

METHODS OF EVALUATING LEARNERS STUDYING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

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Abstract: *The present paper intends to present the perceptions of 90 students, studying at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology and Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, about two evaluation methods used at the English course, namely the classical, end-of-semester testing method and the so-called “progressive evaluation”, which is carried out during the course and results from weekly in-class grading. At the end of the two years of studying English as part of their curricula, students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire of 11 items, in which they reported either their contentment or discontentment with the two evaluation methods used, and expressed opinions about the efficiency and usefulness of the English course they have attended. A copy of the questionnaire is included as an appendix to this paper. This paper begins with a brief discussion and definition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), after which it focuses on the description of the evaluation methods applied, on students’ response to these methods and some personal consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of the two evaluation methods. ESP is a very broad domain, referring mainly to teaching English to students or people who need it for specific purposes, i.e. at work, or in their future career. In these faculties ESP is the main instrument for teaching a foreign language. In contrast to general English, ESP starts from the assessment of those functions and purposes for which English is required, as well as of the skills the learner might need most. In order to give students the possibility to compare two evaluation methods, they were evaluated at the end of their first semester, by using a method that is often used at the University of Oradea, namely that of testing learners’ achievement at the end of the semester. Starting with the second semester, we have presented students with the other evaluation method, which we called “permanent evaluation”, based on weekly in-class grading.*

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the progressive evaluation method

JEL classification: Y9

1. Introduction

At the University of Oradea, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology and Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture all students are required to attend a foreign language course (during the first two years of study, 2 hours per week, 14 weeks per semester). As students are preparing for a career in the engineering domain, the course is structured so that it might meet the specific needs of learners, namely to approach topics and themes that would be related to the field in which they will probably activate in the future. It includes reading and vocabulary sections, which focus on the language appropriate to the field of engineering, starting with a reading section and continuing with multiple-choice exercises, matching words with their definitions, translations, gap-filling, matching headings with paragraphs or sections of text, sentence completion, true/false/not given text information, and other content-embedded exercises. There are sections dedicated to the grammatical structures encountered in the text, which might help students become better communicators when using English; writing sections, giving learners hints and practice in selecting and summarizing information, presenting information based on tables, graphs, images, and writing information sheets, letters, reviews, reports; speaking sections, encouraging and helping students to demonstrate their ability to exchange personal and factual information, to explain or summarize, to compare and contrast images, charts, graphs [1]. Extra-materials are brought so as to give student practice in listening and understanding a spoken text in the foreign language. As illustrated by the presentation of the course above, it gives attention primarily to English for Specific Purposes, but also to General English. This situation is determined by the fact that groups are heterogeneous, with sometimes important variations in their language level. This is a result of the fact that students are grouped according to their alphabetical order rather than according to ability. Therefore, when the differences were too obvious to allow the teaching and learning of English in a homogeneous group, the class was split into groups according to students' English ability level, based on a pre-test.

Given the situation presented above, this paper starts with a brief discussion and definition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and then focuses on the description of the evaluation methods applied, on students' response to these methods and some personal consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of the two evaluation methods.

2. The origins of ESP. Characteristics of ESP courses

Especially after World War II, ESP has become important due to the process of globalization, the adoption of English as a means of international communication, and the increase in vocational training and education throughout the world. This situation has triggered a change of perspective in the field of linguistics, where the accent started to be placed on communication, rather than on the general features of a language.

ESP is a very broad domain, referring mainly to teaching English to students or people who need it for specific purposes, i.e. at work, or in their future career. Therefore it is associated with learner's specific needs [2]. In contrast to general English, ESP starts from the assessment of those functions and purposes for which English is required, as well as of the skills the learner might need most (for example speaking skills are given more attention when students are preparing to become tourist agents, air traffic controllers, etc, while reading might be emphasized for students of business administration; some universities offer specialized courses on legal writing; listening and speaking skills for legal students; communicating in the business world, etc.). However, it includes English language teaching, which makes it very appealing to students.

Many researchers have attempted different definitions of ESP: for example, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that "the purpose of the ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation" [3], while Dudley Evens, at a conference held in

Japan, tried to make the term clear, by emphasizing its absolute and variable characteristics, which are as follows:

“Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet the specific needs of learners;
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.” [4]

David Carter (1983) has tried a description of different types of ESP, namely:

1. English as a restricted language (usually found in tourist phrase books, or used by some professionals, such as air-hostesses, air-traffic controllers), which gives its learners practice only in restricted contexts.
2. English for Academic and Occupational purposes (e.g. English for Science and Technology, English for Business and Economics, English for Nurses, etc).
3. English with specific topics (which anticipates people’s future English needs, such as working in a foreign institution, speaking on behalf of their company, etc) [5].

