

*Original Paper***Pedagogical Principles, Practices and Preventives as Perceived****by ESP Practitioners: Humanities in Focus**Reza Zabihi^{1*}, Momene Ghadiri¹ and Dariush Nejad Ansari¹¹ Department of English, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to describe what Iranian ESP teachers believe to be the main pedagogical principles and what their perceived barriers seem to be. The examination of these principles and barriers were mainly based on the interviewees' English background, followed by the elicitation of teachers' beliefs about the main pedagogical principles of English Language Education in their department, their teaching practices inside the class, dilemmas and obstacles they faced with during their English teaching career and how they cope with or manage those dilemmas, and ended with their suggestions for improvement of English education in Faculties of Humanities. Data were subsequently transcribed, modified, analyzed and translated into English. The results properly reflected various perceived theoretical beliefs of ESP teachers regarding pedagogical principles as well as the obstacles which prevent them from following those principles.

Keywords

pedagogical principles, practices, Barriers, ESP teachers, managing dilemmas

1. Introduction

Teaching is a many-sided and labyrinthine activity that often requires that teachers manipulate several tasks and goals concurrently and flexibly. It requires that teachers make critical and informed decisions, exercise careful judgment, and appreciate the multifaceted nature of education. Over the past two decades, the nature of teaching has changed a lot so much so that early transmission-bound teaching approaches have given way to reflective and scaffolded instruction. In the field of Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been, and still seems to be, one of the most controversial areas (Huang, 2007; Maleki, 2008; Wong, 2005).

Some of the major arguments that loom large in the literature revolve around the obscure and inaccurate theoretical and practical positions taken by the ESP theoreticians as well as language teachers (Dudley-Evans, 1998; Nunan, 2004). From the theoretical standpoint, several authors have

showcased indeterminacy about the linguistic, social, psychological, and anthropological outlooks which ESP could have been built upon. When it comes to practice, likewise, many ESP teachers have cast doubt upon the correspondence between the principles and guidelines recommended by the theoreticians and what they actually practice in such classes.

With the emergence in the 1960s of English for Specific Purposes methodology (ESP), alongside its unique approaches to syllabus design, materials development, teaching, testing, and research (Nunan, 2004), there has been a radical shift in the norms of mainstream ELT in that the new trend put a great emphasis upon practical outcomes which have been ascertained via a process of needs analysis. The ultimate objective was to prepare learners for subject-specific language use as well as effective communication in the tasks required by their study or work situation (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). By and large, it is generally acknowledged that ESP need not necessarily be discipline-wise, i.e. concerned with a specific discipline; rather, it can simply be regarded as an approach to language teaching or an “attitude of mind” (Dudley-Evans, 1998).

This is in line with the claim made by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) that “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning”. That said, we might expect the ESP practitioners to have a clear idea of what ESP means. Lamentably, however, this does not seem to be the case. In this paper, the authors discuss ESP teachers’ perceptions about the key pedagogical principles, practices, and dilemmas which they consider to be part and parcel of their professional identity. The data was gathered from ESP teachers teaching English at the Faculty of Humanities (University of Isfahan, Iran), holding their M.A. and Ph.D. in humanities.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Pedagogical Principles in ESP

According to Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999), the conditions under which optimal language learning can take place and which should be seriously taken into considered by teachers when designing any language course are as follows: (a) language classes should provide learners with opportunities for social interaction and negotiation of meaning, hence the need for creating authentic contexts; (b) the language class should create opportunities for learners to interact in the L2 with an authentic audience; (c) language teachers should make use of authentic tasks; (d) teachers should involve learners in the creative use of language; (e) learners should receive enough time and feedback from language teachers; (f) teachers should guide learners to attend mindfully to the learning process, i.e., the “how” and “why” of performing a task; (g) the stress or anxiety level of the learners should be kept at a minimum; and (h) language teaching should center upon developing learners’ autonomy.

