

Critical Examination of Iranian Engineering University Students' Needs in ESP Courses

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Abstract

When designing courses or exams for ESP students, it is vital for language departments to have reliable information on the language needs of these students during and after their studies. With consideration of the importance of gaining such knowledge, this study was conducted to address engineering students' specific needs in ESP classes. However, to provide a better portray of the issue, three types of data were gathered. In the first phase of the study, 86 engineering students shared their ideas with respect to the four main skills, classroom procedures, and textbooks using a questionnaire. In the second phase, classroom observations were conducted to shed more light on the realities of ESP classes in Iran. Finally, the textbooks were under focus to examine whether students' wants and needs are met. With consideration of the obtained results in these three phases, it seems that dramatic changes are demanded as the realities of ESP classes are so far from engineering students' requirements. Detailed information about the results as well as the suggestions is provided in the article.

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Keywords: Engineering students; English for specific purposes; ESP textbooks; needs analysis

Introduction

A clear cut statement of the goal or purpose is inevitable for any kind of activity or move in the world without which that move or activity would be meaningless and futile. Hence, identification of the learning objectives is an essential step in the development of any educational program. The first step in setting the goals and objectives for any kind of language program in general and ESP programs in particular is to conduct needs analysis. Needs Analysis (NA) is identified as an influential mean to obtain valid and reliable information about the general and specific needs of learners. This information is of high value in developing goals, objectives, content, and syllabuses for any course.

Although the needs of EFL learners are diverse, the needs of ESP learners as a distinct group reveals further diversity as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that the distinctive feature of ESP is its subjects' awareness of their needs. Moreover, the literature review suggests that in language learning/teaching approaches toward learner- and learning-centeredness, a great emphasis must be laid on learners' needs. In line with this claim, Nunan (1989) believes that to achieve learner-centered curriculum, consideration of learners' subjective needs is demanded.

The very focus of the present study is on English for specific purposes required by Agriculture engineering students. In response to internationalization and globalization, these learners will certainly use English as a professional lingua franca. According to Hyland

(2005), conducting needs analysis is a prerequisite for interweaving what learners must acquire in ESP classes to the outside professional and academic realities. However, it seems that in spite of the crucial role of learners' actual wants and needs in developing the required materials and designing the proper syllabuses, teachers' intuitions and decisions leaves little room for active involvement of learners in the process of curriculum development. Therefore, it seems to be appropriate to focus our study on a group of agriculture engineering students and to pinpoint their needs.

Significance of the Study

The main aim of English classes at undergraduate level in Iran is to help students improve their technical vocabulary, reading, and translation skills; however, with consideration of the new demands of the academic settings, detailed investigation of learners' current needs is required. Moreover, although the selection of the appropriate material as the most significant decision to be made most likely guarantees the success of the course, it seems that the offered materials are provided on the basis of either facilities or teachers' perceptions without implementing any thorough needs analysis. If learners are engaged in the process of topic and task selection, perhaps their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual engagement will be more observable. Hence, it is logical to reconsider our present knowledge about the learners' needs through conducting a comprehensive needs analysis.

Though review of literature indicates that several studies have been conducted regarding English language needs of students from a variety of different majors, with respect to agriculture engineering, very little research has been conducted to reveal its students' true needs. Hence, it seems essential to investigate this group's needs in detail. Such an investigation can lead to a better development of courses which would be in line with the defined objectives of the course.

The following questions are addressed in the present study:

1. What are learners' attitudes toward the four skills?
2. What are learners' attitudes toward classroom procedures and textbooks?
3. Are students' needs appropriately responded to considering the employed classroom procedures and textbooks?

Method

Subjects

The subjects of the study were students majoring in different branches of agricultural engineering. The subjects of the study were doing their BA at the Faculty of Agriculture at Urmia University, Iran. They were mostly within the age range of 18-24 and their language proficiency level was upper-elementary at the time of study. All of them had already passed general English course and they were busy passing ESP course. 100 questionnaires were distributed but only 86 of them were returned. 57 of the respondents were female and 29 of them were male.

