

## **ESP Teaching: A Matter of Controversy**

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## **Abstract**

Teaching English for Specific Purposes was and is a controversial issue among EFL teachers and others. Whether the EFL teacher or the specialist in the field should teach ESP courses is the matter of controversy. In the current research, an experiment is conducted to find out who is better qualified for the job: the EFL teacher or the specialist in the field? Forty out of sixty second-year medical students studying at an Iranian medical sciences university were randomly selected. Then, they were divided into two equal classes of twenty members each. Later, the classes were assigned to two teachers: a TEFL teacher and a GP. Everything being equal, including the textbook, the course started. The two classes were taught for an entire semester. At the end of the course, two types of measures were used: an achievement test and a five-point Likert Scale. Analysis of the results showed that the EFL teacher's class scored higher in every aspect of the final achievement test, and that they expressed greater satisfaction with his class than the competing class on the Likert Scale.

**Key Words:** ESP; EFL; EFL teacher; ESP teacher; General English; Specialized English; Specialist in the Field

## **ESP Teaching: A Matter of Controversy**

### **1. Introduction**

There has been much discussion among ESP specialists and teachers as to who should teach business or scientific English: EFL/ESL teachers or specialists in the field? Some people claim that EFL teachers do not possess the necessary grip of the subject matter, and therefore he/she may not be able to exchange ideas which contribute to bringing about the intended learning outcomes. However, what defines the intended learning outcome raises a number of questions which should be directly addressed. Moreover, there are those who claim that ESP teaching is part and parcel of an English language teacher's career and that it is therefore their responsibility to design or teach such courses. While it is true that "The emphasis in the definition of ESP has been on how ESP teaching develops procedures appropriate for learners whose main purpose is learning English for a purpose other than just learning the language system" (Davoodifard and Eslami Rasekh, 2005), the meaning of the word "specific" that goes with the term English for Specific Purposes does not mean "specialized", and the aim of teaching ESP is not to teach special terminology or jargon in a specific field of study (Maleki, 2005).

The aim of this study is to show who has the right to teach ESP courses, which is a controversial subject. As the paper unfolds, we will discover that the goal of English for Specific Purposes is not primarily the teaching of a subject in English as a foreign language, but rather that the aim is to teach English with a specific content which is normally mixed with general topics. To reach that goal, we should pave the way for EFL teachers to undertake the task, because they are those who are solely qualified for the job.

## 1.1. ESP Background

In the past forty years or so, for ESP to attain its current status, five concepts have evolved, the earliest of which was that of authenticity. Authenticity was the main idea behind ESP exercise typology (Coffey, 1984), and is a skills-based approach to materials development and design in ESP courses. Materials developers took the skills priorities of students into account to create appropriate ESP teaching materials. Reading was specifically of prime importance (e. g. Broughton, 1965; Thornley, 1964 and 1972). At this stage, there was no differentiation between reading materials. At the next stage, however, texts were made more specific to meet the needs of learners, and tasks were designed to practically match the content of the texts with the target situation.

The second conception was that of research: the register analysis approach. It developed out of the need for a research base for ESP. Several early ESP materials designers analyzed large corpora of specialized texts to establish the statistical contours of different registers. Ewer and Latorre (1967) put it the following way:

"In order to get a working idea of what this basic language consisted of, a frequency analysis of the English actually used by scientific writers was required .... In subject, it covered ten main areas of science and a large number of individual disciplines from anatomy to volcanology."

The reaction against register analysis in the early 1970s brought about the concept of text: the discourse analysis. It focused on the communicative values of discourse rather than the lexical and grammatical properties of register. Allen and Widdowson (1974) set out the approach as follows:

"One might usefully distinguish two kinds of ability which an English course at this level should aim at developing. The first is

the ability to recognize how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication, the ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use. The second is the ability to recognize and manipulate the formal devices which are used to combine sentences to create continuous passage of prose. We might say that the first has to do with rhetorical coherence of discourse, the second with the grammatical cohesion of text."

Therefore, the discourse analysis approach focused on the way sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication and developed materials based on functions. Such functions included definitions, generalizations, inductive statements, deductive statements, descriptions of processes, descriptions of sequences of events, and descriptions of devices.

The discourse analysis approach soon came under attack for being too fragmentary to combine these functions to make longer texts:

"We are given little idea of how these functions combine to make longer texts." (Robinson, 1981)

The concept of text - the genre analysis approach - came to make up for this shortcoming. This approach considers text as a total entity, rather than a collection of unrelated units.

