Assessment in English for Specific Purposes through Integrated Skills

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses a review of key areas of knowledge and skills in language assessment in English for specific purposes (ESP) teachers and learners, as well as language teacher educators and other language professionals. The study provides insights regarding the reasons for providing both teachers and learners with opportunities to acquire and develop assessment-related knowledge and integrated skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking. The present study also aims to demonstrate the advantages of using assessment in the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class. By resorting to theoretical support and also practical examples from professional experience, the researcher argues that employing assessment to check the level of the English language skills for students is a beneficial factor for general language progress in the context of specific content language required by the students' educational outline.

Keywords- assessment, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), language skills, language learning, language teaching, methodology.

I. INTRODUCTION

This topic reviews the theoretical issues related to ESP assessment in general. There has always been a debate concerning ESP and "general English", ESP courses and general English courses, ESP assessment and general English assessment. Traditionally there has been a distinction between the two, but after recent publications (Bachman and Palmer, 1996) this contrast became indistinct. Currently most language assessment specialists agree on the same principles of measurement concerning validity and impact (Douglas, 2010). Nowadays, no formal learning can be envisaged without some form of assessment, because educational stakeholders are eager to be informed about students' progress. Moreover, the course objectives, content and methodology are also scrutinized in this process, so that suggestions for improvement could be made, if necessary.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is specialized English language teaching that aims to develop the specific skills of the learner in response to the needs identified or indicated by various stakeholders. This specificity includes equipping learners with 'not only knowledge of a specific part of the English knowledge, but also competency in the skills required using this language' (Orr, 2002, p.1). Furthermore, ESP learners comprise almost all adult age groups, as well as cultural, linguistic, professional and academic backgrounds.

The field of ESP assessment has been seen as a separate and distinctive part of a more general movement of English language assessment, focusing on measuring specific uses of English language, among identified groups of people. Moreover, ESP assessment has been viewed in the broader context of the teaching and learning process. Thus, assessment does not stand alone, but occupies a prominent place in the ESP process, giving an ESP teacher a wealth of information on the effectiveness and quality of learning and teaching (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998, p. 121). On the other hand, tests enhance the learning process and act as a learning device, and, particularly, an ESP test is an aid to learning, encompassing benefits such as reinforcement, confidence building, involvement and building on strengths (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998, pp. 210-212).

From the early 1960s English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English foreign language teaching. This development is reflected in an increasing number of publications, conferences and journals dedicated to ESP discussions. Similarly, more traditional general English courses gave place to courses aimed at specific areas, for example English for Business Purposes. In addition to the emergence of ESP a strong need for testing of specific groups of learners was created. As a result, ESP testing movement has shown a slow but definite growth over the past few years. In this article it is my intention to discuss some key issues surrounding the field of ESP assessment. I will begin the discussion by addressing the nature and characteristics of assessment in ESP and offer examples of reading, writing, listening and speaking tasks used in the English language. (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998, p. 121)

II.   ASSESSMENT

Assessment is a process of measuring, and one formal method of measuring is to test. Assessment is the concern with measuring significant learning or the act of judging or forming an opinion about something/ somebody (Saphier, 1997). It is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development. Assessment is central importance. Every teacher has an interest in knowing whether, and to what degree, his/her teaching has been successful.

Principles of Assessment

According to Tracy Hall, et al., (2009, pp. 2) "not all students are alike." Therefore, in order to best promote learning and to give a valid picture of individual achievement, the assessment process should incorporate the following principles:

•   Assessment process should be planned and communicated to learners and parents prior to instruction;
•   Assessment strategies must align with the prescribed curriculum objectives and with the teaching strategies used;
•   Assessment must be fair and designed to enable each student to demonstrate the full extent of their own learning;
•   Assessments should measure how well students learn as well as what they have learned;
•   Assessment instrument should be highly varied in type; assessments should cover a full range of instructional objectives including knowledge, skills, and affective items;
•   And set personal achievement goals; students must receive clear instructions for improvement in what they have learned as well as how they learn.

