

# Teacher Perceptions of ESP Materials: The Case of an ESP Teacher at a Vocational Institution in Kuwait

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the journeys through which English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers can go while designing and employing ESP materials in their classrooms. The research implements a case study approach to track the terrains of the experience of one ESP teacher through the observation and documentary analysis of the design and application of ESP materials in her courses at a vocational institution in Kuwait, the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training. This analysis was accompanied by a series of semistructured interviews to gain an idea of what the teacher's thoughts and feelings were during the experience. The research has uncovered valuable insights into the events that ESP teachers encounter while venturing into a field in which they might not be highly experienced. Recommendations revolved around reinforcing the value of teamwork in the design, development, and implementation of ESP materials in the institution, both internally within the department and externally with the scientific disciplines. The study similarly suggests an urgent need for teacher education and professional development programs to raise the awareness of novice and in-service teachers on the experiences of teachers in this realm and the anticipated pitfalls, urging them to think creatively about how to overcome such struggles and achieve successful outcomes.

**Keywords:** ESP, materials design, perceptions, teacher beliefs

## 1. Introduction

Discussion of the status of the English language as a medium of communication between members of different cultures rarely generates doubts and disagreements. The insistent need for English, especially in professional settings, is urging academic institutions worldwide to introduce discipline-specific language programs using approaches such as ESP, EAP, CLIL, and EMI. There is, however, a dearth of studies focusing on the experiential aspects of ESP courses, especially less tangible aspects such as what actors in the courses think, know, and feel as well as how they consequently enact and are guided by these aspects in their teaching and learning experiences (Alexander, 2012; Basturkmen, 2019; Basturkmen & Bocanegra-valle, 2018; Campion, 2016).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Understanding Cognition

With respect to the issue of teacher cognition, the literature has pinpointed the difficulty of differentiating between cognitive concepts such as beliefs and knowledge. On the one hand, researchers such as Borg (2015) have brought to attention the issue of having different labels for conceptualizing similar concepts, such as images, conceptions, case knowledge, knowing-in-action, and orientations of teaching, which could generate confusion among researchers problematizing these concepts. Other researchers, such as Pajares (1992), have highlighted the "inextricably intertwined" nature of the complex processes accruing in human cognition such as beliefs and knowledge, making these concepts problematic to deconstruct. Adding up to the complexity of problematizing the domain of cognitions, despite the usually stated dynamic nature of teachers' cognitions, they are also seen in the literature as "deep-seated" (Trinder, 2013), deeply established in the context of their occurrence (Phipps &

Borg, 2009), and usually impervious to change (Borg, 2015). As such, beliefs and knowledge are discussed in this article under the umbrella term *teacher cognition*, where “the main focus of attention is on the complex totality of cognitions, the ways this develops, and the way this interacts with teacher behavior in the classroom” (Verloop et al., 2001, p. 446). In the current study, cognition is seen as the “networks of beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts which L2 teachers hold about all the aspects of their profession and draw on in their work” (Sanchez & Borg, 2014, p.45). Thus, by probing into the journey of the teacher participant in the current study, we hope to gain a better understanding of the experience of ESP teachers while designing and implementing their ESP materials and how their thoughts can steer their classroom actions and practices.

## 2.2 Cognition in the Field of ESP

A core ingredient in the ESP course is considering the nature of language “use” for the “user” of a specific domain (Ferguson, 2007). Based on this concept, planning for instruction should be reflective of the styles and conventions commonly adopted in a target professional community. Achievement of intended outcomes is therefore subjected to and governed by the adequate knowledge of the target context in which students will be potentially involved. The above concepts naturally support a discussion of materials as an essential component that could help provide students with what they need to be able to communicate effectively in their potential workplaces. Specifically in the area of ESP materials, an important aspect that should occupy considerable space in ESP research is teachers’ cognitions regarding this aspect of the ESP course and how these cognitions are interpreted into actions inside and outside their classrooms. In a general sense, Borg (2018, 2015) referred to the value of familiarizing teachers with their past and present beliefs about numerous aspects of their teaching experiences and how these beliefs can be the foundation on which they constantly form new beliefs to inform their instructional practice.

