

Teaching English for Specific Purposes in Higher Education

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Abstract

Teaching English constitutes a challenge in higher education and in most countries considering career advance and employment eligibility. This quantitative study investigates the perception of higher education learners in relation to the teaching of English for specific purposes at Milagro State University. Thus, a survey research design, which consisted of multiple-choice questions and Likert-type scales, was applied, to 834 university students in diverse professional fields considering measurements of central tendency. The results indicate that the higher education students are aware of the importance of English within their academic and professional training; however, the curriculum, programs, and instructional practices do not effectively support them to achieve high levels of proficiency for effective oral communication. The data analysis allows to conclude that the teaching of English for Specific Purposes at the university level is an academic challenge since it requires a paradigm shift from teachers and program designer; as well as the implementation of communicative methodologies to create meaningful conditions for natural interactions.

Keywords: teaching, English, education, higher education, currilum.

1. Introduction

Currently, the modern world, characterized by globalization, internationalization, and digitalization, demands professionals to master several languages, with English being one of the most important as it is considered the language of science and technology (Angulo et al., 2021; Borg & Edmett, 2019). Hence, many schools and higher education institutions have included English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) learning in their curricula either as mandatory or as a graduation requirement, ensuring the quality of their programs. By including English learning within the curriculum, educational institutions support the acquisition of communicatives and sociolinguistic competences required for effective interaction within the modern world. Learning a foreign language has become a fundamental factor of individuals' academic

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achievement, having a high influence in employment eligibility (Espinoza Zúñiga et al., 2019; Juárez Díaz & Perales Escudero, 2019).

In the Latin American context, some research has evinced that the level of English language proficiency is still limited and low (Juárez Díaz & Perales Escudero, 2019). In Ecuador, most of the educational institutions have continually revisited their EFL programs to become more responsive to their realities. English is included within the curriculum as a mandatory course from elementary to higher education; it means that Ecuadorian learners spend around 15 years of formal education receiving English language classes, yet little improvement have been documented. In this sense, it is imperative to investigate the reasons why a high number of English Language Learners (ELLs) do not achieve an appropriate level of English proficiency when finishing their formal education studies.

As a way to respond to the above approaches and to the needs of university students, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), also known as Professional and Academic English (PAE) (Puspita et al., 2022), arises as an instructional approach to teach English to learners in specific areas (e.g., accounting, health, law). English for Specific Purposes refers to two aspects: a) English courses aimed at meeting the educational or professional needs of students, that is, vocabulary and terminology that they require for their specialty, and b) English used in special communicative situations (Guan et al., 2018; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996). Generally speaking, ESP is the instructional approach that guides the language education in most universities, therefore, it has pedagogical implications for both undergraduate learners who aim to achieve a bachelor's degree and teacher-researchers who wish to publish their scientific products in international journals or forums (Rose et al., 2021; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Within the Ecuadorian educational policies, undergraduate learners need to achieve a B1 level of English proficiency as graduation requirement (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2022), and professors are asked to achieve the same level as a hiring requirement within the higher education contexts (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2021).

However, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of English in professional training, the scientific literature identifies several gaps in this field of study. Firstly, institutional English programs are criticized for their rigidity and obsolescence which mostly centralize grammar- or exam-based instructional approaches. Both teachers and students are often forced to "adapt" to the demands of the program, neglecting the real communicative needs of the students. Additionally, standardized exams may require an accelerated pace of teaching, with not enough time for authentic, natural, and meaningful language interactions. This is coupled with the limited availability of time for formative assessment in the classroom, which contrasts significantly with standardized assessment - usually based on numerical conclusions, and opportunities for language use beyond classroom boundaries.

On the other hand, there is a constant need to innovate teachers' instructional practices and competences to become more responsive when attending ELLs' needs. According to Duta et al. (2015) and Kononenko y Nedospasova (2021), language educators training consists of four quadrants: disciplinary training, psychopedagogical training, social awareness, and vocation. If one of these quadrants fails, the others may be compromised. This problem is exacerbated if we consider the scarce opportunities for natural communication, and the physical conditions and technological infrastructure of higher education institutions. Therefore, these challenges need to be addressed to improve the teaching of English for specific purposes.

In addition to the above, conventional teaching approaches do not experience significant changes and do not respond to the rapid pace at which societies evolve in all fields and disciplines (Fernández-Martín et al., 2020). From the considerations described, a theoretical-practical gap is evident concerning the teaching of English in universities;

these fall between the scant attention to the real needs of students, teaching approaches (methods, techniques, strategies), standardized exams, limited time for tutoring, teacher training, and the physical and technological conditions of universities.

