

Do ESP students need grammar?

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Suggested Citation:

Popescu, A. V., Vida, M. I. C. & Constantin, E. C. (2017). Do ESP students need grammar? *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 7(2), 71-75.

Received from December 14, 2016; revised January 20, 2017; accepted March 18, 2017.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University, Thailand.

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Abstract

ESP courses in technical universities have become a priority within an engineering context. English helps ESP students to be active and efficient participants at international conferences and symposia. This paper investigates whether grammar is really important while teaching for specific purposes, and do ESP students need grammar? There are at least two aspects to take into account: first, students' perception of grammar, i.e., most of them associate grammar with sets of rules, exceptions to the rules, long and boring exercises practicing English tenses, etc. The second aspect refers to communication that is seen as the application of grammatical rules in oral and written practices. Our conviction is that efficient communication cannot take place without the correct usage of grammar. Teachers should support ESP students to use effective learning strategies that transform them into autonomous learners who are able to take control and master the language.

Keywords: ESP students, need of teaching grammar, grammar and communication, combined methods.

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1. Introduction

English, as the most widely spoken language in the world, has become the international language, and it plays a significant role in the contemporary modern life. It is already accepted by everyone that English is the most powerful source for technical progress and development, as it enables rapid exchange of information. Students of technical universities should master all English skills for their professional communication. Efficient professional communication cannot take place without correct usage of grammar. Ignoring grammar rules may lead to misunderstandings or even cause scientific errors. ESP students should be encouraged and motivated to study grammar. Grammar is a means of communication that helps students to communicate better.

2. Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages

Language teaching has changed a lot over years. The learner's various reasons and motivations for language learning have played an important role in the learning-teaching process. Consequently, the methods and approaches have been in a continuous transformation and improvement. The following methods and approaches illustrate the way in which languages have been taught through years.

The approach known as Grammar Translation (1850-1950) was based on the model of classical languages (Greek and Latin); grammar was taught as a set of rules; practice was done through written exercises; and these were used to teach vocabulary via translation, the means of instruction was the mother tongue. Written language was considered superior to the spoken version.

The direct method (1890-now) is related to Berlitz who considered that the second language learning is similar to the first language. Speaking and listening are the most important skills. In short the principles of the direct method were as follows: inductive approach of grammar; instruction was done in the target language; everyday vocabulary was taught; concrete vocabulary was taught through pictures and objects, while abstract vocabulary was taught by association of ideas.

The audio-lingual method (1960-1970) was based on the principles of behaviour psychology and on habit formation models of learning. The teacher was like an orchestra leader while the students are imitators of the set structures given. There was an abundant use of language laboratories and visual aids. Some of the principles and procedures of the Direct Method were adapted. However, vocabulary was strictly limited and learned in context, it was seen as an adjunct to the structures. Great importance was given to precise native-like pronunciation and to immediate reinforcement of correct answers.

Communicative language teaching (1970-the present) was first proposed in the 1970s and it has served as a significant source of inspiration on learning teaching practice. It has been seen as a response to the audio-lingual method, its focus was on helping learners to create meaning rather than helping them to acquire native-like-pronunciation or develop grammatical structures. This method is very often defined as a list of general features. Numan's (1991) list of the five features of communicative language teaching is the most recognised:

- an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language,
- the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation,
- the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning management process,
- an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning
- an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Communicative language teaching is a flexible method that is concerned with the authentic needs of each learner to communicate her/his ideas. Moreover, there are some types of learning associated with the Communicative Language Teaching: Interactive Learning, Learner-centred Learning,

Cooperative Learning, Content-based Learning and Task-based Learning. Most of these techniques are successfully used in the learning–teaching process.

Humanistic Approaches (1970–1980) include four methods: Community Language Learning (Curran), The Silent Way (Gattegno), Suggestopaedia (Lazanov), and Total Physical Response (James Asher). All the above mentioned approaches reflect the basic principles of humanistic education which are the following:

1. Students' learning should be self-directed.
2. Schools should produce students who want and know how to learn.
3. The only form of meaningful evaluation is self-evaluation.
4. Feelings, as well as knowledge, are important in the learning process.
5. Students learn best in a non-threatening environment.

Each method or approach has both advantages and disadvantages; as teachers we should decide and select from the various methods and approaches those that fulfil our goals of teaching. Teachers should be flexible persons, open to new ideas and concepts, ready to adapt and combine their methods to the real needs of their students. And we end with Brown's notes (2000, IX): '.... you are led on a quest for your own personal, integrated understanding of how people learn – and sometimes fail to learn – a second language. That quest is eclectic: no single theory or hypothesis will provide a magic formula for all learners in all contexts. And the quest is cautious: you will be urged to be as critical as you can in considering the merit of various models and theories and research findings'.

