From an Appraisal of Iranian ESP Courses to Curriculum Development

Ali Khodi

PhD Candidate, Kish International Campus, University of Tehran

Alikhodi92@gmail.com

Abstract

The applicability of second language instruction to various situations including academic settings provides great opportunities for students and researchers to access fresh sources of knowledge. This is extended to the majority of Iranian students receiving courses such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) who may not find instruction compatible with their needs and aspirations. The present study intends to provide an insight into the status of ESP and EAP courses within the Iranian context. To this end, 120 male and female university postgraduate students majoring in various non-English fields were selected and given a survey questionnaire to report on their needs and on the quality of the language courses presented to them. The results of the statistical analysis showed that 44.2% of students believed that listening comprehension was the most required skill, followed by reading, speaking, and writing skills by41.7%, 39.2%, and 17%, respectively. Meanwhile, the most satisfying ESP and EAP skills currently presented at universities were found to be listening, speaking, and reading, in order of preference. In fact, it seems that the current instructional trend ought to be discontinued or modified in various ways. Finally, a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the needs and components of each skill has been provided, discussing the potential of the current research for improving ESP and EAP instruction inside Iran.
Keywords: **Needs Analysis, ESP Courses, Academic Settings, Language Skills**

Introduction

The prominent role of English in academic settings is clear, and English for specific purposes (ESP), a developing offshoot of English as a foreign language instruction, has been considered as a pivotal component of education in non-English fields. The main aim of ESP courses may be to bring about vast improvement in learners' capabilities in terms of their language skills within a short time span. Iranian universities like their counterparts elsewhere present ESP courses for students aimed to help them tackle communicative problems in their respective disciplines. Regardless of the quality of the courses, the sense of dissatisfaction among students is annoyingly noticeable. By examining the current status of the ESP courses in Iran, the present study seeks to provide insights into the real and essential needs of ESP learners.

Literature Review

Ideally, teaching English or any other language ought to be accompanied by specific purposes. Otherwise, it would seem pointless for learners. The importance of the matter has been suggested by Long (2005):

"General (language for no purpose) courses at any proficiency level almost always teach too much, e.g., vocabulary, skills, registers or styles some learners do not need, and too little, e.g., omitting lexis and genres that they do. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, it is more defensible to view every course as involving specific purposes." (p. 19).

Recent developments of ESP courses leads to using English in academic gatherings and professional conferences as a lingua franca and practitioners are becoming more interested in ESP (Rajabi, Kiany & Maftoon, 2012). In fact, it is said that ESP refers to teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language by the aim of recognizing and covering the needs of learners in a particular domain (Khoshsima, Saed, & Ghasemi, 2014). To this end, different methodologies have been utilized and numerous syllabuses have been suggested. The growth of ESP dates back to 1960s, but until 1997 there was no comprehensive definition of the term; Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) presented absolute characteristics of it including meeting specific needs, and using the underlying methodology and activities. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) asserted that it is better for ESP courses to be based on learners needs in their respective specialized fields.

There are a number of good models of needs analysis in ESP literature (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 2001).Applying and evaluating ESP courses in Iran has always been a matter of controversy and plenty of studies have been done in this regard (Aliakbari & Boghayeri, 2014; Fadavi & Ershadi, 2014; Khoshsima et. al, 2014; Moslemi, Moinzadeh, & Dabaghi, 2011).

Generally, ESP studies in Iran have two major goals: first course design and then finding the proper instructors. Majority of instructors believe that size of the class and unmotivated students and low level of proficiency are the main problems in ESP

classes, which impede learners' progress tremendously (Boniadi, Ghojazadeh, Rahmatvand, 2013). On the other hand, in spite of the problems already mentioned the authenticity of materials in ESP courses could accentuate the issue (Zohoorian, Baghban, & Pandian, 2011). Additionally, Khoshsima, et al., (2014) stated that the ESP course does not motivate students enough and they are not complied in accordance with their need.

The common ground between studies on ESP needs analysis in Iran is that participants of these classes are not satisfied with the program and they claim that it does not meet their needs (Akbari, 2014; Aliakbari & Baghayeri, 2014; Khoshsima et al, 2014; Moslemi et al., 2011; Rajabi et al., 2011). Therefore, many research studies that examined needs of pupils suggest that the reading comprehension skill is the most required.

