

## Who Should Teach English for Medical Purposes (EMP) ?

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### Abstract

**Background and purpose:** The fact that who is more qualified to teach the EMP (English for Medical purposes) courses has long been the cause of argument between the heads of language departments (LDs) on one side and those of discipline-specific departments (DSDs) on the other side. This research was conducted to study the views of both sides as well as those of students in some EMP English classes.

**Methods:** Three questionnaires were used as the tool of data collecting. They were filled by some vice-deans, some heads of LDs and DSDs as well as the students of some EMP English classes in six medical universities during the academic year 2006-2007.

**Results:** According to the data gathered, though most vice-deans and almost all heads of language departments (LDs) tended to assign EMP classes to the teachers of LDs, the majority of the heads of discipline-specialist departments (DSDs) believed that these courses should be taught by subject-specialist teachers. The students of EMP classes, in all, believed that in teaching EMP courses, LD teachers are more qualified than discipline-specialist teachers. From the six questions posed to 176 students about the different capabilities of EMP teachers, LD teachers gained 1515 positive points (out of 1920 points) while the points gained by discipline-specialist teachers was just 1331.

**Conclusions:** Students and heads of language department preferred LD teachers while heads of DSDs preferred DS teachers for teaching EMP. LD teachers should enhance their knowledge of the discipline while DSD teacher should study language and language teaching.

**Keywords:** IRAN, TEACHING EMP; EMP TEACHER

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### Introduction

In Iranian medical universities, in the curriculum of most disciplines, at all levels, in addition to one 3-credit general English course, at least one 3-credit EMP course has also been included. But the fact that there is an ongoing controversy regarding who is more qualified to teach these EMP courses,

the teachers of language departments (LDs) with at least a master degree in TEFL, or those of discipline-specific departments (DSDs), with a good or even mediocre mastery in English, has long been the cause of argument between the heads of these two departments.

In order to prove the priority of subject-specialist teachers over language department teachers, the first group claim that teaching an EMP course requires a great deal of knowledge about the main terms and topics of related discipline, and as LD teachers are usually lacking such knowledge they are not consequently competent to teach EMP classes. In contrast, almost all the heads of

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the experienced ones. Dr. Tahririan, an Iranian well-experienced ESP teacher and text book writer, in answer to an inquiry about the same problem writes, " In an EMP class, such as English for medical purposes, we are not supposed to teach medicine. The medical content of our textbook is just a means for placing the students in a medical English environment ." He adds, " The teachers of such classes ought to acquire as much information as possible on the basic principles and topics of medicine in order to avoid misunderstanding of the EMP texts they want to teach " (1)

It seems that this problem is not limited to the Iranian universities. Jordan, a British linguist writes ( 1997) , " A teacher of ESP (English for specific purposes) needn't be necessarily an specialist in a certain discipline. He/she can manage an ESP class with just some degree of familiarity, (2) with the students' field of study. " ( 2) . Holme (1996) argues that " ESP cannot be shut away in such a separate compartment that general English teacher feel unable to enter."( 3) .Ludmila Newirthova (2003) a linguist from Cseck republic, has written, "The role of an ESP teacher is not to be a substitute teacher regarding technical subjects. On the other hand, a good ESP teacher must have knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject matter he /she wants to teach because he /she can effectively use only those specialized materials where there is a common fund of knowledge between him/her and the learner. "(4)

This research was conducted during the academic year 2006-7 and aimed at studying the views of :

- \* The heads of language departments about above-mentioned problem.
- \*The heads of discipline-specialist departments about the same problem.
- \* And also the students attending EMP classes about their EMP teachers.

## Methods

This study was conducted in the form of a survey .Three questionnaires were designed and used to gather the data needed .The first questionnaire that was sent to the vice deans for academic affairs of the six small and large medical universities, contained questions on the type and number of EMP course credits offered and the teachers of these courses.The second questionnaire was sent to 42 faculty members of the universities studied, including 8 vice deans,20 heads of DSDs,10 heads of LDs and 4 discipline-specialist teachers in charge of teaching EMP classes .It was used to reflect the views of these faculty members on the main question of the study : Who is a qualified ESP teacher?The third questionnaire that was distributed among 176 students (3)

of eight EMP classes majoring in the dentistry, nursing ,food science ,food technology and optometry had some questions on the general characteristics of their EMP course, EMP coursebook, linguistic and pedagogic competence of their EMP teachers and some aspects of his/her teaching methodology .

