

Students' Perceptions of ESP Courses: The Case of the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir Tunisia

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ABSTRACT: *This study aims to describe the educational situation of English for Specific Purposes within the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir, Tunisia. In order to explore the attitudes of learners in this institution, a questionnaire was used. Scrutiny of the results shows that an overwhelming majority of these students are motivated to study English but there are some constraints related to time-table and teaching aids. Ultimately, this study aims to improve the educational situation of English for Specific Purposes in Tunisian higher education.*

KEYWORDS: English for Specific purposes, ESL, EFL, Learners' attitudes, Motivation, Audiovisuals.

INTRODUCTION

The development of science and the use of English as its principal language of information dissemination have vastly increased the number of university science students attending English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs in institutions of higher education around the world. In response to their needs there has been a significant demand for programs and research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). So what is ESP?

The term ESP was a source of contention with many arguments as to what exactly was ESP? Even today there is a large amount of on-going debate as to how to specify what exactly ESP constitutes (Belcher, 2006, Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998). I would add that as general English courses become increasingly specialized and learner centred with many courses using needs analysis, it is getting harder to describe what ESP is and what "General English" is.

According to Strevens (1977) ESP concerns the emergence of a number of activities, movements and subjects that are carried out predominantly in English across the world. It looks at the purpose for which the student needs to learn English, i.e. for occupational or for study purposes. ESP is a term that refers to teaching or studying English for a particular career (like law, medicine) or for business in general.

The fact that learners know specifically why they are learning a language is a great advantage on both sides of the process. The learners are therefore motivated, and this enables the teacher to meet learners' needs and expectations more easily. Learner and the way of learning ("acquiring language") are considered to be the main factors in the whole process. Hutchinson and Waters (1992) emphasize ESP to be an approach and not a product which means language learning not language use is highlighted. They draw attention to a learning-centred approach "in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (p. 19).

Coffey (1985) observes that ESP is “a quick and economical use of the English language to pursue a course of academic study (EAP) or effectiveness in paid employment (EOP)” (p.79). Lorenzo (2005) reminds us that ESP “concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures” (p. 1) He also points out that as ESP is usually delivered to adult students, frequently in a work related setting (EOP), that motivation to learn is higher than in usual ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. Carter (1983) believes that self-direction is important in the sense that an ESP course is concerned with turning learners into users of the language.

ESP programs, to be relevant to the needs of their clientele, must be sustained by effective research. In attempting to incorporate research into instruction, some studies advanced the consideration that specific needs of a specific group of students should be determined. Tarone (1982) rightfully argued that

In order to design the most useful sort of syllabus for "Engineering English" or "English for Business" we need to determine exactly what sorts of communicative demands will be made on our students in Engineering and Business contexts. We cannot rely on our intuitions ... for this purpose; rather, we need to go into the contexts where our students will be using their English, examine the materials they will need to read ... interview their teachers and employers, and so on. (P i)

In Tunisia, The increase in the number of the university structures (Chabchoub 2002), especially of scientific and technological specialties, was not accompanied by any development in teaching programs, particularly the teaching of English for Specific Purposes. The current situation regarding the teaching of this specialty at vocational or technical faculties in the non-literary institutions is characterized especially by a lack of human resources and adequate teaching material.

Knowing the attitudes of students of English for Specific Purposes is of paramount importance before undertaking any action aiming at improving the teaching/learning of this specialty. In fact, the attitude of the learner plays a considerable role in second language learning (Bogaards, 1990).

In Tunisia we don't have enough information concerning the English for Specific Purposes educational situation. The aim of this study is to describe the situation of the education of English for Specific Purposes in Tunisia through the attitudes of the students belonging to the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir, Tunisia.

LITERATURE RE VIEW

English for Specific Purposes

English for specific purposes (ESP), a specific branch of Communicative Language Teaching, is designed for non-native English speakers who need specific knowledge of English in their field or profession. ESP focuses mainly on applications of English in specific fields (Robinson, 1991; Widdowson, 1987). Accordingly, the language learners' expectations and needs drive the course or curriculum design process (Hutchison & Waters, 1993).

