

Exploring Iranian ESP teachers' language-related critical incidents

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Abstract

English for specific purposes (ESP) practitioners who are content experts experience different types of critical incidents (CIs), which are unplanned and unexpected events that happen during a lesson or outside of the classroom, leading to insights about teaching and learning. Although CIs can influence the success or failure of ESP courses and impact on ESP practitioners' professional lives significantly, they have received only limited attention in the ESP literature. This study investigates language-related CIs experienced by ESP instructors who are content experts. Twenty-seven CIs were identified via narrative frames ($n = 17$) and interviews with Iranian ESP practitioners ($n = 10$). Of them, the ten language-related CIs were analyzed in terms of their nature, the strategies and tactics that the ESP practitioners utilized to tackle them, and the lessons that they learned from them. These CIs centered on difficulty in pronunciation, grammar, teaching reading and writing, language testing, and research on academic genres. In their response to the CIs, the ESP instructors deployed three types of coping strategy: admitting ignorance, avoidance, and risk-taking. They utilized different tactics to manage their CIs and reported different lessons learned. The results of this study have important implications because they shed light on the real difficulties encountered by ESP practitioners who are content experts and highlight the need for ESP teacher training programs.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), critical incidents, ESP instructors, language knowledge, strategies and tactics for managing critical incidents.

Resumen

Explorando los incidentes críticos relacionados con el lenguaje experimentados por los profesores de Inglés para Fines Específicos en Irán

Los profesores de Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE) que son expertos en el contenido disciplinar experimentan diferentes tipos de incidentes críticos (IC), que consisten en situaciones no planificadas e inesperadas durante una lección o fuera del aula, lo cual conduce a determinadas percepciones sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. Aunque los IC pueden influir en el éxito o fracaso de los cursos de IFE y pueden tener un impacto significativo en la vida profesional de los profesores de IFE, han recibido poca atención en la bibliografía de IFE. Este estudio investiga los IC relacionados con el lenguaje experimentados por instructores de IFE que son expertos en el contenido disciplinar. Se identificaron veintisiete IC a través de marcos narrativos ($n = 17$) y entrevistas con profesionales de IFE iraníes ($n = 10$). De ellos, los diez IC relacionados con el lenguaje se analizaron teniendo en cuenta su naturaleza, las estrategias y tácticas que los profesores de IFE utilizaron para abordarlos y las lecciones que aprendieron de ellos. Estos IC se centraron en la dificultad en la pronunciación, gramática, enseñanza de la lectura y escritura, evaluación del lenguaje e investigación sobre géneros académicos. En su respuesta a los IC, los instructores de IFE adoptaron tres tipos de estrategias: admitir su ignorancia, evasión y asunción de riesgos. Utilizaron diferentes tácticas para gestionar sus IC y señalaron diferentes lecciones aprendidas. Los resultados de este estudio tienen importantes implicaciones porque arrojan luz sobre las dificultades reales encontradas por los profesores de IFE que son expertos en el contenido disciplinar y resaltan la necesidad de programas de formación para instructores de IFE.

Palabras clave: Inglés para Fines Específicos, incidentes críticos, instructores de IFE, conocimiento del lenguaje, estrategias y tácticas para gestionar incidentes críticos.

1. Introduction

English for specific purposes (ESP) practitioners are critical to the success of ESP courses (Brown, 2016) because of their focal role in the four pillars of ESP, namely needs analysis, learning objectives, materials and methods, and evaluation (Anthony, 2018). ESP teaching requires high levels of specialized knowledge and teacher training (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). ESP teachers are often described as “reluctant dwellers in a strange and uncharted land” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 158), which is intimidating (Belcher,

