

***Teaching the ESP course in the LMD system:
Problems and Perspectives***

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Abstract :

With the implementation of LMD system in the Algerian universities an ESP course was incorporated as an essential component of the curriculum of the LMD 'licence'. This fact is dictated mainly by the nature of the LMD degree which is shaped by two main orientations, namely the academic and the occupational (professional) one. However, it must be mentioned that despite teachers great will and dedication, this course still faces serious hurdles that prevent it from reaching its objectives.

My paper will primarily deal with the teaching problems of the ESP course in the department of English, Biskra University. I will try to diagnose those problems in terms of 1) Course objectives, 2) Students' needs, 3) Teachers' experience, 4) Teaching materials and teaching methodology.

I will also try to bring my humble contribution as how to improve the teaching of this course through a number of pedagogical recommendations.

Mots-clés : Enseignant-Apprenant-Langue-Interaction- Acteur- scène
Méthode-

الملخص:

إن تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية العلمية ليست ظاهرة جديدة إنما يعود تاريخها إلى السبعينات حيث كان يحتوي مقرر ليسانس اللغة الإنجليزية على مقياس يسمى اللغة الإنجليزية من أجل العلوم و التكنولوجيا لكن ولأسباب مجهولة اختلف هذا المقياس تماما. اليوم مع تطبيق نظام ل م د في الجامعة الجزائرية ظهر هذا المقياس مجددا و بتسمية جديدة و كمكون أساسي في مقرر الليسانس و برجع سبب ظهوره إلي طبيعة ليسانس ل م د التي قد تكون مهنية أو أكاديمية. و في كلتا الحالتين فإن تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية العلمية أصبح أساسيا بالنسبة للطلبة. مقالي هذا يتناول العوائق التي تواجه تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية العلمية في ليسانس ل م د. و سأحاول تشخيص هاته العوائق على مستوى أهداف المقياس ,متطلبات الطلبة ,خبرة الأستاذ ,المنهجية المتبعة و أخيرا المعدات و الوسائل التعليمية .

1. Introduction

The implementation of the LMD system in the Algerian universities led to the inclusion of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) module as an essential component of the curriculum of the "licence" of English. This module was imposed by the nature of the LMD degree which has become either academic or occupational. However; this course is facing serious obstacles which stand in the way of ESP teachers and ESP learners. This paper will be divided into two main parts: a rapid survey of the theoretical development in ESP which will allow us to establish the criterial features which will be used in our discussion. Then, we will try to diagnose and analyse the teaching problems of the ESP course.

2. Defining ESP

With the English language becoming a very essential tool for non-native speakers scientists, technologists and all those who would like to read or publish research materials in international journals, the question arises whether their professional training prepares them linguistically for all the English language activities. The fact that English has become an international language for science and technology is neither unknown nor disputed. The publication of major research is done in English. Most books and articles in different fields are written by native speakers.

In fact, In Algeria the teaching of the ESP course is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the early 1970's when a module called EST (English for Science and Technology, as it was originally known) was introduced in the curriculum of the "licence". The aim of teaching this module was mainly to initiate students to the scientific and technological writings. At that time, ESP (or English for Special Purposes, as it was called) was, and still is fashionable in many parts of the world and in the Arab world in particular. Part of this success was fuelled by the belief that since English was the language of science and technology, the mastery of this language would ensure the success of such a transfer. At that time, they have primarily responded to the calls to make the content of English courses offered relevant to the specific groups of learners. However, for unknown reason this particular subject disappeared completely from the curriculum of the "licence"

Today, with the implementation of the LMD system an ESP course was introduced in the curriculum of the "licence". In fact, the

goal of teaching ESP in the LMD system is twofold. If the students are oriented towards further academic studies this will enable them to conduct their research. And since not all students will finish their studies the study of ESP will become a very indispensable tool for any possible future career.

Now, let us have a look at the term ESP and see what this acronym stands for. But before I would like to make an important distinction between ESP (English For Special Purposes) and ESP (English For Specific Purposes). The former, implies that there exists in the language some sort of restricted languages which constitute a small part of EST (English for Science and Technology). Unfortunately, this was the characteristic of LST (Langue de sciences et de la technologie). The latter, however, specifies and emphasizes the purposefulness that ESP is intended for clear usefulness to the students. But we still have to define the criteria which make these purposes "specific" to avoid the use of ESP as an umbrella term which covers a variety of vocational and professional reasons for learning or teaching languages. Today, it is agreed that there are two kinds of purposes:

1. Occupational purposes: For example, air traffic controllers need English primarily to guide aircrafts. They may not use the language at all apart from this. Business executives need English for international trade. Waiters may need English to serve their customers.

