Inquiring What to Teach and How to Teach in EVP Classes: A General Overview on English Teaching for Vocational Purposes in Turkey

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Abstract

In the 21st century we have witnessed a rise of vocational educational training in Turkey. Millions of people in more than 1000 vocational colleges are being trained in almost 100 different vocations. As a result, English Language Teaching for Vocational Purposes has gained great importance. However, English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) is still a mystery to us. As the debates about what to teach and how to teach in the context of EVP are going on in the world, an inquiry into teaching English at a vocational training context becomes inevitable for us, too. We need to discuss the goals, contents and approaches of EVP and question if we are successful enough in terms of helping our students function well in a workplace at an international level. If English teaching in vocational colleges focuses more on professionalization, practicability and specialization, we need to find an answer to the essential question: What is the best way to provide students with an English course integrated with vocational contexts? A study of theoretical views about EVP will help us inquire our practices of English teaching for vocational purposes in Turkey.

1. Introduction

Currently, higher vocational educational training is attached great importance in Turkey. Based on the data by the Council of Higher Education, there are today 952 vocational colleges excluding the institutions. The number of students having vocational/technical training in 264 different upper secondary educational programs is 2.285.406. This number shows us the importance of vocational training in Turkey; and the fact that many of these programs require an English preparatory year proves the

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importance of English language teaching at vocational contexts. The reason of this is very clear; we are witnessing an era where having a good command of English is crucial for employability. This also explains the importance attached to English teaching in vocational colleges, the common mission of which is to provide students with specific occupations. However, insufficiency in English language skills usually occurs to be the main reason of failure in employment after graduating from vocational colleges. As it is stated in the baseline study of British Council in cooperation with TEPAV (The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey) project team, the languages used for instruction in Turkey "often undermine academic needs and efficiency." (British Council and TEPAV project team, 2015, p.18). Limiting its scope to vocational English teaching, that is why this study aims to inquire our practices of English teaching for vocational purposes.

2. Literature review

In order to begin inquiring our practices, it is important to understand the philosophy behind teaching English for vocational purposes (EVP). Therefore, it would be useful to understand what this term means to us. "Different from the teaching modes of other colleges and universities, English teaching in vocational colleges focus more on professionalization, practicability and specialization," (Fang, 2016, p. 2). As the priority is on job-oriented training rather than academic cultivation (Liu, & Liu, 2010, p.170), whole nature of English courses in vocational colleges differ from the ones in other higher educational institutions.

2.1. Definitions

What do we mean with the term English for Vocational Purposes?

English for Vocational Purposes, a term which is mainly taken into consideration 'under the umbrella of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)' (Widodo, 2016, p. 278) is closely connected to some other terms such as Vocational Oriented Language Learning (VOLL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Therefore, before beginning to discuss the goals, contents and approaches of EVP, it may be useful to check the definitions of all these terms, which are inter-connected.

"Traditionally the aim of linguistics had been to describe the rules of English language, that is, the grammar" say Hutchinson and Waters (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987 p.7). However, in the second half of 20th century, the rise of learner-centered approaches, introduces the term English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which is usually contrasted with English for General Purposes (EGP). While explaining the origins of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters state that it has derived from a very simple idea: "if language varies from one situation use to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the basis of the learners' course" (Hutchinson, &

Waters, 1987, p.7). They also point out that ESP is not only about vocabulary, register or discourse but also is about function and skills. Focusing on the learners' needs, and connecting English language teaching with the needs of specific situations which demand proficiency in different skills, ESP could justifiably be defined as the origin of EVP.

The second term which is closely connected to EVP is vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL). As it is clearly explained within the term itself, VOLL refers to teaching and learning of a foreign language within a vocational context. "A VOLL program aims to provide students with an English course integrated with vocational content," (Widodo, 2016, p.279). "Like ESP, vocationally oriented language learning is focused on English for a specific purpose. However, VOLL, in contrast to ESP, is a broader term that includes more situations learners need to be prepared for, and encompasses languages other than English," (Lindahl, 2015, p. 26).

