

A Needs-Based Evaluation Of ESP Materials In The Bachelor Program Of Applied Linguistics At An LPDR University

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Abstract- The present study aims to evaluate the current ESP materials used in a LPDR university from students' perspectives as well as propose changes to the learning documents based on better considerations of students' needs. As an exploratory study, it employed questionnaires as the primary research instrument to collect 100 students' opinions of the in-use ESP materials in the mentioned university and their expectations for the future learning materials. The findings indicated that ESP materials should be revised to ensure more access to communicative English teaching and more opportunities for students' professional learning. A need-based proposal of the ESP materials was introduced to the learners for their initial ideas of the changes. The result suggested that students were satisfied with the proposed changes of the new ESP materials, which could be the first starting point to the revision and design of the new ESP materials in that LPDR university.

Keywords: ESP, Need-based evaluation, ESP material evaluation

I. INTRODUCTION

With its widespread use as the international language, English has now been used not only as the medium of communication in life aspects but also as the language for academic and professional purposes in many countries. ESP (English for Specific Purposes), similarly to EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes), has been dimensions in English teaching and learning with more focus on learners' occupational orientation and thus they aim at a specific audience in a specific environment, and the course materials are pertinent to the learners' specialized field of study (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011). More specifically, Silva (2002) claimed that ESP conveys students' specific purposes for learning a second language and that it is a reaction to students' needs and the acquisition of language connected to communication outside of the classroom, particularly in their studies and future vocations.

In Laos, like many other countries where English is not the native or the second language, ESP courses are now mandatory at universities as there has been a growing demand in learning the language through subject contents and for occupations. To succeed in their academic fields, students are required to be proficient in written and spoken English, which is obviously important in the era of globalization. However, ESP courses are largely limited to learning specific terminologies, grammar points, and translating texts, which potentially disregards learners' interests and needs and frequently results in low motivation and poor performance in their future profession. The teachers' usage of inappropriate materials may be regarded as a contributing factor to this situation as it can be challenging to determine what factors should be taken into account when selecting an English textbook, and there has been inadequacy of needs survey and textbook evaluation for better decision making.

The Faculty of Linguistics and Humanities in this aforesaid LPDR university offers an Applied Linguistics degree for undergraduate students in which the ESP components include such courses as English for Commerce, English for Business, English for Tourism - hospitality, and English for successful Meetings. Nevertheless, it is revealed that the current ESP materials used in this higher education institution had not been tailored to the needs, preferences, or requirements of the students. Therefore, this study is an attempt to initiate evaluation of the ESP materials and proposed changes in the design of such learning resources based on students' perceptions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

English for Specific Purposes, or ESP as it is abbreviated, is a term that is frequently used nowadays by instructors, experts, and teachers. There are many definitions of ESP, but they all center on how ESP instruction helps students who want to learn English for a specific

purpose in addition to learning relevant processes. These objectives could be academic, professional, or anything else, and ESP claims to be able to adequately prepare its students to meet the necessary objectives.

According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), Hutchinson & Waters (1987), Munby (1978), Robinson (1991), and Strevens (1898), all of which were cited by Chien et al. (2008), it has traditionally been divided into two main classes: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). The ESP movement later grew and developed into a vital and specific field due to a variety of factors, including the dominance of English as the global language of science, technology, and business as well as the growing influence of English-speaking nations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998 as cited in Karimi, 2006).

ESP is a method of teaching languages that, according to Paltridge and Starfield (2013), is the acquisition of "a set of transferable generic language and literacy skills that are deemed to be appropriate in the majority of academic and workplace settings." The focus of ESP is developing appropriate courses based on learner need analysis, which are then followed by important procedures of syllabus design, material design, selection, and evaluation, classroom teaching, and evaluation moving forward linearly (Hutchinson & Water, 1987). As is evident, one of the most crucial components of teaching ESP is evaluation. The most fundamental definition of evaluation is to ask questions, receive responses, form judgments, prepare responses, and take appropriate action (Lynch, 1996).

Although there are many approaches to the evaluation of teaching materials, they are significantly less prevalent in the field of ESP even though materials and textbooks are the primary tools for forming students' knowledge, attitudes, and principles (Nooreen & Arshad, 2010). In light of this, Ansari and Babayi (2002), revealed that instructors or teachers have been in charge of reviewing textbooks, making the evaluation of instructional materials a significant and crucial aspect of a teacher's job.

