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Examining the relationship between students' requirements and English for Islamic studies programs in Dar El Hadith El Hassania Institute, Rabat

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Abstract

This study investigates ESP programs in the context of Islamic studies in Morocco. It examines the relevance of the English for Islamic Studies program implemented at Dar El Hadith El Hassania on students' needs. To fulfill this purpose, a mixed-methods approach is adopted. A survey questionnaire and interviews are used to obtain reliable and scientific data. The survey findings indicated that the majority of participants have a great interest to learn English. Speaking and Grammar were rated as extremely important. The results obtained from students' perceptions of the usefulness of the English course in meeting their needs reported that tasks related to Grammar and vocabulary were achieved to a satisfactory level.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), grammar, Islamic Studies, Morocco, needs analysis



Public Interest Statement

This research delves into the English for Islamic Studies curriculum at Dar El Hadith El Hassania in Morocco, emphasizing how well it meets the needs of the students. Data collection involved a mixed-methods approach that included questionnaires and interviews. The findings demonstrated the students' strong interest in learning English, with a particular emphasis on speaking and grammar. The English course's grammar and vocabulary assignments were reported by the students as completed satisfactorily.

1. Introduction

In the Moroccan context, the place of English in Islamic higher education institutions has been widely emphasized. To this end, there have been new calls for regulating and establishing a new conceptual and theoretical framework for teaching English for Islamic studies at a time of radical turmoil events, mainly the dramatic events of 9/11 in the US and 16/5 in Morocco. As Karmani (2005) claimed, among the factors for expanding the English for Islamic studies is based on the terrorist acts of 9/11 in order to "Fight the global menace of Islamic radicalism" (P. 15). This leads us to talk about the pressure that was on the Muslim countries (particularly in Arabian Gulf Region) to reform educational curricula based on the assumption that they are partly responsible for motivating the terrorist attacks. Having said this, there were calls for the government of Saudi Arabia to "Reform its curriculum in a manner that promotes tolerance, develops civil society, and encourages functionality in the global economy" (Karmani, 2005, p. 15). Based on this, in recent years, Morocco as well has witnessed a number of reforms in various domains, and the religious field has been no exception. Thus, the reform undertaken in 2005 at Dar El Hadith El Hassania Institution in Rabat emphasized on the inclusion of English for Islamic studies within its education curricula. As can be noticed, the development of ESP in Morocco goes further to include the field of Islamic studies. This indicates the significant status of English in Morocco. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state "As English became the accepted international language of technology and commerce, it created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language" (p. 6). This has created a new generation of learners with specific needs and interests which gives rise to new vocabularies, grammatical forms, and ways of speaking and writing (Graddol, 1997). This fact has led syllabus makers and course designers to produce and adopt new courses aimed at specific disciplines. For example, English for medicine, English for engineering, and English for business. Accordingly, students at Islamic schools have their own linguistic needs as well. It is stated that English for Islamic purposes is new to the world of language for specific purposes. To illustrate this (Abudhahir & Ali, 2018) claimed that English for Islamic studies is a new subfield in English for specific purposes and it currently lacks a specialized curriculum. To this end, Al Faruqi (1986) has had a remarkable contribution in the field of religious studies in relation to language in which he was the first to give birth to new modified English which is named "Islamic English."

In this respect and on account of the current status of English for specific purposes in Morocco, English for Islamic purposes has been of great importance for many learners with different needs. This has injected their enthusiasm to learn English for Islamic Studies in many Islamic schools, namely, Dar El Hadith El Hassania in Rabat. Yet, the problematic issue that needs to have an answer is the extent to which the English for Islamic Studies program implemented at this institution meets students' needs.

Before presenting our research methodology and data, a brief description of ESP is pointed out with a focus on its main definitions. The Second point in the literature review discusses the nature of the English for Islamic Studies and the emergence of the concept 'Islamic English'

2. Review of literature

2.1 Issues in ESP

In this era of global scientific and professional cooperation in which English is the leading language both for communication and for the dissemination of knowledge, the need for teaching courses designed for particular objectives is stronger than ever before. As a result, English for Specific Purposes has developed into being one of the most prominent branches of EFL.

