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THE ISSUE OF DOUBLE-COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING / LEARNING OF ESP REVISITED

(LA QUESTION DE LA DOUBLE COMPETENCE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT/APPRENTISSAGE DE L'ANGLAIS DE SPECIALITE REVISITEE)

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ABSTRACT

The issue of double-competence in the teaching/learning of ESP has been an issue of serious concern since the early eighties (Strevens 1980, Dudley-Evans 1993, Perrin 1995, Combes-Joncheray 1999, Narcy-Combes 2005, Fanou 2009 & 2010, etc.). Double-competence was first considered as non important, then as useful, and then as a very important tool for a successful teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), in a French speaking environment in particular.
Through this paper, I have tried to weigh the importance of double-competence in my teaching of ESP after more than two decades' experiences, and have found out that a minimum of command of the specialist subject is indispensable for an easy and successful teaching/learning of ESP, and also that the help of a specialist is still indispensable, especially if the teacher of ESP has not been trained in the specialist subject, given that he/she cannot have been trained in several specialist subjects and yet he/she may still have to teach English applied to more than one specialist subject. Such a specialist is still required for the assessment of learners' needs and for the preparation of ESP teaching materials.

Keywords: double-competence, specialist subject, English for specific purposes (ESP), teaching/learning, learners' needs, teachability/learnablity.

RESUME

La question de la double-compétence dans l'enseignement/apprentissage de l'anglais de spécialité constitue une préoccupation pour bien des chercheurs depuis le début des années 1980 (Strevens 1980, Dudley-Evans 1993, Perrin 1995, Combes-Joncheray 1999, Narcy-Combes 2005, Fanou 2009 & 2010, etc. La double-compétence a d'abord été considérée comme sans importance, puis comme quelque chose d'utile, et ensuite comme un outil très important dans l'enseignement/apprentissage de l'anglais de spécialité (ASP), en particulier dans un environnement francophone.
A travers cet article, j'ai essayé de peser l'importance de la double-compétence dans mon enseignement de l'anglais de spécialité après plus de deux décennies d'expériences et me suis rendu compte qu'un minimum de maîtrise de la matière de spécialité est indispensable pour un enseignement/apprentissage aisé et productif de l'anglais de spécialité, et que l'assistance d'un spécialiste est toujours nécessaire, surtout si l'enseignant d'anglais de spécialité n'a pas été formé dans la matière de spécialité, étant donné qu'il/elle ne peut pas avoir été formé(e) dans plusieurs matières de spécialité alors qu'il/elle peut avoir à enseigner l'anglais appliqué à plus d'une matière de spécialité. Un tel spécialiste est toujours nécessaire pour le recensement des besoins des apprenants et pour la préparation des supports de cours.

Mots clés : double-compétence, matière de spécialité, anglais de spécialité, enseignement/apprentissage, les besoins des apprenants, enseignabilité/apprenabilité

INTRODUCTION

The teaching/learning of English for specific purposes is the teaching/learning of English applied to a specialist subject such as Economics, Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Business, Engineering, etc. It requires the command of the English language and it used to be considered as possible without the knowledge of the specialist subject before being considered as easier and more comfortable with a minimum of knowledge in the specialist subject, and ultimately as impossible without a minimum knowledge of the specialist subject to which the English language to be taught is applied.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF DOUBLE-COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING/LEARNING OF ESP

Double-competence has not been regarded as having the same importance for teachers of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) since this concept became an issue of investigation for researchers in the eighties.

English teachers considered to be incapable of teaching ESP without the help of specialists

At the beginning of research on the issue, the knowledge of English was considered to be the only criterion for being an ESP teacher, who was then supposed to be incapable of teaching any item relating to the specialist subject, no matter the language in which he/she was to teach it, but who did need the assistance of a teacher of the specialist subject to teach ESP effectively. For Strevens (1980: 111) for example,

> when a specialist of English as a Foreign Language first embarks on teaching ESP, it is generally many months before he or she ceases to be haunted at every lesson by the fear of 'making a mistake in the subject' or even simply of 'not understanding the texts.' The ESP task requires teachers to accept from the outset that they will never be specialists in the learner's subject - but they also have to learn that this does not matter: the task is a three-way partnership in which the teacher first seeks the assistance of a subject specialist, for the purpose of preparing suitable English teaching materials, and then helps the learner to become able to operate within his own role and identity as a specialist in English. English teachers are not normally teachers of specialist subjects (except in rare and fortunate cases) and they should not attempt to be so.