2. Academic purposes: Students of medicine, engineering, law and scientific disciplines need to be able to read articles and books about these subjects. They also need English to write reports or essays and function in seminars.

EOP or English for Occupational Purposes refers to the specific demands certain occupations place upon communicative ability while EAP (English for Academic purposes) refers to those communicative skills in English required for study purposes in a formal educational system.

3. ESP versus General English

When we talk of the language of science, we immediately have in mind the idea of "special fields" because in the fashionable area of ESP, we find many varieties, i.e. English for medicine, agriculture, metallurgy, chemistry etc. According to Swales (1981: 4) "every society requires its members to use different varieties of language in

different situations. Each of these varieties has its distinctive features".As a result, both ESP practitioners and theoreticians have to be pragmatic.Moreover, due to certain pedagogical consideration English is divided into many "Englishes".Therefore, an English which has significant distinct features requires a special pedagogical treatment and is considered as a distinct variety.Moreover, the question that needs to be raised is whether "Scientific English" is different from "General English".

The answer is of course, yes, though as Strevens (1971:7) explains:"... the rules for sentence construction are the rules of languages as a whole and do not vary as between scientific and non scientific discourse, they nevertheless have very little similarity of context and circumstances of use of language are quite different". In fact, both "Scientific English "and "General English" share part of the lexis of the language.However, Sager (1980) believes that:" The lexicon of special languages is their most distinguishing characteristic".Another important feature of scientific writing is the common use of impersonal style, which explains the high incidence of the passive voice. This is because scientists prefer to talk or write about things and processes rather than about persons and their actions. In addition to this, scientific prose is characterized by the frequent use of function words, modals and a wide distribution of nouns and adjectives resulting in the tendency to nominalized style. One indisputable thing about science texts is their own syntactic, stylistic and discursal peculiarities that make them different from general English with its expository style.

Furthermore, these differences between "General English" and ESP in terms of style structure and lexis have their implications on the teaching practice.However, this should not lead us to make a complete separateness between ESP and "General English". In fact, ESP is built on general English.On the contrary, teachers of general English through their training and their experience have a lot to contribute to the teaching of ESP. In this respect, the knowledge of general English which teachers possess is considered as an adequate and valuable tool to which must be added the skill of dealing with ESP. Therefore the idea of dealing with ESP as a complete isolated system is not favourable.

4. Course objectives

The first characteristic of the ESP courses is that that they are goal-oriented. Learners taking an ESP course in English is not for the

sake of the English language as such, but because they generally have a task to perform in that language. They may need it either to further education (EAP) English for Academic Purposes or to carry out their occupation (EOP) English for Occupational Purposes.

Most of the time, learners have specific goals in mind. Therefore, it is quite understandable that learners always start with the idea of: "At the end of the course, I want to be able to do this and that". So, we should not blame such learners if they do not show the desire to study Shakespeare, the characteristic of a narrative text, or how English people behave in different situations. To find out what learners on particular course need English for, needs analysis must be carried out (needs analysis is an important feature of ESP).

Now, let us make a fundamental difference between two kinds of ESP courses. On the one hand, we have courses specially designed for a group of highly motivated people who are familiar with subject being taught but not with language. On the hand, English for specific purposes (LST as it was called) in the department of English which was originally designed with two different but complementary purposes. The first one is to familiarize learners with scientific and technological English and the second one is to train them to teach this particular subject. The former, is an ESP course where content is not a problem but the language (English) is. The latter, deals with English as a general subject but the specific side is a problem.

