Exploring Iranian ESP teachers' subject-related critical incidents

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English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, among other challenges, are required to deal with content areas which are beyond their realms of expertise. This can lead to special types of critical incidents (CIs) for them (i.e., subject-related CIs). Despite their importance, CIs seem to have received little attention in EAP teaching and teacher education. This study addresses EAP teachers' subject-related CIs. A total of 13 subject-related CIs gathered from interviews with 34 Iranian EAP teachers were analyzed in order to examine their nature as well as the strategies and tactics that teachers used to handle them and the insights they gained from such incidents. The analysis shows that EAP teachers used three types of strategies for dealing with subject-related CIs: admitting ignorance, avoidance, and risk taking. They used various types of tactics for handling their subject-related CIs and described lessons they learned from them. The results indicate that CIs can provide invaluable insights into the nature of the challenges EAP teachers face regarding the specialized content of EAP courses.

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1. Introduction

Hyland (2006, p. 193) argues that “while students’ learning experiences are influenced by needs analysis, course design, and materials, it is methodologies, and the teachers’ understanding of language and learning which lie behind these, which are at the heart of EAP instruction”. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) hold that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education has been excessively preoccupied with ‘descriptions of language use’ (p. 14) and call for a ‘learning-centered approach’ which emphasizes the learning and teaching processes as well as the challenges EAP teachers typically face while dealing with specialist knowledge of the students. More recently, Watson Todd (2003) claims that EAP teaching has suffered from an exclusive focus on content and in so doing has ignored teachers’ decision making and creative methodologies. EAP methodology and teacher education have received insufficient attention (Ding & Campion, 2016; Hamp-Lyons, 2011).

EAP education is a substantial component of the ELT curriculum at Iranian universities (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Recent years have witnessed an increase in the study of EAP in Iran mainly in the form of needs analysis and program evaluation projects (e.g. Hayati, 2008; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008); however, there is little literature on the real practice of EAP (Hayati, 2008).

It is hard to find any published work on the preferred methodologies among EAP instructors in Iran (Atai, 2006). There is no EAP teacher education and this has resulted in a fuzzy state in which teachers basically follow their own tentative...
conceptualizations of the nature of EAP instruction. Consequently, there is no consistent pattern as to the actual methodologies and practices of the EAP courses in Iran. The EAP courses are taught by either ELT or content instructors with little or no cooperation and there is no agreement among them as to the objectives, methodology, and assessment of EAP courses. Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014) suggest that the background specializations of EAP teachers, either ELT or content, may account for their divergent conceptualizations and cognitions regarding EAP courses. Based on the results of observations and interviews, they concluded that ELT instructors who had not received any EAP teacher training, basically drew upon their methodologies for teaching general English courses and did not necessarily gear the tasks and activities to the specific aims of discipline-based EAP reading comprehension courses. Following non-participant observations of EAP classes, Bonyadi (1996) reported that in these teacher-centered courses the main activity is reading and translation. Students typically read the texts and translate them into Persian word by word while teachers correct their lexical and grammatical errors. Likewise, Hayati (2008) observes that EAP classes are teacher-centered and students are sporadically asked to read a few sentences from their books and translate them into Persian. The bulk of class time is spent on reading the text or speaking about it (Hayati, 2008).

As Hyland (2006, p. 293) notes, teachers’ reflection on their teaching methods, beliefs, and practices can be seen as “a useful starting point in understanding and critically evaluating how we approach our classroom practices”. In attempting to explore Iranian EAP teachers’ reflections on their teaching, this study addresses their Critical Incidents (CIs) which are defined by Brookfield (1990) as clearly remembered incidents, not expected by teachers, happening inside or outside classes. Although the significance and benefits of reflection on CIs have been highlighted in the literature (see Farrell, 2013; Finch, 2010; Romano, 2006), they seem to have received little attention in EAP teaching.

This study addresses CIs which EAP teachers may face when dealing with the discipline-related contents which do not fall within their realms of expertise. We propose that analyzing EAP teachers’ CIs can present a real picture of the ‘how’ of EAP teaching which, in turn, might illuminate future EAP teaching and prospective pre/in-service teacher education in the Iranian context. Furthermore, exploring the factors that contribute to subject-related CIs, the strategies and tactics which teachers’ use to deal with them, and also the lessons they might learn from such incidents can be useful in sharing the CIs that EAP teachers face and this can raise teachers’ awareness and confidence in handling such challenges.

1.1. Diverse roles of EAP practitioners

Watson Todd (2003) notes that while English for General Purposes (EGP) and EAP are different in terms of content, there is no agreement as to whether they are similar in terms of methodology. Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) argue that EAP classes require a different methodology from that of an EGP class. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) propose calling ESP teachers ‘practitioners’ not ‘teachers’ to highlight the varying roles that they are supposed to fulfill. Much along the same lines, Richards (1997) calls ESP teachers ‘special’ teachers in that they need to possess special skills that are essential in their career. Similarly others propose that ESP teachers should fulfill various roles. For example, Basturkmen (2014) holds that, in addition to the typical practices of a teacher, ESP/EAP teachers’ roles include needs analysis, discourse analysis, materials development and course design. Hall (2013) maintains that ESP/EAP teaching requires teachers to transcend their own degrees of knowledge and adopt the role of a researcher as well as a teacher. Likewise, Ding and Campion (2016) note that EAP teachers have to handle a range of roles, identities, contexts and praxis.

Finally, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 158) stress, a challenge facing EAP teachers is “the new realms of knowledge the ESP teacher has to cope with”. As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 13) argue, the learners ‘specialist knowledge’ is a major factor which makes ESP teaching different from ESL/EFL teaching in that in ESP teaching teachers are “not in the position of being the ‘primary knower’ of the carrier content of the material”. The diverse roles that ESP/EAP teachers are supposed to fulfill, and the difficulties imposed by not being the ‘primary knower’ may trigger different kinds of CIs. We conjecture that, among other challenges, teachers’ unfamiliarity or low familiarity with ‘specialist knowledge’ may be a trigger to special kinds of CIs in the class which are the focus of this study.

1.2. ESP teaching and specialized knowledge

The degree of specialized knowledge required of teachers has been an area of controversy from the early days of Language for Specific Purposes (Master, 2005), and has not yet been agreed upon (Belcher, 2009). While some scholars emphasize the need for teachers’ familiarity with subject areas (e.g., Sešek, 2007), others (e.g., Adams-Smith, 1983) argue that teachers’ willingness and openness to the subject matter is enough for EAP teaching. Hyland and Shaw (2016) believe that students attending EAP classes have good subject-specific knowledge and teachers need to give them the responsibility of subject content and provide them with the tools to explore that subject content. In addition, Belcher (2006, 2009) and Hall (2013), among others, state that awareness of discipline-specific discourses and of genres would be enough.

As Ferguson (1997) and Belcher (2009) argue, the present literature does not provide conclusive evidence on the quantity of specialist knowledge required for EAP teaching. In an attempt to shed some light on the issue, in this study, the impacts of ‘specialist knowledge’ on teachers’ classroom teaching practice are explored through CIs.
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