A Study of ESP Teaching in European Higher Education After Bologna Process

GAO Wenyan[a,*]

[a] Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai, China.
* Corresponding author.

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Abstract
English as an international language, has gained a privileged position and already become the establish language of science and technology. Teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in the higher education has increasingly specialized to cater to the specific situations or purposes for which the language may be needed. Most of the English taught in universities in Europe today is English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This paper is concerned with the teaching of English for Specific Purposes and attempts to analyze the state and main problems of ESP teaching in European higher education after Bologna Process. The author hopes that this research will give some insights to the ESP teaching in China.

Key words: Bologna Process; Higher education; ESP teaching; Europe; China

1. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND EUROPEAN POLICIES AFTER BOLOGNA PROCESS

In the European Union, education is the responsibility of Member States; European Union institutions play a supporting role. According to Art. 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the community “shall contribute to the development of quality education...
by encouraging cooperation between Member States, through actions such as promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, exchanging information or teaching languages of the European Union”. The languages of the European Union are languages used by people within the member states of the European Union. They include the 23 official languages of the European Union plus many others. EU policy is to encourage all its citizens to be multilingual; specifically, it encourages them to be able to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue. Children are starting to learn foreign languages at an increasingly early age in Europe and English is by far the most taught foreign language in nearly all European countries. Language learning facilitates communication between peoples and countries, as well as encouraging cross-border mobility and the integration of migrants. Due to the widespread learning of English, it is often presupposed that students coming into higher education have prior knowledge of the language. Teaching and learning of English at tertiary level has therefore tried to cater to the specific situations and purposes based on the analysis of market needs.

The document to have mentioned the importance of language learning for the Bologna Process was the Berlin Communiqué (2003) as the following: (1) It is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination; (2) member states, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, may achieve greater convergence at the European level by means of appropriate arrangements for ongoing cooperation and co-ordination of policies. The main achievement of the Common European Framework has been the establishment of (1) the three components of defining communicative language competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence; (2) the four language activities: reception, production, interaction and mediation; and (3) the three domains: personal, occupational and educational. In July 2003, the European Commission issued a document, Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004–2006, which urges universities to play “a key role in promoting societal and individual multilingualism”, which also emphasized the need for formal and continued education for language teachers.

2. ESP TEACHING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AFTER BOLOGNA PROCESS

English is intended ultimately to help educational professionals throughout Europe and enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thus promoting international co-operation in academic fields. One of the most important goals of the Bologna Process is to gear the higher education toward preparing students for the multifaceted challenges of the marketplace, which means a shift from traditional input-driven and theory-focused teaching to a focus on the learner and the learning outcomes and objectives of that being taught.

2.1 Needs Analysis and Approaches to Course Design

A need analysis reveals that the ESP learners need English in order to be able to read texts in their subject specialism. Ewer and Latorre (1967) put it this way:

In order to get a working idea of what this basic language consisted of, a frequency analysis of the English actually used by scientific writers was required. . . . In subject, it covered ten main areas of science and a large number of individual disciplines from anatomy to volcanology.

Needs are associated with individual learners. Since they change and shift during the period of a course, needs are best addressed at the level of classroom instruction, where a teacher can select appropriate techniques and materials to accommodate individuals. Course design is the process by which the raw data about a learning need is interpreted in order to produce an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences. There are four general headings based on their educational-cultural orientations: humanistic, social-reconstructions, technological, and academic subject matter. The basic principle of the course design is derived from operations management. If we want to produce a student with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities, we need to specify, as precisely as possible, the learning outcomes of interest. We can identify three main types of course design in ESP: language-centered, skills-centered and learning centered.

