

Academic needs of Iranian business administration students in ESP classes

İranlı İşletme Bölümü öğrencilerinin mesleki İngilizceyle ilgili akademik gereksinimleri

Payman Rajabi¹
Nazli Azarpour²

Abstract

This study is conducted to investigate the academic needs of the Business Administration students in the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at Malayer Islamic Azad University. A total of 45 male senior students majoring in Business Administration were selected through random sampling. They were taking ESP as a compulsory course during their university studies at Malayer IAU. Besides, two ESP instructors who were teaching English to the subjects were interviewed to investigate their ideas about the questions of the study. The findings revealed that reading and writing skills have great importance in classroom practice while speaking got high priority in success in future jobs of these students.

Keywords: English for specific purposes, needs analysis, business administration

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Malayer İslami Azad Üniversitesinde öğrenim görmekte olan İşletme bölümü öğrencilerinin akademik ihtiyaçlarını özel amaçlı İngilizce (Mesleki İngilizce) bilgisini kullanımı bağlamında incelemektir. İşletme bölümünde öğrenim görmekte olan ve zorunlu bir ders olarak mesleki İngilizce dersleri almakta olan toplam 45 erkek öğrenci rastgele örneklem yoluyla seçilmiştir. Buna ek olarak, Mesleki İngilizce derslerini yürütmekte olan iki okutmanla da görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bulgular bu öğrencilerin derslerde okuma ve yazma çalışmalarını yoğunlukla yaptıklarını ancak gelecekte iş başarısında yüksek önceliğe sahip bulunan konuşma becerisinin daha çok önemli olduğunu ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Mesleki İngilizce, gereksinim çözümlemesi, işletme

¹ Islamic Azad University , Malayer Branch , paymanrajabi2002@yahoo.com

² Payame Noor University, Malayer Center, nazliazarpour2010@yahoo.com

Introduction

As a result of the emerging interest in learner-centered systems of language learning, needs analysis procedures appeared in language planning during the 1970s; Since then, being responsive to the learners' needs has been emphasized in designing almost any educational programs including foreign language learning. Nunan (1993) notes, needs analysis is one of the elements that distinguishes traditional views of language learning and teaching from the communicative perspective towards the issues. Richterich (1983, cited in Johnson and Johnson, 1998) defines the concept of needs analysis as a procedure which "consists primarily of compiling information both on the individuals or groups of individuals who are to learn a language and on the use which they are expected to make of it" (p.228). In another definition of needs analysis, Nunan (1988a) focuses on the information-gathering process: "techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design are referred to as needs analysis" (p.13). The definition provided by Basturkmen (1998) covers the methodology of assessing needs too: "needs analysis is the identification of difficulties and standard situations by observation of participants functioning in a target situation in conjunction with interviews and questionnaire" (p.1).

Brindley (1989), who made great contributions to the field of needs analysis, elaborated on the distinction made by Richterich (1980) between objective and subjective needs. He defined objective needs as those "which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real life communicative situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties" (p. 70). Since it is usually the teachers who will perceive the objective needs, so they can be carried out in the absence of the learner (Robinson, 1991). To assess objective needs, a need analyst may include information about students' background (e.g. country, culture, education, family, profession, age), their proficiency in different language skills, and their needs as far as the language use outside the class is concerned.

Subjective needs, on the other hand, are derived from the learner themselves (Nunan, 1988a). They include "the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation, derivable from information about affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations with regard to the

learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies" (Brindley, 1989, p. 70). To assess subjective needs, information about students themselves, their needs and wants, their lacks, their attitudes towards L2 and its culture, and learning are included.

Researchers have realized that it is not practical to teach the whole of a foreign language, as this will require more time and effort than is practically possible for the majority of learners and teachers alike. Accordingly, focusing on the reasons why learners need to learn the foreign language will enable language teaching professionals to cater for their learners' specific needs and save a lot of time and energy (Maley, 1983, cited in Ounis, 2005). On the other hand, since ESL learners have different needs due to differences in cultural backgrounds, purposes, learning styles, age, and previous education, teachers have to be aware of the problems involved in teaching students if their social and academic needs are not taken into account (Peck, 1991).

The significance of needs assessment is also noted by King (1999, cited in Martinez-Pons, 2001) who says: if the performance problem is not actually identified and instructional needs are not fully assessed, any effort by instructional developers to design instructional materials that enhance performance may fail. He goes on to say that the instructors aware of the educational needs for his institution are in a better position to prepare for the teaching-learning enterprise than one who lacks this awareness. Needs analysis may serve three basic purposes: It can be used as a means of getting wider input into the content, design, and implementation of a language programme; it can be implemented in defining goals, objectives, and content; and its data can be used to review and evaluate a current programme (Richards, 1984, cited in Nunan, 1988b).

