

# Challenges Encountered By Saudi ESP Students: A Case Study Of Taif University

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the difficulties that Saudi students encounter in their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. The study adopts a quantitative method and distributed 120 questionnaires among students in Applied Medical Sciences College at Taif University. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The study results showed that the materials used in the ESP classroom do not address the needs of the learners entirely, resulting in their being unsuccessful in performing their occupational roles in medical sciences. The results also showed that the productive skills were less practiced, and teachers did not give feedback to the students due to the class size. The study helps in understanding the challenges in ESP through student 's' perspectives who study English for medical purposes. The study recommends that the ESP courses need to be redesigned with a major focus on the ESP needs of the learners integrated with modern teaching practices.

**Keywords:** ESP, language skills, 'Grammar Translation Method (GTM), course, strategies, challenges.

## **I. Introduction**

### **I.1 Introduce the Problem**

The necessity of suitable and immediate ways of communication has constantly been expanding in this modern era due to increased globalization and interconnection. It is an undeniable reality that a common language is required to interact with the current rising trade and commerce between firms all over the world. As a result of globalization, most people all around the world communicate with individuals from different areas in only one globally recognized language: English (Rao, 2019). The English language is the

world's first global lingua franca and the most widely spoken language in international trade, popular entertainment, diplomacy, international telecommunications, literature, scientific publications, and newspaper publishing.

Crystal (2003) maintains that any language attains the status of global language for one reason, power. This power includes supremacy in science, technology, military, and culture. All these attributes are apprehended to the English language for its status today. The necessity of suitable and immediate ways of communication has constantly been expanding in this modern era

due to increased globalization and interconnection. It is an undeniable reality that a common language is required to interact with the current rising trade and commerce between firms all over the world. As a result of globalization, most people all around the world communicate with individuals from different areas in only one globally recognized language: English (Rao, 2019). The English language is the world's first global lingua franca and the most widely spoken language in international trade, popular entertainment, diplomacy, international telecommunications, literature, scientific publications, and newspaper publishing. Approximately 33% of the populations around the world are exposed to it in one way or another. The acquisition of the English language is now a need for a variety of occupations. More and more people believe that learning English is necessary to keep up with the latest advances forced by the information revolution in their professional contexts (Alsamani and Daif-Allah, 2016). For the past many years, English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been one of the fastest-growing areas of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is one of Applied Linguistics' most active branches (Khan, 2020). The growth of English as a world language necessitates ESP for science, engineering, and technology professionals to deal with a wide range of educational scenarios and demands. The instruction of the English language with the goal of helping a student to utilize it appropriately in his or her area is known as ESP (Paltridge & Starfield, 2014). ESP is defined as follows by Anthony (2018, p.12):

""English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching that targets

the current and/or future academic or occupational needs of learners, focuses on the necessary language, genres, and skills to address these needs, and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general and/or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods""."

In addition, Duedly-Evans (1998) has defined ESP in terms of certain absolute and variable characteristics, as shown below:

#### Absolute characteristics

- ESP is determined to meet the particular needs of the learners.
- ESP is focused on the language suited to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genres, and it uses the underlying methodology and practices of the field it serves.

#### Variable Characteristics

- ESP may be tied to or intended for certain fields, and it may employ a different technique than general English in specific teaching situations.
- Adult learners, whether in a tertiary level institution or in the workplace, are likely to benefit from ESP.
- ESP is primarily meant for intermediate or advanced students, with most ESP courses assuming some basic familiarity with the language system.

From the previous definitions, it is obvious that there is a consensus on the definition of ESP, and one can argue that ESP is found in order to fulfill the particular needs of the learners.

In fact, ESP has witnessed dramatic growth in Saudi Arabia. Accordance to Ahmad (2012), all

Saudi universities provide ESP courses for different disciplines. According to Al-Roomy (2017), ESP has gained increasing prominence in Saudi Arabia as a result of the ongoing and sustained development of diverse disciplines for professional and academic objectives. For example, ESP for medicine, ESP for computing, ESP for engineering, and ESP for business administration. According to Al-Roomy (2017), some military colleges in Saudi Arabia offer ESP courses, for example, English, to teach aviation or logistics. In addition, the researcher claims that the students of preparatory year in Saudi Arabia, who want to specialize in majors like medicine, engineering, or business, must take English for general and specific purposes. Therefore, this paper will shed light on the challenges encountered by medical ESP students in a Saudi context.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