The basic proposition of ESP is “all language teaching should be tailored to the specific learning and language use needs of identified groups of students - and also sensitive to the sociocultural contexts in which these students will be using English” (Johns & Price-Machado, 2003, p.43). Furthermore, Johns and Price-Machado (2003) argued that all good language teaching is for specific purposes in English. Robinson (1984) implied that ESP is, in essence, a means for achieving the necessary communicative competence. Therefore, ESP is goal-oriented and is based on needs analysis. According to Flowerdew & Peacock (2001), the rationale for ESP is based upon four claims:

- Being focused on the learners' needs, it wastes no time; □ It is relevant to the learner;
- It is successful in imparting learning;
- It is more cost effective than „General English.“

Aside from the above factors, “authentic texts, communicative task-based approach, custom-made materials, adult learners, and purposeful courses” were mentioned (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.13).

Generally, ESP can be divided into two main types: English for occupational purposes (EOP) and English for academic purposes (EAP). However, since there is a diversity of ESP courses offered around the world, and the ESP programs are adapted to the contexts, ESP can be categorized in a number of ways (Johns, 1991). The researcher is more concerned about EAP, because the language learners in this study were college students who wanted to learn English related to their specific academic areas.

Communicative Language Teaching

Basically, communicative language teaching (CLT) focuses on the process rather than the product in language learning, and the purpose of language is communication. This approach grew out of the work of anthropological linguists “who view language first and foremost as a system of communication” (Celce-Muricia, 1991, p.8).

Nunan (1999, p.246) offers several characteristics of CL T, some of which are as follows:

- Language is a system of the expression of meaning: primary function – and communication.
- Activities involving real communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language that is meaningful to the learner promote learning.
- Objectives will reflect the needs of the learner; they will include functional skills as well as linguistic objectives.
- Syllabus will include some or all of the following: structures, functions, notions, and tasks. Ordering will be guided by learner needs.
- Role of materials – primary role of promoting communicative language use; task based, authentic.

In CLT, communicative competence, which refers to an ability to use the language for actual communication purposes, is emphasized (Canale and Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). This refers

to functional language proficiency: “the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons belonging to the same (or different) speech community (communities), or between one person and a written or oral text” (Savignon, 1983, p.303). Communicative competence applies to both written and spoken language. CLT also advocates a communicative syllabus in which real-world tasks and authentic materials are used to design language courses (Yalden, 1987).

Also, in the CLT classroom, since learners’ active involvement in class is essential, the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator of the communication process and a needs analyst, rather than a knower or director of the classroom activities. The role of the learner is a negotiator or interactor, which is quite different from the traditional Tunisian students’ role as a learner, receiver, follower, or listener (Savignon, 2002). Therefore, for effective CLT implementation in the language classroom, not only teachers but also students have to abandon their traditional roles, and this has been one of the major obstacles to successful implementation of CLT in the Tunisian context. Regarding cultural mismatches and the new roles for CLT classes, several studies have been conducted in many EFL countries (e.g., Shamin, 1996; Li, 1998; Holliday, 1996).

Whole Language Approach

According to Goodman (1986), whole language is defined as “a way of bringing together, a view of language, a view of learning, a view of people, in particular two special groups of people: kids and teachers” (p.5). Whole language approach unifies and integrates the four language skills, which should not be broken into parts (Goodman, 1986; Hennings, 1990; Rigg, 1991).

A major tenet of whole language is that language is best learned in authentic, meaningful situations in which language is not separated into parts, but remains whole (Gaburo, 1988; Goodman, 1986). The following elements of whole language teaching are considered essential to language teaching and learning (Weaver, 1990; Edelsky, et al., 1991):

- All the language arts are integrative and integrated inside and outside of the classroom;
- Language learning to learn the use of wholeness;
- Learners’ ownership and responsibility for their own engagement in language practices;
- Proceeds more from whole-to-part than from part-to-whole;
- Students are engaged in reading and writing, speaking and listening, for a variety of authentic purposes;
- Language learning in a learner-centered curriculum;
- Teacher as an ingenious innovator, facilitator, provider, astute observer, colearner in a classroom community;
- The richness of literature and authentic materials (material from a variety of sources, including textbooks, trade books, newspapers, magazines, and references).

One of the hallmarks of a whole language program is that curricular decisions are based on the knowledge and needs of individual students, and the curriculum is negotiated with students

(Gilles, 1988). Compared with CLT, where language learning activities are structured so as to provide meaningful opportunities to communicate in the target language, students in a whole language program acquire a foreign or second language through immersion in the language.

