An Evaluation of English for Specific Courses Offered by the Language Institute of Thammasat University

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the opinions and satisfaction of instructors and students at the Language Institute of Thammasat University regarding the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses offered by the Institute. Questionnaires on 26 ESP courses were completed by the participants. The results revealed that both the instructors and the students were very satisfied with all aspects of the courses, including physical learning and teaching environment, course content, textbooks and supplementary worksheets, assessment and evaluation, and benefits of the course.

Keywords: students' opinions, instructors' opinions, ESP

1.Introduction

Officially established on December 27, 1985, the Language Institute of Thammasat University (LITU) has catered to all students of Thammasat University with the main aim to improve their skills of English. Enjoying the same status as that of a faculty, LITU mainly offers English courses for general and specific purposes at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

At the undergraduate level, LITU offers a wide range of courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) specially designed and customized for students from diverse faculties and departments. For instance, English for Sociologists and Anthropologists is a compulsory course for students from the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, although students from other faculties are also allowed to take the course as an elective one. Most of the ESP courses offered by LITU are divided into two levels, one being the pre-requisite for the other. English for Sociologists and Anthropologists 1 (EL281) and English for Sociologists and Anthropologists 2 (EL381), for example, are offered with the former being the pre-requisite for the latter, and both of them are required courses for students majoring in sociology and anthropology.

In addition to the required courses, certain courses are offered merely as elective courses for all majors at Thammasat University. Among them are English for Work and English for Airline Business, the two elective courses that have continuously gained a great deal of popularity as they are perceived by many students as very useful for their future careers.

Most ESP courses are aimed at developing students' integrated language skills. Therefore, each ESP course focuses on the teaching of all English skills although a few courses, such as English for Airline Business, mainly focus on the development of aural and oral skills. Some ESP course books were compiled by LITU's faculty members, while others are commercial course books published by various publishers. Each year there are approximately 100 sections of the ESP classes and in each class, there are approximately 25 students. All the students who can enroll in ESP courses are required to pass the foundation courses or are exempted from them.

The ESP courses are normally taught in English by full-time or part-time, Thai or native-speaking teachers. Apart from lectures, group discussion is usually a major activity conducted during classes. In courses that focus on the development of listening and speaking skills, oral presentations and role plays are also assigned. In courses that emphasize the development of reading and writing skills, students are required to read and discuss the materials, and write paragraphs, essays, or various types of documents in response to the prompts provided. Quizzes and/or examinations are the primary assessment methods in all ESP courses.

To ensure that all the ESP courses offered by LITU still meet the standards of university-level English courses, and satisfy the needs of both the students and the instructors, LITU undertook an evaluation program during the first and second semesters of the 2010 academic year. The program was expected to enhance the ESP

syllabus at LITU while keeping abreast of the current developments of English instruction in the areas of English as a foreign language and English as an international communication.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the instructors' and the students' opinions about the current ESP courses
2. To identify the instructors' and the students' level of satisfaction regarding the current ESP courses

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the instructors' and the students' opinions about the current ESP courses?
2. What are the instructors' and the students' level of satisfaction regarding the current ESP courses?

2. Literature Review

Curriculum has numerous meanings. In general senses, curriculum includes all courses of academic studies offered by an educational institution. Curriculum can also be defined as the group of subjects studied in a school, college, etc. (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995). Curriculum is the formal and informal content and process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills, and alter attitudes, appreciations, and value under the auspices of that school (Doll, 1995, p. 15). Curriculum can refer to decision-making processes and products that focus on preparation and assessment of plans designed to influence students' development of insights related to specific knowledge and skills (Armstrong, 2003).

A curriculum evaluation is needed to achieve improved teaching and learning, and better education programs. The term evaluation is defined by Weir and Roberts (1994) as the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within a context of particular institutions involved. According to Doll (1996), evaluation may be defined as a broad and continuous effort to inquire into the effects of utilizing educational content and process to meet clearly defined goals. Evaluators need to determine, make judgments or decisions about the worth, merit and value of the object of evaluation according to appropriate criteria (House, 1993:1; Kiely and Rea-Dickins, 2005; McGregor and Meiers, 1983; McMillan and Schumacher, 1997: 541; Scriven, 1991).