Nonetheless, prior to explaining how these optimal settings may inform the design of ESP courses, we shall define ESP first. In doing so, Dudley-Evans and St. Johns (1998) have enumerated three unique features for ESP courses: (a) English for Specific Purposes is expected to meet the specific needs of

language learners; (b) it should utilize the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline to which it contributes; and, (c) it should revolve around the language which is appropriate to these activities with regards to syntax, vocabulary, register, study skills as well as genre and discourse.

Based on the specific needs of language learners, ESP as an umbrella term, has thus been extended to include three major branches including English for Academic Purposes (EAP) such as English for academic writing and English for law studies, English for Professional Purposes (EPP) such as English for the health care sector and English for nursing, and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) such as English for the hospitality industry and English for hotel receptionists (Basturkmen, 2010). Hence, according to Tudor (1997), ESP deals with “domains of knowledge which the average educated native speaker could not reasonably be expected to be familiar with” (p. 91). As a case in point, in an ESP course developed for a group of nurses, we might include the medical terminology as well as the interaction patterns between nurses and their patients, and patient records, etc. So, for example, the courses which a tourist to England should take are essentially and potentially different from those of an air traffic controller in Singapore (Nunan, 2004).

Teaching an ESP course thus demands that teachers consider the situations where learners will need to use the English language, the tasks, communicative activities and processes (production, reception, interaction and mediation processes) related with these situations, and the genres, language, and communicative strategies used in these situations. According to the situated learning theory proposed by Collins (1988), in an ESP course situated learning provides the learners with opportunities to engage in purposeful tasks in a context that reflects the objectives for which learners may require to use English in the future. Such situated learning is characterized as “the notion of learning knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be useful in real life” (Collins, 1988, p. 2).

Accordingly, based on the principles of the situated learning theory, Herrington and Oliver (1995) have enumerated the features that learning environments need to have: (a) using authentic context, reflecting the ways through which “knowledge will be used in real life”; (b) using authentic classroom practices; (c) modeling the task so that learners have a fair understanding of task processes before it is attempted; (d) assigning and adopting multiple roles and outlooks; (e) collaborating; (f) scaffolding; (g) encouraging learners’ reflection and facilitating the formation of abstractions; (h) enabling “tacit knowledge to be made explicit”; and, (i) integrating learning assessment within the tasks (p. 237).

2.2 Pedagogical Practices and Barriers in ESP

In what follows, we consider how Egbert and Hanson-Smith’s (1999) conditions for optimal language learning classroom environments can be used and practiced as guidelines in designing ESP courses.

2.2.1 Authentic Settings and Audiences

ESP practitioners should provide learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning and use the L2 to communicate with an authentic audience. That is to say, learners should have “an audience for the linguistic output they produce so that they attempt to use the language to construct meanings for

communication rather than solely for practice” (Chapelle, 1998). Authentic audience is characterized as “an audience that is concerned exclusively with the meaning of the speaker’s message” (Johnson, 1999, p. 60). In ESP classes, learners need to practice in social contexts pertaining to particular subject areas. This is in line with the Situated Learning Theory (Lave and Wenger 1991), which states that learning tasks should be incorporated into the target context and addresses the same cognitive processes that one might need in real life, hence the need for learners to be acquainted with the particular norms and conventions of their specialist community. Meaning negotiation is important in ESP classes partly due to the fact that what the learner produces should be adjusted to what authentic social communication requires.

2.2.2 Authentic Tasks

Moreover, learners should be largely exposed to and involved in authentic tasks. Tasks should be meaningful in the sense that learners have to learn language *incidentally*, while making use of the language forms demanded by the task. Task has been defined as “some kind of activity designed to engage the learner in using the language communicatively or reflectively in order to arrive at an outcome other than that of learning a specified feature of the language” (Ellis, 1994, p. 595). However, authentic task has been defined as “one that learners perceive is something that they will use outside of class in their ‘real’ world or that parallels or replicates ‘real’ functions beyond the classroom” (Egbert, 2005). In ESP classes, learners should be provided with opportunities to engage in authentic tasks, to make use of language for real-life purposes, and to be exposed to texts with the same purpose as they would be used by the particular specialist community. In this connection, it has been argued that the incorporation of community-based experiences into classroom tasks can lead to increased language gains (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985).

