ESP on the border between tradition and innovation

Elitsa Stoichkova [a, *]

[a] Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" Medical University – Varna, Shumen Affiliate, Department of Health Care
Shumen 9700, Bulgaria
[*] Corresponding author Ph: 8073534767; Email: elitsa_stoichkova@abv.bg

Abstract: This paper focuses on English for specific purposes (ESP) for Nursing students at a tertiary level institution and the materials designed for these classes. It does not cover all the fields of ESP. It aims at exploring just one facet of the process of language teaching and learning. That one point of view will contribute to understanding the optimal means of successful teaching mastery. The first part represents the theoretical background of ESP methodology. In the second part, the authors provide examples of activities designed for their students that have proved to be an effective way to facilitate the process of language acquisition.

Keywords: ESP, Teaching, Learning, Methods, Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

The concept of language acquisition has changed over the years along with the dynamic world. The language setting has developed from an ordinary to a high-tech classroom tailored to the needs of today's technology savvy learners. New subsets of English as a foreign language appeared, such as ESP. The new generation of both language teachers and learners raises the question of ESP coursebook content, because ESP is still in its infancy. Language teachers have always been innovative and willing to integrate the tidings and this way new teaching modalities have been created. In order to boost students' motivation and achieve the ultimate goal – second language acquisition, language teachers have adopted game elements in the language classroom. There is a multitude of interactive options to develop your own materials to improve your learners' skills, e.g., Kahoot. Dichev and Dicheva (2017) found out that gamification of education is a strategy for increasing engagement by incorporating game elements into an educational environment. Research, conducted by Purgina, et al. (2019), suggests that gamification has a positive impact on students' motivation, engagement, and performance. Moreover, they are in favor of more game-like features implemented in the language classroom (ibid.). Gamification can be viewed as a way to shift from the traditional teacher-centered approach to an innovative student-centered approach. Considering the teacher's aims, the students' needs and the course objectives are some of the basic principles when choosing the right textbook. The teacher's personal style and pedagogical experience determine whether to rely mainly on the textbook or use it rarely. All these peculiarities raise the same language questions about the significance of ESP textbooks. When a language teacher begins the quest for language acquisition, multitudes of questions arise: What are the benefits of going beyond the limitations of the textbook content? How and how much grammar should be taught in ESP classes? To what degree can entertainment contribute to education? What impact do the different methodological approaches, coursebooks, materials, teacher styles and institutional policies have on language acquisition? Attempting to address all these questions can help us make a small step to the precious possession of knowledge in the field of ESP.

2. Background

The new generation of both language teachers and learners is in a constant search for effective teaching and learning methods. Mitchell and Vidal (2001) referred to the last century of language teaching metaphorically as a pendulum swinging back and forth between a number of juxtapositions: focus on accuracy vs. focus on fluency,

separation of skills vs. integration of skills, and teacher-centered vs. learner-centered approaches, to name a few. Mitchell and Vidal suggested another metaphor that may better depict the process of language teaching in time: "that of a major river, constantly flowing, fed by many sources of water – rivers, streams, springs in remote territories, all fed by rain on wide expanses of land" (ibid., p. 27). One of the main principles of language acquisition is fluency, according to which "A language course should provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which learners can use the language they already know, both receptively and productively" (Nation and Macalister 2010, p. 54). In the context of ESP, fluency can be achieved only if learners have general knowledge of the chosen professional field. Moreover, ESP language learners come with their linguistic heritage, intellectual capacity and learning styles. All these peculiarities should be considered when we refer to the phenomenon ESP. Applying the key principles in language teaching based on theory and practice is the only way to achieve optimal outcomes instead of using the coursebook alone.

If we compare English, as a foreign language, to the human body, then the skeleton is grammar and the muscles are vocabulary. Nevertheless, the "glue" between the two are the four basic skills – reading, listening, speaking and writing. Nowadays, language teaching has gone beyond the traditional methodology. In the past two millennia, there has been a shift from the Classical Method, which focuses mainly on grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary, to the Grammar Translation Method, which focuses on grammatical rules and their application in translating sentences between the target and the native language. Historically, the 20th century was marked with innovations in terms of language teaching with emphasis on oral production when the Audiolingual Method was adopted. The main objective of this method is developing communicative competence through dialogues. The 21st century revolutionized the world of language teaching and the current trend is represented by the term Communicative Language Teaching. Brown (2000, p. 28) pointed that "the single greatest challenge in the profession is to move significantly beyond the teaching of rules, patterns, definitions, and other knowledge "about" language to the point that we are teaching our students to communicate genuinely, spontaneously, and meaningfully in the second language." Building bridges between theory and practice can acquaint us with the major trends in methodology and pedagogical issues in order to achieve the utmost goal – "go beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Brown, 2000, p. 12).

