Teaching and Learning English for General Business Purposes in Algeria: An Observational Study

Case of First Year LMD Teachers and Students of Commercial Sciences at Batna 1 University, Algeria

تدريس وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض الأعمال العامة في الجزائر: دراسة الرصد
حالة السنة الدراسية الأولى للعلماء وطلاب العلوم التجارية في جامعة باتنة 1 ، الجزائر

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Abstract

        The present paper is an observational study that aimed at investigating the situation of teaching and learning English for General Business Purposes in Algeria. It took first year LMD teachers and students of Commercial Sciences at Batna 1 University as a population. Results showed that this type of English is taught as General English and its teachers do not cater for their learners' needs. Although the courses contain more business specialized terminology, they are teacher-centered and target lexico-grammatical points instead of communicative skills. Most learners' general linguistic proficiency is poor as they commit grammatical, lexical, and phonological mistakes. Moreover, it was observed that English for General Business Purposes' teachers carry out only summative assessment while the formative one is completely ignored. Lack of professional training, determined syllabi and specialized teaching materials are the most common challenges that face teachers. These findings are discussed with pedagogical implications for classroom practices.

Key words: Business English; English for General Business Purposes; English for Specific Purposes; commercial sciences; learners' needs

ملخص :
        هذه الورقة البحثية هي دراسة ملاحظة لحالة التعليم والتعلم للغة الإنجليزية لأغراض تجارية عامة في الجزائر، والعينة من أساتذة وطلاب السنة الأولى LMD تخصص علوم تجارية بجامعة الحاج لخضر باتنة 01 ، أظهرت النتائج أن هذا النوع من الإنجليزية يدرس كالإنجليزية العامة، إضافة إلى ذلك أساتذته لا يأخذون بعين الاعتبار احتياجات الطلبة ، على الرغم من أن دروسه تحتوي على مصطلحات متخصصة في التجارة إلا انها تعتمد على إلقاء الأستاذ بصفة كبيرة وتستهدف النقاط اللغوية بدلا من المهارات التواصلية فالكفاءات اللغوية العامة لمعظم الطلبة ضعيفة حيث انهم يرتكبون أخطاء نحوية وصعوبة النطق، علاوة على ذلك لوحظ أن الأساتذة لا يقومون إلا بتقييم نهائي بينما يتجاهلون التقييم المستمر تماما، يمثل نقص التدريب المهني ، المناهج الدراسية المحددة ، والمواد التعليمية المتخصصة ، التحديات الأكثر شيوعًا التي تواجه الأساتذة.
الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغـــة الإنجليزية لأغراض تجارية عامة، اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض معينة، علوم تجارية، احتياجات المتعلمين

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1. Introduction

English has become an international means of communication. This fact is reflected in different fields. It is, for example, included in the formal educational systems all over the world, and Algerian universities are no exception. This increasing spread of the English language in the world resulted in the expansion of one particular aspect of English language teaching (Henceforth ELT) namely English for specific purposes (Henceforth ESP). Business English (Henceforth BE), a part of ESP, is the language related to trade. The use of this specific English is extending day after day due to the globalization of business. Every day, thousands of international native to non-native and non-native to non-native communications take place in business settings, and this might cause unease for those people whose first language is not English. Although all Algerian universities offer BE courses for their students who major in commercial, economic and management sciences, there are hardly any studies on teaching and learning BE in Algeria. Attempting to fill this gap, the present study investigates teaching and learning English for General Business Purposes (Henceforth EGBP) with reference to teacher and learners at the Department of Commercial Sciences of Batna 1 University.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English for Specific Purposes

ESP appeared in the 1960s in order to cater for the learners' specific needs. Thus, it can be said that its purpose is purely utilitarian. In this respect, Mackay and Mountford (1978: 2) state that, "ESP is generally used to the teaching of English for a clearly utilitarian purpose". It is defined as "Situations where the student has some specific reasons for wanting to learn a language" (Harmer: 1983:1). It is noteworthy that ESP can be divided into two types: English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 8) maintain that ESP's development logically stems from three converging movements which are presented below:

a. The increasing demand of English after the WWII to meet specific professional needs

b. Development in linguistics i.e. the use of language in real-life communications

c. An increasing interest in educational psychology i.e. learners' needs and interest are important variables in the teaching/learning process as they have an influence on their motivation and therefore affect their learning effectiveness