Dudley-Evans (1987) conveys the idea in the following way:

"If we are to teach the writing of certain very specific texts such as ... the business or technical report, we need a system analysis that shows how each type of text differs from other types."

This, as Johnson (1993) says, can be achieved by seeking to identify the overall pattern of text through a series of phases or moves.

Due to the limitations of genre analysis, its research was hardly applied to pedagogy. In the mid-1970s, materials developers came to see learners' purposes rather than specialist language as the driving force behind ESP. The conception of need - the target situation needs an analytical approach - was to lead the way. Mumby's model of needs analysis (1978) clearly established the place of needs as central to ESP. In order to establish needs, the target situation for which learners were being prepared has to be defined. Chambers (1980) defines the latter as follows:

"By the language I mean the language of the target situation.

Thus, needs analysis should be concerned with the establishment of communicative needs and their realizations, resulting from an analysis of the communication in the target situation- what I will refer to from now on as target situation analysis (TSA)."

The conception of pedagogic needs analysis came to complement target-situation needs analysis. This includes three types of analysis: deficiency analysis give us information about what target-situation needs learners lack or feel they lack (Allwright, 1982); strategy analysis seeks to establish learners' preferred learning styles and strategies (Allwright, 1982); means analysis investigates the educational environment in which the ESP course is to take place (Swales, 1989).

Finally, the attention to strategy analysis gave rise to a new generation of ESP materials based on the conception of learning, that is, learning-centered approaches:

"Our concern in ESP is not with language use-although this will help to define the course objectives. Our concern is with language learning. We cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying what people do with language will enable someone to learn it .... A truly valid approach to ESP must

be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning." (Hutchinson and Waters, 1982)

## **1.2. Review of Literature**

Although there are comments on practice, materials design, development, and teaching of EAP/ESP courses, research into as who should teach such courses is scanty. Hamp-Lyons (2001) thinks that EAP is not only a teaching approach, but is also a branch of applied linguistics which consists of a great deal of research into effective teaching and testing methods, analysis of the academic language needs of students, analysis of the linguistic and discursal structures of academic texts, and analysis of the textual practices of academics. She believes, "EAP is an educational approach and a set of beliefs about TESOL that is unlike that taken in general English courses and textbooks." Dudley-Evans (2001) asserts that for ESP the key defining feature is its teaching and materials development on the basis of the results of needs analysis. Regarding teaching methodology, Dudley-Evans (2001) thinks, "The use of a distinctive methodology is ... a variable characteristic of ESP." Dudley-Evans (2001) continues to say that in certain situations, such as pre-study or pre-work courses in which learners have not yet begun their academic or professional work and have poor subject knowledge, methods of teaching ESP courses will be similar to those of general English. On ESP practice, Dudley-Evans (2001) argues that ESP is a materials-led field, and that most materials are prepared by individual teachers for particular situations. This is, of course, no simple job. According to McDonough and Shaw (1993), materials development is very complex, though rich: "... a merging of two broad approaches. One of these is concerned with a view of language in use, and includes categories of function, context, and language skill. The other is a version of a more formal linguistic syllabus, and is comprised of elements of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary."

One of the major goals of ESP courses is developing reading skills for specialist texts. Some scholars have indicated that university students mostly suffer from a limited range of general vocabulary rather than technical terms. Gilmour and Marshal (1993), for example, argue that many of students' problems in comprehending what they read are not caused by the specialist words of their subject matter, rather, the problems they face are mostly caused by general English words. Spack (1988) thinks that overcoming the problems students have is not simply a matter of learning specialist language because more often the general use of language causes the great problem. She illustrates this by using her students' complaints about their problems in understanding specialist texts. These are not due to the technical terminology, but mostly because of poor general vocabulary. Also, some studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between English language proficiency and the academic success of students whose language of instruction is English (Graham, 1987). Wiwczaroski (2003) writes that in "order to succeed in preparing our students, we as professionals need to first lay a proper foundation of competencies". Maleki (2006) demonstrated that low English language proficiency of Iranian EFL students hindered their academic progress. Thus, strong English language proficiency is needed to reach one of the major goals of ESP courses, that is, reading, at university level. Studies in psychology show that for a reader to construct meaning from the text, two different approaches are utilized: syntactic and semantic approach (see Clark and Clark, 1977; Field, 2003). In the syntactic approach, the reader divides the sequence of letters into words and their constituents and by using their linguistic knowledge and formal schemata, the reader constructs meaning. In the semantic approach, on the other hand, the reader uses content words, content schemata, and world knowledge and life experiences to construct meaning. According to Clark and Clark (1977) and Field (2003) in most cases the reader mixes these two approaches to understand the text. Ziahosseiny (2005) argues that for the reader to



utilize the two approaches, that they must have a command of the following pieces of information:

- a. the meaning and function of the key words in the text;
- b. the key grammatical structures in the text; and
- c. the cohesive devices and coherence in the text.

