



Evaluation of ESP Teachers in Different Contexts of Iranian Universities

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Received: 30-05- 2012

Accepted: 26-06- 2012

Published: 01-07- 2012

doi:10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.2p.198

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.2p.198>

Abstract

In countries where English is mainly used for academic purposes, such as Iran, ESP plays a highly important role. In Iran, there are three major different contexts of ESP in which content teachers, language teachers, and professional ESP teachers at Language Departments of each discipline teach ESP. The present study intends to evaluate teachers in the three mentioned ESP contexts at several Iranian universities such as Shahid Beheshti, Esfahan, and Guilan Universities. For this purpose, at the first stage, 15 teachers and 30 students were interviewed and 20 classes were observed. At the second stage, 470 teachers and students of Medical and Para-medical Faculties were asked to participate in the study. A survey was run through distributing a 101-item questionnaire for teachers and an 83-item one for students, each one was checked through a pilot study and with a high reliability, among the participants. The results indicate teachers' and students' opinions of the current situation regarding their ESP context, especially the methodology, matched with each other. The results concerning the three contexts showed that context of Language Departments in each discipline is the most effective one as far as ESP teaching parameters are concerned and students and ESP teachers at Language Departments were mostly satisfied with their courses. On the other hand, the context of content teachers is the least effective one with the most problematic areas. This suggests that if ESP courses are offered by professional ESP teachers of Language Departments in each faculty, the shortcomings could be minimized.

Keywords: ESP, evaluation, content teachers, language teachers, professional ESP teachers at Language Departments

1. Introduction

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. It has developed in diverse directions and has become increasingly international in scope (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Orr, 2001; Sysoyev, 2000).

In countries where English is mainly used for academic purposes, like Iran, ESP has a crucial role. Furthermore, "in Iran, after the Islamic revolution, in an effort to defy westernization of the country, A strong tendency to teach ESP, which is perceived to be a variety of English that can be somewhat separated from the dominant culture attached to it, has been present. ESP has increasingly expanded and it currently forms a significant part of the curricula for all academic fields at universities" (Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, & Quiroz, 2007 as cited in Eslami-Rasekh, 2010).

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 (Farhady, 2006; Yarmohammadi, 2005)

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 field of studies such as Engineering, Medicine, etc. And in the last context, Professional ESP teachers who are language teachers at organized Language Departments of each discipline teach ESP.

Therefore, the main aim of conducting this study was to evaluate these three contexts to find out which context works better and students feel satisfied the most. In the other words, the methodological effectiveness of three different types of ESP teaching existing at Iranian universities was evaluated by examining ESP teachers' and students' perceptions of each context to introduce the best model in existing situation. If the ESP community hopes to grow, it is essential that the ESP community evaluates what ESP actually represents and explores its merits and demerits, the acknowledgement of which ensures its improvement.

2. Theoretical & Research Background

As existing literature in English language teaching asserts, 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. ESP was detected as a dynamic movement within ELT by the 1960s (Basturkmen, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Swales, 2000). An immediate corollary of such dynamism has been led to creation of diverse conceptualizations, definitions, and interpretations (Robinson, 1991).

According to Strevens' widely accepted definition, ESP is "a particular case of the category of special-purpose language teaching" building on a bunch of absolute and variable characteristics (Strevens, 1988). That is, ESP programs are absolute in the sense that they are geared to meeting the specific needs of a previously-defined group of learners; they are content-specific as far as particular disciplines and professions are concerned; they focus on the use of language appropriate to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities in terms of discourse structure, syntax, and semantics; and, finally, they contrast with 'General English' courses. As far as variable characteristics of ESP are concerned, it is maintained that these courses do not assume any typical conditions which might necessarily limit the teachers concerning their choice of skill/s, methodology, and so on. Also, it is claimed that in comparison with English for General Purposes (EGP), ESP teaching is 'more relevant', 'more cost-effective', and 'more accountable' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; John & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Robinson, 1991).

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

Based on Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), "the teaching of ESP has been seen as a separate activity within English Language Teaching (ELT), and ESP research as an identifiable component of applied linguistics research" (Dudley-Evans, & St John, 1998, p. 1). ESP has grown into a major field within ELT with reason, as it covers such significant subfields like English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

As Dudley-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 factors related to ESP teachers.

Describing various roles of ESP teacher is a vital issue (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987). Dudley-Evans and St



Jones (1998) state that apart from the main tasks of the general English teacher, i.e. controlling ongoing classroom activities, providing information about skills and language, organizing pair- or group work, in other words 'acting as provider of input and activities', the ESP teacher fulfills the additional task of a 'facilitator or consultant' meaning "when the teacher knows relatively little about the content or the skill that is being taught in the ESP class, and proceeds by pulling together and organizing the information that the learners, and – if possible – their lecturers [the real specialists of that content area] are able to provide." (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987, pp. 149-150)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make two significant distinctions between general English teachers and ESP teachers. Firstly, they claim that "in addition to the normal functions of a classroom teacher, the ESP teacher will have to deal with needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation and evaluation" (p. 157). As the second major distinction, they point out that "the majority of ESP teachers have not been trained as such" (p. 157), i.e., they need to obtain a more thorough knowledge of a specific field which they have not been qualified in and are not completely familiar with.

