

Assessing English Language Learners' Needs and Lacks

İngilizce Öğrenenlerin İhtiyaç ve Eksikliklerinin Değerlendirilmesi

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Abstract

The aim of this study is, firstly, to specify the needs and lacks of the second year International Relations and Political Science (IRPS) students studying at Başkent University, Ankara in relation to writing in English in their current academic studies and for their future professional lives. Secondly, it aims to explore the extent to which students, instructors, and employers agree on these needs and lacks. Based on the identified needs and lacks, the goals, objectives and content of a new writing course syllabus are formulated. The data were collected from the students currently enrolled in the course, their departmental and ESP instructors, and employers in the field of IRPS through questionnaires, structured interviews and analysis of the students' written productions in different academic tasks.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), needs assessment, and course evaluation

Öz

Bu çalışmanın ilk amacı, Başkent Üniversitesi Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Siyaset Bilimi Bölümü ikinci sınıf öğrencilerinin İngilizce yazmada akademik ve mesleki yaşamlarında hissettikleri ihtiyaç ve eksikliklerin belirlenmesidir. Çalışmanın ikinci amacı ise, öğrencilerin, öğretmenlerin ve işverenlerin görüşlerinin ne derecede birbirleriyle uyumlu olduğunu belirlemektir. İlk aşamada belirlenen ihtiyaç ve eksikliklerden yola çıkarak yeni bir İngilizce yazma dersi programının hedefleri ve içeriği saptanmıştır. Veriler, öğrencilerden, bölüm ve İngilizce öğretmenlerinden ve işverenlerden anket ve görüşmeler yoluyla ve öğrencilerin değişik akademik çalışmalar için yazılı çıktılarından toplanmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Özel amaçlı İngilizce öğretimi, ihtiyaç belirlemesi, ders değerlendirmesi

Introduction

Instructional programs for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have become popular recently, mainly due to the growing need to use English internationally in the fields of science, technology, trade, commerce, administration, diplomacy, and law. Learners are seeking proficiency in the English language in specific domains of use to serve their specific purposes. The most widely obvious explanation for this increasing demand for ESP has been made by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who note that this trend is closely related to the developments in economy, technology, linguistics, and educational psychology in the last fifty years. Today, in many parts of the world, many business and educational institutions offer ESP courses to help learners function effectively in their academic studies and professions.

In many universities in Turkey, the demand for English courses that are designed to meet the specific needs of the students in their academic studies is increasing and writing is reported to be the skill that is mostly needed (Özbek, 1995, Toplu, 1997). Therefore, designing courses

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that meet the specific needs of the learners is of great importance. A learning-centered approach (Nunan, 1996) to course design advocates the involvement of learners in contributing to the design of lessons, materials, and the course. Studies have, however, shown that there can be discrepancies among the opinions of learners, instructors, and professionals in relation to what learners need. The aim of this study was, firstly, to specify the needs and lacks of the second year International Relations and Political Science (IRPS) students at Başkent University, Ankara when writing in English for their current academic studies and their future professional life. Secondly, it aimed to explore the extent to which students, instructors, and employers agree on these needs and lacks.

The concept of needs assessment is considered as the backbone for ESP instructional design. McDonough (1984) suggests that the learner should be at the heart of any teaching program. Thus, information on his/her language needs contributes to drawing up a profile to establish coherent objectives and to taking subsequent decisions on course content. Nevertheless, she proposes that this assumption built on learner-centeredness as a principle can be adopted in all teaching situations. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it is always possible to specify the needs of learners; but what distinguishes between ESP and general English is not the existence of a need but rather the awareness of the need. They further explain this awareness of the target situation—a definable need to communicate in English—distinguishes the ESP learner from the general English learner.

Needs assessment models

In Munby's (1978) Communication Needs Processor (CNP), needs analysis is considered as a systematic and important stage in course design. Munby (1978) introduces eight variables in a dynamic relationship that should be considered in needs analysis. These variables involve information about the participant, purposive domain, setting, interaction, instrumentality, dialect, target level, communicative event, and communicative key. Besides the data collected in standard needs analysis studies, information such as psychological settings, different environments in which the language will be used; the role-set, the people with whom the participant will interact, the nature and size of participation; and the attitudinal tones or keys, how the target communicative acts are performed are also essential in deciding the language content and the learning context in any CNP.

In their learning-centered approach, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) view needs analysis as a stage of ESP instructional design which should involve two aspects: target situation analysis and learning needs analysis. Their view is quite similar to Munby's CNP in terms of the questions that should be asked during the needs analysis process about the identity and purpose of the learner, the place and time of the study, the people the learner will interact with, or the level of the proficiency required. However, Hutchinson and Waters make the distinction between target needs and learning needs clearer by developing two separate frameworks for each involving different sets of questions. Robinson (1991) also argues that learners' present learning needs and target situation needs should be considered with equal weight and simultaneously in syllabus design.

With the increasing significance of needs analysis in ESP, studies on models and approaches to needs assessment have also gained importance. Several systematic and thorough procedural models of needs assessment give direction to instructional design studies in the field of education. Smith and Ragan (1992), Dick and Carey (1996), Posner and Rudnisky (1997) have established instructional design models in which the needs assessment procedures for school and non-school learning environments are described. One of the most detailed and systematic models for needs assessment is proposed by Kemp, Morrison and Ross (1994). The significance of this model is that the needs assessment is not considered as a simple pre-instructional activity but considered as a research project that involves all the basic stages of a research study. The process is divided into four stages and individual steps under each stage are identified clearly (Figure 1). The main stages are planning, collecting data, data analysis and the final

report. This model has been adopted in this study since it is flexible enough to assess both learning-related and job-related needs and lacks of the learners. Moreover, in this model, the needs assessment stage is the backbone of the instructional design that provides the data for the course objectives, materials selection, and evaluation.

