

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 Schmith (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 a 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.

No.	Items	5	4	3	2	1	Mean value
		Always (%)	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)	Never (%)	
1	To do well in this course all you really needed was a good memory	15	38	29	13	4	3.46
		26	23	35	14	2	3.36
2	The staff seemed more interested in testing what I had memorised than what I had understood.	0	6	25	36	33	3.96
		22	11	24	42	1	3.73
3	I was generally given enough time to understand the things I had to learn	28	40	23	9	0	3.87
		27	40	22	6	4	3
4	The workload was too heavy	22	42	24	11	1	3.73
		26	45	11	15	2	3.28
5	There was a lot of pressure on me as a student in this course	1	11	28	36	24	3.71
		19	40	19	8	4	2.82
6	It was always easy to know the standard of work expected	17	42	34	7	0	3.69
		32	27	19	18	4	3.36
7	I usually had a clear idea of where I was going and what was expected of me in this course	45	26	15	11	2	3.28
		38	15	29	13	4	3.46
8	It was often hard to discover what was expected of me in this course	2	13	16	29	40	3.55
		42	17	34	7	0	3.69
9	The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member	36	35	12	16	1	3.42
		20	46	28	3	2	3.09
10	The course sharpened my analytic skills	19	30	36	13	2	3.51
		40	13	34	11	1	3.4
11	The course developed my problem-solving skills	33	19	29	17	2	3.50
		29	42	19	5	4	2.87
12	The course improved my skills in written communication	17	42	34	7	0	3.69
		36	29	21	5	8	2.97
13	As a result of my course, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	15	27	34	20	4	3.29
		33	32	22	5	8	3.16
14	My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work	7	26	29	1	36	3.21
		35	36	16	12	1	3.42
15	The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work	15	30	32	20	3	3.34
		36	25	6	33	0	3.96
16	The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going	27	32	19	18	4	3.36
		11	1	36	28	24	3.71
17	The teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work	20	32	30	17	1	3.42
		23	28	30	9	8	3.05

Table 1. Contd.

18	My lecturers were extremely good at explaining things	34	40	13	11	1	3.4
		36	29	26	7	1	3.21
19	The course provided me with a broad overview of my field of knowledge	38	17	30	12	2	3.4
		20	24	43	4	9	3.06
20	The course developed my confidence to investigate new ideas	35	26	23	14	2	3.36
		40	34	11	13	1	3.4
21	I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations	22	33	32	5	8	3.16
		17	30	38	12	2	3.4
22	I consider what I learned valuable for my future	20	42	21	12	5	3.15
		30	19	13	36	2	3.51
23	I found my studies intellectually stimulating	24	38	24	4	9	3.09
		30	32	15	20	3	3.34
24	I found the course motivating	46	20	28	3	2	3.09
		38	24	24	4	9	3.09
25	I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning	43	20	24	9	4	3.06
		27	34	15	4	20	3.29
26	Students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course	30	28	23	8	9	3.05
		19	33	17	2	29	3.50
27	I learned to explore ideas confidently with other people	40	27	22	4	6	3
		20	21	12	5	42	3.15
28	I felt I belonged to the university community	21	36	29	5	8	2.97
		13	2	29	16	40	3.55
29	I was able to explore academic interests with staff and students	31	31	26	8	3	2.93
		28	23	9	40	0	3.87
30	The study materials were clear and concise	25	30	30	8	6	2.9
		42	17	34	0	7	3.69
31	It was made clear what resources were available to help me learn	29	19	42	4	5	2.87
		25	30	30	6	8	2.9
32	Course materials were relevant and up to date	32	31	18	9	9	2.84
		19	30	37	5	9	2.81
33	I was satisfied with the course and careers advice provided	29	19	40	8	4	2.82
		31	32	9	18	19	2.84
34	Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this course	37	30	19	9	5	2.81
		31	26	31	3	8	2.93

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-Zu’be (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

Vocabulary exercises	Islamic Architecture
Colour wheel	Middle age Architecture
Who is an architect?	Byzantine Architecture
The history of houses	Romanesque Architecture
Stonehenge	Gothic Architecture
Architecture of Egypt	Renaissance Architecture
Ancient Greek Architecture	Baroque Architecture
Ancient Roman Architecture	Rococo Architecture