All assessment research aims to recommend improvements and make the situation better. The effectiveness of textbooks is evaluated using a variety of techniques. Pre-use evaluation, in-use evaluation, and post-use evaluation are the three categories of evaluation that Cunningsworth (1984) takes into account (as stated in Cepon, 2008). There are two types of evaluation, according to Mukundan (2004) as referenced in Nasiri (2011) and Ellis (1997 as cited in Tok, 2010): predictive evaluation and retrospective evaluation. Baleghizadeh and Rahimi (2011) divide evaluation into formative and summative kinds, as indicated by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). McDonough and Shaw (2003) consider three sorts of evaluations: external, internal, and total.

Two well-known ESP levels of evaluation are proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, as quoted in Hatam, 2012): learner assessment and course evaluation. These two modes of evaluation are not necessarily separate, in their opinion. In other words, student evaluations take into account both their performance and, to some extent, the course's usefulness. The three main ways that learners are assessed in ESP are through placement tests, achievement tests, and proficiency tests. Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who are quoted by Hatam (2012), also state that there are four important factors to take into account while evaluating an ESP course 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?

Tomlinson (2001) devised a technique for curriculum evaluation that enables material developers, instructors, and administrators to evaluate the worth of the resources they have used with students. Ellis (2011) focuses on micro-evaluation, which has to do with how subject-related classroom tasks affect students. It aids in determining the task's viability and goes beyond impressionistic judgment. On how it works and how it might be improved for usage later. It evaluates its fit for the objectives of the learners as well as the constraints of certain circumstances (Kalsoom Jahan, Syed Kazim Shah & Sumera Shan Ahmad, 2019).

There have been a large body of research on material evaluation across Asian countries and Laos is included. Using McDonough and Shaw's (2003) methodology, Davari, Iranmehr, and Erfani (2013) evaluated the ESP textbooks used at Payam Nour University in Iran. Low face validity, a lack of material review and updating, ineffective and traditional activities and drills, and an incorrect concept of ESP were the book's main shortcomings. The basic conclusion they reached was that the theory and practice presented in the textbook are out of alignment. Thein (2006) conducted a study at the Myanmar Institute of Technology to assess the efficacy and suitability of the textbook used to teach English to religious students. The results showed that the textbook used in the course was appropriate for several reasons. For instance, textbooks did not help teachers and students meet their needs, they did not help students develop their critical thinking skills, and they did not help students communicate more effectively in real-world settings. Khoshimani (2014) also did a study to assess ESP textbooks used nationally based on the views of Iranian teachers. The findings of their investigation demonstrated the teachers' dissatisfaction with ESP textbooks since they fell short of their expectations.

In Laos context, Xayapheth (2017) studies the evaluation of curricula from the perspective of English in a business setting. He found that (1) final-year students still struggled with English. The issues revealed that not just English in business, but the entire curriculum, should be used to address them. (2) students were unable to learn the material that had been taught to them. (3) many students lacked business abilities and were unfamiliar with fundamental business terms and principles. When taking into account students' English ability, it appears that teaching in English has a clear limit in terms of solving this problem. As a result, business-related lessons should be taught in Lao.

Udomluck (2017) performed a study on curriculum evaluation and early childhood teacher education curriculum of Dongkhamxang Teacher Training Colleges in Laos including the following issues: (1) Context: Curricular structures, courses, and materials were appropriate to fulfill curriculum objectives and context, according to the research findings. (2) Input: The input addressed the credentials of the professors and students. Materials for learning and teaching needed to be improved. Program budgeting received a fair rating; (3) Process: The process satisfied the needs of managing the curriculum and the student teaching practicum; (4) Product: The knowledge and teaching practicum satisfied the needs of professional practice and professional behavior, and (5) Impact: It satisfied graduates and employers.

At Champhasak and Souphanouvong Universities in Laos, Yommana Syhakhang, Thongkham Hungsavath, and Vanvichit Kitthikoun (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of viewpoints on the English curriculum and teaching methodology. The finding shows that both universities should contribute enough funding to create fresh, modern programs. The collaboration of knowledgeable teaching staff, local and international specialists, and most crucially, student engagement is required for the development of curriculum procedures. Additionally, the five dimensions of education taxonomy announced by the Ministry of Education and Sports, Lao PDR, must be addressed in the building of the new curricula. Finally, they ought to give students easier access to and more learning resources for them to use.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study concerns the evaluation of the ESP materials used in aforementioned LPDR university in terms of content and exercises, topics, skills and strategies, and teaching methodology and attempts to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of their ESP textbooks. Therefore, it has sought to answer the following research questions:

- (i) What is the learner’s attitude toward the current ESP materials used in the bachelor’s program of Applied Linguistics at this institution?
- (ii) What topics do students expect to learn the most from ESP materials?
- (iii) What changes could be made to the ESP materials to better meet the needs of the learners?