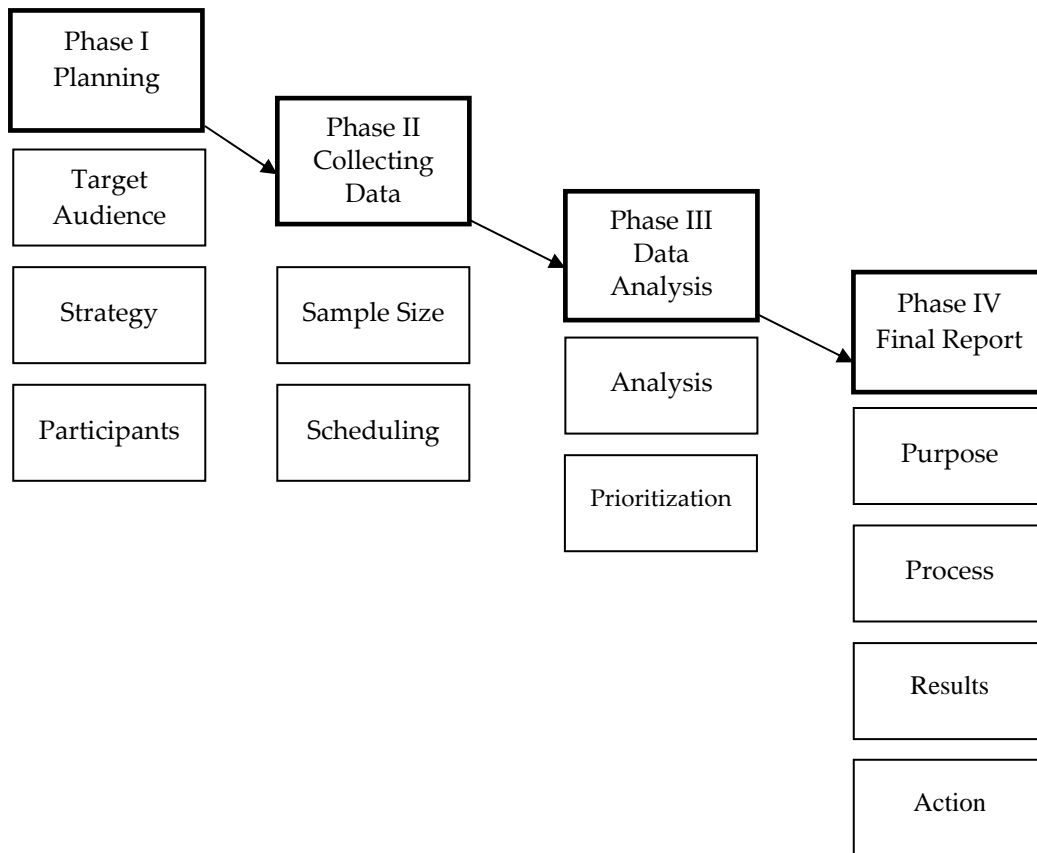


Figure 1: Needs Assessment Process (Kemp, Morrison and Ross, 1994: 31)

Course Design Based on Needs Analysis

Various course design studies have shown that there are considerable discrepancies in opinions of groups that are involved in needs analysis studies. Yin (1988), in a study comparing course content and language learning activities in different ESP courses, concludes that despite the agreement among employers on the types of tasks that are demanded in the work context, there are important differences in the skills that are required by these tasks. Similarly, the results of a needs assessment study carried out by Jenkins et al (1993) reflects significant discrepancies between the needs reported by the ESP instructors and the content course instructors. In this study, while the ESP instructors did not view report writing as an important skill for their engineering students, students were expected to write reports as a requirement of most departmental course they took during their undergraduate study.

Studies also demonstrate that instructors' and learners' perceptions of needs do not always match. Baştürkmen (1998) reports the existence of differing perceptions between the students and the faculty on the relative importance of language skills. While the students in her study saw listening as being more difficult than the skills of reading, speaking and writing, the faculty saw these skills at the same level of difficulty. Similarly, Spratt (1999), in a study that compares learners' preferred activities with teachers' perceptions of what those preferences were, concludes that the instructors could perceive their students' preferences with only 50% accuracy. There is, however, evidence that students have definite opinions about their abilities in various skills, and can assess the importance of sub-skills to in their academic studies. In Chan's (2001) study, students' perceptions of their language needs and wants, and their ratings

of their own competence in particular skills in the academic, social and professional domains matched their English language instructors' opinions of their competence. Generally, in the needs assessment studies in ESP the data obtained from two sources of data, such as the students themselves and their instructors of English are compared. In the present study, however, the data obtained from five sources, the students, the instructors of English, departmental instructors, employers and the written productions of the students, are compared.

The present study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the students' current academic needs and lacks when writing in English?
2. What are the future professional needs of the students when writing in English?
3. To what extent do the students, departmental instructors, ESP instructors and employers agree on the learners' academic and professional needs and lacks?

In this study the terms "needs" and "lacks" are used to refer to different complementary aspects of the general term needs assessment. A need refers to the students' academic and/or job requirements, that is, what the students have to be able to do at the end of the English language course. A lack, on the other hand, refers to the gap between the target proficiency and the existing proficiency of the learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

Method

Design of the Study

The research design was based on the needs assessment model proposed by Kemp, Morrison and Ross (1994) and the learning-centered syllabus design proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). In the needs assessment, the four phases involved in the needs assessment model of Kemp, Morrison and Ross were applied. First, the data collection strategies and data collection sources were identified. Then, data were collected. Third, data were analyzed and needs were identified. Finally, the results were reported and the action that had to be taken was determined.

Regarding the recommendations that were made for the syllabus design of the writing component of the ESP course, the stages in Hutchinson and Water's learning-centered model were applied except for the evaluation stage, which was not in the scope of this study. In line with Hutchinson and Water's model, in this study, first the skills and knowledge required in the target situation of the students were identified. Then, the potential of the current learning situation was analyzed. Finally, some recommendations based on the identified needs of the students were made with a consideration of the students' needs, lacks and the potential of the target situation. To sum up, all the steps in both models except for the dimension of evaluation were addressed.

