Enhancing Communicative Competence Through English for Specific Purposes (ESP): A Comparative Study of ESP and General English Approaches in University Language Programme

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Abstract:
It is generally observed that the communicative performance of the students in English language is below average. It is disheartening that a large percentage of students and graduates of Nigerian higher institutions cannot express themselves freely in both written and spoken forms of English language. Whereas, communication is central to the field of teaching and learning. Thus, there is a need to take measures through research, to improve the communicative competence of the students. This research is conceived to examine the competence of the students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria in the use of English Language for interpersonal, official, academic and professional communicative purposes; design English for specific Purpose (ESP) language learning programme for teaching English language in the University to enhance the communicative competence of the students. This study set out to experiment how the use of ESP as a teaching approach can immerse the learners with the required communicative ability for all communicative situations. The study compares the traditional approach of General English with ESP. Empirical evidence from the study suggests that the ESP approach is more effective in enhancing students' communicative competence compared to the traditional General English approach. Significant differences in communicative competence have been observed between students who undergo ESP-based education and those following the conventional General English approach. Based on the significant findings of the research; it is recommended that educational institutions in Nigeria consider incorporating the ESP-based language teaching method into their curriculum.

Keywords: Communicative ability, ESP, Language learning, performance.
Introduction

English language is a second language in Nigeria and it has attained a status that other languages cannot match in that it is the language of social mobility in the society. It is the official medium of communication, the language of commerce and the medium of instruction in schools, at all levels of education. According to Jowitt (1991), “English language performs a wide range of functions in Nigeria. It is a lingual Franca that enjoys official or semi-official status. English language is used for the effectiveness of education and for the sake of academic uniformity from one part of the country to another. English language, the official language and as such it enjoys high status within the nation. It is usually the language of education, administration, government, commerce, external communication and general utility”. Bamgbose (1971) submits that English language is perhaps the most important heritage of British colonial masters left. He went further that the most remarkable area where English is firmly rooted and evident is in the field of education. It is expected that every educated Nigerian should be able to speak fluently in English language and also write good English. This is why the policy makers in education had made a credit pass in English language a requirement for admission into any higher institution of learning (University, College of Education and Polytechnic) in Nigeria. While in such institutions, every learner is expected to offer compulsory General English (GST) courses to equip them with language skills needed for academic success and professional competence after graduation. Considering the wide range of purposes that the students of University need English language for, there is always a need to evaluate and appraise the various approaches of teaching the language to the students in order to ensure effectiveness.

The traditional method utilized in teaching English is no longer fashionable and effectual due to the wide range of uses to which English is put today. There is need to recognise functional varieties of English that are responsive to the social and professional needs of the learners and users generally. Scholars in different parts of the world are engaging in studies to show the nature of the language that can meet the new demands of the users. With the new developments in various professional sectors and all human disciplines, the need for learning of English language has also increased. This demand gives rise to a novel and more refined approach to language teaching, named as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It has been observed that this approach has not been commonly put to use in language education in Nigeria Universities. The main concern of this study, therefore, is to empirically examine the effectiveness of the developed ESP approach in enhancing the communicative competence of the students in Nigerian University through an experimental teaching of English to the students of Bamidele Olumilua University Education, Science and Technology Ikere-Ekiti using ESP approach to determine its effectiveness and advantage over General English teaching approach.

Literature review

English for specific purposes programme is a situational Language Teaching programme based on Need Analysis. What serves as prelude to any ESP course design is the analysis of the specific needs of the learners because it determines the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of an ESP course. According to Lorenzo (2005) ESP “concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures”. To him, ESP is usually meant for adult learners who are in a work related setting with higher motivation to learn than in usual ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts.

The program of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be done and has always been done at both the institutional level and occupational settings (Suyanto, 2004). This is especially intended to meet particular instructional objectives such as to give the students ability to read English text in their fields of study, to be able to write reports of laboratory activities, and to make presentation. Belcher (2006), states that “ESP assumes that the problems are unique to specific learners in specific contexts and thus
must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored to fit instruction” (p. 135). Mohan (1986) adds that ESP courses focus on preparing learners “for chosen communicative environments”.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) different interpretations may be given to the word “specific” in ESP. In 1960’s it meant a list of technical vocabulary of a given field or profession. In 1980’s up to now it referred to the learners’ needs and interests (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), (Strevens, 1988), (John, 1995), (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Scholars in the field of ESP seem to agree that to identify the learners’ need and interest, a need analysis must be taken as what is specific and appropriate in one particular group of learners and may well not be elsewhere. Based on this, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an approach of language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners’ reasons for learning.

