

Evaluation of an ESP Course of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition

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Abstract

Evaluation is defined as matching process that matches the needs to available solutions. The present study is an attempt to evaluate English for specific purposes (ESP) course book on “*the ESP Course of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition*” taught at some universities in Iran. To achieve this goal, a researcher-made questionnaire and an interview protocol was used. The sample of this study consisted of 80 master students majoring in Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition and 6 teachers teaching this course. The textbook was evaluated in terms of four factors including content and exercises, topics, skills and strategies, and teaching methodology. Data was collected through (i) a five-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 51 items and (ii) an interview protocol including some comprehensive questions. Regarding the presented results on the evaluation of ESP textbook it was found that general consensus is that the course book is appropriate for the students who should pass the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition course. However, the students did not give high evaluation to some issues. The findings of this study would enable the ESP teachers to adapt the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition textbook more relevant to the students' needs.

Keywords: ESP, ESP materials, textbook evaluation, ESP course of Qur'anic sciences and tradition

1. Introduction

English for specific purposes (ESP) has been around for more than three decades. It does not consist of a specific kind of language or methodology, nor is it a particular type of teaching material. As the name offers, ESP is designed for a particular group of people in a particular setting and the materials used are relevant to the learners' specialized field of study (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011).

According to Amirian and Tavakoli (2009), “ESP is viewed as a cover term for teaching and learning English for multiple specific purposes: EAP, EOP and others” (p. 3). Similarly, Silva (2002) mentioned that ESP expresses learners' specific purpose in learning the second language and it is a response to learners' requirements and the acquisition of language related to communication outside the classroom, especially in their studies and future professions. It examines the tasks that students require to perform professionally in English.

In Iran, like many other countries, English has become the language of a lot of academic textbooks, and this has caused ESP courses to include in the curriculum as a necessary course in the universities. Even though ESP courses have become more comprehensive recently, and despite the growing demand for communicating through English for Specific Purposes, ESP courses are still limited to learning specific words, grammar points, and translating texts, which basically disregard learners' personal interests and needs and often leads to low motivation and then poor performance later their future profession. Moreover, with the advent of globalization, it is essential that students be able to listen, to read and present English information orally and in writing in the field of their studies. Despite the academic effort to strengthen the students' language proficiency in their especial fields these students still show poor performance when they use English in their profession. A reason for this can be the use of unsuitable materials on the part of the teachers. However, it is difficult to know what is important in choosing an English textbook but administrators and institutes do not usually carry out systematic textbook evaluation to inform teachers of the optimal choice.

2. Literature Review

ESP is the abbreviated form of English for Specific Purposes which many teachers, experts and instructors are using it nowadays. There are numerous definitions for ESP but the focus of all of them is on how teaching of ESP develops appropriate procedures to learners whose main aim is not only learning language but also learning English for a specific purpose. These aims may be educational or professional or something else and ESP claims to be capable of preparing well its learners to achieve the required goals.

Traditionally it has been divided into two main classes of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991; Strevens, 1988, as cited in Chien et al., 2008). Later, many issues such as the dominance of English as the international language of science, technology, and business; and the increased power of English speaking countries lead to the expansion of the ESP movement and then it is turning into an essential and particular field (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998 as cited in Karimi, 2006).

There are numerous definitions for ESP. Gatehouse (2001) referred to Strevens' original definition of ESP and presented his own revised definition of ESP. He considered absolute and variable characteristics for ESP. The absolute characteristics are: defining ESP to meet specific needs of the learners, making use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves and focusing on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. Variable characteristics involve: ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines; it may use, in specific teaching context, a different methodology from that of General English; and it is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level; ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students; most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems (as cited in Karimi, 2006).

According to Zhang (2007), course book is a resource for achieving aims that have been set in terms of learners' needs. Jahangard (2007) argued that textbooks are an effective resource for self-directed learning, presentation material, activities, and a reference for students. The process of curriculum development is a dynamic process that many elements such as needs analysis, goals placement, implementation, and program evaluation are interrelated and involved in (Richards, 2011).

Although materials and textbooks serve as one of the main instruments for shaping knowledge, attitudes, and principles of the students (Nooreen & Arshad, 2010), there are numerous proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials, but these proposals are much less common in the field of ESP. Accordingly it is worth to mention that, as noted by Ansari and Babayi (2002), teachers or instructors have been responsible for evaluating textbooks, so the evaluation of teaching materials is an influential and prominent part of a teacher's work.