Participants

Data were collected from students, instructors, and employers. All 40 of the second year IRPS students who were taking the ESP course at Baškent University participated in the study. Their ages ranged between 19 and 21, and 23 of them were female.

Two instructors teaching the ESP course and all six of the instructors of the department of IRPS participated in the study. Both ESP instructors were female and their ages were 30 and 32. They had been teaching the course for almost three years. The departmental instructors' ages ranged between 35 and 60, and except one, all of them had been a member of the department since it was founded in 1999.

The four employers who participated in the study represented different fields of international relations and political science. These employers were chosen after a consultation with two of the departmental instructors who identified them to be successful, experienced, knowledgeable, and ideal representatives of the field of international politics and diplomacy.

Instruments for Needs Assessment

To allow for triangulation, data were collected through questionnaires, structured interviews, and students' various productions in different activities (Patton, 1987).

A. Questionnaire for the Students

The questionnaire, adapted from Chan (2001), focused on five areas: 1) the importance of particular language skills in the academic and professional domains, 2) the importance of particular rhetorical patterns and activities in the academic and professional domains, 3) a self-rating of perceived ability, and 4) a rating of how much emphasis is currently given and should be given in class to particular rhetorical patterns and activities. The overall aim of the questionnaire was to identify the students' needs in two domains: academic and future/professional life.

B. Structured Interviews with the Departmental Instructors and Instructors of the ESP course

The structured interviews held with the departmental instructors and ESP instructors contained mainly the same categories as the student questionnaire, but the item stems were worded differently. For example, instead of "How would you rate yourself in terms of each of the following?" the stem read, "How would you rate your students in terms of each of the following?" Different from the categories in the student questionnaire, these structured interviews included questions related to the teaching and field experiences of the instructors.

C. Structured Interviews with the Employers

These structured interviews had two parts. In the first part, the aim was to gather information about the professional experiences of the respondents in terms of their background and responsibilities. The second part of the questionnaire aimed to identify the relative importance of the writing activities in the scope of the professional experience of each respondent.

D. Students' Written Productions

Sixty samples of students' written productions in the ESP course and 40 samples of students' productions in a take-home exam in a departmental course were analyzed.

Procedure

The data were collected in the second half of the spring semester after the students had received around 170 hours of instruction in the ESP course and in their departmental courses. In this respect, it was assumed that 170 hours of instruction would provide the students and the instructors with sufficient information to identify the needs and lacks. Before the interview, as recommended by Oppenheim (1992), the respondents were given copies of the interview questions to avoid any misunderstandings. These copies were kept by the respondents until the end of the interview to give them the opportunity to reread the questions.

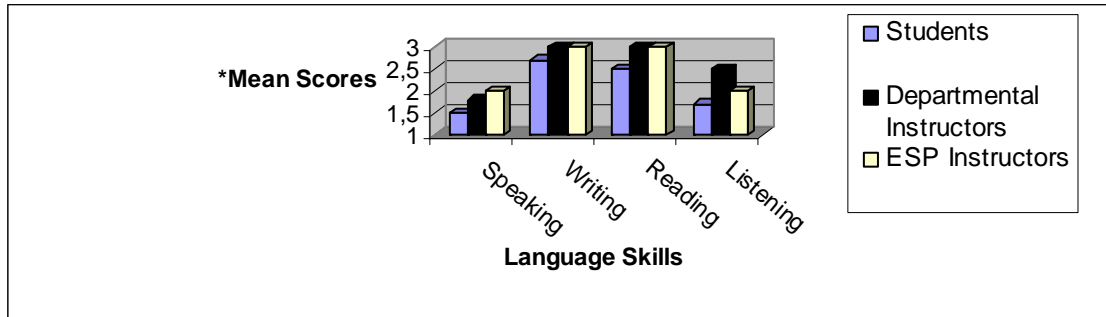
Results

Current Academic Needs

General Language Skills

Participants in this study agreed that reading and writing were the most important skills for the students' current academic needs (Figure 2). However, there was a discrepancy in the participants' ratings of the importance of the listening and speaking skills. Contrary to the students who regarded speaking and listening as unimportant skills, departmental instructors thought that the listening and speaking skills should not be totally ignored within the students' academic studies. During the interview, the departmental instructors pointed out that the students are frequently invited to academic talks given by native speakers of English. The

students might have ignored this fact simply because they did not regard these talks as part of their usual academic studies in which their performance was evaluated.

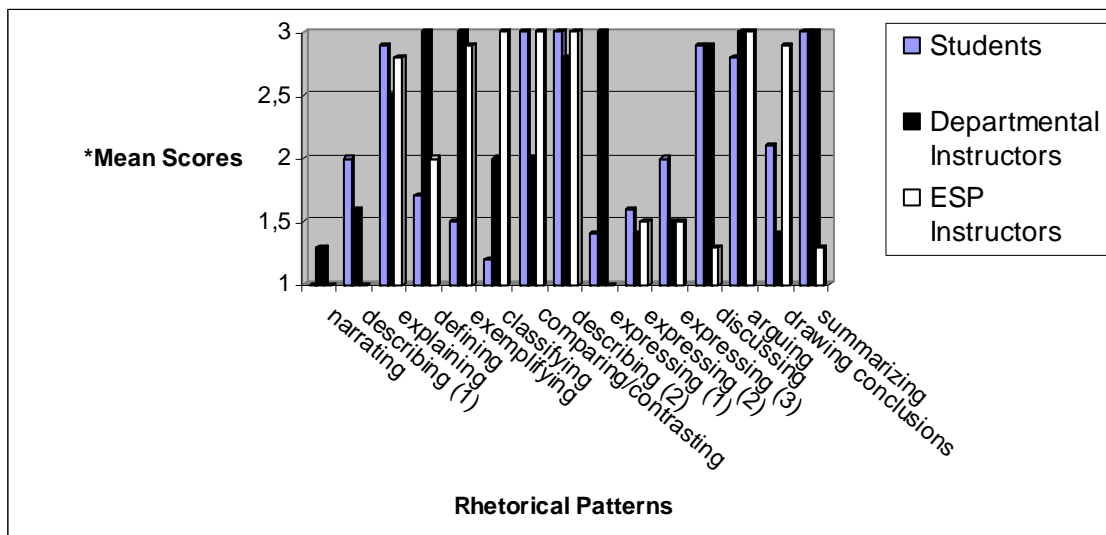


* 1= Not Important 2= Somewhat Important 3= Important

Figure 2: Participants' Ratings of the Relative Importance of Four Language Skills for Students' Current Academic Studies