ESP has its roots in ELT principles of the past and in the basic recognition that learners’ needs differ (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Richards (1985) defines English Specific Purposes (ESP) as “the role of English in a language course or programme of instruction in which the content and aims of the course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners”. ESP had developed alongside a new concern for the needs and feelings of the learner rather than imposing a syllabus on him, without paying attention to his needs. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) ESP is an approach of language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners’ reasons for learning.

English for Specific Purpose (ESP) requires specialized methodologies and approaches that are different to those found in general English classes. The Approaches of ESP are learner centered in that they take into account learners’ backgrounds, language needs, and goals and generally allow learners some creativity and role in instructional decisions. ESP involves communicative activities which require frequent interaction among learners to exchange information and solve problems; and communication activities linked to “real world” contexts, often emphasizing links across written and spoken modes and channels.

Objective of the Study

This study set out to experiment how the use of ESP as a teaching approach can immerse the learners with the required communicative ability for all communicative situations. The study compares the traditional approach of General English with ESP. The specific objectives of the study are:

i. to find out if there any difference in the baseline communicative competence of students who undergo ESP-based education and those who followed the conventional general English approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti?

ii. to empirically examine the effectiveness of the developed ESP approach in enhancing the communicative competence of the students

Methodology

The study is an experimental language teaching that will lead to the design of the programme of English for specific purposes (ESP) for teaching English to the students of the Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology. Three hundred (300) 100 level students across all the three colleges of the University are the population for this study. Hundred (100) students from each college of the University are randomly selected based on availability. The study was carried out in two stages within six months:

At the beginning stage of the study, a pretest was conducted on all the selected 300 students as a baseline assessment to ascertain their level of communicative competence in English language. The set of 178 poorest among them were selected based on the outcome of the test, as experimental group while the remaining 142 students formed the control group. The need analysis (NA) was carried out on the experimental group to determine what their
communicative need in English language was. Thereafter, they were exposed to our specially
designed English for specific purpose (ESP)
programme for another three months while the
remaining students continued with their General
English programme of the University. The ESP
programme curriculum was based on the general
communicative need as well as official, academic
and professional communicative needs of the
learners.

After the three months’ ESP course for the
experimental group, a post-test was conducted
as Midline data to determine the general
communicative competence of both the
experimental and the control group. The
learning outcome of the two groups were
compared and analysed both quantitatively and
qualitatively to determine the effectiveness of
ESP in enhancing the communicative
competence of the students. After this, the two
groups were both exposed to ESP programme
for another three months after which another
evaluation was conducted as the end-line data in
order to see how fast the approach is in
enhancing the communicative competence
among the two groups. The end-line data was
collated and analysed quantitatively and
qualitatively to form the basis of the final
recommendation of the study.

Results

Research Question 1
Is there any difference in the baseline
communicative competence of students who
undergo ESP-based education and those who
followed the conventional general English
approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of
Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-
Ekiti?

Table 1. Analysis of students’ performance
in the Baseline test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESP-based</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>29.84</td>
<td>8.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result in Table 1 shows the difference in
mean score of students taught using ESP-based
approach and conventional method in the
Baseline test. The Table revealed that mean score for ESP-based students which is 12.80 (SD = 5.33) was less than the mean score for students in the conventional group which is 29.80 (SD = 8.60) with a mean difference of 17.04.

Research Question 2
Is there any difference in the Midline
communicative competence of students who
undergo ESP-based education and those who
followed the conventional general English
approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of
Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-
Ekiti?

Table 2. Analysis of students’ performance
in the Midline test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESP-based</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>30.60</td>
<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>7.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result in Table 14 shows the difference in
mean score of students taught using ESP-based
approach and conventional method in the
Midline test. The Table revealed that mean score for ESP-based students which is 30.60 (SD = 8.26) was greater than the mean score for students in the conventional group which is 24.85 (SD = 7.98) with a mean difference of 5.85.

Research Question 3
Is there any difference in the Endline
communicative competence of students who
undergo ESP-based education and those who
followed the conventional general English
approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of
Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-
Ekiti?
Table 3. Analysis of students’ performance in the Endline test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESP-based</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>39.33</td>
<td>6.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>38.42</td>
<td>6.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result in Table 15 shows the difference in mean score of students taught using ESP-based approach and conventional method in the Endline test. The Table revealed that mean score for ESP-based students which is 39.33 (SD = 6.44) was greater than the mean score for students in the conventional group which is 38.42 (SD = 6.14) with a mean difference of 1.91.

Test of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the baseline communicative competence of students who undergo ESP-based education and those who followed the conventional general English approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti.

