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Esp Course Evaluation

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Esp Course Evaluation

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses offered in the School of Foreign Languages of a state school in Istanbul. These ESP courses, offered during the second semester of the English preparatory year as a part of the general English courses, are mainly designed to equip the students with the skills which will assist them to follow their departmental courses in the following years. In these courses, the students are introduced to the basic terminology and some concepts of their disciplines which they are likely to encounter in their departmental courses. In the short run these courses cater for the academic needs of the students, while they cater for the occupational needs of the students in the long run. In order to gather information about the teaching practice and learning in these classes and their impact, and to restructure the already existing program, it is necessary to make an overall evaluation of the courses. An evaluation of the courses will also give the course designers an opportunity to identify whether there are any problems with any aspects of the course, and the students are really equipped with the proper skills to pursue their departmental courses. To this aim a questionnaire examining different factors such as students' perceptions of ESP courses, course content, materials, instructors, and assessment procedures has been prepared and administered to the students who are currently enrolled in the courses in their departments, but had ESP courses in the previous years at the preparatory level. The courses are evaluated in relation to the factors mentioned above and it is determined if the results change by departments. The findings are provided and discussed in the full paper.

Keywords: ESP, Course Evaluation, ELT

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Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of teaching English today. ESP is considered to be the general name used for the courses which aim at teaching English for specific contexts mainly related to academic or occupational studies. There are several studies dealing with the issues and development in ESP. However, research into ESP studies is still limited to defining some aspects of ESP, assessing students' needs or designing a new course. There are very few studies of ESP course evaluation although it is one of the important issues in teaching.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define evaluation as a process of matching needs to available solutions. They divide the evaluation process into 4 stages. These are 'defining criteria', 'subjective analysis', 'objective analysis', and 'matching'. Defining criteria refers to the basis on which you judge your program. Subjective analysis includes who the learners are, their age level, field of study, interests, what the learners' needs are, language content and the structure of the curriculum and the assessment. In objective analysis the actual material is considered. In the final stage, subjective analysis is compared with the objective one and the best match is found. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest that the best choice can be made as long as different parties, such as instructors, students, materials involved in the course are considered. In the evaluation process the fitness of these parties for a particular purpose is determined.

According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), on the other hand, evaluation can be defined as 'asking questions and acting on the responses'. They propose that evaluation starts with deciding on what information to collect about the program and ends with bringing about changes in what is being done currently or influencing future ones. Therefore, they define two different types of evaluation which are formative and summative evaluation. They suggest that more attention should be paid to formative evaluation by ESP practitioners because this kind of evaluation makes necessary modifications possible during the course instruction.

Richards (2001) suggests another kind of evaluation besides formative and summative evaluation. It is 'illuminative evaluation'. This kind of evaluation can be described as the evaluation that tries to identify how different aspects of the program work or are being implemented. It tries to explore a deeper understanding of the processes of teaching and learning that occur in the program, without necessarily seeking to change the course in any way.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) claim an ESP teacher needs to perform five different roles. These are 'teacher', 'collaborator', 'course designer and materials provider', 'researcher', and finally 'evaluator' roles. The ESP practitioners are often involved in various types of evaluation. They test the students and evaluate the course and course materials. They assess whether students have the necessary language and skills to undertake a particular academic course or career. They also evaluate course design and teaching materials and whether the learners can make use of what they have

learned. Finally, evaluation can be used to adapt the syllabus. However, of all these roles, 'evaluator' role can be considered as the most neglected one. Bhatia, V., Anthony, L., and Noguchi, J. (2011) proposed that few ESP practitioners are experienced enough or have time to be aware of the multiple roles assigned to them. As a result, as Johns et al. (1991) describe, there have been few empirical studies that investigate the effectiveness of ESP courses.

Conducting a course evaluation is necessary for different reasons. Bell suggested twenty-four possible purposes for an evaluation including guidance of any curriculum changes, documentation of events, determination of curriculum-related in-service need of staff, identification of unintended outcomes of the program and clarification of objectives. Evaluation supports to make a decision to cancel or change a program. The design of the future programs will be influenced by the results of the evaluation.

