

The use of focus group interviews in order to define students' views of the ESP course

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings of a survey on students' views of the ESP course in University of Ioannina. Four focus group interviews were conducted, each consisting of 5 students. These interviews were carried out in order to further explore in depth data gathered in the two previous stages of the research. The finding indicated that there is a consistency over time on certain issues identified in previous interpretation of in-depth interviews and content analysis of essays. The evidence shows that there are problems regarding policies of foreign language teaching in the state sector and culture specific attitudes concerning English language learning. It is apparent that more adequate and descriptive information on the ESP course is required both to students and to academic staff of university departments. Co-operation among all appears to facilitate an effort to make the ESP course useful and worth attending in University.

Keywords

Focus group Interviews, Qualitative analysis, English for Specific Purposes, Greek students, needs analysis, motivation

1. Introduction

Students' opinions on English for Specific (ESP) courses are vital in designing teaching materials and in improving teaching techniques. Many studies were undertaken in order to define students' views on courses using quantitative and qualitative methods (Hadzigiannoglou Xenodohidis, 2002, Graham, 2004, Evans. and Green, 2007). Katsara (2007, 2008) carried out research in the University of Ioannina, in order to investigate issues relating to English language teaching in Greek universities. It was found that students' past experiences on language learning plays a very important role and that professionalism on the part of all involved in the design and delivery of language teaching could enhance their motivation to study. This study is an expansion of those two studies aiming to elucidate key issues.

2. Research Approach

This paper describes a survey using focus groups investigating students' views of the ESP course. The following section explains the reason why focus group interviews were used in order to analyze data.

2.1. *The choice of focus group Interviews*

This study checked the consistency of students' experiences over time. In particular, this study used triangulation of qualitative data sources. According to Patton (1990), this means comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means by qualitative methods. This study used information gathered from in depth interviews and analysis of essays in order to clarify data. The use of focus group interviews was selected in order to reinforce the most fruitful lines of inquiry and explore further certain issues. Patton (1990) argued that striving for consistency in overall patterns of data from different sources and explanations for differences in data from divergent sources contributes to the credibility of findings. This indicates the importance of focus groups in research since it reflects their usefulness for reflecting social realities of a cultural group through direct access to the language and key concepts that forms participants' experiences (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). In similar lines, Carey (1994) argues that focus groups can provide major insight into beliefs, attitudes and opinions. In developing the study, the views of Krueger & Casey (2000) proved valuable in establishing the context and the structure of the groups. According to Krueger & Casey (2000):

A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service (p.4)

The objectives were: a) to reinforce some of the information gathered from the in depth interviews and the essays and b) to explore in more depth the ideas that had been put forward. According to Krueger (1994), focus groups are essentially homogeneous but with variations among participants so that different opinions will be raised. This homogeneity is often defined in terms of age, gender, education, occupation etc. In this study all the students that took part in the focus group sessions were students studying in the University of Ioannina. A total of 20 students participated in the discussions, 10 students from the Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises and 10 from the Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Management. Krueger (1994:86) also suggest that randomization lessens the possibility of bias in selection. This random selection is important when attitudes and opinions are being investigated which makes inferences to a larger population. For this study, all students from the three departments of University of Ioannina where the researcher is teaching were invited to take part. An announcement was made and students contacted the researcher in order to arrange a meeting.

2.2. Data analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued that qualitative analysis begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data. They call this process ‘open coding’. During this process, the researcher should identify the conceptual categories into which the phenomena observed would be grouped. The aim is to create multi categories, which will determine the framework for analysis. The raw data should be broken down and the researcher must undertake an ‘audit trail’, which means providing a scheme, which identifies the data according to speaker and context. Then ‘axial coding’ must be applied to re-examine the identified categories. The purpose is to describe and acquire an understanding of a phenomenon of interest. The final stage involves the development of the conceptual model so that others can understand it. According to the above model offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the current research was undertaken using three stages.

The previous two stages were based on the use of deductive and inductive analysis. Holloway (1997) interpreted deductive analysis as involving the move from the general to the specific and Schwandt (1997) defined inductive analysis as working from the data of specific cases to a more general conclusion. Specifically, deductive analysis was particularly apposite in the analysis of the initial in depth interviews leading to categorizing students’ specific experiences. This analysis led to the use of inductive analysis to help the researcher draw conclusions and frame the structure of the next stage of the research, which was content analysis of the essays.