2.1.1 Language-centered Course Design

This is the simplest kind of course design and particularly prevalent in ESP, with the aim to draw a direct connect between target situation and the content of the ESP course. The language-centered course design starts from the learners and their needs, proceeds through various stages of analysis to a syllabus, thence to materials in use in the classroom and finally to evaluation of mastery of the syllabus items. Learners must have a command of the following pieces of information: (1) the meaning and function of the key words in the text; (2) the key grammatical structures in the text; and (3) the cohesive devices and coherence in the text.

2.1.2 Skills-centered Course Design

Students in the tertiary level have the limited but important need to read subject texts in English, and based on this need, a number of ESP projects have been set up with the specific aim of developing the students’ ability to read in English. A skills-centered course will present its learning objectives in terms of both performance and
Competence. The skills-centered model is a reaction both to the idea of specific registers of English as a basis for ESP and to the practical constraints on learning imposed by limited time and resources and it approaches the learners as a user of language rather than as a learner of language. To achieve this goal, ESP teachers should possess (1) English language knowledge, and (2) expert knowledge of the related filed of science.

2.1.3 Learner-centered Course Design
ESP, like any form of language teaching, is primarily concerned with learning. The starting point for all language teaching should be an understanding of how people learn. The learner-centered approach is based on the principle that learning is totally determined by the learners. The term learner-centered is akin to “user-centered” focus of a product. If a course is designed in a learner-centered way, it means extensive attention has been given to the needs, interest and skills of our learners when designing courses. Learning is seen as a process in which the learners use what knowledge or skills they have in order to make sense of the flow of new information. Learning is an internal process, which is crucially dependent upon the knowledge the learners already have and their ability and motivation to use it. The heart of learner-centered approach is to decide first what students can and should learn in relation to this course, then how to assess students’ performance and figured out how such learning can be facilitated.

2.2 A Survey of Teaching Approaches in European Higher Education
The kind of ESP courses taught at universities bear certain similarities, what differs is the extent of the teaching and the levels at which the courses are given as well as the approaches used. As with any kind of teaching, there is a variety of methodologies used depending on cultural pre-activities, aims of the courses and available mediating tools. In some universities there has been strong emphasis on change of methodologies, taking into consideration credits, assessment, teaching staff, course materials, and introduction of methodologies, etc.

2.2.1 Content-based Instruction Approach (CBI)
Content-based Instruction (CBI) is a significant approach in language education and it is designed to provide second-language learners instruction in content and language. CBI supports contextualized learning and learners are taught useful language that is embedded within relevant discourse contexts rather than as isolated language fragments. Hence, students make greater connections with the language and what they already know. In teaching English for Specific Purposes, the CBI approach is for vocational and occupational needs or English for Specific Purposes. The goal of CBI is to prepare students to acquire the language while using the context of any subject matter so that students learn the language by using it within the specific context. Keeping students motivated and interested are two important factors underlying content-based instruction. The CBI classroom is learner rather than teacher centered, in which students learn through doing and are actively engaged in the learning process.

2.2.2 Integrated Content and Language Approach (ICL)
Integrated content and language approach (ICL) is a term as a methodology similar to but distinct from content-based instruction. It’s an approach for learning content through an additional language, thus teaching both the subject and the language. ICL is fundamentally based on methodological principles established by research on “language immersion”. ICL is a widely accepted concept nowadays which allows language teachers to be more involved with content and content teachers to be more involved with language. This kind of approach has been identified as very important by the European Mission because “it opens doors on language for a broader range of learners, nurturing self-confidence in young learners and those who have not responded well to formal language instruction in general education. It provides exposure to the language without requiring extra time in the curriculum, which can be of particular interest in vocational settings”. The European Commission has therefore decided to promote the training of teachers to “... enhancing the language competences in general, in order to promote the teaching of non-linguistic subjects in foreign languages”. Therefore, ICL offers a wide range of opportunities for those lecturers interested in merging content and language. By teaching content subjects in English, students are exposed to a twofold learning process, being able to improve both their specialized knowledge of a subject and their linguistic competence in English. ICL approach to learning languages can be a good way for students to improve their communicative competence, helping them to communicate in different cultural and linguistic environments.