Recently, many experts in ESL/EFL have believed that the whole language teaching approach is an effective way of meeting the needs not only of children and secondary school students but also college students, thanks to its empowering qualities. For example, in their study of language minority students, Freeman and Freeman (1989) found that whole language allowed the students to have greater control over their own learning goals. Otero's research (1993) also demonstrated the usefulness of the whole language approach for the development of ESL students' literacy skills at the postsecondary level.

ESL versus EFL

ESL is an acronym for English as a second language. ESL is defined as "the role of English for immigrant and other minority groups in English-speaking countries" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p.124). In this context, since English has a special standing, it is used both inside and outside the classroom. "When English functions as a second language, that is, where it is used alongside other languages but is commonly the most important language of education, government, or business, it is often regarded by its users as a local rather than a foreign language" (Richards, 1985, p.2-3). Examples of an ESL situation can be seen when non-native English speakers reside in America or Australia.

On the contrary, EFL, an acronym for English as a foreign language, is defined as "the role of English in countries where it is taught as a subject in schools but not used as a medium of instruction in education nor as a language of communication" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p.123124). In this context, students have fewer chances to practice English outside the classroom because English is not an official language. But it may still have a significant role to play: "It may be an important school subject and it may be necessary to pass an examination in English to enter a university. It may be the language of certain courses at a university, or at least of a large percentage of the students' textbooks. It may be related for people who work in a tourism, business, and for some sections of the civil service" (Richards, 1985, p.2-3). A country such as Tunisia is regarded as an EFL setting.

Currently, the distinction between ESL and EFL is widely regarded as an oversimplification (Nunan, 1999), and some scholars (Nayar, 1997; Kachru & Nelson, 1996) argue for an alternative distinction of EAL (English as an additional language) versus ESL/EFL, because of the vagueness or overlapping of these terms, ESL and EFL. EAL may better address the concerns for more sociolinguistically accurate terms of language use in global contexts. However, many researchers (Ellis, 1994; Strevens, 1992) agree that there are still distinct factors distinguishing between ESL and EFL that should be taken into consideration in terms of teaching and learning English, because these differences have an impact on both what is learned and how it is learned in English education.

First of all, the student populations differ. In many EFL contexts such as Tunisia, the population is homogeneous, sharing a similar history and culture as well as the L1 (primary language). Although there are some cultural differences because of their personal religious or family traditions, a common bond through the larger cultural identity still exists (Gebhard, 1996). But students in many ESL settings like America are heterogeneous, coming from a variety of

countries and cultures. They have diverse backgrounds and interests. For example, an ESL class could consist of students from different nationalities.

Second, the purposes for learning ESL and EFL are different. In Tunisia, where English is a foreign language, the primary goal of studying English is to pass the examination or obtain a good score on a test. Since these exams have created washback effects (Hancock, 1994), especially for secondary level education in Tunisia, most English instruction is exam-oriented, focusing on grammar and reading comprehension more than communicative abilities in English. In contrast, in the ESL setting, "the goal is often tied to literacy," which is necessarily to assimilate into the mainstream English-speaking population (Gebhard, 1996, p.3). Also, acquiring English is necessary for immediate, day-to-day communication in the society at large. Of course, there are some exceptions, such as people who need to learn English for communicative purposes in an EFL context, and students who want to gain a good score on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test in ESL countries. Generally, in EFL situations, English is perceived as one of the most important academic subjects, rather than as a tool for survival as in business and education, which is often the case with ESL (Liu, D., 1999).

EFL teachers are usually non-native speakers of English, having less proficiency in the target language than native English-speaking teachers. But teachers and students share the same native language (L1) and culture, which could be a good medium of instruction and a valuable resource for teaching English as a foreign language.

Materials are often different, too. In EFL, English teaching materials are usually provided in textbooks prescribed by the government or policy administrators, although some teachers may use supplemental materials of their own choice. Some EFL teachers may try to introduce many authentic materials, because students do not have many chances to encounter them on their own. On the contrary, ESL teachers often have more freedom to choose or develop materials. Furthermore, there is easy access to authentic materials for English instruction outside the classroom in ESL contexts.

