

## **ESP Classes: Sharing a Report**

Alireza Bonyadi

Faculty of Education, University of Malaya

Moses Samuel

Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Malaya

### **ABSTRACT**

English for specific purposes, ESP, has been taught in Iran's higher educational centers for years. For certain reasons, however, these courses have been marginalized and less exposed to expert's criticism and evaluation. To evaluate the effectiveness of these courses in assisting the students to achieve the desired educational objectives, non-participant observations of ESP classes in two of the country's institutions of higher education were carried out. Based on our observations, we found that developing the reading skills was the main objective of these classes. Moreover, it was found that the students in their struggle to comprehend the assigned reading texts had problems in recognizing the basic sentence structure, the grammatical functions of gerunds, polysemous words and passive voice. The level of difficulty of the texts was found to be the source of reading problems as well. Considering the findings from the observed classes, the paper offers some practical suggestions for qualitative promotion of the classes.

*Keywords:* Reading for Academic Purposes, Reading Skills, Teaching, Vocabulary, English for Specific Purposes

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

English for special purposes (ESP), an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning (Hutchinson and A. Waters, 1987), has grown to become one of the most important areas of teaching English as a foreign language. It is also known as a learner-centered approach to teaching English as a foreign or second language. It meets the needs of (mostly) adult learners who need to learn a foreign language for use in their specific fields, such as science, technology, medicine, leisure, and academic learning. This is, in fact, of particular importance for university students as it is an effective means of enabling them to become familiar with professional texts written in English.

With the adoption of English as the international language for communication and its wide use all over the world more and more colleges and universities place an emphasis on running different kinds of English courses for their students to enable them to become competitive and competent enough in their future career.

---

\*Correspondence to: Moses Samuel (email: [mosess@um.edu.my](mailto:mosess@um.edu.my))

In Iran English is taught as a foreign language. At the junior school or “guidance level” and high school, English is allocated two instructional hours a week. At tertiary level the students whose English grade at the University entrance examination is low have to take a two-credit Basic English. Passing a three-credit General English course is compulsory for all students at this level followed by a two or four- credit ESP course based on their field of study. The goal of such courses is to provide the students with the skills and strategies needed to meet their reading requirements for academic courses.

Although English for Special Purposes has been taught in Iran for years, for certain reasons these courses have been marginalized and less exposed to experts’ criticism and evaluations. Specifically, in our setting ESP teachers and ESP students are faced with a number of issues and practical problems.

Of course every year one can find some research reports on issues related to teaching and conducting ESP courses like Evans and John (1998), Gatehouse (2001), Graves (2001), Richards, (2001), Robinson, (1991), Xenodohidis, (2002) and Yong (2006).

However, as their findings usually have been based on the specific settings and participants, not all of their findings can be generalized to our setting. Besides, findings from research are relatively inaccessible to many teachers who are busy designing and teaching ESP courses. So, there is often little exchange between research and teachers. In fact little research has been done to investigate the practical problems that students and teachers are facing with. Thus, the present paper aims to tackle the issue and find out the answer for the following two general questions:

- 1) What are the major classroom activities in the observed ESP classes in a state university and a private university?
- 2) What are the students’ major problems in their ESP classes?

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

A generic qualitative research design has been used in the present study. In a qualitative research, observation continues to be an accepted form of data collection (Cresswell, 2008). So, initially we developed an observational protocol for recording data as the study preceded (see appendix). Some general questions were included in the protocol to get the answer to the research questions. The researchers tried to take both descriptive and reflective field notes on the behavior of the students attending their ESP classes.\*

As for analyzing the data, we reviewed the written field notes from different observations. In a report form the authors tried discuss and interpret the emerged themes and descriptions.

### 2.1 The Observation Report

Based on both the descriptive and reflective observation notes, it became known that the major activity taking place in these classes was mostly reading and translation from English into Persian. The classes were mostly teacher-centered with the exception of reading a few lines from the booklet by students one by one offering the meaning of the words, if they were asked. The teachers were busy wording the texts giving the overall meaning of it, in Persian of course, while the students were busy writing down those uttered translations by the teachers above or under the English words or phrases.