Considering the area of ESP teacher cognition, a cursory look at the ESP literature leads to a surprising inference of the paucity of research tackling ESP teacher cognitions and practices. This is especially surprising when bearing in mind the unique nature of ESP classrooms and the specific content introduced. Researchers such as Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) and Wu and Badger (2009), for example, have looked into what ESP teachers think about when teaching specific genres and how they make in-class decisions to react to certain unexpected situations. For example, Wu and Badger found that ESP teachers facing in-class subject knowledge dilemmas felt like they were incompetent but that the strategies they used to resolve these dilemmas allowed them to maintain their students’ respect. Atai and Nejadghanbar explored the same area with ESP teachers decisions’ ranging from admitting ignorance of subject knowledge to avoidance to taking risks in addressing the situation. Findings in these studies support the claims of the impact of contextual factors on teachers’ beliefs and consequential instructional decisions and further confirm the impact of historical experiential knowledge on their actions in the ESP classroom.

Another aspect in this discussion that can affect the success of ESP materials is related to ESP professional development and teacher education. Hüttner and Smit (2019) pinpointed the virtue of exposing preservice teachers to the experience of ESP material design and development, which can lead to their realization of the importance of attaining specific content knowledge for the success of the ESP instructional experience. The role of management in facilitating these TE opportunities has been a crucial factor determining the success of an ESP experience (Celani, 2008; Holmes & Celani, 2006) or its failure (Labassi, 2010; Tavakoli, 2018). As Modiano (1999) described, “English seems to be rushing forward, always one step ahead of the practitioners responsible for teaching the language” (p. 22). In the special case of ESP course materials, it can be contended that the three main pillars on which the materials design process can be founded are (a) the theoretical underpinnings driving the teachers’ decisions, (b) the needs of the learners, and (c) the context in which the teaching and learning experiences would potentially take place (Brown J. D., 2016). Although language teachers in academic institutions usually come from different general backgrounds such as ELT, assessment, and TESOL, formally training these teachers to be considerate of how to successfully tackle the task of designing and developing their own ESP materials can rarely be found in academic settings (Atai & Nejadghanbar; Campion, 2016; Tao & Gao, 2018). Thus, it can be contended that specific language instruction is often treated as a “marketable commodity” (Chun, 2009). Here, Chun (2009) explained how the view of the personnel in charge of managing and teaching ESP courses has been recently driven to embrace a view of the “marketization” of the educational field, something that has seriously affected the courses’ decisions, including the quality of syllabus and materials. As Basturkmen (2019) further asserted, “to date, the literature in EAP and ESP has tended to foreground the needs of learners and background the learning and knowledge needs of teachers” (p. 318). Thus, this situation is further aggravated by the lack of institutional support to provide genuine and effective ESP learning opportunities whether for preservice or in-service teachers. The irony here lies in the contradiction between arguments in the

aforementioned discussion; although academic institutions expect language departments to come up with solutions and new and effective ways to cater to the large numbers of students annually pouring into their institutions, the same academic institutions do not necessarily provide the staff members with the support and training they need to creatively reach the intended outcomes. This becomes especially threatening for the success of ESP instruction, given that most specific materials are in-house materials that are supposed to be purposefully customized for the context in which they would be used. To get better results from the ESP courses, academic institutions should not only focus on equipping their teachers with the theoretical knowledge of ESP but also aspire to problematize, through their teacher educators, issues related to the realities of the ESP courses such as understanding the learners' current and future aspired backgrounds, learning how to effectively cater for learners' needs in their materials, and learning how to be sensitive of contextual issues surrounding the instructional experiences and the learners' future scenarios. Then, teachers should learn how to effectively implement these concepts in their classrooms in a way that could help reach the intended outcomes.

A possible hazard that can be generated from the lack of teachers' ESP education is a potential condemnation of the unteachability of ESP for their learners, which can consequently affect how they approach their courses, instructional decisions, and learners. In this realm, studies such as those of Alexander (2012) and Johnson and Lyddon (2016) have discussed the beliefs of EAP teachers working with students of low language proficiency. Both studies have tapped into substantial issues pertaining to teachers' depictions versus the realities of ESP courses such as the complicated conflict between how teachers view their learners' target situations needs and the time allocated for the ESP courses. This, in turn, has led to teachers deeming ESP as being unteachable, something that has jeopardized teachers' decisions regarding their material design and approach. Such examples of teachers' beliefs come in opposition to some arguments in the literature, such as that of Hyland (2009), who taps in his discussion of specificity into the issue of teaching ESP to less proficient learners, maintaining that instead of treating language instruction as a system of grammatical and linguistic items that should be rigidly delivered to students, specific language instruction should be viewed as an "induction to a new culture," which helps students experience a flavour of what communication in their target situations could be like and how to survive by effectively employing the linguistic competencies commonly used in these situations. Such cognitive shift can have a considerable impact on how teachers view specific instruction and how to effectively employ such belief to achieve learning outcomes.

