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## NA and ESAP in Iran: some problems and possible solutions

(برخی از مشکلات و راهکارهای ارائه شده در مورد زبان انگلیسی برای

اهداف ویژه فرهنگی و چگونگی انجام نیازسنجی در ایران)

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شوندگان ضبط و تحلیل شده است. براین اساس است که برخی از مشکلات و راهکارهای ارائه شده در باب زبان انگلیسی برای اهداف ویژه فرهنگی و نیازسنجی مطرح شده و، در پایان، کاربردهای عملی و آموزشی این تحقیق، به همراه چند سؤال تحقیقی جدید، در راستای تحقیق انجام شده، ارائه شده است.

**کلیدواژه:** زبان انگلیسی برای اهداف ویژه فرهنگی (ESP)، نگارش مطالب درسی، نیازسنجی.

**چکیده:** هدف از این تحقیق بررسی چگونگی اجرای برنامه‌های زبان انگلیسی برای اهداف ویژه فرهنگی در ایران است. به طور خاص، بررسی روی مشکلات و راهکارها در این باب و در رابطه با لزوم اعمال نیازسنجی است. برای ارائه تصویر واضح‌تر، تاریخچه چگونگی اجرای برنامه‌های زبان انگلیسی برای اهداف ویژه فرهنگی در ایران، در طی بیست سال گذشته، بررسی و ارائه شده است. علاوه بر این، نظرات هشت سیاست‌گذار زبان انگلیسی و ده نگارنده مطالب انگلیسی در پیرامون اهداف ویژه فرهنگی و برخی از مشکلات و راهکارهای احتمالی، از طریق مصاحبه، جمع‌آوری شده است. سپس، پاسخ‌های مصاحبه

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## 1. Introduction

In this part, first a brief explanation about English for specific purpose (ESP) and Needs analysis (NA) is presented. Then, English for general academic purpose (EGAP) and English for specific academic purpose (ESAP), as two branches of ESP, are compared with each other. Third, a discussion about the status of ESAP in Iran during the previous 20 years is offered. Finally statement of the problem is put out.

### 1.1. ESP

Flowerdew (1995) posited that ESP is part of a more general movement of teaching language for specific purposes (LSP). The most important difference between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English as a Second Language (ESL) lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English (Long, 2005). ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). An ESP program is, therefore, built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required (Jordan, 1997).

NA as an indispensable part of the ESP courses is defined as systematic way of seeking students' language needs (Hyland, 2006). Assessment of language needs is considered as an important part of any

instructional program design. It can benefit both teachers and students alike by avoiding fixed, linear curricula, especially when the students have specific and individualized learning goals and needs, which is the case mainly in ESP courses. Assessments of the students' needs 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 confronting to the norms and conventions of their academic disciplines. Fixed, linear curricula in EAP contexts may also have the disadvantage of trying to meet curricular objectives rather than the needs of students, which may change as the course progresses (Robinson, 1980).

### 1.2. EGAP and ESAP

EGAP refers to the teaching of the features that are common to all disciplines (Long, 2005). It isolates the skills associated with study activities such as listening to lectures, participating in supervisions, seminars and tutorials (Swale, 1994). Ever & Lattore (1969) proposed that ESAP on the other hand, is teaching of the features that distinguish one discipline from others. It integrates the skills work of EGAP with help for students in their actual subject tasks. West (1994) Believed that ESAP generally involves some cooperation with the actual subject department since it shows how students can

transfer the skills they have learnt to the understanding of their actual lectures or reading tasks.

### 1.3. ESAP in Iran

In Iran, ESAP, as a branch of ESP, has increasingly expanded so that currently it plays a fundamental role in curricula in all academic fields at universities. Following the outburst of ESP instruction within ELT curriculum in the 1970s, EAP programs were implemented in Iran, too. According to Atai (2002), the history of ESAP instruction in Iran can be studied in three distinct generations of ESAP programs.

At first, the western academic centers and Iranian Universities cooperated to implement ESAP programs. A pioneering ESAP curriculum was the program implemented jointly by Tehran University and the University of Illinois in 1974. It resulted in the development of the books that enable learners to be advanced readers. Five EAP books were compiled during this program. Another program was conducted by Tabriz University with the collaboration of the British Council in 1975 (Duddly- Evans et al. 1976). A number of courses were designed to meet the English language needs of the students of medicine, pharmacy, physics, chemistry, engineering, biology, and agriculture. The Nucleus Series was compiled which comprised of a core book- General Science and nine specific books thematically arranged for academic fields based on the Functional/

Notional approach.

