



## Engineering Students' ESP Problems at Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province

Maryam Roodbari<sup>1</sup>, Amir Marzban<sup>2\*</sup>, Seyed Hassan Talebi<sup>3</sup>, Ahmad Mohseni<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2\*</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr Branch, Mazandaran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, University of Mazandaran, Mazandaran, Iran

<sup>4</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

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### ABSTRACT

Using observation and a semi-structured interview technique, this study aimed at finding the English learning problems of ESP students in engineering departments of Islamic Azad universities across Mazandaran province from the perspectives of 64 ESP students and 32 ESP teachers in 33 classes who were selected through convenience sampling method. The procedure used for the observation was a narrative summary which included a comprehensive view of the recorded main events in the summary. The results of the study indicated that there are different types of problems in ESP classes which are related to six main categories: *Academic setting*, *ESP teachers*, *ESP students*, *ESP materials*, *ESP teaching methods*, and *ESP testing methods*. The findings of this research are hoped to provide clear insights for ESP instructors around the problems of ESP programs and motivate material developers and Azad University educational headquarters to find a good way to eliminate these problems and improve the quality of ESP courses for engineering students.

**Keywords:** ESP classroom evaluation; ESP classroom observation; Narrative summary

### INTRODUCTION

Mazandaran is one of the provinces in Iran situated on the northern coast of the Caspian Sea, with many governmental and non-profit university centers across it. The medium of instruction in all levels of higher education is Persian in these educational centers, a point which is not restricted to Mazandaran province of course. The problem is augmented when it comes to teaching and learning English at universities where general and specialized English courses are offered to students mostly through the outdated Grammar Translation

Method (GTM) which emphasizes grammar and vocabulary. Generally, students learn English by rote learning with all its inefficiencies (Ivie, 1998) which seems to be in line with the perceptions of teachers who are not usually used to teach otherwise. As most of the ESP teachers themselves were brought up in the same outdated fashion, they follow similar strategies in their teaching (Richards, 1998). Still, to worsen the matter further, English classes at Azad universities across the province sometimes have a high student-teacher ratio which in turn makes it difficult for the ESP

\* Corresponding Author's Email:  
a.marzban@qaemiau.ac.ir



teachers to give special attention to each student in such busy and crowded classes. These and so many other problems and concerns might taint the reputation of the Azad university ESP courses, as such the system provides no scope for learning and thinking. Therefore, it sounds essential to conduct a study to analyze ESP students' and teachers' perceptions of the issues and challenges of ESP course at Azad universities across the province of Mazandaran. According to Atai and Tahririan (2004), as the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) designed ESP programs, the effectiveness of ESP courses and books was not so far seriously examined.

As engineering students' success in learning English for employment in the industry is important, it is essential that they learn those skills and sub-skills related to their disciplines in a suitable learning context. Each educational program has its own certain goals which are defined in advance. Therefore, program evaluation is a necessary step to check the extent the goals have been met, and if not, to look for the possible reasons for the betterment of the system. According to Mostafaei and Ershadi (2017), "a program without evaluation is always prone to failure" (p. 1). To this end, this study employs observation and interview techniques to collect data to evaluate such ESP programs and intends to answer the following question:

*what are the problems of teaching and learning ESP to engineering students at Mazandaran Islamic Azad universities from both students' and teachers' perspectives?*

### **ESP Teaching in Iran**

The need for communication across languages in areas such as commerce and technology motivated ESP teaching (Starfield, 2012). ESP is offered as a compulsory course at the universities. According to Eslami (2010), the history of ESAP instruction in Iran can be studied in three distinct generations of ESAP programs as follows:

1. In 1974 a pioneering ESAP curriculum was implemented as a joint venture by Tehran University and the University of Illinois. In 1975, another program was conducted by

Tabriz University with the collaboration of the British Council (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

2- 1978 witnessed the second generation. In this era "the government tried to plan and implement EAP instruction consistently at all Iranian Universities" (Ataei, 2002, p. 23). This movement led to compiling several ESP textbooks for the students of some academic fields such as medicine and social sciences. The focus of the textbooks was mainly on developing reading skills. However, based on Farhady and Hedayati, (2009), because these courses were not designed based on any systematic needs analysis, the program designer's goals fell short of the requirement.

