

## Conference Paper

# English Courses for Students of Islamic Economics: What Do They Really Need?

M. Ridwan, Rahmah Fithriani, Widia Fransiska, and Chuzaimah Batubara

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UIN SU), Medan, Indonesia

**ORCID:**

M. Ridwan: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0123-1666>

**Abstract**

The teaching of the English language to the students of Islamic Economics should aim to provide them with the skills needed for completing academic as well as professional tasks. The purposes of this study are twofold: (1) identifying what types of English language skills the students of Islamic Economics need; and (2) figuring out whether the current English for specific purposes (ESP) course offered is relevant to their needs. This on-going study employs qualitative descriptive methods with 200 first- and second-year students of the Islamic Economics study program of a state university in Medan, Indonesia. The data analyzed in this paper were collected using an online survey divided into two sections: one to collect the participants' demographics and the other to explore their perceived language skill needs. The results reveal that most students need reading and writing skills more than any other language skills. The students reported that the English course they have taken so far did not prepare them to master those two needed skills. This study recommends that the existing ESP syllabus be redesigned to meet the students' needs.

**Keywords:** English for specific purposes (ESP), higher education, Islamic economics, need analysis

Corresponding Author:

M. Ridwan

[mridwanku@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:mridwanku@uinsu.ac.id)

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## 1. Introduction

As the most widely spoken language worldwide with approximately 1.75 billion speakers, English has secured the position as the dominant language of global communication, particularly for trade, education, business and tourism (Fithriani, 2018). With the continuing globalization of markets in the last few decades, the need for English language skills has become more essential, especially in the sector of economy. Studies have shown a direct correlation between the English skills of a population and the economic performance of the country. Furthermore, on the individual level, people with high

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English proficiency are at a significant advantage over those with low one in terms of earnings and job-market competitiveness (Tran & Burman, 2016).

Due to its significance as a global language, English courses are much offered either in formal or non-formal educational settings in many countries, particularly in countries where the language is not used as a means of communication for daily interactions such as Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia. In Indonesia, English has become the only foreign language mandatorily taught to students from junior high school level to higher education one, either in public or religion-affiliated educational institutions (Fithriani, 2017). In higher education context, the purpose of English language teaching (ELT) is to prepare students with the language skills needed within academic or professional environments. This particular purpose of ELT is known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). From ESP perspective, an effective English course should be designed and developed with the aid of needs analysis.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987:19), ESP is an approach of language teaching in which the content and method of language teaching are based on what students' reasons in learning. They assume that when the students know why they are learning a particular language; they are aware with what they need for the result of learning. Therefore, many researchers assume that conducting need analysis for students is necessary for the development of ESP course design (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Dehnad, et al, 2010). In detail, it can help curriculum developers in designing materials, syllabus and even determining the teaching methods for students in every different context.

Especially in Islamic economics context, English teaching and learning is designed to prepare higher education (HE) students to be experts, practitioners and/or workers in the field of Islamic economics (Darmadji & Andriansyah, 2013). They are expected to be able not only to access information (reading and listening) but to communicate (speaking and writing) in Islamic economic English. Therefore, for this specific purpose, English courses and programs should be prepared based on the analysis of what students' needs for their future goals.

Despite the significance of the importance of need analysis, many studies show that in Islamic economics context, ESP course design for HE students seems to exclude students' needs as the foundation to design English courses or programs. As stated by Madkur (2018), the English class syllabus of Islamic Banking department cannot reflect the objective of Islamic Banking department, because most of the syllabus includes sub-skills. This mismatching might be caused by some issues faced by both students and lecturers which include limited references, lack of time and facilities. Mohammadzadeh,

Barati and Fatemi (2015) also find many bank employees still have low competency in English, even those who have worked for years. Thus, more attention is needed to the process and the materials of English learning as well as the design and the development of the syllabus done by English lecturers teaching in Islamic economics department.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. A Brief Review of ESP

English for specific purpose (ESP) emerged in 1960s as a branch of English language teaching (ELT) (Rahman, 2015). The emergence of ESP was triggered by the development of science, technology and economic activity, the variation of English in different contexts, the effectiveness of language learning resulting from learners' motivation to study a language related to their needs and interests (Hutchinson and Water, 1987). The nature of ESP course that aims to meet learners' specific needs has allowed learning to become more time-efficient, relevant, and cost-effective compared to "General English" (Dudley-Evans and John, 1998: 9). Despite such advantages, the implementation of ESP could rise some challenges, such as the teachers' capability of delivering an ESP course.

