EFL Students' Perspectives on EAP Courses: A Data-Driven Study

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Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (Specialized English) has been vastly explored through theory-driven and questionnaire-based studies. However, exploring students' perceptions of the materials and methods used in EAP classes has remained relatively unexplored. To give voice to EAP students, this data-driven study selected 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students through purposive sampling procedures and explored their perspectives and suggestions through open-ended qualitative interviews. Students' perspectives were then analyzed and conceptualized according to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1991). The cyclical process of data collection continued until the emerged categories and propositions were saturated. The credibility of the findings was also verified through member checking. The constant comparative technique yielded a set of propositions which reflect students' perceptions of EAP practice and suggestions for improvement. Among other things, the participants suggested that EAP instruction can be enriched by adding reading fluency instruction to reading comprehension instruction, going beyond teaching subject matter instruction, responding to the students' needs, which was found to be speaking rather than reading, and replacing lecture-based instruction with discussion-based instruction. Since these suggestions give voice to EAP students, they have clear implications for both EAP materials writers and instructors.

Key words: EAP, university students, teaching strategies, suggestions, perceptions

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 1960s, ESP has been rapidly growing and as a result of globalization, it has become an integral part of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching around the world (Poedjiastutie, 2017). Due to the upsurge of international interactions and exchanges, the need to have people who know not just general English, but to have an extensive English knowledge on various specific fields has increased (Beshaj, 2015). With this in mind, universities in Iran deliver EAP courses to students in order to help them tackle communicative problems in their respective disciplines (Khodi, 2016). Students require ESP/EAP courses to master both their English language and professional knowledge (Popescue, 2012); however, a number of studies (Akbari, 2014; Aliakbari & Baghayeri, 2014; Atai, Babaii, & Nili-Ahmadabadi, 2018; Khoshsima, Saed & Ghasemi, 2014; Mostafavi, Mohseni & Abbasian, 2021) suggest that students are not satisfied with the EAP program and claim that it does not meet their needs. Iranian students also claim that EAP courses do not fulfill their needs since the classes are predominantly teacher-centered and the time dedicated to this course is very limited (Rajabi, Kiany, & Maftoon, 2012). Moreover, Boroujeni and Moradian-Fard (2013) mentioned that ESP courses in Iranian universities are not satisfactory and

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do not lead to learning the language and it also shows that traditional approaches of teaching is being used in the classes.

Although the results of the foregoing studies clearly indicate that EAP students are dissatisfied with EAP methods and materials, they may not reflect the reality of what happens in practice in EAP classes since, more often than not, they studied students' perceptions through questionnaire that have been developed by people who are alien to the practice of EAP. Although some of these studies (e.g. Jafari-Pazoki & Alemi, 2019; Zand-moghaddam, Meihami, & Ghiasvand, 2018) followed a mixed-method approach, the qualitative part had a marginal role. To provide the field with an insider view of EAP practice and give voice to EAP students, the field is in need of qualitative studies that explore EAP students' perspectives through open-ended interviews. To fill in this gap, this study followed a data-driven approach to conceptualize EAP students' perceptions of practice and explored their suggestions for improvement. The results of this data-driven study are significant in that they complement the results of theory-driven or questionnaire-based studies

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

Since English is spreading rapidly in different parts of the world (Crystal, 2003) and students feel the need to gain sufficient language skills for international communications, English language has gained a prominent role in language learning courses, especially English for specific purposes (ESP). English for academic purposes (EAP) as a branch of ESP is intended to satisfy the special language needs of the students who are studying in different disciplines at universities. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP courses are taught to students for a specific time, during which they are going to achieve the required level of English ability they need to study their international textbooks and communicate with the professionals in their fields of study. Due to this fact, nowadays Iranian students are becoming more aware of the importance of being equipped with English language skills, both oral and written (Zand-Moghaddam, Meihami, & Ghiasvand, 2018).

ESP is defined as teaching and learning of a foreign or second language where learners' goal is to use the language for a specific domain (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). The focus of this definition is on how learners can be competent in a particular domain of English, which is an essentially practical goal of the broader field of applied linguistics (Williams, 2014). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) mention that ESP is not a result or product, but it is an approach to achieve a result. They point out that ESP is not teaching "specialized varieties" of English; it is not about teaching vocabularies and structures, and considering the educational methods. Moreover, it is not different from other teaching methodologies.

Apart from the importance of considering students' needs, and the qualities of teachers in designing ESP classes, the materials being taught in the classroom is also emphasized. As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state, ESP materials being presented in the classroom should be "real language"; hence, materials development for ESP courses has a key role in exposing students to the language of a particular domain. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) explained that students' needs and goals are the first step of designing materials and they presented a four-element model for ESP materials consisting of input (any piece of communication data like text, video, etc.), content (language should not be considered as an end but means of conveying information), language focus (a chance to take language apart and study it carefully and put it back together), and task (a communicative way of giving students a chance to use content and language knowledge they have). In this regard, clear understanding of the objectives will pave the way for teachers to make sure about how to design ESP materials and how to teach them to students. Therefore, it can be mentioned that ESP materials selection should depend on students' needs analysis and the materials should concentrate on appropriate topics and include tasks and activities that practice the target skill areas.