A similar situation occurs at Milagro State University, where empirical evidence suggests that there is an assumption about the language proficiency of learners within diverse major of studies, when observing that some learners lack the skills and linguistic abilities to understand and effectively communicate by written or oral means in their specific disciplinary field. Also, the current English language program is poorly in line with the academic needs of the students. Thus, ELLs face significant challenges to be motivate and capture their attention towards the real need to become highly competent in a foreign language (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Lamb & Arisandy, 2020; Tatzl, 2011). However, it is highly important to emphasize that this scenario differ from the Tourism and Pedagogy for Language Teaching undergraduate program which manage a different ELT curriculum and program.

This research aims to explore and document higher education learners' needs and perspectives towards English language learning centralizing the need for approving a course, graduation, employability, and personal/human development. The research questions that guide this study are: (a) How English Language Teaching (ELT) is characterized at the higher education level, and (b) What are higher education learners' perspectives towards English language learning as measured by a Likert scale?

2. Theoretical conceptions about teaching English at the university level

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Teaching

Upon reviewing the existing literature in relation to the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), it is necessary to clarify that there are many discrepancies on the topic. Hence, it is not easy to accurately define what is meant by this construct.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a term that emerged in the 1960s and refers to two strands: a) courses focused on what students need to do with English in an academic or professional context and b) English used in special communicative situations (Hyland & Shaw, 2016). From this perspective, English becomes an international means of communication that encompasses both the academic and professional field and is of great interest to higher education students and research-teachers who aspire to disseminate the scientific result of their research work in international forums, through communications and scientific publications in English (Martín Martín, 2010).

Within this context, ESP has been the subject of controversy among experts in this area who have made indiscriminate use of the terminology. Examples of this are the different terms: English for Professional and Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and English for General Purposes (EGP). In this regard, UNESCO and the British Council considered English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as the center of many courses and subjects offered in many universities, which has contributed to its becoming one of the most important subjects for teaching English as a foreign language (Espinoza Zúñiga et al., 2019). From the researchers' standpoint, the gap between the different terms exists, and many prefer to continue dividing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into academic and/or professional, which cover very different aspects than what English for General Purposes (EGP) implies, referring to the development of both receptive and productive skills in EFL contexts.

Fundamental Pillars in the Process of Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language

The process of acquiring English as a foreign language is subject to a series of factors that can act as facilitators or barriers. In this sense, it is essential to consider two key elements in this process: teacher training and student learning.

Teacher training, in a current context where pedagogy becomes increasingly complex, requires the acquisition and implementation of a series of skills and interactive strategies with students. In this sense, the training of teachers in the teaching of English as a foreign language can be illustrated through a quadrangular model, divided into four areas of equal importance. First, there is disciplinary training, which implies mastery of English at its various levels and understanding of the culture that surrounds it. Second, there is the psychopedagogical training, which includes the management of practical aspects such as didactics, pedagogy, psychology of learning and development, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, and the use of information and communication technologies, among others. Third, there is social awareness, referring to the perception of the fundamental role of the teacher and its impact on students and society. Finally, the teaching vocation refers to the commitment and passion for teaching and learning, as well as innate skills such as empathy and tolerance (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Oxford et al., 1998).

On the other hand, the learning of the student of EFL is permeated by various contextual factors, such as technological advances, social networks, labor competition, and international opportunities (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016). In addition, it is crucial that the student has both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards language learning (Subakthiasih & Putri, 2020).

From this perspective, the teacher and the student are the central actors in the educational process. It is expected that a well-trained teacher will be able to effectively use a variety of approaches, objectives, methods, strategies, and teaching resources, and apply different forms of evaluation. Simultaneously, the student should be motivated to learn the language. However, if this ideal interaction occurs and yet English courses for specific purposes do not achieve their objectives, there must be other limiting factors in the university context, such as physical infrastructure, connectivity, teacher salaries, learning styles, and prior knowledge of students. Therefore, this seeks to investigate the perceptions of university students about the teaching of English for specific study purposes and to somehow analyze which factors, limit or favor, the teaching of said language from the students' perspective.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted through a quantitative approach considering a survey study. According to Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza Torres (2018), this paradigm is used when the researcher collects and analyzes data to answer scientific questions and verify hypotheses that have been formulated at the beginning of the research, making use of numerical measurement and statistics to establish behaviors in the population under study. In this sense, the use of this paradigm was relevant because it was intended to investigate the factors that contextualize the current structure and programs of ELT at Milagro State University

The population of the study include ESP learners of Milagro State University and the sample consisted of 834 students. Considering that the population is small and finite, all the students that made it up were taken as units of study (Arias, 2012); hence, in this research, no sampling criteria were applied to generalize to the universe under study.