2.1 Characteristics of ESP Coursebook Content

Teaching ESP in the context of a certain syllabus means constant challenges such as the most suitable coursebook tailored to the students' needs. of course, scheduling the course content is another limitation along with mixed-ability groups. Creating a rich and multimodal discourse takes a lot of time and effort. ESP teachers in Bulgaria have a limited range of options and many constraints, such as the curriculum and the syllabus, when they have to choose the most suitable coursebook. On the other hand, they have the freedom to make changes in the material and the methods they use. The author focuses on the coursebook *Career Paths: Nursing Part I,* Student's Book by Virginia Evans and Kori Salcido-R.N. Based on the four basic language skills, it comprises a variety of realistic reading passages, career-specific dialogues and terms.
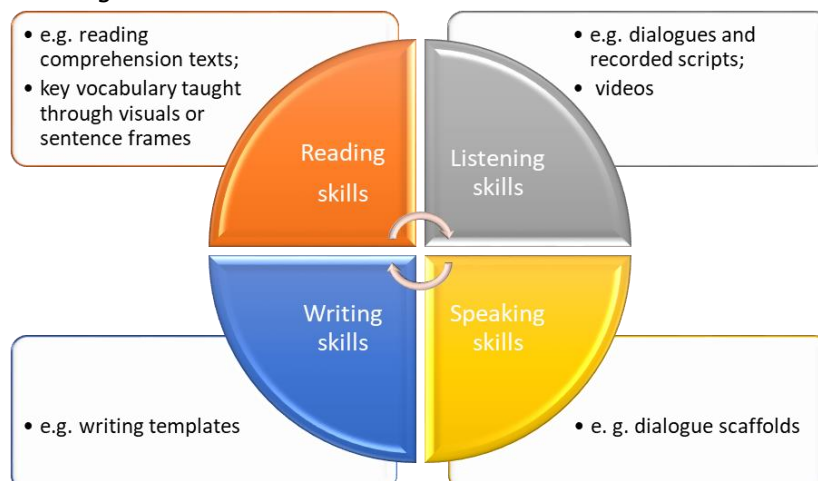

Figure 1. ESP content design based on the four basic skills

This educational resource immerses students in topics related to hospital staff, departments and equipment, specific illnesses and medication, nutrition, nursing duties and career options, to mention but a few. Each unit incorporates the four basic language skills developed by reading comprehension tasks, vocabulary, listening, speaking and writing tasks (Figure. 1).

Generally, the ESP class starts with warm-up questions centered on the main topic. The students are provided with a reading text and multiple-choice questions following it. The text usually refers to a specific topic related to the nursing field of study. The ESP teacher aims at engaging students in discussion to grasp the information. In this way, ESP students are exposed to particular terminology and vocabulary. Motivating students to debate and discuss the meaning of the new vocabulary is crucial for its further usage in the vocabulary tasks. ESP teachers adopt different techniques to teach new vocabulary such as pictures, definitions, synonyms or antonyms among others, depending on their style and experience. When it comes to lexis, the issue of the mother tongue in the ESP classroom is usually debated. In order to maintain students' motivation and enhance their proficiency level in terms of both content and language, ESP teachers should shift to their mother tongue to reach each student in the ESP class because students learn when they understand. The reading phase is followed by vocabulary practice based on matching or space filling and then come the listening and speaking phases. Listening and speaking are two of the highest anxiety provoking activities for language learners. The listening task is centered on dialogues with blanks and listening comprehension questions. This phase also initiates further practice of the previously covered terminology. The speaking task, which is based on the dialogue from the preceding exercise, encourages communication by role-playing. To improve the students' writing skills each unit ends with some kind of written practice. Generally, the above-mentioned teaching scenario lacks teaching grammar and grammatical structures and it depends on the teacher's competence and creativity to implement that crucial part of language learning in the ESP class. In this particular unit, the Present Simple can be discussed as it refers to job duties and routines. Students can further be triggered to list some of the work responsibilities of nurses and in this way, they are one step closer to remembering the rules regarding the Present Simple. What's more, they can be assigned homework to watch similar videos and take notes of the verbs in the Present Simple. Identifying grammar elements can be more engaging than doing boring grammar exercises.

