Critical Appraisal of ELT in ESP/EAP Programs

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Abstract: This study makes an attempt to introductorily differentiate between theory and practice in ESP/EAP and General English courses and illuminates some less-paid-attention-to facts connected to it. Later the difference between these courses is posed in terms of needs analysis and the concept of learner-centeredness in these programs. The connection between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and ESP/EAP courses is also discussed in length. The study then tries to see rather deeply into the perspectives of some prominent as well as other Iranian researchers about the history and the existing status of ESP/EAP programs in Iran both before and after the Islamic Revolution. A brief reference to the evaluation of these programs as well the as the materials used in these courses is also made. In the end, the study appraises the shortcomings of these programs and then suggestions are made so as to ameliorate the condition.

Index terms: communicative language teaching, ESP/EAP, general English, needs analysis, theory and practice

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the things which is critical and thus have to be taken into consideration in the realm of teaching ESP/EAP is the link between theory and ESP teaching and research. To differentiate first between General English and ESP, as Basturkmen (2006) asserts, it is appropriate to mention that "whereas General English language teaching tends to set out from point A toward an often pretty indeterminate destination, setting sail through uncharted waters, ESP aims to speed learners through to a known destination" (p.9). This emphasis in ESP of going from A to B has made the field to be viewed as an 'essentially practical effort'. Although within the realm of ESP including EAP (English for Academic purposes), EPP (English for professional purposes, and EVP (English for vocational purposes), there are still arguments about the exact destination, this field, like any other teaching mode, is based on the ideas about the nature of language, learning, and teaching. The three key elements of the approach to the examination of these ideas are “a) data-driven nature of the enquiry; b) the reference to a Social theory-Structuration theory, which, it is argued, offers a useful perspective of ESP; and c) the framework by which ideas in ESP are examined and the work organized” (Basturkmen, 2006, p.9). Widdowson (2003) however, asserts that “all language use is specific in a sense” (p.61). He refers to the use of language as indexical to refer to
aspects of knowledge which are assumed to be shared among the speakers and their listeners. Dudley-Evans (1997) prefers to call ESP “an attitude of mind” and provides an extended definition of ESP in terms of absolute and variable properties.

I. Absolute properties:
1. It meets specific needs of the learners.
2. It makes use of the underlying methodology and pertinent activities.
3. It centers on the language appropriate to these activities.

II. Variable properties:
1. It may be designed for specific disciplines.
2. It may use a different methodology from that of General English.
3. It is likely to be designed for secondary and tertiary levels as well as professional work situations.
4. It is generally designed for intermediate/advanced levels.
5. Most ESP courses assume some fundamental knowledge of the language systems.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Farhady (2005) in an article entitled Reflections on and Directions for ESP Materials Development in SAMT declares his dissatisfaction with the fact that for ESP we do not find any theory in literature. He views ESP to be more under the control of practitioners than theoreticians. Farhady (2005) adds that “although some scholars such as Strevens (1979, 1980, 1988), Widdowson (1977, 1983, 1999), Trimble (1985), Robinson (1980), and Hutchison and Waters (1987), to name a few, all have widely written on the topic of ESP, but none has delineated any theoretical framework for the important concept of ESP” (p.7). The following are some other Farhady’s viewpoints on ESP:

He believes that even though not having articulated and documented theoretical principles, ESP has met some theoretical fundamentals that cannot be overlooked. In agreement with the perspectives of some prominent scholars in the field, Farhady (2005) asserts that the field has enjoyed “adapting to and adopting almost all developments in GPE and has established itself as an autonomous field” (p.8). He refers to the early 1960s that Mackey and Mountford claimed the foundation of teaching ESP to be in line with the learners’ needs (see also Chastain, 1988) and adds that this does not mean that GPE instruction was not needs-oriented, but that the instruction was not just directed towards the needs of the learners.

