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THE ESP TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

Abstract. The field of language teaching, both TESOL and ESP, is undergoing rapid changes. It is responding to new educational trends and paradigms and institutions face new challenges connected with changes in the curriculum, national tests and student needs. As a result, language teachers need to update their professional knowledge by taking on new roles, such as those of teacher-researcher. The purpose of this paper is to present new developments in the area of general language teaching research, with a particular focus on methods of qualitative research that might be found useful while examining certain aspects of teaching in the field of ESP, such as case studies, action research, interviews or observations. The presentation of research methods is followed by a review of research practice focused on pedagogical issues published in recent years in ESP journals, such as *English for Specific Purposes*, *The Asian ESP Journal* or *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. Of major interest are articles on Legal English. The article concludes with suggestions for further study.

Keywords: research, English for Specific Purposes, teacher-researcher, Legal English

There are rapid changes taking place in the field of both English Language Teaching (ELT) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These changes have occurred as a result of changing curricula, evaluation procedures, teaching materials and a re-evaluation of students' needs. To meet these demands English teachers, whether they are general English or ESP teachers, need to update their knowledge base and engage themselves in various professional development activities. To do this, teachers need to adopt different roles, in order to take a broader perspective on teaching as involving not only the act of teaching in the classroom. The new roles may involve engaging in self-reflection, becoming a teacher mentor, a materials writer or taking on the role of teacher-researcher. Carrying out individual research would appear to be a very powerful way of developing teachers' skills. When teachers engage in research and make their pedagogical choices

based on the evidence they have gathered in the process of the research this would be expected to bring beneficial results to their teaching and their students' learning, irrespective of whether they are general English or ESP teachers. For teachers, a primary reason for doing research is to become more effective teachers. Research contributes to more effective teaching, not by offering definitive answers to pedagogical questions, but rather by providing new insights into the teaching and learning process. (McKay, 2006:1)

Doing research is not an activity reserved for the so-called 'experts', that is academics with European grants who carry out large-scale projects, or university teachers who do research as part of their doctoral dissertations. Every teacher can become a researcher with respect to his/her own students provided that s/he achieves a certain threshold of research expertise, that is key components of research methodology that are necessary "to become a 'good enough researcher'" (Dörnyei, 2007:10). In the present paper the main paradigms for research methods in applied linguistics will be presented and a selected number of research methods will be described in detail. The theoretical part of the paper will be followed by a review of research practice focused on pedagogical issues published in recent years in ESP journals, with a special focus on legal English.

Characteristics of a good researcher

In Dörnyei's opinion, there are certain characteristics that a 'good enough researcher' should be able to identify in him/herself. A good researcher should "have a genuine and strong curiosity about their topic" (Dörnyei, 2007:17). Thus, if a teacher has always been interested in the topic of motivation, s/he might make an attempt to investigate the relationship between interesting teaching materials and the rise of motivation in his/her law students. Another characteristic of a good researcher mentioned by Dörnyei is common sense, which helps researchers "to keep their feet firmly on the ground" (Dörnyei, 2007:17). Other indispensable features include: having good ideas and being disciplined and responsible (Dörnyei, 2007:17).

Research traditions

One of the very first challenges faced by a researcher, is the selection of a research method, which is closely connected with the research questions

posed. The two main paradigms of research methodology, include quantitative and qualitative research. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a third tradition in educational research, which is the mixed methods approach to research.

The quantitative paradigm

Quantitative research is an inquiry into an identified problem, based on testing a theory, measured with numbers, and analyzed using statistical techniques. The goal of quantitative methods is to determine whether the predictive generalizations of a theory hold true. Quantitative research is considered to be generalizable and objective since it “assumes the existence of ‘facts’ which are somehow external to and independent of the observer or researcher” (Nunan, 1992:3). A typical example of a quantitative method is survey research using a questionnaire, as is the case with most needs analysis research in the field of ESP.

