

Exploring the Factors and their Effects on ESP Students' Low Language Performance

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Abstract: English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses are usually taught in almost all disciplines in universities to help students develop their English proficiency in relation to their respective fields of study. Sometimes these courses happen to be quite challenging and cause learners either to fail in the ESP courses' exams or to gain very low marks. Hence, the present study aimed to explore the factors and their effects on students' low language performances in these courses. A quantitative research design was applied where 100 participants were chosen from departments of physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics in Education Faculty at Badghis Institute of Higher Education. Two types of questionnaires were used as data collection instruments. The results showed three main factors that strongly influence the low language performance of participants in ESP courses. These factors included the students' English background, ESP textbooks, and the teaching methodology of the ESP teachers.

Keywords: Factors, poor English performance, ESP courses

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INTRODUCTION

ESP courses are designed for a specific group of students, and the materials on the ESP courses are relevant and based on the student's specialized field of study (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011) and the needs of the learner (Zhang, 2007). The development of ESP textbook materials is the primary means of building English proficiency and attitudes among ESP students (Nooreen & Arshad, 2010). Therefore, the process of curriculum development in ESP courses is structured according to many elements such as needs analysis, goal setting, and implementation.

(Kim, 2009), states that one of the most important factors for the efficiency of an ESP course is the responsibility of an ESP teacher to analyze the needs and the course language adaptability with the students' level. However, since university ESP courses are elective and students think they only need to take these courses to complete the required credits, sometimes these courses are not taken seriously by students or faculty members. As a result, learners produce significantly low performance including failing or obtaining low scores in the ESP courses' exams. It mainly happened to the ESP students at the Education Faculty of the Badghis Institute of Higher Education where a very large percentage of the students had such poor performance and mass failures in their exams.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the main factors and their effects on the low language proficiency of ESP students. This study is important because it provides ESP teachers with the diagnosis that would be helpful for them to teach ESP courses differently and more effectively, where they can help learners overcome their poor language performance in ESP courses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

ESP students mostly have low language performance in ESP courses. They sometimes have great difficulty dealing with the ESP courses that barely can pass this course with low marks in exams. Therefore, many types of research have been conducted to examine and evaluate the factors that lead to poor language performance in ESP students. According to (Salehi, 2015) *et al*, the factors causing poor performance in ESP courses are because these courses are limited only to learning specific words, grammar points, and translating texts, which disregard learners' interests, needs, and low motivation. (Loan, 2017) Also conducted a study upon finding the affective factors causing students' low English performance in ESP courses at the faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy in Thaibinh University, Vietnam. The participants of the study were 82 second-year undergraduate students. The Likert scale questionnaires were used as a data collection tool. The results showed that the learning activities in ESP courses are poorly designed and do not contribute to learning. Similarly, (Mawere, 2012) conducted a study in Mozambique public schools to examine the underachievement of ESP learners learning English in ESP courses. In this study, 90% of respondents' perceptions were that teachers were not qualified. (Souriyavongsa, 2013) *et al*, on the other hand conducted a study to generally find out the factors causing students' low performance in learning the English language skills in the National University of Laos. This investigation aimed to explore student-teachers weakness towards English learning as a foreign language at the Faculty of Education. To collect data the question "Why Lao student's weak in English?" was administered to 30 student-teacher respondents to provide their views. The results indicated several factors for poor performance: 1) The teachers are not

well trained and use the Loe language. 2) The students' English proficiency is poor. 3) Due to shyness and fear of making mistakes, students lack confidence in speaking English. 4) The curriculum is not well designed to help students improve their English skills.

To find out the main factors for ESP students' low English performance, some researchers focused on the evaluation of ESP textbooks and their compatibility with the student's needs and levels. It was found that the ESP textbooks chosen for learners were not well designed to meet the students' level and needs. For example, (Zafarghandi, 2017) *et al*, conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of an ESP course offered to psychology students at Tonekabon Islamic Azad University. In this study, a needs analysis was carried out to identify the main needs of the students and to assess the extent to which their ESP courses met these needs. The needs analysis was carried out using questionnaires. The findings indicated that the ESP textbook seemed insufficient and incompatible with the student's needs; however, the teacher's teaching method was believed to be comprehensive. Overall, it was concluded that some required changes should be made in both textbook materials and some specific techniques to help students achieve their goals. In addition, (Thein's, 2006) *et al*, study on evaluation of ESP textbooks revealed that the ESP courses were not suitable and not carefully chosen since they neither stimulated critical thinking nor did they improve communication skills such as real-life language use. Therefore, the ESP textbooks and teaching materials should be evaluated and developed effectively.

