

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ESP COURSES: THE CASE OF THE
PREPARATORY INSTITUTE FOR ENGINEERING STUDIES OF MONASTIR,
TUNISIA**

Abdelfatteh Harrabi

Higher Institute of Applied Studies in the Humanities, Mahdia Tunisia

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 adopted. 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 the use of information and communication technology. Ultimately, this study aims to improve the educational situation of English for Specific Purposes in the Tunisian higher education.*

KEYWORDS: English for Specific purposes, learners' attitudes, motivation, information and communication technology.

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[1], Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998[2]). 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) [3] 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) [4] 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) [5] 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) [6] 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) [7] 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) [8] 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) [9], 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.

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.

ICT And English Language Teaching

The direct link between ICT use and students’ performance was in the heart of an extensive literature during the last two decades. Several studies have tried to explain the role and the added value of those technologies on classrooms and on student’s performances. The first body of the literature explored the impact of computers uses. Since the Internet revolution, there’s a shift in the literature that focuses more on the impact of online activities: use of Internet, use of educative online platforms, digital devices, and use of blogs.

Several studies show a real impact of ICT on students' achievement (Sosin et al. 2004; Fushs and Wossman, 2004; Talley, 2005; Coates et al. 2004). Kulik (1994) meta-analysis study revealed that on average, students who used ICT-based instruction scored higher than students without computers. The students also learn more in less time and they like their classes more when ICT-based instruction was included. Sosin et al. (2004) construct a database of 67 sections of introductory economics, enrolling 3,986 students, taught by 30 instructors across 15 institutions in the United States of America during the spring and fall semesters of 2002. They found significant but small positive impact on students' performance due to ICT use. But they show that some ICT seem to be positively correlated to the performance while the others are not!

Fuchs and Woessman (2004) used international data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). They show that while the bivariate correlation between the availability of ICTs and students' performance is strongly and significantly positive, the correlation becomes small and insignificant when other student environment characteristics are taken into consideration.

The analysis of the effects of these methodological and technological innovations on students' attitude towards the learning process and on students' performance seems to be evolving towards a consensus according to which an appropriate use of digital technologies in higher education can have significant positive effects both on students' attitude and achievement.

Attwell and Battle (1999) examined the relationship between having a home computer and school performance, for a sample of approximately 64,300 students in the United States. Their findings suggest that students, who have access to a computer at home, for educational purposes, demonstrate improved scores in reading and math.

Coates et al (2004), show that students in on-campus courses used to score better than their online counterparts, but this difference is not significant. Li et al. (2003) pointed out that web-based instruction presents information in a non-linear style, allowing students to explore new information via browsing and cross-referencing activities, and that web-based teaching supports active learning processes emphasized by constructivist theory. Third, web-based education is enhanced understanding through improved visualization and finally, the convenience, it could be used any time, at any place.

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 figures showed that 90,6% of these students stated the need to use information and communication technology during the English courses. This part (90,6%) of students prefer to extend the use of information and communication technology to virtual learning.

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.

DISCUSSION

A great majority of learners expressed their predilection for the use of the information and communication technology in their learning process and in the preparation of the courses by their English teachers. Nevertheless, several researches demonstrate that there's no evidence of a key role for ICT in High Education (Goolsbee and Guryan (2002); Kirkpatrick and Cuban (1998)).

Coates et al. (2004) surveyed three matched pairs of face-to-face and online principles of economics courses taught at three different institutions. The students' score in the Test of Understanding College Level Economics (TUCE) administered at the end of the semester is used as the measure of learning outcomes. After controlling for selection bias and differences in student characteristics, they report that the average TUCE scores is almost 15% higher for the face-to-face format than for the online format.

Anstine and Skidmore (2005) surveyed two matched pairs of on-campus and online courses, one in statistics, and the other in managerial economics. They report that after controlling for student characteristics and selection bias, students in the online format of the statistics class exam scored 14.1% less than in the traditional format, whereas, for the managerial economics class the test scores within both formats were not significantly different.

Navarro and Shoemaker (1999) surveyed a matched pair of on-campus and online sections of a class in principles of macroeconomics. The students self-selected the instruction format, each section was approximately 30 students, and there was no difference in the demographic composition of each section. They used a simple comparison of means of test scores and reported no-significant difference in academic performance between the two formats.

Terry, Lewer and Macy (2003) surveyed 240 students in a program offering courses in the three formats of online, on-campus, and hybrid. Using a standard regression model where final exam score is the dependent variable and student characteristics are the independent variables, they report that predicted exam scores for students in the online courses were significantly less than those of students in the on-campus and in the hybrid formats. However, the comparison of exam scores between students in the hybrid and students in the on-campus classes report no significant difference.

Brown and Liedholm (2002) surveyed students in a match pair of online and face-to-face principles of economics course taught by the same teacher. They reported that exam scores, after controlling for differences in student characteristics, are approximately 6 percent higher for the on-campus format than for the online format. They attribute the relatively better performance in the on-campus classes to the benefit of in-person teacher-student interactions, and attribute the relatively poorer performance of the students in the online class to the lack of self-discipline necessary for successful independent learning in the online environment.

Leuven et al. (2004), conclude that there's no evidence relationship between increased educational use of ICT's and students' performance. In fact, they find a consistently negative

and marginally significant relationship between ICT's use and some student achievement measures. Students may use ICT to increase their leisure time and have less time to study. Online gaming, increased communications channels do not mean necessarily increased achievement.

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 in the non literary institutions has been in increase for a number of years and this increase requires an exploration of the educational situation 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 audiovisual as well as offering trainings to the teachers of English for Specific Purposes.

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