

A Diagnostic View on the Status of ESP at the Vocational Training Institute of Bejaia, Algeria: The Case of Health, Safety and Environment Trainees

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Received: 31/10/2021

Accepted: 29/11/2021

Published: 31/12/2021

Abstract

In today's modern world, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach is the most widely applied in various fields and workplaces around the world. As a result, the demand for specific English has increased. ESP courses are usually developed to meet learners' goals, to use English in specialized disciplines and contexts. Therefore, the current study aimed at portraying the present situation of ESP at the vocational training institute of Bejaia (Algeria) and also to find out the challenges faced by Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) trainees as well as their attitudes and perceptions towards the current ESP course. A quantitative method was used through a questionnaire addressed to HSE trainees. The findings revealed that the actual situation of ESP at the vocational institute is unsatisfactory. Time constraints, lack of authentic materials, trainees' weak English language proficiency level and lack of practice were the main challenges faced by HSE trainees. Finally, developing a more focused English language course based on a rigorous needs analysis is highly recommended.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), HSE trainees, perceptions, vocational institute.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The vocational training institute of Bejaia offers diverse professional training meeting different qualifications and degrees. For instance, Health, Safety and Environment (HSE), computer science, tourism and accounting are identified according to the needs of the labour market and technological evolution. Trainees graduating from this institution are taught to be a strong economic workforce holding a firm theoretical and practical knowledge in their different fields. They are also exposed to some English language instruction during their training which is supposed to enable them to understand and use appropriate English language, eventually in their related fields. However, some questions were raised about the type of English taught in this institution. The norms require that the trainees should be exposed to special English courses according to each field.

The ultimate goal of this study is to examine the challenges faced by HSE trainees as well as their attitudes and perceptions towards the ESP course. Most importantly, it is necessary to increase trainees' linguistic competence to prepare them to have a strong character as professional workers in today's workplace. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the concern of teaching and learning ESP at vocational training institutes remains a fertile area of research that has not been exploited before; at least in the Algerian context. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the actual position of English for Health, Safety and Environment (EHSE) at the vocational training institute of Bejaia, Algeria and try to sort out the difficulties that hinder HSE trainees regarding the English language learning. We seek to examine the English courses and linguistic input provided by teachers of English and whether it serves the trainees' domain or it is just developing the general English linguistic competence. Given this, we aim to find out solutions to remedy the existing problems.

Following the above reasons, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

Q1. How is the English language perceived at the vocational training institute of Bejaia, Algeria?

Q2. Where do the difficulties of HSE trainees (regarding English) stem from?

Q3. What are the possible recommendations to solve eventual existing pedagogic problems?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. ESP Definitions

The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has shown remarkable growth since its inception in the 1960s. Even though Strevens (1980) considers that “producing a simple definition of ESP is not an easy task”, many scholars have attempted to define it. This denotes that this term has been defined and viewed differently. ESP refers to "the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programs for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs" (Swales, 1992). It sits within the general framework of applied linguistics that endeavours to meet the particular language needs of learners and foster their knowledge needed in a certain professional or academic context. In this vein, other researchers like Mackay and Mountford (1978) conceive the term as "the teaching of English for a utilitarian purpose". This purpose they refer to is usually defined by the needs of the learners which could be academic, occupational, or scientific.

Moving further, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) propound ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". Based on this definition, ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material, or methodology. The basic concern regarding ESP is why the learner needs to learn a foreign language. Thus, the purpose of learning English became the basis upon which the pedagogy was designed. In this line of thought, Basturkmen (2010) emphasized that “ESP focuses on when,

where and why learners need the language either in study or workplace context”. According to her, in an ESP situation, the learner would want to achieve “real world” objectives requiring specific linguistic competencies.

