



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TEACHING METHODS IN ESP COURSES

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Abstract:

The aim of this study was to compare the efficiency of two different methods of teaching in ESP courses. To achieve this objective, two groups of students of Economics were selected for the study. Each group consisted of 20 participants. Their level of proficiency in English and subject matter was tested by a sample of Michigan TOEFL test and a pre-test. The two groups were at the same level of proficiency in both general English and English for Students of Economics before receiving treatment. The first group attended a two-month ESP course whose medium of instruction was a combination of English and Persian. The second group attended a two-month ESP course whose medium of instruction was solely English. After this period of treatment, the two groups were tested by a post-test. The results showed that the second group was more successful in the post-test. These results suggest that those learners who are proficient in English and subject matter benefit more from courses that are taught solely in English. Finally, it was concluded that level of knowledge in English and subject matter, nature of the subject (theoretical or applied), and the skills that are the focus of the course are the main characteristics that must be taken into account in the process of planning for ESP courses.

Keywords: ESP courses, English only policy, bilingual teaching

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1. Introduction

The efficiency of English Only Policy (EOP) in educational settings has been a controversial issue in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Teachers and learners are against the use of EOP, and those who favor this policy have their own justifications. The policy usually prohibits the use of students' native languages inside the classroom.

ESP refers to the type of education which is aimed at highlighting and prioritizing the fulfillment of learners' needs in a target-oriented prospect. This necessitates the existence of accordance between the principles of ESP course design and the ESP textbooks being taught in a course. Khoshsima, Saed and Ghassemi (2014) found that there is a contradiction instead of accordance in the textbooks used in Iran. ESP is divided into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) in general regarding the professional domains. In this study both types are referred under the top branch as ESP. The present study is regarded as a novel investigation of the practice of English Only Policy in ESP courses in Iran and therefore adds some possible pedagogical implications in terms of the language and teaching procedures used in classes and even a change in syllabus design and development of the curriculum.

Perhaps the basic theoretical framework underlying English Only Policy is the L1=L2 hypothesis (Nation, 2005). A number of researchers (Macaro, 2009; Rivers, 2011) have indicated that first language (L1) is an inevitable part of learning and teaching a foreign language (L2). In contrast, some other studies (Davila, 2005; Tang 2002) claimed that in-depth exposure to the target language needs to be set as the learners' final target. Learning a language in an ESP context is bound to meticulous needs analysis and development of specific curriculum to make the learning interactional and meaningful.

The usage of L1 as a vehicle of information and a means of interaction has been a popular subject among EFL teachers. That is argued to be significantly beneficial when employed appropriately. Nevertheless, prohibiting the use of L1 to enhance learners' level of exposure to English (L2) is not certainly productive (Dujmovic, 2007).

So far, many researchers and language teachers conducted research in the area of first language use in English classrooms. Most of this research has studied teachers' opinions about the use of native language in the classroom or the frequency of that usage. There have not been many studies exploring the efficiency of EOP in ESP courses.

This paper, therefore, reports a study carried out to investigate the practice of the insistence on English only in terms of its pedagogical effectiveness in the English learning and teaching settings in Chabahar Maritime University in Iran.

2. Literature Review

Much of the current literature related to ESP is done on the efficacy of textbooks and learners' attitudes. Unwillingly the role of teaching techniques and the language as the vehicle of information in ESP has been neglected in previous studies. The study of literature on the area has shown discrepancies between using English only or along with the first language among learners and teachers. Such disagreements have resulted in ineffective and unsuccessful teaching and learning; therefore, it is especially important to continue exploring this area of EFL research in ESP courses. Khoshsima and Khosravani (2014) stated that Iranian ESP teachers do not hold positive attitudes towards current ESP textbooks.

The facilitative role of L1 in EFL contexts has been supported in several recent studies (Khreshneh, 2012; Jafari & Shokrpour, 2013; Mart, 2013) which have stated it is not important whether the learners or the teacher uses L1; it is the matter of existence. Enhancement and enrichment of learners' speech was confirmed by Jamshidi and Navehebrahim (2013) in a study done in Iran. They indicated that the use of Persian (L1) in English classes organized learners' speech and increased learners' enjoyment and confidence. Accordingly, L1 interaction was argued to be motivational in ESP classes, and disregard for learners' L1 was considered demotivating in a study by Spahiu (2013). Furthermore, McMillan and Rivers (2011) argued that in order to benefit from the use of L1 in communicative, cognitive and social functions in L2 learning, the employment of L1 must be selective.