Needs analysis in English for academic purposes, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), incorporates two types of needs, the first type is target needs which refer to what students are supposed to do in the target situation. The second type is learning needs which refer to how students learn (Paltridge, 2012). They consist of the students' specifications such as age, language proficiency, language learning reasons, and also about the time and location of EAP courses. Therefore needs analysis assesses the difference between the present situation needs and the future needs of the students (West, 1994). Furthermore, Nunan (1988) distinguishes between objective needs and subjective needs. The former is concerned with the real information about the students such as their language proficiency while the latter deals with the mental and emotional needs of the students in the learning situation.

Many scholars (e.g., Brown, 2009; Long, 2005) emphasized the importance of needs analysis in ESP/EAP courses. To their belief, the awareness of such needs can be considered as the differentiating point between general English and ESP/EAP. Belcher (2009) delineates need analysis to be an essential part of EAP course design and teachers should implement it as part of their teaching. To perform needs analysis, various data should be derived from different sources and the stakeholders such as EAP teachers, students, practitioners and professionals.

Teachers are required to perform a needs analysis as an initial step to determine the language needs of the students. They may use this information not only to design EAP courses and develop EAP materials, but also adapt their teaching methods based on the students' real needs (Kaewpet, 2009). Based on the results of the needs analysis data, teachers are able to design EAP courses tailored specifically to the students' wants and necessities, and develop the instructional materials and teaching strategies in order to provide students with the skills and abilities they may need both for their work places and educational institutions.

2.2. EAP in Iranian Setting

Over the last twenty years, the study of specialized discourse has burgeoned, and considering English as lingua franca of this globalized world, English for Specific Purposes has gained a significant position in language studies (Williams, 2014). Parallel to the developments in worldwide and regional setting, Iran was also attempting to westernize its society and industry as a premier country to adopt English language as its foreign language (Foroozandeh, 2011) and was also among the first countries to join the camp of ESP (Swales, 1985).

The history of EAP courses in Iran goes back to the early 1960s when there was a joint collaboration between Western and Iranian universities, whose aim was to provide EAP programs mostly for engineering and medical students (Riazi, 2005). These programs were mostly targeted at improving the learners' reading ability in discipline-specific fields (Atai, 2000).

After the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1978, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) decided to publish uniform discipline-based EAP textbooks for universities. Therefore, various EAP textbooks for the students of different disciplines such as engineering, sciences, and medicine were published. These EAP programs were aimed at meeting the students' specific needs in different fields of study, which accordingly caused the increase in the students' motivation and interest. Nevertheless, the main problem was that these programs did not follow any systematic needs analysis, hence the real needs of the students and teachers were not satisfied (Alavi, Kaivanpanah, & Taase, 2018; Atai, 2000; Zand-Moghaddam, Meihami, & Ghiasvand, 2018).

The EAP programs in Iran constitute a general English course taught by language teachers, which is followed by 1 or 2 EAP courses which are usually instructed by content-specific teachers. The EAP courses in Iran are principally aimed at teaching and enhancing students' academic English through reading skill; the EAP students are supposed to read such content area texts in English, and be able to translate them into their L1, i.e. Persian (Atai, Babaii, & Nili-Ahmadabadi, 2018).

Regarding the EAP used in Iranian context, it is worth mentioning such textbooks follow a uniform format, which consists of one or two reading comprehension passages, followed by some

comprehension exercises, vocabulary definitions and analysis, and some grammatical exercises. At the end of each lesson, there are some short field-specific passages related to students' disciplines to be translated from English to Persian.

Contrary to the uniformity which exists in EAP textbooks mainly published by SAMT publication, EAP programs lack such uniformity in course preparation procedure, teacher development, methodology, and evaluation (Atai 2000; Soodmand-Afashar & Movassagh, 2016). Therefore, a thorough inquiry into the real EAP classroom practices and the students' perceptions seems necessary in order to judge the success of EAP courses in Iranian contexts.

2.3. Empirical findings on EAP courses in Iran

Numerous studies have probed into the students' perspectives regarding the usefulness of various EAP programs in Iran, whose results were more or less confirming each other. Some studies collected numerical data through the administration of questionnaires. Among other things they found that:

- the students favored the communicative activities while the status quo revealed the same form-focused grammar translation dominance in Iranian classrooms (Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, & Quiroz, 2007);
- only the reading skill and the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary received enough attention (Zand-moghaddam, Meihami, & Ghiasvand, 2018);
- students and teachers' perceptions nearly varied on the students' needs in listening and grammar, but they agreed on listening, speaking and writing (Ranjbar & Soodmand-Afashar, 2021);
- students were more satisfied with the receptive skills of reading and listening than the productive skills of speaking and writing. Moreover, the ESP courses did not meet the communicative needs of the students when staring their postgraduate studies (Mostafavi, Mohseni & Abbasian, 2021);

A second group of studies moved beyond numerical data collection and analysis. Following mixed method, they found that:

- neither the students nor the teachers enjoyed the power active in policy-making (Atai, Babaii, & Nili-Ahmadabadi, 2018);
- students prioritized general English over EAP course since the participants reiterated the importance of developing their general English before starting EAP courses. Similarly, instructors emphasized general language proficiency and oral communication skills before EAP courses (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008);
- EAP courses did not pay suitable attention to the four skills, but the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary received proper attention. Analysis of the students' perspectives revealed that more attention should be given to communicative skills and designing communicative materials (Zand-Moghaddam, Meihami, & Ghiasvand, 2018);
- explored engineering students' motivation in ESP classes and identified four components of motivation through a principal component analysis. The qualitative part of the study revealed that the course contents and materials were outdated and didn't satisfy the students' needs, and students expected learner-centered classes and students' more participation (Jafari-Pazoki & Alemi, 2019);
- there are some deficiencies in both policy and practice and suggested a reconceptualization of policy-making and practice in order to reach an acceptable status of EAP programs in Iran (Iranmehr, Atai & Babaii, 2018).

