Inside the ESP Classroom: Analyzing MBA Students' Learning Difficulties Through Teachers' Eyes

Marzieh Khedri, Samad Mirza Suzani, Fatemeh Behjat

Abstract

English for Specific Purposes, known by the acronym "ESP," has been a distinct activity in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). This study investigates the challenges Iranian MBA students face by Iranian MBA students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs from the perspectives of their instructors. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with ten ESP teachers, the research identifies five major themes: lack of relevant business background, medium of instruction issues, communication challenges (oral and listening skills), the speed of teachers' speech, and deficiencies in writing skills. Findings reveal that students with non-business backgrounds struggle with quantitative coursework, while the transition from Persian to English exacerbates difficulties, particularly for those juggling work and study. Teachers noted persistent issues with students' English proficiency, notably in speaking and listening, which hindered class participation and comprehension. The rapid pace of lectures and poor note-taking skills further complicated students' ability to keep up with the curriculum. To address these multifaceted challenges, the study suggests implementing remedial courses, enhancing English language support, and adjusting teaching methodologies. These tailored interventions aim to improve students' academic performance and overall learning experience in ESP programs, offering valuable insights for educational institutions striving to support MBA students better. The pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: ESP, ESP teachers, Learning challenges, MBA

1 Introduction

In recent decades, internationalization has become a central focus for universities worldwide, driving significant changes in higher education. This shift is characterized by an increased emphasis on student mobility, international exchanges, and the adoption of English as the global lingua franca of academia (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lumby & Foskett, 2016; Tamtik & Kirss,

2015). For universities aspiring to enhance their global presence and competitiveness, proficiency in English is not merely advantageous but essential. English language skills are integral to academic mobility, international research collaborations, and participation in global conferences (Teichler, 2007).

As English has solidified its role as the predominant language in global academic and professional arenas, universities worldwide are increasingly incorporating it into their curricula. This trend is particularly evident in the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where English is tailored to meet the specific needs of various professional fields, including business (Bardi, 2015). For institutions aiming to internationalize their programs, offering high-quality English language education is paramount. This is reflected in the demand for English proficiency across all levels of education, from undergraduate to doctoral studies.

The emphasis on English in higher education is driven by the need for effective communication in international diplomacy, trade, and academia. English serves as a bridge across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, facilitating global collaboration and knowledge exchange (Wall, 2009). Consequently, students and professionals alike are required to develop strong English language skills to succeed in the global marketplace. For students, particularly those in graduate programs, English proficiency is crucial for accessing and producing academic knowledge, engaging in scholarly discussions, and publishing research. In the context of Iranian higher education, the integration of ESP into academic programs has gained prominence. Iranian university students across various disciplines are expected to demonstrate proficiency in English, both in understanding and producing academic texts. At the undergraduate level, students encounter English primarily through translated texts, while at the graduate level, they face the challenge of engaging with original English-language academic materials and producing their own research in English (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014; Akbari, 2016). This shift presents a significant challenge, particularly for students in fields such as business, where the ability to write and publish in English is increasingly important.

The demand for graduate-level research writing instruction has grown, with genre-based pedagogies and ESP frameworks playing a crucial role in addressing this need (Cheng, 2018). This development is not confined to English-speaking countries but extends globally, including in

regions like Europe and Asia (Simpson et al., 2016). In Iran, however, there is a lack of comprehensive research focusing on the challenges faced by MBA students in ESP programs and the perspectives of their instructors.

Despite the growing emphasis on ESP programs and their expansion across various disciplines, significant challenges persist for both students and instructors. Previous studies have highlighted various issues faced by students, such as anxiety, embarrassment, and difficulties in mastering subject content in an English-medium environment (Dimova, 2017). However, less attention has been paid to the perspectives of instructors who play a critical role in shaping and delivering ESP programs.

