



## Teachers' Voice vs. Students' Voice: A Needs Analysis Approach to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Iran

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### Abstract

EAP plays a highly important role in countries where English is used mainly for academic purposes. However, EAP programs have been developed without conducting a systematic needs analysis from both the students' and instructors' perspective. The purpose of this study is to describe the perception that EAP students and instructors have of the problematic areas in EAP programs. A total of 693 EAP students majoring in different academic fields and 37 instructors participated in this study. Survey information included respondents' perception the importance of problematic areas in EAP programs. The results show discrepancy between the perceptions of EAP learners in different academic fields and between learners and instructors. The study has implications for curriculum design and instructional delivery of EAP courses for college level students.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, English for academic purposes, Teachers' voice, Students' voice, Needs analysis, EAP methodology

### 1. Introduction

Due to the status of English as an international language and advancements in technology in recent years, there has been a worldwide increase in demand for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses varying in length and the mode of instruction (Jordan, 1997). EAP is needed not only for educational studies in countries where English is the mother tongue, but also in other countries where English is the medium of instruction in the higher.

In expanding circle countries like Iran, where English is mainly used for academic purposes, EAP plays a highly important role. Additionally, in Iran, after the Islamic revolution, in an effort to defy westernization of the country, there has been a strong tendency to teach EAP, which is perceived to be a variety of English that can be somewhat separated from the dominant culture attached to it. EAP has increasingly expanded so that it currently forms a considerable part of the curricula for all academic fields at universities (Eslami, Eslami-Rasekh, & Quiroz, 2007).

Despite the government's high level of investment in EAP programs, there is very limited research (exceptions are: Atai, 2000; Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Gooniband, 1988; Khajeie, 1993; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008) addressing the effectiveness of these programs from learners' and instructors' perspectives. Current EAP practice is largely ad-hoc, lacking in course design, teacher training, sufficient instruction time, and proper evaluation. The challenges will necessarily involve developing true specific-purpose curricula based on learners' needs which would provide the appropriate context for sustainable language programs. More specifically, learners' and teachers' voices on the effectiveness of these programs, problems faced, and the use of textbooks produced and published locally is not heard.

The objective of the study is to examine Iranian EAP learners' perceptions with regard to the problematic areas in EAP programs compared to instructors' perceptions. More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are the EAP instructors' perceptions of the importance of problematic areas in EAP classes?
- 2) What are the EAP students' perceptions of the importance of problematic areas in EAP classes?
- 3) Are there any significant differences between the learners' perceptions in different academic fields?
- 4) Are there any significant differences between the learners' perceptions and their instructors?

### 2. Needs analysis

Assessment of needs from the individual learner's perspective is an important part of any instructional program design and it can benefit both teachers and students alike (Lytle, 1988). The learner-centered approach to language learning builds on the premise that teaching/learning programs should be responsive to learners' needs (Hutchinson & Waters,

1987; Robinson, 1991; Savignon & Wang, 2003). As Hamp-Lyons (2001) points out, EAP begins with the learner and the situation, whereas General English begins with the language. English for Academic Purposes curriculum development is guided by learner needs leading to a research area known as 'needs analysis' or 'needs assessment'. Hence, the needs analysis initiates and guides EAP curriculum development, involving surveying the learners to collect data on their background and goals, linguistic and behavioral demands, and preferred learning/teaching strategies (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). Students' needs assessment remains elemental to EAP (Allison et al., 1994; Brinton et al., 1989; Dudley-Evans, 1998; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997) and the unifying feature of any EAP course is the definition of objectives and content of each course according to learners' functional needs in the target language and how the students are expected to perform in conforming to the norms and conventions of their academic disciplines.

Needs assessment should be considered as an on-going process designed to gather and analyse information about the target language needs of learners in an existing or proposed setting and to find out whether the program's objectives and the learners' requirements are being achieved and for planning the learners' and the program's future directions and making informed decisions (Purpura & King, 2003; Santopietro & Peyton, 1991).

An important question in relation to needs analysis is how the notion of 'need' is to be conceptualized. According to Brindley (1989: 65) the main source of the ambiguity in the concept of language needs is the distinction between various concepts of need, namely the distinction between *necessities* or *demands*, and learners' *wants* and the methods of bridging the gap between these two. Similarly, Berwick (1989) defines 'need' as a measurable discrepancy or the gap between the existing conditions and the desired future state. Benesch (1996) believes that we need to go beyond the descriptive approach to needs analysis and consider critical needs analysis. Critical needs analysis acknowledges the existing demands but considers the target situation demands as a site of possible reform. Benesch believes that needs analysis has so far surrendered to the domination of the institutes and authorities and suggests that we need to consider needs analysis as a political and subjective process and EAP classrooms as a site of struggle. Critical needs analysis assumes that institutions are hierarchical and those at the bottom are entitled to more power than they have and therefore areas where greater equality might be achieved should be explored.