3- The third generation was concerned with greater specificity of content with respect to academic discipline and text authenticity. In this generation, for the production of materials, content instructors and ELT practitioners collaborated. The materials for these courses were mostly compiled by the Iranian Center for Studying and Compiling University Books in Humanities (SAMT).

### **ESP Challenges in Iran**

There are different challenges that Iranian ESP teachers and students encounter in ESP classes. Eslami (2010) asserted that in Iran, Needs Analysis was the missing link in most of the ESP courses. Davoudi-Mobarakeh, Eslami-Rasekh, and Barati (2014) mentioned that through the past twenty-five years, the methodologies for ESP teaching are victims of fashion and a range of approaches have proceeded through classrooms without being checked for their efficacy and positive impact. Nafissi, Rezaeipanah, and Monsefi (2017) tried to design an ESP course for undergraduate Statistics students at AL Zahra and Shahid Beheshti Universities. One of the main purposes of their study was to prepare the students for the English language section of the entrance examination for MSc degree in Statistics. Different instruments for needs analysis like a questionnaire, structured and semi-structured interviews, and texts analysis were used. The findings showed that most participants wanted to have more ESP courses

at universities, indicating insufficiency of the existing program.

One of the common features of most of the ESP textbooks is the high uniformity in their structure, organization, and subsections with reading skill ruling the roost. Each unit in all ESP textbooks usually includes a list of technical or semi-technical words followed by a reading passage related to the students' academic fields. This is followed by some exercises related to reading comprehension and vocabulary. Finally, there is a short text for translation. Although there is uniformity in teaching ESP materials, most ESP practices and tasks are not planned; it lacks course design, systematic needs analysis and teacher training courses. Therefore, a need for accurate textbooks evaluation and systematic research on the effectiveness of these programs sound inevitable (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009).

Ghaemi and Sarlak (2015) argued that unfortunately strategic teaching and the use of reading strategies has no place in Iranian ESP classes. Analyzing ESP teaching in higher education, Andriani (2014) found that there are five main problems in ESP: teaching pedagogy, the teachers, the course design, the ability of students, and finally the needs of students. Rajabi, Kiany and Maftoon (2012) investigated the major effects of an ESP in-service teacher training programs on Iranian ESP teachers' beliefs and ESP students' achievements. They concluded that the ESP teaching methodology in Iran "suffers from unprincipled diversity and there is hardly any published document on the patterns of methodological adaptations and preferences among the Iranian ESP practitioners" (p.281). As Massum (2011, p. 424) stated, "the system of Iranian universities lacks a disciplined basis upon which a comprehensive program for syllabus design and evaluation may be needed. ESP texts which are taught are nothing but a (random) selection of some technical texts related to the field plus a series of comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises."

However, despite the studies mentioned above, there has been no study conducted at Azad universities in Iran regarding the students' and instructors' perspectives and attitudes to

problems existing in ESP courses among Azad university students in engineering faculties, a gap the current study aims to fill.

## METHOD

### Participants

Sixty-four ESP students (both male and female) were selected from different engineering fields (namely architecture, surveying, mechanic, facilities, electrical, computer, and civil engineering) from 12 university branches in Mazandaran province (Amol, Babol, Behshahr, Chaloos, Mahmoud Abad, Neka, Noor, Noshahr, Qaemshahr, Ramsar, Sari, and Tonekabon). The participants were selected through convenience sampling from among all those students who were attending ESP courses in spring semester of the year 2018. In addition, 32 ESP teachers from the above-mentioned fields and universities, who had experience in ESP teaching from five to more than 20 years at Islamic Azad universities were selected based on convenience sampling. All the teachers had PhD degree or were PhD candidates in their respective fields.

