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A New Perspectivist Approach to the Teaching and Learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESPs) : An Experiential and Experimental Study

Dr. S. Gandhimathi

Assistant Professor in English
Kongu Engineering College
Erode.
Tamil Nadu, **INDIA.**

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the author's experience and experiment with the first year learners of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and the result of what is required of ESP teaching in the classroom in the modern context. It is based on an analysis which modules itself on three classes of 60 learners who are at the beginning of their college studies. The new perspectivist approach deals with how learners adopt certain traditional learning techniques which do not prove to be helpful in the fast changing world. Then the paper proceeds to arrive at a solution that only by paying much attention to the perspectives of the learners, the ESP can be taught effectively. Since different people have different kinds of perceptions regarding the teaching of ESP, this approach is recommended for the teaching of ESP in the modern context. This paper defines and deliberates on issues such as instructional materials design by the teacher, teacher and learner perceptions and their behavior in the classroom context. This approach adopted by the author in the Indian context may be applicable in other cross-cultural contexts.

Key words: perspectives, attitudes, dynamic, context, newness, mind, behavior

Introduction

This study deals with various ways and means of making improvements on the young learners' English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It analyses the teachers' method of communication and the methodology to be adopted for effective language classroom. Learners seem to perceive themselves to be at a loss for words to express their ideas in terms of what they study. They depend upon the functional and grammatical aspects of language that can create a dynamic approach towards the use of language skills in varied situations. It is the integration of prior knowledge of English language and its present context that would decide the success of ESP learners.

Background of the study

There are various approaches and theories that focus on effective teaching of ESP in the classroom. Jolita Butkiene and Lilija Vilkančienė (2005) have recommended content-based instruction in the language classroom which would develop learners' language skills and make learners more 'knowledgeable citizens of the world'. The content-based instruction tries to interlink language teaching and the practical applications by providing reading materials based on real-time situations. Context-based language instruction would be quite beneficial rather than content-based instruction.

Wong (2007) has found that the participants, who are pre-service teachers, show more interest in learning English outside the classroom. The participants learn English in order to improve themselves for the future course of action. The result that Wong has arrived at conveys the information that only through task-based learning, English could be taught effectively. This does not adhere to learners' conscious learning of English. It is also found that the pre-service teachers of English are passive and not interested in learning English inside the classroom. However, the present study revolves around the idea that the teacher must make learning meaningful and interesting inside the classroom by designing various language activities. Through effective classroom atmosphere, learners can acquire English language skills easily.

In the same way, James (1971) has suggested three techniques in language learning: 'imitation', 'analogy' and 'analysis'. Imitation involves the adoption of teachers' mode of using the language through repetition. Learners have also to be provided with the creation of meaning through analogy. As they grow, the learners try to reason out things and language habits. His 'analysis' suits the needs of the modern learners. Nevertheless, James has believed in the memorization and its division into separate sessions in learning, but it is believed that learners grasp language aspects with full concentration, and not by memorization.

Further, Lin Hsiao (1996) has advocated that Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) facilitates sharing and distribution of knowledge and expertise among community members. It can be observed in the modern days that technology alone would not contribute to making learners attentive and conscious of what happens in the classroom. Collaborative learning does not encourage learners to learn individually nor does it allow them know all things by themselves. Instead, learners have to depend upon others. This would make certain learners lethargic in acquiring the relevant language skills.

In the same way, Wood (2006) has analyzed the motive of English for Academic Purpose (EAP) involving problem solving. The problems can be set forth by learners rather than ‘imposed’ by teachers. Learners must work in small groups in the investigation of problems and find a solution to these problems. Wood himself has acknowledged that problem-solving alone cannot entail learning. In the present study, it is believed that whatever language aspects are to be solved, they can happen only through exploring individual skills and capabilities, and not through group work that may make certain learners inattentive and irresponsible throughout language processes.

As a by-product, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have stated that the learning process is conditioned by the functions of the mind. Moving a step ahead, they have talked about understanding the structure and processes of the mind and said that they themselves did not know how people learn. They have also talked about the adoption of techniques as practiced in a classroom, but did not give importance to newness.

History of ELT Methodology

Blumenfeld (2000) has advocated rote learning involving imitation and unconscious learning, i.e. learning by repetition and memorization. This approach believes in the idea that only through repetition, learners recall what is taught in the classroom. However, it is experienced in the present study that language especially ESP can be taught effectively only through newness, and not through repetition.