It is important for the researcher to be aware of techniques for enhancing the quality of analysis of results in research. Marshall & Rossman (1995) argued that when categories and patterns become clear, the researcher should evaluate these patterns by developing hypotheses and testing them further. The design of the study is based on this continuous evaluation process. Hypotheses developed from the in depth interviews were tested through the analysis of the essays, which were further tested through focus group interviews.

3. Results

This section describes the procedure of carrying out the focus group interviews including the questions used throughout the interview sessions.

3.1. Procedure

The researcher conducted four focus group interviews after analyzing the data from the 40 initial in depth interviews and after the content analysis, which was drawn from the collection of 112 essays from students of the University of Ioannina. The aim was to explore some specific issues arising from the comments made throughout the focus group interviews and reinforce previous findings. The researcher gave a copy with a summary of the results of the previous two phases of the research, that is the in depth interviews and the analysis of the essays to the participants of the focus group interviews (see Appendix A). Based on the results of the two phases the topics of the

discussion were predetermined and arranged in a logical sequence. The discussions were focused but there was scope for individual perspectives. According to Krueger (1994), this approach is called the ‘interview guide’, *which* provides subject areas within which the interviewer can freely explore and ask questions that will illuminate those specific subjects. The questions of the focus group interviews were:

- a) What do you think of the delivery of the English course in University?
- b) Describe your experiences in learning English in University.
- c) What do you think are the problems that exist in English language teaching in University?
- d) What are your suggestions on effective English teaching in University?

3.2. Presentation of findings from the four focus group interviews

This section offers a description of the results of the four focus group interviews. A summary of the main findings is provided while direct quotations are used to make data more clear.

First focus group interview

The first focus group comprised 5 students. All of them were from the Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises. The focus group interview was conducted in March 2008 in the researcher’s office and it was tape-recorded.

During the session, students cited a number of issues relating to English language teaching in Universities. Most of the students reported that the English course in University is not taken seriously. The issue of quality was expressed in different ways with attention placed more on the need for individual care on the part of the teachers in each Department. They suggested that since each department has its own rules regarding course content and delivery and since the course content can be decided in the General Assembly of the Department, they could reach to an agreement with the English teacher and suggest ways to make the teaching materials useful and more motivating. Interestingly students had different opinions about the usefulness of the specialized English course in University

I want to be taught skills that will help me get prepared for the Cambridge Proficiency of English. I wish I could be taught everything in school or university and not go to a private centre to get prepared for the certificate and pay for the tuition.

I don’t need to be taught ESP and EAP. I will not need all this later. All I need is to get the Proficiency certificate in order to get a job.

Students are immature and they do not want to co-operate with the teacher and learn. It is daft. In state school and university, they do not pay for tuition. However, they do not pay attention to the lesson and prefer to go in a private institution and pay to learn.

Obviously, students were not satisfied with the education system regarding foreign language teaching and would have liked more organization in the state section.

State schools and Universities do not cater for foreign language tuition. In some universities, students have to pay for the course-book. For other courses, the books are free I don't understand why this is happening.

I really think that there should be more teaching hours in the curriculum. It is impossible to learn if the course is only three hours a week.

I think that English teachers do not care to teach because they are frustrated by all this mentality.

Comments made by students indicated that internal regulations in each department cause many problems with regard to a proper organization of the students' needs.

The regulations concerning assessment of the English course varies in Universities. In some universities, students are exempted from the English course if they are holders of Proficiency certificates. In other departments, the mark of the examination of English does not count and in other department students are not even given a mark. The results of the examinations indicate either pass or fail. This is the reason why students do not care about English.

I think that an English teacher is strict if he/ she doesn't agree on this policy of getting an exemption of the course if students are holders of the Proficiency certificate.

The departmental curriculum cannot include many courses of English because other courses should be incorporated. These logistics cause problems.

Comments showed that students think that the Ministry of Education should make an adjustment of a modified policy regarding foreign language teaching.

I think that English should be taught properly in primary and secondary school. The Ministry of Education should make a decision to incorporate more hours on the teaching of English in schools.

I think that everyone is upset for his/her own reasons. Students are upset because they have to pay to learn English in private centres and teachers are upset because students do not take them and their teaching seriously.