These days, ESP has become a popular teaching approach in many countries (Zhu and Liu, 2014). It can be seen by the increasing number of universities offering an MA programme in ESP, such as the University of Birmingham and Aston University in the UK. In Japan, Mombusho's decision to hand over the control of university curricula to the universities in 1994 has led a rapid growth of ESP courses in which many 'General English' courses were designed to be more specific, e.g. English for Chemist (Abu-Melhim, 2013). In addition, there is a growing acceptance of ESP as academic discipline in China (Ramirez, 2015). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, ESP has been implemented as an approach to teach students at secondary and tertiary level, especially students of non-English department. In this country, the ESP approach is found to be beneficial to help learners communicate in English effectively, especially in their own major (Agustina, 2014).

ESP is also known as learner-centred approach because the teaching content and method in ESP curriculum are chosen by considering learners' certain needs. In other words, learners become educators' top priority in an ESP course (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988). Since it is an approach, every ESP course contains teaching materials and methodologies which are relevant to students of a particular field, for instances students who learn English for Islamic Economics, English for Business,

English for Mathematics, English for Technology, and English for Medicine. To design an ESP course, educators should understand some characteristics of ESP, namely 1) it is taught to meet students' particular needs, 2) the teaching method used depends on a certain field of study, 3) it focuses on developing English skills which are commonly used in a specific field of study, 4) the participants are mostly adults in intermediate or advanced level of proficiency, and 5) the teaching materials can be used for students in beginner or intermediate level (Gatehouse, 2001).

In an ESP course, learners are taught specific words and expressions that are commonly written or spoken in a specific field of study. This is important because students are expected to use the language in their future journey as professional workers in that field (Laborda and Litzer, 2015). For instance, in English for Business course, students learn vocabularies related to marketing and merchandising. Another example is students of Islamic economics who learn English in order to become the experts, practitioners or workers in the field of Islamic Economics (Darmadji & Andriansyah, 2013). To successfully develop an ESP curriculum, teachers should understand learners' condition and reasons for learning English in their field. By doing this, educators can decide the most appropriate content and method when delivering an ESP lesson (Robinson, 1991). One way to gain such information is by conducting a need analysis (NA) before designing an ESP curriculum (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Chegeni and Chegeni, 2013).

## 2.2. The Role of Need Analysis in ESP

As previously mentioned, need analysis (NA) plays a vital role in designing an ESP curriculum (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1998; Chegeni and Chegeni, 2013). NA is a basic principal in ESP (Robinson, 1991), and it is a technique to gain and evaluate information from learners in order to establish a curriculum that can meet learners' interest (Iwai, et al., 1999; Starfield, 2013). This technique has been acknowledged by many scholars as an important step to develop an ESP curriculum (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

Some purposes of conducting NA are such to let educators understand more about language learners (Paci, 2013), to facilitate students' learning based on their needs and reasons for studying English (Basturkmen, 2010), to learn about students' learning objectives (what they want to know), to know students' level of language proficiency skills, their motivation to learn English, preferred teaching strategy and learning preferences. Furthermore, conducting NA is beneficial to know learners' and teachers' beliefs about

the effectiveness of current ESP course and to evaluate and improve ESP program so that it is relevant to learners' needs (Robinson, 1991).

Sothan (2015) argues that an ESP course will not run smoothly and effectively without conducting NA. This can happen because the data gathered from NA is used to choose relevant teaching materials and strategy that can motivate students in learning (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Doey, 2010). Using the information from NA, the ESP curriculum established is expected to allow students to have the skills in comprehending and producing common linguistic features of English in certain field (Hutchinson and Water, 1987). Therefore, the syllabus, teaching content and methodology, and learning assessment planned in an ESP curriculum can prepare students to effectively communicate in English in their future workplace settings (Guiyu and Yang, 2016; Zhu and Liu, 2014).

NA can be conducted through different ways, for instances by using questionnaires, interviews or document analysis. Khan (2007) develops a questionnaire focusing on ten areas. The ten areas in the questionnaires are 1) the present and future domains of language use and reasons for studying English, 2) the students' attitude towards the place and role of English in school curriculum, 3) Learning preferences in terms of language skills, 4) the importance of particular language skills, 5) the preferred learning styles and strategies, 6) pattern of learner to class interaction, 7) the role of relationship between learners and lecturers, 8) the preference for teaching strategies, 9) the environmental situation, and 10) the students' needs from the course. By adapting this questionnaire, this study focuses on two areas of need analysis, namely learning preferences in terms of language skills and the importance of particular language skills.

