

Teacher Professional Development: A Challenging Perspective in ESP Settings

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Abstract

All along history, the teacher has gone through a variety of practices; from merely a provider of knowledge to a facilitator of the acquisition of knowledge. The teacher then, needs to be sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills and competencies in order to face the meeting challenges of the twenty first century learners. Unfortunately, some of our learners are usually confronted to teachers who have been launched into classrooms without any training which prepares them to face classroom difficulties. The present paper highlights the deficiencies existing in some departments where English is taught for specific purposes. The findings obtained revealed that teachers of English in the department of sociology were not trained to teaching ESP and lack the competencies in designing courses for sociology students.

1. Introduction

Algeria, like many other nations concerned with the incessant worldwide revolutions, has adapted its educational system according to those changes, giving birth to a system which aims at coping with the requirements and needs of the society and the world, as a whole. In fact, the 1980s was the start of a series of reforms and an overhaul to meet the needs of the educational system. Accordingly, teachers were recruited after completing their secondary school education and sometimes without passing their baccalaureate examination. Yet, in order to enroll for a teaching career, a two-year training was crucial in order to be qualified as a teacher. Trainees in different teaching subjects had to learn various subjects in addition to the ones they would teach. As far as foreign language is

concerned, trainees studied several subjects , including, phonetics, British and American civilizations, TEFL, Arabic, and educational psychology .After passing the first year, trainees had to attend classes and observe real learning. Later on, they had to put in practice what they acquired during their lectures.

The transition from the classical teaching to the LMD¹ has witnessed a re-examination of the teaching methodology for better learning outcomes. In spite of the fact that training institutes have disappeared there are still some like ENS² where learners are trained to be teachers, at the secondary school or the middle school. In addition to learning the science of teaching, the trainees experience a limited period of time allowing them to be confronted to the challenges of the classroom. Unfortunately, the number of those trainees is limited and does not satisfy the needs in terms of teachers' needs in the educational market. Nonetheless, students who specialize in other disciplines may teach although they have never been trained to. Similarly, University teachers are parachuted into classrooms without any experience in teaching. They enroll at the university after they obtain a magister, or sometimes a master degree in some universities where there is a shortage of teachers. They are not trained to lecturing, to tutorials, or to be confronted to the colossal responsibility they hold.

In the same line of thought, attrition of ESP teachers is witnessed in most if not all institutes and departments where specific English is needed. In fact, Algeria has implemented a reform in its educational system and has introduced English in almost all disciplines but has not thought of training teachers

¹ LMD acronym for Licence (BA), Master, Doctorat

² ENS: acronym for Ecole Nationale Supérieure

for specific purposes. Hence, a '*laissez-aller*' situation is witnessed in those departments where English is needed for specific purposes, like the department of sociology in the University of Oran. The absence of the teaching material and the ambiguity of the learning objectives make teaching difficult and sometimes hazardous. English teachers, each one on his own initiative, (when he exists) , trying to cope with the teaching conditions, adapting and mainly adopting the content of the course to those existing conditions. Yet, the validity of the teaching remains questionable. That is, the quality of the teaching methodology has to be carefully examined. The present paper was guided by two main questions:

1-What qualifications do ESP teachers possess and?

2-How can General English teachers improve their competencies to meet the needs of ESP learners?

To answer the aforementioned questions, we hypothesize that:

1-ESP teachers are not qualified to teach specific learners.

2-We also hypothesize that General English teachers may improve their competencies under mediation from more qualified and specialized teachers.

2. Data collection and Findings

The survey concerns teaching English in the department of sociology in the University of Oran. The backbone of the present survey consists of a combination of two tools; a structured observation and a questionnaire for three English teachers in the department of sociology in the University of Oran. Obtained data revealed the teachers' profiles; the three teachers are part-time teachers who teach at the secondary school. Besides, they avowed not having been trained to teaching ESP learners, making teaching rather ponderous and hazardous. The results also demonstrate that such deficiencies not only affect learning but the students' attitudes, as well. The students' attitudes are reflected through their lack of attendance

and participation, affecting both teaching and learning negatively.

