

The Teaching of ESP Compared to General English: An Experimental Project

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to evaluate the scope for improvement of teaching ESP to engineering students for developing their proficiency in English. The paper addresses the issues of teaching ESP in comparison to General English to analyse the improvements shown by learners in English. The differences in courses and methods and their impact can well be analysed to determine the efficacy of ESP focus. The paper tries to explore the effectiveness of ESP teaching through a survey of students' feedback. The results show that teaching ESP is effective in terms of students' basic understanding of grammar, syntax and the correct usage of words. It also proves effective in terms of the development of learners' language skills (LSRW). Moreover, learners have been found to be highly motivated in the classroom.

Keywords: *English for specific purposes; ESP Vs. General English.*

Introduction

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) refers to communication as well as writing needs and practices of a particular professional or an occupational group. ESP proves its utility to students who have already some basic knowledge of English and learn the language in order to communicate properly in job-oriented functions. A wide range of areas such as accounting, computer science, tourism, business management, aviation, hospitality, marketing and engineering are covered under ESP. The focal point is that English is not taught as a subject and isolated from students' needs; instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area for the learners. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have observed that one has to give learners access to the language they

want and need to accomplish their own academic or professional goals. In ESP all four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) are stressed equally.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

In ESP the term 'specific' refers to the specific purposes for learning English. ESP draws its strength from a theoretical foundation and a commitment to research-based language education which seeks to reveal the constraints of social contexts on language use. A skill-based language teaching approach was adopted by Calderbank who applied it in 1988/1989 as an integrated approach to meet the needs of his trainees to perform better afterwards. Unlike other pedagogical approaches which may be less specific-needs-based and more

theory-driven, ESP pedagogy places heavy demands on its practitioners to collect empirical needs assessment data to create or adapt materials to meet the specific needs identified. Needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a focused course (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jordan, 1997). In many ways, the means and ends of ESP and general English studies are so similar that it is difficult to disentangle both. There are also other terms in the field of ELT, such as EGP/GPE (English for General Purposes/General Purpose English), EST (English for Science and Technology) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). The importance of ESP becomes particularly evident when these terms are placed in the context of concepts such as 'register' and 'needs analysis', which generally provide the underpinning of context specification in an ESP course. In engineering colleges ESP course is introduced to meet the needs of the cutting-edge society and the needs required for jobs.

Experimenting with ESP in the Classroom

It was decided to test the efficacy of ESP in engineering colleges where only general English (mostly conventional grammar) is taught. The teaching of ESP started in a class of engineering students taught by the Dept. of English, Cambridge Institute of Technology, Ranchi and continued for a month. The sample size was 55-60 students of an engineering class of second semester of 2013 batch. The students of this class were given some reading materials related

to engineering subjects and reading exercises with comprehension questions, sentence writing and vocabulary related to the reading texts. Unlike the conventional classes, where short stories, paragraphs and other study materials were taught in the classroom, the students of this class were given questions to assess their motivation, language learning skills and communication skills. For example, a piece of writing from engineering subject 'Strength of Material' (SOM) was distributed to them and they were asked to answer some questions based on it. This case study aimed to focus on three areas, namely writing skills, oral communication skills and motivation. The experiment tried to focus only on writing and speaking, as these two skills were found to be more important than the other two for students of engineering. In this regard a survey was conducted to investigate improvements in English proficiency of the engineering students.

Results and Discussion

This study revealed some very interesting results. The students had gone through the experiment and showed keen interest in such an approach to teaching and classroom activities. The results revealed that out of 60 students, 45-50 students (75%-76%) frequently and unhesitatingly started to turn up for the class for writing skills and a very few students (14%-15%) admitted that they were weak and not competent enough in writing (See Figure 1).