In Iranian ESP contexts, particularly within MBA programs, understanding the specific challenges faced by students and the corresponding attitudes of their teachers is crucial. Existing research has largely focused on students' experiences and needs, leaving a gap in understanding how instructors perceive and address these challenges. Teachers' perspectives are essential for identifying the obstacles encountered by students and for developing effective strategies to support their learning. The gap in research is particularly notable in the context of Iranian MBA programs, where the linguistic demands of English for Specific Purposes are high. While previous studies have examined ESP in various international contexts, there is limited research on how Iranian instructors perceive and address the challenges faced by MBA students in their ESP courses. This lack of understanding can lead to a reliance on general English teaching methods, which may not adequately address the specific needs of students in professional fields. To address this gap, the present study aims to explore the challenges faced by Iranian MBA students in their ESP programs from the perspectives of their instructors. By focusing on teachers' attitudes and experiences, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties encountered in ESP contexts and to offer insights into how these challenges can be effectively addressed. This investigation will contribute to the broader field of ESP research by highlighting the importance of considering instructors' viewpoints in the development and implementation of ESP programs.

2 Literature Review

Theoretical Considerations on ESP

The rapid theoretical and practical development of teaching English as a second or foreign language in the last few decades is easily noticeable. Its ever-changing nature has been affected by some features, such as educational needs and objectives. These features led to different views and cogent approaches to language teaching. Training competent students is considered one of the most eminent goals that all these methodologies attempt to obtain. In order to accomplish the different needs of different groups of students, some modifications were made in the teaching of English, which in turn resulted in the development of teaching ESP, an international movement characterized by a concern with adult students' roles as English language speakers and writers outside the classroom, and by its foundation in pedagogy (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991). Accordingly, Widdowson (1983) mentioned Palmer's critical statement on the value of relating language teaching to the particular needs of learners in that we cannot design a language course until we know something about the students for whom the course is intended since a program of study is connected to the aim or aims of the students.

Evaluating and measuring the development of the learners and the courses they learn have always been an obsession for academics. As the goals of education have become more complex and the number of students has enormously grown, evaluation has become much more difficult in effect. Concerning the ESP courses, the evaluation requirements take on even more significance in the fact that these courses normally have specified objectives (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). EAP for contexts of tertiary education and ESP for professional training in industry demonstrate a high degree of specialist content that language students and teachers encounter in courses. Therefore, the mutual effect of the language teaching and content professions is an opportunity for improvement on both sides. A promising way forward for the field of EAP is the adoption of instructional methods from content disciplines and their modifications for the needs of English language teaching (Tatzl, 2015).

English medium instruction in higher education is growing all over the world. It is described as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English (Macaro et al., 2018). The growing demand for highly qualified professionals who can freely access data and communicate worldwide with their English-speaking international colleagues has put this concept at the center of curricula in universities in several parts of the world (Tamtam et al., 2012).

From the outset, a decision has been made that all programs should be delivered through the medium of English. Therefore, almost all of the reading material that students have to work with is in English. Assignments, essays, and reports have to be written in English. However, there have been considerable issues in implementing this decision. Although students have to achieve certain levels in English language test scores as a condition of entry, they often lack the ability to understand course content, either written materials or lectures, and classes in English. All teaching staff should be fluent in English. There is a range of English competence among Iranian EFL speakers. Some are fluent, but others struggle (Pritasari et al., 2019). It is crucial to bear in mind that the rapidly developing sciences in different advanced countries of the world are communicated through their own languages. By evaluating the ESP course for MBA students in Iran and considering the fact that nowadays, all sciences and technologies are interrelated and supplement each other, the present study attempts to integrate subjects such as ESP and MBA in this regard.

ESP in Iran

English plays a crucial role in higher education all over the world. There is a worldwide growth in demand for English for academic courses. English, the lingua franca of all sciences, came out in non-English speaking countries as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Ghanbari, 2010; Jafarie & Heidari Tabrizi, 2022). ESP refers to a developing branch of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Iran (Moslemi et al., 2011). Teaching English in the Gulf region, in general, attracts the attention of several researchers and scholars. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978), there was a doctrinaire move supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to set up identical discipline-based EAP programs for institutions (Eslami, 2010). An eminent aspect of language instruction on the higher educational level is learning English for a specific objective, with the particular aim of recognizing specialized vocabularies, enhancing one's knowledge about the subject matter by reading in English, and being able to apply the language in the prospective profession or study area by enough preparation for some common conditions such as transferring higher level studies, going for an interview or conducting professional communication (Varnosfardani, 2009). Therefore, careful examination of the expectations and perceptions of students and teachers is observed to be important in determining the success of ESP courses.