2.2 English for Specific Purposes vs. General English (GE)

ELT can be divided into two branches: GE and ESP. Both of them target effective learning. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 18) assert that "though the content of learning may vary, there is no reason to suppose that the processes of learning should be any different for the ESP learner than the General English learner". They stress that the methodologies used in teaching ESP could have been used with any other type of English. According to Bernard and Zemach (2003), what distinguishes ESP from GE is that the courses of the latter have more focused objectives and use a more restricted range of topics. Furthermore, Richards (2005) maintains that ESP courses can be viewed as miniature versions of regular ELT courses with appropriate specialized vocabulary stressed in them.

In a nutshell, the main difference between GE and ESP lies in the awareness of meeting the learners' needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1991: 53) write:

> What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need. If learners, sponsors, and teachers know why the learners need English, that awareness will leave an influence on what will be acceptable as reasonable content in the language course and, on the opposite side, what potential can be exploited

2.3 English for General Business Purposes

Before dealing with EGBP, it is necessary to define Business English (Henceforth BE). BE is a part of ESP. In this respect, Ellis and Johnson (1994: 3) state:

> Business English must be seen in the overall context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as it shares the important elements of needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, and material selection and development which are common to all field of work in ESP.

Frendo (2005: 7) defines BE as "An umbrella term for a mixture of general everyday English, general business English, and ESP. It is not limited to words and phrases that only appear in some special business world."

BE can be divided into EGBP and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP). The former is the focus of the present study. It is defined as BE which is taught to pre-experienced learners. They are those who will need to prepare for future business career (Ellis & Johnson, 1994) and have no or little experience in business world (Frendo, 2005). This type of English is taught to university or even high school students. The present investigation classified the English taught at the Department of Commercial Sciences as EGBP because it is taught to learners who lack experience in business and therefore need the teacher to open a window on this world.

EGBP courses target the four skills. They include exercises to practice grammar and vocabulary points and develop accuracy as well as fluency in the four skills. In that, they are much similar to the course of GE. The only difference is that their materials are put into business situations. For this reason, Ellis and Johnson (1994) criticize them as they provide only theoretical knowledge insufficient for real-life business situations.

The second type of BE, which is out of the scope of the present study, is ESBP. It is taught for job-experienced learners who usually bring business knowledge and skills to the classroom. In ESBP courses, "the practical use of language is more important than theoretical knowledge about language" (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 6). Learners usually take intensive courses in small groups of 6-8 persons and senior staff generally opts for one-to-one tuition.

2.4 The Register of BE

Halliday (1987) considers register as a functional variety of language. He conceives it as the language used in different situations and defines it based on three factors: Field (What is happening), tenor

(Participants' statuses and roles) and mode (Type of language and communication channels).

Register analysis has a pedagogic function; it is essential in making the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs. The grammar used in writing can be used as an example. While the grammar of ESP writing is similar to that of GE, some grammatical structures are used more frequently. Brieger (1997) sheds light on the grammar and lexis of BE but he restricts his investigation to only who is talking to whom in which situation. Unfortunately, his definition was more pedagogic than linguistically analytic. Robinson (1991: 79) states that there is no specific core grammar and lexis of BE but instead, there are "some broad areas to focus on".

2.5 Teaching EGBP

2.5.1 Importance of Needs Analysis

As mentioned earlier, ESP aims at developing linguistic competences of a specific group of learners to perform their activities. Thus, the word "needs" is a keyword in ESP. Indeed, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 8) state that, "ESP is an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners". As a result, needs analysis is a vital concept in ESP. In this vein, Richards (2001) defines needs analysis as "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language".

In 1978, Munby proposed the Communication Needs Processor. It is a model for needs analysis which was quite influential. Munby states that the design of syllabus for language courses could only take place after a preliminary work on the learners' needs. However, he just produced a list of the linguistic features of the target situation in his model. Being aware of the learners' needs influences not only on the content of the language course, but also what potential can be exploited through this course. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 54) maintain that needs analysis is a complex process which has to take into consideration what they define as "target needs" i.e. what learners need to do in the target situation, and "learning needs" i.e. what they need to do in order to learn.

