

¿Son necesarios los cursos de inglés con propósitos específicos? Perspectivas de estudiantes y graduados de una Universidad del Norte de México

Are ESP Courses Necessary? The Perspectives of Students and Graduates from a Northern Mexican University

Les cours ESP sont-ils nécessaires? Les perspectives des étudiants et des diplômés d'une université du nord du Mexique

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Abstract

Nowadays, university students need to be proficient in English if they want to be competitive in the globalized world. Nevertheless, studies show that when finishing university, not all Mexican students achieve this proficiency as they are not always interested in English classes. English for specific purposes (ESP) courses could aid in the motivation of university students, as they are designed according to the learners' needs of a specific field. The present paper is derived from two bachelor thesis and explores the needs of including ESP courses in four high-demand majors in a Mexican university in the North of Mexico, Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, and

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Business Administration, based on the perceptions of 77 students and graduates from these programs. Findings suggest that ESP courses are necessary at the university level as they can positively impact the professional development of students, provided that they are well-designed and that they complement the general English courses that students take, through the acquisition of jargon and the development of the students' communicative competence.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, university students, needs analysis, English learning

Resumen

Debido a la globalización, los estudiantes universitarios necesitan ser competentes en el idioma inglés para tener oportunidades competitivas. No obstante, estudios muestran que al terminar la Universidad, no todos los estudiantes mexicanos son competentes en el idioma ya que no les dan la importancia necesaria a las clases de inglés. Los cursos de inglés para propósitos específicos (ESP por sus siglas en inglés) podrían ayudar a la motivación de los estudiantes puesto que están diseñados de acuerdo con las necesidades de los estudiantes de un área específica. El presente artículo se deriva de dos tesis de licenciatura y explora la necesidad de la implementación de cursos ESP en cuatro programas académicos de alta demanda en una Universidad Mexicana en el norte de México: Medicina, Ingeniería Química, Ingeniería Aeroespacial, y Administración de Empresas. La información se basa en las percepciones de 77 estudiantes y egresados de estos cuatro programas. Se encontró que los cursos de inglés con fines específicos son necesarios a nivel Universitario ya que pueden impactar positivamente el desarrollo profesional de los estudiantes, siempre y cuando estén bien diseñados y complementen los cursos de inglés general que llevan los alumnos a través de la adquisición de vocabulario técnico y del desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Inglés para propósitos específicos, universitarios, análisis de necesidades, aprendizaje de inglés.

Are ESP Courses Necessary? The Perspectives of Students and Graduates from a Northern Mexican University.

Nowadays, due to globalization, university students and graduates need to be proficient in English in order to compete with their peers. According to Webber (2016), there are currently over 6500 languages in the world, being English the most

spoken one by speakers of other languages. Thus, being proficient in this language can provide more job and research opportunities to university students and graduates. Nevertheless, during the educational years of students, the learning of English tends to be focused on general communication but when they graduate from a program, they usually need more specific vocabulary; they need to use and understand the terminology related to their fields. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses could cover this need as they focus on teaching vocabulary related to a specific field or area of study. Nevertheless, even though this type of courses could impact the academic learning of English of university students, not all programs offer them.

The University in Northern Mexico where this study took place, is in this situation: although it offers English courses to its students, most of them are general English courses. All the students at this university must take four general English courses, from first to fourth semesters, being the B.A. in English the only program which is not required to take English courses as students of this major must be proficient in English since their first semester, that is, English is an admission requirement in this program. Similarly, the Aerospace Engineering program has an admission requirement of basic English proficiency, but they must also take the four mandatory English courses. The purpose of taking these compulsory courses is that students reach an A2 to B1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) by the time they graduate. If students are proficient in English, they can exempt these courses by taking a proficiency test provided by the university. Thus, even though the university offers general English courses in order to achieve proficiency by the end of the academic programs, not all majors offer ESP courses for their students. Only a couple of programs include in their curricula technical English courses, which tend to be one-term courses or are electives. Consequently, only a few students acquire vocabulary of their field or jargon during their university studies.