In a needs analysis which was done by Aliakbari and Baghayeri (2014), the need for reading, followed by writing, speaking, and listening was stated by students and the main sources of dissatisfaction were textbooks, pertinent topics, and lengths of courses. Along with the growth of communicative approaches, a new trend has been shaped stating that not only in daily communication but also in ESP courses the focus should be on the act of communication which leads to the importance of speaking and also listening rather than reading and writing. As it was stated by Boroujeni and Moradian Fard (2013), most students claim for speaking, listening, reading and writing respectively while the current ESP courses provide them with reading and writing more than the other two skills. Actually, the main goal of the participants in these courses center on their higher education and their success in future jobs which are social activities asking for communicative competence. Hosseinpour & Koosha (2015) stated that there is a noticeable gap between current EAP courses and both the present and target

situation needs of learners which is partly due to the low general English proficiency (GEP) of the students" (p. 5). Since different pinions have been suggested in this regard, the best approach to finding out a solution is to probe the present ESP courses and perhaps another needs analysis could pave the way and make the ground for a comprehensive syllabus in this regard.

Statement of the Problem

One of the basic assumptions of any curriculum development is the analysis of learners' needs (Richards, 2001). In the realm of language instruction, the importance of this issue has been accentuated specially for ESP learners–those who want to implement their capabilities not only in social dimensions of their fields but also in their specialist fields.

A curriculum in fact is the nexus of educational decisions and should take in to account the purposes of the course. To this End, it has been suggested by many scholars including Richards (2001) that needs analysis prior to curriculum development could make ground for the appropriate syllabi design. Since majority of presented ESP courses in Iranian universities were followed by students' dissatisfaction, in the present study we firstly tried to investigate the major needs of the ESP learners in using English for their non-language purposes and secondly, we examined the quality of the present status of ESP in Iran. What seems to have been overlooked here is what purpose the ESP courses should serve, and this question has been answered here.

Research Questions

1) What are the needs of Iranian ESP learners? How they should be prioritized in syllabus?
2) Dose the current ESP courses meet the academic needs of Iranian ESP learners?

Methodology
Participants

The sample of this study were selected from graduate students of Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan, majoring in non- English fields including accounting, management, chemistry, physics, engineering etc. The total number of participants was 120 consisting of both male and female learners who had already passed the ESP courses in their academic education.

Instrumentation

The only instrumentation for this study was a modified needs analysis questionnaire for non-English-background students which was developed by Gravatt, Richards, and Lewis (1997), examining the ESP learners needs in their academic experiences. Additionally, a new part was added to the questionnaire surveying participants' opinions about the quality of the presented courses.

Procedure

In order to achieve the goals of the study, after fifteen sessions of ESP instruction for graduate students and providing them with presumed materials in the syllabus, the needs analysis questionnaire was distributed among the participants in the last session of the course. Participants were required to answer the questions based on their needs in a scientific manner and report whether the presented course was effective or not. The total time of answering the survey was 20 minutes. Finally, the result of the survey was analyzed via SPSS 21 software.

Results

The data obtained from the questionnaire of this research were analyzed via SPSS21 reporting descriptive statistics of the selected choices. As the Table 1 shows, the most required skill which was suggested by students was listening followed by reading comprehension, speaking, and writing. In fact, 44.2% of students suggested listening as the primary goal of language learning. The participants claimed that after listening comprehension, the most required language skill was reading comprehension. Table 1 shows that both receptive skills (i.e. reading and listening) are more required in

this context rather than those productive skills. For writing ability, only 17.5% of students suggested a very high importance and the majority agreed that it comes after other skill in academic settings.

After conducting needs analysis which was reported in Table 1, we surveyed to what extent the presented ESP courses met the students' needs and it became clear that (Table 2) the least satisfying part of ESP courses was writing ability; only 2.5% of total students believed that it was highly effective for them and the majority of the respondents believed it was rarely effective and useful. Although reading comprehension was one of the priorities for learners based on the present syllabi, just 5 % of students were highly satisfied with their achievements in this regard. It is necessary to say that in listening comprehension part, 31.7 of students believed that participating in such courses rarely improved their listening comprehension and by considering this issue, listening comprehension was the most dissatisfactory part of the current syllabi.