In EFL settings, students have fewer chances to apply what they learn to communicative situations, especially with native speakers of English. "Quite often the only comprehensible English some EFL students hear and read is in the classroom. In contrast, when ESL students leave the classroom they can enter any number of situations in which they can use English" (Gebhard, 1996, p.4). Therefore, EFL teachers are concerned with not only how to teach to the test, but also finding ways to get students to speak English in class. Also, in EFL countries, since students have less direct contact with speakers of English, there is an absence of learner's immersion into the target language cultural community (Serdiukov & Tarnopolsky, 1999). It is widely recognized that understanding the social and cultural norms of a target speech community is an integral and fundamental part of L2 language instruction. Therefore, developing intercultural awareness in an EFL setting is important. In the case of ESL, where students' L1 and culture may be easily neglected because of their need to use English for everyday purposes, maintenance of students' L1 and culture is an issue. The goal is to enhance additive bilingualism rather than induce subtractive bilingualism (Ellis, 1994). Additive bilingualism means acquiring a second language without loss of native language skills, thereby enabling learners to maintain L1 ability as well as to develop or maintain a positive attitude toward their native languages and themselves. By contrast, subtractive bilingualism occurs when learners' L1 ability declines in the course of acquiring the L2, and the learners develop

a negative attitude towards their native language in the process of becoming bilingual (Carter & Nunan, 2001).

In spite of the differences between ESL and EFL, the researcher agrees with Phillipson's (1992) statement that the comparison between ESL and EFL is relative; ESL and EFL should not be viewed as a dichotomy, but rather be presented on a continuum of English use. Nevertheless, the above distinction makes a considerable difference when it comes to the learning and teaching of English because it affects "the extent of the learner's prior familiarity with English, the learner's expectations of success, and the average level of attainment reached by most learners" (Stevens, 1992, p.36-37). Therefore, English language educators and administrators should keep those differences in mind not only for teaching English in class but also for designing a curriculum for EFL situations as well as ESL situations.

Major English Instructional Approaches and Applications

Over the last two decades, a paradigm shift has occurred in perspectives on foreign or second language acquisition. Specifically, major English instructional approaches have changed from traditional teacher-centered, grammar-oriented instruction to student-centered, communicative approaches (Celce-Murcia, 2002). A brief overview of major English instructional approaches and applications used widely is presented next.

Traditional English instruction usually refers to the grammar-translation method. Initially, the grammar-translation method was used to teach classical languages and became one of the most common second/foreign language teaching methods not only in ESL but also in EFL contexts. Typically, students learn a foreign or second language by translating the L2 to their L1, accompanied by analyses of sentence level grammar. In Tunisia, this approach used to be the most dominant teaching method, because many teachers and administrators believed that it was effective for their purposes, and they were taught through this method themselves. Celce-Murcia (1991, p.6) lists the major characteristics of the grammar-translation method as follows:

- Instruction is given in the native language of the students.
- There is little use of the target language.
- Focus is on grammatical parsing, i.e., the form and inflection of words.
- A typical exercise is to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
- The result of this approach is usually an inability on the part of the student to use the language for communication.
- The teacher does not have to be able to speak the target language.

In this method, since there is little interaction between teachers and students, the classroom is teacher-centered, which matches the Tunisian classroom culture. The disadvantage of this method is that because grammar is taught as a set of rules to be memorized and repeated, it is difficult for learners to apply the grammar they have learned in actual communication (Nunan, 1999), thereby resulting in producing poor speakers of English with a lot of grammatical knowledge.

Also, some teachers use the grammar-translation method together with the audio-lingual method in a kind of hybrid pedagogy. The audio-lingual method emphasizes pattern

memorization and practice, structural drills, and habit formation. The instructional principles of the audio-lingual method are: students are taught incrementally, errors are identified and corrected, and accuracy is expected to arise out of practice with structures (Carter & Nunan, 2001). Since the audio-lingual method was used widely in the 1950s and 1960s and is still being used, the method is also included in the traditional English instruction in this study.

Technology and English Teaching

Recently, technology has played an important role in teaching a foreign or second language. For example, advanced computer technology has enabled learners to generate their own target language discourse with much more freedom than ever before (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Recent studies have found that computer networking tools, such as the Internet and e-mail, to be an effective medium for promoting second or foreign language (L2) learners' communicative competence, by providing learners with ample opportunities to negotiate meaning with others (Allen & Thompson, 1995; Kelm, 1992a; Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1995; Chun & Plass, 2000). Therefore, the general tendency has shifted from using computers as a tutor to regarding them as an effective means for communication and a resource for creating a more open learning environment in which students feel encouraged to express themselves (Tella, 1995).

