

TURKISH STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ESP INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching of English in relation to the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of particular academic contexts, tailoring instruction to meet specific needs of the learners (Benesch, 2001). The aim of the present study was to examine the views of Turkish engineering students and ESP instructors in relation to learning and teaching ESP. Results revealed that students thought they needed English for their future studies and careers to a great extent and teachers often had to deal with areas of knowledge with which they were not completely familiar.

Keywords: ESP, student needs, teacher strategies, EFL context

INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of trade and economy, and the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, the demand for ESP has expanded, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an “approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to context and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (p.19). ESP aims to meet students’ needs for both academic and work environments and in an ESP course learners are provided with knowledge on language and communication requirement in a particular professional field (Riemer, 2002) and the syllabus and materials are determined by a prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner, rather than by non-learner-centered criteria such as the “teacher’s or institution’s predetermined preferences” (Munby, 1978, p. 2).

Despite the given importance, ESP research is highly limited and has typically focused on what should be taught in language classes and the implications of this for syllabus and material design (Northcott & Brown 2006). There is surprisingly little research about what subject matter knowledge an ESP teachers might be expected to have. Hutchinson & Waters (1987, p. 160) say that ESP teachers have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience. Wu et. al. (2009) in a recent study investigated the teaching practices and cognitions of three teachers of maritime English in a college of China, particularly trying to identify how teachers responded to unpredicted situations in class where their subject knowledge was limited. Results showed that teachers used avoidance or risk taking when dealing with such situations. Although unpredicted problems reflected poorly on teachers’ teaching competence, the strategies they adopted helped them to have a smooth lesson.

To our best knowledge, there have been only a few studies carried out in the field of ESP in Turkey (Coskuner, 2002; Kanık, 2003; Yıldırım, 2002). Thus, by linking students’ perceptions and instructors’ ideas and challenges, we hoped to provide a foundation for the ESP classes.

The following research questions are addressed in the study:

- (1) How do engineering students define their language learning needs regarding ESP?
- (2) What are the opinions of Turkish ESP instructors in relation to teaching ESP?

METHODOLOGY

Participants & Setting

The present study took place in 2009-2010 academic year. The participants were 65 Turkish intermediate level EFL learners, enrolled at the English preparatory school of a state university in Istanbul, Turkey and 6 ESP instructors. Students' average age was 17.8.

In the prep school, students have 12 hours of reading each week and 3 hours of these are allocated to ESP. Materials for different majors, e.g., engineering, medicine and social sciences, are prepared by the materials office of the department.

The instructors had 9 years teaching experience, and had been teaching ESP for 5 to 12 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the present study came from a questionnaire (adapted from Mazdayasna &Tahririan, 2008) given to students and semi-structured focus group interviews with teachers. The questionnaire consists of three sections. The first section (21 items) aims to explore the opinions of the students about their perceived needs in using four language skills in their ESP classes. The second section, (13 items), investigates students' attitudes and opinions towards ESP instruction, the length of the course, and the content, syllabus, and methodology of their ESP course. The first section and the first five items of the second section were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (to a very great extent) to 1 (not at all). The rest of the items were in a multiple-choice format. The scale was used by Mazdaysashna & Tahririan (2008) with medical science students. However, for the purposes of the study the wording of some items were changed to match the needs of engineering students. The questionnaire was piloted with 34 ESP students in the same institution and the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .83. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Semi-structured focus group interviews aimed to find out the opinions of teachers regarding teaching ESP. Interviews were conducted with three teachers at a time and each lasted about 25-30 minutes. Data from the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by means of pattern coding as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

FINDINGS

Questionnaire

In the first section of the questionnaire students were asked to indicate to what extent they needed English for the given situations. The following table shows the mean score of each item (Table 1).

