

Critical Evaluation of Teaching ESP for Tertiary Level Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract-Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for all students except students of English is widespread in many countries of the world, also in Iran, however, with teachers facing many obstacles and trying to come up with creative solutions to the problems of teachers and students. The proficiency in different language skills is of utmost importance to these students at tertiary levels. In order to succeed, students need to develop proficiency in reading, writing, vocabulary, and translating from English into their mother tongue and vice versa. Therefore, the most important skills suitable for ESP objectives were studied and a short overview of some beneficial techniques for teaching reading, writing, translation, and vocabulary skills are presented. This study indicates that EFL teachers have to concentrate on the learner's interaction (student-centered), be aware of different learning styles and employ a variety of assessment techniques, and make use of modern technologies and the worldwide web in their classes for different activities.

Key Words: Transfer, Interference, ESP, Tertiary Level, Learning Styles, Strategies

1 Introduction

English for Specific Purposes, so far, is probing its way in the Iranian universities. It is taught as a university requirement. The current situation of learning this foreign language is the continuation of language instruction from the high school. In the educational system in Iran, the teaching of English as a foreign language starts in the guidance school and continues through the high school before being accepted into the university. Although the materials selected for the recommended texts aim at the communicative approach, the usual teaching methodology in schools tends more towards grammar translation and audio lingual method. More or less the same trend continues at the tertiary level in the universities, even for ESP courses. Then learning ESP has almost always remained virtually unachievable to most students in the tertiary level in Iranian universities.

Learners, as a rule, prefer being passive, avoid taking responsibility for their own learning and depend upon teachers too much. Such approach is inefficient basically because learners are not involved in perceiving and correcting their errors. In other words, fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive.

Afterwards, the students' obsession is how to pass the examination rather than to achieve any development in the language field. Therefore, they feel disappointed when they graduate confronting the real situation to use their ESP background. Furthermore, the EFL teachers concentrate on teaching general English rather than ESP and follow a traditional approach of teaching and examination. Optimistically, we hope that this situation gradually changes and the teachers get aware of need analysis in designing their material to meet the goals of learners.

Overcoming learners' fear is also an essential element of successful learning. It necessitates creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere in language classrooms, encouraging cooperation between learners through peer or small group work and employing various language learning techniques. The learner-friendly ways of rectifying mistakes are fateful for overcoming learners' intimidation as well.

The issue of learning how to read efficiently is also of paramount importance in the second language basically because many learners usually prefer translating word for word. This paper addresses the issue of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It will endeavor the objectives of the core course of ESP at the tertiary level in Iran. Furthermore, how we should mobilize all the efforts to overcome the difficulties to promote the students communicative competency in English language in their very field of their specialization.

1.1 Purpose & Significance of the Study

Teaching English for Specific Purposes for all students except students of English is widespread in many countries of the world, also in Iran, however, with teachers facing many obstacles and trying to come up with creative solutions to the problems of teachers and students.

In the majority of universities in Iran, the compulsory General English courses for the non- majors are conducted with especial focus on grammar and vocabulary, and the teachers (who may have the required proficiency) adhere mainly to the grammar translation method. The students go through the English courses (three to six credit hours) with the sole objective of passing the credits that are pre-requisites to the other major credit hours. In other words, three credit hours of General English and three to six credit hours of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are mandatory in obtaining the undergraduate degree. Moreover, students' proficiency level in English is mostly graded on a multiple choice examination and translation. What is important here is why the knowledge and usage of English that the university leavers possess give rise to concern. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to illuminate and articulate a new perspective in teaching ESP, in Iran and explore the ways of improving the quality of learning for ESP courses.

The common sense suggests that this issue in the second language must be understood through the acquisition of literacy in the first language. In other words, it involves the fundamental psycholinguistic issue of transfer of the abilities that enable L2 learners to utilize knowledge from one language in acquiring literacy in another (Carson, 1994).

English for Specific Purposes is an obligatory subject for the Iranian university students at the tertiary level as well. So it is taught as a university requirement. The natural question that occurs is why school and university leavers do not possess adequate language skills, so attempts should be made to tackle this question.