As already mentioned earlier in this section, ESP is a goal-oriented subject and ESP learners have specific goals in their mind. The question that we can ask ourselves is: Do our students know why they have to study this type of English? We believe that the only objective behind the inclusion of this module of ESP or LS (*Langue de spécialité*) in the curriculum of the LMD "licence" is simply to familiarize our students with certain specialized English. In fact, the very labeling of the module as LS reveals that it favours specialty at the expense of specificity. Furthermore, the LS module or ESP as some teachers prefer calling is introduced under different labels. In the first and second semester of the LMD cursus it is called LS (*langue de spécialité*). This name is then changed in the third semester to "Initiations au Sciences". Later, in the fourth semester it reappears as it was initially called in the first semester i.e. LS. However, this module is given a more precise title only at the third year where it is called LST (*langues des Sciences et Techniques*).

In fact, there is little concern about what students are supposed

to do with such a course. A quick look at the suggested official syllabus shows no clear cut objectives. The course description in all the three years of the LMD "licence" revolves around an initiation of the students to some sort of scientific and technological English. Moreover, with our modern world being more and more specialized it seems quite impossible to study all these fields.

5. Course content

In fact, the document available at the department of English concerning the content of the ESP course in no more than the name of the course followed by a very short course description with no clear objectives. Teachers are provided with general guidelines and left afterwards to decide on the teaching materials, teaching methodology and evaluation methods. Therefore, most of the work being done is on a "Do it yourself " basis and teachers rely much on their personal efforts. In fact, it is thanks to the coordination meetings regularly held by the sub-pedagogical committee that a more or less detailed syllabus outline is designed. Teachers in charge of this module still find difficulties in finding the materials that best suit their students level and help them reach their objectives. The main problem remains that because of the failure of the students to master "General English", teachers find it hard to introduce them to the specialized language.

It is noteworthy here, that in ESP there is a wide recognition that teaching the whole formal system of language is useless because of time constraints and the specific purpose learners need to perform through language. This is why most ESP courses adopt a selective approach in terms of the choice of the pertinent texts and the linguistic structures to be highlighted in lessons. The sample of texts should be examined by the teachers to see whether which syntactic features occur frequently and which can present learners with comprehension problems. An instance of this is the common occurrence of complex structures because of embedded clauses. If they find that this occurs frequently, then they should be included in their teaching materials. Of course, this will help learners in processing scientific discourse more effectively.

In the same way, a suitable corpus of text can be analysed to find out the percentage of the non finite clauses and see if they constitute difficulties in reading comprehension .As Bejan (1979:9) posits "...The most rational way of developing a course is the systematic study of the structures which are numerically important and which are not."

We may also undertake an analysis of the texts to identify the recurring patterns of discourse. Moreover, most of our students are not sufficiently equipped with cohesive devices or discourse markers which in fact makes the understanding of scientific discourse more difficult. Therefore, the teaching of cohesive devices such as anaphora, the referential system and traditional moves is very important to the learners. To this must be added the teaching of logical connectors which will foster learners' understanding of utterances beyond the sentence level and will therefore develop their interpretative ability and their cognitive process of prediction.

Another problem worth raising is the teaching of lexis. We should first recognize that vocabulary is one of the areas that have benefitted less from ESP research. However, recently there has been a growing interest in the teaching of scientific vocabulary. Many textbook writers have put much attention to the various functions of scientific text and neglected dealing with vocabulary. Some writers attribute this to the lack of a coherent approach to vocabulary while others consider vocabulary as a key issue in teaching ESP. One of the most serious hurdles our learners encounter is the wide corpus of technical vocabulary together with certain language forms and uses (i.e. noun compounding and verbs contextually determined) which are not common features in "General English". In addition to this, each discipline has a considerable number of terminology and lexical items whose use is mainly restricted to it. (e.g. English for Medicine, Metallurgy, and Agriculture etc.) As far as scientific lexis is concerned Swales (1981) distinguishes between three categories "...Technical (which the scientist teaches); Non-technical (which is needed for everyday conversation) and Sub-technical (which is needed to support the students academically in an "English" medium institution". However, it is what has been called the "basic words" rather than the "technical words" that can create difficulties. The so called basic words have a high frequency in technical literature and also appear in non-technical expository writing. On this particular point, Jordan (1978:9) explains that: "...It is extremely important for the student to realize that it is not only the unfamiliar lexical items which cause problems in understanding but also the simplest words, immediately recognizable in print but often misinterpreted or even unheard in speech."