### Materials and Instruments

To have an in-depth understanding of the problems associated with ESP classes, the following materials were used in the present study. This study required qualitative instruments which could deeply explore the teaching and learning problems of ESP classes from the perspective of students and teachers.

**Observation.** To identify what problems engineering students, have in the ESP classes at Mazandaran Islamic Azad Universities, observations were made on the manners of holding some ESP classes in the spring semester of the year 2019. The main goal of the current study was to observe exactly what happens in ESP classes and hopefully to identify the potential problems or shortcomings these ESP classes might face in the sufficient and optimal implementation of ESP principles.

**Interview.** After each class observation, the researchers interviewed the teacher and some students in the class observed. A semi-structured face to face interview was used. The

questions for the interview were taken from the Alsamadani (2017), (see appendix).

### Procedure

The observation procedure used in this study was a *narrative summary*. According to Richards and Farrell (2011), "a narrative summary is a written summary of the lesson that tries to capture the main things that happened during the course of it, such as how the lesson opened, the sequence of activities that occurred, how the teacher introduced each activity, and so on" (p. 95). It was a narrative observation because the researchers directly observed 33 ESP classes and recorded everything that happened in those classes. It was a summary because it focused on retelling the main events of the *observation* in researchers' own words.

The interviews were also conducted after the class observation. To avoid any misunderstandings, all interviews were conducted in Persian. All the interviews were transcribed for analyses. The researchers read the transcripts again and again. The problems observed by them and those stated by the ESP students and teachers were categorized thematically (grouped by codes).

## RESULTS

### Report

The following report is the result of observing the ESP classes.

In Iranian educational system, non-English major students must pass a two-credit pre-requisite English course followed by a three-credit General English (GE) course. Next, based on their major, they have to pass a two-credit (or more) ESP courses. However, many limitations and problems reduce the quality of these courses dramatically. To explain the point, a brief description of the ways these classes are conducted in engineering departments of Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran province is presented here. It should be mentioned that the researchers observed 33 ESP classes at different branches of Islamic Azad University in Mazandaran province, because of the similarity among the classes, two of them are mentioned here. A

table is also prepared in order to show those features which were common among all or most of the observed classes.

**The first ESP class.** This architectural engineering class was mainly a teacher-centered one. The most distinctive thing in this class was the book which was written by the teacher teaching in the class and her colleague. At first, the teacher who was a content teacher herself read the text slowly to enunciate the correct pronunciation of the words. Some students wrote the pronunciation of new words above or below them in Persian because students were unfamiliar with the standard pronunciation symbols. Next, the text was re-read by some of the students line by line while they tried to offer their own translations mainly in word by word fashion which were corrected by the teacher.

After the whole text was read and translated by the students, the teacher herself translated the whole text. She asked the students to write down her translation. The students were really busy writing down their teacher's translation in the form of a dictation activity! Most of the class time was spent on reading the text and translating, a perfect example of Grammar Translation Method. After translating, the teacher asked them to answer the comprehension questions at home. At the end of the class, the teacher asked them to talk about the topic of unit two (Beaux-Arts Architecture). Some students discussed the topic in their own mother tongue Persian rather than English.

**The second ESP class.** The majority of participants in this class were both solid and fluid mechanic engineering sophomores. It was a crowded class. The teacher who was a content teacher chose SAMT book as the ESP material. The researchers observed the last session of that class. Only nine units were covered during the term.