3. Competencies VS Needs

Along decades of restless investigations in pedagogy, researchers have come to a common conclusion that effective teaching is the result of the genuine ability to combine science with art. In fact, teaching is like driving a car; the mastery of the mechanisms of the vehicle makes practice easier and artistic. Similarly, ignorance of the theoretical background of teaching makes the practical phase difficult if not impossible. Hedgock (2009) describes the acquisition of professional competence as two interrelated and interacting stages in the same process whereby the trainee acquires the necessary knowledge and experience in the development of his career. Indeed, the practices within the classroom reveal the teachers' beliefs concerning the teaching and learning process. Moreover, the teacher's competence is a set of systematic considerations; his prior knowledge and assumptions of the teaching profession constitute the science and the theories upon which each decision is taken. Existing knowledge, in addition to updated one and ongoing reflection make the ground to successful teaching practice. Yet, knowledge is ineffective without an awareness of its implementation. In fact, like preparing their students for the 'know-how' to be, teachers should be trained for a 'know-how' to teach within the classroom. That is, emphasis in training should be directed towards the *how* more than the *what*. (Carr, 2006:40)

It is important then, that those future teachers and more specifically ESP ones have some knowledge of the profession they want to practise. This existing knowledge will be the foundation to a new one. These two constitute the science of teaching which is crucial in any teaching training. Yet, knowledge alone is not sufficient to make effective teaching; a

combination of knowledge and practice are essential in the construction of professional competence which is undoubtedly the goal of teacher training. It is our major concern then, as foreign language teachers to effectively think of appropriate decisions for the betterment of our teaching. Our mission, in fact, consists of sharing an overall aim with other institutions, which consists of training our learners to become ‘good’ global citizens.

Unlike other teaching contexts, teaching English as a secondary/tertiary subject requires more consciousness, not only from the teacher and his learners but from the whole institution, as well. Being aware of the requirements of the educational market cannot be dissociated from the social one. Moreover, it is the social market which determines the learning needs. Thus, politicians, economists, educationists, and all the constituents of the society share the responsibility for the identification of the requirements of the society as a whole, and learners specifically, allowing educationists and curriculum designers to identify the learning needs and outcomes. (Long, 2009:4)

Technological improvements are making the whole world in constant mutation. Accordingly, the educational domain is affected by such mutations. The reforms in the Algerian educational system have helped to some extent, to move from conventional and archaic teaching methodologies to more developed and updated ones, taking into account technological means as major features of such transition. Unfortunately, our educational institutions are still witnessing a high rate of failure since introducing technology only in the classroom does not guarantee success. Besides, assessing teaching is not an easy matter because “*demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency is often difficult.*” (Long, 2009:4)

Thus, serious reflection on appropriate teaching methodologies, adapted to our classrooms and our culture, have to be carried out in order to achieve successful learning. Specialists in the domain relate school failure to different variables; the big number of the pupils in the classroom, unsuitable teaching material, and unqualified teachers. Moreover, the teacher, the main actor in such system is pointed out as being the “weakest stitch” that is responsible for academic failure.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the teachers’ competence or incompetence .Besides, it is important to delimit the characteristics of the people who are qualified for measuring the teacher’s competence/incompetence. Obviously, teachers’ incompetence in foreign language learning pertains to their poor training or unreadiness to face the challenges of the classroom. In fact, the majority of our teachers are not trained; they are generally launched into a classroom without being aware of the hidden parameters of such environment.50% of school failure in Algeria is due to the lack of teacher training, (Meziane,2013).In fact, teachers at the primary, middle, and secondary schools, are employed just after they obtain their BA, or MA degrees, without any preparation to meet youngsters, generally, adolescents, who are in a critical period which needs professionals aware of their behaviors and unexpected reactions. Similarly, at the university level, teachers are enrolled just after obtaining their postgraduate degree, often without being prepared for classroom challenges.