---

\* The observations have been conducted in two higher education institutions in Iran. One of these institutions is a state university that is considered one of the biggest academic institutions in the country. The other one, a private university which includes 12 different faculties.

Most of the class time was spent either reading the texts or speaking about the topics with a gradual deviation from the text itself. Bearing in mind the importance of the knowledge of the grammatical structures in decoding the meaning of a text, we observed that there was no discussion of any relevant grammatical points inherent in the text, and indeed it had been presupposed by the teachers that the students had already got the linguistic structures fully. Teachers in most cases used their own notes selected from different sources. For example, in one of the classes some pages of an encyclopedia have been selected and copied to be read and translated in the classroom.

By going through the observation notes and questions students posed during the class time, we classified their major areas of difficulties as (1) defining the syntactic structures of the sentences, (2) gerund, (3) polysemous words, (4) passive voice and (5) the authenticity of texts.

**The syntactic structures of the sentences:** As a rule of thumb, the more complicated the syntactic structure, the more difficult the comprehension is. As an example of the case, most students had difficulty in comprehending the following sentence:

Example 1

*Merely through an enlargement of the optical scale causing a closer emotional relation, strong physical and psychological sensations sprang up.*

The above-mentioned sentence appeared to be less comprehensible to some students due to its somehow complex syntactic structure. In fact, at the end of the class, when the observer asked a few students to underline the main verb of the sentence, they got confused what the verb was (causing or sprang up).

**Gerund.** As forms of verbs ending in ING and used as nouns, gerunds posed another problem in students' comprehension of the ESP texts in that they were always taken as verb causing misinterpretations of the sentences by the students. In one of our observed classes a student's question regarding the following sentence was to clarify having two verbs in the sentence.

Example 2

*Burning destroys organic matter.*

**Polysemous words:** Some words' capacity to carry more than one meaning was another common source of students' misunderstanding of the ESP texts. As we know, most of the words, even some small words, may have more than one meaning. Unless the students are aware of these meanings, they will experience problems in their reading by generalizing the commonly used meaning to the other contexts. Some uses of the small word "as" can serve as examples of the point.

Example 3

*He is famous as physicist (considered to be).*

*It is as you told me (the way).*

*As we grow older, we gain experience (while).*

**Passive voice:** Use of passive voice is very common in ESP and as the students have not got a good command of it, they are usually unable to comprehend the texts. In one of our observed classes most students had difficulty in comprehending the following simple but passive sentence:

Example 4

*The cell units were found to be filled with living substances.*

**The degree of authenticity:** It is a usual practice among ESP practitioners to prepare authentic ESP texts. However, the authenticity of the texts should vary based on factors like the language proficiency of the students and the degree of complexities of the skills practiced. So, it is of great importance to have a balance between the extent of authenticity and the linguistic proficiency of the students. Otherwise, the text would appear too difficult to the students. The other problem with the authentic texts is the fact that in preparing these text native speaker knowledge is assumed. We may consider the following paragraph taken from an ESP textbook as an example of the case:

#### Example 5

*Balance sheets now normally show assets and liabilities classified so that they give adequate information to those who use them. With limited companies in the UK, this has been largely brought about by the companies Act 1948 and 1967, which lay down how assets and liabilities should be valued and classified in a company's balance sheet.*

By going through the paragraph, one can notice the extent of native knowledge assumed in the text especially where it refers to the *Act of 1948* and *1967* passed in the UK.