The more modern view thinks that learners' subjective needs (affective needs), such as their interests, whishes, expectations and preferences should also be taken into account in addition to "target

needs" and "learning needs" (Nunan, 2013). Information about learners' needs can be obtained through different ways: survey questionnaires and interviews, attitude scales, intelligence texts, language tests, job analyses, content analyses, statistical analyses, observation, and or informal discussions with learners and other parties (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Palacios Martinez, 1994). Furthermore, needs analysis should not only be considered as a pre-stage for the design of language courses; but rather as an "on-going process" (White, 1998) and, as evaluation. It can therefore be used to design ESP courses.

2.5.2 EGBP Teacher Requirements

The EGBP teacher should possess knowledge and skills to be an effective teacher. As far as knowledge is concerned, two types of teacher knowledge can be distinguished: knowledge about effective practice and knowledge about one's own practice. The former is concerned with information about education and includes subject matter, how students learn, how and why to use particular instructional strategies. The latter restricts itself to particular practices individual teachers use in their classrooms and the effects they have on learners' learning and motivation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Because a language teaching program consists of three stages, namely: input, process, and output (Bell, 1981), the EGBP teacher is required to have both content and formal schemata knowledge in BE. Input is concerned with identifying and determining learners' needs, syllabus design, material preparation and selection. The second stage, process, is concerned with the implementation of the program while the last one restricts itself to the assessment of the learners' performance. Hence, the EGBP needs to be a needs' analyst, a course designer, a material provider and a performance assessor.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), EGBP require three things. They are: First, a positive attitude towards the content; second, knowledge of the fundamental principle of the subject area; and third, an awareness of how much they (teachers) probably already know. These elements enable the EGBP teacher to ask intelligent questions and therefore be an interested student in the subject matter rather than a teacher of the subject matter.

Teaching EGBP does not require knowledge from the part of teachers but skills too. Goodwin (1997) asserts that an accomplished EGBP teacher is:

> Self-reflective and self-critical, prepared to experiment, able to provide appropriate guidance and response, tolerant and promotes tolerance amongst learners, an excellent communicator, clear, articulate and responsive to others. (p. 123)

Brookfield (1990) goes further and defines the perfect EGBP teacher as:

> Teachers who are passionate about their practice can easily be obsessed with a role model of the exemplary teacher. This role model offers a perfectly balanced composite of admired behaviors and personality traits. (P. 7)

Thus, it can be concluded that, in terms of methodology, teaching EGBP is not totally different from teaching GE; however, moving to the domain of BE makes teaching just more specific.

Additionally, the EGBP teacher should have a minimum command of the language used in BE, at least adequate for classroom purposes. S/he needs a reasonable understanding of the materials s/he uses when teaching. When s/he writes a business report, for instance, s/he needs to take the role an executive director, administrative assistant, business admin, consultant, etc. So, a minimum knowledge of the expressions and techniques of writing such business reports is needed.

Besides, part of the EGBP teacher classroom skills is to manage learning. It is necessary that the teacher assesses from time to time the progress of his/her learners and manages the learning activities well so that the distinguished learners do not feel bored by being held back and the slowest are not frustrated by being left back. Brookfield (1990) puts this point as follows:

> As a critically responsive teacher, your practice exhibits a constant interplay between action and analysis…You change your methods, content, and evaluative criteria as you come to know more about the ways these are perceived by students. Which knowledge and skills to explore next and how best to examine these are decisions made in the midst of the

teaching activity itself, rather than being planned in detail from the outset. (p. 30)

In addition to professional skills, equally important to the EGBP teacher are the personal ones. It is essential for him/her to be sociable, to have an outgoing personality, and most importantly to be a good negotiator, especially when teaching managers who like to impose their own terms. Here, the EGBP should negotiate with tact and diplomacy the way the course is structured and also agree with his/her managers as learners on the principles with which to work.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

There are four first-grade teachers of EGBP at the Department of Commercial Sciences of Batna 1 University, Algeria. When the researcher asked for their consent to be observed in their classrooms, three agreed and one refused. This might be due to the fact that classroom observation is a stressful experience for him/her. The three teachers teach a total of 143 which make four intact groups at the aforementioned department. These learners belong to the same age group (18-22 years old). Before attending university, they have learnt English as a foreign language for at least seven years in middle and secondary schools. They have been oriented to the Department of Commercial Sciences in order to carry on their studies and obtain a "Licence" degree after three years of study. In addition to the subjects of their specialization, they take one hour and a half of English on a weekly basis.

