

Overcoming Difficulties ESP Students have in doing ESP Tasks

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at discussing the difficulties ESP students encounter when doing the assigned tasks. Some of the problems associated with this aspect are examined as well. A questionnaire done to first year students studying at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana, highlights how students prefer working when performing an ESP task in class (working individually, in pairs, in groups), the aspects that mostly influence the difficulty of the task, what can be done to overcome these difficulties, what are the types of tasks they consider the most difficult and the way tasks help students in enlarging ESP language vocabulary. Conclusions are based on both theoretical and practical points of view, thus showing what the ESP learner needs in order to make it easier and challenging for them to do the assigned tasks.

Keywords: ESP vocabulary, tasks, learning/teaching process, ESP learner.

Introduction

Tasks have a very important role in enlarging ESP vocabulary and in practicing the various skills needed to acquire a foreign language at best. Ellis claims that task-based learning facilitates acquisition, and as Dudley-Evans and St. John note, teaching integrated skills facilitates support learning more than teaching skills in isolation. ESP course writers should begin with pedagogical tasks (designed to promote second language learning processes), before introducing real world tasks (chosen for their relevance to target community situations). For Skehan the level of difficulty must be set so that learners can cope with therequirements of the task and still focus on form, whether this is accuracy or complexity. Basturkmen points out that the ESP learner would want to achieve ‘real world’ objectives, objectives requiring specific linguistic competencies. According to Willis and Willis, classroom tasks are seen to mirror the real world at three levels:

- The level of meaning (learners produce meanings which will be useful in the real world).
- The level of discourse (learners realize discourse acts which will reflect the real world).
- The level of activity (learners engage in a communicative activity which reflects very directly the way language is used outside the classroom).

Djapoura emphasizes that pre-task planning time is beneficial, because attention will be drawn to language form. Brown succinctly expresses the influence confidence has on learning when he writes: “At the heart of all learning is a person’s belief in his or her ability to accomplish the task”. Nunan states that it should be possible for learners to make choices about what to do and how to do it. But this implies a major change in the roles assigned to learners and teachers. By using “task” as a basic unit of learning, and by incorporating a focus on strategies, the possibility of planning and monitoring their own learning is opened to the students and some of the traditional hierarchies will begin to break down. Other basics such as teaching learning strategies– especially those that “facilitate the intake of new material”, ensuring proper task sequencing, making assessment criteria transparent via assignment and course rubrics, and providing frequent models of task outcomes all help students feel more secure in their ability to deal with new material. Mozzon-McPherson and Van Der Wolf, state that teachers should take into account the needs of their learners. In reality, whilst the majority of teachers may strive to change how and what they teach, many continue with a fundamentally teacher-focused approach, excluding students from planning, pacing and evaluation of classroom tasks, hence still limiting the level of independence of the learner to assigned activities.

Self-assess is one means of achieving autonomy. Edwards & Jane think that the process of gaining student feedback can also be a task in its own right. For Linn & Gronlund, assessment should be transparent and reflect program and course goals and objectives. Moreover, each testing instrument should accurately represent the course content and learning tasks. Thomas and Reinders point out that awakening an interest in the task, giving learners different ways of accomplishing it and the possibility for each student to set goals of their own, is the duty of the teacher. Setting objectives help teachers in knowing what tasks are to be done and how to present them during the learning process. Hyland stresses that specific objectives describe the achievable behaviors that learners will be expected to perform at the end of the course and during it too. In English for Specific Purposes, objectives often describe the competences that are considered as the cluster of skills, abilities and knowledge that a student must have to perform a specific task.

Objectives of the study

- To know whether students prefer doing the tasks at home, in class, at home and in class or not to have tasks at all.
- To know how students prefer working in performing/accomplishing a given task in class.
- To know the type of task that students consider the most difficult.
- To know what makes an ESP task difficult.
- To know the strategies students use to overcome the difficulties they encounter in doing the assigned tasks.

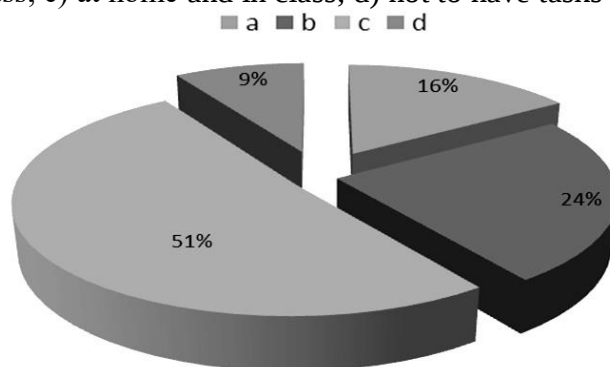
Material and Method

A questionnaire done to 126 first year students studying at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana. The chosen learners were selected by random cluster sampling. Students study English for Specific Purposes. Their textbook is "Engineering" by Lloyd, Ch. & Frazier, J.A., which contains topics related to many engineering fields of study. Questions of the questionnaire are based on personal teaching experience and on what students do during the English class.