Research on computer technology has demonstrated that technology provides second/foreign language learners with increased opportunities to participate in genuine real-life communication as well as within an empowering environment where language learners can freely express themselves at their own pace. Based on previous studies (Beauvois, 1992; Kelm, 1992b; Allen & Thompson, 1995), several characteristics of computer-based foreign or second language instruction, including e-mail and the Internet, are presented as follows:

- The syllabus should be learner-centered, allowing students to have multiple opportunities to intake and produce L2. Students should also have a fair amount of control over their planning and implementation in order to lead students to be responsible for their learning and be autonomous themselves.
- Computer-based L2 instruction should foster authentic communication and use authentic materials whenever possible.
- Efforts should be made to keep the extraneous factors to be minimum, such as access to computers and apprehension for using a new medium.
- Networked computers also provide authentic sources for target language and culture.
- Telecommunications such as e-mails provides an empowering environment where nonnative speakers can freely express their emotions and thoughts in the target language.
- Through network-based interaction, students feel motivated and take more control over their L2 learning.

Certainly, several previous studies have shown that using the Internet or e-mail would motivate students to learn and provide them with more opportunities to use the language for communicative purposes (e.g., Warschauer, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

Study design

We have used a cross sectional study to describe the situation of teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes in the Tunisian higher education.

Population

The studied population was composed of the students of the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir. A class of students was picked out randomly (all the classes of the institution were numbered, a simple random picking out was done and a class was selected and included in the study).

Data Collection

The data were collected using a self administered and anonymous questionnaire in which I was initially based on the personal criteria of age, sex as well as the socio-demographic characteristics to draw a distinction between learners. The specialty before undertaking the higher education is also used as a parameter in the questionnaire in order to determine the importance of English language. We have also collected information about the number of hours of English language learning, the time table and their influence on the learning of English, and the students' point of view towards the teaching aids.

RESULTS

General Characteristics

The studied population included 32 second year students at the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir. These students were aged between 20 and 25 years. The average age of this population was 21 years. The percentage of males slightly exceeded that of females in the studied population. In fact, 44,6% of this population were males whereas 55,4% were females. These students obtained their bachelor's degree in different sections. The students who had the bachelor's degree in the specialty of mathematics represented 52,2% of the population, while the students who had a bachelor's degree in the specialty of science represented 31,5% of it. The students who had a bachelor's degree in the specialty of economics and management represented only 16,1% of the whole population.

Importance of English for Specific Purposes

The answers showed that 87,5% of the students of the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir considered English for Specific Purposes as important.

The number of hours of the English learning was very sufficient for 20,7% of the students, while students who considered this number as sufficient were 55,4% of the population 23,9% of them affirmed that the number of hours of the learning of English was not sufficient.

More than half of these students weren't satisfied with the English for Specific Purposes time table. In fact, 59,4% among them mentioned that the schedules of learning English were not

suitable. Nevertheless they see The ESP course contents as adapted and adaptable to their future professional life.

The rate of motivation (96,9%) of the students of the Preparatory Institute for Engineering Studies of Monastir for the learning of English for Specific Purposes showed that almost all students were motivated to study this subject. Yet, it is important to notice that a big majority of these students see English teaching at university as less motivating than that of the secondary school. In fact, 71,9% of these students said that the teaching of English at university was not motivating.

Concerning teaching aids, 87,5% of these students were in favor of the use of audio-visual aids during the English courses and only 12,5% of them partially agreed with the usage of this teaching aid.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the situation of teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes in Tunisia is of paramount importance and this is for different reasons. On the one hand, there was scarce work devoted to the study of this situation in our country. In addition, the number of students and the non literary institutions has been in increase for a number of years and this increase requires an exploration of the situation of teaching/learning of this specialty.

Scrutiny of the results shows that the majority of learners were motivated for the learning of English for Specific Purposes. Yet, these learners regarded the teaching of English for Specific Purposes in the higher education as not motivating. A great percentage of learners preferred the use of audiovisuals in the English courses.

It would be thus interesting to think of improving the situation in this field in Tunisia. This improvement could be carried out by introducing the use of audiovisuals as well as offering trainings to the teachers of English for Specific Purposes.

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