



EFL LEARNERS PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH FOR THE SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Mahmut Uğur Arslan, Azamat Akbarov

Abstract. In the past, during a language teaching process, focus was on the teacher not on students. Today the attention is given to students namely students' needs. At every level of teaching English, take it primary school education or tertiary education, the student is at the center. However, when we talk about tertiary education, students' needs become more specific because they learn English for a specific purpose. Spending 5 years teaching English at a tertiary education institution, I have witnessed cases in which students from faculties come to us and complain that we have not taught them what they need at their faculty departments. They say they mostly do not understand the terminology used in their lectures. They believe that they are relatively good at using General English in both productive skills, but they have problems understanding the English both written and spoken, being used during their lectures. What do the students think? What is their expectation? Since we always say that teaching English can no longer be teacher-centered but student-centered, we cannot neglect which English they need in their faculty departments. The aim of this study is to determine the attitude of students towards English for Specific Purposes and we want to learn their opinions about English for Specific Purposes.

Key Words: General English, English for Specific Purposes, Approach, Language Acquisition

Introduction

The development in communication and business technology throughout the recent years has deeply influenced the field of English language teaching. Especially, after the Second World War there happened an unexpected boom in scientific, economic and technical world which required an international language. This language was English. And due to the developments in the various areas like science, economics, and technology, the attention of course designers turned from teaching English for general purposes to teaching English for more specialized purposes. In most countries, especially in the developed and developing ones, where English is the foreign or second language the aim to teach and learn English has become purposive. According to Jones and Davies (1983) "foreign languages have been learned not for their own sake but as vehicles for social and economic contacts and for the transportation of ideas." (Cited in Kirkgoz, 1999, p.59)

In Turkey like most of other parts of the world English is taught with a general aim, bearing in mind that learning a language is a good thing, it will be of great benefit in the future or one language one person, two languages two persons. That is the case especially when the learners are children. But it is not the same with adults. According to Mackay and Mountford (1978) "Adults, on the other hand, unless they are learning a foreign language for 'pleasure' at evening institutes, as a 'cultural' and social experience, are generally highly conscious of the use to which they intend to put it. That use is frequently associated with an occupational, vocational, academic or professional requirement."

As the first author of the paper works at an international university in which medium of instruction is English, he thinks it is a good idea to draw a picture of the situation the school and the students. The main objective of IUS English Language School (ELS) is to provide high-quality intensive English Language instruction to those students who are admitted to International University of Sarajevo without the needed language skills. This way every IUS student is expected to be able to fully cope with the undergraduate programs in their faculties. All students who have been accepted to IUS are

expected to have a basic knowledge of English and with the help of education they get at ELS they are expected to have a better academic life in their faculty education. These are what we as teachers and the administrators expect from the students, whereas it will be wiser to look at the other side of the medallion. What do the students think? What is their expectation? Since we always say that teaching English can no longer be teacher-centered but student-centered, we cannot neglect what they think about the language they are going to learn

Research Design

Accordingly, in this descriptive study we wanted to examine our students' attitudes towards General English and also their attitude towards English for Specific Purposes.

In this research we will see our students' perception of General English and English for Specific Purposes. We tried to find the answers in two separate parts as general attitude towards English and students' attitude towards ESP. We asked 15 questions in total under the parts mentioned above to 100 students whose level of English is upper-intermediate. We analyzed the findings by using the SPSS program.

It has many times been discussed and stressed that students' attitudes towards the use of the language has a deep effect on the achievement and the use of the language. Al-Khatib (2005, p.9) We tried to find out their tendency towards the language indirectly in order that they will not feel that their tendency is being tested. One of the most of impressive articles we have come across during our literature review process was Al-Khatib's paper and his approach to debates as to whether ESP should be integrated to our preparatory school syllabus. Some of the items we also included in our questionnaire "are designed to elicit such information on the attractiveness of language, the usefulness of language, the importance of language in facilitating the process of communication, and on to what extent the use of the language may form a threat to their native tongue and so on." Al-Khatib (2005, p.9) In the second part we wanted to discover whether the students are aware of some basic terms in English from their occupational field. Besides they are asked if some basic terms in English from their occupational field should be integrated into the syllabus and/or they should have English classes related to their occupational field. We also wanted to determine if they think ESP courses would likely to be helpful hence should be mandatory.

Discussion of the attitudes of students towards General English

Table 1

Questions (Section A)		Strongly agree	agree	disagree	X ²
1	I find English an interesting language to learn	46	46	8	28.80
2	I find English a boring language to learn.	3	12	85	121.34

d.f.= 2, p<.01; table value= 9.21

As seen in Table 1, most of the students find English interesting to learn and this result is statistically significant ($X^2=28.80 > 9.21$; $p < .01$; $df=2$). Out of 100 students only 8 students do not find it interesting. The answers of the students to the second question support the responses to the first question because most of the students state that they do not find English a boring language to learn ($X^2=121.34 > 9.21$; $p < .01$; $df=2$).