Khati (2011) conducted a study on the use of the first language in English classes and claimed that first language use in English medium classes contributed to the learners' progress made in both their language proficiency and their subjects' content. It was asserted that learners need be able to employ their L1 when they need to, as this could facilitate learning. A study conducted by Afzal (2013) affirmed that providing Persian (L1) equivalents besides the English definitions enhanced learning the novel lexical items vocabulary and increased their word power. Yet there are studies which are opposed to the use of L1 and recommend EOP.

Cook (2001) argued that L1 and L2 have two different linguistic systems and characteristics. As a result, learners should reduce their use of the L1 in order to accomplish the L2 learning. Teachers may insist on the separation of the two languages, yet learners tend to compare the two linguistic systems as they learn the target language. Teachers try to stimulate their learners to avoid employing the L1 and the comparison of the languages. In addition, learners need ultimate exposure to the target language to learn it best. This demands frequently usage of L2 by learners. Accordingly,

Mattioli (2004) asserted that the use of learners' first language is inconceivable. Even linguistic items and classroom language need to be performed in English (Davila, 2005).

In academic educational settings, the purpose of ESP has accepted an alteration from text as linguistic object to language as vehicle of information. These courses and the related textbooks are designed and developed with the presumption that learners do not endeavor hardship dealing with the linguistic and the content knowledge through reading strategies. Ghanbari and Eslami-Rasekh (2010) discussed that learners' needs related to the targeted specialty is the purpose and priority of ESP courses, even though they claimed that courses in Iran were not designed to any systematic needs analysis and ESP curriculum developers have not been successful.

In this respect, Maleki (2006) investigated the efficacy of ESP courses by comparing the courses held by an EFL teacher and a specialist in the content. The results indicated that EFL teachers were significantly more qualified to teach ESP courses). Davoudi-Mobarakeh and his colleagues (2014) discussed that most of ESP courses are taught by content area specialists and are ineffective based on various reasons such as; lack of variety of pedagogical techniques, lack of background knowledge of strategies and methodologies, lack of linguistic knowledge to teach English and mostly they translated texts, therefore teachers vitally need be guided or even educated to teach ESP courses in Iran.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Participants

Participants of this study were selected from students of Economics studying at Chabahar Maritime University. They were divided into two groups, each one consisting of 20 students. The first group consisted of 13 males and 7 females, and the second group consisted of 12 males and 8 females, all of whom were between 19 and 23 years old. The proficiency of these participants in general English was tested by a sample of Michigan TOEFL test. This test was used to make sure that the two groups were at the same level of proficiency in general English. Participants of the study had not passed any ESP course in Economics before conducting this study.

3.2 Instrument

In this study, a pre-test and a post-test were used to examine participants' proficiency in English for Students of Economics. These multiple-choice tests were designed by researchers of this study. The designs of pre-test and post-test were similar. The aim of the first item was to test participants' knowledge in special vocabulary in Economics. The second item tested participants' proficiency in grammar. Although the main aim of

this item was to test grammatical ability, participants had to have knowledge in special vocabulary and Economics in order to successfully answer questions of this item. The third item consisted of two reading comprehension texts. Each part consisted of a text in Economics followed by eight multiple-choice questions. Totally, each test consisted of 15 questions for testing vocabulary, 15 questions for testing grammatical ability in special texts of Economics, and 8 questions for testing participants' proficiency in understanding special texts in Economics.

3.3 Procedure

As was mentioned, at the beginning, a sample of Michigan TOEFL test was used to make sure that participants were at the same level in general English and English for Students of Economics. Both classes were taught by the same instructor. However, the two classes were taught by different methods. In the first class, the instructor used English and Persian (native language of participants) to teach the content of the course. In this course, the instructor used Persian equivalents of technical vocabularies to explain the meanings of the words. He also used Persian to elaborate on grammatical points and texts of reading comprehension. In the second class, the instructor only used English to teach the content of the course. Even the meanings of special vocabularies and grammatical points were explained in English. The two classes were taught throughout a period of two months. After this period of treatment, both groups were tested by the post-test.

3.4 Data analysis

The means of scores of both groups in pre-test and post-test were calculated. Also, two t-tests were used. The aim of the first t-test was to compare the level of participants before treatment period. The aim of the second t-test was to compare the performance of the two groups after treatment period. The obtained means and P-values could give a criterion for comparing the progress of the two groups when they were taught by two different methods in ESP courses.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

As was mentioned, a t-test was used to compare the performance of the two groups in the pre-test. Results of this t-test have been presented in Table 1. The obtained P-value in this test was 1, which is statistically non-significant. This value and means of the two groups show that there is no significant difference between participants' scores in the

pre-test. In other words, the two groups were at the same level of proficiency before treatment.