Table 4. t-Test Analysis of Students’ Performance in the Baseline Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t_cal</th>
<th>t_tab</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESP-based</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>12.80</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>21.17</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>29.84</td>
<td>8.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result in Table 4 shows the difference in mean score of students taught using ESP-based approach and conventional method in the Baseline test. The t-test analysis revealed that mean score for ESP-based students (12.80) was less than the mean score for students in the conventional group (29.80) with mean difference of 17.04. The t-test analysis also showed that t_cal (21.17) greater than t_tab (1.96) at p < 0.05 level of significant. This implies that there is a significant difference between the performance of ESP-based education and those who followed the conventional general English approach in the Baseline test.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the Midline communicative competence of students who undergo ESP-based education and those who followed the conventional general English approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti.

Table 5. ANCOVA of Performance Students Taught with Different Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected</td>
<td>9649.577&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4924.789</td>
<td>118.498</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>4076.221</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4076.221</td>
<td>98.080</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>7460.821</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7460.821</td>
<td>179.519</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>9570.208</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9570.208</td>
<td>230.274</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>12343.339</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>41.560</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262177.000</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected</td>
<td>22192.917</td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a. R Squared = .444 (Adjusted R Squared = .440)

A one-way between subject analysis of variance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the impact of the two teaching strategies on the performance of students in the Midline test scores as shown in Table 5. The independent variables were the teaching strategies (ESP-
based method, and conventional method), and the dependent variable consisted of Midline test scores on the communicative competence test. Students’ scores on the Baseline test administration were used as covariate in the analysis. After adjusting for Baseline test scores, there was a significant difference between the two groups in the Midline test scores on the communicative competence test, F(1, 297) = 179.519, p<0.05. This means that there is a significant difference in the Midline test performance of students taught with ESP-based language method and conventional approach. In fact, the value of partial $\eta^2 = 0.38$ indicates that the teaching strategy (ESP-based method) contributed about 38% to the improvement in the Midline test scores of students in that group.

**Hypothesis 3**

There is no significant difference in the Endline communicative competence of students who undergo ESP-based education and those who followed the conventional general English approach at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti.

### Table 6. ANCOVA of Students’ Performance in the Endline Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>6123.961*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3061.980</td>
<td>155.409</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>13100.603</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13100.603</td>
<td>664.914</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midline</td>
<td>6063.686</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6063.686</td>
<td>307.759</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>331.731</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>331.731</td>
<td>16.837</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>5851.706</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>19.703</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>467496.000</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>11975.667</td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** a. R Squared = .511 (Adjusted R Squared = .508)

A one-way between subject analysis of variance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the impact of the two teaching strategies on the performance of students in the Endline test scores as shown in Table 6. The independent variables were the teaching strategies (ESP-based method, and conventional method), and the dependent variable consisted of Endline test scores on the communicative competence test. Students’ scores on the Midline test administration were used as covariate in the analysis. After adjusting for Midline test scores, there was a significant difference between the two groups in the Endline test scores on the communicative competence test, F(1, 297) = 307.759, p<0.05. This means that there is a significant difference in the Endline test performance of students taught with ESP-based language method and conventional approach. In fact, the value of partial $\eta^2 = 0.51$ indicates that the teaching strategy (ESP-based method) contributed about 51% to the improvement in the Endline test scores of students in that group.

**Discussion**

The outcome of the study reveals that an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) language learning course has been found effective in enhancing the communicative competence of the university students. Students who undergo ESP-based education demonstrate better proficiency in specific areas of language use. Students have also shown significant improvement in their ability to use English in specific, academic and communicative contexts. Empirical evidence from the study suggests that the ESP approach is more effective in enhancing students’ communicative competence compared to the traditional General English approach.
Significant differences in communicative competence have been observed between students who undergo ESP-based education and those following the conventional General English approach.

**Conclusion**

Based on the significant findings of the research, it is recommended that educational institutions consider incorporating the ESP-based language teaching method into their curriculum. The substantial impact demonstrated by this method on students’ performance in the Endline test scores suggests its potential to enhance communicative competence among learners. Further exploration and implementation of this approach could lead to more effective teaching methodologies and improved learning outcomes. The statistical significance of this difference, supported by a high partial $\eta^2$ value of 0.51, underscores the considerable contribution of the ESP-based method in enhancing students’ performance on the communicative competence test. These findings emphasize the relevance and effectiveness of incorporating innovative teaching strategies, specifically the ESP-based method, to foster improved learning outcomes in language education.

**Acknowledgment**

The authors wish to acknowledge Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), Prof. O.V. Adeoluwa (The Vice-Chancellor of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria) and the University Centre for Research and Development (CERAD), Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti for approving the sponsorship of this research.

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