

Iranian Undergraduate Students' Needs in English Courses for General and Specific Purposes

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Abstract: *ESP teaching at all levels has been the rise of one of the effects of the growing importance of global English in professional contexts. Academically speaking, needs analysis, one of the most important factors in ESP teaching, plays an important role in curriculum design which determines the goal and content of the course being designed. In other words, it is the process of establishing the “what” and “how” of a course. Accordingly, the current study has explored English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate students' needs in English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP/EAP) courses in terms of their perceptions of three subcategories of needs, necessities, wants, and lacks, and reasons for students' course enrollment. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to 70 non-English major undergraduate students, who had already passed EGP and ESP classes, to evaluate the different perceptions of necessities, wants, and lacks in the different language skills taught in EGP and ESP courses. The results revealed that students had different perceptions of necessities, wants, and lacks in the different language skills taught in EGP and ESP/EAP courses. In addition, there was a noticeable discrepancies between the students' perceptions of needs and the actual courses they took.*

Keywords: *ESP, EGP, undergraduates, needs analysis*

1. Introduction

The term ESP stands for English for Specific Purposes. It is a linguistic field of study that addresses the immediate and very specific needs of learners for a target language which is required for academic or professional purposes. ESP is essentially a material and teaching-led movement. In fact, ESP original flowering movement resulted from general developments in the world in the 1950s and 1960s. It has been influenced by developments and changes in applied linguistics and ELT but as a lively, ambitious, and young movement within ELT (Dudley-Evans,

& St. John, 1998). On the other hand, globalization has facilitated English learning in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts around the world. Interestingly enough, ESP is a subdivision of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), which is defined as, "...the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programs for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs" [4]. Therefore, communicative competence is a very significant issue in ESP. ESP has a number of characteristics which differentiate itself from general English.

By and large, courses for English language learning at the tertiary level are often divided into two categories: English for General Purposes (EGP) courses and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, depending on how specific a course is. At the tertiary level, ESP courses such as engineering course, business communication, nursing, journalistic English, or conference presentation skills often aim to train students on a specific genre or to use English in a specific discipline or a particular communicative context. In other words, EGP courses are planned to enhance students' general language competence for a more accurate and fluent production and reception of English in dealing with everyday situations. Also, one of the most important mission of EGP courses is to cultivate students' enthusiasm and habits in learning English. Thus, ESP courses are normally designed to smooth the way for English learners' specific learning goals so as to get the result easier. According to (Byrne & Flood, 2003) the efficiency and effectiveness of ESP courses in higher education institutions have become popular over the past two decades following the trend towards ensuring quality in teaching. According to Hutchinson & Waters (1987) ESP is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". Needs analysis process has been established as a key concept of ESP course design, program implementation and evaluation (Brown, 1995; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jordan, 1997; Munby, 1978; Richards, 2001; Flowerdew, 2000; Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Amazingly, it is said that EGP and ESP courses are designed to fulfill students' different language learning needs at the tertiary level; however, these kinds of course have sometimes been criticized for not thoroughly serving their purposes because course takers still underperform, feel dissatisfied with their abilities, or are frustrated with certain aspects of the course (Derwing, Schutiz, & Yang, 1978; Leki & Carson, 1994; Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Yang, 2006).

1.1 Significance of the Study

Since ESP specialists have specific purposes in language teaching, it is widely believed that ESP specialists are often needs assessors, then designers and implementers of specialized curricula in response to identified needs. In fact, needs analysis has often been conducted in ESP contexts to pinpoint the kind of language skills college students need and the particular challenges they encounter when trying to improve their language competence (Chia et al., 1999; Kikuchi, 2005;

Kroll, 1979; Taillefer, 2007). It is widely said that for successful ESP training/learning, ongoing needs analysis is regarded as a valuable tool to anticipate learners' future demands so that learners will be able to transfer "language knowledge to novel situations" and "acquired skills in real life communication" (Kavaliauskien & Zpalien, 2003, p. 35).