Rhetorical Patterns

In order to identify which rhetorical patterns were required in the departmental courses, the respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of the rhetorical patterns. All participants reported that arguing, describing cause and effect, and explaining are the rhetorical patterns most frequently required in the academic writing of the students (Figure 3). For the importance of other rhetorical patterns, the participants had different judgments. For instance, the students thought that they had to do a lot of summarizing. However, both the department and ESP instructors did not regard this skill as important. Similarly, expressing purpose was a rhetorical pattern regarded as important by only the departmental instructors. On the other hand, the departmental instructors did not regard comparing and contrasting as an important rhetorical pattern, whereas the students and the ESP instructors thought that to learn how to compare and contrast is important in academic writing.



* 1= Not Important 2= Somewhat Important 3= Important

Describing 1: Describing physical settings

Describing 2: Describing cause and effect

Expressing 1: Expressing purpose

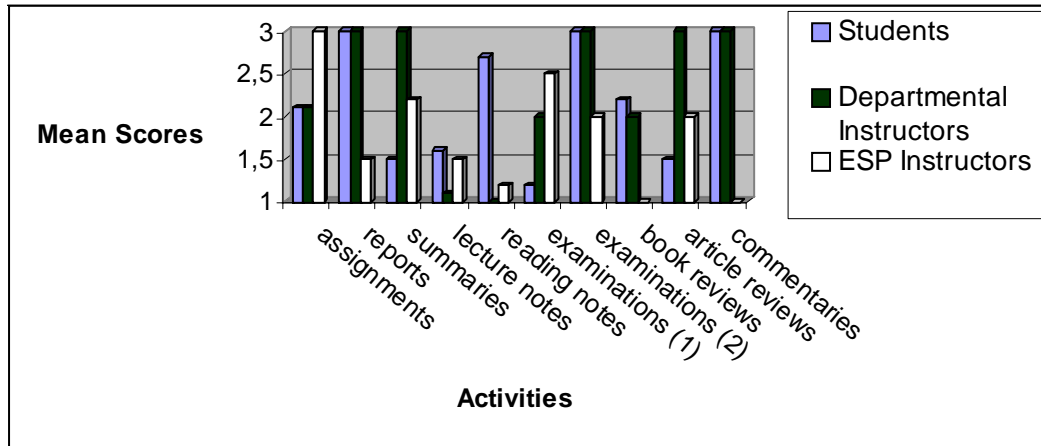
Expressing 2: Expressing expectancy

Expressing 3: Expressing reservations

Figure 3: Participants' Ratings of the Relative Importance of Learning the Listed Rhetorical Patterns for Students' Current Academic Studies

Activities

Doing take-home examinations was the only activity evaluated as important by all participants (Figure 4). For the other activities, a large degree of disagreement existed among the participants. The students did not regard any activity other than doing take-home examinations, and writing reports and commentaries as important. Similarly, the ESP instructors thought that most important activities were completing assignments and take-home examinations. However, the departmental instructors thought that writing summaries and article reviews as well as take-home exams and reports were important activities in their department.



* 1= Not Important 2= Somewhat Important 3= Important

Examinations 1: In-class examinations

Examinations 2: Take-home examinations

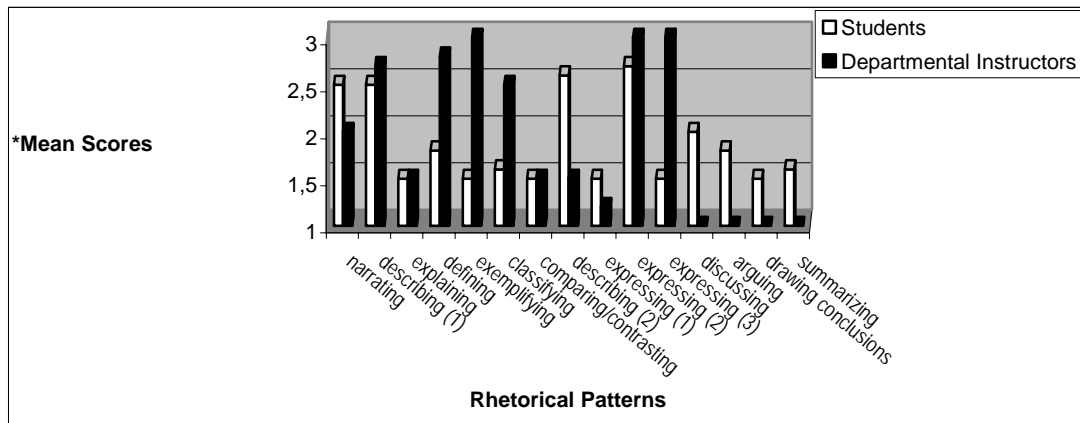
Figure 4: Participants' Ratings of the Relative Importance of Learning the Listed Writing Activities for Students' Current Academic Studies

In conclusion, it is possible to say that views of students ESP and departmental instructors differed considerably in identifying current academic needs. In identifying general language skills, both ESP and departmental instructors had similar views while the views of the students differed from those of both instructor groups. In identifying the importance of rhetorical patterns, students and instructors had different opinions. Patterns that were viewed as being important by the students were not regarded the same way by both instructor groups. When the importance of instructional activities is considered, it is possible to conclude that there was agreement between ESP instructors and students but the views of the department instructors were rather different from the views of these two participant groups.