Instruments

In the empirical investigations addressing needs analysis, questionnaires are the most prevalent instruments employed in data gathering. This study employed Mazdayasna and Tahririan's (2008) questionnaire designed to study the needs of students majoring in nursing. However, this questionnaire was adapted to be suitable for engineering students. After some modifications, it was translated with the help of a group of M.A. English students. The translated version was distributed to allow agriculture students to freely negotiate their ideas. The final version of the questionnaire comprised three sections: background information, subjects' attitude toward the four skills and why they need these skills, and subjects' attitude toward the classroom procedures and textbooks. The background information section consisted of six items: name (optional), age, gender, academic discipline, whether they have passed general English, and whether they have passed ESP course or they are currently engaged in passing it. The section related to attitude toward the four skills consisted of 18 items (five questions about listening, five questions about speaking, four questions about reading, and four questions about writing), with a six-option response: very much, much, sometimes, to some extent, few, and never. The questions addressing attitudes toward the classroom procedure and textbook consisted of 14 questions such as whether they were satisfied with the content of the book, with teaching methodology, and with lecturer's assessment criteria. Furthermore, one question addressed their perspective with respect to whether an English teacher should present the course or a subject specialist.

Procedure

In order to provide the response for the first and second questions regarding the needs of agriculture students, the final version of the questionnaire was distributed among the students of Urmia agriculture faculty. To address the third question, textbook analyses as well as classroom observations were conducted to shed better light on the issue.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were submitted to SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) (version 16) for frequency.

Results and Discussion

The first section of the questionnaire was devoted to address subjects' background information consisting of six questions. The results are as below:

The first question with respect to subjects' age revealed that their age range was 18-24. With regard to the distribution of the gender, 66.3% of the subjects were female and only 33.7% of them were male. The majority of the students belonged to the soil branch (53.5%) and the rest were members of water branch (46.5%). The other question was whether the subjects had passed general English or not. The results revealed that it is not possible to take ESP course without passing general English; hence, all the subjects had already passed general English. Moreover, it was found that 58.1% of the subjects are busy doing their ESP course while 41.9% have already passed this course.

The second and the main section of the questionnaire was devoted to investigate students' reasons to improve their four skills.

Table 1 represents students' attitudes toward the frequency of situations they will need listening skill. As the following table shows, the majority of the students (46.6 %) think that listening skill is important for them to successfully use mass media. It states that they are

attending ESP classes without having any particular aim to improve their professional listening skill; they treat ESP course and its objectives as general English class.

Table1.

listening to English media

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
very much	19	21.6	22.1	22.1
Much	22	25.0	25.6	47.7
Sometimes	14	15.9	16.3	64.0
to some extent	12	13.6	14.0	77.9
Few	10	11.4	11.6	89.5
Never	9	10.2	10.5	100.0
Total	86	97.7	100.0	
Total	86	100.0		

Table 2 demonstrates the results of subjects' attitude toward the importance of listening to conversations on general topics. The noticeable portion of the students, i.e. 40.9 %, considers being proficient listeners in non-professional topics to be of high priority for them. Interestingly, they expect their ESP classes to function as EGP (English for general purposes) classes and facilitate their grasp of conversations on general topics.

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Table 2.

listening to conversations on general topics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very much	16	18.2	18.6	18.6
	Much	20	22.7	23.3	41.9

Sometimes	21	23.9	24.4	66.3
to some extent	11	12.5	12.8	79.1
Few	8	9.1	9.3	88.4
Never	10	11.4	11.6	100.0
Total	86	97.7	100.0	
Total	86	100.0		

The remaining three questions in the listening section were more relevant to subjects' special field of study. The comparison of the obtained results shows that the listening skill of the students must be improved to contribute to their understanding in lectures (37.5 %), in real situations (31.8%), and in presentations (30.7%).

The results imply the existence of a very limited number of presentations and lectures offered in English; hence, subjects do not consider being proficient listeners to successfully comprehend the English presentations and lectures. Furthermore, the frequency of the real situations which obligates subjects to follow instructions in English is also very limited. These results may be a great contribution to portray ESP classes in Iranian context.