1.2 The Importance of Needs Analysis in EGP and ESP

Needs analysis is "the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation" (Brown, 1995). Since many questioned whether needs analysis based on specialists' objective observation could really manifest problems learners face and construct interventions targeting problems of the learning community, subjective needs analysts thus entrust learners' emic perspectives and utilized information provided by learners in making instructional decisions. In essence, such a learner-centered perspective is believed to help instructors and course designers understand not only learners' desires and aspirations, but also allow "learners a voice in content selection" (Belcher, 2006, p. 139) and encourage "learner investment and participation" (p. 136).

Accordingly, this study is to answer two research questions:

1. What particular needs (necessities, wants, and lacks) did the EFL students want the courses to fill?
2. To what extent are ESP/EGP courses contrasted, as shown in the student responses?

2. Literature Review

Needs analysis is widely considered to be the main driving factor in ESP curriculum development. It plays an important role in the field of language curriculum design. In fact, needs analysis largely determines the goal and content of the course being designed. Without needs analysis, in fact, a teacher may end up involved in what has described as Teaching English for No Obvious Reason West (1994). In essence it refers to a number of means for identifying and validating the needs and establishes priorities among those in the domain of language program design. Brown defines needs analysis as "the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of learners". Ellis and Johnson view needs analysis as a method of obtaining a description of a learner's needs (or group of learner's needs) [10]. Their definition of needs analysis is almost similar to Brown's. Thus the goals of needs analysis are to find out what

learners want to use the language for and what level of competencies they have in the language at present. Data collection about the course materials is also necessary.

Interestingly, the importance of needs analysis is therefore, and unsurprisingly, reflected in various models of curriculum design. There are, however, different levels of need. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) differentiate between target needs and learning needs, and their target needs which describe what the learner needs to do in the target situation are what are captured in the outer circle of Nation and Macalister's model of language curriculum design, where the needs analysis circle is divided into three segments lacks, necessities, and wants. Lacks identify what the learners can and cannot currently do, whereas necessities describe what is necessary in the learners' use of language in the target situation. A well-designed course should bridge the gap from lacks to necessities, always of course allowing for environmental constraints such as the length of the course

The importance of data collection procedures aiming at the identification of the demands of the target and learning situation (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; West, 1994, 1997) and the genres to be adopted (Bhatia, 1993) are widely acknowledged as essential stages for the development of ESP course design. It is said that there are considerable benefits in evaluating the effectiveness of ESP courses to address the learners' identified purposes for using the target language as part of curriculum renewal. Curriculum renewal or reform is most often introduced to realize expectations in terms of its potential to enhance the performance of students as a result of the shift in focus, the change of goals, content and teaching materials and methods.

In effect, the issue of whether the new curriculum has the impact ascribed to it is raised, a fact which calls for a systematic evaluation of its implementation. Moreover, the challenge of designing and delivering a needs-based course can be identified in relation to its effectiveness as indicated by repeated measures of the students' performance. It was considered that since student learning is a valuable indicator of effective implementation of instructional goals, a properly developed evaluation of the students' performance can yield data adequately reliable and valid to measure the effectiveness of the course and account for factors which are influential and affect the students' performance.

In an English-medium university in Hong Kong, Evans and Green (2007) conducted a large-scale investigation into the linguistic difficulties experienced by college students who were taking required English for Academic Purpose (EAP; the most common branch of ESP) courses. Their results reveal that a large proportion of the students still had language difficulties with English-medium content courses, and that the core problems were associated with vocabulary and academic writing and speaking abilities. The study underscores the importance of

developing specific language courses that can more precisely address students' needs as the efficiency of the existing programs have been questioned at a time of budget cutting.

In Seedhouse's (1995) study of Spanish teenagers' language learning needs in general English courses, he found that the students were motivated to learn English primarily for psychological and social purposes (e.g. to travel, to speak to foreign people, and to get a better job). His study not only shows that learners in EGP courses have a clear understanding of their needs, but also how findings from needs analysis could be useful for EGP course design, classroom implementation, and evaluation. Furthermore, Seedhouse's study also strengthens Nunan's (1988) and Richards' (1990) beliefs that the application of needs analysis research in EGP courses may be able to illuminate the otherwise less discernable needs of students in EGP courses and serve as "fundamental to the planning of general language courses" (Richards, 1990, p. 13).

