

Challenges Facing Students Learning ESP in Arab Universities

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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays a significant role in the today's increasingly globalized world yet students undertaking the ESP courses experience unique challenges that have not been explored. This study investigated the challenges facing Arab students in Arab universities learning ESP. Data was collected using self-administered questionnaire and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Results revealed that key challenges experienced by Arab learners of ESP in Arab universities are vocabulary problems; grammatical problems; problems with organizing ideas; and spelling problems. Specific VP problems were identified as register (VR), general (VG), capacity (VC), paraphrasing (P), and expressing ideas (EI). While specific grammatical problems were identified as articles and tenses. These challenges were linked to various causes: methods of teaching English, lack of practicing writing skills in educational institutions, the use of Arabic in English classes, mother tongue influence, and lack of motivation. These challenges can be solved by teachers providing more discipline-specific reading material to improve students vocabulary depth and size; using discipline specific writing material; using multiple teaching techniques; offering extra classes; encouraging students to read extensively and fostering learner autonomy.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, General English Learners of ESP.

Introduction

Since 1960s when ESP (English for Specific Purposes) was adopted to help meet the needs of specific learners, students who are enrolled for ESP courses have been experiencing numerous challenges. Surprisingly, only a few studies have recognized these challenges. However, the consensus is that ESP plays a significant role in the today's increasingly globalized world. For example, it acknowledged that ESP enables learners to meet vocational and professional goals (Flowerdew, & Peacock, 2001; Hyland, 2006). Hyland (2006) identified three specific benefits associated with ESP to learners: increasing the speed of the acquisition of the linguistic items; increasing learning efficiency; and increasing learning effectiveness. Hyland (2006) supported others that ESP increases the learning speed of acquiring the required linguistic items by following the pattern of the language acquisition by a native speaker for specific purposes. This enables speakers to learn authentically content-based contexts of what they need and whenever they need it. For Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) ESP enables ESP course trainees to maximally utilize their learning resources. This way, the learner can acquire the necessary specific and pre-identified linguistic skills and items. Commenting on the learning effectiveness, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) argued that ESP enables trainees to learn language and use it correctly and appropriately in job-related tasks. It also prepares trainees for other job-related training that are conducted in English enabling them to perform better in such trainings. Johns (2013) further added that upon completion of the ESP courses, learners could use English within the employment context. Others (e.g., Ezza, & Al-Jarallah, 2015) argued that ESP plays a key economic priority in many non-English speaking countries including Arab countries. According to Ezza and Al-Jarallah (2015), ESP helps people with inadequate proficiency to handle specific jobs. Recognizing the value and importance of ESP to Arab professionals, and the gap in research identified herein, the present study investigated the challenges facing Arab students in Arab universities learning ESP.

Literature Review

Studies have overwhelmingly recognized what informed the introduction of ESP; comparison of ESP against General English; the value and importance of ESP; and challenges experienced by teachers of English for specific purposes in different contexts.

However, few studies have examined and documented challenges experienced by students undertaking ESP courses. More revealing is that these few studies focused on challenges within the Asian and other contexts. To the best knowledge of the researcher, only three studies recognized challenges experienced by Arab students of ESP within specific Arab universities.

Value and importance of ESP

Why was ESP Introduced?

Studies documenting the history of ESP have noted that the adoption of ESP in early 1960s was necessitated by the need to find a better approach to English language teaching as an alternative to poor teaching methods that characterized early 1960s. According to Robinson (1991), the language teaching practice that prevailed in early 1960s was characterized by poor method of teaching, in which learners were offered literature regardless of their interests, needs or aims. As detailed in Hutchinson, and Waters (1987), this method could not fulfil actual needs of learners. Robinson (1991) herald that recognizing this shortcoming, and recognizing the growing importance, acceptability and use of English language internationally and in all fields, teachers advocated for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an approach to English Language Teaching, which was aimed at meeting specific learning objectives. As indicated by Munby (1987), examples of courses offered under ESP, include English for Educators; English for Media; English for Chemists, English for Advertisers.

ESP vs. General English

Various studies have compared ESP with General English and noted the several similarities and differences. It has been noted that unlike General English, which include songs and literature, social events, general writing skills, time for games and free time that takes place in a more freedom and relaxed atmosphere; ESP focuses on specialized lexis; goal-oriented students; and teaching presentation and negotiation (Bulter-Pascoe, 2009). It has also been noted that ESP is targeted at business correspondence and those who undertake it are driven by job-related motivation. Others have noted that ESP serves a particular discipline; is aimed at meeting specific needs; aimed at turning the learner into a user (i.e., self-directed learning); the positive effects of its authentic materials are the advanced at intermediate levels are easily feasible. Lastly, it is indicated that ESP is stemmed from General English. However, unlike General English, all decisions regarding the method used and the content covered in ESP are based on the learners' decision or reason to learn (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Elsewhere, Jarvis (2009) appreciated the commonalities between General English and ESP noting that these two have commonalities, including grammar and functions, small talk, survival English, general vocabulary, everyday English, and anxiety about abilities.