3.2 Instrumentation

Classroom observation is used as a data gathering tool in the present study in order to have a comprehensive insight of what is happening in the EGBP teaching situation. This tool is opted for because it allows gathering direct and in-depth data about the day-to-day context in which EGBP courses take place by observing teachers and their learners. Mason (1996: 60) writes that, "Observations are methods of generating data which involve the researcher immersing him or herself in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions events, and so on, within it". Dörnyei (2007:178), on the other hand, maintains that "classroom observation provides direct information and it is one of the three basic data sources for empirical research".

Classroom observation was carried in April and May 2018. It lasted for 12 hours in each EGBP classroom observed. Every session lasted for one hour and a half. It is worth mentioning here that after the researcher got the teachers' consent to be observed, she had about a 10-miunute discussion with all of them about what will be observed during the classroom visitation. General information was shared about the characteristics of the learners and the learning environment. Specific information was also shared about the objectives of EGBP teaching at the Commercial Sciences Department of Batna 1 University.

The aim of the present study's classroom observation is examining the following points:

- ✓ The talking time for both teacher and learners
- ✓ The language being used during the course;
- ✓ The teaching materials used;
- ✓ The way the course is conducted;
- ✓ The type of assessment used;
- ✓ The set of difficulties and challenges EGBP teachers usually face.

4. Results and Discussion

The objective of classroom observation was an exploration of day-to-day issues of EGBP teaching and learning of the sample in focus. The observation procedure took a two-month period. Observation was carried on a weekly basis with every session lasting for one hour and a half making a total of 36 hours. Maintaining observation during this period has shown the following results.

4.1 Course Content and Conduct

The first part of observation is concerned with the content and conduct of the courses. The first thing that attracted the researchers' attention is the insufficient time allocated to teaching ESP which is only one hour and a half per week. Besides, this course is planned the last course of the day and the week. Nonetheless, all along eight weeks of classroom observation, the researchers noticed that the majority of students attend this class though its coefficient is only "1". Moreover, the absent students always try to justify their absences with written records. This shows that they are interested in this module.

As far as the content of the courses is concerned, observation revealed that it was lexico-grammatical in nature to a very far extent with much more emphasis on lexis. The skill that was mostly present was reading while speaking, listening and writing were totally absent. The grammatical points covered were about sentence structure and elements, tenses, reported speech, and conditionals. Specialized BE vocabulary was presented to the students in the form of English texts with emphasis on keywords. Grammar and vocabulary exercises (Title of the text, synonyms and antonyms, reformulation of sentences maintaining the same meaning, matching, etc.) followed the reading texts. Another aspect that attracted the researcher's attention is the use of non-authentic texts by the teachers and the complete absence of a textbook. Audio-visual aids were not employed too.

Another thing that has been noticed by the researchers is that the teacher's talking time is much more than the learners' talking time. In other words, the lesson can be described as teacher-centered. Moreover, the teacher is more a translator than an EGBP teacher. Learners in all the classes observed keep asking the teacher to translate words and expressions to Arabic claiming that they do not understand English and French is difficult for them. Here, it is worth mentioning that there were few students who have either an intermediate or advanced level of English either in speaking or writing.

4.2 Learners' Lacks and Weaknesses

The second part of classroom observation is concerned with learners' lacks and weaknesses. It aims at detecting the necessities that the learners lack and their weak areas of language performance. Such a process is referred to as deficiency analysis (Jordan, 1997). Data revealed that learners' level of English language competence is poor in general, except from few students that exhibited a good and even excellent level of English. The weaknesses and lacks have been grouped under three headings: Grammatical, lexical and phonological. They were mostly of a linguistic nature.