ESP is a term that refers to the language teaching approach that targets the current and/or future academic or occupational needs of learners, puts emphasis on the necessary language, genres, and skills to meet these needs, and assists learners in meeting these needs through the use of general and/or discipline-specific teaching materials and methods (Anthony, 2018). Indeed, it is maintained that ESP is the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language in which the learners’ purpose is to use English in a specific field (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). To this end, it could be said that most ESP definitions concur on three crucial points: the learner (the specific goal of learners in learning), the language to be taught and used (specialized discourse) as well as the context in which the other two would occur (specific learning setting).

2.2. The State of English for Specific Purposes in Algeria

The English language has gained a noticeable importance in today's world. It has become the lingua franca, the international language, the global language of the 21st Century. Accordingly, the massive demand for English learning undergoes a remarkable increase, mainly in domains where international communication is required. Besides, English language proficiency has a significant impact on employment opportunities. Kennedy (1980) asserted that a need for English as a medium of communication is related to the development of business and the progress of the institutions led to have an access to many scientific and technical literature. Although English is not the official language, it is the language most taught as a second or a foreign language around the world; and Algeria is not an exception.

Algeria is a multilingual and multicultural country. Diverse languages are spoken according to different regions. Tamazight and Arabic are the

two official languages and French is used as the first foreign language and considered the primary language of business. The English language is considered the second foreign language. With the demand for English either nationally or internationally, the government initiated English language instruction as a compulsory subject starting from the middle school level and endure up to the higher education level as well as vocational institutions. Since then, the teaching of English in general and ESP, in particular, has become a fundamental need for all sorts of communication in the Algerian context. Nonetheless, the status of ESP in Algeria is still in its early stages. Furthermore, despite the government's attempt to improve its status, Algerian's mastery of English is well below the national average (Hadj Djelloul, 2019).

Djaileb and Bendiabdellah (2017) claimed that the situation in Algeria is a little bit complicated since there is not real difference between ESP and General English (GE). Seemingly, Assassi, (2020) maintained that the actual courses students attend do not meet their needs since they are English for General Purposes (EGP) classes. In effect, Algeria is characterised by EGP rather than ESP. Moreover, Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) put forward that for learners where English for specific purposes is indispensable, the course content should be based on their needs and in the situation where it will be used.

This view is crucial in the context of ESP where the courses should be based on their specific needs for their disciplines. Additionally, Boudersa (2018) emphasizes the challenges faced by the Algerian ESP teachers. She avows that in the Algerian higher education system, many ESP teachers encounter major issues and ongoing obstacles in their ESP classroom. The issue with regard to ESP teaching becomes more complex because of the non-existence of programs for Algerian ESP teachers training in Algeria. The ESP teacher should be well trained for a successful and efficient ESP course. Assassi (2020) argued that because of the absence of ESP training programmes, teachers of English left to teach General English (GE). According to him, Algerian universities do not offer adequate specialised

ESP courses. Based on what has been said, one can notice that ESP teachers in Algeria face many pedagogical obstacles/challenges.

An important point that should be considered here is the level of Algerian students in the English language. The allotted time and coefficient makes the Algerian ESP learners neglect attending their English classes and this may potentially result in the failure of the ESP course and can create serious teaching/learning problem (Boudersa, 2018). The time allotted to the English class is very limited; the case of vocational institutes is one hour per week and it is not sufficient.

Supplementary efforts are required to improve the teaching/learning of ESP in Algeria. For Instance, Assassi (2020) proposes an ESP centre as a modal project that would encourage different departments to collaborate more effectively. Boudersa (2018) as well highlighted a temporary solution concerning ESP teachers, she indicated that through adopting “self-training”, ESP teachers improve their teaching practices and enrich their knowledge in specific areas since it forms a part of their professional development.

3. Methodology

The study under scrutiny is a case study that is concerned to examine the ESP teaching and learning for HSE trainees at the vocational training institute (I.N.S.F.P) of Bejaia, Algeria. More precisely, it attempts to investigate the current position of ESP and sort out the obstacles that hinder HSE trainees regarding the English language. To this end, data was collected through a questionnaire as it seemed to be the most adequate tool for gathering views and perceptions of HSE trainees.