Current Academic Lacks

Rhetorical Patterns, Activities and Other Aspects of Writing

In this study, the students themselves were the primary source of data in identifying their needs. However, as far as their lacks were concerned, they could not easily identify their weak and strong points (Figure 5). In fact, they had the tendency to mark the middle descriptor "not very good" for almost all of the rhetorical patterns, activities, and other aspects of writing such as grammar and vocabulary. At this point, it was crucial to take other sources of data into consideration.



1= Poor 2= Not very good 3= Good

Describing 1: Describing physical settings

Describing 2: Describing cause and effect

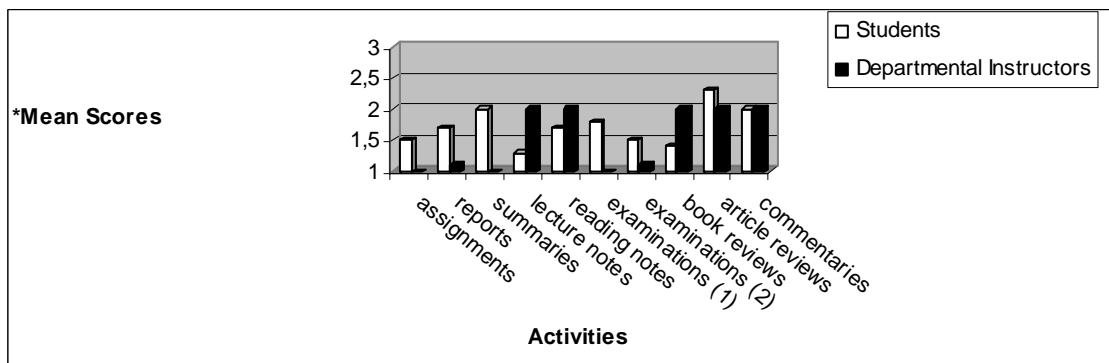
Expressing 1: Expressing purpose

Expressing 2: Expressing expectancy

Expressing 3: Expressing reservations

Figure 5: Participants' Assessment of Students' Performance in Using Rhetorical Patterns

The ESP instructors identified the students' problems in rhetorical patterns and other aspects of writing. They reported that the students had difficulty in discussing, arguing, summarizing, expressing cause and effect, expressing purpose, and drawing conclusions. Moreover, these instructors stated that the students had problems in organizing their ideas, using words appropriately and correctly, and generating original ideas. The departmental instructors identified classroom examinations, take-home examinations, assignments, reports, article reviews and summaries as the activities in which the students had difficulty in writing (Figures 6 and 7).

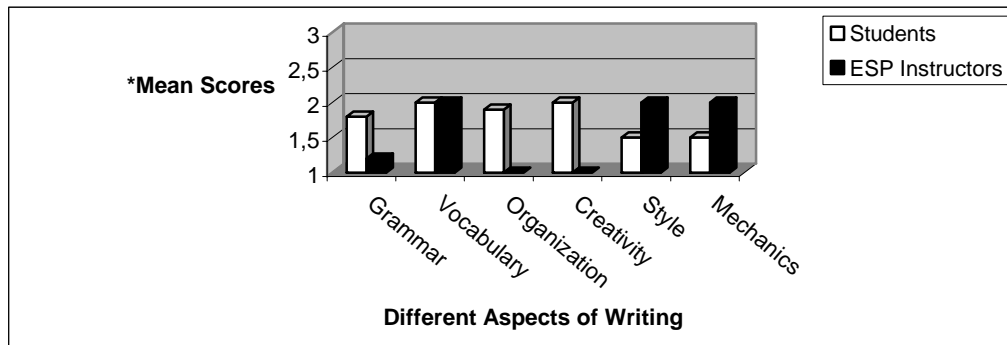


* 1= Poor 2= Not very good 3= Good

Examinations 1: In-class examinations

Examinations 2: Take-home examinations

Figure 6: Departmental Instructors' Assessment of Students' Performance in Writing Activities



* 1= Poor 2= Not very good 3= Good

Figure 7: ESP Instructors' Assessment of Students' Performance in Different Aspects of Writing

The Students' Written Productions

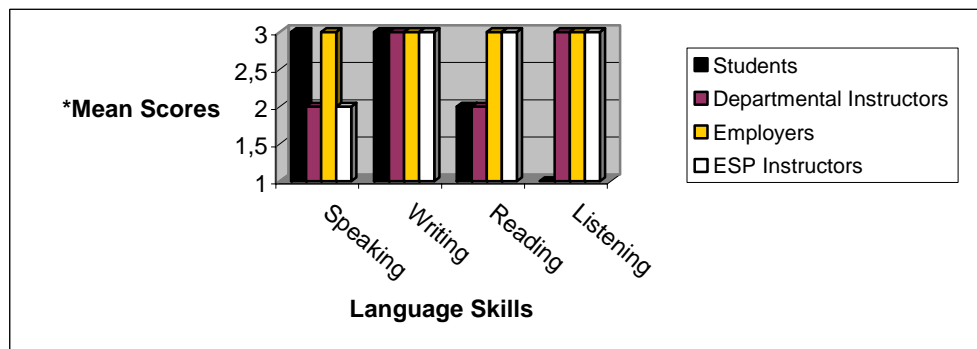
The departmental and ESP instructors' responses were supported by the analysis of the students' written productions in different academic tasks. When the samples were analyzed, it was noted that the students had difficulty in summarizing the important parts of the article. Almost all of the students had the tendency to copy sentences verbatim from the original text into their own productions in tasks like answering comprehension questions. Moreover, the students had problems in organizing their ideas. In essay-type tasks, an introduction with a clear thesis statement could rarely be found. Also, the analysis revealed that the students had difficulty in using the structures, especially transition signals appropriate for the rhetorical pattern they were writing in. To sum up, the analysis of the students' written productions supported the judgments' of both groups of instructors.

In conclusion, there are major differences in students' and instructors' opinions regarding current academic lacks of students. While students did not see major lacks in their performance on rhetorical patterns and activities, their instructors reported they were rather weak.

