

To collaborate or not? In-depth issues raised by ESP and Medical Biology participants in Saudi Arabia

Nadia Ahmad Shukri
University of Leicester, School of Education
Leicester, United Kingdom
ns122@le.ac.uk

Teaching to write in a second language (L2) is complex, and teaching writing in an ESP context is even more demanding. There is a need for medical students to write clearly in order to meet the requirements of both the ESP and the Medical Biology courses at a university level. The role of the ESP teacher is to prepare students to write academically while one of the roles of the Medical Biology teacher is to support students to answer written examinations in Medical Biology. The paper specifically explores ESP and Medical Biology teachers' perceptions towards teacher collaboration and its challenges in an Arab university. Also, its purpose is to provide a theoretical basis in meeting medical students' writing needs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Issues raised by 9 participants (teachers, coordinators, deputy head of the English centre, and the Dean of Medicine) were discussed. The data analysis involved using both manual analysis and computer software (Nvivo). Data regarding teachers' perspectives were discussed as points to be further developed in considering a preliminary collaborative model applicable to the Arab context. Regarding collaboration, both departments (ESP and Medical Biology) showed positive inclinations to cooperate. However, there were underlying issues regarding the lack of communication, the teaching of content, the marginalization of the ESP teacher, the status of the English language, interpersonal issues, and administrative issues.

Perceptions, challenges, teacher collaboration, ESP, Medical Biology, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Writing has always been described as a complex skill in comparison to other skills such as reading, listening and speaking (Hyland, 2003, Ortega, 2004). Even more so, writing at a university level and in various academic disciplines, such as Science or Medicine, is even more complex (Cozens, 2006). In the college of Medicine, at a SAU University, the demands of writing include: taking notes, describing objects or devices, writing essays, answering written compositions, writing lab/experimental reports, and writing in exams. It is argued that in the college, medical students do not perform well in answering exam questions in the content areas. As pointed out by Saunders and Scialfa (2003) students do not perform well in Science written examinations, and suggested pre-exam instruction or tutorial as a useful tool in improving writing exams. Science is mentioned here since it is similar to the content subjects given at the university such as Medical Biology (MB). For these reasons, writing has always been an important aspect of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course. From the data in the pilot study, it has been argued that medical students do not have the necessary basic skills to write clearly in MB examinations as well as in their assignments. Presently, there is no ongoing relationship between the ESP teachers of the English Language Center (ELC) and the MB teachers. Primarily, the ESP and the content teachers work independently and unfortunately there is no consistent negotiation and systematic relationship between the ESP teachers and the content teachers regarding the ESP writing curriculum and students' learning. Two research questions are addressed here to fulfill the research aim: What is the current level of co-operation between ESP teachers and MB teachers? What are the issues and challenges in the collaboration of ESP and MB teachers?

Research theoretical framework

Past studies showed the value of collaboration between a language writing teacher and a subject content teacher for sharing respective knowledge areas between them for the benefit of their students' learning (Vance and Crosling, 1998; Barron, 2003). This leads to the Social Constructivist theory which has been widely applied in second language learning and teaching (Palinscar, 1998). The theory is mainly applied to children's learning, but here it is applied to teachers learning from each other. Thus, learners will benefit from the development their teachers achieve by this collaboration. My study involves exploring from a social constructivist point of view issues of collaboration between language teachers and content teachers in meeting medical students' writing needs. According to Vygotsky (1896-1934), knowledge is constructed, and learning takes place through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Eventually, a form of understanding is reached through communication and negotiation (Gergen, 2003). Previous research has shown that collaboration of teachers has proved to be successful (Crandall, 1998; Barron, 2003). Brinton *et al.*, (2006) discuss examples of where collaboration may be successful as manifested in the theme-based model, sheltered model, adjunct model.