In so far as participants are concerned, it encompasses thirty-one (31), HSE) trainees of the fourth (04th) semester at the vocational training institute of Bejaia (Algeria) participated in this investigation during the year 2020/2021. They are divided into 52 % of males and 48% of females. As far as the age variable is concerned, trainees' age varied between 20 to 25

representing the dominant category with a percentage of 68% and 32 % were aged between 25 and 30. Information about the participants' profiles is illustrated in Table 1.

Demographics	Percentage
Gender	
• Male	52%
• Female	48%
Age	
• 20 to 25	68%
• 25 to 30	32%

Table1: Trainees' Demographics

The questionnaire was administered to HSE trainees. It was first written in English and then translated into French to ensure the highest rate of return and to avoid incomplete answers. The questionnaire consists of close and open-ended questions and it is divided into three sections which are personal information, information about their perceptions towards the English language, their attitudes towards the HSE course as well as the difficulties they encounter while learning the English language at the institute. Findings

3.1. Trainees' Perceptions of the English Language for study and work

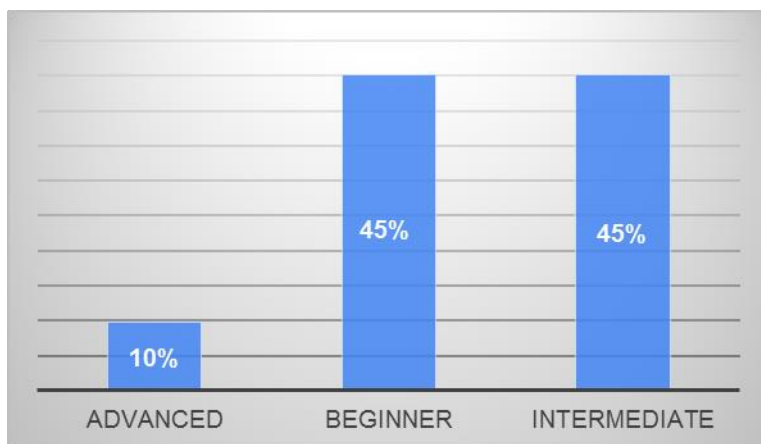


Fig.1. Trainees' self-evaluation of their proficiency level in the English language

As far as the trainees' English level is concerned, it can be inferred from the above responses that the majority of the respondents perceived themselves as beginners and intermediates. Therefore, the results show that (10%) of them consider themselves advanced. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that these results present the participants' self-assessment of their language proficiency. Conversely, the respondents' answers might be to some extent misleading as English is not their first language and they stopped learning English in secondary school. In addition, the informants stated that they do not practice it outside. In turn, we assume that the majority of the respondents are beginners.

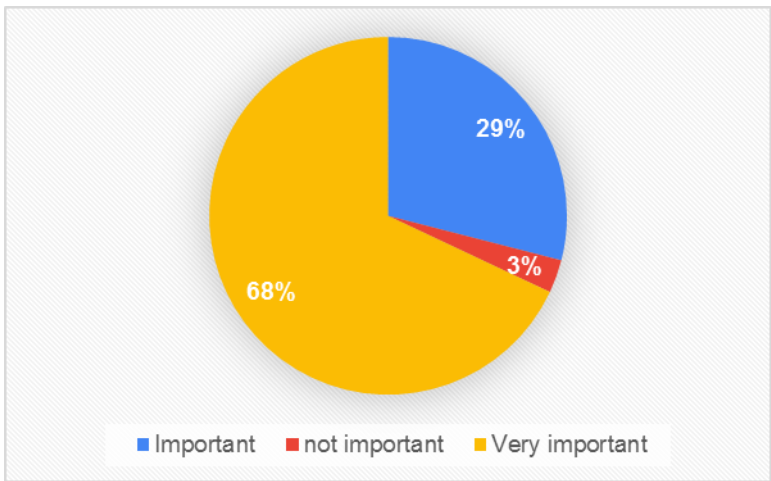


Fig.2. Degree of the importance of English language

Concerning the degree of importance of English language, we could say that a strong majority of the respondents (68%) claim that English is very important for their studies as well as their future profession. Most of the trainees did not seem to lack interest in English language learning. In turn, a tiny proportion (3%) of the 31 respondents assumed that it is not important.

