

Current Status of English Instruction at Medical Universities in Iran: Zooming in on Teachers

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Abstract

Introduction: English language is now an indispensable part of higher education, and a good command of English, like in many parts around the globe, is of special importance for Iranian university students who want to continue their education toward a higher degree. Yet, the English language instruction they receive after entering university throughout their studies is in need of constant investigation and improvement.

Materials and Methods: The present survey study tried to examine the current status of the English language courses and their instructors in the Iranian universities of medical sciences in different cities of the country nationwide using questionnaires.

Results: Regarding course instructors, of a total of 485 English language instructors at 31 universities of medical sciences, only 61 (12.57%) were English language faculty members. The remaining 424 (87.43%) instructors were either medical specialists who taught English language courses (191; 39.3%) or non-faculty part-time (guest) lecturers (233; 48%). As for the courses, a significant number of ESAP (499 credits; 39.5%) and general English (61 credits; 5.15%) course credits were taught by medically-oriented faculty members (content specialists).

Conclusion: The results highlight the need to assess the quality of EAP instruction in Iran through drawing on multiple sources of data and taking into account the perspectives of all the stakeholders, especially those of the students.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT), English for specific academic purposes (ESAP), English for academic purposes (EAP), English language instructors, Universities of medical sciences

1. Introduction

Almost a decade ago, Seidlhofer [1] contended that “a lingua franca has no native speakers by definition, but all its speakers have to learn how to use it” (p. 379). In effect, the lingua franca enables them to communicate with one another [2]. As the current lingua franca, English as the widespread medium of information exchange plays a decisive role in academic and professional lives of university students. At the same time, the English language paves the way for universities and scientific institutions to achieve

academic excellence through access to the wealth of new knowledge [3]. Given the present globalized milieu, the wide range of applications of English in various scientific domains, and the need for a standardized education, the necessity of English language in higher education is underscored.

As a branch of English for specific purposes, teaching English at universities requires certain skills and competencies on the instructors' part to be able to teach language through content [4].

Of importance, too, is the quality of the instruction of

this language particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) context where students' learning depends chiefly on classroom-based instruction. In these situations, students' command of English is to a considerable extent contingent upon formal education which, in turn, hinges, among other things, on the availability of suitable and sufficient resources, including experienced EFL instructors and a sufficient number of course credits in the curriculum.

Like a number of countries around the world, Iranian universities offer courses on English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These courses fall into two subdivisions, namely English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) [5]. EGAP is the term used for teaching common language skills used in various academic fields, while ESAP mainly focuses on teaching those skills that are specific to one field of study. Given this, the study at hand investigated the current status of EGAP and ESAP courses and their instructors in the Iranian universities of medical sciences.

An explanation about the system of higher education in Iran may be in order at this point. The majority of institutes of higher education in Iran work under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. Yet, more than 60 universities are recognized as universities of medical sciences and function under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MoHME). Currently more than 222,000 students study in more than 300 major/levels which are being offered at these universities. In the curriculums offered at the universities of medical sciences for all the different majors at the undergraduate level and some of the majors at the graduate levels, credits have been considered for EGAP and ESAP courses.

On an empirical level, myriads of studies have been conducted on EAP instruction in Iran [6-10]. A common thread running through almost all these studies, except for Kaivanpanah et al.'s, is that their participants were mainly graduates of English language majors; thus, their samples failed to represent the population of EGAP and ESAP instructors, especially those who are content specialists. In 2021, for example, Pourhaji and Sadeghi explored how EAP teachers respond to learners' initiations, especially when they are within the realm of the teachers' knowledge and expertise. Through video-taping classes and holding reflective meetings, they categorized teachers' understanding of their talk into three levels, including pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal, and showcased how they can attain higher

levels in classroom discourse. Their participants were all PhD holders of applied linguistics; none of the nine teachers in their study were content specialists [9]. Kaivanpanah et al., however, took into account teachers' knowledge base as one of the challenges involved in the delivery of EAP courses. Hence, they focused on both English language majors and content specialists, yet they did not specify whether they were faculty members or guest non-faculty lecturers [8]. Against this backdrop and to fill this gap in the literature, the current study specifically sought to examine the status of English language teaching and its efficiency particularly with regard to the instructors' study background (whether they are English language majors or content specialists) and employment status (whether they are faculty members or guest non-faculty lecturers). To this end, the following questions were formulated:

1. What is the current status of EGAP and ESAP courses in the Iranian universities of medical sciences?
2. How efficiently are the English language faculty members involved in teaching EGAP and ESAP courses in medical universities nationwide?
3. What is the role of non-English-major faculty members in the instruction of EGAP and ESAP courses in the Iranian universities of medical sciences?