It seems that a professional EFL teacher and material designer is needed to reach that goal. Ziahosseiny (2002), also believes that ESP readers should be engaged in activities that will give them a knowledge of formal schemata (key words and key grammatical structures), and content schemata (the necessary background knowledge).

Zoumana (2007), in concluding a study on pre-service ESP teacher training, argues that we can design ESP teacher training courses which are both content-oriented and intended for learning methodology. He thinks that basic knowledge in business, science and technology is required in rendering an ESP teacher operational; however, teachers trained this way build on the basic knowledge they have acquired. Sadeghi (2005), citing Hutchinson and Waters (1987), argues that the ESP teacher should have the same qualities of the general English teacher. He continues saying that the ESP teacher should possess (a) English language knowledge, (b) thorough command of the course design, and (c) expert knowledge of the related field of science. Apparently, most subject teachers lack a and b, which cannot be ignored. Robinson (1991) asserts that the most important quality the ESP teacher needs is flexibility. For Robinson (1991), flexibility means changing from being a general English teacher to being a specific purpose teacher. Such a flexible teacher should cope with different groups of students, often at very short notice. Therefore, it can be inferred from Robinson (1991) that it is the general language teacher's responsibility to teach ESP classes. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) argue that ESP teaching is extremely varied. They continue to say that the ESP

practioner should perform different roles: teacher, course designer, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator.

### **1.3. Research questions**

This study intends to answer the following questions:

- (1) Who should teach ESP courses?
- (2) Who is better qualified to teach ESP courses?
- (3) With whose teaching do students get greater satisfaction?
- (4) Does the specialist in the field have the right to teach or design the ESP courses?

### **1.4. Research hypotheses**

The following hypotheses are proposed to conduct the research:

- (1) The EFL teacher is the person who should teach ESP courses.
- (2) The EFL teacher is the person who is better qualified to teach ESP courses.
- (3) Students get greater satisfaction with the EFL teacher's teaching ESP courses than from that of the specialist in the field.
- (4) The specialist in the field has the right to teach ESP courses if he/she has acquired an EFL teacher's qualifications.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Subjects**

Forty second-year medical students took part in the experiment. The group comprised twenty five females and fifteen males. They were in the same age range and were enrolled through the Iranian annual university entrance examination. All medical students in Iran are required to pass a general English course as a prerequisite to their specialized medical English. Care was therefore taken to select subjects that had met the requirement. The general English course is normally taught by TEFL teachers and includes all the four skills with specific attention to reading. It takes one semester with three hours a week to complete. Immediately

after its completion, the students have to choose specialized medical English, which takes two semesters to complete with three hours a week at each semester.

Before the experiment, the subjects were familiarized with the teachers, materials, and the course. They were very well aware of the fact that this was part of their major study, and therefore, were fully prepared and highly motivated to start the course.

## **2.2. Materials and Procedures**

Two stages were set to select the subjects in the experiment. First, sixty second-year medical students who had met the requirement of the general English course were asked to sit for a TOEFL test (Sullivan, 1999). Of these, forty students who scored 400 or above on the TOEFL were selected to take part in the study. Then, they were divided into two equal groups of twenty members. Next, the two groups were randomly assigned to two different classes named A and B. Later, two male teachers were told to teach the classes: a TEFL teacher and a GP. By tossing a coin, we decided who might teach each class. The TEFL teacher taught class A and the GP taught class B. Both teachers were new to teaching career, and therefore, the probable confounding effect of prior teaching experience was restricted.

The textbook to be taught in the class was Medical English (James, 1989), which consists of fifteen units. Each unit includes a topic in medicine with exercises on reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, understanding a printed text, understanding a lecture, and understanding discourse. The teachers were asked to teach the whole book following the teacher's manual in the first semester of the academic year, 2006.