This may be explained that they lack awareness of the importance of the English language.

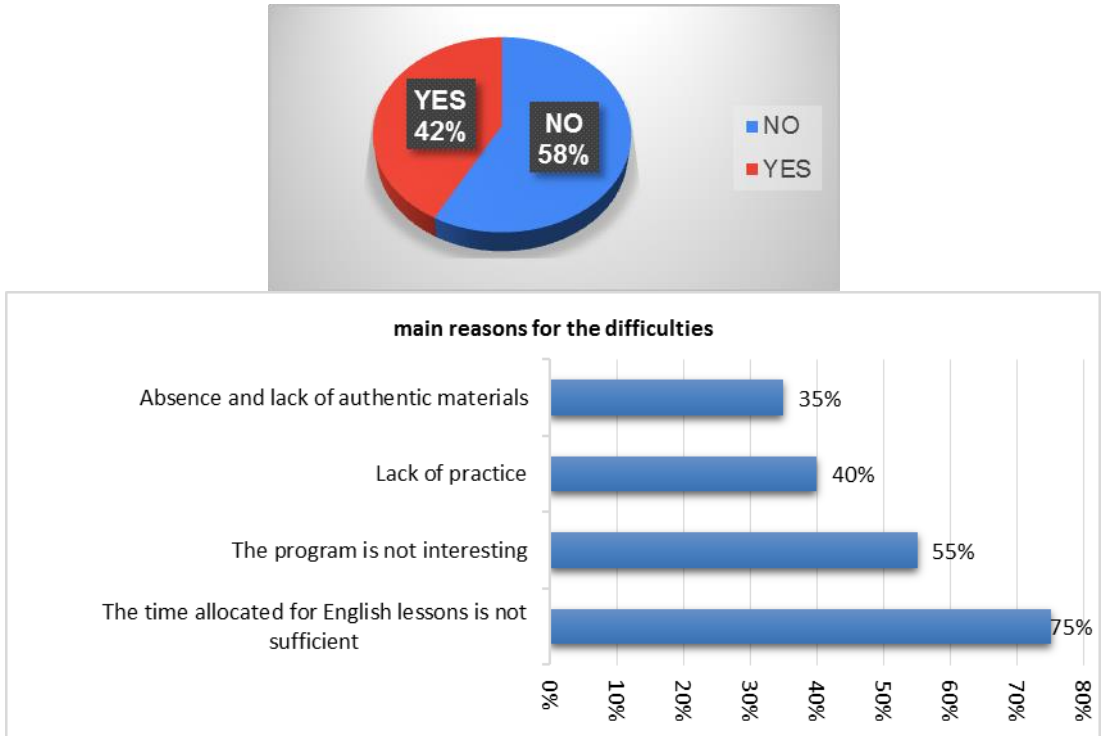


Fig.3. Difficulty in learning the English language

With regards to respondents' answers about the difficulty in learning the English language; a significant percentage (58%) thought that it is not difficult to learn the English language. However, a noticeable percentage (42%) claimed that they found it problematic. The participants were asked then to explain the reasons behind this impediment. They reported that the absence and the lack of authentic materials, lack of practice as well as the insufficient time allotted to the English course are the major difficulties.