Developed by Curran (1976), Community Language Learning (CLL) is patterned upon the counseling techniques for learners who are affected by ‘peculiar anxiety’ and ‘threat’ posed by the foreign language learning. The method looks at the teacher as a counselor and the learner as a client. This creates absolutely a different environment by considering learners to be full of language confusions and conflicts. It is furthered by the counselors’ ability to establish an ‘other-language self’ by providing a warm and acceptable relationship towards the client. In the present study, it is maintained that a teacher is not a counselor with a strict approach or a third person, but a friend so that the learners are able to express their views on language learning and the curriculum.

Gattegno (1972) has proposed a new method of teaching called ‘the Silent Way’. This method uses colored rods and certain commands in the language classroom. It proposes the employment of simple linguistic situations rather than complex ones. It focuses on the fluency of words as used by learners. The teacher should be as silent as possible. In the current study, it is opined that the involvement of a simple language situation would make learners remain in the same level of knowledge which would not contribute to the learners’ progress starting from the first class. Teachers have to contribute to the learners’ activities throughout the class.

Asher’s (1969) Total Physical Response (TPR) expects learners to observe certain materials and to respond physically to commands using their fingers and hands. Since this method does not give importance to the cognitive skills of the learners of ESP, this would not pave way for kindling the curiosity of learners in relating their language skills to the material presented. TPR gives no significance to mental processes. Hence, in the present study, learners are considered to be productive beings, capable of producing sentences and sentence structures instantaneously at times required.

In the oral analysis, conducted at the time of teaching in the classroom as part of the present study, learners expressed their views of repetition and its ineffectiveness in acquiring and practicing each aspect of grammar. They feel bored using the textbook for teaching. They want a revision in the method of teaching in the classroom. Many existing theories such as Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response do not suit the needs of the present day learners or they make learners bored in acquiring language skills, hence the needs for proposing the perspectivist approach.

Learning and teaching of ESP

At present, it is widely observed that ESP is learnt as a theory, and not applied in various situations. Materials are chosen from the text prescribed or in some cases from general English books. No importance is given to real time facts and language usage. Most ESP teachers are expected to follow certain texts in teaching in the classroom. Learners, sometimes, are not allowed to think and generate ideas of their own on topics of their choice. So, extempore seminar activities, exercises and tests are necessary for the ESP classroom.

Rationale for the study

Learners, with innovative thinking, have a thirst for language which can be expressed through their attempts to use it. The success of classroom teaching lies in how far the learners are able to reproduce, in their own style, what is given and how a teacher presents the entire curriculum efficiently. To do this, the teacher needs to assign importance to the learners' inherent abilities. ESP learners, in the fast changing world, need to spend sufficient time for reading by themselves. They have to create a language environment for learning and to listen to new words carefully. They feel bored with repetition and rewriting. In an atmosphere like this, the learning-centered approach is suggested to meet the dynamic expectations of the learners.

Teacher performance roles

Teachers of the learning-centered approach are context-oriented and creative in instruction. They look for the specific context which influences the learners in choosing the type of English, be it technical English, scientific English or business English. They are able to produce sentences and expressions extempore. Simultaneously, they are clear about the content of the course. They choose exercises based on the technical books meant for the particular set of learners at the entry or advanced level.

In order to teach aspects of grammar, ESP teachers, of this approach, evolve a practical method including data about a company, in the case of technical English. They administer 'cloze tests' to improve learners' skill in using parts of speech and devise exercises on subject verb agreement and error detection. They drill learners on the efficient use of commonly confusable words. In the case of EST learners, a lot of exposure is given to improving vocabulary, definitions and familiarity with technical terms in their field of study.

Learner performance roles

In the present learning-centered approach, learners learn how best to pick up the language aspects on time. They predict with their forethought what is right in the modern context. They expect that certain

techniques which they handle these days are to be new and enhancing in the way of acquiring language skills. They are prepared to be highly individualized in learning the target language for use in engineering context. Their expectations of a course differ even from the specific ESP learners for they consider a regular class to be meaning-based rather than design-based, the reason being that they decide for themselves the discipline they have to pursue with and move along with it. What the learners perceive is what they aim at. Their way of choosing the discipline of ESP decides their life style.

Instructional role

Instruction, in the current learning-centered method, starts with the parts of grammar with innovative examples. The instructors or teachers do not take any piece of paper to the class and they tend to dictate as well as write on the board the points on the particular topic for that class, be it grammar or lessons. They raise their voice so as to be audible to all the sixty learners in the class. They try to bridge the gap between the learners from L2 (Second Language) medium and L1 (Mother Tongue) medium by using the complex words at the beginning of the course in L2. They make even the L1 learner understand L2 with their body language. They never try to discriminate between the weak and the bright learners for it would induce a pessimistic attitude upon the weaker ones about L2. They have the ability to extract a better performance from the weaker set of learners in speaking L2 though it is not an easy task. They must focus on the problems of the learners and devise new techniques of teaching English. They must make use of various new examples for the learners of different classes.

