

## The Status of ESP in the Algerian University Setting

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### **Abstract:**

The present study seeks to shed light on the status of ESP in the Algerian university setting. In the absence of an already-developed ESP course, teachers find themselves at stake as they are required to design a specific English course that meets students' expectations in the academic field and serves their needs in the professional setting. This study investigates the major problems encountered by general English teachers at the departments of Biology and Economy at Biskra University. The findings reveal the importance of ESP instruction in providing students with the necessary language skills needed in their future professional setting. They also show the main obstacles and challenges encountered by EFL teachers in teaching ESP especially within a learner-centered approach.

**Keywords:** ESP; needs' analysis; learner-centered approach; syllabus design.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English has become a mandatory task in the recent years. The demand for using English in different contexts has increased due to its role as the international language of technology and commerce. As a response to this situation, English started to be taught at different levels of education: middle and secondary schools and also universities.

In the age of globalisation, English language plays a significant role and enjoys a worldwide importance. Much attention was given to the learning of English. Due to the growing demand of English as a means of access to modern science and technology and to economic development, much attention was given to the learning of English in many countries particularly in Algeria. Considering the reasons behind such growing interests towards learning English, it might be valuable to consider Kennedy and Bolitho's (1984, p.01) claim: "the growth of business and increased occupational mobility is resulting in a need for English as a common medium of communication; and access to much scientific and technical literature is difficult for those with no knowledge of English".

It becomes evident that English is highly recommended since almost every paper is published in English, and all conferences use English. As a result, English is taught in Algerian faculties and institutions. The situation chosen in this paper is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the Departments of Biology and Economy at Mohamed Khider University, Biskra. At these departments, the English language course is compulsory and receives great importance for a variety of reasons mainly because of its specificity, its tight relationship to the nature of the subjects, the wide range of scientific documentation available in English, the facilitation of communicating information and business development.

Therefore, the findings of the present study are expected to shed light on the problems encountered by teachers in the ESP class in the departments of Biology and Economy as well as to help course designers to create specialised English courses that meet the students' needs. For that reason, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the main challenges encountered by ESP teachers at the departments of Biology and Economy?
2. What are the English language-related skills needed by those students?
3. What is the English language proficiency level the students in those departments?
4. To what extent is the ESP course pertinent to the students' needs and expectations?

## 2. The ESP Teaching Situation

ESP, also known as a learner-centred approach to teaching English, has undergone different stages of progress since its beginnings in the 1960s (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It is worth mentioning that the term ESP stands for English for Special Purposes. After 1970, it was replaced by the name English for Specific Purposes since "specific" implies the purposes of performing a task in English (Andrei, 2013).

ESP was developed to respond to the new world's scientific, economic, technological revolution. Hence, ESP was that sort of language that emerged as a result to the current circumstances which necessitated specific terminologies not only to facilitate communication but also to unify and contextualise the different types of exchanges. So that to keep the different specificities in their unique contexts. Put differently, ESP provides international connections among different types of English to encourage communication all over the world within the same field.

English represents the second foreign language after French in the Algerian educational context. The Algerian policy makers recognize the importance of the English language use as a medium of development and international exchange in different spheres.

In a situation where the French language has lost much of its ground in the sociocultural and educational environments of the country; the introduction of English is being heralded as the major solution to all possible ills – including economic, technological and educational ones. (Miliiani, 2001, p.12)

Thus, the Algerian government encourages the teaching of foreign languages and put much interest on the teaching of English in all school levels besides tertiary levels in response to the new worldwide economic, business and scientific demands.

In Algeria, English is taught in different ways and almost in all the departments in the Algerian universities. Besides the Department of English wherein it is the main subject, English is taught as a complementary but compulsory module in the other departments. The English course in those departments is normally an ESP course that relates to the students' needs and interest with a time proportion equal to one hour and half. In addition to the fact that the time allotted is not sufficient to meet all the students' language needs, unfortunately, most teachers are teachers of general English who did not benefit from ESP training.

Almost in all educational settings, ESP is often taught by general English teachers. Though the demand for specific language courses has increased, decision makers and curriculum designers have not taken ESP education very seriously. In the Algerian educational context, ESP teacher training is not given much importance if not to say neglected.

### **3. Key Definitions**

#### **3.1. English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**

The term ESP stands for “English for Specific Purposes”, which implies the emphasis on learners' language-related purposes and the needed language resources. Robinson (1980, p. 13) defines ESP course by stating that “An ESP course is purposeful and is aimed at the successful performance of occupational or educational roles. It is based on a rigorous analysis of students' needs and should be tailor-made”.

Munby (1978, p.2) argues that learners' needs communication is a fundamental step in both syllabus and materials' design and claims that “ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners”. Moreover, Harmer (1983, p.1) refers to ESP as “...situations where the student has some specific reasons to learn a language.” That is,

learners want to learn the target language (English) to fulfil specific reasons which can be academic or occupational.

In the same respect, ESP is defined as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methods are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.19). Subsequently, teachers should consider the reasons why a learner needs to learn a foreign language in order to decide about the content to be taught. According to Basturkmen (2006), ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments and a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students.

### **3.2. Needs Analysis**

Needs analysis is a key phase in any ESP course design. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.53) accentuate the importance of conducting needs analysis before any course design and maintain that any language course should be based on needs analysis.