The purpose of all evaluation research projects is to prescribe changes and improve the situation. Various methods are used to assess the quality of textbooks. Cunningsworth (1984) considers three different types of evaluation: pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and post-use evaluation (as cited in Čepon, 2008). According to Mukundan (2004 as cited in Nasiri, 2011) and Ellis (1997 as cited in Tok, 2010) there are two types of evaluation: predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation. As mentioned by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), Baleghizadeh and Rahimi (2011) divide evaluation into formative and summative types. McDonough and Shaw (2003) regard three classes of evaluations: external, internal, overall.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, as cited in Hatam, 2012) propose two prominent ESP levels of evaluation: learner assessment and course evaluation. Based on their view these two types of evaluation are not always distinct. In other words, evaluation of learners reflects not only the learners' performance but also to some extent the effectiveness of the course. In ESP, there are three basic types of learner assessment namely placement tests, achievement tests and proficiency tests. Moreover, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, as cited in Hatam, 2012), there are four main aspects of ESP course evaluation to be considered: a) what should be evaluated? b) how can ESP courses be evaluated? c) who should be involved in the evaluation? d) when (and how often) should evaluation take place?

Thein (2006) conducted a study to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the textbooks used for teaching English to religious students at Myanmar Institute of Technology. Questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations were used to collect data both from teachers and learners. The study was aimed at investigating the extent to which teachers and learners' expectations match the objectives of the program in developing students' communicative skills and critical thinking. The findings revealed that textbooks used in the program were not suitable for several reasons. For example, the textbooks did not contribute to achieve the needs of both teachers and learners, they were not effective to promote students' critical thinking, and they were not effective in

improving the students' communicative skills for everyday life situations.

Since, as Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008) maintain, the ESP courses in Iran, as in many countries, "have marginal status at the tertiary level"; therefore, most of the students have low level of proficiency in general English (p. 278). Since the early 1960's, ESP has been a developing branch of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction in Iran. As in Kiany (2005) mentioned, the First National ESP/EAP Conference in Iran was held in 2005, and 46 papers and 11 sample lessons were presented at the conference.

Maleki and Kazemi (2012) evaluated and compared Medical Terminology and English for the Students of Medicine on the basis of a teacher's and a number of students' attitudes. By applying survey questionnaires, they (i) investigated the extent to which each textbook addresses the teacher's and students' expectations and (ii) found the textbooks' strengths and weaknesses and made suggestions for their improvement.

Karimi and Sadeghi (2013) evaluated the 'Agricultural Extension and Rural Development ESP Textbook' with analyzing particular needs of a special group of learners considered as an introductory part for evaluating an ESP textbook. They made use of Hutchinson and Waters' framework. Then, they discussed the adaptability of the content of these textbooks in agricultural extension and rural development regarding the learners' needs.

Najafi-Sarem, Hamidi, and Mahmoudiyeh (2013) conducted a study to evaluate the specialized book of English for International Tourism based on the checklist developed by Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979). The characteristics of the book were mainly analyzed in two general dimensions concerning the physical appearance and its content in such aspects as grammar, vocabulary, exercises, and illustrations. The obtained results showed that the current book can be used as an acceptable textbook to teach to students who are interested in studying tourism.

The present study concerns evaluation of mentioned textbook in terms of content and exercises, topics, skills and strategies, and teaching methodology of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition MA students in Qur'anic sciences universities, and attempts to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of their ESP textbook. Therefore, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are learners' attitudes towards teaching methodology in the class?
- 2) Does the ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition major cover the necessary language skills and strategies?
- 3) Is ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition major appropriate according to the topics?
- 4) Are the language content and exercises of the ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition major appropriate?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A group of 80 MA Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition students, both male and female, doing an ESP course formed the whole population of this study. The students' age range was 17-40 years. They study at the University of Isfahan, Faculty of Humanities, Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition Department, and the University of Quranic Sciences and Tradition (Hadith), Isfahan, and the University of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition in Dowlatabad, Isfahan. All the students passed their general English in previous semesters but they had not taken other ESP courses.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to elicit the students' perceptions regarding their ESP textbooks. The questionnaire comes in five parts: 1) demographic information, content and exercises, topics, language skills and strategies, and teaching methodology. All of the items in these sections were designed on a five-point Likert scale of frequency, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. To make the items easy to understand, the researchers translated the questionnaire into Persian and it was back translated into English. The questionnaire was mainly developed by the researcher although for some parts, checklists including checklists of Litz (2005), Garinger (2001), Littlejohn (1998), Ur (1996), Cunningsworth (1995), Eskey and Grabe (1988), and Sheldon (1988) were examined and browsed. Common features of these checklists were selected. Two university professors checked its content and face validity. The questionnaire was piloted on 15 ESP students. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.92.

