

Students' perspective of ESP in IT classroom: challenges and opinions

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Abstract: *ESP has become a crucial part of every EFL curriculum. Hence, there are numerous challenges that both students and teachers encounter during their classes. This paper deals with potential problems that students face in ESP classroom, their attitudes towards the content and perspective of ESP classes and materials, as well as implications and recommendations for future methods and resources used in ESP classrooms. For the purpose of the study, we conducted a survey among students to examine their attitudes and to investigate their perspectives of ESP classes and materials. The paper presents the results of a survey conducted among IT students. The main research instrument used in our study was a questionnaire combined with a semi-structured interview and a small-scale needs analysis. The results show that students are aware of the importance of ESP and are motivated to improve their level of professional English in order to be successful in their future careers. The findings also show that most of the students' value authentic materials and speaking activities, which were both evaluated as positive aspects of ESP classes. These findings can help us design future ESP curricula and overcome difficulties and challenges in an ESP classroom.*

Keywords: *ESP, needs analysis, tertiary level of education, non-English majors.*

1. INTRODUCTION

ESP (English for specific purposes) has become one of the main areas of interest for both teachers and students.

Teachers have come to a conclusion that general English is simply not enough for students of non-English majors, and students (especially final-year students) realized that their knowledge of professional terms and language specific to their field of study is pretty modest. Hence, both teachers and learners have been trying to improve their approach to ESP teaching and learning.

However, there have been many difficult areas and challenges when it comes to ESP. General English itself can be challenging for non-natives and ESP has certain characteristics that differentiate it from both ESL (English as a Second Language) and EGP (English for General Purposes), which makes it even more complicated. In addition to that, ESP does not have a very long history, since it has been actively used since the 1960s and is still being reshaped and modified. It has survived many changes, in terms of materials, teaching methods, approaches and course books.

Nowadays, we have numerous options for teaching ESP for different fields, but there are still many discrepancies and areas to improve. Different institutions and different countries use different approaches. A more unified approach is something

which is definitely needed, but in order to have that, we need to analyze not only the teachers' perspectives, but the students' opinions and needs as well, since ESP, more than any other field of English requires teamwork: well-prepared and trained teachers and students who are open to being actively involved in every step of the class.

In our paper, we are going to present the students' perspective of ESP classes, from their opinion on materials, didactics, drawbacks and gaps, to suggestions for further steps.

2. THE ROLE OF ESP TEACHERS

The role of an ESP teacher is not the same as a role of a General English teacher. As Hutchinson and Waters stated "in contrast to the General English teacher, the ESP teacher is faced by a group of learners with certain expectations as to the nature, content and achievements of the course" [1]. Very often, an ESP teacher needs to cooperate with other specialists from the field, in order to understand the vocabulary that they teach. Also, an ESP teacher is often a guide, a mediator, something more than a teacher, since in ESP classes, a student-centered approach is more valuable and better accepted than any other approach. An ideal situation would be for the teacher to use subject-specific materials, but unfortunately, resources (both in terms of time and

finances) are not always ideal, so teacher's role is to try to meet all demands and still fulfill everyone's needs and desires. Hence, systematic change is needed not only to change approaches to ESP teaching but also to change the role of ESP teachers and learners.

3. THE POSITION OF ESP IN HIGHER EDUCATION – THE NEED FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS

One of the main pre-conditions for a successful ESP course is to know who we teach and what outcomes we expect. In order to know that, we need to have proper needs analysis as the first and foremost step. Also called "Needs Assessment", needs analysis has one aim: to help us design a reliable and effective curriculum, by determining why a certain group of learners need (or want) to study a language.

The term "analysis of needs" was originally used in the field of language teaching by Michael West in 1926 [2]. However, many decades after that, needs analysis was completely disregarded, but it resurfaced again during the 1970s as a result of work and intensive studies conducted by the Council of Europe team [3]. This team wanted to help adult learners improve their knowledge of English and they intended to do so by implementing communicative approach [4].

What has been true from that moment on is that without proper needs analysis, we would never be able to improve the goals and outcomes of ESP classes. Precisely because of this reason, needs analysis requires more attention in the first place, and in accordance with that, research and discussion from everyone in the community of higher education, not only policymakers, but students and teachers as well. Only after that can we discuss course books and approaches to teaching and learning ESP.

