
Exploring Algerian Law Students' Needs In Reading English Texts

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Abstract

In Algeria law students learn English as a foreign language to achieve specific academic and professional tasks. However, regardless of all the efforts done by ELP teachers, students are not effective readers of the English language used in legal context. Hence, this paper explores the occupational and academic English reading needs of Law students and proposes pedagogical solutions by undertaking a case study of Master's students at Tlemcen University. The aim is to guide English teachers to design an ELP course that fulfils students' academic requirements, and to help law students to use appropriate strategies when reading legal texts.

Keywords: English for Legal Purposes, Reading, Needs Identification and Analysis

Introduction

In the Algerian educational programme English is regarded as part of the core competences students should acquire to participate in the country's global economy. The four English language skills are instructed to improve learners' linguistic, social and communicative competencies. In the Faculty of Law and Political Science students are theoretically trained to become lawyers or to carry on post-graduate studies at university. During their tertiary studies Law students read in the English course, different types of texts; however the analysis and the study of these texts is limited to syntax, vocabulary and comprehension questions. ELP teachers did not design clear objectives to be reached systematically by the students at the end of their studies. Reading is more considered as a medium of teaching English rather than a language skill to be performed.

Teaching and Learning ELP

Teaching and learning ELP differs significantly from General English because the "linguistic aspects of the law raise many issues and difficulties" (Gibbons 2004:285). Based on the specificities of legal language register specific courses and programmes for law students and professionals are designed to equip them with terminological, structural and strategic knowledge.

Law students are required to obtain ideas and information about managerial and regulatory rules by reading a variety of publications. In such a situation, the syllabus is more content-oriented and focuses essentially on the desired outcome so that students can understand ideas and information in a wide range of legal materials. Accordingly, they should be in contact with key legal concepts and ideas in English as well as the related register and vocabulary. This means that students are expected to have a wide-range of data on themes related to ELP.

The ELP teacher in the classroom is "...a knowledge provider and a facilitator of students' learning and no more as a resourceful authority" (Kashani et al 2007: 85). However, he/she is more concerned with designing suitable syllabi and courses for different learners with various needs and fields. Thus, for the ESP teacher, course design is often a substantial and important part of the workload (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 21). Nowadays, teachers who fail to draw upon technology in language teaching are likely to be considered at least out-of-date (Chapelle, 2008: 585). The role of the teacher goes beyond the design of materials and involves active participation because he has to master additional skills in technology to deal with a new teaching environment (time and space separation), and to use new teaching strategies.

Target Situation Analysis

English course is a compulsory module from Master and PhD studies in the Department of Law. The aim of such courses is to enable the students and future professionals to comprehend texts related to their field of interest and to communicate with colleagues. However, Law students study English only two hours per week and the English course in the syllabus stand for cross-section Unit (Unité transversale), i.e., students can have access to the following years without having the average grade. Therefore, the English course is not well considered.

Furthermore, lack of permanent ELP teachers constitutes a real handicap for the Faculty of Law at Tlemcen University. Each year the Departments of the Faculty recruit part time teachers, generally without any prior experience, to teach English. The administration is not able to set up long term English teaching objectives to be achieved by the students at the end of their learning process. At the beginning of the year, In the Department Law, teachers are provided with some broad topics but the teachers are free to teach what they want in English. Teaching approaches vary among English teachers in the Department. Texts are taught the same way as in a General

English course, i.e., the focus is on General English activities rather than on training students to be competent in a specific skill. In addition, all language skills are studied in integration simultaneously in a short period of time. Students do not have enough time to use correctly what was read or listened to in written or oral production. In general, the administration, students and teachers are aware of the importance of English in their context but nothing is done or planned to have appropriate learning/ teaching conditions.

The Study

This study was undertaken with Master's students registered in the academic year 2018-2019 at the Department of Law at Tlemcen University to study the actual teaching/learning situation and students reading requirement. A total number of fifty students out of one hundred and ninety specialized in general relations and communication were dealt with. Regarding the subject specialist teachers' number in the Faculty is one hundred and six, ten among them teach English. One informant involved in the study is a full-time teacher in the Faculty with a long teaching experience. The other informants are part time teachers and specialized in ESP, TEFL, and translation.

Results and Discussions

Both the interview and the questionnaire reveal that the content of the English course is inappropriate to ELP students' study needs, because it focuses mainly on general English activities or provides business terminology or translation. The content provided cannot be considered as a source for legal vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the data obtained from teachers' answers reveal that the English course in general and the reading activities in particular are not instructed with the same time distribution. Time allocated to reading activities is not the same for all the students. The students' questionnaire also shows that informants are aware of the inadequacy of the time allocated to the English course with their learning needs. They maintain that the English course time load is not sufficient to deal with more texts, to vary the genres, to increase the frequency of text reading in class, and to increase the number of reading tasks. Moreover, they do not receive reading homework assignments to overcome the lack of time, i.e., they are not intensively exposed to English texts. Furthermore, even if the students see that the English course can complete the content modules; however in figure 1 bellow, the students

maintain that they do not like the English course in general, or that they are not interested by the provided reading topics in particular because they have a problem of comprehension.