The main characteristic features of quantitative research, according to Dörnyei (2007:32–34) are the following:

- Using numerical data
- A priori categorization – the preparation of a questionnaire requires a great deal of time and precision and piloting before it can be administered. The researcher needs to be very precise and clear about what s/he wishes to study, that is, what questions s/he wants to find answers to before the whole study begins.
- Variables rather than cases
- The use of statistics
- A search for generalizability
- The researcher starts with a hypothesis

The qualitative paradigm

Qualitative research is, by contrast, a process of inquiry whose goal is to understand a problem from multiple perspectives. Richards (2009:149) characterizes qualitative research as being locally situated, participant-oriented, holistic and inductive. Dörnyei (2007:37–39) describes the main features of qualitative research as follows:

- In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research does not use a priori categorization, but its design is emergent; research questions may change or evolve during the study, different codes may be added when necessary
- It is less systematic and standardized in its data collection than quantitative methodology

- Data should contain rich and complex details; it has a tendency to become increasingly long
- It uses much smaller sampling than quantitative research, and very often it may be based on studying one individual
- Its nature is rather unfocused and heterogeneous
- The result of qualitative research is almost always a researcher's subjective interpretation of the data
- The researcher observes and formulates questions.

Miles and Huberman (1994:10) emphasize the longitudinal nature of qualitative data and its usefulness when one needs “to supplement, validate, explain, illuminate, or reinterpret quantitative data gathered from the same setting”.

Mixed methods research

Mixed methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods for both data collection and analysis. A study may consist, for example, of a questionnaire survey to produce a large amount of data followed by an interview study of a selected and small group of teachers.

Examples of qualitative research methods

The focus of this part of the paper is to briefly describe some qualitative methods of research with the aim of encouraging prospective researchers (ESP teachers) to undertake inquiry into problems that are of interest to them. Our assumption is that most ESP teachers, including legal English teachers, are familiar with quantitative methodology since most of them have had, at some point in their teaching career, to carry out a needs analysis for the purpose of the course they were teaching, but they may need some guidance and advice on how to pursue qualitative research.

Qualitative research in the field of language teaching is now increasingly accepted as an important way of generating new knowledge. According to Duff (2007:974–5), reasons for the shift towards this research perspective might include the following:

- An acceptance of the value and power of well-presented case studies and ethnographic descriptions in shedding light on educational issues as well as providing solutions to socio-educational problems
- A growing awareness that conducting a limited number of detailed small-scale studies can provide as much insight as larger studies carried out in the quantitative tradition

- A recognition of the value of teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of their educational experiences.

In his overview of qualitative research trends since 2000 based on an analysis of leading journals in the field of language teaching, Richards (2009) states that qualitative research in language teaching has secured a position for itself and some journals have shown a noticeable increase in qualitative research contributions over the last few years. The area of research that has benefitted particularly from the strengths of qualitative research is, what Richards (2009:153) calls, “approaches to teaching” – studies of teachers’ and students’ perceptions of communicative language teaching, research on student writing and feedback on it, conversation analysis, classroom interaction and teacher collaboration. The surveyed studies used different methods of qualitative research, of which the most widely represented are discussed below.

Case studies

The case study is a study of what is particular and complex of a single case. What can constitute ‘a case’? It can be a particular teacher or a group of teachers either working in the same institution, or teaching the same subject – e.g., legal English teachers. One can also research a teaching programme as a case study, or a given institution. Case studies are considered part of qualitative paradigm because they are not generalizable, as are quantitative studies. A case study is not a specific technique, it combines various qualitative techniques, such as interviews, observations, document archives and is recommended to be combined with other research approaches in mixed method studies.

Case study methodology has been used widely in applied linguistics to study the development of first and second language learners. Duff 1990 (in Nunan, 1992:79) gives examples of research questions addressed in case studies in the field of SLA:

- Why do some learners fossilize in the acquisition of a second language while others continue to progress?
- What are the characteristic features of a good language learner?
- How do learners benefit from different methods of instruction?

According to Van Lier (2005) (in Dörnyei, 2007:154), an area that could be investigated using case study methodology is the role of technology in language learning, for example CALL. The biggest strength of case studies is the in-depth insights they offer into the complicated nature of the language acquisition process or the social world in which the learners function.

Interviews

Interview is the most often used method in qualitative research. There are different types of interviews, depending on the degree of structure in the process of creating it.

Structured interviews are very similar to a questionnaire survey – they consist of a number of pre-prepared questions, so there is very little room for flexibility both on the part of the interviewer and the interviewee. The advantage of the structured interview is, though, comparability of answers among the sample.