2 What is ESP?

Most of the students feel they discontent with the syllabus which had been taught, because it doesn't meet their needs. Furthermore, the EFL teachers concentrate on teaching general English rather than ESP. This situation evokes the question whether we teach English for Academic purposes or English for Specific Purposes at the tertiary level. Accordingly, we should investigate the topic to characterize the term first, and then discuss the relevant issues. We have to find out what kind of language acquisition is actually required by the learner. There is an obvious confusion between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes. For this reason we should attempt to distinguish the line of demarcation between the terms.

English for Specific Purposes or English for Special Purposes (ESP) has developed gradually to be an important area of interest for all who are concerned with the activities of the discipline it serves. There are many fields of interest with various activities which require special linguistic competency such as technical English, scientific English, medical English, English for business, English for political affairs, and English for tourism. Wright (1992) defines the concept of English for Specific Purposes, "ESP is, basically, language learning which has its focus on all aspects of language pertaining to a particular field of human activity, while taking into account the time constraints imposed by learners".

Although ESP is a controversial issue, consequently, there is much misinterpretation concerning the exact definition of ESP. Moreover there is a hot debate whether or not English for Academic Purposes could be considered part of ESP in general. Some scholars described ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Dudley – Evans, Coeditor of the ESP Journal defines ESP in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics.

2.1 Definition of ESP (Dudley-Evans, 1998):

Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems

Most of ESP definitions distinguish three themes: the nature of language to be taught and used, the learners, and the settings in which the other two would occur. These three aspects of ESP are very much connected together. ESP is the teaching of specific English (specialized discourse) to learners (adults), who will use it, in a particular setting (business, engineering, medical field, science, etc.) in order to realize a practical purpose.

Bearing in mind all the definitions mentioned, we admit that ESP is broader than what we apparently bounded to, in our universities. Hence, ESP may be considered as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. The likewise (Hutchinson et al. 1987:19) state that, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".

Accordingly, ESP teachers should be aware for the matter and should not concentrate on teaching general English, but they have to satisfy their students' needs for the language in the different fields of specialization in order to use the language linguistically correct verbally or on paper.

2.2 Application of ESP

ESP is considered as a goal directed kind of language; therefore, the students are not learning the English language for its own sake, but because there is a need for its exploitation in the workplace and they are enforced by a certain motivation. ESP is considered as a major field of EFL teaching at present. It begins to emerge from the EFL field since the 1960s. EFL teachers nowadays are more aware of the role of ESP in the different modern fields of specialization.

That indicates ESP is determined by specific learning needs of the language learner. Therefore the teacher's role should not be restricted to mere teaching, but should extend to be a course designer, researcher, evaluators, and an active participator in all of aspects of the teaching/learning process.

2.3 Needs analysis

EFL teachers have to be aware of the need analyses importance in the field of ESP. Needs analysis helps us to collect information about our students' learning needs and wants to help us draw the objectives of the targeted core courses and determined the appropriate content. It is very important to start needs analysis for the targeted group of students before a teacher determines the exact content, which he is going to subscribe them. Consequently, needs analysis has been given a significant consideration in making a particular course serve a particular group's interests (Vorobieva N., 1996).

2.4 Course Design

Teachers have to ask whether their students will use English to pass the exam as a university requirement or in workforce after graduation. Absolutely, in this case our intention is to prepare learners for the future not for passing exams, because we rely on the results of the need analysis, which we have to execute before designing the ESP course. ESP needs analysis positions a solid foundation for a stable ESP syllabus. Since needs analysis have been run for the targeted group to collect data about their learning needs then the process of core courses designation will take place.