This qualitative case study, hence, attempted to explore the viability of ESP courses in a Northern Mexican University through the analysis of the students' needs and graduates of four majors: Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Business Administration, and Aerospace Engineering. We attempted to do this by answering the following research questions:

- In what ways would an ESP course impact the professional development of the students of the above-mentioned programs in this university in the North of Mexico?

Are ESP programs necessary in this university?

To answer these questions, we gathered information between 2018 and 2020 from 77 participants: 17 from Medicine, 20 from Chemical Engineering, 20 from Business Administration, and 20 from Aerospace Engineering.

Brief Review of the Literature

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been an important area of English teaching and learning since the 1960s as it allows learners to focus on a specific field. So, what exactly is ESP? Anthony (2019) claims that it is a teaching approach where students of a specific area of knowledge learn English to improve their language skills by incorporating specific vocabulary that is used in their jobs. To complement this idea, Fiorito (2006) argues that the aim of ESP is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real-world or wishes but instead, it is combined with the field, the subject area that is important and of interest to the learners as this will increase their motivation in learning. In other words, ESP aims at blending English with the context of the learners to encourage their motivation and interest in the language and to improve their communicative competence in a way that is useful in their working environment.

ESP courses, thus, emerged as a need to teach work-related vocabulary to students. According to Hutchinson and Waters (2010), there are three main reasons for the emergence of ESP: the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics, and the focus on the learner. In the past decades, universities realized the importance of exploring the needs of English in their particular fields as they wanted their graduates to remain competitive in a globalized world. Professors and those in charge of curriculum design, have studied how language is used in real communication in the different professions, and this fact affected the stages of ESP development, which include an analysis of the sentences and of the discourse used in the field of study (García, 1999).

This becomes relevant in the university context as students are preparing themselves in a specific field, hence, they need to use specific technical vocabulary or jargon in their classes, research, and in the future, in the labor market. According to Kavaliauskienė (2002), when ESP courses are taught at the university, students not only acquire vocabulary but also develop their communicative skills by using it through the reading and understanding of professional texts such as articles, essays, etc., and through the use of this vocabulary when they engage in presentations or discussions. At university, this engagement usually occurs in the first language of the students or in that in which the courses are taught. In Mexico, university courses are taught in

Spanish hence the jargon of each field is taught in this language but, when students are immersed in the labor market, they often need it in English as that is the language that has more updated academic literature in most areas.

Thus, the students' needs are a crucial element for ESP courses. A way of finding out what students want and, most importantly, need, is by conducting a *needs analysis*. According to Soruc (2012), a needs analysis is “a procedure for establishing the specific needs of language learners” (p. 14). Similarly, Brown (2009) defines it as “the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” (p. 269). Thus, in order to create a course adapted to the students' needs, that is relevant to their field, it is important to first explore which are those needs.

Xhaferi (2009) argues that following a needs analysis approach “can be highly motivating for students because [they] are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study” (p. 236), emphasizing, therefore, the importance of linking the language to the context of the students. Hence, as each ESP course has elements that are specific to a field, conducting a needs analysis is important because it will provide the specific characteristics of the group to teach. Dudley-Evans and St. John (2009) claim that a “needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching nor within language training but it is often seen as being the cornerstone of ESP and leads to a very focused course” (p. 122). This means that although conducting needs analysis to improve a course is a common practice in language teaching in general, in ESP it becomes more important because these courses are, to a degree, more personalized, as they are designed for a specific set of students with similar job-related needs.