According to him, The ESP teacher cannot prepare teaching materials by himself. He needs a specialist of the learners' specific subject without whom he cannot teach effectively. As a language teacher, and not a teacher of the learners' specialist subject, he needs suitable teaching materials that are related to the specialist subject, unknown to him, and which he can prepare with the help of specialists to be sure that they actually correspond to the standards acceptable in the community of specialists of the subject.

So, the language teacher is not able to prepare appropriate teaching materials unless a specialist is ready to help him do it, or unless he has himself been trained in the specialist subject. According to Strevens then, the language teacher cannot be self-reliant for the teaching of ESP. As for Hawkins (1987), he recommends a reciprocal course for adult learners assuming that the British lawyer, for example, is the one that masters the vocabulary of law in English more than any lawyer from any other country where the official language is not English:

> […] the potential of reciprocal courses for adult learners is clear. If specialists (lawyers, engineers, accountants, salesmen) are to learn the functional language of their trade they need tutors who have learned the highly specialized concepts that are transacted. No generalist language teacher can expect to know the meanings that, say, the lawyer attaches to the vocabulary of law. Yet it is these very fine meanings that the

> foreign lawyer will wish to have explained. Who is better to do this than the British lawyer who, in return, expects to be taught the legal language of the foreign country? (pp. 95-96)

The form of learning hereby recommended by Hawkins is not an institutional ESP learning. Yet, he also refers to the specialist – the specialist as a native speaker of English - to help learners acquire ESP effectively. For him too, specialists are the ones that master specific concepts and can actually help to teach the real vocabulary of specific fields.

Perrin (1999) also thinks that language teachers are not and do not have to be specialists of specific subjects. For him, language teachers must even be allowed to make all kinds of mistakes regarding the specialist subject since they are not specialists, but they may learn the specialist subject with the help of learners who are, or are supposed to be, specialists or experts compared to their ESP teacher.

ESP teachers having to be interested in the specialist subject

Another trend was that ESP teachers should not only be language experts but should also be interested in the specialist subject as well, without necessarily being particularly knowledgeable in it. For Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 163) for example, "the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather an interested student of the subject." For them,

ESP teachers do not need to learn specialist knowledge. They require three things only:

> i. a positive attitude towards the ESP content;
> ii. a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area;
> iii. an awareness of how much they probably already know.
>
> This can be summed up as "the ability to ask intelligent questions".
> When confronted with a machine, for example, the teacher should not necessarily know how it works, but should be able to ask:
> - What is the machine used for?
> - What is this part called?
> - Why doesn't it do that?
> Etc. (p. 163).

Another author with a similar view is Dudley-Evans for whom one need not be knowledgeable in every aspect of the specialist subject but just has to display some interest in it. He wrote:

> Clearly one needs an interest in the discipline and a willingness to find out about the genre conventions and the favoured 'stories', but one does not necessarily need to have detailed knowledge of the actual content. One needs to try to find out how the discipline works, what sort of questions they are seeking answers to, rather than necessarily know and understand all the answers (Dudley-Evans 1993: 182).

Double-competence regarded today as indispensable for a successful ESP teaching/learning

Certain authors consider double-competence as a necessity. For Percebois (1996), the teacher of English applied to Economics should not only be somehow competent in economics but should also have some deep comprehension of the article his teaching is based upon so as to address the issues dealt with in the article, in front of his students, in a convincing manner.