#### **Some Practical Guidelines**

As instructors of ESP classes and also by referring to our personal experiences, we believe that to some extent we can treat (not eliminate) the mentioned problems by considering the following suggested points:

- a) Most of the problems in our ESP classes arise first from the fact that students usually have a poor knowledge of basic English. It is obvious that with such knowledge attending an ESP class will yield nothing but wasting the time. So, a precondition for offering these classes is the knowledge and familiarity of the students with the basic language sentence structure, vocabulary and language varieties.
- b) As it was observed in our classes, translation was the major activity in our ESP classes. However, by considering our students' needs to refer to other academic articles and text-books to enhance their studies, it sounds logical to focus on developing the reading skills. Of course, reading articles for academic purposes is not the same as reading newspapers, that is, reading in ESP classes demands a greater degree of concentration, precision and intensity. One reading is not enough when the reader's purpose is to explain what the article is about, so we should elaborate on its meaning with more accuracy. (Ancic and Manenica, 2002). To achieve these goals we, the ESP teachers, should provide the students with the kind of exercises that deal with contextual references, rephrasing, diagram labeling or mapping activities, summarizing and note-taking activities.
- c) Academic articles are characterized by concepts usually expressed through long and embedded sentences that are closely interrelated and sometimes dependent on each other. Naturally, it would be rather difficult for the students to grasp the meaning of these embedded sentences. Therefore, assigning a task to divide long sentences into their components, i.e., breaking an active sentence into its main subject and object can be very useful. Task no. 1 illustrates the point.

**Task 1** Scan the sentences of the paragraph for their main components (i.e. subject, verb, object)

Sentence no.	Subject	Verb	(Object)

d) Generally, there are many discipline specific phrases or collocations in each discipline. Collocations are in fact pair or groups of words that co-occur with very high frequency in ESP texts. Teachers can use these collocations as the foundation of teaching since they are used in a formulaic and rehearsed way. They are also easily stored and retrieved as whole chunks helping the students ease the frustration and promoting motivation and a sense of reading fluency (Jeanette, 2001). As an example of the point, we can mention the following accounting collocations:

- prepaid expenses
- incurred expenses
- estimated revenue
- revenue analysis
- nominal value
- liquidity ratio
- bonds payable
- accrued revenue
- cash flow
- factory overhead

To make the students care about these collocations the following task may be assigned:

**Task 2** Scan the text for any collocations and list them under the given heading

Verb-adjectives	Verb-noun	Noun-noun	Adjective-noun

e) As we observed in our classes, teachers try to prepare the texts that are to be taught in the class. So, enough care should be taken to clarify in advance what we are to teach and the order in which they are to be taught so that we can break the body of knowledge into teachable units (Broughton *et al.*, 1994). Of course there are various types of syllabuses based on certain assumptions about the nature of language and learning (Nunan, 1999). In organizing the material in ESP courses, it is suggested that a topic-based syllabus should be preferred to the other kinds of syllabuses (Siderova, 1999). Experience has shown that by following a topic-based syllabus, we are able to cover the important related topics that our students may potentially need to study. It would also help them to believe that the knowledge they are getting is not the scattered one. In general, a topic-based syllabus gives our trainees a clear view not only of the objectives of the ESP classes but also it eases the way in which they are going to achieve these goals. We may list the following topics for an ESP class on accounting:

- accounting: definition

- types of  
accounting:

- a) financial accounting
- b) management accounting

- financial statements
  - a) balances sheet
  - b) capital statement
  - c) cash flow statement
  
- accounting basis:
  - a) cash basis
  - b) accrual basis
  
- budgeting:
  - a) capital budgeting
  - b) budget period

As a word of caution, it should be reminded that since an ESP teacher is not, in most cases, a specialist in the specific area of knowledge, he would not be able to make a decision on the topics to be included in the syllabus. To provide the students with the needed terminology even arranging the topics in a suitable and teachable order, would not be as easy as it may appear at first. Thus, it is of great importance to consult a subject specialist.

- f) To make the ESP texts more authentic, some teachers tend to use original books on a specific field of study. The problems with these books lie in their purposes. While the purpose of original books is to teach the subject matter, it is the teaching of English that is mostly concerned in ESP courses. Moreover, as we discussed before, native speaker knowledge is assumed in these original books that mostly does not match with that of a foreign language learner. So, as Maley (1990) argues, students cannot simply be left to deal with the awesome “foreignness” of the new language in all its manifestations, but they must be helped with judicious simplification. The teacher, in fact, has to adapt these texts to make them suitable for teaching English. Of course adapting the original materials is a subtle process and a teacher, on the basis of students’ age and their English language proficiency and his own experience, has to make a sound decision on adapting semantic, lexical, syntactic and discourse elements of the text (Darian, 2001).

