

A SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION IN REGARD TO ITS PROVISION OF ENGLISH COMMUNICATION COURSES: A CASE OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EAP) AND ENGLISH FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES (EPP)

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Abstract

This study attempts a SWOT analysis of the higher level English Communication courses offered by the Department of Communication at the Polytechnic of Namibia (Communication Skills, Professional Writing and Professional Communication), in order to probe the current situation and use the findings to argue a case for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Professional Purposes (EPP) as alternative higher level courses. The study aims at carving a niche for an English curriculum that meets the demands made upon the learners by target situations. Therefore, the problem that this study seeks to address is that whereas learners face a heterogeneous target situation characterized by varieties of English, (English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP), English for Legal Purposes (ELP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), English for Economics (EE) and English for Science and Technology (EST), as the case may be, (Dudley – Evans and St John, 1998)), the higher level courses expose students to mainly a generalised English curriculum which, by and large, does not fully address the requirements of the target situation. Findings from the study are aimed at bolstering efforts to implement an ESP curriculum that meets the expectation of learners as is demanded by the target situation. The study employs a descriptive analysis of data within the qualitative research paradigm.

Keywords

SWOT analysis – an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of a given situation in order to find a positive way forward.

English for Academic Purposes – A variety of English that is needed by the learner in order to learn.

English for Professional Purposes – Varieties of English that are used in the

world of work, for example,

English for Medical Purposes and English for Legal Purposes.

Target situation – The situation in which the learner will apply the acquired knowledge and skills.

Introduction

When she presented her June 2011 conference paper titled, "Pressing the right button to motivate student learning in a multicultural African context", Buyiso Ige of the University of Cape Town's Academic Development Unit noted the following stumbling blocks to learning as evident in her students:

- Some students come inadequately prepared by their primary and secondary schools
- Even English first language speakers are having learning problems
- First generation university students with no one to learn from
- Problems of time management and stress management.

Even though there are very few English first language speakers among students at the Polytechnic of Namibia, Ige chronicles what appears to be universal problems which also affect students at the Polytechnic of Namibia. It is such problems that a well planned English curriculum should address. However, as revealed by findings in this study, the current English curriculum offered by the Department of Communication, particularly at higher level English courses, only partially address challenges faced by students particularly those related to the target situation needs. This paper, which stems from two conferences, namely, the Poetics and Language Association (PALA) conference which was hosted by the Polytechnic of Namibia in July 2011 and the E-Teacher Scholars conference held in August 2011 at the University of Maryland, USA, seeks not only to precipitate debate about the current English curriculum of the Department of Communication, but to encourage academics to purposefully implement the on-going curriculum change without taking any shortcuts in order to fully address the needs of learners and relevant stakeholders.

The importance of a needs analysis in the English for Specific Purposes curriculum

To date, current English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research point to the primacy of needs analysis both in the conceptualisation and implementation of an ESP curriculum (Nunan, 1988, Jordan, 1997, Spiropoulou, 1996, Bouzidi, 2009). In this study, ESP is conceived as referring to a variety of English, used more or less consistently, to serve a specified purpose in a specified context. This view is in tandem with the definition given by Dudley-Evans & St Johns (1998, p. 4-5). Their definition is based on the following absolute and variable characteristics of ESP:

Absolute characteristics:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner
- ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves
- ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Variable characteristics:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
- ESP may use, in many specific situations, a different methodology from that of General English.

It follows from the above that a needs driven definition of ESP regards it as the English that is needed by the learner were s/he to brace with challenges of the 21st-century workplace. The US national Institute for Literacy indicated that employers gave the following as key skills of the 21st-century: skills in communicating, making decisions, solving problems, planning, working in teams, negotiating, resolving conflicts, and taking responsibility for learning (Wastefield et al., http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/). The learner-centeredness of ESP methodology coupled with its use of authentic materials for instructional purposes makes it the best subject discipline to equip learners with the above-mentioned skills.

