

ESP: A local report

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Introduction:

English for specific purposes, ESP, has been taught in our higher educational centers for years. For certain reasons, however, this course has been marginalized and less exposed to expert's criticism and evaluation. To discuss the effectiveness of these courses in assisting the students to achieve the desired educational objectives the article at first presents a brief observation report on the manners of holding ESP classes in some of the country's institutions of higher education and then offers some practical proposals for qualitative promotion of the classes.

The report:

In our educational system, students majoring in one of the different fields offered in universities throughout the country have to pass a two-credit Basic English followed by a three-credit General English. They are, then, required to pass a three-credit or more ESP courses depending on their majors. However, most of the students and teachers as well are not satisfied with these

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ESP classes (Bonyadi, 1996). To clarify the point a brief description of the ways these classes are conducted is presented.

On the basis of the regular observation, it was found that the major activity taking place in these classes was almost reading and translation from English into Persian. The classes were 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. 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, I 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 structures fully. Teachers in most cases used notes of themselves 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.

Meanwhile in the process of reading, it was observed that the major problems of the students

were:

1) Sentence structures: More specifically they did not know which words or phrases serve as subject or verb in a sentence. As an example of the case, most students had difficulty in comprehending the following sentence:

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

The students did not understand the above-mentioned sentence due to the fact that they were indeed unable to clarify the basic structure of the sentence and thus got confused what the verb was (causing or sprang up).

2) “ing-ending” words: words ending in “-ing” were another major source of difficulty in ESP texts. Having potentially different grammatical functions, these words usually misled the students. Many of these words, for example, had the role of a noun as in:

Burning destroys organic matter.

Others functioned as modifiers as in:

...river **flowing** (= river that flows)

3) Multi-meaning words: Words having different meanings were the source of difficulty too. As we know, most of the words even some small words may have more than one meaning. Unless the students know most of the meanings, they will get confused when they see them in a text. We may take some uses of the word “as”:

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

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

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

4) 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:

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

5) Level of difficulty: In preparing the ESP texts, teachers try to get authentic texts. These texts are in general difficult not only because they do not take the degree of L2 proficiency of the learners into account, but also a native speaker’s knowledge is assumed in the discussion of the subject. We may consider the following paragraph taken from an ESP textbook as an example of the case:

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.

A quick glance at the text reveals the extent of native knowledge assumed in the text especially where it refers to the Act of 1948 and 1967 passed in the UK.

Suggestions:

As an instructor of ESP classes and also by referring to my personal experience I 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 a 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) Reading and not translation, as it was observed in our classes, should be paid greater attention due to the fact that our students will need to refer to academic articles or textbooks. However, reading articles for academic purposes is not the same as reading newspapers. 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, elaborate on its meaning with accuracy or formulate a generalization (Ancic and Manenica, 2002). To achieve these goals we, the ESP teachers, should provide the students with kind of exercises dealing with contextual references, rephrasing, diagram labeling or mapping activities, summarizing and note-taking activities (Bonyadi, 2002).

c) Academic articles are characterized by concepts that are related and sometimes dependent on each other. Naturally, it would be rather difficult for the students to grasp the meaning 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) ESP texts and articles are marked with abundant use of multi-word units, or collocations. These are pair or groups of words that co-occur with very high frequency. Teachers can use these collocations as the foundation of teaching since learners can use them in a formulaic and rehearsed way. They are easily stored and retrieved as whole chunks helping the students ease the frustration and promote 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 student 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 and et. al., 1994). Of course there are various types of syllabuses based on certain assumptions about the nature of language and learning (Nunnan, 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 concerned in ESP courses. Moreover, as we discussed before, native speaker knowledge is assumed in these original books that almost does not match with that of a foreign language learner. So, as Allan Maley (1990) argues students cannot simply be left to deal with the awesome “foreignness” of the new language in all its manifestations, but must be helped with judicious simplification. The teacher, in fact, has to adapt these texts in way 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).

Conclusion:

The requirement of passing few ESP courses for all students majoring in one of the fields at the

university has led to a rapid growth of such classes throughout the country. However, despite this growth, not much literature has been written on the practical aspects of these classes. For this reason, I have presented a brief report on such classes based on my personal observation mentioning the major problems that our students are facing with. In an effort to share my ideas on managing these classes I 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 careful adapting of authentic texts, we would be able to ease the problems. I hope that these suggestions will lend insight into the challenges facing the ESP instructor.

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The description has been based on my direct and regular observation of some of ESP classes offered at the state university of Tabriz, Islamic Azad University of Tabriz and Urmia, Iran.

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