



Increasing student engagement by investigating the ESP needs of students of economics and political studies

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Abstract

In Bulgaria, academic courses in English for specific purposes (ESP) reflect global trends in foreign language teaching, good teaching and educational practices, and lecturers' observations. However, learners' specific features should also be taken into account in order to provide maximised course effectiveness. Course effectiveness, in turn, is achieved if students are motivated and their engagement is high.

The new generations of learners are different because they grow up with modern technologies and media. They spend more time in the virtual reality and tend to communicate and learn better if they are involved in an interactive educational process. In addition, their needs differ as well for new learners, for instance, do not have difficulty overcoming the language barrier. They are faced with challenges such as register, advanced vocabulary or critical thinking. Furthermore, globalisation and internationalisation emphasise the importance of student functional communicative competence because it means more opportunities for a successful career and enhanced competitiveness on the labour market.

Students are more interested in seeing the benefits of their education and language training in particular. The awareness of the relation between educational content, the knowledge and skills taught and student engagement, prompted the study of the needs of the students of economics and political studies. The study included surveys of both students and lecturers and involved students from five Bulgarian universities and from universities in Albania, Cyprus, Portugal, Macedonia, China, Latvia, Romania and Spain as well as lecturers in language and subject matter from Bulgaria. The survey results are presented and considered along with some recommendations for increased student engagement leading to enhanced performance and course optimisation.

Keywords: *ESP, communicative competence, student engagement, needs analysis*

1. Introduction

Unlike courses in General English, courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have always been more challenging to lecturers because of the ever changing needs of the industry on the one hand and the specific features of the modern generations of learners, on the other. In addition, scientific advance in the fields of psychology, methodology of teaching, computer sciences and technology has resulted in the appearance of new teaching methods and techniques, new ways of learning and assessment, different learner needs and nuances in student engagement and motivation.

Designing academic ESP courses for students majoring in economics and socio-political studies must be aimed at the acquisition and improvement of student functional communicative competence in a balanced way, i.e. developing all specialised skills and providing all specialised knowledge learners will need in order to be competitive and professional at work in the future [1]. In addition, it is the author's view that course effectiveness and maximised results are achieved based on enhanced student engagement and motivation. Learners are encouraged to actively get involved in the educational process and are offered to participate in content creation, assessment and course optimisation.

According to employers, workforce must be prepared to fully contribute to an organisation as soon as they join it. Thus educational institutions are expected to focus on the relation between academic education and professional context. The close cooperation between academics and the industry means a higher quality educational product and increased benefits for employers.



2. Modern courses in ESP

Over the last decades, global economic and social development generated a higher demand for English for specific purposes. Furthermore, it resulted in a greater variety as well. Nowadays, there are ESP courses for each sector of the economy. A multitude of textbooks has been designed to cater for the needs of aviation, engineering, nursing, textile, marketing, tourism, management, accounting, etc. New materials have been developed to complement textbooks and meet the specific needs of the learners – students and employees – within a sector or organisation, or with regard to particular skills and organisational aims. New technologies and scientific achievements have been applied to enhance language acquisition such as information and communication technologies, the Internet, social media, interactive boards, gamification, simulations, project work, interactive textbooks, virtual classrooms, specialised networks, learning and content management systems.

Following discussions with employer organisations, local policy in higher education and novelties in English language teaching (ELT), course designers and educational experts develop courses ensuring maximised student performance and achievements. However, taking into account learner needs is essential for the success of each course and this is why needs analysis is considered of critical importance. In ESP, needs analysis (NA) focuses on learner needs with different authors emphasising different aspects: target situation needs [2]; career context and ESP as a means for achieving career related goals [3]; the communication in the target situation with relation to the satisfaction of learner needs [4]; target situation, present situation, discourse analysis, learner factor analysis, learning environment analysis [5]; needs analysis in terms of information analysis including professional and personal information, expectations and means analysis [6]; course syllabus and motivation [7]. Hutchinson and Waters [8] make a distinction between target needs – the what to do in a target situation and educational needs – the what to learn. Target needs are further classified into needs – the ones the learner needs to satisfy in the given target situation, lacks – the gap between current and expected learner achievements with regard to the target functional communicative competence and wants – learner perceptions of their needs.