Future Professional Needs

General Language Skills

All participants thought that writing was an important skill for the students' future careers in the field of PSIR. However, the participants' opinions as regards the other language skills showed variance. The students' believed that speaking, as well as writing was important for their future careers. However, the departmental instructors thought that listening was more important than speaking for the students' future professional lives. ESP instructors thought that all skills except reading were important. Employers, on the other hand, thought that all four language skills were of equal importance for a person working in the field of IRPS (Figure 8).

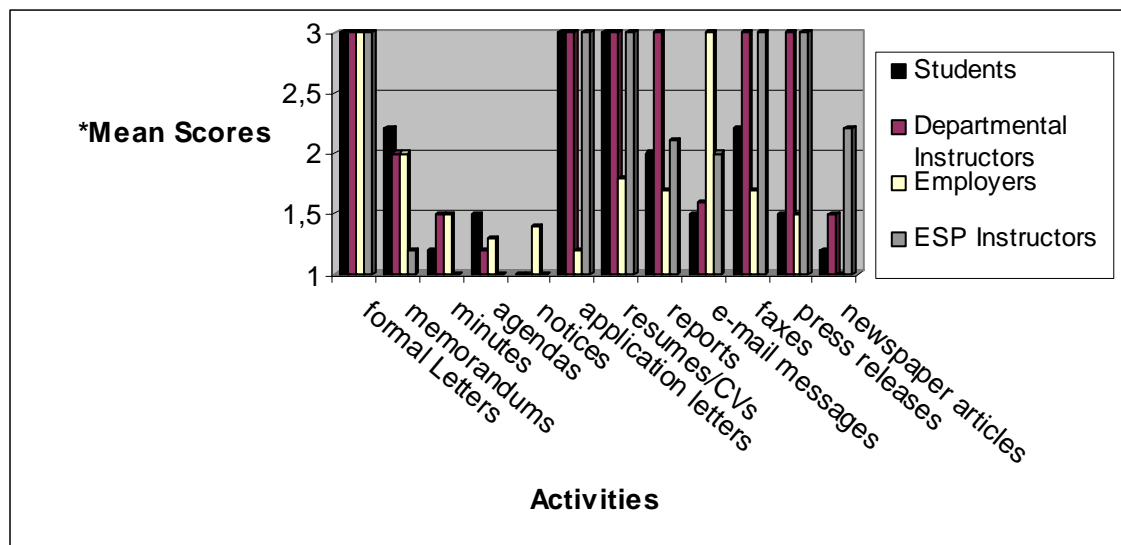


* 1= Not Important 2= Somewhat Important 3= Important

Figure 8: Participants' Ratings of the Relative Importance of the Four Language Skills for Students' Future Professional Lives

Activities

All participants agreed that writing formal letters was the most important writing activity for the students' future professional lives. However, for the other activities, the participants' opinions were quite different from each other. The responses from the students, their instructors and the employers revealed an interesting point: while the students and the instructors emphasized writing resumes, CVs and application letters as important needs of the students, the employers did not think that these were important. Instead, the employers emphasized the importance of writing reports, formal letters, reports, and e-mail messages as important activities. The students and the instructors seemed to be more focused on being accepted to a job in the field of International Relations and Political Science rather than functioning effectively in the job (Figure 9).



* 1= Not Important 2= Somewhat Important 3= Important

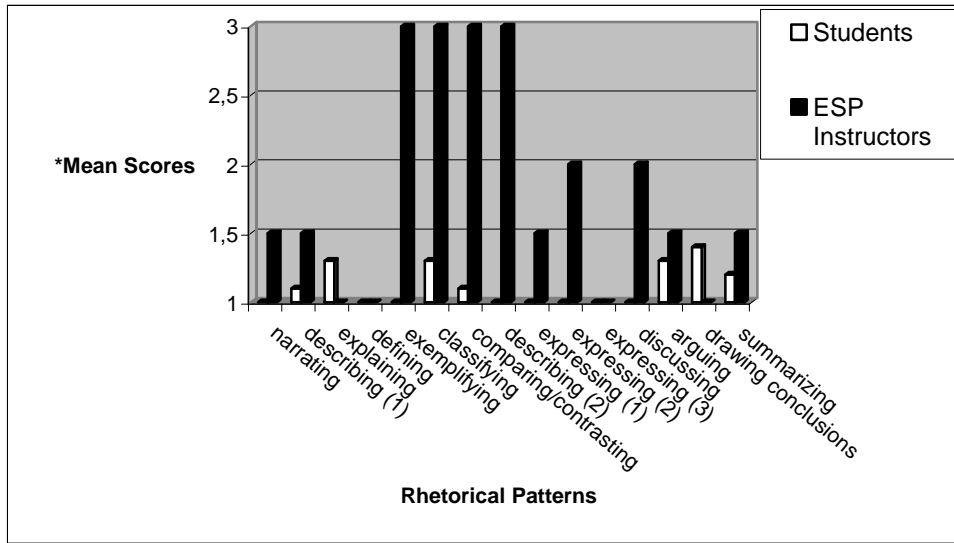
Figure 9: Participants' Ratings of the Relative Importance of the Listed Activities for Students' Future Professional Lives

In conclusion, it can be said that there are major discrepancies among the participants groups in how future professional needs are perceived. Students' views of their future needs are different from the views of the ESP and departmental instructors. Moreover, the views of the employers' are different from the views of the students and both groups of instructors.

Evaluation of the Writing Component of the ESP course by the Students and the ESP Instructors

Rhetorical Patterns

Most of the students reported that the writing instruction in the ESP course neither catered for their needs in their departmental courses nor would cater for their future professional needs. However, the ESP instructors thought that the writing instruction in the ESP course was sufficient to cater for the students academic and future professional needs in writing. The students' and the ESP instructors' opinions were different also for the rhetorical patterns that are taught and that should be taught in the course (Figure 10).