3.2. Trainees’ attitudes towards the current ESP course

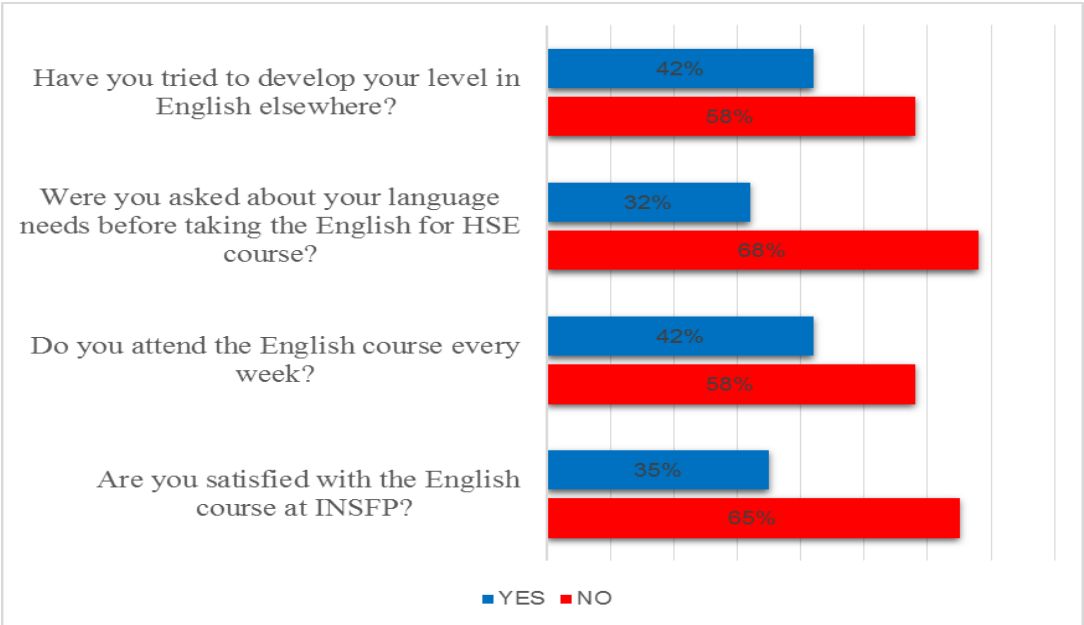


Fig.4. Trainees' attendance and satisfaction with the English course

The second section of the questionnaire examined the trainees’ attendance and satisfaction with the English course. In answer to the first question which concerns whether the informants develop their proficiency level in English elsewhere or not, it could be seen that a number of the participants (58%) stated that they did not take any English courses in private schools. The participants were asked to justify their answers. Following up on their replies, they believed that unfortunately, they are quite expensive for a program that is not effective. Some of them reported that they do not have enough time and others try to develop their proficiency level by playing video games, watching films or talking with native speakers.

The next question found that an overwhelming proportion equals 68% of the population claimed that they were not asked about their language needs before taking the ESP course. In turn, 32% of them answered positively. It

should be said that the importance of needs analysis cannot be ignored for an effective ESP course.

Regarding the trainees' attendance of English courses, it has been found that (42%) of them attend English courses weekly, while a considerable percentage (58%) answered that they are not often present in their English course. As for the trainees' satisfaction regarding the content of the ESP course at the institution, it can be seen that (35%) of the respondents stated that they are satisfied with the ESP course content. Therefore, a significant percentage (65%) assumed that they were not satisfied. They justified their answers by saying that the program was not convenient, they also mentioned lack motivation and interest in addition to their low level of English language proficiency.

Concerning the time allocated to the English course, almost all the participants (87%) agreed that the time allotted to the course of English is insufficient to develop their proficiency level in English. They reported that two hours per week could not be sufficient to be able to master the English language fluently. However, (13%) of the respondents indicated that the time allocated to the course was appropriate. Ultimately, the English course timing is crucial in improving HSE trainees' proficiency level. In other words, it is worth mentioning that the time devoted to the English course may, indeed, have an impact on the achievement of learners.