Moreover, needs analysis is crucial in ESP courses as the exploration of the needs of the students will not only determine the vocabulary they need to use, but also the context in which it is used. Brown (2009) claims that ESP courses are not only about memorizing terminology but about learning to use that specific vocabulary in their everyday field of work. That is, ESP courses do not aim at the memorization of lists of words but at the communicative use of that vocabulary in context. Therefore, an identification of the elements that students want to learn may give the designers of the course an overview of the lexicon, discourse, and topics they must focus on. Georgieva (2010) claims that the needs analysis can also help the teachers identify all the vocabulary and terminology related to the students' field that will allow them to

perform successfully in their jobs. Thus, there is indeed a prominent lexicon element in ESP courses, but also a communicative one.

Based on the students' needs, ESP courses can be of two types. Basturkmen (2003) claims that ESP courses are divided into wide-angled and narrow-angled designs. Wide-angled designs are directed to students who want to study abroad and people who need to use English at work. Narrow-angled designs, on the other hand, are for the same type of people but with a very specific target of workplace, professional, or academic environment. For example, a wide-angled design could involve an ESP course for medical students while a narrow-angle one, an ESP course for anesthesiologists.

Research, therefore, shows the importance of ESP courses as they aim at providing students with tools that will help them in their professional development. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the university where this study took place, does not include mandatory ESP courses as part of the curricula. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the needs of students and graduates of four high-demand majors: Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Business Administration, and Aerospace Engineering.

Methodology

As mentioned above, a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2014) was carried out with 77 participants from four different majors: 17 from Medicine, 20 from Chemical Engineering, 20 from Business Administration, and 20 from Aerospace Engineering. These majors were chosen as they have a big population of students and because they are locally known for needing English in the labor market either for research or work opportunities in the USA or other countries.

Data was gathered from open-ended interviews and questionnaires between 2018 and 2020. Originally, we attempted to conduct follow-up interviews as well, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was not possible to contact participants for face-to-face interviews, so we opted for follow-up questionnaires. The students who participated were between 18 to 25 years old, while the graduates between 23 and 30 years old. To gather data, first, we asked the university language center for permission and contact information of the English coordinators of these four academic programs. Then, we made appointments with the coordinators who told us how to contact the English teachers, students, and graduates.

Before the pandemic, we were able to apply the first questionnaires face-to-face, and we interviewed the coordinators and teachers as well. These interviews were to get

more information about the way the English program works, but our main data was gathered from students and graduates as our study focused on their perceptions. This is why we do not consider teachers and coordinators participants of the study per se, as the information we got from them was informative but not the focus of the study.

We got written consent from our participants. Moreover, they were told what the study was about, its purpose, and contact information. Participants were also told that their responses would be used to write our bachelor theses. Therefore, this paper reports on the main findings we got in our theses. The data we gathered was anonymized to protect the identity of the participants. They were assigned a code made from the letter S for student or G for graduate, then a letter M for Medicine, An Aerospace Engineering, C Chemical Engineering, and B for Business Administration, and then a number assigned to each participant of each major.

To analyze the data gathered, we digitalized the answers and then used axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, we observed a central phenomenon in each participant, the needs of students and graduates for an ESP course, and then, we compared and contrasted the information with the other participants of the same major, and then a final comparison with the four majors. We designed the following diagram to guide our analysis.