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The other skills that are being addressed are the speaking, reading, and writing skills. The results related to these skills are reported according to the priorities that are assigned to them from students' point of view (comparing the number of the students that have selected much and very much).

A careful examination of Table 3 reveals that improving the reading skill for a better comprehension of texts on general topics seems to be much more important than understanding professional texts in their own major (only 4.7 % stated that they need a good reading skill for reading agriculture engineering textbooks). Once more, this result suggests that gaining overall proficiency in reading seems much more important than being proficient readers in their specialist field. Furthermore, it may indicate that the majority of the agriculture textbooks are translated into Persian and this fact lessens the burden of reading original agriculture engineering textbooks.

Table 3.

Subjects' needs with respect to reading skill

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
texts on the internet	43	50.0	50.0	50.0
newspapers & magazines	29	33.7	33.7	83.7
articles in journals	10	11.6	11.6	95.3
agriculture engineering textbooks	4	4.7	4.7	100.0
Total	86	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 reports the results of the writing skill. The high percentages ascribed to writing term papers and taking notes from term papers (47.1% and 32.9%, respectively) are demonstrative of prevalence of such assignments in the students' ESP classes. The presence of such activities may be the main cause of the selection of "much and very much" options by a large number of students.

Table 4.

Subjects' needs with respect to writing skill

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid term papers	40	47.1	47.1	47.1
taking notes from term papers	28	32.9	32.9	80.0
writing a paper for oral presentation	10	11.8	11.8	91.8
reading & taking lecture notes	7	8.2	8.2	100.0
Total	85	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 is related to the speaking skill. The first high percentages are related to lecture presentations and asking and answering questions in the class. It may indicate that these are the main class activities that may be used for assessing students' learning. Furthermore, as speaking and listening skills are interrelated, the comparison of the results related to these two skills indicates that a similar portion of the subjects (approximately 37%) consider presenting and listening to lectures to be essential for them.

Table 5.

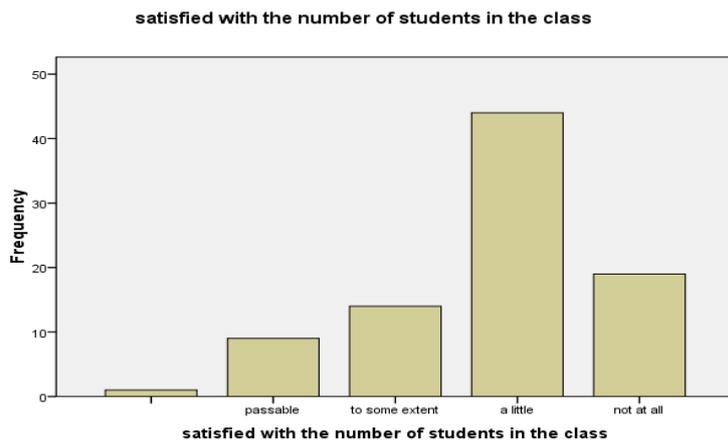
Subjects' needs with respect to speaking skill

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
lecture presenting	33	38.8	38.8	38.8
asking and answering questions in the class	15	17.6	17.6	56.5
asking and answering questions in seminars	12	14.1	14.1	70.6
participating in academic discussions	11	12.9	12.9	83.5
talking with professionals in real situations	7	8.2	8.2	91.8
Missing	7	8.2	8.2	100.0
Total	85	100.0	100.0	

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The third section of the questionnaire investigated the students' attitudes toward classroom procedures and textbook. The analysis of the gathered data showed that the majority of the students are not pleased with the present conditions and this implies the necessity of making broad changes in the classroom procedures and textbooks in agriculture engineering ESP courses. In order to facilitate the understanding of the obtained results, Bar graphs are utilized.

The first graph is representative of the students' satisfaction with the number of learners' in each ESP class. The majority of them (50.6 %) expressed their dissatisfaction. This must be taken into account in defining the educational system's criteria to accept university students in the entrance exam.