In conclusion to the opinions presented above, one may argue that ESP refers to the teaching of English in accordance to learner’s specific interests and needs, which would imply some previous knowledge of general English on the part of the learner, though lately courses are designed for beginners as well.

3. Analysis of the “progressive” evaluation method

As indicated in the introductory part of this paper, though intended as an ESP course, the English course taught at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology and Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, during the two years we have considered for the purpose of this study, to mix some general English teaching with ESP teaching, given the differences between the students presented in terms of their ability to use English.

In order to give students the possibility to compare two evaluation methods, we have chosen to evaluate them, at the end of their first semester, by using a method that is often used at the University of Oradea, namely that of testing learners’ achievement at the end of the semester. Starting with the second semester, the students were presented with the other evaluation method, which we called “permanent evaluation”, based on weekly in-class grading. The classes were organized as follows: 70-75 minutes were dedicated to teaching and exercises, and the last 30-25 minutes were dedicated to students’ completion of different tasks (80% of each student’s grade was based on the completion and marking of these tasks, while 20% of the final grade took into consideration students’ attendance and contribution to class activities). At least 80% of the classes became compulsory in order to get the final mark.

As indicated by their responses to the questionnaire completed at the end of the four semesters of English learning, students' impressions on the benefits of permanent evaluation were consistently positive, with few exceptions on most items. This is very significant, especially since the permanent evaluation method requires students to work a lot during the classes. Some of their comments, relating to items 1-3 of the questionnaire, may be classified as follows:

Category	Positive	Negative	Total
1. Which evaluation method contributes to a more objective evaluation of the English-language knowledge? a. the classical method b. the progressive method	87	3	90
2. Which of the 2 evaluation methods presented more advantages for you? a. the classical method b. the progressive method	87	3	90
3. Which evaluation method made you more attentive during the English-language classes? a. the classical method b. the progressive method	89	1	90

Students were asked to bring arguments for their answers at each of the 3 first items of the questionnaire. Most answers came from those who chose alternative b (the progressive evaluation method) and generally emphasized students' possibility to monitor their progress and improve their marks on the way; the possibility for evaluating both oral and written abilities; the step-by-step evaluation of fresh knowledge; avoiding the necessity to learn a lot before an exam; better marks; less busy final session of exams; students' determination to be more active and attentive during the classes; reduced amount of stress; increased motivation to attend and focus on teaching and activities during the English class. Those who have chosen the first alternative (the classical evaluation method) argued that the necessity to attend at least 80% of the classes was a chief disadvantage for them, as for different reasons they could not be present at all the required classes.

Item 4, asking the students about the extent to which their participation to the English classes was determined by their awareness that their mark depended on their presence, received the following answers:

Category	Number of answers
1. to a very high extent	25
2. to a certain extent	27
3. to a little extent	15
4. not at all, as I am motivated to take part at the English class for other reasons than that of receiving a mark	23

At item 5, requiring students to point out some of the disadvantages of each method in particular, the answers were as follows:

- *the classical method*: is boring, not appealing to students; students are not encouraged and motivated to attend and be attentive during classes; too much subject matter to be assimilated at the end of the semester; the tendency to learn only before the final examination; the final mark does not reflect student's participation and contribution to the English course during the semester; a single mark might not reflect students' knowledge;

- *the progressive method*: demands students' presence at courses; sometimes students' only motivation is to be present at classes just to make sure they will get enough marks; students might encounter problems when they have to express themselves freely in a foreign language, especially in front of the class; the tendency not to repeat the topics or issues presented, and study thoroughly; little time for preparation before the test, some information might not have been assimilated properly during the course; more time dedicated to evaluation.

It is worth mentioning here that many students said they could see no disadvantage in the progressive method.

As the progressive evaluation method demands much more work and time on the part of the teacher, first for the organization of classes and second for the out-of-class reading and response to students' papers, item 6 asked students to say to what degree has the teacher contributed to the efficiency of the progressive evaluation method. Their answers may be classified as follows:

To a great extent	83
To some extent	5
To a little extent	1
The effort was insufficient	1

At item 7, students were encouraged to enumerate arguments, other than the need to get a mark (as they were informed they were going to be evaluated through the progressive method), that motivated them to attend the English classes, some accepted that initially they were encouraged to be present mainly to get a mark, but that they gradually came to enjoy classes and appreciate the new things they could learn and the practice they could get; others said they were motivated by their desire to learn English, learn new things; the possibility offered to express themselves freely in a foreign language. Ten students said they had no other reason, besides the need to get a mark, to participate at the English classes.

As far as their suggestions for the improvement in the application of the progressive method were concerned (Item 8), some students said that the evaluation should take place once in a fortnight rather than weekly, ensure more time for debates and dialogue, the presentation of some subjects proposed by students. Most students said they had no suggestion for improvement, while 3 answered “I don’t know”.