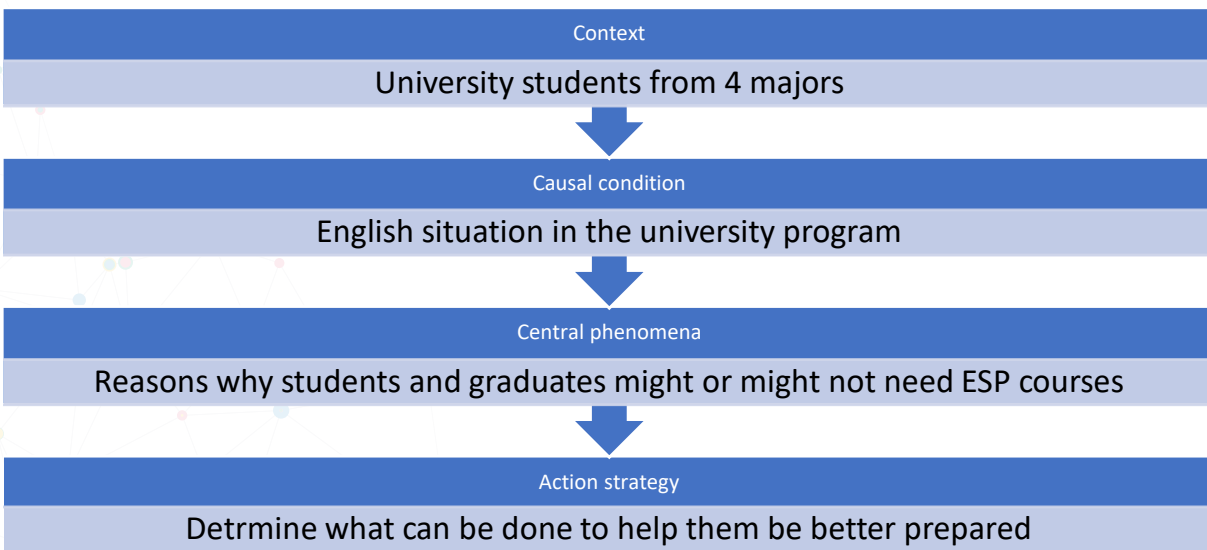


Diagram 1 Analysis guide

The context we studied was four majors at a Mexican university in northern Mexico, where we wanted to explore how English is taught to determine through interviews and

questionnaires if universities and graduates need these courses and why. The diagram was later adapted to present the findings as can be seen in the results section below.

The English Situation of the Medicine Students and Graduates.

The Medicine program at this university is one of the few which offers an ESP course, Medical English, besides the four mandatory general English courses required by the university. Nevertheless, this is only an elective which means that not all the students take it so not all of them finish their Medicine program knowing jargon in this field. Moreover, the general English classes and the elective are both face-to-face and virtual, but the students who take the virtual course do not interact with their professor as the platform only includes an explanation of the topic and exercises to practice.

The findings from the Medicine students and graduates are summarized in the following diagram, adapted from the one presented in the methodology section.