Therefore, conducting a needs assessment is a mandate for the selection of ESP textbooks or the

development of ESP course materials that meet the needs and levels of students. According to Hutchinson and Waters (as cited in Hatam, 2012), in case of evaluating ESP classes, evaluating the course and assessing the students are highly prominent because from one hand it depicts the learners' level of performance and on the other hand, it could reveal the effectiveness of the textbook.

There are various ways of evaluation. For example, (Ansari & Babayi, 2002) introduced three types of tests to assess the level of learners, including a placement test, an achievement test, and an aptitude test. (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011) suggest formative and summative assessment. Also, for evaluation of a textbook, (Cepon, 2008) presented three kinds of evaluation including pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and post-use evaluation.

Research Questions

- What are the most affective factors for ESP students' low language performance in ESP courses?
- To what extent do these factors have effects on the students' poor performance?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 100 undergraduate students; 32 female and 68 male, who were from four departments such as physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics in the education faculty of Badghis Institute of Higher Education. The participants' age ranged between 18-23 years old. (Table-1 shows more details).

Table-1: The participants' demographic data

Age	Male	Gender Female	Total
19	11	6	17
20	17	21	38
22	16	1	17
21	10	4	14
18	5	0	5
23	9	0	9
Total	68	32	100

Data Collection Instrument

The instrument used in this study ranged from two types of questionnaires. The First one was a five-point Likert scale by (Loan, 2014) which was adapted and used in this research. It comprised 2 sections and 24 items. The information gleaned from the participants, in this questionnaire, was on the following themes: English background knowledge (8 items) and ESP textbook (16 items). The items in the first theme included questions relating to students' background knowledge such as interest in English, the effectiveness of school's English books in improving their English,

studying English in the past, the participants' English before starting university, and understanding English teacher's lessons. The items in the second theme included questions relating to the ESP textbook such as its materials (i.e. vocabulary, structure, practicality in real-life language use, and learning activities). The second type of questionnaire was developed by the Ministry of Higher Education comprising 15 items used to evaluate teacher's teaching methodology in terms of teaching management, paying attention to the presence of students, stating the general objectives of the lesson before starting the lesson, teaching the lessons

following the course policy, mastering the course contents, using body language, presentation clarity, updating students with new resources, using technology, appreciating homework, assessing students, and concluding by the end of the lesson.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed among participants in two days so that more attention is paid when filling the questionnaire by the participants. Filling the questionnaires, the participants were supported with any technical or non-technical information they demanded. Also, it was notified that filling the questionnaire has no effect either on their scores or on their current English teacher and that their identity remains anonymous since they are not required to write their name on the papers. Also, since the

average English proficiency of the students did not suffice to understand and respond to the questionnaires in their original language (English), they were translated into Persian so that students could thoroughly perceive the items and reflect on them, and then they were translated back to English.

Data Analysis

After collecting all the papers from the participants in two days, the data were analyzed through a worksheet of Microsoft Excel computer program to evaluate the ESP instructors' teaching methodology and to explore the participants' English background knowledge and the extent of their satisfaction regarding their textbook appropriateness in terms of contents such as lesson materials and activities.