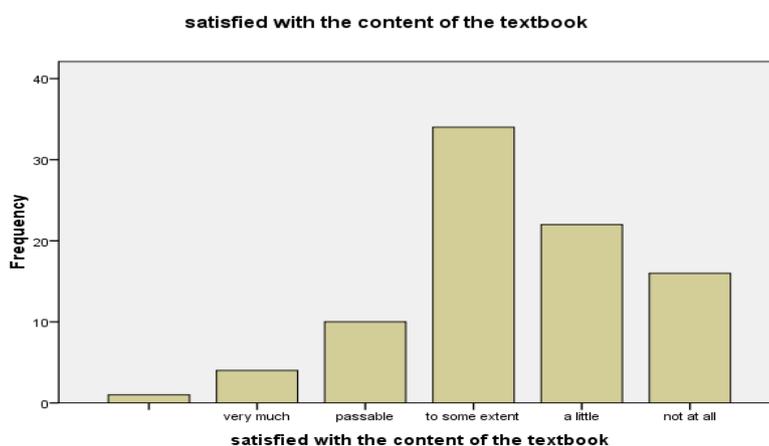
Graph1.

Satisfaction with the number of students in the class

The second graph is related to the students' satisfaction with the content of the textbook, the third one demonstrates their satisfaction with the textbooks that are being used in the classrooms, and the fourth one presents their satisfaction with the topics introduced in the textbooks. These three issues are somehow related to one another and the results are more or less the same. The worthy point is that the students believe that the topics are passable to a great degree (42.2%), while the textbooks and their content are to some extent acceptable (39.1% pleased with the content and 34.5 % satisfied with the textbooks).

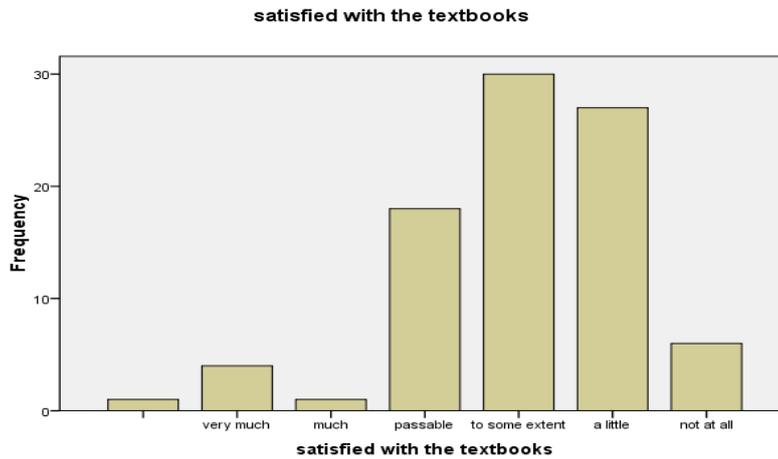
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The following three graphs clarify the issues in a better sense.



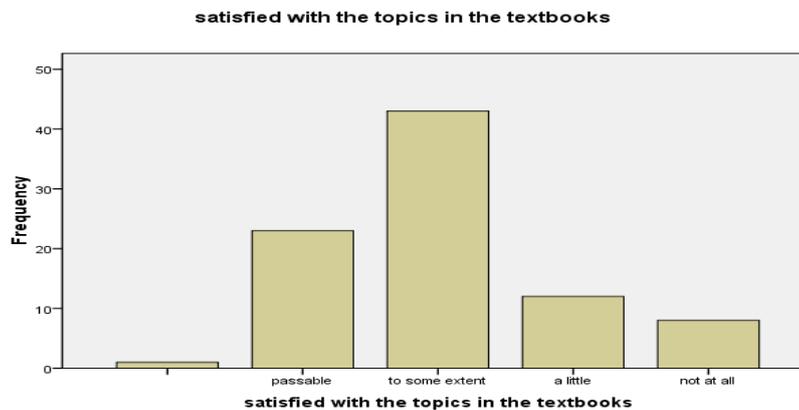
Graph 2.

Satisfaction with the content of the textbooks



Graph 3.