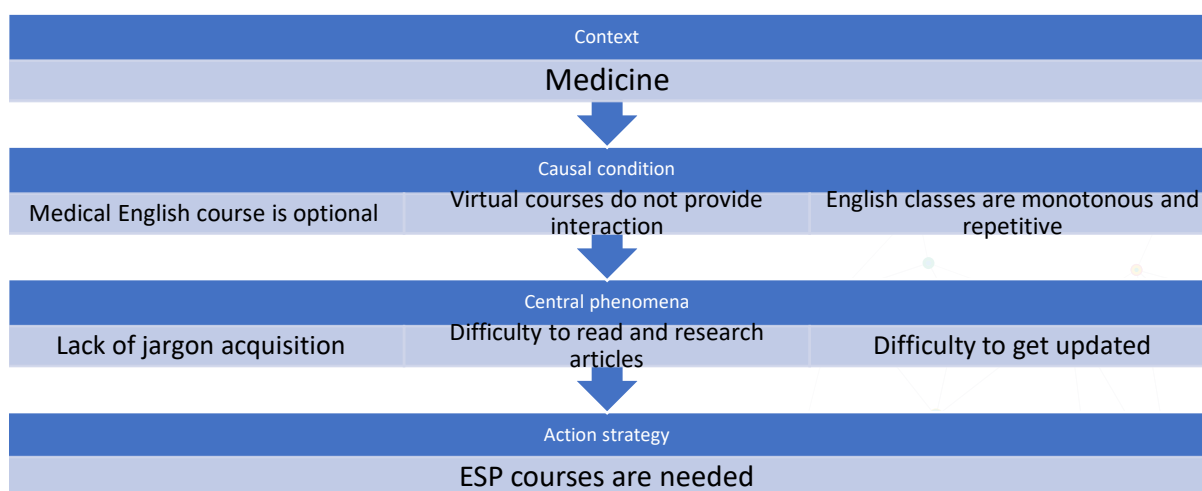


Diagram 2 Medicine Results Summary

The participants from the Medicine School believe that ESP courses are needed in the major. In this School students take general English classes face-to-face but also online, and most of the participants in this study are registered in the online courses, thus, their perspectives come from this context. The teaching of English online through a platform occurs because the Medicine School has a high number of students, so virtual courses offer flexibility to the learners to take the class at their own pace and having time to attend the laboratory and practice courses specific to the medical area.

Nevertheless, a disadvantage of virtual courses is that learners are unable to interact with peers, neither with their teachers nor classmates, and they believe that this is a

drawback as they cannot practice speaking. Students also argue that the English classes tend to be monotonous and repetitive and that many of the practice activities consist of simple grammar exercises, so they do not feel they make improvements in their English level. The general English lessons are, therefore, more grammar-based as learners do not have opportunities to develop their communicative skills and are unable to acquire the proficiency they want.

Therefore, the grammar-based courses offered by the program are incongruent with the communicative needs of students and graduates. Participants claimed that they are interested in learning English both for personal and professional reasons. They want to be able to communicate with foreigners but also to understand information relevant to their major as they consider that translations are sometimes wrong.

Participants also mentioned that they want to learn English to do research in their field and to get a better job and academic-related opportunities as professionals. Moreover, three participants, SM1, SM4, and GM5, claimed that they practice their English and try to be updated by reading articles, but argued that it is hard for them to understand the jargon used in them, so they constantly need a dictionary or online translator.

Thus, participants from the Medicine School believe that their general English courses do not provide them with the knowledge and proficiency they need once they finish their studies. They consider that ESP courses would help university students to acquire jargon while developing their communicative skills. Moreover, students think that ESP courses should be mandatory as not all of them have the opportunity to take the Medical English elective as it sometimes clashes with their other classes' schedule, but that they should be designed in such a way that they learn jargon but also practice the communicative skills they will need once they finish their major.

The English Situation of the Chemical Engineering Students and Graduates.

The Chemical Engineering program does not include in their curricula ESP courses, so students only take the mandatory general English classes. Students and graduates generally agree that these courses are very basic and do not allow them to use the language in a real context which is a problem as they need English in their field of work once they graduate. The findings of this group are summarized in the following diagram.

