

Saudi Students' Perception of ESP Courses in the Preparatory Year

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Abstract

Globalisation has made English a dominant language both in education and in manpower recruitment worldwide. Due to globalisation and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia which enhanced the involvement of Saudi youth in the work force, the study of English language, especially English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has become increasingly important in the Saudi context. Therefore, this research study aims to investigate the importance of learning ESP by highlighting students' perceptions of the ESP courses delivered in the preparatory year in a Saudi university. To achieve this, a quantitative method was employed to collect data. The study briefly explores the impact of students' perceptions of the subject matter on their performance. It focusses on students' perception of the impact of learning the different components of ESP, i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking, on their current studies and future career. A study sample of 70 participants responded to the Dundee Ready Educational Environment Measure (DREEM) questionnaire. The results revealed that the students indicated that ESP was important for, not only their current studies, but also for their future careers. Another significant outcome of the research was that the students believed that competence in ESP can help them to understand specialised textbooks.

Keywords: English for specific purposes, English language teaching, students' perception, EFL Saudi students

1. Introduction

The contemporary globalised world is characterised by economic activities that spun international borders. It is now the norm for individuals and teams with different language backgrounds to work on projects, making effective communication among all team members critical to project success. Academic institutions have recognised this component of the contemporary world and have moved to reduce potential language barriers. One approach that has been widely accepted in non-English speaking countries, such as Saudi Arabia, is to have courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This approach is believed to mitigate language barriers that may emerge when these non-native English speakers interact with other professionals in the same field or read literature from other parts of the world that are often presented in English. This study, therefore, explores the perceptions of students enrolled in Saudi universities regarding learning ESP.

There are many reasons why an individual may want to learn a second language. These include being able to converse with others in a foreign land or communicate with them as one carries out their professional duties. Learning a language for the latter purposes is often referred to as learning a Language for special or specific purposes (LSP). An interrogation of the history of the LSP field reveals a high degree of theoretical interest in the description of various sublanguages. Though these sub-languages exist within the general language system, LSP is taken as a response to specific professional needs. Initially, approaches to teaching LSP focused on written outputs such as specific terminology, registers, and text types amongst others. However, in recent years there has been increasing interest in the communicative processes involved as well as accompanying sociological and psychological dimensions. This resulted in the emergence of aspects such as sociolinguistics, critical linguistics, and social constructivism.

1.1 Defining English for Special Purposes (ESP)

English is used as an international language, and is taught in most areas across the world (Tan et al., 2020). In addition, globalisation has seen the status of the English language in the world shifting enormously. Its use has spread globally in recent years and this has changed its status from being a standard language spoken by a handful of powerful countries into an international language or *lingua franca* spoken by speakers from around the world, most of whom learned it when they were adults (Llurda, 2004). The accompanying global demand, use, and

appropriation of English as an international language (EIL) motivated a profession-wide response to English language learning (Tan et al., 2020).

The required competencies in English are not uniform and as such, they are taught using different models and pedagogical approaches dictated by the needs of different individuals. Since there are several reasons why people need to understand, speak, or write English, it is not surprising that there is a myriad of English teaching causes, each tailored to meet specific goals. Common English teaching courses include English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English for General Purposes (EGP). It is for this reason that it has been deemed appropriate to devote this section to defining how ESP is often conceptualised.

According to Alvi et al. (2021), ESP is a targeted and oriented form of English language teaching that is designed to meet the demands of specific communities of learners studying towards obtaining certain professional skills as well as improving certain job-related performances. English for Specific Purposes differs from ESL, EFL, and EGP in that it is oriented (Hutchinson & Waters, 1984). This means the material taught leans towards a specific profession, for example engineering students who are non-native English speakers may need to know specific terms relevant to their field of study. Hutchinson and Waters (1984) argued that ESP is not a product but an approach. This is because ESP involves teaching appropriate academic conventions specific to particular academic subjects (Jordan, 1997). “ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987. p. 19).