The objects of evaluation as mentioned above are different depending on disciplines and areas of concerns. Weir and Roberts (1994) say that the scope of evaluations can vary greatly because an educational evaluation may have a number of possible focal points, according to the decisions it is designed to inform and the assumptions of participants. The object of evaluation therefore may include teaching materials, staff, student needs, or student performance. According to McGregor and

Meiers (1983), the object of evaluation may be the operation of the whole program, course objectives, organisation, resources, context, methods, student assessment and student learning. Whatever the objects of evaluation are, the common purposes of evaluation are to improve, justify, or change the object of evaluation (Calder, 1994; House, 1993:1, McGregor and Meiers, 1983; McMillan and Schumacher, 1997; Scriven, 1991).

Weir and Roberts (1994) suggest that different stakeholders should participate in program evaluation because an evaluator cannot provide a comprehensive account of a program on his own. As a consequence, in this evaluation project, an evaluation of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum at LITU, different stakeholders were invited to participate in the evaluation. Those stakeholders included (1) instructors who were involved in the design and delivery of the language programs and (2) students who were the clients of the programs. The reported experiences and perceptions from these different stakeholders were able to increase the understanding of the ESP curriculum at LITU.

There are many methods of evaluation. The evaluators can choose the most appropriate one(s) based on the purposes, focuses, duration, and timing of evaluation. The evaluation may involve tests, course statistics, classroom description, document analysis, diaries, logs, interviews, observations, self-assessment checklists, materials checklist evaluation, or case study. In this evaluation project, questionnaires were used to seek out the opinions of different stakeholders with regard to different elements of ESP courses: physical learning and teaching environment and equipment; course content; textbook and supplementary materials; assessment and evaluation; and benefits of the course. According to Weir & Roberts (1994), questionnaire is one of the data collection methods that can be used in evaluation. It can elicit reactions to both course content (aims, objectives, materials) and methodology. It can also provide information through self-assessments and attitude measurement. Questionnaire can be administered to students, directors of studies, teachers, and other stakeholders. The value of the questionnaire is that it enables course providers to distinguish a generally held point of view from purely individual reactions and opinions.

3. Methodology

In this study, the evaluation of the ESP courses offered at LITU was conducted quantitatively. The questionnaire used in this study was originally developed in three different versions to be used with the instructors, the students, and the experts from other faculties in Thammasat University. The questionnaires for the students and the experts were in Thai, whereas the English-translated version was used for both Thai and international instructors. The questionnaires were piloted in the second semester of the academic year 2009. Then the actual study was carried out during the 2010 academic year. The 26 ESP courses are divided into 5 categories in accordance with their content and objectives.

1. English for Academic Purposes
   1.1 EL 217 Speaking and Listening for Academic Purposes
   1.2 EL 317 Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes

2. English for Social Sciences
   2.1 EL 216 English for Lawyers 1
   2.2 EL 231 English for Political Scientists 1
   2.3 EL 331 English for Political Scientists 2
   2.4 EL 241 English for Economists 1
   2.5 EL 341 English for Economists 2
   2.6 EL 256 English for Social Workers 1
   2.7 EL 271 English for Mass Communications 2
   2.8 EL 281 English for Sociologist and Anthropologists 1
   2.9 EL 381 English for Sociologist and Anthropologists 2

3. English for Business Purposes
   3.1 EL 201 English for Airline Business
   3.2 EL 202 English for Work
   3.3. EL 212 English for Job Applications
   3.4 EL 221 Communicative Business English
   3.5 EL 226 English for Import-Export Business
   3.6 EL 321 Communicative Business English 1

4. English for Health Sciences
   4.1 EL 211 English for Health Science 1
   4.2 EL 311 English for Health Science 2
   4.3 EL 213 English for Nurses
   4.4 EL 313 English for Health Communication

5. English for Applied Sciences

   5.1 EL 210 English for Engineering 1
   5.2 EL 295 English for Science and Technology 1
   5.3 EL 395 English for Science and Technology 2
   5.4 EL 296 English for Mathematicians & Computer Scientists 1
   5.5 EL 396 English for Mathematicians & Computer Scientists 2

Both LITU instructors and the students were highly cooperative in the course evaluation project resulting in a high return rate. Questionnaires were obtained from 46 instructors who taught in the 26 ESP courses and from 3,056 students who were enrolled in the 26 ESP courses. The following discussion of the findings will be based on the data gathered from these participants.

