

Challenges teaching ESP vocabulary to engineering students

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Abstract

This article provides a general overview and course design of English for Specific Purposes in the field of ELT, the difficulties related to teaching ESP engineering students and effective strategies for teaching special vocabulary for engineering students. Teaching and learning vocabulary is crucial in language acquisition and it has been in the central attention of most English teachers for the last decades. In order to develop communicative competence of language learners, teachers should encourage them to learn as many words as possible. As the world has been becoming a global village, there has appeared a huge demand for English for specific purposes (ESP) courses. There are diverse courses such as business English, scientific English, technical English, English for medical professionals, English for waitresses and English for engineers. Mainly these courses are differentiated with their content as well as special vocabulary of the target field. There may be possible challenges for teachers as well as for learners related to vocabulary as special words used only in a narrow field. Hence there are some effective strategies to overcome those difficulties which are illustrated below.

Introduction

In our era the ability of exchanging basic information in English is not enough for specialists in various fields such as medicine, economics, engineering. Actually, they should be able to discuss the matters in their field without any language barriers. So ESP is considered a rather new trend in English language teaching (ELT). ESP concerns the specific English language needs of the target learners. It refers to teaching a specific genre of English for students with specific goals which is oriented and focused on English teaching and learning. Tira Nur Fitriana defines that the ESP approach improves the relevance of what the students / learners are learning, then enables them to use English that they have known before. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) assesses the students'/learners' needs and it integrates motivation, subject matter, and content for the teaching of relevant skills. (DDDD). Nearly all fields have their special terms that are used only within that field. In addition to being complicated, those terms can be complex as well. The main purpose of learning ESP is learning English to communicate a set of professional skills and perform specific job-related functions. According to Hans and Hans (2015) ESP more concentrates on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. It covers subjects varying from engineering or computer science to economics and business management etc. The most important point in ESP is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world, but it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. As mentioned above, there are diverse courses of ESP that one of them is English for

engineering students. The nature of this course is different from general English courses. Mainly it is characterized by less focusing on grammar and language structures, existing technical words and concentrating on context. On the one hand, teaching as well as learning technical words can be a major problem both for teachers and learners. As they are considered rather complicated. On the other hand, majority of specific terms are known for learners in their mother tongue. To be more precise, engineers may know the cooling system of a vehicle in detail and conceptualize what is engine, radiator, thermostat, fan blades, top hose or bottom hose and the function of them. However, they can not describe the process in English. So it should be restated that effective teaching vocabulary is important in ESP courses. EFL Teachers need to assist them not only just introduce the target words but also to convert passive vocabulary to active one with implementing effective teaching methods as well as materials.

Discussion

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) the emphasis is on “Specific English” that belongs to any particular discipline, occupation or activity (Javid, 2015). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a fruitful field over the last three decades. (Ramirez, 2015). As a learner-centered approach, its main purpose has been that of fulfilling the specific needs of target learners to satisfy their professional or vocational demands. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) hold the view that in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, the outcomes of the historical occurrences resulted from a number of people across the globe who wanted to learn the English language due to the key language in the fields of science, technology, and commerce. The emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching movement is caused by the English language needs of the learners for specific purposes in relation to their professions or job description. According to Robinson’s (1991: 3) defines that ESP is based on two criteria they are: 1) ESP is normally ‘goal-directed’, and 2) ESP courses are developed from a needs analysis which aim to specify what exactly it is that the students have to go through the medium of English, and a number of characteristics which explain that ESP courses are generally constrained by a limited time period in which their goals have to be achieved and are taught to adults in homogenous and various classes in terms of the work or specialist studies that the learners are involved in. It can be concluded as to the definitions above ESP is learning English for a specific purpose to get specific goals and it is an approach based on the common belief of teaching language for communicative purposes.

Dudley-Evans and John (1998) highlighted several characteristics of ESP:

- ESP meets specific purposes of the learners;
- ESP uses the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centered and focused on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre.

Furthermore, ESP has some variable characteristics, such as :

- ESP is related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use in specific teaching situation, or even in different methodology from the general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed or used for adult learners;

- ESP is generally designed for an intermediate or an advanced student ; basic knowledge of the language system, but it also can be used by beginners.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes in a foreign language context can be differentiated from English for General Purposes which formerly is more directed towards the immediate professional or academic demands and applicable situations. It is not a straightforward task to give one overall definition for this area of teaching-learning to cover all of the courses offered today given the “growing body of research and theory, and ever-diversifying and expanding range of purposes” (Belcher, 2006: 134).

Concerning reviewed theoretical data we can summarize that ESP teachers should use textbooks as an alternative option. They need to be able to adjust authentic materials and implement successfully on their classes.

The second issue is teaching vocabulary for ESP classes. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) are of the opinion that ESP teachers should not teach technical vocabulary but should check if the learners understood technical vocabulary that appears as carrier content for an exercise. I firmly believe that ESP teachers should teach words. I agree with Strevens (1973) who points out that “learners who know scientific field may have little difficulty with technical words; but a teacher who doesn’t may have a great deal”. A suitable approach for teaching ESP words is the lexical approach. The lexical approach follows the principle that lexis is the most important part of any language and should be treated that way. Chunks are used in communication a lot especially by L2 learners as they strive to meet their basic communicative needs. L2 learners sometimes try to be creative and combine one part of the lexical phrase with another word in order to produce a better utterance. Chunks are also very important in learning ESP because the learners should be able to identify them and should be aware of them. The usage of lexical chunks helps students write and communicate better and they should be able to distinguish high-frequency and low-frequency lexical items. It is also widely believed that language fluency and accuracy is achieved largely by retrieving and combining ready-made chunks of language (Kavaliauskienė and Janulevičienė, 2000).

To conclude, lexis is a very important part of a language. The teachers’ responsibility is to follow different procedures suggested by researchers in this field and try to make the learning of words as easy as possible for the students. I

definitely believe that words should not be taught as isolated items but in context for later use in conversation. It has been suggested that the lexical approach is very suitable in teaching ESP vocabulary which is more complex and requires more attention and time to study it because it involves low-frequency words. All in all, teachers should strive to help learners become independent learners and show them there are many vocabulary learning strategies that can be used to learn ESP words.

Based on the verbalization, the think-aloud protocol, the participants used different strategies to discover the meaning of unknown words. It was shown that the most frequently used discovery strategies were guessing from the context (syntactic and semantic), asking a teacher, a monolingual dictionary and analyzing the part of speech. The most frequently used strategy, was guessing from the context, shows that the participants in this study were good guessers. It seems that the learners use the strategies in a combined way, which is positive for further learning. Nevertheless, there were learners who immediately turned to the dictionary without trying to guess the

meaning from the context. These learners should be helped and trained in using guessing from context because it enhances their independence.

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