Each session, students were asked to translate two reading passages from the book. It should be noted that each unit had three reading passages. The teacher asked the students one by one to translate each paragraph. In case of wrong translation, he used peer-feedback by asking other students to correct the translation errors. The Persian equivalents of the new

words were not told by the teacher because they had been assigned as the homework to be prepared prior to class. The teacher only read the new words and all students said the Persian equivalents aloud. The comprehension questions were assigned as homework. No time was devoted to this part in the class. But if students had problems in this part, they individually asked the teacher when the class was finished, not during the class time. In sum, the following features were common among the observed classes:

- Persian was the dominate medium of instruction in classed observed
- Because of time limitation, the material was not covered
- Teacher-centered classes were the norm
- The old version book published by of SAMT or old pamphlets were used as the coursebooks
- Reading skill was the main skill practiced in the classes
- Texts read aloud by teachers
- Memorizing a long list of technical words was emphasized
- Translation was regarded as the most important goal of ESP courses

- Translation was done by students and teachers
- No translation strategies were taught
- Persian equivalents of the new words were offered by teacher
- Teacher-correction was the main source of feedback for error correction procedure
- Little attention was paid to pronunciation
- Assignment of homework was part of the course
- Comprehension questions was a common pedagogical activity
- Assessment was done only by teacher
- Assessment mostly was limited to translation and writing equivalents of technical words
- Teacher rarely used the board

### Interview

The students' and teachers' responses were meticulously transcribed in order to be analyzed later. The following extracts are some of the students' and teachers' responses to the questions in the interviews. (See Table 1)

**Table 1**

*Excerpt of the Students' and Teachers' Responses to the Questions on ESP*

Question	Examples of answers
Is there anything wrong with the process of ESP learning / teaching?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One English teacher said: "ESP teaching should be in such a way to help the students improve their reading skills but unfortunately they are repeatedly asked to translate some texts.</li> <li>• An ESP teacher in computer engineering argued that "lack of attention to writing in ESP course for computer engineering students is the big sin that cannot be forgiven".</li> <li>• An ESP student in civil engineering stated: "ESP course sometimes is offered in the third semester. It is of course a big mistake because we do not become familiar with most of the technical terms in Persian, so how is it possible to learn it in English? I mean we do not learn these terms and their uses until the fifth or sixth semester".</li> </ul>

Do you think that engineering students should be taught all language skills besides vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?

- One English teacher with a long experience in ESP teaching argued that "not all language skills, they only need to learn reading strategies besides grammar and vocabulary".
- An ESP teacher whose field was electric engineering argued that "the biggest mistake is teaching grammar in ESP courses! Speaking and listening skills are not needed for electronic students. Of course the most important aim of ESP courses is to understand the specialized texts. The second most needed skill is writing (of course it should be mentioned that it is not as important as reading skill).
- One student stated that "in our major, computer engineering, reading skill is as important as writing skill. Reading for learning knowledge of the day; and writing for sharing experience and expressing questions".
- A surveying engineering student said: "the aim of ESP is to comprehend specialized texts. Sometimes speaking skill is needed too (oral presentation in classroom). The other skills are not important.

What can you suggest to improve the quality of ESP teaching/learning?

- An English teacher stated that "in my opinion task-based teaching can be an alternative to this traditional method of teaching. Students can do projects in English according to their majors".
- Another English teacher stated that "I suggest spending more time on students' general English, vocabulary, and grammar (teaching them how to understand a text without translating) before they take ESP course, then based on the reading strategies they need to push the students to get the gist of the text.
- An ESP student in civil engineering argued that "By using the most recent specialized texts such as articles, catalogs, and technical description of maintaining a tool, they can learn the required information".
- An architecture engineering student stated: "to improve the quality of ESP teaching the best way is that the big part of teaching be devoted to teaching diagrams and figures as they convey more information, for example about the styles of architecture, than texts".

Generally, the problems which were observed and expressed by the ESP teachers and students are listed below.

### **Problems related to the Academic setting Heterogeneous class.**

Generally, ESP classes at Islamic Azad universities are heterogeneous both in age and language proficiency levels. The reason might be low entrance requirement because of pressing economic factors. Students at different ages have different language learning needs which seem to be ignored in such heterogeneous classes. For example the need of a middle-aged employee of a small company who wants to get an associate or a bachelor degree only for salary increase prospect is different from the need of a young student whose ambition is to continue his/her studies abroad.

**Time limitation.** Because ESP is a two-credit course, and it is held once a week in Fall and Spring semesters; and twice or three times a week in the Summer semester, teachers usually do not have enough time to cover the syllabus and the students also do not have enough time to acquire the required knowledge from this course.