For Combes-Joncheray (1999), it is utopian to think that one can teach ESP related to a field in which one knows nothing as one cannot pretend to teach what one does not understand at all. For her, a minimum of knowledge in the specialist subject is indispensable. Mangiante and Parpette (2004) and Gilbert (2008) even consider that an LSP teacher who has nothing but some superficial knowledge of the specialist subject will not be able to assess his students' needs effectively so as to prepare a customized LSP syllabus for them.

In fact, for Gilbert (2008), double-competence is a real asset, especially when the LSP syllabus is imposed to the LSP teacher, as it enables him to have a precise representation of the learners'

needs and objectives in a learner-centred approach context. However, for him, in some cases such as during optimal situations of negotiation requiring an advanced level of autonomy for the students, the LSP teacher trained both in language and in the specialist subject may be a mere source of information but may not be considered to be a necessity.

For Gilbert then, depending on the circumstances, double-competence may be not only useful but also a necessity.

LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FROM MY RECENT EXPERIENCES IN ESP TEACHING

I have visited some of my ESP classes to assess the relation between my level of competence in the specialist subject and my performance as an ESP teacher. I have adopted the task-based teaching approach.

On April 24th 2015, in a class of *Prépa 2*, at the *Ecole Supérieure des Télécommunications du Bénin (ESTB),* I had to keep on with the teaching of a unit, 'The Internet and email', and deal specifically with a reading comprehension task on 'Email features', from the book *Infotech: English for computer users* (fourth edition), by Santiago Emeras Remachas (Cambridge University Press). The text being written in simple English, I could easily understand it and check the answers proposed by Sylvain on the board. It was a teachable/learnable material for me and I did not find it difficult to answer the questions related to the task. But that was not the case for the free questions asked by the students some of which were very difficult for me to answer. My difficulties were related to the fact that I was not very knowledgeable in Internet issues. Regarding the next topic dealt with, 'The web', I found the proposed task the instruction of which was 'Look at the screenshot of a typical webpage. How many of the features (a-k) can you say in English?' very difficult. In fact, I found the text, 'A typical web page', particularly hard to comprehend.

On April 29th, 2015, in a second year class of *Sciences et techniques de l'information et de la documentation (STID)* at the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature (ENAM)* of the *Université d'abomey-Calavi (UAC)*, I taught a unit entitled 'Inside the system' (taken from *Infotech: English for Computer users* by Santiago Emeras Remachas). In the exercise number 2 of that unit, there are 10 questions, all of which were easy for me as the answers were to be found in the text that was simple and easily readable.

The next exercise corrected was Exercise 4. It was on the binary system. Here is the correction proposed by a student, Paul, on the board:

1) A binary system uses eight digits.
2) A bit are grouped into eight-digit codes that typically represent characters (letters, numbers and symbol)
3) A collection of eight bits called character
4) ASCII stand to describe the RAM memory, the storage capacity of disks and the size of a program on document.

All of the answers proposed by Paul were wrong, and I did not need to refer to the authors' keys (answers) to assess them. Being knowledgeable in such basics in computer science, for having taught the binary system for a long time, I found it easy to assess Paul's answers and to give some explanations to the class.

On May 20th, 2015, at the *Ecole Supérieure des Télécommunications du Bénin (ESTB)*, in a class of *Ingénieur 1*, I had to teach a lesson entitled Current, voltage and resistance, corresponding to Unit 43 in the book *Engineering: Technical English for Professionals*, by Mark Ibbotson

(Cambridge University Press). The material taken from the book consisted of three parts, A, B and C,
entitled respectively **Electric current**, **Voltage and resistance** and **Electrical power**. It was not a teachable/learnable material for me. Although I did scientific studies in high school, I had forgotten most of what I had learned then regarding current, voltage and resistance issues, and it was not a long time since I had been teaching that unit. I found it hard to understand, in particular, part C, **Electrical power**:

C. Electrical power

The text below, about electrical power, is from a home improvements magazine.

The amount of current, in amps, required by an **electrical appliance** – such as a TV or an electric kettle – depends on the **power** of the appliance. This number – expressed in **watts (w)** – will be marked somewhere on the appliance. To calculate the required current, simply take the **wattage** and divide it by the voltage of the electrical supply in your home – around 230 volts in most of Europe. Therefore, for an electric kettle with a **power rating** of 2,000 watts (as specified by the manufacturer), the current required is 2,000 watts/230 volts = 8.7 amps.