3.2.2 Interview

To achieve more reliable and valid findings, an interview was run. It was mostly adopted from Litz (2005) and the present researchers made some changes. It was translated using back translation method from English to Persian back to English. Two university professors checked its content and face validity and then it was piloted on 2 students.

3.3 Materials

The book to be evaluated was “English for the students of Qur’anic Sciences and Tradition, written by Mohsen Jan Nezhad and Jalal-e-Din Jalali, which is a specialized textbook for MA Qur’anic Sciences and Tradition students to be used at the universities in Iran. The book consists of eighteen units. Each unit includes reading passages and different exercises such as language practice, comprehension exercises, true and false, multiple choice, comprehension questions and cloze tests in order. Most parts of the textbook emphasize reading skill. No listening exercises have been provided; also this book has not been equipped with charts, figures, tables and color pictures.

3.4 Procedure

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative designs to evaluate the ESP textbook designed for the students of Qur’anic Sciences and Tradition. At first, the researcher talked with the participants about the study for a few minutes and made them aware of the processes they were supposed to go through. They were informed that it was not necessary to write their names and their answers won’t affect their course grade. Then, the questionnaires were distributed among the participants and the required data were collected. Next, in the qualitative part, the book was evaluated through an interview. The students were asked to give their views about content and exercises, topics, language skills and strategies, and teaching methodology.

4. Results and Discussion

The first question, “*What are learners’ attitudes towards teaching methodology in the class?*” was answered through nine items in the students’ questionnaire and three questions in the interview protocol. Almost 50% of the participants had positive attitude toward teaching methodology of the textbook and selected ‘agree’, while only 3% of the participants did not agree. More than 40% of the respondents selected ‘undecided’ and ‘strongly disagree’ was not selected by the participants. As the findings revealed, the majority of the participants had a positive attitude towards teaching methodology. They felt that the teachers were helpful and understanding. Teachers themselves regarded teaching methodology as very effective and satisfactory. Of course, the results obtained from the interviews with the students showed that they had some expectations and suggestions. Some of the students felt that teaching methods required to be changed, so that the students can follow the course even better. They stated that teachers should be more creative and make lessons interesting for learners. Using videos and movies related to the topics was suggested to achieve this goal. They added that group work or pair work promote student interaction. During the interview, some students suggested that learning and teaching process should be more learner-centered and according to Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 53), “the teachers should help learners take responsibility for their own learning”. Fostering individual learning is important and should not be neglected. Ur (1996, as cited in Danaye-Tous & Haghighi, 2014) has also identified encouraging learners to develop their own learning strategies to become independent learners in his checklist. Students also expressed their hope that teachers would create a situation for students so that will participate in class discussions and will enjoy learning the course. Some even added that they like teacher let the students present the lesson.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants’ perceptions of teaching methodology

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (Median)	75th
Teaching Methodology	77	2.3377	0.71838	1.00	4.00	2.000	2.000	3.000

The second question “*Does the ESP textbook of Qur’anic Sciences and Tradition major cover the necessary language skills and strategies?*” was answered by 14 items in the questionnaires and one question in the interview protocol. As the results showed, about 36% of the participants believed that the textbook covers the necessary language skills and strategies and less than 15% of them believed that the textbook fairly covers the

necessary language skills and strategies. In terms of four language skills coverage, the results of the students' questionnaire revealed that students had positive attitudes. The findings of interviews showed that students found that all four language skills were not adequately covered in the textbook. Cunningsworth (1995, as cited in Danaye-Tous & Haghighi, 2014) asserted that all four language skills should be dealt with in the course book. Regarding the reading skill, which is basic part of all ESP courses in Iran (cited in Rajabi & Azarpour, 2011), the results showed the students' satisfaction with reading passages and associated activities. This skill was practiced mostly through translating English passages into Farsi, and then elaborating Farsi explanations of technical words in the passage by the teacher. In terms of speaking ability, the results showed that the textbook insufficiently focused on this skill. Developing speaking skill is essential for students majoring in Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition, because they were expected to use English in propagating religion and taking part in religious meetings. Moreover, the materials for spoken English should equip learners for real-life interaction like participating in seminars and listening to lectures as students seek to.

