

Students' Perceptions about ESP Teaching Quality in Higher Education

تصورات الطلبة لجودة تدريس ESP في التعليم العالي

Les perceptions des étudiants sur la qualité de l'enseignement de l'ESP dans l'enseignement supérieur

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Introduction

Higher education institutions world-wide are experiencing a quality evaluation wave in recent years (Buckley and Hurley, 2001). Accordingly, quality teaching researches are gaining much interest as it is considered the primary objective of education. Therefore, it has become necessary to develop performance indicators in an attempt to measure the quality of the teaching and learning output.

In fact, assuring the quality of teaching is based on the constant maintenance and development of teaching and learning process. Undoubtedly, achieving quality requires offering programmes that meets the needs of learners throughout presenting a creative process, implementing a variety of sources to support good practice, incorporating up-to-date information technologies within the teaching process for facilitating learning process, as well as assessing the teaching and learning for the improvement of quality.

English for specific purposes (ESP) courses seek to equip learners with the language competences that allow them to be effective communicators in their field of study or future profession. In other words, they become successful in real life tasks a part from solely focussing on passing examinations. Therefore, faculties and department are responsible of monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. Hence, the main actors to be praised or blamed are ESP practitioner, as far as ESP is concerned. Their role lies in finding the most effective teaching methods, techniques of instruction, appropriate classrooms tasks and activities in order to meet learners' needs and wants.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Quality Teaching

“Quality is never an accident, it is always the result of high intension, sincere efforts, intelligent direction and skillful excusion ; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives”.

William A. Fostter

Before tackling quality teaching, it would seem important to bring about a clear definition of ‘quality’; however, the literature revealed that there is no consensus of what quality means (Barnett, 1994). The concept of quality is multifaceted, it is perceived as a “relative concept” (Harvey and Green, 1993) and may hold a variety of meanings. Harvey and Green (1993) claim that “quality is relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is involved. It means different things to different people ; indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments. This raises the issue of whose quality ? (p. 10)

In the same vein of thoughts, Brown and Harvey (1992) assert that stakeholders in higher education are various and diverse, involving, students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, accreditors, etc. each of these stakeholders has a precise view on the meaning of quality, which is created and influenced by their position or interest in higher education.

Quality teaching is today a great concern for society ; higher education sphere is no exception. Thereupon, universities worldwide are continuously striving to yield better teaching and learning conditions for the purpose of maintaining better quality teaching, and therefore, better learning outcomes. Evidently, the quality of teaching is of great connection with learning, and it has a great influence on learners. That translates the fact that teacher’s instruction and ways of teaching is deemed to impact on the acquisition of learners, as those teachers who possess high qualities and competences are to provide more acceptable practices which contribute to produce improved learning outcomes. Along this line, Barber and Mourshid (2009: 27) argue that “there is no more important empirical determinant of students’ outcomes than good teaching”.

In a more specific context, ESP is a subdivision of a wider field, language for specific purposes (LSP), which is defined by Swales (1993, 300) as “the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programmes for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs”.

it is worth noting that achieving quality teaching in ESP necessitates meeting learners’ needs, utilize appropriate resources that foster students’ engagement in classrooms and support good practice, be creative and innovative, incorporating state-to-the-art technologies and finally manage to effectively evaluate both, teaching performance as well as learning outcomes.

1.2. Factors affecting the Quality of Teaching

It is by no means that the quality of any educational system is guided by the input, process, environment and output. In this respect, effective teaching

demands a combination of fundamental knowledge, effective application of methods and pedagogies in accordance to adequate and creative use of up-to-date instructional tools. It is a truism to assert that teaching is unpredictable and dynamic process, this makes it a daunting profession that requires maintaining a set of skills which permit teachers monitor and enhance their teaching practices. Therefore, teachers' skills and qualifications, teaching process, working conditions and evaluation and assessment are the four basic factors that are likely to influence the provision of high quality teaching.

1.2.1. Teachers' skills and qualifications

Teachers are perceived to be the vital catalysts for the improvement of teaching periphery. Good teachers are likely to compensate the deficiencies of the various areas of teaching. In the light of this, Wallace (2011) claims that teachers are the directors of students' learning, as they are the first who are able to identify each student's strengths and weaknesses and then maintain their capabilities in learning with the view to enhance their learning skills.