Designing a course for any ESP system need a considerable amount of general English along with an integrated functional terminological language matted in the targeted ESP course

which is based on the needs analysis. Moreover, the objective of the course must be authentic to meet the needs of students to grantee motivation and better achievement. On the area under discussion of an ESP course for Greek student, Xenodohidis, (2002) confirms that: "the goals should be realistic; otherwise the students would be de-motivated." Concerning, another ESP course for employees at the American University of Beirut, Shaaban (2005) explains that the core course development and its content focus on a common core for the learners from various workplaces. This content contains basic social English communication, following directions, giving instructions, along with specialized terminologies and expressions. Developing a course for health science, Gatehouse (2001) also integrates General English language content and acquisition skills for language. Referring to the mentioned cases of ESP, it can be concluded that General English language content, grammar, functions and skills acquisition are the dominant aspects in any core course plan, while terminologies and specific functions of a particular content are integrated in the course to meet the learners' specific needs.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) compare ESP to the leaves and branches of a tree to a language tree. Without any roots to absorb water, leaves or branches would not grow up; so do the leaves and branches ESP language will not flourish, if they lack the essential language support such as general English grammar, lexis and functions. Gilmour and Marshal (1993) argue that the ESP learners' difficulties are not attributed to the lack of technical terminology but mostly due to the shortage of general English vocabulary. These essential items must be matted in the prescribed course for the ESP learners with relevancy to the field of specialization. Moreover, in designing any ESP course, attention should be paid to the four learning styles, using a range of combinations of knowledge, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Different experiential elements should be used in the classroom, such as sound, music, visuals, movement, experience, and even talking.

Therefore, EFL teachers who teach ESP courses have to know the goals of ESP well in order to grantee its steady progress of areas of concern. There should be much more researches in this vital field to explore the needs and draw clear objectives of each discipline. ESP teachers have to shoulder the responsibility of assessing the needs of their students, setting the learning objectives, organizing the courses, creating a vivid learning environment in the classroom, evaluating his students' development and assuring the quality continuously.

Nowadays, there is an immense breakthrough of the modern information and communication technologies (ICT). Computer is the corner stone of these technologies; via this smart machine we listen, speak, read, write and even communicate at distance. Therefore, it is applicable to invest these facilities in the teaching and learning process. Now, we can change our traditional classes to more modern styles of instructing either utilizing the multimedia or even online learning via the web. ESP materials or classes can be approachable in a very apt techniques to meet the different needs and the advance method of instructional designing does let the learner feels the loneliness or remoteness. Open and distance learning would be a very suitable mode instruction for ESP adult learners in the future.

When devising any language learning course, it is absolutely essential to start with creating a learner profile and investigating the target learner's expectations about the different

aspects of the course (Nunan, 1995; Harmer, 1991). Learner needs, apart from logistical considerations, administrative considerations, psychosocial considerations, are what a course designer has to take into account. As Nunan (1987) suggests, the modern classrooms should experience a shift from a teacher-centred curriculum, decided upon in advance by the teacher, to a learner-centred one, where the purpose for learning, individual differences, learning styles preferences, interests determine to a large extent the content and methodology of the course.

2.5 Reading, Writing and Vocabulary Skills

The issue of learning how to efficiently deal with the most important skills suitable for ESP objectives is of paramount importance in the second language basically because many learners usually prefer translating word for word. There are various ways of addressing the problem of language difficulty for ESP learners in Iran. The most common are pre-teaching difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary, encouraging learners to read extensively, to train learners in intensive reading, and to teach reading and writing strategies.

Reading is a complex cognitive activity, and its development can be promoted by two approaches – extensive and intensive reading practice. Extensive reading is known to develop word recognition and general language proficiency, while intensive reading deals with detailed comprehension and teaching reading strategies.

Authenticity of reading materials presents difficulty to ESP learners because no concessions are made to foreign learners who encounter non-simplified content (Harmer, 2001:205). Authentic materials can be extremely de-motivating for students. Negative expectations of reading are often due to previous unsuccessful experiences (Harmer, 2001:208).

For some inexplicable reasons, learners are basically taught (and tested) skimming and scanning strategies. Skimming and scanning are useful first stages, when a reader decides whether to read a text at all or which parts to read carefully. To develop an independent reader, a number of other strategies are paramount, e.g. inferring, summarizing, checking & monitoring one's comprehension, connecting information from different parts of the text, evaluating and fault-finding. All these strategies involve ability to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups, relations within the sentence, implications – not explicitly stated information, conceptual meaning, understanding relationship in the text structure and parts of a text through lexical-grammatical cohesion devices and indicators in discourse, distinguishing facts from opinions (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/reading>).