Pedagogically, by encouraging learners to discover their own needs, many ESP professionals look forward to "promoting a greater sense of ownership of learners and making a more consistent identification between need and want than is often achieved in ESP programmes" (Holme, 2006, p. 404). Compared to ESP courses, general English courses seem to lack the same concerns of learner needs due to "an erroneous belief that it is not possible to specify the needs of general English learners, and partly because of a lack of literature on the practicalities of analyzing needs data in the context of General English" (Seedhouse, 1995, p. 59).

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 70 non-English major undergraduate students who had already passed ESP and EAP courses. Their age range was between 18 to 31 (both females and males). In practice, they were recruited from both EGP and ESP/EAP courses for matriculating students across departments (excluding English majors). They have already taken ESP and EGP courses.

2.2 Instruments

A questionnaire consisting of 32 questions was developed so as to get EFL undergraduates' needs in ESP/EAP courses. Questionnaires allow researchers to collect data from a large group of participants and the uniformity of the instrument typically leads to greater reliability (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

2.3 Procedure of Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed to and completed by students in class. Then all key words were clarified and explained clearly in participants' first language, Farsi. In addition, when students were filling out the questionnaire, the researcher provided further individual assistance to those who still had questions regarding the items of questionnaire.

3. Result and discussion

The following tables are precisely designed to specifically specify descriptive statistics and ANOVA results for EGP in table 1 and ESP in table 2. Additionally, the summaries of the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient four skills in EGP courses and ESP/EAP have been clarified in table 3 and 4.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and ANOVA results for EGP

| Four skills | Necessities | | Wants | | Lacks | |
|------------------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Listening | 2.89 | 0.51 | 2.84 | 0.49 | 3.21 | 0.62 |
| Speaking | 3.99 | 0.83 | 4.12 | 0.96 | 4.12 | 0.98 |
| Reading | 2.41 | 0.49 | 2.88 | 0.59 | 3.05 | 0.44 |
| Writing | 3.85 | 0.63 | 3.96 | 0.78 | 4.09 | 0.84 |
| F | 22.81 | | 11.02 | | 10.55 | |

Table 1 is consisted of numerical calculation of four skills. In essence, a summary of descriptive statistics and ANOVA results of students' necessities, wants, and lacks for different English abilities in EGP courses. The results of three one-way ANOVAs (Table 4) illustrate how EFL students perceive their needs (i.e., necessities, wants, and lacks) in four language skills in EGP courses. The result shows that the four types of language skills were not perceived as equally necessary, desirable, and insufficient by EFL students. It can clearly be seen that the most necessary skills in EGP courses were related to speaking (M=3.99) and writing (M=4.12) abilities.

Interestingly enough, the precise comparison of language skills under each needs subcategory (i.e., necessities, wants, and lacks) revealed that there were significant differences among several pairs of language skills. To illustrate, although listening was considered a less necessary skill to master compared to reading skills in EGP courses, the students identified that their listening skills were less sufficient than reading skills. It is noteworthy that students have conflicting needs. It can be concluded that the students perceived reading a more necessary skill to learn although reading ability is not what they lack. In fact, students may be thoroughly aware that they lack listening ability, they would not consider it as a necessary skill to acquire in EGP courses.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and ANOVA results for ESP

| Four skills | Necessities | | Wants | | Lacks | |
|------------------|-------------|------|-------|------|--------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Listening | 2.45 | 0.44 | 2.80 | 0.88 | 4.02 | 0.95 |
| Speaking | 2.56 | 0.52 | 2.78 | 0.81 | 2.95 | 0.69 |
| Reading | 3.10 | 0.74 | 3.21 | 0.90 | 2.65 | 0.53 |
| Writing | 3.02 | 0.67 | 3.14 | 0.89 | 4.00 | 0.92 |
| F | 7.88* | | 5.15* | | 10.06* | |