ESP courses are taught widely for different disciplines at Taif University, including ESP for medicine, ESP for engineering, and ESP for business. The researcher(s) had the opportunity to teach two sections of ESP for medical purposes in the academic year 2018-2019 to the students of Applied Medical Sciences College at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. Where the researcher(s) have observed that there is a huge gap between the students and the course itself since their performance during classes was not satisfying. In addition to that, the overall results of the final examination were not satisfying, since few students got "A" and "A+" grades. Therefore, this study aims to identify the challenges that encounter the students of applied medical sciences who studied English for medical

purposes at Taif University. Moreover, this study aims to offer solutions that help in overcoming these challenges.

### 1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This research attempts to achieve the following aims:

- To discover the challenges that ESP students encounter in Applied Medical Sciences College at Taif University.
- To know 'learners' perceptions about the materials used in ESP classes.
- To discover the difficulties students face while participating in ESP classroom activities.
- To understand the 'learners' views about the teachers and the teaching methodologies employed in ESP classes.

To achieve the objectives above, the study formulates four research questions.

- 1) What challenges are encountered by ESP students in Applied Medical Sciences College at Taif University?
- 2) What are 'learners' perceptions about the materials used in ESP Class and about the teachers and the teaching methodologies employed in ESP classes?
- 3) What are the difficulties learners' face during their participation in ESP classrooms?

## 2. Literature Review

Many kinds of research have been conducted in order to discuss the challenges faced by medical students studying ESP for medical purposes. For example, Dejaileb (2015) investigated the challenges encountered by medical students who studied ESP for medical purposes in Algeria. The study revealed that medical students face plenty

of difficulties in understanding authentic medical texts because they lack behavioral skills, cognitive skills, and learning strategies. In addition, the results showed that intervention between 'students' first language (Arabic) and the second language (English) hinders students from explaining the high technical terms since they cannot think in English but Arabic. Furthermore, the study revealed that students encounter a real dilemma in the reading skill, and the reason behind that is that the majority of them rely on translation. Also, the study showed that students lack techniques in writing comprehension since they cannot write a summary of any topic in English. Moreover, the study revealed that teachers of ESP for medical purposes are not specialists in the field; however, they are general English teachers. Regarding these obstacles, needs analysis and cooperation with content teachers will minimize these challenges.

Moreover, a study by Alanazi et al. (2020) in Saudi Arabia found that according to the perception of nursing students, the ESP course instructors do not have sufficient knowledge of the ESP content to teach the courses. The students complained that the ESP instructors were not very aware of what the students needed from the course and neglected to teach medical, and technical terminology. They also complain the instructors are basically more focused on general English rather than medical topics, which are integral for preparing the students for their academic majors. In addition, all nursing students complain about the inadequacy of the course materials; they stated that the textbook is short and not relevant linguistically and professionally for nursing students. Moreover, they also stated

that the ESP course should be the path to learning more about medical issues and terminology than general English topics.

Another study that addressed the challenges faced by medical students was conducted in Iran by Boniadi et al. (2013). The study revealed that the use of L1 (Persian) and the authority of teachers in the classroom resulted in low motivation of students and their negligence of participation. Also, the study showed that overcrowded classes and the low level of students' language proficiency resulted in uninterested and unmotivated learners. Moreover, the results showed that ESP for medical purposes classes is boring due to the use of outdated materials and the neglect of audio-visual materials such as projectors and videos.

Nezaratgoo and Behzadpoor (2017) classified the challenges encountered by medical students who studied ESP for medical purposes in Iran into three main categories: (a) teacher-related challenges, (b) learner related challenges, and (c) institution challenges. Regarding the first category, the results revealed that the objectives of ESP courses were not clear to the students. Furthermore, the time assigned to complete the course was not sufficient. In addition to that, the size of the classrooms was abnormal. Considering the second category, the results showed that students are not motivated to study English for medical purposes. Furthermore, 'students' language proficiency was very weak, so they faced many problems in comprehending the content of the course. For the third category, the results showed that teachers are not familiar with the medical terminologies, appropriate teaching methods, material development, and principles of

language testing.

