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M.A. Thesis

ESP needs analysis of Iranian MA students: A Case of the University of Isfahan

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the foreign language learning needs of MA students of university of Isfahan, in particular those majoring in Biology, Psychology, Physical Education, Accounting and Western Philosophy.

A total of 80 MA students specializing in five different disciplines at the University of Isfahan participated in the study. In addition to these eighty MA students, 25 content teachers as well as 7 English teachers took part in the study. The study was designed on a qualitative –quantitative survey basis using interviews, questionnaires, and texts. In order to investigate participants' point of views, appropriate statistical technique was used to analyze the data. The result obtained revealed that majority of the participants were dissatisfied with the current ESP courses for MA students. More than half of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the teaching methods adopted by the instructors, stating that they are not taught any strategies about how to handle English texts on their own. For the most part, students' problem was found to lie in their general English rather than specialized English; students had difficulty understanding the organization of the texts. Furthermore, almost all content instructors, English instructors and the students believed that the main reason for the MA students' low language proficiency was poor instruction they received in Iranian junior as well as senior high schools. Therefore, the participants suggested an urgent need for the revision and reconsideration of the English language pedagogy in the Iranian educational system. They believed that since Iranian EFL learners do not have enough exposure to English language, they fail to develop skills required to fulfill their subjective and objective needs concerning their English proficiency. This need for a change in the Iranian educational system reflected the inadequacy of the language teaching programs in the Iranian educational system in preparing the students for academic tasks.

Giving more weight to English in the MA entrance exam was suggested as one possible solution. It was thought that this would increase the motivation of

the students to improve their language proficiency; furthermore, team teaching of the ESP courses was suggested as another solution to help students meet their English needs at the MA level.

Keywords: ESP, Needs analysis, objective needs, subjective needs, team teaching.

Table of Contents

Title **Page**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction 1

1.1.1. Overview.....1

1.2. Theoretical framework 3

1.3. Statement of the problem 7

1.4. Research questions 10

1.5. Significance of the study 10

1.6. Scope of the Study 11

1.7. Definition of key terms 11

1.8. Outline and organization of the study 12

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction 14

2.2. Definitions of ESP 14

2.2.1. The Meaning of the Word 'Special' in ESP 17

2.3. Classification of ESP 18

2.3.1 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) 21

2.3.1.1. English for Academic Legal Purposes (EALP) 23

2.3.1.2. English for Science and Technology (EST) 24

2.3.1.3. English for Medical Purposes (EMP) 25

2.3.1.4. English for Business and Economics (EBE).....26

2.3.2. English for Occupational / Professional Purposes (EOP/EPP) 27

2.3.2.1. Abilities Required for Successful Communication in Occupational Settings..... 28

2.4. Needs Analysis 29

2.4.1. Issues and methods in Needs Analysis 31

2.4.2. Methods of collecting data for Needs Analysis 32

Title **Page**

2.4.3. Critical needs analysis.....32
2.5. Critical EAP 33
2.6. Right analysis.....34
2.7. Methodology in ESP.....35
2.7.1. Inductive learning 36
2.7.2. Self-access learning.....36
2.7.2.1. Authenticity of Materials 36
2.7.3. Task-based learning 38
2.7.4. ESP and Team teaching 39
2.7.5. ESP and Content-based Instruction 40
2.8. Specificity and Academic literacy 41
2.9. Subject-matter knowledge.....43
2.10. The current state of EAP in Iran 45

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction.....47
3.1.1. Participants.....47
3.2. Design of the study 49
3.3. Instruments.....49
3.3.1. Interviews 49
3.3.2. Needs Analysis questionnaires.....50
3.3.2.1. MA students' questionnaire 50
3.3.2.2. Instructors' questionnaire.....51
3.3.3. Texts.....51
3.4. Data collection procedure 52

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction.....53

Title **Page**

4.2. Data analysis procedure 53
4.3. Analysis of the responses of MA students; special subject and English Language instructors' questionnaires.....54
4.4. Analysis of the Interviews 107
4.4.1. The Students' Perspective 108
4.4.2. The subject-specific instructors' Perspective 110
4.4.3. The English instructors' Perspective 111
4.5. The analysis of the texts.....112
4.5.1. The text of Physical Training.....113
4.5.2. The text of Philosophy 114
4.5.3. The text of Psychology 114
4.5.4. The text of Biology 115
4.5.5. The text of Accounting 115

