Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal
IEEPJ
University of Hormozgan
Online ISSN: 2588 - 4395
Homepage: https://ieepj.hormozgan.ac.ir

Iranian Psychology Teachers' Perceptions of Pluralistic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Teaching in Iran: A Grounded Theory Study

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 23 May. 2023
Received in revised form 23 Aug. 2023
Accepted 26 Aug. 2023
Published online 01 Sep. 2024

Keywords:
ESP, Pluralism, Pluralistic Education, Psychology Field

ABSTRACT

Objective: In spite of the fact that pluralistic education has formally found its own way into the World educational systems, seemingly, ESP teaching system of Iran is almost devoid of pluralistic principles. This study aimed at exploring Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching in Iran.

Methods: In so doing, it benefited from a grounded theory approach. The participants of the present study consisted of 20 Iranian male and female psychology teachers who were selected through purposive sampling from those teachers who were teaching ESP in different branches of the field of psychology at different universities in Iran including Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Tehran, Tarbiat Modares University, Shahid Rajaee University, Shahid Chamran University, Hormozgan University, Isfahan University, and Shiraz University. To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was used.

Results: According to the results of thematic analysis, several themes were extracted as Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching in Iran which were mainly related to ESP teaching methods, assessment procedures, and content. Some of the extracted themes included Using Diverse Methods of ESP Teaching, Developing ESP Courses based on the Students' Needs, and Teaching ESP Students to be Creative.

Conclusions: The findings have some implications for ESP teachers and students in the field of psychology, ESP materials developers, and researchers.

Cite this article: Behboudi, S., Nazari Bagha, K. & Farsani, M. A. (2024). Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic English for specific purposes (ESP) teaching in Iran: a grounded theory study. *Iranian Evolutionary Educational Psychology Journal*, 6 (3), 199-214.
DOI: https//doi.org/ 10.22034/6.3.199

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Publisher: University of Hormozgan.
DOI: https// doi.org/ 10.22034/6.3.199

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Introduction

Recently, globalization has put the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in some challenges in various ways. One kind of such challenges is the emergence of multicultural communities wherein pluralistic principles should be used in their educational programs (Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019). As argued by Stika (2012), paradigm change has been occurred in different societies towards the acceptance and utilization of pluralism in the realm of education to take advantage of diversity in forming new thinking and knowledge. Pluralism is defined as the space within which different viewpoints, thoughts, ideas, languages, values, norms, cultures, races, political arrangements, etc. exist (Hongladarom, 2011). Giselbrecht (2009) considers pluralistic education a democratic concept wherein the emphasis is on linguistic and cultural diversity, open-mindedness, mutual resilience and shared understanding. In pluralistic education, learners are taught so that they can support multicultural communication and viewpoints (Motamed, Yarmohammadian, & Yusefy, 2013).

Further, EFL teaching is mainly taught in different contexts for different goals one of which is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Islam, 2016). ESP refers to "the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain" (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013, p. 2). More specifically, ESP is part of the curriculum of different fields including medical sciences, computer science, management, education, etc. Kitkauskiene (2006) has regarded ESP as a branch of EFL teaching which seeks to tackle both linguistic and professional skills.

However, in spite of the fact that pluralistic education has formally found its own way into the World educational systems, seemingly, ESP teaching system of Iran is almost devoid of pluralistic principles. This is contrary to the recent belief that pluralistic principles should be injected into the educational systems to make them congruent with the social, political and cultural improvements (Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019). According to Kumar (2018), part of this could be rooted in some educators' lack of awareness of the advantages of as well as the opportunities provided by pluralistic education. This means that teachers' perceptions of pluralistic education can prove very efficient in paving the way for the arrival of this education type to the context of Iran. But reviewing the extant literature shows that, to the best knowledge of the researchers, ESP teachers' perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching have not been yet touched in Iran. This is while several