Referring to growing demands for accountability and relevancy in public life, Long (2005) cites four reasons for performing needs analyses: First, to determine the relevance of the material to the learners' situations; second, to justify the material in terms of relevance for all parties concerned (teacher, learner, administration, parents); third, to account for differences in learner needs and styles, fourth, to create a syllabus which will meet the needs of the learners as fully as possible within the context of the

situation. Accordingly, every language course should be viewed as a course for specific purposes which just varies in the precision with which learner needs can be specified. The results of needs analyses can also be used for modifying the programs and grouping students in different programs; Valdez (1999) suggests that once the information of learners' needs has been collected, the teacher can modify the existing syllabus. Under language proficiency, for instance, students will be grouped with those having oral skills but with little or no literacy skills; with those with specific affective language and communication needs; or with those who are approximating native- like proficiency.

Needs assessment can also show the learning strategies used by students. Adapting Willing's (1988, cited in Valdez, 1999) grouping, some students are concrete learners who like using games, pictures, films, video, cassettes, talking in pairs, and practicing English outside the class; some are analytical learners who like to study grammar and English books, and read newspapers, and who like to study alone, find their own mistakes, and work on problems set by the teacher. Definitely using the same methodology and materials for all students will fail due to lack of match to their styles. Accordingly, Graves (1996) reminds that different students have different needs, and the information gathered through needs assessment can help a teacher choose what to teach and how to teach it. However, many students are not familiar with the procedure of needs assessment so they have problem in expressing their purposes or needs. They think that identifying their needs is the responsibility of the teacher or institution. Thus, as Hul (1996)) suggests, the first thing teachers should do is to make their students aware of their language-learning needs. This awareness of individual learning needs would need to encompass the linguistic, functional, and cultural learning needs of the student. As the last point, since needs may change between the time an assessment is conducted and the time services are delivered based on the results, it may happen that the services do not address the present needs of learners. Thus, formative evaluation procedures involving a constant dialogue with interested parties seems necessary to deal with the changing needs (Martinez-Pons, 2001).

Research questions

Given the necessity of assessing the English needs of ESP students, the researcher made an attempt to (a) investigate the language needs of the students majoring in business administration at Malayer IAU and (b) to examine the students' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the current ESP textbooks used in their classes, and (3) to find out the mostly preferred teaching methodology by ESP students in order to make teachers sensitive to the kinds of techniques and methods they apply in teaching English. To these aims, the following research questions were developed:

1. What skill areas are needed by business administration students in order of importance?
2. What are the most important sub-skills and language-based tasks for these students?
3. How do the subjects evaluate their language problem areas?
4. What is the subjects' mostly preferred approach to learning English?
5. What are the teachers and students' attitudes towards the currently used ESP textbook?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 45 male senior students majoring in Business Administration were selected through purposive sampling. They were taking ESP as a compulsory course during their university studies at Malayer Islamic Azad University. However, of the total sample, only 38 were selected for the final analysis. The remaining 7 subjects were discarded due to their reluctance to complete all portions of the instrument. Additionally, two ESP instructors who were teaching English to the subjects were interviewed to investigate their ideas about the questions of the study.

Instrumentation

The methodology underlying the research was both quantitative (through the implementation of the students' questionnaire) and qualitative (the teachers' interviews). The students' questionnaire (see the Appendix) included four sections and thirty eight items. The first section, addressing some demographic information, was

designed in order to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects as far as their previous experiences and backgrounds in learning English were concerned.

The second part of the tool addressed the students' perceptions of the necessity of knowing the four major language skills for their success both in the university studies and in their future jobs in the order of importance, their need of the most important sub-skills and language-based tasks, and their language problem areas. The third part of the questionnaire, dealing with the methodological issues, was designed in order to find out the subjects' mostly preferred approach to learning English; and finally the fourth section which included an open-ended question was developed to elicit the participants' opinions about the ESP textbook they were working with in order to examine the degree to which the material meets their English needs.

Results

Demographic Data

Questions one to six in the questionnaire were designed to obtain a profile of the sample. According to the responses to this section, all the sample (100%) were the male senior students majoring in Business Administration; Only 2% of the sample were employed, but their jobs had nothing to do with their fields of study. Regarding their previous experiences of learning English, 82% of the sample had studied English just as a part of their school requirements, while the remaining 18% had participated in the private institutes besides attending schools, and no one had the chance to live in an English-speaking country. Thus, the sample seemed to be almost homogeneous in terms of their major, sex, and their previous experiences and backgrounds in learning English.

Research question 1

In order to answer the first research question (What skill areas are needed by business administration business administration students in the order of importance?), the subjects' responses to items seven and eight of the questionnaire were analyzed. Item seven required the subjects to rank the four major language skills in order of their importance for success in business studies. Table 1 shows the percentage of rankings by the sample.