The challenges that ESP students encounter for medical purposes are addressed in Romania as well. According to Popa (2013), the linguistic competence of some Romanian students prevents them from achieving the objectives of ESP courses for medical purposes, which means that they are not ready to take such courses. In addition, the researcher claims that relying on the classroom as a main means of interaction does not foster 'students' abilities in communication in medical discourse. A study conducted in Indonesia aimed to identify the needs of physics students in ESP classes. The study recruited 4 ESP lecturers who taught ESP Physics students and 50 students. The study used questionnaires and interviews as the main instruments. The findings revealed that most of the 'students' need is speaking activities in ESP and that most students preferred pair and group work activities (Indrasari, 2016). According to Rao (2019b), teachers while selecting topics, should consider the needs of learners and interests that lead the learners to work more on the given topics with interest and enthusiasm.

In the Saudi context, Alharthi (2020) conducted a study on Saudi undergraduates studying ESP at Taif University in order to explore the challenges they encounter. Using interviews and the results of the final examination, he gathered data from 5 students studying English for Business Management. The findings of the study revealed that the students encountered various difficulties regarding the selected course, including the number of students in the classroom, the limitation of the input, and the classroom management. A study conducted by Alsamadani

(2017) at Umm-Alqura University, Saudi Arabia aimed to shed light on 'students' needs in ESP classes. The study was conducted on 200 ESP engineering students and 25 teachers. The study has adopted mixed-method approach. The instruments used to conduct the study were classroom observation, a questionnaire, and an interview. In addition, one of the aims of the study was to provide empirical data related to the various needs of engineering students in ESP classes. The researcher examined the language skills and activities used in ESP classes. Hence, the results showed that receptive skills received more focus in the ESP classes for the engineering students. Whereas, the teachers' talks were given extra time than student-student interaction. In a study conducted by Nazim and Hazarika (2017), the efficacy of ESP in EFL context in Saudi Arabia was investigated. The objective of the study is to find out whether the English proficiency of the students of the Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) in Najran University follows the ESP standards. Using interviews and a questionnaire, the researchers analyzed 40 ESP 'teachers' responses to the relevant research areas. The findings of the study revealed that most of the 'students' English proficiency is not up to the required level. For this reason, the study made a number of suggestions to enhance the 'students' language and communication levels including using more vocabulary items from different scientific and professional disciplines, comprising more speaking activities and more practice on exercises, and a student-centered approach should be employed in teaching ESP courses.

Regarding the previous challenges and obstacles,

needs analysis and cooperation with content teachers will minimize these challenges. Without needs analysis, textbook developers, language instructors, and students will face a lot of difficulties while studying any course related to ESP.

Nevertheless, the literature review has discussed the challenges that encountered ESP for medical purposes in various contexts. However, this study is going to shed light on the challenges that face Applied Medical Sciences College students at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. To the best of my knowledge and according to the literature, the challenges that encounter ESP for Applied Medical Sciences College at Taif University have never been discussed.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Study Design and Sample**

The quantitative research methodology was implemented by the study to conduct a survey on 120 students at Taif University, Saudi Arabia, who studied English for Medical Purposes. Among them, 65 students were male, and 55 were female. The study distributed 174 questionnaires among students, and out of them received 160 forms. The study rejected 40 forms because they were incomplete, leaving just 120 surveys that were entirely filled out. The recommended sample size, according to Raosoft, was 120 with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Male and female individuals were both included in the sample. The researcher described the goal of the study and got written consent from all participants prior to the start of the investigation.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data have been collected during the academic

year 2019-2020. The questionnaire was an adapted version of the one used by Mohebi et al. (2013). The questionnaire consists of 24 Likert scale items ranging from 1. Very weak to 5. Excellent. The questionnaire aims to know the perceptions of students by asking them several questions related to the content of the book they studied, the appropriateness of the materials, the relationship between the materials and 'students' occupational needs, the quality of teachers who taught them, and the appropriateness of the size of the classroom.

#### **3.3 Reliability and Validity**

To enhance the validity of the questionnaire, it was distributed to the participants in a bilingual manner (Arabic and English) in order to make sure that participants would fully understand the content of the questionnaire and to guarantee the accuracy of the results.

#### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The data were statistically analyzed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Moreover, the collected data were analyzed using frequencies and mean values in order to improve understanding of the responses of the participants.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 'Learners' Perceptions about Materials Used in ESP Class**

The questionnaire was administered among 120 students of medical sciences at Taif University to investigate their perceptions about ESP course contents, relevance to their needs, teaching methodology, and learning environment at the Medical College.