2006). Despite the recognition of this issue in the literature, the training and professional development of ESP practitioners have received only marginal attention (Basturkmen, 2019). While ESP research has addressed various aspects, such as language analysis, linguistic research, rights analysis, and reshaping the purpose of universities, it is important to acknowledge that the primary focus of ESP practitioners is classroom teaching, an area that has received relatively limited attention (Bell, 2022). Two decades ago, in a seminal paper, Watson Todd (2003) called for more research on ESP methodology to address the field's heavy emphasis on the content of teaching (i.e., the what) at the expense of ESP methodology (i.e., the how). However, there is still a dearth of research on ESP methodology and practitioners (Bell, 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). In Iranian higher education, there has been a growing ESP research centering on needs analysis, right analysis, and program evaluation (e.g., Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016; Tavakoli & Tavakoli, 2018). Similar to other contexts, there is a little literature on the actual practices of ESP practitioners in Iran (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). ESP courses in Iran are taught either by language experts, i.e., those who have a degree in English language teaching (ELT), or content experts, i.e., those who have a degree in the discipline that the ESP course is designed to cater for (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017). ESP practitioners' disciplinary backgrounds have led to different conceptualizations and enactments of ESP teaching (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014). Content teachers usually have expert disciplinary knowledge but may not have adequate knowledge of the English language and are unlikely to have received any systematic training in language teaching. Language teachers, on the other hand, typically have a solid grasp of the target language and a strong background in English teaching methodology but may not possess adequate specialist knowledge of the subject matter covered in their ESP courses (Afshar & Movassagh, 2016).

Against this backdrop, a few studies have focused on ESP methodology. Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014) examined the classroom practices and cognitions of three language teachers and three content teachers and found background-related differences. In a similar nationwide study, Atai and Taherkhani (2018) analyzed 318 ESP practitioners' instructional practices and beliefs, again finding that the language and content teachers differed in their understandings of ESP and pedagogical practices. Taking a somewhat different perspective, Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) examined the critical incidents (CIs) that ESP practitioners with ELT degrees underwent and

found that the ESP practitioners faced various challenges stemming from their lack of specialization in content. To our best knowledge, however, no study has explored the challenges experienced by content teachers. To address this gap, this study explores the types of CI that content teachers experience, the strategies, and tactics that they use to deal with those CIs, and the lessons they learn from them.

We should emphasize that our objective in this study is not to examine the impact of reflection on CIs in terms of enhancing teaching practices. Instead, we employ the CI technique to gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges encountered by ESP content teachers. These challenges are deeply rooted in the longstanding question of who should be responsible for teaching ESP courses (Anthony, 2018). We refer readers to Nejadghanbar (2021) if they are interested in learning more about the use of CIs as a tool for promoting reflection and professional development. Insights gained from analyzing content teachers' CIs can shed light on ESP teachers' professional needs and contribute to future professional development work, ensuring that the voices and experiences of the practitioners themselves inform future professional development efforts.

1.1. The Critical Incident Technique

The CI technique became a widely used qualitative research method in different disciplines, including education (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). The term 'critical incident' has been variously defined in the literature. Among others, Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 113) characterize CI as "an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning". Tripp (2012) maintains that CIs are not necessarily exceptional events: They often appear to be ordinary events that become critical through analysis. The way teachers look at events happening around them and their interpretation of those events determine whether they are CIs or not. CIs are different from normal everyday classroom events because they "prompt deep processing of the event through critical reflection" (Nejadghanbar, 2021, p. 3). A student unintentionally dropping their class textbook on the floor during a lesson does not qualify as a CI. However, if a student angrily tears a class textbook into pieces during a lesson, it is potentially a CI (Nejadghanbar, 2021).

Teachers' reflection on CIs can yield new insights into the teaching and learning processes (Nazari & De Costa, 2021). By encouraging teachers to

reflect on CIs, we can learn about the 'how' and 'why' of their decisions during teaching (Romano, 2006). As Richards and Farrell (2005) point out, reflecting on CIs can help teachers in a number of ways by providing a space for practicing self-reflection, locating and resolving challenges, identifying good practices, promoting a sense of 'professional awareness', sharing experiences, and building collegiality. Although the CI technique has gained increasing traction in the ELT literature in the last few years (see Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Babaii et al, 2021; Nazari & De Costa, 2021), it is under-used in the ESP field. In view of the scarcity of CI-based research on ESP, we set out to unpack the nature of CIs that content teachers are faced with, the strategies and tactics they deploy to deal with these CIs, and the lessons they learn accordingly.