A group of 100 undergraduates both male and female, who are doing ESP courses in the university, were invited to provide their opinions of the in-use ESP materials. The majority of the participants have English proficiency at between B1 and B2 level and wish to work as EFL teachers, translators, interpreters, tour guides, officials, or other English language-related professions.

Mixed questionnaires were employed in the study as the primary research instrument collecting information of the participants’ background, their evaluation of the current ESP materials and their expectations of the proposed documents for the ESP courses. The second part is a closed questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale of agreement, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = moderate, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. The open-ended questions in section 3 targeted students’ recommendations for the proposed changes of the ESP materials. With the use of mixed methods, the study has shown more features of an exploratory research design including quantitative components aiming to analyze students’ viewpoint on current ESP materials, and topics they wish to learn their ESP courses, and qualitative approach seeking to explore students’ recommendations for the proposed changes of new ESP materials.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the learner’s attitudes toward the current ESP materials used in the bachelor’s program of Applied Linguistics at the aforementioned Lao university, the result shows that the participants generally agreed with the appropriateness of the layout and design, book objective, language skills, and content of the materials while the availability of the materials, the exercises and activities were not very well acknowledged.

As illustrated in Table 1, there was a consensus among the learners that the design was attractive and consistent and the details of material structures and table contents were adequately provided. In addition, the objectives of the materials were suitably communicated in that they were related to the students’ needs and points out clear goals for students’ learning. The participants also agreed that they had opportunities to practice the 4 language skills in those in-house ESP materials. Other aspects including the provision of exercises, the access to technical vocabulary and relevant grammar points and general appearance were considered moderately sufficient. Nevertheless, negative feedback was given on materials availability. To be more specific, the English majors were dissatisfied with the provision of the ESP materials either in the library or online, which lead to their poor overall evaluation of the availability of the materials.

Table 1. Students’ evaluation of the current ESP materials

Students’ perceptions of current ESP materials	5	4	3	2	1	N	Mean	S.D	Level of agreement
General Appearance									
The outside cover is attractive	6	31	52	8	3	100	3.29	0.82	Moderate
The font size used in the book is appropriate	14	41	34	11	0	100	3.58	0.86	Agree
The titles and sub- titles are written clearly and appropriately	17	40	34	9	0	100	3.65	0.86	Agree
Total							3.00	0.85	Moderate

Layout and design										
There is a variety of designs to achieve the impression	16	34	40	9	1	100	3.55	0.90	Agree	
There is consistency in the use of titles, icons, labels, italics, etc.	18	32	38	12	0	100	3.56	0.92	Agree	
The textbook includes a detailed overview of the functions and structures that will be taught in each unit	21	37	34	8	0	100	3.71	0.89	Agree	
The textbook has a detailed table of contents.	25	38	30	7	0	100	3.81	0.89	Agree	
Total							3.66	0.90	Agree	
Book objectives										
The objectives are related to the student's needs	16	40	37	7	0	100	3.65	0.83	Agree	
The objectives help the students to choose the right aids for learning ESP	14	44	34	7	1	100	3.63	0.84	Agree	
The textbook raises students' interest in further English language study	20	30	37	12	1	100	3.56	0.97	Agree	
Total							3.61	0.88	Agree	
Book Content										
The content of the book provides the necessary specialized vocabulary and communication skills	19	43	30	7	1	100	3.72	0.88	Agree	
The content of the book meets student's need of specialized knowledge and presentation skill	13	45	32	8	2	100	3.59	0.88	Agree	
The content of the textbook is interesting, motivating, and up to date	3	36	49	8	4	100	3.26	0.81	Moderate	
Total							3.52	0.04	Agree	
Exercises										
The exercises in the textbook are relevant to the student's interests	1	32	52	12	3	100	3.16	0.76	Moderate	
The textbook provides a variety of meaningful exercises to practice language skills	3	36	46	11	4	100	3.23	0.83	Moderate	
The exercises allow students to practice more than teachers and allow students to use English outside the school	8	27	47	13	5	100	3.20	0.94	Moderate	
Total							3.20	0.09	moderate	
The materials suggest a variety of activities (pair work, whole class, group work, etc)										
Activities provided in the textbook are interesting, relevant and effectiveness	12	44	35	9	0	100	3.59	0.81	Agree	
The textbook provides outside-class activities	16	29	39	13	3	100	3.42	1.00	Moderate	
The textbook provides variety of activities	13	37	39	10	1	100	3.51	0.88	Agree	
Total							3.51	0.90	moderate	
The four language skills										
The reading tasks are appropriate for improving students' reading skills.	20	41	32	6	1	100	3.73	0.88	Agree	
Reading activities can motivate learners to become effective readers.	19	39	37	5	0	100	3.72	0.83	Agree	
The writing tasks are appropriate for improving students' writing skills.	19	36	33	11	1	100	3.61	0.95	Agree	
The writing tasks are suitable in terms of accuracy.	12	29	51	8	0	100	3.45	0.80	Moderate	