Table 1: *Perceived needs related to four language skills*

Items	Mean*	SD
I need English for...		
(Listening)		
1. listening to conversations on general topics	3.90	.70
2. listening to lectures	4.23	.79
3. listening to presentations in class	3.57	1.01
4. listening to English mass media	3.75	.80
5. listening to instructions in real situations (i.e., at a work place)	4.43	.77
6. listening to students, colleagues and customers	3.93	.95
<i>Total</i>	<i>3.97</i>	<i>.56</i>
(Speaking)		
7. participating in academic discussions	3.97	.83
8. speaking at seminars, meetings, and presentations	4.18	.93
9. asking and answering questions in class	3.57	.97
10. asking and answering questions in seminars	3.86	.97
11. talking with professionals in real situations	4.42	.77
12. talking with lecturers, students and customers	4.00	.90
<i>Total</i>	<i>4.00</i>	<i>.61</i>
(Reading)		
13. reading engineering textbooks	4.28	.76
14. reading articles in professional journals	4.17	.80
15. reading engineering reports	4.24	.76
16. reading English newspapers and magazines	3.65	1.02
17. reading texts on the Internet	3.69	.90
<i>Total</i>	<i>4.03</i>	<i>.60</i>
(Writing)		
18. taking lecture notes	3.43	1.11
19. taking notes from engineering textbooks	3.41	1.10
20. writing a paper for oral presentation	4.00	.91
21. writing term papers	3.96	.98
<i>Total</i>	<i>3.71</i>	<i>.83</i>

*Mean scores are out of 5

The second section investigates the opinions of the engineering students concerning their ESP course. Table 2 shows the first five statements investigating students' satisfaction with the textbook, and teaching style and evaluation methods of the teacher.

Table 2: *Students' opinions on ESP courses*

Items	Mean*	SD
I feel satisfied...		
22. with the topics included in the textbook	2.83	.89
23. with the methodology utilized in my class	3.52	.83
24. with my teacher's evaluation method	3.48	.77
25. with the present textbook	2.83	.87
26. with the content of the textbook	2.75	.89
<i>Total</i>	<i>3.06</i>	<i>.61</i>

*Mean scores are out of 5

The remaining eight questions of the questionnaire focused on the preferences of the students related to ESP courses in general. 65% of the students stated that they preferred studying individually, while 17 % of them preferred pair work and 17% preferred group work in their ESP classes (q.29). Questions 30, 31 and 32 focusing on the length and frequency of ESP courses revealed that 74 % of the students wanted to have ESP courses for four years throughout their undergraduate education and that those courses should be offered 3 to 4 hours a week (54%) for two semesters (71 %). When asked about their opinions regarding their ESP instructors (q. 33), 43% of the students stated that they would prefer ESP instructors who are native speakers of English, 32% preferred teachers qualified in engineering, and 22% preferred Turkish teachers of English. 99% of the students stated that they would prefer teachers who have sufficient knowledge on both general and specialized subject vocabulary (q. 34). In question 35, 65% of the students stated that they preferred to master English before starting their specialized subject courses, while 32% preferred mastering it during their undergraduate studies. Finally, in the last question, 86% of the students stated that they preferred learning their subject specific lessons from both Turkish and English sources, while 12% preferred only English sources and 1% only Turkish sources.

Interviews

In the semi-structured focus group interviews ESP teachers reflected on their opinions and experiences regarding teaching ESP. When teachers' comments were pattern coded, four major categories were identified: benefits, limited content knowledge, strategies used and lack of coordination.

Benefits: Regarding the benefits of ESP, all teachers believed that ESP lessons were necessary for students' undergraduate studies and future careers.

Limited content knowledge: Teachers in general mentioned their limited understanding of engineering topics in comparison to their students' "superior" knowledge of mathematics and science. Teachers stated that when dealing with a subject-specific text, students asked content or theory related questions, often putting them in a difficult position in class. The following teacher quotes reflect these points:

They have tremendous knowledge of science and I can not compete with that.

I feel frustrated as I find myself in a situation where I feel incompetent. This is not my field of expertise. To give an example, the two concepts elliptical and ellipsoidal are not clear to me. I ask them and they say something like you can make calculations for three dimensional planes based on two dimensions and I feel at a loss, and all I'm capable of is to say this word is an adjective. I feel useless.