On the other extreme there is the unstructured interview, which allows a great degree of flexibility, both for the interviewer and the interviewee. No detailed questions are prepared, making the unstructured interview an open situation. This does not mean, however, that it does not have to be carefully planned. Such an interview allows the respondent to feel relaxed. Unstructured interviews are most appropriate when a study focuses on the deep meaning of a given phenomenon or if the focus is on a personal history of how a phenomenon developed (Cohen & Manion, 1994:273; Dörnyei, 2007:135).

A semi-structured interview is the form most often used in the field of applied linguistics. It consists of a set of pre-prepared questions, but the format is open-ended, allowing the interviewee to elaborate on certain issues. This form of semi-structured interview is most suitable in situations when a researcher has a sufficient overview of the studied phenomenon, but does not want to limit the depth of the respondent's answers (Dörnyei, 2007:136).

Interviews yield a large amount of in-depth data, but they require good communication skills on the part of the interviewer. The main weakness of the interview, however, is that it is time-consuming to set up and conduct. Another problem is that it is not anonymous and thus the respondent may want to show himself in better than real light.

Classroom research

Classroom research is a term that covers empirical investigation which uses the classroom as the main research site. Classroom research may be a combination of different research paradigms – we can use quantitative methods (questionnaires or quasi-experiments) as well as qualitative ones (ethnographic observations, interviews or diary studies). The aim of classroom research is “to identify and better understand the roles of the different participants in classroom interaction, the impact that certain type of instruction may have on FL/SL learning, and the factors which promote or inhibit learning.” (Lightbown, 2000:438)

One of the domains of classroom research is discourse analysis of classroom interaction – this area, however, is not within the scope of this paper.

Classroom observation

One of the most prominent research methods in classroom research is classroom observation. It differs from other research methods, such as questionnaires or interviews, because it provides direct information. It is more objective than second-hand, self-report data.

Classroom observation may be structured or unstructured, which corresponds to the quantitative/qualitative distinction. In a structured form of observation, the researcher goes into the classroom with a specific aim and focus and with a concrete set of observation categories, the so-called observation schemes. A researcher may make use of a number of readily available instruments (e.g. COLT), may adapt them, or may make his/her own observation instrument. The use of observation schemes makes the process of data gathering more reliable and produces results that are comparable across different classrooms.

Problems:

- You can observe only what can be observed – many phenomena taking place in the classroom are mental and thus unobservable
- Observing and recording something does not lead to understanding *why* it has happened – other forms of inquiry are needed
- Observer’s paradox – the observation of an event is influenced by the presence of the observer
- Highly structured observations miss some other important features of classroom interaction

Action research

Action-research is teacher-conducted classroom research whose purpose is to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems. The main characteristics of action research are that it is carried out by classroom teachers rather than outside researchers, it is collaborative, and it is aimed at changing things (Nunan, 1992:17). It takes place in the teacher’s own classroom and involves a cycle of activities:

- Planning
- Action
- Observation
- Reflection

The teacher:

1. Selects an issue to examine in more detail (e.g. the teacher’s use of questions)

2. Selects a method of collecting data (e.g. recording classroom lessons)
3. Collects data, analyzes it and decides what changes to introduce
4. Develops an action plan for how to introduce the changes
5. Observes the effects of the plan on teaching behaviour
6. Initiates a second action cycle, if necessary

(Richards & Farrell, 2005:175).

McKay (2006:31) maintains that the biggest value of action research is that “if undertaken with rigor, it can supply local knowledge regarding problems in L2 teaching and learning and suggest ways for addressing these problems”.

Review of research practice

The part of the paper that follows is a review of research practice focused on pedagogical issues published in recent years in the three leading ESP journals i.e. *English for Specific Purposes*, *the Asian ESP Journal* and *the Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. The purpose of the review was to see what research had been carried out in the field of ESP, with special attention being paid to the field of legal English.

The journal *English for Specific Purposes* and *the Asian ESP Journal* are international peer-reviewed journals which focus on topics relevant to the teaching and learning of discourse for academic, occupational or otherwise specialized communities. Topics included refer to different issues such as needs assessment, curriculum development and evaluation, materials preparations, discourse analysis, as well as descriptions of specialized varieties of English, teaching and testing techniques, the effectiveness of various approaches to language learning and language teaching, and the training or retraining of teachers for the teaching of ESP – all of these from the perspective of English for specific purposes. *English for Specific Purposes* has been issued since 1995 whereas *The Asian ESP Journal* since 2005.