1.2. ESP in Iran

In Iranian higher education, all undergraduate students are required to take English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) courses. They need to pass a 2-credit basic English course (EGAP), a 3-credit mandatory general English course (EGAP), and one or more 2/4-credit ESAP courses (Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016). The English-language program starts with EGAP courses designed to improve students' vocabulary, reading and translation skills and proceeds to more specialized ESAP courses (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). The ESAP courses are tasked with preparing students for their specialist studies and engagement with their respective academic communities (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). In this study, our participants were teaching ESAP courses. We use ESP to refer to these teachers because the ESAP courses are, by nature, English for specific purposes courses.

Similar to many international contexts (Anthony, 2018), ESP courses in Iranian higher education are taught either by content teachers or language teachers. The existence of these two groups of practitioners, with their strengths and limitations, has led to an age-old conundrum regarding who should teach ESP courses (Anthony, 2018). In Iran, a considerably larger proportion of ESP teachers are content teachers (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). This dominance can be ascribed to the popular belief that content teachers are better candidates to teach ESP courses (Afshar & Movassagh, 2016) because content knowledge is more important than language (teaching) knowledge (Atai et al., 2022). Through surveys and interviews with 105 ESP teachers, Kaivanpanah et al. (2021) found that most content teachers

believed that ESP teachers should have academic training in relevant disciplines along with advanced English proficiency. On the other hand, language teachers thought that ESP teachers should be language teachers with English language teaching qualifications, rather than content specialists because teaching ESP “is not just reading and translating texts and is different from teaching subject-matter” (p. 8).

As regards actual practices in the ESP classroom, Atai and Taherkhani (2018) found that while language teachers adopt “routine practices of teaching reading, speaking, and listening, content teachers’ patterns of activities were mainly limited to bottom-up reading activities and word-by-word translation of academic texts” (p. 116). Similarly, Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014) found that while language teachers tend to teach reading strategies to engage students in the process of ESP reading comprehension, subject teachers seem to follow no well-established approach to ESP teaching and tend to focus on the teaching of terminology and translation of the texts into Persian. We aim to extend the available literature by analyzing the CIs that content teachers face. Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main categories of Iranian ESP university teachers’ language-related CIs?
2. What strategies and tactics do Iranian ESP university teachers use to deal with language-related CIs?
3. What lessons do Iranian ESP university teachers learn from their language-related CIs?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

To identify prospective participants, we approached the departments responsible for ESP courses at six universities and informed them of our study, and gained their approval. We purposefully chose state ($n = 3$) and private ($n = 3$) universities that differed in size and location to obtain a more representative sample of CIs with regard to the context of teaching, while also allowing for an exploration of teacher practices and their responses to these incidents. Then we asked the related departments of each university to

share the phone number and/or email addresses of the ESP practitioners who would be willing to participate in our study. Twenty-one practitioners, with varying teaching experiences, agreed to participate in the study but when we contacted them, four dropped out of the study. The remaining participants, as indicated in Table 1, exhibited a diversity in gender, age, and experience. This diversity allowed us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various types of CIs that ESP teachers encounter in their practice. For the sake of anonymity, the participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3, etc.

P.	Gender	Age	Experience	Degree	Reported language proficiency level or certificate
P1	Male	55	25	PhD in psychology	TOEFL-IBT 102
P2	Male	37	6	PhD in mechanical engineering	
P3	Female	32	5	PhD candidate in economics	IELTS 6.5
P4	Male	33	6	PhD in civil engineering	IELTS 6 / TESOL Teacher Training Courses (TTC)
P5	Male	40	10	PhD in physics	
P6	Female	34	7	PhD in human resources	
P7	Female	35	5	PhD in civil engineering	TOLIMO: 545
P8	Female	39	9	PhD in mathematics	IELTS 6.5
P9	Female	48	8	PhD in education	
P10	Male	39	7	PhD in industrial engineering	TOEFL-IBT 87
P11	Female	35	7	PhD candidate in psychology	
P12	Male	41	12	PhD in textile engineering	Upper-Intermediate
P13	Male	34	8	PhD in mechanical engineering	IELTS 7
P14	Female	40	7	PhD in law	TTC
P15	Female	37	16	PhD candidate in social sciences	
P16	Male	39	10	PhD in engineering	
P17	Female	29	5	PhD in physics	Upper-Intermediate

Table 1. Teachers' demographic information.