It is highly important to consider the 'need' in relation to the unique characteristics of the educational context in which the study takes place (Holmes & Celani, 2006). Students' needs in different contexts are diverse and the analysis of needs can be effective if the academic language needs are accurately defined and seek utmost specificity within the specific target use (Deutch, 2003). It is based on this assertion that we will embark on analyzing the problems EAP students and instructors face in Iranian EAP programs.

### 3. The Iranian context

Prior to the change of government in 1979 in Iran, the British council had sponsored a major ESP materials initiative which generated many textbooks targeted for Iranian students in tertiary education. In the early 1960s joint projects between Iranian universities and Western academic centers (Cowan, 1974; Bates, 1978) with a focus on teaching English to engineering and medical students were implemented. Several discipline-specific English textbooks were published during this time.

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978), there has been a systematic move supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to establish uniform discipline-based EAP programs for universities. This move has led to the compilation of several ESP textbooks for students of medicine, engineering, science, social sciences, humanities, law, geography, agriculture and other academic fields. The purpose of these programs is to provide courses more closely geared to the learners' needs in special fields of study, and in so doing to enhance the students' level of motivation and interest. However, since the courses were not designed based on any systematic needs analysis, the program designer's goals do not seem to have been fulfilled (Atai, 2000; Eslami et al., 2007; Farhady & Hedayati, 2009; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Tahririan, 1990).

The EAP curriculum for all university students includes one to three EAP courses which are either taught by English or content area instructors. These courses are three credit courses and taught three hours per week. The first course is 'General English' and the other two courses (three credit hours each) get increasingly more discipline-specific. The main purpose for teaching EAP is to facilitate the academic English level of students to enable them to read discipline-specific texts in English, be present at conferences, and/or translate the English texts into Persian. An important section of the graduate entrance exam is students' level of competence in their related EAP field.

There is high uniformity in all the textbooks as far as the structure, organization, and subsections are concerned and there is a noticeable emphasis on developing reading skills. They commonly include reading excerpts related to the students' academic fields followed by exercises on reading comprehension skills, vocabulary and word analysis exercises, and short paragraphs for translation.

Despite the uniformity in the teaching materials, EAP practice is mainly ad hoc, lacking in course design, systematic needs analysis, teacher education, proper evaluation and systematic research on the effectiveness of these programs

(Atai, 2000; Eslami et al., 2007; Farhady & Hedayati, 2009; Gooniband 1988; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Therefore, careful examination of the attitudes and perceptions of learners and instructor is seen to be important in determining the success of EAP programs.

The present study was therefore carried out in order to broaden the scope of studies undertaken so far in the area of students' and instructors' perceptions of their language learning needs and to analyze the perception of EAP learners from different though related academic backgrounds in relation to the problematic areas in EAP.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### *4.1. Participants*

###### *Students*

Because of practical limitations, the researchers used nonprobability sample designs (Cohen & Manion, 1994) to select the student population for this study. More specifically, 'quota sampling', which is the nonprobability equivalent of stratified sampling (Nachmias & Nachmias 1981) was used. Moreover, since specific academic disciplines are shown to affect the needs of the students (Ferris & Tagg, 1996), the student's field of study was used as an important criterion for sampling (Table 1). There were 393 females and 300 males in the sample. Their ages ranged from 20 to 25 years and they were all undergraduates.

The students were enrolled in the EAP courses in the academic year of 2005-2006. The sample was taken from Esfahan University, Iran University of Science and Technology, Esfahan University of Technology, and Tehran University. Medical students were selected from the medical Universities of Tehran and Esfahan.

###### *Instructors*

The instructors sample included the instructors (ELT experts and subject-matter experts) who taught EAP courses at the universities included in our students' sample. Their age was between 28 and 55 years and their experience in teaching English at university level ranged from three to 19 years. Only 33% of the instructors were PhD holders. The rest were MA or MSc holders. Fifty-one percent of the instructors reported their specialty to be in TEFL, English literature, or linguistics, and 41% reported to be subject-matter instructors.