Challenging Aspects of ESP for Teachers

A key issue in ESP contexts that students find challenging is writing ability. On the other hand, writing assessment is different among raters, and this is especially true for EFL writing due to the different conceptualizations of writing and genres in different contexts all over the world. Studies indicate that even trained raters demonstrate significant differences in their overall level of severity (Eckes, 2012). In assessment, the rater communicates with the student, the task, and the procedure, creating a highly complex process. Wang et al. (2017) discovered that teachers and test experts can differ in scores and that some essay aspects tend to result in discrepancies. Moreover, Baker (2012) suggested that decision-making styles affect rating behavior, and more difficult papers might enhance the influence of these styles.

Several studies documented the variable of difficulty in papers. Raczynski et al. (2015) describe that for professional raters, some essays are seriously more challenging to score accurately. Wolfe et al. (2016) examined characteristics of difficult-to-score essays and understood that length and lexical diversity accounted for 25% of the variance in the difficulty of scoring accurately. Therefore, rater discrepancy might be enhanced by difficult-to-score essays, particularly those with qualities not covered in the rubric, such as originality (Lim, 2019). Mumford and Atay (2021) identified three other potential causes of discrepancy: rater type, level of assessment literacy, and social context. Eckes (2008) emphasized the need to assess the relationship between rater types and noted that concentrating on one criterion might bring forth greater inconsistencies in the others. Crusan et al. (2016) discovered different levels of assessment literacy among instructors and noted lower levels among more experienced instructors who lack recent training and hold entrenched attitudes. The social context is identified as another variable that can be related both to the L1 and the practices surrounding the rating, for instance, the number of raters for each paper.

One possible difference in instructor approach to rating might be related to the amount of attention given to teaching, content, and students. Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008) gave the hypothetical example of a teacher who viewed the cause of error in relation to the aspect of the content and another who viewed it in terms of the students, using previous teaching experience to predict problematic areas, i.e., teachers might take a content-focused or student-focused view of writing. Ballock et al. (2019) pointed out that teachers' interpretations of writing might be deeper or more

superficial; higher levels of both content and teaching knowledge might allow better evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, interpretation of criteria might be affected by attitudes and experience (Mumford & Atay, 2021).

Success at university is highly contingent on the ability to write; consequently, a significant objective for any EMI English program involves ensuring that student scores demonstrate writing ability and readiness for mainstream university courses. The measurement of writing generally needs the assignment of a score, which is thought to reflect the underlying construct or ability to be measured, connected to scoring rubric descriptors. A definition of a rubric is a document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria or what is essential, describing levels from excellent to poor. It presents explicit standards for judging student performance. A scoring rubric can demonstrate how well a student attained mastery of features of L2 writing taught in a program course, for example, conventions, structure, and vocabulary along with the ability to stay on topic which enables determination of the level of proficiency. Second-language writers tend to describe different degrees of performance in different traits, and if instructors do not score for these features and report the scores, much information might be lost (Mumford & Atay, 2021).

Given the significance devoted to the score discrepancies, the present study focused on individual teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face while teaching EFL students in ESP courses. It can be helpful in that their views might account for discrepancies. Recent definitions of fairness emphasized the role of context and of the individual within it. Accordingly, a fair test is defined by Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing as one that reduces construct irrelevant variance connected with individual characteristics and testing contexts that would otherwise compromise the validity of scores for individual students (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education as cited in Poe & Elliot, 2019). Therefore, this might be reported as a challenge by students and content teachers. Poe and Elliot (2019) explained that the concept of fairness is evolving. They mentioned that social context is a significant aspect of fairness, which engages the level of knowledge assumed for the student group.