Table 1. *Overall Needs of ESP Learners*

Skill	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Reading	41.7	47.5	10.8	-	-
Listening	44.2	23.3	25	7.5	-
Writing	17.5	41.7	23.3	13.3	4.2
Speaking	39.2	28.3	23.3	4.2	5

Table 2. *The Extent to Which the Course Meets the Learners Needs*

Skill	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Reading	5	32.5	23.3	20.8	18.3
Listening	9.2	16.7	25.8	31.7	16.7
Writing	2.5	21.7	33	20	22.5
Speaking	7.5	14.2	41.7	23.3	13.3

* Reported in percentage

After overall assessment of the quality and needs, we analytically discuss different components of each skill in the ESP curriculum. Firstly, for speaking ability (Table3), the most probable problem for learners is stress and being worried to speak (28.7%), followed by difficulty in oral presentations. It is safe to say that finding proper words for speaking with 7.3% was the least trouble-making component of the speaking skill.

The same pattern for speaking skill does not hold here for listening comprehension (see Table 4) and the major source of difficulty for learners, as 39.3% of students reported, was grasping the subject of talks and conversations. In addition, note taking by 18.8 % could be a major source of difficulty here.

Table 3. *Speaking*

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Difficulty in giving oral presentation	21.1	35.3	26	12.2	4.9
Difficulty in finding suitable words	7.3	35	42.7	7.4	4.8
Being Worry about making mistake	28.5	21.9	35.9	9.8	4.5
Not know how to say in English	26	33.2	18.7	9.8	4.9
Difficulty In pronunciation	21.1	30.9	35.8	9.8	2.4
Find it difficult to enter discussion	26	37	19.5	14.6	2.4

* Reported in percentage

Table 4. *Listening*

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Have trouble in understanding lectures	17.4	46.4	29	79	-
Have trouble in note taking	18.8	27.1	27.6	12.3	4
Have trouble in understanding lengthy oral text	8.9	22	51.5	7.4	8.9
Have trouble understanding Subject of talk	39.3	10.2	29.2	11.1	1.9

* Reported in percentage

Table 5. *Writing*

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Difficulty in using correct punctuation and spelling	10	55	12	7	-
Difficulty in using appropriate vocabulary	17.7	44.4	18.8	-	-
Organizing Paragraphs	5.6	56.2	26.3	3.7	
Expressing what you want to say	9.3	47.7	18.3	7.4	
Adopting appropriate tone and style	8.5	54.3	22.1	4	1.9

Writing ability was reported as the least required component of language use (Table1), but in detailed analyses of this ability (Table5), it is suggested that the majority of learners have difficulty in this area; vocabulary by 17.7% was the pioneer in making problems for students. Statistically speaking, more than half of the participants asserted that often they find themselves in competentin writing text in English from different aspects including punctuation.

Considering the importance of the reading comprehension for language learners, we could say that this has been the present component in educational settings. Although 9.3% of the participants repeatedly faced difficulty in scanning the texts, we could see in Table 6 that the major difficulty in reading comprehension stemmed from disability to understand the main points and to underst and the details of the content. Only 5.6% reported getting the gist of the text difficult and it shows that they had anover all competence in reading comprehension.

Table 6. *Reading*

	Very Often	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
Difficulty in understanding main points of text	7.4	48.4	8.8	2	-
Difficulty in reading quickly in order to get the gist	5.6	39.2	16.2	3.7	-
Difficulty in scanning the text	9.3	38.7	9.3	7.4	-
Difficulty in reading slowly to understand the details	8.8	46.6	9.3	-	-
Guessing unfamiliar words	20	7.4	44.3	11.1	1.9
Understanding specialist vocabulary	10	22.2	45	-	-
Reading speed	7	9	38	12	-

* **Reported in percentage**

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of the needs analysis and appraisal survey in this study, among 120 graduate students majoring indifferent fields in Iran, it became clear that listening comprehension is the most required skill for them because not only this is the one of the two channels of receiving information for scientific purposes, but also it could handle the burden of language learning and social communication. In fact, 44.2% of the participants suggested listening comprehensions a primary concern of their education.

