

Status of General English and Specific English in Arab Countries

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Abstract: *General English language is considered an obstacle which hinders the way in front of Saudi students seeking to continue their university studies. The problem is deeply rooted, it dated back to their history of education when first joined the primary and secondary schools. In fact in these schools no English in the true term was taught, those teachers dared to reduce English to only memorization of grammar rules, as the result all the English language skills were neglected badly, and the outcome is the false learners of English. The same schools product now enrolled in the university, now they face a new problem which is English for specific purpose.*

Keywords: Latin language, General language, ESP, medical terminology. Lay terms

1. How is English thought of in Saudi Arabia?

Saudi students consider English as an undesirable tedious subject and as a course to pass, rather than a subject to be used in their studies. In fact English is not used in their everyday life, or in other words is not used outside their classrooms. But the most important reason is that English is viewed by them as, a foreign language that belongs to a foreign culture, they dislike. Their “dislike” is based on religious platform. They usually pass the language course by just memorizing mechanically the grammar rules.

The students of medicine, and applied medical studies, come to know or discover that the tedious memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules, are of no use or of any help, in their medical majors, then soon emerged the idea, of adopting English for specific purposes, (ESP) as an approach, in their language courses. The idea behind that is to provide students with the knowledge that enables them to cope with their new medical majors, therefore, universities start introducing ESP courses in the first year of their study.

In their attempts to do carry out that, there are defects and shortcomings, because ESP designers have not paid any attention to the students’ needs, needs analysis was totally neglected, the course designers seem to be lazy enough, they have just selected materials available for teaching ESP, ignoring at the same time the standard in which the students are in presently. This, I mean the standard of general English; will lead us to discuss the status of English in Saudi Universities.

The status of English

English is taught as a subject among other subjects, or rather a compulsory subject at different stages of education. The dilemma is that the Saudi students are facing now, is that the un- expectable shift, after they spent their life been instructed in Arabic, and after the intentional neglect ion of the undesirable English, they have to cope with that subject, which they have ignored throughout their study. Now they join the university, and take their majors in medicine, and they face a new medium of teaching, that is English, and in order to cope with it, and with the large amount of references, they try to acquire that language, which has been

ignored through their past years of studies. In the beginning most of the students start being frustrated, and then gradually adapt themselves to the new situation. It should be noted that adaptation to the new situation will not solve the problem, unless they try hard to acquire adequate proficiency in English, in order to put up with English language as a medium of teaching. Others see that, implementing English as a medium of instruction constitutes a cultural catastrophe for them. In addition to the fact that, general English courses, which they take in their classes, do not include vocabulary that they encounter now in their field of specialties in medicine, pharmacy as well as other medical applied sciences. This is shows the necessity of an ESP course, which has to be designed to help them in their majors.

History of English for specific purposes

Many researchers have attempted to identify its origin, but have not come yet to an agreement on the origin of ESP course. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have stated that the origin of ESP is very difficult to be historically traced. However, there are some causes which lead to the emergence of ESP, among the reasons is the focus on the learners. The scientific economic growth is also considered one of the reasons. In addition to, the relationship, between the West and the Middle East This relationship resulted in what we call the medium of international communication which is dominated by English, or to be exact by special English. An important factor is psycholinguistics, which means language acquisition of children of first and second languages, which witnessed dramatic development. The successive years of 1960s and 1970s had witnessed attempts to design courses for science and technology.

2. Emergence of English for Specific Purposes

Huge amount of ink has been spilt on the definitions of English for specific purposes. Many scholars have attempted to identify it, the International Teacher Training Organization, (2005) defines it as it refers to studying English for a particular career, like (law) (medicine) or business in general.

In fact English for specific purposes is learned for specific reasons. We frequently mentioned that ESP is linked with