Rather than observing fairness as mainly concerned with maintaining validity for all student subgroups in large-scale tests (Xi, 2010), the present study assessed the concept at the level of the

individual teacher and student for a task and criteria produced for the specific context. Therefore, this study provided a detailed investigation of a small number of teachers' and students' perceptions of the causes of problems in a particular English as a Foreign Language context, consistent with Poe and Elliot's (2019) call for nuanced research and investigation of non-western settings. White (2019) discussed that instructors, as important stakeholders, prioritize knowledge for improvement, among other things that acknowledge and support the diversity of students and faculty together with their various modes and genres of expression; hence, recognizing the many different perceptions of the concept of English language among MBA students (Mumford & Atay, 2021). Although the studies reviewed above presented some perceptions of the types of second language lecture comprehension challenges faced by EFL or ESL students, they did not consider MBA students' problems and difficulties combining different methods and obtaining data based on teachers' perceptions. The current study aimed to present a more detailed, comprehensive picture of the situation in a specific geographical and cultural context and to thereby better inform the provision of ESP in the Iranian context.

3 Method

Participants

Ten participants were recruited from the Islamic Azad University, Boushehr Branch in Iran. The sample comprised English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers (n = 10). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. A convenience sampling method was used to select participants with relevant disciplinary backgrounds, specifically in the MBA field. The ages of the participating teachers ranged from 37 to 54, and all were native Persian speakers. Language proficiency was not a criterion for participant selection.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study included interviews, participant observations, and ESP-related course texts. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt and probe further based on participants' responses, encouraging detailed and open answers

(Kvale, 2007; Robson, 2011). These interviews provided students the opportunity to discuss broader challenges in their field.

The observation was employed alongside other data collection methods to capture live, authentic social interactions, which are crucial for understanding issues that students may be reluctant to discuss (Denscombe, 2010; Robson, 2011). Observations offer direct insight into real-life occurrences, complementing and validating data obtained from interviews (Robson, 2011).

To triangulate the data, documents were also utilized. Semi-structured interviews were designed to explore learners' problems related to English as a language of education. Stimulus cards and documents were used during interviews to elicit detailed responses. These cards contained three types of information: a) Quotations from class observations, b) Insights and data from other participants, and c) Quotations from document resources.

Interviews were conducted in Persian to ensure the reliability of the data. Each session lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and was audio-recorded for further analysis. Observations provided a comprehensive view of students' challenges within their lessons, offering first-hand data that might not be captured through indirect methods such as student interviews (Robson, 2011). Various texts and documents were collected to enrich the data sources. These included:

1. Sample answers from MBA-related assignments;

2. An MBA program leaflet detailing the program structure, course design, and evaluation criteria;

3. A textbook used in ESP lessons for MBA undergraduates for comparison with students' samples and assessment criteria.

To ensure the validity of the instruments, three experts (two in TEFL and one in MBA) reviewed and confirmed the content validity of the interview questions. Revisions were made based on their feedback, and reliability estimates were assessed. For objective thematic analysis and inter-rater agreement, the researcher selected five transcripts randomly and had another rater (a TEFL PhD holder) code them and assign themes. The results were compared to ensure consistency between coders. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the

linguistic challenges questionnaire. The internal consistency reliability of the survey was 0.89, indicating an acceptable level of reliability (Pallant, 2010).

Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilized a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations, and text analysis to gather data. Sixteen class observations were conducted to thoroughly explore the context of the study. These observations were strategically spread across the research period, including at the beginning of the course and after the interviews, to ensure comprehensive coverage and minimize the risk of missing data. The collected information was analyzed thematically, guided by the study's objectives and interview data.

One-on-one interviews with students were conducted in two cycles at the end of each course. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the interviews were designed to create a supportive environment, encouraging students to freely share their experiences and insights regarding the ESP courses and associated challenges. Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Interviews were both recorded and noted to capture all relevant information. Stimulus cards and documents were used during interviews to elicit detailed responses. The data were translated into English, and two experts reviewed the translations to ensure accuracy. These translations were used to complement other data sources.

For data analysis, interview transcripts and observational notes were coded and thematically analyzed using an inductive approach. An exploratory open coding strategy was employed to identify all potential issues based on the data. This approach, inspired by cross-sectional qualitative methods, involved thematic coding followed by the coding of demonstrative quotations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason, 2002). To enhance the reliability and validity of the research, various techniques were employed. Methodological triangulation was used to mitigate potential drawbacks in data collection, providing a more comprehensive view of the study's context and challenges (Alhassan et al., 2021). The flexibility of thematic analysis further supported a thorough understanding of the data.