The materials offer a great range of listening texts.	21	27	43	9	0	100	3.60	0.92	Agree
Textbook activities can help students acquire a range of listening skills.	17	36	37	10	0	100	3.60	0.88	Agree
The speaking tasks are appropriate for improving students' speaking skills.	22	41	31	5	1	100	3.78	0.88	Agree
There are adequate materials for spoken English (e.g. dialogues, role-plays, etc).	9	32	40	17	2	100	3.29	0.92	Moderate
Total							3.60	0.05	Agree
Vocabulary and grammatical components									
The vocabulary items are appropriate for the student's level.	14	30	38	16	2	100	3.38	0.98	Moderate
The main grammar items the textbook covers are appropriate for the student's level.	9	35	39	15	2	100	3.34	0.91	Moderate
The grammatical structures are presented inductively.	13	33	44	9	1	100	3.48	0.87	Moderate
The materials for teaching grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are graded in a suitable manner.	14	37	33	13	3	100	3.46	0.98	Moderate
Total							3.42	0.06	moderate
Materials availability									
There are materials needed in the library	0	1	18	64	17	100	2.03	0.62	Disagree
There is an online version of the materials	0	8	42	33	17	100	2.41	0.86	Disagree
I am satisfied with the materials	0	6	41	36	17	100	2.36	0.83	Disagree
Total							2.27	0.13	Disagree

The students' needs for language skills practice embedded in the ESP materials were demonstrated in Table 2. As indicated in the survey results, all the 4 English skills were regarded as significant and writing was the skill that students expected to learn the most. They wanted to learn how to write academic reports, essays, journal papers, emails, CVs, taking notes as well as writing a paper for an oral presentation. Speaking skill comes in second place in reference to students' needs for language skills practice. The participants strongly agreed that they should be engaged in in-class and out-of-class English activities; moreover, they expected to get access to professional conversations, seminars, meetings and presentations in authentic contexts. The receptive skills received lower mean scores but were still of importance in that they were supposed to be involved in meaningful reading and listening activities.

Table 2. Needs in skills practice

Items	5	4	3	2	1	N	\bar{x}	S.D	Level of agreement
Needs in speaking skill							4.59	0.66	strongly agree
Talking with a professional in a real situation	70	25	4	1	0	100	4.64	0.61	strongly agree
Speaking at seminars, meetings, and presentation	75	20	5	0	0	100	4.70	0.56	strongly agree
Asking and answering in class/outside class	67	23	5	5	0	100	4.52	0.81	strongly agree
Participating in academic discussions	61	29	10	0	0	100	4.51	0.67	strongly agree
Need in reading skill							3.96	0.80	Agree
Reading articles in professional journals	31	46	23	0	0	100	4.08	0.73	agree
Reading texts on the internet, books...	32	40	28	0	0	100	4.04	0.77	agree
Reading academic reports	19	48	28	5	0	100	3.81	0.80	agree
Reading specializes literature	32	32	32	4	0	100	3.92	0.89	agree
Needs in writing skill							4.61	0.58	strongly agree

Writing academic reports, essays, journal papers, emails, CVs...	70	24	6	0	0	100	4.64	0.59	strongly agree
Take notes from lectures, conferences ...	65	30	5	0	0	100	4.60	0.58	strongly agree
Writing a paper for an oral presentation	68	25	7	0	0	100	4.61	0.61	strongly agree
Applying for scholarships studying abroad	62	35	3	0	0	100	4.59	0.55	strongly agree
Needs in listening skill							4.41	0.71	agree
Listening to the real situation	55	32	13	0	0	100	4.42	0.71	agree
Listening to lectures and international conferences	53	33	14	0	0	100	4.39	0.72	agree
Total							4.39	0.69	agree

Participants' suggestions for the changes of the proposed ESP materials used in the bachelor's program of Applied Linguistics at the mentioned university were collected and displayed in the following table.