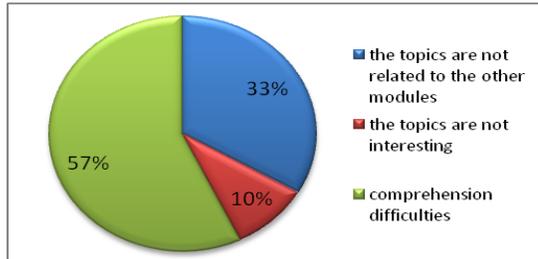


Figure 1: Reasons for dissatisfaction with reading topics

With regard to the way the students are studying a text in the classroom, pre-reading tasks are neglected as an important stage in the reading process to activate prior knowledge, however students maintain that they perform tasks while and after reading a text and these tasks are mainly comprehension questions. In addition the results revealed the use of the reading strategies in an unbalanced way. All teachers stress on inferring the meaning from context, skimming, scanning and vocabulary acquisition, and only 35% of the questioned teachers activate students' background knowledge. Finally, the informants' suggested change which further stresses the inappropriacy of the presently delivered ELP course namely in terms of developing the reading skill. Regarding the way the students are studying a text in the classroom, the reading process is not systematically structured. According to the majority of the informants (teachers and students) pre-reading tasks are not provided, however they maintain that they perform tasks while and after reading a text and the nature of the tasks consists only of comprehension questions.

Concerning ELP students' needs in terms of lacks, wants and necessities, the analysis reveals the following results: Concerning students reading competencies, the findings revealed that the majority of the students evaluate their level as elementary or intermediate in reading English texts.

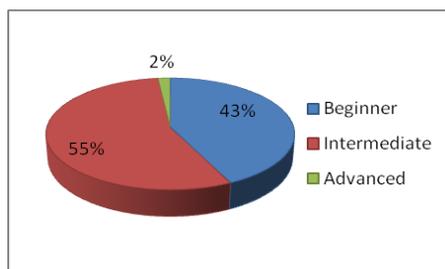


Figure 2: Students' reading proficiency level

Students (50.87%) explained that they had difficulties to match words with their sounds/pronunciation, to understand the grammatical relationship between sentences, and to know word and sentence meanings. On the other hand, the teachers claim that students have various reading difficulties because of lexical, phonological and syntactic lacks. Furthermore, teachers argue that their students have various reading weaknesses starting from their lack of vocabulary knowledge to their non ability to paraphrase the information in the text, i.e., they lack linguistic and strategic competence. The main reason for students' reading difficulties, is the insufficient teaching time load devoted to the English course in general and to reading activities in particular. Teachers also maintain that it is impossible to deal with more texts, to vary the genres, to increase the frequency of text reading in class, and to augment the number of reading tasks.

Concerning students learning wants, the students are eager to learn English because it is important to succeed in their studies, research work and future professions. For that reason, students want to improve their four language skills with more focus on speaking and reading. In addition, they speak about the existence of authentic references written in English that the students are not able to exploit. The content of these pedagogical references are related to international laws, international relations, political communication, administrative laws, human rights, legal systems, and the comparative laws (British and American laws) knowing that these laws are part of their curriculum.

Regarding students learning necessities, the data outcomes highlighted that the reading skill must be developed because teachers believe that it has a great deal to offer to the students in their research works and future careers. Students should develop their reading abilities by acquiring the necessary reading processes which will help them comprehend legal texts written in English. The analysis of the target needs showed that Master's students are in need of reading English legal texts encouraged by their teachers who believe that it is necessary to read English texts efficiently because this will play a facilitating role in their careers and help them to communicate with their peers. Actually students need to exploit and use legal texts found in all types of texts and in the web.

Conclusion

What emerges from this investigation is that the current teaching of ELP needs to be reconsidered. As English in Algeria is used for purely academic and occupational purposes teachers have to expose their students to the target language through intensive and extensive reading tasks that help to build language and content knowledge. Furthermore, integrating interesting content for ELP students will help them to keep a degree of motivation to learn English. Teachers also have to update their teaching methods and techniques by integrating new technologies in their classroom and test the feasibility of blended approach in that context. This allows ELP students to be exposed to intensive reading activities and overcome lack of teaching time. Nowadays, internet technologies are at the very heart of the educational process. It is not surprising that blended learning solutions are intensively used to overcome teaching difficulties. Webmasters created learning platforms to allow students and teachers to gradually move from traditional classrooms to e-learning. Some of these new tools can be used by English teachers in Algerian Universities because the required devices (internet access, PCs, tabs and Iphones) exist among students.

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