Another consequential pitfall in the realm of ESP teacher cognitions can be teachers resorting to their past repertoires of beliefs and practices about language teaching as means of seeking an already validated style and strategies of instruction that has already been tried. These beliefs can be inadequate to ESP instruction and can also be stagnant and decontextualized, especially in the modern time of everchanging needs and knowledge. In the ESP scene particularly, the hazard generated by the lack of TE exacerbates, resulting in teachers resorting back to their GE-related beliefs and practices that they have acquired historically as GE teachers and former learners. For ESP teachers to soundly ground their instructional decisions in the ESP classroom, they should be familiar with the textual and contextual elements surrounding the target knowledge and competencies as they occur in their authentic environment. Such level of awareness, as Campion (2016), Ding and Campion (2016), and Alexander (2012) proposed, is not always found among ESP/EAP staff members because of the lack of educational opportunities, whether for preservice or in-service teachers, something that eventually hinders the GE to ESP transformation.

Researchers such as Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) have confirmed that studies that demonstrate the journey through which teachers and course designers go during their configuration and application of their ESP course curriculums and materials are not as common as they should be to enable teachers (preservice and in-service) and teacher educators to form expectations of *their* own journeys. An example of these few studies is Lockwood's (2012) detailed account of the experience of delving into the worksite's linguistic needs and her learners in the context of Asian call centres. This experience informed her decisions of the target skills and approaches to endorse and employ in her curriculum. Later, Lockwood explained her experience of designing the course content using the authentic materials from the researched call centre as tools to sensitize the textual and contextual aspects that were found problematic for her learners such as dealing with customers in conditions such as poor call quality and moments of customers' distress. Hafner and Miller (2018) also contributed to the ESP literature with their elaborate illustration of their case of designing, developing, and evaluating their ESP courses in the context of Hong Kong, delineating several significant terrains in the experiences of teachers during such experience and documenting the nature of decision-making and the changes made to react to certain contingencies in the course and with their learners. Celani (2008) and Holmes and Celani (2006) have indicated that the success of the ESP experience in the Brazilian context was due to numerous factors, amongst them the

involvement of language teachers in the discussion about the curriculum and materials across the nation. This amplified the sense of ownership teachers had because of their involvement in the decision-making process and their dynamic involvement in course and materials design, review, and amendment. The lack of such collaborative and community-based approach toward handling the ESP experience was among the factors contributing to the derailment of the sustainability of the ESP experience in Tunisia as Labassi (2010) stated. Labassi explained how teachers, who mostly came from ELT backgrounds, felt the solitude of being responsible for handling their own courses, thus jeopardizing the quality of materials and selection of instructional approaches.

Based on the above discussion, the importance of facilitating channels through which teachers communicate and exchange knowledge as well as instructional tips and tricks can be highlighted as a fundamental method of gaining insights into “the ways individuals acquire and deploy the specialist discourse competencies that allow them to legitimate their professional identities and to effectively participate as group members” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 6). In contrast, “Relationships with other colleagues who are unsupportive, emotionally cold, or at best display an ambivalent attitude toward innovative teaching methods can contribute to a sense of futility and isolation” (Hiver et al., 2018, p. 14). Such views render the inference that language instruction is and should be regarded by members of the community as a social event by nature. This conception in turn entails the consideration of teacher–teacher communication and the reciprocation of experiences as a crucial tool to lead teachers’ knowledge and approaches through their exposure to the positive and negative instances experienced by their surrounding others whether in planning, daily classroom decisions, assessment, and review of their ESP courses. This reciprocation of knowledge and experiences is particularly beneficial in ESP because of the “different layers of context” in which teachers might find themselves because of the specific nature of target genres (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Tao & Gao, 2018; Wu & Badger, 2009), leading ultimately to shaping their perceptions toward improving their instructional experiences.