“The second generation of ESAP curriculum development in Iran is characterized by the governments’ attempt in the 1980s to plan and implement EAP instruction consistently at all Iranian Universities” (Atai, 2002, p.23). In this try the courses did not contrast sharply with the ELT ones except for some correspondence between the content of the reading passage and the learners’ field of study.

The third movement is concerned with greater specificity of content in terms of academic discipline and text authenticity, the collaboration of content instructors and ELT practitioners in producing materials. The materials for these courses were mostly compiled by the Iranian Center for Studying and Compiling University Books in Humanities (SAMT).

### 1.4. Statement of the problem

Generally speaking, the overall goal of the ESAP curriculum in Iran is to provide autonomous readers who can use various sources in their specific field of study at the end of the programs (Atai, 2002). But setting such high standards and goals for ESAP curriculum without having enough picture of the students’ capacities and characteristics on entrance to these programs has led to an incoherent educational experience. That is, despite the significant weight of discipline-based EAP courses at Iranian universities, no

serious research has so far addressed the systematic needs analysis of the Iranian English for Specific Academic/ Occupational Purposes (ESA/ OP) students. Hence, this study aims at analyzing the present problems and possible solutions in this way regarding the view points of the policymakers and material developers.

## **2. Method**

In this part of the study first, participants will be introduced. Second, instruments and data analysis techniques will be explained. Finally, procedures and results of the data analysis will be clarified.

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants of this study were inclusive of two groups of EGAP policy makers and material developers. 8 policy makers were chosen among those who establish policies relevant to what and how of the EGAP material development and evaluation. 20 material developers were selected among those who develop material for the Iranian university students under the control and management of the Iranian Center for Studying and Compiling University Books in Humanities (SAMT). It is worth mentioning that some of the policy makers were at the same time material developer and vice versa.

### **2.2. Instruments**

In this study, with the purpose of gathering information about the policy makers and

material developers' perceptions of the problems and possible solutions of ESAP programs with focus on the necessity of conducting needs analysis, a semi-structured interview framework was developed and conducted by the researcher of the study. Questions of the interviews were first developed based on the review of the related literature. Second, they were reviewed by 3 ESP experts and due changes were incorporated. Then, in part, they were piloted by four respondents and finally the last version of the questionnaire with 11 questions was developed.

The researcher held face-to-face private interviews with the subjects. In this type of interview, as its name implies, topics of discussion were mostly pre determined by the researcher but in many cases just during the interview some questions were raised and resulted in a new, and mostly quite useful, trend of discussion around the main issue. For the interview questions you can refer to the appendix.

### **2.3. Data analysis techniques**

The data obtained from the interviews were subjected to descriptive analysis. That is, in order to do content analysis (analyze the content of the participants' answers), the respondents' answers were taped, transcribed, analyzed and categorized under certain categories and then their similar and different view points became clear and merged. Later, out of this analysis, a list of the possible

problems and solutions in the ESAP was developed.

According to Brown (1988), there are two major categories of Content Analysis. In "Conceptual Analysis", the existence and frequency of different concepts in a text are factored in while in "relational analysis" the point of departure is the relationships existing among concepts. The present study follows both analyses so that a concept is picked and the number of its occurrences is gained. According to research questions, a number of content categories were determined and participants' answers were codified based on those categories. Through a process of selective reduction of the content categories, relevant units of information which constitute the representative list of the possible problems and solutions in ESAP was developed.

#### 2.4. Procedures

In order to conduct the present study, the researcher took the following steps.

1. Used on the review of the related literature and consideration of the general inadequacies in the ESAP system of Iran's universities, questions of the interview were developed for policy makers and material developers.
2. The developed questions were reviewed by 3 ESP experts and some concepts were changed and revised.
3. The revised version of the interview

was piloted by 2 instructors and 1 policy maker and again some slight changes were made in the interview questions.

4. Participants of the study, 8 policy makers and 10 material developers were chosen. Then, the researcher made the prior arrangement for the interviews.
5. Interviews were conducted and recorded, transcribed, analyzed and reported.
6. Based on the results of the study, conclusions and implications of the study were reported.

