

Research Article

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF LEARNERS' INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relevance of learners' Individual Differences (IDS), other than their needs, in the teaching and learning programs related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). By considering learners' needs (wants, lacks, and deficiencies) as only one aspect of learners' individual differences; it examines the contribution of other individual differences such as their multiple intelligences, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence in the teaching of ESP. From the perspective of the humanistic approach to learning and emotional theory of learning, the study analyses the limitations of an exclusive focus on ESP learners' needs and demonstrates the advantages of including other learners' IDS in the teaching programs so as to contribute to the individual growth of each learner. The findings show that if the inclusion of learners' needs tends to make the teaching content motivating and attractive, the ignorance of their multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, and perceived self-efficacy can negatively affect meaning construction process and learners' readiness to effectively use language in real professional situations.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Multiple Intelligences, Emotional Intelligence, Self-efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), learners' needs are put at the centre of all decisions related to teaching content, materials selection or development and the choice of the relevant approach to language teaching as well [1]. This makes learners' needs a topical issue in ESP courses and justifies the learner-centeredness dimension of these courses.

However, differential psychology asserts that learners' needs represent only one dimension of their individual differences [2]. Given the learner-centeredness of ESP, this raises a critical question: should ESP instruction also take into account other individual differences, especially learners' multiple intelligences, perceived self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence? Since these factors influence how learners engage with teaching methods and training content, and how well they manage their learning progress [3], their consideration seems potentially crucial for effective teaching and learning in ESP. This study focuses on that issue by specifically investigating the relevance of integrating these individual differences—beyond learners' needs—into ESP instruction.

More precisely, this study aims to critically analyse the importance of considering individual differences, other than learners' needs, in ESP context. The main research question it tries to answer is as follows: What is the relevance of integrating learners' individual differences — multiple intelligences, perceived self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence — into ESP teaching? This question calls for two subsidiary ones: What are the advantages and limitations of including learners' needs in ESP teaching content compared to other individual differences in ESP teaching? How can other learner factors contribute to more effective ESP instruction?

The main objective of this study is to investigate in order to explain the relevance of considering other learners' Individual Differences, namely their multiple intelligences, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, into ESP programs. This main research objective calls for two subsidiary ones: analyze the strengths and limitations of focusing solely on learners' needs in ESP teaching; examine the contribution of other learners' factors such as multiple intelligences, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence in the design, teaching, and evaluation of ESP courses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The emotional intelligence theory

Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory, introduced by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) and popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995), posits that emotional awareness and management are fundamental to personal and professional success. It claims that emotions significantly influence how individuals learn, interact, and perform [4].

In the context of ESP, where learners often face the pressure of meeting specific linguistic and professional standards, managing emotions becomes a key factor in determining success. Emotionally intelligent learners are better equipped to cope with the anxieties, stresses, and challenges involved in mastering language skills for specialized fields [5].

Five key concepts of Emotional Intelligence Theory are relevant for this theory. The first one, self-awareness recognizes one's emotions and their effects on thoughts and behavior. In the context of ESP, learners who are aware of their emotional responses can better manage stress associated with language learning and professional communication [6].

The second, self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's emotions effectively. This is essential in ESP context, where learners

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might experience anxiety about using English in professional situations. Self-regulation can help them cope with such feelings and improve their performance [7]. The third concept is motivation. The theory contends that emotionally intelligent individuals are often more motivated. In an ESP setting, understanding learners' intrinsic motivations (beyond just their needs) can enhance engagement and learning outcomes [8].

The fourth concept is empathy. It refers to the ability to understand the emotions of others. This is essential in collaborative learning environments typical of ESP classes, where teamwork and communication are fundamental. Recognizing classmates' emotional states can foster a supportive learning atmosphere [9].

The fifth and last concept is related to social skills seen as the proficiency in managing relationships and building networks. In ESP contexts, strong social skills can facilitate better interaction in professional settings, **helping** learners in applying their language skills effectively [10].

The relevance of this theory in this study lies in the fact that Emotional intelligence has a direct impact on how learners engage with specialized content, interact in the learning environment, and adapt to the specific linguistic and cognitive demands of ESP.