Moreover, it has been noted herein, ESP is goal-oriented and it is aimed at meeting specific needs of a learner (Robinson, 2003). Its courses are tailored towards meeting the needs of adult learners. These learners have a limited time to learn heterogeneous courses and belong to different areas of specialization (Jarvis, 2009; Arno, 2012; Plastina, 2003). ESP instruction consists of two branches: English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The aim of EAP is aimed at helping the learner to study, teach or conduct research in the language of specialization. On the contrary, EOP is targeted at professionals who learn English for professional and vocational purposes, as well as for use in the pre-work situations (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). This paper considered the ESP as an umbrella term for EOP and EAP. However, previous studies on ESP can be categorized into three perspectives. The first stream of studies have examined challenges experienced by learners of ESP as a whole. The second stream of research has examined challenges experienced by learners from the perspective of English for Academic purposes (EAP). The third and last stream of research has examined these challenges from the perspective of English for Academic purposes (EOP) (Bulter-Pascoe, 2009).

Challenges Experienced by Teachers of ESP

Challenges experienced by teachers of ESP as identified by Abdulaziz et al. (2012) within the Pakistani contexts include: pronunciation of words borrowed from other languages; the course title not matching the ESP practitioner's qualification; inadequate trained teachers and teacher-training institutions). Within the Vietnam, Chinese; Japan and Korean contexts, challenges identified by Thi et al. (2016) include quality of textbooks and lecturers; teaching methods adopted by teachers and teacher's qualifications; lack of theoretical framework supporting ESP; inadequate teaching materials; increased focus on examination; large classes.

Others identified the specific pedagogical challenges within the Indonesian context: the absence of communication focus, authentic materials, collaborative teaching and practical and learner-centered teaching in the ESP classrooms (Poedjiastutie, 2017). Recognizing this gap in literature, the present study investigated challenges experienced by students in specific Arab universities learning ESP.

Challenges Experienced by Students Undertaking ESP courses

Studies have identified several challenges facing students undertaking ESP within different contexts.

Asian Context

Within the Chinese context, Terraschke and Wahid (2011) noted that students of ESP found it difficult to notice rhetoric differences between Chinese and English written languages. Similarly, Chou (2011) noted that students' key challenges were idea generation and idea expression. According to Chou (2011), students expressed difficulties in expressing their own ideas and selecting relevant references. In Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) and Yasuda (2004), challenges faced by students of ESP included difficulties in writing thesis and dissertations. Students expressed difficulties in academic writing. In a similar study involving learners in Japan, Vietnam, and China undertaking ESP courses, Maruyama (1996) identified differences between Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese languages and English as a challenge to students. According to Maruyama (1996) the differences between Japanese writing style and English writing style made students undertaking ESP to experience difficulties when learning ESP. Maruyama (1996) also noted that the differences in pronunciation and grammar between English and Vietnamese makes the learning of ESP difficult to students. Another challenge reported by Japanese electrical engineering students undertaking ESP as revealed by Maruyama (1996) was inadequate vocabulary. According to Maruyama (1996), the lack of motivation to explore and use English vocabulary and the low English proficiency of teachers of ESP were the key causes of students lacking enough vocabulary in English to enable them learn and express themselves in conversations. Other challenges identified by Maruyama (1996) include low proficiency in English among students; lack of skills to use dictionary and overdependence on the dictionary.

Within the Arabic Context

Al-Khasawneh (2010) investigated challenges faced by Arab postgraduate students undertaking one of the courses of ESP (i.e., English writing for academic purposes) in the college of business, UMM (University of Utara Malaysia) and the possible solutions. Data was collected using face-to-face interviews. Similarly, Al Fadda (2012) investigated challenges faced by Saudi students undertaking one of the courses of ESP and identified grammar problems, notably sentence structure and subject-verb agreement. In a similar study involving postgraduate students learning in an Omani university Hassan and Badi (2015) identifies cohesion, difficulties in using citations and referencing, logical organization of ideas and coherence of paragraphs as key challenges faced by Arab students.

Methodology

Research Design: Survey

The survey design of this research was used to collect data on challenges faced by learners of ESP in universities. The rationale for choosing survey research design was to ensure reliable and usable data was obtained from participants.

Research Tool: Semi-structured Questionnaire

A questionnaire was adopted and utilized to collect data from learners of ESP in Arab universities. The choice of survey semi-structured questionnaire as a data collection tool was informed by the nature of data (i.e., quantitative data) collected in this study. The questionnaire was deemed the most suitable tool that could allow the researcher to design responses to questions that could easily be scored and summed to obtain the respondents' overall measure of opinions regarding the challenges experienced while learning ESP. Questionnaires permitted the anonymity of the respondents and made it easy for the researcher to mail them and receive responses via email. This ruled out the need for the researcher to be present when the respondents were completing the questionnaires and made the data collection relatively faster. Questionnaires also made it easy for the researcher to collect data from a large population from ESP students regarding their challenges. Again, by using questionnaires, the researcher succeeded in obtaining unanimous feedback from respondents. This encouraged honesty and openness and therefore, reliable data.