Table 2

Questions (Section A)		Strongly agree	agree	disagree	X ²
3	I like English more than any other school subject	22	28	50	13.040
4	English is my least important course	4	20	76	85.760

d.f.= 2, $p < .01$; table value= 9.21

In Table 2, the number of students disagreeing with the third statement equals to the total of the number of students who are agreeing with the same statement. Here we see that most of the students in fact do not prefer English to their other school subjects ($X^2=13.040 > 9.21$; $p < .01$; $df=2$). However, when it comes to putting English to a scale of importance, a great majority, 76 out of 100 students disagree that English is the least important course at school. ($X^2=85.760 > 9.21$; $p < .01$; $df=2$). The fact that they do not like English does not change the fact that it is important. It is important for their studies at least. We can say that students are aware of this.

Table 3

Questions (Section A)		Strongly agree	agree	disagree	X^2
5	English will be useful in my future job.	83	10	7	111.140

d.f.= 2, $p < .01$; table value= 9.21

As we see in table 3, most of the students believe that English will be useful in their future job. This finding is statistically important ($X^2=111.140 > 9.21$; $p < .01$; $df=2$). This finding also supports the finding to the 4th statement with which 76 students disagreed. It is also in line with the general belief that knowing English opens doors to jobs.

Table 4

Questions (Section A)		Strongly agree	agree	disagree	X^2
6	I feel confident when I write and speak in English.	38	50	12	22.640
7	I try to use every opportunity to use English outside the school.	31	43	26	4.580

d.f.= 2, $p < .01$; table value= 9.21

When we look at the 6th question, we see that half of the students trust themselves in terms of productive skills and 38 of them are very much confident when they speak and write in English. This is probably because they are upper-intermediate level students. On the other hand; a significant number of students, 26 of them admit that they do not use every opportunity to use the language outside the school. This might stem from a few reasons. The fact that they are not living in an English-speaking country may be preventing them from speaking English outside the school. They do not have the urge to speak in English. As the native language of the country is Bosnian, students might be tending to use Bosnian more often. No wonder it is an awkward situation that while a great majority of students say they feel confident when they use English but 26 of them say they do not use the language outside the school.

Table 5

Questions (Section A)		Strongly agree	agree	disagree	X^2
8	Using English indicates prestige and civilization.	31	47	22	9.620
9	Using English facilitates communication with international institutions and the outside world	57	41	2	48.020
10	Using English poses a threat to my native language.	12	35	53	25.340

d.f.= 2, $p < .01$; table value= 9.21

In table 5 while 31 and 47 of the students strongly agree and agree respectively agree with the statement that using English is an indicator of prestige and civilization, 22 of the students do not believe that it shows prestige and civilization. They do not take using English as something to be proud of. However, only two students out of 100 disagree that using English facilitates communication with international institutions and the outside world. The students who do not take the language as an indicator of prestige appreciate that English is the means of communication with international institutions and the outside world. When we look at the findings of the 10th statement, we see that the result is a complete supporter of the two statements above. Only 12 students believe that using English poses a threat to their native language while little more than half of the students do not agree with the statement. The statistic of this statement also proves ($X^2=25.340>9.21$; $p<.01$; $df=2$)

Discussion of the attitudes of students towards English for Specific Purposes

Table 6

Questions (Section B)		Yes	No	X^2
1	Are you familiar with some basic terms in English from your occupational field?	24	76	27.04

d.f.=1, $p<.01$; table value= 6.63

An overwhelming 76 out of 100 number of students say that they are not familiar with some basic terms in English from their occupational field. Given the fact that they were zero beginners of English in the beginning of the education year and we teach them only General English, it is quite natural that they do not know even the basic terms in their fields. This question is a key question because it also supports the fact that we have a problem in our syllabus with regards to ESP. Sometimes professors from faculties of the university come to us unofficially complaining about students' lack of knowledge of terms in their field of study. The finding also shows that students are aware that they lack this knowledge.

Table 7

Questions (Section B)		Yes	No	X^2
2	Do you think some basic terms in English from your occupational field should be integrated into your syllabus?	71	29	17,640

d.f.=1, $p<.01$; table value= 6.63

In compliance with the 1st question in Section B, the answers given to the 2nd question shows that a great majority of students are aware that they lack basic terms in English from their occupational field and they want these terms to be presented in their course syllabus.

Table 8

Questions (Section B)		Yes	No	X^2
3	Do you think you should have English classes in which you study English about your occupational field?	72	28	19,360

d.f.=1, $p<.01$; table value= 6.63

The finding extracted from the 3rd question is completely overlapping with the finding that we got from the second question. The number of students saying 'yes' to the question if they would like to have English classes in which they study English about their occupational field is less only by one person than the number of students who said 'yes' to the question asking if they would like to have basic terms in English from their occupational field to be integrated into their course syllabus. This finding supports the fact that they are aware of their needs in terms of English for Specific Purposes.

