

## Evaluation of Problematic Areas in Different ESP Contexts of Iranian Universities

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### Biodata

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### Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of ESP courses in different contexts at Iranian universities in which content teachers, language teachers and ESP teachers at Language Departments of each discipline teach ESP. For this purpose, 30 students and 15 teachers were randomly interviewed. A questionnaire, based on content of interviews, was designed and checked through a pilot study. In the next stage, the questionnaire, with a high reliability, was administered to 50 teachers and 420 students attending ESP classes in the three mentioned contexts at different Iranian universities. The results concerning the three contexts showed that there are significant differences among the three contexts and the shortcomings emerged mostly in the case of content teachers teaching ESP as a part of their job. On the other hand, students and ESP teachers at Language Departments were mostly satisfied with their ESP courses. This suggests that if ESP courses are offered by ESP teachers of Language Departments in each discipline, the problems could be minimized.

**Key words:** ESP, evaluation, problematic areas, content teachers, language teachers, ESP teachers at Language Departments

## Evaluation of Problematic Areas in Different ESP Contexts of Iranian Universities

The emergence of ever-growing need for a lingua franca of Science and Technology has led to the worldwide demand of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) within TEFL curriculum. ESP has established itself as a dynamic and distinct area within the field of ELT with sound theoretical foundation which can guide various practical concerns. It has developed in diverse directions and has become increasingly international in scope (Dudley-Evans & Johns, 1998).

According to the literature in English language teaching, the term English for Specific Purpose (ESP) carries a wide range of definitions as it incorporates various functions and features of professions and work situations. Definitions of ESP in the literature are relatively late in time, if we assume that ESP began in the 1960s. For instance, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) defined ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".

The point is that that ESP has developed at different speeds in different parts of world because different needs arise in different language-learning environments. Thus, it is not considered a 'monolithic universal phenomenon' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

According to Duddley-Evans (1998) the key stages in ESP are needs analysis, course design, material selection, teaching and learning, and evaluation. Dudley-Evans (2001) thinks that for ESP, the key defining feature is its teaching and materials development based on the results of needs analysis. Regarding teaching methodology, he declares, "The use of a distinctive methodology is ... a variable characteristic of ESP."

As Duddley-Evans (1998) mentioned, a significant stage in ESP is evaluation. Brown (1995) defined evaluation as "the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and assess its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved." More specifically, different aspects of a program can be evaluated such as Curriculum

design, the syllabus and program content, classroom processes, materials of instruction, the teachers, the students, training, monitoring of learners' progress, learners' motivation, the institution, learning environment, staff development and decision making. (Sanders 1992; Weir & Roberts 1994) .The present study is an attempt to evaluate problematic areas related to ESP teaching in different ESP contexts at Iranian universities.

In Iran, there are three different contexts in which ESP is being taught. In the first context content teachers, specialists in each field, teach ESP courses. In the second context, language teachers teach ESP in different fields of study such as Engineering, Medicine, etc. And in the last context, language teachers at professional Language Departments of each discipline teach ESP only in one field of study.

Although there are excessive research on different aspects of ESP and EAP such as practice, materials design, development, and methodology of ESP courses in context of Iran (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008), practical research regarding introducing the best model of current ESP teaching context and exploration of problematic areas in each of the three mentioned contexts, has not been enough. If the ESP community hopes to grow, it is essential that the community as a whole evaluates what ESP actually represents and explores its problems, the acknowledgement of which ensures its improvement.

### **Statement of the problem**

All researchers interested in assessing “the progress of ESP as a component of ELT” agree that one of the most constraining factors to this progress is the lack of appropriate Language teachers (Swales, 1985). This situation applies in Asia and even more emphatically in Iran where, to this date, very little attention has been given to minimizing the shortcoming of ESP teaching.