3. Need for Grammar in ESP Courses

There have been different opinions and attitudes concerning the importance and role of grammar in the learning–teaching process. Some teachers use 'the grammar-oriented approach', others prefer 'the communicative approach' in language teaching. Some are interested 'on analysing the language' while others 'focus on using it'(Savage, Bitterlin & Price, 2010, p. 5). We consider that grammar helps the students to master the language. The following definition helps us to see grammar in a complex way:

'One of the most fundamental claims of modern linguistic analysis is that all languages have a grammar. It could not be any other way. If a language is spoken, it must have a phonetic and phonological system; since it has words and sentences, it must also have a morphology and a syntax; and since these words and sentences have systematic meanings, there must obviously be semantic principles as well. Of course, these are the very things that make up a grammar' (O'Grady & Archibald, 2000, p. 5).

We all had grammar classes in our native language. The grammar knowledge of our native language is a necessary tool for our future readings and writings during university studies or in our career. Consequently, we consider that grammar is a need in the foreign language teaching process.

The technical faculties require their students to study a foreign language. Our students have foreign languages in the curricula as an obligatory discipline for two hours per week in the first year. Most of the students have studied English in high school for several years and they want to continue their studies. Unfortunately many ESP students are low-level students, with little and not satisfactory experience in their second language. Consequently, they encounter difficulties in expressing their ideas during the English classes. A diagnostic test is administered to the students enrolled in ESP classes to check their English knowledge on vocabulary and grammar. The test results help the teacher both to evaluate the students' level of language and to establish the type of courses the students need, to pass from the General English high school courses to the ESP university courses. The best solution is a base language course that helps the low-level students to review key language features taught during the school years.

The teaching–learning process requires time, systematic practice and regular revisions on certain problematic issues of grammar and vocabulary. The students should be enabled to develop specific language skills for different needs of communication. There are two important tools the teachers should use: vocabulary and grammar as the core of the English language.

Grammar, as a natural part of the language itself, needs to be reviewed within the context of the language use so that the students will be able to make the right choices. It is the teacher’s duty and role to make the students aware of the importance and value of the grammar. Grammar helps them in the following ways:

- to gain a clear understanding of how language works,
- to control the way they shape words into sentences and paragraphs,
- to become efficient writers.

ESP courses are meant to prepare specialists who are able to use the English language as the main professional means of communication in their future jobs and in real-life situations. The ESP teachers’ main goal is to make their students efficient users of the English language. We, as teachers should avoid extreme language teaching methods and adopt combined methods in teaching grammar as part of the language itself. Grammar should be ‘a master skill’ that facilitates competence in all skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Savage et al., 2010, p. 2). The limited number of English classes, the students’ insufficient specialised knowledge and their low English proficiency are some of the problems the ESP teachers are confronted with. The materials used during the ESP courses are meant: to help the students to become familiar with some basic scientific notions, to improve their English skills, and to become aware of the form and meaning of the grammatical structures. It is necessary to select authentic materials that correspond to the real needs of the students. Students are asked either to present their opinions about general scientific subjects during the debate classes or to write one or two paragraphs on a specific subject. Writing is the skill in which grammar can successfully be practiced; it is a complex exercise that on the one hand allows learning or revision of the verb tenses, the nouns and determiners, or the connectors; and on the other hand gives the students the possibility to use the theoretical grammar knowledge to find and correct the mistakes. In addition, the students learn how to organise their ideas in a clear and systematic way. The teachers should use the students’ writings as the basis for explaining or discussing a certain grammatical issue. During the writing tasks, students are asked to use dictionaries and to share ideas with their classmates. The teachers’ role is to engage students in a systematic writing practice that is pleasant and useful at the same time.

Our conviction is that the teachers should keep a balance between grammar and communication. ESP students should be taught how to use the English structures and the scientific vocabulary; how to correct their mistakes. Teachers should support and encourage ESP students to use effective learning strategies that transform them into autonomous learners who are able to take control and master the language.

4. Conclusions

ESP courses are meant to prepare specialists who are able to use the English language as the main professional communication means in their future jobs and in real-life situations. The teachers’ main objective is to make their students efficient users of the English language and active participants able to communicate accurately.

The teachers should keep a balance between grammar and communication, as there is no communication without correct grammar.

We consider that combined methods, adequate strategies and authentic materials related to the students’ needs will increase the students’ language proficiency and motivation.

Practicing writing as an exercise to teach or discuss grammar issues is a great help for the low-level students in the first year who encounter difficulties during the ESP courses. Students should be encouraged and stimulated to make efforts to overpass the present difficulties in order to become professional communicators. Writing practice should be a systematic exercise that will help the students, the future participants at international conferences and symposia, where they have to write and present their papers in a clear, accurate English language.

The students in technical faculties need more English classes, the courses should be a part of the curriculum for at least two years, and they should be enrolled in ESP courses only in the second year, when they have already got at least basic knowledge in their future speciality.

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