2. Materials and Methods

Questionnaire: A questionnaire dealing with the current status of English language courses and their instructors was formulated by the researchers. It *sought information* on the personal information and educational qualifications of the instructors, including their field of study, level of education, the country or countries where they received their education, university rank (lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor), employment status (hourly paid, short-term contract, probationary, tenure-track) among other things. It also asked about the number and type of course credits they taught. It included an instructional leaflet on the aim of the questionnaire and its completion procedure. The questionnaire was pilot-tested prior to being widely administered in order to examine and ensure both its validity and reliability. Concerning construct validity, a suitable factorial structure of the instrument was achieved as a result of conducting exploratory factor analysis. With regard to content validity, a panel of three experts of EAP instruction and applied linguistics who were all experienced university professors commented on the appropriateness of the items; modifications and amendments were made on the content and structure of the items accordingly. In terms of reliability, Cronbach's

Alpha coefficient (0.861) showed an acceptable level of reliability for the items of the questionnaire.

Participants

The questionnaire, together with an instruction leaflet, was sent to 51 medical universities in provincial capitals and big cities in Iran by the MoHME's **Secretariat of Medical Education for General Practitioners**. The leaflet explained the objectives of the questionnaire while asking the head of the English language departments, or those in charge of the English language courses, to fill in the form and send it back to the **Secretariat**.

It took much longer than expected to get the completed questionnaires back from the universities. Following constant reminders, 38 universities returned the questionnaires of which 7 were incomplete, but 31 could be used in the study. Yet, 14 universities did not complete and return the questionnaire for different reasons. As the required information could not be collected from these universities, making any conclusions about them may be unwarranted assumptions, but the researchers' personal information hinted to the result that the major reason on the part of (all but one of) these universities for not having filled and returned the questionnaires can best be associated with a lack of a language department or any responsible body for affairs related to English language instruction. In these universities, individuals, mostly a content specialist, or at times a guest lecturer (or at some universities, a collaboration of the two) was responsible for teaching English language courses as part of the curriculum.

Procedure

Through some meetings, the researchers first explained the objectives of the research project to the relevant members of the MoHME's **Secretariat of Medical Education for General Practitioners** to seek their cooperation in conducting the study. The Secretariat then accepted to facilitate the data collection procedure and provided the researchers with the list of the contact information of 51 medical universities located in different cities and provincial capitals nationwide. The Secretariat generously accepted to assign one of its personnel as the coordinator for gathering the required data for the study of interest, which proved to be an effective aid to the project and for the researchers to obtain the requested information from the medical universities.

The questionnaire, together with the instruction brochure, was sent to 51 medical universities **by the Secretariat**, asking them to provide the requested

information and return the completed questionnaire back. It took more than two months for the coordinator at the Secretariat to get the completed questionnaires back from the universities. Though mostly anecdotal, her frequent progress reports implied that except for certain major universities of the country (which she did not believe to be more than 20), finding the right office, department, or individual at the universities was the most cumbersome part of the data collection. Given this, the researchers kept sending reminders to get the completed forms. All in all, 38 universities completed and returned the questionnaire.

Soon after receiving the completed questionnaires, the researchers started analyzing the data and extracting the necessary information. Of the 38 questionnaire received, after sessions of contemplation and discussion, the researchers decided to put seven of the filled questionnaires aside and label them as flawed since they could not yield the expected information correctly or sufficiently. Altogether, thus, questionnaires filled in by 31 universities underwent statistical analyses.

Data analysis

The questionnaires did not inquire any private information on the part of the respondents, so the analysis was conducted with the assistance of the Advisory Unit of the Bio-statistic Department of the School of Allied Medical Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. Prior to the analysis, the data were cross-checked, and any data-entry mistakes were fixed through direct contacts with the respondents. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

3. Results

General English Language Courses: As figure 1 demonstrates, of a total of 1,281 General English course credits per semester in the 31 universities, only 411 credits (32.08%) were taught by English language faculty members. A sum of 809 (63.15%) credits were taught by non-faculty (guest) part-time English language lecturers and 61 (5.15%) credits were instructed by faculty members who are content specialists.