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

With the continuing increase of offering ESP courses at tertiary level throughout the country, and also by considering the ever-increasing theoretical discussions of ESP courses, it is of importance to consider the practical and pedagogical aspects of these classes. In response to this need, we have tried to present an observation report on such classes. In an effort to share our findings on conducting these classes, we have suggested that by providing a sound knowledge of basic English, dividing the long sentences into their components, caring for multi-word units or collocations, selecting a topic-based syllabus and also by adapting of authentic texts, we would be able to ease the problems. It is hoped

that these suggestions will lend insight into the challenges facing the ESP instructor and students. Moreover and as a further study, observing past students who are presently engaged in their professional setting is possibly another effective measure of evaluating the extent these ESP courses have fully prepared them for workplace needs.

## REFERENCES

- Ancic, J. and Shaw-Manencia. 1999. Using ESP texts as Supplementary Materials for English Language Literature students. In *English for Specific Purposes: Contradictions and balances*. (Ed.). Tokic, B., Davis, M. and Jemersic, J. retrieved November 15, 2006, from <http://www.britishcouncil.hr/English/contradictions-and-balances.html>.
- Broughton, G., Brumfit, C., Flavell, R., Hill, P. and Pincas, A. (eds.). 1994. *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. London. Routledge
- Creswell, J. W. 2008. *Educational research: Planning, Conducting, and evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Darian, S. 2001. Adapting Materials For Language Teaching. *Forum*. 39(2): 2-10.
- Dudley Evans, T. & St. John, M. J. 1998. *Developments In English For Specific Purposes: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gatehouse, K. 2001. Key Issues in English for Specific purposes (ESP) Curriculum Development. *The Internet TESL Journal*. VII(10): Retrieved December 18, 2006, from <Http://www.iteslj.org>.
- Graves, K. 2001. A Framework Of Course Development Processes. In Hall, D. R. & Hewings, A. (eds.). *Innovations in English language Teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Hutchinson, T., Waters, A. 1993. *English For Specific Purposes: A Learner-Centered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jeanette, S. Decarrico. 2001. Vocabulary Learning and Teaching. In *Teaching English As A Second Or Foreign Language*. M. Celle-Murcia. Ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers. 285-301.
- Maley, A. 1990. New Lamps For Old: Realism And Surrealism In Foreign Language Teaching. In *Currents of Change in English Language Teaching*. (Ed.). R. Rossner and R. Bolitho. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nunnan, D. 1999. *Second language Teaching and Learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Richards, J. C. 2001. *Curriculum Development In Language Teaching Cambridge*. Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, P. 1991. *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Siderova, J. 1999. Writing an ESP Course-book, In *English for Specific Purposes: Contradictions and balances*. Ed. Tokic, B. Davis, M. and, Jemersic, J. Retrieved March 9, 2003. 167-174. from <http://www.britishcouncil.hr/English/contradictions-and-balances.htm>.
- Xenodohidis, T. H. 2002. An ESP Curriculum for Greek EFL Students of Computing: A New Approach. *ESP World*. 1(2). Retrieved November 29th, 2006 from [http://www. esp-world.info/index.html](http://www.esp-world.info/index.html).
- Yong, C. 2006. From Common Core To Specific. *Asian ESP Journal Online*. 1(3): 24-47. Retrieved October 28, 2007. From [http://www.asian-esp-journal.com/June\\_2006\\_yc.php](http://www.asian-esp-journal.com/June_2006_yc.php).

**Appendix**

**Table A**

<b>Observation Protocol</b>		
<b>Setting</b> ..... <b>Observer:</b> ..... <b>Time:</b> ..... <b>Length of the observation:</b> ...		
Notes		
General points on :	descriptive	reflective
_ major classroom activity		
_ the kinds of students' questions		
_ kinds of students' problems		
_ other important points		