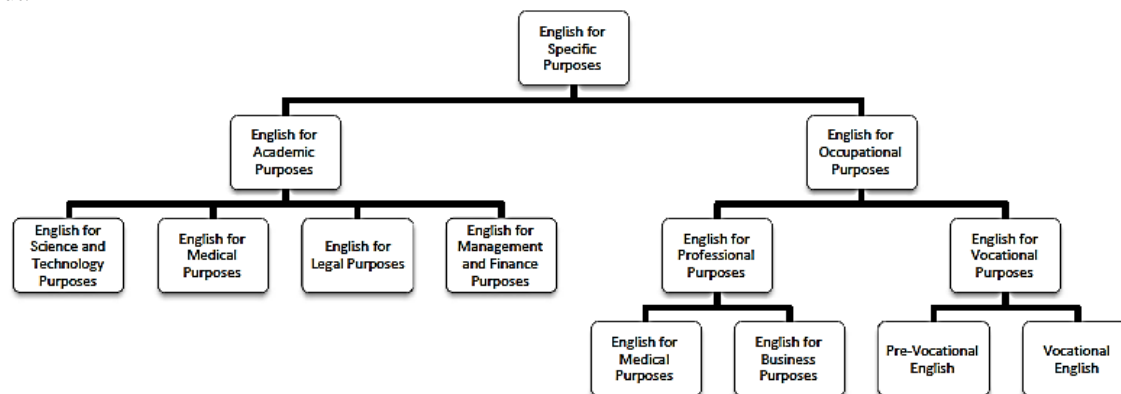
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learners' interest, for example law English, English for Hotel industry, or English for business, English for medicine etc, usually students study ESP not because they are interested in English language, but because they have to perform a certain task in English. By doing so, they are more adapted to their work environment, and consequently pave their way, and be easily employed in their field of specialty.

Here, it is a good chance to shed light on the types of English for specific purposes. The term covers area such as English for occupational purposes; it is abbreviated and known as (EOP). In this type the learners use English as a part of their work or professions (Kenady and Bolithio, 1984,4). The content of this type of English is different from other types according to the profession that a learner is carrying out.



To conclude we can emphasize the fact that English for Academic purposes EAP refers to any English that relates to academic needs.

Dudley and Evans and St. John argue that in the area of English for Academic Purposes, and English for Sciences and Technology (EST) has been identified as the focal area, but English for medical purposes gained their places.

Many scholars considered English for specific purposes as a new area of study. It is also described by Dudley and Evans as fascinating area of study. English for specific purposes is built on what has been acquired in general English. Some other scholars in the field described it as the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Dudley-Evans (1997) defined it as to meet specific needs of the learner. A broader definition is given by Hutchinson and Waters (1987,) they considered it as an approach to language which takes into account the learners' reasons for learning in making decisions related to content and method. This broader definition leads Anthony (1997) to say that it is not clear where GPA ends and ESP starts.

Mackay and Mountford (1987) described the learners' technically specific needs as "clearly utilitarian purpose (p.2), they stated that learners need a special language employed in their settings.

It is noted that all ESP definitions are circled around ESP participants or learners needs such as medical English and the language used in real life such as hospitals. To support the fact mentioned above, we can quote Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998, "ESP is basically a sub-section of General

English for Academic Purposes, it is also known and abbreviated as (EAP). This type of English is taught in educational institutes or schools, it is widely found in general education, either in public or private schools. It is usually taught when a learner intends to specialize, or in other word it is a pre-study. This type of English forms the basic part of their course, and prepares students and qualifies them to start any further studies. It further more provides accessibility to knowledge found in their schools text books. It is focusing on the language of academic performance. While English for occupational purposes, or (EOP), is focusing on the language of job performance.

Diagram of divisions of English

English language, which focuses on a real-life outcomes of an ESP course".

The idea of developing courses for specific learners, based on the variation from one situation to other, since situations are varied, then it is possible to determine the features of specific situations, and make these features the basis of the course. The guiding principles for ESP is that saying, "...tell me what you need English for, I will tell you the English that you need".

In fact English for specific purposes has not yet been understood by those who teach it, such a phenomenon is widely spread in Arab countries, ESP program in most universities is considered as "slot filling" subject in any time-table, and that probably is due to lake of awareness of the subject itself. As far as the syllabuses and methodology are concerned, there is not even a separation between English for specific purposes, and English for general purposes, ESP and EGP. Here, emerges the importance of needs analysis, without which no ESP can be designed. Unfortunately, most of ESP teachers teach ESP with the same methodology of EGP programs, by doing so; they put ESP in the same basket of EGP. Again in such a situation we keep on emphasizing on the needs analysis before starting an ESP program.

3. The difference between ESP and EGP

Hutchinson and Waters (1987), formed their view of the difference between ESP and EGP, when they state there is no difference in theory, they say 'in theory nothing, in practice a great deal'. ESP and EGP mainly differ in the subject matter, since subject matter for ESP is relevant to a

particular field. A part from the subject matters, there are some other features which make the distinctions between the two are more visible, these features are as follow:

- (i) ESP learners are usually adults, whereas English for general purposes is the English language for junior and secondary schools, its objectives are directed towards the sounds and symbols of English, we also noticed that in EGP the absence of particular situation targeted in this kind of language learning, but it focuses on general situations. English for general purposes is considered as a pre-requisite for English for specific purposes, in other words, we can state that ESP is built upon what has been acquired in EGP.
- (ii) ESP objectives are for particular groups, while EGP is to improve English competence and elevate range of skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar, etc.
- (iii) Concern sphere of interest .ESP to design courses for different types of groups of learners according to their needs, while EGP designing courses targeting spelling, vocabulary work, grammar, pronunciation, and language functions.
- (iv) The ESP syllabus is directed towards serving particular occupation in particular field, the vocabulary of ESP courses are related to the specific occupations or professions.