2.2.3 Problem-based Learning (PBL)
Problem-based learning is a student-centered pedagogy in which students learn about a subject through the experience of problem solving. Students learn both thinking strategies and domain knowledge. The goal of PBL is to help the students develop flexible knowledge, effective problem solving skills, self-directed learning, effective collaboration skills and intrinsic motivation. Problem-based learning represents a paradigm shift from traditional teaching and learning philosophy, which is more often lecture-based. The tutor must build students’ confidence to take on the problem, and to encourage the students, while also stretching their understanding. PBL follows a constructivist perspective in learning as the role of the instructor is to guide and challenge the learning process rather than strictly providing knowledge. From this perspective, feedback and reflection on the learning
A Study of ESP Teaching in European Higher Education
After Bologna Process

process and group dynamics are essential components of PBL. The learning process is collaborative with students working in small groups and multidisciplinary, where knowledge, skills, and attitudes are integrated. Oral presentation is the most important element of all the courses surveyed and much training and practice seem to go into providing students with these skills through, for example, presentation practice, role play and discussion. PBL has variously been described as active learning, oriented to adults and professional focused on practice in professional contexts. Within a PBL approach, English is seen as a skill that students need to enhance and they do so within the contexts of their multidisciplinary studies.

2.2.4 Team Teaching (Both Language and Content Teachers)

There has been much discussion among ESP specialists and teachers as to who should teach English for specific purposes: English language teachers or specialists in the field? Some people assert that EFL teachers do not possess the knowledge of necessary science knowledge and not be able to expound the knowledge precisely, but on the other hand, most specialists in certain fields also have difficulty in giving lectures with fluent English. Therefore, collaborative learning and team teaching are advocated as a better option for content and language integrated learning, including credits and grades for both aspects of the subject. In any case, what is vital for the future is a good collaboration between content and language teachers based on confidence and respect. Team teaching involves a group of instructors working purposely, regularly, and cooperatively to help a group of students. Teachers together set goals for a course, design a syllabus, prepare individual lesson plans, teach students, and evaluate the results. Teams can be single-discipline, interdisciplinary, or school-within-a-school teams that meet with a common set of students over an extended period of time. The greater the agreement on common objectives and interests, the more likely that teaching will be interdependent and coordinated. Although team teaching in ESP is still rare, there is an increasing awareness of the need to integrate content and language in the domain-specific courses. Both language and content teachers corrected papers and shared grading. How well this cooperative works largely depends on the individuals and disciplinary cultures.

CONCLUSION

English for Specific Purposes has always been seen to be a marginalized subject with low status compared to pure linguistic and literature. With internationalization and globalization, the demand for ESP courses has increased dramatically, making it a great deal of pressure on language centers at universities to develop ESP courses for staff. However, most of the ESP courses offered still seemed to be independent of the content courses and to be very little cooperation between content teachers and language teachers. More ESP teachers tend to favor a teacher-centered methodology with lecturers, individual tasks, and presentations as preferred methods and it is still oriented towards teaching specific terminology and translation. However, it has also opened old debates as to who should be teaching in English, a language or a content teacher. As the paper unfolds, we will discover that the goal of English for Specific Purposes is not primarily the teaching of a subject in English as a foreign language, but rather that the aim is to teach English with a specific content which is normally mixed with general topics. Despite intensive pressure on the English departments and centers to cater to the ESP needs of increasing numbers of specialized departments, the result has been that language teachers are often considered merely as a support for the content teacher rather than collaborators.

We have focused on ESP teaching in European nations of higher education where English is a foreign language and impressed by the development of new ESP teaching and learning approaches and applications. There are valuable experiences and lessons to be learned and shared. We would be interested to find out what methods were used in ESP teaching today within a Chinese context. It’s hoped that the research of this paper, along with its teaching methodologies, will contribute to the development of ESP teaching in China.

REFERENCES

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