Table 1: Results of the first t-test

	Mean	SD	SEM	N	P-value
Group 1	21.30	4.90	1.10	20	1
Group 2	21.30	5.40	1.21	20	

The second t-test was used to compare participants' scores in the post-test. Results of this test have been given in Table 2. The obtained means and P-value (0.2538) show that there is a relatively significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the performance of the second group (that was taught by English-only policy) was relatively better than the performance of the first group that was taught by a combination of English and Persian.

Table 2: Results of the second t-test

	Mean	SD	SEM	N	P-value
Group 1	22.35	4.94	1.11	20	0.2538
Group 2	24.15	4.88	1.09	20	

4.2 Discussion

Results obtained in this study suggest that using English-only policy in ESP classrooms was more successful in improving L2 learners' proficiency. Almost in all ESP courses, learners have a lot of knowledge in subject matter. This knowledge plays a key role in the success of L2 learners. In fact, when the content of an ESP course is taught in English, much of it is already known by learners. Based on this partial knowledge of the subject, in many cases, learners can make inferences and obtain a clear understanding of those parts for which they face with difficulties. In fact, the background knowledge can compensate for their insufficient knowledge in English. When learners' knowledge in English is not enough to help them to understand some parts of the subject, they rely on their background knowledge of the subject and make inferences to fill this gap. This process is important in two respects. Firstly, it keeps the channel of receiving input open. Lack of sufficient knowledge in English is compensated for by knowledge of the subject. In fact, learning process can be conceived as a puzzle whose parts can be found by relying on a variety of resources, including knowledge of English and subject matter. When one or several of these resources are not sufficient, the other resources can be employed. This dynamic process of learning and receiving input continues throughout the course. Receiving more input means more learning is taking place. Therefore, when the content of an ESP course is taught solely in English, L2 learners have a good

opportunity to receive a large body of input which can be digested by relying on a variety of resources. Secondly, the dynamic process of learning through a variety of resources can be very motivating for learners. In fact, it can function as a psychological drive to make learners more motivated to challenge with the subject. When one resource fails to help learners to learn, another resource comes into stage to compensate for the failure of the first one. Therefore, the benefits of learning English through a variety of resources can be seen from cognitive and psychological perspectives.

However, one point that cannot be ignored when we want to interpret the results of such studies is the level of learners. Learners who attend ESP courses could be at various levels in the subject matter and English. There is no doubt that having more knowledge in the subject is an advantage for learners, because gap of knowledge in English can effectively be filled by knowledge in the subject itself. Also, level of learners is crucially important. We cannot expect learners who are at various levels of English proficiency make the same amount of progress when they are taught by a certain method. Since participants of this study were at a relatively high level proficiency in English and Economics, they were relatively more successful in the course that only English was used as the medium of instruction. Therefore, the inconsistency between the results of this study and those studies that found a combination of English and Persian is more effective (such as Jamshidi & Navehebrahimi, 2013; Spahiu, 2013) can be explained by differences between level of knowledge in the subject matter and English. Results of this study suggest that when learners are at a high level of knowledge in the subject matter and English proficiency, they benefit more from the courses that are fully taught in English.

Finally, it must be noted that any conclusion drawn from such studies must be accompanied by some degree of consideration, because the nature of the subject can have an influence on the success of the course. Some subjects are more theory-oriented, and abstract concepts play a salient role in the discussions. Also, the skills that are the focus of attention throughout any ESP course are an issue that cannot be ignored when we conduct such studies. All in all, it seems that in selecting a method for an ESP course, a variety of factors must be taken into account. Every ESP course has its own characteristics and its own learners. Level of knowledge in English and subject matter, nature of the subject, and the skills that are the focus of the course are the characteristics that must be considered in any planning for ESP courses.

5. Conclusion

Every ESP course is conducted in its own setting. It has its own subject and its own learners. Learners in one course can be at a high level of proficiency in general English;

learners of another course might be at a lower level of proficiency. Each course needs a special planning for the presentation of materials. Results of this study suggest that more advanced learners benefit more from those ESP courses in which the materials are presented within the framework of EOP. Therefore, any planning for ESP courses must be started with an evaluation of learners' proficiency in general English. This initial evaluation can help course designers to employ the best methods for teaching in ESP courses. Also, nature of the subject of a given ESP course might be different from subject of other courses. Some subjects are theory-oriented; others are applied-oriented. Nature of the materials is an issue that must seriously be taken into account. The extent to which abstract concepts are discussed in an ESP course is critical because these concepts are difficult to explain in L2, particularly for learners who are at a low level of proficiency. All in all, in the process of planning for an ESP course, all of these elements must be included, as the inclusion of one element might reduce the quality of any course in ESP.

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