Thematic analysis followed the five stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) transcribing, reading, and reviewing the data to become familiar with it; (2) generating initial codes and themes; (3) inspecting and organizing the data to identify and refine accurate aspects and recurring themes; (4) developing a thematic framework by reviewing and organizing the themes; and (5) refining, defining, and naming themes to ensure they accurately reflect the students' insights and experiences.

4 Results

To address the research question on the challenges faced by Iranian MBA students in their ESP programs from the instructors' perspectives, five key themes were identified. As previously described, the five stages of thematic analysis were applied to the study of the interviews. Data analysis revealed a range of problems that MBA students reportedly experienced, as reported by the content teachers. These issues were attributed to several sources and were believed by participants to have negatively impacted students' academic performance in the curriculum. Each theme is detailed as follows (T = teacher; CO = classroom observation):

1. Lack of relevant background in business
The lack of related business background among a large number of the teachers seemed to be a challenge that impeded their academic performance development. Most teachers showed consent that quantitative or numerical backgrounds could pave the way for the students to accomplish some of the MBA courses with ease, for instance:

> *Students coming from mathematical backgrounds generally have a better comprehension for the subjects that involve calculations and accounting issues . . . so most of the high-achieving students in the MBA are of engineering backgrounds since they recognize problems better, and so they are better as a result [in accomplishing accounting courses]. (T1/T4)*

2. Medium of instruction
The difference between the languages of instruction used in the MBA (English) and the predominant language (Persian) seemed to affect students' academic performance. The majority of the teachers found the English-medium teaching experience unfamiliar for students as they seemed to experience a difficult transition into adapting to and coping with this new learning

condition and context. University teachers referred to some other aspects of this theme, which involved students' lack of punctuality and fatigue concerning lesson time:

> *Almost all of the students are employees who would like to have the degree for promotion at work . . . and they would come directly from the office to the class. It is easily noticeable that they are tired, and sometimes they do not even have the interest to attend the lesson or participate in the activities. I noticed that some would come very late. [The classes] starting time is 5 pm onward, and they still join the class with delay, and their main excuse is always that they are working. . ., however, having lessons on the second half of the day also triggers their lack of energy which is an inevitable issue. (T5)*

Another major issue was the students' poor English language abilities. The problems related to these abilities are described in more detail, beginning with speaking and listening problems.

3. Communication challenges: Oral and listening skills

The speaking problem was one of the most persistent language challenges highlighted in class observations over the two visits gap. MBA instructors also identified and commented on this challenge. Students tend to speak hesitantly, and they speak in fragmented and incomplete phrases:

> *The teacher raised a question concerning the difference between cost accounting, financial accounting, and accounting management . . . and students provided different answers to the teacher's question in the class. These answers were expressed in incomplete phrases while the teacher kept pointing out the problem that you don't organize your ideas. "You just talk without putting your ideas in an organized way; please organize your ideas." (T5, CO1 = Class observation, first visit)*

During classroom observations, it was also noticed how students would refer to the Persian language as a compensatory coping strategy:

> *It was noticed that students used a mixture of both Persian and English language when asking questions. They could generally communicate using half English and half Persian . . . (T8/1 CO2)*

Students seemed to refer to their native language to facilitate interaction and avoid communication breakdown when asking or answering questions during class activities:

> *I noticed that one of the students asked the instructor to repeat the explanation of a topic in Persian, and the instructor commented on the issue of students resorting to Persian to answer or ask questions in classes by recalling an example from the exams he marked. He*

told students that he realized that some students in the exams when they feel blocked writing in English, would refer to their native language and write some points in Persian . . . (T8/1 CO2)

Most teachers also mutually agreed that students had communication challenges that stopped them from engaging in-class activities and discussions successfully:

Sometimes, when I present the lecture, I notice that students look uneasy, or I notice that they might have caught the point partially, which means there is an issue in understanding the English language. The problem with communication comes also from the fact that students are not easily able to express themselves in English . . . (T7/CO2)

