Communicative Competence as a Sociocultural Component in ESP Teaching Methodology

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Abstract

Teaching English for Specific Purposes cannot be set apart from sociolinguistics as a field of research, the fact that there is a general agreement among Educationalists that learning a language does not occur in a vacuum but rather to carry out meanings and facts in its social, economic, and cultural contexts. In ESP context, for instance, language is not learnt for its own sake but to engage in meaningful interactions; this means that a considerable attention should be put on how the language is taught, acquired and how it is modified by a specific group of people who share the same social factors such as discourse community, context of language use, purposes of learning and using the English language. Therefore, the present paper investigates the sociocultural parameters in an ESP classroom and how they can be used for an effective ESP teaching methodology.

Keywords: ESP Context, Discourse Community, Sociocultural parameter, Teaching Methodology

Bio Data

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1. Introduction

Being part of ELT, teaching English for specific purposes has received increasing interest on the part of non-native language users all over the world who need English, as a global language, for communication to cope with the various challenges and features of the globalization process. English, indeed, has become a prerequisite for successful interactions in both national and international spheres.

Briefly speaking, the main purpose of ESP teaching, in general, is to train ESP learners to function effectively in their target discourse community, thus, whether the English language is needed in educational setting or whether it is required to fulfill occupational purposes, enabling students to become communicatively competent has been the dominant feature of ESP course design since 1960's.

To cope with our students' requirements, a new challenge in education for our ESP teaching should bridge the gap between the academic and professional needs through including the sociocultural aspect in ESP instruction. This, therefore, requires conducting a process of needs analysis, identifying the target discourse community, and investigating the purpose and the context where language is required.

At this level of discussion, one may ask the question: How can sociolinguistics contribute to ESP teaching and learning process? And to what extent is the sociocultural aspect important in ESP classroom?

To explore this topic and discuss the aforementioned problematic, the following section is provided to present the fundamental of the sociocultural aspect in ESP teaching.

2

2. The Sociocultural Parameter in ESP Teaching

Although extensive research has been carried out on teaching Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), scant attention is paid to the sociocultural parameters in ESP teaching methodology. The contribution of sociolinguistics as a scientific study of language can be only inferred from the various ranges of investigations conducted in ESP classroom that may cover the set of issues related, for instance to:
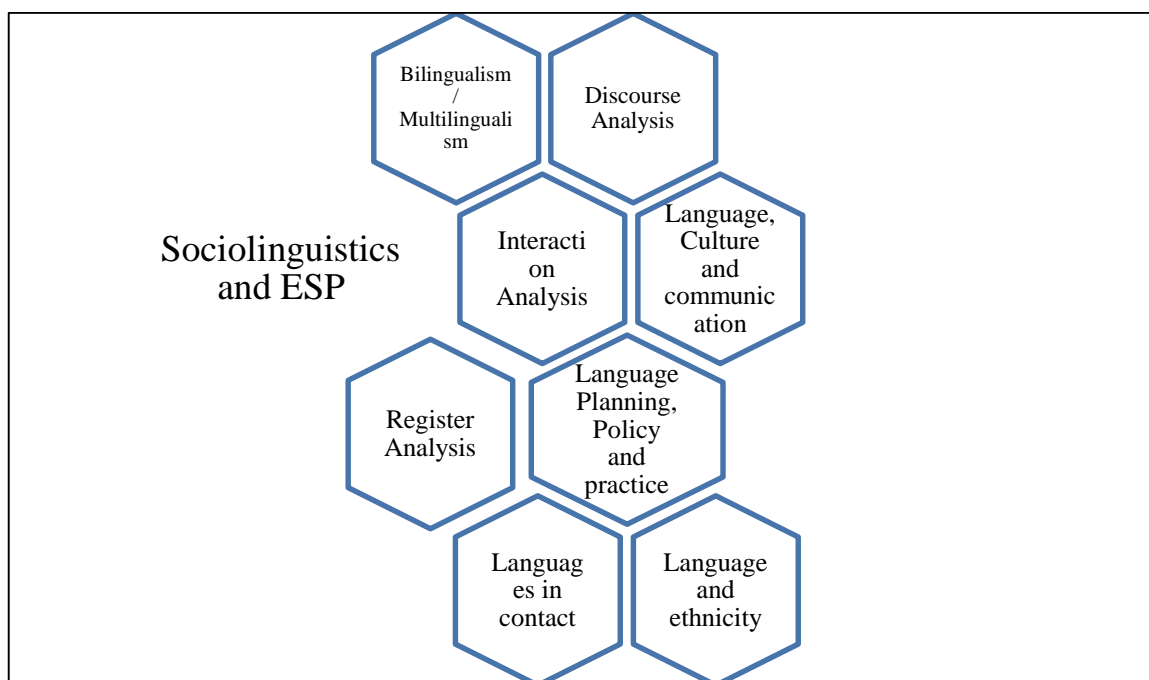
Figure 1. The Contribution of Sociolinguistics in ESP Classroom (Bayyurt, 2013)