Nowadays, ESP learners in Iran are experiencing a traditional, form-focused L2 education with little opportunity to use English for communicative purposes (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009). It can be observed obviously that students are not satisfied with ESP courses and complain about the problematic areas, particularly about Language

teachers, at universities and these courses in exception of what happens at several universities have not brought benefit to the educational system. Although the students may be brilliantly knowledgeable in their fields, they have real problems in everything related to English.

Thus, the present study is to evaluate the problematic issues, most of them related to teachers, in current ESP courses in Medical and Paramedical fields of study at different universities such as Shahid Beheshti University, Esfahan University and University of Guilan to unfold who can undertake the task of ESP teaching to minimize the problematic areas.

As the most important function of evaluation is to help administrators make informed decisions, this study attempts to gather information that will help them make effective decisions by considering the problematic issues related to different ESP contexts.

### **Theoretical & Research background**

Differences exist in how people interpreted the meaning of ESP. While it is true that "The emphasis in the definition of ESP has been on how ESP teaching develops procedures appropriate for learners whose main purpose is learning English for a purpose other than just learning the language system" .(Davoodifard & Eslami Rasekh, 2005)

Hamp-Lyons (2001) thinks that EAP is not only a teaching approach, but is also a branch of applied linguistics which consists of a great deal of research into effective teaching and testing methods. She believes, "EAP is an educational approach and a set of beliefs about TESOL that is unlike that taken in general English courses and textbooks." And Spack (1988) thinks that overcoming the problems students face is not only a matter of learning a special language because more often the general use of language leads to great problem and the key role of teacher should be taken into account.

The diversity of ESP domain makes it impossible to prepare Language teachers for all possible subjects in ESP, and teacher education programs are inevitably inadequate and cannot fully prepare teachers for their entire careers (Northfield & Gunstone, 1997). Just as Boswood and Marriott (1994) mention, traditional ESP teacher training programs, focusing on course design or genre analysis techniques, can rarely prepare language teachers to interact as ESP practitioners who can minimize the shortcoming of their classes.

Dudley and John (1998) did an empirical study illustrating the significance of joint-teaching between language teachers and subject teachers as the best model of ESP teaching with the least problems. They point out that this joint-teaching model based on the cooperation among language teachers, subject teachers, as well as ESP learners, is the most efficient way to develop ESP teaching and teachers education.

In several studies, an agreement of opinions is found between the students and the teachers. The great majority of the respondents from both groups agree that ESP instructors should possess both English-teaching competency and subject content knowledge. However, to find instructors who are experienced and capable of teaching English may be easy, whereas it is certainly not easy to find someone who is at once a competent language teacher and a knowledgeable specialist. To solve this problem, previous research has suggested team-teaching as a coping strategy (Adams-Smith, 1980; Jackson & Price, 1981). Yet, while co-teaching may be an ideal way to deal with the shortage of qualified ESP instructors, it is not widely feasible when taking into account the cost and time spent on making co-teaching work and the difficulty of coordinating language and subject teachers. In comparison, the suggestion of seeking advice from subject specialists or obtaining subject area information from students seems to be more plausible (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Robinson, 1991).

As a matter of fact, the lack of content-area knowledge is not a problem for most of the ESP courses, because it is general English communication ability, not subject-content knowledge that is most desired by the learners (Chen, 2006; Oledajo, 2005; Wang, 2004). Harding (2007) stresses that the general skills that a general

English teacher uses e.g. being communicative, using authentic materials and analyzing English in a practical way are also effective and applicable to ESP.

According to Yarmohammadi (2005), "language teaching in Iran does not follow any specific purposes - i.e. it can be characterized as language for no specific purposes" in most of ESP contexts at Iranian Universities. ESP is nowadays increasingly taught to large classes of demotivated learners by inappropriate teachers with very limited resources. There is little collaboration between language teachers and content teachers concerning issues such as the objectives, content as well as the methodology of the course. Many Iranian scholars have argued that English should be taught by language teachers and not content, subject-specific, teachers if we believe that our profession demands special training (e.g. Farhady, 2006; Yarmohammadi, 2005).