The Humanistic Approach of learning

The Humanistic Approach to learning, developed by theorists like Maslow and Carl Rogers, emphasizes personal growth, self-actualization, and the development of the whole person. This theory advocates for a more holistic view of learners, considering not just their academic or professional needs but also their emotional, psychological, and self-fulfilment aspects; hence its relevance in analysing the limitations of focusing solely on learners' needs in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) [11][12].

Among the main concepts underlying this theory, three will retain our attention for the purpose of this study. The first one is related to self-actualization, which refers to the realization of an individual's full potential so that they become self-directed and autonomous individuals. This concept is central to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, suggesting that learners' motivation to achieve higher-level goals depends on the satisfaction of basic needs first [11]. In the context of ESP, this can mean that learners need to go beyond basic linguistic goals to develop broader personal and professional competencies.

The second fundamental concept concerns the focus on the whole person. Humanistic theory promotes the idea of educating the whole person, not just their intellectual or cognitive abilities [12]. In an ESP program, this means addressing not only learners' linguistic needs but also their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Research suggests that when learners' emotional and social needs are met, they are more likely to engage in meaningful learning and apply their skills in real-world contexts [13].

The third concept deals with personal meaning. Humanistic theory emphasizes the importance of learners finding personal meaning in their learning experiences [12]. In an ESP context, simply addressing learners' needs may not be enough if the teaching program does not also help them connect language learning with their broader life goals, emotional development, and personal growth. Studies on intrinsic motivation in adult learning also support the idea that learners are more engaged when they see the relevance of the material to their personal and professional development [14].

The relevance of this theory in this study lies in its ability to help us understand the extent to which ESP programs should go beyond

learners' needs to address emotional and psychological factors so as to link language learning with the personal growth of learners. Ignoring these aspects can reduce the potential for deeper learning and the effective use of language in professional contexts [12].

THE FOCUS ON ESP LEARNERS NEEDS: A LOGICAL BUT INSUFFICIENT ARGUMENT?

The relevant and logical argument of learners' needs in ESP setting

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), learners' needs have traditionally been the primary focus when designing instructional content and methodologies. This approach, known as Needs Analysis, is essential for tailoring language instruction to meet the professional or academic requirements of specific learner groups [1]. However, a critical analysis of this exclusive focus on learners' needs reveals that while logical, it is insufficient for addressing the broader dimensions of learner development.

Learners' needs are undeniably at the core of ESP programs, as decisions about course content, objectives, and assessment methods are typically based on the specific linguistic and professional requirements of the learners [1]. Identifying the reasons why learners study a language helps in designing a curriculum that aligns with their professional or academic aspirations, making it more relevant and motivating. This approach has clear advantages since courses tailored to learners' needs can enhance engagement, motivation, and learner investment in the learning process.

However, focusing solely on needs can be reductionist, as it overlooks other important aspects of learners' individual characteristics. A genuinely learner-centered approach requires a broader perspective that considers not only professional and academic needs but also personal attributes, such as emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, and self-efficacy. Integrating these factors into ESP instruction would improve both the learning experience and the effectiveness of language acquisition.

Neglecting ESP learners' emotional intelligence; a source of emotional and linguistic difficulties

One important factor that is often neglected in a needs-analysis based approach to ESP course design is Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence Theory emphasizes the importance of recognizing, managing, and using emotions in a constructive way [15]. This theory suggests that learners' emotional states significantly impact their ability to learn, interact, and perform, particularly in high-stakes environments such as ESP. Ignoring these emotional dimensions can lead to learner disengagement, anxiety, and impact their language performance.

In an ESP context, learners often face pressure to meet specific linguistic and professional standards. Emotional factors such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills are all important to successfully deal with these challenges. The following examples illustrate the relevance of this idea. A learner in an ESP program for international business may experience anxiety when using English in meetings or negotiations. If the course fails to address emotional management—such as how to regulate stress or build confidence; the learner may struggle to apply their linguistic skills effectively.

Another concrete example is the following. In an ESP course for healthcare professionals, learners may face anxiety when having to use medical English in real-life patient interactions. By incorporating

emotional intelligence strategies such as peer support, reflective practices, and stress management techniques, the course can help learners manage their emotions, build confidence, and perform better in professional settings. From these two examples, it appears that addressing only learners' linguistic needs, without considering the emotional dimensions, would limit the learner's ability to succeed in real-world communication.