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studies have dealt with the investigation of pluralistic education from a variety of angles. For example, Sadeghi (2010) conducted a study to find the extent to which the principles of pluralistic education are already administered in National Curriculum of Iran. The outcomes of the study indicated that some traces of pluralistic education could be identified in assessment, objectives, and course specifications. Lee (2013) sought to see what challenges are in the way of implementing pluralism in international programs. The study reported the following challenges: Lack of a definite policy to encourage pluralistic education, lack of familiarity of educators with pluralistic education, and lack of required facilities and resources. Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah and Ringlaben (2015) investigated teachers' perceptions of pluralistic education and documented that most of the teachers had consensus on the applicability of pluralistic education in teacher education, however, they were not aware of how to implement it in educational settings. Enyew and Melesse (2018) probed the degree of infusion of pluralistic issues into the Ethiopian universities. The outputs confirmed that pluralistic issues are already used in the universities of Ethiopia. Parker (2019) touched the values of pluralistic education for ELT. The results uncovered re-conceptualization of teaching and evaluation methods as the main achievement of pluralistic education for the field of ELT. Zohrabi, Razmjoo, and Ahmadi (2019) developed a pluralistic model for ELT in Iranian high schools. The developed model contained the following components: pluralistic education, pluralistic evaluation, racial and ethnic equality, social class equality, cultural diversity, etc. As it can be seen in the reviewed studies, pluralistic education has been tackled by foreign and Iranian scholars. However, no study could be found on how Iranian psychology teachers perceived pluralistic ESP teaching. Covering this gap was the main aim of the present study. This gap in combination with the recently backed arguments for the efficiency of using pluralistic education in ESP area (Parker, 2019) served as the main motif behind this study which sought the aim of exploring Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching in Iran. To further elaborate this issue, in spite of the robust empirical evidence in the literature on the effectiveness of pluralistic teaching on ESP learning (e.g., Talukder, 2023), most of the courses provided for ESP teaching in Iran are devoid of pluralistic themes. To conduct the present study, the following research question was formulated: What are Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching in Iran?

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Material and Methods

Design

To conduct this study, a grounded theory approach was used within a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2015). According to Creswell (2015), via this type of design, the perceptions of people can be revealed in the best way.

Participants

A total of 20 Iranian male and female ESP teachers took part in this study. They were picked up from different universities in Iran through purposive sampling. They were teaching ESP in different branches of the field of psychology at different universities in Iran including Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Tehran, Tarbiat Modares University, Shahid Rajaee University, Shahid Chamran University, Hormozgan University, Isfahan University, and Shiraz University. They had from 3 to 10 years of ESP teaching experience. They had Ph.D. degree in different branches of the field of psychology and were in the 33-45 age range. They were completely informed of the purpose of the study and were promised that their private information would not spread.

Instrument

This study used a semi-structured interview to collect the data. It contained five open-ended questions which were developed by the researchers in consultation with the extant literature. The interview was run in Persian with no time limit. The interview was in one-on-one format and conducted in accessible social networks. To ensure about the credibility and dependability of the interview data, low-inference descriptors and member checks were used.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

To collect the data, the participants were kindly invited to take part in the interview in the individual format. Each interview session was held in social networks accessible for each interviewee and audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Then, audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim for further analysis. To analyze the data, the researchers did qualitative thematic analysis on the transcribed data. To do this, first, the researchers became familiar with the data via note taking or looking through the data. Then, the data were coded through making some phrases bold and figuring out some codes as representatives of the content of the bold parts.

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Afterwards, the codes were re-analyzed for the recurrent patterns or themes in them to be identified. Finally, the identified themes were reviewed to ensure about their accuracy.

Results

The qualitative thematic analysis led to the identification of the following themes:

1. **Using Diverse Methods of ESP Teaching**

A variety of teaching methods should be used in teaching ESP. Just using a fixed method is not compatible with pluralistic education. (Participant 11)

2. **Developing ESP Courses based on the Students' Needs**

In developing ESP courses, language needs of students should be paid attention. This is important in pluralistic education to consider students' needs when designing the educational materials. (Participant 6)

3. **Generating Equal Opportunities for Learning of all ESP Students**

To operationalize pluralistic education in teaching ESP, all ESP students should be exposed to equal learning opportunities. Discrimination must be seriously avoided. No ESP student is superior to others in terms of learning right. (Participant 17)