The major components of teachers' skills and qualifications, as far as English language teaching is concerned, are the following :

- a. Practical knowledge : the set of techniques and strategies that teachers adapt in classrooms.
- b. Content knowledge : teachers' mastery of linguistic competence (phonology, grammar, etc), language acquisition, and the maintenance of teaching theories.
- c. Contextual knowledge : the familiarity with the context and norms of institution.
- d. Pedagogical knowledge : the ability to restructure content knowledge for teaching purposes, plan, adapt and improvise.
- e. Personal knowledge : the personal beliefs and principals of teachers, and their approaches to teaching.
- f. Reflective knowledge : the ability to reflect upon one's teaching performance, and self-evaluation (Krsmanović & Petrović, 2009).

1.2.2. Teaching process

Teaching process involves interactions between teachers, learners, materials, administrators and curriculum planners, wherein each element affects the others in a way or another. Yet, a big part of responsibility is put on teachers' roles in promoting the quality of instruction and improving the learning situation based on the approaches and philosophies that they adapt along their teaching.

As a case in point, the following points recapitulate the major philosophies pertaining to language teaching, and ESP sphere is no exception :

- a. Students are engaged in practical tasks that relates to world uses of English.
- b. Teachers serve as facilitators of learning rather than presenters of information.
- c. Language and communication should confirm to realistic and authentic Language use.
- d. Students' are qualified with strategies to monitor their learning, and being able to set goals and objectives that yield improvement and progress in language competence.
- e. Incorporating pair and group activities for the purpose of promoting collaborative work.

Notwithstanding teaching philosophies and standards might be the same, there is a variety of teaching styles that teachers may adapt. The same goal and content might be performed in different ways according to each teacher's own style. Albeit, Krsmanović & Petrović (2009) claim that there is a consensus that effective learning is highly dependent on :

- a. The exposure of students to rich input of the target language.
- b. Offering learners opportunities to interact and communicate the language.
- c. Motivating students to learn and build high language competences.

1.2.3. Working conditions

The teaching environment has a paramount influence on the process as well as on the output of learning. The major factors that are said to impact the teaching quality involve the materials and equipment (photocopier, computers, laboratories...) as they help to facilitate teaching and learning process. Class size is also an important factor since the lesser the number of students in class is, the better the teachers controls his class ; besides students have more chances to engage in classroom activities.

In this light, Fenstermacher and Richardson (2000 : 5) claim that “high quality teaching occurs in a supportive environment where teachers work as part of a professional community within a workplace that fosters continuous learning on the part of children and adults”.

1.2.4. Evaluation and assessment

Evaluation and assessment play a vital role in identifying, monitoring and improving teaching quality. Determining the quality of any teaching/learning

situation is based on the measurement of quality of its process and outcomes. Accordingly, the evaluation must entail teachers, students and institutions as well.

Assessment in higher education entails monitoring learners' approaches to study, provide both teachers and students feedback about their teaching/learning performance, measure their performance and assure their academic standards.

1.3. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is the process by which an institution assess the outcomes of its educational services, and assures that they confirm to the quality standards. It is based on the premise that everyone in an organisation has a responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of the product or service (Tam, 2001).

Quality assurance in higher education institutions has become an issue of concern as a result of the increasing demand of good quality by students and society. Hence, making higher education institutions valuable and affordable for students need to be applied nationwide so as to enhance institutions' role in society, in addition to improve the methodologies of quality assurance and its implementation.

Worth noting that quality assurance entails external and internal evaluations. Internal quality assurance comes from the globalisation of the profession and international agencies. Internal quality assurance can be conducted by lecturers of each faculty.

2. Methodology

ESP teaching serves, in essence, to equip learners with adequate language knowledge, and provide them the required skills that they need in order to be successful communicators and achieve betterment in their professional domain. Thus, the question is whether or not ESP courses at the Algerian universities are up-to-date and cater to students' needs.

In down to earth terms, teaching situation in ESP is suffering some deficiencies with regard to the methods and course content. Actually, the review of literature revealed that the major issues involve : low language proficiency, demotivation and lack of student' interest, communication problems, lack of opportunities to practice the language and out-dated methodologies. As for teachers, they suffer an absence of training, challenge to set syllabuses that fit to student's needs and wants, and be effective in motivating students to learn.