Therefore, it is to be mentioned that in any ELT context in general, and ESP in particular, the language classroom is considered as a small community where communication and learning are seen as a cornerstone for successful interaction thus, no one can deny the fact that the language classroom should be a center of sociolinguistics research (Halliday, 1978)**.** In the same line of thought, Bayyurt (2013) states "the application of sociolinguistics in a classroom context can contribute enormously to the development of foreign language teaching techniques" (p. 71)

Additionally, language is learnt to carry out meanings and facts in its social, economic and cultural contexts. The cultural aspect in ESP, in particular, is viewed from different perspectives. Jordon (1997) goes beyond the standard definition of the term culture, providing a further distinction between academic and general culture. The former, according to him, which is also known by disciplinary culture, refers to the students' shared knowledge, views and experiences related their field of study. In the same line of thought, Hyland (2006) asserts that: "…disciplines are often distinguished by their specialized subject areas, the diverse topics, methodologies and the ways of seeing the world" (p. 38)

The latter, on the other hand, is more related to the cultural norms, ideas and beliefs of the English-speaking discourse community. Thus, familiarizing students with the socio-cultural components may also serve as a strategy not only to cope with their subject area but also to succeed in professional life. In this vein, Luke (1995) asserts "Learning to engage with texts and discourses...entails far more than language development or skill acquisition per se. It involves the development and articulation of common sense, of hegemonic 'truths' about social life, political values, and cultural practices" (p.35).

3

2.1.   The Identification of the Target Discourse Community

The concept of '*discourse community*' has been the subject of heated debates; it has been interpreted in different contexts. It is used as a reaction to the long- standing notion of *speech community* in sociolinguistics. This latter tends to describe a particular group of people whose members *share the same linguistic rules*, place, background, language variety whereas discourse community, on the other hand, generally refers to a heterogeneous group of learners who may speak different L1 but share purposes and common public goals of their academic disciplines or social groups(Roe, 1993; Swales, 1990; 2016).

Discourse Community was first introduced by Martin Nystrand (1982) to be more associated, later on, with the *social view* of the writing process (Faigley, 1985). It is, nowadays, applied in different teaching and learning environments such as: teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Discourse community in ESP is different from that of General Language Teaching in terms of its approach to language teaching, the age of the ESP learners, their purposes in learning English, their level of awareness and the role of the teacher. Moreover, it is characterized by its distinctive forms of discourse, language forms, features, communicative purposes and specific genres (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, Basturkmen, 2006; Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984). The table below attempts to shed light on the main differences between ESP and GL communities:

4

	ESP	GL
Approach	Learners-centered approach	Language-centered approach: language, skills, culture, literature etc..
Age of learners	adults	Children, adolescents and adults
Types of learners	workers/ students	students
Context	Academic/ occupational context	Educational context
Awareness	More awareness	Awareness
Purposes	To fit the learners' target and learning needs	To improve their overall English competences

Table 1. The major Differences between ESP and GL (Kennedy and Bolitho, 1984; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Basturkmen, 2006).