Listening skill was missing in the course book. Using authentic listening task which is relevant to the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition students' needs enhances their achievements in the real world. Students also felt that they have difficulties in writing; thus, more practice is needed for improving the skill. Moreover, the associated activities were insufficient. This ability is required in some contexts or situations like writing short essays. According McDonough and Shaw (2003), materials should enable the learners to see how the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) can be used effectively in appropriate contexts. They also stated that when materials for integrated skills are likely to involve learners in authentic and realistic tasks, their level of motivation will be increased. Therefore, they perceive a clear rationale behind what they are being asked to do. They stated that a suitable textbook should cover necessary grammatical structures and should have adequate quantity and range of vocabulary. But according to students' viewpoints, the vocabulary load is too much and the textbook contains basic grammatical patterns. Interviewing with teachers also showed the same results. They believed that students were willing to learn English and improve their language skills but there were some problems on the students' path. As teachers stated, students neither understand written or spoken English nor were able to speak or write very well. They added that students use memorization to learn and thus the English knowledge is very superficial and confined to limited vocabularies. Teachers complained that students rely heavily on the grammar-translation method. They mostly ask teacher to explain grammar in Persian, as that would make it easier for them to understand the explanation. Additionally, students have too many subjects to learn and learning English is too bookish. They mentioned that students have problem with pronunciation and listening skills as a result of lack of input. They believed that the time of the course is too short to cover adequately all language skills and strategies. These results are in consistent with those of Danaye-Tous and Haghighi (2014). The findings of the research also revealed that ESP students have found that the course book is inappropriate in terms of covering all four skills.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of participants' perceptions of skill and strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (Median)	75th
Skill and Strategies	77	2.7273	0.80519	1.00	5.00	2.000	3.000	3.000

The answer to the third question "Is ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition major appropriate according to the topics?" was answered by eight items in the questionnaire and one question in the interview protocol. As the results showed, about 53% of the participants agree that the ESP textbook is appropriate according to the topics and less than 3% of the participants disagree that the ESP textbook is appropriate according to the topics. In terms of the topics, the results of the students' questionnaire revealed that students had positive attitudes. According to Wilson and Yang (2007), the materials should be so challenging and interesting for students that call their attention and motivate them to learn through their interaction. As McDonough and Shaw (2003) suggested, materials of a textbook should aim at a specific group and some topics should be more suitable for some particular audience. As the results showed, the textbook covered varieties of topics in relation to the field in order to enhance learning process and to meet the needs of the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition students. It is assumed that including various topics are appealed to maintain the students' interest and motivation. As Cunningsworth (1995, cited in Danaye-Tous & Haghighi, 2014) asserted, interesting topics

motivate learners. These results contradicted with those of Jebahi (2009). The results of the study revealed that the students found the topics and tasks uninteresting, boring, and lacking any sort of creativity. As a matter of fact, some topics in course book were not easy to be followed by the students. Some of them complained that some topics were too philosophic thus not comprehensible for students and even teachers. Students also thought that the topics of the course book are adequate in enabling a student to use them in his field of study. But the problem is that all the topics were not covered in one course.

Similarly, teachers believed that the course book includes relevant topics. There is sufficient variety in the topics of the textbook. Moreover, the ordering of materials by topics has been arranged in a logical fashion. They also added that the topics in course book are relevant to the students' needs. The topics help expand students' awareness and enrich their experience. In his study, Hasmawati (2003) also showed that the participants were satisfied with the topics covered in the class and they were mostly sufficient for the learners to enter the workforce.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of participants' perceptions of topics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (Median)	75th
Topics	76	2.2763	0.87329	1.00	5.00	2.000	2.000	3.000