Assessment in ESP

Assessment, referring to various means of information collection for the observation and interpretation of learners' performance and progress (Brindley, 2001; Dudley- Evans & St John, 1998), is one of the key elements of any course, and ESP courses are no exception. Assessment in ESP is to showcase that learners are equipped with the knowledge of English and competent in it to perform well in a profession or to simply pass a course for further study (Alderson, 1988). In their very recent work on assessing English for professional purposes, Knoch and Macqueen (2019) define assessment in ESP as "any assessment process, carried out by and for invested parties, which is used to determine a person's ability to understand and/or use the language of a professionally-oriented domain to a specified or necessary level" (p. 2). Alderson (1988) once regarded ESP courses as more effective and ESP tests as more relevant and valid as they are more appropriate for learners. However, the time that has been left behind with the practices of ESP teaching has shown that Alderson's claim is without a doubt true.

In this regard, assessment in ESP is seen to be determined by two major sources, namely the analysis of learning situation and the analysis of target situation which are presented in detail in the next section. According to Douglas (2013) one of the most prominent figures in ESP research, "ESP assessment is clearly a definable sub field of language assessment, with its focus on assessing ability to use language precisely to perform relevant tasks in authentic contexts while integrating appropriate aspects of field-specific background knowledge" (pp.378-379). Douglas (2013, 2000) further highlights that assessment in ESP is no different from assessment in General English in terms of the consideration attached to test purpose (validity), reliability, the test takers (proficiency, grade, age), and impact. Therefore, all the principles of assessment in General English courses also apply to ESP assessment. Additionally, Douglas states that as in any other assessment, assessment in ESP aims to give learners the opportunity to show what they are able to do with what they have learned, to showcase their progress, and what they need further. Assessment also aims to provide feedback to learners to help and support their learning, help them build confidence and develop autonomy, ultimately to see if and how well they succeed when using English in their target situations (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Furthermore, assessment gives ESP teachers the chance to consistently compare learners' performance and progress within themselves and against the performance criteria defined by the ESP program (Douglas, 2013).

Assessment as learning is connected to assessment for learning: "Assessment as learning encourages students to monitor and exert self-regulation over their thinking processes and stresses the importance of fostering students' capacity overtime to be their own assessors. Students take a proactive role in their learning, use assessment information to self-assess and self-monitor their learning progress, reflect on their learning,

and make adjustments in their thinking so as to achieve deeper understanding and to advance their learning" (Lee, 2017, p. 10).

III. NEEDS ANALYSIS: AN UMBRELLA TERM

It is without a doubt that there has always been a consensus among ESP researchers and teachers upon the role and function of needs analysis as the cornerstone in ESP and a prerequisite in ESP course design (Blok et al., 2020; Dudley-Evans, 2001). The goal behind needs analysis is to ascertain the reasons learners learn the language and language features needed in a specific context, tasks to perform in English in that context (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 2006), and accordingly what and how to teach to enable them to fulfill their reasons to learn (Sabieh, 2018). Recent studies regard needs analysis as continuous process gathering information from all relevant parties (Blok et al., 2020). Needs analysis broadly covers multiple purposes such as the determination of learners as professionals and individuals, what they know currently, what their learning needs are, genres that they need to perform as professionals, and how they learn the language. In this sense, there seems to be an intricate relationship between various functions of needs analysis. For instance, present situation analysis, which relies on the premise that there are needs to be assessed, serves for the course design, measuring proficiency and placing learners into groups, or observing and checking their progress (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Learning situation analysis includes the determination of subjective, felt, and process-oriented needs. Learning needs are also determined through needs analysis to gather information about how they learn and what they need to do to learn (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). As seen, these bits of analysis help us draw a complete picture of needs analysis. However, a striking definition of needs analysis has already been given by Hutchinson and Waters as they regarded it as "the awareness of a target situation" (1987, p. 54). However, it is not the only resource paying attention to target situation, language uses there, and its analysis to understand how to approach ESP assessment. There is a strong consensus among advocates of ESP assessment for target situation analysis as a fundamental step to determine language tasks and how to assess them (Alderson, 1988; Coombe, 2018; Douglas, 2000, 2001, 2013; Sabieh, 2018). Therefore, I would also like to put more emphasis on target situation, its analysis, and language uses there for various reasons explained in detail below.