Another factor which had a critical impact on the emergence of ESP was the fever of communicative teaching which had crept into the whole figure of teaching methodology.(Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Johns & Price-Machado, 2001). Nearly all researchers of the time had concurred that the purpose of learning a language is to be able to communicate with the speakers of the community in which the language is spoken. Therefore another theoretical principle of ESP was indirectly formed claiming that language should be taught and used for communicative purposes, along which a revolution took place in material development to accommodate the principles of communicative teaching (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Furthermore, in the 1980s, the learner-centered approach to teaching became the fashion of the day which later received due attention in the ESP field. Learner-centeredness entailed taking into consideration the variables critical in learning such as affective, cognitive, biological and social factors which can be assumed to be important in the process of language learning. Thus including learner characteristics became another fundamental principle in the theoretical design of ESP programs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). According to Farhady (2005), “these principles are not different from those of teaching GPE. Thus theoretically we might not notice much of the difference between ESP and GPE” (p.10).
3. THE IRANIAN SITUATION

As Yarmohammadi (2005) claims, language teaching in Iran does not follow any specific purpose, i.e., “it can be characterized as language for no specific purposes” (p.4). He goes on to observe that what the Iranian situation is lacking is the verification and operationalization of the objectives of language teaching and learning. Yarmohammadi (2005) points that he has witnessed a great deal of English teaching and learning in Iran during the 60s and 70s partly cooperating with some English and American Institutions. One is Iran-America society the establishment of which dates back to the 1950 in Iran, and the other one named British Council which both have been “active at their full capacity in terms of offering General English classes, conducting teacher training summer courses and workshops, and providing consultations to the ministry of Education and the universities among other things” (p.7). He also observes that the following major Iranian universities set up scientific and cultural relations with some institutions in the United States and England:

a) Shiraz University with Pennsylvania University
b) Ferdowsis University with Georgetown University
c) Isfahan Technical University with the University of Illinois
d) Tehran Teacher Training college with Brigham Young University
e) Tabriz University with the British Council

However, Yarmohammadi (2005) also refers to the shortcomings of these courses in terms of lacking any comprehensive evaluation of their activities and claims that if the aim of EAP can be assumed loosely as meeting the needs of the learners, Shiraz University has been undoubtedly “the only university in Iran which has succeeded in establishing a full-fledged EAP program” (p.8). Also as Strain (1971, as cited in Yarmohammadi, 2005, p.8) holds that with regard to the Shiraz English program, the goal of having a student body that is proficient in English as well as Persian remains a key objective of the university: in fact it has become a goal of other Iranian universities as well. The textbooks used at Shiraz, and in some other Iranian universities, are generally the same as those regularly used in American universities; the main exception is Persian literature, History and Culture. The assistance provided by the University of Pennsylvania in the field has consisted of visiting applied linguists for 1965-1968 and the active recruitment of Direct Hire English teachers since 1967.

However, one very important aspect of EAP classes of that time in Shiraz compared with the situation in other settings in Iran was that, as Yarmohammadi (2005) also confirms, in Shiraz, the English Department had, as one of its responsibility, “to be in close contact with other departments to verify and evaluate the needs of students and the program was competency-based (rather than time-based) as through a number of placement tests” (p.8). This was really needed for the university students to take their ESP courses more seriously and not assume it as barren as others might think.

As for needs-analysis, asserted by Farhady (2005), the purpose of which is to collect valid and reliable data around the learners for optimization of instructional program, data needed must not be restricted to the learners: different sources, consisting of the learners, the teachers, and the experts in the field and work-place are needed to be debriefed and asked for cooperation. After some time, by reexamining the developments and advancements in GPE teaching methods and identifying that none of the methods have operated satisfactorily to meet the learners’ demands, scholars sought to think factors other than methodology, and finally came to the importance of examining materials as well. In Farhady’s terms,” by considering the potential role of materials in language instruction, there was a shift of focus from research on methodology to research on materials” (p.14). As Hutchinson and Waters (1997, as cited in Askari-Arani, 2005) have stipulated, from its
early beginnings in the 1960s, ESP has undergone a number of modifications including register analysis, rhetorical or genre analysis, needs analysis as well as skills and strategies.