Table 9

Questions (Section B)		Yes	No	X ²
4	Do you think these classes should be obligatory?	36	64	7,840

d.f.=1, p<.01; table value= 6.63

We think that we have an interesting situation when we look at the 4th question because if we consider that 71 students said they wanted some basic terms to be integrated into their syllabus and 72 students said they wanted have ESP classes, the number of students saying 'yes' to the question if they think these classes should be obligatory is only 36, approximately half the number of 'yes' answers to previous two questions, which is quite interesting. In fact, this is a hard situation to analyze. On the one hand majority if students say that they want basic terms from their occupational field to be integrated into their syllabus and about the same number of students even say that they want ESP classes, on the other hand only half of those students say these classes should be obligatory. We can say that these students are somewhat undecided about the necessity of ESP. The reason may also be that our students want to escape from the responsibility of taking an ESP class.

Table 10

Questions (Section B)		Yes	No	X ²
5	Do you think that these classes will be helpful to you in your future job?	88	12	57,760

d.f.=1, p<.01; table value= 6.63

Most of the students said ESP classes will be helpful to them in their future job. This finding also supports the second and third findings. If we ignore the fact that they do not want those ESP classes to be obligatory and they escape the responsibility of taking an obligatory course, in general we can say that they are aware that they lack and need to learn English about their occupational fields and that they want to have these classes either as an integration to their current English classes or as separate ESP classes.

Conclusion

In this study we tried to find out the students' attitudes towards General English, their attitudes towards English for Specific Purposes. We tried to find out their general needs in terms of language skills and we also tried to determine their needs in English for Specific Purposes. In this first section, we are going to talk about the students' attitudes towards General English.

A big majority of the students have no bias towards the language. Most of them say that they find the language interesting to learn. Only a minority of them state that it is boring to learn the language. When they compare English with other university courses, they put it on a lower place than other subjects. Their field courses are more important for them, but this does not change the fact that they know they need to learn the language at least for the sake of their studies as the medium of instruction at university is English. They also think that being able to use the language will be beneficial for them in their future jobs. They will be able to work at international companies where the language of communication is English and also they will be able to work outside their countries. In terms of

feeling self-confidence while using the language, half of the students state that they are feeling confident when they speak outside the school, but when we look at one-fourth of students saying they do not feel confident, we see a problem that needs solution. If, at a university where language of instruction and communication is English, one-fourth, namely 26 students out of 100, state that they are not feeling okay when they use the language outside the school, it means there is a problem in the teaching process though most of the students think that using English gives the user some kind of feeling of prestige.

A great majority of the students do not think that learning English is a threat to their mother tongue, which shows that there is not such a barrier between the students and English. Briefly we can say that in general students do not have any biases towards English and they have a positive attitude towards English.

In the second section, we wanted to find out about the attitudes of the students towards English for Specific Purposes. We did not name the term English for Specific Purposes explicitly. Instead, we asked them questions in such a way that we could extract their opinions implicitly. First of all, when we asked them whether they are familiar with basic terms in their occupational field most of them stated that they did not, which is the situation that we are very familiar with. There have been many situations when students from faculties come to us and say that they have difficulty understanding the language in their faculty courses. They say that when they are using the language in daily life both in written and spoken form, they do not have any big problems but when it comes to reading a text that is connected with their field of study, or listening to a lecture, they have problems understanding the text or the lecture since the amount of unfamiliar terms and vocabulary used in those texts and lectures is in great numbers, they have difficulty understanding what they read or listen to. When we asked students if they would like to have those kinds of terms and vocabulary added to their syllabus, their response was mainly positive. They are aware that they need vocabulary that is connected with their study fields to be added to their syllabus. This awareness stems from the fact that they have difficulty in understanding the lessons in their faculty courses. They even state that they would like to have courses where they study English that is connected with their study field, which is in fact English for Specific Purposes. The majority of students also believe that taking ESP classes will be helpful in their future careers, but on the other hand only half of the students think that those ESP classes should be obligatory. The reason for this might be that they are undecided about the necessity of having an ESP class or they do not want to take the responsibility of an ESP class. They probably want to take it as an elective course if not obligatory. Overall, we see that most of the students are aware that they lack knowledge of vocabulary related to their occupational fields and they think that something must be done to solve this problem.

References

- [1] Akbarov, A. (2011) "Languages for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice", Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, United Kingdom
- [2] Al-Khatib, (2005). English in the Work Place, An Analysis of the Communication Needs of Tourism and Banking Personnel, Asian EFL Journal Volume 7. Issue 2
- [3] Kırkgöz, Y.(1999). Identifying Learners' Lexical Needs Through Computer Analysis of Texts Language Journal Vol.83
- [4] Mackay, R. & Mountford, A.J. (1978). English for Specific Purposes. Longman

Authors

Mahmut Uğur Arslan, English Department, Faculty of Education, International Burch University, Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Azamat Akbarov, English Department, Faculty of Education, International Burch University, Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). E-mail: aakbarov@ibu.edu.ba