Figure 2. Source: Career Paths: Nursing I-Unit 1

Thomas Kuhn (1970) referred to "normal science" as a process of puzzle solving in which part of the task of the scientist, in this case the teacher, is to discover the pieces and then to fit the pieces together. As far as ESP

learners are supposed to have prior knowledge of General English, it is a good idea to diagnose their language level at the beginning of the course. This can help ESP teachers identify their students' needs and achieve the course objectives. The images below represent pictures of the first unit of the coursebook that introduces hospital staff with all the aforementioned features (Figure. 2).

2.2 How and how much Grammar to be Taught in ESP Classes?

Diversity and uniqueness are typical of language learning. Every linguistic context is unique and the language teacher should rely on various principles and techniques. On the other hand, language teaching should always mirror the current theoretical trends and innovations in the field. At the forefront of debates on the methods of teaching grammar in the ESP class is how and how much grammar to be taught. However, grammar has its role in ESP classes and although it is not the most important aspect, it outlines the rules that must be followed to complete the process of language acquisition. It also intertwines the four basic language skills and language use is not hindered. The process of language learning is a complex undertaking and grammar is an indispensable part of it. Furthermore, grammar in the ESP class cannot be neglected because it can be regarded as the missing element in the jigsaw puzzle called language learning. At present, two methods are in light when grammar teaching is discussed – inductive and deductive. Although deductive and inductive grammar teaching approaches share the same goal, they are completely different in nature. Thornbury (1999, p.29) states that "a deductive approach (rule-driven) starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. An inductive approach (rule-discovery) starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred." Regardless of the theoretical arguments, if the teacher is able to attract learners' attention and "provides activities that promote awareness of grammar, learning seems to result" (ibid., p. 24). Although there are "anti-grammar" positions, according to Thornbury (ibid., p. 25) there are compelling arguments in favor of focus on grammatical form that guarantees progress beyond the basic level of communication. It seems imperative that grammar should be incorporated in language teaching because it is the resource that gives form to meaning.

2.3 Edutainment in the ESP Classroom

The ESP teacher is usually a multitasker in a non-linguistic higher institution who faces many challenges and plays a variety of roles – an expert at the subject, at the language and at information technology, a psychologist, to name a few. The core of ESP is developing communicative skills in a field-specific context along with developing critical and analytical thinking through discussions, quizzes, projects, problem-solving, group or individual presentations, text analysis and text translations are just some of the tools that need expertise and creativity. For example, when the topic of blood is discussed, firstly, students can be provoked to do a quiz on blood to enrich their general medical knowledge: https://www.visionlearning.com/en/library/Biology/2/Blood-Biology-I/242/quiz/submit

Source: Internet

Secondly, they can be asked to solve a crime to arouse their curiosity:

Date: 1235

Place: China

A man is murdered in a village.

The investigator knows the murderer used a sickle. But he can't find the murder weapon because all the sickles in the village are clean. He lays them out in the sun and watches. Soon he knows which sickle was used in the murder. How?

Source: Oxford English for Careers: Nursing Part 1

Thirdly, the interactive digital platform Express DigiBooks provides a variety of options to choose from, such as videos and interactive exercises: https://www.expressdigibooks.com/reader/read/178 – all of which promoting the innovative and motivating learning of 21st century.

The ESP teaching approaches nowadays tend to adopt game elements in the ESP classroom. At the end of a tiring language class, the play Chinese whispers can be introduced – a simple exercise with little preparation in advance, suitable for kinesthetic learners. It is an activity intended to develop pronunciation skills, but it also integrates grammar and spelling when students pass on the message in the classroom – ex. *The nurse is taking the patient's blood pressure.* Comparing the initial with the final variant usually involves lots of fun and contributes to the positive attitude and motivation in the ESP classes.