According to Donesch-Jezo (2012), Both EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP/EPP (English for Occupational/Professional Purposes) are subcategories of ESP. While the former focuses on preparing students for study in foreign universities, the latter prepares students to perform in a certain profession. This includes engineering, medicine, computer science, and business management. A brief review of the literature on the definition of ESP reveals that various definitions have been offered to explain what ESP really is. As a point of departure, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claim that “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner reasons for learning” (p. 19). Thus, the most important defining feature of ESP according to this definition is the needs analysis. Anthony (2015), on the other hand, has provided a general definition that seems to include all that has been said so far. He argues that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a form of language instruction that focuses on the language, skills, themes, and genres required to fit the present and/or future students’ academic or occupational needs which could be reached via broad and/or subject-specific instructional and learning strategies. Kirkgöz & Dikilita (2018), tackle the issue from a different angle in which they argue that ESP focuses on natural communication rather than proper language use. In fact, the authors presented the major concepts and recent advancements in ESP within the context of English as the global lingua franca, and the new requirements of English language learners in a globalised society that puts communication on its first agenda. They highlight as well that ESP is important in securing employment for university graduates. All in all, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a well-established and rapidly expanding field of study which has become a fundamental part of (ELT) and incorporated into the majority of university courses. When comparing general English (GE) and English for specific purposes (ESP), the distinction is not conceptual and theoretical. For general English, the instructor is primarily concerned with covering materials adopted or adapted; whereas, the emphasis in English for specific purposes is on meeting the needs of students. Therefore, language structure is less central than the processes of teaching and learning (Sekhri, 2020).

2.2 English for Islamic Studies

It is vital to keep in mind that in today’s world, English is the main conveyor of Islamic knowledge, and more literature pertaining to Islam is published in this language than in any other language (Mahmudul, 2014). It is from this standpoint that the notion of Islamic English arises, which was conceptualized by Al Faruqi (1986) in his book *Toward Islamic English*, in which he claims that English is widely used as a means of communication among Muslims, with estimates putting the number as high as several hundred million in a variety of social, academic and other areas. Al Faruqi (1986) proposes the use of Islamic English to ensure the correct use of Islamic names and lexis, in order to prevent them from any kind of distortion that can occur through transliteration and translation which cause these names and terms to be changed semantically. Needless to say, a cultural loss occurs when the process of translation and transliteration ignores the implicit meaning in the source language (Arabic) and gives much consideration to the linguistic and semantic norms of the target language (English). This made him coin the term ‘Islamic English’, which he describes as “The English language modified to enable it to carry Islamic proper nouns and meanings without distortion, and thus to serve the linguistic needs of

Muslim users of the English language”. (Faruqi, 1986, p. 7)

3. Research Methodology

The section will detail the research methodology. We will first state the research questions and elaborate on the research participants and the instruments that have been adopted in this study for data collection.

3.1 Research Questions

This study examines the extent to which the English for Islamic studies program is relevant to students’ needs. Therefore, study will answer the following research questions.

1. How do students perceive their linguistic needs?
2. Do teaching objectives and content reflect students’ needs?

3.2 Participants

The targeted population in this study constitutes of MA students at Dar El Hadith El Hassania in Rabat. The total number of students studying at the master program is 84 in the academic year 2015/2016. As the number is not large, there was no need for selection of participants. All the students who were present at the day of distribution were administered a questionnaire.

Table 1: Distribution of Students by Gender.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Female	18	27,7	27,7	27,7
male	47	72,3	72,3	100,0
Total	65	100,0	100,0	

3.3 Data Collection

3.1 Instruments and Collecting Data

To conduct this research, the collected data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with two instructors currently teaching at the targeted institution and one with the director of Dar El Hadith El Hassania to obtain in-depth results. As for quantitative data, a self-reported questionnaire was addressed to collect data from participants.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data gathered through the questionnaire was analyzed by SPSS Statistics (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 17.0. This latter provides the statistical techniques recommended for answering the research questions: frequency distribution and percentages, etc. Subsequently, the data were analyzed through both descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. Results and Discussion

This section reports and interprets the findings of the study. Hence, the results were displayed under two main sections which constantly try to answer the research questions. The first section attempts to investigate students’ linguistic needs. The second section examines the relevance of the English course to students’ needs. The last part of this chapter analyses interviews conducted with English instructors.

4.1 Identifying Students' Linguistic Needs

In order to investigate the English language skills prioritized by students, they were asked to rank each skill according to the degree of its importance on a likert scale.

Figure 2: the Importance of the English language Skills as Perceived by Students.

