

## Recognizing the ESP Course Challenges to Improve the Quality of ESP Program of Counseling Students

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### Abstract

This study examined the challenges, perceptions and expectations of students and instructors involving ESP courses which are seen to be significant in determining the effectiveness of ESP programs in Iran. It was conducted with 180 students (psychology and counsel) as participants who were requested to answer two kinds of questionnaires. Along with these questionnaires, six ESP instructors attended in semi structures interviews on the challenges of the course and their attitudes and expectations of the course. Additionally, the ESP courses at this university were observed to see how the process of ESP classes is. After obtaining the data through the observation, questionnaires and interviews, they were analyzed to get outcomes. The findings indicate some challenges and expectations which should be regarded in designing the ESP course to improve its quality in Iranian Universities. They include the low language proficiency of students, inexperienced instructors, lack of communicative activities, and lack of productive language skills, along with the receptive language skills, overcrowded classes and irrelevant and outdated materials in ESP programs. As current instruction is limited to training unique vocabulary and reading via translating texts to the Persian language, the ESP course does not reflect any active participation and motivation of the ESP students and so it turns to be an ineffective course. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that these factors (low language proficiency of students, inexperienced instructors, lack of communicative activities, lack of productive language skills, along with the receptive language skills, overcrowded classes and irrelevant and outdated materials) are regarded in designing ESP courses to attain the objectives of the courses. It is recommended to use ESP for specialized English language training for students, especially students of counseling and educational sciences.

**Keywords:** challenges of ESP course, teaching methods in ESP, ESP students

## Introduction

Since a number of scholars have noted (for example, Johns & Price-Machado, 2001; Widdowson, 1998) every course in a sense involves English for specific purposes(ESP), since a fundamental goal of all instruction is to meet the needs of a particular group of learners in a specific context. However, the term ESP is conventionally used to refer to the teaching of language items, skills, text types and competencies needed by learners for success in specialized occupational, academic, or sociocultural domains such as business, engineering, science and technology, medicine, academic study, community access, tourism, or other service roles(Wette, 2018).

Controversy on the advent of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is on the rise in academic circles. The fact of taking into accounts the learners and their objectives and needs resulted in some modifications in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program. Besides, the eminent role of English in higher education leads to rapid growth in this innovative field throughout the world. It is believed that language acquisition would be most effectively facilitated, provided that it could be contributed to the learners' field of study.

Defining ESP, Tudor (1997) ravers that a significant prominent feature of ESP is that it deals with 'domains of knowledge which the average educated native speaker could not reasonably be expected to be familiar with' (p. 91). Other scholars also highlighted its typical characteristics to take into account in teaching and designing the course. For example, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) characterize ESP as a distinctive methodological approach focusing on specific learner needs and a set of teaching patterns that recognize the learner's subject-matter expertise. This definition therefore, also stresses both the research-base of the field in terms of the need to identify the language features, skills, and genres of the target groups to be taught and the various roles of the ESP instructors. Research has always played a vital part in ESP teaching and the teacher's role as either a consumer of this research or as a user of its techniques of analyzing target events, texts, and contexts of use cannot be overemphasized.

The ESP instructor's primary role is to manage learning by setting up conditions in the classroom that will promote language acquisition. Basturkmen (2010) states that ESP teaching makes demands on teachers and course developers for investigating needs and designing courses and asks whether teaching ESP is effective.

As the ESP course intends to help the students study their subject matter and use language in their career in the future, the principle of many English language courses in universities sets the purpose of language learning of students as using language during and after their studies. They should be able to use the language in the prospective profession or study area by becoming prepared for some everyday situations such as carrying out higher-level studies, going for an interview or conducting professional communication (Varnosfardani, 2009). Still, one of the most severe problems that Iranian students encounter in their field of study is their inability to communicate and handle English after graduating from university. This problem seems to be due to students' difficulties in grasping fully the contents and concepts faced in their particular course of study which may have a drastic impact on their academic success. According to Eslami,

2010; Karimkhanlouei, 2012, Hayati, 2008, problems of ESP courses in Iran arise due to some issues such as the lack of systematic needs analysis, systematic research on the effectiveness of these programs, ESP teacher training, time, textbook and advanced planning in course design.

Hence, in determining the improvement of ESP courses, it is a need for careful examination of the challenges and difficulties area students are faced with and to investigate the attitudes, stance, needs, expectations and perceptions of learners and instructors in their use of academic English language.