#### 2.5. Results and discussions

In the process of content analysis, relevant categories and statements based on the interview questions and purpose of the study were extracted from the participants' answers. Then, in part, a list of the possible problems and solutions in ESAP was developed. In this part first categorized statements and answers of the participants are stated and second a list of the possible problems and solutions in the ESAP is presented.

Extracted themes out of the informants' answers:

1. The determining factors in deciding upon the present EAP materials are:
  - A. needs of the students and
  - B. the frame work which is proposed by SAMT.

2. There are some problems with the existing ESP materials including:

- A. the application of the old and traditional texts and
- B. lack of task based exercises in the books.

3. Information about what skills and linguistic knowledge students need to acquire is almost always collected through:

- A. the framework proposed by SAMT and
- B. the intuition based methods of material developers.

4. The supervision of the ESP materials is on the shoulder of SAMT and, in the eyes of the policy makers, it is done in a good way.

5. Policy makers' suggestions on the ways of obtaining information about what skills and linguistic information students need to acquire were:

- A. mostly around the qualitative and quantitative ways of conducting NA and,
- B. application of the viewpoints of EAP experts and instructors.

6. Although obtaining information about the proficiency level of the ESP students is necessary for materials development, almost no policies have been offered in this regard. The root of this problem is mainly due to the:

A. lack of planning

B. lack of the existence of the operational definition of the threshold level in prior.

C. ESP experts and experienced instructors idea that they are aware of the proficiency level of the students and it works for material development in a way that there is no requirement for conducting NA.

7. It is necessary to collect information about the target situations where students will make use of the EAP materials but almost no systematic research has been conducted in this regard. This inadequacy is mostly due to the lack of systematic research and shortage of budget.

8. It is necessary to know whether students make use of the covered materials and acquired skills and it can be done through:

- A. administering questionnaires
- B. conducting an interview and,
- C. direct/ indirect observations as different methods of conducting NA.

9. Students' language needs are almost never analyzed before an EAP materials development. This inadequacy is mostly the result of the:

- A. lack of systematic planning,
- B. lack of the budget,
- C. intuition based knowledge of the policy makers which is regarded as the basis up to the point that they

sometimes do not feel the exigency of allocating any room for conducting the NA.

10. The present system has been allocated almost no budget for conducting NA because:

A. It was mostly ignorant of the value of conducting the research in this area.

B. lack of planning for the systematic development of EAP materials.

11. It is very difficult to conduct the NA studies in Iran because of the:

A. lack of the cooperation on the part of the participants,

B. lack of the budget allocation,

C. lack of planning, as the third factor.

**Table (1) list of the possible problems and solutions in ESAP system**

Problems	solutions
1. application of the old and traditional texts	1. NA should be regarded as the determining factors in deciding upon the materials of the present ESAP materials
2. Lack of task based exercises in the books	2. first understanding students' needs and second incorporating the tasks that are interesting for students
3. use of the intuition based methods of NA	3. training ESAP experts, material developer and experienced instructors
4. Intuition based decisions of material developers about students' needs and strict framework proposed by SAMT for collecting about language skills and linguistic knowledge that students need to acquire	4. provide material developers with more flexible frame work through which they can tailor the materials based on the results of the systematic NA to the local context of use
5. almost no policies have been offered so far about the proficiency level of the ESAP students	5. conducting a systematic planning for testing the proficiency level and developing an operational definition of the students' threshold level in prior
6. lack of systematic NA about target situations where students will make use of the EAP materials	6. increasing the budget for this purpose and conducting systematic NA attempts
7. lack of systematic NA to know whether students make use of the covered materials and acquired skills	7. administering questionnaires and conducting an interviews al with direct/ indirect observations
8. no analysis of the students' needs an ESAP materials development	8. devote budget and time for planning and avoid intuition based knowledge of the policy makers
9. lack of budget for conducting NA	9. policy makers' attention to the value of conducting the research prior to ESAP material development
10. difficulty of conducting NA studies in Iran	10. inform informants about the values of conducting NA and increase their cooperation and allocate more money to this process and have a systematic planning

### 3. Conclusion

The present study hopefully turns out to be a

step toward boosting the quality of the ESAP materials for the Iranian university students.

Hyland (2006) posits that it is very important to start the course-developing process with an ongoing analysis of the needs of students and as a result, most of the time considerable attention goes to needs analysis in making a particular course serve a particular group's interests. Considering this important issue in academic material development, based on the results of the study and considering the "local context", the following conclusions surfaced:

1. Unfortunately the process of Needs Analysis is greatly ignored by our educational system and there is almost no room for conducting NA prior to our ESAP material development.