Williams (2014) holds that ESP programs differ from general English language courses in the following characteristics:

- 1) ESP content is designed to meet specific student needs.
- 2) ESP content has an overwhelming bias towards themes and topics from a particular occupation or discipline.
- 3) They use real work-related documents to create content.
- 4) They promote intercultural competency and cultural awareness.

1.2 Need for ESP with a Special Focus on Saudi Arabia

Given the reality that English is now the dominant medium across the world, it makes sense for non-native English-speaking professionals to improve their English communication skills. This will allow more efficient transboundary communication. The need for individuals to be able to converse with peers in their professions is also increased by globalisation.

Globalisation has allowed individuals to trade technologies across the world. In the Saudi context, Alsubaie (2016) reported that ESP it is important in fields such as health, engineering, business, and management to deliver expected outcomes. This is due to the fact that—compared to other developed nations—Saudi Arabia can be considered as lagging in home-grown technologies and has to import many of the technologies in use today. It is therefore very important that Saudi people can efficiently converse with technology partners elsewhere, who most likely do not speak Arabic.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has several universities that were created to produce individuals competent enough to contribute to economic development. The kingdom has seen the value of higher education and the number of universities has increased from only one in 1957 to 29 government universities currently as well as several technical colleges. The student in these institutions of higher learning will need to read literature on respective subjects produced by other scholars elsewhere. This literature is more likely to be in English hence the importance of ESP in the Kingdom. Furthermore, the students will also need to produce publications that can be read by other individuals elsewhere and English is the most effective language in that regard. This discussion illustrates the importance of ESP in Saudi Arabia.

It must also be appreciated that the utility of ESP goes beyond teaching professionals to be competent in conversing or communicating in English. It is increasingly getting accepted that in the contemporary globalised and highly interconnected world, professionals need not only to be multilingual but to also have intercultural skills to enhance communication among culturally diverse individuals (Aguilar Pérez, 2018). This is in alignment with the argument of Pulverness and Tomlinson (2003, p. 426) that “language teaching and learning invariably involve issues of sociocultural meaning, and that approaches which disregard the cultural dimension of language are fundamentally flawed”. In other words, ESP is useful in addressing other challenges such as ethnic marginalisation and racism.

Having discussed the importance of ESP in non-English speaking countries, the discussion shifts to one factor that

may hinder or promote the learning of ESP, student perceptions.

1.3 Students' Perceptions and Learning

The teaching of ESP has shifted from focusing on writing, reading, and general communication to comprising aspects, such as sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is defined as “the descriptive study of the effect of all aspects of society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and society’s effect on language” (Hudson, 1996, p. 4). It is now acknowledged that any language is essentially made up of a set of items, what Hudson (1996, p. 21) calls ‘linguistic items’. These items include entities as words, sounds, and grammatical structures among others. Early linguists, such as Chomsky, were concerned with the arrangements of these items and they formed the basis of language teaching. However, sociologists have since realised that these items do not exist in a vacuum. They are also influenced by the social structure the speaker exists in. In other words, the social context where one exists can promote or hinder their ability to learn a new language. One important socially constructed factor that affects the ability to learn is the perception of the learner regarding the items being learned, in this case, ESP. It is for this reason that the essay discusses the perceptions of learners regarding ESP.

Furthermore, the overall goal of any education system is to ensure that all students understand, derive utility from what they have been taught, and achieve expected competencies. It is common knowledge that academic performance varies markedly, even within a seemingly homogenous classroom with some students performing better than others. There are different reasons why students perform differently, with students’ perceptions towards some components of the subject or teaching being one of the reasons. However, student perceptions are a powerful tool for measuring effective teaching practices in the classroom (König & Pflanzl, 2016).

A universally agreed-upon definition of what entails a perception is difficult to come by, as many authors define the concept differently. Wang et al. (2009), for example, succinctly defined perceptions as ‘one’s beliefs about something’. Wesely (2012) went further defining perceptions as one’s beliefs about something that are shaped by the respective individual’s lived experiences, or what they have learnt from others. Outlaw et al. (2017), on the other hand, defined perception as an individual’s interpretation of a situation and this interpretation drives personal decisions or behaviour. An important outcome one gathers from the varying definitions of what entails a perception described above is that perceptions are influenced by what an individual has experienced, seen, or heard. Since these individuals’ experience differs, most of the time, different people can have different perceptions regarding the same issue(s). Furthermore, different parts of the environment in which people exist can shape their perceptions. The following section will therefore look at some aspects of students’ perceptions that may affect performance.

