University Teachers and Students' Perceptions of EAP Methodologies and Their Effectiveness

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Abstract: The area of English for Academic Purposes assumes particular importance because of its utility in helping language learners develop the competencies required to function efficiently in their specialized disciplines. As such, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the improvement of EAP teaching and learning, however, research on beliefs about EAP courses has been rather scarce. This research reports on a survey study conducted to identify issues worthy of more in-depth investigation in the area of EAP teaching and learning. To elicit the perceptions of 30 EAP teachers and 90 EAP students, a series of questionnaires were developed and administered which covered such issues as the degree of satisfaction with materials and facilities, degree of focus that should be on language or non-language needs and factors contributing to effective language learning. One issue which emerged from the students' perceptions was the fact that they had little opportunity to practice English in the class. Also, teachers felt that EFL teachers did not have enough knowledge about their fields and that they could not anticipate language difficulties that EAP students would encounter. Both groups were dissatisfied with textbooks due to the scarcity of authentic tasks and pointed to the simplicity of the books as a hindrance to being skilled in reading the original materials. An interesting finding was the emphasis students placed on the importance of having materials related to their specialized knowledge and the recognition that it was a key to success in EAP classes.

Key words: EAP, materials, methodology, perceptions of students, perceptions of teachers

INTRODUCTION

The relevance and usefulness of English language in academic settings initiated in 1960's and has not yet decreased (Ruiz-Garrido *et al.*, 2010). English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is usually defined as teaching English with the purpose of assisting learners' study or research in that language (Hyland, 2006). EAP could be considered as a practical academic activity which is primarily concerned with investigating needs, preparing teaching materials and devising appropriate teaching methodologies (Dudley-Evans, 2001).

EAP itself has been divided into two sub-disciplines according to the level of specificity; namely English for General Academic Purposes (EAGP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Hyland, 2006). In the former area (EAGP), researchers and practitioners are concerned with such skills as listening to lectures, participation in seminars, reading textbooks and writing essays which happen to be common to virtually all fields of study (Dudley-Evans and John, 1998). This means that in almost all of the university disciplines the above mentioned skills are essential and students are assumed to have such skills. Therefore, the nature of these skills might warrant the use of such activities as questioning, note taking, summary writing, giving prepared presentations on different scientific topics, etc., in EGAP classrooms (Hyland, 2006). In fact, the underlying assumption is that the generic skills are of more import than discipline specific skills. In ESAP, however, the reverse is assumed. That is, both researchers and practitioners hold the idea that the distinctions among these skills and common practices across different disciplines may be greater than the similarities (Hyland, 2006).

Despite the host of findings regarding how to improve EAP courses (of both ESAP and EAGP types), relatively little attention has been paid to students' and teachers' beliefs about such courses. This issue assumes particular importance in that the way language learners perceive language learning or any particular course of instruction could affect the outcome of that course. The study reported in this research aimed to shed more light on EAP students and teachers' perceptions of the degree of satisfaction with materials and facilities, degree of focus that should be on language or non-language needs, importance of English skill areas, effectiveness of teaching methods used and factors contributing to effective language learning.

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Review of the literature: One strand of research dealing with students and teachers' perceptions in EAP contexts has to do with students' perception of difficulty in such courses. By way of illustration, Lee and Tajino (2008) found that students tend to perceive academic writing to be difficult. Also, their findings pointed to the fact that 1st year Japanese university students perceive language related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components. They proposed some useful implications of teacher development courses.

In another study, Leki and Carson (1994) attempted to investigate students' perceptions of the relationship between the writing instruction the students received in ESL writing classes and the actual writing tasks they found in courses across the disciplines. The results of their study revealed that overall writing skills taught in ESL writing courses were considered useful by students in dealing with the writing demands of other content courses. Leki and Carson reported that ESL students, in their answers to open-ended questionnaires described their perceptions of their ongoing writing needs beyond the ESL writing curriculum. In light of the perceptions of the students, Leki and Carson (1994) provided some very useful implications which are summarized here to illuminate how important canvasing students' perceptions could be:

- Courses need to give students a variety of writing experiences rather than restricting writing exercises to essay writing
- It is important to foster a flexible attitude towards writing in the students
- It would seem reasonable to link reading to writing in ESP classes

In another research attempt, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) employed in-depth interviews with four supervisor, student pairs and focused on student difficulties in writing the discussion of results section of the thesis and examined the extent to which the perceptions of the students matched those of their supervisors. The study found that:

- Students had a more limited understanding of the function of the discussion of the results compared to that of their supervisors
- The overall understanding between the supervisors and the students about the nature and cause of the students' difficulties was very limited
- Students tended to use limited proficiency as a default mode of explanation of their difficulties whereas three out of the four supervisors offered explanations not related to second language proficiency

Overall as it is clear from the above studies, researchers in the area of English for Academic Purposes have placed premium on the way students perceive different areas of language learning. These perceptions have been at times used as a basis for decision making in EAP and ESP courses. The study reported in this research aimed to investigate how EAP learners and teachers perceive EAP methodologies and their efficacy in the Iranian context. The findings of such study, although closely related to the Iranian context, could be of use in other countries whose students and teachers have some commonalities with the Iranians in terms of their goals and objectives in studying at a university or the overall courses offered in their universities.

According to Hyland (2006), while students' learning experiences are influenced by needs analysis, course design and materials, it is methodologies and the teacher's understandings of language and learning which lie behind these which are at the heart of EAP instruction. As it happens to the best of our knowledge, there is no published research indicative of the methodological preferences of the Iranian EAP practitioners or researchers. There are, however, some published research which could have implications for the present study.

For example, Atai and Dashtestani (2012) argued that in the Iranian EAP context, there exists a lacuna concerning the attitudes of the various EAP stakeholders toward the internet and they argue no serious study has addressed this area yet. They further rightly point out that through understanding EAP stakeholders' perceptions toward the internet, EAP curriculum developers will be able to help course designers, instructors and learners to incorporate the internet into their pedagogical/learning activities. Their study was in fact aimed to cover this very gap. They found that the majority of EAP instructors, instructors and undergraduate students have a fairly positive attitude and perception toward the internet. However, their results showed that EAP instructors do not employ internet-based activities in their classes. They concluded that undergraduate students of civil engineering need training in various internet-based skills. The present study aims to cover the gap discussed in this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study; introduction: The aim of this study was to identify issues worthy of more in-depth investigation in the area of EAP teaching and learning. For doing so, a survey was carried out to canvass students and teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding EAP methodology and their effectiveness. This study will provide more

information regarding the nature of the study conducted the participants who took the surveys and the analytical procedures.

Participants: Total 30 EAP teachers and 90 EAP students participated in this study. The teachers were all male and their ages ranged from 29-35 (M = 29). They were all experienced teachers who had taught English for Academic Purpose for >7 years. They were told that the data elicited would be used for the purpose of research only and that they will be informed of the results of the study if they desired. The EAP students too were all male. Their ages ranged between 22-24 and they had never been to an English speaking country. They were selected from among 200 students of science. All of them signed written consent forms in which it was explicitly mentioned that the data elicited will not affect their scores and will be used for the purpose of research. In order to make sure that they were of the same level of proficiency, an Oxford Placement Test was administered. The results indicated that they were all of roughly the same level of proficiency with their scores ranging between 23-29 (out of 100). The questionnaires were administered to teachers and students separately. In the first session, the teachers were invited to a quiet language classroom and were asked to fill out the questionnaires. They were told that they could ask questions if they find an item vague. The same procedure was used for the group of students.

Instrument and procedure: For the purpose of this research, a series of questionnaires were developed by the researchers and were administered after piloting (some examples of the questions given to both groups are provided in the Appendix). The reliability of all questionnaires was checked via Cronbach alpha which yielded an agreement of about 0.90 for all questionnaires. The questionnaires covered such issues as the degree of satisfaction with materials and facilities, degree of focus that should be on language or non-language needs, the importance of English skill areas, effectiveness of teaching methods used and factors contributing to effective language learning. The questionnaires also

elicited opinions as to the degree to which materials should be consistent with students' professional needs and whether they should be specific or general EAP. In addition, teachers were asked to comment on their roles in the class and the degree of their satisfaction with the pedagogic models given in the books. Students were asked to voice their perceptions for learning English and their perceived responsibilities in the class. As it was indicated before, the questionnaires were filled out in two different sessions. In the first session, the teachers were invited to a quiet language classroom and were asked to fill out the questionnaires. They were told that they could ask questions if they find an item vague. In the second session, the same procedure was used for the group of students.

Analysis: Statistical tools used in this study include descriptive statistics for various items on the survey to examine overall frequencies, totals, percentages and means.