ESAP Courses: Of a total of 1,263 ESAP course credits, just 421 (33.3%) credits were instructed by English language faculty members; 499 (39.5%) course credits were taught by faculty members who are content specialists and the remaining 343 (27.15%) were taught by non-faculty guest language instructors. These figures, being overall averages, tend to change significantly with the university size and rank (See Figure 2).

Distribution of Course Instructors: Of a total of 485 instructors teaching English language courses in 31 universities, only 61 (12.57%) were faculty members. of the remaining 424 (87.4%) instructors, 191 (39.3%)

faculty members were content specialists (medically-oriented faculty members), and 233 (48%) instructors were non-faculty (guest) EFL lectures (Figure 3).

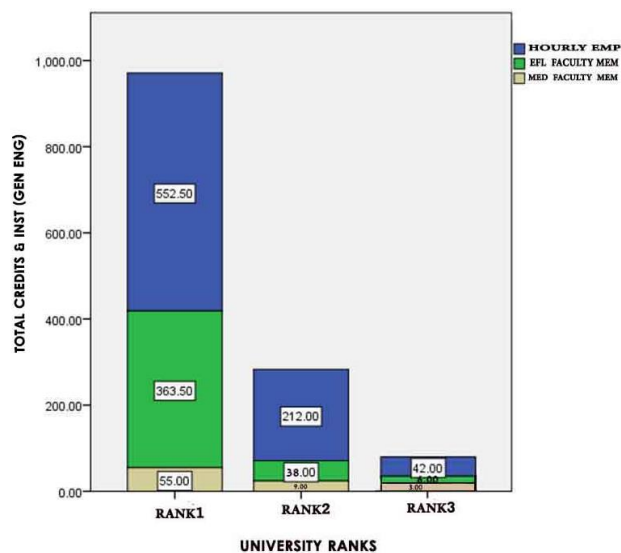


Figure 1. Distribution of instructors of General

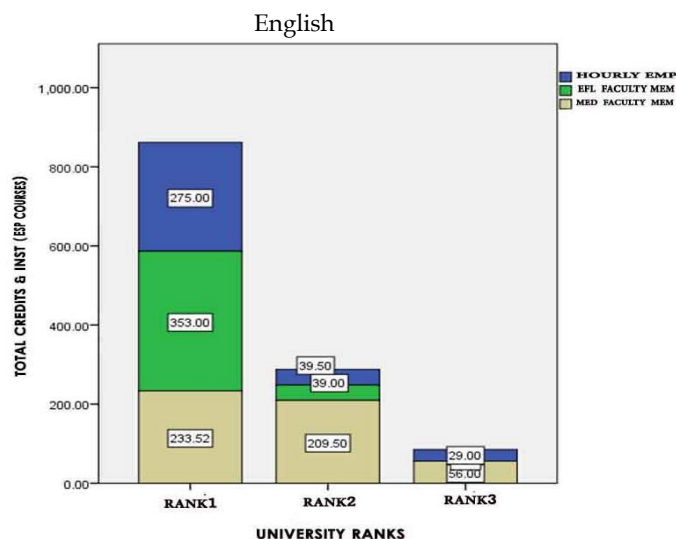


Figure 2. Distribution of instructors of ESAP courses

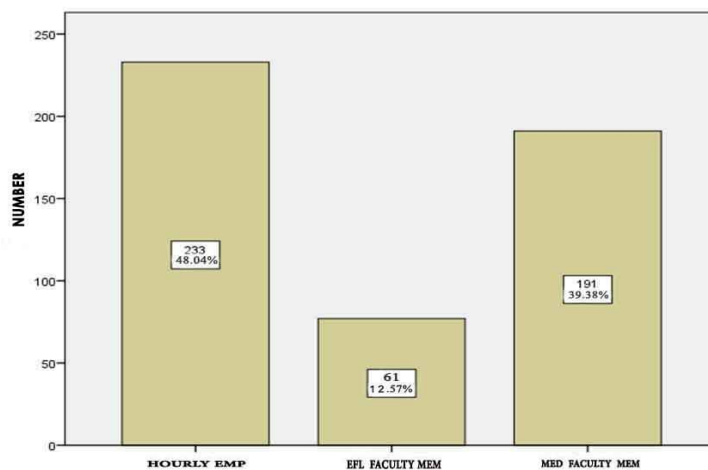


Figure 3. Distribution of course instructors

English Language Departments: Of 31 the medical universities which were included in the present study, only two universities had their English Language departments officially accredited and approved by the MoHME in Iran. The remaining 29 either had no language departments or, if they did, their departments had been set up internally by the university, without receiving the Ministry’s approval.