Research questions

Certain oral questions were applied in order to analyze the needs of the learners. Learners are asked to comment on the following questions:

1. What is the active part of English for specific purpose in deciding their higher studies and career?
2. What did they know about learner autonomy and method of teaching?
3. What are the aspects of curriculum design which would be effective in the modern context?

Method

Participants

Participants of the study, between the age of 16 and 21, are at the beginning of their college study, 60 first year undergraduate learners, belonging to a specific category of ESP. They are both boys and girls entering the college for higher study. They are not informed that they are put under a research following the new perspectivist approach. This study is intended to find out the inner feelings of the participants on classroom methodology.

The learners are divided into four categories according to their existing knowledge of the variety of ESP chosen for study. These four categories of learners are: advanced, upper intermediate, intermediate, lower intermediate and beginners. Since the learners come from various disciplines at the time of joining the specific ESP course, an oral case study is conducted to analyze their knowledge of

that specific ESP. The level of the mindset of all these four different groups are taken into account and their performance is evaluated.

Materials and procedure

The teachers are friendly in their behavior with learners, but not in teaching the language. In this atmosphere, learners look well satisfied in expressing their opinions related to the study of ESP in an effective way along with the methods and approaches used in the classroom. They respond spontaneously by relating their drawbacks in learning and using English as well as the effectiveness of ESP.

The present study consists of three levels of analysis. First level deals with the existing knowledge of learners, second level lies with the introduction of the new method while the third propagates the level of knowledge-improvement by the learners after the introduction of the new method. To analyze their inherent skills, learners are asked to give their views on different linguistic and psychological questions. They are given complete freedom in identifying in-depth opinions for self improvement.

Materials belonging to a particular variety of ESP, prescribed for the learners, are selected for the experiment. The target language is employed as a medium of communication always in the classroom even though some of the learners are with L1 background. Before moving onto the syllabus, five hours are spent in making the learners aware of the objectives of ESP and its basics. No word or definition is repeated so as to make them keen observers. After finishing the basics, the curriculum prescribed is followed strictly for 20 hours concentrating more on grammar and vocabulary. After making them aware of their ESP requirements, the learners are guided entirely towards productive activities in the form of seminars, extempore writing and listening to use of language in new contexts. Their interests towards the specific ESP are derived by adopting dynamic selections of productive activities. Teachers become innovators bringing out their talents by using innovative classroom techniques. Table 1 presents the analysis of the performance of the learners of ESP before employing learning-centered method.

Table 1 Performance of the learners of ESP before employing perspectivist approach

Category	No. of learners	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Meaning
Advanced	11	70%	60%	45%	50%
Upper intermediate	13	40%	20%	10%	15%
Intermediate	19	10%	20%	10%	10%
Lower intermediate	10	10%	10%	20%	10%
Beginners	7	5%	10%	5%	5%

The data above represent the language abilities of learners at the time of joining the specific ESP course derived through an oral analysis.

Consolidated research findings

Learners

- want to implement their own methodologies of learning and do not want to be considered as cognitive beings,
- have their own capacity and abilities of learning,
- feel bored with repetition of words, examples and grammatical rules,
- are productive beings rather than thinking beings,
- are bored with certain teaching approaches followed in ESP classroom similar to general English and
- want newness in teaching methods, use of words, examples and lesson plans for they consider every moment of classroom procedure to be new and innovative.

Issues to be focused

Content analysis

Learners are of the view that the use of the language content which varies according to the discipline of study must follow a high level of structural analysis. The way words are organized is as important as the meaning conveyed. The teaching of the ESP skills must include substantial experiences and dynamic viewpoints of grammar on the part of the learners. The grammatical rules can be the same as of the general ESP class, but with a variant form of meaning.

Learning and context-centered curriculum

As for the design of curriculum, it is necessary to be learning- and context-centered rather than learning- or learner-centered separately. While designing the ESP curriculum, it is necessary to consider the context based on the learners' needs. A curriculum should assign prior importance to grammar such as determiners, run-on and how to avoid them, descriptions and preparation of different job applications. It must also focus on the technical vocabulary relevant to the particular category of ESP. It has also to focus on productive and receptive activities. It is important for the experts in the field of curriculum design to recommend teachers to adopt different situations of language use. For instance, a teacher can engage learners in industrial visits and other activities apart from curriculum-based activities. The curriculum must recommend such activities and allot scores for learners. Only then, would the learners be exposed to the exact context of language use in relation to their field of study.