This general lack of English language abilities and its impact was summarized by T9 as follows:

From my point of view, language is a real issue. It is a barrier. Those who suffer from a lack of enough language proficiency are not able to study they are not able to understand lectures, they are not able to do exercises after lessons, they are not able to read and write, and also, as a result, they are not able to do better in their exams. (T9)

4. The speed of teachers' speech

One of the issues pointed out by students and teachers refers to the lack of listening skills. It was noticed when students explained their problems in understanding lectures by attributing comprehension problems to teachers' speed of speaking. This problem repeatedly prevented students from comprehending the subject and taking notes in response to teachers' descriptions and elaborations on the topic in lessons. An MBA teacher (T8) commented on this challenge, highlighting that many students struggle to keep up with the pace of lectures. "*Several students have expressed difficulty in understanding the lectures," the teacher noted*." They often attribute their comprehension problems to the speed at which the material is presented. This rapid pace can prevent them from fully grasping the subject matter and from taking effective notes during the lessons. "*It is clear that the student's listening skills need to be enhanced to better manage the demands of the course." (T8*). This observation underscores the need for tailored support to help students develop their listening abilities, ensuring they can follow and engage with the course content more effectively.

The note-taking difficulty was also confirmed in the classroom observations during the first round of data collection. It was seen that students did not take notes in classes and seemed to find listening and writing at the same time difficult:

I saw that only a few students took notes while the teacher was speaking. I also noticed that only a few of the students wrote down what the teacher was explaining in the PowerPoint slides. (T5/CO1)

The same issue was also seen during the second round of data collection in-class observation:

I noticed that the students in this lesson were not taking notes. Quite a few numbers of the students were taking notes . . . while there more than 50 students were attending the class. (T1/2 CO2)

5. Lack of writing skills

The students' lack of writing abilities was also seen during classroom observations. As a consequence, they could not take notes in classes:

I understood that most of the students were not taking notes from slides or the instructor's explanations and elaboration on the content presented on the slides. (T1 CO2)

The only time students started taking notes in classes was when the teachers wrote their explanations and details of topics on the boards. Students could then copy directly the exact words from the boards.

To sum up, based on the identified categories and themes, it seems that all these types of problems might have negatively affected the student's performance and educational life in the MBA program.

5 Discussion

The prevailing aim of the study was to examine the content teachers' challenges with the view of enhancing both the delivery of the MBA program and improving supportive English for Academic Purposes provision for better-preparing students to cope with the MBA study. The results revealed that based on teachers' reports, MBA students had experienced a number of problems that seemed to have a negative impact on effective academic performance and engagement with the plan. Through interviews with ten ESP teachers and classroom observations, five key themes were identified that shed light on these challenges: lack of relevant background in business, medium of instruction, communication challenges (oral and listening skills), the speed of teachers' speech, and lack of writing skills. Teachers unanimously noted that students with a quantitative or numerical background, such as engineering, performed better in MBA courses involving

calculations and accounting issues. This disparity highlights the need for bridging courses or support mechanisms to help students from non-business backgrounds catch up. The transition from Persian to English as the medium of instruction posed significant challenges for students. Teachers observed that many students, often fatigued from their day jobs, struggled to adapt to the English-medium teaching environment. This issue was compounded by the timing of the classes and the student's overall lack of punctuality and engagement.

The students' limited English proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening, was a recurring problem. Teachers noted that students often communicated in fragmented phrases and resorted to Persian to compensate for their difficulties in English. This issue hindered their participation in class discussions and their ability to express themselves clearly. Content teachers identified the rapid pace of lectures as a major barrier to comprehension. Students struggled to keep up with the fast delivery, which affected their ability to take effective notes and fully grasp the lecture content. This challenge was consistently observed during classroom sessions. The deficiency in writing skills further impeded students' academic performance. Teachers and classroom observations indicated that students rarely took notes and found it challenging to write down important information during lectures. This lack of note-taking was especially problematic in understanding and retaining the lecture content.