Results, Discussion, Research Questions

1. Where do you prefer doing the assigned tasks?

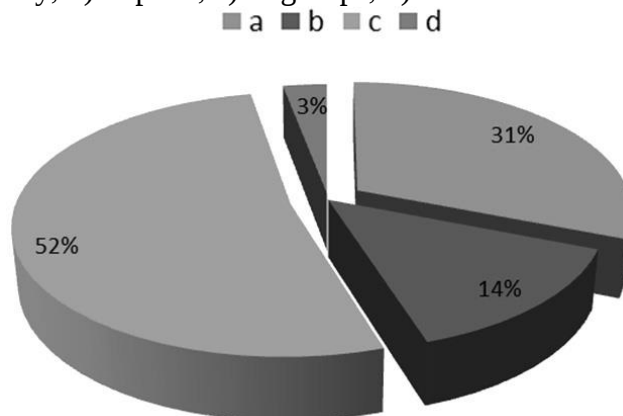
a) At home; b) in class; c) at home and in class; d) not to have tasks at all.



The graph shows that students (51%) prefer doing the assigned tasks at home and in class as well. In so doing they practice English more. But if we compare the percentages of students who prefer doing the tasks at home (16%) or in class (24%), it is found out that students don't want to work a lot at home. Some students (9%) don't want to have tasks at all. This category doesn't take the teaching/learning process seriously, they show laziness and most often stay passive.

2. How do you prefer working in class when performing an ESP task?

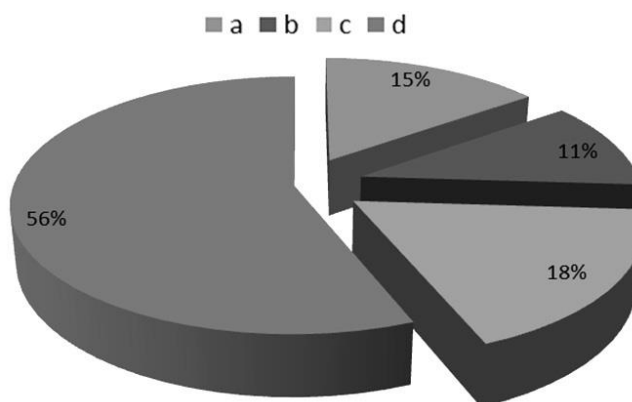
a) Working individually; b) in pairs; c) in groups; d) as a whole class.



In performing the tasks given in class, students think that working in groups (52%) is the best way to acquire knowledge. In a group they generate new ideas, share knowledge and experience and get used to appreciating each-other. Working in groups helps them reinforce and practice ESP language vocabulary in class. Teachers have to be very vigilant when students work in groups, because not always and not every student considers working in groups as a source of information, knowledge, corporation, but sometimes some of them stay passive and consider it a way “to have fun” with friends. Differently to what can be believed, only 14% of students like to work in pairs when performing the tasks. This comes as a result of the different level of proficiency different students have. Another percentage (31%) prefers to work individually when performing a given task. This is the category of the students who are well-prepared and have self-confidence. Students don’t like to work with the whole class (3%), because it’s very difficult to find a consensus and to share common opinions with the whole class.

3. Which is the type of task that you consider the most difficult?

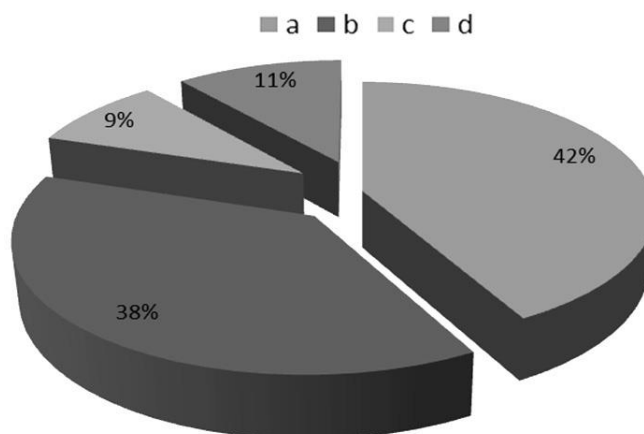
a) Comprehension check exercises; b) matching new words with their definitions; c) true/false exercises based on listening passages; d) writing about different topics based on the taken lesson.