The studies have demonstrated that the notion of ESP teacher cognition is complex, and it is most likely even more complex when related to material design, given the contextual factors of each ESP teacher’s individual context. To further understand the position of ESP teachers in the process of choosing or designing materials, research into ESP teacher cognition in light of material design comes into the picture.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Questions*

Based on the above justifications and consideration of the literature in the field, the objectives of the study are to explore what affects ESP teachers’ perceptions during material selection and implementation as well as how the perceptions of these materials influence their classrooms. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What affects ESP teachers’ perceptions during their preparation of ESP materials, and how does it affect them?
2. How do teachers’ perceptions of their materials affect teaching and learning in the classroom?

#### *3.2 Context*

The study takes place in the English Language Unit (ELU) in the College of Technological Studies (hereafter CTS) in Kuwait, a vocational college responsible for supplying the Kuwaiti labour market with technical personnel in numerous majors. CTS offers several diploma and bachelor’s degree programs within the technology of chemical, technical, civil, marine, and petroleum engineering fields. As part of the English language requirements, students take two common core preparatory courses of technical nature, leading to two advanced courses: Technical Report Writing and Communication Skills.

Communication Skills, the course targeted in this study, is an ESP course that focuses on the skills of listening and speaking. It has the overarching aims of preparing learners to effectively receive and use language in potential workplace scenarios pertinent to daily communications and specific incidents, such as accidents, presentations, and safety in the workplace. The course is organized according to themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Communication Skills course themes

Theme	Focus
<b>Safety</b>	Talking about safety signs Warning against workplace hazards Reporting details of accidents
<b>Specifications</b>	Understanding conversations about specifications Asking and answering questions about specifications Presenting product specifications
<b>Processes and Procedures</b>	Understanding the logical flow of processes and procedures Explaining processes and procedures
<b>Figures and Statistics</b>	Understanding figures and statistics Explaining figures and statistics
<b>Troubleshooting</b>	Asking and answering troubleshooting questions Explaining defaults and suggesting fixes

Because there is no specific textbook that can help satisfactorily address the above themes, the course uses a compilation of materials gathered by staff members from sources such as the internet or self-developed materials. Teachers are not obliged to use the provided materials; they must work toward achieving the target course goals. Based on the course and the compiled materials, teachers usually adopt other supplementary materials, such as YouTube videos, or they design their own worksheets.

### 3.3 Participant

The participant is a Kuwaiti staff member who has served at the institution since 2010 (pseudonym R1). Her master's and doctoral degrees are both in the field of ESP. She has 14 years of experience teaching ESP, four of which are at the CTS. No sampling protocol was followed with respect to the selection of the participant. The participant was not purposefully selected for the study; she was the one who came up with the idea for the current research. When R1 was assigned to teach Communication Skills for the first time, she looked at the provided materials and immediately decided to generate her own set of materials based on the course goals. She then approached the other researcher (R2) and a discussion helped build an idea about the motivation behind the study as well as the theoretical underpinnings, the methodological and ethical issues surrounding the study.

### 3.4 Methods, Procedures, and Analysis

A multimethod qualitative approach was implemented to address the research questions in this study, including classroom observations, documentary analysis of the materials, and stimulated recall interviews. A case study was adopted to thoroughly answer the research questions. The main features of case studies are that the "units" can range from an individual to an organization with the boundaries of space and time (Ashley, 2012). A case study is especially useful in this study because it requires in-depth, descriptive answers based on a variety of evidence and flexibility to retrieve this evidence from documents, interviews, and observations (Ashley, 2012; Yin, 2012). This case study is a combination of both an intrinsic case study, where the researcher wants better understanding of a specific context (ESP teaching at PAAET), and an instrumental case study, where the researcher wants to provide insights that have a generalizable relevance (ESP teacher cognition regarding materials design). To ensure the variety of evidence, the case of the ESP teacher was examined through documentary analysis (ESP materials), observations, and interviews.