RESULTS

Table-2: Evaluation of teachers' teaching methodology

	Evaluation Items	VL	L	M	H	VH	P
1	Our teacher has the ability to manage the instructions in a way leading to achieve educational goals.	1 (1.0)	6 (6.0)	55 (55.0)	23 (23.0)	15 (15.0)	66.4
2	Our teacher Pays attention to the presence of students in the class and motivate them to participate in the lesson.	10 (10.0)	23 (23.0)	28 (28.0)	28 (28.0)	11 (11.0)	50.2
3	Our teacher states the general objectives of the lesson before starting the lesson.	10 (10.0)	23 (23.0)	30 (30.0)	18 (18.0)	19 (19.0)	51.4
4	Our teachers teach the lesson in accordance with the course policy.	11 (11.0)	28 (28.0)	20 (20.0)	18 (18.0)	23 (23.0)	49.4
5	Our teacher masters the course contents and can answer the questions and provide sufficient time for questions and answers.	6 (6.0)	11 (11.0)	33 (33.0)	26 (26.0)	24 (24.0)	64.6
6	Our teacher uses contemporary sources of education.	15 (15.0)	23 (23.0)	26 (26.0)	21 (21.0)	13 (13.0)	45.4
7	Our teacher has the ability to express and explain the contents of the lesson fluently and clearly.	3 (3.0)	13 (13.0)	29 (29.0)	20 (20.0)	21 (21.0)	54.4
8	Our teacher presents the lesson in a practical way with clear and relevant examples.	9 (9.0)	15 (15.0)	40 (40.0)	23 (23.0)	13 (13.0)	55.4
9	Our teacher Observe coherency in explaining the lesson contents.	10 (10.0)	15 (15.0)	32 (32.0)	25 (25.0)	18 (18.0)	57.2
10	Our teacher introduces students with the new resources and motivates them for further research.	13 (13.0)	18 (18.0)	32 (32.0)	25 (25.0)	12 (12.0)	51.2
11	Using technology and audio materials in teaching the lesson.	37 (37.0)	16 (16.0)	23 (23.0)	11 (11.0)	13 (13.0)	35.6
12	Our teacher appreciates assignments, projects and class activities.	9 (9.0)	10 (10.0)	21 (21.0)	19 (19.0)	41 (41.0)	68.8
13	Our teacher has formative assessment during the semester.	8(8.0)	15 (15.0)	33 (33.0)	28 (28.0)	16 (16.0)	58.2
14	Our teacher welcomes the comments, suggestions, and traditions of students.	10 (10.0)	18 (18.0)	28 (28.0)	25 (25.0)	19 (19.0)	55.8
15	Our teacher concludes the lesson by the end of each session.	13 (13.0)	13 (13.0)	43 (43.0)	16 (16.0)	15 (15.0)	53.6
		Mean percentage					54.5

1. VL= Very Low, 2. L= Low, 3. M= Moderate, 4. H= High, 5. VH= Very High, P=Percentage

According to (Table-2) representing the teacher evaluation questionnaire developed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in Afghanistan, teachers' teaching method, for a course, must be

approved at least by 60% of the students in a class so the teacher can be considered qualified. Otherwise, if their method, for a particular course, is approved by less than 60%, they fail in the teacher evaluation test.

Concerning the evaluation of ESP teachers, their teaching methods were approved by 54.5% of the participants indicating that ESP instructors have not been qualified in teaching ESP courses and also assumption can be made that the teachers' teaching methods highly affected students' low English performance in ESP courses. The items in which ESP instructors' teaching method got a very low percentage of approval were items, 11 in which the ESP instructors got 35% approval out of 100 in terms of using

technology in presenting the lesson, followed by item 6 (45%) in terms of using modern teaching methodology, item 4 (49%) in terms of preparing a good lesson plan, item 2 (50%) in terms of creating motivation among students, item 3 (51%) in terms of clarifying the lesson objectives at the initial of the class, item 10 (51.1%) in terms of introducing students with the new resources and motivating them for further research, item 15 (53,6%) in terms of concluding the lesson by the end of the session.

