

Training ESP Teachers: An Under-Estimated Overhaul

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Abstract

In this era of ongoing technical improvements, ESP has witnessed an emergence, as a need for a mastery of specific English is observed, in almost all domains; being social, economic, medical, technological, etc. The present paper tries to unveil an issue which exists at the level of many university departments in Algeria where English is taught as a secondary/ tertiary subject. This status and its learning conditions have affected the students' attitudes towards learning the target language. Moreover, English is taught by GE teachers who have not been equipped to face the challenges of ESP classes. Hence, training becomes a necessity in order to improve teachers' competencies to meet their learners' needs.

1. Introduction

The development of any state depends on the quality of its education; a developed country has certainly a high level of educational success resulting in economical and social welfare. Conversely, non developed countries witness a poor educational system that results in a very high school failure, affecting their development and keeping them in the bottom list of social, economical and political advancements. For such reasons, it is important

to strive for the reasons behind school failure and the deficiencies of our educational system. Recognition of the weaknesses is certainly the first step for an objective diagnostic of the educational system and an overhaul as a resolution to overcome those deficiencies.

2. Repository of Teacher Training

Whether teaching is science or art has long been questioned by specialists and practitioners. Along decades of restless investigations in pedagogy, researchers have come to a common conclusion that effective teaching is the result to the genuine ability to combine science with art for effective teaching. In fact, teaching, like driving a car; the mastery of the mechanisms of the vehicle makes practice easier and artistic with time. Similarly, ignorance of the theoretical background of teaching makes the practical phase difficult if not impossible.

In the same nutshell, 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. Professional educational development according to Wallace (1999) and Hedgock (2009) requires reflection. The process stresses the trainee's existing knowledge as the backbone of the teaching profession. In fact, it is important that future teachers have some knowledge of

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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. Moreover, the practices within the ESP classroom reveal the teachers' beliefs concerning the teaching and learning process. Indeed, 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 relies. Existing knowledge, in addition to updated one, related to the subject being taught and an 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'. It is our major concern then, as foreign language teachers, and specifically, as ESP practitioners, to effectively think of appropriate decisions for the betterment of our teaching.

3. Teaching ESP

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.

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. Yet, those reforms have not reached the ESP classroom, since the GE teacher generally applies the same methodology to both classrooms. 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 learners in the classroom, unsuitable teaching material, and unqualified teachers. Moreover, the teacher,

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the main actor in such system is pointed out as being the “weakest stitch” that is responsible of academic failure “...the failure of some teachers to do their job properly has been a taboo subject in educational research. (Wragg 2000:2).

Teachers’ incompetence, then is often pointed out as the major factor in educational decline. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the teachers’ competence or incompetence. “...demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency is often difficult.”(Long, 2009:4)

In the same line of thought, teacher’s competence, according to Anderson (2009) peratins to three major paradigms; knowledge, ability and leadership. The ESP practitioner, in my opinion, also should possess those competencies.

3.1. Knowledge

Although the teacher is no more the only source of knowledge, he remains a model for his learners, affecting them positively or negatively. Therefore, the ESP practitioner should have a thorough knowledge of the subject he teaches. A mastery of the subject provides the him/her with self confidence which is transmitted to learners who feel this strength in mastering the subject. If it is not the case, learners will demonstrate a rejection and a negative attitude towards the teacher and consequently towards learning will be observed. Richards (2011) distinguishes between disciplinary knowledge and

pedagogical content knowledge, and both are crucial in for effective teaching.

The ESP teacher, then more than the GE one, should have a meticulous awareness of his learners' knowledge. In fact, unless the ESP teacher masters his students' knowledge, he cannot design the right methodology and teaching material. Hence training teachers for ESP settings is necessary for helping those teachers acquire the necessary skills and competencies to teach specific English. Needs analysis, course design, syllabus design, material adapting, and other necessary competencies are crucial in training ESP teachers.