The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire allowed the researcher to utilize both closed-ended and open-ended questions to provoke better responses from the subjects with regard to challenges they faced while learning ESP. Closed-ended questions yielded data that could be analyzed quantitatively for trends and patterns. These structured questions were derived from previous studies that identified challenges faced by Arab learners of English in Arab universities. These questions were scored on the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 and 5 with 1 indicated strongly disagree to 5 indicating strongly agree. On the other hand, the open-ended questions allowed the subjects the freedom to respond to the questions in their own words, and thus, to offer greater qualification in responding to questions.

The only challenge presented by the questionnaire was the relatively low response rate which was compensated by mailing a large number of questionnaires and following up to ensure the respondents filled and returned them. Questionnaires were sent alongside the cover letter to study participants. The responses to these questionnaires were analyzed and used to determine challenges faced by students of ESP in specific Arab universities. This non-probability sampling technique allowed the researcher to collect data from members of population (i.e., ESP learners) who were conveniently available and willing to participate in the study. It is noteworthy that the ESP learners were conveniently available to the various institutions of higher education in some Arab countries.

Sample: Convenient Sampling

Several probability and non-probability sampling techniques were at the disposal of the researcher: snowball sampling, quota sampling, random sampling, stratified sampling, convenience sampling etc. This study made use of convenient sampling to select subjects from the population of Arab learners of ESP in Arab universities. Accordingly, a sample of 120 ESP learners was conveniently selected from specific Arab students to represent the population of learners of ESP in Arab universities. These participants were mailed survey questionnaires. The sample size of 120 participants was large enough to improve the power of the study, improve the confidence level of readers in the study findings as well as increase the generalizability of the study to Arab learners of ESP.

Data Analysis

Microsoft excel was used to analyze and quantify the common challenges identified by Arab students of ESP in Arab universities. Accordingly, responses to questions scored on the 5-point Likert scale were analyzed and presented in form of tables and graphs.

Results

Results revealed that majority of participants identify with grammatical problems (GP), organization of ideas (OIP), vocabulary problems (VP), and spelling problems (SP) as challenges they face while learning English for specific purposes (figure 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Participants overwhelmingly (83%) agreed to the statement that GP is one of the key challenges facing students in Arab universities learning ESP (figure 1).

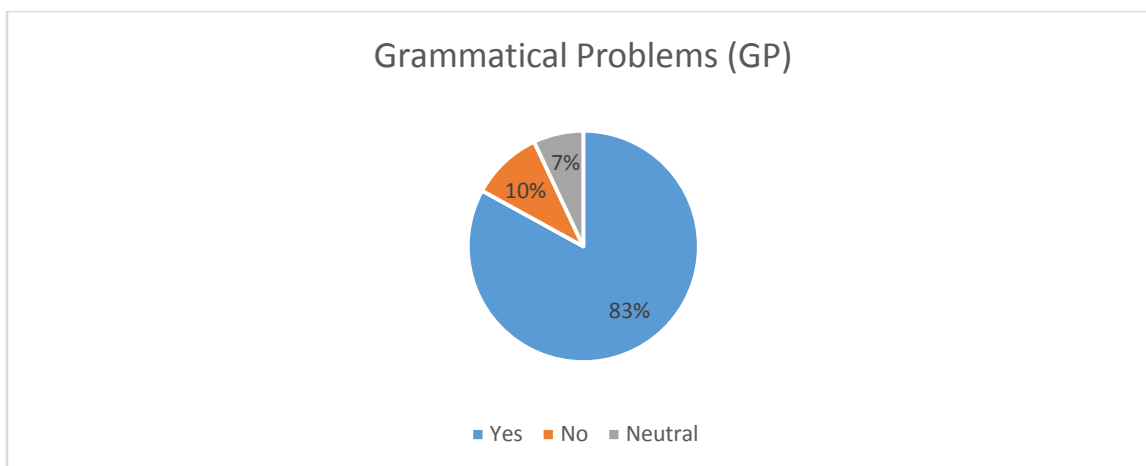


Figure 1: participants' response to grammatical problem as a problem faced while learning English for Specific Purposes.

Majority of participants (86%) agreed to the statement that organization of ideas is one of the challenges facing students in Arab universities learning ESP (figure 2).

