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Didactics of Teaching ESP

First Term

All Groups

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Who should teach ESP the specialist teacher or the English language teacher?

Teaching English for Specific Purposes has been a controversial issue among EFL teachers and others. Experiments were conducted to find out who is better qualified for the job: the EFL teacher or the specialist in the field?

One of the major goals of ESP courses is developing reading skills for specialist texts. Some scholars have indicated that university students mostly suffer from a limited range of general vocabulary rather than technical terms. Gilmour and Marshal (1993), for example, argue that many of students' problems in comprehending what they read are not caused by the specialist words of their subject matter, rather, the problems they face are mostly caused by general English words.

Spack (1988) thinks that overcoming the problems students have is not simply a matter of learning specialist language because more often the general use of language causes the great problem. She illustrates this by using her students' complaints about their problems in understanding specialist texts. These are not due to the technical terminology, but mostly

because of poor general vocabulary. Also, some studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between English language proficiency and the academic success of students whose language of instruction is English (Graham, 1987).

Wiwczarowski (2003) writes that *‘in order to succeed in preparing our students, we as professionals need to first lay a proper foundation of competencies’*.

Maleki (2006) demonstrated that low English language proficiency of EFL students hindered their academic progress. Thus, strong English language proficiency is needed to reach one of the major goals of ESP courses, that is, reading, at university level.

Studies in psychology show that for a reader to construct meaning from the text, two different approaches are utilized: syntactic and semantic approach (Clark and Clark, 1977; Field, 2003). In the syntactic approach, the reader divides the sequence of letters into words and their constituents and by using their linguistic knowledge and formal schemata, the reader constructs meaning. In the semantic approach, on the other hand, the reader uses content words, content schemata, and world knowledge and life experiences to construct meaning. According to Clark and Clark (and Field (ibid.)) in most cases the reader mixes these two approaches to understand the text. Ziahosseiny (2005) argues that for the reader to utilize the two approaches, that they must have a command of the following pieces of information:

- a. the meaning and function of the key words in the text;
- b. the key grammatical structures in the text; and
- c. the cohesive devices and coherence in the text.

It seems that a professional EFL teacher and material designer is needed to reach that goal. Ziahosseiny (2002), also believes that ESP readers should be engaged in activities that will give them a knowledge of formal schemata (key words and key grammatical structures), and content schemata (the necessary background knowledge). Sadeghi (2005), citing Hutchinson and Waters (1987), argues that the ESP teacher should have the same qualities of the general English teacher. He continues saying that the ESP teacher should possess (a) English language knowledge, (b) thorough command of the course design, and (c) expert knowledge of the related field of science. Apparently, most subject teachers lack (a) and (b), which cannot be ignored.

Robinson (1991) asserts that the most important quality the ESP teacher needs is flexibility. For Robinson (*ibid.*), flexibility means changing from being a general English teacher to being a specific purpose teacher. Such a flexible teacher should cope with different groups of students. Therefore, it can be inferred from Robinson (*ibid.*) that it is the general language teacher's responsibility to teach ESP classes. Hutchinson and Waters add that ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist subject knowledge.

They require three parameters only:

- A positive attitude towards the ESP content;
- A knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area;
- An awareness of how much they probably already know.

Therefore, the ESP teacher does not need to be an expert in the vocational area his students study or work in. He needs to have some understanding of the subject area. Scrivener (qtd in *Learning Teaching*, MacMillan 2005, n.p) reassures the worried teacher when faced with teaching an ESP course for nuclear engineers that ‘you know about English; they know about the topic. Put them together, and you have the potential for some exciting lessons.’

He goes on to say that what ESP really means is: ‘Go on teaching all the normal English you already teach, but use lexis, examples, topics, and contexts that are, as far as possible, relevant to the students and practise relevant specific skills.’

The result of many studies showed that EFL teachers can fulfill course goals much better than specialists in the field. Therefore, ESP courses should be taught by EFL teachers rather than specialists in the field. Those specialists interested in teaching English should attain the necessary qualifications.