Teaching Medical English

Teaching medical English requires apart from mastering over the language, knowledge of the some medical English that is Latin and Greek, in addition to information regarding body systems, and the pathology of each body system.

In teaching medical terminology, Laar (1998) points out the need for systematic presentation of the formation elements such as prefixes and suffixes in medical texts. He suggests that the vocabulary of Latin and Greek origins could be taught. He also indicated that such words could be included in the prerequisite English course before joining the medical English course. He also points out that the stem and affixes of Latin and Greek origin have to be presented systematically to the medical students learning English at advance level. He also says that the Latin and Greek stems and affixes were listed and their definitions were given in English. Laar in his study indicates that the English language is enriched by Latin borrowings, and therefore, the English course is the most reasonable frame work to teach Latin and Greek elements found in medical terms to students studying medicine and other applied medical studies.

Other approach to English for medical purposes is the grammar- translation method, which is considered as a common feature of language course over the world. Maher, (1986 b) states that grammar- translation method has remained a common practice method of ELT. It is an important field in Turkey, all the scientific discoveries and treatments in medicine are usually made accessible to readers via translations, this method is used to make the medical texts understandable to the students, although there are some possible problems encountered in the filed of professional medical translation. But he argues that translation of medical texts may not be effective in improving English competence.

We can add using technologies which provide real life situation. To conclude we confidentially say that English for medical purposes teaching is a demanding job for the instructors. The instructors therefore, should analyze the students' needs, and then consider which of the approaches will suit their students; here comes the importance of needs analysis.

Who Teaches Medical English?

This is a never-ending debate and un resolved discussion, as who is better and qualified to teach medical English, an English language teacher, specialized in ESP, or the specialist in the field. By the term 'specialist' we mean a doctor of medicine, a physician who specialized in different branches of medicine. Some scholars say the matter is much more than memorizing technical terms, and some support the idea that the matter includes language competency which most of the specialists in medical sciences lack very sadly. Gilmour and Marshal (1993), argue that many of students' problems in comprehending what they read are not caused by the specialist words of their subject matter, rather, the problem they face are caused by general English words. Spack (1988) states, that the problem is the general use of language. She adds that the students' complaints, about problems in understanding specialist text. She says the complaint is not due to the terminology, but due to general English vocabulary. Maleki (2006) stated that low English proficiency hindered the academic progress.

Hutchinson and Waters (1978), argues that the ESP teacher should have the quality of general English teacher. They also added an ESP teacher should have English language knowledge, and expert knowledge of the related field of science. But unfortunately, most of ESP teachers lack the knowledge of the related field of science. Robinson (1991) raised the issue of flexibility, by the term 'flexibility' he means a shift from being a general English teacher to being a specific purpose teacher. What is Robinson mentioned can be understood that any ESP course should be taught by a general language teacher, or at least one can say that he favored the idea that an ESP course can easily be given by a general English teacher, provided that the availability of flexibility.

The majority of the medical English teachers experienced the feeling of un comfortability, while they are in the classroom, that was mainly due to the lack of knowledge and skills in medicine, and also due to the feeling that the medical students he is lecturing are having more medical information and knowledge than he is. Some experts say that the teacher of medical English must be an expert in medical English, not in medicine. Pauline Webber states, "*the teacher is at advantage linguistically anyway and the learners will in fact probably feel more relaxed at speaking in front of a teacher who is just a language expert and not a subject specialist, too, who might become an over dominant figure in the class. The may admit ignorance of the specialist disipline, but must never give the impression that the subject itself in uninteresting or unimportant.*" (Richards,2001:209) stated "*it is teachers themselves who ultimately determine the success of a program*". General English language teachers without necessary training on ESP in general and medical English in specific would not be able to deliver a

successful medical English lesson, medical background is necessary without which a medical English lesson would be mere memorization of certain terms in isolation. A medical English instructor has to be a course evaluator, designer and has the ability to assess the appropriateness of the text books and can suggest alternatives. Here it is appropriate to quote (Richards, 2001:213). *“Teachers in an institution may not always have the particular knowledge and skills program needs, so it may be important to select staff for specialized training to meet these needs.”*

