

## THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ESP IN THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCES

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines in depth the current situation of teaching and learning ESP in the department of political sciences in the University Centre of Tissemsilt, Algeria. It does this by reporting on three methods of data collection so as to investigate the suitability of the designed curriculum in meeting students' needs in this specialty, to analyse the teacher's methods of teaching ESP and whether they are effective in boosting active learning. Then it uncovers the students' learning deficiencies. Results suggested that curriculum designers need to clarify some components on how to conduct some practices. It also points at the importance of reconsidering some teaching practices in relation to the main principle of ESP, which is needs analysis. Eventually, it suggests some recommendations to conduct ESP teaching and make it a beneficial learning opportunity.*

**Key words:** *ESP, Political Sciences, Teaching, Skills.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a shared consensus among Algerian university teachers about the fact that the English language is of a paramount importance as it has stood as a valuable tool for students to learn about their subject matter since the majority of the adopted academic references are originally written in English when it comes to the specialty of political sciences. Besides, English represents a decisive factor for the students' success, particularly if they aspire to pursue a brilliant academic career in higher education. Hence, English has been granted the priority over French, which is widely taught in many university departments across the country, to be the means of instruction. However, a close investigation revealed that teaching English for Specific Purposes in newly established divisions as the department of political sciences has faced fundamental issues, which are mainly related to the design of the curriculum and its objectives, the methods of teaching and the assigned roles to both teachers and students.

### 2. THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aim of this inquiry was to investigate the current teaching as well as the learning situation of ESP in a context where English is uniquely used in academic settings due to the domination of French as the first foreign language in Algeria. In addition, it sought to

examine whether the curriculum was professionally designed to promote the effective teaching and learning of ESP. Eventually, it was interested in identifying the extent to which the adopted methods of teaching correspond with the principles of teaching ESP and suggest some practical recommendations for an effective teaching of ESP in the department of political sciences.

### 3. THE PARTICIPANTS

This study encompassed the active participation of two populations. The first targeted population was an ESP teacher, who took part in this study by allowing the researcher to interview him. He has a M.A in translation and he has taught ESP in the department of economics and business. The second involved population was a group of 30 first-year License-Master-Doctorate political sciences students. Their ages range between 18 and 36 years old. They have been studying English for seven years (four years at middle school and three years at secondary school). Finally, they are a mixed-ability group.

### 4. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

So as to get reliable data about the current learning and teaching situations of English for Specific Purposes in the department of political sciences and to examine the existing issues from different perspectives, the researcher relies on triangulation. Altrichter *et al* (2005: 115) assume that it is very significant for any research question to rely on the triangulation method in the procedure of data collection. Triangulation consists of combining various methods of research whereby data is collected from three perspectives. Besides, the usefulness of triangulation lies in identifying the contradictions that may occur in the studied situation so that it allows the researcher to make profound interpretations and analysis. Finally, by triangulating the research methods, all the involved participants in the study have equal status though they have different ranks. For instance, the researcher can count on the teacher's point of view as well as that of the students' because they can also contribute to the understanding and the explanation of a situation. Therefore, in this particular context, the researcher adopts three data collection methods namely: the analysis of the curriculum of teaching ESP in the department of political sciences, an interview with an ESP teacher and a focus group with students.

#### 4.1. The analysis of the curriculum

The curriculum is composed of the themes and the topics of four semesters. However, only the curriculum of the first semester is going to be analysed in this section. The designed curriculum comprises five sections. The module is entitled: English 01 and it is a complementary unit (Unité d'Enseignement Transversale), which means that this module has to be taught in a foreign language other than Arabic or by teachers, whose specialty is computing to equip the students with the appropriate computing skills like using Microsoft programmes in their studies, and knowing how to create their own emails and blogs. The major aim of teaching this unit is that by the end of the semester, the students would be able to acquire knowledge about the culture of the target language or the methodological techniques in that discipline (Blida, 2012). The first section of the

program of teaching ESP to political sciences students identifies the objectives of teaching this unit, which are: First, enabling the students to improve their English due to the fact that this language represents an indispensable role in studying this discipline. In addition, it aims at helping the students acquire political terms. Finally, it emphasizes the significance of equipping the students with the skills and the competencies that would assist them in studying and analysing English-written political texts. The second section informs teachers about the students' required prior knowledge in the following fields (philosophy, economy, contemporary history and a range of administrative and legal concepts) in order to provide them with a clear understanding of political events and issues, and lead them to interpret them successfully. The third section briefly mentions the modes of assessment that are: summative assessment and formative assessment. The fourth section is about the references that the teachers can rely on as teaching materials. They include books, brochures and internet web sites. The final section refers to the topics that the teachers should deal with and prepare the suitable material for. They include the following themes (introduction to political concepts, political systems, approaches of studying politics, and the fields of political sciences such as international relations, international organizations, public administration and public policy).

The objectives of the curriculum highlight the endeavours to equip the students with the appropriate knowledge about politics, to reinforce their linguistic competence and the skills that will enable them to learn effectively. However, there are some sections which need further clarifications and substitutions so that the teachers in charge can make use of the curriculum content in a way that serves the teaching and the learning situations well.

