

ASSESSING THE WRITING SKILL IN AN ESP CONTEXT: THE CASE OF 1ST YEAR MASTERS' STUDENTS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF TLEMCCEN

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ABSTRACT

The present study tries to focus on the concept of assessment and its significance as a pedagogical instrument in the teaching-learning process in an ESP situation, where 1st year Immunology Masters' Students at the Department of Biology at University of Tlemcen encountered difficulties while writing. On the basis of the results obtained from the mixed methods of data collection and analysis, this work has argued that assessment of writing skill is very important for ESP students, and should include various techniques and strategies to guide and inform effectively ESP teachers about their learners' needs and wants. Thus, to cope with those difficulties, it suggested and recommended some criteria in order to offer useful instruction.

KEYWORDS: Assessment, Writing Skill, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Learners' Needs

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching and learning in which all teaching courses are governed by specific needs of specific learners. It includes not only knowledge of a special part of the English language, but also capacity to use the skills of this later. In fact, the focus of every ESP courses should be on developing learners' skills. Thus, in order to help learners develop their knowledge, assessing their learning is a very essential task, it can help them to increase and ensure their success. Among the ESP learners' difficulties, writing skill is usually considered as the most difficult task in English foreign language (EFL). The main objective of this research work is to provide information about the methods and strategies applied for the assessment of the writing skill of the first year Masters' students of Immunology at the Department of Biology in the University of Tlemcen, as well as the difficulties encountered by students while writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment is a process of gathering information about learners' knowledge, skills, abilities and progress. It is a key component of all educational programmes of measuring the learners' success. As for (Carr and Harris, 2001, P.35), "[Assessment] an integral part of instruction... effective classroom assessment is relevant to immediate learning." In fact, it needs to entail effective strategies that push learners to determine their real achievement.

However, assessment of students' writing is a process of measuring students' knowledge and skills in writing. The ability to write a coherent and effective text is very important skill for the learners, because it does not involve just the language system, but it also develops their cognitive systems for memory and thinking. (Elbow, 1998, p.7) reports that

“writing calls on two different skills that usually conflict with each other. That is, writing calls on the ability to create words and ideas, but it also calls on the ability to criticize them in order to decide which ones to use.” Thus, writing develops the learners’ ability to state their thoughts clearly and accurately.

The situation under study is related to assessing the writing skill in ESP context, with reference to 1st year Masters’ students of Immunology at the Department of Biology at the University of Tlemcen. In fact, ESP is a discipline based on needs specification in which all teaching courses are related to specific needs of specific learners. Thus, the English language taught in ESP, should mainly based on learners’ needs and wants. However, ESP learners have some difficulties in English, and the most frequent ones are problems with reading, writing, grammar and lack of vocabulary.

Hence, the overall aim is to diagnose those difficulties using a process for data collection and data analysis. These kinds of challenges deeply motivate the researcher to undertake this work which revolves around the following situation : Assessing the Writing Skill in ESP Context.

METHODOLOGY

Different tools and instruments were used for gathering information to achieve this research work. Data included: students’ questionnaire in order to identifying their needs and lacks. A semi-structured interview with ESP teachers was organized for the purpose of analyzing the overall ESP situation in the Department of Biology. And an English final test for the purpose of identifying the students’ level and difficulties in English while writing.

DATA ANALYSIS

On the basis of the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, this work has argued that Masters’ Students face difficulties:

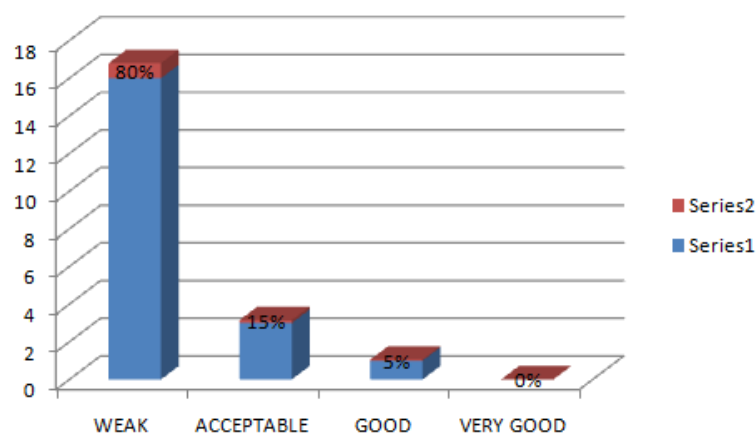
- In language knowledge which consists of : grammar mistakes, spelling and lack of vocabulary.

Also ESP teachers face several problems when teaching writing like :

- The lack of teaching materials.

From students’ responses, the majority say that their level in writing is weak.

The following bar-graph demonstrates the percentages of students’ writing level.



Bar Graph 1: The Writing Level

The majority of students (80%) find their academic to say that their level in writing is weak, while (15%) of them find their writing acceptable and only (5%) is good.

From the analysis of the English test, it was noted that students,

- Have difficult vocabulary words.
- Did not write a correct sentences.
- Make a grammatical mistakes as well as in punctuation and spelling when writing a summary.

Thus, problems in writing include language knowledge, which consists of grammar and usage, spelling and vocabulary. It also includes cohesive elements that link the text together (e.g. pronoun reference, conjunctions) and organizational conventions for constructing texts (e.g topic-sentence, supporting sentences, conclusion paragraph structure).

Furthermore, the knowledge of how to use the language to accomplish communicative functions, such as conveying information and ideas, manipulating the world, teaching and learning, and recasting the world in artistic or humorous ways.

Finally, various aspects of social knowledge about language, including knowledge of regional and social dialects, levels of formality and technical language, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references.

In addition to these language knowledge problems, difficulty in reading can also be due to learners' problems with strategic competence (correctly assessing the communicative situation and planning a response to it), and problems with background knowledge (experience with the communicative situation and knowledge of the world and the specific context). This involves the capacity for language use. One can conclude that, students' weaknesses in one of these elements can cause problems with writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The final part of this work emphasizes on the effective ways to improve ESP students writing, and it deals with some recommendations concerning the different methods of assessment and the most common ones are:

- To use different tasks activities that enhance students' knowledge.
- To get students more written practice activities to do at home.
- To use dictation to learn spelling.
- To read scientific articles in English language.
- To promote translation, which is considered as the basic need for ESP Masters' Students.

CONCLUSIONS

The writing skill is seen by ESP students as the most difficult one. The main reasons are the lack of checking and their weaknesses in English skills.

Moreover, ESP Masters' student is adult's learners, they are aware of the importance of English language in their field of study, so, they need to write effectively and accurately to exploit legal texts and write coherent articles. They also

believe that, scientific research and technical exchange at the international conferences cannot be achieved without an acceptable work written in English language.

Therefore, it is then the teachers responsibility to draw students attention on the importance of writing in English and are required to be more confident while teaching and assessing ESP, and have to work in collaboration in order to make students able to write their own works, such as thesis, abstracts, research papers, and transform the writing symbols to speaking sounds.

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