Target situation analysis

Analyzing or analysis is commonly linked with needs analysis which serves first to the identification of target situation. Given that ESP course is to meet a certain need to enable its learners communicate effectively and adequately in a target situation, namely the cultural context, the institution, the course, the teachers, and learners (Littlejohn, 2011), identification of the target situation and the analysis of linguistic needs, the way language and skills are used, at that situation is known as target situation analysis (hereafter TSA) (Dudley-Evans, 2001). TSA refers to "professional information about the learners and the tasks and activities they are/will be using English for" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 125). TSA is stated to include objective, perceived, and product-oriented needs which are obtained by outsiders from the insiders (could also be by insiders from other insiders) regarding the realities, necessities, and goals of target situation, and thus can be confirmed (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). TSA is known as the prerequisite for ESP tests and assessment (Douglas, 2000), and also regarded as the most important feature of ESP assessment as it is the strongest means informing upon the subject-specific content and target language use (TLU) situations and language needs in that situation (Coombe, 2018). TLUs and thus their determination through TSA, are very important as they inform the test tasks (Douglas, 2000). TSA is also to assure authenticity of test tasks (Elder, 2016).

Assessing writing skill

While writing may not be one of students' favorite tasks, it is an endeavor with which students are confronted daily. What is essential for a correct assessment of writing skills is the provision of adequate input and the specification of purpose and audience. The input must be connected to the students' interest; it should have a practical application in real life and activate students' vocabulary in terms of specific terminology. Especially in the case of technical English, the input is often in visual form: a graph, a scheme, a diagram, a table, a drawing, a pie chart. The specification of purpose and audience of the writing task is also important as this information guides learners in terms of register choice and specific terminology, while also setting a standard for the teacher to facilitate assessment (Katz, 2014).

The use of holistic rating scales to the detriment of analytical ones is preferable in the case of ESP. Holistic scoring draws on an assessor's response to an entire performance produces by the student. These rubrics generate a single score for a performance. Their drawback is that they do not provide specific information about individual components or subskills. However, the choice of holistic scales to assess written production of most types in the ESP language class seems to be the adequate choice. The reason lies in the fundamental objective of any the ESP teaching process, that of making the future learner perform well in a professional environment requiring English language skills. The fluent production of coherent and cohesive texts prevails over the otherwise significant issues regarding, for example, specific language structures (Katz, 2014).

Assessing reading skill

The practice of reading skills in the context of teaching foreign languages for learners has much in

common with the Content language integrated learning (CLIL) approach. The common point is the obvious focus on content and on creating motivation for the learner to acquire not only language skills, but also specialized knowledge. While the general English teaching is usually concerned with reading material which should be interesting and arouse students' curiosity, the professional learning context implies this and much more (Katz, 2014).

Given the specialized aspect of reading material, assessment practices should include a series of tasks (classically questions) which should make it impossible for students to know the answer from previous knowledge, without reading the text. Bearing this in mind, the instructor may design the classical indirect items to check understanding: multiple choice, true/false, matching tasks, gap fill, short answers questions, ordering tasks, integrated tasks (Katz, 2014).