An important component of learning is the perception of the utility or importance of what is learnt. This is because one’s perceptions towards any subject determine the effort one will put into that subject and, consequently, performance. In one study, Ferreira and Santoso (2008) explored undergraduate and graduate students’ perceptions concerning accounting and found a negative correlation between perceptions and performance. In other words, the study revealed that those that had negative perceptions of accounting performed poorly compared to their peers with perceptions that are more positive. This is an important finding because it illustrates the role of the teacher, not only in delivering course material but also in delivering the material in a manner that reduces negative perceptions towards the study.

However, it must be noted that the results of different studies on this phenomenon have not been consistent. Azrinawati et al. (2015), for example, analysed the performance of 331 students studying for a Bachelor of Accounting in Malaysian private and public institutions and found the relationship between students’ perception and academic performance was not significant. One explanation for this could be that students with a negative perception towards a complete course, especially if they are forced to finish that course, they may work hard because if they fail, they will not get their qualification. In that case, there are other more important influencing factors for performance than students’ perception. This explanation is supported by those who reported that perceptions and performance had a significant relationship for individual modules that are part of a single subject. This is because one can afford to fail such modules but still get their qualification (Ibid, 2015).

In another such study looking at the influence of environment on student perceptions and subsequent performance, Ahmed et al. (2018) evaluated students’ perceptions of their learning environment and how differences in perception affected student performance. The study, which had more than 600 participants, revealed that students who perceived the learning environment as appropriate performed significantly better than their peers who had negative perceptions.

2. Methodology

The methodology section of a study is concerned with describing and justifying all steps taken to effectively respond to study questions. Patel and Patel (2019) state that research methodology is the science of scientifically explaining how research is conducted. This section describes all the adopted steps of the respective study.

2.1 Measuring Perceptions

Having discussed the role of perceptions in promoting or hindering the learning of ESP, it is important to discuss how perception regarding ESP can be measured. Generally, there are two methodological approaches to measuring perceptions, qualitative and quantitative approaches. The following section will discuss the differences between these two approaches as well as the advantages of each approach.

Quantitative approaches involve the use of Likert scale-based questionnaires to measure perceptions. An example of this questionnaire is the Dundee Ready Educational Environment Measure (DREEM) inventory tool which is used to assess students' perceptions of the learning environment (Roff, 2005). The DREEM tool was published in 1997 as a tool to evaluate educational environments of health training settings such as medical schools. A recent review concluded that it was the most suitable instrument for such purposes (Miles et al., 2012).

Since, as indicated earlier, there are many areas that researchers can focus on when measuring perceptions, it is also advisable for researchers to create their own quantitative questionnaires so that they can measure what they need. To increase the credibility of such tools, they must be validated (Taherdoost, 2016). Validating a questionnaire simply means that the researcher proves that the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure (Tsang et al., 2017).

Quantitative tools have both advantages and drawbacks. First, they are advantageous in that they allow data to be collected from many participants in a reasonably short time. Secondly, they allow greater repeatability of studies. The other approach to data collection if one intends to measure perceptions is to use qualitative approaches. This involves using tools such as semi-structured interviews, observations, and focus group discussions amongst others. Such methods have gained favour among researchers, especially in the social scientific field because they help researchers to understand better the phenomena being investigated.

2.2 Justification

The ability to effectively communicate is important for professionals. In a globalised world, it is not uncommon for individuals with different language backgrounds to collaborate. This is particularly true for a country like Saudi Arabia, which is rapidly developing and some of the technologies are imported from other parts of the world. In such a country, ensuring students are competent in an international language, particularly English, is very important. This makes teaching and learning ESP an important part of the Saudi education system.

