Students’ perceptions of learner-centred teaching in English for specific purposes in higher education

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Abstract. Attempts to demonstrate a relationship between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and learner-centred teaching have been bedevilled by limitations of the research and the problem of aggregating students’ perceptions. The “Ramsden Learner centred questionnaire” was adapted for use in English for Specific Purposes course and administered with a survey to the students taking an ESP course in European University of Lefke. Usable responses were obtained from over 100 students. Students’ perceptions of an ESP course in higher education are strongly associated with the approach – learner centred teaching.

Keywords: ESP, general English, learner centred teaching, Ramsden learner centred questionnaire.

INTRODUCTION

The question which this paper tries to answer is “what is the impact of the teaching style on learners’ communication skills”? The primary aim of the research is to explore teaching and learning. It is concerned with how learners construct English related to their field of study that underlies their use of foreign language. This focus on learning has been motivated by the belief that it is necessary to understand as fully as possible the processes by which learners internalise knowledge of ESP in their own fields.

In the last 20 years the structure of an ESP course has changed significantly. There appears to have been increase in regarding students’ needs during the design process of ESP courses. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), ESP is a teaching program which is designed by taking into account the special needs of a particular group of students while designing the course content and the objectives.

Newly published research examines some important questions about the necessity of using a needs analysis questionnaire at the beginning of any teaching program. Berwick (1989:52) suggests a basic definition of need: a need is a “gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state”.

A good starting point, then, is to try to compare English for Specific Purposes with general English. The term – ESP exists in opposition to general English. The difference between the two types of teaching/learning is ‘in theory nothing, in practice a great deals’ (Hutchinson and Waters, 2010:53) what distinguishes ESP from general English will be discussed under three subtitles; aim, content, and structure.

Aim

All courses are purposeful – that is they are constructed with a particular goal in mind. 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 (Hutchinson and Waters, 2010:19). It should be emphasized that the awareness of the need of ESP learners is as important as the existence of a need. It can be suggested that the aim of an ESP course should guide both the teachers and the learners to discover the awareness of the need.

An ESP course aims to teach learners the necessary knowledge and skills related to their field of study. ESP
does not mean to teach the terminology of the specified field of study. An ESP student is not only required to understand the texts that are related to their disciplines but also to be able to communicate in that language. For instance, a Turkish doctor working in Britain needs to be able to communicate with his patients in English or update himself with the recent information and requirements in the field.

The aim of a general English course, on the other hand, is to help students improve their language level. Teachers in that course usually focus on everyday language. These allow students to use the language for survival needs. It has been estimated that students who prefer to study general English have no specific aims. It is often hard understanding the academic texts, speeches, or lectures of a specific field of study after completing a general English course.

Content

An understanding of content may help with the learning process both in ESP and general English. The research of a content of a language course is the key study to the underpinning of all learning and teaching activities which are carried out to learners' level of foreign language. Therefore, the study of content of a language course has become necessary for the sake of language teaching.

When the content of an ESP course is compared with the general one, it is seen that the ESP one is both more restricted to one field of study and more academic. Anyone who would like to improve their level of foreign language can benefit from a general course. The content of it is shaped by an educator/teacher who aims to teach the everyday language/survival language. This is an important and useful distinction as it contributed to conceptual clarity and helps us to decide precisely what the content of an ESP and a general English course should cover.

Structure

Structure of a course has attracted increasing attention from researchers. Some of the main characteristics of ESP and general English will be sketched under this title by considering the language skills namely speaking, reading, writing, and listening.

The fundamental nature of communication in a foreign language is largely a product of the amount of exposition to the foreign language. ESP is structurally a learner-centred course. In other words, it puts the learner in the centre of education.

As Hutchinson and Waters (2010) states, "while designing a course, the learner is taken account at every stage of the design process". During this process, the needs and resources vary with time. Therefore, the designed course, which takes account of the learners' needs, should have feedback channels for developments. Methodologically, we would need to ask further questions during the design process. A learning centred methodology will guide us explain the teaching of language skills in ESP lessons. The use of real materials and engaging learners in ESP classes are important means of motivating the learners from different disciplines. Let us look at the issue at the level of practice.

ESP is a learner centred approach to teaching English as an additional language which focuses on developing English communication skills in a specific discipline such as architecture and engineering.