Since there is no formal survey on whether teaching ESP to students this study attempted to observe how language is taught in this university and the similar universities. This investigation addressing the issue of learners and instructors' challenges in using ESP courses and some of the difficulties that they have encountered with aimed at gathering such data at university to seek the ways of improving the quality of learning in ESP program for making informed decisions to ensure effective language learning.

Indeed it is answer to the question: "What problems cause that the ESP students in university do not possess adequate language skills and what attempt should be conducted to tackle this question." So, for a careful investigation of strengths or weaknesses of the learners, it is needed a documented survey to get information to arrange for a new situation analysis so that there is a plan for a multilateral contention against difficulties to improve the situation by submitting useful suggestions in the syllabus if not in the whole system of English learning. This conducted research carries some suggestions towards what should be done in our context to promote the level of the ESP students in achieving their educational goals.

## Methods

In order to achieve the aim of the study, qualitative and quantite, research was conducted. This investigation was attempting to be carried out in a way that the interpretation of the data about the rating of problematic issues in teaching and learning of ESP courses can be realistic and results in consciousness-raising in students to ways of achieving their course goals. Due to constraints regarding accessibility, distance and time, the relevant data were gathered from the students and the ESP teachers of Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University in Tabriz(Virtual space). This study included 180 students (both male and female) as the participants from the psychology and counsel disciplines in this university.

### Entry criteria

- 1- ages ranged from 20 to 24
- 2-third year of study
- 3- Conscious consent to participate in research

### Exit criteria

- 1-Request to leave the research program
- 2-Absence of more than 2 training sessions
- 3-Participate at the same time as another English language class

From all the students participating in the study, a total of 180, 110 (61.1%) were female and 70 (38.8%) were male. Additionally, six teachers including both male and female holding Ph.D degrees in ELT, Psychology, Civilization history and Chemistry engineering participated in this study. Four of them have been taught ESP courses students for more than twelve years.

### **Instruments and Procedure**

To get a more reliable and accurate interpretation of the data, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The ESP class observation and semi- structured interviews conducted with the ESP instructors by the researcher are considered as the qualitative method of data interpretation.

### **Hutchinson and Waters' checklist during the ESP courses**

Data collection was initiated with the intent of classroom observation by using Hutchinson and Waters' checklist during the ESP courses. Then, the semi- structured face to face individual interviews in Persian were conducted with the instructors aiming at obtaining the instructors' insights on the programs such as the cooperation between subject matter teacher and English language teacher, the level of proficiency of learners, using L1 in the class, practice in four language skills, communicative activities, comments on the ESP material, content of the course, teaching method, the amount of time and the problems arisen in their classes. The conversations were recorded for interpretations accurately; notes were taken while participants were engaged in discussions, and member checking was incorporated by returning transcripts to participants for respondents' verification. the Cronbach alpha reliability index turned out to be 0.76..

As mentioned earlier, for gathering data in this study, a quantitative method along with the qualitative method was applied. This additional attempt was to obtain data of learners' views on their needs, expectations and insights on the ESP program such as involving two teachers (subject matter teacher and English language teacher), using L1 in the class, the level of English proficiency, practice in four language skills, comments on the ESP material, current teaching method and of time and also to obtain data about learners' problems arisen in teaching and learning. To achieve useful findings from the conducted survey, two relevant questionnaires were set aiming at investigating how students rank their needs, expectations and opinion on the ESP program and what problems they encounter in their learning in ESP course, that is, these type of questionnaires not only requests the learners to identify the problematic issues in ESP course but also ask them to give their idea about the appropriate way of managing and teaching ESP class to gather necessary data for exploring the ways of improving the quality of learning. For ranking the items of the questionnaire, the Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5 was used. The reliability of this developed questionnaire was estimated against the Cronbach's Alpha. The values for the total questions were 0.69. This value is high enough to conclude that the instruments employed in this study enjoy high reliabilities. Along with the

measurement of reliability, the validity of the questionnaires was estimated by content validity and using factorial analysis for determining the construct validity.

## Results

the results obtained from the questionnaires administered to learners are provided in table 1 It indicates the problems as subcategories including insufficiency language proficiency of learners, lack of practice in four language skills, lack of communicative activities, poor participation of students in classes, low level of English knowledge of teachers, low level of subject knowledge of teachers, overcrowded classes, boring class, lack of appropriate material, lack of audiovisual material, time and credits of course, limited ESP vocabulary and heterogeneous students (mixed professional). They are regarded as the main challenging and problematic issues in their ESP course.