According to Table 1. The highest mean is 4,

which is inclined towards weak on the Likert scale of the questionnaire used in the present study. This explains that materials used in ESP class do not meet the 'learners' level of proficiency at Medical College of Taif University, Saudi Arabia. The findings show that the ESP materials moderately address the occupational needs of the learners. While addressing the presence of language skills in the ESP course, the data show that ESP courses do include the four skills; however, the skills are not abundantly included, which as a result does not favor the ESP

learners to cope with real-life situations faced in the medical field. The study finds that ESP teachers rely on the prescribed textbooks for language which can be seen from the statement 'To what extent do the teachers bring relevant course content to your field' mean score is 3.83 which is inclined towards weak on the likert scale of the questionnaarie used in the study Hence, they do not bring other relevant materials in the classrooms so as to bring ESP learners close to communicative situations they meet when they practice their profession.

Table 1. 'Learners' perceptions about materials used in ESP class

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
To what extent do you understand the content of the book?	120	2.00	5.00	461.00	3.8417
To what extent do you think that the materials are above your level?	120	2.00	5.00	480.00	4.0000
To what extent do you think the materials have been chosen according to your occupational needs?	120	2.00	5.00	460.00	3.8333
To what extent do you feel that the medical terminologies that are taught are related to your major?	120	2.00	5.00	453.00	3.7750
To what extent do the teachers bring relevant course	120	2.00	5.00	460.00	3.8333

content to your field?					
To what extent does the coursebook offer speaking activities?	120	2.00	5.00	450.00	3.7500
To what extent does the coursebook offer writing activities?	120	2.00	5.00	445.00	3.7395
To what extent does the ESP course include listening activities?	120	2.00	5.00	429.00	3.5750
To what extent does the ESP course include readings tasks to improve reading comprehension?	120	2.00	5.00	439.00	3.6583

In addition, the material used in ESP classrooms focuses less on productive skills i.e., speaking and writing. Nonetheless, reading is practiced, which also needs some improvements in terms of the relevance of terminology and subject matter of the medical sciences in teaching English as a foreign language since the ultimate goal of medical students in this course is to use English for medical purposes.

#### 4.2 'Learners' Perceptions about their participation in ESP classrooms

Learners seem to be less engaged in ESL classroom as evidenced in the findings shown in

table 2. The highest mean is 3.67, which relates to the investigation of 'learners' engagement in performing medical roles through speaking. The results show that they are less practically involved in speaking skills related to the roles they are likely to perform in their medical field via conversation with the patients and other stakeholders in the field. Likewise, writing skill is an ignored skill thought taught to them, yet unpracticed. The reason for this seems to be the size of the class, which affects the participation of learners in writing and speaking skills. The teacher does not effectively give feedback and/or engage them in productive skills constructively.

Table 2. 'Learners' perceptions about their participation in ESP classrooms

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
To what extent do you have the opportunity to practice the input you receive?	120	3.00	5.00	414.00	3.45



	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
To what extent do you think that the size of the class is appropriate for interacting and participating in the class?	120	3.00	5.00	425.00	3.54
To what extent do you feel excluded from learning English as a foreign language?	120	3.00	5.00	438.00	3.65
To what extent do you take part in writing activities?	120	2.00	4.00	418.00	3.48
To what extent do you practice listening skills in the class?	120	2.00	5.00	429.00	3.58
To what extent do you speak to perform medical roles?	120	2.00	5.00	440.00	3.67

#### 4.3 'Learners' perception about ESP Teachers and Methodology

As shown in table 3, the results indicate that pedagogy in ESP class needs to be improved. As seen in table 3 mean 3.69 showed that teachers rely more on 'Grammar Translation Method (GTM)'" while teaching ESP courses to the applied medical sciences students; GTM is not the appropriate method since it does not develop communicative competence in learners. As a result, the ESP learners are given very few opportunities to practice their language skills. They rather acquire a body of linguistic knowledge which is less favorable to them.

ESP teachers lack the necessary training in ESP courses which consequently affects their pedagogical skills affecting learners directly. Teachers use a more authoritative approach in ESP class. Thus, they do not welcome the queries of the learners. Students are not taught in groups or through peer learning; instead, they are more trained through the lecture method. In the entire course of teaching, feedback is also significantly an ignored factor in ESP class. In the absence of constructive feedback, the learners do not successfully develop the language skills required for their occupational purposes.