Hutchison and Waters (1987) also indicate that as a result of the information gathered during the evaluation process some conclusions can be drawn. Evaluations may contribute to the design of other similar courses within the same institution or in other institutions. It shows the various parties involved such as teachers, and learners that their views are important.

Course evaluation helps to assess if the course objectives are being met, in other words if the course is doing what is designed to do. It provides in-depth information about how well the course is fulfilling the students' needs. In addition, course evaluation provides feedback on the ESP course. A careful evaluation can prevent frustrations about the course and course content.

Robinson (1991) points out that observing past students who are working may be an effective means in seeing to what extent the ESP course has fully prepared them for workplace needs. Similarly, in this study students who had already started their education in their disciplines were examined to evaluate if the ESP course they had taken prepared them for their studies in their departments. Robinson indicates that after observing past students, the course designer is then able to reorganize the course materials for the students of the following years. The result of this study will also be used to redesign the courses offered in the institution where the study is carried out.

Background to the Study

University students in Turkey have a year-long of intensive English course if the medium of instruction is English in the universities they attend. These courses are offered as a part of the students' university education the year before they start taking their departmental courses. The year when the students take this intensive English course is called English Preparatory Year. The main aim of this English preparatory year is to equip students with the necessary language skills to be able to follow their departmental courses which are mostly in English.

In the institution where this study has been carried out there are 24 hours of English lessons weekly during the English preparatory year. The

program is based on teaching 4 skills. ESP courses are offered as a part of the academic reading and writing course which is 12 hours weekly.

In ESP courses, alongside language, general disciplinary concepts from the students' own fields are taught through different texts. Each instructor must teach at least an hour of ESP weekly. These instructors are teachers of English. However, they have been teaching ESP courses for a very long time, so each has specialized in one subject area and become the specialists of the discipline they have been teaching so far. They have learned the fundamental principles of their students' field of study along with their students in time. Little training opportunities are provided for the instructors, so those who are more enthusiastic to teach ESP try to learn more about it through personal efforts.

Three different ESP courses are offered, which are Medical ESP, Social Science ESP, and Engineering ESP. These courses start in the second term when the students complete a certain level of English. This is usually the time when they start taking English courses is B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Material selection for these classes in the institution has always been a critical concern. As the language instructors came from an unrelated background to the discipline in which they were asked to teach, they were not familiar with the books for the students when they first started teaching ESP. They began with using ESP textbooks by different publishers. However, since neither of these books was prepared for a specific group of learners, they were not very satisfactory. Instructors were left with no alternative than to develop their own materials. They adopted published textbooks, compiled materials from different resources and wrote their own ones.

Three different books prepared by the instructors are currently used at the institution. A topical syllabus was followed during the preparation of the materials. The topics were chosen considering the previous ESP books used in the classroom and books which were intended to be taught in the departments in the coming years. The books are more like reading books. There are a variety of texts in which some basic concepts and the terminology of the students' disciplines are introduced. The materials prepared for ESP courses do not have any supplementary such as audio cassettes, teachers book etc.

Assessment is another major component of ESP. The assessment of the students' performances in ESP classes in the institution is limited to the ESP quiz given at the end of the term. This quiz is also more like a reading quiz. It includes one text from the students discipline with some comprehension questions. There is also a vocabulary section in which some basic terminology of the discipline is asked. The overall weight of ESP quiz grades assigned in general grading is very limited.

Although a great deal of work was done during the material preparation for ESP classes, no evaluation of these materials or the course in general had been carried out until this study started. The changes in the program were done according to teachers' intuitions which rose from the informal talks with their former students. This study is important in the sense that it is the first study

which aims to evaluate the ESP courses in general and different variables such as materials, instructors and exams.

Research Method

The main aim of this study is to evaluate the ESP courses offered during the second term of the English Preparatory classes in a state university in Istanbul.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were

1. What language aspects do the students need more in their departmental courses?
2. Who is suggested by the students as the instructor of the ESP courses? Prep instructors or instructors in their departments?
3. When should ESP courses be offered?
4. Should the ESP courses be optional or compulsory?
5. When should the ESP courses start?
6. What are students' perceptions of the ESP courses?
7. What are students' opinions about the instructors, materials and exams of the ESP courses? Do the results differ according to disciplines?
8. What is the importance of each language aspects for the students? Do the results differ according to disciplines?
9. What activities are important for the students?
10. To what extent are the topics in the course contents important for the students?

