



The ESP Teaching and Learning Situation in the Algerian Universities with reference to Psychology Students at Tlemcen University

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Abstract

Language for specific purposes reveals some specificities quite complex to grasp and make use of, if not an explicit knowledge and an appropriate approach to the situation at hand is devoted to its teaching. This is why, it has been the study that goes back to the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and from its earliest days has caught the interest of the learned and the wise. Strevens (1977) says that the history of LSP teaching can go back to the 16th and 17th centuries. In fact, this was the period of new discoveries and experiments of new approaches to science which called for a language suitable for expressing accurately the new phenomena. The main concern of the present research work is to give a clear picture of the ESP teaching and learning situation in Algeria. First, this study draws a quick sketch on the Algerian ESP project background, then, restates the major objectives of ESP teaching. Besides, it presents the Algerian ESP teaching situation, the difficulties and barriers that English teachers encounter when dealing with this area of English as well as the need for change which will allow the learners to use the foreign language in their specific fields. A case in point is the teaching/learning of ESP to 1st year psychology students at Tlemcen University. The problem is that Algerian university students, and especially those of the 1st year, who have received at least seven years of formal English teaching in the middle and secondary schools still find themselves unable to use the English language, let alone make an effective use of it for specific purposes.

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1. Introduction

The widespread use of the English language as an international means of communication is in a continual growth. This fact is reflected in different fields and in a variety of ways notably, its inclusion in the formal educational systems all over the world, and our country is no exception. This increasing importance of the English language in the world resulted in the expansion of one particular aspect of ELT namely English for specific

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purposes, henceforth ESP. It has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is reflected in the increasing number of universities offering ESP courses. In Algeria, the ESP movement has shown a slow but definite growth over the past few years. This has led to a rapid growth in English courses aimed at specific disciplines. Courses were to be designed in accordance to the different learners' requirements in order to sustain motivation and promote effective learning.

The present research work is an attempt to give a clear picture of ESP teaching in Algeria to university students and its elaboration towards better learning. ESP refers to teaching a specific genre of mainly scientific or technical English for students with specific goals, careers or fields of study. It meets the need of mostly adult learners who need to learn a foreign language for use in their specific fields, such as science, technology, medicine, psychology, leisure or academic learning. Yet, to have a clear idea about the subject matter discussed, ESP definition is first provided.

2. What is ESP?

The teaching of English has witnessed the development of ESP to cater for specific needs of the learners. It is thus set for a purely utilitarian purpose. Mackay and Mountford (1978:2) write in this effect that: ***“ESP is generally used to the teaching of English for a clearly utilitarian purpose”***.

In the same vein Harmer (1983:1) defines ESP as: “Situations where the student has some specific reasons for wanting to learn a language”.

Basturkmen (2006, P. 18) provides a rather similar definition of ESP by saying:

In ESP, language is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education, but to smooth the path to entry a greater linguistic efficiency in academic, professional or workplace environments.

3. The Algerian ESP Project Background

Osman Bencherif who was the national coordinator of the Algerian Universities ESP project in 1993 declared in the ESP Maghreb Conference that the project background started in 1987 after a series of contacts between the Ministry of Higher Education and a number of British Universities namely University of Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, and Salford. These universities have agreed to sign individual agreements with the Ministry of Higher Education. These agreements made provision for a number of Algerian students to be enrolled at these universities as full-time post-graduate scholars. In return, these universities committed themselves to develop Algerian-British cooperation especially at magister and doctoral levels in the field of science and technology. Each university was to be twinned with an Algerian tertiary institution.

- University of Blida with Salford University which had to deal with ‘genie mecanique’.
- University of Constantine with Glasgow University. It had to tackle computing purposes.
- University of Oran more precisely USTO (Université des Sciences et Technologies D’Oran) with Nottingham University fulfilled electronic needs.
- INELEC (Institut National D’Electricité et d’Electronique) and the University of Sheffield which had to take in hand electricity, electronics and electro-techniques.

The aim of these links was to associate the British universities in an agreement for post graduate course development and teaching and joint supervision and research. Accordingly, three ESP centers were set throughout the country: the first one was in Oran, the second one in Algiers and the third one in Constantine. The British council at that time supplied the Algerian institutions with the necessary pedagogical equipments in order to enable the centers to perform their tasks adequately. These centers became operational in February 1988.