Unfortunately, several factors negatively affect students' ability to learn and these include attitudes toward the subject (Aydin, 2007). It is therefore pivotal to measure students' attitudes towards a subject so that the teacher can take the required steps to improve students' outcomes in the subject. It is for this reason that this study was conducted.

2.3 Research Questions

- In what way do preparatory year Saudi students think that learning ESP will benefit their future careers?
- How do preparatory year Saudi students perceive ESP learning?

2.4 Research Design

A quantitative design was used to determine students' attitudes toward the learning of ESP. The quantitative approach has several advantages. One of the main advantages of the quantitative approach is that it allows for the collection of information from a large sample within a reasonably short space of time. This is due to the fact that, unlike qualitative interviews, the researcher can simply mail the questionnaires to the participants and wait for responses. It also does not require the researcher to have special interviewing skills.

2.5 Study Participants

This research study was conducted at a Saudi University in the city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where the participants were 70 Saudi female preparatory year students. These students were taking ESP courses offered by the Department of Communication and Media. The reason for choosing this context was based on the accessibility of the participants to the researcher, as it was a convenient sampling. It's worth mentioning here that understanding how students perceive the influence of a certain subject is essential for assessing the

effectiveness of teaching practices in the learning environment (König & Pflanzl, 2016), hence improving both learning and teaching. As a result of the importance of learning ESP in the global world, improving learning and teaching ESP is subsequently significant. Therefore, it can be considered as one factor contributing in students' growing as ethical global citizens.

2.6 Data Collection Tool

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Celik (2018). It had five sections, see (Appendix A). The first section was concerned with an enquiry into the general information about the importance of ESP to participants. The second to the fourth sections explored the important of the four language skills, namely, reading listening, writing, and speaking. In total, the questionnaire had 33 items. A five-point Likert response scale was used to measure the participants' attitudes towards ESP (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). A Likert scale was chosen because attitudes have traditionally been measured using Likert scales (Carrasco & Lucas, 2015).

2.7 Procedures

The researcher had face-to-face discussions with the students and explained what the study was looking at. Those that agree to participate were asked to sign informed consent forms. After that, the participants were given a printed form of the questionnaire. The researcher collected the questionnaire after they were completed. The responses were entered into an excel spreadsheet for further analysis.

2.8 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were done on the data obtained from the participants. This involved calculating means and standard deviation. This is a common way of analysing data based on Likert scales.

3. Results and Findings

This section presents the results obtained from the analysis of the data collected from the students.

3.1 Reasons for Learning ESP for Future Career

Part of the study focused on assessing students' perceptions concerning the utility of ESP in their future careers. This section had five questions and they were: the role of ESP in understanding professional journals, understanding specialized textbooks, writing articles for publication, and the role of ESP in succeeding in current studies.

Table 1. Importance of learning ESP for future career

Questionnaire section	Strongly agree Mean (S.D)	Agree Mean (S.D)	Undecided Mean (S.D)	Disagree Mean (S.D)	Strongly disagree Mean (S.D)
Importance of ESP for future career	48.86 (21.93)	22.29 (6.28)	8 (6.11)	11.14 (17.94)	9.71 (18.61)

As shown in Table 1, most of the students ($M = 48.86$, $S.D = 21.93$) strongly agreed that learning ESP was beneficial for their future careers. Looking at the raw data, it can be seen that the statement the students mostly disagreed with (42.86%) was "ESP helping me in writing articles for publication". Also, (65.71%) of the students strongly agreed that learning ESP was important for their success in their current studies.

3.2 Importance of ESP for Respective Course Contents

The second section of the questionnaire was concerned with assessing the students' perceptions regarding importance of ESP in enhancing competences in course contents. These contents were speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

3.2.1 Learning ESP and Listening

Most of the students either strongly agreed or agreed with statements suggesting that learning ESP was important to them because it helped to increase their listening skills (Figure 1). The results presented in Figure 1 were drawn from responses to six statements and these statements suggested that ESP helps to improve listening to conversations on general topics, lectures, presentations, mass media, students, colleagues, and clients.