Participants

315 students who had taken ESP courses in the previous years and started taking their departmental courses in a state university in Istanbul participated in this study. 90 of them were students from Engineering ESP classes, while the 96 of them were from the Medical ESP classes. The remaining 129 students were from the Social Science ESP classes.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a questionnaire prepared by the researchers. Items were developed through review of related literature and examining existing questionnaires. To provide evidence for content validity, some experts in the fields of ESP and course evaluation reviewed the questionnaire. Necessary changes were made based on the suggestions, and it was piloted on 24 students. The final version of the questionnaire included the following parts:

- Part A: Demographic information about the students.
- Part B: General questions to get information about subjects such as language aspects needed most, suggested instructor, suggested time and level of English to offer ESP course, and suggested course feature. Students marked the answers which stated their opinions from the alternatives.
- Part C: Statements to get students perception of the ESP course and to evaluate the instructors, materials and exams of the ESP courses. Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed with each statement on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”
- Part D: Importance of each language aspects for the students. Students were asked to indicate the importance of each language aspect on a five-point scale from “not important at all” to “very important”.
- Part E: Importance of each activity for the students. The students were given a list of activities which they did during the ESP course. Sample items included “writing a report”, “listening to the lectures”, or “doing homework”. Students were asked to indicate the importance of each activity on a five-point scale from “not important at all” to “very important”.
- Part F: Importance of each topic in the course content. The students were given a list of the topics appeared in their ESP course content. Students were asked to indicate the importance of each topic on a five-point scale from “not important at all” to “very important”.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and One-Way Anova were used to analyse the data. After data were collected, all the responses were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). More specifically, to analyse the data to answer all of the research questions descriptive statistics were generated. In order to be able to see if there was any significant difference between different disciplines One-Way was used.

Limitations

The main limitation of that study is that the data was obtained from the students' questionnaires only. Students may not have the knowledge to judge some of the things evaluated. They may be unaware of some of the important points and misjudge the quality of education they received.

A “biased rating” is always possible which may be a result of differences in students in terms of ‘interest in the subject’ (Husbands, 1998). However, even if the students may not be ‘a perfect judge’, their opinions are still useful to the educators, at least for choosing a suitable teaching strategy (Wilson, 1999).

Results

Table 1 shows the most needed language aspects by the students. Engineering ESP students indicated that they needed ‘speaking’ the most, while Social Science and Medical ESP students indicated that they needed ‘listening’ the most. ‘Vocabulary’ was found to be the least needed language aspects among Engineering ESP and Social Science ESP students, whereas ‘grammar’ was the least needed for Medical ESP students.

Table 1. What Language Aspects Students Need Most

	Engineering (f)	Medical (f)	Social Science (f)	Total (f)
Listening	28	46	52	126
Speaking	31	10	49	90
Reading	12	12	15	39
Writing	9	9	14	32
Grammar	10	8	11	30
Translation	16	19	20	55
Vocabulary	4	21	7	32

The second research question of the study was ‘Who is suggested by the students as the instructor of the ESP courses? Prep instructors or instructors in their departments?’ Table 2 shows the students’ responses. Majority of the students from three disciplines stated that ESP courses should be given by the department instructors, not by the language teachers.

Table 2. Suggested Instructor

	Engineering (n)	Medical (n)	Social Science (n)	Total (n)
Prep Inst.	23	42	54	119
Dept. Inst.	67	53	75	195

Table 3 shows the responses to the question of ‘When ESP courses should be offered?’ Engineering ESP students indicated that ESP courses should be offered during their departmental education, while Medical ESP students preferred to have it during the English Preparatory Year. On the other hand, Social Science students stated that ESP courses should start in the Preparatory Year and continue in the following years while they were taking departmental courses.