### **Problems related to ESP instructors**

#### **Teacher-centered class.**

Most of the ESP classes were teacher-centered. No attempt was made on the part of the teachers to lead learners to autonomy; for example, teachers did not teach learning strategies to the students to enable them to tackle learning problems by themselves. Consequently, teachers usually kept their status as the main source of knowledge with students relying on them and hardly ever trying to gain autonomy.

#### **Content teachers usually did not know how to teach English well.**

Although content teachers were experts in their own fields, they usually did not know how to teach English. In all the classes observed, the content teachers just asked students to read the texts and translate them. It can be assumed that it was mainly because they were not even familiar with different types of reading or

reading strategies. They just knew the subject matter but nothing about teaching English methods.

### **English teachers usually are unfamiliar with genre of engineering subjects.**

This is related to the problem mentioned in the previous section. Some English teachers who taught ESP were not familiar with technical terms and expressions or engineering genre. According to Nezakatgoo and Behzadpoor (2017, p. 73) "they translate the terms literally which do not make sense at all". An example was in one of the classes observed where a computer engineering student asked his teacher about the meaning of "desktop publishing program", for which the teacher came up with a word-for-word translation of *برنامه ی نشر رومیزی* the student's second attempt to extract some clarification from the teacher was an aborted attempt, as the teacher simply lacked the required information.

### **Problems related to ESP students**

#### **Low proficiency level.**

An important problem in most of the ESP classes observed was students' inefficient knowledge about English grammatical structures which caused problem in reading comprehension of the texts. Examples in this case were problems related to tense system because of lack of one-to one correspondence in tense system between English and their mother tongue. Their low proficiency level made their dictionary use quire cumbersome and daunting too, with the consequence that they had to rely on their teachers as the sole source of information.

The negative effect of low proficiency level is stressed by Ghaemi and Sarlak (2015), stating that 'an important problem that non-English major students face while reading ESP courses is "their poor language proficiency they carry with themselves to the university which is not compatible with the goals of ESP' (p.273). For attending ESP classes, students are supposed to know basic language sentence structures, and have enough vocabulary knowledge but these students seem to lack this required knowledge. According to Dudley Evans and St. John (1998)

"ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system. Most of the students in these observed classes were beginners. Therefore, one can expect to see a discrepancy between the required level of language proficiency on the part of the students and their low proficiency.

#### **Students' lack of interest in ESP courses.**

A sad and to some extent eye opening point in most of the ESP classes observed was sheer lack of interest on the part of the students to learn ESP course in particular and English language in general. This lack of interest showed itself in the kind of concern students exhibited in the class. Some of the disheartening objections raised repeatedly by the students were: "what is the benefit of this course? We are not English students. Why should we pass ESP? I hate English." "We are not going to learn English; we just have to pass this course. So be kind in scoring our final paper!" a point that is easily attested by any teacher of English due to the high frequency of such comments.

#### **Problems related to ESP materials**

##### **Not authentic materials.**

Most of the materials used in the observed ESP classes were prepared only for teaching English to engineering students not teaching the subject matters. This concern was voiced by Moattarian and Tahririan (2014) that unlike the original books whose purpose is to teach subject matters, it is the teaching of English that is the main concern in ESP courses. So as far as their goal is concerned, authentic textbooks and ESP coursebooks are different from one another. The effect of inauthenticity of ESP material might be seen in the lack of motivation or interest on the part of the students, discussed above.

##### **Simplified Reading Texts.**

Quite related to inauthenticity issue, is the point that because the aim of ESP teaching in Iran is not teaching the subject matters and also because most of the students' proficiency level is low, the authors of ESP books prefer or resort

to simplifying English in order to make it more manageable and comprehensible for ESP students. This seems to be a two-edge sword; on the one hand, simplified reading texts are easier to be read and understood hence boosting students' morals; on the other hand, because of their very simplified nature, they are unlikely to prepare students to deal with the authentic texts, a point that should be the final goal of ESP materials.

