

A critical evaluation of ‘English for academic purposes (EAP)’ program in Iranian higher education from specialists’ perspective: A grounded theory

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ABSTRACT

The ‘English for academic purposes’ program, or the so-called ‘specialized English’ program, is one of the key educational sub-systems in Iran's higher education, which has experienced a life of about four decades. Reviewing the related research to this program in the higher education system shows that although it has been evaluated from different angles and mainly from the viewpoint of teaching methods and materials, we have rarely seen its critical evaluation from a broader perspective, understanding such necessity and using grounded theory, the opinions of eleven specialists in the field of English for academic purposes (EAP) have been qualitatively examined and analyzed. The findings indicate that this program is faced with serious shortcomings in two main areas of policymaking and implementation, which were classified into seven sub-areas. The results of this research can help higher education policymakers, curriculum designer, instructors and other stakeholders in the process of revising and implementing this program.

Keywords: *Specialized English, Evaluation, Educational planning, Higher education system, Language planning*

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP), also commonly known as Specialized English, has played a significant role in English language education programs in recent decades. According to Hyland (2006) and Hyland and Wang (2019), ESP, since its emergence in the 1960s, has been recognized as an important area in applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT)



in particular. The EAP program in Iran, which was originally designed to prepare students and, consequently, graduates for communication and meeting educational and professional needs in national and international settings, has occupied an important part of the formal English language education process.

An examination of the theoretical and practical developments of this emerging program in the field of English language education in different societies reveals that, influenced by factors and events such as globalization, economic, social, and occupational changes, new communication technologies, the expansion of higher education, and others, we have witnessed significant progress in this program (Ding and Bruce, 2017). Given the importance of the topic and the understanding that the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program is one of the key educational sub-systems in the higher education in Iran (Atai, 2002), and based on the available evidence and documentation that it faces serious shortcomings in various dimensions (Hayati, 2008; Soodmandafshar & Movassagh, 2016), this research attempts to examine its pathology from a different perspective than the existing research.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory, to examine the perspectives of experts in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as one of the most important stakeholders of the program. In order to increase the validity or credibility of the research, purposive sampling was used. For this purpose, based on the criteria determined in the data collection process, a total of twenty-one experts in this field were invited for interviews in several stages, of whom eleven agreed to participate. Since theoretical saturation or source sufficiency was achieved at this stage, the data collection process was stopped and the analysis of the findings was followed up.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the data obtained from the interviews indicate that the incomplete success of the specialized language program in Iran can be classified due to shortcomings in two main categories and, in accordance with them, in several subcategories. The resulting categories can be introduced as follows:

Table 1

Main and subcategories of the analysis of the English for academic purposes program in the Iranian higher education system

Main Categories	Subcategories
1) Policymaking and Planning	a) Top-level policies b) Goal and mission of the program c) Role of stakeholders in the design and development of programs
2) Program Implementation	a) Professional qualifications of teachers b) Student qualifications c) Teaching materials and methodology d) Cultural and social components

1) Policymaking and Planning

This category, which was raised in the views of some participants in this study, can be presented in three subcategories as follows:

a) Top-level Policies. According to experts in this field, the specialized language program in Iran is itself part of the comprehensive English language teaching program; a program in which overt and covert evidence indicates the dominance of a skeptical view of this language by policymakers and cultural authorities. From this perspective, as long as the task of language policymakers and planners with English language teaching in Iran is not clear, it is illogical to expect a specific policy to be presented on specialized language.

b) Program Goal and Mission. From the perspective of experts in this field, one of the shortcomings of the specialized language program in Iran is its serious weakness in goal setting and mission assignment. They believe that in presenting any language program, determining its goal and mission can determine the direction and determine the cost and time for its

implementation, and this is a gap that is completely evident in the specialized language program in the Iranian higher education system. In other words, in determining the goals, mission and dimensions of this program in the curriculum of each course of study and specifically for each course title, we have faced serious shortcomings, which can be introduced in at least two cases as follows: a) Outdatedness of programs and syllabi; b) No change in the expected goals over three decades.

c) The Place of Stakeholders in Program Design and Development. According to experts in this field, in the design and development of specialized language syllabi in Iran, the program stakeholders, and at the head of them, teachers and learners, have no role. This lack of communication has led, on the one hand, to the repetition of stereotyped programs for different disciplines without considering the feedback of teachers and paying attention to their problems, shortcomings and suggestions for improvement, and on the other hand, special attention to the needs and interests of learners.

2) Program Implementation

A significant part of the critical views of the experts of this program is related to the implementation of it and also the elements of this section. The findings obtained from this category can be classified and introduced in at least four subcategories:

a) Professional Qualifications of Teachers. The statements of the interviewees indicate that there is no specific criterion or standard for recruiting or teaching this course, and it is based on the educational background and experience of the teacher and with the discretion of the decision-making official for this course, such as the group leader or the dean. The existence of the duality of language teacher versus content teacher is an issue that remains unresolved. This is while determining the qualifications of the teacher of each course and observing those conditions is a logical matter in the teaching of each course title.

b) Student Qualifications. In most curricula, general English is defined as a prerequisite for specialized language, and it is expected that students must have an initial level of language proficiency that is defined in general English. However, according to experts, a significant number of students do not have this level of language proficiency, and their weak language skills slow down and sometimes disrupt the process of specialized language teaching.

c) Teaching Materials and Methodology. The importance of teaching materials, or textbooks, in societies like Iran, where English is a foreign language and most language input is limited to the classroom, is highly important. The curriculum experts believe that despite the publication of several new and up-to-date books in recent years by SAMT Publication, there are still many shortcomings in teaching resources. First, in many cases, especially in classes where teachers are not specialized in language teaching, that is, content teachers, we see the distribution of handouts that are not educational content but rather parts of specialized books of that particular discipline, and the purpose of the lesson is only limited to the translation of these texts.

d) Cultural and Social Components. Essentially, university English classes are limited to language knowledge. The other half is the culture of using this knowledge in future academic and professional environments, which includes the correct way of interacting with colleagues and managers, familiarity with workplace discourse, and familiarity with workplace culture, which, according to a number of experts, has been neglected in these courses, despite its great importance. They believe that cultural and social skills should be an integral part of language education in general and specialized language in particular.

Conclusion

The alignment between expectations and practical implementations in higher education institutions plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration among stakeholders and advancing the education sector in Iran. It is essential for governing bodies and educational entities to strategically focus on key areas identified in upstream documents to enhance communication within the sector. By bridging the gap between expectations outlined in these documents and the actual practices, a more coherent and efficient higher education system in Iran can be achieved. Strategically aligning expectations with practical implementation is paramount for facilitating smoother communication and collaboration within the education sector in Iran. By emphasizing key areas identified in upstream documents, governing institutions and educational entities can enhance the overall effectiveness of the higher education system. Bridging the existing gap between expectations and practices is crucial for creating a more cohesive and functional environment that benefits all stakeholders involved in the advancement and development of higher education in Iran.



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