Second Focus group Interview

In the second focus group interview, the participants were 5 students from the department of Environmental and Natural Resource Management. The meeting was held in the researcher's office and it was tape-recorded. Students discussed issues relating to their experiences of studying English in University of Ioannina. The discussion has shown that students proved willing to discuss features that would make English teaching in their department effective. Practicalities regarding the English course were raised.

It is a good idea to mark group work in class. In this way, students are getting into a habit of doing various tasks as part of their assessment of the course.

I think that group work in class can motivate students to participate and help the teacher as well to do his/her job.

Some students though do not help when the teacher assigns us a task. They expect everything from the other members of the group. I think that the teacher should check on us continuously and not give a mark to students who are lazy.

Comments by students indicated that students were prepared to acknowledge various issues and propose solutions, which they would have found useful.

Doing some oral discussions could be useful as well. Speaking is a major problem. The teacher should encourage us to speak even if we are making mistakes.

It is important for the students to feel relaxed in class. The teacher should praise us and make us feel good about our performance.

Our fear is examinations. Our teacher should prepare us for the exams and tell us exactly what we have to study.

Homework is fine. However, it should be of average difficulty because otherwise; there will be cases where students will cheat.

Maybe it should be a good idea to offer various examination questions in the final exam. There should be easy, of average difficulty and difficult questions.

Students' views revealed that marking is a factor that needs to be considered in relation to teaching.

Students' views revealed that marking is a factor that needs to be considered in relation to teaching. Some of their comments show that students are aware that there are false expectations regarding teaching and learning.

I know that there is huge problem in foreign language teaching in state institutions. Nobody takes a foreign language at university seriously. They do

not even care about the exam mark they will get upon completion of the course. All they want is to pass.

My fellow students believe the English tutor has to treat us with more lenience because we are not studying English Language and Literature.

One student's comment neatly encapsulates the view that there is a need for all involved in the teaching and learning to take responsibility of their actions. This comment is taking the discussion a step further by adding more data regarding the students' metacognitive knowledge in language learning.

This misinterpretation about the nature of the English course influences English tutors who being burned out are forced to do away with easy solutions which means passing students who did not deserve to pass or humiliating the English course by offering a ridiculous syllabus It is high time to be honest with ourselves and realize that education is not a game of hide and seek and that everyone is responsible of his/her own actions. This stupidity of doing nothing about it and continuing this ill-tradition has to stop. Students have to study and teachers have to teach!

It reflects the argument put forward by Kitzinger & Farqular (1999) who argue that focus group interviews can give in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. It was indicated by the researchers that underneath that seemingly loose talk, some issues that are brought onto surface bring about new knowledge.

Students seem to show that they would have liked more information on the academic culture of the department they are studying.

Knowing what the rules of each department are is instrumental. Not all students know that the General Assembly of each department can modify or incorporate new courses.

Being a student in University of Ioannina for 4 years now I have realized that in every department there is certain culture regarding teaching, marking etc. Unfortunately, this plays an important role in our studies. The motto temporary becomes permanent is for sure a bad habit.

Third Focus group Interview

In the third focus group interview, the participants were 5 students from University of Ioannina in the department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises. The focus group interview was conducted again in the researcher's office and it was also tape-recorded. Comments indicated that students are aware that due to linguistic deficiency plagiarism can create problems in learning.

We all know that some students are cheating in order to pass the course. They lift information from the Internet or other books and they hand it in as their own piece of work.

This is very bad. I know some students who pay an English teacher to write their essays. This is happening because students have forgotten English and it is impossible to learn enough to pass the course in a three-hour session in a semester.

There was more evidence that students were unaware of study skills relating to an ESP/EAP course. On the positive side, students seem to admit that this ignorance could be avoided.

I don't know how to write an essay. In the private centre, I was taught how to write a composition.

Critical thinking is important. Being able to comment on articles and writing our opinion based on literature of the field we are studying is crucial. Academic writing skills can even help in other courses.

We all have to realize that attending an ESP/EAP course at University is different from attending a private centre and get prepared to sit the exams for the Proficiency certificate.

It is shown that students were not aware of the different demands made on them by an English teacher in University.

Some English teachers in some Universities are not permanent staff and work on a contract basis. This influences the way they teach. Some of them are vulnerable since all they care about is to become permanent.