Members of the same discourse community in ESP share the same learning requirements, purposes of using the language, the target environment (the discipline, academic and occupational contexts) where English is needed. These aspects give birth to different types of ESP courses such as those categories put forward by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) namely:

- English for Science and Technology (EST)
- English for Social Sciences (ESS)
- English for Business   and Economics (EBE)

2.2.   Communication in ESP Classroom

Another level of investigating the sociocultural aspect in language teaching is through the examination of how language is used for communication in classroom. Believing that this latter focuses more on the formal properties of spoken and written communication through a formal instruction of how language is used in their target discourse community. In this view, an ESP course must be tailored in a way to promote the development of the learners' communication abilities depending on their needed skills. It might, for instance, focus on the reading skills to help students reading updated research relevant to their field of studies, or develop their writing skills by stressing specific genres that characterize a workplace group or a specific professional community. For example, writing letters, emails and memos in business English. This idea is suggested by Basturkman (2006) "it is not possible to teach all of a language, teachers and course designers must be selective" (p. 23)

5

At another levels of analysis, any ESP teaching environment seems to be more subject to informal interactions at the different steps of course design where mutual intelligibility should occur between students/ teacher and students / students. This idea is premised on the view that while the ESP teacher is considered a '*stranger in a strange land*', he finds himself in a dilemma of understanding disciplinary- based knowledge and negotiating the content of the course. Learners, on the other hand, are more knowledgeable in their field of study (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), and are believed to be aware of their needs; this gives another dimension to ESP course where learners are encouraged to perform an active role expressing what they expect to learn. This entails engaging in informal interactions to cooperate with them for the purpose of course design and materials development. This idea is stated by Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) "many students are mature and articulate enough their needs and wants quite clearly" (p.140)

Moreover, whatever the approaches of ESP course design, the practitioner's role is to match the content to the language course objectives. The decision upon any approach to ESP course design depends on several factors such as the results of Needs Analysis and Identification, the status of English in a specific country and the aim of the course. This idea is suggested by Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) "the teacher's task here is to teach language, but the texts he chooses must be significant to the students in their content" (p.14)

For the sake of encouraging students to engage in meaningful interaction, content-based approach is widely acknowledged in the ESP environment. Thus, whatever its models; which are articulated around sheltered-content instruction, adjunct language instruction, theme-based language instruction, and Sustained-Content language teaching, considerable attention should

be oriented to the acquisition of both content and language at different degrees. Learners, in this respect, should be taught in a way to activate their background knowledge and transfer what they have learned in their content courses to language context (Brinton *et al.,* 1989; Snow, 2001; Brinton, 2003). Based on the different studies conducted on the role of Content Based Approach in language classroom, results reveal that learners will be able to enhance their communicative competence and language skills (Bratlett, 1932; Coady, 1979; Carrel, 1988; Harley *et al.,* 1990).

However, in many cases, while another language is used as a medium of instruction French or Arabic, for instance, learners may use code-switching as a strategy to compensate for their lack in linguistic competence. Additionally, for a successful teaching and learning process, the ESP practitioner may also code-switch. However, as well-intentioned researchers we should consider the following set of enquiries: why do our ESP teachers code switch? Is it a willing or pedagogical obligation*?* Is it is syntactically random or rule-governed ESP target community?