This text is obviously too technical for me and is beyond the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) of most ESP teachers who have been trained in English only. Yet, it was part of the material I had used for the teaching of ESP applied to a scientific and technical subject, current, voltage and resistance.

I also had some difficulties to understand and do the following exercise (exercise n° 43.2, from the same unit of the same book):

Complete the extract about current and power calculations using the words in the box. Look at A, B and C to help you.

amps	conductor	current	resistance	voltage	wattage	components
circuit	ohms	supply	volts	watts		

In electrical calculations, electromotive force is expressed by the letter E, resistance by the letter R, and current by the letter I (which comes from the word 'intensity').
According to Ohm's Law: I = E/R.
In other words, the (1) … flowing through a (2) …, measured in (3) …, equals the (4) … of the electrical (5) …, measured in (6) …, divided by the total (7) …, measured in (8) … To work out the value of R, it is necessary to calculate the total resistance of all the (9) … and connecting lengths of (10) … that make up the circuit.
Once both the voltage and amperage are known, it is possible to work out the power, measured in (11) …, that will be consumed. Power (P) can be calculated using the equation P = EI. Therefore (12) … equals voltage multiplied by amperage.

The task was not very easy for me. However, I did not find it too difficult because of my background knowledge, and my difficulties were due to my lack of practice in the field. I wonder how difficult it would be for an ESP teacher with very little or no background knowledge to do it, to explain it to the students, or to check the latter's answers. I would not have

been able to prepare the material proposed by Mark Ibbotson and I was not surprised to read on the cover of the book that the latter was "authored by a qualified engineer with professional experience in both engineering and English language teaching" and that we could "trust this book to provide the specialist vocabulary that engineers really need."

On 22nd May, 2015, at the *Ecole Supérieure des Télécommunications du Bénin (ESTB)*, in a class of *Prépa 2*, I had to teach a unit (Unit 19 of the book *Infotech: English for computer users* by Santiago Emeras Remachas) entitled 'Internet security'. I am not knowledgeable in such an issue, unlike the students who are well informed about it. I decided to ask them to do the exercises proposed by the author. The first one, an introductory exercise, comprised the following questions:

1) What is a hacker?
2) How easy do you think it is to infiltrate the Internet system and steal sensitive information?
3) How can you protect your computer from viruses and spyware?

Apart from the first question which I could easily answer, the other two questions were difficult questions for me, and the answers proposed by the students could only be corrected regarding grammar issues but not the content. I could hardly understand and answer their questions. I had the same difficulties for exercises 2 and 3.
Exercise 4 is a reading comprehension exercise with a text entitled "The history of hacking". Given that all the information required to do it was inside the text, I found it quite easy to understand and answer the comprehension questions:

1) Which hacking case inspired the film "War games"?
2) When did Captain Zap hack into the Pentagon?
3) Why was Nicholas Whitely arrested in 1988?
4) How old was the hacker that broke into the US defense computer in 1989?

In fact they were very easy questions that anybody could answer. If they had required some specific knowledge of hacking or Internet security, I would not have found the text teachable/learnable (Pienemann) and would not have been able to answer them so easily. I also have to confess that I am not able to design such a text as a non specialist of Internet security. So, to prepare teaching materials, double-competence is indispensable unless the ESP teacher is assisted by a specialist.

On Saturday 13, June, 2015, in a class of Master / Human Resource Management at the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature* of the *Université d'Abomey-Calavi*, I had to teach a unit, 'Unit 11 Working from home', from a book by Annie Goulvent and Frédérique Le Graverend, *L'anglais des affaires* (Sup'Foucher Edition). I first decided to introduce my lesson by asking the students a question on the issue, "What is telework?" Several definitions were proposed with the teacher (me) able to appreciate each of them properly. Then I asked, "What are the advantages of telework?" and then, "What are the disadvantages?" These questions led to a free and interesting discussion between the students and me. I was at ease with the questions as I had been teaching 'telework' as an ESP issue for a very long time and had therefore become knowledgeable in it. I also found the teaching material easy to understand with some tasks that I did not find difficult to handle with my students, especially the reading comprehension task, with the text 'Software that monitors your work, wherever you are.'