The findings confirm the results discovered in the MBA, ESP, and EAP literature reporting on students' challenges in other English-medium programs in other similar contexts (e.g., Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Holi, 2020; Airey, 2020; Aizawa et al., 2020; Kamasak et al., 2020; Lin & He, 2019; Roothooft, 2019). Content instructors in a study conducted by Ferris and Tagg (1996), for example, discovered that ESL learners' inability or unwillingness to engage in class discussions and to ask or respond to mentioned questions were the main issues that students faced in ESP content courses.

The results on students' problems with speech comprehension highlighted similar results in previous studies (e.g., Alhassan, 2019; Holi, 2020). Moreover, lecture comprehension-related problems found in the present study suggest that students appeared to face the problem of the triple burden "of simultaneously listening, reading/understanding a visual, and taking notes," as mentioned by Flowerdew and Miller (1996, p. 126). Challenges with lecture comprehension also seemed to be aggravated by learners' difficulties in asking questions, as without the students'

questions, instructors might have less power to determine students' specific issues and difficulties to modify their lectures quickly, and this might, in effect, further impede students' comprehension of lectures (Chang, 2010).

The findings of the present study are in line with the findings reported in the literature by Airey and Linder (2006), Arden-Close (1993), Benson (1989), Campbell (1973), and Kim (2006) in that comprehending lectures and taking notes while listening to lectures are two of the most common difficulties encountered by EFL or ESL students registered in English-medium courses. The lack of business knowledge was also considered one of the major challenges that students encounter in the MBA program. This problem was found to negatively affect learners' academic performance in the program to the extent that students struggled to understand the lectures and different activities that were requested of them. This suggests that the relationship between students' literacy level or educational histories and their current learning situation is highly important in investigating and comprehending their problems, and it affects practices in their new learning contexts. This result is supported by some other academic literacy studies, including Johns (1997), Casanave (1995), Prior (1994), and Spack (1997), in highlighting this connection between language challenge and context familiarity. For example, Yuko, in Spack's (1997) study, described that in addition to linguistic difficulties, challenges in managing two social science courses in her first year due to a lack of background knowledge essential for these courses, which contained knowledge of U.S. and European history. Due to problems in understanding the arguments and rhetoric of the subject content, some students became so frustrated that they led to dropping the course.

The lack of writing skills seemed to impede learners from effectively performing the writing assignments. Writing difficulties can be attributed to several factors, such as the students' non-business educational background knowledge, the use of Persian as a main medium of instruction during their courses, in contrast to the English-medium MBA, the structure of the MBA, and its intensive nature, and the student's mode of study on the program. Some of these issues were connected to learners and their backgrounds and the impact these factors have on their comprehension and handling of the tasks they were asked to do in the new learning contexts. Some others were task-related since the instructors who assigned these tasks, in most cases, were not clear and explicit in stating their instructions, requirements, and expectations behind these

assignments. While previous research on business writing genres required from students on business courses (e.g., Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Horowitz, 1986) has discovered prompts or detailed teachers' instructions for the tasks in the business course syllabuses useful in assisting students to effectively accomplish the tasks, in contrast, the course descriptions or syllabuses in the context of the present study did not normally involve such detailed task instructions nor did content teachers deliver direct instructions. This condition might have triggered students' failure to meet the requirements and thus prevented them from successfully achieving some of the tasks. Moreover, the writing task was identified as the most challenging task for students before speaking.

It was reported that prior background in the major and English-mediated classes had a significantly positive impact in terms of adjusting to the MBA program. This finding is consistent with previous transition studies (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Sultana, 2014), emphasizing the significance of prior experience of learning through EMI as the significant constellation of factors affecting adjustment. The qualitative data results also revealed the benefit of English-medium education systems in improving learner self-efficacy (e.g., willingness to use English). This might reduce the experienced challenges reported on each skill discovered in the quantitative part of the study as well.