Another important term - learner centred approach - has to be defined in this paper to emphasize its importance in ESP. It has been defined by many writers from different perspectives. It is an approach to teaching that focuses on student learning - rather than on what the teacher is doing. In fact, it is not one specific teaching method. Different instructional methods can use a learner-centered approach.

To understand the approach, it is necessary to compare it with the teacher centred approach which assumes that learners are passive and the teacher serves as the centre of knowledge and learning process.

On the other hand, learner centred approach requires students to be active in their learning process. Kain (2003) argues that learning is achieved through learners' engagement with various activities. In teacher centred one, the focus is almost on what the students learn because they are viewed as "empty" vessels and learning is an additive process. By contrast, in learner centred approach students' learning styles and strategies are as important as what is taught them. According to this approach learning is an active dynamic process which requires students to use their own perceptual frameworks. Learners' unique differences must be taken into account if all learners are to learn more effectively and efficiently.

As defined by McCombs and Whistler (1997:9), "learner centred education is a perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest level of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners)".

In this vein, learner centred teaching requires the learners to use their ability to apply what has been learned rather than using the traditional didactic methods of instruction to retain what they were taught. In such classes teachers are responsible for not only having classrooms that promote effective learning but also being knowledgeable about their students. Weimer (2002) stated that the responsibility for learning shifts from the
instructor to the students. The instructor creates learning environments that motivate students to accept responsibility for learning.

As was mentioned before ESP focuses on developing the language skills needed for specific field. Emphasis is given on learning language structures and vocabulary common to the professional areas of the learners. Hands-on experience case studies, group analysis, and real work simulations can be used for such an approach.

The present study investigated the teaching style of the instructor in a Cypriot university and it addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the teaching style on learners' communication skills?
2. What variables influence students' learning?

Problem

As communication is the key aim for many educational organizations, it is significant that ESP programs be based on an interactionist approach due to the need for cross-fertilization regardless of different disciplines. Hence, while developing students' communicative skills, the ESP process should not only focus on the content of a particular subject, but also should aim at triggering the incentives of the ESP teachers to educate and prepare their students as autonomous learners. For that, the individual needs of students such as prior knowledge, language and cultural background, rate of learning/amount of instructional time, interests, and attitudes should be found out through needs analysis at the beginning of any ESP program. Needs analysis is an important means of designing a course in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Therefore, the problem of this study is how EFL learners' who will work in different fields in the Asia-Pacific region perceive a learner centered ESP course.

Aim of the study

While teaching English for specific purposes, we are not only teaching English for the future of our students but also make them focus attention on what and how they are learning. Students should feel aware of this fact during their educational period through learner centred teaching. Applying a need analysis can awaken an awareness and interest in teaching students English for specific purposes. This study, therefore, aims to examine the impact of learner centred teaching in an ESP course in terms of its effectiveness in conveying learners' level of English, and to discuss how the learner centred lessons can be more effective in awakening the awareness of students' responsibilities in their own learning and involve them in learning to value and view their own and society's needs.

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed according to the principles of an experimental study based on quantitative data collection from an experimental and a control group. The following procedures were followed in the study:

1. Determining the needs of learners via needs analysis. In this study “Petrova’s Needs Analysis” was distributed to the students of architecture and interior architecture at the beginning of the semester and the most required needs were determined. The data from the respondents were analyzed statistically through percentages (Appendix A: The Students’ Questionnaire)
2. After defining the needs, which had been selected by respondents as the most required, a wide range of resources were used to compile a booklet for the experimental group. A book, which meets the needs of learners in the control group, was chosen from their specified field by the instructor.
3. Revising and adapting the course materials to increase their effectiveness in improving students’ ability to use English in their fields. For this purpose, various elements concerning real life situations and terminology were added to the curriculum (Appendix B: Curriculum of Architecture / Interior Architecture).
4. After the final examinations, Ramsden’s course experience questionnaire was administered to two different groups of students, one experimental group and one control group in two different departments.
5. Analyzing the data and finalizing the paper: the effectiveness of learner centred teaching in ESP was examined statistically and the paper finalized.