3. Purpose of the Study

As the review clearly shows the previous studies are predominantly quantitative in nature. Although some studies explored students' perspectives through both questionnaires and interviews, the qualitative part lacks in rigor and credibility since the researchers did not elaborate how they collected and analyzed interview data and they rarely specified how they established the credibility of the qualitative findings. Another major problem with these studies is that instead of starting from the bottom up and exploring EAP students' and teachers' perspectives, they imposed the

researchers' perceptions and perspectives on EAP courses since without exception the questionnaires used in these studies rarely reflected EAP students and instructors. As Benesch (1996, 2001) asserted, in these studies, students are kept at the consumer end. She asserts that students should be given more voice and power in this power hierarchy. To fill in this gap and give voice to students who have always been at the consumer end of EAP initiatives, this study aims at presenting an emic or insiders' view of EAP by entering the classroom, interviewing EAP students and conceptualizing their perspectives. More specifically, it aims at answering the following grand tour questions:

Research Question One: What are students' perceptions of the techniques teachers use in teaching EAP?

Research Question Two: What are students' suggestions and recommendations for improving the quality of EAP courses?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Following a non-statistical sampling procedure, i.e., purposive sampling procedure, this study is based on the perceptions of 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students who showed informed consent to participate in this study and share their experience of learning English in EAP courses. This sampling procedure was selected because it enables the researchers to choose participants who can provide the researcher with rich information rather than those who have been randomly selected. As suggested bygrounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1991), the number of participants was not predetermined. Iterative data collection continued until the emerged concepts and categories reached a point of theoretical saturation. Participants were taken from different universities in Behshahr, Mazandaran province. All of them had passed their EAP courses or they were doing the EAP course in the current term. In short, having explained the purpose and rationale of the study and having sought participants' consent, the researchers interviewed 10 graduate and 10 postgraduate students in different fields of study.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The initial round of data collection started with a briefing session which aimed at establishing rapport, clarifying the purpose of the study, and assuring their informed consent to participate in the study. Each participant was then asked to share their perceptions of EAP practice and their suggestions for improving the status quo. Followinggrounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1991), during the process of data collection, the researcher acted as a passive listener. However, at times, she asked some clarification questions which aimed at having a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions and suggestions. The data were audio-taped and transcribed word for word. This initial round of data, was then analyzed based on the coding scheme presented by Strauss and Corbin (1991). The emerged concepts and categories were used to develop more refined questions and gather theoretically-relevant information. Iterative data collection and analysis continued until transient concepts and categories reached a point of theoretical saturation. Finally, the credibility of the findings were established through member checking or showing the final conceptualization to the participants. What follows reflects an abstraction which was verified by the participants.

5. Results

Iterative data collection and analysis yielded the techniques that teachers use in implementing EAP courses together with learners' suggestions for improvement or what they expected of the course. A subsequent analysis of the learners' perspectives revealed that learners divide the techniques used by teachers into empowering and limiting techniques. What follows aims at: (1) presenting the techniques and learners' suggestions for improvement, (2) and grounding the emerged techniques in the participants' perspectives.

5.1. Empowering Techniques

5.1.1. Teaching The Key Vocabularies

Improving students' vocabulary knowledge helps them understand the text better. In other words, vocabulary learning will ease the process of comprehension. Pre-teaching the key vocabularies prior to reading the text is one of the most effective strategies in fostering students' comprehension skill (Mousavian & Siahpoosh, 2018). According to this, one of the participants explains how lexical complexities are tackled prior to reading comprehension:

> *Before reading the passage, the teacher used to write a list of vocabularies on the board, which were also highlighted in the passage, and then some of the students were called to pronounce the words. Afterwards, we were given the Persian equivalents of the vocabularies with no further explanation, then the teacher would start reading the passage. Becoming familiar with the most important words of the text facilitated reading comprehension.*

Pre-teaching vocabulary is an efficient way to improve students' reading skill because in this way, the teacher is trying to master one component of a language at a time and then integrate it with other more complex skills or components. Nation (2001) argues that although vocabulary comprehension is not equivalent to reading comprehension, reading comprehension is not accessible without vocabulary knowledge. Consistent with this, another participant expresses similar concerns and explains familiarizing students with difficult words increases their level of confidence:

> *Whenever I face difficult or challenging vocabularies inside the text, I easily get anxious. A good point of our ESP class is that the teacher highlights the challenging words of the text, and before reading the passage he would give all the definitions of the words, i.e. Persian equivalents. Knowing the key words of the text, not only makes me a bit more confident, but also makes the text more comprehensible.*