The technique used for data collection was the survey, with multiple-choice closed questions and Likert-type scales, which was shared via massive email through a Google

forms questionnaire. Thus, the data analysis was conducted through measurements of central tendency using Microsoft Excel to calculate the percentages and create the corresponding figure and graphics. In this way, the responses were grouped and analyzed, according to the objective pursued by this research.

4. Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis and the measurements of the central tendency of the data is presented considering the objective set out in the research. The results are presented with the percentage statistical analysis of the data obtained from the surveys conducted with the students.

The objective of the research was to explore and document higher education learners' needs and perspectives towards English language learning centralizing the need for approving a course, graduation, employability, and personal/human development. The results of the survey, as displayed in table 1, support the researchers to answer the two questions: (a) How English Language Teaching (ELT) is characterized at the higher education level, and (b) What are higher education learners' perspectives towards English language learning as measured by a Likert scale?

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the surveys conducted with the students (N=834)

N°	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutro	Agree	Strongly Agree
I1	¿How important is the teaching of English for Specific Purposes in your academic training?	1,8%	5,3%	8,88%	56,1%	28,1%
I2	¿Do you feel motivated in English for Specific Purposes?	26,3%	64,9%	5,3%	3,5%	
I3	¿Does the teacher in charge of the ESP course use a variety of teaching methods?	24,6 %	59,6%	12,3%	3,5 %	
I4	¿Does the teacher in charge of the ESP course use a variety of didactic strategies in the teaching process?	34 %	44, 9 %	15,8%	5, 3 %	
I5	¿Does the teacher in charge of the ESP course use a variety of forms of evaluation (exams, forums, presentations, content analysis, etc.) to assess achievements in the ESP course?	29, 8 %	40, 4 %	19,3%	10,5%	
I6	¿Do the university's physical infrastructure conditions favor learning?	1,8%	5,3%	8,8%	56,1%	28 %
I7	¿Does the university have the technological equipment to dynamize foreign language learning?		7%	14%	54,4%	24,6%
I8	Have the topics covered and texts helped you to expand your vocabulary in English in your field of study?	33 %	49 %	12 %	5 %	

I9	¿Does the teacher use technological resources for learning English (apps, dictionaries, video lessons, podcasts, virtual platforms, etc. for teaching English for Specific Purposes)?	40,4%	54,4%	1,8%	3,4%	
I10	¿At the start of the English for Specific Purposes course, does the teacher carry out a needs analysis?	29,8%	59,6%	3,5%	7,1%	

The study in question, which focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in an academic context, was based on responses provided by the participants, who occupy various social roles within the studied community. This approach allowed us to evaluate a range of perceptions and experiences related to ESP education.

In response to the research question, which sought to understand the respondents' perception of the importance of ESP in their academic formation, 84.2% of the participants affirmed they agree or strongly agree. ESP learners agree that English is a fundamental factor within their academic training. These findings coincide with the literature to support the idea that communicating in a foreign language is considered a high important competence in professional growth and employability eligibility regardless the disciplinary field of study. However, the results obtained in the second question of the survey reveals that a high level of learners, 91.2% of the respondents expressing disagreement or strong disagreement, lack evinced a lack of motivation towards ESP classes. This indicates a clear need to revisit the curriculum, the program, and to innovate the instructional assessment strategies to increase student motivation and engagement in this crucial aspect of their education.

Considering the research question associated with characteristics of ELT in higher education, in the third question of the survey, respondents evaluated the teaching methods used in ESP classes. 84.2% of the participants expressed disagreement or strong disagreement regarding the variety of teaching methods used, suggesting there might be a need to diversify and improve teaching techniques in this educational context. The fourth question explored the participants' perception of the use of various teaching strategies during teaching. A significant majority of respondents (78.9%) expressed their disagreement with current teaching strategies, underlining the need to review and optimize these practices to improve ESP education.

The following questions within the survey aim to analyze teachers instructional competences and the quality of the program. In the fifth question, participants were asked to evaluate whether the teacher used a variety of forms of evaluation in the ESP course. 40.4% of respondents indicated their disagreement with this statement, which could indicate the need to incorporate a wider variety of assessment methods to effectively measure student progress. In the last question, which asked whether the teacher conducted a needs analysis at the start of the ESP course, 89.4% of respondents indicated disagreement or strong disagreement. This result highlights the perception that teachers may not be adequately adjusting their teaching and evaluation strategies to the individual needs of students.