##### *4.2. The questionnaire*

The questionnaire used in this study was a modified version of the one used by Atai (2000), and Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004). In addition to some demographic information, students' rank ordering of the importance of different language skills to their academic and professional goals, frequency of different instructional activities used in their classes, and their perceived importance of different problematic areas in EAP courses were included.

To ensure the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items, four instructors were consulted, six classroom observations were conducted and a general discussion was held in three EAP classes. To make sure that students understand the items in the questionnaire, students' native language (Persian) was used. The questionnaire was piloted with 30 students and 5 instructors representative of the actual participants of the study. Based on the results, and the students' comments, the questionnaire was modified and finalized for the large-scale data collection.

The students' questionnaire consisted of 53 items and was divided into four parts. Part A of the questionnaire contained items asking about participants' demographic information. Part B of the questionnaire contained 21 items related to the perception of the importance of language skills, language components, and instructional activities. The items were ranked on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). Part C (13 items) asked students to specify how frequently different instructional activities were used in their classes ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always). Part D included 19 items and asked about the importance of different problems in the EAP programs based on a ranking scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). The items for problematic areas in EAP instruction in Iran were based on the findings of previous studies, classroom observations and general discussions held in three EAP classes. The questionnaire was distributed to the students either by the researchers or the instructors in their classes. In this paper we only cover part D (19 items) of the questionnaire which focuses on the importance of different problems in the EAP programs from students vs. instructors perspective. For the findings related to other 3 parts of the survey refer to Eslami et al. (2007).

The questionnaire for the faculty members was slightly different from that of the students. In Part A demographic information related to the instructors was elicited. In Part B the perceptions of the faculty members concerning the importance of language skills and components to students' studies and careers were elicited. The last part of the faculty members' questionnaire (Part C) asked for their perceptions of the importance of different problems in EAP instruction and implementation. The instructors' perceptions regarding the frequency of use of different instructional activities was not elicited because the result of the pilot study showed that what the instructors report was highly different from what was observed in their classes which, according to Dörnyei (2003), is evidence of the desirability effect. Of the 72 copies of the questionnaires delivered to the instructors, 51% completed and returned the survey to the researchers.

The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of instruments and each subscale were estimated as shown in Table 2. All the reliability coefficients were high enough (higher than 0.80) to enable the researchers to conduct statistical analyses of the entire questionnaires and their subscales.

## 5. Data analysis

Statistical procedures employed include descriptive statistics for various items on the survey to examine overall frequencies, totals, percentages, means, and standard deviations. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine whether there were significant mean differences based on the students' field of the study. Mann-Whitney *U* tests were used to examine the differences between the students' responses and those of the instructors.

### 5.1. Results

In the following subsections the results of the data analysis are presented in relation to the research questions and the two main groups of participants. We will first explore the result of the students' perception of the importance of different problems in EAP instruction. Then, we examine the students' perception in different fields of study to find out if the problems are perceived differently based on the students' field of study. Following the students' section, the result of the instructors' questionnaire will be presented and compared with that of students.

#### a) Students' perceptions of problems in EAP courses

Table 3 summarizes the participants' responses to the items in this section and shows the significant differences based on ANOVA results. The results show that students did not perceive the instructors' low level of language proficiency and content knowledge to be highly important (mean range of 2-3). Furthermore, low content knowledge of instructors was perceived to be a significantly more important problem by students in medicine ( $M = 2.87$ ) and engineering ( $M = 2.75$ ) than by students in humanities (2.25).

In contrast, 65-75% of the students selected a *most important* (5), or *important* (4) ranking for their own low English language proficiency. Students' low level of language proficiency was perceived to be a significantly more important problem by students in humanities ( $M = 4.55$ ), and engineering ( $M = 4.02$ ) than medicine ( $M = 3.58$ ). Limited vocabulary, slow reading speed, poor listening, speaking, writing and reading comprehension, boring classes, access to the Internet, and lack of instructors' emphasis on the use of the Internet were ranked by the majority (67%-87%) either as *important* or *highly important*.

The students ranked problems with overcrowded classes, excessive use of translation activities, lack of audio-visual facilities and outdated materials relatively high, (mean range of 3.78-3.75). Excessive use of translation activities was perceived as significantly more important by students in medicine ( $M = 3.98$ ) and engineering ( $M = 3.89$ ) than students in humanities ( $M = 3.01$ ). Similarly, the use of outdated textbooks was ranked as significantly more important by students in engineering ( $M = 3.71$ ) than students in medicine ( $M = 3.19$ ).