Understanding words' meanings is vitally important because it directly affects comprehension. Nababan (1993) mentioned that the vocabulary component is the central core of numerous ESP programs. Clarifying the challenging words prior to reading not only facilitates comprehension but also improves students' reading fluency skill. One of the participants explains:

> *In our ESP course, my teacher used to introduce a list of vocabularies before reading the text. Having practiced the pronunciation of the words, the teacher asked us to restate or explain the new word in our own words. Before reading the text, we were asked to guess the meaning of the words and then the teacher would give us the Persian equivalents of the vocabularies.*

5.1.2. Teaching Grammar

Grammar is the sub-skill which in fact provides EAP students the way how to understand the meaning of the sentences, or how to properly use the vocabulary they learn in their EAP classes. Students need to know both vocabularies and grammar to form a sentence and comprehend the content. One of the participants explains how the ESP teacher taught grammar while teaching the passage:

> *After reading the passage for the first time and analyzing each sentence to get the meaning of that sentence, the teacher would highlight the most salient*

grammatical points of that sentence. For example, if there were a passive sentence in the text, the teacher would explain how to make a passive sentence. In this way, at the end of each unit, we would learn some grammatical points of the passage.

Undeniably, linguistic competence cannot be ignored in ESP classes and it has important roles in learning ESP. among the general principles that Ellis (2005) proposed for successful instructed learning is that teaching should be in a way to make sure that students gain a wide range of "formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence". Therefore, learners in ESP classes should obtain an acceptable fluency in ESP communication by using their formulaic expressions, and also a good knowledge of specific grammatical rules by using their rule-based competence. In this way, they can acquire an acceptable command to communicate ESP concepts. Considering the importance of grammatical points, one of the participants maintains:

Having read the texts and analyzed them semantically, the teacher would highlight the most important grammatical structure used in those passages. For instance, in one unit, the passage consisted of passive sentences; so, the teacher would start teaching the grammatical point of that specific sentence. Of course, the style of teaching was completely traditional and rule-based and never would the teacher ask us to use the newly-taught structure in a piece of writing or whatsoever.

Pop and Berariu (2016) maitain that "Despite being considered obsolete, grammar teaching/learning has given generations of fluent foreign language speakers, although some methods such as the teaching of sets of rules failed to make more fluent speakers and writers and were, therefore, discontinued" (p. 76). However, some ESP teachers believe that ESP course should concentrate more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. Based on this, one of the participants explains:

Grammar had been briefly taught in our ESP course. Besides the reading book which the teacher had provided, we were given a grammar pamphlet with some of the most important grammatical structures like verb tense, pronouns, conditional sentences etc. However, the grammar part of the class was somehow self-study by which I mean that the teacher just shortly explained the grammatical point and we were responsible for further practicing.

5.2. Limiting Techniques

5.2.1. Exclusive Focus on Reading Comprehension

Reading is a crucial component in learning a second or foreign language. In this study, almost in all of EAP classes, the focus of reading an English passage is to derive meaning. Overemphasizing reading comprehension results in ignoring other aspects of reading like fluency and reading strategies. In this vein, one of the participants explains how the ESP teacher focuses on reading comprehension and totally ignores other aspects:

In the first session of ESP course, we were given a pamphlet which contained a series of reading passages for mechanical engineering students. Each unit consisted of a reading passage along with a series of reading comprehension questions. To present the passage, the teacher read the passage sentence by sentence, expecting us to give the correct answers to the comprehension questions. Decoding the text semantically was the main teaching principle that the teacher used and scant attention was given to fluency or other reading strategies.

Teachers' mere focus on reading comprehension and overlooking other parts of language like pronunciation and sentence intonation are deeply rooted in their inefficient linguistic repertoire, since some of the ESP teachers are not language teacher. Definitely, ESP teachers should provide the learners with suitable linguistic and strategic competencies, through which students are capable of increasing their academic competence independently (Ghafournia & Ahmadian-Sabet, 2014). However, since the ESP teachers are mostly field-specific teachers, their linguistic competency is under question (Davoudi-Mobarakeh, Eslami-Rasekh, & Barati, 2014; Mashhadi-Heidar & Abassy-Delvand, 2015). As Hayati (2008, p. 155) mentioned, "knowledgeable teachers are those familiar with the English language (form) on the one hand and the technical information (content) on the other." In this regard, one of the participants declares:

> *The primary techniques for reading, in my ESP program, was reading for comprehension. Neither the teacher nor the students would pay attention to pronunciation, accent, or intonation. The teacher, an expert in the specific field, would read the passages out loud with a terrible intonation and wrong pronunciation, asking the students to focus on the meaning, to pave the way for them to answer the comprehension questions. Since the teacher was not a language teacher, his linguistic performance was not satisfactory, and he cared too much to the content.*

Undoubtedly, reading comprehension plays a significant role in second language acquisition and it is considered as a dynamic process. Students in ESP courses need novel techniques that enable them to have full comprehension of what they have already read. However, most ESP courses rely heavily on the conventional techniques of reading instruction which simply involve reading the text, explaining its meaning, and answering its questions. Based on this, one of the participants mentions:

> *One of the main techniques in comprehending reading passages was to find the main idea of the text. In the first few sessions of our ESP class, our teacher explained how to find the main idea of each paragraph and the whole text. So, while reading, our teacher used to ask us to explain the main idea of the text. Unfortunately, the teacher was not fluent in reading the text and hence did not work on students' fluency, either.*

5.2.2. Inadequate Use of Translation

One of the most used techniques in ESP classes is translating the text from the second language into the mother tongue. Translation can improve comprehension since it encourages the students to read a passage carefully and precisely at the word, sentence and text levels (Van Els et al., 1984). In this regard, one of the participants explains how the teacher used this technique in the class:

> *Translating the texts was the most-used technique of my ESP class. In order to make sure that students fully comprehended the texts, the teacher would translate the texts sentence by sentence into L1, and while doing that he asked us to focus on some technical words as well. There were, of course, no interaction between students and the teacher, and he, himself, would translate the texts. So, this solid and boring technique was the main medium of teaching and learning.*

When translating a text, students come into contact with all the main ideas and specific details of a reading passage (Mahmoud, 2006).Translation should be used as a guide for ESP students and assist them through practical synonyms and explanations. Put it in other words, translation should be used

in the class in order to impart students with useful comments, so as to compensate students' language difficulties. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

> *Translating the key words and the reading passage word by word from English into Persian was the main technique of my ESP course. Sometimes, students were asked to translate the reading passage at home, and then we just read our dtranslated works without being instructed some rudimentary strategies of translating. While translating from English to Persian, the teacher would not put emphasis on the structure of English, and it was as if we were in a Persian class!*

Translation has a positive and facilitative role in an English class. However, some scholars (Carreres, 2006) believe that translation into L2 is impracticable because it pressures learners to continuously view the foreign language through their L1; such reliance on L1 hinders free communication in L2 (Mogahed, 2011). In this vein, one of the participants explains:

> *Translation played a key role in my ESP class. Having read the reading passage, the teacher would translate the text into our L1 thoroughly. The excessive use of this technique made the class and the learning process boring. We used to listen to the teacher and write the word by word translation. Moreover, focusing too much on mother tongue, there was no chance of learning English more communicatively.*

5.3. Suggestions For Improvement

It seems that EAP students are not prepared for professional communication in English in their fields of study. Having interviewed university students, it was revealed that they were not satisfied with the techniques used in their ESP course. Problems such as ignorance in reading fluency, speaking and writing skill, lack of students' involvement in ESP classes etc. lead students to the following suggestions for improving the course. Traditional methods of teaching ESP cannot meet the needs and objectives of the learners.

5.3.1. Adding Reading Fluency Interventions

It is well established that reading process entails two separate yet highly interrelated areas, i.e., fluency and comprehension. However, fluency interventions are usually ignored in language teaching system in Iran because language teachers mainly emphasize reading comprehension (Ostovar-Namaghi, Hosseini, & Norouzi, 2015). Although it is well known that using techniques for enhancing automaticity and fluency is critical, ESP teachers underestimate the necessity of this skill. Based on this, one of the participants explains:

> *Well, in my opinion, parts of a language should not be separated. Focusing on one aspect of reading (comprehension) and ignoring the other important dimension of it (fluency) causes nothing but inefficiency and failure. Reading fluency was an ignored precious skill in my ESP course albeit its importance and necessity. And I do suggest ESP teachers to add the ingredient of fluency in teaching reading to foster students' reading ability.*

It should be noticed that struggle in word recognition and fluency extremely influences readers' ability to efficiently comprehend what they are reading. Being considered as an imperative skill of reading, fluency is almost always denied in ESP courses. In this vein, one of the participants mentions:

> *Efficacious reading comprehension requires not only accurate reading skill but also automatic and fluent reading ability. Due to a false premise that only reading comprehension should be emphasized, in our ESP course, the absence of reading fluency technique was unfavorable and detrimental. As a postgraduate student in mechanical engineering field, I do not have the confidence to read a text out loud because of my deficiency in reading fluency. Thus, I recommend the syllabus designers and teachers to consider fluency in ESP textbooks and the process of teaching and learning.*

It is worth noting that the importance of reading fluency is twofold. For one thing, fluent readers are more eager to read and reading fluency is also a pre-requisite of reading comprehension. Along the same lines, one of the participants explains the necessity of combining fluency and comprehension together in ESP classes:

> *Being a university student, it is crucial for me to be capable of reading an academic text smoothly with proper speed and intonation. However, I was deprived of any guidance in deepening my fluency techniques from high school to university; from General English Course to ESP. Unfortunately, my teacher was unaware of the importance of developing reading fluency in ESP course. I would really enjoy a class in which I could learn to be a fluent reader beside the ability of comprehending texts!*

5.3.2. Going Beyond Teaching Subject Matter

Analysis of the participants' perspective revealed some sort of dissatisfaction with the way EAP is presented. The reason could be that EAP teachers were ignorant of techniques and principles of language teaching. In other words, instead of teaching English, they mainly taught subject matter. Participants believed that EAP teachers should systematically integrate techniques of language teaching with techniques of teaching different subject matters. Supporting this perspective, one of the participants explains:

> *I think ESP is not just about learning and teaching the subject matter, indeed it should combine the subject matter and English language teaching. A combination of these two can be motivating since it will reinforce students to apply what they have learnt in a real context or in other classes. However, in my ESP class, the focus was only on the subject matter and the grammatical point was almost ignored.*

Since the focus was on subject matter, teachers did not have time to present grammar and even when they presented it, they did not know how to present it systematically. Participants believed EAP instruction will improve greatly if grammar instruction is taken as an inseparable part of EAP courses. Knowing grammar enables students to correct their mistakes and improve their writing, therefore it can be said that grammar is an indispensable aspect of a language. Based on this perspective, one of the participants explains:

> *Our ESP teacher thought teaching grammar was totally useless, but how is it possible to learn a language without knowing its structure? As a postgraduate student, I think grammar cannot be acquired naturally, it needs to be taught. However, I was deprived of any grammar-teaching in my ESP course. I want to take a moment here and recommend ESP teachers that "we, students, DO need*

grammar, and this course would be more fruitful for us if it encompassed this component of the language".

While EAP teachers ignored grammar or defined a marginal role for grammar instruction, the participants believed that it should be considered a core component of EAP instruction. Actually the use of bad grammar can be annoying and egregious. Grammatical errors on everything from letters to e-mails often make a poor impression of the speaker. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

As a postgraduate student, there are some occasions in which I have to send an email or write a letter to a native speaker of English to ask for some information on a special issue about my field of study. Nonetheless, we are not equipped with this language skill . Not only the teacher is not able to teach the grammatical structures, but also no grammatical points are provided in the syllabus.

5.3.3. Leaving Room for Writing Instruction

The proficiency in different language skills and sub-components of the language is of utmost importance. Inefficient teaching in ESP classes may stem from ignoring learners' needs and expectations. Based on this perception, one of the participants explains:

I think writing skill is one of the most demanding skills for postgraduate students. Due to the extension and development of technologies, we need to improve our writing skill for various purposes such as writing papers for conference presentation, and writing a report or email for different type of communication.

Writing has always been regarded as a prominent skill in learning a second language. However, it seems that ESP teachers do not put much time and effort on it. The ignorance of writing skill in ESP classes causes real problems for students such as committing a lot of lexical and structural mistakes, writing run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs. One of the participants explains:

I think reading, writing and grammar are necessary for both undergraduate and graduate students. Competency in writing skills to fulfill the requirements of the postgraduate program, such as writing M.A. thesis, PhD dissertation, research proposals, essays and abstracts, is a necessity.

The ability to summarize is considered an important part of writing. In higher education summarizing is invaluable for students. Writing a summary can be considered as the most important writing skill. Since students should have the ability to summarize before they learn other types of writing. In this vein, one of the participants mentions:

An ESP course should not only be about reading skill. Students should be able to write and summarize the main points of the passage. And this requires students to be capable of integrating reading, writing, and grammar.

5.3.4. Responding To the Learners' Needs

Another vivid discrepancy between EAP teachers and students is that while EAP teachers take reading instruction as their major concern, learns believe speaking instruction is far more important. To solve this problem, the participants believed that EAP instruction should be responsive. In other words, it should respond to the learners' needs. Specifying their major concern and priorities, one of the participants explains:

> *I think the development of speaking skill should be a goal in ESP class. However, in many ESP situations, improving speaking skill may be beyond the scope of class. Of course, in a typical class of 50 students with two hours of class time, it is impossible to give everyone the same amount of practice. I think the class time should be much more than two hours a week so that the most important skills of a language are practiced inside class.*

In many universities in the world, ESP teachers want to continue their education in, say, reading strategies, listening or writing skills. Teachers who maintain an active agenda to improve their English speaking skills are fewer in number. Normally, speaking skills exercise has turned into one of the most demanding tasks for ESP teachers, principally since it is difficult to provide each student with feedback. On behalf of this perspective, one of the participants maintains:

> *Oral activities ought to be used systematically and should support and push learners to produce spoken output to provide opportunities for cooperative interaction. Pair work and group work are favorite activities which substantially increase students' speaking time; however, the teacher is not able to provide sufficient immediate feedback to all students.*

The language proficiency level in a classroom determines whether students are capable of using language in the class or not. Homogeneity and maturity of students are also important factors to consider. Considering students' level of proficiency and their needs, it can be decided to practice speaking skill or not. In this regard, one of the participants mentions:

> *One problem in ESP course is that students are not homogeneous. I mean the level of learners' proficiency is not the same, which is a big challenge for ESP teacher. Not all students in a class are capable of using language, so in this situation providing speaking practices is an inefficient use of class time. Although my classmates were perfect in speaking English, I had even difficulties in reading an English passage. And since the weaker students outnumbered the sharper ones, the teacher used the traditional way of teaching, i.e., translating.*

5.3.5. Replacing Lecture-Based Classes with Discussion-Based Classes

According to the participants of the study, ESP teachers seem to have a vital role in the classroom giving instruction with little input from students. Since the teacher decides the goals of the class based on some outside criteria, ESP classes place students in a passive rather than an active role, which hinders learning. Based on this assumption, one of the participants mentions:

> *One major drawback of our ESP course was the negligence of interaction among the learners. In my opinion, teachers should be aware that interaction can facilitate language development and communicative competence. Interaction and cooperation contribute to language development simply by providing opportunities to practice the target language.*

The debate of teacher-centered vs. student-centered classrooms has been in the forefront of scholars' minds for many years. ESP classroom in Iranian context seems to be exclusively teacher-centered where students have to put all their focus on the teacher (Hayati, 2008); furthermore, any collaboration among students is discouraged. In this vein, one of the participants explains:

> *It is true that ESP students are not so proficient and competent in using English to make the class totally learner-centered; however, participating in a merely teacher-centered classe is really boring since students are not allowed to express their ideas. For example, different types of reading comprehension exercises for technical texts can be recommended specifically on scanning or skimming.*

Student-centered instruction embraces occasions in which students may have interaction with each other. Implementing group/pair work in ESP classes can be effective in motivating students, encouraging active learning, developing critical thinking, communicating and decision making skills. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

> *One major flaw of ESP course is its crowded classes which inhibit the teacher to use any creative and motivating strategies in teaching this course. Still, if we had a class of 20, the teacher would still utilize the old methods of translating numerous texts and teaching special lexicons. Activities such as group/pair work, negotiation, and discussion let students be autonomous to work together to learn on their own. The appropriate use of these strategies in ESP course can provide a valuable learning experience to students and give them the opportunity to practically experience the ideas and strengthen their learning.*

5.3.6. Replacing One-Way Translation with Two-Way Translation

It is obvious that in Iranian context, ESP teaching and learning is still limited to training technical terminologies and translating numerous texts from English to Persian. Translation provide learners some information about the language but not how to use it. Translation does not also help them develop their communication skill. In this vein, one of the participants explains:

> *Translation is a frequently used strategy for teachers which is also appreciated by learners. However, the mere use of translation in the class can be counterproductive. As an ESP student, I do need the meaning and translation of the text to get the main idea of the passage, but sometimes translation should be on the other side as well, i.e. from Persian into English in order to support and improve my writing skill.*

Teachers' emphasis on translation does not and should not mean that other skill areas out to be neglected. Since the ability to function adequately in writing skill continues to be an important goal of EAP students, it is incumbent upon teachers to identify effective strategies for teaching writing skill. Accordingly, one of the participants explains:

> *Well, translation is a conscious activity through which a message is reconstructed and recreated in the target codes according to the original message in the original text. It is taken for granted that translation is a facilitative tool in making a text comprehensible. But the main shortcoming in implementing this strategy in ESP classes is that most of the teachers do not consider this strategy as a two-way process. As an MA student, I need the ability of translating passages from Persian to English which is totally neglected in this course.*

It must be noted that though today's most innovative methods have originated from the earlier traditional methodologies, these new methods and approaches have often put aside the deep-rooted procedures of the old methods rather than reconsidering them. It may be considered some comfort

for the experienced teacher to be aware that yesterday's 'old-fashioned' method has come back, albeit in a slightly different form. Based on this notion, one of the participants explains:

> *Translation is considered as an effective means of forcing students to read texts thoughtfully and to concentrate on the lexical, grammatical and textual levels, and improving general knowledge. Since translation is of utmost importance in almost all ESP courses, it is better to integrate this strategy with other language skills. I mean teachers can teach students how to translate a text from their native language into the target language, which indeed demands the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and writing skill of target language.*

5.3.7. Using Technology to Complement Traditional Instruction

EAP teachers should be aware of the fact that they are not just merely teaching EAP. They are teaching EAP to the web generation; hence, to improve EAP instruction, instructors should present materials through modern technology such as blog-integrated writing in EAP (Asoodar, Atai, & Vaezi, 2016), online EAP classrooms (Keshtiarast, Salehi, Tabatabaei, & Baharlooie, 2021) and interactive whiteboards since today's generation learns best through technology. Owing to the development of technology and the availability of computer and its utilization in different fields of specialization, it will be very facilitative and motivating for at least the contemporary generation to be taught using the technology in the class. Following this idea, one of the participants explains:

> *We have large ESP classes full of learners with different learning strategies and learning styles. Consequently, we have to make use of modern technologies in our classes or otherwise the traditional audio-visual aids to meet our learners' needs and to motivate them. In addition, there should be a variety of activities such as presentation, problem-solving, and role-play to make the teaching and learning process more up-to-date.*

Actually, the students are more concerned with how to pass the tests rather than to attain any improvement in the language skills. Moreover, the teachers themselves put more emphasis on the content rather than the language skills which are essential for the students. Hopefully, the situation has changed in the recent years and the teachers are becoming more aware of the necessity of need analysis when they are designing their teaching materials to satisfy the learners' goals. In this line of thought, one of the participants explains:

> *The traditional way of teaching ESP through translation and reading comprehension practices has become so cliché and boring. ESP teachers should consider more innovative ways to involve students in teaching and learning process. One innovative way, in my opinion, is to use videotaped material for special field of study, for example some short movies for computer engineering students. There are a number of reasons why video is a great resource in ESP classes: it helps bring a subject to life, the language in video is more natural which will help students hear natural pronunciation, stress and intonation; videos can make a lesson memorable and last but not least, the language is set in a realistic context.*