The classification of the gist of the result of students' necessities, wants, and lacks for different English abilities in ESP/EAP courses has been revealed in table 2. Accordingly, as the descriptive statistics and ANOVA results can be seen from the table, the most necessary and desirable skills in ESP/EAP courses were related to EFL students' writing ability (M: 3.02); however, the most insufficient skill was related to their reading ability (M:3.10).Furthermore, the result of three one-way ANOVAs revealed that the four types of language skills were not perceived as equally necessary, desirable, and insufficient by EFL students. AS F value shows; necessities, $F(7.88) 8.91, p < 0.01$; wants, $F(5.15) 6.25, p < 0.01$; also, lacks, $F(10.06) 13.22, p < 0.01$. According to the results in this section, It can be concluded that what students need is not always what they lack. Therefore, this mismatch corroborates the conceptualization of needs as a multiple and sometimes conflicting construct as mentioned above. Amazingly enough, it is

widely mentioned that students' internal mismatch of needs may be related to their own knowledge about the target situations, life goals, and instructional expectation.

Table 3

Summary of the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient four skills in EGP courses

| Four skills | Necessities | Wants | Lacks |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Speaking | Introduce oneself in English | Converse with others in fluent English | Speak English with foreigners socially |
| Listening | Listen to daily English conversations | Listen to daily English conversations | Listen to English news |
| Writing | Write basic personal information | Write personal basic information | Write English assignments |
| Reading | Read English letters and E-mails | Read English newspapers and magazines | Read English newspapers and magazines |

Comparing and contrasting EGP and ESP/EAP courses is done in this part. According to table 3 the most essential, desirable, and insufficient skills are different in EGP courses. The data were based on descriptive statistics of the language skill that received the highest score under each subcategory of needs (i.e., necessities, wants, and lacks). According to table 6 the skills that these students considered as most necessary, desirable, and insufficient were quite different in EGP courses. Namely, although most students believed that they lacked sufficient speaking skills to interact with foreigners, they indicated that a more general conversational skill is needed so as to be able to converse with others in English fluently.

This result implies that students in the same type of EGP courses may have different kinds of needs, wants, and lacks; thus they are differently motivated when they enroll for an EGP course though EGP courses are typically taught without particular goals in mind.

Table 4

Summary of the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient four skills in ESP/EAP courses

| Four skills | Necessities | Wants | Lacks |
|-------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Speaking | Answer questions in conferences | Answer questions in conferences | Answer questions in conferences |
| Listening | Listen to English questions in academic fields | Listen to English terminologies | Listen to English questions in academic fields |

| | | | |
|---------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Writing | Write English theses | Write English theses | Write English theses |
| Reading | Read English textbooks | Read English textbooks | Read English textbooks |

Amazingly, the results of comparing and contrasting of findings revealed that the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient skills are identical in ESP/EAP courses different from the findings for EGP courses, the students' perceptions of the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient skills to learn in ESP/EAP courses were generally consistent. As table 4 revealed some particular language skills perceived to be the most necessary, desirable, and insufficient for the EFL students to acquire in ESP/EAP courses. According to the finding of the study students had identical necessities, wants, and lacks for speaking, reading and writing skills when taking ESP/EAP courses. It is possibly related to their goals and purposes. Pedagogically, ESP/EAP courses aim to equip students with specific language skills for academic or professional success, students taking the courses usually have a clearer idea of the course objectives. Therefore, the range of the possible skills the students deemed as necessary, desired, and insufficient in ESP/EAP course would be smaller than that those in EGP courses.

4. Conclusion

Briefly speaking, this study set out to provide a more detailed examination of non-English major EFL students' needs in both EGP and ESP/EAP courses. It also studied factors that might influence their course-taking willingness. Academically, need analysis is divided into three major subparts: necessities, wants, and lacks (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Iranian learners marked the importance of understanding needs as a complex, multiple, and conflicting concept. The findings have revealed that the students have different perceptions of necessities, wants, and lacks not only in terms of the different language skills taught within, but also across, EGP or ESP/EAP courses.