Moreover, ESP specialist recognize that introducing unfamiliar or new lexical items is a highly skilled task which requires an exclusive

pedagogical treatment. Therefore, technological study should constitute part of the teacher's training method such as word formation (i.e. derivation, construction, conversion and abbreviation) can be efficient since scientific vocabulary is often made of roots plus affixation (e.g. extra, super, bi, di, logy, graphy etc.)

6. Characteristics of the ESP course

6.1 The teacher

The teachers who are presently in charge of the ESP course in the LMD are primarily language teachers and not specialized in any scientific subject matter. However, one of the major requirements of an ESP teacher is having sufficient scientific knowledge of the subject he/she is teaching. In fact, teachers of "General English" have a lot to contribute from their training and from their experience. In this respect, we need to emphasize that their knowledge of "General English", far from being an inadequate source to which must be added a new or several new languages, remains a valuable tool.

It is noteworthy that most ESP teachers were from a literary background and had neither previous experience in the teaching of ESP nor knowledge of its theoretical background and development. They also lack adequate knowledge of linguistic and learning theories which could enable them to design and implement an ESP course. Another major obstacle facing the ESP teachers is the linguistic problem. An example of this is the teaching of technical jargon which poses serious problems to teachers who are called upon to teach ESP courses.

There is ample evidence that in the study of professional literature of science and technology, vocabulary constitutes one of the most serious hurdles encountered by teachers. This is because ESP exhibits a wide corpus of technical vocabulary together with certain language forms and uses. In fact, each discipline or ESP variety has a considerable number of lexical items whose use is mainly, or even exclusively restricted to it.

Moreover, the continuous efforts in linguistics to account for the communicative properties of language have had direct repercussions on EFL in general and on ESP in particular. In the communicative language teaching the focus is no longer brought to bear on sentence-oriented grammar but on how language is used in the performance of communicative or rhetorical functions. On this particular aspect of language use Widdowson (1979:25) contends that "when we accept the need to teach language as communication we can

obviously no longer think of language in terms of sentences.” The shift towards a more pragmatic use of language is exemplified by ESP courses which basically reflect the communicative ‘par excellence’. He also adds that "teaching English as a medium for science and technology must involve us in the teaching of how scientists and technologists use the system to communicate."

Therefore, the pedagogical implications for adopting a communicative approach would be the design of a course to train teachers in the rhetoric of science and discourse analysis. This way, they would use and teach language more communicatively than the manipulation of structures. Thus, Candlin et al (1975:22) believe that: "In teaching ESP one is involving specialist learners in performing in the target language those mental processes and intellectual operations already familiar to them from "Doing science" in their mother tongue."

Hence, for practical as well as pedagogical purposes we should train ESP teachers and in this training they should be familiarized with the distinctive features of the language of sciences.

6.2 Learners

The majority of learners who study ESP courses in the LMD system come from different streams with varying levels in English. Moreover, the syllabuses in the secondary education deal with English rather as a general subject. Even the syllabuses for the so-called scientific streams do not really reflect any scientific aspect of the language.

The introduction of ESP in the curriculum of the LMD "licence" is intended for either occupational or academic purposes. Therefore, ESP (langue de spécialité) is goal-oriented and our students must be aware of the reasons why this particular subject is introduced and studied at all along the three years of their "licence" degree. The question that we can ask is: Do our students know why they had to study this kind of English? As said earlier, the introduction of this course in the LMD curriculum is not a matter of fashion but rather imposed by the nature of the degree to be prepared. In fact, labeling this course as "Special languages" (langue de spécialité) favoured speciality at the expense of specificity of goal. This module is introduced as a result of prevailing linguistic and language learning theories. ESP theory developed immensely and we should not remain frozen at the association of ESP=LST which could have a negative impact on our teaching methodologies.

So, we agree that the inclusion of this course in the LMD "licence" far from having specific goals is no more than familiarizing students with scientific writing. In fact, there is very little concern if any, what our students are supposed to do with such knowledge. If we look at the way this course is taught by most teachers, we will conclude that the aim is to let students acquire some sort of scientific knowledge, just for the sake of it. Besides there is no provision made for the possibility that students could be involved in a situation where they had to use this kind of English. Students' reluctance becomes greater when they realize that the exploitation of the teaching materials involved not only the practice of the structural and lexical characteristics of scientific texts, but also a knowledge of the particular scientific fields the text is dealing with. Therefore, we should not be surprised if our students show very low motivation and a negative attitude towards this course.

