RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Task-Based Language Teaching in ESP Education in the Agricultural University of Tirana

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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education is required to play an important role in teaching students of the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT) to be more open-minded, so improving English proficiency has become an important educational goal in higher education curricula.This article aims to put into evidence the problems faced in ESP teaching in AUT nowadays and for the benefit of the learner to take up all the challenges in an integrated way and to strive for the creation of a new style in the educational system in which learners' attempts to systematize behaviour and knowledge is the point of departure rather than the rigid systems of scientific knowledge and educational organization of teachers. The implementation of task-based ESP teaching has better chances of success when is taken up by the whole high education system. The teachers should be those who set the pace and decide upon the content of the task-based programme. Our experience in the Agricultural University of Tirana has proved that task-based ESP teaching can be a reality and its success depends on the communication among ESP teachers and the construction of a common and coherent view on how the programme can be adapted to the learning needs of the students to promote their personal development and success in the future.

Key words: ESP education, task-based teaching, proficiency, curriculum, learner.

1. Introduction

The evidence shows that the complexity of the language used by ESP teachers in higher education is not well adapted to the level of language proficiency of their students. It is often stated that for learners who have a poor command of academic or technical language, teachers' language is an "obstacle" to learning rather than an efficient tool of instruction. As a consequence, the learners fail to acquire the needed skills and target subject knowledge. So, for them education fails to foster their personal development and success, and career seem to be far away from them.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in ESP environments provides learners with natural sources of meaningful material, various situations for communicative purposes and supportive feedback for greater opportunities in using language. In this paper based on real classroom experiences with students of the first year in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine we will describe some pedagogical approaches that have been introduced in order to cope with the linguistic problem of ESP teaching. In light of this, the paper's aim is to stress the potential of task-based teaching to overcome the problems we are facing nowadays. It will give insight for teachers to design and implement real communicative tasks in ESP classes and it will contribute to facilitating their practical use of TBLT techniques, thus improving students' communicative abilities.

2.Theoretical background and methodology

The language we use as ESP teachers and that is present in the books we use is described as too "difficult", "theoretical", "complex", "disembedded" and "decontextualized" [1]. This happens because subject teaching is supposed to introduce students with different topics connected with various fields such as economics, agriculture and environment, veterinary medicine, forestry etc which can have highly abstract aspects to them. The book "English for Veterinary Medicine" [2] for students of the first year in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine includes the following text:

Endoskeleton

Vertebrates have a more or less rigid group of structures composed of cartilage or bone and a

combination of these two connective tissues. The most primitive of these structures is the notochord, which is a backbone of the cartilage occurring in fishes. Animals higher in the evolutionary scale have an axial skeleton, consisting of the skull, spinal column, and ribs, and an appendicular skeleton, made up of the pelvic and pectoral girdles and the appendages.

In higher animals, the skeleton formed in the embryo, is initially cartilaginous; bone and calcium are deposited as the organism matures. In humans, the process of bone hardening, or ossification, is completed at about the age of 25. The last bone to ossify is the breastbone.

Example of academic language in an English language syllabus for first year students in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine.

The teacher or the syllabus developer complicates matters in subject teaching, too. It is true that the teachers are experts, who have become familiar with the abstract and specialist terms they use in ESP teaching, but they find it hard to understand the lack of knowledge and the different perspectives of their students. As a result, teachers seem to use language which is meaningful to teachers, but not to students [3]. This leads to confusion because the texts have high information density and a lot of metaphorical language, references are unclear, relationships are left implicit and specialized concepts are not explained. All these make the students' learning process very difficult.

A lot depends on the way the language is used in the classroom. It is usual for the teacher to monopolize the floor. Learners are considered as "vessels" to be filled by the expert. It depends on the teacher to decide when the students are ready to get that particular bit of information. It is he that decides the way to follow and the explicit mode in order to provide instruction on the topic at hand. The learner has to reproduce the information he has got, just to prove that he has absorbed the knowledge transmitted. The link with the reality is reduced to simple illustration. Learners that have a limited scope of knowledge of the world find it hard to relate the knowledge given by the teacher to the concrete phenomena. As often happens, learners wonder what the knowledge is used for and what problems it may help to resolve.

