

Challenges in Implementing English for Specific Purposes: A Study of Science Major Students at ENS-Rabat

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Abstract

Designing an ESP course for Higher Education is often criticized for weak planning and implementation. Foreign language pedagogy in Morocco is a challenging and a complex area of research especially when investigating language teaching and learning in higher education. The present study sets rather general and controversial principles of English language teaching in higher education in general, and in ESP in particular. We conducted focus groups with 97 students, whom we divided into three groups. The findings promote that the learners' motivation, needs, and course content are the foundations that support a successful implementation of an ESP course. We found that science students at ENS-Rabat were divided into those whose motivation is greatly impacted by course content and those whose motivation is influenced by extraneous factors.

Keywords: ESP, Students' Motivation, English in Higher Education

1. Background of the study

With the increasing demand of English language learning, each English language learner is required to become proficient in his field of study (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). On the basis of this assumption, English for Specific Purposes saw the light during the 1960s to accommodate the needs of specific learners of specific fields. Accordingly, ESP branched into different subsidiaries among which English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Science and Technology (EST), and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

These three subbranches of ESP target specific learning needs. That being said, Hutchinson & Waters (1987) assert that ESP is an approach to language learning mainly based on language learners' needs. Hence, the content and the method of an ESP course depend on the identification of the needs of these learners. The latter does not only concern the teachers' awareness of their students' needs but also the learners' own awareness of their own needs. In the same vein, learners who seek to study English for specific purposes have the intention of deploying English to achieve certain goals in the application of particular tasks or activities such as being able to read scientific texts in English.

Far (2008) establishes the distinction between English for General Purposes and ESP in the fact that the former focuses on education while the latter focuses on training. Additionally, Fiorito (2005) further explains that generally ESP courses pander to adult learners, in work related settings, who are more motivated than learners of English as a Foreign Language. Thus, authentic materials and resources are highly recommended for ESP courses and the approach has to be learner-centered in order to provide the learners with English as a medium to achieve some specific purposes. Referring back to motivation in ESP learning, it is one of the aspects that have a great impact on students' success or failure. So, motivation is central in both learning and teaching and remains challenging. According to Scheidecker and Freeman (1999:166) "*motivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today.*" Respectively, ESP students have in mind the objective to achieve a certain mastery of English in order to deploy it for functional purposes. Their motivation can be driven by, apart from their learning objectives, other factors such as the learning environment, the teaching method, and other external resources. Sometimes, a flaw in one of these aspects affects the motivation and thus hinders the learning and the teaching.

Studying GE or ESP is a matter of personal choice and objectives. However, motivation is what determines the success of the learning of GE and ESP. Indeed, learners' motivation is vital, and a number of factors influence the success of language learning regardless of the circumstances. Motivation is 'an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action' (Brown, 1987:114). Eventually, a motivated learner is the one who strives to achieve their learning objective and who considers investing time and effort in attaining that objective. Generally, all learners have needs and drives that are instinctive. Yet, the intensity of the aforementioned depends on the environment in which they are operating.

Respectively, the significance of motivation in advancing foreign language learning is undisputable. This being said, a number of factors play a vital role in learning a language effectively such as attitude which in turn is a related variable to motivation (Gardner, 2010; Kormos, 2008). We assume that ESP students' level of motivation in learning English is always high because they acknowledge the importance of English and they know why they need it. In addition, there is no common agreement on the true meaning of motivation despite that the majority of researchers would perceive motivation as the trend and extent of human conduct, that is the choice of a certain action, the determination with it, and the effort drawn out upon it (Dornyei, 2001). Therefore, what drives a learner to acquire ESP? and what mechanisms are involved? These are not simple questions for one to answer as students, whichever their academic level or major, want to study English either for pleasure, to better understand classic English novels, or to land a better job. A student who wants to study English for pleasure would totally treat this matter differently from one who wants to study it for specific purposes. In the end, it all depends on the outcomes of studying or learning the English language. In here, we refer back to why a teacher observes a significant difference of when certain students perform better than others as far as language learning is concerned.

Among the external factors that might also affect a student's desire to acquire English for Specific Purposes is the undergoing continuous change in the academic education, attempting to keep up with the new requirements on the labor market and academia. Such is the case in Morocco. Considering the latter's rapid economic growth, and its opening to the sum of academic partnerships, Moroccan university students find themselves bound by regulations

that, if neglected, would slow down their academic or career achievements.

Course content can also act as a variable affecting students' motivation. Students come to classes loaded with various perceptions, expectations and beliefs. Especially in language courses, course content can sometimes be deceiving in terms of the textbooks and materials or the teacher's curriculum design. As an example, some students might be surprised as they are being taught GE instead of ESP because the overall level of the class is below the expected level set for the course, while others, who in turn attend the classes thinking they are taking a GE class while, in fact, it is an ESP one. Course content sometimes cannot satisfy the needs of all the students in one class which effectively hinders the students' motivation. Here, we go back to the planning and the design of the whole course before it is launched to the students. Course content, learners' motivation, teachers' readiness and curriculum design are intertwined aspects that cannot be studied separately and each one has an effect on the other.