2.2.3 Exposure to Creative Language

In addition to providing learners with authentic settings, audiences and tasks, ESP teachers are expected to encourage learners to produce miscellaneous and creative language. Given the fact that the prospective communicative needs of ESP learners might not be pre-specified, teachers should teach them how to deal with different situations, which implies getting acquainted with different types of texts used in their respective field of study. Therefore, it seems necessary that ESP teachers provide learners with opportunities to be familiar with different genres. Johns (2002) advocates a “socio-literate” approach, whereby learners are expected to engage in assignments that help them understand how different types of texts are constructed.

2.2.4 Optimal Levels of Anxiety

In an ESP class, learners should work in an environment with optimal levels of stress or anxiety level and receive enough time and feedback. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 128) have pointed out, language learning is an emotional experience for learners. Therefore, learners’ motivation, anxiety, stress, self-confidence, and so on should be seriously taken into consideration. Making use of pair work

and group work to build and strengthen social relationships, allotting enough time for learners to think, avoiding pressure and highlighting the learning process rather than product, can be appropriate strategies.

2.2.5 Learner Autonomy and Mindfulness

Last but by no means least, ESP practitioners should try to enhance learner autonomy and to help learners attend to the learning process mindfully. It is crystal clear that learners should become enabled to continue learning and developing their communicative skills even when the course is over. Granted that learners may engage in different areas in the future, ESP teachers are supposed to help learners develop the necessary skills and strategies which can enable them to manage in different contexts of language use. Learners are in turn expected to acquire the required ability to decide what they might need to know, and how they can learn it, in order to face a specific communicative situation.

In the light of the above, we might expect the ESP practitioners to have a clear idea of what ESP means. Sadly, however, this does not seem to be the case. In order to shed more light on the issue, the authors discuss ESP teachers' perceptions about the key pedagogical principles, practices, and dilemmas which they consider to be part of their professional academic identity.

3. Method

3.1 Participant

A total number of eight ESP teachers teaching English at the Faculty of Humanities (University of Isfahan) participated in this study. They all agreed to take part in this study voluntarily. They also completed their M.A. and Ph.D. in humanities rather than English Language Education. Their English background dates back to their Ph.D. career studying abroad, taking different English courses at institutes, and taking different standardized tests. Through purposive sampling, from eight Humanity departments at University of Isfahan, eight ESP teachers were opted for this study. The detailed information on the participants in the interview is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of participants

Sex	Age	department	Teaching Experience				
Male	7	Twenties	1	Persian Literature	1	Less than two years	2
Female	1	Thirties	1	Social Sciences	1	2-4 years	1
		Forties	4	Geography	1	5-9 years	1
		Fifties	2	History	1	10-14 years	1
		Philosophy	1	15-19 years	1		
		Psychology	1	20-24 years	2		
		Educational Sciences	1				
		counseling	1				
Total	8						8

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Persian (and then translated into English by the present authors) in a quiet but relaxing environment in March 2012 and lasted for about 30-45 minutes. The interviewer carefully conducted the interviews and cautiously analyzed the data. Prior to the interview, the interviewees were told that their participation would be voluntary, that they had the right to skip and stop the interview if the questions were inappropriate and that the researchers would pay heed to keep the data confidential, using those for the research purposes only. It was tried to make a good, stable relationship that enabled the interviewees to speak freely regardless of their position, age, or career.

The interview began with some demographic information mainly with a focus on the interviewees' English background, continued with teachers' beliefs about the main pedagogical principles of English Language Education in their department, their teaching practices inside the class, dilemmas and obstacles they faced with during their English teaching career and how they coped with or managed those dilemmas, and lasted with their suggestions for improvement of English education in Faculties of Humanities. The detailed information on the questions in the interview is shown in Table 2. Data were subsequently transcribed, modified, analyzed and translated into English. Authors have made an attempt to pay careful heed to the analysis of the data so that the English transcript accurately reflected the interviewees' voices, although a few very minor amendments have been made accordingly.