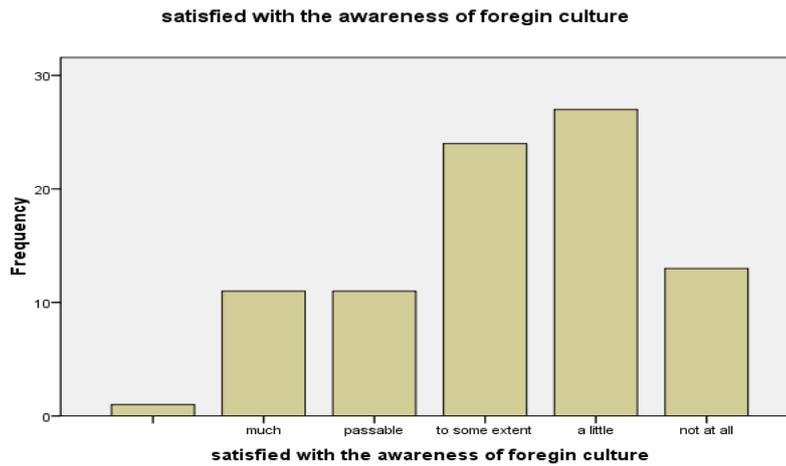
Satisfaction with the textbooks



Graph 4.

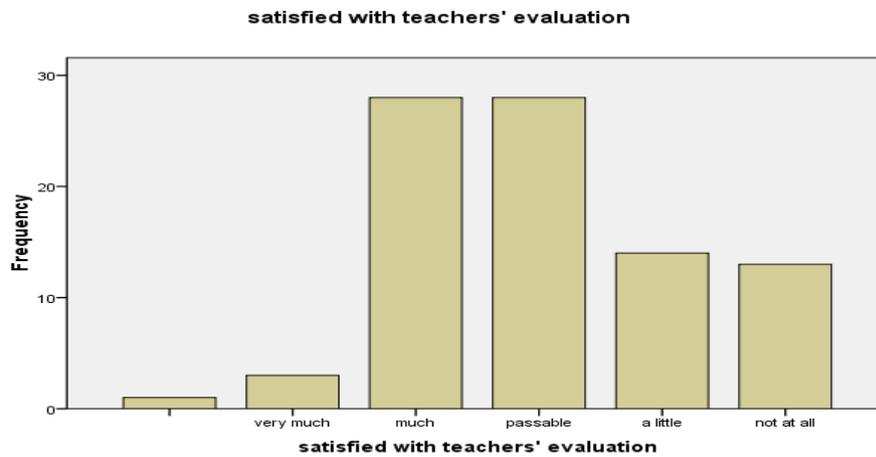
Satisfaction with the topics in the textbooks

The following graph is showing the degree of students' satisfaction with the awareness of foreign culture. A minor proportion (12.6 %) has selected much and passable while the largest proportion (31%) believes that little attention has been paid to this issue. In this question, the overall meaning of the culture is not intended. Culture of a specific discourse community, i.e. in this field the culture of the agriculture engineering specialists, refers to the most dominant behaviors and tasks that are accomplished by that community. Agriculture engineering students expect to become more familiar with the culture of their own discourse community. This familiarity can be achieved if their ESP textbooks are rich in reflecting the target discourse communities' typical behaviors and activities.