Because that an EVP course requires teaching a very specific content, it is also important to understand the term CLIL."Content and Language Integrated Learning can be described as a 'dual-focused approach' that focuses both on language and the content." (Lindahl, 2015, p. 24) It "can be described as an educational approach where curricular content is taught through the medium of a foreign language," (Dalton-Puffer, 2011, p.183). The main target of CLIL is to teach the content, not the language; even the teachers of CLIL are not, in most cases, foreign language experts.

To sum up;, "ESP is used to refer to English for specific purposes, not necessarily only vocational English… VOLL refers to language for vocational purposes, but can include a variety of languages, not only English… CLIL refers to teaching content (…) in combination with language learning," (Lindahl, 2015, p.19) and it "gives equal attention to language and content," (Dalton-Puffer, 2011, p.183).

In the light of these definitions it is possible to define EVP as a program "which equips students with English competence that supports their vocational expertise" (Widodo, 2016, p.280). In this case, "the role of English as a medium of vocational communication helps students understand their vocational content, build and develop their vocational knowledge and skills, communicate their vocational expertise and perform specialist tasks, and develop their disciplinary language," (Widodo, 2016, p.280).

2.2. Designing a course based on EVP

How do we design a course based on EVP?

"As part of ESP instructional design, needs analyses serves as the basis for informed curriculum practices, such as syllabus design, materials development and instructional design," (Widodo, 2016, p.279). This is also the starting point for any EVP course design.

Starting with Munby's Communicative Syllabus Design in 1978, there have been long debates about the needs analyses. Many linguists and researchers introduced different

points of view to this issue during these debates. Considering all these different types of needs analyses complementary rather than exclusive, Mehdi Haseli Songhori compares each different type of needs analyses to a piece to complete a jigsaw.

Figure 1. Needs analyses jigsaw (Songhori, 2008, p. 22)

In an EVP context, needs analyses phase also requires a knowledge of the occupational sector. Having a realistic knowledge about the needs and expectations of the sector is essential for a successful curriculum design; that makes the cooperation between the school and the sector undeniably important, even inevitable. In this context, before beginning to design our curriculum, some essential questions to answer arise: "Which language skills will our students use in their occupation? What kind of situations will they use English in?" Only after knowing details about the functional language, we can begin to design an appropriate curriculum.

This knowledge will also be the core of the materials design, too. If "building vocational knowledge and skills is one of the goals that the students will envision," (Widodo, 2016, p.279) only after knowing the vocational knowledge and language skills it requires, it is possible to design appropriate materials 'relevant to the students' vocational knowledge and skills'.

Yet there is still an unclear point here. What should be the content of the vocational English lessons?

"There has been a burgeoning issue whether ESP teachers should teach content or language or both content and language," says Widodo (Widodo, 2016, p. 277). This may be considered as a crucial decision to be given before designing an EVP course.

3. Research methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data in this study. Firstly, to collect qualitative data interview sessions with the instructors of vocational English lessons in Cappadocia Vocational College were conducted. Participants for the interview sessions were selected from two different programs: Civil Aviation and Cabin Services Program which doesn't require an obligatory preparatory year, and Civil Aviation Transportation Management (English) Program which requires an obligatory preparatory year. During the interview sessions, the aim was to find out what kind of obstacles were met in vocational English courses. Target of the interviews was to find answers to following questions:

1. Do the instructors of vocational English in Civil Aviation and Cabin Services Program at Cappadocia Vocational College experience any difficulties in their classes? If so, what may be the reasons?
2. Do the instructors of vocational English in Civil Aviation Transportation Management (English) Program at Cappadocia Vocational College experience any difficulties in their classes? If so, what may be the reasons?
3. What are the common and different views of the instructors of vocational English in these two programs at Cappadocia Vocational College?

The participants that interview sessions were conducted with were chosen randomly amongst the target groups of the study. Answers were kept under record by note-taking.

Following the interviews, an online survey was developed to gather quantitative data. In addition to multiple choice questions, slider question type for rating and textbox question type for open answers were used. Analyses of the quantitative data was provided directly from the online system used for the survey.