Item 9 asked students to evaluate how much new knowledge they have acquired during the 4 semesters of ESP. Their answers may be classified as follows:

Item 10 evaluated students’ contentment or discontentment with the fact that the 4-semester English course was compulsory so as to obtain the 2 transferable credits. Their answers may be classified as follows:

I have acquired new knowledge	88
I have acquired little new knowledge, but I managed not to forget the knowledge acquired previously	2
I have acquired no new knowledge	0
Very content	60
Content	30
Indifferent	0
Discontent	0

The last item, 11, asked students to express their opinions about the number of classes of ESP they had per week. They were asked to say if they would:

Increase the number of foreign languages at their faculty	22
To let the current situation unchanged	68
To make the foreign language course optional	0
To eliminate the English course from the curriculum	0

4. Conclusions

Teaching ESP may be a very demanding task for teachers, though it might give them opportunities to constantly improve their teaching and evaluation methods.

This study has focused on students' perception of two evaluation methods for their ESP course at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technology and Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture: the classical and the progressive method. As indicated by their answers to the questionnaire referred to above and included in Appendix 1, the weekly, in-class evaluation method is perceived as more efficient and motivating by the largest percentage of students. Among its most important benefits, the increased motivation to make constant effort, involvement of students to classroom practice, the possibility to improve marks as the course progresses, the encouragement to attend classes and the constant feedback received from the teacher may be worth mentioning.

Though the teacher is faced with the necessity to spend much more time in evaluating students' activity, the satisfaction that comes with realizing that students are more involved in learning English may compensate for the out-of class activities of the evaluator.

References

- [1] See Simona Veronica Abrudan, *English for Computer Science Students*, Editura Universitatii din Oradea, Oradea, 2009.
- [2] Hutchinson and Waters emphasize that the process of organizing and designing and ESP course should start with the identification and evaluation of the target situation, a process they call *needs analysis*. See Hutchinson, T; Waters, A, *English for Specific Purposes. A learning-centered approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.12.
- [3] Idem.
- [4] Dudley-Evans, T. and St. John, M., *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.4-5.
- [5] Cf. Carter, David, *Some Propositions about ESP*, in *The ESP Journal*, 2, 1983, pp.131-137.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire for ESP Students

During the 4 semesters in which you studied English, you were evaluated in 2 different ways, namely through:

- a. the classical method, obtaining a final mark at the end of the semester, based on a test aimed at evaluating the knowledge acquired during the semester;
- b. the progressive method, based on in-class weekly evaluation of the topics presented during that particular class.

The following questionnaire aims at gathering information about the way in which you perceived the two evaluation methods referred to above.

1. Which of the two methods contributes to a more objective evaluation of your English language knowledge?

- a. the classical method
- b. the progressive method

Bring arguments in order to support your choice.

2. Which of the two methods presents more advantages to you?

- a. the classical method
- b. the progressive method

Bring arguments in support of your answer.

3. Which of the two methods determined you to be more attentive during the English language course?

- a. the classical method
- b. the progressive method

4. After you were informed that you were going to be evaluated through the progressive method, to what extent did you participate at the English language course just to get the mark?

- a. to a large extent;

- b. to a certain extent;
 - c. to a little extent;
 - d. not at all, I am motivated to take part at the English course for other reasons than the intention to get a mark.
5. Enumerate possible disadvantages of each method in particular.
6. In order to be efficient, the progressive evaluation method requires a very good organization of classes and increased effort on the part of the teacher. To what extent do you believe that the teacher has contributed to the efficient application of the progressive method?
- a. to a large extent;
 - b. to a certain extent;
 - c. to a little extent;
 - d. the teacher's effort was insufficient.
7. If you were informed that you were going to be evaluated through the progressive method, were there any other reasons for coming to classes, besides the required presence? Enumerate.
8. What suggestions would you have for the improvement of the progressive method in the evaluation of your English language knowledge?
9. After four semesters in which you studied English, which of the alternatives below would best reflect your current situation (more alternatives may be chosen):
- a. I have accumulated new knowledge;
 - b. I have acquired little new knowledge, but I managed not to forget the knowledge acquired previously;
 - c. I have accumulated no new knowledge.
10. The fact that it was compulsory to take part at 4 semesters of English courses and obtain 4 marks, the equivalent of 2 credits each, made me declare myself:
- a. Very content. I believe that the knowledge of English for a specialist in my field is a must.
 - b. Content. I consider that it is good to know English.
 - c. Indifferent. As it was compulsory, I have participated at the English language course.
 - d. Discontent. The English language course should not be compulsory.
11. If I could:
- a. I would increase the number of English language classes at our faculty;
 - b. I wouldn't change the current situation. 2 hours of practical English course per week, during four semesters, are sufficient;
 - c. I would make the English course optional;
 - d. I would eliminate the English course from the curricula.