From the studies reviewed above, we can see that abundant research has been devoted to the field of ESP, and yet very few studies have been conducted to investigate ESP teaching and its related problematic areas. Thus, making the undertaking of the current study is significant to decide who can teach ESP better by minimizing the problematic areas. It should be mentioned that the perspective of this study is the relevant-features view meaning a positive approach which says: 'what will be best in this particular and given situation?'

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study, randomly selected from Medical and Paramedical Faculties, were 50 ESP teachers including 15 content teachers, 17 language teachers, and 18 Language teachers teaching only at professional Language Departments of each discipline. Besides, 420 students attending ESP classes, 114 students from content teachers' context, 145 students from language teachers' context, and 161 students from professional Language Departments of each discipline at different universities such as Shahid Beheshti University, Esfahan University and University of Guilan in Iran took part in the study. Among these participants, 15 teachers (5 in each context) and 30

students (10 in each context) were selected for interview before designing the questionnaire.

#### Data collection instruments

The data gathering instruments used in this research are interview and questionnaire. Interview, was used to design a questionnaire and strengthen the data gathered through the questionnaire and validate collected data at the end. And the main instrument of the study which was the designed questionnaire including twenty three items. The items of the questionnaire were drawn from analysis of Language teachers' and students' interviews content. The questionnaire was designed and validated through a pilot study and its Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.92, revealing satisfactory internal consistency and accuracy of the scale. The questionnaire was translated to Persian and distributed among the participants.

#### Results

The most common problematic areas which were obtained from the content of interviews and used in the questionnaire are the following 23 items:

1. Teacher-centered classes
2. Limiting the course to learning of specific lexicon by the teacher
3. Excessive use of word by word translation activities which do not result in learning English
4. Lack of students' involvement and participation in class activities
5. The pedagogical focus on the content not language
6. Use of outdated materials by the teacher
7. Lack of use of technological facilities
8. Lack of availability of technological facilities
9. Students' heterogeneous proficiency levels
10. Students serving as the participants of teachers' research in the class many times
11. Lack of different language learning strategies introduced by the teacher
12. Lack of access to teacher for further help
13. Inappropriate assessment methods

14. Lack of continuous assessment
15. Low content knowledge of teacher
16. Teacher as a demotivating factor
17. Teacher s' method of teaching English
18. Teachers' lack of ability to speak English
19. Teachers' poor pronunciation
20. Low English proficiency of teacher
21. Shortage of qualified teachers
22. Teachers' not fulfilling students' needs
23. Lack of students' preparedness to start ESP course

Obviously, most of the problems mentioned by the participants are related to ESP teachers. Thus, ESP teaching aspect is a crucial one causing demerits of such courses. Since there are different contexts of ESP teaching at Iranian universities, this study intends to evaluate each context and then compare them to recognize the best model of ESP teaching at tertiary level.

Using Statistical procedures employed included non-parametric tests since the ordinal Likert –scale was used in the study. Mann-Whitney U tests were used to examine the differences between the students' responses and those of the teachers and Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine the rank of each item in each context and to see whether there were significant differences among the three different contexts or not.

### **The most problematic areas in each context**

According to the finding, the most problematic areas in context1, content teachers' context, were teacher-centered classes, lack of different language learning strategies introduced by the teacher, the pedagogical focus on the content not language, teacher s' method of teaching English, teachers' poor pronunciation, and low English proficiency of teacher.



Besides, students and teachers in the second context, context of language teachers, found lack of access to teacher for further help, inappropriate assessment methods, students' heterogeneous proficiency levels, and low content knowledge of teacher as the most problematic areas. But the ranks of the problems in this context were significantly less than those in the first context.

Finally, Lack of continuous assessment and lack of use of technological facilities were recognized as the shortcomings of the Language Departments of each discipline context. The shortcomings ranks in this case are the lowest comparing to the first two contexts.