As Basturkmen observed more than 15 years ago, one of the main problems of ESP (in the world and in Serbia) is the lack of literature [5]. With the internet and widespread use of online tools the situation is slightly improved but not so changed in the past 15 years.

So, in order to try to improve it, we need to gain insight into the students' and teachers' perspectives regarding this issue.

Our first step toward a better ESP education is to examine students' perspectives of ESP classes and to identify the main problems and difficulties when it comes to studying ESP.

For the purpose of this study, we conducted research, as it will be further described in the paper.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In our research, we used a questionnaire, designed for the purpose of this study, which had both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions (Likert scale, yes/no questions) in order to investigate the students' perspectives regarding ESP classes and materials.

Since the survey was both quantitative (the questionnaires) and qualitative (open-ended questions), the methodology combined both approaches.

The questionnaire included 14 questions, which are further elaborated in the paper.

Questions one to three were given in order to obtain demographic data and observe the profile of the respondents.

Questions four to ten were designed in order to gain insight into the students' previous experience in studying English and their current status. Finally, questions 11-14 were open-ended and were designed to elicit the participants' attitudes about ESP in general and the ESP course, methodology and materials that were used during the course.

The purpose of this survey was to assess their needs, opinions and suggestions regarding ESP.

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 50 first-year students of Software Engineering at the State University of Novi Pazar. Initially, there were 67 of students who participated in the survey, but 17 questionnaires were discarded, since they were not fully completed. Most of the students share similar demographic data: 45 out of 50 participants are 19 years old, whereas 2 of them are 20, one is 21, and two of them are 22 years old. As for the gender, the majority of participants is male, as it is often the case in technical sciences, so there are 38 males, and 12 females in our sample. All of our participants have studied English before, either in elementary school, high school or in both schools.

When it comes to their current level of English, 37 participants assessed it as B1, 8 participants as B2, 3 as C1 and 2 participants thought that their level of English was at A2 level. As it was later observed on their final exam, most of the participants were in fact somewhere between B1 and B2 levels.

5. RESULTS

5.1. General English

In the following part, we asked our students to elaborate on their opinions, needs and attitudes toward General English. The detailed information about this part of the survey is given in Tables 1-3.

Table 1. Students' opinions and needs regarding General English

Question	To pass the exam	For future education	For future job	To be able to communicate with foreigners
Why do you need English?	2%	0	91%	7%

Table 2. Students' opinions regarding their weak points in General English

Question	Reading skills	Writing skills	Speaking skills	Grammar
What would you like to improve in your English?	1%	5%	85%	9%

Table 3. Students' opinions on most and least useful activities in General English

Question	Conversation practice	Reading professional texts	Listening to professional dialogues	Grammar activities	Writing activities
What kind of activities are most useful for you?	95%	3%	0	2%	0

Table 4. Students' opinions on most difficult activities in General English

Question	Conversation practice	Reading professional texts	Listening to professional dialogues	Grammar activities	Writing activities
What kind of activities are most difficult for you?	38%	7%	3%	29%	23%

As we can observe from our results, the students in our sample think that they need English in order to get a job or to be successful in their future careers, since more than 90% of them share that opinion.

This was not surprising, since they are aware that IT is a field where they cannot do much without solid knowledge of English. This might be the reason why most of them are actually motivated to improve their English, which can be seen by their attendance and exam results.

The majority of the students in the sample would like to improve their speaking skills (85%), whereas there is a small number of students (9%) who think that they have problems with their grammar and that it is something that they should work on.

Almost all of them (95%) also agree that speaking classes are the most useful classes for them, whereas there is a small number of students who value reading and grammar activities as the most important ones (3% and 2%, respectively).

However, what is interesting is that although writing activities are difficult for 23% of the students, that is not something that they think they should work on or consider useful for them. On the other hand, speaking activities are difficult for more than one third of our sample (38%), but remain both the most useful activities and activities that most of our student wish to improve.

5.2. ESP classes and needs analysis

In the following part, we present the results regarding the students' opinions on the course books and materials used in their classes, on their self-assessment of their vocabulary from the IT field, and finally we provide students' opinions on

what they actually need when it comes to ESP classes.