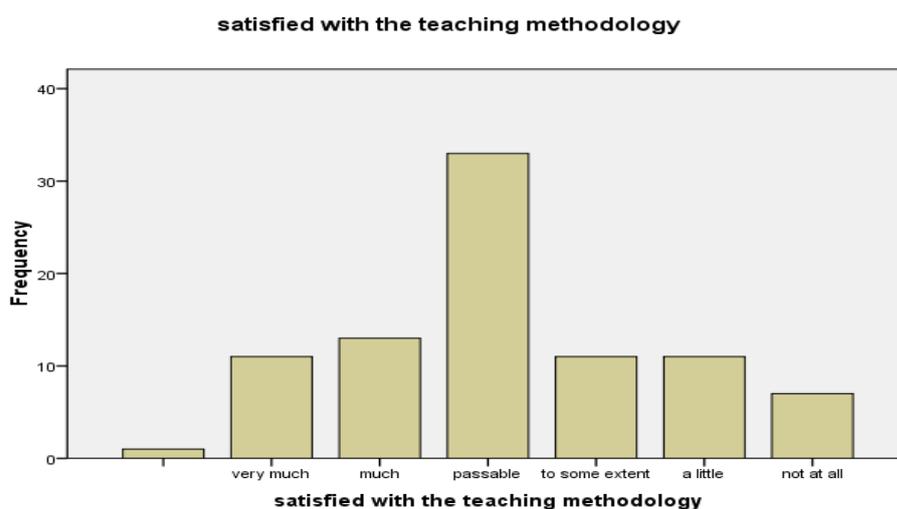


Graph 5.
Satisfaction with the awareness of foreign culture

Satisfaction with the ways of evaluation and teaching methodology are the other examined topics. As the graphs 6 and 7 reveal a large number of students believe teachers' performance with respect to these matters are satisfactory. In the classroom observation, it was noticed that the dominant methodology was grammar-translation and the evaluation methods were its obedient. It seems that unfamiliarity with other methods in teaching ESP course affects subjects' attitudes toward classroom methodology and evaluation.



Graph 6.
Satisfaction with teacher's evaluation



Graph 7.

Satisfaction with the teaching methodology

The rest of the questionnaire items address subjects' preferences toward the various ways of holding ESP classes. Subjects' preferences to work alone, in pairs, or in groups is questioned in one of the items. A large number of the students prefer to work individually (47.7%). This may be rooted in the peculiar features of Iran's educational system which emphasizes individualistic rather than group or pair works (Table 6). Furthermore, as it will be explained in the classroom observation section, the kinds of the activities included in the presented materials do not set the conditions for group or even pair works.

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Table 6.

The students prefer to work and study...

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Individually	41	47.7	47.7	47.7
	in pairs	21	24.4	24.4	72.1
	in small groups	24	27.9	27.9	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 shows the results of the subjects' preferences with respect to the length of presentation of ESP course throughout the years of their studies and Table 8 displays subjects' attitude toward its length of presentation in a week. The major number of the

students believes that if this course is presented throughout their four years of study (53.5%) and twice a week (54.7%), a better achievement will be obtained. This result reveals agriculture students' awareness of the fact that they require to spend much more time on improving their English proficiency if they wish to become adept users of that language. As it will be discussed in more detail in the classroom observation section, spending two hours a week throughout just one semester cannot guarantee their success in English language acquisition.

Table 7.

How long specialized English course should be offered to students of engineering?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	one semester	13	15.1	15.1	15.1
	two semesters	27	31.4	31.4	46.5
	throughout the four years of their studies	46	53.5	53.5	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

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Table 8.

How often should the course be held in a week?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	1.2	1.2	1.2
	once a week	17	19.8	19.8	20.9
	twice a week	47	54.7	54.7	75.6
	three times a week	21	24.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

The other illuminative result is related to students' opinion about the most appropriate person to teach ESP courses. An eye-catching number of the students (55.8%) trust the subject specific instructor and only 32.6% of them believe in non-native English speakers (Table 9). This may have some implications for English teachers that a wide range of students do not trust them to be capable of teaching ESP courses while it is undoubted that the days of the

EFL generalist teacher may be numbered, so it might just be the time to explore the possibility of working in ESP! However, in order to tackle with this problem two suggestions can be proposed. First is related to team-teaching, a situation in which a content teacher and an English teacher hold ESP classes. However, considering the realities of Iranian educational system, such a suggestion seems to be impractical. The second solution refers to conduct a number of teacher education programs for English teachers. In such programs they may be taught by a content teacher and become familiar with the most prevalent topics and required subject knowledge in order to handle ESP classes. Only 10 % of the subjects prefer native English teachers; however, considering the practicality of employing native English teachers and the very limited number of such teachers in Iranian EFL context, this wish does not seem to become a reality.

