بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Iran University of
Science and Technology

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS IN TEACHING ENGLISH
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

AREAS OF DIFFICULTY IN THE
READING COMPREHENSION OF
IRANIAN ESP STUDENTS

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BY
ALI SOLTANY

ENTITLED

AREAS OF DIFFICULTY IN THE READING COMPREHENSION OF IRANIAN ESP STUDENTS

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEFL

Committee on Oral Examination

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AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

TO

MY DEAR

MOTHER

FATHER

AND WIFE.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

To design a reading course with the purpose of training ESP learners to read effectively at advanced levels, it is of prime importance to determine the major difficulties these learners encounter when they are required to comprehend the scientific or technical prose. In order to achieve this goal, a plethora of studies are needed to explore and exhaust the problematic areas in the domain of ESP reading materials. The present research was an attempt to investigate the two linguistic impediments, namely vocabulary and structure problems that are believed to be the major sources of difficulty for Iranian ESP students. To this end, three homogeneous groups of students majoring in geography, theology, and medicine at Zanjan University and Zanjan University of Medical Sciences received three separate data collection tasks each including six unseen and authentic reading comprehension passages. First, they were required to circle all difficult (unknown) words. Then, they were asked to underline the grammatical units which were problematic for them. The data obtained were analyzed by a statistical package called Quattro Pro. The end product of this analysis was the percentages of the problematic vocabulary items and grammatical units. According to the results, syntax proved to be more problematic than vocabulary for the Iranian ESP students. To narrow it down, for the medicine and geography students reduced adjective / adverb clauses were most problematic; whereas, the theology students found passive constructions as the most challenging grammatical units. As far as vocabulary is concerned, the general vocabulary items were the most problematic ones, and the sub-technical vocabulary items turned out to be more challenging than the technical vocabulary items for the subjects. The results of this study can contribute to the betterment of education, assessment, as well as course design processes in the realm of ESP.

Chapter one
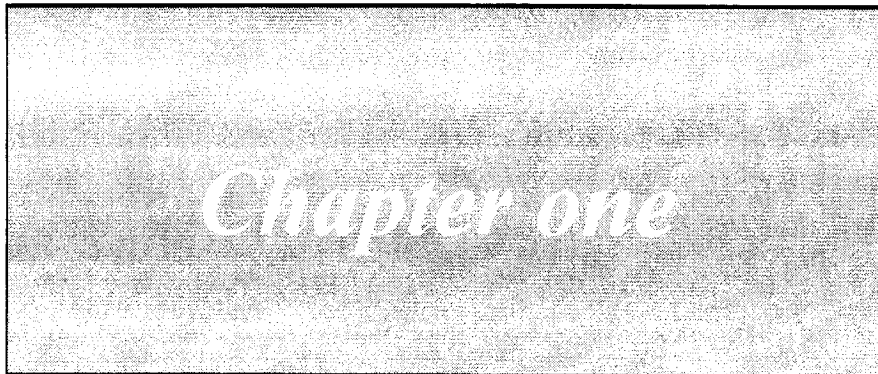
Overview

1.1. Introduction

Reading, as the most important skill, enjoys the greatest magnitude

in the domain of ESP particularly in English as a second or foreign

language which has gained ascendancy in international science,

technology, and trade. And the demand for English for specific purposes

is still increasing as novel strides are taken to push back the boundaries of

science and technology. In this respect, Johns and Evans (1991, P.297)

also are of a similar idea, " as TESOL enters its second quarter century,

the demand for English for specific purposes (e.g. English for science and

technology, English for business, vocational ESL) continues to increase

and expand throughout the world".

Parallel to this, Carrell (1988) also considers reading as the main

reason why students learn the language. Then he adds, " for many students, reading is by far the most important of the four skills in a second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language"(P.1).

Yet in spite of the significance attached to reading by many scholars, it is a common experience that most ESP students fail to read adequately in the foreign language, and very frequently they seem to read with less understanding than we expect them to have.

Accordingly, researchers have attempted to root out the causes of poor reading. Linguistically speaking, to do so we are inevitably obliged to answer a question like : Is poor reading a matter of linguistic complexity?

In order to come up with an answer to the above-mentioned question, Alderson (1989) conducted a research and concluded that :

> Considerable support was found that some sort of threshold or language competence ceiling has to be attained before existing abilities in the first language can begin to transfer. (P.20)

The conclusion, he came up with, has also been supported and confirmed by some other scholars. For instance, Lee and Schallert

(1997) also believe that, " whether or not a reader has reached the threshold level may be the deciding factor in success or failure in L2 reading" (P.714).

After proving the existence of the relationship between poor reading and linguistic complexity, Alderson (1984) put forward a question as to the nature of the threshold level which L2 readers should reach. His question was, "what the nature of this threshold is : to what extent it is syntactic or semantic." (P.20).

The above -mentioned question shapes the corner-stone of this research. To put it in a nutshell, since a great number of ESP students have difficulty in reading and comprehending the texts written in their subject matter, problematic areas (lexical and grammatical) of these readers should be incisively spotted. Pedagogically speaking ,studies of this nature are usually carried out in order to provide material designers, teachers, and other related figures with worthy information in the hope of eradication or at least alleviation of the problems involved.

1.2.Statement of the problem and the purpose of the study

Rarely do we deny the fact that a great number of ESP students have difficulties in the processes of comprehending the texts written in

their subject matter. These problems can be due to lack of sufficient command of various types of vocabulary namely general, technical and sub-technical and some of them, on the other hand, stem from different syntactic complexities.

In addition, on account of the significance of reading as the most generally needed skill in EAP world wide and as a prerequisite for academic studies and personal development, this superficially simple skill has been one of the most controversial issues in ELT in general and TEFL in particular.

Furthermore, a giant-sized corpus of written texts in EAP and ESP doubles the importance of reading comprehension. And this significance has resulted in a large number of studies into the nature of reading comprehension on one hand and inefficiency of readers in the processes of reading on the other hand. In this respect, Grabe (1991) argues that one of the knowledge areas which have an influence on the process of reading is vocabulary and structural knowledge. In other words, readers who have problems in these areas of knowledge will also get into trouble in the processes involved in reading comprehension.

The present research seeks to delve into the linguistic problems of ESP students. It tries to shed light on the problems these readers encounter while reading their specialized texts. Similar studies have already been conducted by some very outstanding and talked-about scholars as well. Among them, Celce Murcia and Mcintosh did a study in 1979 and came to the conclusion that 68% of the students' problems in reading comprehension originated from syntactic complexities ,19% from insufficient command of vocabulary, 6% from their speed of reading ,and 7% from their inefficiency in pronunciation .

To sum up, from pedagogical viewpoint, the results of such a study will certainly be of invaluable assistance to material developers and course designers. In other words, they can make use of the findings of this study in the process of developing novel, appropriate, and fully-fledged materials for innumerable ESP students majoring in various fields of study all around the country.

1.3. Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions were proposed :

1.What are the areas of difficulty in the reading comprehension of Iranian ESP students in terms of vocabulary?

2.What are the areas of difficulty in the reading comprehension of Iranian ESP students in terms of syntax?

1.4. Definition of Important Terms

ESP (English for Specific Purpose) : refers to, "an approach to language

learning which is based on learner need, interest, and specific

purpose" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987 P.19).

Reading Comprehension : " a process involving the activation of relevant

knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange

of information from one person to another. It requires the reader

to focus attention on the reading material and integrate previously

acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend what someone else

has written"(Chastain, 1988, P.216).

General Vocabulary : Richards and Platt (1992) define vocabulary as, " a

set of lexemes, including single words, compound words, and idioms"

(P.400).