*1= Not taught 2= Taught briefly 3= Taught in detail

Describing 1: Describing physical settings

Describing 2: Describing cause and effect

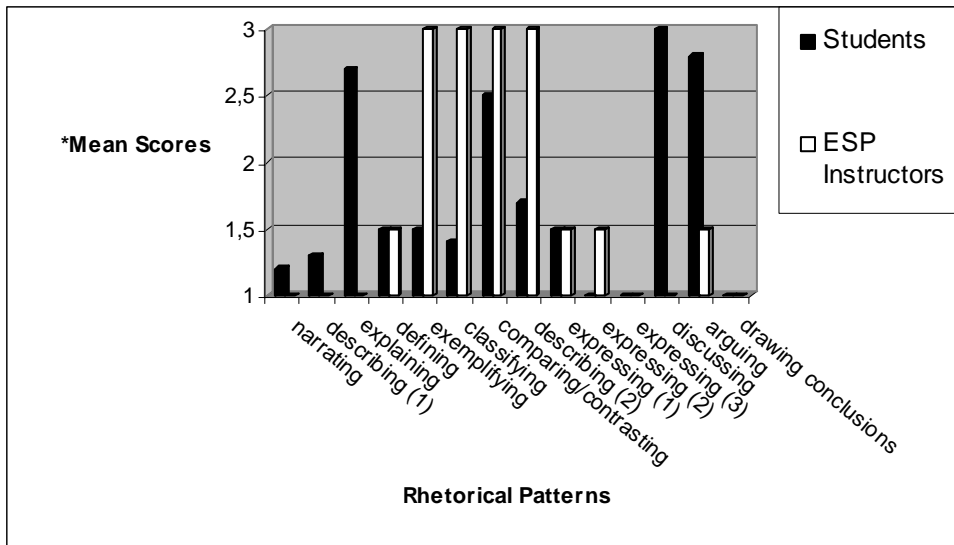
Expressing 1: Expressing purpose

Expressing 2: Expressing expectancy

Expressing 3: Expressing reservations

Figure 10: Amount of Emphasis Placed on Rhetorical Patterns As Perceived by Students and ESP Instructors

Most of the students thought that none of the rhetorical patterns received a lot of emphasis in the ESP course, whereas the ESP instructors reported that exemplifying, classifying, expressing cause and effect and comparing and contrasting were taught in detail. Most of the students thought that discussing, explaining, comparing and contrasting are the rhetorical patterns that should be taught in detail in the ESP course. However, the ESP instructors thought that classifying, comparing and contrasting, describing cause and effect and exemplifying should be taught in detail (Figure 11).



*1= Does not need to be taught 2= May be taught briefly 3= Should be taught in detail

Describing 1: Describing physical settings

Describing 2: Describing cause and effect

Expressing 1: Expressing purpose

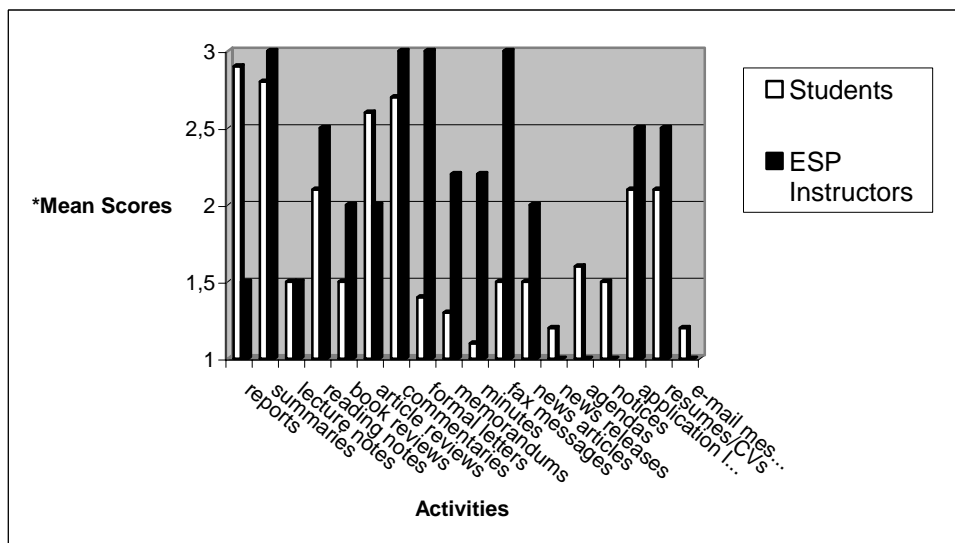
Expressing 2: Expressing expectancy

Expressing 3: Expressing reservations

Figure 11: Amount of Emphasis That Should Be Placed on Rhetorical Patterns As Perceived by Students and ESP Instructors

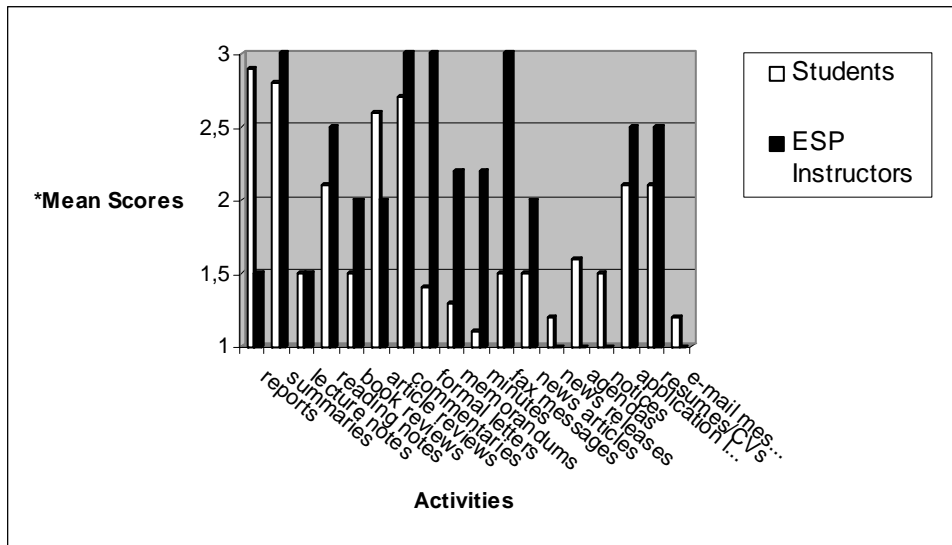
Activities

According to the majority of the students, none of the activities listed in the questionnaire received emphasis in the course. Also, the ESP instructors stated that none of the activities in the list except for formal letters received emphasis in the course. The students thought that writing reports, summaries, commentaries and article reviews should be taught in the course. Similarly, the ESP instructors stated that summaries of written texts, commentaries on written texts should receive emphasis. In addition to these, though not mentioned by the students, the ESP instructors thought that writing formal letters and fax messages should receive a lot of emphasis in the course (See figures 12 and 13).