FINDINGS BASED ON THE COURSE EXPERIENCE IN ESP CLASSES

The questionnaire was administered to 107 students in total. The questionnaire was returned from 100 students in total, 37 students in the control group (teacher centred teaching in the department of Interior Architecture) and from 67 students in the experimental group (learner centred teaching in the department of Architecture). These students had just started the third grade of their departments in the same university – European University of Lefke. The questionnaire was administered to the students in the first academic term since they had not had learner centred teaching, and thus the risk of being influenced by previous knowledge of the teaching method was avoided. The results of the assessment based on the effectiveness of the teaching method are shown in Table 1. The items below examine a course in terms of appropriate assessment scale, appropriate
Table 1. The course experience in learner centred ESP class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>5 Always (%)</th>
<th>4 Often (%)</th>
<th>3 Sometimes (%)</th>
<th>2 Rarely (%)</th>
<th>1 Never (%)</th>
<th>Mean value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>To do well in this course all you really needed was a good memory</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The staff seemed more interested in testing what I had memorised than what I had understood.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I was generally given enough time to understand the things I had to learn</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.87</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The workload was too heavy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.73</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There was a lot of pressure on me as a student in this course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.71</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It was always easy to know the standard of work expected</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I usually had a clear idea of where I was going and what was expected of me in this course</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.28</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>It was often hard to discover what was expected of me in this course</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.55</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The course sharpened my analytic skills</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The course developed my problem-solving skills</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.50</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The course improved my skills in written communication</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.69</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>As a result of my course, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.29</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.21</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.34</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.36</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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<td></td>
<td>My lecturers were extremely good at explaining things</td>
<td>The course provided me with a broad overview of my field of knowledge</td>
<td>The course developed my confidence to investigate new ideas</td>
<td>I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations</td>
<td>I consider what I learned valuable for my future</td>
<td>I found my studies intellectually stimulating</td>
<td>I found the course motivating</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>36</td>
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</table>
workload scale, clear goals and standard scale, core
generic skills, core good teaching, grad qualities,
intellectual motivation, learning community, learning
resources, and student support. It is seen that students
find the learner centred ESP class well structured,
valuable for their future, challenging, and improve their
academic and intellectual skills regardless their
departments.

DISCUSSION

The findings allow us to address the two questions in the
study. The first research question was “what is the impact
of the teaching style on learners’ communication skills?”

The results indicated that the teaching style of the
instructor is teacher centred in the control group. This
finding concurs with many previous studies that reported
instructors resort to traditional, teacher centred styles in
different teaching settings for instance overcrowded
classrooms. In the present study there were 37 students
who were trying to learn English in one class. When there
are more students, teachers cannot spend the same
amount of time with each student. If a student is
struggling, there is not enough time to help them because
there are thirty or more other students. Sometimes a
teacher may not notice the student struggling or may not
have the time to give them help they need. On the other
hand, Al-Zube (2013) argues that “... in the teacher–
centred approach, there is little or no noise in the class.
This is due to the fact that since it is the teacher who
passes on the information, the students will automatically
be quiet in order to grab the necessary knowledge of the
language from the teacher”.

New trends in education support the idea of learner
centred teaching style for various reasons. The learner
centred teaching style is regarded as a concept and a
practice in which learners and teachers learn from one
another. Teachers need to design educational experiences to produce desirable learning outcomes and
provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their
success in achieving their expectations. The descriptive
results in this study along with previous research studies
indicate that learners prefer to be employed with learner
centred approaches in classrooms.

With regard to the second research question “what variables influence students’ learning?”, results in this
study indicated that relevant and up to date course
materials (32%), usage of students’ ideas and
suggestions (30%), being part of a group of students and
staff committed to learning (43%), and being able to
explore academic interests with staff and students (31%)
are important for the respondents.

These findings provide useful information for ESP
programs and instructors. Instead of looking at the
learner centred approach as a complex and inconvenient
concept, the results in this study reveal some concrete
actions instructors might want to incorporate into practice
to have achievement.

This study does not precisely indicate that variables
such as level of education or different study fields
significantly influence teaching style. Rather, it supports
the importance of expectations and the needs of learners
in the learning-teaching process. The findings of this
study suggest that factors influencing a learner’s
communication skills and learning are complex and more
research is needed to be done by considering the
individual differences.