The 6-week data collection process was divided into two interactive stages (inspired by Ashley, 2012), which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Stages of data collection

Exploratory stage	First interview
	Documentary analysis
	Participant observations
Semistructured stage	Participant observations
	Documentary analysis
	Second interview

The two stages were interactive in the sense that R2 went back and forth between the different methods of data collection to explore and investigate recurring themes and patterns elicited from the data. There were two interviews, documents including the course description and materials of the course, and three observations (each 1 hour and 20 minutes), which is the full duration of class time. The exploratory stage involved a first semistructured interview, which helped set the scene and elicit R1's perception in terms of the ESP course and its materials, as well as a documentary analysis of the course materials (description, aims, syllabus, suggested materials, etc.) and participant observations. The semistructured stage involved more participant observations, handouts given to the learners during the observations, and a second semistructured interview to further investigate issues discovered from the other data collection methods. The second interview questions were based on the issues uncovered during the data collection period from all methods combined.

R2 attended one lesson of each chapter for observation. Selection of the observed lessons was according to the convenience of both researchers based on their work schedules. R2 was introduced to the students as a researcher involved in a study focusing on *teachers'* experiences in the classroom, and students were given the right to express any feelings of discomfort that could be generated by her presence in the classroom.

After each observation session, R2 took notes of what happened in the classroom. This was then followed by a semistructured interview to allow the participant to justify some of the adopted practices, elaborate on important thoughts, and allow the second researcher to demystify any misunderstanding that could be generated from the observations.

Large amounts of varied data require an approach that adds structure and coherence without compromising the originality of the accounts and information. Thematic analysis was used to elicit prominent themes from the generated data. This analytic framework was used because of its effectiveness in "thematising meaning" (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Thematic analysis has the potential of allowing for the reduction of large amounts of complex data to form themes that bear meaningful portrayals to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2014). As such, a pixelated depiction could be built from the generation of the themes, potentially leading to an understanding of the teachers' experiences while designing and developing ESP materials and the impact of these experiences on their classroom decisions and practices. The analytic cycles that Braun and Clarke introduced were adopted to generate themes to address the questions in this study. The thematic analysis was done systematically to uncover patterns and connections within and between datasets, which in turn helps answer the research questions in a comprehensive manner.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the themes and patterns uncovered from the thematic analysis process will be categorized according to the two research questions proposed for this study. The quotations were extracted from the first interview (I1) and second interview (I2). To familiarize the reader with R1's teaching practices and procedures, Table 3 lists key characteristics of R1's ESP teaching noted during the observations that depict her teaching style in the targeted ESP courses.

Table 3. Key characteristics of R1 teaching

Key Characteristics of R1 ESP Teaching
Uses data show for presentation slides/internet searches
Encourages use of the computers in the lab to complete tasks
Promotes constant engagement and frequently receives high participation from students
Teaches in English, rarely communicates with students in Arabic
Continuously relates topics, tasks, and terminology to learners' disciplines

#### 4.1 Issues affecting ESP teachers' perceptions during their preparation of ESP materials

##### 4.1.1 View of ELU as a Service Department

R1 believes that the language unit she works in is viewed second tier compared to other faculties in the institution. From the interview, it seems that this institutional view has filtered down to the English teachers themselves, “. . . we are a service department, and the staff members themselves, they are saying this and it bugs me . . .” (I1). This view affects a number of issues in ESP teaching and materials development. On the one hand, teachers do not always find themselves in the lucky situation of teaching a single discipline at the same time or generally during their careers. ESP teachers sometimes find themselves juggling between the teaching of more than one discipline for multiple reasons such as the inflated rates of students wanting to earn academic degrees as a gateway to career security (Ding & Campion, 2016) and the current status of ESP/EAP teachers as being within a “service” department supposedly in charge of catering to the needs of all scientific departments within the academic institution (Benesch, 2009; Ding & Bruce, 2017). This was exactly the case of the English unit at the CTS as the participant depicted. With the numerous disciplines introduced at the CTS (p. 6), language teachers are usually seen as supporting elements who are supposed to cater to the differing needs of the core major departments in the institution. Such pragmatic perception of language instruction, which is surprisingly shared by members of the language unit themselves, sometimes makes their instruction more linguistically oriented—a pitfall that is prone to happen when teachers are overwhelmed with the differing types of knowledge required for each department, which makes their jobs of teaching ESP even more challenging. Other challenges such as the lack of experienced teachers, budget, and research support come to the fore as a natural consequence to this current view of ESP in this context. Looking at it from another angle, Peters and Fernandez (2013) uncovered that adopting the view of language and professional genres as “incentives,” which brings advancements to one’s professional path in the institution, prompts teachers, learners, and managing personnel to design and approach ESP courses with greater preparedness to tackle potential obstacles faced during the course. Additionally, promoting the perception of English as a core ingredient in the learners’ educational experiences in the institution, rather than a provider of linguistic supporting services, can help raise the awareness of staff members in the institution of the role that language plays in the educational endeavours of their learners.