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Instruments

Data were collected by two methods: narrative frames and follow-up interviews. We used narrative frames to collect the CIs because such frames “provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written” (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). Narrative frames consisting of a sequence of sentence prompts enable several participants to construct narratives that are similar in terms of length, structure, and content. This feature allows researchers to focus more directly on specific issues of interest compared to more open-ended types of narrative data (Greenier & Moodie, 2021). Like Babaii et al. (2021), we believed that collecting data via narrative frames could provide teachers with more time than interviews to reflect and recollect their CIs. To design an effective narrative frame that would facilitate teachers' reflection on their CIs

in a structured manner, we adopted Thiel's (1999) conceptualization of CIs and contextualized it. We followed the steps suggested by Thiel for reporting CIs and designed our narrative frame accordingly. These steps include:

1. Self-observation: reflecting on one's practice to identify incidents that are considered CIs.
2. Re-counting what happened: describing what transpired, what the cause(s) was, and what followed the CI.
3. Self-awareness: analyzing the 'why' of the CI.
4. Self-evaluation: examining how the CI has influenced one's teaching.

Thus, our narrative frame was designed to collect data on what happened, why it happened, how the teachers reacted, what the outcome was, and what they learned from the CI.

To complement and extend the data collected with the narrative frame, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers to collect more information about each language-related CI identified by them with the assistance of the narrative frame. The interviews were necessary because in many cases the written narrative accounts provided by the teachers did not include enough details for us to fully understand the situation and the CI in question. Adding follow-up interviews to narrative frames can be considered as a novel aspect of narrative inquiry because teachers can elaborate on their narratives and provide richer data (Babaii et al., 2021). The interview data were used to provide more details about each CI after each reported narrative frame. In a few cases, the interview data are added to the narrative frames within square brackets to present a more complete picture of each CI reported in this paper.

2.2.2. Procedure

After selecting the target universities and participants, we then emailed all 17 participants to explain what CIs were and how they were expected to report them. Three samples (taken from Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017) of CIs were shared with them to ensure that they knew what they needed to reflect on. To facilitate their reflection, we sent them the narrative frame (see Appendix). All of them returned the completed narrative frames within two weeks. The participants were encouraged to report any types of CIs they

experienced, with the understanding that they were free to share one or multiple incidents. It is important to note that each narrative frame focused exclusively on one CI. When participants wished to report more than one CI, they were asked to fill out additional narrative frames.

After the first round of data analysis, which will be described in the next section, we conducted face-to-face ($n = 7$) or online ($n = 3$) interviews with 10 practitioners who had each reported a language-related CI. The participants decided on the interview mode. In response to our invitation for one-to-one interviews, the participants decided on the venue, date, and time of the interviews. The interviews lasted, on average, 17 minutes and were conducted in Persian. They were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Subsequently, the CIs were translated into English by the third author, and the accuracy of the translations was verified by the first author. The interviews were merged with the data gathered by the narrative frame to constitute the dataset for this study.

2.3. Data analysis

In the first round of data analysis, the first and third authors read the collected CIs independently to develop an initial impression of them. As part of the data analysis, we read and reread each CI multiple times to determine its main theme. We noted what caused each CI. As Table 2 shows, there were five main causes for the identified CIs. Since our interest was in language-related CIs, we ignored the other types of CI and focused on the 10 language-related CIs, which constituted 37.04% of all CIs.

In the second round of data analysis, we added the interview data to the narratives to enrich them with more details. Following Wu and Badger (2009), we used three general strategies – admitting ignorance (admission of not having all the answers or being knowledgeable about a particular topic), avoidance (intentionally sidestepping difficult questions), and risk-taking, (providing a reply relying on uncertain or insufficient understanding), but we were open to the emergence of new strategies. We did not have a pre-specified list of tactics (actions to deal with a CI) or learned lessons (values gained from a CI) to look for in the data. Rather, they emerged bottom-up from our many passes through the data. We read the language-related CIs and coded them based on the types of strategy used by the practitioners to deal with them. Next, we reread the CIs to identify the specific tactics used by the practitioners. Further readings

focused on identifying the lessons that the practitioners appeared to have learned from them.