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION
5.1. Introduction.....117
5.2. Summary of the aims and procedures.....117
5.3. Discussion 129
5.4. Implications and suggestions 133
5.5. Recommendations for further research.....136
5.6. Limitations of the study 136
Appendixes.....137
APPENDIX A (MA Students' questionnaire) …….137
APPENDIX B (English Instructors' questionnaire)……142
APPENDIX C (specialized texts……153
APPENDIX D (interviews' questions)……156
References 157

List of Figures

Title **Page**

Figure 1.2: A comparison of approaches to course design 6
Figure 2.1: ESP classification by experience.....20
Figure 2.2: ESP classification by professional area.....20
Figure 4.1: Distribution of answers to Q1 56
Figure 4.2: Distribution of answers to Q2 59
Figure 4.3: Distribution of answers to Q3 62
Figure 4.4: Distribution of answers to Q4 65
Figure 4.5: Distribution of answers to Q5 67
Figure 4.6: Distribution of answers toQ6 71
Figure 4.7: Distribution of answers to Q7 73
Figure 4.8: Distribution of answers to Q8 76
Figure 4.9: Distribution of answers to Q9 79
Figure 4.10: Distribution of answers to Q10 81
Figure 4.11: Distribution of answers to Q11 85
Figure 4.12: Distribution of answers to Q12 88
Figure 4.13: Distribution of answers to Q13 91
Figure 4.14: Distribution of answers to Q14 93
Figure 4.15: Distribution of answers to Q15 96
Figure 4.16: Distribution of answers to Q16 99
Figure 4.17: Distribution of answers to Q17 102
Figure 4.18: Distribution of answers to Q18 104

List of Tables

Title **Page**

Table 3.1: Distribution of participants who took part in the study 49
Table 4.1: Distribution of answers to Q1 57
Table 4.2: Chi-square Tests for Q1 58
Table 4.3: Distribution of answers to Q2 60
Table 4.4: Chi-square Tests for Q2 61
Table 4.5: Distribution of answers to Q3 63
Table 4.6: Chi-square Tests for Q3 64
Table 4.7: Distribution of answers to Q4 66
Table 4.8: Chi-square Tests for Q4 67
Table 4.9: Distribution of answers to Q5 69
Table 4.10: Chi-square Tests for Q5 70
Table 4.11: Distribution of answers to Q6 72
Table 4.12: Chi-square Tests for Q6 73
Table 4.13: Distribution of answers to Q7 75
Table 4.14: Chi-square Tests for Q7 76
Table 4.15: Distribution of answers to Q8 77
Table 4.16: Chi-square Tests for Q8 78
Table 4.17: Distribution of answers to Q9 80
Table 4.18: Chi-square Tests for Q9 81
Table 4.19: Distribution of answers to Q10 83
Table 4.20: Chi-square Tests for Q10 84
Table 4.21: Distribution of answers to Q11 86
Table 4.22: Chi-square Tests for Q11 87
Table 4.23: Distribution of answers to Q12 89
Table 4.24: Chi-square Tests for Q12 90
Table 4.25: Distribution of answers to Q13 92
Table 4.26: Chi-square Tests for Q13 92

Title **Page**

Table 4.27: Distribution of answers to Q14.....94
Table 4.28: Chi-square Tests for Q14.....95
Table 4.29: Distribution of answers to Q15.....97
Table 4.30: Chi-square Tests for Q15.....98
Table 4.31: Distribution of answers to Q16.....100
Table 4.32: Chi-square Tests for Q16.....101
Table 4.33: Distribution of answers to Q17.....103
Table 4.34: Chi-square Tests for Q17.....104
Table 4.35: Distribution of answers to Q18.....106
Table 4.36: Chi-square Tests for Q18.....106
Table 4.37: Cross tabulation of merged cells for Q19-24.....107
Table 4.38: Cross tabulation of merged cells for Q25-28.....107
Table 4.39.The distribution of participants who took part in the interviews...109

List of Abbreviations

CBI Content Based Instruction

CPE Corpus of Professional English

CLT Communicative Language Teaching

EAP English for Academic Purposes

EBE English for Business and Economics

EBE English for Business Purposes

EFL English as a Foreign Language

EGAP English for General Academic Purposes

ELT English Language Teaching

EMP English for Medical Purposes

EOP English for Occupational Purposes

EPP English for Professional Purposes

ESAP English for Specific Academic Purposes

ESP English for Specific Purposes

EST English for Science and Technology

EVP English for Vocational Purposes

GE General English

GEP General English Proficiency

LSA Learning Situational Analysis

PBA Problem Based Learning

PSA Present Situation Analysis

TSA Target Situation Analysis

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

This chapter comprises four sections: overview, theoretical framework, and statement of the problem, scope of the study and significance of the study.