After listening comprehension, reading ability was suggested by 41.7% of students as a very important component of language learning, finding reading comprehension amalgamated with the process of their specialist field, which could give them the opportunity of using up-to-date sources of knowledge. By considering the statistics, we could say that more than90% of students give priority to reading and listening more than other two skills. It is true that 7.5% of students suggested speaking as a very important skill, but it is safe to say that

more than speaking skill, writing was important for them because 24.2% of students reported this as ever present skill in their education.

In terms of the sense of satisfaction, in the presented courses for ESP learners, it could be concluded that listening comprehension by 9.2% was the most satisfying component, and writing ability by 2.5% was the most dissatisfying component. Listening comprehension is a type of reciprocal ability, which gives the learner the opportunity of being sure about his/her understanding and maybe this was the reason of that sense of satisfaction. Partly the incompetency of students in writing ability caused difficulty for learners and also giving the priory to communicative methods could bring about the overlook of writing ability in ESP courses, while it is inseparable part of scientific performance.

In speaking ability, entering discussions, oral presentations, pronunciation, and translation were the major goals of learners and it requires more attention to be paid to by the material developers. Also in listening comprehension, understanding lectures and oral presentations brought a great deal of stress for learners and they always faced difficulty in the related aspects.

Like any other situation, academic settings require reading comprehension because it is the great source of getting information from books, articles, surfing the net etc. The major problem in this regards was understanding the main points and also the details of the content which requires a more serious attention to these components of this language skill. Writing is constructed by words and in the same way, the most repetitive difficulty for langue learners was finding proper words and organizing the paragraphs in the scientific manner.

As it is illustrated in the present article, in line with other studies (e.g. Hosseinpour &Koosha, 2015; Sadeghi & Tahririan, 2015) the current curriculum of ESP course in

Iran dose not meets the need of learners, by the growth of communicative approaches to language learning and advances in online communication tools the need for the authentic and communicative base skill increases and the result of this study clearly stated that the students require listening and reading more than other skills because they feel the need to gather the data. It is suggestive that a major modification should be implemented in ESP course in Iran, which could serve for pedagogical needs of learners.

References

Aliakbari, M., & Boghayeri, M. (2014). A Needs Analysis Approach to ESP Design in Iranian Context. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *98*, 175-181.

Belcher, D.D. (2004). 8. Trends in teaching English for specific purposes. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *24*, 165-186.

Boniadi, A., Ghojazadeh, M., & Rahmatvand, N. (2013). Problems of English for specific purpose course for medical students in Iran. *Khazar Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, *16*(1), 48.

Boroujeni, S., Moradian Fard, F. (2013).A needs analysis of English for specific purposes (ESP) course for adoption of communicative language teaching: A case of Iranian first-year students of educational administration). *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, 2(6), 35-44.*

Dudley-Evans & St John. *Developments in English for specific purposes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 140–144.

Fadavi, M., & Ershadi, A.R. (2014).Evaluating the position of ESP for art students in university of Tehran art schools.*Journal of Novel Applied Sciences, 1151-1162.*

Hosseinpour, N., & Koosha, M. (2015). EAP Needs Assessment of Undergraduate Students of Computer Science. *Iranian Journal of Research in English Language Teaching*, *3*(1), 5-15.

Hutchinson & Waters. *English for specific purposes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Khoshsima, H., Saed, A., & Ghasemi, P. (2014).The application of ESP principles on course design: the case of English for students of management and fisheries. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*, 5(2), 163-175.

Long, M. (2005). *Second language needs analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Moslemi, F., Moinzadeh, A., & Dabaghi, A. (2011). ESP needs analysis of Iranian MA students: A case study of the University of Isfahan. *English Language Teaching*, *4*(4), p121.

Rajabi, P., Kiany, G. R., & Maftoon, P. (2012). ESP in-service teacher training programs: Do they change Iranian teachers' beliefs, classroom practices and students' achievements?. *Ibérica: Revista de la Asociación Europea de Lenguaspara Fines Específicos (AELFE)*, 24, 261-282.

Richards, J. (2001) *Curriculum development in language teaching*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sadeghi, E., & Tahririan, M.H. (2015). ESP courses for psychology and law tertiary level students: attitudes, challenges needs and obstacles. *Iranian Journal of Research in English Language Teaching*, 2(2), 63-77.

Zohoorian, Z., Baghban, V.,& Pandian, A. (2011). Areview on the effectiveness of using authentic materials in ESP courses. *English for Specific Purposes World, 31*(10), 1-14.