4.3. Trainees' reasons for learning ESP

HSE trainees' responses were interesting. Most of them believed that the English language plays a crucial role in their field as a noticeable means of communication in the world. The ultimate purpose is that mastering the English language will allow them to work in multinational companies as it is of significant value for recruiters. Among the objectives that have been also listed is reading and understanding recent HSE publications.

4.5. Trainees' suggestions

The last part of the questionnaire is devoted to the suggestions made by the HSE trainees for the improvement of the ESP course at the vocational institute. It is worth considering their viewpoints which were both informative and warning. According to the trainees' responses, many illuminating ideas were highlighted below:

-The two main points that have been widely shared were the increase in the time span of the English course and the improvement of the ESP program. They strongly recommended allotting more time to English classes and it would be more beneficial if it is taken seriously. Additionally, they proposed that they should be assessed frequently.

-Most of the HSE trainees expressed their wish to be engaged in oral and written productions through the development of an adequate ESP program and the use of appropriate materials.

-They also suggested that it is convenient to avoid the use of other languages during the ESP class to facilitate the learning process.

-the course attendance should be mandatory.

4. Discussion

In this study, we sought to portray the present situation of ESP at the vocational training institute of Bejaia (Algeria) and also to find out the challenges faced by Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) trainees as well as their attitudes and perceptions towards the current ESP course. The gathered data revealed vital information, which allowed the researchers to draw a clear picture of the ESP position at the vocational training institute of Bejaia (Algeria). According to the trainees' answers, the current ESP learning state is unsatisfactory.

The findings showed that most of the respondents demonstrated a high level of motivation and interest in learning the English language as they admitted that it is highly needed in their field. It can also be noted from the

results that although HSE trainees showed a zeal for the study of the English language, many weaknesses were identified in the current English language course. Regarding the current English course content, the respondents agreed that they were not satisfied and it can be inferred that the course content is perceived as inadequate. Boubekur & Benyelles (2016) in their research about designing a course targeted to engineers in SAMSUNG engineering work in Timimoun found that the lack of adequate and relevant ESP courses is one of the major issues faced by both instructors and engineers.

Besides, they assumed that they are not often present in their English course. They justified their answers by saying that the program was not inconvenient and they lacked motivation and interest. Hence, it is clear that the current ESP course seemed highly dissatisfying. It is in line with Mebetil (2011) who revealed important difficulties in relation to the learners as the lack of motivation, weak attendance as well as heterogenous groups.

Concerning the time allocated to the English course, the results imply that almost all the participants agreed on the fact that the time devoted to the ESP course was not enough. They argued that two hours are not sufficient to develop their English language competencies. In like manner, Mebetil (2011) also highlighted some administrative restrictions such as the short course duration and the absence of an official syllabi. Nevertheless, Boudersa (2018), while examining ESP Education in Algeria emphasized that “the importance of the English subject is reflected by the allocated time and co-efficient makes them underestimate the value of the course by not attending and/or missing many sessions”. She, therefore, pointed out that the ESP course time span can lead to course failure and can create serious problems in the teaching/learning process.

In accordance with language needs analysis, data obtained from the questionnaire demonstrate that the informants were not asked about their language needs that meet their academic and professional requirements

before taking the ESP course. Accordingly, it is indispensable not to deny the importance of needs analysis for an efficient and effective ESP course. To illustrate, without a comprehensive needs analysis, no language teaching program should be established (Long, 2005).

In relation with their reasons for learning ESP, their answers were interesting. They believe that English plays a key role in their field of interest as it will allow them to work in multinational companies. It is also congruent with a study carried by Beddiaf & Ben Safi (2018). The study revealed that English is highly valued in the business context and appears to enjoy an appreciated position. Besides, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become a significant value for recruiters. In addition, reading and understanding HSE publications are also important motives for learning English.