CONCLUSION

Learner centred teaching meets individual learner needs.
It is worth mentioning that the findings of this study along
with previous research studies indicate that learners
prefer to have learner centred teaching approach in
university setting. Even in higher education for learners’
effective learning teachers are required to have certain
characteristics such as being responsible for their
learners’ learning. In other words, teachers need to care
about their learners.

One implication of this study is that ESP classes should
address learner centred approach. A good starting point
might be a need analysis. In this way, teachers could
plan learning activities by considering learners’ needs
and expectations (doing a need analysis before the
semester begins). Specific materials and activities should
be designed in ESP classes to promote learner centred
teaching. The core idea of both ESP and learner centred
teaching support learner based approaches because
both give importance to individual performance.

Due to the sample size of the study, further research
with larger samples needs to be conducted to investigate
other variables that may influence the choice of the
teaching approach. Doing a need analysis would provide
more insights into the teaching styles used by the
instructors and the variables that may influence these
styles.

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APPENDIX A

The students’ questionnaire

PART 1

1) Please, provide the following information about yourself:

• Field of study : …………………...
• Age : …………………...
• Gender : …………………...
• Native language : …………………...

2) What do you think your level of English is (underline the suitable variant):

Elementary : …………………...
Pre-intermediate : …………………...
Intermediate : …………………...
Upper-intermediate : …………………...
Advanced : …………………...

3) Do you have to use English in your job or studies at present?

Yes : …………………...
A lot : …………………...
Sometimes : …………………...
Not much : …………………...
No : …………………...

4) How much specialist knowledge do you already have in your main field of study?

Very much : …………………...
Basics : …………………...
Not much yet : …………………...

PART 2

5) Are you interested in taking an ESP course?

Yes, very much : …………………...
Yes : …………………...
Not very much : …………………...
Not interested at all : …………………...

6) How important do you think ESP is in comparison with other subjects?
More important than many other subjects : ..............................
As important as other subjects : ..............................
Less important than other subjects : ..............................

7) Do you think ESP will be useful for you?
Yes, very useful : ..............................
Yes, but not now : ..............................
I am not sure : ..............................
No, it's a waste of time : ..............................

8) Do you think ESP will be useful:
\* For using materials related to your speciality written in English?
Yes, very useful : ..............................
Yes : ..............................
Not very useful : ..............................
Not useful at all : ..............................

\* For finding a better job?
Yes, very useful : ..............................
Yes : ..............................
Not very useful : ..............................
Not useful at all : ..............................

\* For communication with specialists from other countries?
Yes, very useful : ..............................
Yes : ..............................
Not very useful : ..............................
Not useful at all : ..............................

\* For improving your general language skills?
Yes, very useful : ..............................
Yes : ..............................
Not very useful : ..............................
Not useful at all : ..............................

\* For any other reason (please, explain):
................................................................................................................................................................................
9) During your ESP course do you think you need
• to study some professional terminology in English?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to study different topics related to your speciality?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to revise English grammar?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to develop your reading skills?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to develop your writing skills?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to develop your listening skills?
  Yes, it’s the most important: ............................................
  Yes, it will be useful: ......................................................
  No, I already know all the necessary terminology: ............
  No, it will not be useful: ..............................................

• to develop your speaking skills?
Yes, it’s the most important : .....................................
Yes, it will be useful : ..........................................  
No, I already know all the necessary terminology : .......................  
No, it will not be useful : ..........................................  
• other (please, explain): .........................................................................................................................

10) What forms of work would you prefer to dominate in your ESP class? Rate the following from 1 (the most effective for you) to 4 (the least effective for you)

……..• Teacher explains a new topic and corrects my mistakes when I do exercises
……..• Analyzing language structures and trying to work with new words on my own
……..• Class discussions, role-plays/group work
……..• Songs/films/games/projects/presentations

11) Please, write about anything you would like your teacher to take into account when planning your ESP course. 
..............................................................................................................................

APPENDIX B

The list of the topics of Architecture and Interior Architecture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary exercises</th>
<th>Islamic Architecture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colour wheel</td>
<td>Middle age Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is an architect?</td>
<td>Byzantine Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The history of houses</td>
<td>Romanesque Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonehenge</td>
<td>Gothic Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture of Egypt</td>
<td>Renaissance Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Greek Architecture</td>
<td>Baroque Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Roman Architecture</td>
<td>Rococo Architecture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>