

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Perspectives and Their Applicability among Science Students at Jazan University – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Jazan University in Saudi Arabia offers a number of highly demanded scientific and technical majors through many academic departments, and English is used as a medium of instruction although the students' native language is Arabic. Therefore, the university administers Intensive English Language Programs (IELP) in the first year in order to develop students' linguistic skills. More specifically, at college of science wherein English is a high-credit subject in the University Foundation Year (UFY), and it is used as a means of instruction. The IELP runs for up one academic year divided into two semesters; each is 14 weeks long. The first semester is devoted to developing general English skills and is referred to as level one, whereas the second semester which is known as level two focuses on developing ESP and communication skills. The research problem stems mainly from the failure of the current ESP courses to achieve the target objectives of the IELPs. The problem is verified by conducting group interviews with the subject-matter teachers at different colleges wherein English is used as a medium of instruction. In addition, two questionnaires are conducted among subject-matter teachers, and students. From the researcher point of view, the problem is triangular in the sense that it has three sides: the ESP course's prerequisite being used in the first semester, the students, and the language teacher. The paper will discuss these three aspects in details and suggest solutions that may reduce the teaching and learning barriers of ESP materials.

Keywords

Intensive English Language Programs, High-Credit Subject, General English Skills, Communication Skills, Target Objectives

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1. Introduction

The research reported in this paper sheds some light on the findings of a study conducted among English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers and students at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia. More specifically, at college of science wherein English is a high-credit subject in the University Foundation Year (UFY) and it is used as a means of instruction. In the UFY, the students receive an Intensive English Language Programme (IELP) that aims to enable them to use English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

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semesters; each is 14 weeks long. The first semester is devoted to developing general English skills and is referred to as level one, whereas the second semester which is known as level two focuses on developing ESP and communication skills

Semi-structured interviews, class observations, and two questionnaires were used for data collection

(See appendices 1 and 2). The researcher was assigned among the Teachers Evaluation Committee (TEC) members for one semester, and therefore he was entitled to observe several ESP classes. (He had the opportunity to observe up to 24 ESP teachers of different nationalities who were teaching different ESP courses according to students' majors; i.e. engineering,

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medicine, science, computer science and informatics, and business administration).

In this research, the most common ESP difficulties and problems were investigated, discussed and analyzed. Then, possible solutions were suggested and applied among level-two science students.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The current study investigates problems among teachers and students at Jazan University in relation to ESP courses. Although English is of particular importance to students, particularly those who are in scientific domains, there are problems for both teachers and students. The former pertains to the critical teaching situations as far as dealing with specialist texts is concerned, but the latter refers to the students' low-level English skills and the dissatisfaction of subject-matter teachers in relation to the students' poor communication skills. Language teachers find some difficulty in teaching ESP materials due to the lexical complexity of very scientific and technical texts included in the units being taught. Also, the teachers' lack of the texts background knowledge adds a further barrier to the teaching process (Afferbach, 1990: 3). Hence, the teachers will be in critical situations with their students, who are always more knowledgeable about the text content due to their previous education. Consequently, the ESP courses don't achieve the target objectives, and this creates dissatisfaction for both students and teachers.

1.2. Aims of Study

The study aims at investigating ESP problems among English language teachers at Jazan University in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and then suggesting some applicable solutions.

1.3. Research Subjects

- 1- ESP teachers at Jazan University, Saudi Arabia (No. 24)
- 2- Level two students at college of Science, Jazan University (No. 67)

1.4. Research Tools

- 1- Students' Questionnaire
- 2- Teachers' Questionnaire, Class observation, and Semi-structured interviews
- 3- Unit One in Nucleus - General Science

2. Historical Backdrop About English for Specific Purposes

In the early 1960s, there were many reports from all over the

world of a growing dissatisfaction with the language teaching practice, where all learners were served up with literature regardless of their aims, needs or interests (McDonough, 1984:4). Hence, the branch of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) became a bud in the tree of English Language Teaching (ELT). This means that ESP has emerged as a consequence of the inability of the General English courses to fulfil learners' actual needs which are very often academic, professional or a combination of both. "ESP is an approach to English language teaching which is directed by specific reasons for learning" (Hutchinson and Water, 1987:8).

3. Background of College of Science

This is a pure educational and scientific setting wherein students study different areas of science, such as physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics. English is of particular importance for those students, as it is used as a means of instruction and learning. In addition, most of subject-matter textbooks and references are in English. Therefore, it is very important to develop certain English language skills in order to enable them to use English for academic purposes. That is to say, the English materials being used among the students at college of science should meet their actual needs, and this is a key aspect of ESP. Certain reading skills necessary for engineering students are determined by Nasr (2002:107) and for specific education students in Egypt are determined by Hussein (1997).