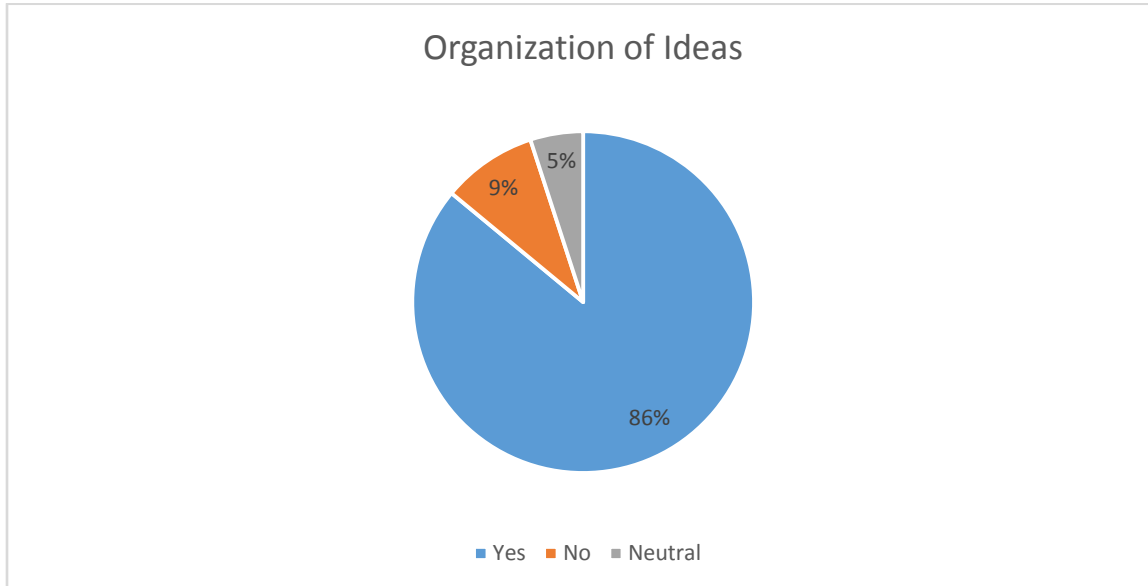


Figure 2: participants’ response to organization of ideas as a problem faced while learning English for Specific Purposes

Equally, the majority (75%) of participants approved the statement that Organization of Ideas Problems (OIP) is one of the challenges facing students in Arab universities learning ESP (figure 3).

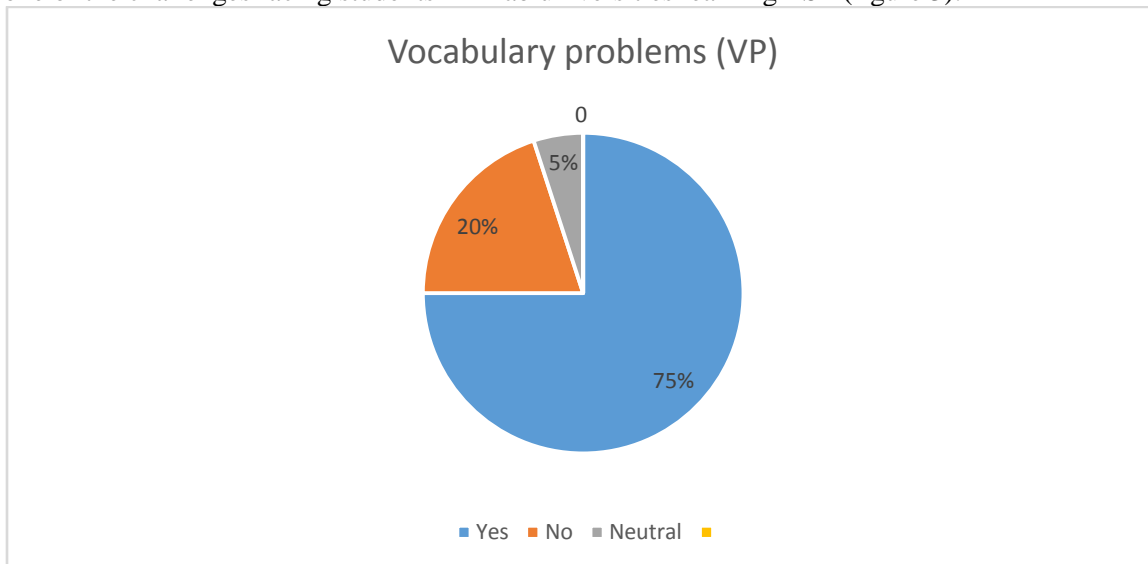


Figure 3: participants’ response to vocabulary problems as a problem faced while learning English for Specific Purposes

Results also revealed that participants overwhelming (72%) agree to the statement: spelling Problems (SP) is one of the challenges facing students in Arab universities learning ESP (Figure 4).