Table 3. Students' recommendations for the changes of the ESP materials

The items	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	N	S.D	Level of agreement
The general appearance of the materials									
The University should provide new ESP materials with interesting, and attractive cover page	14	69	16	1	0	3.96		0.58	agree
The university should design up-to-date materials for the students	65	21	14	0	0	4.51		0.73	strongly agree
Book objectives									
The objective of the textbooks should be related to the student's needs	12	52	28	8	0	3.68		0.79	agree
New materials should cover a variety of topics of business, banking, meeting, working in the office, tourism industry...	70	25	5	0	0	4.65		0.57	strongly agree
Activities									
The textbook allows students to practice a lot of speaking both inside and outside class (phone call, role play, debate, presentation...)	70	20	9	1	0	4.59		0.69	strongly agree
The textbook provides a lot of inside and outside class activities	19	59	19	3	0	3.94		0.70	agree
The new textbook provides interesting, relevant & effective activities for the students	19	52	28	1	0	3.89		0.71	agree
Activities are developed to encourage students' oral communication and become more confident English speaker	28	40	32	0	0	3.96		0.77	agree
Activities are balanced between individual response, pair work, and group work	26	48	24	2	0	3.98		0.76	agree
The textbook allows students to do the real projects	72	18	10	0	0	4.62		0.66	strongly agree
Exercises									
The number of exercises in each unit is relevant	17	52	31	0	0	3.86		0.68	agree
Language skills									
Textbooks provide good communication skills	65	25	10	0	0	4.55		0.67	strongly agree
The new textbook provides writing skills (writing reports, writing essays, writing emails, writing journals ...)	31	49	17	3	0	4.08		0.77	agree

The new textbook provides reading skills (skimming, scanning...)	29	48	23	0	0	4.06	0.72	agree
The textbook provides listening skills (telephone conversation, international conferences, company negotiation...)	29	37	30	4	0	3.91	0.86	agree
Vocabulary and grammar								
The textbook covers the appropriate grammar (verb, tenses, part of speech, subject-verb – agreement ...)	23	54	20	3	0	3.97	0.74	agree
Textbooks provide specialized vocabulary in terms of a variety of topics of business, banking, meeting, working in the office, tourism industry...	24	50	25	1	0	3.97	0.73	agree
Materials availability								
The university allows students to get into the textbook easily both online and offline in the library	28	46	24	2	0	4.00	0.77	agree
Total						4.12	0.72	agree

The data show that the students expected to have new ESP materials, which cover a wide range of business, banking, meeting, office job, and tourism-related topics. They noted that they preferred the so-called textbooks with plenty of opportunities for students to work on actual projects and practice speaking both inside and outside the classroom, such as during role-playing activities, debates, presentations, and other speaking circumstances. They accordingly expressed their strong support for the new ESP materials if they could provide them with current tools and productive communication skills. Moreover, the English majors recommended that the language skills task cover a wide range of text genres and profession-related topics, which shares a lot of similarities in their requests for language knowledge components. Table 3 also indicates learners' high expectations of the learning activities to be conducted in ESP courses. In particular, they highlighted that the textbook should allow more communication practice both inside and outside class and more balanced individual, pair and group work activities and projects. It is noteworthy to mention that students insist on the availability of the materials in the university library.

It is obvious that the aforementioned university has made a great effort to meet learners' needs in the English academic learning resources. Students' overall satisfaction of the layout and design, book objective, language skills, and content of the materials indicates the university's attempt to provide their learners with relevant and comprehensive learning materials. However, there exists some negative feedback on materials availability as well as the range of activities included in the materials.

A number of recommendations on the changes of the ESP materials were introduced for more need-based design of the materials, which were in parallel with the discussion of Harding (2007) and McDonough and Shaw (2003). The former author suggested that ESP teachers ought to use texts, scenarios, and circumstances related to the students' subject matters and thus they will automatically incorporate the terminology that the students require, whether they are simulated or real. Additionally, he recommended that teachers make use of the real-world materials that students utilize in their chosen professions or fields and not be put off by the idea that they might not sound like standard English. Similarly the later authors proposed that the content of a textbook should be directed at a particular audience, and textbook materials should address such specific audiences in terms of their needs.

V. CONCLUSION

The study is an attempt for a need-based evaluation of the ESP materials used in a LPDR university. Findings have shown that there should be more critical considerations of the learners' perspectives in the design and implementation of the learning materials. It is suggested that university propose procedures for their material development in which students' engagement before, during and after the implementation should be included.

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