##### **Not developing students' knowledge in their own major.**

One of the inevitable consequences of opting for inauthentic or simplified texts is that students' knowledge in their own major does not develop enough in ESP classes. The students seem to be suffering the double burden of not learning English in ESP classes, because of the plethora of reasons mentioned in previous sections, and not improving their information regarding their major either. According to one students' suggestion, if new advances related to technology in each major were incorporated in the ESP books, it could be fairly postulated that students would become more willing to invest some effort or energy in familiarizing themselves with these points.

##### **Unfamiliar content vs. students' lack of schema.**

ESP course is usually offered at the fourth semester. So, it is natural that students do not know all the issues in their major because some of them would be taught in the next semesters. One of the most difficulties of ESP classes observed was that the content of some of the reading passages was too difficult, so students did not have appropriate background knowledge or schema about them. The problem went from bad to worse when due to time limitation, the teachers had no extra time to discuss them and it got even a lot worse, when the language teachers rather than content teachers were in charge of teaching ESP since they were at a loss just to figure out the problem itself. Based on the feedback from the observed students, it must be acknowledged that while aiming for fine-tuned content seems highly unrealistic, the content must be to some extent



in line with students' expected schema in certain fields. The logic behind this is that since English itself is considered daunting for most if not all ESP students, part of the difficulty can be obviated if the content of the units is congruent with students' background information.

### **Problems related to ESP teaching methods**

#### **Old teaching method.**

It seems that most of the ESP classes in Mazandaran Islamic Azad Universities are conducted based on Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The main objective of these classes is that students gain the ability to translate academic texts from English to their mother tongue Persian. Of course following GTM does not mean that all its main principles are adhered to by the teachers or students, rather in the classes observed, teachers seemed to use GTM eclectically. For example, one of the objectives of GTM is to develop writing skill, but in all ESP classes observed, writing was treated as a Cinderella skill, brushed under the pedagogic carpet under the pretext of lack of time.

Many students expressed their dissatisfaction with translation task as the main activity in the ESP classes. They believed that they were not translation students. So they did not have the ability to translate because they were not supposed to.

#### **Memorization of a long list of isolated words.**

Another counterproductive technique observed which was frequently used by the teachers was memorization of a list of isolated words. Students had to memorize a long list of technical words related to their majors. They expressed their dissatisfaction and considered it difficult, frustrating, time-consuming, and even meaningless waste of time. Because of these points it is safe to postulate that rote memorization of a list of unrelated words could not be conducive to improving students' proficiency level in English.

The inefficiency of rote memorization was emphasized by one teacher saying that although his students had to memorize over 300 technical terms during the semester, they were unable to

make novel English sentence. The same concern was expressed by the students themselves, saying that 'what is the benefit of memorizing long lists of technical terms. We will forget them after the exam'

#### **Monopoly of reading skill at the cost of other skills.**

In all ESP classes observed, reading skill was the sole dominant skill. No attention was paid to writing, listening, or speaking. How students could learn writing, listening, and speaking skills where all ESP classes are devoted to reading skill remained to be an open question. Now that reading was the sole skill, one might expect that it is taught and learned well. However, based on the observation, it can be said that even that one skill was not taught completely and thoroughly. No reading strategy was introduced to or practiced with students; nor were students exposed to different types of reading. Very crudely, teachers opted for the most straightforward method of teaching: just giving students reading passages and asking them to read; that is all.

#### **Dominance of Persian as the medium of instruction.**

In all the observed classes, students were allowed to speak in their mother tongue, Persian. Most of the time, the teachers also spoke in Persian. The main reason for opting for Persian as the medium of instruction was explained by one of the teachers who believed that 'if we speak in English, students will not probably be able to understand the lesson and we will fall behind the schedule'. In the same vein, the meanings of new vocabulary were explained in Persian. The reading passages were only read in English once and then followed by translation into Persian. Whenever a teacher asked a question in English, the students was free to answer either in English or in Persian which as it goes without saying, in nearly all occasions, they opted for Persian.