3.2. Ability

Ability is one of the main distinctive features of an ESP teacher. Teacher's ability lies first, in his capacity in mastering the classroom subject, demonstrating a capacity to control the class and the subject he teaches. This can only be achieved if a needs analysis is undertaken before the course starts. The identification of the learners' needs, lacks and wants can but facilitate the selection of the appropriate teaching methodology and consequently the learning outcomes. Besides, he (the ESP teacher) should demonstrate an indisputable ability to unleash the students' motivation, allowing space for learners' autonomy, encouraging interaction and cooperation in an environment that is free from fear and stress. The teacher's ability, then lies in his genuine

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capacity in creating the suitable learning conditions. “Ability” according to Anderson, lies in the teachers’ capacity in having both leadership and instructional skills. On the one hand, planning, a leadership criterion is crucial for any formal learning setting. Indeed, course planning facilitates teaching and enhances learning. Moreover, a course which is not planned or not well-planned is quickly felt by learners who demonstrate once again a negative attitude towards learning the target language. Thus, planning requires time, effort, and reflection on the part of the ESP teacher. Successful planning, though effortful and demanding, certainly provides the teacher with self satisfaction, confidence, and enhances learning. On the other hand, ‘instructional’ ability, as named by Anderson lies in the teacher’s capacity in imparting knowledge appropriately and effectively. Indeed, It is important that the teacher knows how to put in practice the knowledge he presents to his learners.

3.3. Personality

In addition to knowledge and ability, the ESP teacher should have some other personal qualities. They should, in fact be “Positive, organized, committed, compassionate, dependable, personable, communicative, flexible, individually perceptive, value-based, creative, patient, sense of humor”(Anderson, 2009). Obviously, being an effective ESP teacher requires more than a

degree; it requires inner capacities and external ones, as well. Thus, decision takers should be cautious and objective in the selection of teachers at the pre-service phase because it is easier to cure an illness at an early stage and before the disease spreads in the whole body; the society.

4. Training ESP Teachers

Undoubtedly, English for Specific Purposes has become a necessity in this era .Therefore, ESP courses are introduced almost everywhere in Algeria, at the level of the university or private institutions. In fact, ESP courses are being taught by GE (General English) teachers who often lack the competence to reach the objectives of those courses. These are, in fact, taught in the same way, with the same teaching material, and the same methodology of GE courses. Obviously, ESP classes need well-trained teachers who are qualified to undertake needs analysis, the design of courses and teaching materials. What content, skills, and literalizes will they be expected to teach? ”. (Johns & Machado 2001:46). Thus, there is an urgent need for training ESP teachers who are qualified in order to meet the needs of the institution or the learners’ ones. English in different specialties, such as, medicine, economy, biology, psychology, sociology, and so on and so forth, is taught to different learners, from different backgrounds and ages. Such learning environment certainly requires different teaching

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methodology that meets those learners' needs and wants. "Dual professionalism, training in both the target subject area, for example, law or medicine, and applied linguistics would seem to provide the best of both worlds but requires breath and depth of commitment to two fields that few are willing to make."(Belcher 2006:140)

To successfully reach such an end, teachers who teach general English should be trained in order to acquire the competencies that allow them be skilful in ESP courses. The authorities then should seriously think of training those teachers to the tasks they have to address in ESP settings."One challenge to ESP content: discerning the particular vocabulary, discourses, and processes that are essential to the ESP training of students within a specialized context"(ibid).In addition to teacher training, efforts should be concentrated on the construction and design of syllabi and the teaching material pertaining to specific purposes.

It is of paramount importance, then to train ESP practitioners to the design of courses, syllabi, and teaching material. Therefore, careful attention should be given to the main principles in course design.In fact , many variables need to be considered when accomplishing such task; mainly, the authenticity of the material used, the vocabulary, and the strategies, too.

Clearly, ESP teacher proficiency pertains to the teacher's ability is making an intersection between styles, strategies, and tasks .But, to achieve that capacity, the

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ESP teacher has to endlessly question and strive for the right tasks that allow the great majority of learners participate in learning though they have different learning styles and use different learning strategies. Yet, the selection of tasks can be realized after the identification of the learner's needs, learning objectives, and the design of the material which are inexistent in our ESP institutions. One way of solving the issue would be to set workshops whose main objective would be to design English courses for different purposes. Also, research papers and dissertations in different specialties may be examined and adapted for an eventual use in ESP classes.

5. Conclusion

Teaching, a human endowment, requires attention and consciousness. These should be directed towards not only the pedagogical means, but also towards the selection and training of teachers. The overhaul in the Algerian educational system has provided new insights to instruction; technological means have been introduced and programs, curricula and books have been adapted to the requirements of the era. Unfortunately, not much consideration has been directed towards the ESP 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 practitioner 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.

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