In light of course design, the right proportion of *entertainment* and *education* can result in *edutainment*. That simple equation is a whole process with its characteristics in terms of topic, target and timing. The age characteristics of ESP learners, who are usually motivated university students, makes it easy to balance between education and entertainment. Another example of a self-developed edutainment world is the template "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" with medical terms and questions – a time-consuming activity that enriches ESP students' general medical knowledge and fosters competitiveness. It can be the logical end of the ESP course for the Nursing students (Figure. 3).
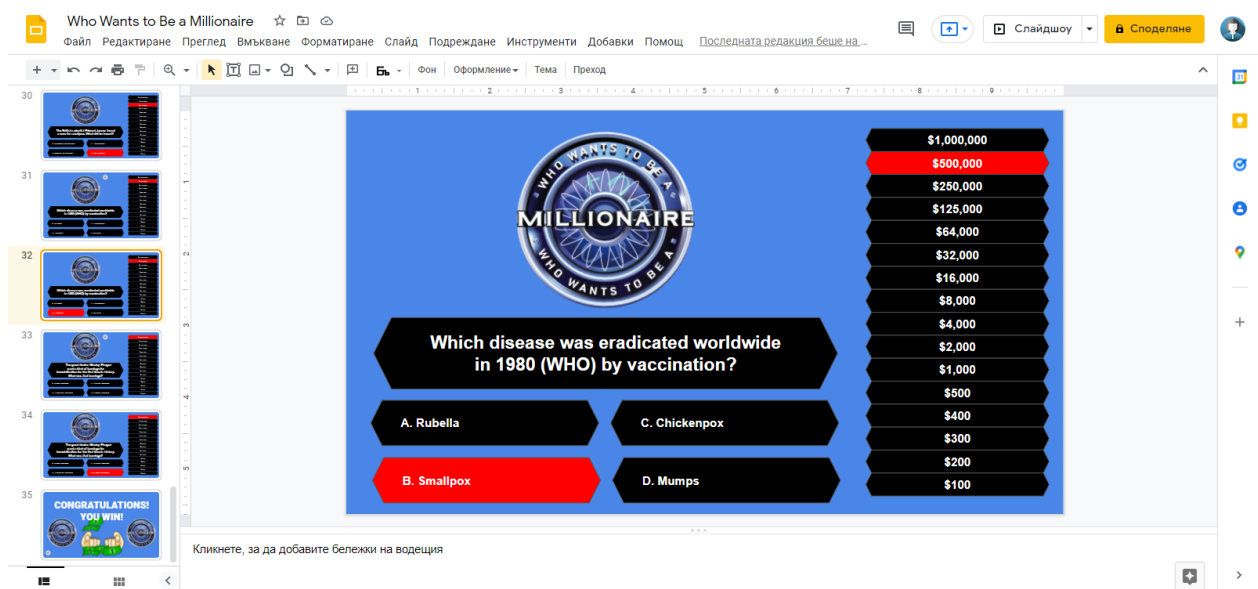

Figure 3. Who Wants to Be a Millionaire template

The very last phase of the ESP course is the assessment and evaluation of learners' achievement. Assessment, whether summative or formative, allows both educators and students to monitor their progress. Metaphorically, summative assessment is the top of the iceberg. Formative assessments in the form of games, projects, presentations or group work can be viewed as the chunks throughout the course leading to the final summative assessment at the end of the ESP course. Furthermore, the impetus to overcome little steps instead of giant leaps is stronger and causes less stress and anxiety in the ESP classroom.

3. Conclusion

Integrating field knowledge and language skills is the optimal means to achieve the ESP course objective. Whether to textbook or not is the language question without clear and definite answers. It depends on the teacher's style and interpretation of the underlying principles of pedagogy. Success in the ESP course is impossible without the synergetic teacher-learner relationship. It is not assessed by the final marks at the end of the semester. It is measured by the willingness and readiness of ESP students to gain knowledge and to cooperate actively in the language classes throughout the course. The ESP course is not limited to developing language skills, it is supposed to prepare the future healthcare professionals to be well-educated, well-prepared and devoted specialists, thanks to the central role of the ESP teacher. Mastering the methodological and organizational skills in course design are crucial for ESP teacher's success and training programs for teachers' professional development can be an excellent opportunity.

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