The English course content differs in Universities. Every English teacher can choose his/her own

Fourth Focus Group Interview

The fourth focus group interview was also tape recorded in the researcher's office and comprised 5 students from the Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Management. Students were asked to express their ideas on teaching a foreign language. Issues that arose from this discussion were very interesting and somewhat surprising, given that the opinions of English tutors indicate that students do have persistent problems especially with speaking English and academic writing. Students' views indicate that there is a continuous tendency to overestimate language ability.

I am a holder of the Proficiency Certificate. I master the language. I do not need to be taught ESP and EAP.

I can teach in the private sector with Proficiency. I do not need anything else to learn.

Several students agreed that learning a language requires time and effort and realized that their ignorance of different teaching fields of the language caused them problems.

Learning a language requires a process of continuous study. I did not know what ESP and EAP stands for and that those fields of English teaching exist.

Students have this idea that specialized language is not what they should be taught at Universities because as they think those aspects of teaching are applicable only for students studying English Language and Literature.

Students noted that adjustment in tertiary education affects foreign language teaching and learning.

Entering University is a very tiring process. Students have to sit exams in many subjects, which do not interest them. English or any other foreign language is not one of these subjects examined. Thus, students leave behind that subject. When they enter University English is again not a priority since finally they can study subjects they are interested in. Besides the Certificate of Proficiency has an expiry date within a two-year period and if they want to use it, they should get it within that certain time period. In addition, English is usually taught during the first two years of study, which lessens students' motivation.

Besides ESP or EAP are not qualifications which are required in job seeking and therefore useless in that sense.

There were comments regarding the teachers' qualifications. Students cited that they do not feel that all teachers are qualified to teach in a University.

I have heard that not all English tutors in Universities are qualified. Not all of them hold an MA or a PhD.

Some teachers do not love their job and this affects the quality of their teaching. Some seem not to care to extend their knowledge for their own benefit. It seems that they see their job profession solely as a way to earn their living.

teaching materials and thus there is confusion of what is expected from us.

Comments made by students indicated that the other academic staff in departments in Universities also recognize the mentality of ineffective teaching of foreign languages in state institutions.

Other University teachers do not care about the English course at University and thus they decide on the General Assembly that students can get an exemption of the course if they hold the Proficiency certificate.

Some students are encouraged not to pay attention to the English course in University if the other academic staff show indifference and sometimes irony towards the English teaching.

4. Some key interpretations from the focus group interviews and conclusion

The four follow-up series of focus group interviews showed that the main thrust of the information coming from the focus group confirmed that there was an opportunity to expand some of the specific points made. Most of the students' comments in the findings from the focus group interviews accorded with the students' comments in the previous two stages of the research (Katsara, 2007, Katsara, 2008).

Clearly, students have serious concerns regarding foreign language teaching in Universities. Foremost among the features were the factors relating to regulations and culture specific attitudes. There is considerable uniformity in the information and the opinions gathered. Students cited specific examples of desirable action. Each student's comment was based on his/her own past experience. Students thought that internal regulations in University department affect proper organization of English courses and that the Ministry of Education should modify the existing policy of foreign language education in state institutions. There is a need for Academic teaching staff at Universities to be informed of the difference in teaching methodology between general EFL courses and ESP courses. Identification of the academic culture in a University is essential when it comes to departmental curriculum design. Students' comments indicated that students are not aware of the nature of a specialized language course and motivation to attend the specialized course is lessened. The status of English competency in Greece has proved to cause many problems in specialized language teaching having as a result difficulties in establishing good relationships between students and teachers. Issues such as plagiarism and marking appeared to establish some parameters of the extent of the problems in the teaching situation.

The implication is that students would welcome more adequate and descriptive information about the ESP course in University. There is a need to find ways of making the course interesting meeting simultaneously students' needs. What stands out of the results is that there are false expectations concerning academic rules, which seem to be a result of insufficient organization regarding foreign language teaching in state institutions. It would be useful if the Ministry of Education placed more significance on the usefulness of the English course in state institutions and modify the existing policy.

The ESP teacher has a crucial role to play ensuring that students are offered appropriate teaching tailored to their needs. The teacher has the responsibility to remedy the situation regarding inadequate organization regarding foreign language teaching. Students' comments reveal that in tertiary education opinions of a course are formed as a result of an agreement among the teaching staff in each department. This indicates that care is needed on the part of the English teachers to co-operate with the other staff of each department and offer enough courses, which can ensure that students learn English properly. Therefore, it is implied that needs analysis having as a purpose the design of a useful language course is necessary.