Question number 10 (How well do you understand vocabulary from your field of study, i.e., IT English?) shows us the students' own perception of their knowledge. For this question, we used a 5-point Likert scale which contains 5 response options. It consists of two extreme sides and a neutral option linked to the middle answer options.

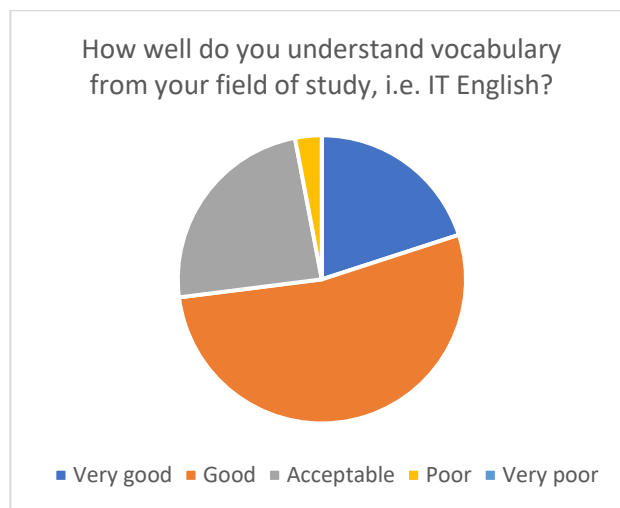


Figure 1. Understanding ESP vocabulary

As it can be observed from the chart, most of the students are pretty satisfied with their vocabulary from the IT field, since 53% of them chose "good", whereas 24% think that their IT vocabulary is on an acceptable level. On the other hand, almost 20% of them consider their IT vocabulary to be very good. Only 3% of our students chose the option poor and nobody chose the option very poor.

In the following part, questions 11 and 12 were two-choice questions, so it was simple to analyze the answers.

As for question 11 (Does the current book used in English classes meet your learning needs?), the students' opinions were divided, since almost half of the students were satisfied with the book used in their English classes and 51% of them responded with yes and the other half thought that General English book is not the best option for them.

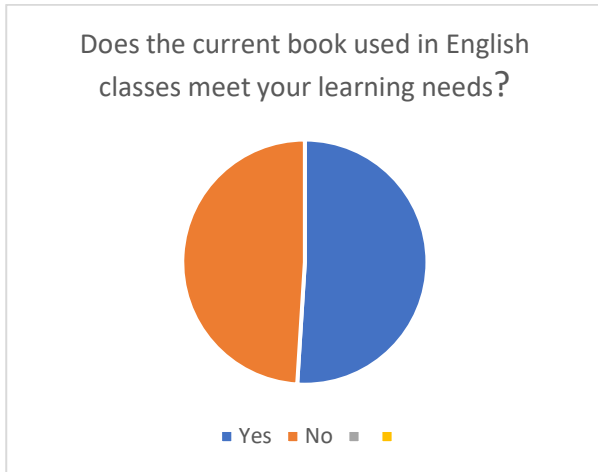


Figure 2. Opinions on the book used in classes

The following question (Question number 12) shows us that the students actually prefer ESP materials, or materials specific to their occupational field, having in mind that 78% of them chose that option over General English. However, they are still pretty satisfied with the current book they use, which is a General English book, since it gives them an opportunity to improve their grammar, whereas an ESP book was used to focus on their vocabulary and for some additional activities.

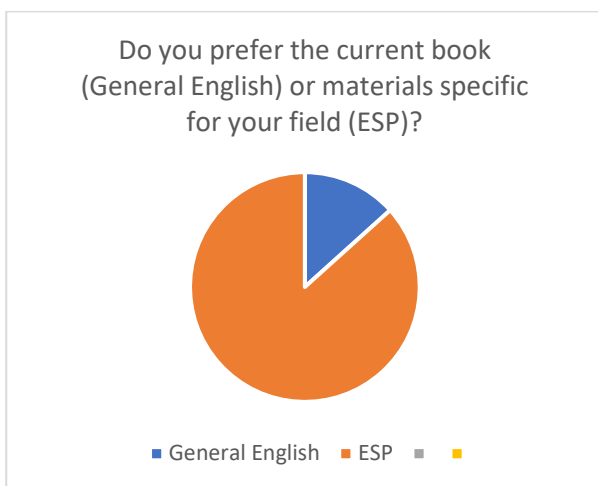


Figure 3. Preferences regarding materials used in classes

Questions 13 and 14 were open-ended questions and due to that, our respondents answered differently.