Given the aforementioned findings, this research results entail important implications proposed by HSE trainees for improving the ESP course at the vocational institute. They highly recommended that ESP courses should be given more time, and they would be more useful if they are taken more seriously. They also suggested that they should be evaluated regularly. Through the design of a sufficient ESP curriculum and the deployment of relevant materials, the majority of the HSE trainees stated their desire to be involved in oral and writing outputs. They also indicated that to simplify the learning process, it is best to avoid using other languages throughout the ESP lesson. Therefore, course attendance should be mandatory. Consistence with the present study, Selama (2021) suggested that teachers are recommended to encourage autonomous learning and look for effective strategies for students to acquire the needed professional English. It is obvious that the current course content and objectives need to be revised.

The current study has some limitations that should be highlighted as well as some implications for further research. It deserves mentioning that due to the limited number of trainees, results cannot be generalized since the case study is not representative of the whole population. In addition, just one

instrument, the questionnaire, could be employed in this study. In the light of the present work results, we emphasize that the current ESP courses should be revised, HSE trainees' needs should be analysed, materials should be appropriate and authentic and an ESP program should be developed in terms of the trainees' needs identification. The findings of this study are significant as they could provide the basis for future research as well course development for other vocational subjects namely accounting, computer science, tourism, ... etc.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the results of this research provide a clear understanding of HSE trainees' perceptions regarding ESP learning at the vocational institution as well as the challenges faced by these trainees concerning the ESP course content. It was found that almost all HSE trainees are in need to learn English since they admitted the fact that it is crucial in their studies and future vocations. Based on what was revealed by the study, HSE trainees face many challenges when studying English at the vocational institute; namely, the restricted time devoted to the English course, lack of authentic materials, weak English language proficiency level as well as the lack of practice. Putting all these together, a needs analysis should be carried out and the development of an ESP program seems necessary to meet the trainees' academic and vocational needs. Yet, due to the limited number of samples, the results cannot be generalized. Therefore, it is suggested that similar studies can be done in a greater number of vocational institutions, through several data collection tools and involving more trainees. In a word, we can say that studying English is no longer a luxury, but a necessity and it is highly demanded.

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Appendix
Trainees' Questionnaire

Dear trainees,

This questionnaire is part of a research work; we would be very grateful if you take part in our research. Please, be assured that your responses are kept strictly confidential. Thank you very much for your collaboration.

Please put a tick (✓) in the right box and write full statements whenever necessary.

Personal Information

1. Gender:
- Male ☐
 - Female ☐
2. Age:

Students' perceptions towards the English language for study and work

1. How do you evaluate your level in English?
- Advanced ☐
 - Intermediate ☐
 - Beginner ☐
 - No opinion ☐
2. Do you think that English is important in your field of study?
- Very important ☐
 - Important ☐
 - Not important ☐
3. Is it hard to learn the English language?
- Yes ☐
 - No ☐

4. If yes, your main reasons of difficulties are:

- You don't have effective teachers
- You are not interested on the program
- You don't have a background on the English language
- The allotted time for English courses is not sufficient
- Others,
specify

5. Have you tried to develop your level in English elsewhere?

- Yes
- No

6. If yes, is it mainly?

- English for Health, Safety and Environment
- General English
- Others,
specify

Attitudes towards the English for Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) course

1. Do you attend English courses weekly?

- Yes
- No

2. If no, why?

.....

3. Is the time allocated to the English course enough to you to use the language effectively?

- Yes
- No

4. Do you think English course should allot more time?

- Yes
- No

5. Have you been asked about your needs before attending the HSE English course?
- Yes ☐
 - NO ☐
6. How do you find the content of English course?
- Very interesting ☐
 - Interesting ☐
 - Not interesting ☐
 - I don't know ☐
7. Are you satisfied with English course at the INSFP?
- Yes ☐
 - No ☐
8. If no, explain your choice
9. How do you think you will be using English in the future?

Further suggestions

What are the solutions that you may suggest to cope with the problems you encounter?

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