 In many situations, ESP practitioner intends to create a relaxed atmosphere, enhance learners' motivation, provide corrective feedback, explain technical terms and clarify the tasks they are required to fulfill. This idea, for instance, has been supported by Shujing (2013) in his study conducted about the examination of the features, functions and educational reflections of Teachers' Code-Switching in the ESP Classroom in China. It is, according to Unamuno (2008) beneficial for "…the restructuring of participants' linguistic and communicative repertoires" (p.02)

6

Taking into consideration that ESP learners are believed to be would-be participants in their discourse communities, they come with different language abilities, they have different reasons, attitudes and motivations for learning English, the role of the practitioner, at this level, should be *"...*concerned with preparing students to enter target discourse communities (academic, professional, and workplace) with distinct and evolving communicative practices" Basturkman (2006, p. 11). This calls for the need to focus on both language use and language learning.

2. 3. From Language Learning to Language Use

Throughout its history, ESP teaching has undergone different stages of development where the sociocultural aspect was always present in ESP classroom-based research and methodology. Traditionally speaking, since 1960's and early 1970's, the function of the ESP course was mainly oriented towards enabling ESP learners to cope with the linguistic features of the language. Register analysis, in this respect, entails the identification and analysis of the subject- specific language use i.e., what are the most common grammatical features and core vocabulary of a specific target environment. In this view, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) write "Taking into account that English for Science and Biology constituted a specific register different from that of GE, the aim of the analysis was to identify the grammatical and lexical features of these registers" (p. 9-10)

Instances of this approach to ESP include the analysis of English for Science and Technology (Barber, 1962; Ewer and Latorre, 1969). Results on sample texts analysis revealed that the scientific language is mainly characterized by a set of language forms, such as: compound nouns, passive voice, conditionals and model verbs.

Moreover, results on register analysis, in general, revealed that ESP target discourse environment is characterized by one or a number of genres which requires a combination of the three categories of terms at different focuses:

- *Specific terminology* or *disciplinary -based terms*: they refer to a set of technical terms which are used in only one specific discourse community
- *Sub- technical* or *core vocabulary*: this category includes those terms which are general to many disciplines but have a specific meaning in an ESP context (table 2 below provides further explanation of this type in Business English)
- *General language terms*: which exist both in ESP and GL and are used with the same meanings e.g., Suggest, provide, argue, reveal …

Verb	General Meaning	Specialized Meaning
Difference	The way in which one person or thing is different from another (Longman Writing Coach Dictionary, 2005)	The term applied to the balance either due to or owing by a speculator on carrying over speculative bargain (Concise Encyclopedia of Real Estate Business Terms, 2006).
Draft	A piece of writing that is not yet in its finished form (Longman Writing Coach Dictionary, 2005)	Bill of exchange (Concise Encyclopedia of Real Estate Business Terms, 2006)
Input	The ideas and things that you do to make something succeed. (Longman Writing Coach Dictionary, 2005)	Raw materials
Instrument	What we use to achieve results	Checks and bills (Concise Encyclopedia of Real Estate Business Terms, 2006)

7

Table 2. Core Vocabulary in Business English (Evans, 2000; Writing Coach Dictionary, 2005; Concise Encyclopedia of Real Estate Business Terms, 2006).

Though teaching grammar and terminology in ESP classroom has played a significant role– from its existence- to enhance the learners' linguistic competence, it is considered nowadays a subject of intensive discussions. A tendency in education has shifted attention to context-based instruction focusing primarily on the communicative approach as suggested by Dudley Evans and John (1998) *"the relationship between form and meaning can be taught and revised in context through analysis and explanation"* (p.74). This explains the fact that the purpose of language learning is not to learn about the language for its own sake but rather it should be used as an instrument to perform communicative assignments or in Austin (1962) words' *"how we do things with words.* In the same line with Austen, Bloor and Bloor (1986) suggest "one thing that ESP …. has shown is that the most important factor for the effective use of the language is that the learner has command of the ways in which the grammar of the language works to perform specific function in a specific context." (p. 21/22)

For this purpose, in English for Business and Administration, for instance, linguistic structures are to be integrated with business functions. The focus should be put on these aspects: Business functions; their related business verbs; model building, and generic features of texts as recommended in the examples below:

Business Functions	Verbs	Associated genres
Managing people	Phrasal verbs: delegate tasks, listen to, deal with	Rapport management. Emails writing.
Recruiting and Selection	Apply, employ, hire, interview, take on.	Job interview Motivation letter. Application letter. CV writing.
Meeting people	Confirm, firm up, make a date, pencil in, set up.	Invitation letter. Making oral business communication.