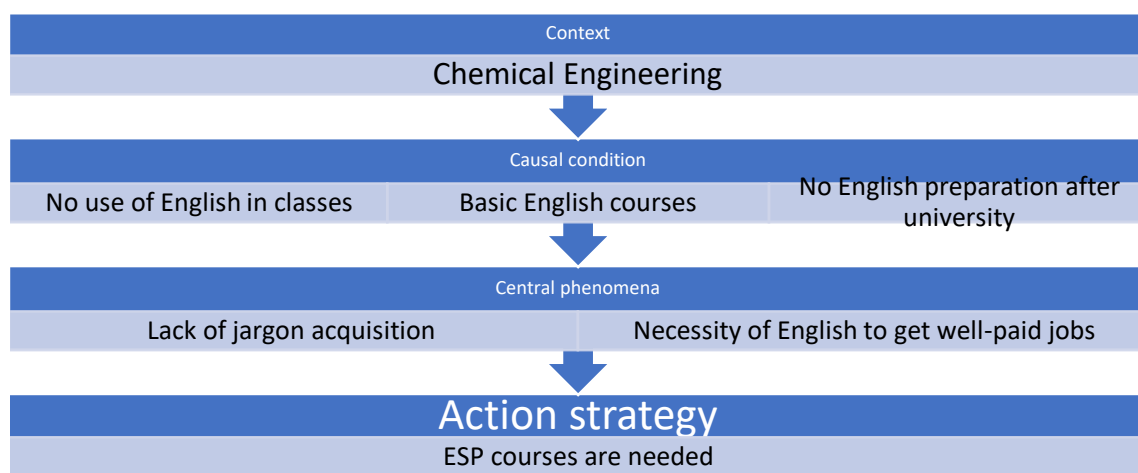


Diagram 3 Chemical Engineering Results Summary

The participants of the Chemical Engineering program believe that ESP courses are necessary as they do not acquire the proficiency and vocabulary they need during their university studies. They argue that the English lessons offered at school are too simple, so students tend to perceive them as boring. A reason for this is that, as participants claimed, English classes tend to focus on grammar practice rather than on using the language. This perception is similar to that of the Medicine School participants discussed above, as Chemical Engineering students also believe that they need more speaking practice.

Moreover, students and graduates of this major agree that English is fundamental once they graduate. All the participants from this program mentioned that English is necessary for the labor market as most publications are in this language, so if they want to be up to date to get better-paid jobs, they need to be fluent in the language. Participants also argued that besides fluency, they need to be acquainted with the terminology in their field, as the articles and general research they read uses very specialized jargon.

Participants claimed that ESP courses are necessary for the university as, once they graduate, it becomes harder for them to join an English course. This is because they tend to have work schedule issues and because, once they are in the labor market, they have several responsibilities that prevent them from finding time to study English.

Thus, graduates encourage the design of ESP courses so that students take advantage of them as part of their university courses.

The English Situation of the Aerospace Engineering Students and Graduates.

The Aerospace Engineering program in this university has as an admission requirement, a basic level of English. This program includes mandatory advanced English courses in its curricula, and one ESP course: technical English. Nevertheless, students and graduates consider that they require more ESP courses due to the nature of their major. The findings from this group of participants are summarized in the following diagram.

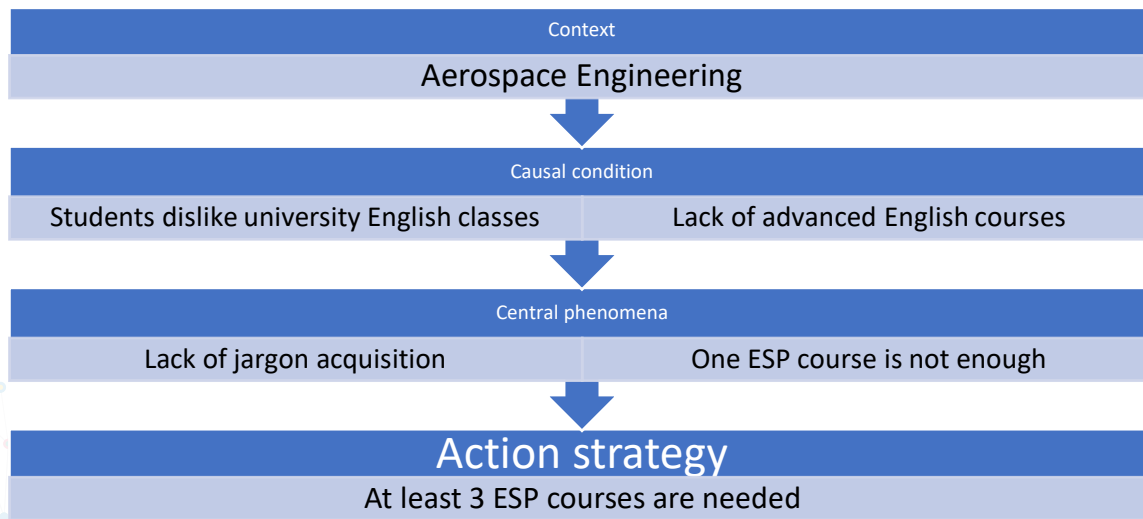


Diagram 4 Aerospace Engineering Results Summary

Participants claimed that their English courses at the university are too basic, even their Advanced English class. Students believe that the course syllabus needs to be modified to cover their needs as, just like with the previous two majors, they are grammar-based instead of communicative. As they are generally not satisfied with the university lessons, 70% of the students claimed that they take an extra English course outside the university.