Table-3: Low language performance related to ESP students' background knowledge

	Likert Scale items	SD	DA	M	A	SA
1	Before I start university, I have already studied English to some extent.	21 (21.0)	42 (42.0)	30 (30.0)	4 (4.0)	3 (3.0)
2	The school English books were very interesting to me because as I have learned some English skills.	23 (23.0)	39 (39.0)	25 (25.0)	6 (6.0)	7 (7.0)
3	I'm currently studying English in a language learning center.	47 (47.0)	28 (28.0)	16 (16.0)	4 (4.0)	5 (5.0)
4	My English level is not much lower than the level of our ESP textbook.	13 (13.0)	35 (35.)	32 (32.0)	11 (11.0)	9 (9.0)
5	I understand our English professor's lectures and presentations because I have some background knowledge regarding what our teacher teaches.	13 (13.0)	29 (29.0)	31 (31.0)	19 (19.0)	8 (8.0)

1.SD= Strongly Disagree, 2. D= Disagree, 3. N= Neutral, 4. A= Agree, 5. A= SA

As far as it is concerned with the background knowledge of the ESP students, the statistics in table 3 show that the students' English background knowledge is significantly weak. The items in which the participants showed that their English background knowledge was so poor were item 3, 75 (75%), that they were not taking any English course except the ESP course in the university. Followed by item 5, 69 (69%), in terms of not understanding the professor's lesson in the class, item 1, 63 (63%) of the participants were unable to understand the English lessons because they

had no input or background regarding what is taught in ESP courses. Followed by item 2, 62(62 % of the participants) showed that the school English books were not effective for them in learning any of the English skills. It can show that they did not have any background knowledge from the school English books either. Considering the above results, the assumption can be made the participants' weak English background knowledge was found as one of the main factors and highly affected the ESP students' low language performance.

Table-4: Low language performance related to the ESP textbook contents

No	Likert Scale items	SD	D	N	A	SA
9	The contents of my English book have always been clear and easy.	20 (20.0)	30 (30.0)	34 (34.0)	7 (7.0)	9 (9.0)
10	I appreciate my English book because its Lessons have always been exciting.	12 (12.0)	35 (35.0)	28 (28.0)	18 (18.0)	7 (7.0)
11	My English book contents have helped improve my English level.	8 (8.0)	19 (19.0)	28 (28.0)	25 (25.0)	20 (20.0)
12	I find the course beneficial for the materials are of high interest and foster critical thinking.	24 (24.0)	37 (37.0)	20 (20.0)	13 (13.0)	6 (6.0)
13	I find the course so appealing for the design, format, and texture of the materials.	10(10.0)	27 (27.0)	23 (23.0)	29 (29.0)	11 (11.0)
14	The content of my English book is very interesting because it is useful and practical.	13 (13.0)	24 (24.0)	23 (23.0)	25 (25.0)	15 (15.0)
15	The contents of my English book have been carefully chosen for its objectives are in line with what I need to learn about English.	20 (20.0)	26 (26.0)	32 (32.0)	10 (10.0)	12 (12.0)
16	I find the course very suitable for the materials have appropriate language in terms of sophistication and difficulty level of vocabulary.	15 (15.0)	25 (25.0)	30 (30.0)	16 (16.0)	14 (14.0)
17	The contents of my English book help me learn English.	21 (21.0)	25 (25.0)	20 (20.0)	29 (29.0)	5 (5.0)

1.SD= Strongly Disagree, 2. D= Disagree, 3. N= Neutral, 4. A= Agree, 5. SA= SA

The statistics in Table 4 shows that the participants showed unfavorable attitudes towards the ESP course contents. In item 12, 61 (61%) of the participants disagreed that their ESP course fosters critical thinking. Followed by item 9, 50 (50%) of the participants disagreed with the clarity of their ESP textbook contents. In item 15, 46, (46%) of the participants disagreed with the compatibility of the coursebook objectives with their needs. in item 17, 46 (46%) disagreed with the effectiveness of the course contents helping their English language skills. In item 16, 40(40%) showed that the vocabularies used in the ESP course are not according to their level. However, 30% of the participants showed satisfactory attitude toward some items of the textbook contents such as item 11, 45 (45%) in terms of the effectiveness of the content in enhancing their English, followed by item 13,

40 (40%) in terms of the contents' design, format and texture, item 14, 40 (40%) in terms of practicality. Finally, 26% of the participants showed neutral behavior toward the course content which was in item 10, 28 (28%) in terms of attractiveness interestingness.