Research in ESP has typically centered on what should be taught and the implications of this for syllabus and material design, with occasional forays into the role of learners in the learning process. With some exceptions (such as Northcott & Brown, 2006), there has been little research into the effective decisions ESP teachers take in the teaching process (Watson Todd, 2003).

Similarly, in Iran, although there are excessive comments on practice, materials design, development, and methodology of EAP/ESP courses (Atai, 2000; Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008), practical research regarding the case that who should teach ESP courses effectively is scanty.

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 (Chang, 2005; 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).

Thus, the present study was carried out to broaden the scope of studies carried out so far in the area of ESP students' and teachers' perceptions of their courses to evaluate and compare different contexts to find out which one is preferred as the most effective one.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study, randomly selected, were 50 ESP teachers including 15 content teachers, 17 language teachers, and 18 professional ESP 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 Language Departments of each discipline at different universities in Iran such as Shahid Beheshti, Esfahan, and Guilan Universities 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 and after designing the questionnaire.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

Three data gathering instruments used in this research are observation, interview, and questionnaire. At first, 20 classes in different contexts were observed and 45 interviews were made. The main purposes of these two instruments were to design a questionnaire, to strengthen the data gathered through the questionnaire, to further investigate teachers' and students' opinions and to validate collected data at the end. Thus, the main instrument of the study which was the designed questionnaire included 101 items for teachers and 83 items for students. The items were drawn from analysis of ESP teachers' and students' interviews and classroom observations. The questionnaire was designed and validated through a pilot study and its Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89, revealing satisfactory internal consistency and accuracy of the scale. Furthermore, several experts in ESP domains reviewed the questionnaire items and approved its validity. The questionnaire was translated to



participants' L1, Persian, and distributed among the participants.

3.3 Data Analysis

Having gathered the necessary data, we took several steps to analyze the data and reach the aim of the study. First, content analysis of observation notes and interviews was run twice with one month interval to explore the items of the questionnaire. Second, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed via SPSS software and non-parametric tests such as Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis were utilized to recognize the most effective ESP teaching context.

4. Results

By analyzing the content of the interviews and observation checklists, a questionnaire which was divided into several sub-sections was designed to evaluate ESP teacher effectiveness. These sub-sections are as the following:

1. Teachers' English proficiency
2. Teachers' English pedagogy including use of activities, group work, interaction, error correction, planning and preparing for the class, materials, assignments, assessments, use of English as the means of communication in the class, and other pedagogy-related factors
3. Socio-affective factors
4. ESP course parameters including teaching English not content, needs analysis, fulfilling students' needs, creating purposeful communication in the class, using materials and methodology appropriate to the discipline, etc.
5. ESP course outcome
6. ESP teaching factors including using an agreed map to guide ESP teachers, being knowledgeable in theoretical and practical developments in ELT and ESP, being aware of different roles of ESP practitioners, being in contact with subject teachers and other ESP teachers, being frequently evaluated by the faculty, etc.
7. Problematic areas of each ESP teaching context including teacher-centered classes, lack of access to teacher for further help, inappropriate assessment methods, teachers' method of teaching, teachers' low proficiency, teacher as a demotivating factor, etc.

Based on the type of data and ordinal Likert-scale, nonparametric tests were employed in this study. So, Kruskal-Wallis test and Chi-square were 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.

First, teachers' questionnaires were analyzed and different variable, mentioned above, were considered to see the differences among the three groups of teachers and evaluate them. Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was utilized to compare teachers' opinions on their ESP teaching.

As table1 shows, the differences among teachers' perception of these three ESP teaching contexts are significant in all variables mentioned above. Regarding teachers' proficiency and pedagogy, socio-affective factors, ESP course parameters, ESP course outcome, and ESP teaching factors, the context of content teachers has the lowest ranks and the context of professional ESP teachers at Language Department of each discipline has the highest ranks meaning it acts as the most effective teaching context.

Table1. Kruskal-Wallis Test, Mean Ranks in Each Context (Teachers' Questionnaire)

	Teachers' contexts	N	Mean Rank
Proficiency	content teachers	15	10.93
	language teachers	17	27.38
	department teachers	18	35.86
	Total	50	
Pedagogy	content teachers	15	9.00
	language teachers	17	24.41
	department teachers	18	40.28
	Total	50	



Socio-affective Factors	content teachers	15	8.70
	language teachers	17	29.97
	department teachers	18	35.28
	Total	50	
ESP Parameters	content teachers	15	9.60
	language teachers	17	23.71
	department teachers	18	40.44
	Total	50	
ESP Outcome	content teachers	15	11.10
	language teachers	17	23.38
	department teachers	18	39.50
	Total	50	
ESP Teaching	content teachers	14	7.50
	language teachers	17	23.00
	department teachers	18	40.50
	Total	49	

Besides, 23 items were used to measure the problematic areas of each context. Here, the context of content teachers with high ranks introduces itself as a context with most problematic areas and shortcomings among other ESP teaching contexts. On the other hand, the context of ESP teachers at Language Departments has the lowest ranks among the others. This findings support the mentioned claim that the third context is the most effective ESP context as far as effective ESP teaching is concerned.