**Table 1.** The Main Problems in ESP classes according to the student's opinion

Main Problem in ESP classes	N.	Percentage
Low level of general English proficiency of the students	155	86.1 %
Inexperienced teachers (low level of English language knowledge or low level of subject matter knowledge)	146	81.1 %
lack of communicative activities	150	83.3 %
Overcrowded classes	133	73.8 %
Monotonous class	151	83.8 %
lack of appropriate & Outdated materials	81	45.0 %
Time and Credit of course	53	29.44 %
Heterogeneous students	49	27.22
lack of audiovisual material	44	24.4 %

. Table presents the obtained results from the administrated questionnaire.

**Table 2.** The students' insights on their ESP program

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Current teaching method	43 23.8%	79 43.8%	30 16.6%	25 13.8%	3 1.6%
Practice in 4 language skills	5 2.7%	10 5.5%	28 15.5%	99 55.0%	38 21.1%

<b>(productive + receptive skills)</b>						
<b>Involving two instructors (language +subject matter)</b>	6	13	21	104	36	
	3.3%	7.2%	11.6%	57.7%	20.0%	
<b>High level of language proficiency</b>	12	21	23	85	39	
	6.6%	11.6%	12.7%	47.2%	21.6%	
<b>ESP course based on their needs</b>	-	2	7	68	103	
	0.0%	1.1%	3.8%	37.7%	57.2%	
<b>Using L1 in the class</b>	6	18	34	74	48	
	3.3%	10.0%	18.8%	41.1%	26.6%	
<b>Appropriate materials</b>	-	-	6	64	110	
	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	35.5%	61.1%	
<b>More time &amp; credit</b>	5	12	29	98	36	
	2.7%	6.6%	16.1%	54.4%	20.0%	
<b>Small size of the class</b>	-	-	16	68	96	
	0.0%	0.0%	8.8%	37.7%	53.3%	

According to the findings of the learners' opinions and expectation on their ESP course, the majority of respondents criticized the current method of teaching but favored some issues including the cooperation of the two instructors (language + subject matter), practice in productive and receptive language skills, ESP course based on their needs, high level of language proficiency, using L1 in the class, appropriate materials, more time & credit and small size of the class. Surprisingly, although the students do not have any experience having two instructors in the ESP course, they think it is an appropriate way of teaching in ESP courses to respond to their needs in language and subject matters area. At Iranian universities, ESP courses are taught to almost all majors by subject matter (content teachers) or non-subject matter teachers (English language majors). The students believe that a combination of language proficiency and familiarity with the genre of their specialized texts is probably a right solution.

As table 2 indicates, the students tend to practice in four language skills. They think based on these practices they can take part in communicative activities. So, they are not

encountered with a boring class. Moreover, they believe that a high level of general English proficiency is a necessity for succeeding in the ESP course. That they prefer the use of L1 in the class seems, on the whole, to be due to the low level of language proficiency of learners for getting information in ESP class. Of course, this weakness can lead them to be poor participants in the communicative activities in the ESP course. Referring to the table, the majority of the participants argued that the time allocated to ESP courses is not enough for the ESP students to master needed skills. Based on a general overview of the findings of several studies, the results obtained from this study confirm the fact that most learners overestimated their needs and expectation and small size of ESP class and convenient materials.

The third phase of this study refers to the data concerning the attitude and expectation of ESP instructors and the problems they are faced with during the course. According to the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with the instructors, one of their main problems is the lack of cooperative between the English language and subject matter instructors. It seems that the given cooperation between two instructors can overlap the poor knowledge observed on both sides. We should always remember that an ESP teacher is not specialized in the field, but in teaching English or not specialized in teaching English but specialized in the field. As Ahmadi (2012) argued the most significant aim of ESP courses is to assist students to understand the specialized texts of their ESP materials and as there are many technical terms, notions and topics in these texts, the teacher with ELT majors are not sufficiently familiar with those terms and topics.

The result of interviews revealed that some of the instructors approved the current methods of teaching in ESP classes which meet the needs of students; they agreed that the materials are authentic ones to be used in real life. Still, some of them did not. They believed that the methods of ESP teaching should be based on communicative language teaching in universities in Iran and the current traditional method focusing on reading and translation neglecting the other language skills is not responsive to the needs of ESP students in their future careers. They criticize the low level of proficiency of the learners, the inactivity of students in the classes, lack of appropriate ESP materials based on the communicative teaching method, overcrowded classes and insufficient time as the main problems for not attempting the communicative activities in the class and for leading ESP classes to be monotonous and ineffective. In their opinion, the low level of English language proficiency is a significant factor in turning the students to be inactive and unmotivated learners and as a result, the students do not participate in the class activities as much as they should. Therefore, with the students' low English language proficiency, more teacher-centered classes are required to teach the large ESP classes effectively. Regarding the time of the ESP program in the universities, it is argued that such class time limitation sometimes creates some challenges for ESP instructors. This might result in teachers' inability to provide the learners of ESP with evaluation and feedback on the individual level, ineffective teaching, and their inability to fulfilled needs analysis projects.