2.1. Design

The present research paper was descriptive in nature. It aims at investigating the quality of teaching and learning in ESP context at Tlemcen University (Algeria). Accordingly, the sample population was comprised of 60 students, whose age ranged from 18-32, enrolled in the department of physics at Tlemcen University. The sample was designated based on stratified sampling ; wherein informants were selected from different levels (undergraduate and graduate students). It was comprised of 13 males and 47 females. It is a truism to assert that the present sample cannot be representative to all ESP contexts. Yet, results might be viable in similar settings.

The objectives of this research were the following :

- a. To investigate the quality of teaching in ESP context.
- b. To explore students' perceptions about the ESP teaching situation with regard to their needs.
- c. Identify the requirements to achieve high quality in teaching English in specific contexts from students' perspectives.

2.2. Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were perceived to be the appropriate tool to gather in-depth data about the situation in the research field. The sample was selected from all levels depending on stratified sampling from the department of physics at Tlemcen University. The interview aimed at investigating the methods and techniques that ESP practitioners use in classrooms, and explores the extent to which they approach to high quality practices. It was, actually, designed according to the objectives of the present research as a means to assure quality.

2.3. Data analysis and discussion

This part was devoted to the analysis and coding of data. Responses involved qualitative analysis of the feedback gathered from students' interviews.

2.3.1. Interview Analysis

Based on the obtained information, it was revealed that students have distinct views and perspectives regarding the issue at hand. Some of them were excited and eager to learn English in order to enhance their competencies, whilst others were careless and considered it uninteresting for their studies or professional career.

1. Rubric One : Interest to English Language Learning : At the onset, students enrolled at the Physics department have a consensus on the

fact that English is crucial for effective citizenship worldwide as it is the global language and the language of science. Yet, in Algerian context, more precisely at universities the dominant language of instruction is French, especially, at the level of scientific fields such as medicine, science, mathematics, chemistry etc. Actually, this decreases students' interest to make efforts for learning English language. More than that, the French language prevails over English language even in society, where People tend to use French in daily life as it the second foreign language of the country.

2. Rubric Two : Knowledge of the English Language : Seemingly, the rejection of a minority of students is a result of a complete ignorance of the English language and its essentials. They claim that they do not possess the necessary knowledge of the language neither its basics, which hinders them to comprehend the information provided by teachers, and what they are required to do in the classroom. Some of them blame the educational system for not giving importance to English in the primary, middle and secondary schools ; others blame ESP teachers for being demotivating and incompetent ; and others admit that they are responsible and the ones to blame for such issues, since language competence can be constructed by students efforts like doing readings in order to widen their vocabulary, making attempts to learn grammar, and give it the necessary interest so as to be effective.
3. Rubric Three : Time Devoted To Teaching English : From another perspective, the time devoted to teaching English is so limited, which makes it insufficient for students and teachers alike. All students take English classes one session (one hour and a half) per week solely. From students' opinion one session is absolutely unfair and insufficient to learn, practice and improve their abilities. Conversely, others complain from the intensive workload they already have in their field of study. Hence, they prefer to devote their time and efforts for the principle modules rather than studying English.
4. Rubric four : the level of competence : Another significant point was raised throughout the interviews, which is the language spoken in class by teachers. Albeit, teachers concentrate on English in context, they, sometimes, use improved English and speak fluently and quickly as well. Even more, some teachers use unfamiliar terms and conceptions, which make it intricate for ESP learners to detect the wording and understand the meaning of what was said or what they are asked to do. One other significant issue that is worth considering when talking

about ESP teaching is teachers' competences of the specific subject matter and content. Generally, ESP teachers are those who graduate from English departments. Hence, they have little knowledge about the content of specific language and terminologies. This raises various inconveniences as teachers may make mistakes in front of learners, who are specialised in that domain.