#### **Problems related to ESP testing methods** **Summative testing.**

Because ESP learners were only being assessed by their teachers, so critical

assessment of oneself (self-assessment) and their classmates (peers-assessment) were never taking place. Self-assessment helps learners identify their learning difficulties and try to correct them. By self-assessment, students understand how they can learn better and identify those learning strategies which help them to be successful in the area of English Learning. Students also recognize learning strategies that assist them learn the vocabulary and structures better. In peer-assessing, learners not only try to identify their classmates' error but also try to correct them. These kinds of assessments may have a positive effect on learners' motivation.

Summative assessments do nothing to detect and remedy instructional difficulties before they become serious. Using only a written formal summative assessment does not provide an overall picture of student achievement. Having one big test, undoubtedly, makes all learners anxious. (Bachman, 1990).

#### **Translation and Persian equivalence as the main criteria for assessment.**

Although there is a variety of assessing methods such as *essay, direct observation of students performing a technical skill in a real setting, short answer, multiple choice, true-false, etc.*, (Bachman, 1990), the main part of ESP assessment is limited to translation and writing Persian equivalent of technical words because most of the class time is devoted to them. It should be mentioned that the final assessment is largely a copy of the book or pamphlet! It means that the sentences which are used in the final test are the exact sentences which the students had translated in the class during the term. This can be expected to encourage rote learning and memorization at the cost of deeper level of processing ( Craik & Lockhart, 1972) which is prone to oblivion ones the students at the test.

#### **DISCUSSION**

Based on the shortcomings observed in the ESP classes observed, it can be emphasized that most, if not all, ESP course need drastic modification to be optimized. This assertion is in line with Davoudi-Mobarakeh, Eslami-

Rasekh, and Barati's ( 2014) findings that ESP course administration should overcome major limitations in order to be effective. Eslami (2005) suggested some solutions such as the development of cross-discipline departments, cooperation in syllabus design, and cooperation in course planning. This is much needed because according to Mostafaei Alaei and Ershadi (2017), around 63% of the available in-house developed ESP textbooks in Iran have been authored by a group of TEFL teachers. It is believed that a logical cooperation of both English language instructors' expertise and content experts' experience must be conducive to a more success in this field because textbooks produced by such a compound group can enjoy maximum authenticity and accountability.

Based on the data gathered from the observations and interviews, it was revealed that the engineering ESP students had many English learning problems in their ESP classes. Most of the problems observed in different classes were similar. For example, the process of English teaching was based on translation of some passages in their fields. It seemed that reading skill was the only need of ESP students. These findings are consistent with the investigations of some researchers like Shahini & Riazi (2001), Atai (2002), and Eslami (2005) who stated that "reading comprehension" was commonly emphasized as the most important skill for ESP students at university level. The emphasis on reading seems to be in line with Reading Method in ELT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and the fact that after revolution it was adopted by the ministry of higher education as a viable method for teaching English as a foreign language in Iran (Borjian, 2013).

An important point that must be taken into account by ESP teachers is that as Mohammad ( 2014) rightly mentioned ESP is not a matter of teaching' specialized varieties' of English. The fact that language is used for a specific purpose does not imply that it is a special form of the language, different in kind from other forms. Certainly, there are some features which can be identified as 'typical' of a particular context of use and which, therefore, the learner is more likely to meet in the target situation. But these differences should not be allowed to

obscure the far larger area of common ground that underlies all English use, and indeed, all language use. The corollary one can draw from this is that most of the pedagogic issues that must be met in other mainstream language classes must also be considered in ESP classes too, issues like creativity, motivation, and investment on the part of both teachers and students to invest time and effort to learn (Peirce, 1995).

The fact that so many of ESP learners' needs such as their needs to gain ability to use dictionary, to be familiar with certain text type, to comprehend rather than just translate, to use authentic text rather than simplified ones are all indicative that the learner-centeredness as one of the *cine quo non* of ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) is ignored by both material developers and teachers alike, a point that is emphasized by Mohammad (2014) too.