### 3. Research Method

This study aimed at 1) identifying types of English language skills the students of Islamic Economics need and 2) figuring out whether the current ESP course offered is relevant to their needs. This on-going study applied a qualitative descriptive method. The participants of the study were 200 first- and second-year students of the Islamic Economics study program (108 male and 92 female students) at a state university in Medan, Indonesia. The data were collected from the participants by using an online survey which was divided into two sections. The first section is to gain information related to participants' demographics while the second one is to explore students' perceived language skill needs.

The data collected instrument (the online survey) administered to the participants consisted of questionnaires adapted from Khan (2007). Of the ten areas discussed in

their questionnaires, this study focuses on two areas investigating; 1) information related to students' learning preferences in terms of language skills, and 2) students' perception about the importance of particular language skills needed for their ESP course in Islamic Economics programme. The data collected in this study were analyzed using frequency count for the quantitative data. By conducting NA with students of Islamic Economics, this study is expected to help curriculum developers in improving or redesigning the ESP course.

## 4. Result and Discussion

This section will present and discuss the results of the study. The findings are presented in two sub-sections. Section 4.1. will describe the demographic data about the participants. Section 4.2 will discuss the English language skills that students of Islamic Economics needs in their ESP course while section 4.3 will discuss students' perceptions of their current ESP course. This study focused on two of ten areas in the questionnaires developed by Khan (2007). In section 4.2., the findings were based on the questionnaire related to "learning preferences in terms of language skills. Meanwhile, in section 4.3., the findings were based on the questionnaire related to "the importance of particular skills.

### 4.1. Demographic Data

The online survey of this study was administered to 200 first- and second-year students of the Islamic Economics Study Programme. As presented in Table 1, the demographic data were collected from the first part of the online survey which was administered to 200 participants in the Islamic Economics study program at a state university in Medan, Indonesia. From the table above, it can be seen that there were 108 male students and 92 female students. It was also found that 100 students were in their first year of study and the other 100 students were in their second year of study. In addition, there were 150 students who perceived themselves in the intermediate level of English proficiency while the other 50 students perceived themselves in the advanced level of English proficiency.

TABLE 1: Participants' demographic data

Gender		Year of Study		Perceived English Skills	
Male	Female	First year	Second year	Intermediate	Advanced
108 students	92 students	100 students	100 students	150 students	50 students

## 4.2. Students' Need of English Language Skills

The second part of the online survey was used to retrieve information related to students' perceived language skill needs, including their perception of the current ESP course. The result of data analysis reveals that most students need reading and writing skills more than any other skills. The data gained from students' responses toward "learning preferences in terms of language skills" (Khan, 2007). In the questionnaire, the participants were asked about the language skills they want to improve during their ESP course. Figure 1 shows the students' responses towards students' needs of language skills.



**Figure 1:** Learning preferences in terms of language skills

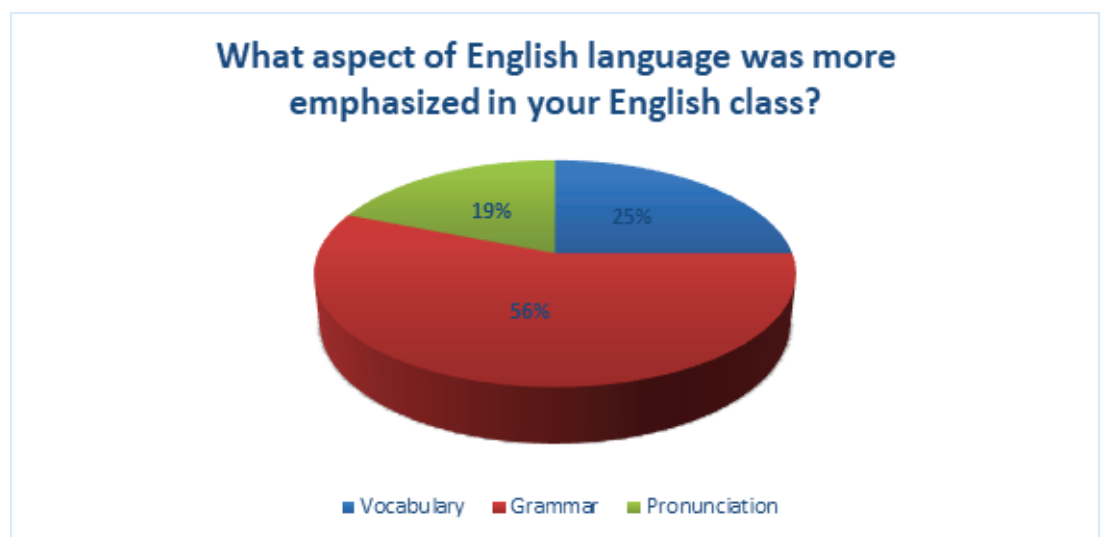
From the chart above, it can be seen that the majority of students in Islamic Economics study programme expressed their desire to improve reading and writing skills more than listening and speaking skills. Of 200 students, 73 students (37%) wanted to improve their writing skill, 61 students (31%) wanted to improve their reading skill, 37 students (19%) concerned about their speaking skill, and 29 students (15%) thought they need to improve their listening skill in their ESP course.