1.1.1. Overview

Certainly, a great deal about the origins of ESP could be written. Notably, there are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that, two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role of international language fell to English, Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge became English. The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver

the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The second key reason cited as having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Whereas traditional linguists set out to describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics began to focus on the ways in which language is used in real communication. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out that one significant discovery was in the ways that spoken and written English vary. In other words, given the particular context in which English is used, the variant of English will change. This idea was taken one step farther. If language in different situations varies, then tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is also possible. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do with Psychology. Rather than simply focus on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs became equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking.

In the late 1970s, ESP course designers started to carry out needs' analysis of their students' future linguistics requirements. In order to understand the importance of needs analysis, one should consider the difference between English for specific purposes (ESP) and General English (GE). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) maintain that the major difference between these two categories lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English. ESP learners are

current or future specialists who need English for their specific area and are aware of their need; they know exactly what they need English for; they know what the ESP course should offer them. On the contrary, the implementation of needs analysis in general English courses has been fraught with difficulties because students' needs are diverse and occasionally even unclear. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.53) express this view in terms of an awareness or lack of it and state:

> What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the *existence* of a need as such but rather an *awareness* of the need. If learners, sponsors and teachers know why the learners need English, that awareness will have an influence on what will be acceptable as reasonable content in the language course and, on the positive side, what potential can be exploited. Thus, although it might appear on the surface that the ESP course is characterized by its content (science, medicine, commerce, tourism, etc.), this is in fact only a secondary consequence of the primary matter of being able to readily specify why the learners need English.

At length, from the standpoint of Hutchinson and Waters (1987), English for specific purposes (ESP) and General English (GE) are differentiated not only in terms of the nature of the need but also the awareness of the need.

1.2. Theoretical framework

Since the late 1980s, English for specific purposes (ESP) has established itself not only as an important and distinctive branch of English Language Teaching (ELT), but also has incorporated most of the work on discourse and genre analysis, as well as the result of corpus linguistics. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) claim that the teaching of ESP has generally been seen as a separate activity within ELT, partly because it has developed its own methodology, and partly because it rests on disciplines other than applied linguistics, particularly

second language teaching. This openness to the insights of other disciplines, however, should not lead us to forget that ESP is an essential component of ELT, retaining its emphasis on practical outcomes stemming from needs analysis, genre analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively. These are characteristic features of ESP, which in the course of time have come to have so strong a bearing on ELT as a whole that they have been leading the way in English Second Language teaching for a long while now, although it was ESP that was originally endowed with them. Until the very advent of ESP, learning English was to a large extent a matter of cultural prestige and educational requirement, but it very much lacked a sense of purpose which is usually attributed to ESP.

From the theoretical point of view, ESP has shown and continues to show itself capable of self –renewal. Important stages in this theoretical development include an interest in register, discourse, the specification of learner needs and wants, study skills, genre analysis and various methodological approaches to the development of communicative competence (Flowerdew, 1990). It is often said that ESP lacks an underlying theory, however Dudley –Evans and St John (1998; cited in Mazdayasna, 2008) believe that a theory of ESP could be outlined based on either the specific nature of texts that learners require knowledge of , or on the basis of the needs related nature of the teaching.

Furthermore, Hutchinson and Waters (1984, pp.110-111) claim that “it is essential to take into account not only the requirements of the target situation which was the mere focus in classic paradigm of ESP – but also the needs and constraints of the ESP learning situation and the general pedagogical approach they determine”. Along similar lines Farhady (2006) asserts that although ESP doesn’t have articulated and documented theoretical principles, it has so many theoretical underpinning that cannot be overlooked. According to Farhady, ESP is goal directed, it focuses on the content of instruction as well as learner and teacher characteristics.

In the 1980s, learner –centered education became the fashion of the day.

Learner –centered education entailed taking into account many learner-related variables such as affective, cognitive, biological and social factors which were assumed to influence the process of language learning. Thus, including learner characteristics in the design of ESP programs became another fundamental theoretical principle in ESP. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that such an approach fails to give due weight to the importance of the learning situation in ESP curriculum design. Therefore, they believed that in order to achieve a learning-centered approach to ESP course design, a crucial modification should be made.

