

The Role of Content-Based Texts to Motivate Students

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Abstract

In recent years a great number of books have appeared in various fields of ESP, and the number is increasing every year. These books are specially prepared and adapted for foreign students possessing varying degrees of language skills.

Experts believe that the production of ESP books is a vital task that requires several stages and procedures. To produce these materials, special attention should be paid to the age of the learners their English background, their level of knowledge in specialist field and the teaching method. The best should be done to provide materials which enable the learners to increase their English proficiency, learn the required skills for communication, and achieve their terminal behavior.

Since the majority of university graduates in Iran are not equipped with sufficient knowledge of English to read and understand the original specialized textbooks, this paper aimed to test the appropriateness of materials used in ESP classes, based on a study conducted at Chabahar Maritime University.

The finding of this research rejected the null hypothesis, because the observed t . was 2.83 and the value of critical t . with the 49 degrees of freedom at the .05 level was 2, and this signifies that the novel content

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based texts motivated the students and improved their English proficiency.

Key terms: ESP Materials, English Proficiency, Content-Based Texts

Introduction

A Comprehensive Definition of ESP

Stevens (cited in Gatehouse 2001) defines ESP as English language teaching which is:

- designed to meet specific needs of learners;
- related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, and analysis of this discourse;

In contrast with General English ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

- restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
- not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology (pp.1-2).

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) have offered a modified definition. They say:

- ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centered on the language, skills, discourse, and genres appropriate to these activities.

They further add:

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- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners (pp.4-5).

From the above absolute and variable characteristics of ESP, a change can be seen in how the range of ESP has been extended and become more flexible in its modified definition. As noted by Gatehouse (2001), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, pp.4-5) have removed the absolute characteristic that ‘ESP is in contrast with General English’ and added more variable characteristics. They assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline.

In addition, Anthony (cited in Gatehouse 2001) notes that it is not clear where ESP courses end and General English courses begin; numerous non-specialist ESL instructors use an ESP approach in which their syllabi are based on analyses of learners’ needs and their own personal, specialist knowledge of using English for real communication. Many ESP programs are examples of such curriculum development and course design.

In the development of an ESP curriculum for Greek EFL students of computing, Xenodohidis (2002) stated that “the goals should be realistic otherwise the students would be de-motivated.” The integration of a considerable amount of General English along with various functions with computing terminology into the syllabi was based on the needs assessment

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from students, and was consequently considered as being realistic by the learners.

In the ESP course for employees at the American University of Beirut, as described by Shaaban (2005), the curriculum development and course content also focus on a common core for the learners from various workplaces. This content includes basic social English communication, following directions and giving instructions plus work-related terms and expressions.

Gatehouse (2001) also integrates General English language content and acquisition skills when developing the curriculum for language preparation for employment in the health sciences.

From all the cases of ESP curriculum design described, it can be concluded that General English language content, grammatical functions and acquisition skills are dominant in curriculum development and course design, while terminology and specific functions of discipline content are integrated in the course to meet the learners' specific needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) liken ESP to the leaves and branches on a tree of language. Without tree trunks and roots, leaves or branches can't grow because they do not have the necessary underlying language support, seen through an analogy of water. The same is true of ESP since content-related specific language can't stand alone without General English syntax, lexis and functions.

This is also true for ESP students whose specific needs emanate from disciplinary content English. In such cases, they usually have a sound language background before they proceed to ESP study. Dudley-Evans and

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St. John (cited in Gatehouse 2001) define ESP as being generally designed for intermediate or advanced students and is likely to be suited to adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation.

Since ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and methodology are based on the learner's rationale for learning (Hutchinson and Waters 1987), the role of the ESP practitioner is essential to the success of ESP programs. Dudley-Evans and St. John (cited in Gatehouse 2001) identify five key roles for the ESP practitioner: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator.

The Origins of ESP

A great deal about the origins of ESP have already been written, but there are mainly three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an:

“... age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale. For various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United

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States in the post-war world, the role of *international language* fell to English” (p.6).

Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge became English.

The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p.7).

The third key reason cited as having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Whereas traditional linguists set out to describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics began to focus on the ways in which language is used in real communication. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out that one significant discovery was in the ways that spoken and written English vary.

In other words, given the particular context in which English is used, the variant of English will change. This idea was taken one step farther. If language in different situations varies, then tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is also possible. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identify Ewer and Latorre, Swales, Selinker and Trimble as a few of the prominent descriptive EST pioneers.

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The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do psychology. Rather than simply focus on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired.

Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs became equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge.

Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking. To this day, the catchword in ESL circles is learner-centered or learning-centered.

ESP Development

The development of ESP has been the concern of many scholars over the past few years. Specifically, the increasing development of science and technology has called for numerous research in the area of ESP.

It was previously believed that ESP was a “type of English” used for science and technology. This was an argument upon which the notion of register was based. But Widdowson (1978) argues that selection of certain lexical and syntactic features related to specialist topics can serve some of the language needs for which those selections are applied, but they do not take into account the other needs dealing with communicative function of language.

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However, to devise ESP programs, the following three generations are known in the field; *Lexicon analysis, Syntax analysis, and discourse analysis.*

The followers of the first generation believe that the only difference between GE and ESP is a group of related registers. They claim that to provide an ESP program, after conducting a statistical survey on certain samples, a frequency count of lexicon is done, then teaching materials are devised on the basis of frequency weight of the lexicon, but as Widdowson (1978) puts it:

“... a register analysis takes samples of actual discourse and breaks them down into constituent linguistic elements... it accounts for samples of language as instances of linguistic usage but not as instances of communicative use...” (p.38).