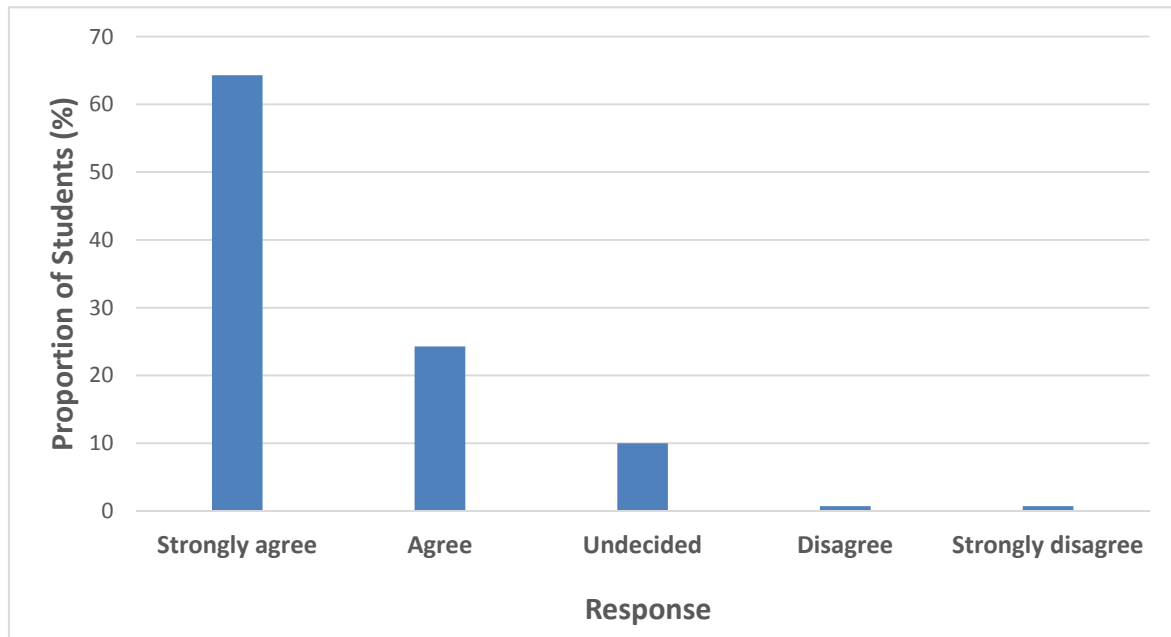


Figure 1. Results on the importance of ESP in listening to the language

3.2.2 Value of ESP in Improving Speaking

Another part of the research focused on the impacts of ESP I improving the participants’ English speaking competences. The results are summarised below:

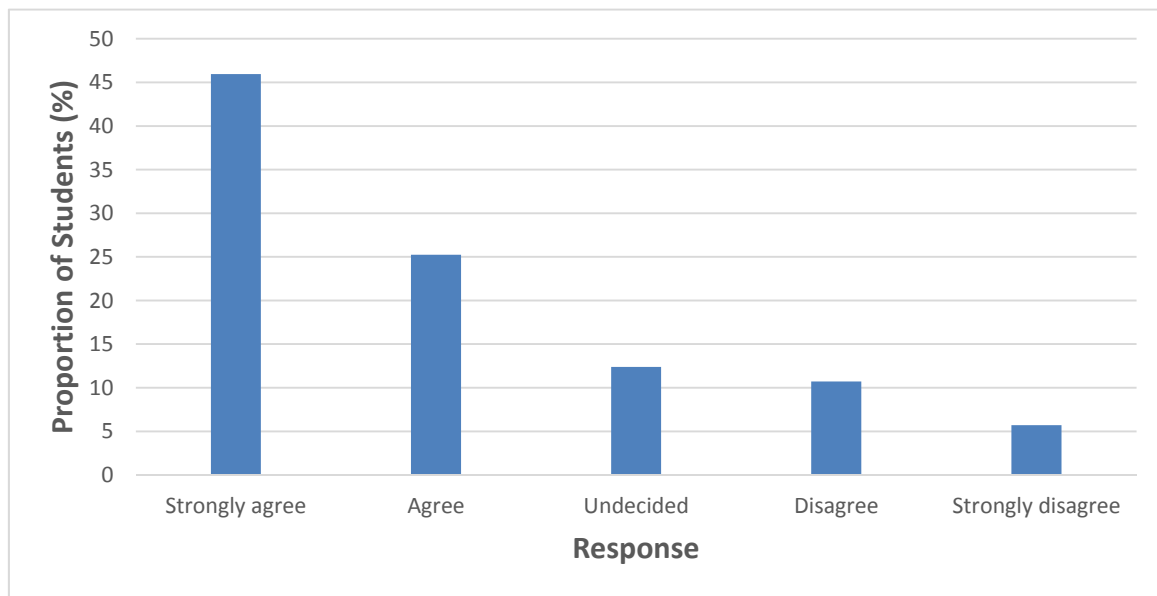


Figure 2. Results on the importance of ESP in speaking English

3.2.3 Learning ESP and Reading

The study also looked at the utility of learning ESP in improving reading text in English. As shown in Figure 3, most of the students strongly agreed or agreed with statements suggesting that learning ESP can improve their readig skills.

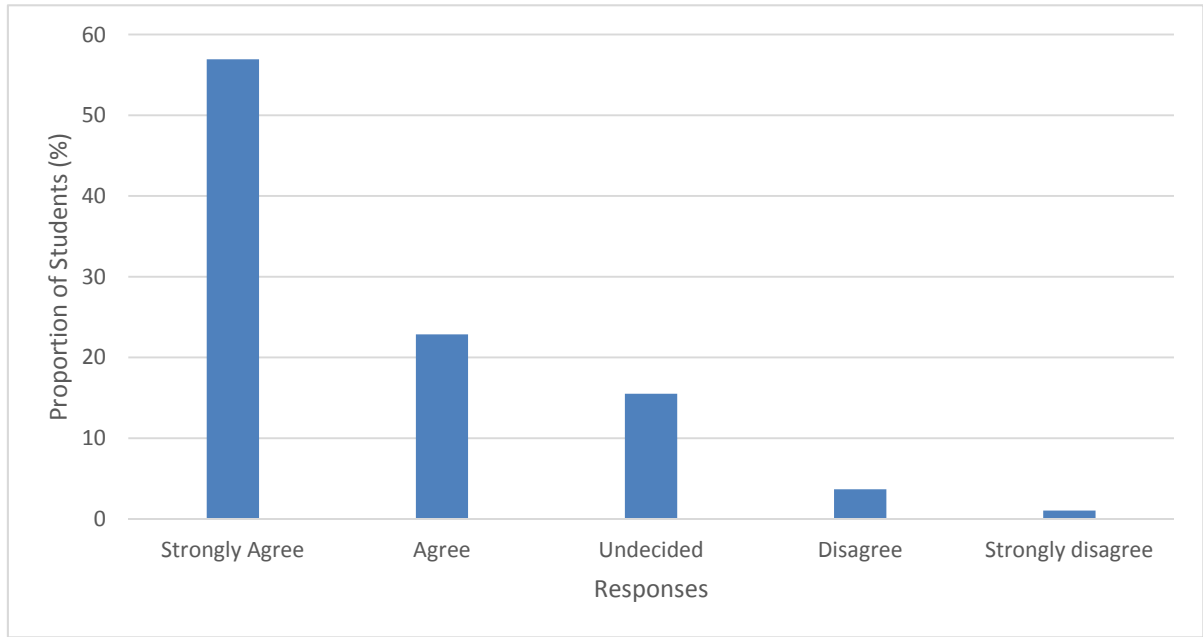


Figure 3. Results on the importance of ESP in reading English text

It can be seen in Figure 3 that most students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement used to assess the importance of learning ESP in reading.