Lack of student involvement in class activities (teacher-centered classes) was ranked relatively high as well (mean range of 3.77-4.55). Students in humanities perceived this to be a significantly more important problem ( $M = 4.55$ ), than students in medicine ( $M = 4.03$ ) or engineering ( $M = 4.01$ ). This could be related, again, to the low English proficiency of students in humanities and consequently the lower use of student-centered activities by teachers.

Finally, the vast majority (75%) of the students ranked a negative attitude toward English as least important (1) and 25% marked the low importance ranking (2). In the following section we will present the result of the instructors' questionnaire of related issues.

As the results show, there were both similarities and differences in the perception of students in different academic fields. The explanation and implications of the findings will be presented in the conclusion section. We now embark on presenting the perception of instructors and the differences between instructors' perception compared to students'.

#### b) Instructors' Perceptions of Major Problems in Current EAP Instruction

Instructors perceived the low level of students' language proficiency to be significantly more important than the students themselves (Table 4 below). Limited vocabulary, negative attitudes toward English, lack of availability of audio-visual materials, and outdated textbooks and materials were other areas in which there was a significant difference between the instructors and the students. Instructors perceived these problems as being more important than students did.

What is notable is that instructors did not perceive teacher-centered classes to be as highly important as students with a significant difference between the two groups. Similarly, students' ranking of boring classes and excessive use of translation activities as problematic areas was significantly higher than instructors' ranking.

On the other hand, instructors perceived the lack of student involvement and participation in class activities to be significantly more important than students (Instructors,  $M = 4.91$ , Students,  $M = 4.18$ ). A likely explanation is that since

faculty members believe students do not participate in class activities as much as they should, and with the students' low English language proficiency, more teacher-centered classes are required to effectively teach large EAP classes.

As shown above, a divergence of opinions between these two groups was noted. We will move to the concluding remarks and the implications of this study for EAP programs.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings have demonstrated both the complex network of elements which play a significant role in determining the needs of EAP students in Iran, and the unavoidable necessity to set priorities.

The findings of the study support the view that the students 'greatly' need to increase their general proficiency in English. Students' low level of language proficiency was perceived to be a significantly more important problem by students in humanities, and engineering than medicine. Limited vocabulary, slow reading speed, poor listening, speaking, writing and reading comprehension, boring classes, access to the Internet, and lack of instructors' emphasis on the use of the Internet were ranked highly by the majority of the students.

The results show that students prefer learner-centered classes and demand more involvement in class activities. It is possible that teachers' perception of students' low English language proficiency and low motivation leads to teachers' lower use of student-centered activities. Teachers need to make constant efforts to keep up to date with new teaching methods to be able to facilitate interactive classrooms with students of different English proficiency levels. Appropriate institutional support, such as providing professional development, releasing time, and funds for teachers (Parkhurst & Bodwell, 2005) are needed to help familiarize the teachers with the new methodologies.

Our study, similar to other studies in previous research in EAP needs analysis in some other contexts (Robinson, 1991; Ferris 1998) has revealed that there are discrepancies among the perceptions of instructors and students. The results show that instructors may not always be the best judges of students' needs and challenges.

There were also differences among different groups of students based on their field of study. The findings of this study, like those of Atai (2000), Ferris & Tagg (1996), and Mazdayasna & Tahririan (2008) stress the importance of examining the precise needs of students in different academic fields in order to prepare them most effectively for the tasks and expectations that lie ahead of them.

These results, similar to Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh (2004) study of general English students in Iran, demonstrate that although students show more interest in communicative activities, the use of the grammar translation method with a heavy emphasis on grammar and translation is still prominent in Iranian universities. This is an indication that EAP learners in Iran are experiencing a fairly traditional, form-focused L2 education with little opportunity to use English for communicative purposes (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009, p. 140). Instructors did not perceive teacher-centered classes to be as highly important as students with a significant difference between the two groups. Similarly, students' ranking of boring classes and excessive use of translation activities as problematic areas was significantly higher than instructors' ranking. Teachers may therefore need to apply diverse communicative activities in language classrooms to give EAP students opportunities to practice using English in different context and focus more on self-regulated learning.

As Benesch (1996: 736) asserts, needs analysis is a political and subjective process. Critical needs analysis assumes that institutions are hierarchical and those at the bottom are often entitled to more power than they have. Based on this ideology, learners, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy in top-down educational systems such as Iran, need to be given more power and their voices should be heard in order to facilitate reform. Possibilities for change do exist even in the existing structures of the country. Faculty members need to become aware of what their students *demand*, versus what the institutions deem necessary and take action accordingly.