The Journal of English for Academic Purposes, on the other hand, is concerned with the dissemination of information and views in the area of English for Specific Purposes i.e. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and its content includes current developments in classroom language, teaching methodology, teacher education, assessment of language, needs analysis, materials development and evaluation, discourse analysis, acquisition studies in EAP contexts. The journal has been issued since 2002.

The present review focuses on articles which have been published in the last 10 years (except for the Asian ESP Journal which has been issued for only the last 8 years) and examines exclusively those articles which concerned pedagogical and methodological issues. Research methods related to discourse and genre analysis were not taken into consideration while reviewing the papers from the aforementioned journals. Only **69** (12%) out of **583** papers in these three scientific journals referred to research on pedagogical issues – out of which **32** – were published in the *English for Specific Purposes* journal, **19** in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and **18** in the *Asian Journal of English for Specific Purposes*.

Research methods

The scientific papers reviewed exploited a variety of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, documents and records, case studies as well as action research. It needs to be noted that some papers included research where more than one research method was used. The data gathered on the basis of the reviewed papers from the three aforementioned journals showed that:

- 39 questionnaires were used;
- 36 interviews were conducted;
- 15 case studies were undertaken;
- 12 observations were carried out;
- 7 types of documents or records were collected;
- 3 types of action research were done.

The questionnaires, for example, were used to investigate cognitive processes in the domain of L2 acquisition (Akbari, 2011) or to gather information on important communication skills and communicative events faced by engineers (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Interviews were utilized to learn about students' perception of business lectures (Camiciottoli, 2010) and to document the needs of students of nursing and midwifery in Iran (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Observations were carried out, for example, while preparing novice history teachers to teach English learners (Schall-Leckrone & McQuillan, 2012) whereas extensive documentation and records were collected at Central Taiwan University of Science and Technology to examine the extent to which Taiwanese educators in one particular school perceived their English language study group as a form of staff development and professional learning community that contributes to their professional growth or learning (Akbari, 2011). A case study was carried out, for example, to assess the effectiveness of role play against an educational computer-based game during a communication course in a Singaporean university

(Pathak & Cavallaro, 2006). The action research method was exploited to explore the use of innovative pedagogy known as *Scaffolding Academic Literacy* among undergraduate health science students at the University of Sydney (Rose, Rose, Farrington & Page, 2008).

Having examined the research methods, it can be stated that the most popular ones include questionnaires and interviews, whereas action research was found to be the least common instrument, which probably reflects the ease, practicability and cost-effectiveness of the research tools used.

The fields of research

The reviewed papers which refer to pedagogical and methodological issues concern a variety of academic and occupational areas such as: science, technology, engineering, maritime, aviation, medicine, professional and staff development, business, skiing and mountaineering, mathematics, economics and humanities (including law), the latter being underrepresented:

1. professional and staff development (but not law) 23×
2. business 11×
3. technology 8×
4. medicine (including dentistry and pharmacy) 8×
5. engineering 5×
6. science 4×
7. aviation 2×
8. economics & banking 2×
9. history 2×
10. skiing & mountaineering 1×
11. mathematics 1×
12. theology 1×
13. law 1×

The ranking list of the most popular areas provided above shows that papers on professional development (in general), science, business and medicine clearly outnumber papers on the humanities: 65:4. The observed lack of interest may not be surprising in the case of skiing and mountaineering or theology as they are quite specialized areas of research. What is quite astonishing, however, (taking into consideration the enormous discourse community of legal professionals) only ONE paper out of 69 (which is equivalent to 1%) was devoted to research on pedagogical issues in law.

Research on Legal English

The only paper that could be found in the three scientific journals on ESP or EAP was *Needs Analysis for Academic Legal English Courses*

in Israel: a Model of Setting Priorities published by Yocheved Deutch in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* in 2003 i.e. 10 years ago. The author in his research attempted to determine the needs of Israeli law students studying English as a foreign language, considering at the same time the deficiencies and constraints of the needs analysis process which could have led to misinterpretation of the data gathered.