But the writers of the same subject may use a single item with different frequency level. In ESP whose concepts and contents change rapidly, word frequencies do not remain stable; they change within a certain period of time. Then another school of thought emerged.

The followers of this generation believe that lexical specification is not enough for ESP text development. They claim that the difference between GE and ESP is a set of structures. For example, they say, in scientific prose passivization, nominalization and opposition are almost the most frequent structures. They do frequency count of syntactic features of ESP texts, and believe that after the usage characteristic of ESP is learned, it is easy to put it to use in certain communicative activities.

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But still Widdowson (1978) believes that both analysis of lexicon and analysis of syntax are quantitative approaches and suggests that a qualitative approach could better fulfill the needs for communication in ESP.

Both kinds of analysis give a quantitative indication of the frequency of lexical items and structures. But, since they are isolated from the context, they can neither indicate how they function in relation to each other, nor can they indicate any variability in their communicative value.

The followers of the second generation concentrating on the forms of sentences, ignore the complexity of scientific prose. They tend to oversimplify the syntax of a language by limiting it to a set of manageable patterns, and do not consider that there are different ways of saying the same thing.

Therefore, to overcome the shortcomings of these theoretical approaches, an alternative approach, referred to as discourse analysis was advocated and received a great deal of attention. ESP in this sense is not considered as varieties of English text, but varieties of discourse namely discourse of science. That is why the followers of this discipline attempted to analyze the language through a hierarchy of rhetorical functions.

Trimble (1985) suggests that description, definition, classification, instruction and visual verbal relationships are hierarchical functions used in ESP, which is agreed upon by most of the followers of the new generation.

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ESP Materials

After designing any kind of syllabus, relevant materials are developed. It is obvious that there is a difference between an ESP text and a general ELT course book. It is argued that the closer and the more relevant the ESP materials are to the field of the learners, the more successful and motivated they will be. Morrow and Shocker (1987) claim:

“... in this case the focus is not on process or model in terms of student use of preidentified areas of language , but rather it is on the content of the text itself. The rationale for the choice of text has to do not with uses to which it can be put, but with the subject matter involved” (p. 249).

The notion of choosing new and interesting ESP texts presented by these two experts is a fundamental issue in the field, and there have been arguments for and against the point nowadays.

Some experts of the field believe that restricted specialist context which is too elementary and familiar, demotivates the learners. They further add within an understandable context which English is used to communicate familiar scientific matters, the interest of the learners is not attracted, because they are primarily interested in the context, not English which is the concern of ESP lecturers.

However the opposite side claims that the relevance of the content and the fact that learners focus on message and not on the language form, are a great help to attain the main goal, i.e. learning the language.

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In content-based teaching, language is a means of communication in meaningful, purposeful and academic contexts. A real situation is created in which language is used about what the learners want to know, not to talk about language itself. What the learners want to know more about is the subject matter. A further underlying principle is that content-based ESP provides both a motivational and cognitive basis for language learning. It provides a primary motivational ground for language learning insofar as it is interesting and of some value to the learner and therefore learning.

Content also provides a cognitive basis for language learning in that it provides real meaning. In the absence of real meaning language structures and functions are likely learned as abstractions lacking conceptual or communicative value.

These controversial arguments still exist, but to shed some light on the issue a study was conducted to test the appropriateness of materials in ESP classes. The research question was:

Do novel content-based texts motivate ESP learners more than simple and familiar texts?

Because of the arguments for and against the issue, a null hypothesis was selected for the experiment.

The study was to test the hypothesis concerning the effectiveness of content-based texts and texts of general interests on the students' English proficiency. Two groups of students from Chabahar Maritime University majoring deck engineering were randomly selected.

In control group, the textbook published by SAMT for general English was used; but, in experimental group ten novel reading passages related to

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the students' course of study with some communicative exercises were taught during the treatment. At the end of instruction period a standard general proficiency test was administered to both groups.

A case II t. test (independent) between the final scores of the experimental and control groups were used to measure the difference between their final performances. The result of this analysis showed a mean of 65.14 and standard deviation of 14.6 for experimental group; a mean of 57 and standard deviation of 2.83 for the control group. The observed t. was 2.83.

The findings of the research rejected the claimed null hypothesis, because the observed t. was 2.83 and the value of critical t.' with the 49 degrees of freedom at the .05 level was 2. This signified that the novel content-based texts motivated the students and improved their English proficiency significantly.

Implications

This study indicates that a very close cooperation of ESP and content lecturer is needed to find out the most up-to-dated materials in the content area, i.e. the content teacher is a source of information for ESP lecturer.

Another implication of the study concerns the relationship between learning and teaching. The content-based instruction implies the integration of a higher order thinking skills into the language classroom. Use of higher order thinking is desirable because it can stimulate learner's interest in the content area and therefore in language.

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Finally, a crucial implication of this study would be a change in the existing procedure of materials development. It is also worth mentioning that in order to present new content-based texts in ESP classes, after certain periods of instruction to keep novelty of materials, a modification of materials would be necessary. However, In the process of materials selection, reorganization and sequencing, three kinds of consideration were stressed (Chen 2005):

- 1) the selection of materials with properly difficult language input in terms of vocabularies and structures taking into consideration of their level transition from simplicity to difficulty;
- 2) attention to subject content input in the tailor-made materials, usually from general topics to subject-specific topics;
- 3) the adaptation of adequate and appropriate activities in the selected materials, namely, the activities in each unit have to be coherently matched to avoid discretion and isolation in materials adaptation and to make the adapted textbooks complete.

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