RESULTS

In this study, significant results obtained for teachers and students' perceptions regarding ESP courses and materials are provided. As can be seen in the Appendix, one of the questions asked from students was their perceptions about the time students have for practicing English in the class. Table 1 shows the result obtained for the students' perceptions regarding this issue.

Analyzing responses given by participants, a teacher dominated language learning classroom was found in which the students perceived little opportunity to practice communicative (especially their speaking) skills. Students commented that their teachers' talking time is almost four times as much as theirs and most were dissatisfied with this condition. In addition, their answers give us the idea that they were dissatisfied with the time they have for writing activities.

When teachers were asked to give their opinions about best EAP teachers, most said that EAP teachers should be familiar with specialized knowledge of the filed.

Table 1: Students' perceptions regarding opportunity for practicing English sub-skills in EAP class (by percentage of total class time)

Skills	Students (No.)	Total class time (%)				
		0-20	20-40	40-60	60-80	80-100
Speaking	90	55	25	10	0	0
Performing tasks	90	10	23	55	2	0
Reading	90	10	42	37	1	0
Writing	90	35	46	5	4	0

Table 2: Teachers' and students' perceptions regarding EAP materials

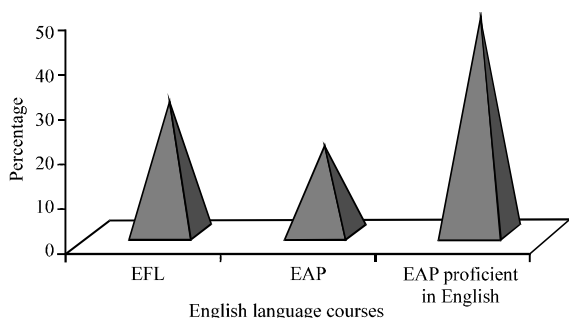| EAP materials	No.	Degree of satisfaction expressed (%)				
		0-20	20-40	40-60	60-80	80-100
Textbooks	Students = 90	13	32	27	11	7
	Teachers = 30	5	7	13	3	2
Audio-video facilities	Students = 90	28	43	17	2	0
	Teachers = 30	3	12	11	4	0
Authenticity of materials	Students = 90	14	36	33	5	2
	Teachers = 30	2	8	14	5	1

Fig. 1: Teachers' perceptions regarding the best EAP instructor

As Fig. 1 shows most selected EAP teachers who are familiar with English as the best choice for teaching EAP courses. They said that language teachers lack the training, expertise and confidence to teach subject specific conventions.

Another question was about the EAP materials used. Analyzing the answers given to the questions related to materials (Table 2), it was found that most students were unhappy with their learning materials which was similar to the dissatisfaction expressed by teachers.

Most participants commented that the textbooks were interesting but not very useful for language learning. In addition, students said they needed more authentic materials and opted for more audio and video facilities in EAP classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to identify issues worthy of more in-depth investigation in the area of EAP teaching and learning. For doing so, a survey was carried out to canvass students and teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding EAP methodology and their effectiveness.

As it was noted in the results, one issue which emerged from the students' perceptions was the fact that they had little opportunity to practice English in the class. This concern raised by EAP students is in line with recent theories of second language acquisition regarding the importance of practice. For example, De Keyser (2007)'s edited volume provides an exhaustive review of the literature on the importance of practice for different aspects of L2 acquisition. Also, there is ample evidence in support of the significance of practice in skill building theories in cognitive psychology (Anderson, 1993). Automatization, which refers to the conversion of knowledge from initial presentation of rule in declarative format to the final stage of fully spontaneous, effortless, fast and errorless use of that rule, often without being aware of that rule anymore (De Keyser, 2007). It becomes clear from the students' comments that the usefulness of practice for the acquisition of language makes intuitive sense and therefore it is imperative that EAP teachers and course designers incorporate more opportunity for meaningful practice into the books and curricular activities in all EAP classes. This will afford an opportunity for not only consolidating the knowledge that the students have already learnt but also for learning new material and linguistic features which might be useful in the students' academic studies.

Another finding was that teachers felt that EFL teachers did not have enough knowledge about their fields and that they could not anticipate language difficulties that EAP students would encounter. This issue is of particular importance. Perhaps that is why most of the ESP researchers have recommended the use of semi-technical knowledge in ESP classes (Robinson, 1991; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Corpus linguistic studies show that semi-technical vocabulary are the most frequent type of vocabulary which are used in academic texts and therefore it is necessary for students to get familiar with these vocabulary items more than anything else.