It should be mentioned that from the 8 EMP classes studied ,four were taught by LD teachers each one holding a master degree in English(TEFL), and the four others by teachers of DSDs with either a Phd. degree(one teacher) or a master degree in the students' field of study. Six of these classes were at undergraduate level and the two others included the students of Dentistry .

## Results

**a:** The data collected by the first questionnaire were all arranged in table one. According to these data , in all , 224 credits of different EMP courses had been offered in the six medical universities studied during the second semester of the academic year 2005-2006. From this number , 76.5% ( 171 credits ) were taught by the teachers of LDs,

and the rest ( 23.5% .or 53 credits ) by discipline-specialist teachers.

**b** : The data obtained by the second questionnaire reflecting the views of 42

faculty members with different occupational positions were classified in tables 2,3 and 4.

**Table 1** .Number of EMP course credits offered in each of the six medical universities studied during the academic year 2005 – 2006

Medical universities studied		Shahid-Beheshti Medical University	Tehran M.U.	Shiraz M.U.	Zanjan M.U.	Ahvaz M.U.	Boosherhre M.U.	Total number of course credits
number of EMP course credits offered by each university		91	77	36	6	8	6	224
EMP course credits taught by Discipline-Specific teachers	number	27	20	—	—	—	6	53
	percentage	30%	26%	—	—	—	100%	23.5%
EMP course credits taught by Language Department teachers	number	64	57	36	6	8	—	171
	percentage	70 %	74 %	100%	100%	100%	—	76.5%

**Table 2.** Response of vice deans for academic affairs to "who should teach EMP courses"?

Teachers	Language Department (LDs)	Discipline-Specialist Departments (DSDs)
Level of students		
Undergraduate students	3	6
Postgraduate students	6	2
Medical students	5	4
Total	14	12

**Table3.** Response of 24 heads and faculties of DSDs to "who should teach EMP courses"?

Teachers of	Language Department (LDs)	Discipline-Specialist Departments (DSDs)
Level of students		
Undergraduate students	12	16
Postgraduate students	6	18
Medical students	10	14
Total	28	48

According to these tables ,while most of the vice deans for academic affairs believed that EMP courses should be taught by LD teachers (table 2) ,the majority of the heads of DSD had expressed an opposite view (table 3).They strongly favoured the teaching of the EMP courses by discipline-specialist lecturers .The heads of LDs ,on the other hand, almost unanimously stated that , EMP courses, at all levels, should be taught by LD teachers ( table 4 ) .

**Table 4 .**Response of 10 heads of LDs to "who should teach EMP courses"?

Teachers of Level of students	Language Department (LDs)	Discipline-Specialist Department (DSDs)
Undergraduate students	8	2
Postgraduate stuents	10	—
Medical students	10	—
Total	28	2

**c:** From among the responses of 176 students of eight EMP classes to the questions on teaching and pedagogic abilities of their EMP teachers ( questionnaire 3 ), those which were convertible into quantitative points were first converted and then arranged in table 5 .

## Discussion

**a :**Although most of the vice-deans and almost all the heads of language departments had tendency to assign the teaching of EMP courses to the teachers of LDs ,the majority of the heads of DSDs believed that these courses should be taught by discipline-specific teachers (tables 2-3-4 ) .. They argued that, " in teaching of EMP courses at

all levels, discipline-specialist teachers with an adequate mastery on English, are more competent than LDs teachers since they are much more familiar with the technical terms and topics of the students` field of study." They added, " The most important aim of EMP courses is to help students understand the specialized texts of their EMP textbooks, and as there are many technical terms, notions and topics in these texts, they should be taught by the teachers of the same specialty and not by LD teachers who are not sufficiently familiar with those terms and topics" However, they admitted that "The unawareness of these teachers of English language grammar, suffixes, prefixes..... is one of their demerits. "