What is worth highlighting is that the instructors acknowledge that the teachers should attempt to replace the current method in the ESP course with new and effective methods of teaching. Most of them were inclined to alter the current method to improve the quality of teaching of ESP providing that they are put in the innovative methods and ideas by attending in the practical training professional ESP courses for instructors.

## Conclusion

Regarding the findings of the present study, the main challenges which the students ranked as being more significant than instructors did are learners' low level of English proficiency, lack of practice in four language skills, lack of communicative activities in the course, low level of English knowledge or subject matter knowledge of the instructors, using a traditional method in ESP class, monotonous classes and outdated materials in the course. The students perceived that ESP students need more practice in using the English language and they should have more opportunities to have more diverse communicative activities in the self-monitoring way of learning and use English in their daily lives. They believe, applying this way, they should try more and rely on themselves for better learning.

According to the results, the main problems that the majority of instructors were currently faced with are unmotivated and inactive students, low English proficiency of students, lack of cooperation between English and subject matter instructors and overcrowded classes. Considering the conditions facing the ESP classes in Iran, it is deemed that the low English language proficiency from one part and the low knowledge of content matter and technical vocabulary from another part are the problematic challenges for the students which lead to their inactivities and poor communicative participation and involvement in the class. It is worth noting that the instructors should be making the students understand that acquiring "general English" must be taken into consideration before any ESP is started. For ESP reading materials, the language would be learned as a prerequisite (Carrel & Eistherhold, 1988). All ESP's have a so-called common core that cannot be acquired from only specific English varieties. It is often thought that the characteristic of ESP is that the course should involve specialist English of its own terminology without any need for common English skills. So, the instructors should inform the learners that without general English (to the extent necessary for them) they can never go into ESP at all.

Based on their opinions, the cooperation between the teacher of English language and subject matter teacher is a need for an effective ESP course. They can overlap the lack of knowledge of each other. Dufour (2003) posited that the results of a successful collaborative classroom could be more substantial than a single teacher classroom. One way to surmount the weakness of the ESP courses is to use and benefit from cooperation and consultation between the field specialists and experienced language teachers in ESP classes. It means two professionals jointly implement gratifying instruction to the students because the ESP pedagogues play noteworthy roles in implementing satisfying and gratifying instruction. It seems that the curriculum design process of all ESP courses



requires a concerted effort from subject specialists and language teachers who assume the role of interested students. Cooperation and collaboration among ESP instructors and subject specialists are keys to the success of such courses.

Moreover, according to the result, they acknowledge ESP classes should include all the productive and receptive skills to promote the level of the four language skills, and focus on whichever is preferably needed. Especially ESP students still encounter problems in communication skills and as the social status and situation like Iran there is low encouragement and support in English learning; they cannot cope with the English language in their academic fields. Thus, the ESP courses should be based on the target needs of students representing the communicative use of language rather than linguistic categories.

The two groups of subjects pointed out that the overcrowded classes are regarded as the main problem; this situation leads to learning /teaching outcomes to be ineffective. It goes without saying that in a given vice versa class in which the size of the class is small, students can get more opportunities to do various tasks and fortify other skills in the classroom. Thus, the teacher can monitor the students' performance, correct students' errors and supervise better the activity of students and help the students to improve their studies. Regarding the credit and time of ESP course, both groups of subjects acknowledged that one of the factors for ineffective ESP course is due to the insufficient credit for such a course.

The obtained findings fortified this belief that the current ESP courses do not meet the academic needs of the students and it is a must to provide the students with ESP classes that are responsive to their needs. The increasing number of students who are motivated to continue their education in the academic stream in Iranian universities reflects the need to adopt effective and responsive instruction, so as to address the students' needs properly.

In conclusion, it is tempting to use these concrete results for decision- making –to make recommendations for some changes in how ESP teaching and learning should be carried out and to determine what the prerequisites of an ESP course should be. It is suggested that some teaching, testing, and material development workshops or seminars should be provided for ESP instructors to sharpen their knowledge about the requirements of teaching ESP and get familiar with the latest innovations in teaching ESP, material development, and testing ESP.

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