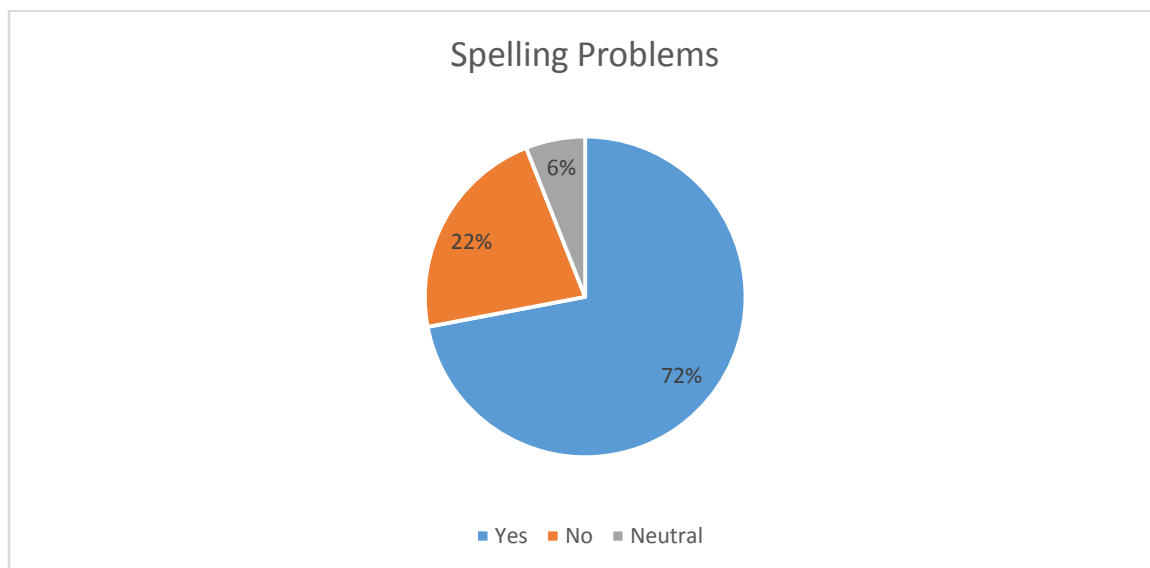


Figure 4: participants’ response to spelling problems as a problem faced while learning English for Specific Purposes.

Next, participants were presented with specific VP problems, namely Register (VR), General (VG), Capacity (VC), Paraphrasing (P) and expressing ideas (EI) identified in the literature and asked to approve any challenge that they felt it was a problem for them. Majority of participants approved paraphrasing (49%) and expressing ideas (46%) as the challenges they faced while leaning ESP.

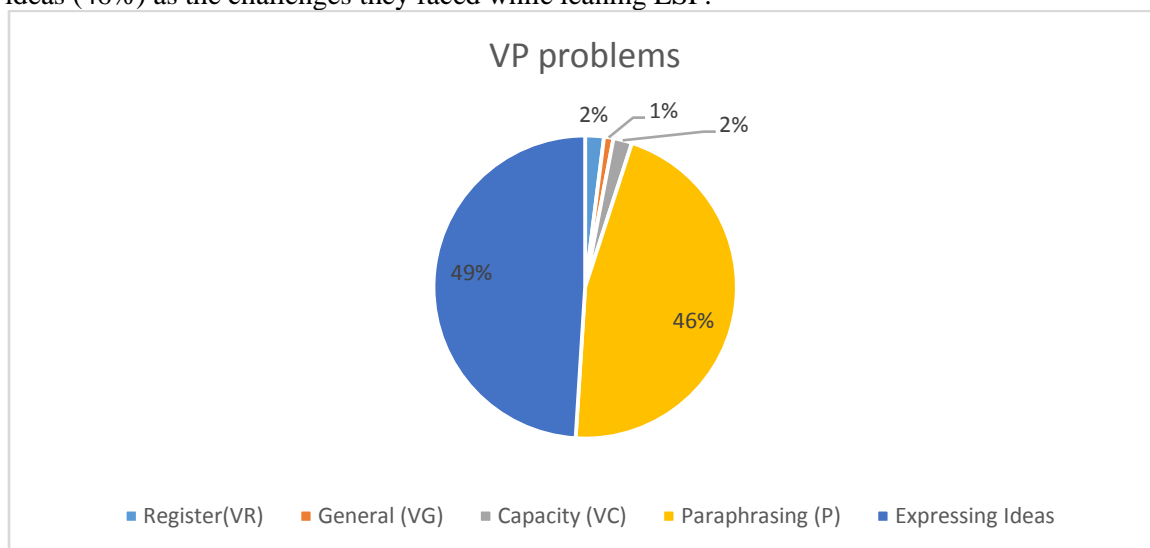


Figure 5: participants’ response to specific VP problems a problem faced while learning English for Specific Purposes

Participants were also presented with specific grammatical problems identified in the literature as affecting ESP learners, namely propositions (GPP), articles (GPA), tenses (GPT), and word order and asked to approve those that were applicable to them. Articles (40%) and tenses (41%) featured as the key challenges faced by Arab learners of ESP.