In line with what has been mentioned above, the experience at ENS-Rabat sets a good learning example for the English language teaching in general, and ESP in particular. Science students showed readiness to learn English for ESP. Yet, assuming they had a fairly good English level, they were somehow disappointed as some of them could not keep up with the course content and the learning pace of the whole class. Some of these students expressed their disappointment with the course content not because it was not interesting, but it did not meet their English language level. Others lost motivation as they saw themselves below the level of their advanced peers though the teacher has put enormous efforts in designing a course that targets both GE and ESP with the hope of satisfying all the students needs and levels.

1. Statement of the problem

The learning of a foreign language is bound to a number of factors, which determine the nature of the learning and its outcomes. Such is the case of Science students at ENS-Rabat who are in a desperate need of English Language in Context classes to cultivate their hindered English language operational skills coupled with basic linguistic commands. Yet, the course in general strictly impacted differently their motivation of English Language Learning (ELL) as their needs varied and levels contrasted. As previously mentioned, the course was developed by the teacher in accordance with the requirements set by the department. The

teacher managed to develop course content encompassing two varieties of English: GE and ESP with the hope to answer to these students' needs. The outcome of this class experience created a vicious circle in which two entities are continuously trying hard to make it successful in order to set an example for similar future classes. However, such experience unveiled real issues and challenges for both the teacher and the students as well as highlighted advantageous aspects.

For a teaching and a learning experience to be (un)successful, we should account for internal and external factors affecting the learning experience. To illustrate, internal factors are course content, teaching method, and teaching materials among others. As for external factors, we can consider the teaching environment, resources, class schedules, and students' division into groups. Examining these factors would lead us to understand why some students were satisfied with the course while others were not.

2.1 Objectives

The present study aims at exploring science students' real motivation behind taking ESP classes, identifying the effect of the present course content on the motivation of science students and examining science students' satisfaction with the current course content.

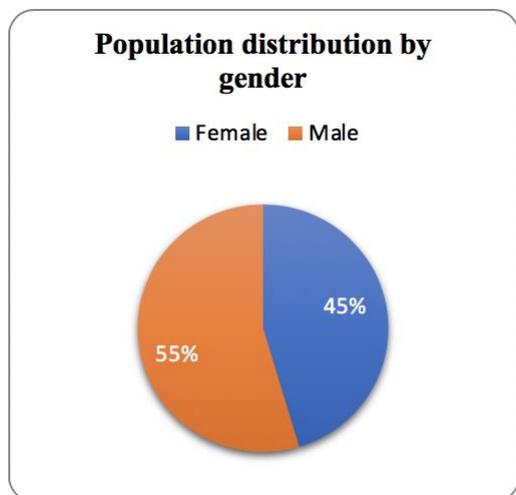
2.2 Research Questions

- a) What are science students' motivations behind taking ESP classes?
- b) In what way does the course content affect the students' motivation?
- c) In their opinion, does the present course satisfy their needs?

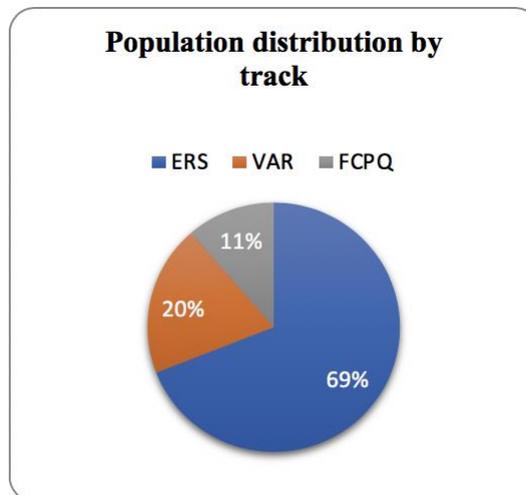
2. Research Methods and Procedures

We opted in this paper for a qualitative research approach. Our data collection took place at the end of each term during the 2016-2017 academic year coupled with a continuous observation on the part of the teacher throughout the two terms. We divided the five classes into three focus groups representing beginners, pre-intermediate and advanced level students in which we asked them a total of thirteen open-ended questions evaluating the course and their language learning experience and interest. These classes included students from renewable energies track (Semester 1 & Semester 3), chemistry formulation and quality track (Semester 1), and valorization of natural resources track (Semester 1). The number of the

students having taken part in these focus groups was 44 females and 53 males out of 97 students. **Graphs 1** and **2** below display the population distribution by gender and track.