Grammatical

Most of the students observed commit serious grammatical errors: tenses, articles, word order, and the passive voice, among others. It was also noticed that learners tend to use the Arabic pattern

of sentence structures which results in incorrect English. In most cases, such a linguistic transfer occurs unconsciously.

Lexical

The learners observed have a limited vocabulary reservoir either in GE or BE. Students often translate words and expressions directly from Arabic into English in order to convey their ideas.

Phonological

In addition to grammatical and lexical problems, the learners observed encounter serious phonological difficulties. Negative linguistic transfer also takes place at the level of pronunciation. This time, however, students rely on their on their knowledge of French pronunciation to pronounce English. The detected errors occur in consonants, vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs, stress and intonation.

4.3 Assessment

Research on language teaching has shown that there are three types of assessment: diagnostic, formative, and summative. The present study's two-month classroom observation revealed that the only type used by the three teachers observed is the last one—summative assessment. It took the form of a quiz. Teachers focused only on the product and ignored the process of learning. In other words, there was no formative assessment which could provide teachers with information for continuous feedback to students and guide their daily instructional decisions and adaptations.

4.4 Problems and Challenges that Face Teachers

The present study's classroom observation revealed a fact about EGBP teaching at the Department of Commercial Sciences of Batna 1 University. Teachers of this type of English were found to be part-time teachers of GE that are not prepared to teach BE. In addition to being unprepared, they received no training as EGBP teachers and they did not collaborate with each other or with other teachers of EGBP from other universities. The common problems and challenges that EGBP teachers seem to face are the following:

1. Teachers often find it difficult to deal with specialized terminology related to learners' field of study—business. In most cases, teachers could not explain the business-related terminology well in English

and therefore resorted to translation into Arabic and occasionally French.

2. Teachers often suffer from the lack of clearly elaborated programs to follow and of suitable authentic as well as non-authentic materials to rely on when teaching EGBP.

3. Most of the language teachers are not aware of the objectives of EGBP and therefore their learners' needs. Consequently, they teach GE instead of BE.

4. No prior special training to BE teaching

5. Teachers suffer from the lack of equipped laboratories specialized for English language learning. During observation, they always regret the absence of audio-visual aids which are likely to facilitate learning and make it more enjoyable for students.

6. Heterogeneous groups that create difficulties for the teacher.

7. No collaboration between EGBP teachers themselves, and between them and subject specialists.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Despite the fact that observing a limited number of EGBP teachers during a limited period of time may not be considered sufficient to claim for setting the findings in a broader context, the present study's classroom observation revealed many facts about the situation of EGBP teaching and learning at the Algerian universities with reference to first year LMD students of commercial sciences at Batna 1 University. The most prominent of which is that ESP in still in its infancy. This might be due to the past years' emphasis on civilization and literature as the main targets of English language teaching. It is a matter of fact that English is of vital importance to university students of commerce. Hence, there is a need for change in order to improve its teaching/learning situation for targeted learners. The following practical points, which aim at solving at least part of the problem, are suggested.

- EGBP teachers should cater for their learners' needs. Needs analysis is of crucial importance in ESP teaching in general and EGBP in particular.
- The EGBP teacher is the key parameter in the teaching/learning process. In order for him/her to be an

effective teacher, s/he should first be an effective learner who always seeks professional development which should join theory and practice. Therefore, s/he should be trained well. Training courses, whether pre-service or in-service, should be compulsory for all BE teachers, whether novice or experienced.

- Team teaching can also benefit the BE teaching situation, therefore, teachers of this kind of English should cooperate with each other and with subject specialists.
- The content of EGBP courses should aim at developing the students' communicative and intercultural competence as the world has become globalized instead of targeting lexico-grammatical points.
- As any lesson of English, EGBP lessons should be learner-centered. This can be done by encouraging learners' autonomy and reflection, collaboration and group projects, creating individual self-paced assignments, getting the learners involved in community-based activities and service-learning projects, etc.
- The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should allocate more time for the English class targeting business purposes.

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