The first and the second round of data analysis was done independently by the first and the third author. After each round, we met to check the accuracy and reliability of our data analysis. The intercoder agreement reached 94% and 91% for the first and second rounds of data analysis respectively. All disagreements were resolved through discussion.

2.4. Researcher positionality

Positionality of the researcher is a critical aspect of qualitative research, as it involves understanding how the researcher's personal background, location, and perceptions of themselves and others influence the research process (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Our motivation for conducting this study stemmed from previous research on the challenges faced by Iranian ESP teachers who are language experts (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017). Given the ongoing debate on who should teach ESP courses (Anthony, 2018), we were curious about the specific challenges faced by Iranian ESP teachers who are content experts. We surmized that due to the lack of teacher education and pedagogical support, ESP teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds would encounter various types of challenges. Both the first and third researchers are from Iran and have extensive experience teaching general and ESP courses in the country, which has allowed us to establish strong relationships with the teachers during data collection. Additionally, the second researcher, an expert in the field of ESP, has collaborated with the first author and gained valuable insights into the Iranian higher education context over the past two years. While all three researchers contributed to the study's conceptualization, the first and third researchers were responsible for data collection and analysis. The second researcher provided guidance throughout the research process, including the development of the narrative frame, supervision, and writing assistance.

3. Results

As summarized in Table 2, teachers experienced CIs in relation to a range of factors. Among all the identified CIs, 10 (37.04%) were attributed to the ESP instructors' low language proficiency, limited familiarity with language teaching/testing, or lack of exposure to research on academic genres. As made clear above, this study focuses on these language-related CIs.

Trigger	Number of reported CIs
Language knowledge	10
Students' behavior	7
Students' proficiency	5
Institutional expectations	3
Clash with colleagues	2
Total	27

Table 2. Categories of CIs in the whole dataset.

3.1. Admitting ignorance

In the following sections, the CIs are presented and analyzed according to the general strategies adopted by the participants in their responses.

The participating ESP practitioners used the strategy of admitting ignorance to deal with four language-related CIs. What follows is the CI identified by P1:

I have been teaching ESP for 25 years. I remember, one session, I mispronounced the words “attitude” and “academic” for students of psychology. One of my students who had an IELTS band score of 8 started murmuring to one of his classmates. After talking to two of his classmates, he raised his hand and asked me to pronounce the words again. His facial expression [grinning] made me notice that my pronunciation of the two words was wrong. I decided to confess that ‘my general English may not be as good as an IELTS holder with a band score of 8 but I am quite experienced and competent regarding the content’. This confession acted like a double-edged sword for me: it made my students become more attentive to the lessons that I presented to them; The lesson for me was to check the pronunciation of every new word (CI1; P1).

Mispronouncing two words made this incident critical for P1. He considered himself a content expert, however, as he explained that “English is full of surprises and there are many things about the language that I am not aware of”. He mentioned this as a reason for this CI. The student with high proficiency in English did not directly tell him that his pronunciation was wrong but his grinning face made him notice his pronunciation problems. He admitted his so-called mistake to his students but reassured them of his vast content knowledge, hoping to gain their trust as a competent ESP practitioner. This incident had both positive and negative consequences. It was positive because his students paid more attention to the content taught by him and negative (as explained during the interview) because their

attention was directed at finding his mistakes, which put him under pressure and made him feel vulnerable. He thought “the only way for me to gain their trust back was to check the pronunciation of every word”. Accordingly, he adopted the tactic of checking the pronunciation of each and every word before class (see Table 3 for the various tactics associated with the different coping strategies).