Graph 1: Population distribution by gender



Graph 2: Population distribution by track

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Level placement

Mixed abilities have always been a liability in language classes. In our case, the five classes were a perfect distribution of multiple levels, representing a serious issue to the students and a real challenge to the teacher. During the focus groups, students declared they were unable to follow the content and keep up with their advanced peers, who represent a minority. The teacher, on the other hand, expressed her concerns about course planning and design and the difficulty in meeting all her students' needs. Additionally, low-level students have displayed not being able to follow the content of the classes with absenteeism. Advanced students also expressed their dissatisfaction with reviewing and going through the same basic English language elements making the class boring and repetitive. Thus, this does not help them advance in their language level. Some students declared they find it difficult to study scientific subjects in French let alone in English. They also confessed that their graduate program is overloaded and stressful which impacts their motivation regarding English learning as they find themselves exhausted with the workload. The majority of students favored studying in small groups over large ones.

We can note that there is a huge conflict underlying the attitudes towards the learning of the language, the provided environment, and the facilities and resources. Students put in such a

situation will automatically lose interest in learning the language and the teacher would not be able to cope with all the language differences and needs in a single classroom. Pedagogically speaking, an effective language teaching and learning can only be guaranteed if students are distributed in small groups in accordance with their level, and the teacher is provided with a well-structured syllabus and a clearly defined curriculum provided by the concerned departments.

4.2 Time allocated to the teaching of English

With regard to the time allocated to the ESP classes at ENS-Rabat, students claimed that one semester is not enough to cover the entire course content. Besides, it is not enough to study only basic skills in English either. Thus, the students disapproved of the short period the English term took place implying that since they did not study English for three years during their undergraduate studies, they have eventually forgotten about 90% of what they had learnt in high school. They clearly stated they would rather study the language solely throughout the two years of graduate studies, as it has become a key element in research and academia. Others suggested that starting off with preliminary sessions of basic English then moving to ESP classes will provide them with a great opportunity to master the operational language of their specialized fields which will help them in turn secure job positions at multinational companies in their sector.

Students were faced with a messy learning experience as most of them thought that they were ready to study technical English but realized they needed first to develop basic skills and correct some before moving to content focused classes. Respectively, it was impossible for the teacher to deal with all sorts of mixed levels in a single group in addition to developing an ESP material, delivering the classes in a short period, and presumably expect students to excel in these classes.

4.3 Students' (dis)satisfaction with the course

As a result of the abovementioned conditions, students were not satisfied with the course. Students at the beginner level expressed that it was due to their low level in addition to being put in a class with advanced students frustrated them and made them resort to the one and only escape which is missing most of the classes. They could by no means keep up with the learning pace of their advanced peers or with the content provided by the teacher. As for the advanced students in Semester 3, they were generally satisfied with the course although it did

not cover much of the ESP elements. For them, the course was great in the sense that it was more focused than their previous experience stating that there have been improvements on both content and activities. Similarly to this group, Semester 1 students reacted well to the content of the class and deemed it very interesting, informative and useful. They further explained their satisfaction with the teaching, which was well organized and supported by good materials and exercises. Thus, the teacher's performance was highly appreciated by the pre-intermediate and advanced students from both groups.

In our case study, students' satisfaction with the course content is significantly impacted by one factor related to the students' level. Those who had low level of English were unhappy with their current linguistic competence and distracted by the level of their classmates. In contrast, those who were pre-intermediate and advanced were not affected by the mixed abilities groups they were put in. In order to bridge the gap, the teacher devoted most of the teaching time allocated to these classes in reinforcing the advanced students' language skills, as those with low levels were constantly absent. It is a regrettable situation for those who could not benefit from these language classes and thus remain victims of the circumstances surrounding the planning of these latter.

4.4 Value of English

All the students agree on the fact that English is a prerequisite to excel in scientific fields especially when it comes to academic articles, and bibliographic references in their chosen fields of study. Some also stressed their need of English for work at multinational manufactures and laboratories. As far as academia and research are concerned, some students admitted to using Google translation to translate articles into French so as to be able to access knowledge in their fields while others declared that they have to wait for others to translate articles into French in order for them to have a glimpse of the novelty science offers in English and benefit from the international experiences. For some, their interests in carrying on their postgraduate studies reflect on their motivation and need to master the language at any cost while others interests' in landing a job at a multinational company reflects their readiness to develop and refine their current English level.

Whether it is for work or education, English is regarded by most of ENS-Rabat students as a tool and medium for both self and career development. Their difference in interest represents on its own a challenge to the administrators who did not identify since the beginning the

students' needs and language gaps as some of them will need English for Science and Technology (EST) and others, in addition to this branch of ESP, will need English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Therefore, we cannot mix different levels with different needs and expect to have a homogeneous mixture and successful outcomes.