Emphasis, then should be put on both theory and practice in teaching. These two constitute “*the two sides of the same coin*” (Jourdenais, 2009:652) .That is, teachers would not perform well if they did not master the science of teaching. Anderson (2009:4) summarizes the qualities of effective teachers into three main criteria; knowledge, ability and personality. These

three features, in fact constitute the basis for any teacher, being novice or experienced.

Moreover, knowledge, ability and personality are crucial ingredients for effective teaching and of course successful learning. Yet, we have to admit that knowledge can be easily acquired through research but ability and personality have to be qualities anchored within the teacher's personality.

4. Teacher Professional Development

Teaching EFL today is faced with increasing enrollments and a shortage of qualified teachers. In addition, a changing student population, nationwide education reforms, and the development of national standards for foreign language learning are placing a number of new demands on foreign language teachers. In fact a big challenge is facing EFL teachers; making their learners proficient speakers and users of the foreign language at an international level. Therefore, EFL teachers, besides their academic competencies and their pedagogical ones, should have extra skills necessary for facing those challenges; mainly interpersonal skills and technological ones. Similarly, ESP teachers must maintain proficiency in the target language and stay up to date on current issues related to the population they face. Regardless of the skills and knowledge that foreign language teachers possess when they start teaching, maintenance and improvement must be an ongoing process. ESP teachers must continue to accumulate pedagogical skills, in order to adapt their teaching to any new and unexpected situation in the classroom. This can be done through evening courses, summer seminars, lectures, or workshops offered by professional associations or universities. Indeed, educational reforms, a rapidly changing student clientele, technological development, and new views on assessment are just a few of the pressures today's foreign language teachers are encountering. If the foreign language

profession is to provide first class instruction to its students while keeping up with a growing list of demands, support for high quality teacher preparation and continuing professional development must be given high priority.

Because the world as a whole and Algeria especially, is witnessing a recession in the educational system, it has become necessary to think about the weaknesses within the system that have led to such a disaster. Being recognized as a major actor in this system, the teacher, with other stakeholders, share the great responsibility of the quality of the learning outcomes. Obviously, the purpose of teacher development is to find remedies to the problems that the educational domain encounters nowadays.

5. Teacher Proficiency/Learner Competency

Proficiency and competency have long been subject to numerous discussions. Although, the two words are sometimes used interchangeably, they differ in meaning. Proficiency refers to the highest level of attainment of a competency. Being proficient entails reaching a satisfactory and satisfying level in a given competency. Teaching competencies include content knowledge, managerial skills, values, material development and course design for specific purposes teaching.

In Algeria, teacher proficiency has long been questioned though not much research has been undertaken in this domain because assessment of the teacher remains still a taboo subject to be discussed. The competency-based approach entails that teachers help and prepare learners to achieve competencies that allow them face the challenges of everyday life. Nevertheless, in order to achieve that goal, teachers should themselves attain proficiency in different teaching skills. In fact, different levels of several competencies are to be attained, not necessarily at a high level but at least a medium one.

Conclusion

Teaching is a uniquely human endowment. Accordingly, attention should be directed towards not only the pedagogical means, but also towards the selection and training of the 'to be' teachers. The overhaul in the Algerian educational system has provided new insights to instruction; technological means have been introduced and programs, books and curricula have been adapted to the requirements of the era. Unfortunately, not much consideration has been directed towards the teacher, the main protagonist of the whole system.

To help teachers improve professionally, training at different levels is decisive. In fact, and in addition to a degree, training is crucial to enable the future to be teacher carry out his responsibilities. Nonetheless, training should be guided by professionals who master both the science and art of teaching. That is, experienced teachers who have had a long and affluent experience in the teaching domain. Proficiency in teaching then, starts with improving teaching competencies. At the beginning of their teaching career, pre -service teachers have to be trained and equipped for improving the competencies they need to teach. In fact, learners' competencies reflect the teacher's ones.

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