4. **Teaching ESP Students to be Creative**

ESP students must learn to think creatively. Creativity is a main parcel of pluralistic teaching. ESP students need to learn creativity in ESP classes. Being pluralistic is not achieved without being creative. (Participant 1)

5. **Teaching ESP Students to Accept Interpersonal Differences**

In line with pluralism, ESP instructors should teach ESP students to welcome the differences that exist among students. ESP students should be made aware of the potentials and merits of these differences for their own growth and development. They should not consider differences as a negative element. (Participant 20)

6. **Supporting Interpersonal Communication in ESP Classes**

One thing ESP teachers should devote much time to is enhancement of communication among students. ESP classes should be converted into immune places for negotiation and communication rather than good places for negative competition. (Participant 10)

7. **Using Participation-Based ESP Teaching Activities**

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To teach ESP based on pluralistic education, educators must take advantage of class activities which enhance participation among students. Cooperation among students should be generated in any possible way. This is at the heart of pluralistic education. (Participant 8)

8. Using ESP Content that Reflects Voices of ESP Students

In selecting the content of ESP materials, ideologies, viewpoints and ideas of ESP students should be taken into account. ESP content should not be in favor of one or two majority groups. (Participant 17)

9. Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Cultures

Since language and culture are closely interrelated, those who seek to learn a second language for specific purposes should have command over the culture of their first and second language. In this way, pluralism is operationalized. (Participant 19)

10. Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Literature

I believe that literature of any language has much to say about the history of that language. Therefore, an exclusive right of ESP students is being informed of literature of their mother language and English language via different means. (Participant 11)

11. Using ESP Content that Reflects Value System of Minority and Majority Groups

The values, arts, ideals, traditions, and attitudes of both minority and majority groups should be introduced in the ESP content. Just introducing the ideologies of majority groups is not in line with pluralistic education. (Participant 7)

12. Using ESP Content that Reflects both Subject Conceptual and Procedural Knowledge

ESP students should be taught conceptual and procedural knowledge. They should be able to make meaningful connections across and within concepts so that they can apply their knowledge to new situations, solve problems and make decisions. (Participant 16)

13. Using Diverse ESP Assessment Procedures

Since according to pluralism, ESP students are not the same regarding their performance in different types of tests and exams, ESP teachers should try to utilize different assessment types in assessing ESP students' ESP knowledge. (Participant 20)

14. Using Fair and Just ESP Assessment Procedures

Evaluation procedures applied in evaluation of ESP students should be based on fair opinions and activities. They should be the same for all students. (Participant 12)

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15. Using Formative and Summative Assessment Procedures

ESP teachers should not constrain themselves to final exams as remarks of ESP knowledge of students. But they should benefit from both formative and summative testing methods during the semesters and at the end of it. (Participant 3)

The extracted themes are thematically shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Iranian Psychology Teachers' Perceptions of Pluralistic ESP Teaching in Iran

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Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the extracted themes.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Extracted Themes

Theme	Frequency/Percentage
Using Diverse Methods of ESP Teaching	
Developing ESP Courses based on the Students' Needs	
Generating Equal Opportunities for Learning of all ESP Students	
Teaching ESP Students to be Creative	
Teaching ESP Students to Accept Interpersonal Differences	
Supporting Interpersonal Communication in ESP Classes	12/60%
Using Participation-Based ESP Teaching Activities	15/75%
Using ESP Content that Reflects Voices of ESP Students	13/65%
Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Cultures	18/90%
Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Literature	16/13.33%
Using ESP Content that Reflects Value System of Minority and Majority Groups	14/70%
Using ESP Content that Reflects both Subject Conceptual and Procedural Knowledge	18/90%
Using Diverse ESP Assessment Procedures	19/95%
Using Fair and Just ESP Assessment Procedures	18/90%
Using Formative and Summative Assessment Procedures	

Based on the extracted theme, a model was extracted which is shown in Figure 2.