3.1. Setting

The study was carried out in the spring term of 2016-2017 academic year at two campuses of Cappadocia Vocational College. All of the participants were the instructors of vocational English lessons.

3.2. Participants

A total of 15 instructors participated in the study. 6 (40%) of them were from Cappadocia campus, and 9 (60%) of them were from Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen campus. With regards to

their teaching vocational English experiences, 12 (80%) of them had teaching experience in Civil Aviation and Cabin Services program, 6 (40%) of them had teaching experience in Aircraft Technology program, 5 (33.33%) of them had teaching experience in Civil Aviation Transportation Management (English) program, 2 (13.33%) of them had teaching experience in Civil Aviation Transportation Management (Turkish) program, 1 (6.67%) of them had teaching experience in Health Tourism Management program, 1 (6.67%) of them had teaching experience in Tourist guidance program, 1 (6.67%) of them had teaching experience in Logistics program (at another college).

4. Findings

Research Question 1: *Do the instructors of vocational English in Civil Aviation and Cabin Services Program at Cappadocia Vocational College experience any difficulties in their classes? If so, what may be the reasons?*

All of the participants indicated that they had some difficulties in their vocational English classes. They stated the readiness of students in terms of English level as a reason of this difficulty. However, they didn't think that the materials were too difficult. They said that the difficulty depended upon the low English level of the students. In addition to this, instructors stated that sometimes they felt uncomfortable about not giving correct information about the vocational content and they needed professional guidance about it.

Research Question 2: *Do the instructors of vocational English in Civil Aviation Transportation Management (English) Program at Cappadocia Vocational College experience any difficulties in their classes? If so, what may be the reasons?*

All of the participants indicated that the materials were too difficult for the students. Even though the students had finished the preparatory year successfully the vocational content was too difficult for them to comprehend in English. It was also reported that the students had difficulty in their vocational English classes due to lack of knowledge about the vocational content. All participants also indicated that they had to do lots of research about the vocational content while preparing for the lesson. Some participants even clearly stated that they felt an ambiguity about the goals of their lessons. They claimed that the content was so much full of vocational knowledge, and they doubted whether they were expected to teach vocational knowledge or only English. They supported their ideas by showing examples from their course books. One of the respondents expressed that sometimes he doubted whether it would be better if an expert in that major with a high level of English taught this class.

Research Question 3: *What are the common and different views of the instructors of vocational English in these two programs at Cappadocia Vocational College?*

A comparison of the answers for the previous two questions highlights similarities between the instructors of two programs. Both groups indicated that the English levels of

students' was an obstacle for the success of their vocational English classes. Similarly both groups reported that they had difficulty due to being unfamiliar with the vocational content.

4.1. Statistics and data analysis

In the light of the interviews, an online survey was developed to gather quantitative data. Some of the important findings are as follows:

Instructors of vocational English classes either had a little or no knowledge about the lesson content before beginning to teach the related subject. The average of previous familiarity with the subject content is 34%.

With regards to the significance of vocational knowledge for their lesson content, %62.5 of the instructors think that having in-job experience in that vocation is important and %68.8 of them think that training on that specific vocational content is important. One of the instructors also specified that being personally interested in that vocation is important, too.

Figure 2. Significance of vocational knowledge for the content of vocational English subject