Weak students often adopt mistaken strategies that cause reading difficulties. The set of so called SQ3R study skills - the abbreviation stands for the following steps: survey (using a previewing skimming technique), question (formulating questions that will be answered in a text), read, recite (rephrasing the ideas in one's mind), review (going over the text as a whole) – might be beneficial (Kopeika, 2000:28).

In the teaching of ESP reading and writing, grammar is often ignored because of many misconceptions about the role of grammar. According to Dudley Evans & et. al. (1998:80), 'for reading, where the learners' grammatical weaknesses interfere with comprehension of meaning and form can be taught in context through analysis and explanation. This often includes the verb form, notably tense and voice, modals, particularly in relation to the expression of certainty and uncertainty,

connectors, noun compounds and various expressions. If students are expected to present written work, serious weaknesses in grammar require more specific help'.

Another aspect of learning reading & writing includes vocabulary that is needed for comprehension and for production. 'In comprehension, deducing the meaning of vocabulary from the context and from the structure of the actual word is the most important method of learning new vocabulary.

Alderson (1984, cited by Dudley Evans & Jo St. John, 1998:74) showed that 'poor reading in a foreign language is due in part to poor reading in the L1, together with an inadequate knowledge of the foreign language. Learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge before they are able to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading tasks'.

The cognitive processes involved in processing a text cannot be ignored. However, learners must be aware of two simultaneous ways of processing a text (Lingzhu, 2003): 'In top-down processing, learners use the prior knowledge to make predictions about the text. In bottom-up processing, learners rely on their linguistic knowledge to recognize linguistic elements – vowels, consonants, words, sentences to do with the construction of meaning'.

Linguists' research findings on writing shows the following: a lack of competence in writing in English results more from the lack of composing competence than from the lack of linguistic competence, differences between L1 and L2 writers relate to composing proficiency rather than to L1, and using L1 when writing in L2 frequently concerns vocabulary and enables the L2 writer to sustain the composing process (Krapels, 1994:49).

The surveys of different literatures allow us to conclude that reading-writing relationship in the ESP has not received proper attention. Researchers display a distinct tendency to investigate the development of either receptive (reading) or productive (writing) skills. The adopted attitude prevails due to complexity of untangling intertwined components of both skills. Theoretically, 'the fundamental process involved in the second language reading-writing relationship and the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy skills is transfer. Transfer of skills is not automatic, either across languages or across modalities. What this means for the L2 reading-writing relationship is that teaching is important to facilitate transfer' (Carson, 1994:99).

2.6 Translation skill

New ways of treating a need for translation in language teaching are advocated by Guy Cook (2001:3): 'Communicative language teaching has prevailed for 30 years and outlawed the translation and explanation in the students' first language, which was declared illegal'.

According to G. Cook, 'bilingualism and translation in the classroom are really quite authentic, together with the conscious focus on differences between languages... The notion that a bilingual environment with a lot of translation and a lot of code-switching and focus on form is something alien to what people are learning a language for is really quite peculiar'. G. Cook concludes that learners need 'a bilingual environment with a lot of translation and a lot of code-switching and focus on form and a bit of focus on meaning and use'.

Nigel J. Ross (2000:61) argues for translation as a useful language learning tool in the ordinary classroom: 'The real usefulness of translation in the EFL classroom lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other

language points in English and the students' mother tongue, Persian. The areas where differences occur range from relatively small points, through sizeable areas such as tense systems, to more complex fields such as contrastive rhetoric. If students are aware of the differences, interference is likely to be reduced'. The use of translation as a discredited tool for language learning has been re-examined lately by Daniel Linder (2002:39), who claims that EL teachers often reject translation in classroom because they associate translation with the use of grammar-translation as a non-communicative method.