3.2.4 Learning ESP and Writing

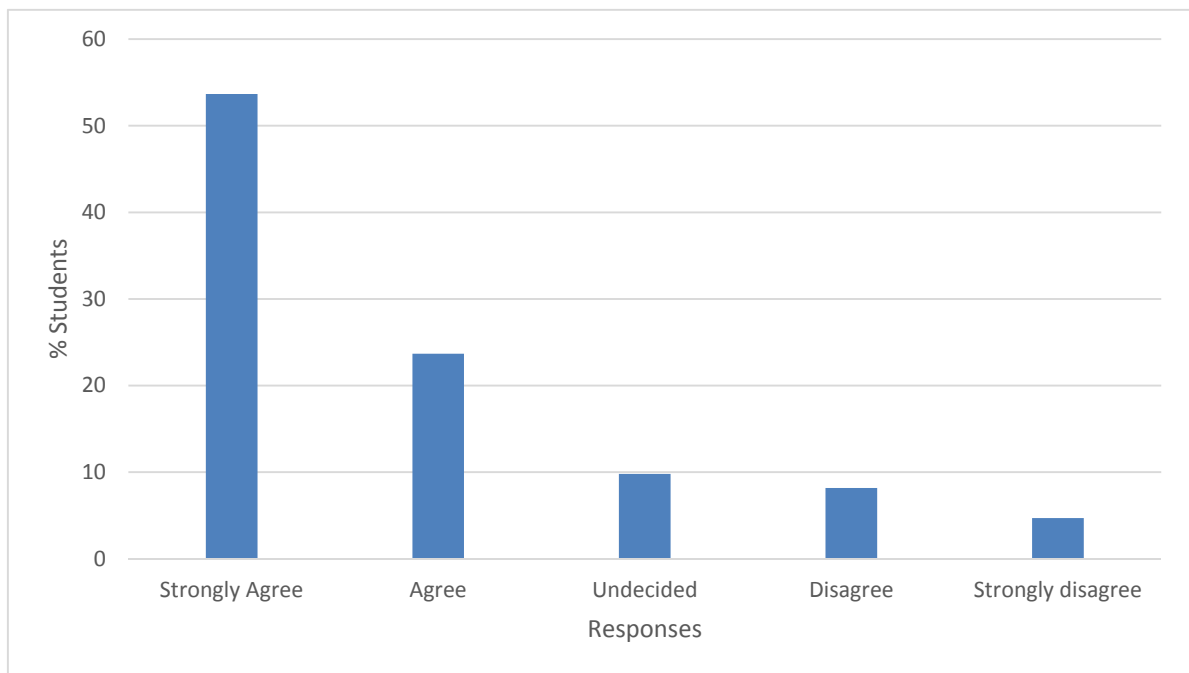


Figure 4. Results on the importance of ESP in writing English

As shown in Figure 4, most student strongly agreed or agreed with statements assessing the importance of ESP in improving writing in English. Compared to other competences, it can be seen that more students disagreed or

strongly disagree that ESP is important in writing. Also, it should be mentioned here that most students reported that they disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements:

- 1) ESP course helps me in “writing articles for journals”
- 2) ESP course helps me in “writing instructions to colleague”

4. Discussion

This study sought to determine the perceptions of female students enrolled for ESP at a Saudi university. Overall, the students indicated that ESP was significant for, not only their current studies, but also for their future careers. First, ESP is important for the students' current studies because it is part of the courses they must pass if they are to successfully complete their studies. According to Gaffas (2019), Saudi students taking English for general purposes (EGP) and ESP are forced to commit to their studies because it a prerequisite for passing an in-house English language proficiency tests. Furthermore, these students feel that, due to factors such as globalisation of the workforce, they will stand a better chance of securing employment if they can prove that they are competent in English. Passing ESP and EGP is one of the ways the students can prove that they are proficient in the language.

Another important outcome of the research is that the students indicate that competence in ESP will help them to understand specialised textbooks. This is important given that the students will have to rely on literature from other parts of the world and this literature is often in English. Having a low language proficiency level probably results in students failing their core modules. The researcher has arrived at this conclusion after looking at studies on language proficiency and academic performance. In one such study, for example, Guglielmi (2008) concluded that non-native English speakers tend to have poor overall academic performance and one of the factors for this is the students' poor grasp of the English language. Comparable results were reported by Douglas (2010) who found that lexical richness positively correlates with Effective Writing Test (EWT) and EWT strongly predicted eventual academic outcomes. In summary, this means lexical richness, which can be improved by interventions such as ESP, is strongly associated with performance in other subjects not just English.

