Exploring Reading Comprehension Needs of Yasouj EAP Students of Persian Literature

Abdolvahed Zarifi*(Corresponding Author),*
Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English,
Faculty of Humanities, Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran.
Email: vahed_zarifi@yahoo.com

Elahe Asadpour,
MA Student of TEFL, Department of English,
Faculty of Humanities, Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran.
Email: elaheasadpour1372@gmail.com

Abstract

The main objective of the current English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in Iran is to fill the gap between the students' general English competence and their ability to read discipline-specific texts. This study aims to investigate the target and present reading comprehension needs of EAP undergraduate students of Persian literature at Yasouj State University through a mixed method approach. A total of 30 undergraduate students who have passed ESP courses and 10 postgraduate students along with two content and two EAP instructors participated in the study which was designed on a mixed method approach using interviews and questionnaires. The results indicated that 'skimming texts', 'using bilingual general dictionaries', 'scanning texts', 'knowledge of Persian literature terminologies', 'guessing meanings of words', and 'understanding main ideas' were perceived as either 'important' or 'very important' to students' success by all the participants. Moreover, the results suggested that General English Proficiency (GEP) level of the students was generally low. The undergraduates held that they need more general English than highly specific academic English. Implications of this study can be used for improving EAP reading courses for Persian literature students.

Keywords: Persian Literature, Reading Comprehension, ESP, Need Analysis, and Mixed Method Approach

Introduction

Although the language of education in Iran is Persian, discipline-based EAP programs are currently applied as compulsory courses at university level and all undergraduate students are obliged to pass one to three English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in addition to one general English course (Atai & Shoja, 2011). However, the Ministry of education offers no clear guidance for selecting and developing basic academic instructional materials related to the linguistic or communicative standards expected by students.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is assumed as an approach to course design. It starts with the question 'Why do these learners need to learn English?' and it is in close relation with need analysis. Although all course designs and programs are based on needs, the difference between ESP and English for General Purposes in needs analysis is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need. It is an approach in which the needs of a specific group of learners in a specific situation are considered.

The importance of Needs Analysis (NA) as a major stage in course design is widely echoed in the present literature (Brown, 1995; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Tomlinson, 2016). Besides, quite recently, some needs analysis projects at Iranian universities attempted to assess the students' needs. For instance, Boakye and Mai (2016) conducted a needs analysis study that sought to explore students' reading challenges as an initial step in designing an appropriate reading intervention program for first-year sociology students. The study aimed to suggest conditions for the production of an effective reading intervention program by determining the needs of the students in the first-year sociology class. A survey using an open-ended questionnaire was used to explore students' reading problems. Content analysis of the responses showed a variety of learner needs and revealed that most of the students had difficulty in reading their first-year sociology texts. Comprehension was the main challenge, but other specific areas such as vocabulary, length of texts, language, and affective issues such as motivation and interest were also mentioned. The findings also showed that this cohort of first-year Sociology students had reading challenges that involve cognitive, language, and affective issues. In another study, Holme and Chalauisaeng (2006) used Participatory Appraisal (PA) as a qualitative technique for NA to study the evolution of a course structure in response to changing needs and to encourage learner independence in an EAP reading context. The subjects were second year university students of pharmacology in Thailand. Instrumentation included transect walking, mapping, understanding daily schedule, brainstorming through semi-structured discussion, well-being ranking, cause and effect diagram, and matrix scoring of priorities. The students acknowledged their problems as limited vocabulary, low ability in getting meaning of texts, lack of background knowledge, complicated sentences, and negative attitudes about reading. Finally, Kazar and Mede (2015) suggested that the ESP program should focus on the effective use of language strategies in given tasks such as improving presentation skills, learning key terms, writing Email messages, and reading academic texts. In almost all these ESP studies, reading comprehension was identified as the most important skill for university students. Therefore, the

main aim of English classes at undergraduate level seems to be helping students to improve their domain of vocabulary, reading comprehension strategies, translation skills, and to fill in the gap between the students' general English competence and their ability to read discipline-specific texts (Atai & Tahririan, 2003).

The study

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), when we get needs analysis right, our teaching is exactly what our students need. When we get needs analysis wrong, we are not doing ESP. This is why needs analysis is probably the single most important professional skill for teachers of ESP. The current and limited literature on nationwide evaluation of discipline-based EAP reading comprehension programs at Iranian Universities indicates that these programs have generally failed to achieve the desired outcomes in terms of improving the learners' reading comprehension abilities (Atai, 2000; Atai & Tahririan, 2003). Given the significance of EAP programs in Iran as a major part of the ELT curriculum with noticeable educational and financial investments, the course designers should reassess the needs of students and improve the current status quo. Further, due to the specificity of EAP reading comprehension needs across academic disciplines (Jordan, 1997), there is an urgent need to carry out in-depth analyses of the contexts and gear the courses to the details of present and target situations more closely. Although Iranian Persian literature undergraduate students pass two obligatory EAP courses, no serious research studies have so far been conducted to operationalize the present and target reading comprehension needs of the students of Persian literature or to identify the gap. Therefore, this study attempted to provide a comprehensive profile of reading comprehension needs of Persian literature undergraduate students at Yasouj University through a mixed method approach. The participants in this study involved a wide range of stakeholders including EAP and content teachers along with undergraduate and post graduate students. More specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the target reading comprehension needs of undergraduate Persian literature students at Yasouj University as perceived by different stakeholders (i.e. postgraduate students and undergraduate students, EAP teachers, and content teachers)?