The aim of the research

The author carried out target situation analysis (TSA) which examined two kinds of needs of Israeli students: their global target needs “stemming from the historical and current indebtedness of the Israeli legal system to foreign legal systems” Deutch (2003:126) and individual target needs which reflect either the demands of the academic institution or needs of legal practitioners.

Methods of research

The data for the research were collected through interviews with law lecturers and questionnaires given to practising lawyers. Some of the lawyers were also interviewed. The author endeavoured to collect the data with a high degree of explicitness; therefore formal and structured types of questions were formulated in advance. The methods exploited in the research were both quantitative and qualitative. T-Tests and Pearson’s and Spearman’s correlation coefficients were calculated for the questionnaire data in order to examine the correlation between the lecturers’ and the lawyers’ responses, and also for examining the correlations within the questionnaire data. Any contradicting responses by the same respondent or surprising and exceptional views were then discussed with both the lecturers and the lawyers.

Participants

Target Needs Analysis (TSA) concerning law students’ language needs was carried out among law lecturers and lawyers. Twenty seven (27) lecturers (who worked at universities and law colleges) were interviewed. Most of them were interviewed personally by the author of the paper, which allowed for discussions of unanticipated issues that arose during the interview. 113 lawyers (two-thirds of whom were from the Tel Aviv area, while the others were from different parts of the country) completed the questionnaire. The law students’ (first year students) opinions were not examined as in the author’s belief they “were obviously unable to assess their needs, neither as students nor as future professionals” Deutch (2013:129).

Results

The results of the study concern **five areas**:

- the extent of English language use,
- the importance of the English language,
- the necessary linguistic skills,
- the required genres,
- the sources of the required material.

As far as **the extent of English language use** is concerned the outcomes of the questionnaire revealed that several respondents could only point to some fields of law where English appeared to be particularly important as regards the demands of the English language.

Examining **the importance of the English language**, the opinions expressed in the questionnaires showed that lecturers almost unanimously considered English to be extremely important or even indispensable for research purposes. Lawyers' responses, on the other hand, revealed that they rarely used English in practice (62.8%), which was later explained in the interviews, as being a result of their insufficient language competence rather than being of their choice.

The research indicated that as far as **necessary linguistic skills** are concerned, reading was evaluated as the most important skill, both for law lecturers and legal practitioners, far greater than that of listening, speaking or writing. Surprisingly, writing was considered to be the least relevant skill. This problem was later raised in the interviews. The respondents explained their gradation of linguistics skills as resulting from the significance that language itself has for the legal profession. Legal professionals feel that a great responsibility rests on their shoulders in order to use language in a clear and unambiguous way, following Maley's observation (1994:1) that "language is medium, process and product". Since they often lacked necessary writing skills in English, they therefore preferred to rely on professional translators' work and/or to consult a native speaker specialist. Interestingly enough, the vast majority of the interviewed lawyers (87%) also pointed out that even in their native language i.e. Hebrew, their drafting skills improved only with practice.

The required genres differed among the interviewees depending on their profession. For legal practice, legal documents were the most important whereas, not surprisingly, for law lecturers, books and articles were of the highest priority.

As far as **sources of the required reading material** are concerned, the research demonstrated the increasing predominance of American law over Israeli law. The interviews with the lecturers gave a deeper insight

into this issue. The predominance of American law resulted not only from its growing influence, but also from the fact that the American law system is more advanced than other legal systems and therefore lecturers frequently made reference to American legal solutions. In addition, many lecturers had completed their doctoral theses or other advanced degrees in the USA and thus they were more familiar with American instructional legal material.

Conclusions

The review of research practice with a pedagogical focus presented above has shown that there is very little research in the field of legal English. There is therefore an urgent need for studies in legal English that might be focused on the pedagogical aspects of teaching. As a result, teachers would be able to develop their teaching competences and deepen their understanding of the processes underlying teaching, which would eventually lead to greater student satisfaction with their courses. The list below presents selected pedagogical aspects of the teaching of legal English that could be researched in order to gain a deeper insight into the understanding of the topic/process itself:

- syllabus design
- teaching materials development
- evaluation and assessment
- skill development
- management of teaching (group and pair work)
- student autonomy
- the use of technology
- teacher's role

There is agreement among teachers that doing research requires intensive involvement, good organization skills and time. Some teachers may feel discouraged even before they take up the challenge. Our position is that we should try to do research in order to become better teachers, but also because conducting research provides a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

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