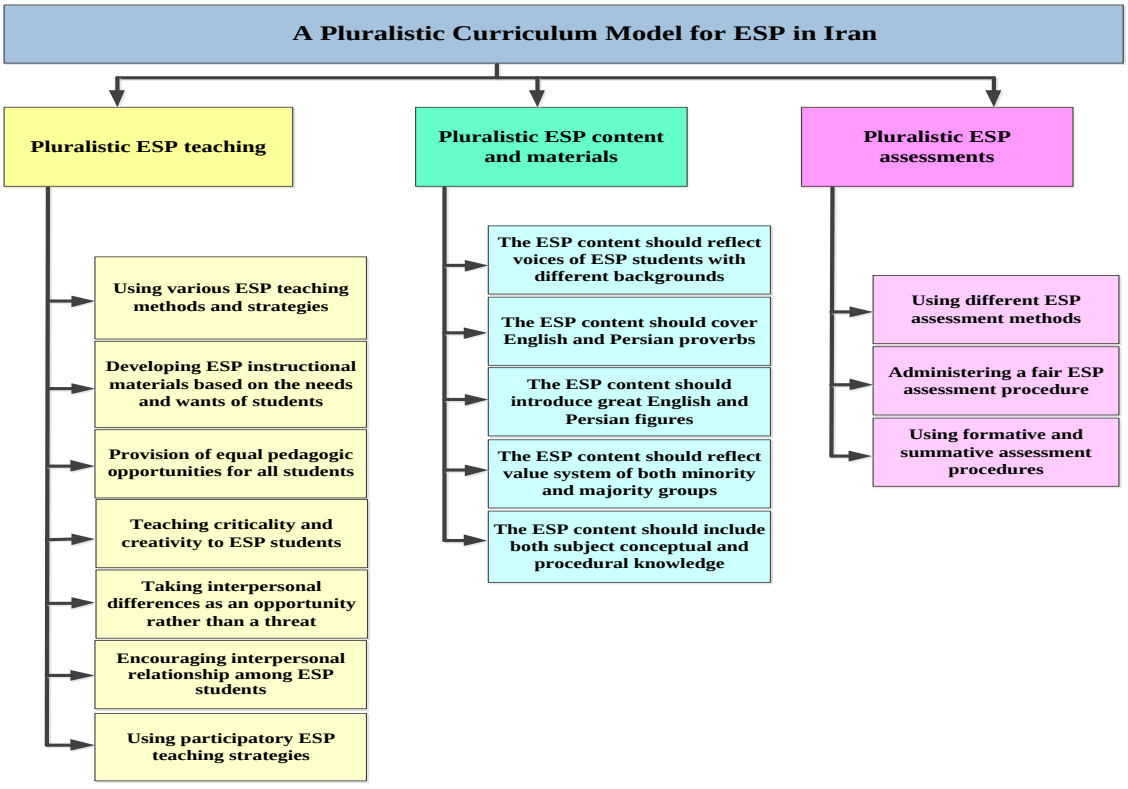

Figure 2. The Proposed Pluralistic Curriculum (PC) Model for ESP in Iran

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Discussion

The present study sought to explore the Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching in Iran. The results revealed the following themes as the Iranian psychology teachers' perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching in Iran: Using Diverse Methods of ESP Teaching, Developing ESP Courses based on the Students' Needs, Generating Equal Opportunities for Learning of all ESP Students, Teaching ESP Students to be Creative, Teaching ESP Students to Accept Interpersonal Differences, Supporting Interpersonal Communication in ESP Classes, Using Participation-Based ESP Teaching Activities, Using ESP Content that Reflects Voices of ESP Students, Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Cultures, Using ESP Content that Introduces English and Persian Literature, Using ESP Content that Reflects Value System of Minority and Majority Groups, Using ESP Content that Reflects both Subject Conceptual and Procedural Knowledge, Using Diverse ESP Assessment Procedures, Using Fair and Just ESP Assessment Procedures, and Using Formative and Summative Assessment Procedures.

The extracted themes have been more or less documented in the previous studies on pluralism, pluralistic education, and related notions such as multiculturalism, multicultural education, etc. (e.g., Abdeli Soltan Ahmadi, & Sadeghi, 2016; Colombo, 2013; Daryai-Hansen et al., 2015; Honnett, 1992; Mostafazadeh et al., 2015; Sadeghi, 2012; Taylor, 1992; Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019) wherein similar perceptions to those extracted in the present study were reported.