*1= Not taught 2= Taught briefly 3= Taught in detail

Figure 12: Amount of Emphasis Placed on Writing Activities As Perceived by Students and ESP Instructors



*1= Does not need to be taught 2= May be taught briefly 3= Should be taught in detail

Figure 13: Amount of Emphasis That Should Be Placed on Writing Activities As Perceived by Students and ESP Instructors

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that students and instructors expressed opposite views in their evaluation of the writing component of the ESP course. When the views on rhetorical patterns and activities are examined closely, contradicting perceptions are observed.

Table 1 summarizes the students' current academic needs and lacks and future professional needs as perceived by the departmental and ESP instructors, the employers and by the students themselves.

Table 1.

Summary of the Current and Recommended Content of the ESP Course Based on the Identified Needs and Lacks of Students

	Current Content	Recommended Content
Rhetorical Patterns	*exemplifying classifying *describing causes/ effects *comparing/contrasting	arguing discussing explaining *comparing/contrasting *describing causes/effects defining *exemplifying expressing purpose summarizing
Activities	*formal letters academic paragraphs and essays with different organizational patterns: chronological order comparison and contrast cause/effect classification	commentaries on reading texts summaries of written texts resumes/CVs *formal letters application letters reports e-mail messages fax messages academic article reviews
Other Aspects	*organization	*organization: creativity vocabulary

* refers to the items that are involved both in the existing and the proposed content of the ESP course.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this study is that perceptions of students, instructors, and employers regarding students' current academic needs, current academic lacks, future professional needs differ from each other considerably. Although the views of two instructor groups, ESP and departmental instructors, agree in some aspects, there are major differences between their perceptions and those of the students. Therefore, similar to the findings of Baştürkmen (1988) and Chan (2001), we can conclude that perceptions of students and instructors regarding need do not match. However, the findings of this study do not reflect those of Jenkins et al (1993) who concluded that there were significant differences between the needs reported by ESP instructors and content course instructors as the results in this study show that the two instructor groups mostly agree on the needs of the students.

Another significant finding of the study is that the perceptions of employers regarding the professional needs differ from the perceptions of both students and instructors. This finding is worth noting as it highlights the importance of including all stakeholders in the process of needs identification.

Another significant finding of this study is that most of the academic and professional needs and lacks of the students in terms of activities and rhetorical patterns are not currently included in the writing component of the ESP course offered to the students of International Relations and Political Science at Başkent University. Therefore, the writing component of the ESP course syllabus was regarded to be insufficient by the students in addressing their academic and professional needs. Table 1 presents the rhetorical patterns, activities, and domains of writing that are currently being covered and that are recommended to be covered based on the needs and lacks of the students. As Table 1 reflects, some of the rhetorical patterns, activities, and other aspects of writing that were identified as needs exist in the current program. In this respect, a total omission of these was not recommended; however, revision of the content mainly by supplementing it with additional items was recommended.

Objectives of the revised course

Based on the analysis of the data collected at the needs assessment, the following instructional goals were formulated for the recommended ESP writing syllabus for the second year students of IRPS at Başkent University.

The students will be able to

1. write in the rhetorical patterns of discussing, comparing/contrasting, arguing, describing cause and effect, defining, exemplifying, expressing purpose, drawing conclusions and summarizing.
2. write coherent and unified reports, commentaries on reading texts, article reviews, summaries of written texts, answers to examination questions, resumes/CVs, formal letters, application letters and e-mail and fax messages.
3. write grammatically and mechanically accurate reports, commentaries on reading texts, article reviews, summaries of written texts, answers to examination questions resumes/CVs, formal letters, application letters and e-mail and fax messages.
4. use correct and appropriate lexicon when writing reports, commentaries on reading texts, article reviews, summaries of written text, answers to examination questions resumes/CVs, formal letters, application letters and e-mail and fax messages.
5. generate original ideas on given topics and use these ideas when writing reports, commentaries on reading texts, article reviews, summaries of written texts, answers to examination questions resumes/CVs, formal letters, application letters and e-mail and fax messages.

Conclusion

In this study, the academic needs and lacks and future needs of the students in terms of writing activities, rhetorical patterns and other aspects of writing such as organization and creativity were identified. Based on the identified needs and lacks, the goals, objectives and content of a new writing syllabus were formulated. The data came from multiple sources, the students themselves, their departmental and ESP instructors, and potential employers in the field of IRPS. Also, the data were collected by using various instruments, which were questionnaires, structured interviews and analysis of the students' written productions in different academic tasks.

The triangulation of data sources and data collection instruments had several advantages during the needs assessment process. First, almost all stakeholders, including the students themselves, took the responsibility of decision-making in formulating the objectives and selecting the content of writing syllabus. More importantly, the existence of conflicting opinions, judgments, and perceptions during the needs assessment revealed that data obtained from a single source may not reflect multiple facets of reality in a needs assessment study. Parallel to the conclusions reached by Jenkins et al (1993), Spratt (1999), and Chan (2001), this study reflected significant discrepancies between perceptions of the ESP instructors, content course instructors, and students. In this respect, the triangulation of the data sources and data collection instruments validated the results of the needs assessment and led to reliable and comprehensive conclusions.

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