Furthermore, motivation, a core component of emotional intelligence, is critical for language learning. Learners who are emotionally intelligent are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, meaning their motive to learn extends beyond mere professional necessity. An ESP course that taps into learners' personal motivations (such as their desire to make a meaningful contribution to their field) will foster deeper engagement and more sustained learning. For example, a medical student might be more motivated to improve their English if they see how it can enhance their ability to connect with patients, rather than simply viewing it as a professional requirement.

Why making ESP course more Holistic can foster learners' personal growth

The Humanistic Approach to learning emphasizes the importance of addressing learners' emotional and psychological needs as part of the learning process. While ESP traditionally focuses on professional and academic outcomes, this approach advocates for a more holistic view of learners—one that also considers their personal growth, emotional well-being, and self-actualization. By focusing solely on needs, ESP programs may neglect important aspects of learners' personal development, which are crucial for meaningful and sustained language learning.

According to humanistic theory, learning is most effective when it complies with a learner's personal goals and values. In ESP, however, the rigid focus on predefined needs may leave little room for learners to explore their identities, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds. This can hinder their ability to engage deeply with the language and limit the effectiveness of instruction. To back up our claim, the following illustration can be relevant. In an ESP program designed for engineers, a rigid focus on technical language skills may neglect opportunities for learners to reflect on how English communication skills align with their personal values or career ambitions. By incorporating reflective activities that encourage learners to connect their language learning with their broader life goals, the program can foster deeper emotional engagement and enhance language acquisition.

The self-actualization principle, central to humanistic theory, suggests that learning should contribute to the full development of the learner as a person. An ESP program that focuses narrowly on professional skills might meet learners' immediate needs but fail to facilitate their personal and emotional growth.

The necessity of considering learners multiple intelligences and their self-efficacy

Another limitation of an exclusive focus on learners' needs is that it neglects the diversity of cognitive and emotional processing among learners. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences [16] highlights that individuals possess different types of intelligences—linguistic, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, to name but a few.

Multiple intelligences appear as a fundamental cognitive function in meaning production. Since the most developed form in a learner provides them with particular cognitive dispositions that influence how

they solve problems and learn, identifying and integrating these intelligences into ESP training content would enable learners to better appropriate the inputs. In the context of language teaching and learning, these sensory inputs represent the material used by the teacher to develop skills in learners. The processing of inputs requires alignment with the sensory modalities of learners. Therefore, the inputs and their modes of presentation must be diversified and correspond to the learners multiple intelligences. This diversification will allow learners to construct knowledge through their preferred channels of information processing. In an ESP setting, learners from various professional backgrounds may have strengths in different areas, and instruction that focus only on linguistic needs fails to take into account these other intelligences. In fact, a learner in an ESP program for architecture might possess strong spatial intelligence, which could be considered by tasks that involve visual or spatial problem-solving. Incorporating tasks that align with learners' dominant intelligences, rather than just linguistic skills, will make the learning process more dynamic and relevant.

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's own ability to succeed, also plays a significant role in ESP learning. Learners who have higher self-efficacy are more likely to take risks, engage in real-world communication, and persist in challenging situations [7]. ESP programs that emphasize self-efficacy through positive reinforcement, realistic goal-setting, and constructive feedback can empower learners to approach language tasks with confidence.

Additionally, the influence of motivation on learning derives from the fact that it regulates the learning action. Motivation increases learners' engagement level and the effort required to develop their linguistic skills. A lack of motivation at this level can negatively affect the quality of learners' production, particularly as motivation helps to "bridge a deficit in ability for language learning" [5, p.65]. Furthermore, self-efficacy influences ESP learning in that it refers to the learners' belief in their capabilities to perform specific learning tasks. When sufficiently high, learners exert more effort and persist in their learning despite the difficulties they encounter. Thus, it acts as an essential psychological factor in performance.