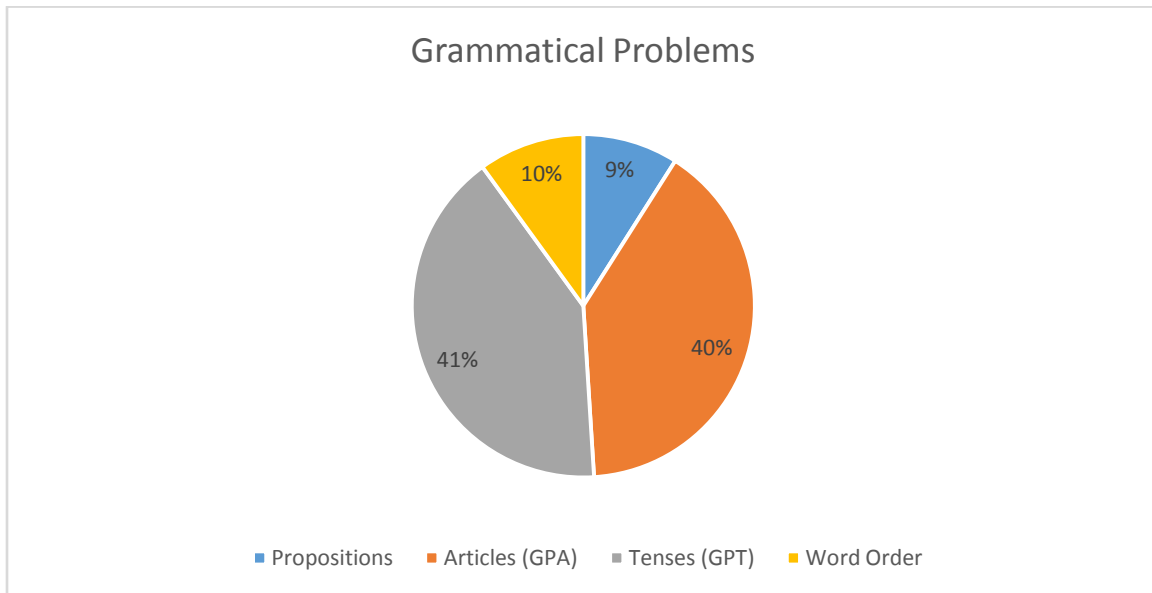


Figure 5: participants’ response to specific grammatical problems as problems faced while learning English for Specific Purposes

Other challenges identified by ESP learners included difficulties in mastering referring styles, difficulty in developing listening comprehension skills, difficulty in developing writing skills, difficulty in developing speaking skills, lack of suitable ESP materials, inadequate course materials for ESP. After the identification of challenges by participants, researcher deemed it necessary to identify from participants the probable causes and solutions to the challenges they faced. To this effect, closed-ended and open-ended questions were posed to participants with regard to probable causes and solutions to the problems identified. The commonly featured causes of the problems as reported by participants included methods of teaching English, lack of practicing writing skills in educational institutions, the use of Arabic in English classes, mother tongue influence, and lack of motivation (figure 6).

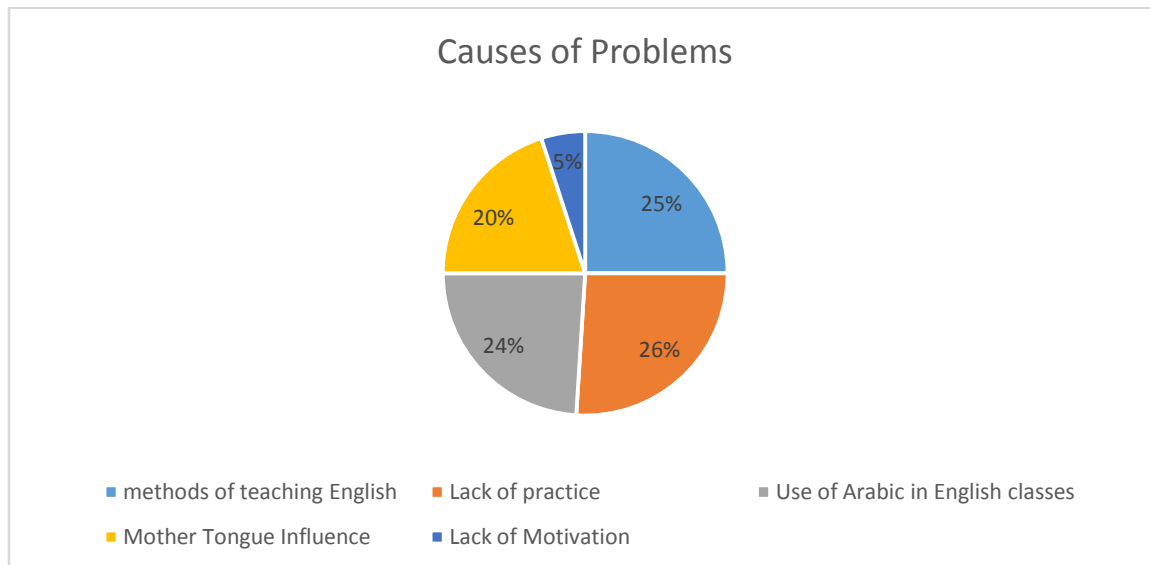


Figure 6: Participants’ response to causes of the identified problems

The commonly featured responses in relation to probable solutions to the problems encountered by Arab ESP learners, included discipline specific material, use multiple teaching techniques, extra classes, reading extensively and learner autonomy (figure 7).