Testing and evaluation

ESP learners can grasp different situations of learning. It is not necessary for them to follow the situation prescribed; they can be asked to choose different situations according to their interests and changing needs. It is also not necessary to have the same situation of using the language for all sixty

students in a class. For instance, if one learner prefers extempore presentation for a few minutes, the other may require the rules of grammar as used in a scientific context or a scientific text.

To test the performance and improvement of learners in productive abilities and knowledge of the subject taught, the learners are asked to write their opinions at first regarding their attitudes towards the learning of ESP in the classroom. Learners' existing knowledge of the language, at the beginning of the ESP course, is tested by conducting certain stage presentations for one minute. After employing the approach, different evaluation methods are sought. The learners are asked to talk on the stage on any one of the topics covered in relation to the curriculum. Towards the completion of the syllabus, the learners are engaged in various activities such as speaking, writing and reporting.

In a class of 55 minutes, 20-25 minutes are spent on regular theory and 10 minutes for classroom test, 10 minutes for seminar presentation and the last 10 minutes for reporting; reporting of news by two members for 2 minutes and reporting of developments in their field of study, science and technology in the case of EST learners. Learners who report news can follow two formats; one is reporting of regional, state, national and international news while the other is the reporting of flash headlines, news of mediatory importance, sports and other events of the day and finally, weather forecasting. Learners who report scientific experiments can also follow two formats: one learner can introduce the innovation, deal with the characteristics and features while the other can deal with the functions and how this innovation is different from the others. Since these are handled differently using various ways of exposing the knowledge and abilities, learners feel satisfied with what they have been doing in the classroom and are able to work on the language even outside the classroom.

Results and discussion

Learners of the specific ESP have responded to the questions mentioned earlier in their own way. For the first question, 80% of learners give importance to ESP as the deciding factor of their life and career. With the emerging need for new trends in the teaching of English, the ESP learners tend to classify and solve problems such as the motive behind learning and why it is necessary to choose EST and not EAP. The second question is answered by many learners who responded saying that they want at least 85% of freedom in deciding the syllabus according to their needs and purposes of selecting the specific type of ESP. They want their teachers to be friendly with them and avoid repetition of language materials as it may damage their thinking process. The third question is being responded by learners who argue that the curricula, in the modern era, should be functional and structural. To shine in the field of study, learners require certain grammatical aspects such as fragments, modifiers and procedures to prepare manuals and proposals in the case of English for Science and Technology (EST) and fashionable vocabulary in the case of English for Professional Purposes (EPP).

The perspectivist approach initiated through the present paper is implemented extensively with an extraordinary success. Within three months, a vast change is noticed in the nature of learners in terms of the learning and acquisition of the specific needs of ESP. Of course, for a few months, the teachers strive very hard to teach learners of varied levels using this approach, but the result proves to be meaningful for all the attempts have had a long-term benefit rather than short-term achievement. At first, some learners find it difficult to listen to teaching in L2 alone, but as the days passed by, they are able to understand the teaching in the target language (L2). The learners are of the view that since they

are introduced to new language with new words and examples and teacher's teaching without the book, they are able to practice, unconsciously, and process ESP skills. Table 2 provides the performance analysis of learners after employing this learning-centered approach.

The details given in the table below include the level of improvement learners achieved in the acquisition of language skills in the ESP setting.

Table 1 Performance of the learners of ESP after employing perspectivist approach

Category of learners	No. of learners	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Meaning
Advanced	11	80%	70%	80%	80%
Upper intermediate	13	70%	60%	70%	60%
Intermediate	19	60%	50%	50%	50%
Lower intermediate	10	50%	40%	50%	40%
Beginners	7	40%	30%	40%	30%

From this analysis, it is obvious that the learners could produce the highest achievements in learning ESP if their expectations are taken into consideration.

Conclusion

The learners are observed carefully and it is clear that they visualize a sense of perfection in teaching which can be derived only by efficient teachers and also by those who practice the language regularly in and outside the classroom. Learners want teachers who are able to perceive their (learners') abilities and are capable of making them produce ESP materials extempore. Their needs differ according to the dynamic nature of the ESP course. They can best be understood and taught efficiently only when they are rightly perceived in terms of their needs, drawbacks and expectations with regard to ESP. It is this aspect or this perspective which caters to the acquisition of the so-called ESP which is a part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) scenario around the world.

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