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis Test, Mean Ranks in Each Context

Problematic Areas	content teachers	15	40.00
	language teachers	17	23.65
	department teachers	15	8.40
	Total	47	

Furthermore, the Chi- Square table below shows that there are significant differences among the three contexts since the level of significant considering all variables is less than 0.05.

Table 3. Test Statistics a,b

	Proficiency	Pedagogy Total	Socio-affective Factors	ESP Parameters	ESP Outcome	ESP Teaching	Problematic Areas
Chi-Square	24.922	37.946	30.730	37.241	32.541	42.678	40.006
df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp.Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: teacher context



The students' questionnaire included the first 83 items evaluating ESP teaching courses in the three contexts. The items were to evaluate teachers' proficiency, Teachers' pedagogy, socio-affective factors, ESP course parameters, ESP course outcome, and Problematic areas of each ESP teaching context. As tables 4 shows, students ranked the items more or less the same as teachers since in all of the variables, context of content teachers has the lowest ranks and context of language teachers at Language Department of each discipline has the highest rank. This means that students of Language Department context found their courses as the most effective ones in terms of effective ESP teaching.

On the other hand, the problematic areas are at the lowest ranks in the third context based on the students' opinions which are in line with their teachers'. Clearly, the problems in their highest ranks in the context of content teachers supports that this context is the least effective one in case of ESP teaching.

Table 4. Kruskal-Wallis Test, Mean Ranks in Each Context
 (Students' Questionnaire)

	Students' context	N	Mean Rank
Proficiency	content students	114	80.42
	language students	145	220.76
	department students	158	290.98
	Total	417	
Pedagogy	content students	114	57.79
	language students	142	187.63
	department students	159	333.89
	Total	415	
Socio-affective Factors	content students	114	59.91
	language students	141	197.73
	department students	161	323.15
	Total	416	
ESP Parameters	content students	114	60.39
	language students	145	186.41
	department students	157	336.45
	Total	416	
ESP Outcome	content students	113	57.00
	language students	145	209.37
	department students	160	317.32
	Total	418	
Problematic Areas	content students	113	360.00
	language students	143	214.72
	department students	160	95.94
	Total	416	



Table 5. Test Statistics a,b

	Proficiency	Pedagogy Total	Socio-affective Factors	ESP Parameters	ESP Outcome	Problematic Areas
Chi-Square	212.101	358.256	324.135	356.867	314.378	320.654
df	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

- a. Kruskal Wallis Test
- b. Grouping Variable: students' contexts

According to the Chi-square table and Kruskal-Wallis test, the differences among the three contexts are significant in all variables and the level of significance is less than 0.05, so the differences have not been occurred by chance. Obviously, we understood that students and teachers had similar opinions regarding their ESP contexts because based on their opinions the first context, context of content teachers, is the least effective one and the third context, context of professional ESP teachers at Language Departments of each discipline is the most effective one in terms of ESP teaching.

5. Conclusion

As the results showed students and teachers in the three ESP contexts where content teachers, language teachers and professional ESP teachers of Language Departments teach ESP, had similar opinions on teachers' evaluation in terms of teachers' English proficiency, pedagogy, socio-affective factors, ESP course parameters, ESP course outcome which define effective teaching in this study. Based on the findings, the Language Departments in different faculties act as the best and most effective ESP context as far as ESP teaching is concerned.

Furthermore, the analysis of the results suggests that the problematic areas emerge mostly in the context of content teachers. This supports our claim once more that content teachers' context is the least effective one. In other words, students are not satisfied with their ESP courses because content teachers do not teach them effectively in such a context.

The second context was found more effective than the context of content teachers whereas it was evaluated to be less effective than the context of Language Departments. According to several interviewees, language teachers who teach ESP at different fields of study, not with a systematic framework, cause problems which are absent in the third context.

To sum up, the present study shows how effective Language Departments can be in providing ESP contexts, where it not only minimizes the problems, but also functions as the most facilitative milieu for learning English for specific purpose. This suggests establishing organized Language Departments in each field of study can be very helpful since the students at Language Departments 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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Acknowledgment

Hereby, I would like to express my heartfelt and gratitude to my friend, Mehdi Mirzaaghaei, cooperating in this study especially in data analysis, for his insightful recommendations and encouragement.

Besides, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Mahdavi, without his contribution and unfailing support the fulfillment of this study from the beginning to the end would have been impossible and meaningless.