As can be seen in Figure above, in regard to speaking, (84, 60%) of the respondents ranked it as extremely important. The grammar component was ranked by (80, 00%) of the participants as extremely important. Listening was rated third in terms of importance with (78, 50%) of students considering it extremely important. In addition, reading constituted the most important skill with (75, 40%) followed by writing with (70, 80%). However, vocabulary was judged by only (69, 20%) of the respondents considering it very important.

Based on the results, it is obvious that the most prioritized skill (speaking) for students goes hand in hand with their motives and interests. (23, 90%) of the respondents revealed that the most important reason for learning English for Islamic studies is to interact with people from other backgrounds and cultures.

The students' responses to the open-ended question confirm this result. They suggest that the English course is required to focus more on developing students' communication abilities. One of the respondents said, "I guess that teachers should suggest different topics to be discussed in class, especially recent ones." A vivid topic could attract students' intention more and motivate them to speak. It can encourage them to express their opinions and feel self-confident. Additionally, it leads students to an open discussion. So, they can exchange different ideas and as well as they can overcome their anxiety about expressing their opinions in front of the public. As a consequence, this would help students develop their communicative skills.

4.2 Examining the relevance of English for Islamic studies program on students' needs

As shown in figure 4, students were more satisfied with their Grammar and vocabulary. Thus, (35, 40%) claimed that the English courses helped them “a lot” in Grammar. This was followed by (32,30%) of the respondents reporting that the English course at Dar El Hadith El Hassania helped them “a lot” in developing their vocabulary. However, students were less satisfied with their productive skills. (23, 10%) of the respondents stated that the English course didn't help them much in writing. Besides, (18, 50%) reported that the English course helped them “a lot” in speaking. Concerning the tasks related to each skill, 23 students (35, 4%), reported that the English course helped them a lot in ‘using language rules in appropriate context’ In addition, 21 students (32,3%) stated that the EIS helped them a lot ‘To make correct sentences in English’. Furthermore, as for vocabulary, 20 students (30,8) reported that the EIS program helped them a lot “To understand specific related terms in context” and “To develop their vocabulary repertoire”. On the other hand, the respondents were less satisfied with some tasks related to writing, listening and speaking. In this line, 18 of the respondents (27,7%) stated that the English courses didn't help them much to ‘translate Islamic related topics from Arabic to English and vice versa’. However, students were less satisfied with their productive skills. (23, 10%) of the respondents stated that the English course didn't help them much in writing. Besides, (18, 50%) reported that the English course helped them “a lot» in speaking.

4.3 Interview Analysis

The results related to the interview that was carried out with the two instructors involved in the study are presented below. Basically, this sub-section reports the points of view of two instructors currently teaching English at Dar El Hadith El Hassania. Both of the instructors were required to answer five main questions to get in-depth data about the English for Islamic studies (EIS) program implemented at Dar El Hadith El Hassania.

Question 1: In your opinion, why was English for Islamic Studies introduced to MA students, and who sets the English course objectives at Dar El Hadith El Hassania?

Like all higher education institutions, Dar El Hadith El Hassania has undergone some profound reforms. Thanks to the reform initiated in 2005 by Mohammed VI. As reported in the interviews, a number of foreign languages have been introduced in the school curriculum, mainly Thus, a number of foreign languages have been introduced in the school curriculum, mainly English, French, Spanish and Hydro. The great importance given to the English language emanates from the assumption that English is a lingua-franca. Based on this, all the students desiring to study at Dar El Hadith El Hassania have to sit for an entrance exam in which they are tested in foreign languages, namely English and French. Inevitably, mastering English is expected to allow students to get access to a large body of literature in different fields, including religious issues. It is worth noting that around 50 journals in the USA are published every year about Islamic issues in English. Besides, both instructors claimed that many reasons undermined the inclusion of English in Islamic studies. First, students may need Islamic-related references in English to conduct their research papers. Second, many students at this institution tend to carry on their higher studies abroad. Third, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs tends to send each year a group of students for a mission abroad for preaching carrying out what is called ‘Waed Wa Al-Irshad’ tutorials. With regard to syllabus making, including teaching objectives, it was stated by the instructors that they have changed the syllabus many times. At first, they taught English for general purposes. Later on, they agreed to design their own program taking into account students' needs in which they decided

to devote general English for undergraduates and EIS for the postgraduate level. These points suggest that the EIS program at this institution adopts an ESP course to serve the objective behind creating such an institution, namely, training scholars in Islamic sciences. Inevitably, those scholars may need English to defend and spread Islamic values abroad.