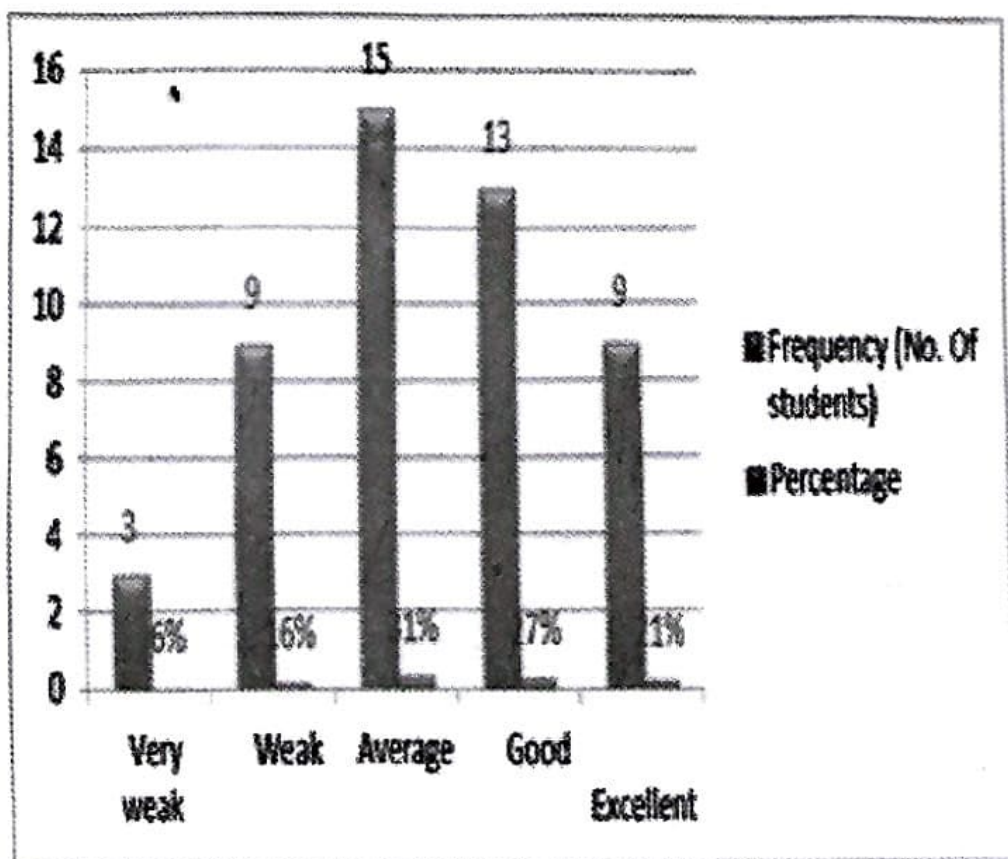


Figure 1: Students on their Writing Skills Improvement

The next step in this case study dealt with the learners' oral communication skills (Speaking). The students were given different topics to prepare a short presentation based on engineering subjects. After a short period of time they were called to make presentations and they performed well. In this process, they were assigned different projects based on engineering topics and at the end a set of questions was asked. It was found on the basis of their responses that they were doing well through this process unlike the traditional approach of speech, extempore, quiz and debate competition related to general topics. Out of 60 students, 48-52 started to turn up for the class with more zeal and enthusiasm unlike in the General English class. There

was a very positive feedback with a surprising 91% with an "YES" response regarding improvement in communication skills. Since this session was based on engineering subjects, the learners were found to be very motivated to make presentations to improve their communication skills.

In this connection a survey was conducted to get the views of learners on their motivation. From the students' responses to the survey questionnaire, it was found that nearly 99% of them said "YES" regarding the improvement in motivation in ESP class through engineering-related texts compared to the general English class (See **Table 1**).

Table 1: Comparison of the ESP Program with the General English Program

Total students in a class	ESP Program (Taught for Case Study)		General English (Traditional Program)	
	No. of learners coming to class	%	No. of learners coming to class	%
62 (strength of class)				
Writing skills	45-50	70%	30-35	53%
Communication skills	50-56	91%	25-30	44%
Motivation	56	99%	35-45	59%

The ESP course was introduced as an experiment, but it was observed that learners started to turn up in the classroom in a large number with greater interest in learning. They found it more interesting and started to attend ESP classes more than they did the general English ones. They were found developing English language skills better than in the general English classes.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This paper reflects the effectiveness of ESP orientation based on the learners' feedback. The results show that the learners had achieved a greater level of motivation as a result of participating in the ESP program in the classroom. They also performed more effectively than before. Secondly, the ESP program motivated the students in improving their writing skills. Thirdly, ESP training served them well in the development of communication skills to meet their professional needs. The study reflects a growing awareness and recognition of the quality issue in ESP teaching-learning. Finally, it can be claimed that the efficacy of the ESP program for students of Cambridge Institute of Technology has contributed to the

improvement of the students' performance in class and is likely to help them in their professional career as well.

A single program alone cannot adequately address all the needs of the learners. ESP training program is a means of continuing professional learning and makes an English teacher more effective and practical to meet the needs of engineering students. The results of the present project can be shared and generalised to the extent possible to other engineering colleges of the state that share the same economic, historical, geographical and cultural background.

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