Table 2. A list of interview question

Interview Question
1 What is (are) the pedagogical principle(s) considered to be most principal for English Language Education in your department?
2 What actions do you follow to reach that (those) principle(s) inside the class?
3 Has there been any change (improvement) in English Language Education in your department since 20 years ago? Why?
4 What are the main obstacles or dilemmas hindering the implementation of that (those) principle(s) inside the class?
5 How do you cope with or manage these dilemmas inside the class?
6 What will you suggest for improvement of the situation?

4. Result

4.1 Pedagogical Principles and Actions towards Reaching Those

Teachers' depiction of the main pedagogical principles reflects strategies they make use of within their teaching career. The main pedagogical principles were coded into two categories.

4.1.1 General Educational Principles

The main pedagogical principle shared among all humanities departments seems to be enabling

learners to be proficient at reading authentic materials related to their field of study. Students should also be familiarized with the jargon or more simply terminologies of their major. In other words, promoting listening and speaking is not the principle inside these classes. Students should gain autonomy and self-regulation in reading comprehension so that they can afterward use the authentic materials related to their field in their papers, books, etc:

Our purpose in English for specific purposes is that students be familiar with using scientific source materials related to their field of study. The main focus is on getting acquainted with key concepts of their major and translating authentic specialized texts to and from English. Students should be fully acquainted with terminology or jargon of the field of study. The purpose of this course is not teaching conversation but to teach texts. Students are to be acquainted with the jargon or more simply terminologies of their major as well as translating texts. We are not concerned with other skills.

To achieve the given goal, the teachers should resort to authentic texts related to learners' field of study and try to translate those into target language. Teachers tend to design each session around a clear structure of activities:

- 1) Mini lecture concerning the key concepts enlightened in the text;
- 2) Reading the text stepwise, one paragraph after another;
- 3) Straying from the text, illustrating the grammar or terminology drawn on, if necessary;
- 4) Students Translating the text one by one;
- 5) Teacher as well as other pupils' comments on the translation given;
- 6) Comparing different translation, revising or even rejecting the translation;
- 7) Teacher final comment on translation;
- 8) Concluding the session.

Students are to prepare the texts and work on them before attending the class. I start reading one paragraph then ask my students to continue. In case of inaccuracy in pronunciation, I will interfere and correct them; if not, I ask them to translate. Translations are compared and discussed among all students. Finally, I will modify and present the last translation. I will ask all students to read and translate.

4.1.2 Expected Skills and Attitudes

Students are to be good at basic general sub-skills. They should make out the basic structure of English sentences as well as general terms. Teachers want students to be conscientious, to learn to work hard on translation to develop their reading proficiency. Teachers pay less heed to other language-related skills or development of practical skills students may face in their real life.

I ask my students to translate the texts and write their translation down before

attending the class.... if they have not translated they would have preferred not to attend the class... Students should at least have studied the book 504 Absolutely Essential Words in their general English course...

4.2 Obstacles to Pedagogical Principles and Ways to Manage Them

Throughout the course of interviews teachers have noted different topics representing dilemmas they face. Obstacles have been coded into six major categories.

4.2.1 Dealing with Students

Students have different levels of proficiency and versatile abilities. So classes are mostly heterogeneous. Largely, their general basic skills are so weak, lower than the standard defined for the course. This system directs teachers towards using translation as a technique inside the class. They sometimes have to devote the time of their class working on general essential terminology and basic sentence structures:

Students are not even acquainted with simple grammatical structures. They cannot even read the texts. I think they have to pay more heed to general English courses.

Those who study history mostly paid less heed to studying in their high school education. They didn't specify enough time to study Their general basic skills are so weak.