4. Discussion

A good command of English is of considerable significance for university students in general and

medical students in particular on several accounts particularly in EFL contexts like Iran. However, the number of course credits being allocated to English instruction seems not to be reflecting its significance. Based on the national curriculums, students at the Bachelor’s level in different majors relevant to medical sciences have to study for just a three-credit general English course and a two- or three-credit ESAP course. As for Master’s and Ph.D. students, the decision about the inclusion or omission of any English course is to a great extent left to the discretion of universities and departments. One possible reason behind this minimum number of course credits could be the scarcity of English

language faculty members and departments in a considerable number of universities.

Regarding the instructors' fields of specialty, a significant number of these courses (i.e., 44.21% of ESAP and 7.65% of EGAP courses) are taught by content specialists rather than language specialists. These figures, being nationwide averages, tend to change significantly as the sizes and ranks of the universities vary. In small size universities, 76.47% of ESAP and 5.36% of EGAP courses are taught by content specialists rather than language specialists. In some universities, there are no English language faculty members to take over the instructions. Even in some universities which have English language faculty members, as their number is not proportional to the courses which should be offered to students, many content (i.e., medical) specialists teach the English language courses.

From among the 485 English language instructors in 31 universities, just 61 (12.57%) were faculty members with education in English language majors. The remaining 424 (87.43%) were either non-English majors (i.e., content specialists) (191; 39.4%) or non-faculty (guest) lecturers (233; 48%), teaching based on hourly paid temporary contracts.

As the data indicated, still %39.5 of ESAP course credits and 7.65% of General English credits are taught by medically-oriented content specialists, with no training in EFL instruction. Added to this are 809 (%63.15) EGAP and 499 (%27.15) ESAP credits taught by mostly novice non-faculty EFL lecturers. As such, in the universities of medical sciences in Iran, a limited number of course credits, that is 411 (%32.08) EGAP and 421 (%33.3) ESAP credits, are taught by EFL faculty members. This can best explain the current situation of teaching EGAP and ESAP courses in universities of medical sciences. After all, it is important to realize that these courses are not designed to teach the subject-matter of a given discipline; rather, the main objective of such courses is to cater to the language needs of the students in their respective disciplines [11].

The findings of this study can contribute to the burgeoning body of literature on EAP instruction in Iran [6-10]. This study highlighted the significance of revisiting the findings of previous studies in the light of teachers' knowledge base and employment status. For example, it parts company with Pourhaji and Sadeghi's as their study involved only PhD holders of applied linguistics. Their participants managed to make a transition from the lower-levels of understanding of their teacher talk to higher levels

through participating in data-led dialogic reflective sessions. An important point that warrants re-investigation is whether content specialists are capable of achieving such post-liminal understanding, thereby creating rich participation opportunities for learners. In line with Kaivanpanah et al.'s, the findings of the present study showed that teachers' field of specialty might be a determining factor either fostering teacher efficacy or creating a challenge within the EGAP and/or ESAP classroom contexts. This study addressed one of the limitations of Kaivanpanah et al.'s by considering teachers' employment status as another determining element playing a significant role in the instruction of EGAP and ESAP courses in the Iranian universities of medical sciences.

5. Conclusion

An attempt was made to explore the distribution of EGAP and ESAP course instructors in the light of their knowledge base and recruitment status. It was found that the majority of the courses are taught by content specialists and most of the language instructors are not faculty members. A word of caution is in order. These findings by no means suggest that the reason behind the dissatisfying condition of EAP instruction in Iran is due to the teachers not being majored in language-related fields and/or not being faculty members, yet these are two factors that warrant further investigation. Therefore, more studies are needed to examine the issue by drawing on multiple sources of data and taking into account the perspectives of all the stakeholders', especially those of the students.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences Ethics Committee. We confirm that informed consent was obtained from all participants of the study. Also, we can confirm that the methods used in this study were in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations of the AAB journal

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Author's contributions

The authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there were no conflicts of interests.

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