4.5 ESP vs. GE

As previously mentioned, students at ENS-Rabat were expecting to study ESP classes and, instead, they had General English language courses accompanied with some ESP elements. However, recognizing their low levels, students stated that they need intensive classes in basic English skills first before delving into ESP (Biddou, Boukanouf, and Al Ghadi, 2019). One of the most acclaimed skills students stressed is communication. Some also added writing as important as communication but stated they find it difficult because of the lack of mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Starting from scratch was no easy task for the teacher who had to cope with different levels and needs within the same group.

Students' readiness to learn the basics of the language from scratch was welcomed by those with the low level and rejected by those with the advanced one. These two different types of students agreed on one thing, which is the importance of English at the academic level and its high value compared to French. Yet, the overloaded program they had stood against their motivation to progress in their English language learning. This created more frustration among them and made them question their ability to pursue their postgraduate studies and attain notable job positions. The students did not forget to highlight the role and efforts of the teacher in coupling GE classes with ESP ones to satisfy all their needs regardless of their levels. English for Specific Purposes represents to these students the gate to science expertise be it academic or professional. Unfortunately, their situation did not allow them to have fully loaded ESP classes as they were not equipped with the necessary and basic General English skills which would allow them to advance in ESP classes that are by nature advanced and field oriented.

4. Implications

From the above analysis and the data retained from the focus groups, students' motivation is significantly impacted by the course content and their readiness to learn the language, for their different interests are determined by the extent to which the content of the course, be it ESP or GE, fulfills their needs. Thus, the students' satisfaction with the course content lies

solely on the motivational factor.

The condition these students are put in is understandable, as we cannot presume a perfect acquisition and mastery of a foreign language with very little content, resources, and time. We cannot blame the students nor the teacher for such deteriorating situation of foreign language teaching in higher education institutions because this actual state has been agitated since the first introduction of English language into Moroccan schools.

A typical Moroccan class of students at the undergraduate or graduate levels is a mixture of linguistic abilities and variation since there has been no unified program that teaches the same foreign languages for the same levels, at the same schools, and in the same region. This unconsolidated structure in education, in general, and in teaching, in particular, disrupts the learning and teaching environments and puts the teacher in a position of control over the learning of the students and the latter in total confusion of the content to be taught.

Issuing a circular to emphasize the inclusion of English language teaching at Moroccan universities does not represent such a huge barrier. In fact, the real problem lies in the unstructured curricula developed in the absence of a proper needs analysis, the scoping of the learning and the teaching environments, and research on teachers' development. Teaching ESP or General English requires the same efforts and resources as they are both chained to one another, meaning that training students of whichever major in ESP with no basic GE skills is a failed attempt to construct a product with a good mastery and expertise in specific fields and vice versa. If we focus on developing and designing a good curriculum, and devote the needed resources and materials with an ongoing monitoring, we will certainly be able to bridge the gaps that are cultivated during the students' high school journey. A great focus should be made on the students' needs per major to reinforce the key skills that will serve the students in both academic and professional pathways during the design of the curriculum.

Teachers should not be excluded either from continuous development especially those who teach ESP. Language is in continuous development, so is the lexicon. Thus, the teachers should be acquainted with the jargon of the field and master the operational use of English language in specific contexts. Respecting all these norms can guarantee a total satisfaction of the students from their learning experience and course content and ensure by the same token the satisfaction of the teacher, the department, and the higher authorities with the outcomes of this field-oriented training.

The Moroccan university should look past making the learning process for students solely for the purpose of being graded. Instead, it should focus on quality rather than on quantity by caring more for the number of students who master their major and its operational language in English than the number of those who validate their semester and graduate with degrees and no profound knowledge nor mastery of the language. Students should also not neglect the role of self-training and development as this will help them open up broadly on the target language and familiarize them with the jargon especially the elements that might be missed during classes.

A partnership with private language centers is favored as Moroccan universities can coordinate with these centers to provide trainers, materials, consultancy, and, if possible, courses. The issue resides in whether the Moroccan university would be ready to dispense a budget geared towards realizing this project in the long term. The students then will be expected to honor their side of the deal by committing to language classes and devoting the required time and efforts to improve their English language skills within the different higher education cycles.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, science students at ENS-Rabat are explicitly affected by the course content and are to some extent divided between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with it. The main reason behind their interest in having ESP classes is an amalgamation of academic and professional needs and purposes. Their current GE level, however, does not allow them to access intensive ESP classes and for the minority who are advanced cannot benefit from a mixed ability ESP class. This experience has provided us with a better understanding of the possibilities that we could review in order to progress in the implementation of English language teaching at Moroccan universities. It has also established a scope that could be revisited in order to consider the inclusion of ESP classes within science major departments, in particular, and other humanities departments.

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