Research on the needs analysis of ESP learners is extensive and comprehensive, aimed at revealing real needs of learners from different spheres of social and economic life and with relation to specific purposes of a different scope such as national stereotypes and peculiarities, specifics of the given professional or occupational context, specific knowledge and skills requirements, industry needs, organisational profile, educational policy at an academic, local or international level, local environment. In addition, apart from learners, NA can include other stakeholders as well: lecturers, employers, educational experts in order to provide insights into what learners really need in terms of competences in a particular target situation.

The new generations of learners, generations Z and Y, are called “digital natives” [9] because they grow up and communicate through modern technologies and are in the virtual reality more than in real life, which affects the way they perceive, learn and retain. Hence they cannot be taught the conventional way like their parents, but in a more interactive environment. If taught their way, new learners are more engaged in language acquisition and their motivation increases which, in turn, results in improved performance and greater course effectiveness. Similarly, when their needs are met, learners are more committed to learning and their achievements are more significant. Therefore, establishing the specific needs of the new generations of learners of ESP is vital.

3. Investigating the ESP needs of modern students of economics and socio-political studies

In order to ensure the preparation of highly qualified professionals at local and global levels, an investigation of the ESP needs of the students studying economics and socio-political studies was undertaken by a team from the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) - the biggest economic university in South-Eastern Europe. A survey was conducted of the students and lecturers of this university along with a survey of students from local and foreign universities with a similar profile. This report presents the results from the survey of 939 Bulgarian students of which 567 are UNWE students. The survey of the 167 foreign participants and the survey of the 32 lecturers are being processed. The research has been done based on Hutchinson and Waters' classification.



Table 1. Student expectations: needs and wants

Expectations (needs and wants) for the ESP course to help me:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree, nor disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
acquire knowledge and skills for written communication I will need during my professional career	51,7	29,2	13,2	3,6	2,2
acquire knowledge and skills for listening comprehension of specialised texts I will need during my professional career	49,4	29,3	13,5	5,5	2,2
acquire knowledge and skills for speaking I will need during my professional career	58,1	22,2	13,1	4,3	2,3
acquire knowledge and skills for reading I will need during my professional career	52,4	28,5	13,1	4,0	1,9
acquire knowledge and skills for the translation of specialised texts I will need during my professional career	49,2	27,2	16,2	5,2	2,2
acquire knowledge of specialised vocabulary I will need during my professional career	53,7	26,5	14,2	3,7	1,9
acquire and improve my knowledge and skills in grammar I will need during my professional career	49,6	27,3	14,6	6,3	2,2
acquire knowledge and skills of the style and register typical of my professional field	46,5	29,9	15,9	5,3	2,3
acquire and improve my knowledge and skills in resolving communication-related problems in the foreign language so that I enjoy a successful career development in my professional field	51,1	28,5	13,3	5,1	2,0
acquire and improve my knowledge and skills in intercultural communication so that I enjoy a successful career development in my professional field	50,2	26,2	16,3	5,0	2,2

Table 2. Student expectations: engagement and motivation

My expectations are that the academic course in English will:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree, nor disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
include interactive tasks that will raise my interest and motivation for studying	49,1	24,7	17,3	5,8	3,2
include work on the Internet and on the social media platforms that will raise my interest and motivation for studying	47,4	24,6	18,1	6,3	3,6
provide the opportunity to suggest specialised topics that will raise my interest and motivation for studying	42,8	26,2	20,6	6,5	3,9
provide the opportunity to discuss with both the lecturer and my colleagues the opportunity to optimise the academic course that will raise my interest and motivation for studying	41,3	26,9	22,0	6,2	3,5



As tables 1 and 2 show, respondents appreciate the importance of studying ESP with the priority of speaking, specialised vocabulary and writing. Students feel more motivated and engaged if interaction, the Internet and SM are actively used in educational process, but at this stage they seem a little confused in terms of greater involvement in course optimisation. The survey provides further details on the respondents' particular needs and wants with regard to each of the four skills. For more information about the survey see Stefanova 2021 [10].