When it comes to question number 13 (What kind of materials would you like to use in English classes?), the most repeated answers were "ESP materials" and "business English materials", along with "debate materials" and "role play materials". It can be concluded that these students value speaking activities more than any other kind of activity.

Finally, one of the most important questions in our survey and the question which belongs to needs analysis is the very last question: What do you need to learn in English classes?

We are going to present only responses which were repeated more than 3 times in students' answers.

One of the most common responses was "I need to practice conversation for my future job" or "I need speaking to be able to communicate with clients", along with "for business communication". The answers that concerned future jobs or which mentioned the word career/business/clients were the most common, almost 50% of the sample.

In addition to these answers, some students think that they should learn more grammar, since there were around 20% of the respondents who wrote "a little grammar", "tenses" or just "grammar" in this part, 9 of them to be more precise.

The remaining part of our students responded differently; some of them think that they should learn more vocabulary (5 of them, or 10%), some think that they need to learn how to communicate better and some think that their listening skills and/or writing skills could be improved.

However, these answers were not in majority, so they were not representative.

6. DISCUSION OF THE RESULTS

Our results show us that the majority of the students who participated in our survey need English for their future jobs and that they are well aware of that fact. Hence, a great number of them would like to improve their professional vocabulary, along with their speaking skills, since they think that those are the most important aspects of their English.

ESP books are a better option for them, according to their responses, although half of them think that the book they use in their classes (General English) meets their needs. This answer, however, might not be completely honest, since the survey was not anonymous and maybe the students did not want to state that the book chosen by their teachers was not the best option for them. On the other hand, they did use materials from one ESP book and authentic materials, along with their course book, so they were able to assess what suited them better.

Based on the students' needs and desires, we can also conclude that they would like to use more

authentic materials in their classes since they wish to improve their Business English and to work on their IT vocabulary. This is not a surprise, since, as Blagojević points out, the introduction of authentic teaching material to the classroom is an important part of teaching ESP [6]. Since the use of authentic material implies reading, comprehension and interpretation of the texts which are written by native speakers for non-pedagogical purposes [6] but also real-life situations, debates, role-plays and interviews are good options for implementing these materials. Additionally, as Manić and Vučo [7] observed, student motivation to learn technical vocabulary increases when the ESP course is related to the subject matter of other professional subjects. And as it is commonly known among ESP teachers, a constant issue permeating the planning and realization of the course "ESP" has been the one regarding student motivation for this course [8].

So, if these materials could increase students' motivation, they should be implemented more and hence improve their overall results regarding learning and acquiring ESP.

All this should be taken into consideration when designing a curriculum for ESP, especially for IT students.

Since the majority of our students expressed their desire and necessity to improve the vocabulary needed for their field of study and future jobs, IT vocabulary is another area for improvement for them and teaching that vocabulary has to be approached carefully. It is very important, among other things, not to teach ESP vocabulary out of context, as individual words [9]. As it was noted by other researchers, the context in which those words appear, along with appropriate tasks and activities, increase not only the acquisition of the vocabulary but the students' motivation in general [10].

Finally, as it was previously stated, almost all of the students agree that speaking skills are something that they value the most and something that they want to improve further. Thus, more speaking activities are needed in their classes

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

English is very important for IT students, since most of them will use it for their future careers and they will not be able to find a job without an appropriate level of English.

Based on our questionnaire, our students do have a certain level of General English, but they want to improve their professional English and our results are valuable in way that they show us what aspects should be taken into account when teaching them. Moreover, the data and the results obtained in this survey could help us improve ESP classes and, more importantly, design a better course syllabus,

after taking into consideration the student's desires, opinions and needs.

However, our survey has certain limitations, the most important one being the sample size. Although 50 students are not a small sample, it would be more representative if there were more participants. Also, students who completed this questionnaire had already passed their English exam, hence their attitudes towards the materials might have been better due to that.

Additionally, the overall level of English of IT students is usually better than that of students of other majors, so it would be good to repeat the survey with students from other fields.

All things considered, it does provide some insight into ESP needs and areas for improvement, since ESP is one part of language teaching (and learning) which requires constant innovations and all of us who are part of it should be open to changes and improvement.

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