Strategies used: When asked to further comment on the strategies they employ to deal with this difficulty, teachers expressed the importance of preparation before teaching, such as doing research to improve their knowledge on specific topics they are going to teach, working on the terminology, preparing for questions students are likely to ask, making a note of the content related information they did not know, and following relevant resources offered on ESP web-sites:

I make sure that I check the meanings of all unfamiliar words, read about the topic, also there are accessible resources of the engineering faculties of universities in America I examine and study them.

I read the texts and work on the vocabulary, then I make a note of the questions I might be asked, if I don't know the answer to one, I consult another colleague, but still there are always questions that I cannot foresee.

The majority of the teachers commented that they tried to answer the questions based on their understanding of the topic; however, in situations where they had no answer, they used the following strategies:

I tell them 'I cannot debate on this issue, your knowledge is superior to mine, all I'm doing is to familiarize you with specific terms you will need, the rest is up to you'.

Another strategy they report to be using is to consult other students for an answer. Teachers added that although they consulted students in their classes, they verified the information from an acknowledged source as well, as illustrated in the following quote:

I make a note of the questions students ask and try to provide the answer in the following lesson; even if I have an idea about the answer I don't say it unless I'm sure. I usually consult another ESP teacher who has engineering background or the program coordinator who is very familiar with the content of the materials.

Lack of coordination: Many teachers complained about the lack of coordination between the ESP program and the Faculty of Engineering:

We have no idea about the engineering faculty, their curriculum or the terminology our students need to know.

Participating teachers deem support and coordination between these two institutions necessary in order to improve the current ESP provision, although they have differences in opinion as to how this can be achieved. Some teachers commented they would welcome guidance about what to teach and what resources to use, others said if the faculty would assign an advisor, they could consult the advisor on matters such as selection of relevant and up-to-date materials and relevant terminology as well as content related questions.. One of the ESP teachers suggested team teaching with an engineering specialist would be ideal, as indicated in following quotes:

He should not tell us how to teach but to offer guidance, something like consultancy, to guide us about what is important, also when teachers get stuck about content there is someone to ask for help.

Only one teacher expressed reservations about receiving materials from the engineering faculty:

If they give us an article and say we would like you to do this with students, this would be beyond our expertise and we are likely to misinform students.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the quantitative data revealed that engineering students reported that they needed English to a great extent for four language skills. In terms of their listening and speaking skills, the items referring to listening and speaking at a work place received the highest mean. Students also mentioned that they needed reading skills the most for reading engineering textbooks. Finally, students reported that they needed writing to make oral presentations. The responses of the students in the second section of the questionnaire also showed that they were satisfied with their textbook and the way their teachers carried out teaching and evaluation to some extent and they preferred to have ESP courses throughout their engineering education.

In a discussion of ESP teaching materials, Dudley-Evans (1998) distinguish content and real context. By giving the example of the life cycle, they suggest that life cycle content is outside the ESP teacher's area of responsibility, but the language used to realize that notion is the ESP teacher's responsibility. However, this division is not easily applicable to classroom settings. Similarly, Wu and Badger (2009) indicate one of the most distinctive features of most ESP contexts is that the teachers often have to deal with areas of knowledge with which they are not completely familiar. What the researchers called ESP teachers' "subject knowledge dilemma" (p.20) also emerged as a major

theme among Turkish ESP teachers, confirming Belcher's (2006) claims that many Turkish ESP teachers may find teaching ESP hard, sometimes even intimidating.

To deal with content-based problems, all ESP teachers mentioned careful preparation before teaching, and reported using specific strategies while teaching, such as avoiding to answer students' engineering related questions unless they are certain, explicitly stating that their engineering related knowledge is limited, and consulting students in class for an answer or explanation.

Needs analysis has been the cornerstone of ESP course design, materials development and program implementation as assessment. Much has been written about the importance of data collection before courses start and the benefits of periodically evaluating ESP programs are accepted. However, the present study shows that the content of the present ESP program is determined by the teachers themselves and the necessary revisions are limited to changing the content of the materials according to recent trends as suggested by the language teachers. However, cooperation between their prep school and the Faculty of Engineering would be highly helpful in establishing an ESP program yielding to the best academic and career needs of the students.

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