**b:** The heads of English departments expressed an entirely different view. They believed that, " in all ESP courses, it is the language that must be taught and not a specific subject , and since language teaching is a kind of science and has its own specific knowledge and principles such as teaching methodology , language testing , phonology , sentence and vocabulary structure , grammar , etc., every language teacher must be adequately aware of these basic principles." They added, "being just fluent in English is not the only requirement for being a competent EMP teacher. Discipline-specific teachers , even with good mastery on English , as they are unaware of these principles, most often fail to teach the language well, they just translate the texts" As for teaching EMP courses to the students of higher academic levels , they stated that teaching these courses to postgraduate students, and the students of medicine, dentistry and pharmacology should go further than teaching of just a number of technical terms and notions. At these levels, though teaching reading comprehension skills should still be part of the EMP courses syllabus, EMP teachers should emphasize on improving the students' linguistic skills such as speaking and writing; and as teaching these skills falls within the scope of LD teachers` tasks, these courses therefore can and should be

**Table 5.** Points given by the students to the teachers of their EMP classes

No : of questions in the questionnaire	Points obtained by Language Department teachers	Points obtained by Discipline-specialist teachers
7	204	189
8	219	150
9	280	245
10	287	246
11	275	263
13	250	238
total	1515	1331

preferably taught by them .As regards undergraduate EMP courses, 90% of the heads of LDs believed again that teaching of these courses too should be assigned to LD teachers ( table4) , the other 10% stated that as at these levels, students need to learn some technical terms and notions relevant to their field of study , discipline- specific teachers are more competent in this regard. The heads of LDs, off course, admitted that, "Teachers of language departments, in order to facilitate their success in EMP classes, need to acquire some subject knowledge of their students' field of study."

**c:** Students of EMP classes too, on the whole , preferred LD teachers to discipline specific teachers. For example, in answering the question 7 of the questionnaire no:3 , "Does your teacher ever explain the difficult grammatical points of the EMP textbook in class ?" , the students of the four EMP classes taught by the teachers of ( LD granted , in all , 204 (out of 320 points) points to their teachers , while in the four other EMP classes , the discipline- specific teachers in charge of teaching these classes gained only 189 points ( table 5 ) . Or , in answering another question ( Q.10) : " How do you evaluate your teacher's knowledge

and fluency in English ? " , LD teachers gained 287 points ( out of 320) while the points given to discipline-specific teachers was 246 ( table 4 ) . Even in answering a question about the degree of the teachers` subject knowledge (question no:11), the students granted 275 and 263 points(out of 320) to the teachers of LD and DMD respectively ( table6 ) , and thus implied that , the LD teachers` knowledge of the subject matter of specialized texts not only matches that of discipline- specific teachers but may also slightly surpass it . This can indicate that the teachers of LDs before teaching any specialized text , try their best to acquire enough knowledge of its subject-matter and technical terms in order to avoid any misunderstanding of the content of the text . It can also indicate that the discipline-specific teachers in charge of teaching EMP courses perhaps do not always have the same specialty as their students do and therefore are not adequately aware of the subject content and technical terms of the texts being taught. For example an EMP course of Public Health students may be assigned to a teacher specialist in Occupational Health , just because he/she is good at English and his/her specialty relates , in some ways , to

Health . Regarding the other questions of the questionnaire no: 3 , teachers of LDs kept their superiority in points over discipline-specific teachers (table 6 ) so that from the six questions posed to 178 students about different teaching qualities and capabilities of EMP teachers , the points gained by the teachers of LD amounted to 1515(out of 1920), while the points granted to discipline-specific teachers was just 1331 , suggesting that for the students of EMP classes learning the meaning of just 30 or 40 pages of specialized texts , during their course is much less important than learning the skills they need to read and comprehend EMP texts and to use those skills in reading medical texts during and after their medical studies.

### Conclusion

**a :** Although most of the vice-deans and almost all the heads of language departments favoured teaching of EMP courses by the teachers of LDs ,they stated that these teachers in order to facilitate their success in EMP classes need to acquire some subject knowledge of their students' field of study.

**b:**The majority of the heads of DSDs believed that EMP courses should be taught by discipline-specific teachers .However, they admitted that "The unawareness of these teachers of English grammar , suffixes, prefixes..... is one of their demerits. "

**c:** Students of EMP classes too, on the whole ,preferred LD teachers to discipline-specific teachers.

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