Question 2: How do you elicit the data regarding your student's needs?

The second question in the interview was designed to know the instructors' methods in gathering data concerning students' own needs. The instructors stated that students are required to fill in a questionnaire at the beginning of the year in which they are asked to provide information about their interests, perceptions and needs. Furthermore, students are asked open-ended questions to let them feel free to express their thoughts and ideas. Some of these questions are the following: what are your needs? What are your strengths and weaknesses in language skills? What do you want your teacher to consider in the syllabus? Most importantly, Dar El Hadith El Hassania organizes lectures, seminars, and study days in which students are invited to attend such activities to participate and share their ideas.

Question 3: Which of the language skills do you think students of Islamic studies need most to succeed in their future careers?

This question was included in the interview so as to elicit the instructors' perceptions of the most needed skills for students. Both instructors deemed that all four skills are important for students' language proficiency. However, some skills should be given more time and focus to serve the students' needs in terms of language skills. In fact, both interviewees had different opinions on this point. One instructor claimed that speaking skills should be prioritized because students will need to talk at many occasions such as taking part in conferences, seminars, or preaching abroad. The other interviewee stated that reading skill is crucial for the student's future academic career in the sense that they might need to read Islamic-related books or any references written in English for their future research.

Question 4: what materials do you rely on to teach these skills?

This question was designed to know about the materials the instructors use to teach language skills. On this point, both interviewees stated that they try to be as selective as possible. Thus, they agreed they use different materials and select what is relevant to students. The main material they use to teach language skills is the textbook entitled "English for Islamic Studies". As was claimed by the interviewees, the book contains interesting issues that inject students' enthusiasm to open debatable discussions in class. Even more, the book enriches the students' vocabulary repertoire. Since the textbook in question lacks sufficient writing and grammar lessons, they include other materials, mainly Academic Writing, Grammar in use, and Oxford Grammar Practice. Furthermore, they pointed out that they use videos in class to raise the students' curiosity to speak in English.

Question 5: Are there any special needs or anything else I should know about?

The Final question in the interview was designed to elicit the instructors' suggestions or any other additions that could be added and weren't mentioned in the previous comments. Accordingly, the interviewees provided many future projects they intend to work on to improve the EIS program at Dar El Hadith El Hassania. As was stated by the interviewees, one of these plans is to activate agreements with Higher Islamic Universities abroad, like Turkey or Malaysia, in order to exchange ideas and experiences in the hope to develop the teaching of English in the context of Islamic studies. Once again, the Instructors at Dar El Hadith El Hassania aim to have their own textbook designed specifically for

the kind of students of Islamic studies with different levels in which the textbook includes aspects of students' specialty. This would actually serve their needs and fulfill their objectives.

To summarize these reports, it is worth saying that the instructors' emphasis on the aim of the English course is to sharpen students' speaking fit with their perceived needs. As was shown in the results obtained from the survey questionnaire, speaking was outstandingly rated as extremely important. However, this result is inconsistent with students' perceptions of the usefulness of the English course in meeting their needs. Within the same line, most students reported that Grammar and vocabulary skills were achieved to a satisfactory level. In this regard, students perceived themselves as having the lowest competence in productive skills.

Conclusion

This study was conducted and intended to investigate ESP programs in the context of Islamic studies. One main reason behind undertaking research on this issue is the increasing demand for regulating and establishing a solid framework for teaching English for Islamic studies in Morocco. Basically, two main objectives underpin the exploration of this case study. Firstly, the study sought to investigate students' self-perceived needs in language skills. Secondly, it attempted to examine the relevance of the English for Islamic studies program implemented at Dar El Hadith El Hassania on students' needs. Before addressing these objectives, however, it was first important to elicit students' influential motives for learning English for Islamic studies. In this line, (23, 90%) of the respondents revealed that the main influential motive for learning English for Islamic English was to interact with people from other backgrounds and cultures. Concerning students' perceptions of their needs in terms of language skills, speaking and grammar skills were outstandingly rated as extremely important. The results obtained from students' perceptions of the usefulness of the English course in meeting their needs reported that tasks related to Grammar and Vocabulary were achieved to a satisfactory level. On the other hand, the respondents were less satisfied with some tasks related to listening and speaking.

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