Students are mostly motiveless. They are not fascinated in philosophy. As a rule of thumb, nearly, 70% of the class is neither interested nor talented enough. They will waste their own time as well as teacher's. Bachelor's degree is more important than learning. This reflects ESP courses as well.

Students have versatile abilities. They are not homogeneous. I cannot homogenize them.

Students are not interested. Few students are truly active; rest of the class doesn't work hard... their basic skills are lower than the standard.

Students are so weak in their general English. This leads teacher to the traditional system of reading and translating. If you are to resist, they will understand nothing.

4.2.2 Dealing with Time

Although not referred to as a problem by most teachers, all instructors believe that a two-unit or four-unit EFL course in BA education is inadequate to let teachers achieve the educational purposes. Although teachers may not have faced with limitation of time, these courses will not lead to autonomous, self-regulated learners. Subsequently, it suffices that teachers acquaint their students with the key concepts and basic translation skills. Students themselves should work hard to acquire proficiency in reading authentic texts:

We have to hurriedly go through the texts inside the class... students resist and

complain...

Two-unit course is not enough at all. If they like, we introduce supplementary texts to them or they can attend some private institutes to work more on their English proficiency.

4.2.3 Lack of Congruence between EGP and ESP Teachers

Although the proportion of this category is not high, interviews revealed that one of the major impediments to development of learners' English proficiency is teacher isolation and lack of collegiality. The following comments well illustrate the point:

In BA education, students have four to six- unit EFL courses. Each two unit is thought by one teacher. If all courses have been thought by one teacher or there would be a sense of collegiality among teachers, it will certainly affect the result....

4.2.4 Use of Facilities and Physical Conditions

Although use of technologies and new media has been encouraged in language teaching, ESP teachers are less likely to use these facilities. Teachers referred to the time constraints and the students' low general skills as the main reason, although some teachers did not consider the use of technologies as the purpose or even facilitator in ESP classes:

Students are not even good at reading the text, how come they present PowerPoint in English...

The ideal is that students can search databases related to their field of study, find articles and present them inside the class; however, students are not capable enough and three or four months of study is not sufficient to both familiarize them with the key concepts of their major and ask them to search and find an article...

Movies are good but it is not the purpose of ESP course... here, we are just to work on reading comprehension, not listening and speaking...

We welcome the use of technologies if the time of the class permits...

Some teachers referred to the poor physical conditions inside the class:

Sometimes, classes are in basement; there is a lot of noise. You turn of the fan; it gets hot; you turn it on, there is a lot of noise ...

4.2.5 Use of First Language vs. Second Language

There is not a consensus among all ESP teachers regarding which language should be used inside the class. Some believe that in order to understand a text you have to translate it into your first language so that you can comprehend it better. Others believe that English courses should be presented in English. However, the actual conditions of the classes including students' low general skills will not let them fulfill their purpose:

Students prefer to use their L1 inside the class. In MA courses, I resist; however, in BA, it is not possible; they will understand nothing.

If you present the course in English, they will not understand anything.

You cannot expect to speak solely English throughout the class. They not only don't understand what you say but they may also be left with negative feelings...

L1 should be used inside the class. Here, the purpose is reading; what language do you want to use? In my opinion, the best way to learn is comparison. You have to translate the text yourself, and then compare it with one valid translation to test out your comprehension...

4.2.6 Teaching Approach

Although the proportion of this category was not high, teachers referred to their ideal language teaching approach which cannot be fulfilled inside the class. They focused on student-centered learning, working on writing skills, presenting articles related to their field of study, etc. This impedes teachers to develop an autonomous language learner who can use the authentic materials related to his major in his works:

Group work and discussion is excellent; however, the actual potential of the class won't let you do so...