Overall 30 % of the participants showed favorable attitudes while 44 % of the participants showed unfavorable attitudes towards the course contents in terms of fostering critical thinking, clarity, compatibility of the course objectives with their language needs, the course effectiveness in learning the language, and use of appropriate level of vocabulary. According to the above results, it can be indicated that the course contents could be one of the factors for ESP students' low language performance and that it affected their learning.

Table-5: Low language performance related to textbook contents (lesson activities).

No	Likert Scale items	SD	D	N	A	SA
15	my English book Exercises have always been interesting	17 (17.0)	28 (28.0)	28 (28.0)	15 (15.0)	12 (12.0)
16	My English book exercises are very helpful in learning my English book lessons.	14 (14.0)	16 (16.0)	31 (13.0)	28 (28.0)	11 (11.0)
17	My English book exercises are so clear and understandable.	14 (14.0)	26 (26.0)	32 (32.0)	16 (16.0)	12 (12.0)
18	The exercises inside my English book help me in learning the lesson	6 (32.0)	10 (38.0)	23 (23.0)	38 (10.0)	23 (6.0)
19	My English book exercises make the lesson interesting and understandable.	11 (11.0)	23 (23.0)	36 (36.0)	27 (27.0)	9 (9.0)
20	My English book has enough exercises for practicing the lesson.	7 (7.0)	22 (22.0)	28 (28.0)	25 (25.0)	18 (18.0)

1.SD= Strongly Disagree, 2. D= Disagree, 3. N= Neutral, 4. A= Agree, 5. SA= Strongly Agree

The statistics in Table 5 shows that 32.8% of the participants portrayed a negative attitude toward their textbook exercises. The items showing this were item 15, 45(45%), in terms of interestingness, followed by item 16, and 17, 40 (40%) in terms of helpfulness and clarity. And 30 % of the participants showed a neutral attitude toward their ESP book exercises. But 39 % of the participants showed a positive perspective toward their book exercises. According to the above results, it can be indicated that the ESP textbook exercises/activities have been helpful since the level of unsatisfactory is low compared to satisfactory and neutral items.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the major factors and their impact on the low language performance of ESP students in ESP classes.

Background knowledge: poor background knowledge was one of the major factors that highly impacted ESP students' low language performance. The elements that caused the poor performance of ESP learners in relation to their background were no basic knowledge of English, a very poor learning background

of their school English books, a low level of English compared to the level of their ESP course, the inability to understand the ESP lessons in class.

Materials and activities in ESP textbooks: The content development of ESP textbooks was another main factor that highly influenced the poor language performance of ESP learners. The responsible elements in this topic were the difficulty of the vocabulary, the ambiguity of the course content, the ineffectiveness of the course content in learning the language, the incompatibility of the course objectives with what students need to learn about English, and the lack of encouragement of critical thinking.

Teaching methodology: low teaching quality was another factor that affected ESP learners' low language performance in a high level. What made the teachers' teaching methodology poor and ineffective in this theme were no clarification of lesson objectives at the beginning of the class, no use of modern teaching methodology, no use of technology in the presentation of the lesson, and no conclusion of the lesson at the end of each lesson session.

Overall, the main factors that strongly

influenced the low language proficiency of the ESP students were the low background knowledge of the students in English, the lack of adaptation of the ESP textbook to the English proficiency of the students and poorly trained ESP teachers. They identified the following main factors that strongly influence the low proficiency in English language learners: 1) Teachers are poorly trained. 2) The students lack knowledge of English. 3) The curriculum does not help students improve their English skills. In addition, (Thein's, 2006) study on evaluation of ESP textbooks revealed that the ESP courses were not suitable and not carefully chosen since they neither stimulated critical thinking nor did they improve communication skills such as real-life language use. The results of (Maweres, 2012) on evaluations of ESP teachers also showed that ESP teachers are not well qualified.

CONCLUSION

The main factors that strongly influenced the low language performance of the ESP students were that the English background knowledge of the ESP students is so weak and in many ways the ESP textbooks chosen for them do not match their level of English and the ESP course teachers are not as qualified as either to select an ESP course based on the level and needs of the students or to prepare students to adapt to the ESP course level. All of these lead to poor performance in ESP courses and even mass failures in ESP exams.

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