The findings of the present study on the teachers teaching ESP courses also support the results of Hayati (2008) who considers teacher, time schedule, and textbook as the three important troubling factors of ESP in Iran. Hayati believes that even knowledgeable ESP teachers should pass teacher training classes (about 100 hours) in order to learn more English. On the other hand, he stresses that Iranian ESP teachers' problems are mostly related to their knowledge of the subject, emphasizing the combination of English and subject matter on the part of teachers.

The amalgam of problems found in the current study was also reported to be troubling in Saliu's (2013) study too. The challenges were as follows: teachers were not specialists in students' professional fields; there were wrong selection and adaptation of texts by teachers; there was no close cooperation and coordination between content teachers and designers of the study program; students had low general English knowledge; ESP courses did not meet students' learning needs; and students were of mixed ability groups, all observed in the current study too, indicating the ever-present nature of these problems in different contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The idea behind ESP course is to better the quality of learning English by students who major in other fields. To implement this successfully needs analysis is the quintessential component in any ESP course design or material development, without which one can be certain that ESP course is doomed to failure which means loss in budget, time, and investment, not to mention affective loss such as disillusionment on the part of students and teachers. The result of hundreds of hours of observation and interviews with both students and teachers as the main parties and stakeholders involved showed clearly that there is a sheer discrepancy between the expectations or goals of the ESP course and the harsh reality one can find in ESP classes. The efficiency of ESP classes is riddled by many factors mentioned in detail in the finding section of the current study. Considering the large number of students, teachers, time and resources involved in running ESP course, it is highly suggested that as long as these gaps are not filled, the only outcome one can expect is far less than ideals. It is highly recommended that instead of top-down excretion of educational dictum, the high-ranking policy makers pay attention to the solid results and findings of research like the current study and take the necessary measure to solve the problems associated with ESP course.

The current research was limited to studying the problems of ESP courses from the perspectives of both students and teachers in engineering fields. To have a comprehensive view on the related problems and to ensure the generalizability, other studies can be conducted in other fields such as humanities, arts or medicine to verify or modify the results presented in the current study.

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### Biodata

**Maryam Roodbari** is an instructor at Islamic Azad University, Neka branch, Māzandarān, Iran. She has taught English courses at BA, BS, and MA levels. She is the author of 5 books, conducting research and supervising MA theses in ELT, and TEFL.

Email: [m.roodbari@iauneka.ac.ir](mailto:m.roodbari@iauneka.ac.ir)

**Amir Marzban** is an Associate Professor of TEFL, at Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr Branch. His research interests include Conversation Analysis, L2 Reading & Writing,

and CALL. He has published in both Iranian, and international journals and has also presented at many international conferences.

Email: [a.marzban@qaemiau.ac.ir](mailto:a.marzban@qaemiau.ac.ir)

**Seyed Hassan Talebi** holds a Ph.D. in TEFL from Mysore University in India and is an Assistant Professor, currently teaching and researching at the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Mazandaran, Iran. His main research interests include multilingualism, cross-linguistic influence, second language learning, learning styles and strategies, study skills, and issues in reading in EGP and ESP.

Email: [hstalebi@umz.ac.ir](mailto:hstalebi@umz.ac.ir)

**Ahmad Mohseni** is associate professor of Applied Linguistics at Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch. He has been teaching TEFL/TESL courses for 35 years at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He has carried out a number of research projects, and he is the author of 10 books and published numerous scholarly essays in national and international academic journals. Dr. Mohseni has also been an invited professor at American Global University, College of Education in Wyoming, USA.

Email: [amohseny1328@gmail.com](mailto:amohseny1328@gmail.com)

### Appendix

- Is anything wrong in the process of ESP learning/teaching?
- Do you think that engineering students should be taught all language skills besides vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?
- What can you suggest to improve the quality of ESP teaching/learning?