Researchers such as Benesch (2009) and Evans and Green (2007) have highlighted the political factor as significant in guiding the beliefs and practices of ESP/EAP teachers in their courses, the former documenting that bolstering her perception as a worthy member of the team during her team teaching with the subject specialist teacher had empowered her to work more confidently during the course, whereas the latter highlighted that negative factors such as the prevalent perceptions of the worthlessness of ESP courses and consequential budget cuts resulted in general uncertain perceptions of ESP instruction and the value of the ESP courses from the ESP teachers themselves, the learners, and the managing personnel. Although the team teaching model is not implemented at the investigated context, there is a possibility that the lack of collaboration between language and scientific discipline teachers is the cause of this service department view as R1 confirms, “. . . we don’t have a lot of collaborations with the scientific disciplines, with the workplace . . .” (I2).

The bidirectional relationship between beliefs and practices would propose another important angle in this issue. Because beliefs are usually seen as catalysts for guiding practices, and similarly practices can be shapers of beliefs, it is inferred here that the approach that some specific language departments have adopted could contribute to the aforementioned view of ESP as peripheral to the educational experience. To be more specific, the tendency of some teachers to “work *for* rather than *with* subject specialists” could stem from a view of language instruction from a purely pragmatic and textual angle, thus validating a view of specific language instruction as “accommodationist” and “subservient” to other departments (Benesch, 2001; Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Hyland, 2016). Because R1 rejects this view and sees ESP as a core subject that is fundamental to the learners and their target situation, she approaches the materials with context in mind. For example, R1 stated,

“We are a core requisite in every programme, in every part of the world” (I1). In addition, R1 reinforces this to her students and sees a difference in their attitude toward the course, “When I explain, for example, at the beginning of each unit how they are going to be using it in the future, how do I expect the benefit for them; I see a different approach. Students approach it differently because they understand we are going to need it” (I1). Therefore, by avoiding the view of ESP courses as a “piecemeal remediation of individual error or a simple topping up of deficiencies” (Hyland, 2009, p. 202), teachers could explore the target genres more critically with a deeper aim of exposing their learners to both textual and contextual aspects pertaining to their scientific content. As such, they could employ approaches and materials that endorse useful skills and competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaborative work, and research skills.

Bearing in mind the cognition–practice dynamic relationship, this in turn can affect how teachers regard and consequently implement their instructional tools during the course, which can eventually jeopardize the experience of the students in the ESP course. Such perception of the superiority of the scientific discipline teachers over specific language teachers can also hinder any attempts of cooperation between the two, as Hyland (2009) indicated. Thus, and instead of regarding the academic scene as a dynamic “site of struggle,” which can be politically sensitive to the learners’ needs and anticipated future scenarios (Benesch, 2001), ESP teachers often tend to “accept institutional imperatives in defining needs too readily” (Hyland, 2009, p. 215).

#### 4.1.2 Difficulty in Planning ESP Materials

Although materials play a key role in the success of an ESP course, the process of designing and developing them is not easy for most ESP teachers. R1 expressed this difficulty in statements such as, “It’s giving me a hard time to design, plan my instructional plans” and “. . . there are materials but they’re not guided they’re not coming in like an organized flow which allows anyone to teach it smoothly [. . .] I’m an ESP specialist, and I’m struggling” (I1). She also explained that “Although my objectives were clear, I couldn’t find a lot of resources, materials to help me” (I2). R1 then approaches materials development through a number of steps including reaching out to colleagues, trial and error, and searching for alternatives as well as complementary and supplementary materials. Hüttner and Smit (2019) viewed ESP material design as a triangulation of what teachers theoretically know, what they believe about language teaching, and their actual experiential repertoire of teaching and learning situations. R1 makes statements that depict her theoretical knowledge and experiential repertoire, such as, “. . . it’s going to be nearly impossible to find a way or to find a book which serves technical language and the type of [. . .] tasks that they would perform later on when they graduate . . .” (I2).