To begin with, the curriculum designer assumed that students have already acquired a prior knowledge in the early-mentioned areas. However, this fact can be relatively true if one takes into account that the majority of the students studied philosophy and contemporary history for one year at least. And even if the students have a prior knowledge in these domains, it must be acquired in the medium of Arabic and not in the target language. Besides, in the Algerian teaching-learning contexts, the students still hold the misconception that teachers are in charge of everything and they are merely passive recipients of knowledge. Moreover, the modes of assessment need a clear explanation on how to conduct them successfully, in particular, when it comes to formative assessment (assessment for learning). According to Brookhart (2008:01), formative assessment is based on a set of skills, which include the fact of setting clear learning targets, designing well-crafted lessons and inside and outside classroom activities, and connecting all these skills with a primary skill that is giving effective feedback.

Secondly, the inclusion of guidelines about the role of formative assessment to teaching and learning is significant because it is not widely considered as an imperative factor in the language classroom and many teachers are not competent in administering it due to the fact that it is a demanding form of assessment on one hand and the number of students per class exceeds thirty students on the other hand, which makes it challenging to address every single student's weaknesses and needs. Furthermore, the teachers are not given account of the percentage of each mode of assessment. Finally, the curriculum does not include any suggested references that would provide the teachers with the adequate knowledge about politics due to the fact that the teachers of ESP are not specialized in the domain of political sciences, but rather in teaching English or other specialities like literature, linguistics and civilisation.

#### **4.2. The Interview**

The researcher relied on using the interview method because it is appropriate when the involved population is small and accessible, and the questions are open-ended (Gillham, 2000:62). The questions revolved around the teacher's method of teaching ESP and how he assessed his students' performances and semesterial exam.

The teacher reported that teaching ESP is devoted one hour and a half a week and that the students had to assume responsibility of their own learning during the session. He claimed that he provided them with a list of political terms and concepts such as the Social Contract Theory, power and authority, political regimes, and asked them to work in groups in which they prepare a written version of the presentation, which includes a glossary of some political terms with their definitions in English, Arabic and French. Moreover, each student in the group was required to translate a passage from the presentation to Arabic. At last, each group of students had to design a power point presentation, which they would rely on when they present their work. During the presentation phase, the teacher would intervene to clarify any misunderstanding or to add any important pieces of information while the rest of the class would be taking notes and discussing the ideas being tackled by their peers. Each student's work would be evaluated and given a mark from the total of 08 points. In their exams they were required to give the definitions of some studied political terms. Furthermore, they were provided with two questions in choice and they had to write an essay, and they had a text for translation. Their exams were evaluated on a scale of 12 points. So the average of the module is based on having two marks.

Though the idea of enabling the students to assume responsibility of their own learning is a valid goal, there had to be a basis for reaching this goal. The main principle of helping students be independent learners is the ability of the teacher to monitor their performances and class work so that he can have clear account of their strengths and can work out some remedial tasks to encourage them to overcome their learning weaknesses and deficiencies. Besides, the aim of teaching ESP is not only to demonstrate the students' ability to make presentations, which is the ultimate product, but the students also needed a sort of guidance on the importance of going through a learning process to get the task accomplished. And within this process of learning, the students would learn a set of given strategies and techniques that they would rely on later on to do other tasks on their own. Finally, the teacher overlooked the main pillars of ESP which are related to the uniqueness of any taught discipline, which is in this situation the domain of politics and to another dimension which is the students' needs and how he could identify them and help his students fulfil them.

#### **4.3. Focus group**

The researcher adopted the focus group method because in educational settings any researcher needs to look at a matter of common interest from all the available sources and perspectives. The second reason for selecting this method was the factors of time and the availability of the target group as the students were available only for one hour and a half a week. Finally, it aimed at uncovering the hindering factors for the students' attainment and learning of ESP. They agreed to take part in this research, but on one condition which was the use of Arabic as a medium of asking them and responding to the researcher's questions because of their deficiency in expressing their ideas and opinions in English.

For the sake of giving the chance to the element of discovery and more space to the target population to broaden the scope of discussing the research issue in depth, the asked questions were not highly structured (Kleiber, 2004: 91). The main questions were whether these students were learning ESP effectively and if they were developing any skills that would help them in their study.

The students admitted that the main assigned task in this module was to make presentations. However, they had never been provided with any useful guidelines on how to conduct their research and make their initial outlines. In addition, they reported that the teacher in charge had never trained them on the main writing skills that could have assisted them in making academically well-written drafts like (searching for the relevant body of knowledge that is related to their subject matter, paraphrasing, quoting, acknowledging references and sources). Moreover, they argued that presenting their work orally constituted a challenge for them as the majority were not able to demonstrate their ability to explain what concepts they worked on and what processes they needed to follow so as to accomplish this task. Furthermore, the interviewed students pointed at a significant issue which was writing political essays during their exams. They said that though they have been taught how to write essays in their final year of secondary education in different topics, they have not been taught how to tackle a political question or task in the form of a well-written essay that takes into account the academic standards of writing.