4. Objectives of ESP Teaching in Algeria

Algeria is well aware of the importance of English-dominated communication in development, i.e. it recognizes English as a factor for economic and intellectual growth. This is why Algerian policy makers have made English part of the official curriculum at all levels of education. The major aim is to make the Algerian students able to communicate effectively. This crucial aim is part of the actual Algerian economic policy which tries to give rise to opportunities of partnership as a logical outcome of the globalization process.

- Educational and scientific, economic and cultural.
- Educational and scientific objectives consist of knowledge base acquisition, access to technology and science, participation and effective communication and continuing professional development.
- Economic and business objectives aim at creating opportunities for development, better preparing managers and employers for globalization, ensuring profitable partnership and participation and widening economic and investment horizons.
- Cultural objectives aim at developing individual potential, fostering cultural understanding, enhancing literacy skills and curiosity and preparing learners as world citizens.

These objectives known as objective needs (Robinson 1991; West 1993) show what the learners are able to do by the end of their language course. For example, a business man may need English to understand business letters, to communicate effectively at conferences, to get the necessary information from sales catalogues and so on.

The objectives affect all that a teacher has to do because they stand for what is believed are the aims of learners' actions. They show perception of teaching-learning situation and influence teaching procedures.

5. ESP Teaching Situation in Algeria

In most educational contexts, ESP is often found to be taught by general English teachers. Though demand for courses in language for specific purposes (LSP) has been growing very fast, policy makers and curriculum designers have not taken ESP teacher education very seriously. The spread of teacher training in ESP can be regarded as an unbelievably slow process.

At the tertiary level, English is studied in different curricula at different departments nationwide. Apart from the English department where it is the main subject, English is introduced as an additional but compulsory module in the other departments. Students from these departments are required to follow ESP courses depending on their area of research and their needs as well. Unfortunately, one may say that most of ESP teachers are originally general English teachers who are recruited to teach ESP courses. Regarding their students' proficiency level, these teachers are more translators than language teachers; the language used in the classroom being English, French or Arabic. The use of the three languages can be explained by the fact that students, who lack a sufficient command of the target language, oblige in most cases, the ESP teachers to switch either to Arabic or French. This is of course to explain various ideas the teacher judges to be of significant importance

It is generally presumed that the common two features of ESP teaching are: time which is allotted to English teaching where it is only a period of one hour and a half per week, generally planned as the last course of the day, or even the last course of the week. The second common feature is the nature of the job; ESP teachers, in almost cases, are unprepared for the teaching of ESP. Most of them are part-time teachers who received no special training as ESP teachers, who have a limited repertoire of the specialized terminology of the specific fields they are teaching, who have no orientation, and who receive no help from their colleagues. This constitutes serious barriers and difficulties for the ESP teacher which can be summarized as follows:

- No prior training to ESP teaching.
- The insufficient time allocated to the English course.
- Heterogeneous groups which create more difficulties for the teacher.
- The absence of syllabus as well as program to follow.
- The lack of specialized knowledge of the relating area they are teaching.
- The lack of cooperation and collaboration between ESP teachers themselves, and between them and subject specialists.

6. ESP Teaching Situation in the Department of Psychology

6.1. Learners

The subjects of this study who are in the age group of seventeen to twenty years, all come from government schools. They are baccalaureate holders from literary and scientific streams and their knowledge of the English language varies from one learner to another. Their mother tongue is Algerian Arabic (a dialectal variety), their first language is standard Arabic, while French and English are respectively their first, and second foreign languages.

Before attending university, the learners have learnt English as a foreign language for at least seven years in middle and secondary schools. They have been oriented to the department of psychology in order to carry on their studies and obtain normally after a duration of three years a “Licence” degree which leads to a psychologist career either in sanitary and educational institutions or in private sectors. In addition to the “modules” of their specialization, only one hour and a half a week is allocated to the teaching of English which is quite insufficient. Moreover, the subjects study together in one mixed ability group at the level of lecture halls throughout the academic year which does not seem either to contribute to the quality of teaching or to raise learners’ motivation for learning. The aim of the programme of first year psychology learners is to consolidate the basis of the language already acquired in the previous years on the one hand, and to meet the learners’ needs and help them reach specific purposes on the other.

7. Method

7.1. Instrument

In order to gain a thorough and overall understanding of what was happening in the teaching/learning situation under consideration, and be able to detect the different elements affecting such a situation either positively or negatively, the researcher had recourse to learners’ questionnaires. They were then addressed to fifty (50) out of eighty (80) first year psychology learners who were randomly chosen in order to identify their needs in terms of target needs, lacks, wants, and learning needs. The investigator has chosen the questionnaire as a tool research because it can be analyzed in a shorter period of time compared to interviews, it allows a large sampling and above all its use enables her to get objective information about the teaching/learning situation.