Clearly, we can report the problems in the last two contexts are not as severe as those in the first context. Furthermore, the important problems in the context of content teachers are related to teachers' English proficiency and pedagogy, in the context of language teachers are related to lack of organization for teachers, and in the third context are related to general educational shortcomings.

### **Differences between the students' and teachers' responses**

According to Mann-Whitney U test, in the context of content teachers (context1) there is no significant difference between students' and teachers' opinions of problematic areas since the level of significance is more than 0.05. The point is that the students found those areas more serious than their teachers.

**TABLE 1, Ranks**

	context1	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Problematic Areas	content teachers	15	61.57	923.50
	students of content teachers	113	64.89	7332.50
	Total	128		

**TABLE 2, Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Problematic Areas
Mann-Whitney U	803.500
Wilcoxon W	923.500
Z	-.333
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.739

a. Grouping Variable: context1

Similar to the context of content teachers, the level of significance is more than 0.05 indicating no difference between students' and teachers' opinion of the problematic areas in the context of language teachers. Here, the language teachers are more worried about problems and the mean ranks of the shortcomings in their perception are higher than the students'.

**TABLE 3, Ranks**

	context2	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Problematic Areas	language teachers	17	94.41	1605.00
	students of language teachers	143	78.85	11275.00
	Total	160		

**TABLE 4, Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Problematic Areas
Mann-Whitney U	979.000
Wilcoxon W	11275.000
Z	-1.312
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.190

a. Grouping Variable: context2

Finally, according to the tables below, there is no significant difference between the students and teachers in Language Departments of each faculty, too. This supports the claim that in all three contexts students and teachers of each ESP context described the current situation the same as each other but teachers in the contexts of language teachers and Language Departments ranked the problems higher than the students.

**TABLE 5, Ranks**

	context3	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Problematic Areas	language teacher with language departments	15	103.40	1551.00
	students of ltld	160	86.56	13849.00
	Total	175		

**TABLE 6, Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	prbmareas
Mann-Whitney U	969.000
Wilcoxon W	13849.000
Z	-1.235
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.217

a. Grouping Variable: context3

### Differences among the three contexts considering problematic areas

The most important part of the data analysis is to compare these three contexts to recognize an ESP context with the least problematic areas considering ESP teachers. For this purpose, Kruskal-Wallis test was used. According to the test there are

differences among the three contexts according to students' and teachers' perceptions in each context since the level of significance is less than 0.05. As the findings in the tables show, rank of the context of content teachers is the highest indicating presence of the most problematic areas and the context of Language teachers at Language Departments of each discipline has the least problematic areas. Besides, language teachers' classes work more effectively and have fewer problems regarding ESP teachers than content teachers'.

TABLE 7, Kruskal-Wallis, Test Ranks

	all.context	N	Mean Rank
Problematic Areas	context1	128	399.45
	context2	160	237.96
	context3	175	104.07
	Total	463	

TABLE 8, Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup>

	prbmareas
Chi-Square	361.365
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: all.context

## Conclusion

The findings show that except the context of content teachers, teachers consider the problematic areas in higher ranks than the students do. This means teachers in the last two contexts are more concerned with the problems in their contexts while content teachers suppose that they teach ESP courses effectively and without serious shortcomings.

However, the problematic areas were found in the context of content teachers with the highest ranks. These problems were mostly related to teachers and specifically to teachers' English proficiency and pedagogy while these shortcomings are not present in the context of language teachers. However, teachers and students embarked on the low content knowledge of language teachers to some extent. According to the ESP teachers teaching only at Language Department of a discipline, this problem can be solved after teaching only in one discipline for a while. Absence of such problem in context of Language teachers in Language Departments supports this claim.

This study reveals how effective Language Departments can be in ESP contexts by not only minimizing the problems, but also functioning as the most effective one. This suggests establishing organized Language Departments in each field of study, can be very helpful since the students at several universities such as Shahid Beheshti University and Esfahan University in the Medical and Paramedic fields of study have been ranked as the most successful ones in publishing international papers in English and getting high scores in English tests of their comprehensive exams.

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