Needs analysis has been defined by Dudley- Evans and St John (1988: 121) as "the process of establishing the what and how of a course". In other words, needs analysis is a prerequisite element in any ESP course because it helps determine the content and the method of teaching. Robinson (1991, p. 7) suggests that “needs analysis is generally regarded as critical to ESP, although ESP is by no means the only educational enterprise which makes use of it”.

### **3.3. Course Design**

Munby (1978, p. 2) states that ESP courses are: “Those where the syllabus and the materials are determined by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner”. That is, the detection and identification of learners’ needs is the first step in any ESP course design. Course design is defined by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 65) as the “integrated series of teaching/learning experiences whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge”.

Course design refers to the planning and structuring of a course to attain the desired aims. Therefore, it is the outcome of number of elements including: the result of the needs analysis, the course designer’s approach to syllabus and methodology, and existing materials (Robinson, 1991).

Any ESP course must take into consideration the subject area of the learners and cover the lexical, semantic and structural aspects of the language characteristics specific to the learners’ field of study. In other words, ESP courses aims to provide learners with specific skills and vocabulary to enable them to communicate effectively in the target situation.

### **3.4. Learner- Centred Approach**

As its name suggests, the chief focus of this approach is the learner as the centre of the learning process. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), “the learner-centred approach is based on the principle that learning is seen as a process in which the learners use what knowledge or skills they have in order to make sense of the flow of new” (p. 72). Put differently, the learner is considered as a starting point when analyzing the target situation, designing syllabus and then adopting appropriate materials that would equip the learner with adequate English language proficiency

necessary for use in the target context. Therefore, the learner is essential and important element in the design of courses.

#### **4. Methodology**

The researcher opted for a mixed-method approach based on both qualitative and quantitative data. As the purpose of this study is identifying the students' language needs and the problems encountered by the teachers of English at the departments of Biology and Economy, the qualitative approach seems to be appropriate in collecting the required data. Moreover, the quantitative approach is also part of this research because it allows the researcher to represent the information collected from respondents to numbers and statistical results.

The study was carried out in the Departments of Biology and Economy at Mohamed khider University, Biskra. It attempts at highlighting the main problems faced by teachers in the ESP class as well as exploring students' needs for English language mastery to perform specific activities and attain English language-related purposes. To attain these goals, six teachers of English at the aforementioned departments were surveyed using questionnaire.

##### **4.2. Instruments**

In order to get insight into what is happening in the ESP teaching/learning situation under consideration, and identify the various factors impacting such a situation, the researcher had recourse to teachers' questionnaires. The questionnaire is one of the most useful tools that help elicit available information from the informants. According to Nunan (1992, p. 231), "a questionnaire is an instrument for the collection of data, usually in written form consisting of open and / or closed questions and other probes requiring a response from subjects". In this research, the questionnaire has been chosen as a research tool to get a clearer vision about teachers' challenges and difficulties when teaching English for Biology and Economy students in addition to those students' needs regarding the English language.

#### **5. Results and Discussion**

To investigate the different obstacles and challenges teachers of English face and the strategies they use in order to adopt themselves to their new situations as ESP teachers, a questionnaire was administered. Various types of difficulties have been encountered by teachers which make their tasks even harder to be done. Among those obstacles, data revealed that teachers' absence of pre-training to ESP teaching plays a salient role in the success and failure of the teaching process. In addition to that, it was clearly noticed that learners' low proficiency level and decreased motivation impacted their learning negatively. The gathered data displayed a considerable deficiency in learners' proficiency of the language, mainly in grammar, vocabulary, phonology and in the four language skills writing, speaking, reading and listening. These difficulties have a negative influence on their level of competence and motivation. ESP teaching/learning situation in the Departments of Biology and Economy does not provide enough and considerable contact with the target language. The ESP learners are regarded as current or future specialists who are aware of their needs and know what the ESP English course should offer to them (Raluka, 2002). However, the ESP English

course presented to the students of Biology and Economy do not cater for their needs and expectations in these specialities. In addition to that, they do not work to strengthen these deficiencies and lacks because the needed language elements and skills are missing in the content provided to them.

Teachers consider speaking and writing as the most important skills needed by the students in the ESP course though in reality the ESP course turns to be a reading and translation session. Teachers also depicted the lack of collaboration between teachers of English and teachers of the speciality as a serious problem. It was also found that among the many teaching difficulties, lack of specialised knowledge in the subject matter and well-designed syllabus to follow hinder teachers from doing their job effectively. Teachers argued that there is an urgent need to develop a course that caters for learners' requirements and expectations from the English language course.

These difficulties and others might be overcome when a corresponding course is presented where suitable teaching materials are provided. It is also believed that incorporating relevant information that the students need to know in English language with knowledge of the subject matter increases the level of interest and motivation.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This paper is an attempt to provide a clear picture of the ESP situation in the Algerian university. It tries to show the ESP teaching situation in Department of Biology and Economy at Mohamed Khider University, Biskra. Many problems have been identified such as the lack of ESP trained teachers and well-designed syllabus make English teaching difficult for teachers and demotivating for learners. It was found that the English course did not respond to learners' needs and did not improve their level. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research needs to encourage the necessary efforts of improving such a primordial side of the EFL policy so as to arouse enthusiasm and interest among learners and teachers alike. In addition to that, pre- and in-service training is a crucial aspect that should be taken into consideration as well as applied to make the teaching situation more effective. An urgent change should be made on the level of course content by reconsideration and revision.

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