Table 1. Skill rankings in order of importance for success in business studies

Skill	1 st ranking	2 nd ranking	3 rd ranking	4 th ranking
Speaking	14	34	21	31
Reading	57	18	15	10
Writing	44	22	20	14
Listening	13	26	28	33

* All scores are to be read as percentages

Reading skill was ranked as the most important skill for success in their academic studies; writing was ranked the second necessary skill for achieving success in their engineering studies, and speaking and listening were ranked the third and the fourth respectively. Item eight of the questionnaire required the subjects to rank the four major language skills in order of their importance for success in their future jobs. Table two shows the percentage of rankings by the sample.

Table 2. Skill rankings in order of importance for success in future job

Skill	1 st ranking	2 nd ranking	3 rd ranking	4 th ranking
Speaking	53	28	13	6
Reading	49	23	23	5
Writing	31	28	23	18
Listening	9	21	28	42

* All scores are to be read as percentages

This time, speaking was ranked as the most important skill for success in their future jobs; reading was ranked the second necessary skill for achieving success in their job-related achievements, and writing and listening were ranked the third and the fourth respectively.

Research question 2

In order to answer the third research question (What are the most important sub-skills and language-based tasks for Business students?), the respondents' answers to items

nine to nineteen were analyzed. Looking at the column representing the 'very important' sub-skills, one finds that the respondents ranked their needs to sub-skills or language-related abilities in the following order of importance: item 17= 71% (continuing academic studies), item 9=63% (reading specialized books), item 11=61% (reading net articles), item 19=59% (others), item 10=51% (reading specialized articles), item 15=47% (participating the conferences), item 14=34% (presenting lectures in English), item 12=32% (writing reports or papers), item 16= 27% (listening to lectures), item 18=23% (giving written answers to exam questions), and item 13= 13% (note-taking). Answering item 19, 59% of the sample referred to 'letter writing' skill, which the researcher had not included in the questionnaire.

Research question 3

Students' self-perceived English abilities in different skills and sub-skills were evaluated by analyzing their responses to items twenty to twenty-six. Besides, since reading comprehension skill is the basic part of all ESP courses, the most common and frequent problems the students might face while reading a passage were also investigated by analyzing items twenty-seven to thirty-seven. Item 26 (general vocabulary knowledge) obtained the highest ranking by the students (55%), i.e. the subjects felt they had not so much problem with this language component and viewed themselves to be very good at it. Item 20 (reading ability) was the next skill the subjects (46%) felt comfortable with. The participants viewed themselves as very good in other language abilities in the following order: Items 23=42% (writing ability), 21=31% (speaking ability), 22=31% (listening ability), 24=30% (grammar), and 25=15% (specialized vocabulary). In other words, the area the subjects (62%) perceived themselves to be the weakest was 'specialized vocabulary knowledge'.

However, teachers' views proved to be somehow different from those of the subjects regarding the third research question. The two instructors believed that the main problem the students had was not the specialized vocabulary, rather the main difficulty reported was the subjects' general proficiency, i.e. general vocabulary, grammar, and the four basic skills. As stated earlier, since reading comprehension skill is the basic part of all ESP courses in Iran, an attempt was made to find out the most common and frequent problems the students might face while reading a passage.

To achieve this purpose, items twenty-seven to thirty-seven addressing the subjects' judgments of the difficulty of the reading sub-skills were analyzed.

The majority considered all language aspects as average difficult. That is, the subjects regarded the difficulties they had in different reading sub-skills mostly as medium so that in all the items (except item 35) the bars representing 'medium difficulty' were the highest. However, item 28 (fast reading with comprehension) was reported by the subjects (43%) as the most difficult sub-skill, while item 35 (looking up the words in the dictionary) was regarded as the easiest reading-related task by 61% of the sample.

A great number of the students (65%) expressed their concerns over item 27 (finding the main idea) which they believed they had difficulty to some extent. Understanding the writer's message in a text (item 33) was another difficult skill for 60% of the subjects. The other reading sub-skills regarded as average difficult were item 32=57% (understanding the grammatical structure of the text), item 34=57% (answering reading comprehension questions), item 31=55% (translation), item 29=52% (finding the details), and item 30=50% (guessing the meaning of the new words).

Research question 4

The fourth research question was designed to elicit the subjects' mostly preferred approach to learning English. To this aim, item thirty eight was analyzed. The result clearly depicts the positive attitudes of 65% of the sample towards working in small groups and the tendency of the minority (7%) to learn English individually, and 16% preferred working in pairs. The remaining 12% preferred teacher-led tutorials (may be because they have got used to the traditional mode of learning and are very dependent on the teacher), learning through listening to tapes or watching movies, or going to private institutes.

