specialization:

Analog system

Networking

Electronic engineering

Manufacturing process

Electrical engineering

Robotic information

Civil engineering

Chemical engineering

Membrane technology

Materials engineering

Control system

Renewable engineering

As we can see from the table above, most of the lecturers have less than 10 years teaching experience with only 3 who stated that they have more than 11 years of teaching experience.

The following table shows respondents' perception of their use of English in the workplace, its importance and if they have co-workers who use English only in the workplace. The results accrued from respondents' answers to Part 2 (Q. 6-9) of the questionnaire.

Table 2 Use of English in the workplace and its importance

6. What percentage of your work is conducted in English? Please write down a rough estimate in the space below.	About 0-29%	0	About 30-49%	6	About 50-79%	6	About 80-100 %	12
7. Do your co-workers include people who communicate in English only?	Yes		13		No		11	
8. If you answered yes above, how often does your job require you to communicate with them?	Never	0	A little	2	Somewhat	3	A lot	8
9. How important is it to have a high level of English proficiency to perform your job effectively?	Not important	0	Little importance	1	Somewhat important	8	Very important	15

Half of the respondents (12) say that 80 to 100 per cent of their work requires the use of English. One-fourth (6) say that English is used 50 - 79 per cent in the job they do and the rest (6) indicate it is between 30 to 49 per cent. Slightly more than half of the respondents (13) indicate that their co-workers include people who communicate with them only in English and, out of these, 8 say that they have to communicate a lot with their English-only colleagues, 3 say somewhat and 2 indicate a little. Slightly more than half (15) agree that English is a very important tool for them to have in order to perform their job effectively, while a third (8) say somewhat important and one saying it is of little importance.

The following table shows respondents' perception of their mastery of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. The results accrued from respondents' answer to Part 3 (Q. 10-15) of the questionnaire.

Table 3 Respondents' perception on the four English language skills

Skills/ Rating	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory
Listening	3	12	9
Speaking	0	10	14
Reading	3	10	11
Writing	2	9	13

It seems that in all four skills, most of them indicate that they either have good or satisfactory command of the language. When asked if they feel that they need help to improve on their language skills (Q.15), only a small number (2) say “No” while the rest (22) say “Yes.”

The following table gives a summary of the rest of the survey questions (Q.16 – 25) on content specialists’ awareness and willingness to act as surrogate language teachers.

Table 4 Respondents’ perception on their ability and willingness to be surrogate language instructors

- 16. To what extent would you agree that content instructors must have a good command of English to teach in their area of specialization?**
 Strongly agree (12) Agree (12) Disagree (0) Strongly disagree (0)
 Not sure (0)
- 17. Do you feel that your English is adequate to impart knowledge in the classroom using the language?**
 No (0) Yes (19) Not sure (5)
- 18. Do you have to struggle for the right words when you are teaching in English?**
 Never (1) Sometimes (18) Most of the time (5) Not sure (0)
- 19. Do you feel that you have a good command of English to help students improve their language skills?**
 No (2) Yes (13) Not sure (9)
- 20. Do you feel that if your spoken English is stronger you can make lessons better?**
 No (1) Yes (14) Not sure (9)
- 21. Do you give students written assignment in English?**
 No (0) (Go to Q. 23 - 25)
 Yes (24) (Go to Q. 22 - 25)
- 22. Do you take into account grammatical mistakes when you are assessing the written assignment?**
 No (9) Yes (15)
- 23. Do you think the teaching of English should be done by language instructors per se?**
 No (4) Yes (15) Not sure (5)
- 24. Do you sometimes feel that you are playing the role of the English teacher?**
 No (5) Yes (10) Not sure (9)
- 25. Have you had the experience of assisting students learn something about English in the past?**
 No (22) Yes (2)
-

Results show that all respondents agree that a good mastery of English is important in delivering lectures, and most feel that their English is adequate to impart knowledge in the classroom using the language even though sometimes they

have to struggle somewhat to search for the right words to deliver the message. Slightly more than half of the respondents feel that they have a good command of English to help students improve their language skills and feel that if their spoken English is better than they can make lessons more effective. All of them say that they give written assignments to students in English but some do not care that much for grammatical mistakes when students turn the assignments in for marking. To the pointed question of whether they think the teaching of English should be done by language instructors per se, slightly more than half say they think it should be so, and almost all responded that they have never had the experience of assisting students learn something about English in the past.

This paper set out to gauge content instructors' perception of their mastery of English, the role they can play as surrogate ESL instructors and their willingness to do so. Results garnered show mixed response from them. Having a good command of English is important in their job since some of them have to communicate with peers in English and definitely they have to deliver lectures in the language. They must have a good command of spoken English to do both. Fifteen of them say they think the teaching of English should be the sole responsibility of their ESP peers while 5 are not sure. This speaks volumes about their willingness to be surrogate ESP teachers even though sometimes they "feel" they have been playing that role. They are mostly reluctant to assume the role of surrogate language teachers due perhaps to their response in Table 3 above, where quite a number of them feel their language skills are only satisfactory. Most feel they need help to improve on their own language skills. When almost all of them say they have never had the experience of assisting students learn something about English in the past then we can somehow assume that the job of teaching elements of the language to students can be quite alien to them.

Conclusion

Even though the postulation from the survey is that most content instructors are not willing to act as surrogate language instructors perhaps due to their lack of mastery of the language, but this does not mean that they cannot be trained to become one in future. The relevant persona in the language department can moot the idea of making content instructors as surrogate language teachers by helping them improve on their language skills and by showing them, for example, how small things like how to spell and pronounce words by content instructors in their lecture can help language acquisition to take place in a relevant and conducive environment, unlike that in the language classroom where lessons might be a bit contrived and sometimes might not fit the actual need of the learners. A class on grammar might even be very beneficial to the content instructors. It is good to note that all those surveyed give written assignments to students in English and it would be beneficial to ESP instructors to have access to them and see how students use language within their actual context outside the language classroom.

The survey was done only on a small sample, and it is felt that having a wider number of participants might provide a clearer picture on the issue. Getting feedback from those with more teaching experience might add a different perspective to the issue. Adding more questions as to how the language department

can help content instructors improve their language skills can also be helpful in preparing content instructors to become better users of English and this in turn can help them realize their potential as surrogate language teachers.

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