With regards to the necessary background knowledge of the students, 56.3% of the instructors think that professional knowledge in mother tongue is important.
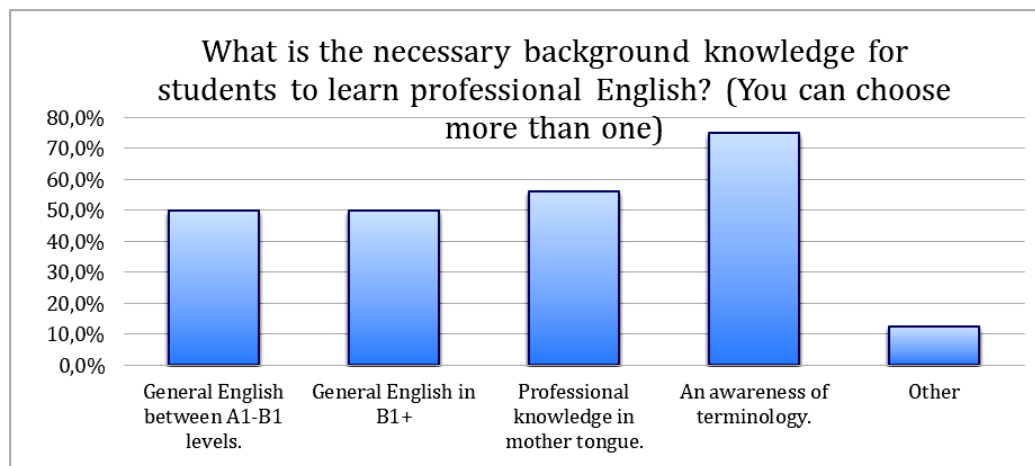

Figure 3. Necessary background knowledge of the students

75% of the instructors think that a teacher training specifically for professional English teachers would be useful.
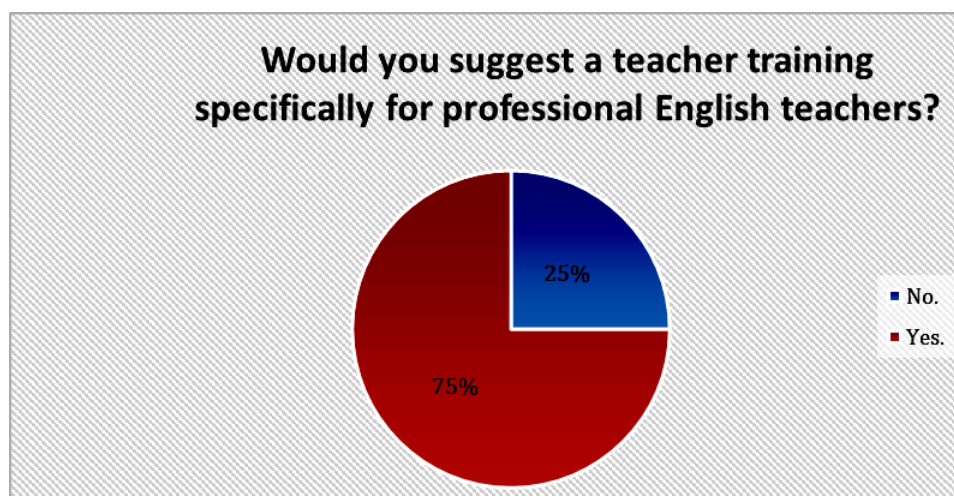

Figure 4: Suggestion of a teacher training specifically for professional English teachers

5. Conclusion

With regards to the findings, it may be claimed that there is an ambiguity about the goals and content of the vocational English lessons. This shows its influence both on teachers' performance and the students' readiness. Indeed, the same issue is also pointed out and made clear in the baseline study of British Council and TEPAV:

"The purpose may be academic (EAP) or occupational (EOP) and the focus may be narrow or specific (ESAP/ESOP) or broad or general (EGAP/EGOP). In ESP the focus is always on the language and the content is merely the 'carrier' which is used for purposes of illustration, relevance and motivation." (British Council and TEPAV project team, 2015, p.98).

However, the fact that even if all planning is done perfectly after a vast research about the sector's expectations, present situation shows us that there is still something missing. And it seems to be due to the lack of clarity at some points, such as the content and the goals of the vocational English courses.

In conclusion, as the philosophy affects our whole curriculum through our choices about each component of the learning/teaching processes, it seems that to increase effectiveness, before beginning to design an EVP course, it is important to have certain decisions beforehand about the goals and the content of the course.

It should also be noted that the opinions reported in the present study are of the instructors of a single vocational college in Turkey; therefore, the results may not be generalizable. Further research studies are to be conducted within a wider scaled project.

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