It would be particularly useful for the other academic staff to use their influence to encourage students to be motivated to study English offered in University. Academic staff should be given more awareness training to help students adjust to their new

academic environment and to be more informed about the different English academic courses. It is particularly important if they are able to explain clearly to all students that when it comes to ESP teaching, students are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning and that a premium is placed on the development of critical thinking.

Furthermore, the results indicated that students seem to recognize that they have a substantial responsibility to ensure that they make the most of their studies. They should realistically assess their English skills and in co-operation with the English teacher and the other teaching staff incorporate EFL courses in the departmental curriculum to ensure that students can improve their general English proficiency. This is very important and should be taken seriously in order to avoid failures later on in the academic year. They should be realistic and expect to have both good and bad experiences in the new academic environment. Since tertiary education is different from secondary education, they should be willing to adjust and to take more responsibility for their own studies and to be aware that they can obtain support from their personal tutor with regard to academic or personal problems.

The main implication is that there is need to identify the characteristics of an appropriate teaching system that caters for all students. The findings might point the way to realizing the usefulness of co-operation and honesty among the teaching staff and the students to ensure that the educational experience is rewarding for all.

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Appendix A

Summary of Findings of the in depth interviews (article published in TESOL Greece Newsletter, No96, October-December 2007)

Participants: 40 students (12 from the Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises, 17 students from the Department of Environmental and Natural resource Management and 12 students from the Department of Cultural Environment and New Technologies Management).

Interview questions

- A) General Information on students' age, sex, department of University, year of study, EFL certificates obtained.
- B) Attitudes towards learning English and difficulties in EFL
- C) Suggestions on the course needs and motivation enhancing.

Results

Students reported that they were instrumentally oriented to learn English and this tendency made them feel hostile towards learning the language

The top answers regarding attitudes towards EFL learning were:

- a) Family pressure to learn English
- b) Job seeking requires holding EFL certificates
- c) Importance to learn a foreign language

The top answers regarding difficulties in EFL were:

- a) Understanding and speaking the foreign language
- b) Structuring a piece of writing

Students commented on language courses offered in Universities. The top answers on this issue were:

- a) Language courses in University are not helpful, as they do not offer any certificate upon completion
- b) The language course should be taken seriously in University aiming at offering teaching of terminology relevant to their field of study.
- c) There should be more teaching hours in the departmental curriculum and the teaching should be done in small numbered classes.

Students' suggestions on course design included the following top answers:

- a) The education system regarding foreign language teaching needs to be modified
- b) Relationship between the tutor and students makes the course interesting
- c) Students themselves play a role in their success

Summary of the findings of the content analysis of the essays (article published in TESOL Greece Newsletter, No 97 January- March 2008.)

Participants: 112 students from the Departments of University of Ioannina: Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises, Department of Environmental and Natural resource Management and Department of Cultural Heritage Management.

Essay Topic: Aspirations regarding tertiary education compare to secondary education. Students' learning preferences with regard to the English course.

Results

Students appear to be dissatisfied regarding the quality of tuition offered in secondary education. The top answers regarding this view were:

- a) Tuition in school is a waste of time since the quality is deficient. They attend private lessons in private institutions in order to succeed in Panhellenic exams.
- b) Students felt pressured in school to study courses they are not interested in
- c) The relationship with school teachers is poor since they feel that teachers downgrade their personality and treat them as children.

Students noted that they have more specific aspirations in tertiary education. The top answers included:

- a) Vocational rehabilitation seems to be students' first priority upon completion of their studies.
- b) Students felt that university teachers play a crucial role in their success. They liked the fact that they treated them as adults. Their comments also revealed that they are concerned about justice in marking.
- c) The findings indicated that students expect advanced courses from experienced professional teachers.

Students' opinions on the learning preferences regarding the English course were also mentioned by students. Their top opinions were:

- a) Students have forgotten English because they stopped studying the language since they focused on passing the Panhellenic exams.
- b) The use of electronic media could make the teaching more effective.
- c) Teaching methods such as workshops, face-to-face tutorials were considered useful when it comes to the development of critical thinking.