Table 9.

English should be taught by...

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	native English teachers	10	11.6	11.6	11.6
	non-native English teachers	28	32.6	32.6	44.2
	subject specific instructor	48	55.8	55.8	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

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Table 10 illustrates that the majority of the students believe they need to master general English before starting their ESP course or master general English simultaneously with their specialized subject course. This result states that the students consider general English as a prerequisite for being successful in ESP courses. It implies that special care should be paid to general English at the universities.

Table 10.

The students prefer to master English ...

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	before starting their specialized subject course	41	47.7	47.7	47.7

at the same time with their specialized subject course	36	41.9	41.9	89.5
after finishing their specialized subject course	9	10.5	10.5	100.0
Total	86	100.0	100.0	

Table 11 is related to the students' preferred resource books; whether they are Persian, English, or both. As it is obvious, most of the students (53.5 %) have selected the third option. This finding shows that students mostly benefit from a combination of Persian and English sources.

Table 11.

The students like to learn through...

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Persian resources	14	16.3	16.3	16.3
	English resources	26	30.2	30.2	46.5
	Both English and Persian resources	46	53.5	53.5	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

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The final question addressed the most appropriate semester to offer ESP course. From the students' point of view 4th year of their studies will be more appropriate for the presentation of this course. May be students think that up to that year they will improve their general English up to an acceptable degree and they will have the least problems in passing their ESP course since they are not supposed to concentrate on the basic structures and vocabulary(Table 12).

Table 12.

The specialized English course should be offered in the...

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Valid	2nd semester	12	14.0	14.0	14.0
	3rd semester	15	17.4	17.4	31.4
	4th semester	20	23.3	23.3	54.7
	3rd year	18	20.9	20.9	75.6
	4th year	21	24.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	86	100.0	100.0	

Classroom Observation

In Iranian educational system, most of the university students majoring in one of the different fields have to pass two-credit General English. They are, then, required to pass two-credit ESP course depending on their majors. To discuss the effectiveness of these courses in assisting the students to achieve the desired objectives, this part presents a brief observation report on the manners of holding ESP classes in some of the undergraduate university classes.

This investigation presents the results of two 75-minute lessons from Agriculture Department of Urmia University. The classes were taught by a male field specialist who has got his Ph.D. from an English speaking country.

The observed students were 60, mostly within the age range of 18-22 and their language proficiency level was upper-elementary. All of them had already passed general English course and they were busy passing ESP course. The majority of the students were female. They have one 75- minute ESP lessons a week.

To clarify the point, a brief description of the ways these classes were conducted is presented. Initially, the teacher began the class with reviewing last session's lesson. The error correction was done by teacher himself. From the beginning of the class, it was found that the major activity taking place in these classes was almost reading and translating from English into Persian. The teacher started to read the text and to offer the meaning of the words. He himself translated reading sentence by sentence into Persian. It seemed that the use of the Persian is a substantial element in the classroom and it is used as a resort not only in clarifying technical terms but in several additional cases when its use did not seem to be justifiable. The teacher was busy giving the overall meaning of the text, in Persian of course, while the students were busy writing down those uttered translations. Meanwhile in the

process of reading, it was observed that there was no discussion of any relevant grammatical points, and indeed it had been presupposed by the teacher that the students had already learnt the structures in their general English course. Most of the class time was spent either reading the texts or speaking about the topics with a gradual deviation from the text itself. The teacher was well-prepared. He exactly knew when students had difficulty understanding. The class felt free to ask questions. He answered students' questions satisfactorily. The lessons were explained in an understandable way, i.e. in Persian meaning. Therefore, the lessons were well-paced. The lessons were also presented at the students' level of comprehension. However, no movement around the class, no eye contact, no monitoring of students' activities, and no attempt to engage the students in the process of teaching were noticed during the class time.

Moreover, teacher-fronted activities outnumbered group or pair work activities and there was no student production of language and the students were not reinforced. Therefore, teacher plays an integral role in these ESP classes. There was no variety in activities, examples, and illustrations during the lesson presentation. Thus, a number of the students were not attentive and involved.