On August 21, 2015, in a class of *Licence professionnelle / Banque et Assurance*, at the

Ecole Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature (ENAM), I had to teach a lesson on 'Banks and banking'. As an ESP teacher that had learned a lot on 'banking' for having taught it for a long time as an ESP issue, I easily prepared an exercise to test their background knowledge about the topic. I asked them to answer the following questions:

1) What is a bank?
2) What are the different types of bank?
3) What are the different kinds of bank account you know?
4) What are the functions of the central bank?
5) What services are rendered by banks?
- by commercial banks?
- by other banks?
6) Would you like to work at a bank? Why?

After some time, I asked Siméon to go to the board to propose his correction for questions 1 and 2. He wrote:

1: a bank is an establishment authorized by a gouvernment to accept deposits, pay interest, clear checks, make loans, act as an intermediary in financial transactions, and provide other financial services to its customers.

Anna proposed another definition copied from a dictionary, which was an appropriate definition, and then I wrote mine on the board: "a bank is a financial institution that keeps people's money and valuables and renders other services such as loans and transfers."

Then, another student, Rock, proposed the following definition: "a bank is an institution which collects money and lends it to customers for interest." I reacted by asking: "So, for you, even a microfinance institution is a bank since it collects money and lends it to its customers too." He said, "No!" Then I asked, "What are the differences between a microfinance institution and a bank, then?" I eventually had to provide the response myself: "The differences are in the kind of services rendered. A microfinance institution can only keep people's money and lend it for interest while a bank can render many other services. For example, can you transfer money to an account in the US through a microfinance institution? He answered, "No!" "But you can do this through a bank, especially a commercial bank," I retorted.

Being knowledgeable in banking issues, I found myself at ease answering all the questions when my students could not answer properly, which I could not do with other subject matters the command of which I do not have.

DISCUSSION

I found it easy to teach certain units and found it difficult to teach others. The units I taught easily are those relating to specialist subjects I had been dealing with for a long time and in which I was relatively knowledgeable. They are units relating to business management, a field of study I have been dealing with for years and in which I have myself got a Master's degree. My double-competence and my long experience in ESP teaching have enabled me to teach business-management related ESP quite easily.

However, I found it relatively difficult to handle very technical issues such as computer science and engineering issues, as my knowledge in those fields is too little to enable me to assess learners' needs, to prepare teaching materials, to read and understand specialized texts, to prepare and be able to do relevant tasks and be at ease when talking for example about either of those two fields. I am unable to prepare appropriate teaching materials for the ESP related to such technical issues and I can notice that regarding engineering, the textbook I use has been written by a specialist and practitioner in both engineering and English teaching, by someone with double-competence, with competence in the two fields.

CONCLUSION

Double-competence is required for the successful teaching/learning of ESP. The ESP teacher cannot assess learners' needs, prepare teaching materials, prepare exam subjects with relevant questions, and teach effectively if he is not knowledgeable in the specialist subject, cannot hold a discussion with his students or other specialists on that subject. The ESP teacher without double-competence needs to resort to the specialist for assistance, to help him understand specific concepts, to prepare appropriate teaching materials, to design and do relevant tasks.

The ESP teacher with no knowledge in the specialist subject will need to learn from books written by specialists so as to become gradually knowledgeable in the specialist subject, for, with no knowledge in such a subject, one can definitely not teach ESP effectively, especially English for Business, Economics, Engineering, Computer science, or other technical subjects. However, for specialist subjects such as tourism, which is not too specific and is understandable by most English teachers, double-competence might not be a necessity as the ESP teacher will easily understand specific texts and can talk about specific issues which most people have some knowledge of. In this case ESP is not very different from general English, and it can be handled somehow easily by any ESP teacher.

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