7.2. Corpus

As in any ESP situation, the investigation was built upon subjects involved in the teaching/learning process. They were considered in this research as an integral part of data collection. I have chosen to build my research upon these learners because being faced to a new area of English i.e. ESP, they are more aware of their needs and of the capital importance of the English instruction for them as future psychologists and researchers as cited in (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984: 13-14): “The older the learner is, the more likely he is to have his own definition, ideas on what and why he is learning English. The utility of learning English is likely to be more apparent.”

7.3. Procedure

It is worth mentioning, at this level, that a preliminary questionnaire was, first, tried out on ten (10) learners beforehand. The aim of this pilot survey was to have a basis for the production of the final questionnaire.

The informants were invited to give any other comments and suggestions that might help to make the questionnaire more effective. Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, deficiencies and repetitions, the questionnaire was reviewed.

The primary objective of the final questionnaire, distributed to all of the fifty first year psychology learners, was to collect data about: learners’ attitude towards the English language, learners’ linguistic background, learners’ opinions about the content provided to them, learners’ difficulties as far as the language is concerned and the type of content they would like to learn.

The objective sought for through the administration of the questionnaire was to try to identify the learners’ purpose when studying English and what they expect to do with this language in their present and future academic and/or professional careers. The information revealed not only the learners’ viewpoints on classes, teachers and the learning process, but also on their own level of competence and language proficiency.

8. Results

The learners’ questionnaires have enabled us to collect a considerable amount of data concerning the state of the art of ESP teaching and learning in the department under study. The data collected revealed an important and affecting lack in learners’ knowledge of the language, i.e. in grammar, vocabulary, phonology and so on. Such difficulties have a negative effect on learners’ level of competence and motivation towards the teaching/learning situation which does not provide enough and considerable contact with the target language. In other words, ESP courses do not cater for learners lacks and expectations since the needed skills and language knowledge are absent from the content provided to them.

8.1. Learners' Lacks

After the identification of the requirements of the target situation and the different areas of language use to fulfill learners' needs, it is necessary to consider the gap that exists between learners' present knowledge of the language and the one required in the target situation in order to determine their lacks. In other words, the investigator aims at sorting out the necessities that the learners lack. Such a process is referred to as deficiency analysis (Jordan 1997). It is a process through which both learners' present needs and wants are taken into account (West 1993).

The data collected revealed, in general, that learners' level of competence was somehow poor. Their lacks have been determined through a thorough consideration of the type of errors sorted out from the questionnaires. Learners' lacks and errors were essentially of a linguistic nature. These are essentially in phonology, vocabulary and grammar.

8.1.1. Phonology

It has been noted that the learners observed encounter serious phonological difficulties. Relying on their knowledge of Arabic and French, they witness a considerable negative transfer at the level of phonology.

Errors may occur in the use of consonants as well as with English vowels, diphthongs and trip thongs which are often shifted to Arabic or French vowels for phonological convenience.

Negative transfer is also noticeable in the use of stress and intonation, too. This results from carrying over some of the Arabic language habits into English.

8.1.2. Vocabulary

The learners are also suffering from an important lack of vocabulary both in terms of general English knowledge and technical vocabulary; i.e. scientific as well as subject specific jargon.

Students often make use of the transfer of French words into English as a strategy to get their message or meaning across.

8.1.3. Grammar

Interference of Arabic and French is also noticed at the grammatical level. In other words, the target learners tend to transfer the grammatical structures of their first and second languages to the English language. In most cases, such a transfer is done unconsciously.

With respect to the learners under consideration, they encounter serious grammatical problems displayed in different areas such as word order, tenses, articles and the passive voice, among others.

8.2. Learners wants and expectations

One has to remind that the learners under consideration who are confronted to the target uses of the English language are well aware of their needs and, hence, of the gap existing between the knowledge provided and the one required to reach their objectives.

The analysis of the situation under study has revealed that the learners require knowledge of the four skills, i.e. an ability to read, write, listen and speak using the English language. Moreover, it has been noted that the learners presented severe lacks in these areas, and this affected negatively learners' motivation towards the ESP course. Accordingly, different types of activities should be provided to enable the learners develop their language skills, arouse their motivation and sustain their interests.