2. What are present reading comprehension abilities of HIM undergraduate students at Yasouj University as perceived by different stakeholders (i.e. postgraduate students and undergraduate students, EAP teachers, and content teachers)?

4. Is there any significant difference between the four groups of stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the Persian literature students' target reading comprehension needs?

5. Is there any significant difference between the four groups of stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the Persian literature students' present reading comprehension abilities?

Method

Participants

Four groups of stakeholders including 30 undergraduates of Persian literature, 10 postgraduate students, 2 subject specific instructors, and 2 ESP instructors at Yasouj University participated in this study. To work for representative views of students, we chose the undergraduates who had passed ESP courses. Figure 1 and 2 show the percentages of male/female and undergraduate/postgraduate students.
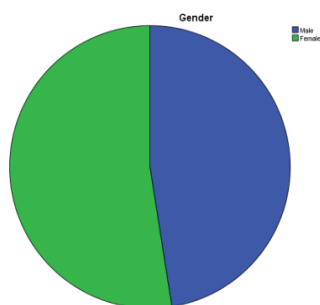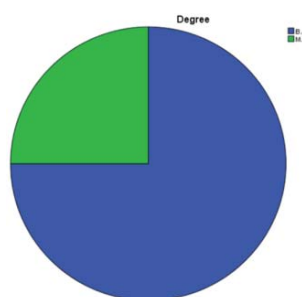

Figure 1

Figure 2

Instruments

This study follows a mixed methods approach including first, semi-structured interviews with ESP instructors, and content instructors in the Persian literature and a questionnaire survey administered to undergraduates and postgraduate students. The elicitation instruments (interviews and questionnaires) were the same ones used in Atai and Nazari's (2011) study 'to explore reading comprehension needs of Iranian EAP students of health information management' (see appendix). The Questionnaires for the undergraduate students included independent sections with items on students' target reading comprehension needs (20 items) and present reading comprehension needs (27 items). Instruments were valid in terms of content and construct. According to Atai and Nazari (2011), content validity of questionnaires was estimated through panel discussions involving EAP experts. According to Atai and Nazari (2011), the reliability of the target situation analysis (TSA) was 0.88. The estimated indices for the present situation analysis (PSA) and reading comprehension difficulties were estimated as 0.93 and 0.80, respectively. Atai and Nazari (2011) also maintain that for probing construct validity of the questionnaire for undergraduate students, exploratory factor analysis was run and the results were confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis. The factors that were extracted were 'direct cognitive strategies for receiving messages' (Oxford, 1990); 'compensation strategies' (Oxford, 1990); 'vocabulary and syntactic knowledge' (Grabe, 1991); 'direct cognitive strategies for analyzing and reasoning' (Oxford,

1990), and 'knowledge of different genres'. Some items had, however, factor loadings less than 0.30 which were deleted from the subsequent analyses.

As this study follows a mixed method approach, the data obtained through quantitative methods were completed with qualitative methods. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted too. Two different interview protocols were developed for content instructors and EAP teachers. It should be mentioned that the interview protocols were developed along the same lines that were explained for the questionnaires.

Data collection

Data for the study were collected over the autumn semester of 2017. The elicitation instruments, as mentioned before, were the same valid and reliable interview and questionnaires used by Atai and Nazari (2011). Initially, the semi-structured interviews were conducted by one of the researchers and presented to correspondent EAP and content teachers at university department. Each interview took an average of 20 minutes. Then, the pre-existing questionnaires which were interestingly designed in a website were sent to the students. This way of administration, not only is so interesting and comfortable that motivate students to answer but also is time, energy, and money saving. The information gathered was stored in the intended website for analysis.

Data analysis

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS 11.5. Content analysis and descriptive analysis were also applied to the information gathered through the interviews.

Results

Analysis of target reading comprehension needs

Analysis of the questionnaires

The stakeholders' views on target reading comprehension needs of undergraduate Persian literature students' needs of reading comprehension in ESP were elicited through the first questionnaire. The results showed that almost all the reading comprehension sub-skills included in the questionnaire were considered as either 'important' or 'very important'.