5. Rubric Five : Needs Analysis : In order to achieve quality in ESP teaching, one key is needs analysis. Nevertheless, it was uncovered throughout this study that practitioners rarely conduct needs analysis processes. In light of this, students showed dissatisfaction about this matter claiming that teachers cannot recognize what learners need in this field of study without conducting an analysis of the situation. Moreover, each student has a specific strength and weaknesses, and if they do not attempt to make an initial evaluation of students' competencies and areas of difficulty, the whole process of teaching and learning is deemed to suffer troubles.
6. Rubric Six : Situation of English in context : Basically, students who possess adequate competencies in general English would find it easier to get into language in context periphery. Notwithstanding, the situation in physics department is not the case. A great part of students find themselves in a maze between improving their English language level, and acquiring the scientific language pertaining to their speciality.
7. Rubric Seven : Language Skills : As far as language skills is concerned, ESP learners claim that teachers tend to rely to a large extent on reading articles and texts in addition to the translation of passages from French to English which they enjoy and find beneficial to improve their reading and listening skills, pronunciation, and also help to extend their vocabulary. Yet, productive skills are not afforded much care. They consider that they are in a need to be able to make readings and speak effectively. Hence, activities to enhance speaking and writing are required.
8. Rubric Eight : Motivation : When considering motivation, the two actors have an impact. That is to say, teachers and students may have a hand in raising motivation level or the contrast. First, students who possess a positive attitude towards learning English and those who value its importance for their future studies or professional career express high motivation and eagerness to learn English. On the other hand, some showed a negative attitude and were careless. From another perspective, teachers are also to blame because lot of students express

their disappointment as the tasks and activities during the course were not motivating or more precisely “boring” as they proclaim.

9. Rubric Nine : Technology and ICT's : Technology is a key to enhance learning outcomes, facilitates teaching and learning process, and it is likely to have positive outcomes on “digital generation” since their daily life is dependent on technology. Unfortunately, in this department ESP classes are purely traditional. In fact, there is a total absence of ICT's and use of technology.
10. Rubric Ten : Evaluation and Assessment : No one can deny the significant role of evaluation in education, ESP periphery is no exception. Evaluation and assessment are deemed to reflect the quality of teaching and learning, indicate the strength and areas of difficulty for students, they also help teachers have a feedback about their performance and, thus, improve the quality of instruction as they enable institutions and educational systems to have judgement about the quality of education they are affording. However, systems of evaluation, in the context at hand, are traditional wherein students take standard tests and examinations in a form of true/false statements, fill in the blanks and translating passages from French to English.

2.3.2. Discussion

Researchers and specialists have a consensus that ESP in Algerian universities is still deficient, and needs further attention and care in order to improve the returns of this field, and fulfil its objectives. What is worth mentioning at the onset is that 4 out of 5 teachers who are in charge of ESP in most departments are not recruited. They are generally doctoral researchers or students holding master degree. This signifies that those part-time teachers didn't have any training before launching in the profession ; they do not have sufficient experience to cope with ESP learners neither pedagogically nor on the cognitive level. Hence, the quality of teaching is likely to decrease.

Regarding the results of the current study which was based on learners' perspectives, the problems in such domain are related to the infrastructure of the educational system. Four, English is not given its proper value. Thus, students lack the base and interest of this language along their studies. In addition a great part of learners need to raise aware about the crucial role of English for their future studies or professional career.

What is more, is the fact that the methods of teaching and instruction need to be refined and improved so as to fit their needs and cater to their lacks and wants. In this specific context it is worth noting that needs analysis is a

prerequisite to establish a sound foundation that helps to set the appropriate curriculum, syllabus and course content. One of the other factors is giving importance to the four language skills, and not to restrain learners' competences by relying only on reading and translation. Instead, teachers should introduce activities that foster listening, reading, speaking and writing along the specific language acquisition.

Despite the fact that teachers need the adequate training in order to be effective and provide high quality of instruction, it must be noted that literary teachers face a big challenge to be able to teach English to students who are specialised in the field. So to speak, teachers' background should be taken into consideration during the employment process. In this respect, teachers with scientific background should be directed to scientific departments such as science, medicine, biology, etc. whereas, those who are literary should be employed at the level of literary departments like psychology, sociology, history, etc.

It goes without saying that teachers' role is important to raise the quality of ESP teaching. However, they are not the only to blame. Students must build positive attitude towards English learning, make efforts and co-operate with teachers in order to attain better results and achieve higher quality in ESP teaching situation. In addition to increase English sessions in the purpose of offering teachers much time to introduce a variety of activities, and have more opportunities to improvise and be creative. Likewise, this is likely to be of great benefits to students' competence and performance.