## **2.3. Instrumentation**

Two types of instrument were used to measure the achievement of both classes: a final achievement test and a five-point Likert Scale. The final achievement test comprised reading comprehension passages, vocabulary (general and medical), understanding printed texts, understanding lectures, and understanding discourse. There were four reading comprehension

passages with five multiple-choice questions following each passage, that is, there were twenty questions in total. Forty multiple-choice vocabulary items including both general English words and medical terms (twenty items for each) were given. In the understanding printed texts section a passage titled "The haemoglobinopathies" was given and the students' understanding of the text was checked by 20 written wh-word questions and true-false tests. The participants' understanding of lectures and discourse was tested with their listening to a recorded tape of an interview between a doctor and a patient and answering 20 written wh-questions.

The five-point Likert Scale was designed in the form of a questionnaire on which the subjects had to indicate their degree of agreement with ten statements regarding their satisfaction with the teachers and the course they taught. Each degree of agreement was given a numerical value from one to five. Then the total value of all responses to each statement was calculated. After that, the total values of responses were converted to percentages. The percentages of response to each statement about the teachers and the course they taught were then compared to find the differences.

Both the achievement test and the five-point Likert Scale were employed at the end of the course, which took about four and a half months. Before students' sitting for the exam, the questionnaires were distributed, and immediately after their completion the final achievement test was administered simultaneously in both classes. The whole procedure took three hours. Finally, results were compared and contrasted with descriptive and inferential statistics.

### **3. Results**

In general, class A members scored higher than class B members in all components of the achievement test (Table 1). The mean score of class A in reading comprehension was considerably higher than the mean score of class B in the same component of the achievement test (17 vs. 13;  $t = 3.927$ ;  $p = 0.0001$ ). Also, the mean score of the vocabulary part of the test was much higher for class A compared with that of class B (36 vs. 25;  $t = 6.860$ ;  $p = 0.0005$ ).

With regard to the understanding printed text component, the results for class A were also conspicuous ( $M = 18$  vs.  $12$ ;  $t = 8.480$ ;  $p = 0.0005$ ). The large difference between the mean score of class A and B in understanding lectures and discourse was another sign of superiority of class A over class B ( $17$  vs.  $11$ ;  $t = 8.487$ ;  $p = 0.0005$ ).

**Table 1 Results on the component of the achievement test**

<b>Class A Test components</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Class B Test components</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>t</b>
<b>Reading comprehension</b>	17	2.851	38	<b>Reading comprehension</b>	13	3.553	38	0.0001	3. 927
<b>Vocabulary</b>	36	4.752	38	<b>Vocabulary</b>	25	5.367	38	0.0005	6. 860
<b>Understanding printed text</b>	18	1.323	38	<b>Understanding printed text</b>	12	2.872	38	0.0005	8. 480
<b>Understanding lectures and discourse</b>	17	1.233	38	<b>Understanding lectures and discourse</b>	11	2.911	38	0.0005	8. 487

Regarding the five-point Likert Scale questionnaire, the results were also remarkable (Appendices 1&2). Almost all class A members strongly agreed that their teacher and the course he taught fulfilled their expectations (Appendix 1). On the other hand, nearly all class B members contended that their teacher and the course he taught was unsatisfactory (Appendix2). Only a small number of students in class A disagreed with the statements 6 (%2), 8 (%3), and 9 (%4). On the other hand, a small number of class B members agreed with the statements 1 (%3), 2 (%2), 3 (%3), 5 (%6), 7 (%7), 8 (%4), and 10 (%1). %1 of class B members strongly agreed with the statement 3 and 5, but nobody in class A strongly disagreed with any of the

statements, although some disagreed with the statements 6 (%2), 8 (%3), and 9 (%4). A few students in both classes neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements.

#### **4. Discussion**

Results of the study confirmed all of our proposed hypotheses. On the reading comprehension component of the final achievement test, EFL teacher's students' mean score was much higher than the mean score of the GP's students on the same component 917 vs. 13;  $P = 0.0001$ ;  $t = 3.927$ ). It seems that reading skill is better developed under the EFL teacher's leadership. Reading is a complex syntactic analysis mixed with a semantic interpretation of the text, which requires professional knowledge to teach it (see Ziahosseiny, 2005; Field, 2003; Ziahosseiny, 2002). The GP's lack of such knowledge hindered the students' developing such an important skill. The EFL teacher's class (class A) also scored much higher on the vocabulary component of the final achievement test than the GP's class (class B) (36 vs. 25;  $p = 0.0005$ ;  $t = 6.860$ ). It appears that Gilmour and Marshal (1993) are right in claiming that many of students' problems in understanding what they read are not caused by the specialist vocabulary of their subject of study, rather, their main problem in reading is with general English words. Also, Spack (1988) is quite right to argue that overcoming the problems students have is not simply a matter of learning specialist language, but more often the general use of language is what that causes the great problem. This could mean that our GP might have been unable to solve the problem. Regarding understanding printed text as well as understanding lectures and discourse sub-test of the final achievement test, the same trend was