It is highly pronounced that the students still regard the teacher as the only responsible for their advancement in learning and acquiring new skills and assets. However, they could seek knowledge for themselves as there are some encouraging factors in their specialty and university:

- Though they admitted that they lacked the necessary skills that could help them design and accomplish their research tasks, they could propose this learning deficiency to the teacher in charge of their 'tutorat'. Every teacher in the department of political sciences is responsible for having four hours a month with ten students in which he/ she would discuss with them any encountered problems in their process of studying any module. Thus, they could tackle the problem of not being guided on how to conduct their task.
- The students had a module entitled 'Methodology of Research'. In this module, the students were presented with an introduction to the major aspects of academic research. Then they studied the approaches and the methods that they would rely on to do their research. In addition, they were trained on research skills. Though the language of instruction was Arabic, they could have asked for guidance as the teachers received bilingual education (Arabic/ French or English) during their master and doctoral studies.
- Knowledge today, is easily accessed thanks to the technological advance and the infinite sources like electronic books, which are specialized in miscellaneous disciplines and methodological procedures, journals and conferences. More than that, if the students were willing to make further efforts, they could reach the author of any published work on one click only.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

After analysing the collected data from the three data collection methods, the researcher comes to suggest some recommendations that ESP practitioners in the Algerian context should take into account in order to teach this unit effectively.

### 5.1. An awareness of the need

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1991: 53), the aspect of ‘an awareness of the need’ is unique to ESP. That means that when a teacher regards his students’ needs at the heart of his teaching, he will direct his endeavours to seek the appropriate methods that can help him analyse and understand these needs. In this context, the following questions would be relevant:

- What are the needs of the political sciences students in the area of studying ESP?
- How can the teacher help them fulfil these needs?
- What roles do the students take to contribute to their learning of ESP?

The first area of interest encompasses two dimensions. The first one is to articulate the students’ needs. In this respect, the teacher needs to be well-aware of the basic practices of ESP, especially, needs analysis and has to be able to demonstrate his ability to conduct it professionally. The second one is the nature of the tasks and the activities that would normally take place to ensure effective learning of ESP and meet the objectives of the curriculum.

Basturkmen (2010: 19) identifies the aspects that needs analysis should address:

- The analysis of the situation in which the target group will be using English for. For instance, as far as the students of politics are concerned, they may need English to write speeches for political leaders.
- Identifying the learners’ prior knowledge and abilities and whether they can meet the requirements of the target situation.
- Identifying learners’ motivational state, their learning styles and what perception they hold about their needs in this area of learning.
- Studying the characteristics of the teaching environment and what the ESP course and the teacher have to equip the students with at the level of knowledge, skills and any other levels which the learners can get benefits from.

### 5.2. Fulfilling students’ needs and wants

The ability of any ESP teacher to prepare lessons which engage the student in learning and getting benefits from their course depends a great deal on the quality of the designed needs analysis questionnaires or interviews and the information it yielded.

According to Day and Krzanowski (2011, 19), an ESP lesson plan can include the same elements as any other lesson designed for a General English class. In this respect, the teacher needs to have clear indicators about the following components: the characteristics of the ESP students group, the specific aims of the designed tasks and activities, any expected learning difficulties and the materials that the teacher would rely on in order to get the appropriate content for his learners’ specialty.

In this context, the students ought to be trained in the skills, which they would need in their future career. For instance, they would be required to write political speeches and

reports. Therefore, the teacher in charge should design lessons which help the students realize their learning goals like developing their writing skills during the different phases of writing and analysing the subject of the political speeches that they would generate, brainstorming the relevant ideas, organizing them into an outline, selecting appropriate terms for the political context and the audience to whom the speech would be addressed. In addition, the teacher should have a discussion with his students in which he can tackle his role as well his students' in the process of equipping them with knowledge and training them to be able to perform a set of skills that they would rely on in their future careers. In this respect, the teacher can provide them with the curriculum as well as some related biography on the content and the practical side of learning English, which they can consult and enrich their knowledge on one hand. On the other hand, the students cannot learn and practise every aspect of ESP in one hour and a half. Therefore, it would be very beneficial if the teacher assigns his students with tasks that they can do outside classroom and which require them to use the references that their teacher provided them with. Once the tasks are accomplished by the students, the teacher needs to correct their work and give them feedback on their performances so that the learners can take further responsibilities and steps to improve their learning in the ESP area. Besides, the teacher is given indicators about the effectiveness of his lesson plans and teaching methods.

### 5.3. Including ESP in teaching EFL departments

One way to improve practising ESP in the Algerian context is by including an ESP module for the teachers who are enrolling in master and doctoral studies. By doing so, they would be exposed to the chief principles of ESP, the approaches of teaching it and how they design and conduct central practices like needs analysis and how they can use the appropriate materials to prepare well-crafted lessons and tasks, which make learners capable of fulfilling their wants and need, and acquire the suitable knowledge and skills so that they can be ready for their professional careers.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Though English is gaining more attention and importance in the Algerian teaching and learning disciplines at university, ESP, in particular, still has a long journey to be well-established and well-implemented in different specialties.

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