Background to the study

Currently all students enrolling with the Polytechnic of Namibia undergo an English placement test. This selection process marks the Department's first step in meeting its goals, which are to:

- equip students with substantive skills for competent and effective communication.
- Promote the students' personal and academic development and teach skills required in coping with the demands of studies and the working environment.

Therefore, from the point of view of this study, what the department does well is the accurate placement of students in English courses on the basis of their ability levels. Such placement follows from students' performance in the English placement test that is written by "all students entering the Polytechnic of Namibia" (<http://www.polytechnic.edu.na>). Through the English placement test, students are placed in English level courses offered by the Departments of Languages and Communication.

The entry level course for students with low English proficiency levels is Language in Practice B. As indicated on the Polytechnic's website, Language in Practice B (LPB) seeks to equip students with "more advanced skills and techniques which enable them to communicate accurately and appropriately in speech and writing" (<http://www.polytechnic.edu.na>).

From LPB students proceed to Communication Skills (CSK). Information on the website states that this is the first "exit course" (ibid). This means that for some programmes, students do this as their last English course. The website further states that "Before going into the work force, students need to be equipped with a good working knowledge of English" (<http://www.polytechnic.edu.na>).

The last two English courses are Professional Writing and Professional Communication. These courses equip students with "advanced language skills required for business purposes (e.g. communication theory, meeting procedures, and report writing". The website further states thus, "These skills prepare students for the tasks they will have to perform when employed in either the private or public sectors" (<http://www.polytechnic.edu.na>). However, this last statement points to the problems that the department faces, as these courses

do not fully address English for Specific Purposes demands made upon the Polytechnic graduate by the target situation. Some employers have indicated gaps that need to be addressed.

A placement gap

Even though the Department of Communication enrolls students for the English courses on the basis of their abilities as reflected by their performance on the English placement test, such placement of students is done without considering students' fields of study. What this amounts to is that in one class one can have students doing Health Sciences, Business Studies, Engineering, Human Resources Management and Hospitality and Tourism. This means students are mainly taught General English, or to be more specific, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) which is not necessarily tied to their respective fields of specialization. This impedes on students performance at the workplace (target situation) (Friedenberg, et al., 2003; Bouzidi, 2009). Therefore, in the eyes of an ESP practitioner, teaching is not solely informed by needs analysis. Thus it is not a learner – centred curriculum (Nunan, 1988).

One also observes that the aims of the department appear to be favouring the teaching of General English as opposed to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Professional Purposes (EPP). Even though the second objective states that students will be equipped with skills required in coping with the demands of studies and the working environment (<http://www.polytechnic.edu.na>), the objectives do not specifically mention EAP, EOP and EPP. There is a gap that is detrimental to both the department and students' learning requirements. The gap manifests itself as follows:

- the production of English course materials which are not based on students, demands for English as determined by the target situation.
- lack of a focus on authentic sources as a basis for the courses of English offered by the department.
- lack of programmes aimed at transforming English Generalists to ESP practitioners.
- lack of use of authentic source materials in language laboratories.

Consequently, many precious hours are spent doing KEWL and/ or MOODLE tasks that have little relevance to students' needs as reflected by the target situation. The question to be asked is whether the department is achieving its objectives of promoting "students' academic development" (<http://www>.

polytechnic.edu.na). In this paper, I argue that such development can only be meaningfully addressed when the department starts to teach students using authentic sources as demanded by the target situation.

Worrying differences in lecturers' conceptualisation of ESP

This section presents a discussion of findings from Lecturers in the Departments of Communication, Languages, Legal and Secretarial Studies and the School of Engineering. These findings are significant in that not only do they demonstrate differences in conceptualisation, which could have been deemed healthy, but rather that such differences betray varied levels of understanding of ESP which are detrimental to curriculum implementation, for ESP practitioners need to be well versed with ESP in order to fully equip learners with knowledge and skills demanded from them by target situations.