Methodology

Nine participants were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews took place with two MB teachers, a MB coordinator, two ESP coordinators of Medics I and II, two ESP writing teachers, the Dean of Medicine, and the head of the ELC. The coordinators and teachers were specifically selected because they had years of experience in teaching ESP and MB. The initial data analysis began with transcribing the tape-recorded interviews, followed by an observation of these transcripts through revised readings to identify patterns (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The interviews were both analysed manually and using the Nvivo software. For ethical purposes, while referring to the academic staff, this paper uses the participants' job position instead of their actual names.

EC1 = ESP coordinator (Medics I) BC = MB coordinator
EC2= ESP coordinator (Medics II) BT1= MB teacher 1
ET1= ESP teacher 1 BT2= MB teacher 2
ET2= ESP teacher 2 DM=Dean of Medicine
DH= deputy head of the English language Center

Results:

These are the main themes from the interview transcripts derived from the ESP/MB participants to illustrate their different perceptions regarding collaboration and noting their expected challenges if they are to collaborate in the future. There are: lack of communication, the teaching of content, marginalization of the ESP teacher, teaching in the L1 (first language), interpersonal issues and administrative issues. However, due to space constraint, two of themes will be briefly described.

Lack of communication

The ESP coordinator expressed a positive attitude towards cooperation. She considered that for medical students, use of English has to be of a "high standard." She also specified that the language should meet the students' needs which she defined as being able to understand and interpret material supplied in MB classes.

Extract 35:

75 *Why should we not cooperate in order to make their English better so they can function as*
76 *medical students? In my view, the teaching should be adapted to their specific needs. We*
77 *don't have this correlation and communication with the content teachers, so I think that this*
78 *would be a benefit to do so (EC1).*

While EC1 believes that teaching ought to be designed to meet students' specific needs, there is a sense of being unable to communicate with the other department. It appears that there is little communication at present. Without channels of communication being open and routinized, neither group of teachers knows what the other is doing.

Marginalization of the ESP teacher

Without equality in work, tension among workers is inevitable. Thus, conflicts arise between individuals. DH raised this issue:

Extract 52:

102 *maybe each one will be competing like I'm the English teacher. I'm more professional than*
103 *the other one. I'm the major teacher, so we have to find a way where to support each other*
104 *and not compete against each other.*

Primarily, partnerships are associated with the subordination of ESL to the content area and with an imbalance between teacher status in terms of curriculum authority, responsibility, and opportunities for input. ESL teachers are considered to be of lower, subordinate status (Arkoudis, 2006). Aurebach, (1991) claims that ESL teachers should find their respective positions in the academic community and not be underestimated.

Discussion and implications

The participants from both departments apparently showed positive inclinations towards cooperation in terms of sharing materials, and being able to suggest innovative ideas regarding the ESP curriculum. One obstacle was raised by ET2 regarding the teaching of content. The resistance of ESP teachers to teach content could be problematic due to their lack of training and the difficulty of the content material. ESP teachers may be reluctant to take on something new, she believed. Another issue was the negative attitude of ET1 and the DH's views on the use of the L1 in the classroom. The ESP teachers seem to feel that the English language should be the preferred language and that it is not given due attention in MB classes. EC2 and BC noted that if collaboration were to take place, the English language would regain its status as an important subject. This is an important issue as the English is the key to educational growth and technological development (Al-Khayaal, 2007), and if it is not recognised by the medical students as a relevant language, educational growth and the development of technology may not progress within the discipline of Medicine in Saudi Arabia. This could remain stagnant for years. Language teachers, as data, in the past and current literature reveal, have not gained a secure position in the workplace when it comes to collaboration with content teachers (Spack, 1988; Davison, 2006). The marginalization of the ESP teachers and the control assumed by the MB teachers are exhibited in these findings and mirrored by previous research (Jacobs, 2007). The goals of both departments vary. MB teachers may be demanding in their expectations, and try to impose ESP teachers into facilitating their demands, and providing sufficient practice for content learning. This is where the paradox lies: they appear to wanting to collaborate but in fact there is the still the relationship of the expert and the facilitator. The ESP teachers are only facilitators and are not treated as equal professionals. Remarkably, the data reveal distance between the departments due to their lack of communication. Interpersonal issues were reflected in the teachers' resistance to interact with certain other teachers (Davison, 2006), and to have unfounded suspicions of them. This highlights the significance of open communication. Without it, there can be no progress (Iancu, 2002). So far current rumours are making the ESP teachers distant. They need to open channels of direct communication, and enter into dialogue with each other's beliefs and understandings. Moreover, administrative issues were highlighted by the DH as issues to consider in the future, particularly regarding time constraint, and making the participants realize the importance of meetings between departments. Women should be able to make their own decisions rather than having to relate to the men's department on every issue. There ought to be a shift from the present centralised organisation to a decentralised organisation where women can act autonomously. This would allow changes to be implemented more faster in the SAU. Importantly, teachers need to be made aware of the importance of collaboration and its benefits. Finally, as Fullan (1999) notes, bringing about change in education may not be easy. Specifically, these teachers have worked independently for many years and to suddenly communicate with colleagues on their students' writing problems and materials may require some time. The challenges could be resolved if both departments were prepared to discipline themselves to communicate with each other interdepartmentally and positively reach a fair consensus regarding any decisions they have to make.