You like to use modern eclectic teaching methods, use discussion inside the class, make use of PowerPoint presentation, ask students search and find articles in English, translate their Persian articles into English. However, if you are to follow your ideal teaching plan, just less than 20% of your class gets involved. Subsequently, you have to resort to the same traditional reading interaction through translation approach.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed at describing what Iranian ESP teachers believe to be the main pedagogical principles and what their perceived barriers seem to be. The data-driven examination of these principles and barriers were mainly based on the interviewees' English background, followed by the elicitation of teachers' beliefs about the main pedagogical principles of English Language Education in their department, their teaching practices inside the class, dilemmas and obstacles they faced with during their English teaching career and how they coped with or managed those dilemmas, and ended with their suggestions for improvement of English education in Faculties of Humanities.

During the course of interviews, it was revealed that the teachers try to resort to authentic texts related to learners' field of study and translate those texts into target language. Teachers tend to design each session around a clear structure of activities such as mini lecture concerning the key concepts

enlightened in the text, reading the text stepwise, one paragraph after another, straying from the text, illustrating the grammar or terminology drawn on, if necessary, students translating the text one by one, teacher as well as other pupils' comments on the translation given, comparing different translation, revising or even rejecting the translation, teacher final comment on translation, and concluding the session. These do not seem to fully satisfy Egbert and Hanson-Smith's (1999) three-part conditions for authenticity, i.e. authentic contexts, authentic audience and authentic tasks.

These conceptualizations point to the fact that Iranian ESP practitioners might have imprecise impressions on the concept of 'authenticity'. ESP curriculum developers and syllabus designers might have to reconsider what is supposed to mean by the notion of 'authenticity' in terms of appropriateness. A major concern for Iranian ESP teachers should be to try to find authentic materials, while naively relying on publishers' claim that their materials are authentic in the narrow sense of authenticity. In a novel outlook on authenticity, however, pragmatic and pedagogic appropriateness should be the main consideration for syllabus designers. Widdowson (1998) conceives of authenticity as a social construct in the sense that people and the context in which they are interacting can certainly contribute more to authenticity than textbooks.

As a case in point, in a medical setting, there are differences in how a request is put forward by a doctor to a nurse, a nurse to a doctor, or a doctor to a patient. If the materials that are used in such a context do not comprise the nuances of the tone or details of utterances, it is the ESP teachers' responsibility to rejuvenate the situation by providing the learners with sufficient information. Furthermore, materials developers are required to take into account the influence of *what* is said to *whom*, *when* and *how* in terms of conforming to a need of being real-life.

It can therefore be argued that ESP course-books find ways of catering to the universal needs of language learners. However, unlike the common belief among the interviewees (i.e. that it suffices that teachers acquaint their students with the key concepts and basic translation skills), it seems that the best resource of authentic materials could be the learners themselves, and in particular those who have already been exposed to real-life and authentic situations and tasks.

In addition to uncovering various perceived theoretical beliefs of ESP teachers with regard to pedagogical principles, the results of this study also properly reflected a number of obstacles which prevent teachers from following those principles and guidelines. Moreover, obstacles toward the implementation of personally important principles into pedagogical practice were related to six categories, three of which seem to be most relevant and prominent as follows:

- 1) Dealing with students which seem to be a shared problem for all teachers both in Western and Eastern countries. Those studying humanities are mostly motiveless and uninterested; some are indifferent in classes; often, their field of study has not been their first choice in Entrance Examinations. This subsequently reflects in ESP courses as well;
- 2) Coping with lack of time, wherein students themselves have to work hard to acquire proficiency in

reading authentic texts. Simply put, a two-unit EFL course means that teachers have two hours English every week. This two-hour is changed to one and half an hour in reality. Each term nearly includes fifteen or sixteen sessions. Some sessions are closed due to holidays at the beginning, middle and end of the semester; in practice, teachers deal with ten or eleven sessions to teach Aristotelian (masha'i) philosophy in an English course. "It is more like a humor than a reality";

3) Lack of congruence between GPE and ESP teachers; that is to say, as one of the interviewees pointed out, "no attention is paid to General English courses. GPE teachers should be stricter with students. Don't let them pass the course. I never heard students have failed their GPE; contrary, I heard they have passed the course with an excellent result, though they may still have problem in reading a simple text".

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