To interpret the findings, since pluralistic education cannot be imagined as separate from diversity and variety as opposed to the sameness and similarity (Mostafazadeh et al., 2015; Wilson, 2003), it seems reasonable that the psychology teachers perceive using diverse methods of ESP teaching and assessment, as well as acceptance of interpersonal differences as significant in pluralistic ESP teaching. The rationale behind this argument is that one single form of instruction or test devoid of flexibility and dynamicity cannot fully reveal learners' learning and development, problems, needs, growth, and achievement. Additionally, it seeks to promote this idea that diversity of teaching and evaluation methods indirectly leads to development of ESP learners' learning potentials, and democratic attitudes and values. Furthermore, it removes domination of one type of ESP teaching and assessment, and consequently provides different educational opportunities for cultural and ethnic minorities Moreover, with a view to the fact equality and fairness have been

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assigned a high weight in pluralistic education (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007; UNESCO, 2003), it is justified that the teachers refer to using fair and just ESP assessment procedures, reflecting value system of minority and majority groups, heed to students' needs, and generating equal opportunities for learning of all ESP students in expressing their ideas. Further, participation, engagement, and active involvement of students are considered as inevitable aspects of pluralistic educational programs (Daryai-Hansen et al., 2015; Zohrabi, Razmjoo, & Ahmadi, 2019). This is why the teachers enumerated using participation-based ESP teaching activities, and using ESP content that reflects voices of ESP students in their perceptions of pluralistic ESP teaching. Besides, the close ties between culture and language is paramount in the components listed for pluralistic education (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). Therefore, it is acceptable that the psychology teachers support the use of ESP content that introduces English and Persian cultures and literature in their viewpoints about pluralistic ESP teaching. Finally, a main motto of pluralistic education is that students should be equipped with both subject matter knowledge and skills to take appropriate paths to reach their goals (Sadeghi, 2012). Accordingly, the teachers' opinion of using ESP content that reflects both subject conceptual and procedural knowledge can be traced in this motto. The bottom line is that pluralistic ESP teaching is worth applying in Iranian context. Given that ESP is an inseparable part of curricula of different fields of studies in Iran, this might make ESP education system of Iran more in line with recent transformations and advancements in the World ESP educational system.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that ESP teaching/assessment methods in the field of psychology should be diverse. That is, they should not constrain ESP students to some common mainstream teaching methods or assessment procedures, but they should leave the room for creativity, diversity and individuality; they should be participatory and cooperative, incorporating the views of the ESP students of different cultures; and they should be based on exploratory teaching/assessment methods which are built on the direct and active involvement of the students with the learning problems. Further, it is concluded that quantitative (e.g., standardized tests) and qualitative (e.g., observation, interview, and autobiography) evaluation methods should simultaneously be used in evaluating ESP students. The evaluation should not be just limited to pen and pencil tests or qualitative data, but it should enjoy dynamicity and flexibility.

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Moreover, it can be concluded that ESP students' needs and voices should be taken into account if pluralism is going to be injected to ESP teaching. Last but not least, all ESP students, regardless of their group/class membership should be provided with equal learning opportunities and involved in planning teaching/assessment procedures.

The findings of the study have several implications for different stakeholders of ESP in the field of psychology. ESP materials developers in the field of psychology need to take the extracted themes into account while developing ESP materials. They can apply the findings of the study to make a change in the content of the currently practiced ESP textbooks for the students of psychology. Given that different educational systems in the World have reported good outcomes for the implementation of the pluralistic education, this may contribute to positive results in the ESP education system of the field of psychology. The third group of people who can use the findings of the study are psychology teachers who perform as ESP instructors. They should bear in mind that pluralistic educational principles should be given appropriate attention, otherwise, marginalized students might not find education and pedagogy fair and effective.

Future research can compare the applicability of pluralistic education in ESP and English for general purposes (EGP) courses. Another area for future research can be replicating the present study in an English as a second language (ESL) context. Conducting a study which deals with the pluralist ESP at the level of implementation and operationalization may add to the validity of the findings of the present study. Finally, doing a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat (SWOT) analysis which explores the opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses of implementing the pluralistic ESP in Iran can be very enlightening.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The authors did (not) receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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