Fig. 1 The most relevant speaking skill

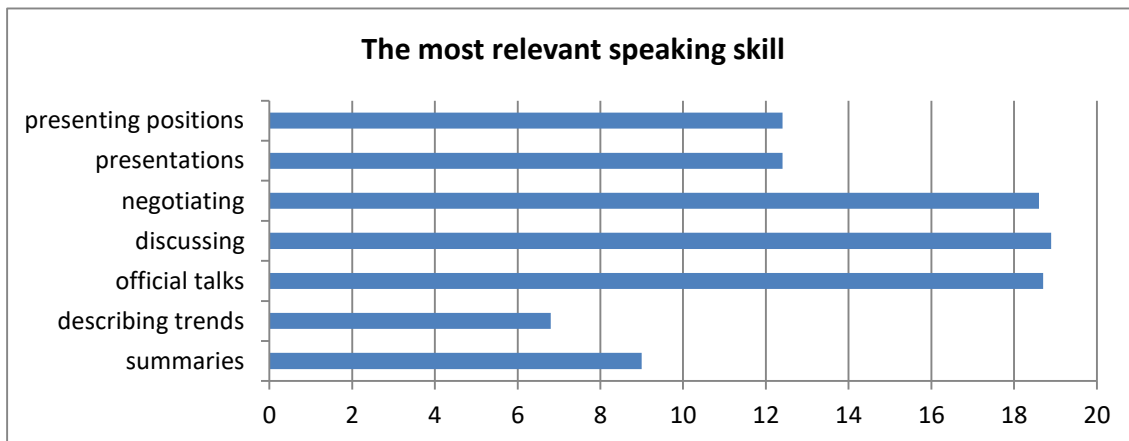


Fig. 2 The most relevant writing skill

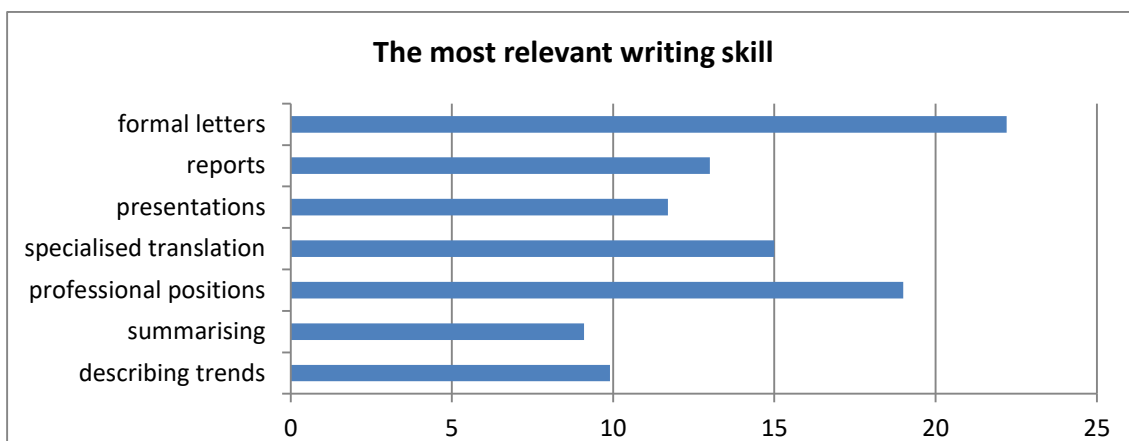


Fig. 3 The most relevant listening skill

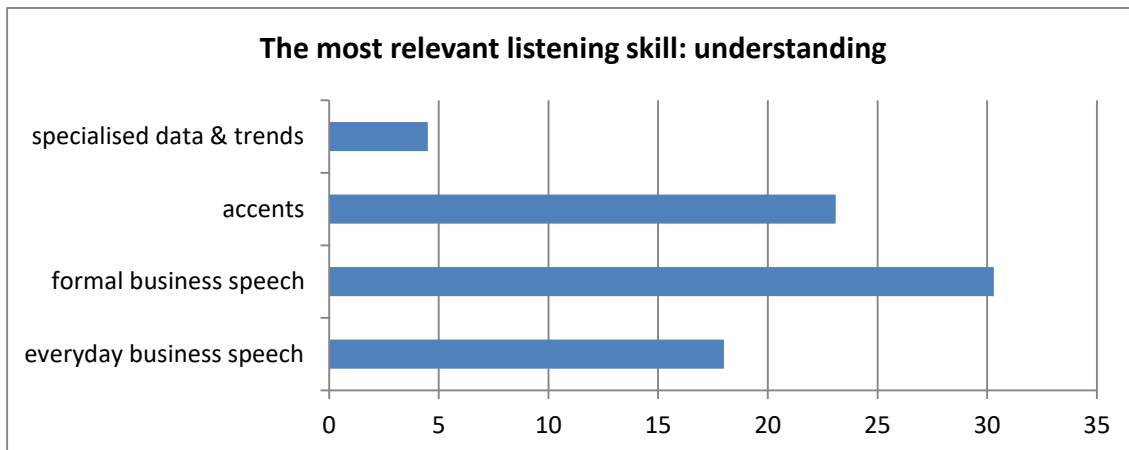
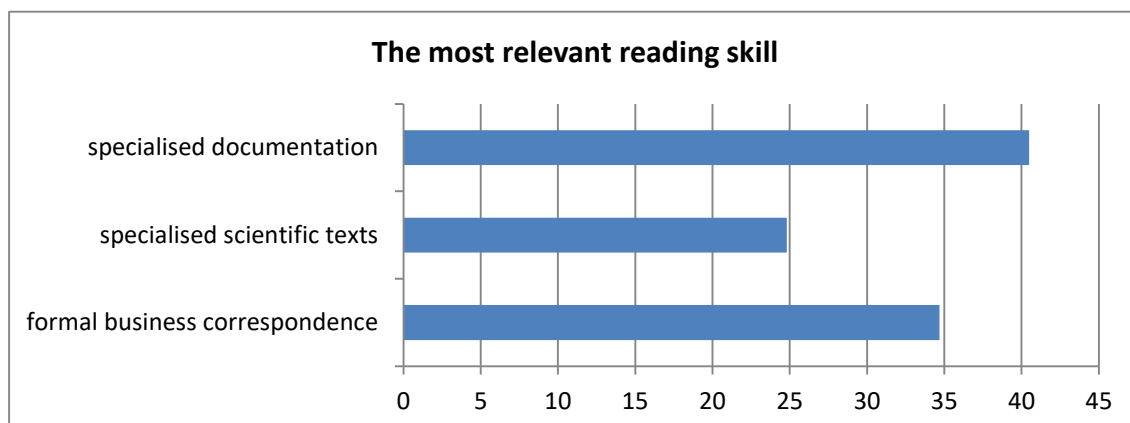




Fig. 4 The most relevant reading skill



The respondents find specialised writing (26.7%) and speaking (42.4%) the most difficult to acquire.

4. Implications

Apart from providing detailed information with regard to academic ESP course optimisation, the survey results imply that there is a correlation between course hours and motivation – the more the hours, the greater the motivation to acquire specialised knowledge and skills. Another finding is the need to put more stress on involving students in course content creation and optimisation as well as on developing and introducing interactive tasks based on modern technologies and team cooperation. Last but not least, learner awareness of the relation between the material taught and real-life professional situations must be raised.

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