The fourth question "Are the language content and exercises of the ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition major appropriate?" was answered by 19 items in the questionnaire and one question in the interview protocol. As the results indicated, about 40% of the participants agree that the language content and exercises of the ESP textbook are appropriate, while less than 18% of the participants disagree that the language content and exercises of the ESP textbook are appropriate. Most of the students agreed that the language content and exercises of the textbook are suitable for them. In terms of language content and exercises, Harding (2007) has claimed that ESP instructors should use texts, contexts, and situations from the students' subject area. Whether they are simulated or real, they will involve naturally the language that the students need. He also suggested that teachers should exploit authentic materials that students use in their vocation or specialism— and should not be repulsed by this opinion that it may not seem normal English. Furthermore, he added that the authentic tasks should be made by ESP teachers and they should get students do things with the material that they actually need to do in their occupation. What a student has been learned can be reinforced via exercises and activities. It is difficult to imagine a book with no exercises or activities, which should encourage learners to think about what the texts really mean and use their cognitive abilities to solve the given problems. The current book includes exercises such as language practice and comprehension exercises. The main reading passage is followed by true and false, multiple choice, comprehension questions, and cloze tests in order to build and expand students' knowledge of vocabulary and improving their reading skill. Of course, these tasks stimulate critical analysis and evaluation of what they have read. It also includes a part to answer some questions orally to improve students' speaking ability and a part to give Persian and English synonyms for words. Furthermore, the course book includes a section to work on some grammar points, and a part to practice translation activities including a text for translating into Persian and finding Persian equivalents of terms. Most parts of the book emphasize the reading skill. Unfortunately, no listening exercises have been provided. Similarly, this book has not been equipped with charts, figures, tables and color pictures, if include, may draw the learners' attention more to the most salient ideas in the text and the book became more interesting for them. The textbook materials should include discussion questions, prediction activities, skimming and scanning exercises. It is important to adapt activities that encourage collaborative learning. Textbooks should provide the learners with activities which ask them to complete tables, flowcharts, and diagrams. These activities arouse the interest of learners. The content of the books should be related to the previous learning experience and background knowledge of the learners. This is what scholars call meaningful learning. In fact, learning experience and background knowledge of the learners was overlooked by material developers. Besides, a suitable textbook should include pronunciation practice as well as issues of style and appropriateness in correct use of English which is missing in this book. The participants' perceptions were that the materials used in the course book are relevant and selected carefully. Accordingly, they found the materials used in the course book helpful to understand the content.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics participants' perceptions about content and exercises

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (Median)	75th
Content and Exercises	77	2.7792	0.83703	1.00	5.00	2.000	3.000	3.000

5. Conclusion

Evaluation of the ESP textbook of Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition taught at some Universities of Iran gave clear insights of its learners' attitudes towards skills and strategies, topics, content and exercises, and teaching methodology.

Regarding teaching methodology, as the findings of the study show, the learners preferred changing in teaching methods to be more learner-centered and encouraging students to become independent learners has been neglected. It seems background knowledge and English level of the learners have been overlooked. These supplementary materials can help students improve their English and learn the textbook contents even better. In terms of language skills, the findings indicated that the textbook insufficiently focused on speaking ability. On the contrary, the results showed the students' satisfaction with the reading skill, reading passages and associated activities. Unfortunately, listening skill has no room in the course book. More practice is needed for improving the writing skill. Moreover, the associated activities were insufficient. The vocabulary load is too much from the students' viewpoints, but the textbook contains basic grammatical patterns. Topics are not different from what Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition students expected. The textbook covers varieties of topics in relation to the field in order to enhance learning process and to meet the needs of the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition students. The current book includes exercises such as language practice, comprehension exercises, true and false, multiple choice, comprehension questions and cloze tests in order to build and expand students' knowledge of vocabulary and improve their reading skill. Of course, these tasks stimulate critical analysis and evaluation of what they have read. In addition, it includes a part to answer some questions orally to improve students' speaking ability. No listening exercises have been provided. Similarly, this book has not been equipped with charts, figures, tables and colorful pictures. The textbook materials should include discussion questions, prediction activities, skimming and scanning exercises. It is important to adapt activities that encourage collaborative learning. Textbooks should provide the learners with activities which ask them to complete tables, flowcharts, and diagrams. These activities arouse the learners' interest. This is what scholars call meaningful learning. Besides, a suitable textbook should include pronunciation practice as well as issues of style and appropriateness in correct use of English which is missing in this book.

It can be concluded that the course book is appropriate for the students of the Qur'anic Sciences and Tradition in general sense. However, students did not give high score to some issues. Of course, in Cunningsworth's (1984) words, there is no perfect textbook which meets all the requirements of teachers and students.

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