The study also revealed that both groups (students and teachers) were dissatisfied with textbooks due to the scarcity of authentic tasks and pointed to the simplicity of the books as a hindrance to being skilled in reading the original materials. The issue of authenticity of textbooks and materials has been around for many years now. According to Benavent and Penamaria (2011), authentic materials are particularly important for ESP students in that they have the potential to represent an immersion environment and provide a realistic context for tasks that relate to learner's needs. Realia and authentic materials, they argue, enhance ESP/EAP learners' motivation but are difficult to adapt to the learners' level of language,

especially at the beginning levels of proficiency. Based on the findings of the resent study, one could claim that although preparing such materials can be very time-consuming, they need to be considered as an integral part of any EAP course. Due to this necessity, authentic materials must be constantly reevaluated according to new definitions of this concept. As Benavent and Penamaria (2011) suggest, the authentic materials should be extracted from the real world texts which are not primarily created for pedagogical purposes. The important of such materials for communicative purposes makes them compatible with theories of learning and teaching too. All in all, students and teachers can use authentic materials as a means to link the formal and to some extent artificial, environment of the classroom with the real world in which we hope our students will eventually be using the language they are learning (House, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the emphasis students placed on the importance of having materials related to their specialized knowledge and the recognition that it was a key to success in EAP classes. This highlights the importance of needs analysis as well as semi-technical vocabulary in all EAP classes. As far as motivation is concerned, one could claim that if the materials are related to the students' fields of expertise they might be more motivated than when they see no relevance between what they are studying in an English class and what is expected from them in their field.

LIMITATIONS

The study reported in this research has a number of limitations which need to be addressed in future studies. The questionnaire was limiting and fairly simplistic in regard to questions about methodologies and it would have benefitted from more open questions. Findings of this study can be used in the design of classroom tasks and in the organization of learning opportunities for EAP learners and planning appropriate language instructions compatible with learners' beliefs. Suggestions are made to improve textbooks so that teachers be encouraged toward more student-centered, active learning approaches. In addition, teachers may use a mixture of approaches in their EAP classes and consider students' individual and group needs.

APPENDIX

Some parts of the questionnaire
Bibliographical information:
1. Would you be willing to be contacted by the researchers in order to provide more detailed information? If so, please provide your email address (optional):

2. Place of residence
3. Name of University
4. Gender
5. Age
6. Are you proficient in English?
7. How much time do you spend learning English (in a week)?
8. What's your motivation for learning English?
   - I'm interested in the language ☐
   - I'm interested in western culture ☐
   - I want to do some research work on English Language ☐
   - I want to get a good job ☐
   - I want to continue studying abroad ☐
   - Other ☐

Use of English in your current English class: (Some examples of the questions given are provided here):
- How often do you speak English in class?
  Seldom ☐   Sometimes ☐
  Often ☐   Always ☐
- What's the proportion of teacher talking time to student talking time in your class? Give a percentage:
  Teacher talking time __%   Student talking time __%
- Are you given many opportunities to practice English in Class?
  Yes ☐   No ☐
- How much opportunity do you have for practicing English sub-skills in EAP class? Please give an estimate, choose from : 0-20%, 20-40%, 40-60%, 60-80%, 80-100%.

	0-20	20-40	40-60	60-80	80-100
Skills			----(%)----		
Speaking					
Performing tasks					
Reading					
Writing					

Perceptions regarding best EAP instructors:
- In your opinion, who can be the best EAP instructor?
  - EFL instructors ☐
  - EAP instructors ☐
  - EAP instructors proficient in the second language ☐
  - Explain the reason for your choice

Perceptions regarding EAP materials: (Some examples of the questions given are provided here):
- Can you help choose textbooks or class materials?
  Yes ☐   No ☐
- What do you think of the content of the textbooks used in your class?
  - Interesting and useful for language learning ☐
  - Interesting but not very useful for language learning ☐
  - Dull but useful for language learning ☐
  - Dull and useless ☐

Perceptions regarding language or non-language tasks: Mark the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree):
- I believe that we must use English a great deal in the classroom. ------
- I believe that we must use only books related to our own major written in English. ---------
- I believe that students should be provided with more audio/video facilities. ---------
- I believe that students and teachers should only use English. ---------
- I believe that we should work more on grammar and usage of English
- It is better to have tasks related to English sub-skills (writing, reading and grammar). ---------
- I believe that we should have activities in students' specialized knowledge. ---------

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