More specifically, Skimming the text (undergraduate students = 55.4% and postgraduate students = 45.4%), Scanning the text (undergraduate students = 62.3% and postgraduate students = 57%), Specific Vocabulary Knowledge (undergraduate students = 45.5 and postgraduate students = 70.2%), Guessing meaning of the words using context and prefix and suffixes (undergraduate students = 35.4 and postgraduate students = 59.27%), Using General Bilingual Dictionaries (undergraduate students = 40.3% and postgraduate students = 39.4%), Understanding Main Ideas (undergraduate students = 60.9% and postgraduate students = 73.3%), and Drawing Conclusion (undergraduate students =59.5% and

postgraduate students =   68.3%) were regarded as both important and very important.

However, undergraduate students' perceptions of degree of importance of some sub-skills differed from those of the postgraduates. While undergraduate students identified Guessing meaning of words using context (30.3%) to be important or very important, it was viewed as important or very important by 69.3% of postgraduate students. Likewise, Specific Vocabulary Knowledge was viewed as important or very important by 45.5% undergraduate students, while it was selected as important or very important by 70.2% of postgraduate students.

The other sub-skills like 'Using Monolingual General Dictionaries', 'General Vocabulary Knowledge', 'Understanding the Relationships Between Texts, Charts, Tables, and Pictures', 'Drawing Conclusions and Understanding Implied Ideas', and 'Familiarity with Different Genres such as Textbooks and Articles' were also perceived as 'important' to the Persian Literature undergraduates.

Analysis of interviews

All four instructors almost agreed that firstly knowledge of general English consisting of knowledge of general terminologies and being aware of grammar or structure are, to some extent, necessary. In addition, the ability to Skim and Scan the text in reading comprehension, the Knowledge of Specific Vocabularies, and some techniques such as Guessing the meaning of words using the context, Getting the Main Idea and Drawing Conclusion were considered to be important.

Analysis of present reading comprehension needs

Analysis of the questionnaires:

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students agreed that the undergraduate students are 'not good' at 'Setting Goals' (undergraduate students = 45.5% and postgraduate students = 59.32%), Predicting and Guessing the meaning of the text (undergraduate students = 45.5% and postgraduate students =54%) , Skimming the text (undergraduate students = 39.3% and postgraduate students = 69.5%), Scanning the text (undergraduate students = 34.5%   and postgraduate students = 55.4%), General Vocabulary Knowledge (undergraduate students = 69.3% and postgraduate students = 80.3%), Understanding Structure (undergraduate students = 49.23% and postgraduate students = 59.55%) and Drawing Conclusion (undergraduate students = 49.44% and postgraduate students = 70.44%).

Analysis of the interviews:

All four instructors agreed that almost all students are weak or very weak in general English. Concerning the reading comprehension, students are weak and need improvement in strategies such as Setting Goal for the text, Skimming and Scanning the text, Knowledge of General and Specific Terminologies, Getting the Main Idea, and Drawing Conclusion. They also argued that they as instructors have some limitations. They cannot go beyond reading the texts aloud and translating them into

the students' native language in a hasty manner. There are not any preplanned tasks to teach reading comprehension strategies or assign the students some purposeful reading homework.

More specifically, one of the content instructors believed that students' English is generally weak because students have learnt English in school in a wrong manner while it was teacher oriented and the class focus was just on grammar and translation. So they have learnt to focus on memorization.

Another instructor believed that students are very weak and demotivated to learn English. They view English as a course of study that should be passed, so they do not try to learn it effectively. First, they are weak at general English. Then, they are not aware of techniques for reading comprehension activities like Taking notes, Skimming and Scanning, Cause and Effect Relations, and Drawing Conclusion. A content teacher suggested that ESP teachers should use interesting teaching methods and strategies to make students interested in English.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was conducted to provide a profile of present and target reading comprehension needs of Yasouj undergraduate students of Persian Literature. To this end, perceptions of four major groups of stakeholders, i.e. graduate students, undergraduate students, content instructors, and EAP teachers, were elicited and analyzed. Findings of the study confirm Long (2005), holding that students' viewpoints are not adequate and should not be considered as "the reliable source, the best source or the only legitimate source" in analyzing their needs. Although all the reading comprehension sub-skills included in the questionnaires were assessed as important by most of the participants, 'Setting Goal', 'Skimming Texts', 'Using Bilingual General Dictionaries', 'Scanning Texts', 'Knowledge of specific terminologies', 'Guessing meanings of words using the context', 'Understanding main ideas,' and 'Drawing Conclusion' were perceived as 'important' or 'very important' by all the participants. These findings confirm Boakye and Mai (2016) who showed that most of the students have difficulty in reading their first-year Sociology texts. Comprehension was the main challenge, but other specific areas such as vocabulary, length of texts, language, and affective issues such as motivation and interest were also mentioned.