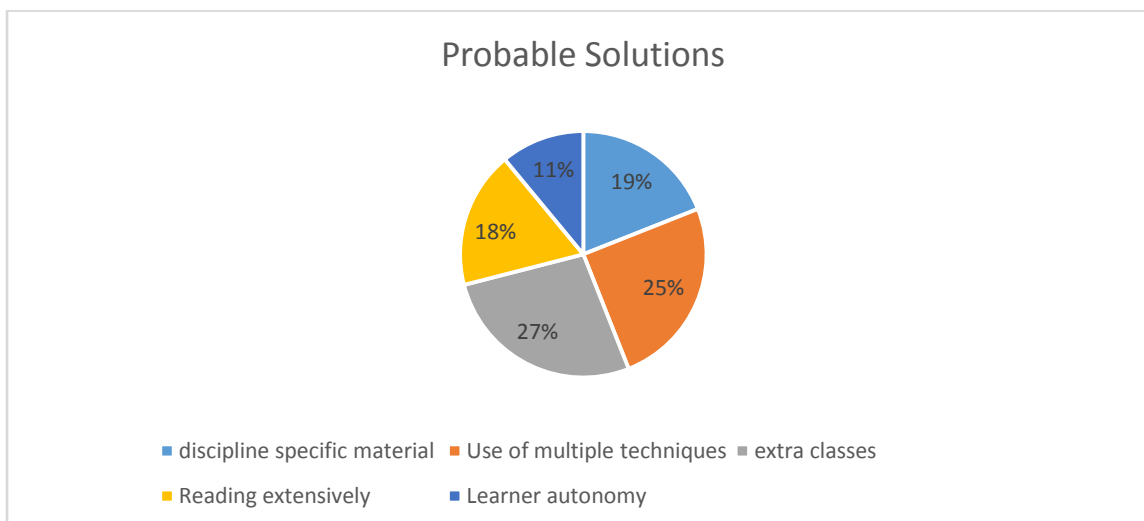


Figure 7: Participants' response to probable solutions to the identified problems

Discussion

The present study investigated challenges experienced by students in specific Arab universities learning ESP. It was revealed that key challenges experienced by Arab learners of ESP in Arab universities are vocabulary problems; grammatical problems; problems with organizing ideas; and spelling problems. Specific vocabulary problem problems identified by learners in Arab universities include register vocabulary, general vocabulary, lexical capacity, paraphrasing, and expressing ideas. While specific grammatical problems affecting Arab learners of ESP include articles and tenses. These findings are consistent with the previous studies on a similar subject (Coxhead & Nation, 2001; Coxhead & Nation, 2001; Rabab`ah, 2003). In particular, the present study finding coincided with those of Al-Khasawneh (2010) that ESP students face challenges in relation to organization of ideas, spelling, and vocabulary. Another identified by Al-Khasawneh (2010) as facing ESP learners though unique to writing but not reflected in the present study is the difficulty in mastering different referencing styles. Key grammatical forms identified in the present study and reflected in other studies (e.g., Al-Khasawneh, 2010) as posing a challenge to ESP learners include logical connectors, nominalization, articles, modals, voices, and tenses. Al-Khasawneh (2010) noted that in ESP programs, grammar is often emphasized because of its importance in conveying accurate messages. Al-Khasawneh (2010) emphasized that teachers of ESP learners need to restrict these forms of grammar and create materials that allow learners to progress and succeed in their academic writing. This view was reflected in Hutchinson & Waters (1987) that grammatical forms and materials covered in the ESP syllabus should allow learners to progress and succeed in their academic writing. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) stressed that the best approach to meet students' need is by focusing on teaching how they should combine sentences together to create meanings.

Concurrent with the present study, Coxhead and Nation (2001) identified vocabulary problems specifically General Service List (GSL) of English words as a problem affecting students undertaking English for academic purposes courses. Coxhead and Nation (2001) noted that about 2,000 words are commonly used in English Language and divided these words in two: General Service 1 (GS1) and General Service 2 (GS2). Coxhead and Nation (2001) opined that GS1, which covers most (77%) of the academic texts contains 1,000 words; while GS2 which covers about 25% of the academic texts contains 1,000 words. The GS1 words are less common in non-academic texts but appear frequently in academic materials regardless of the academic field or subject area (Coxhead & Nation, 2001). Coxhead and Nation (2001) contented that these GS2 words must be learned by learners undertaking ESP courses. These words are needed for students undertaking ESP courses as it is necessary for the effective functioning in their different academic programs. This view was further reinforced by Rabab`ah (2003) that limited vocabulary often make students unable to engage in authentic communicative situations notably speaking and writing. Rabab`ah (2003) noted that the lack of necessary vocabulary makes it difficult for students in ESP programs to express their ideas accurately and freely.