During these two classes, the main focus was laid on improving learners' technical vocabulary, reading, and translation skills. Furthermore, the teacher did not pay attention to the other skill 4.

Textbook analysis

English textbooks in a Foreign Language (EFL) context are the main source of input for the learners. Therefore, they require giving sufficient attention. This part reports on the findings of a study carried out to evaluate an English textbook, which is being used in one of the classes in Agriculture Department of Urmia University, Iran.

The constituents of each lesson are as follows: Reading Comprehension, Comprehension Exercises, Vocabulary Drills, Language Practice, and Cloze test. The book allocates the largest proportion of each lesson to vocabulary and reading comprehension. These activities can only satisfy a small part of the students' needs. Apparently, the most important section that is emphasized in the book is reading. Hence, more interesting, practical, and up-to-date

topics are needed to be included in the lessons. Yet, the number of new words that can be rehearsed is a lot. The students have to memorize a long list of words by repetition which is common in Audio lingual method. In addition, the focus on such vocabulary activities is just on individual words without any reference to them in combinations. These vocabulary exercises are not sufficient for EFL students who are not exposed to English language outside the classrooms. In addition, the activities are not authentic.

Students are expected to develop their communicative competence by using English textbooks as the main resource. Therefore, four skills should be taken into account to help students acquire a foreign language. Regarding the listening skill, there are no special activities in the book. This skill is just regarded marginally and can only be practiced indirectly in the reading sections. Moreover, what comes under the title of speaking is just a set of vocabulary activities. Truly communicative speaking activities are completely eliminated from the textbook. As it was mentioned, there were no lecture presentations, seminars, or academic discussions in class. Also, English is not used in genuine situations and in communicative ways. The salient skill in the book was reading. Most of the class time was spent either reading the texts or speaking about the topics with a gradual deviation from the text itself. Thus, this does not let other skills and components flourish. The last skill, that is, writing skill, is also totally neglected in the book. In fact, writing activities are limited to the practice of the newly presented vocabularies. Mainly, the English books should focus on four skills, but the present textbook almost lacks these characteristics.

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The aim of this section was to find out whether the textbook under study plays any role in fulfilling the present and future language needs of the students. The results showed that although all language abilities were almost significant for the majority of the learners, the text book could not satisfy the students' foreign language needs. It is proposed that the textbook needs to be completed by means of other learning materials in order to be more efficient for the students. It is also suggested that they should be revised. In all, the textbook analysis indicates that the Iranian ESP textbooks are not conducive to real language instruction and implementation.

The obtained results in the quantitative part of the study, the description of classroom observation as well as the description of text book analysis may reveal that the wants and needs of ESP students are not fully met. Hence, dramatic changes may be demanded to satisfy students in the ESP classes. As a final remark, it can be concluded that the demand of

having a highly specific ESP language course for learners with a clear focus on their special perceived needs has to be at the center of all language programs and in all language learning contexts if success in presenting these courses is welcome.

Conclusion

The respondents' motivation for improving their English can be said to be characterized by their instrumental orientation. The undeniable effect of learners' motivation in directing their attitudes toward their needs clarifies the importance of taking this factor in to account. Dudley-Evans & Jo St John (1998) point out that needs are driven by the motivation and motivation is the cause of achieving something. Learners needs are generally determined by their internal and external motivation. Here comes the importance of involving learners' in the selection and even design of course books to help them to show their highest performance.

So questions arise regarding the process of designing curriculum on the basis of needs analysis. But some problems come to surface in conducting the needs' analysis that the clash between the learners' perceived needs and actual uses, and the course designer's own estimation of the learner's needs and their actual ones is one of them, hence a clear direction for the course designer does not obviously emerge. As for the present case, because the survey was a small scale project taking advantage of questionnaire, further investigation including other survey techniques- such as in-depth interviews and direct observations- would be needed to test and generalize the findings before considering the best course of action to take place. Though such limitations are present in this study, it could shed more light on the quality of ESP classes. It was with the aim of modifying an existing ESP program that this needs analysis was conducted.