Because needs analysis is by definition context-specific (Ferris, 1998: 314), it is hoped that this study has shed light on the needs of Iranian EAP students from different disciplines and has brought into focus the discrepancies between students' perceptions and instructors' perceptions of students' language learning needs and problems in EAP instruction and delivery.

Our findings revealed that there are many factors one should take into account when designing EAP courses for students in different academic fields. Use of technology and student-centered approaches to teaching are among the highly important issues to consider based on the opinions of EAP students revealed in this study.

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Table 1. Total number and percentage of students in the three academic fields

Academic Field	Number	Percent (%)
Medicine	268	38.7
Engineering	223	32.2
Humanities	202	29.1
Total	693	100

Table 2. Reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) of both instruments and each subscale

Instruments and their subscale	No. of cases	No. of items	Reliability Coefficient
Students' questionnaire	693	53	0.9232
Instructors' questionnaire	37	40	0.8771
Language skills, abilities and instructional activities	730	21	0.8413
Instructional activities used in classes	693	13	0.8593
Existing problems	730	19	0.8561

Table 3. Students' ranking of the importance of problems in EAP courses

Problems	Medicine	Engineering	Humanities
	M SD	M SD	M SD
1. Low level of language proficiency*	3.58 1.27	4.02 1.22	4.55 1.11
2. Limited vocabulary	3.71 1.01	3.84 1.02	3.90 1.09
3. Slow reading speed	3.45 1.01	3.31 1.08	3.53 1.03
4. Poor reading comprehension	3.33 .89	3.54 .87	4.01 .91
5. Poor listening comprehension	4.05 1.05	4.10 1.24	4.23 1.43
6. Poor speaking ability	4.32 1.04	4.46 .97	4.52 1.02
7. Poor writing ability	4.33 .98	4.07 1.14	4.74 1.22
8. Overcrowded classes	3.78 1.23	3.87 .98	4.01 .87
9. Negative attitude toward English	1.01 .57	1.20 .91	1.23 .98
10. Boring classes	3.85 1.07	3.76 1.01	4.05 1.02
11. Low English proficiency of instructors	2.98 1.09	3.01 .97	2.81 1.02
12. Low content knowledge of instructors*	2.87 1.11	2.75 1.05	2.25 .98
13. Excessive use of translation activities*	3.98 1.06	3.89 1.01	3.01 1.07
14. Lack of availability of audio-visual materials	4.01 1.05	4.08 .95	4.07 1.09
15. Lack of easy access to Internet	4.39 1.33	4.49 1.11	4.57 1.08
16. Lack of the instructor's emphasis on the use of Internet	3.91 1.07	3.87 1.08	4.01 .99
17. Outdated textbooks and materials*	3.19 1.11	3.71 1.06	3.01 .97
18. Teacher-centered classes	3.77 .97	3.96 1.12	3.99 1.01
19. Lack of student involvement and participation in classroom activities*	4.03 .97	4.01 .98	4.55 .99

\* Shows a significant difference between the groups at  $p < .05$



Table 4. Instructors' perception of the importance of problems in EAP programs

Problems	Students	Instructors
	M SD	M SD
1. Low level of students' language proficiency*	4.04 1.19	4.55 1.01
2. Limited vocabulary*	3.79 1.04	4.32 1.02
3. Slow reading speed	3.42 1.04	3.81 1.08
4. Poor reading comprehension	3.62 .87	3.91 .87
5. Poor listening comprehension	4.11 1.24	4.55 .91
6. Poor speaking ability	4.43 1.01	4.56 .97
7. Poor writing ability	4.37 1.10	4.41 .91
8. Overcrowded classes	3.87 1.02	4.45 .98
9. Negative attitude toward English*	1.13 .81	2.93 .91
10. Boring classes	3.78 1.03	3.53 1.01
11. Low English proficiency of instructors	2.93 1.02	3.01 .97
12. Low content knowledge of instructors	2.61 1.03	2.75 1.05
13. Excessive use of translation activities	3.61 1.04	3.12 1.01
14. Lack of availability of audio-visual materials*	4.05 1.03	4.61 .95
15. Lack of easy access to internet	4.47 1.16	4.67 1.11
16. Lack of the instructor's emphasis on the use of internet	3.92 1.04	3.87 1.08
17. Outdated textbooks and materials*	3.29 1.03	3.98 1.06
18. Teacher-centred classes*	3.89 1.02	3.02 1.12
19. Lack of student involvement and participation in classroom activities*	4.18 .98	4.91 .98

\* Shows a significant difference between the groups at  $p < .05$