The learner-centered is based on the principle that learning is totally determined by the learner. Learning is seen as a process in which the learners use what knowledge or skills they have in order to make sense of the flow of the new information. Learning, therefore, is an internal process, which is crucially dependent upon the knowledge the learners already have and their ability and their motivation to use it (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). They believe that it is difficult to fault this view of learning simply in terms of the end product in the learner's mind. But learning can, and should, be seen in the context in which it takes place. Learning is not just a mental process; it is a process of negotiation between individuals and society. Society sets the target in the case of ESP performance in the target situation and the individuals must do their best to get as close to that target as is possible or reject it. In the learning process, then, there is more than just the learner to consider. For this reason they have rejected the term a learner-centered approach in favor of learning –centered approach to indicate that the concern is to maximize learning. The learner is one factor to consider in the learning process, but not the only one. In the learning –centered approach, we must look beyond the competence that enables someone to perform, because what we really want to discover is not the competence itself, but how someone acquires that competence.

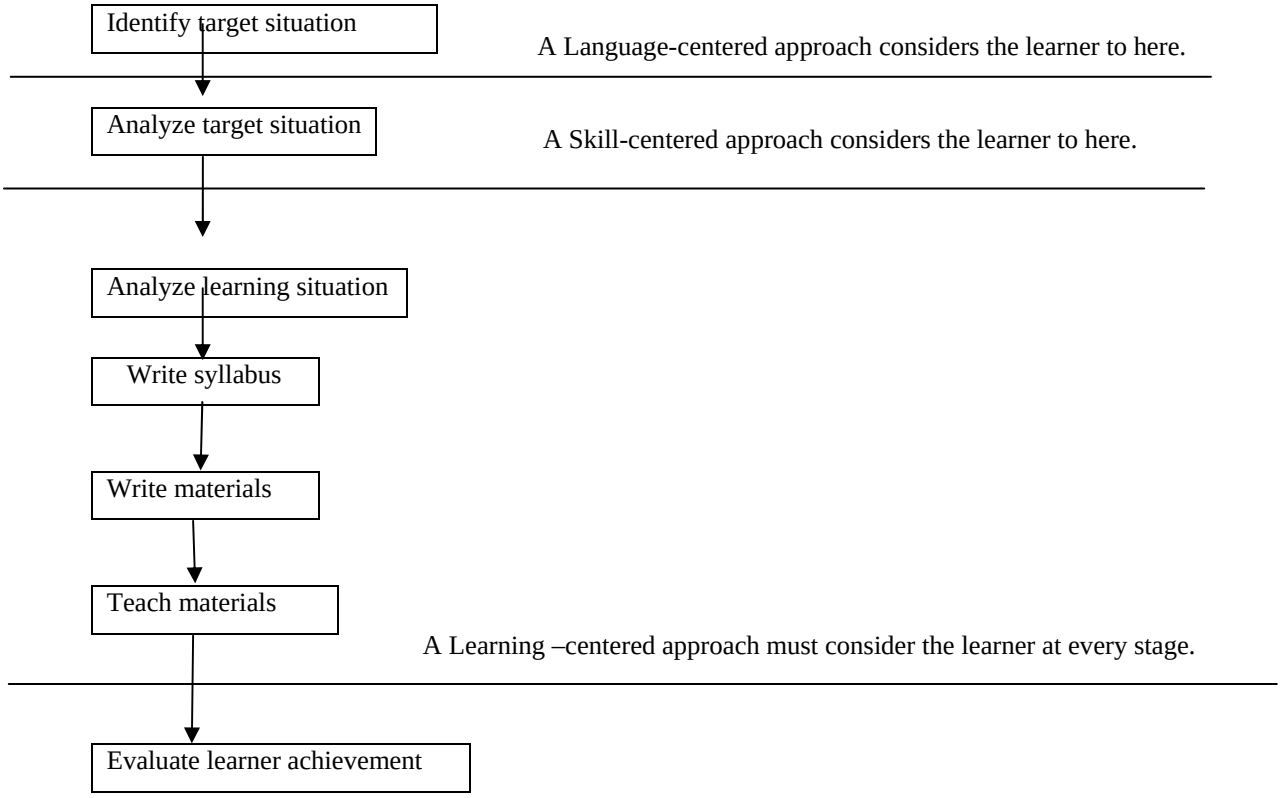

Figure 1.2.: A comparison of approaches to course design (Taken from Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p.73)