The three tables below present findings from questionnaires completed by a purposive sample of lecturers in the Departments of Communication; Languages; Legal and Secretarial Studies and the School of Engineering. Questionnaires were distributed electronically and in hard copies (in some cases) to lecturers.

English lecturers

Question	Answer		Implication
	Yes	No	
Is English for learning the same as English for work?	5	5	This shows a challenge.
English curricula (CSK, PFW & PFC) are adequate.	7 One respondent left it unanswered.	2	Majority are satisfied
Curricula deal with specialised vocabulary.	3	7	Curriculum is biased towards EGAP

English lecturer works in collaboration with host lecturer	0 10	There is no collaboration.
A word that best describes the English lecturer's role in the current set up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator 2 • Teacher 3 Others either left it blank or unexplained.	This betrays a disparity.
Knowledge of EAP & EPP	6 22 respondents did not answer this question.	A problem exists.
EAP & EPP will adequately meet students needs	7 1 Two respondents did not answer this question.	People see merit in an ESP curriculum.

Discussion

Firstly, the diagram betrays a discord about lecturers' conceptualisation of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Professional Purposes (EPP). However, ESP scholars recognise differences in the English that students need in order to learn (EAP) and the English that they would need in order to work (EPP). For instance, Dudley-Evans and St Johns (1998) present the following varieties:



Source: Dudley-Evans & St Johns (1998: 6)

By presenting four varieties of EAP and two varieties of EOP, the diagram above points to the fact that the English that students need in order to learn is different from the target situation's variety. However, both varieties are important to the learner. This has implications for what students learn and how they should learn. First, it has implications for a needs driven curriculum which necessitates the need to put in place a fully fledged ESP and EPP curriculum (to cater for the target situation) in the Department of Communication. This curriculum change, however, faces immediate challenges as 70 % (the majority) of lecturers hold the view that the curriculum is adequate. However, the fact that 7 out of 10 respondents mentioned that the current curriculum does not adequately deal with specialized vocabulary is indicative of the fact that the current curriculum does not fully address students' needs.

Scholars hold the view that students need to be helped in deciphering and using technical vocabulary (Dudley-Evans & St Johns, 1998, Jordan, 1997; Wasterfield, 2010, Hutschinson and Waters). In fact, on this subject, Dudley- Evans and St Johns (1998, p. 83) concur with Barker (1988, p. 92) who maintains the verdict that ESP practitioners should teach students to grapple with, "vocabulary that is used in general language but has a higher frequency of occurrence in scientific and technical description and discussion while less emphasis should be placed on vocabulary that has specialized and restricted meaning across disciplines".

Three lecturers in the Department of Legal Studies indicated that the field of legal studies has specialised English with specialized vocabulary. Four of the lecturers further indicated that the current English curriculum, as reflected in Communication Skills, Professional Writing, and Professional Communication, does not adequately deal with vocabulary that is associated with the field of

law. Two lecturers stated that they did not know. Asked whether in the current arrangement the English lecturer develops the English curriculum in 'close consultation with lecturers in the Department of Legal Studies, all respondents emphatically denied any involvement. One responded wrote, "I was never consulted prior to the drafting of the English curricula except that I attended Board of Studies (BOS) after the curriculum had already been drafted."

Findings from responses by a purposive sample of lecturers in the School of Engineering are presented below:

Question	Answer		Implication
	Yes	No	
Is English for learning the same as English for work?	4	4	A challenge exists.
English curricula (CSK, PFW & PFC) are adequate.	4 One left it blank.	3 One left it blank.	A challenge exists.
Curricula deal with technical English used in Engineering	0 0 Two left is unanswered.	6	Curriculum is inadequate.
Curriculum needs revisiting	1 Three left it unanswered.		There is need for curriculum change.