Another aspect of translation is its being a professional activity which requires special training. Thus, 'for students, translation into English as well as literal translation into students' native tongue is professionally unrealistic task, and it should not be the focus of an English class'. D.Linder advocates translation activities on a regular basis as natural language learning methods 'for promoting contextualised language use, discourse and textual-level language competence, and cultural transfer skills'. According to D. Linder, 'translation activities should be used, and they should be supported by communicative, natural language learning methods'.

'Real-world' foreign language use is full of translation... and for the majority of the world's population, switching and negotiating between languages is part and parcel of everyday use'.

However, 'the usual objections to translation as a pedagogic tool are twofold: that it encourages a sense of false equivalence between two languages, and that it impedes automatic and fluent language use. Both views are silly'. G. Cook believes: 'the outlawing of translation not only reflects the monolingual mindset of the English-speaking world, it has also been to its political and commercial advantage. Monolingual native-speaker teachers have been privileged, and the status of 'local' experts undermined'.

Nobody would argue that human way of thinking is shaped by a mother tongue, which always interferes with a foreign language. The interference may be positive or negative, and the latter causes errors in a foreign language. There appears to be a widespread assumption that language interference or transfer is an important characteristic of second language acquisition. Majority of linguists agree that the relation between transfer and other processes in second language acquisition remains only partly understood, and the role of language transfer has long been a very controversial topic. The term *transfer* is widely used to describe the issue of cross-linguistic influence. Cross-linguistic similarities and differences can produce varied effects (Odlin, 1996:36):

- I. Positive transfer
- II. Negative transfer
 - A. Underproduction
 - B. Overproduction
 - C. Production Errors
 - D. Misinterpretation
- III. Differing lengths of acquisition

The linguistic awareness of the L1 transfer to L2 helps learners to deal with the hazards of using two languages alternately. The new findings show that the ability to switch to a native language even for a short time allows learners to preserve face, get rid of anxiety, build confidence and feel independent in their choice of expression.

3 Discussion & Conclusion

Based on studying different articles and observations, these important facts emerged:

- learners' reading rates are low,
- Learners' difficulties in reading, translation and writing are caused by either limited vocabulary or its inappropriate usage. This point is emphasized by R. Buckmaster (2003) who argues that 'the most important 'skill' is a very large vocabulary'.
- Learners' difficulties in reading and writing are triggered by insufficient vocabulary and inadequate knowledge of sentence structure, tenses and textual organization.
- Learners seem to be unaware of their lacks in good practice strategies in reading and writing. For transfer of language skills to occur learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge. Teachers' objectives are to help learners in the acquisition of language knowledge and train students in developing their reading and writing skills efficiently.
- Examining each learner's attitudes, difficulties and production in different language areas allows catering for their needs and fostering proficiency in the ESP.
- Consciousness-raising in students to ways of mastering language skills is a valid part of pedagogic strategy. It implies encouraging learners' initiative and taking over responsibility for their own learning. Given space, time and clear directions learners are bound to succeed. It is tempting to use specific concrete results for decision-making – to make recommendations for changes in how teaching and learning should be carried out.
- teachers' attitudes to the use of learners' native language in the classroom have undergone significant changes from a complete denial to a reluctant acceptance. The majority of teachers should support the limited use of translation in the ESP classroom and agree that L1 assists students in learning a foreign language. The prohibition or avoidance of the mother tongue minimizes the effectiveness of its learning.

4 Recommendations and Suggestions

- Teachers should concentrate on the learner's interaction (student-centered) rather than lecturing and overwhelming the course with exhaustive list of words and boring grammar exercises. Meaningful interaction with others speakers in the target language enhances the opportunity for competency. Therefore, we have to create opportunities for the learners to create effective communication skills in the classroom.
- EFL teachers should be aware of different learning styles of their students. Moreover, teachers should employ a variety of assessment techniques, focusing on each of the different learning styles.
- Teachers have to make use of modern technologies in their classes or otherwise the traditional audio visual aids to meet their learners' needs and to motivate them. In addition, there should be a variety of activities such as presentation, problem solving, role-play; practical hand-on activities, field visits and interviews with experts using the target language exclusively.
- Teachers should make use of the worldwide web for different activities to expose ESP learners to different experiences and different activities with various techniques.

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