Research question 5

The last question which was an open-ended one was designed to elicit the participants' opinions about the ESP textbook they were currently working with and their suggestions, if any, for improving its quality. In this way, the researcher could examine the degree to which the material met their English needs. Besides, the same

question was asked from the two teachers while interviewing them in order to get a deeper insight of the ESP textbook, its features, and its process and conses.

The “very good” response to this item of the questionnaire (98% of the students answered it in details) could be attributed to their general concern about the ESP course they are attending and their tendency to make some changes in the system. Due to its qualitative nature, the data was subjected to content analysis which resulted in the emergence of some common points and patterns in the participants' views about the ESP course and the material used for it. The main points discovered by analyzing the teachers and the students' responses are summarized in the discussion part of the article.

Conclusion

This section presents the implications of the findings reported above. Based on figures one and two, the students did not see language skills as equally important for success in their current academic studies and their future jobs. They ranked reading as the most important skills for success in the engineering studies, which may be due to the fact that the focus of ESP materials in Iran is often on this skill. In contrasts, speaking or listening were not regarded as essential skills because the students' pass or fail in ESP course is not dependent on these two skills.

However, being able to communicate either orally or in written forms are absolutely necessary for success in their future job, if related to their fields of study. This may be the reason they ranked speaking first. The same result was obtained by analyzing the teachers' interviews. They also believed that a graduate student majoring in business administration is usually employed in factories or industrial companies where he has a great need to be able to communicate with other companies around the world; Therefore, the necessity of developing speaking skill is more felt after graduation, while developing reading skill is the key to their success during their university studies. Accordingly, reading and speaking skills should be given more priority in the curriculum.

It does not mean to ignore the other two skills. Analyzing item 19, which asked student to specify any other needs they felt to be necessary, resulted in including 'letter writing' skill to the list of the subjects' needs. This should be considered by the course designers. As the teachers mentioned in their interviews, the current book does not have any activity or exercise to develop the writing skill. Besides, the teachers repeatedly emphasized in their interviews that students are not usually aware of the great role that listening skill can play in their job-related performances. Their claim was consistent with the students' perceptions of the necessity of listening skill in their rankings too. This implies the necessity of making the ESP students conscious of the part listening may play in their career achievements. It also has an implication for course designers or authors to reconsider the current lack of emphasis on the development of listening skill, and do not limit the material activities just to those targeting at developing reading skill.

Specialized vocabulary emerged as the most problematic area in the subjects' views, and general vocabulary was the area they thought they had the least problem with. In contrast, their teachers believed that if they had enough mastery in general English abilities, they would have been able to deal with the specialized vocabulary much more easily. Since the teachers' views did not match the student's self-perceptions of their language abilities, a need for doing further research in a wider scope with a larger population is felt in order to investigate the match between teacher and subjects' views regarding the difficulty of different aspects of language for ESP students. This may enable course designers or material developers to focus their attentions more on those aspects of the language with which the subjects have more problems.

The subjects' assessments of the most difficult reading sub-skills implies the necessity of directing attentions to those areas in which ESP students have more problems. Including strategy-based teaching/learning in ESP curriculum may be one solution to this problem. Besides, students should be encouraged to read extensively in order to develop effective reading strategies and foster autonomous reading. While the learning approach preferred by the majority of the subjects of the study was learning in groups, the reality of ESP classes seems to be different. Nearly all ESP classes are teacher-led tutorials in which students are passive and teachers do everything. This implies reconsidering the kinds of teaching approaches used in such classes. More

communicative activities and techniques should be used. Definitely if the approach matches the students' needs and interests, the efforts that both teachers and students exert would come to more valuable results. Besides, using audio and video equipments in ESP classes may not only increase their motivation to learn English but also foster their learning and achievements.

As for implications of responses to the last item, the main points discovered by analyzing the teachers and the students' responses are briefly outlined here:

1. Using up-to-date materials are more motivating
2. The content of the texts should be interesting and relevant to the ESP students' needs both before and after graduation.
3. The quality of ESP books should be improved as far as typing and layout are concerned. The subjects had repeatedly complained about the typing mistakes and the absence of any informative or attractive pictures in their books.
4. The students' basic English needs should be given due attention. It was emphasized that if the students' general proficiency was improved, they would have less difficulty in dealing with specialized English too.
5. The level of ESP book should match the students' level of proficiency.
6. Given the time allocated to ESP classes (one hour and a half per week during four academic years), it is difficult and sometimes impossible to cover all the units of the textbook, no matter how important they are. Thus, either more time should be assigned for this program, or the number of units or exercise should be decreased.
7. Since most activities in ESP books are reading-based, the teachers should provide the students with extra tasks or activities with the aim of developing other skills too.
8. Learners' pronunciation should be given due attention too.
9. Using any tapes, films, or documentaries which are relevant to the students' majors is both motivating and informative.

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