Moreover, 80% of the Aerospace Engineering major students and 90% of the graduates claimed that English is necessary for their field, mainly if you want to work in a transnational company. However, the rest of the participants mentioned that when working in a Mexican company, English is not determinant to get a job, as “experience is

more important” (SA5). Hence, the need for English depends on the students’ personal aspirations: where they want to work.

Nevertheless, graduates believe that there are better job opportunities abroad, so they recommend that the university should add more ESP courses to the Aerospace Engineering major. They believe that having only one Technical English class does not provide them with enough lexicon to fully understand specialized articles and research, thus, they recommend that the program should have at least three ESP courses.

The English Situation of the Business Administration Students and Graduates.

Finally, the English situation of the Business Administration program in this university is similar to that of Aerospace Engineering. Students enrolled in this program must take the four mandatory general English courses, but they must also take an ESP course: technical English: Business Administration (Inglés técnico: LAE). Also, the general English classes offered in this program are face-to-face, virtual, and blended, so they use a platform provided by the editorial house of the books they use as a complement to the classes. The participants of this group also believe that one technical English course is not enough to acquire the jargon they need in the labor market. The findings of this group are summarized in the diagram below.

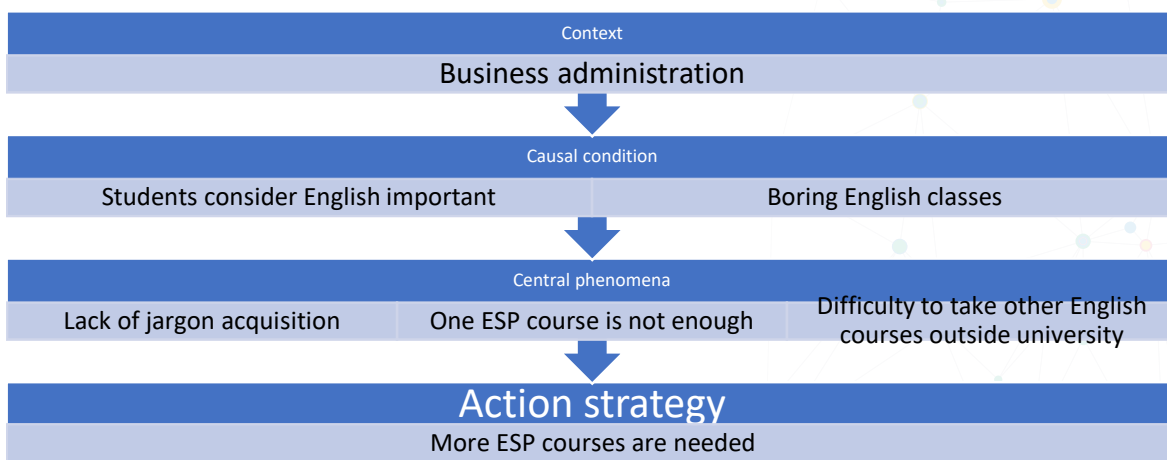


Diagram 5 Business Administration Results Summary

Business administration students and graduates do not think that the English classes offered by the university are good enough to develop their English skills as professionals. In fact, their perceptions of these classes tend to be negative. For instance,

80% of the participants claimed that the classes were bad, while the others mentioned that they were incomplete or regular. Only one participant mentioned that the classes were “good but not complete” (SB10) while another said that they were “ok” (SB 3). When questioned why they had this perception of the English lessons, participants complained about the lack of preparation of the classes from the teachers’ side and about how simple they think they were. Participant SB2 said that the English classes lack “commitment and useful information,” because, in his perception, some of the teachers do not prepare the classes and just make them answer the exercises on the platform. Other students claimed that classes are boring because they always covered the same topics and do not really pay attention in class. Nevertheless, students claimed that, although English classes at the university are generally bad, it is important that they learn the language as they may need it when trying to find a job.