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, the data gathered were analysed through a mixed method approach using questionnaire and interview. The results indicated that there were no significant differences between the perceptions of stakeholders' view of target and present reading comprehension needs. More specifically, with regard to the target reading comprehension needs of the students, interviews as well as the students' questionnaire showed that the students were not fully aware of the aims of EAP courses and future language use domains.

Concerning the undergraduate students' present reading comprehension abilities, both groups of students and instructors agreed that the undergraduate students are not good at many EAP reading skills. However, what EAP teachers actually implemented did not go beyond reading the texts aloud and translating them

into the students' native language in a hasty manner. There were no preplanned tasks to teach reading comprehension strategies or assign the students some purposeful reading homework. This claim is in line with the study conducted by Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008) which revealed that these EAP courses do not fully prepare the students to embark on their studies because they do not sufficiently take into account students' (1) learning needs, (2) present level of foreign language proficiency, (3) objectives of the course, (4) resources available in terms of staff, materials, equipment, finances, and time constraint, and (5) the skill of the teachers and the teacher's knowledge of the specific area.

Finally, Atai (2002) argues that since the current Iranian EAP courses are not research-based, they are, therefore, not designed systematically and coherently. The point is that the stakeholders are not usually provided with an operational definition of the curriculum at the implementation level. More specifically, in the absence of compatibility between the target needs and the students' present reading comprehension abilities and problems, there is no ground for examining the effectiveness of these courses or their renewal.

Implications of the study

This study investigated academic reading comprehension needs of Iranian undergraduate students of Persian Literature. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue, the data obtained from needs analysis studies should provide the basis for curriculum developers, syllabus designers, materials writers, methodologists, and evaluators. With regard to the high financial and time investment on EAP courses, the results of this study offer implications for renewing the EAP course for Iranian undergraduate Yasouj Persian Literature students and improving their efficiency in terms of reading comprehension instruction. The EAP teachers may use the results of this study to refresh and update their methodological policies and options according to the students' reading comprehension needs and lacks rather than utopian goals prescribed by the syllabus designers. Also, as the students' general English proficiency (GEP) levels were rather low, it is suggested that program designers set a criterion GEP level for students upon entry to the EAP course. It seems more logical to invest in students' GEP through remedial courses if significant improvements in EAP courses are considered.

References

Atai, M. R. (2000). ESP revisited: a reappraisal study of discipline-based EAP programs in Iran. Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation. Isfahan University: Isfahan.

Atai, M. R., (2002). EAP curriculum planning in Iran: an incoherent educational experience. *Special Issue of the Journal of Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Teacher Training University, 9*(3), pp.17-34.

Atai, M. R., & Nazari, O. (2011). Exploring reading comprehension needs of Iranian EAP students of health information management (HIM): A triangulated approach. *System, 39*(1), 30-43.

Atai, M. R., & Shoja, L. (2011). A triangulated study of academic language needs of Iranian students of computer engineering: Are the courses on track? *RELC Journal, 42*(3), 305-323.

Atai, M. R., & Tahririan, M. H. (2003). Assessment of the ESP status in the current Iranian higher education system. *LSP 2000, communication, culture and knowledge,* University of Surrey, Guilford, UK.

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boakye, N. A. N. Y., & Mai, M. M. (2016). A Needs Analysis for a Discipline-Specific Reading Intervention. *English Language Teaching, 9*(3), 235-247.

Brown, J. D. (1995). *The elements of language curriculum: A systematic approach to program development*. ERIC.

Grabe, W. (1991). Current developments in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly, 25*(3), 375-406.

Holme, R., & Chalauisaeng, B. (2006). The learner as needs analyst: The use of participatory appraisal in the EAP reading classroom. *English for Specific Purposes, 25*(4), 403-419.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jordan, R. R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kazar, S. G., & Mede, E. (2015). The Perceptions Of ESP Students' Target Needs: A Case Study. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 191*, 2526-2530.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. New York: Routledge.

Long, M. H. (2005). *Second language needs analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mazdayasna, G., & Tahririan, M. H. (2008). Developing a profile of the ESP needs of Iranian students: The case of students of nursing and midwifery. *Journal of English for Academic purposes, 7*(4), 277-289.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies*. New York: Newbury House Publishers.

Tomlinson, B. (2016). The importance of materials development for language learning, *Issues in Materials Development* (pp. 1-9). Springer.

Author Biography

Abdolvahed Zarifi is an Assistant professor of TESL at Yasouj University. He got his Ph. D. degree from UPM, Malaysia. His areas of research interest are Vocabulary, Phrasal Verbs, and Curriculum Development. Email address is: vahed_zarifi@yahoo.com.

Elahe Asadpour is a TEFL M. A. student at Yasuj University. She got her B. A. degree from the same university. Her areas of research interest are Assessment, SLA, and Curriculum Development. Email address is: Elaheasadpour1372@gmail.com