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES IN CONSIDERING LEARNERS FACTORS IN ESP TEACHING CONTENT

Awareness and Identification of Learners' Individual Differences

While integrating learners' individual differences beyond their needs can be advantageous for their personal growth and readiness for real-world settings, this approach also presents significant challenges. One of the primary difficulties in integrating these factors into ESP teaching content is the requirement to first be aware of these individual differences. Once this awareness is achieved, educators must use appropriate tools and strategies to identify and address these differences effectively [16].

In the context of ESP, this means rethinking both the teaching content and the learning environments in which students interact. There is a need to reflect on teaching situations that not only impart technical or professional knowledge but also foster opportunities for learners to explore their emotional intelligence and multiple intelligences.

A key challenge is the identification of individual differences, such as multiple intelligences or emotional intelligence, among learners. This requires a range of diagnostic tools that may not be readily available or widely understood by ESP instructors. Additionally, ESP teachers

may not be trained in using tools designed to assess emotional intelligence or multiple intelligences, which can limit their ability to incorporate these dimensions into their teaching [15].

In a business English course, learners may exhibit strong logical-mathematical intelligence, but have weaker interpersonal skills, which are crucial for negotiation and collaboration. An instructor aware of these differences could design group activities that specifically target interpersonal communication, thus balancing the learning experience. Without identifying these needs through appropriate assessment tools, instructors may inadvertently overlook these areas of development [4].

The need for Practicality in Designing Teaching Content and Situations

Another challenge lies in the practicality of incorporating multiple intelligences and emotional intelligence into ESP teaching content. While including problem-solving tasks or reflective activities might enrich the learning experience, it requires careful planning and an adaptable curriculum. Designing courses that cater to individual differences means offering varied activities, such as case studies, role-playing, or individual projects, which may not align with the more rigid, needs-focused structure of many ESP programs [3].

Moreover, time constraints in ESP courses often make it difficult to balance the professional and academic needs of learners with the exploration of personal growth and emotional development. Teachers may feel pressed to meet learning objectives that focus primarily on professional competencies, leaving little room for activities that address learners' emotional or multiple intelligence needs [17].

The Need for Teacher Training and Resources

To successfully implement an approach that integrates learners' individual factors, teacher training is essential. Many ESP instructors are experts in their fields but may lack formal training in recognizing and supporting emotional intelligence or multiple intelligences. There is a need for professional development programs that equip teachers with the tools to integrate these elements into their teaching practices [18]. An ESP teacher in a technical field like engineering may not be familiar with the concept of emotional intelligence or how to incorporate it into their lessons. Professional development workshops could introduce instructors to strategies for integrating emotional intelligence into their teaching, such as using peer feedback to foster social awareness or providing activities that build self-confidence in technical presentations [4].

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the relevance of learners' individual differences, other than their needs, in the teaching and learning programs related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The main question is tries to answer is as follows: What is the relevance of integrating learners' individual differences — multiple intelligences, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence — into ESP teaching?

By considering learners needs (wants, lacks, and deficiencies) as only one aspect of learners' individual differences; it scrutinizes the role of other learners' factor, especially their multiple intelligences, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence in the teaching of ESP. The humanistic approach to learning and emotional theory of learning helps in analysing the strengths and limitations of an exclusive focus on ESP learners' needs and demonstrate the advantages and relevance of including other learners' individual differences in the

teaching content so as to contribute to the individual growth of each individual student. The findings show that if the inclusion of learners' needs is fundamental and logical since it tends to make the teaching content motivating and attractive; it is reductionist to the extent that the ignorance of their multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, and perceived self-efficacy negatively affect meaning construction process and learners' readiness to effectively use language in real professional situations.

Our suggestions to improve the situation lies in three main points; developing an awareness of ESP learners individual differences and identifying them with adequate instruments, making the teaching content and learning situations more practical by including problem-solving tasks or reflective activities to enrich the learning experience, and the need for professional development programs that equip teachers with the tools to integrate ESP learners IDs into their teaching practices.

Competing interests

"Authors have declared that no competing interests exist."

Authors' Contributions

Author A is specialized in individualized Instruction of English Language teaching while author B is specialized in English for Specific Purposes. They both put their expertise in the conduct of this study from the identification of the topic, the selection of the relevant but unexplored learners' individual differences in ESP content. The critical analysis of the relevance of these Individual Differences was conducted by both authors.

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