Yarmohammadi (2005) asserts that:

Register-analysis-based type of material was produced in Isfahan Technical University… by individuals such as John Hitchcock, and in Tehran University language center headed by the late Dr. Mehri Ahi. The Tehran project directed by Ron Cowan and Katherine Aston was very extensive. They developed sophisticated computerized programs to detect vocabulary and sentence types associated with academic registers based on which, as far as I know, five pilot editions were published: two for medical students, two for students of science and technology, and one for students of business… I think these texts were far more superior in quality than many other texts produced later in Iran. (p. 12)

Yarmohammadi (2005) then refers to two major semi-international conferences on ESP sponsored by the British Council and the Association of Professors of English held in Isfahan and Mashhad. The proceedings of the first were published but nothing has remained from the Mashhad conference. With the background that Yarmohammadi (2005) had in CA he did not feel that the rhetorical processes and the discourse structures and functions needed for ESP which had been stipulated by some researchers and had been introduced in the texts were appropriate for Iranian students without taking into account a contrastive analysis between English and Persian which were not available at that time. He adds that after the Islamic revolution all these activities stopped and American and British teachers left the country. Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution started its operation in the 1980… In the early 1981, Textbook Compilation Committee, which later changed to Markaz Nashr Danesgahi, was convened,… and in 1985 the responsibility of materials production fell on SAMT which up to 2005 had published 110 volumes of so-called subtechnical and technical textbooks in different areas of specialization.

4. SHORTCOMINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Maftoon (2002 as cited in Yarmohammadi, 2005) referring to the carryover reading skill problem of the L2 learners maintains that “Iranian students of English take a longer time to read a passage and comprehend less because they have never been taught to read rapidly in their own language” (p.12). Sadeghi (2005) refers to the acute shortage of time and the impossibility of covering all the contents of ESP textbooks in Iranian educational system as well as reluctance of some teachers to engage in the world of ESP and to take responsibility in the field. By pointing to the role of listening skill, Farhady (2005) believes that reading comprehension ability is not to be assumed as the only skill our students need to improve. He says, “some people argue that our students might not have ample opportunities with the people of the target community in a face-to-face manner. How much truth is in the statement is not clear. Our students are exposed to so many audiovisual pieces of information that may lead to rethinking of giving reading the top priority” (p.27). This idea is also put forth by Mahdavi-Zafarghandi (2005) who points to a high degree of transferability of the two skills of listening and reading thereby suggesting the inclusion of educational films in ESP courses to pave the way for the improvement of reading comprehension as well.

According to Zohrabi (2005) many Iranian students with so many years of studying English, still they have problem to read and understand their specialized texts without recourse to translation. He believes that if our students are to be equipped well with what they need in GPE courses, the problem will mostly be resolved in the realm of ESP as well. However, according to Mahbudi (2005), some scholars such as Corbluth (1972), and Spack (1998) maintain that general English courses can lead to the same results as ESP ones. In Mahbudi’s (2005) study, the learners of the two groups, -GPE and ESP-, came to the same results with no significant difference when reading and comprehending authentic texts. Zohrabi
(2005) points to the problem of time limitation with the Iranian ESP courses as well. As McDonough (1984, as cited in Zohrabi, 2005) also approves “ESP programs are typically imbued with a sense of urgency, stemming from the time constraint frequently imposed by learners and their sponsors” (p.47) (see also Hasrati, 2005; Khani & Tahiririan, 2005; Nejati, 2005; Shokouhi, 2005). Another problem that Yarmohammadi (2005) addresses is that the content of some technical texts are so simplistic that students are usually better acquainted with the contents than even the teachers! Moreover, translation of a good number of these texts has brought about another problem to the profession that needs quick cessation. To make the problem even worse, ESP courses in Iran, including Shiraz University, are mostly instructed by the respective colleges and departments rather than language departments. This problem has also conspicuously been projected in Yazd and likely in many other Iranian universities.

Moreover, Yarmohammadi is of the conviction that in EAP courses, vocabulary should be controlled up to the level of sub-technical. The concept of genre appreciation has, moreover, been addressed in many studies germane to ESP courses as the perspective is that by learning the discursive practices of their discipline as a requisite to develop genre, learners would acquire a deeper knowledge of their cultural values as well (Hyland, 2005; Kuteeva & Negretti, 2016; Tardy, 2009). And finally, Banan-Sadeghian (2005) confirms that ESP is highly in need of laxatives of liquid types. Its methodology and materials cause constipation. Its teachers and learners suffer from indigestion. The cause of all of this is highly-condensed and all-protein doses of linguistic orientation and terminology priority. The “cure I believe, lies in a highly lenient, communicative anthropological treatment. The change of name from ESP to developing bilingual professionals, I suggest, can encapsulate all this effectively” (pp. 10-11).

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