Table 3. When to Offer ESP Courses

	Engineering (n)	Medical (n)	Social Science (n)	Total (n)
Prep Year	33	44	45	122
Departments	34	24	21	79
Prep Year & Departments	23	28	63	114

Table 4 shows the students' preferences for whether ESP courses should be compulsory or optional. 247 students from three disciplines indicated that ESP courses should be compulsory.

Table 4. Course Feature

	Engineering (n)	Medical (n)	Social Science (n)	Total (n)
Compulsory	78	57	112	247
Optional	12	39	17	68

The research question 5 aimed to investigate whether ESP courses should start after the students reach a certain level of English or it should start directly when the students start learning English. The results are provided in Table 5. 244 students from three disciplines indicated that they should start taking ESP courses after they reached a certain level in English.

Table 5. Required Level of English

	Engineering (n)	Medical (n)	Social Science (n)	Total (n)
After a certain level of English	67	75	102	244
From the beginning	23	21	27	71

Table 6 shows the means of the students' responses to the statements about their perceptions of the ESP course, course material, instructor, and exams. When the means of the students' perception of the ESP courses were compared, Engineering ESP students had the lowest mean score, indicating that they were the least positive about the ESP courses. Social Science ESP students had the highest mean score which was 3,28. This result indicated that they were moderately positive about their ESP courses. Only the difference in students' perception of ESP courses among three disciplines was found to be significant according to ANOVA results. No significant difference was found among the disciplines in terms of their evaluation of course materials, instructors and exams. In the same table it can be seen that students from three disciplines were most satisfied with the exams. Social Science ESP students and Medical ESP students were the least satisfied with the instructor. What Engineering ESP students the least satisfied with was the materials. Generally speaking only exams were a bit above the average satisfactory level while materials and instructor were below the average satisfactory level.

Table 6. Averages by Departments

	Engineering (M)	Medical (M)	Social Science (M)	Total (M)
Perception	2,79	2,94	3,28	3,00
Materials	2,48	2,58	2,69	2,58
Instructor	2,57	2,56	2,55	2,56
Exams	3,44	3,54	3,53	3,50

Table 7 shows the importance of each language aspect for the students of different disciplines to be able to follow the departmental courses. The most important skill for Engineering ESP student was ‘listening’ ($M=4,54$), while it was ‘vocabulary’ for Medical ($M=4,57$), and Social Science ESP ($M=4,62$) students. ‘Listening’, on the other hand, was equally important for Social Science students. ‘Grammar’ was found to be the least important language aspect for the students of three disciplines. ANOVA results indicated that only the differences between the mean scores of writing and speaking by disciplines is significant, indicating that the degree of importance of these skills stated by the students of three disciplines differs. When the degree of importance for each skill is compared it was found out that listening and writing were significantly more important for Social Science ESP students in comparison to students of other disciplines. No significant difference was found in other language aspects by disciplines.

Table 7. Importance of Each Skill

	Engineering (<i>M</i>)	Medical (<i>M</i>)	Social Science (<i>M</i>)	Total (<i>M</i>)
Listening	4,54	4,42	4,62	4,52
Speaking	4,38	4,15	4,60	4,37
Reading	4,42	4,34	4,40	4,38
Writing	4,15	4,02	4,41	4,19
Grammar	3,58	3,71	3,75	3,68
Vocabulary	4,35	4,57	4,62	4,51
Translation	4,10	4,30	4,25	4,21

Table 8 shows the importance of each educational activity for the students of three disciplines. The results indicated that for Engineering ESP students the most important activities were ‘Learning new words’ ($M=4,63$) and ‘learning terminology’ ($M=4,47$), whereas the least important educational activities were ‘writing a report’ ($M=3,44$) and ‘presentation’ ($M=3,54$). For Medical ESP the most important activities were ‘learning terminology’ ($M=4,47$) and ‘answering questions during the exam’ ($M=4,25$), whereas the least important educational activities were ‘writing a report’ ($M=3,09$) and ‘doing a project’ ($M=3,22$). For the Social Science ESP students the most important activities were found to be ‘learning terminology’ ($M=4,68$) and ‘Learning new words’ ($M=4,56$) and, whereas the least important skills educational activities were found to be ‘writing a report’ ($M=3,44$) and ‘doing homework’ ($M=3,54$).