Table 3. Teaching Grammar and Terminology in its Target Discourse (Evans; 2000; Basterkmen, 2005).

In this phase of ESP development, discourse or rhetorical analysis is, thus, used to provide another dimension in ESP instruction comprising two lines of enquiry: the description of language use and its functional explanation of language. Studies conducted this phase include the analysis of how people use language to achieve their communicative purposes. Examples of the social function of language include the social interactions in academic and occupational contexts, speech acts, genre (Basturkmen, 2006).

Briefly speaking, the ESP context is governed by a set of social interaction, the communicative purposes people want to achieve and this will determine how language will be organized in terms of textual patterns, collocations, specific lexis and the formality of language. The following is example of the common patters and regulations examined by Blue and Harun (2002) on the language for Hospitality Purposes.

Example of speech act
• *ESP Context:* English for Hospitality Purposes • *Interaction:* face to face interaction (Hotel staff/ Customer) • *Communicative Purposes:* Check in/ check out function • *Functional explanation of language:* it is too late *Semantic meaning:* it is used to say that time is passed and it is night. *Pragmatic meaning:* it is used to excuse for not being able to provide a service

Table 4. An Example of Speech Act in English for Hospitality Purposes (Blue and Harun, 2002; Basturkmen, 2006)

9

Moreover, the social function of language learning should be based on the idea of training ESP students to become socially and psychologically integrated into their target environment (Basturkmen, 2006). Learning ESP, like any other form of language, entails learning about its target culture as language is used to carry out meanings and facts in its social, economic and cultural contexts. This, therefore, indicates matching the actual gap between the requirements of the educational and occupational settings. In this regard, Alfred and Byram (2002) acknowledge the acculturation process in education "in any society which expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalised culture and globalized economy, and also for the interaction between people of different cultures within and across national boundaries, the process of tertiary socialisation and the acquisition of intercultural competence are clearly desirable" (p. 351).

3. Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it should be mentioned that sociolinguistics, as a scientific study of language, plays a significant role in ESP teaching since 1960's. Though many studies may not give enough attention to the close relationship between language and society, the social function of teaching English for specific purposes is reflected on the fact that its main purpose is to enable learners to become communicatively competent in their target discourse communities.

Therefore, being able to communicate effectively requires a good command of the different components of communicative competence which are: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences. Each ESP environment is characterized by the use of a

specific register, communicative purposes and genres. Sociolinguistics can help us to better understand the sociocultural parameters.

In this vein we can take into account the following limitations and implications the present work suffers from. This present research is limited to a set of weaknesses. The first limitation is that it is based on theory. It would be better to carry out other practical investigations based on action, experimental and case studies on the contribution of the sociocultural aspect in ESP classrooms.

Another limitation is related the issue of using those aspects for learners with academic purposes. They are more beneficial if the language is needed in occupational context. Thus, the ESP teacher should first undertake the process of Needs Analysis, draw the profile of his learners, identify the context where language is used by members of the same discourse community, and finally design his course accordingly.

Based on the discussion above, some implications have to be put forward to improve the ESP teaching and learning process:

Training learners to become communicatively competent in using the language is more likely to occur if an interactive environment is created in an ESP classroom. The role of the ESP teacher, at this level, is to use authentic materials. They are of different types such as scientific articles, business letters, emails, telephone conversation, and memos. They may help students to see how language is used in real life. Authentic tasks, additionally, should be used in a way to raise the students' critical thinking, enhance their internal and external motivation in language learning, and pushing them to engage in meaningful interactions.

10

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11

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12