In this realm, Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) have maintained that teachers’ exposure to the experiences of their peers enhance innovation in their course decisions inside and outside the classroom. This is, as Labassi (2010) explained, is because of the sense of community gained in such environment, which can help boost the exchange of useful resources and support. In contexts where these communicational channels are missing, teachers’ instruction can depend on methods such as classroom trials and errors to try to bridge the gap between their GE and ESP knowledge (Campion, 2016). The risk of such environments can lie in the teachers’ inability to reflect on their current instructional status, where they currently are in term of ESP instruction and the means of improving it, thus resulting in a static professional mode that can not only accommodate to the comfort of the teacher but also be of little genuine outcomes to the learners or the achievement of intended outcomes. R1 realized this and suggested, “If there was one hour [. . .] where students or teachers gather casually in a lounge for example, we drink coffee, we casually chat about our experiences . . .” (I1). She also plans to continue her efforts in reaching out to her colleagues regardless of believing that her efforts are lonely: “I will approach some teachers about the troubleshooting chapter. I will try to see their experience [. . .] But why do I have to always take the initiative?” (I2). This theme of individual teachers working hard to support students through their programs is also discussed at length in the work of Bond (2020), especially because these individual teachers are working “in degrees of isolation” (2020, p. 193). Therefore, R1 agrees that there is a strong need for sharing information and practice as an ongoing process leading ultimately to professional improvement.

#### 4.1.3 Struggling with Learners’ Low Autonomy and Proficiency Levels

Most ready-made pedagogic materials are seen as too advanced for ESP learners suffering from low proficiency levels (Bayram & Canaran, 2020; Swales, 1980; Tawalbeh, 2018). This can be seen in the Chinese (Evans & Green, 2007) and Saudi (Gaffas, 2019) contexts, where learners have difficulty in EAP/ESP courses in terms of vocabulary, reading disciplinary texts, and writing. Another finding in the Saudi context is that the remedial and preparatory courses “were not found to have much impact on students’ language improvement in the four skills [. . .] They encountered problems in speaking English, resulting in resistance to participate in class discussions,

even when they had adequate subject-matter knowledge” (Gaffas 2019, p. 11). The ESP learners observed in one of R1’s sections displayed low proficiency but had high participation and engagement in the classroom, unlike the learners in her other sections. The ESP materials that R1 provided were beginner to preintermediate, although the learners are expected to be at a higher proficiency level, preintermediate to intermediate, by the time they reach ESP level. R1’s readiness to deal with situations where learners are below the required level was explained in her first interview about her on-the-spot change of classroom plan: “. . . but when I saw them struggling, and they don’t know, so immediately I had a worksheet where I explained the passive voice [. . .] their level is what guides the reality in the classroom although you have prepared for something totally different.” Therefore, as Borg (2015) explained, there are number of reasons to explain a range of instructional decisions, and in the case of R1, it seems that leans toward facilitating learning on the expense of the thorough achievement of ESP-related course goals.

Green (2020) explained the consequences of low-proficiency-level GCC students facing EMI in their tertiary education after years of learning in Arabic—from low levels of communicative ability to teachers doing what they could to overcome these challenges. The learners’ low proficiency could also be contributing to their low autonomy. R1 makes the effort to encourage her learners through elicitation and asking questions about their specialization as R2 observed; however, she still stated, “I try as much as I can to reinforce this shared responsibility, but with the cultural beliefs regarding what the role of the learner is and what the role of the teacher is, it’s a whole different story.” Although the learners’ low proficiency and autonomy levels put R1 in a discouraging situation for an ESP teacher, she confirms that she has adapted to being more responsible in the teacher–learner equation; “I’ve had a good command of the materials through my teaching for three sections last semester. I know the weaknesses and the strengths now, and I’m working on it” (I2). In the case of R1, her linguistic expertise has allowed her to identify how to connect her materials and instruction to the learners’ disciplinary needs. However, knowing what needs to be done but not having the support from peers or learners has resulted in a sense of loneliness and frustration. A key strategy that R1 follows here as shown in her responses is her concession to the conditions of the current situation and her learners’ proficiencies and attitudes, as well as attitudes of her colleagues, thus continuing solo on her course refinement journey.