4. Challenges of Teaching ESP Courses at Jazan University

The result of the class observations and semi-structured interviews with the ESP teachers (N. 24) at Jazan University indicated to some obstacles during teaching English to level two students. These difficulties are due to the scientific context and content of the texts which are almost adjacent to specialist lexical items, nominal compounds, and non-verbal information and scientific formula. Added to this, the teachers' lack of the schemata about the topics included in these scientific texts hinders making use of contextual and textual instances to reduce the barrier of understanding such difficult texts. More importantly, the wide gap between the students' background knowledge and that of the teachers as far as texts topics are concerned due to the nature of the previous education of each, bearing in mind the cultural aspect of Arab students. Culturally speaking in Arab countries, the teacher is an information source and has to answer any question addressed by students to attain their satisfaction in the teaching process. This, in fact, maximizes the challenging rate

of administrating ESP courses among Jazan University students, and this is referred to by Prichard and Nasr (2004:443).

5. Relationship Between Language Teachers and Students in ESP Classes

Activating students' appropriate background knowledge is the concern of the ESP teacher in the class. This can be done by addressing simple questions about the main points of the unit, and the teacher can get an access to these points via the title, figures, headings, and sub-headings of the text. Suggested Simple Questions about the text on page 10, section 4 (Nucleus Book – General Science): *What is a substance?, Mention some substances, Are there some substances in the classroom? If so, what are they?, What are the properties of(some substances)....?, What is the melting / boiling point of ?* Such questions may activate students' background knowledge about the text that is about substances and their properties, and this in turn will generate teachable materials/ information to the teacher, and this was applied successfully by Prichard and Nasr (2004:434-435).

6. Relationship Between Language Teachers and Subject-Matter Teachers in an ESP Class

The relationship between an ESP teacher and subject-matter teacher is very important. It has been controversially discussed, and several questions are raised about the job of ESP teacher; does s/he teach language or subject content, or both? If s/he instructs the former, what is the connection with the latter? What is the relationship between specialist subject lecturers and language teachers? Do they collaborate? and if so, who does need the other more? Such issues are of vital importance for us as ESP teachers. There is a mutual collaboration between them; a language teacher always needs consultation about specialist texts and the subject students and lecturers need linguistic competence so that they can deal with English texts efficiently. This harmonization is advocated and referred to in Ahmedni (2011); both business administration teachers and English language teachers need each other. The former provides and set the general objectives of ESP materials and the latter formulates these objectives methodologically, and comes up with the teachable English materials that develop students' linguistic competence and communication skills within their area of specialization; i.e. management and business administration. Also, it is very

important to consult science teachers to be able to select the proper ESP materials and set the objectives of the English class well.

7. Relationship Between English Teachers, Subject-Matter Teachers, and Students in ESP Classes

The ESP issue essentially concerns three aspects: the ESP teacher, the subject-matter instructor, and the ESP learner who is sometimes expected to be more knowledgeable than the ESP teacher with regard to some chunks of specialist information. This, in fact, may contribute to ESP problems both for the teacher and the learner. However, the skilful ESP teacher should be able to make use of the student's potential content background knowledge and get some scolding hints from the specialist teachers in order to reduce the lexical and content complexity of some texts. Therefore, it is necessary to attain harmonization between these three elements (the ESP teacher, the subject-matter instructor and the ESP learner) in order to achieve successful learning situations in ESP classes.

8. Result and Analysis of the Study Tools

8.1. Teachers- Based Tools

The teachers' responses to the questionnaire and the classes observation indicated to these outcomes: the teachers find difficulty in teaching ESP materials due to the lexical complexity of some very scientific and technical texts included the units being taught, and this is advocated by Prichard and Nasr (2004: 426). Also, the teachers' lack of the texts background knowledge adds further barrier to the teaching process and thus puts them in critical situations with their students, who are always more knowledgeable about the texts topics due to their previous education, and this is referred to by Carrell (1983: 83) Furthermore, reading and listening were the most difficult language skills being taught in ESP classes as cited by the teachers, and this enhances the former variable that concerns the lexical complicity of the scientific and technical texts.