Table 8. Importance of Each Activity

Educational Activities	Engineering (<i>M</i>)	Medical (<i>M</i>)	Social Science (<i>M</i>)	Total (<i>M</i>)
Learning new words	4,63	4,33	4,56	4,50
Learning terminology	4,47	4,47	4,68	4,54
Asking questions	3,95	3,63	3,95	3,84
Doing research	4,06	3,65	3,95	3,88

Doing homework	3,63	3,28	3,54	3,48
Participating in-class discussions	3,77	3,50	4,27	3,84
Doing a project	3,98	3,22	3,62	3,60
Following the lecture	4,23	4,17	4,55	4,31
Note-taking	4,16	4,07	4,39	4,20
Presentations	3,54	3,26	3,59	3,46
Answering the questions	3,84	3,78	4,02	3,38
Writing a report	3,44	3,09	3,15	3,22
Reading course materials	3,73	3,94	4,15	3,94
Translation	3,91	3,96	3,96	3,94
Answering exam questions	4,13	4,25	4,39	4,25
Doing exercises	3,90	3,67	3,86	3,81
Using audio-visual material	4,16	4,00	3,95	4,03

Table 9 shows the mean scores of the Engineering ESP students' evaluation of the topics appeared in the course content in the descending order. As it can be seen in the table all of topics were found to be satisfactory or above satisfactory level.

Table 9. Engineering ESP Course Content

Content	<i>M</i>
Mathematical Symbols	4,65
Arithmetic	4,30
Ratio and Statistics	4,27
Fractions	4,25
Computers	4,25
Dimensions	4,23
Process (Steps in a Production)	4,17
Angles and Lines	4,16
Experiments	4,16
Movement and Action	4,15
Shapes	4,10
Apparatus	4,10
Numbers	4,05

Table 10 shows the mean scores of the Medical ESP students' evaluation of the topics appeared in the course content in the descending order. As it can be seen in the table 5 of the topics were found to be satisfactory. Students were averagely satisfied with the remaining 5 topics.

Table 10. Medical ESP Course Content

Content	<i>M</i>
Muscular System	4,22
Skeletal System	4,20

Nervous System	4,19
Digestive System	4,05
Circulatory System	4,00
Endocrine System	3,93
Respiratory System	3,92
Human Nutrition	3,85
Integumentary System	3,74
Urinary System	3,74

Table 11 shows the mean scores of the Social Science ESP students' evaluation of the topics appeared in the course content in the descending order. As it can be seen in the table 3 of the topics were found to be satisfactory by the students. However, students were averagely satisfied with the remaining topics.

Table11. Social Science ESP Course Content

Content	<i>M</i>
Three Basic Economic Activities	4,27
What is Business	4,05
The Science of Economics	4,19
Types of Economic Systems	3,96
Business Basics	3,91
Factors of Production	3,89
Earning and Using Money	3,86
Establishing A Business	3,83
The Problem of Scarcity	3,73
The History of Trade and Money	3,71
Public Relations	3,65
Government and Politics	3,57
IR as a Field of Study	3,51
What is International Relations	3,47
Democratic Socialism	3,44
The Media	3,41
Types of Political Rule	3,38
What is Sociology	3,35
Actors and Influences of IR	3,28
NonState Actors	3,26

Discussions

The main aim of this study is to evaluate the ESP courses offered during the second term of the English Preparatory classes in a state university in Istanbul. Within that evaluation different variables of the program were examined. The results showed that most of the students from three disciplines indicated that department instructors should teach ESP courses. This has been a

very long a still unresolved discussion. Who should be the teachers of ESP classes? Should it be the language teacher or an expert in the target subject of the class?

Anthony states (2007) that in order to understand the target material specialist knowledge is necessary. However, teachers of ESP courses have often been criticized for lacking it. Without this knowledge, it is not possible for a language teacher to teach the complex concepts of the specialist subjects (Bell, 2002). This results in teachers' feeling insecure in the classroom. They become too sensitive because they doubt about their abilities to teach.