#### *4.2 Effects of Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Materials on Teaching and Learning in the Classroom*

##### *4.2.1 Skills are Contextual*

As Dudley-Evans and St. John (2001) explained, “ESP may be designed for specific disciplines, may use methodology that differs from general English, and is more likely to be designed for intermediate or advanced adult learners at tertiary level” (pp. 4–5). In addition, Hyland (2002, p. 385) argued “that ESP must involve teaching the literacy skills which are appropriate to the purposes and understandings of particular academic and professional communities.” These two statements combined represent the first belief reflected in R1’s teaching: ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner and that these specific needs focus mostly on skills that are contextual to their target situations. This is recurrent in the interviews as well when R1 explained that learners must be informed that these skills are going to be used in their target situations, “It’s not only to enable them to use it in the class. No, you have to raise their awareness that you are going to use it in the future, so how are you going to use it in the future?” (I1). She also expressed a sense of reward in succeeding to do so, “. . . that’s where I find the reward, that I have to raise their awareness of how to use it in the future rather than teach them the specific terms or specific structures . . .” (I1). Therefore, in addition to the challenges of familiarizing herself with the learners’ specializations (Swales, 2019), there is also the additional challenge of R1 familiarizing herself with their professional target situations because she insists, “I have to relate it to their workplace to enable them to envision themselves working there and using the aspect” (I2). This belief is affirmed and reaffirmed in the interviews, classroom materials, and teaching observed in her classroom.

##### *4.2.2 Student Engagement Informs ESP Teachers’ Decision-Making*

Another belief that R1 repeatedly depicts is that inviting students to participate in her teaching process is a must: “I do believe strongly in students engagement in decision-making” (I1). In fact, at the start of every course, she provides the learners with a link, where learners are encouraged to share their thoughts throughout the course. She tells the learners, “You are with me on this. We are in the same classroom. I’m not the only decision-maker here. I would consider your opinion. It’s anonymous just to make it easier, [. . .] to eliminate any embarrassment or negative feelings” (I1). R1 also believes that different disciplines require different teaching methods and communication and that high levels of specificity in ESP is essential for her students to engage and participate in their learning (Bond, 2020). Therefore, reflecting on what engages the learners is also part of her process, “I always thought about what stimulates the participation. I always thought about what at least caters for their

needs” (I2). Gestanti et al. (2019) found that ESP learners need highly specific materials to encourage them to participate in the classroom because they potentially link this content to their future professional destinations. However, not all her learners are motivated to participate: “It was only this class that took these opportunities, and they worked on it, they built on it, and they gave me really creative ideas in terms of how they saw the materials” (I2). Because ESP courses are usually customized to learners’ needs, it is expected that learners are more highly motivated than GE learners, but sometimes learners are simply not motivated to learn regardless of the specificity of the course (Brown, 2007; Hutchinson & Waters; Robinson, 1980; Swales, 1985). This could be attributed to many other factors such as learners’ willingness to communicate in the classroom being affected by their traditional learning background (Nunan, 2006) or the image of their professional future identity (Shen et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

In this final section, we will explain the implications derived from the findings of the study and direct them toward future research.

First, ESP teacher education should include materials development as a major component. Issues such as finding suitable materials based on learners’ specialization and developing materials based on learner proficiency are common concerns of ESP teachers, whether preservice or in-service, and thus should be included in ESP teacher education before they start their specific teaching experience or continuously while engaging in this activity.

Second, the difficulties that ESP teachers face can be resolved by a number of collaborations. These include collaborations with ESP teachers within the department (especially those teaching the same courses), scientific discipline teachers, and the ESP learners’ future workplaces. These collaborations should result in familiarizing ESP teachers with the required contextual skills as well as addressing learner needs and customizing materials that attend to those needs.

Third, the institutional role in facilitating a healthy environment for teachers to share knowledge and experiences whether internally in their institution or externally with counterparts in other parts of the world is an advantage for the development of ESP courses. Another role of the institution is to bridge the gap between teachers and learners so teachers can approach ESP instruction in the most beneficial way.

A final implication for institutions is to facilitate an ongoing discourse channel between ESP teachers and learners’ future workplaces to enable ESP teachers to build a conception of future workplace realities for their learners.

It must be noted that similar studies investigating the perceptions of a larger number of ESP teachers within similar contexts are recommended. Teacher reflections during the design and implementation of their ESP materials is also recommended for further research. In addition, investigations of ESP teacher collaborations with different stakeholders is another area to explore in future research.

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