Students find it easy to match new words with their definition (11%), especially when new words are associated with photos/drawings etc. But it is very difficult for them to write about different topics based on the taken lesson (56%), as they deal with engineering topics and very specific ESP terms. Some students find the listening language skill difficult as well (18%), because most often they do not get the right words, expressions, because of the accent, intonation and pronunciation used by English native speakers. Moreover when they deal with ESP in which most often students have to deal with specific engineering terms they had never heard/learned before and which can be encountered rarely in their everyday life.

4. What makes an ESP task difficult?

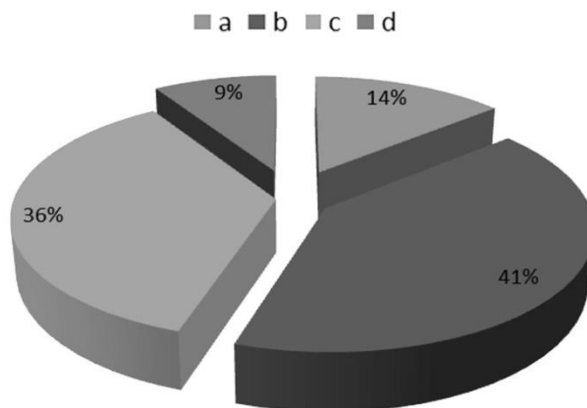
a) The limited knowledge about the topic of the task; b) the new vocabulary; c) the time to finish the task; d) the unclear request about what to do.



Students associate the difficulty of the task with the specific field they study. Students have chosen the insufficient knowledge about the topic of the task (42%) and the new vocabulary (38%) as factors that mostly influence the difficulty of the task. This is even because most of the tasks assigned to them have to do with new terminology from their own field of study. Setting the time allows students to know the time they need to finish a specific task. Different students need different limits of time in their disposal to finish the assigned tasks (9%). The choice of the students about the difficulty they have in even understanding the request of the task (11%), shows their poor knowledge of ESP.

5. What do you do to overcome these difficulties?

a) You ask your friends to help you; b) you use other materials that have additional information about the topic of the task; c) you surf the internet; d) you don't do the task.



As it is noticed from the above percentages, a considerable number of students (41%) like reading other books and materials to help them with additional information. Compared to the 9% of students, who have chosen not to do the task when they have difficulties. This shows that they have a lack of responsibility, concentration and effort. Some students (14%) ask friends to help them to overcome difficulties. In so doing they

share knowledge and learn even from each-other's mistakes. A 36% of students, use the internet when they have difficulty in doing a task. This indicates that the new technology has become an indispensable and a reliable tool for this generation.

Conclusions

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) meaningful and challenging tasks are an essential element of the teaching process. TBLT (Task Based Language Teaching) in ESP involves students in performing tasks relevant to their future profession and increases learners' motivation. By assigning tasks to students, teachers make it possible to keep students at work and be engaged in the learning process. Most students prefer doing the assigned tasks in class and at home as well. This is a good thing because before doing the assigned tasks, students will feel the need to learn and study the lesson and the new ESP terms. Teachers must classify tasks according to the difficulty that each task might have, and according to the students' proficiency level. Teachers must be sure that each assigned task will be finished in time by the students, otherwise students will lose their self-esteem, self-confidence, and be reluctant to do tasks next time. Students prefer working in groups, thinking that performing the tasks given in class in groups, is the best way to acquire knowledge. But teachers have to be alert to make sure each member of the group participates and give various activities to make students not just acquire knowledge but have fun as well (quizzes, competitions, learning through inventing, designing, etc).

Teachers should give more writing assignments as students find writing about different specific topics the most difficult tasks assigned, so they need more practice. Students associate the difficulty of the task with the specific field they study. They mostly read books, other materials, surf the internet to get additional information when they have difficulties, but there are other students as well who decide not to do the task at all, so teachers have to inflict other proper strategies for these students to make them more responsible and try harder. Tasks play an important role in enlarging and practicing ESP language vocabulary. Tasks are considered an indispensable tool in enabling learners to acquire the variety of language and skills they need in typical situations they meet not just in their everyday life, but in their professional life as well.

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