Regarding the physical infrastructure conditions of the university, the sixth question showed a predominantly positive perception, with 84.1% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the facilities favor learning. This result highlights the perception that the physical facilities are adequate for ESP education. The seventh question inquired whether the university has the necessary technological equipment for learning. Here, 78.6% of the participants expressed agreement or strong agreement, reflecting a favorable perception of the technological resources available at the institution.

Finally, when asked whether the course contents and texts contributed to expanding specific English vocabulary, the majority of respondents (82%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, suggesting that course materials may not be adequately meeting this educational need. In the ninth question, which explored the use of technological resources for learning English, a surprising 94.8% of respondents expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, implying an overwhelmingly negative response to the integration of technology in ESP teaching.

From the data obtained, it was evidenced that the surveyed students recognize the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in their academic and professional training. This confirms the results obtained by Gómez Paniagua (2015) who stated that students recognize English as a tool that could define their professional future in a globalized world. However, the sample expressed feeling unmotivated in English classes, which could be partly due to the lack of variety in methods, teaching strategies, forms of evaluation, contents and texts used, and technological resources used in ESP teaching. This represents a challenge for language teachers and program designers who will need to find suitable mechanisms to intrinsically and extrinsically motivate their students, as one of the variables influencing the learning of this language (Liu, 2020).

In this line of argument, it was found that both the physical infrastructure conditions of the university and the technological equipment favor learning. Therefore, these aspects can be considered as drivers of the language teaching and learning process, as reported by Marchlik et al. (2021). The technological infrastructure of the university may strongly support the ELT in the target university without the guide or support of external institutions. Thus, the ESP teacher should take advantage of these resources and means to innovate methodologically in the classrooms and be open to modern teaching approaches where information and communication technologies take precedence (Abellán & Herrada, 2016; Aguilera-Ruiz et al., 2017), and where the student becomes the center of the process (Colomo-Magaña et al., 2020).

Finally, the data reveal that another limitation in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes is that the students' needs are not currently taken into account (Durrant, 2009; Jiang et al., 2019). This is why it is complex for the teacher to have a prospective view of the students' interests that allows avoiding the rigidity and obsolescence of instructional programs. English programs should be contextualized and situated within the need of the target learners. These data contradict the ideas of Hinkel (2005); McGrath & Kaufhold (2016) who assert that English for Specific Purposes courses should be centered on what students need to do with English in an academic or professional context.

Overall, the findings reveal high dissatisfaction associated when the results when achieving a high level of English proficiency from the sample studied regarding how ESP teaching is approached in the university context, evidenced by the number of factors causing this view.

5. Conclusions

The teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher education represents a significant opportunity for the academic, linguistic, labor, and professional growth of students. These courses, though they face considerable challenges, offer a space for educators to rethink outdated paradigms anchored in overly rigid teaching methodologies and adopt student-centered constructivist approaches. This shift would foster a deeper understanding of the importance of English in their training. However, the data obtained highlight that, from the perspective of higher education students, there are several obstacles that limit the effectiveness of ESP teaching. A significant issue identified is the scarce attention to the real needs of the students considering contextual and situated conditions that promote meaningful interactions for natural language acquisition. This

finding underlines the importance of tailoring course content to what students need to do with the language in their academic and professional contexts, the very essence of the ESP approach.

The findings from this exploratory phase provide a starting point for future research on English teaching in higher education. Such studies could consider student perceptions regarding the object of study, which would further enrich the understanding of the problem. By delving into the multiple facets that might be affecting the teaching of English for academic purposes in university institutions, it will be possible to design and implement more effective interventions. These interventions should be aimed at overcoming the identified challenges and seizing the opportunities presented by the ESP approach.

The obtained results also set the stage to revisit and analyze the current programs, curriculum, and practices to become more responsive to the need of all ELLs regardless their professional field. An elevated number of higher education learners recognize the need for and importance of acquiring a foreign language, yet they express that they are not receiving an effective support, attention, and guide to be capable of effectively communicating. More than completing a graduation requirement, they have a great sense and desire to learn English as a communicative instrument for career advance.

Ultimately, effective teaching of ESP in higher education is a key element to improve student performance and adequately prepare them for the professional world. By improving this aspect, higher education institutions will be making a significant contribution to the comprehensive training of their students, preparing them for a successful future in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

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