observed. On the understanding of printed text part of the test, class A members' mean score was greater than that of class B's (18 vs. 12;  $p = 0.0005$ ;  $t = 8.480$ ). This was, also, true for understanding lecture and discourse (17 vs. 11;  $p = 0.0005$ ;  $t = 8.487$ ).

The gap between the mean scores of class A and B is not due to their English language proficiency, as this was on a par before the study. In fact, the problem goes with our GP's teaching, and his lack of knowledge of the way language works. English language proficiency has not been a problem of our subjects in the study, because a positive correlation has been found between English language proficiency and academic success of students (see Maleki, 2006; Graham, 1987). Therefore, the GP has not been of much help to the students. If this is the case, is there any justification for sending specialists in the field to ESP classes? They might be sent to such classes, but as Hutchinson and Waters (1987, in Sadeghi, 2005) argue, the ESP teacher should have the same qualities of the general English teacher. He/she should have English language knowledge, thorough command of the course design, and expert knowledge of the related field. The latter is easy to overcome, because, as Zoumana (2007) puts it, we can design ESP teacher training courses which are both content-oriented and intended for learning methodology. Therefore, EFL teachers trained this way build on the basic knowledge they have acquired. A very important quality of the ESP teacher, as Robinson (1991) thinks, is flexibility, that is, changing from being an EFL teacher to being an ESP teacher. As this specific quality of EFL teachers, ESP teaching is the responsibility of EFL teachers to fulfil expectations of different groups of students.

With regard to students' satisfaction with the teachers and the course they taught, little contentment was expressed by the students. On the Likert Scale, the majority of class A members strongly agreed with all the ten statements. Only a few disagreed with statements 2, 6, 8, and 9 (Appendix 1). On the other hand, class B members either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statements. Only a small percentage strongly agreed or agreed with the

statements (Appendix 2). Here again, our hypothesis that the EFL teacher's teaching ESP courses satisfies ESP students' needs was confirmed. This may be another impetus to stopping sending specialists in the field to ESP classes, unless they are well-trained in language learning and teaching.

## 5. Conclusion

The controversy as who should teach ESP courses was discussed in the present research. Everything being equal, the analysis of final examinations and questions proved that EFL teachers can fulfil course goals much better than specialists in the field. Therefore, we strongly recommend that ESP courses be taught by EFL teachers rather than specialists in the field. Those specialists interested in teaching English should attain the necessary qualifications.

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## Appendix 1

### Class A

For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by placing a tick in the appropriate column.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. My teacher's method of teaching was excellent.	%98		%2		
2. I was highly motivated in the class.	%92	%6			
3. My teacher taught English not medicine.	%99	%1			
4. My teacher's pronunciation was excellent.	%97	%3			
5. My class was varied and interesting.	%95	%5			
6. Now, I can use English as a means of communication in medicine.	%90	%5	%3	%2	
7. I understand English structure much better than before.	%96	%4			
8. I can read medical texts much better now.	%91	%6	%1	%3	

9. I can understand lectures in English much better than before.	%90	%2	%4	%4	
10. I wish I could repeat the course with the same teacher.	%95	%2	%3		

## Appendix 2

### Class B

For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by placing a tick in the appropriate column.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. My teacher's method of teaching was excellent.		%3	%2	%5	%90
2. I was highly motivated in the class.		%2	%7	%10	%81
3. My teacher taught English not medicine.	%1	%3	%1	%3	%92
4. My teacher's pronunciation was excellent.			%1	%8	%91
5. My class was varied and interesting.	%1	%6	%2	%51	%40
6. Now, I can use English as a means of communication in medicine.			%3	%15	%82

7. I understand English structure much better than before.		%7	%3	%75	%15
8. I can read medical texts much better now.		%4	%10	%66	%20
9. I can understand lectures in English much better than before.			%12	%16	%72
10. I wish I could repeat the course with the same teacher.		%1	%4	%2	%93