4. Findings

Based on the questionnaire, the results of this study are divided into two major parts as follows:

Part 1: Details about the instructors and students
Part 2: Instructors' and students' opinions on various aspects of the courses

4.1 Details about the instructors and students

Table 1 presents details regarding the instructors including gender, age range, level of education, academic position, and teaching experience.

Table 1: Details of the Instructors

Instructors' Personal Information	Frequency	Percentage
1. Gender		
Female	27	58.69
Male	19	41.30
2. Age range		
21-30	10	21.73
31-40	17	36.95
41-50	13	28.26
51-60	4	8.69
60 +	2	4.34
3. Level of education		
Bachelor's degree	11	23.91
Master's degree	26	56.52
Ph.D	9	19.56
4. Academic position		
Lecturer	27	58.96
Assistant professor	13	28.26
Associate professor	6	13.04
Professor	-	-
5. Teaching experience		
Less than 5 years	16	34.78
5-10 years	6	13.04
11-15 years	5	10.86
16-20 years	9	19.56
More than 20 years	10	21.73

The teaching staff at LITU consisted of a group of full-time and part-time Thai and international instructors. As can be seen from Table 1, there were slightly more female instructors (58.69%) than male instructors (41.30%). In terms of age range, most of the teaching staff members were between 31- 40 (36.95%).

Regarding the educational level, more than half of the instructors had Master's degrees (56.52%). Most of the international staff had Bachelor's degrees (23.91%). There were 9 Thai instructors with Ph.D (19.56%). Among all the teaching staff members, more than half had no academic titles (58.69%). Most of the instructors with academic titles were assistant professors (28.26%) while the rest were associate professors (13.04%).

With regard to the number of teaching experience, most of the instructors taught at LITU for less than 5 years (34.78%), while the remainder had more than 20 years of experience teaching at LITU (21.73%) and between 16-20 years of the experience (19.56 %).

Table 2 presents details of the students including gender, year of study, faculty, and the nature of enrollment can be presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Details of the Students

Students' Personal Information	Total	Percentage
1. Gender		
Female	2,160	70.68
Male	896	29.32
2. Year of study		
1	336	11.00
2	1,222	39.99
3	857	28.04
4	607	19.90
Others	34	01.10

Table 2 Details of the Students (Cont.)

Students' Personal Information	Total	Percentage
3. Faculty		
Law	5	0.16
Commerce & Accountancy	516	16.88
Political Science	402	13.15
Economics	296	9.69
Social Administration	15	0.49
Liberal Arts	100	3.27
Journalism & Mass Communication	62	2.03
Sociology & Anthropology	79	2.59
Science & Technology	508	16.62
Engineering	107	3.50
Medicine	346	11.32
Allied Health Sciences	118	3.86
Dentistry	130	4.25

Nursing	210	6.87
Fine & Applied Arts	25	0.82
Public Health	137	4.48

4. Nature of enrollment

Compulsory	2,648	86.65
Minor elective	83	2.72
Elective	248	8.12
Others	77	2.52

The students who took part in the study were from various fields of study. With reference to Table 2, most of the respondents were female students (70.68%). The majority of the ESP students participating in this study were in their second year (39.99%), followed by third-year students (28.04%) and fourth-year students (19.90%). Most of the respondents were from the Faculties of Commerce and Accountancy (16.88%) and Science and Technology (16.62%). Most of the students were required to be enrolled in the ESP courses (86.65%) and a few of them took these courses as electives (8.12%).