In relation to the communication between the teachers and their students in ESP classes, the responses referred to the lack of effective communicative situations due to the teacher-based teaching strategies that cast the full burden on the teacher in the teaching process without any help from the side of students as far as the technical and scientific background knowledge is concerned, and this issue is discussed and treated by Prichard and Nasr (2004). However, this could be due to the Arab

cultural aspects that consider the teacher as an information provider in the class as well as the appreciation given to those who are quiet and talk less in the class. Therefore, the efficient teachers should include the students in ESP classes by addressing some simple questions about the topics of text in order to activate their likely background knowledge and, then function this scaffolding help to create successful communicative teaching situations, and this is applied successfully among engineering students in Egypt by Nasr (2002:10).

With regard to the students' performance in ESP courses over the last four semesters, the teachers referred to a very low performance, and this aligned with the continuous complains of the subject- matter teachers about the students' low level in English language and their inability to use English as a medium of instruction. This verifies the ineffectiveness of the current ESP teaching methods among Jazan University students and may generate a fruitful academic research.

8.2. Students- Based Tools

In the result of a questionnaire among Jazan University students in scientific and engineering domains (Subject No. 67) aligned with the teachers' views. Students expressed their dissatisfaction with their ESP teachers. Also, they considered reading and writing as the most important language skills, and this goes with the main objectives of the Intensive English Language Programs (IELP) being conducted in the University Foundation Year (UFY). Nevertheless, they expressed a strong motivation to learn English and maximize the benefits of ESP classes. Also, there was no indication about the effective communication between the students and their teacher in ESP classes. It was due to the fact that, they expect to learn all text details via their language teacher, and this is very challenging in the teaching process; the teacher often stumbles at specialized scientific information stated in the text, his background education was not in the scientific domains and he cannot cope with all different specializations, as s/he is subject to different branches of ESP such as English for Science, English for Business Administration, English for Medicine, English for Tourism, and so on. In relation to the ESP courses, the students expressed their negative attitudes in spite of the strong motivation towards learning English language. This could be due to the inefficiency demonstrated by the teachers in the ESP classes; they cannot fulfill the courses objectives set by the university regulations and instructions. Therefore, the teachers should change the teaching methods and strategies so that the students can develop their academic study skills and this in turn will reflect positively on learning their specialist disciplines.

Regarding the vocabulary difficulty, the students considered the semi-technical words as the most difficult, and this

enhances the importance of understanding the words contexts; guessing meaning from context is an important vocabulary recognition strategy (Nasr, 1994). Therefore, it is the role of the teacher to draw the students' attention to the situational descriptions of the texts topics, and this will determine the most appropriate meaning to unfamiliar lexical items. In other words, the context elements help the students to guess meaning from context.

9. Recommendations and Suggestions to ESP Teachers at Jazan University

ESP courses should be undertaken by highly qualified ESP teachers so that they can achieve the target objectives. That is to say, I strongly support the notion of conducting training sessions for the current teachers, particularly those who will be engaged in teaching level two ESP materials. YES, it is true that they are all academically qualified, as the selection caliber of the teaching staff members at Jazan University is strict. However, the English language teachers may lack certain professional technicalities of teaching English in such new pedagogical environment. Also, it is necessary to fill the gap between the teachers' background knowledge about scientific texts, and that of the students; i.e. making use of the student's potential content information to create successful learning situations and clarify the relationship between teacher and students, treating the negative impact of the cultural aspects in English language classes as far as the teacher's role is concerned. Furthermore, it is more effective to depend on the textual clues to deal with unfamiliar lexical items better than looking them up in dictionaries and make use of the lexical familiarization which is intentionally provided by the author for a specific reader (Bramki and Williams, 1984). More importantly, in an ESP class, the teacher should focus on the expression rather than the content when dealing with technical texts; i.e. s/he emphasizes on the linguistic features of these texts, as it is main concern of ESP settings, and this is advocated by Prichard and Nasr (2004) That is to say, students are supposed to study the morphological and grammatical structures of some text sentences and use technical lexical items in academic situations verbally and nonverbally. For example, students should be able to recognize the lexical and syntactical parts of some sentences and how to reword them in several structures. Examples from Nucleus Book – General Science: 'A protractor is shaped like a semi-circle' and '*A chess-board is shaped like a square*'. These sentences could be restructured like '*A protractor is semi-circular in shape*' and '*A chess-board is square in shape*'. This should be clear to students to avoid the negative effects of Arab cultural aspects as far as the role of teachers is concerned.

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Biography



Atef Nasr has been employed at the University of Suez Canal, and he is working as an assistant professor of ELT/ESP at Jazan University – Saudi Arabia. He is mainly interested in ESP areas; he has worked in the domains of business, management, engineering, science, and medicine at the University of Zagazig – Egypt. Also, he has worked in different Middle East countries: Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. His basic work is at the Suez Canal University – Egypt.