Table 3. 'Learners' perceptions about ESP teachers and methodology

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
To what extent do teachers clarify the main points of the lesson?	120	2.00	5.00	396.00	3.3000
To what extent do you feel that the teacher is qualified enough to teach ESP courses for medical purposes?	120	2.00	5.00	399.00	3.3250

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
To what extent do the teachers provide feedback?	120	2.00	5.00	390.00	3.2500
How frequently do the teachers respond to your questions?	120	2.00	5.00	405.00	3.3750
To what extent do the teachers use strategies to overcome your reading problems?	120	2.00	5.00	491.00	4.0917
To what extent do the ESP instructors give you feedback to improve your writing skills?	120	2.00	5.00	438.00	3.6500
To what extent do the ESP teachers teach through Grammar Translation Method (GTM)?	120	2.00	5.00	443.00	3.6917
To what extent do the ESP teachers form groups in classroom learning?	120	2.00	5.00	435.00	3.6250
To what extent do the ESP teachers engage you in speaking activities?	120	3.00	5.00	461.00	3.8417

## 5. Discussion

The study found that the content of the course was understood at an average level by the ESP learners in the class at Medical College of Taif University. The findings of the study are in line with the existing literature as the study of Dejaileb (2015) showed that the medical students face great difficulty in understanding their contents and the ESP course does not support resolving this complexity of the content. Moreover, the ESP practices in the ESP class were moderately conducted including 'teacher's role in the engagement of the students in the classroom, giving feedback to the learners, and using terminologies relevant to their field. Indrasari (2016) stated that ESP classes are less favorable to the ESP learners in terms of content, relevance to their field and their participation in

the class so as to overcome their anxiety level in language learning. Alanazi et al. (2020) stated that student teachers do not have sufficient knowledge to the course to teach.

Moreover, the course contains reading activities but they do not favor the reading comprehension of the learners since they are not abundantly present. Moreover, other skills such as writing, speaking and listening are distributed in the course books moderately falling insufficient to improve language skills of the students. The students are encouraged to participate in learning these skills, though. Nonetheless, a good number of ESP learners go unattended in the class, feeling excluded from learning, as noted by Nezakatgoo and Behzadpoor (2017).

The study showed that ESP teachers rely on the prescribed textbooks for language. Hence, they

do not bring other relevant materials in the classrooms so as to bring ESP learners close to communicative situations they meet when they practice their profession. This is in line with the study by Alanazi et al. (2020) that stated complain of the nursing student in Saudi Arabia about the inadequacy of the course materials. They stated that the textbook is short and not relevant linguistically and professionally for nursing students.

Teaching methodology in the classroom was dominantly followed through the Grammar Translation Method it is indicated by the results; to some extent, the ESP teachers also engaged the students in group formations so as to develop interaction among the learners. The ESP course contents do not fulfill the occupational needs of the ESP learners in the class as found in the data. Class size is also another important factor which somehow affected the learning of ESP courses.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The present study was designed to investigate the problems of students enrolled in the Medical Sciences College of Taif University while studying ESP courses. The study focused on ESP teachers, material, methodology, the skills taught in the class and strategies used by teachers to improve the language skills of the students.

The study found that the course content which was taught in the ESP class did not closely link to the medical sciences. As a result, they faced problems in reading comprehension of their field. Moreover, teachers used Grammar Translation Method dominantly along with the focus on developing language skills, both receptive and productive. However, due to class size, they could

not concentrate on all the students of the classroom. In writing and speaking, the teachers tried their best to give feedback so as to help the students improve their writing and speaking problems. And to do so, they used group formation in an attempt to facilitate learning. In spite of that, a number of students felt excluded from learning activities. Listening and reading were also included in the ESP course. The students responded that reading was less relevant to the medical field, so they faced challenges in comprehending the text in medical sciences. Speaking roles were performed, too.

The study recommends that ESP courses should include content mainly relevant to medical sciences since the ultimate goal of learning English for them is to cope with the challenges they face in their field. Besides, the class size also affects the learning activity which needs to be rethought under large class perspectives. The ideal size of the class is 30-40 which is manageable. The teachers need to be equipped with modern trends in TESOL and pedagogical approaches so that they teach the students with new methodologies instead of relying on GTM which is quite outdated. More specifically, the teachers need to identify the most important areas of the language that the medical students need on daily basis which should be developed in learners. The futures studies can verify the current study findings by conducting face-to-face interviews or focus-group discussions.

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