Conclusion

Assuring quality teaching is based on the continuous monitoring and supervision of teaching and learning process. From a narrower standpoint, ESP context suffer from a number of deficiencies that require to be considered so as to mend the chasms and afford improved instructions, thus, produce higher learning outcomes. Based on learners' perspectives, ESP situation may witness better conditions and enhanced outcomes by raising awareness about the English language, proper employment of teachers as well training them so as to be well groomed and ready to launch into the profession of ESP teaching, working on raising teaching quality standards, motivate learners and carrying out appropriate evaluation procedures are possible suggestions that may raise quality in ESP context.

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Abstract

Quality teaching is becoming a salient topic that is gaining a rousing interest in recent years. Actually, the identification of the quality of any educational system depends on a number of methods and determinants. Therefore, defining learners' perceptions and expectations can be considered one of the methods to assure the effectiveness of teaching. Teaching and learning English for specific purposes (ESP) aims at equipping students with the language competences that help them be effective in their field of study as well as their professions. Hence, teaching English with accordance to students' needs. The present research paper aims at investigating learners' perceptions about the ESP course, and examines the extent to which they find ESP teaching situation effective and beneficial. Accordingly, data were gathered based on interviews conducted with ESP students enrolled at the Physics department at Tlemcen University (Algeria). Results revealed that ESP context suffer from a number of deficiencies related to teachers, students and teaching and learning conditions.

Keywords

English for specific purposes, higher education, quality teaching, students' perception.

مستخلص

أصبحت جودة التدريس موضوعًا بارزًا يكتسب اهتمامًا متزايدًا في الآونة الأخيرة. ويعتمد تحديد جودة أي نظام تعليمي على عدد من الطرق والمحددات، حيث يمكن اعتبار تصورات المتعلمين وتوقعاتهم إحدى الطرق المساعدة لتقييم واستكشاف فعالية التدريس. يهدف تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض محددة (ESP) إلى تزويد الطلاب بالكفاءات اللغوية، والتي تساعدهم على أن يكونوا أكثر جاهزية في مجال دراستهم وتؤهلهم لتولي مهامهم المستقبلية، وعليه يتم تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية وفقًا لاحتياجات الطلاب. وعلى هذا الأساس جاءت هذه الورقة البحثية للاطلاع على تصورات الطلبة حول جودة تدريس ESP ومدى فاعليته، من خلال مقابلات أجريت مع طلبة ESP المسجلين في قسم الفيزياء بجامعة تلمسان (الجزائر). وخلصت هذه الدراسة إلى أن نظام ESP يتعرض لبعض النقائص والصعوبات منقسمة بين جوانب مرتبطة بالطلبة وأخرى مرتبطة بالأساتذة إلى جانب بعض الجوانب المادية كالوسائل المستخدمة في العملية التعليمية.

كلمات مفتاحية

اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض محددة، التعليم العالي، ضمان الجودة، تصورات الطلبة.

Résumé

La qualité de l'éducation est un sujet saillant qui suscite un intérêt vif. En fait, l'identification de la qualité de tout système éducatif dépend d'un certain nombre de méthodes et déterminants. Par conséquent, la définition des attentes et des perceptions des étudiants peut être considérée comme l'une des méthodes permettant d'assurer l'efficacité de l'enseignement. L'enseignement de l'anglais à des fins spécifiques (ESP) vise à apporter les étudiants des compétences linguistiques qui les aident à être compétents dans leur domaine d'études ainsi que dans leurs professions. C'est à dire, enseigner l'anglais selon les besoins des étudiants. Cet article vise à explorer les perceptions des étudiants dans la situation d'enseignement ESP et examine sa efficacité. En conséquence, une étude a été menée dans laquelle des données ont été recueillies par des entretiens avec des étudiants ESP inscrits au département de physique de l'Université de Tlemcen (Algérie). Les résultats ont révélé que le contexte ESP souffre d'un certain nombre de déficiences liées aux enseignants, aux étudiants et aux conditions d'enseignement et d'apprentissage.

Mots-clés

Anglais à des fins spécifiques, l'enseignement supérieur, qualité de l'enseignement, perception des étudiants