Participants also claimed that the Technical English course could be better. Both students and graduates agree that it is important to learn the specific vocabulary of their field, but they believe that one ESP course is not enough. They also claimed that they would like to learn technical vocabulary in a way that they do not just need to memorize it, but put it into practice.

Regarding the importance of English in the labor market, students and graduates had different perceptions. 90% of the students claimed that English is important because they will need it in the future to get a good job, but the graduates stated that it is necessary “if you want an international job” (GB6) but not if you are working in Mexico. It seems, therefore, that similarly to the Aerospace Engineering major, people who study Business Administration may or may not need English depending on where they choose to work.

Discussion and conclusions

The general perceptions of students and graduates of these four high-demand majors are that ESP courses are needed, but also that their current general English courses should be re-designed to cover their language needs. Findings suggest that students and graduates perceive English in their labor market as necessary, which justifies the need for ESP courses at the university level. This is because, as Hosni (2014) said, if we want the learners to successfully become proficient in the language, the transfer of the contents seen in the classroom into the real world is essential. Thus, it is suggested that the university through the English coordinators and faculty, create

new strategies to improve the syllabus and teaching of the general English and ESP courses already offered so that students take full advantage of them.

Based on the perceptions of the participants of this study, university English programs must be designed in such a way that they cover the needs of the different programs so that students become fluent in the language and get successfully immersed in the labor market. The design of English courses must be carefully done to start tackling for once one of the main problems with English learning in Mexico: it seems that students take many years of English classes, but do not really learn and are not fluent even after graduating from the university.

Graduates have stated that they need better English classes to be real professionals, that is, classes where they learn something that will help them in their jobs. They have also claimed that at the moment of getting a job, they have needed to take extra English courses because the classes provided by the university were insufficient. They have felt insecure, and in the worst of situations, they have been rejected from very important jobs due to the lack of English knowledge.

This lack of English proficiency is mainly in the communicative aspect. Participants claimed that they need to improve their speaking, listening, reading, writing, and technical vocabulary elements as they are required by the companies where graduates work. This occurs because, as mentioned above, most English courses at this university are grammar-based instead of communicative.

Therefore, answering the first research question, in what ways would an ESP course impact the professional development of the students of the above-mentioned programs in this university in the north of Mexico? we can argue that well-designed ESP courses that complement the improved general English courses, would provide university students with tools and confidence to get better academic and job opportunities once they graduate. Thus, we can answer the second question, are ESP programs necessary in this university? with a definite yes.

Hence, it seems that the implementation of ESP courses in university majors is crucial so that students graduate better prepared to be updated in their field, with the ability to read and write academic papers, and with more job opportunities. This will help to improve the professional development and confidence of the students, as well as the prestige of the university by offering quality programs. Thus, we recommend that university programs conduct a needs analysis with students and graduates of their different majors, to first improve their general English courses and then to add to their curricula ESP courses. For ESP courses to succeed, the general English courses must be

re-designed to guarantee that students not only pass the classes but that they actually learn and are able to communicate with their peers and to ensure that learners receive quality courses and that graduates get successfully immersed in the labor market.

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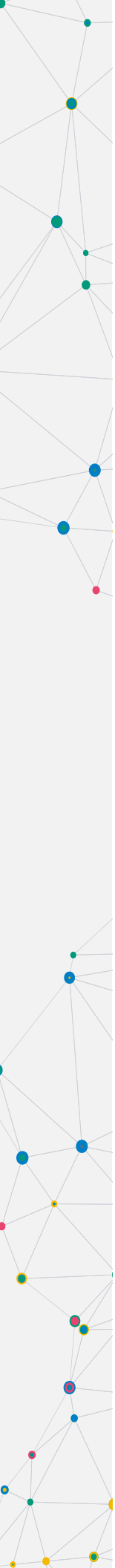
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