6.3 Teaching materials

ESP teachers exploit a variety of teaching materials. These materials fall into three main kinds: authentic adopted or created. Many authors advocate the use of authentic (i.e. unaltered materials) texts. Authenticity here refers to the use of unsimplified or 'genuine' texts used in ESP but originally were not written for teaching purposes. Others believe that a genuine text does not really ensure relevance. They argue that a text is only authentic if it is used in the same manner it is exploited in the real world. In other words, genuineness does not really mean authenticity. A text may be genuine but not exploited for the same purpose it was naturally produced for. Thus, Widdowson (1983) believes that authenticity lies in the nature of the interaction between the reader (or hearer) and the text.

Furthermore, materials taken directly from printed sources and presented in their natural state may present great challenges to both teachers and learners. For learner with a weak background in English authentic texts may be too difficult for them consequently they may be completely demotivated. For teachers, it is often difficult to adopt these texts because of the complexity of the technical terminology or the lack of the structures or the functions he/she wants his/ her students to practise. However, authors such as Widdowson (1983) believe that it is necessary to expose our students to authentic materials and develop their strategies for reading long and complex texts which they are likely to meet and use in their lives. The second type of material teacher can use in ESP courses are non-authentic

materials. Texts of this type are taken from academic contexts but they are simplified or especially written to meet specific pedagogical purposes. ESP teachers generally take genuine materials and adapt them by making the necessary changes which gives the teacher more control over the grammatical or lexical features than do other materials. In fact, most of the materials exploited in ESP courses are of the created or adapted type we mentioned earlier. They are taken from different sources including textbooks, the Net or from specialized magazines. Thus, we find texts titled Medicine, Business, Journalism, etc., with no link between them. Generally, a unit lay out would take the following form: (i) Students are given hand outs (ii) Teacher reads the text and explains the technical terms (iii) Students do some reading comprehension activities similar to the exploitation of a "General English" text (iv) Structural exercises i.e. Practice of the target structure(s) from the text.

In the above procedure teachers adopts a register based approach with no attention given to the communicative function or rhetorical organization of the text. It comes no surprise then, that most of our students show no real interest to study this module.

7. Pedagogical recommendations

In terms of teachers, I believe that some sort of training is necessary before they embark in teaching this module. It is also obvious that teachers in charge of this module should not only be familiar with the linguistic and language learning theories but should have experience in the design of a language course in ESP as well. In fact, ESP teachers need not become experts in science nevertheless they should acquaint themselves with the language of science. Emphasis should also be put on the fact that ESP teachers should not be possessors and transmitters of scientific knowledge, but possessors of strategies enabling students to make the best use of language.

In terms of the instructional materials and course content I think that emphasis should not be on content but on the functioning and organization of texts and their pedagogical implications. Therefore, texts should be chosen from a variety of sources in order to illustrate all the rhetorical approaches. And since we do not know where these students will go, it is then preferable to select a variety of subjects linked by a common denominator either syntactic or rhetorical. Moreover, for pedagogical treatment, texts should be analysed by teachers to see, on the one hand whether any syntactic features occur more frequently and can present learners with comprehension

problems, and, on the other hand, to identify recurring patterns of discourse structuring such as cohesive devices and discourse markers. Thus ESP course should adopt a selective approach in terms of the pertinent linguistic structures to be highlighted in the lessons. Last but not least, scientific vocabulary requires and exclusive pedagogical treatment therefore, a terminological study should constitute part of the teachers' training.

Finally, for the learners I believe that they should be made aware that the ESP course in the LMD system is very useful for their possible future careers. They should also know that this module is not introduced in the curriculum for the sake of cramming their heads with scientific and technological knowledge ,but solely for the purpose of familiarizing them with this particularly important register in view for preparing them for either occupational or academic purposes.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that the difficulties facing the teaching of the ESP course in the LMD system can be attitudinal, conceptual, linguistic or methodological. In fact, our first concern should be the elaboration of an ESP programme that covers all the semesters of the LMD 'licence'. To do so, we have to collect and analyse data about our students needs. The second and most important step is the selection and evaluation of the teaching materials in order to decide which ones to use to meet our students needs and objectives. Finally, we believe that an adequate and updated teacher training programmes is indispensable within the Algerian universities to meet the demand for ESP teachers and courses.

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