Since subject-knowledge is necessary to teach ESP courses, language teachers try to learn some basic concepts of their students' disciplines. However, they may find it confusing and complicated to comprehend the subject because they have no education in that subject. They feel alienated by the subject they are expected to teach. This can have a negative effect on their classroom performance. The students may realize their reluctance and hesitations, so they may have negative feelings towards their teachers.

Those who are in favour of language teachers as ESP teachers claim that there are many factors that prevent experts from teaching ESP courses. First of all, they cannot play all 5 roles of an ESP teacher, which are 'teacher', 'collaborator', 'course designer and materials provider', 'researcher' and 'evaluator', defined by Dudley Evans and St. John (1998). Madeleine (2007) indicates the main reason why we have ESP courses is to teach English and subject-specialists of the disciplines often do not have effective English skills to teach an ESP course. In addition, according to Anthony (2001) subject-specialists of the disciplines have loads of other work to do and lots of other classes to teach. Therefore, they are simply unwilling to teach an ESP course. Moreover, even if their English skills are good enough, and they are willing to teach an ESP course, they may not be aware of how language is used in their disciplines and what language items are necessary because they are not language experts. They may not be familiar with the students' needs. Therefore, they cannot develop an effective ESP course or program, a relevant and appropriate materials and exams.

Another main challenge in the field of ESP is the selection of the course material. The results show that the materials used in three disciplines were evaluated as below the satisfactory level by the students of three disciplines although these materials are prepared by the instructors considering the students' needs.

Anthony (2001) states that ESP teachers cannot rely on personal experiences when evaluating materials because they come from a background unrelated to the discipline. In addition, not enough time is allocated for needs analysis, research and materials development. ESP practitioners are expected to produce a course material with no, or very limited, preparation time (Jones, 1990). In that case the decision cannot always be a satisfactory one.

Another controversial issue in ESP is when to start teaching it. The results shows that students prefer to start taking ESP courses when they reach a certain level in English. However, if ESP is not different from general English,

field-related concepts can be taught alongside language. On the other hand, some propose that ESP deals with often relatively high-level, mature learners (Dudley-Evans & St. John's, 1998). Therefore, ESP should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level. When students have little or no basic knowledge of English, teaching English for a specific purpose is almost impossible.

Recommendations for Future Research

Data for this study was collected only through student questionnaire. For a better evaluation other data gathering methods can be included in the study. Students can be asked for their needs but they may not be reliable source of information about their own needs because they may be unfamiliar with the subject they are to study (Long,1996). Another questionnaire can be prepared for the instructors in the departments to get their opinions on some aspects of the ESP courses and their students' performances in their departmental courses. In addition, ESP instructors can be interviewed. A focus group interview with the students can be organized to focus on some of the results obtained from the student questionnaire.

Since the satisfactory level of the students for materials and instructors were found to be below average, some improvements in these can be programmed. A training program supported by the instructors in the departments can be offered to the language instructors. Hutchison and Waters (1987) state that training can eliminate the fears and hesitations the teachers have towards teaching ESP. Teachers can realize that it is not too difficult to teach ESP and it can be interesting. The cooperation between the language teachers and subject specialist can be improved so that subject specialists can be included in the course design.

Considering the results obtained in the study such as the importance of each educational activity, language aspects and the topics appeared in the course content, the materials can be revised to include the variables which are more important for the students of different disciplines. In addition, a detailed material evaluation can be carried out to find out more about the problems with the material. While the material is being revised some supplementary which include audio-visual materials can be added. Integration of ICT can be considered while redesigning the ESP course.

Conclusion

An ESP course revision based on the administrators' beliefs and interests or the teachers' perceptions would not be a realistic approach. If any change to be made in the course, a detailed course evaluation is necessary to find out which aspects of the course need improvement. Such an analysis will

make the teachers more aware of the realities of the course and help to design a more effective and efficient course.

It is hoped that this study may bring benefits to other ESP course designers, or course evaluators who are involved in similar studies in similar contexts.

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