2. ESAP policy makers look at conducting NA for ESAP materials as a must but in practice, they develop almost no policy in this regard. Based on the present study, the main root of this problem lies in the lack of budget and planning.

4. Conducting NA in our country is a demanding and time consuming challenge.

5. Perceptions of the material developers and policy makers about the necessity of conducting NA for ESAP materials were almost very similar.

The reasons behind the inadequacy of the ESAP materials may be perceived differently by different individuals. Anyway the researcher, based on the results of the study, believes that the ignorance of policy makers

and material developers regarding the conduction of NA studies is one of the primary factors in this regard.

Concerning the paucity of systematic research in Iranian ESAP programs, the findings of this study will hopefully be of great importance for syllabus designers and curriculum developers and can provide useful insights regarding the practical ways of boosting the efficiency of ESAP programs.

The following studies can compliment the present study through applying more methods of triangulation (both by sources and methods of data collection).

#### **4. Sources**

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## 5. Appendix

### Interview questions for policy makers and material developers

1. What are the determining factors in deciding upon the present EAP materials' content and way of representation?

۱- چه فاکتورهایی اساس تصمیم گیری برای محتوا و نحوه ارائه مطالب درسی ESP را تشکیل می دهند؟

2. Is there any problem with the existing ESP materials? If yes, what are they?

۲- آیا در حال حاضر کتب درسی دارای مشکلات اساسی

هستند؟ اگر بله چه مشکلاتی؟

3. How is information about what skills and linguistic knowledge students need to acquire gathered in present ESP materials development? Who does so?

۳- اطلاعات مربوط به مهارت های زبانی که مورد نیاز زبان آموزان بوده و در کتب درسی آنها گنجانده شده، چگونه جمع آوری شده است؟ چه کسی این اطلاعات را جمع آوری کرده است؟

4. Who supervise materials' developers' work? (I'll say that I'm not looking for names but positions which have this responsibility.)

۴- در حال حاضر چه کسی (سازمانی) بر کار نویسندگان کتب ESP نظارت دارد؟

5. What are your suggestions on the ways of obtaining information about what skills and linguistic information students need to acquire?

۵- چه راه هایی را برای جمع آوری اطلاعات در مورد نیازها و مهارت های زبانی زبان آموزان پیشنهاد می دهید؟

6. Is obtaining information about the proficiency level of the ESP students necessary for materials development? Have any policies been offered in this regard? If yes, how? If no, why?

۶- آیا برای نوشتن کتب درسی دانستن سطح بسندگی زبان آموزان (proficiency level) ضرورت دارد؟ آیا در این مورد تصمیمی گرفته شده است؟ اگر بله، چه تصمیمی؟ اگر نه، چرا؟

7. Is it necessary to collect information about the target situations where students will make use of the EAP materials? Have any policies

been offered in this regard? If yes, how? If no, why?

۷- آیا لزومی برای جمع‌آوری اطلاعات درمورد موقعیت‌هایی زبان‌آموزان در آینده از زبان انگلیسی که یاد گرفته‌اند استفاده خواهند کرد وجود دارد؟ (target situation)

8. Is it necessary to know whether students make use of the covered materials and acquired skills? If yes, how? If no, why?

۸- آیا دانستن اینکه محتوای کتب درسی در حال حاضر پاسخگویی نیاز زبان‌آموزان هست یا خیر لزومی دارد؟ اگر بله، چگونه؟ اگر خیر، چرا؟

9. Were students' language needs analyzed before an EAP materials development? If yes,

how?

۹- آیا نیازهای زبانی زبان‌آموزان قبل از نوشتن مطالب درسی شان سنجیده می‌شود؟ اگر بله، چگونه؟

10. Has the present system ever had any budget allocated for conducting NA? If not, why?

۱۰- آیا سیستم کنونی جهت نیازسنجی بودجه‌ای را اختصاص داده است؟ اگر خیر، چرا؟

11. How do you estimate the ease of conducting needs analysis in Iran? Please name the probable problems, if there is any.

۱۱- سهولت انجام نیازسنجی در ایران را چگونه برآورد می‌کنید؟ اگر مشکلی وجود دارد آنها را نام ببرید. ■