References

- Al-Khayaal, A. M. (2007, January 10). Educating ourselves to a New way. *Arab News*, Retrieved December 30, 2007, from <http://www.arab.news.com>.
- Arkoudis, S. (2006). Negotiating the rough ground between ESL and mainstream teachers. *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(4), 415-433.
- Attridge-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic Networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(1), 385 - 405.
- Auerbach, E. R. (1991). Politics, pedagogy and professionalism: challenging marginalisation in ESL. *College ESL*, 1-9.
- Barron, (2003). Problem-solving and EAP: themes and issues in a collaborative teaching venture. *English for Specific Purposes*, 22, 297-314.
- Brinton, M. D., Snow, M. A., & Wesche (1989). *Content-Based Instruction: second language instruction*. New York, Newbury House Publishers.
- Brinton, M. D., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. (2006). *Content-Based second language instruction*. USA: The

University of Michigan Press.

Cozens, P. (2006). ESP: content, or no content. In M. S. Lahlou & A. Richardson (Eds.), *English for specific purposes in The Arab World* (pp. 7-16). Dubai TESOL Arabia.

Crandall, J. (1998). Collaborate and Cooperate. *FORUM*, 36.

Davison, C. (2006). Collaboration between ESL and content teachers: How do we know when we are doing it right? *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(4), 454-475.

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel*. London: Falmer Press.

Gergen, K. J. (2003). Knowledge as socially constructed. In M. Gergen & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Social construction: A reader*. (pp. 15-17). London: Sage Publications.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes : a learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. (2003) *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.

Iancu, A. M. (2002). Adapting the adjunct model: A case study. In M. A. Snow & D. M. Brinton (Eds.), *The content-based classroom: Perspectives on integrating language and content*. USA: Addison Wesley Longman.

Jacobs, C. (2007). Integrating content and language: whose job is it anyway? In R. Wilkinson & V. Zegers (Eds.), *Integrating content and language*. (pp. 35-47). Maastricht: Uitgeverij Valkhof Pers, Nijmegen.

Ortega, L. (2004). L2 Writing research in EFL contexts: Some Challenges and opportunities for EFL researchers. *ALANK NEWSLETTER*, pp. 1 -12.

Palinscar, A. S. (1998). Social constructivist perspectives on teaching and learning. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49, 345-375.

Vygotsky, S. L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Saunders, P., & Scialfa, T. C. (2003). The effects of pre-exam instructions on students' performance on an effective writing exam. *Written Communication*, 20(2), 195-212.

Spack, R. (1988). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: How far should we go?

Vance, S., & Crosling, G. (1998). Integrating writing skills into the curriculum of the disciplines: A social constructionist approach. In F. J. J. Forest (Ed.), *University teaching: International perspectives*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