Nowadays there are hundreds of ESP materials, particularly textbooks, suitable for teaching. However, an experienced and motivated teacher tries to find his golden mean in using the textbook and enrich his classes with other materials to react, motivate and satisfy the students' immediate

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learning needs. One of such materials is video programs which seem to be attractive for both experienced and inexperienced students. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

> *It is true that in any language class the most efficient and beneficial type of video is an authentic video which provides students with an authentic model of speech and can develop particular skills and language structures through different kinds of activities. The teacher can use documentaries, public information videos, or biography videos about a particular field of study and then through brainstorming, group or pair work students can highlight the academic glossary or write a summary so as to develop their listening as well as writing skill.*

6. Discussion

As the review of the empirical findings shows, EAP courses have been explored through the use of questionnaires, which rarely reflect EAP instructors' and students' perspectives. Although questionnaire-oriented studies shed some light on the practice of EAP, many of these questionnaires reflect the researchers' presuppositions about what happens in these classes. In this study, we did our best to bracket our preconceptions and presuppositions about EAP and present an emic or insiders' view of EAP practice. In other words, instead of standing outside the fishbowl, observing it, and measuring it objectively through questionnaires, which were found to have met the psychometric criteria for measurement, we did our best to enter the fishbowl and present the field with a subjective interpretation of EAP. In other words, to get an emic view of what happens in EAP courses, we collected the perspectives of those who actually experienced it and analyzed these perspectives consistent with principles and procedures of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

Iterative data collection and analysis yielded two core categories: one reflecting how the participants' perceived EAP practice, and the other one describing and abstracting the participants' suggestion for improvement. As shown in the results section, the participants had both positive and negative perceptions of EAP practice. Their positive perceptions were rooted in EAP teachers' empowering techniques such as teaching the key vocabulary and grammar. Their negative perceptions were related to EAP teachers' limiting strategies such as exclusive focus on reading comprehension at the cost of other skills and inadequate use of translation. They believed that EAP instruction can be enriched by: (1) adding reading fluency instruction to reading comprehension instruction; (2) going beyond teaching subject matter instruction; (3) leaving room for writing instruction; (4) responding to the learners' needs which was found to be speaking rather than reading; (5) replacing lecture-based instruction with discussion-based instruction; (6) replacing one-way translation with two-way translation; and (7) using technology to enrich EAP instruction.

Analysis of the participants' perspectives show that they are dissatisfied with EAP instruction since EAP materials, methods and instructors focus exclusively on reading comprehension. The results of this study seem to correspond with the findings of Boroujeni & Moradian-Fard (2013) and Mostafavi, Mohseni and Abbasian (2021). This may be rooted in the fact that ESP courses do not meet the communicative needs of the students when staring their postgraduate studies or entering their communities of practice. The study also conforms to the findings of Atai (2000), and Soodmand-Afashar and Movassagh (2016) which claim that lack of uniformity in course preparation procedure, teacher development, methodology, and evaluation can be another underlying cause of learners' dissatisfaction. These EAP courses have a limited view of reading instruction since the participants believed reading comprehension and reading fluency instruction complement each other.

Moreover, the participants believed that EAP instruction should go beyond reading to cover other language skills such as speaking and writing. These perspectives lend support to Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, and Quiroz, (2007) who found that EAP students favored the communicative activities while the status quo revealed the same form-focused grammar translation dominance in

Iranian classrooms. They also verify Zand-moghaddam, Meihami, and Ghiasvand's (2018) study, which shows that in EAP courses only the reading skill and the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary received enough attention. Being data-driven, the findings of this study not only shed some light on previous findings, they also add unique perspectives which complement the questionnaire-based findings.

7. Conclusion and Implications

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; hence, instead of imposing our perspectives on EAP materials and methods, we should make a case in the opposite direction. That is, EAP theory and practice should be improved by accommodating the perspectives of EAP instructors and students. The authors of the present study maintain that conceptualization of students' perspectives, which reflect their real needs and wants in EAP courses, can be effective in designing EAP courses and modifying the mainstream practice, which is currently dominant in EAP classes. Accordingly, this qualitative research conceptualized students' perspectives, as one of the main stakeholders of EAP programs in Iran, and elicited their suggestions as how to improve these courses. The results evidently show that EAP teachers' practice is not in some cases in line with the students' expectations which were elicited based on an emic view in needs analysis. Moreover, the students suggested some practical aspects for the modification of the course, and accordingly a critical change in the teachers' priority in EAP material presentation.

Taking the perspectives of the participants of this study into account, it is essential that policy makers, materials developers, syllabus designers, and instructors:

- deepen and enrich EAP instruction by adding exercises and tasks that are conducive to the development of all language skills.
- not take reading fluency interventions for granted and develop it as a prerequisite to reading comprehension;
- replace one-way translation with two-way translation and focus predominantly on translation from the learners' mother tongue to the target language since in an English speaking context, they should be able to translate the background subject matter knowledge into English not the other way round;
- enrich EAP instruction through the use of technology since the web generation learn best through technology;
- move away from lecture-based classes towards discussion-based classes by integrating language skills and letting students exchange their subject matter knowledge through pair-work and group work.

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