So, the learners are seriously demotivated. This may become harder when teachers are constrained by time to "complete" the curriculum. In their opinion, time is not enough to explain things thoroughly, to connect abstract notions with real life, to get to know better their learners' personal life, to support them while trying to find applications for the knowledge they have acquired and to provide support for those who have a hard time understanding the text. Some learners consider themselves as losers because most of the syllabuses follow the principle: every new lesson builds upon the knowledge that was relayed in the previous lessons. Some others begin to learn by heart. The closer the students' verbosity is similar to that of the teacher, the better the student tends to be evaluated.

This kind of ESP education puts great demands on learners. For certain groups of learners, these demands may simply be too high [4]: learners with a relatively low level of language proficiency in the medium of instruction, learners who are not acquainted with these kinds of explanations and instructions in their home environment, learners with a limited knowledge of the world, adult learners who already failed in compulsory education because they had difficulties coping with the transmission model.

To improve this situation so that students can profit from education, we need to refine the model, in order to have success in ESP teaching.

We have to be aware that in education around the world, ESP courses are taught by experts, who do two things at the same time: they teach English in specific contexts. They not only should be prepared linguistically, but also should have good knowledge of specific technical fields. The teaching of English is organized, both in preparation of, and alongside the technical training. The weak point is that there are high barriers between the technical and linguistic strands. Communication between teachers in different strands is limited and as a result, what is taught in language courses is not put into practice in the subject courses and vice versa.

To compensate for the gap between the learners' language proficiency and the linguistic demands posed by the ESP educational programme, various ways to approach this problem can be considered:

a. *Raising the learners' academic or technical language proficiency.* An ESP course would have the explicit goal of preparing learners for the language of the technical or scientific course.

b. *Raising the teacher's linguistic awareness.* Another strategy is to try and make teachers

more aware of their own language use and to train them to make their language more accessible to their learners.

These two approaches can be combined. One way is the re-writing of curricula and new task-based syllabuses based on a corpus study of academic language in higher education. These task-based syllabuses aim to familiarize the students with the technical language they will encounter in ESP courses preparing them for a job in the future. The tasks have a strong element of reality, that's why they are so important on the efficient use of subject language.

Experience shows that there is a vast gap between the abstract pedagogical principles and the reality in the ESP classes. Most of the teachers don't make use of tasks in their ESP courses, reducing the learning process in a routine where students are required to read and translate the text. On the other hand, task-based syllabus developers opt for realistic tasks, but this choice leads to other practical problems. For instance, in one of the activities the students of the Economic Faculty were required to comprehend written instructions on the computer in order to place an order online. However, there were no computers available, so the students had to work on paper. So, rather than putting the order online, they were asked to put paper copies of computer screen images in order.

This can be compensated for by stimulating students to carry out tasks in authentic situations or in the workplace that includes interaction with other students and teachers. Even in these cases, the absence of appropriate space and conditions is a constraint.

However, all these refinements do not change the overall structure. The transmission model adapted in ESP teaching is not abolished, it is only improved. The model is convenient for ESP teachers because it does not involve crucial changes in their teaching behaviour, curriculum development or evaluation practices. Time after time something is done, but still the language problem is attributed to the learner. The learner is seen as someone who doesn't have the right skill to follow a certain course, so this problem has to be cured by a language specialist before he is allowed to participate.

Will these refinements deal efficiently with the learning problems we have? Illich (1971:72), has stated that they will not, since powerful learning experiences typically do not occur within strictly confined environments [5]:

The same people, paradoxically, when pressed to specify how they acquired what they know and value, will readily admit that they learned it more often outside than inside school. Their knowledge of facts, their understanding of life and work came to them from friendship or love, while viewing TV, or while reading, from examples of peers or the challenge of a street encounter.