9. Discussion: Need for Change

Most of ELT researchers agree on the fact that ESP is still in its “infancy” and this is mainly due to long-term practice in English where the emphasis was put on literature and civilization. It has taken decades before something was done towards ESP. Now, ESP teaching/learning is about to progressively develop and improve, particularly in the light of the newly emerging LMD system and the globalization process.

When dealing with teachers' ESP experience, one may say that having a high proportion of novice language teachers across the different faculties may have negative effects on the quality of the ESP teaching. Those teachers who have been recently graduated, having a limited ESP teaching experience, and who obviously lack a specialized ESP training are often unable to cater for their learners' needs. Besides, being very often par-time teachers, having other responsibilities outside the university (either at secondary school or tertiary level) seems also to have an influence on the ESP teaching/learning process. On the other hand, some other teachers have a long teaching experience in ESP without having received any specialized training in or outside the country. This essentially means that they have learnt how to teach ESP through experience, as they started their careers as general English teachers, and then turned to teaching ESP.

Moving to the methodology to follow while teaching ESP, researchers share the same view stating that no specific methodology is available for teaching ESP. According to them, needs analysis and identification are of paramount importance to ESP teaching. It is, then, worth remembering that ESP teachers should take into consideration their learners differences, their wants, needs and lacks.

The ESP teacher who constitutes a key-parameter in the teaching/learning process has been neglected. For the purpose of functioning adequately in any teaching situation, ESP teachers need to acquire three types of competences, notably language competence,

pedagogic competence and language awareness in addition to another element which is related to the specialized knowledge.

Moreover, for the sake of better improving the ESP teaching/learning situation, training courses are a necessary requirement for both novice and experienced ESP teachers. Training as a process may underline two phases, namely pre-service, and in-service training courses.

9.1. Pre-service training courses

Before any ESP teaching, a “pre-service teacher training” should be designed. In this phase, priority should be given to areas like basic information on ESP, procedures for course design, criteria for evaluating course materials, criteria for selecting or establishing classroom procedures. Since any prospective teacher may feel inadequate if he seeks to rely on what he has learnt in theory, he also needs to find a way to practice what he has acquired in his theoretical years. The latter can be achieved through observing other teachers, and later on running the course under his trainer’s monitoring. Trainers’ supervision may constitute a great help for a prospective teacher who does not only need supervision but a feedback too.

As it has been mentioned above, pre-service teacher training is of paramount importance for prospective teachers. On the other hand, and for those who are already involved in ESP teaching situations, in-service teacher training will also constitute a great help for them.

9.2. In-service training courses

This can be achieved through attending workshops and seminars by which they seek to cater for a better professional development. In this context Savas (2009, p. 402) writes:

“Language teachers and prospective language teachers can attend professional development workshops to let themselves acquire a second field of expertise, such as medicine, engineering or law.”

In the same line of thoughts Buckley (2000, p. 12) stated that while taking part in such training, ESP teachers may benefit a lot saying: “new teachers learn from veterans. They become oriented more quickly and effectively”. As far as in-service teacher training is concerned, team teaching is also considered as an important key to the improvement of ESP teaching situations. It can take different forms: either by collaborating with subject specialists or other ESP teachers. The presence of the subject specialist can be considered as a significant key in the progress of the ESP classes. To succeed in this task, a set of elements need to be included:

- Willingness to collaborate on the part of both sets of staff.
- Awareness of each other’s conceptual apparatus and teaching approach.

- Clear demarcation as to where their respective responsibilities lie.

In the same line of thoughts Richards et al (2005) assume that for a better implementation of team teaching, the following components should be ensured:

- Time.
- Patience.
- Honest reflection.
- Re-evaluation.

Another essential parameter which is of significant value to language teachers in general and ESP teachers in particular in day-to-day communication is the internet. The internet helps teachers to design and even deliver their courses through what is called 'virtual platform'. It also helps them to be in contact with their learners everywhere and at any time; being online or offline.

10. Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the investigator has conducted this research because she is convinced and believes in the vital importance of English for the targeted learners. The present dissertation attempted to provide a clear picture of the ESP situation in the Algerian university.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research needs to encourage the necessary efforts of improving such a primordial side of the EFL policy so as to arouse enthusiasm and interest among learners and teachers alike. It is worth adding that for the aim of improving the teaching/learning process, to bring about change in any situation an ESP teacher is involved in is a necessity. As a matter of fact, teachers need first to accept change as an essential component in the progress of any process and most precisely that of the ESP teaching. Hence, ESP teachers should be seen as effective learners who seek a daily development for a continuous improvement which should join knowledge, theory and practice.

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