This result indicates that most participants considered that reading and writing skill in English are the most important skills for the students to master, thus needs improvement in the field of Islamic Economics. Since students are the main concern in an ESP curriculum (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988), it becomes crucial to emphasize reading and writing skill in the next ESP course for students of Islamic Economics programme.



### 4.3. Students' Perceptions of the Current English Course

The second section of the online survey also consisted of questionnaire asking for students' perception of the current ESP course in their study programme. This questionnaire is related to "the importance of particular skill" described by Khan (2007). The students were asked the English language which were taught in their ESP class and the particular skills needed to be emphasized in their current ESP course. After analysing the participants' responses, the results indicate that the current ESP course taught to them focuses on grammar more than vocabulary or pronunciation. In addition, it was also found that reading and writing are needed to be emphasized in their ESP course. These findings are in line with students' desire to improve reading and writing skills more than any other skills (see section 4.2). Figure 2 present the results of students' responses toward the aspects of English language which were emphasized in students' ESP course, and the English skills that should be emphasized in students' ESP class.



**Figure 2:** Students' perception of the English language taught in ESP course

The chart above describes that a majority of students learned grammar more than vocabulary or pronunciation in their English class. One hundred twelve of 200 students, (56%) reported that grammar was more emphasized in their class, 50 students (25%) answered 'vocabulary', and 19 students chose 'pronunciation'. These findings are related to the following chart that represents students' perception of skills needed to be emphasized.

Furthermore, of 200 participants filling out the online survey, 81 students (41%) reported that writing skill should be emphasized in their current ESP course, 70 students (35%) thought that reading skill should become the important skill to learn, 27 students





**Figure 3:** Students' perception of skills needed to be emphasized in ESP Course

(14%) considered speaking skills to be emphasized while 22 students (11%) thought that listening skill should be highlighted in their ESP course. From the findings, it can be seen that reading and writing skills are the most important skills needed to be emphasized in their current ESP course.

Based on the data in Figures 1 to 3, the study concludes that the students of Islamic Economics study programme want their ESP course focus more on reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, it was found that the current ESP course taught grammar more than other aspects. In addition, reading and writing skills were also less emphasized. From these findings, the research suggests that the current ESP course should be redesigned to meet students' needs to learn reading and writing in English for Islamic Economics.

## 5. Conclusion

The teaching of English language to the students of Islamic Economics should aim at providing them the skills needed for completing academic as well as professional tasks. The current ESP course delivered to the students focuses on helping students to have the language skills that they can use to support their future career as experts and practitioners in the field of Islamic Economics. Thus, at the end the ESP course, students are expected not only to comprehend information (reading and listening), but also to communicate (speaking and writing) using the common English used in the field of Islamic Economics.

In this on-going study, need analysis was conducted with 200 students of Islamic Economics programme at a university in Medan, Indonesia. An online survey consisted of questionnaires focusing on two areas of need analysis was administered to all

participants. The study aimed at identifying the language skills needed by students and students' perception about the current ESP course. After collecting and analyzing the data, the study revealed that the majority of students in Islamic Economics study programme need to learn reading and writing skills more than any other language skills. However, the results also showed that the ESP course the students have taken did not prepare them to master those two skills. The findings of this study indicate that the current ESP course is not relevant for students of Islamic Economics study programme. From these findings, the study recommends that the existing ESP curriculum should be redesigned to meet students' needs.

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