It is noteworthy that the majority of the EFL students don't perceive all language skills as equally desirable, necessary or insufficient; and the reason behind dedicating efforts in developing a particular language skill is not always to make up for their lack in competence. Although EFL students may desire to polish or acquire language skills in a specific area, their wants could very well be undermined in the face of their perceived language needs in another for the purpose of fulfilling their long-term or short-term academic and/or academic purposes. Interestingly enough, the students' answers to the questionnaire revealed the inconsistency between their perceptions of needs and their actual course-taking action. To recap, ESP teachers, first and foremost, should take the needs of the students into account then go through the process of teaching.

5. Pedagogical implications and Suggestions

It can be easily concluded that the present study contributes significantly to identifying EFL students' necessities, wants, and lacks. The result and aim of every research study findings can be very fruitful to improve others' knowledge as well. As matter of fact, ESP learning and teaching is affected by several elements including personal ones such as wants, necessity, and lack. Therefore, ESP teachers should bear this point in their minds that all the other factors are effective in the way that they want to select in ESP classes. To put it simply, ESP teachers' decision for designing ESP classes are very important. Accordingly, the findings of this study targeted to encourage teachers, students and researchers to develop a more positive attitude toward using needs analysis to reflect on one's teaching objectives and pedagogy as well as learning goals in either EGP or ESP/EAP courses. As suggestion for other researchers, they can conduct a similar study in different participants with different nationalities.

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Appendix

Sample questionnaire items

1 strongly disagree; 2 disagree; 3 neutral; 4 agree; 5 strongly agree.

| No. | Factors | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | EGP/ESP listening courses contain the language skills of necessities. | | | | | |
| 2 | EGP/ ESP listening courses contain the language skills of wants. | | | | | |
| 3 | EGP/ESP listening courses contain the language skills of lacks | | | | | |
| 4 | EGP/ESP listening courses can meet daily needs | | | | | |
| 5 | EGP/ESP listening courses are helpful for the current academic studies. | | | | | |
| 6 | EGP/ESP listening courses are helpful for passing the English proficiency tests | | | | | |
| 7 | EGP/ESP listening courses are helpful for future academic studies. | | | | | |
| 8 | EGP/ESP listening courses are helpful for future careers. | | | | | |
| 9 | EGP/ESP speaking courses contain the language skills of necessities. | | | | | |
| 10 | EGP/ESP speaking courses contain the language skills of wants. | | | | | |
| 11 | EGP/ESP speaking courses contain the language skills of lacks. | | | | | |
| 12 | EGP/ESP speaking courses can meet daily needs. | | | | | |
| 13 | EGP/ESP speaking courses are helpful for the current academic studies. | | | | | |
| 14 | EGP/ESP speaking courses are helpful for passing the English proficiency tests | | | | | |
| 15 | EGP/ESP speaking courses are helpful for future academic studies. | | | | | |
| 16 | EGP/ESP speaking courses are helpful for future careers. | | | | | |
| 17 | EGP/ESP reading courses contain the language skills of necessities | | | | | |
| 18 | EGP/ESP reading courses contain the language skills of wants. | | | | | |
| 19 | EGP/ESP reading courses contain the language skills of lacks. | | | | | |
| 20 | EGP/ESP reading courses can meet daily needs. | | | | | |
| 21 | EGP/ESP reading courses are helpful for the current academic studies. | | | | | |
| 22 | EGP/ESP reading courses are helpful for passing the English proficiency tests. | | | | | |
| 23 | EGP/ESP reading courses are helpful for future academic studies. | | | | | |
| 24 | EGP/ESP reading courses are helpful for future careers. | | | | | |
| 25 | EGP/ESP writing courses contain the language skills of | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|----|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | necessities | | | | | |
| 26 | EGP/ESP writing courses contain the language skills of wants | | | | | |
| 27 | EGP/ESP writing courses contain the language skills of lacks. | | | | | |
| 28 | EGP/ESP writing courses can meet daily needs. | | | | | |
| 29 | EGP/ESP writing courses are helpful for the current academic studies | | | | | |
| 30 | EGP/ESP writing courses are helpful for passing the English proficiency tests. | | | | | |
| 31 | EGP/ESP writing courses are helpful for future academic studies. | | | | | |
| 32 | EGP/ESP writing courses are helpful for future careers. | | | | | |