Teachers of medical English were normally specialized in linguistics or literature, and most of them had never been trained in teaching medical English, therefore, there is a need to re-trained those who teach or intend to teach medical English. The demand for medical English teachers has obviously exceeded the supply of well-trained qualified ones, therefore, the majority of General English teachers are required to teach medical English, such an un expected shift is considered a burden on General English language teachers, it is suitable here to quote Hutchison et al (1987: 160) *“ teachers who have been trained for general teaching or for teaching literature may suddenly find themselves having to teach with texts that may know little or nothing about.”*Strevens (1988) describes teaching medical English by untrained or unspecialized teachers as a “shock” for those teachers , and they usually find it difficult to carryout, such an experience may result in total failure, therefore, lack of respect from the students is expected.

The serious barriers for the language teachers who assigned to teach medical terminology are many, among them is lacking of specialized training and stock of skills of specialized terminology.

To conclude this debate, we can state that an ESP teacher does not need to be an expert in the field, but definitely he needs to have some considerable knowledge of area or field he is teaching.

2.1. Significance of ESP teacher

An ESP teacher is not just an ordinary teacher; he has extra other roles to play if we compare him to the general English teacher. In addition to his traditional role of teaching, he has to design courses, and he has to evaluate what he designs. Due to the mentioned roles an ESP teacher is playing, some specialists and scholars in the field tend to call him a ‘ practitioner’ more than a teacher. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) stated that the term ‘ESP practitioner’ seems to be more detailed and complete.

There are so many roles an ESP teacher to play; they can be summarized as follow:

As a teacher

His role is to help students learning, although as a teacher is not the chief knower of the materials he is teaching. His role as a teacher in the classroom is much more like a partner, and above all he should be able to develop authentic communications.

As a designer

Due to unavailability and lack of the specialists’ materials for the courses, the ESP practitioner has to plan for the course, irrespective of the materials available whether they are published or self-produced. He has to investigate deeply the students’ needs which he is supposed to be familiar with, and upon that familiarity and knowledge a teacher as a designer can easily reproduced or develop a course that suits the students.

As a researcher

Research is a very important tool for designing, writing, and conducting a needs analysis. As a researcher has to go deep investigating students’ needs and developing courses that can match the needs. In fact a teacher of medical English is in the process of continuous learning, acquiring knowledge can only be achieved by involving in research activities. An in active teacher who only teaches what has been chosen for him, without discussing the merits and demerits of the course cannot be called a researcher.

As a collaborator

The ESP practitioner was also considered a collaborator by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1999). The collaboration is mainly done by close relations with the subject specialists. The information about the subject should directly be obtained from the specialists, for instance, the college of medicine insists on teaching particular topics such as the skeletal system, whereas, applied medical college or the respiratory therapy concentrates on the respiratory system. In short collaboration between the specialist subject and ESP teacher proves to be one of the multiple means through which a medical English course can be enriched and develop.

As an evaluator

The ESP teacher is also considered an evaluator of the course he is teaching. The course itself should be under the continuous evaluation, therefor, the ESP as a practitioner should involve in different type of evaluation such as testing, which will evaluate the students’ progress and achievements.

Medical English Problems

One of the major obstacles that facing medical English is the general English language curriculum, and its inability to cope with the universities, such difficulties can be summarized in the verities of different levels of knowledge and acquisition of the English language, most of the students are expected upon completion of the secondary schools and enter universities with at least basic knowledge of the language that they had spent 9 years in only solving grammatical problems, but the fact that the majority have very little knowledge of English, or have never any at all.

The problem is that the universities they joined adopted English as the medium of instructions, but this is also false, because most of the lecturers of other subjects such as physiology ,biology, and anatomy adopt a system which can neither be described as English, nor Arabic, a strange mixture of both, to be more exact one can state that they just translated what is written in their text books, in fact there is no and a well-established base upon which English is chosen as the language of instructions, if we accept the assumption

that the translation of the text books to be called medium of teaching, that because the medium of teaching is not just a mere translation, in fact English is the language of communication.

The other problem which is created by the instructors or lecturers themselves, is teaching selective vocabulary with their equivalent meaning in Arabic, therefore, of the entire chapter, students pick up some vocabularies with complete ignorance of the content in which the vocabularies are occurred. To support the assumption above we quote Hence Baker when he stated “learners should be given a great deal of exposure to these items in order to appreciate and make use of the information in a text. The other obvious implication is that these items should not be taught in isolation but in context as central elements in typical collocations. (Baker 1988:103).

There is a co-relation between the English course and the medical course; the English course may include the same topics which are in the other subjects.