Similarly, the results are consistent with Lin and Morrison's (2010) study in that the students expressed challenges associated with insufficient vocabulary knowledge. This mirrors Evans and Morrison's (2011) investigation, which claimed that acquiring technical discipline-specific vocabulary is an academic challenge commonly reported by students regardless of second or foreign language proficiency. The result of this category might be reflected in all language skills; however, the productive skills can be more intimidating as the students have to recall the exact vocabulary to be able to use it in writing or speaking. At the same time, this issue seems to cause less challenge in receptive skills as they might be able to solve the problem with a certain amount of familiarity rather than a thorough knowledge of the term.

While in the present research, English language knowledge was connected to self-perceived language-related problems, insufficient vocabulary knowledge was revealed through this study to be an issue reported by content teachers as being related to all four aspects of academic English

skills. This result is supported by previous studies conducted by Koizumi and In'nami (2013) and Harrington and Roche (2014). However, the results do not confirm Uchihara and Harada's (2019) findings that vocabulary measures were not significantly correlated with academic outcomes. One potential explanation for their contradictory finding might be the assessment criteria, which, if it does not involve practicing productive skills, might hide certain factors or tackle the role of some extraneous factors.

Bui (2022) believed that both teachers and students were cognizant of the significance of the learning journey, related tactics and abilities, language use, and discipline. His research was more concentrated on the effective method for teaching ESP with regard to task-based strategies versus classroom practice. Basturkmen (2020) and Mostafavi, Mohseni, and Abbasian (2021) were among the other scholars who supported his attitude that lecture-based lessons cannot lead to a successful learning experience. This perception can be highly convincing, along with the results of the present study, as the sole existence of productive and receptive skills provides enough proof for this fact. Academic performance can be improved if the focus is on the learning process (Bui, 2022) rather than following a task for its own sake, regardless of the conception and comprehension of the students. As pointed out by one of the teachers, it might slow down the process of learning, which tackles the decisions that educators should make in terms of priority.

6   Conclusion

The study identified five key challenges faced by Iranian MBA students in their ESP programs, revealing that students from non-business fields, such as engineering, struggled more with business-related courses due to their lack of relevant background. The transition from Persian to English as the medium of instruction also posed difficulties, particularly for students who were fatigued or lacked engagement. Limited English proficiency in speaking and listening further hindered students' participation and clarity in class discussions. Additionally, the rapid pace of lectures made it challenging for students to take notes and fully understand the material, while deficient writing skills exacerbated their difficulties in note-taking and retaining lecture content.

To address these issues and improve students' academic performance, the study suggests interventions such as enhancing English proficiency, providing bridging courses for non-business students, and offering workshops on effective note-taking and communication skills. Tailored interventions, such as remedial courses, workshops on effective note-taking, and strategies to improve listening and speaking skills, could help mitigate these challenges and improve the overall learning experience for MBA students. By understanding and addressing these issues, educational institutions can better support their students and enhance the effectiveness of their ESP programs.

The findings of this research have several pedagogical implications for improving the ESP programs for Iranian MBA students. Addressing the identified challenges can enhance students' academic performance and engagement. Implementing bridging courses or preparatory classes can provide foundational knowledge in business concepts, particularly for students from non-business backgrounds, including basic courses in accounting, finance, and quantitative methods. Supplementary workshops throughout the MBA program can reinforce these concepts and provide continuous support. Additionally, offering intensive English courses focusing on academic and professional language skills before and during the MBA program can enhance English language proficiency. Establishing language support centers where students can receive additional help, including one-on-one tutoring and language labs, can further support this goal. Incorporating training sessions on active listening techniques and strategies, along with workshops on effective note-taking methods, can improve students' listening and note-taking skills. Adjusting the pace of lectures, promoting interactive teaching methods, and providing clear and detailed instructions for assignments can also enhance students' understanding and engagement.

The study suggests various strategies to support Iranian MBA students in their ESP programs, such as regular speaking activities, gradual bilingual transitions, and the use of educational technologies to enhance learning. Providing recorded lectures, professional development for instructors, and collaborative teaching approaches can further aid students' academic and language development. While the study offers valuable pedagogical implications, it acknowledges limitations, as the results may not represent all MBA candidates and are specific to a particular setting. The study recommends further research, including longitudinal studies, regional comparisons, and evaluations of specific interventions, like bridging courses and intensive English programs, to improve ESP programs and better support students.

7 References

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