Compared to other language competences such as listening, more students indicated that they strongly disagreed or disagreed with statements that ESP helps them in speaking in class or during discussions. This is expected because in such circumstances, students tend to mix English with their home language and this makes it possible to effectively discuss with others during discussions. This phenomenon was reported by Thakur et al. (2007) who found that students in India mix English and Hindi (something they describe as Hindlish) when they communicate with other students.

In this study, it also emerged that the students do not feel that learning ESP will help them in writing journal articles. This result cannot be taken at face value. This is because most students are not really interested in publishing articles, particularly those in the undergraduate level (Gilbert, 2004). Generally, post graduate students (PhDs and masters students) usually have to produce publications.

It can be concluded that most students who took part in this study value ESP but the value ascribed to ESP varies between different competences needed by the students. This was well-illustrated by the results on listening and speaking in class.

5. Conclusion

ESP has proved to be an important component of the Saudi education system. This is due to the impact of globalisation and the accompanying need to work with people from all over the world. However, it is important to ensure that ESP students get the best quality of education so that they attain their career goals. This paper sought to understand the perception of Saudi female students regarding ESP. Based on the findings of this research study, it can be argued that learning ESP is deemed important by the students in their current studies. The data revealed that the preparatory year students agreed or strongly agreed with statements suggesting that learning ESP will put them in a better footing for their future careers. This concurs with the literature that have stated that being competent in English is considered a major advantage on the job market, which this study also revealed.

To conclude, it is essential to acknowledge the fact that there were several limitations that need to be addressed in future studies on this issue. One of the limitations is that a quantitative study does not capture deep-seated attributes (Hussain et al., 2013). This can be improved by using a qualitative approach. This can be taken as an exploratory study that paves the way for a more in-depth qualitative study. Researchers such as Venkatesh et al. (2013) have suggested that mixed methods studies, can be more valuable in understanding social phenomenon such as the mechanics behind learning ESP.

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Appendix A

Data Collection Tool and Results

Questionnaire

Qtn Num	Question	1 Strongly agree	2	3	4	5 Strongly disagree
Reasons for learning ESP (English)						
1	ESP helps me to understand professional journals	20	15	2	30	3
2	ESP helps me to understand specialized textbooks	45	20	1	3	1
3	ESP helps me in writing articles for publication	15	10	10	5	30
4	The ESP course is important for my success in college	46	13	10	1	0
5	ESP is important for my career advancement	45	20	5	0	0
Listening: ESP course helps me in...						
6	Listening to conversations on general topics	50	15	5		
7	listening to lectures	40	20	10		
8	listening to presentations in class	35	25	15		
9	listening to English mass media	50		17		3
10	listening to instructions in real situations	55	15			
11	listening to students, colleagues, and clients	30	27		3	
Speaking: ESP course helps me in...						
12	participating in academic discussions	25	15	12	10	9
13	speaking at seminars, meetings and presentations	15	28	12		15
14	asking and answering questions in class	45	15	5	5	
15	asking and answering questions in seminars students	20	16	3	30	1
16	talking with professionals in real situations	40	20	10		
17	talking with lecturers, students and customers	48	12	10		
Reading: ESP course helps me in...						
18	reading specialized textbooks	50	18	2		
19	reading articles in professional journals	25	20	15	10	
20	reading specialized reports students	48	12	9	1	
21	reading English newspapers and magazines	20	15	25	5	5
22	reading texts on the Internet	58	12			
23	reading the colleagues reports	38	15	15	2	
24	reading instructions	40	20	10		
Writing: ESP course helps me in...						
25	taking lecture notes	33	17	13	2	5
26	taking notes from textbooks students	46	34			
27	writing a paper for oral presentation	50	15	5		
28	writing term papers	47	13	9	1	
29	writing articles for journals	20	25	15	8	2
20	writing reports	52	17	1		
31	writing instructions to colleague	15	5	5	29	16

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