4.2 Instructors' and students' opinions on various aspects of the courses

Table 3 presents the findings from the second part of the questionnaire, which reflects both instructors' and students' opinions on various aspects of the ESP courses including the physical learning and teaching environment and equipment, course content, the textbook/supplementary worksheets, and assessment and evaluation. The evaluation criteria range from 5 (strongly satisfied) to 1 (strongly dissatisfied). Mean scores are interpreted with regard to the satisfaction level as follows:

4.50-5.00	means	strongly satisfied
3.50-4.49	means	very satisfied
2.50-3.49	means	weakly satisfied
1.50-2.49	means	dissatisfied
1.00-2.49	means	strongly dissatisfied

Table 3: Instructors' and Students' Opinions on Various Aspects of the ESP Courses

Aspects of the ESP courses	Instructors' Opinions		Students' Opinions	
	Mean Score	SD.	Mean Score	SD.
1. Physical learning and teaching environment and equipment	4.28	0.95	4.31	0.18
2. Course content	3.79	1.04	3.91	0.21
3. The textbook/ supplementary worksheets	3.59	1.00	3.91	0.26
4. Assessment and evaluation	3.96	1.08	3.94	0.22
5. Benefit of the course	3.83	0.93	4.00	0.20

As can be seen from Table 3, the mean scores showing the instructors' and students' opinions on the five aspects of the ESP courses are all within the range of 3.50-4.49. This reveals that both the instructors and the students were very satisfied with all the major aspects of the courses.

The instructors were the most satisfied with the teaching and learning environment ($M = 4.28$) and were the least satisfied with assessment and evaluation ($M = 3.59$). Similarly, the students were the most satisfied with the teaching and learning environment ($M = 4.31$). However, they were the least satisfied with the course content ($M = 3.91$) and the supplementary worksheets ($M = 3.91$).

Moreover, it can be seen that the students were more satisfied with most aspects than the instructors. They were only slightly less satisfied with assessment and evaluation than the instructors.

Table 4 presents the findings from the final part of the questionnaire, which reflects both the instructors' and the students' opinions regarding the course, the students, the instructors, and the textbooks. In this section, the instructors' and the students' questionnaires were designed slightly differently. That is, the instructors were asked to rate the level of satisfaction towards the course they were currently teaching, the students they were teaching, and the textbook they were using, whereas the students were asked about the course they were enrolled in and their instructors.

Table 4: Instructors' and Students' Level of Satisfaction

Aspects of satisfaction	Instructors' Opinions		Students' Opinions	
	Mean Score	**SD.**	**Mean Score**	**SD.**
1. Level of satisfaction towards the course	3.72	1.04	3.91	0.32
2. Level of satisfaction towards the students	3.82	0.90	-	-
3. Level of satisfaction towards the instructors	-	-	4.28	0.02
4. Level of satisfaction towards the textbook	3.33	1.15	-	-

As can be seen from Table 4, the instructors were very satisfied with the students ($M = 3.82$) and the courses they were teaching ($M = 3.72$), while they were weakly satisfied with the textbooks they were using ($M = 3.33$). The students were very satisfied with the instructors ($M = 4.28$) and the courses they were enrolled in ($M = 3.91$). Overall, the students were more satisfied with all the aspects than the instructors.

5. Discussion and Recommendation

Overall, both instructors and students were very satisfied with all aspects of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Courses offered by the Language Institute of Thammasat University, namely physical learning and teaching environment, course content, textbooks and supplementary worksheets, assessment and evaluation, and

benefits of the course. The aspect that received the highest level of satisfaction by both groups of participants was the physical learning and teaching environment.

Physical environment is simply the physical characteristics of the room. This refers to things like the size of the room, how dark or light it is, what the temperature is like, whether it has carpeting or just concrete, etc. The major importance of the physical environment is that it can affect students' comfort and, to some extent, their ability to learn. Students who are uncomfortable are unlikely to learn as well as those who are comfortable. In addition, the environment can affect the morale of students. If they feel their classroom is physically worse than others', for example, they might be discouraged, upset, and less willing to learn.