The last two responses by lecturers in the School of Engineering are significant in that they bear testimony to the need for a curriculum revision in order to effectively teach students in the School. English for Engineering appears to be the natural choice as is directly related both to their academic and career development. In order for this to be effected, the English lecturer needs retooling in order to grapple with the dictates of a new role of teacher, facilitator, collaborator and evaluator in one breath. In addition, responses by employers and supervisors of Bachelor of Communication students who were on Work Integrated Learning (WIL) also point to the need to equip students with English

for Professional Purposes (EPP).

The way forward

Needs assessment

There is a general consensus among contemporary ESP scholars that ESP programmes should follow from a thorough instructional and organizational / target situation needs assessment (Westerfield, 2010, Dudley – Evans & St Johns, 1998, Gimnez, 1996, Kaur, S. (Unpublished)). Such a needs assessment should be three-fold as follows:

- Present Situation Analysis – which looks at what the learner needs to do with the language now.
- Target Situation Analysis – dealing with what the learner needs to do with the language in future.
- Context Analysis – deals with the environment in which the learning takes place.

An analysis of the current practices of the Department of Communication and that of Languages betrays a situation in which there is a need to go beyond placement tests and address the above if a successful ESP programme is to be charted.

Justification for ESP

The advantages of an ESP course over a General English course are well documented. For example, Strevens (1988 in Dudley-Evans & St Johns, 1998, p. 9) identifies the following advantages:

- being focused on the learner's need, it wastes no time
- it is relevant to the learner
- it is successful in imparting learning
- it is more cost-effective than General English.

Additionally, ESP scholars hold the general view that "ESP teaching is more motivating for learners than General English" (Dudley-Evans and St Johns, 1998, p. 10). Furthermore, it was found that team-taught courses in which a language teacher works together with the subject lecturer are highly motivating for international students in western universities. Lastly, research conducted (Dudley-Evans , 1995, (ibid)) in British universities established the existence of

high motivation among post graduate students doing academic writing courses on specific skills such as writing essays and dissertations.

Other advantages are that ESP fosters metacognition or metacognitive awareness among learners, that is, awareness of one's own thinking process. This enables students to select specific strategies for specific tasks. Students will be able to use metacognitive strategies to perform the following:

- organize / plan their own learning
- manage their own learning
- monitor their own learning
- evaluate their own learning.

Learners will achieve greater independence due to learner-centered class activities. Use of authentic materials and activities enable students to learn professional best practices necessary for them to find a niche in the target situation. In this study one maintains that authentic texts allow students to:

- use work related methods of problem solving
- adopt and adapt to a problem solving approach
- adjust to working in teams and groups
- learn professional communication genres and channels
- orient themselves to a professional etiquette
- become independent thinkers
- develop genre awareness
- develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivation upon finding solutions to real work - related problems
- develop positive professional attitudes.

Thus, authentic materials (Sheppard, K. & Stoller, F.L., 1995; Spiropoulou, M. 1996) usage enhances learners' motivation and cognitive processes. Therefore, learners become independent. Additionally, they will be empowered to plan and organize their time, cooperate with lecturers and fellow students. Learners also engage in strategic learning in which they match goals of learning and outcomes in keeping with their own thinking processes.

Conclusion

This study leads to the conclusion that ESP has advantages over General English. It is further noted that ESP (EAP & EPP) could empower students at the Polytechnic of Namibia. Additionally, EAP & EPP inculcate metacognitive skills in learners which will equip them for the 21st century workplace's challenges. There is also a need to put students in learning groups according to their areas of specialisation in order to use authentic texts in keeping with the dictates of target situations. Disparities in the responses given by lecturers, particularly those in the Department of Communication, are indicative of the need for lecturers to hold a workshop aimed at building bridges on lecturers knowledge and skills in ESP curriculum conceptualization, design, materials development, implementation and evaluation. However, the current high rate of staff turnover that cascades into heavy workloads appears to militate against the mounting of such a critical workshop.

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