However, within the Thai context, Srikrui, Lin, Lakaisone and Sirinthorn (2016) identified challenges faced by non-native English postgraduate learners undertaking English for Academic purposes as writing in academic style; synthesizing essays, paraphrasing, writing articles, research papers, dissertations, thesis, and reports. Other studies within other Asian context have identified challenges faced by students under ESP programs as difficulties in generating ideas relating to their study topics; difficulty in writing with cohesion and coherence, and summarizing reading gist; difficulties in doing academic writing and expressing their own ideas; and difficulties in selecting relevant references and significant topic (Al Fadda, 2012; Al Murshidi, 2014; Yasuda, 2004; Hassan & Badi, 2015; Amin & Alamin, 2012). These differences in challenges among students in different contexts suggest that Arab learners of ESP encounter unique challenges that reflect the Arabic context. As noted herein, the present study identified causes of the problems as methods of teaching English, lack of practicing writing skills in educational institutions, the use of Arabic in English classes, mother tongue influence, and lack of motivation. This partly coincides with the results by Al-Khasawneh (2010). However, the present study disproved other causes of problems identified in by Al-Khasawneh (2010) namely weak foundation, environment, isolated culture, not practicing speaking English, teachers' low proficiency, medium of instruments, and status of English. However, it is noteworthy that challenges identified in the present study are all captured under the themes method of teaching in student respective countries, environmental, and weak foundation as reflected in Al-Khasawneh (2010). This suggests that results of the present study map those found by Al-Khasawneh (2010) that key causes of challenges faced by Arab learners of ESP fall under the broad themes: methods of teaching English in students' respective countries, environment, and weak foundation. Al-Khasawneh (2010) identified causes of problems under weak foundation as teachers' lack of interest; lack of motivation to learn English by students; and status of English. Causes under environmental reasons were identified as limited opportunities for students to isolated culture, practice English, and mother tongue. Causes of reasons identified under methods of teaching English included using Arabic in English classes; medium of instruction; inadequate writing practice within the educational institutions; and low proficiency of teachers in English.

On the contrary within the Asian Thai context, Srikrui, Lin, Lakaisone and Sirinthorn (2016) identified causes of challenges experienced by students of ESP as insufficient English expressions, grammar knowledge and English words for academic writing; the inability to synthesize in-depth information from their reading materials; insufficient training in writing academic work; insufficient exposure to use of English language; students' poor English background; difficulty in understanding lecturers; and the unfamiliarity with new and complicated words. Again, this confirms that causes of problems faced by Arab students of ESP are unique to the Arab context. Lastly, the present study revealed that probable solutions to the problems encountered by Arab ESP learners, include discipline specific material; use multiple teaching techniques; extra classes; reading extensively and learner autonomy. Clearly, only few of the solutions identified by Al-Khasawneh (2010) were confirmed in the present study. Al-Khasawneh (2010) identified other possible solutions as increasing the number of writing tasks; correcting students' writing errors; speaking simple English; and correcting students' speaking errors.

For Rabab`ah (2003) vocabulary problems faced by ESP learners can be solved by teachers improving students vocabulary depth and size through providing more discipline-specific reading courses. Rabab`ah (2003) believes that this can help students of ESP improve their communication as well as academic writing in their respective academic disciplines. For Kasper (2000), the problem of inadequate vocabulary can be solved by offering students material that cover the content to make them aware of the audience, concepts and aims of their respective academic disciplines. Elsewhere, Gocsik (1997) suggested that students' grammatical errors and problem could be solved by teachers correcting grammatical errors made by students whenever they arise. Gocsik (1997) noted that by correcting students' grammatical errors, teachers would help make students aware of these errors and encourage them to use grammar books to check and correct them. Others (e.g., Ober, 1992) supported the finding of the present study that multiple teaching techniques should be employed by teachers to help boost students' academic writing skills. Ober (1992) suggested that teachers could motivate students undertaking ESP to learn English by using fun activities such as scrambled sentences and games. Ober (1992) further contented that teachers should embrace the use of micro-writing activities that reflect students' writing problems and use simple activities that are in line with the academic disciplines of students.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Arab students in Arab universities undertaking ESP face unique challenges that require specific solutions.

Notable challenges include vocabulary problems; grammatical problems; problems with organizing ideas; and spelling problems. It is, therefore, for teachers teaching Arab students undertaking ESP to use strategies tailored and engineered towards solving these challenges. Solutions that can be adopted include teachers providing more discipline-specific reading material to improve students' vocabulary depth and size; using discipline specific material; using multiple teaching techniques; offering extra classes; encouraging students to read extensively and fostering learner autonomy.

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