Illich's quote points to the need for a new conception of powerful learning environments in which learning is a matter of active construction, in which education is adapted to the needs of the individual learner and in which learning content is interdisciplinary.

Three years ago, we started using new task-based language syllabuses with the students of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture & Environment because we were not satisfied with the teacher-dominated methodology in ESP teaching [6]. This study has been carried out during the academic year 2012-2013. The methodology used in this study was that of task-based teaching and learning in ESP classroom environment. The data for this study were collected from a total of 60 students of the first year in the faculties of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture and Environment. All of the participants were chosen randomly from a pool of volunteers with different levels of proficiency ranging from pre-intermediate and intermediate to advanced learners. They were with the age range of 18-25. We developed some projects, consisted of a number of classroom activities that were linked together by a common theme (e.g. "A dog's heart operation", or "Glossary compilation for Agriculture and Environment"). Each of the projects focused on different subject matter content, different targets and experimented with new formats. One of the questions we dealt with was whether our students acquired enough scientific knowledge with these task-based methods. We were convinced of the profit in terms of skills, but had the impression that they didn't develop basic knowledge. So, at the end of the year, tests were developed, which reassured us about the relevance of the projects.

3.Results and discussion

In their attempts to complete the projects, the students got a vast array of skills and knowledge. However, these skills and knowledge may not be enough to finish the project. Task-based ESP teaching presents interesting problems that confront students with the limits of their skills and knowledge, and with

the insight that their theories cannot explain everything. Students' motivation to investigate, to take initiative and to find solutions remains the driving force during the whole activity.

Task-based education is based on the idea of "learning by experience". Learning is a fundamentally constructive process: what we learn, is what we mentally construct for ourselves [7] or together with others. The students will learn by looking for a solution themselves and working together while doing so. What they discover has greater impact on their minds than what they have been told. So, the projects give an answer to Kinsella's critique that content-based instruction is often too teacher-driven and fails to create independent learners [8].

In task-based ESP teaching, learners move from concrete experiences to abstract insights at a higher level. By assisting in an operation or compiling glossaries, students try their way towards a deeper understanding of scientific principles, which can be applied in many different situations. Throughout these activities they use language. So, rather than being an obstacle for learning, language becomes an important tool for exploration and learning.

The role of teacher changes in these approaches, too. They focus on the student's explorative process, support them and stimulate them towards solutions by helping them thinking aloud, asking questions and challenging their hypothesis. At the same time, the teacher helps them in giving particular linguistic forms to their thoughts.

The implementation of task-based ESP teaching has better chances of success if we all work together in that direction. In essence, it is a matter of communication. Language policy planning primarily aims to stimulate team members to construct a common and coherent view on how "the educational programme and practice can be adapted to the language learning needs of the students with a view to promoting their personal development and increasing their chances of success in school." [9].

4. Conclusions

The complexity of the language used by ESP teachers is ill-adapted to the level of proficiency of their students so, for them education fails to foster their personal development and success.

-Firstly, teachers, who have become familiar with the abstract and specialist terms they use in ESP teaching, find it hard to understand the lack of knowledge and the different perspectives of their students. This makes the students' learning process very difficult.

-Secondly, in ESP courses learners are considered as "containers" to be filled by the teacher, so they are seriously demotivated and consider themselves as losers. The link with reality is reduced to simple illustration.

-Thirdly, there is an immediate need for a new conception of powerful learning environments in which learning is a matter of active construction, in which education is adapted to the needs of the individual learner and in which learning content is interdisciplinary.

-Fourthly, our findings in the Agricultural University of Tirana are a good way to improve the present situation. The re-writing of curricula and new task-based syllabuses based on a corpus study of academic language can be of great help because they take the learning needs of the students as the starting point. The tasks have a strong element of reality that is why they are so important in the efficient use of subject language.

-Finally, ESP teachers are encouraged to adopt TBLT approach in their classrooms. In this regard, people in charge of the educational system in our country should do their best to promote it.

5. References

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