According to Nikolic and Cabaj (2000), classrooms should be spacious and clean. Besides, they should have lots of board and wall space, good lighting and ventilation, and good climate control. LITU was well aware of the importance of physical environment to learning and teaching. Several strategies have been implemented to enhance conducive learning and teaching environment. One is the provision of necessary physical facilities. Each classroom at LITU is equipped with a computer, an LCD projector, a screen, a white board, and a microphone. This set of equipment facilitates both instructors and students tremendously. Moreover, each room has enough space to accommodate 30-35 students. It contains movable lecture chairs, so that the classroom atmosphere is flexible. Students and instructors can move freely and rearrange the chairs in any configuration to meet their needs. For instance, the instructors can foster their students' interaction and collaboration by asking the students to arrange their seating in a group layout. Each classroom is also enclosed and equipped with an air conditioner, so it is free from outside distraction. Furthermore, LITU provides the facilities for self-study through the Self-Access Language Learning Center (SALC). Therefore, students can learn whatever, whenever, and however they prefer. These facilities help promote autonomous learning and student-centered learning. This physical environment was conducive to learning and so contributed to students' and instructors' highest level of satisfaction.

Another aspect that received a very high level of satisfaction is the instructors. All of the LITU instructors have degrees relevant to teaching English language skills, namely Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English, Literature, Education, and Linguistics. Moreover, they had a lot of opportunities to develop themselves professionally through workshops, trainings or seminars offered by LITU or other institutions. Therefore, it is most likely that the LITU instructors are competent in teaching English, contributing to the very high level of satisfaction of students. According to Soontornwipast (2008), effective EFL teachers should possess the following skills and qualities:

• Technical skills which include the theoretical knowledge and skills of the English language, e.g., phonology, vocabulary, morphology, syntax; the knowledge of language acquisition and development; an awareness of culture and the knowledge of its nature and role; and the ability to use the language.

• Pedagogical skills which include the knowledge and skills of pedagogical methods, e.g., planning and implementing lessons, managing classes, using resources effectively, problem solving, an awareness of students' needs, organizing a conducive classroom atmosphere, and assessment.

• Interpersonal skills which include an awareness and acceptance of learners' differences, e.g., in opinions, cultures, and abilities; other personalities, e.g., enthusiasm, fun, warmth, sense of humor, friendliness, etc.

• Personal qualities which include being well-organized, reliable, flexible, creative; and having high morals and adhering to the code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Conduct of Teachers.

• Professionalism which includes engaging in professional development which helps strengthen competence in linguistics, culture, reflection; engaging in life-long learning; being aware of the value of foreign language learning; and having positive attitudes towards the profession.

To maintain the students' high level of satisfaction with instructors, the above characteristics should be enhanced in the instructors through workshops and seminars.

Of all the aspects of the ESP courses that were rated satisfied, the aspect that received the lowest satisfaction level was textbooks. For each ESP course, a core textbook is assigned. Some textbooks are commercially developed, while others are developed by LITU instructors. An academic committee is responsible for designing the course content and selecting a book for each course. Most of the instructors are rarely involved in the course design and course book selection process. As a result, when they teach the course, whether it is voluntary or not, they might find that it was not what they and the students want and that it did not match their teaching styles. In addition, needs of clients have rarely been assessed in the development of each course. Therefore, the content and course book chosen for each course might not satisfy or meet the needs of the students. This adversely affected the satisfaction of students. According to Robinson (1991), the selection of specialist texts should not in itself make a course an ESP course. What is more important is a demonstrated need, which may be for specialist texts or for some other kind of material. Therefore, to make the course as relevant to students as possible which in turn will increase the level of satisfaction, needs assessment should be conducted. Thornbury (2006) suggests that the design of an ESP course should be dictated by the practical, communicative needs of the learners, rather than abstract linguistics description. Needs analysis can be conducted using quantitative means such as structured surveys, structured interviews, or tests. It is also possible to use qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus group and so on (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000).

In this evaluation, the data were collected through questionnaires from two groups of stakeholders: instructors who were involved in the design and delivery of the language programs and (2) students who were the clients of the programs. To gain more understanding of the ESP courses at LITU, data should be sought out from every group of stakeholders – experts in each study field, faculty members from the school

that the students were studying, and so on. Further, to gain more in-depth data regarding the ESP courses, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations should be conducted by evaluators. Moreover, a curriculum evaluation should be conducted every four or five years, and the results should be presented to the administration to generate the improvement plan for each ESP course.

6. Conclusion

This evaluation of the ESP courses offered by LITU was part of the LITU curriculum evaluation project. It provides implications for the improvement of the English curriculum used in the Institute. It will also lead to teaching and learning improvement, which in turns yields higher English proficient students.

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