Test tasks assessing reading and writing

The assessment of reading and writing, which are stated to be hardly performed without the presence of each other (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010), will also be dealt with in an integrated manner. The criteria that determine the selection of reading texts, both for teaching and assessment purposes, rely on two basic factors namely carrier and real content (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). It might be perceived that ESP reading texts majorly have to meet the carrier content, to teach the specific language, but Dudley-Evans and St John emphasize the significance of real content, language to express the carrier content, for instant relevancy to aims, easiness to be understood etc. Therefore, for the selection of ESP reading texts for assessment purposes, the same criteria should be considered. As for the assessment of writing, the knowledge of genre which involves an understanding of the expectations of the discourse community that reads the text (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 115) is crucial. Besides the awareness of genre, two approaches guiding the teaching of writing also inform the assessment of it.

Assessing listening skill

In the ESP class, listening is usually assessed in integrated activities. However, there are cases when specific listening tasks are in order, for example in the case of formal exams which require objectively quantified results. In this case, the same activities used to assess reading skill may be used: multiple choice, true/false, matching tasks, gap fill, short answers questions, ordering tasks, integrated tasks. Information transfer is an activity which can be successfully implemented with engineering students given its practical nature. Students are expected to listen to a text and fill in a table or label charts and diagrams based on the information they receive. Just like in the case of assessing reading skill, when designing listening tasks one should primarily focus on the subject of the audio material which should reflect students' academic interest (Underhill, 1998).

Assessing speaking skill

Since modern methodologies of English language teaching all focus on the importance of the speaking skill to assess learning progress, the same importance should be given to the practice and assessment of speaking skills in ESP classes. Since it is a special, essentially interactive skill, its design, practice and assessment methods may become a challenge for the ESP language instructor. This special status is formally acknowledged and treated accordingly in methodological literature: There is a lot of interest now in oral testing, partly because teaching is more than ever directed towards the speaking and listening skills, particularly in the early stages. Naturally, this should be reflected in the testing. In order to free oral tests from the burden of conventional language testing wisdom, they should be considered as a class of their own (Underhill, 1998).

The selection of input is essential for the language instructor. They must select them in such a way that the subject is relevant for the general purpose of the ESP class and it should simultaneously be generous enough to stimulate discussion, task which may be difficult to achieve with essentially technical topics. Among the most common assessment methods for ESP purposes are presentation, interviews, group discussion tasks, reacting to a stimulus (describing pictures and other types of visual inputs, compare and contrast, explain trends in graphs, offer opinion, give instructions in a given situation etc). The assessment of the speaking skill should focus on various aspects such as fluency, accuracy, specialized lexical range, grammatical structure, pronunciation. To assess all these correctly, the language instructor may resort to rating scales which are objective standards against which students' English speaking level is measured (Underhill, 1998).

Test tasks assessing listening and speaking

This section provides test tasks assessing listening and speaking skills to exemplify the assessment of different TLUs. Although, listening can be performed as a stand-alone skill in everyday use of the language, it is not the same when it comes to the classroom use of it since it needs to be interactive mostly followed by comprehension tasks of any sort (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010) or preceded by discussions, title or picture readings. Therefore, listening in ESP, which is not different from listening for general purposes may occur as listening (to monologue), and listening and speaking (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 95). ESP professionals in any context participate in meetings, conferences; thus listen to the talks and presentations there or make presentations and interact with colleagues both within their day-to-day job-related tasks and business meetings. Therefore, they both perform listening and speaking (Goh, 2013).

IV.   CONCLUSION

Assessment is a process of measuring, and one formal method of measuring is to test. Assessment is needed in order to know whether, and in what degree, the teaching of ESP has been successful. Improving language

skills enhances personal and professional fulfillment, and reflects the process of lifelong learning. Therefore, special attention in ESP teaching should be focused on ways of promoting skills, which encourage and enable learners to respond to different day-to-day situations and react properly in special circumstances. Correspondingly, assessment in ESP should be based on direct evaluation of language ability in acts of communication (reading, speaking, writing, and listening) and assessment of content knowledge in situations and activities, which are as engaging and realistic as possible for learners. Seen from this point, teachers should devise such tasks, which enable the learner to see the connection between language uses required in assessment and real-life language uses.

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