No.	Strategy	Incident	Tactic	Lesson learned
1	Admitting ignorance	Mispronunciation of words	Checking the pronunciation of words	Check the pronunciation
2	Admitting ignorance	Mispronunciation of words	--	Check the pronunciation
3	Admitting ignorance	A question about the difference between clauses, phrases and sentences	Surfing the Internet	Improve your grammar
4	Admitting ignorance	Unfamiliarity with of the procedure of reading comprehension	Confessing to unfamiliarity with language teaching skills	Participate in TESOL Teacher Training Courses (TTC) afterward
5	Risk-taking	The English translation of a Persian word	Giving a sham answer and moving on quickly	Improve general English
6	Risk-taking	Subtle differences among three words	Giving the meaning of the word you know and having them find out the meaning of the other two	Trust your students + Improve grammar and vocabulary
7	Risk-taking	The part-genre of introductions (CARS model)	Pretending to know the CARS model and base her teaching on it	Read more about academic writing
8	Avoidance	Unfamiliarity with writing skills	Asking students to work on another task	Do not lose my control over the class
9	Avoidance	Mispronunciation of words	Not using those words anymore	Improve your pronunciation
10	Avoidance	Constructing a poor test	Avoiding saying anything about the test and promising better tests	See the need for training on ESP assessment

Table 3. Summary of language-related CIs.

P2 faced a CI like what happened to P1, with the same strategy adopted and the same lesson learned. In another CI, P3 also resorted to the strategy of admitting ignorance but utilized a different tactic to do so and learned a new lesson. She explained:

About four years ago, I had an ESP class with BA students in economics. In one session, when we were working on an academic text, I asked them to highlight the present tenses in the text to check if they had learned the grammar of that session, but one of the students asked an unrelated question about the differences between a clause and a phrase. I tried to answer the question but he was not satisfied and started asking more questions. I was not prepared for those questions, and I was confused about the differences. The students noticed I was struggling to answer the questions. I decided to remind them that I had no educational background in English and asked them to go online to find answers to those questions. I

went online as well to figure out the subtle differences. The students did not judge me and enjoyed finding the answers by going online. This CI taught me to trust my incredible students (CI3; P3).

P3 encountered a CI that highlighted the importance of having a strong grasp of English grammar. As she explained in the interview, she had already informed her students of her background and the fact that she was a content specialist, not a language specialist, but “the students always asked many language-related questions”. As a novice teacher and due to her belief that she should answer all her students’ questions, she did not try to skip or ignore the initial question. She tried to provide the best answer she could, which did not satisfy her students and led to more questions about dependent and independent clauses and different sentence types: simple, complex, compound, and compound-complex. This CI made her see the need to improve her explicit grammar knowledge. She explained, in the interview, that “after this incident, I devoted more time to studying grammatical rules and concepts because as an ESP teacher, I must have a good grasp of them and be prepared to answer different questions”. The positive outcome of this CI also strengthened her belief in trusting her students and being open in her communication with them.

Similarly, P4 also adopted the strategy of admitting ignorance to deal with a CI happening at the start of his ESP career. As he confided,

5 years ago, I started teaching ESP courses. At the beginning of the course, I was going to work on a text which I had chosen for them. I did not anticipate any major difficulty in teaching the text. But just as I was about to teach it, I panicked and felt that I was not well-prepared to teach it. I did not know how to begin. I started the lesson anyway and asked students to start reading and translating. I did not do any warm-up, pre-reading, etc. I felt bad and my facial expressions were signals to students that I was having a problem. I had to intimate that my expertise was mostly in content, not language teaching. I guess my students were mature enough and collaborated a lot in moving the lesson forward. After that, I decided to enroll in a crash course called English teacher training courses (ITC) to learn more about ELT methodology (CI4; P4).

The interview with P4 revealed that, as a novice teacher, he was anxious and afraid of the possible challenges that could pop up and the risk of losing his job as an ESP instructor. He thought that the only essential skill for teaching reading was to clearly define and explain the meanings of the new words in

a text, so he went through the text before class to see if there were any words new to him. However, his unfamiliarity with, or misconception of, how reading should be taught turned an initial instructional activity into a CI for him. His belief that knowing the meaning of the words was enough for teaching reading comprehension was “a wrong conception of ESP teaching”. In the interview, he told us that, later on, he learned from a friend about some TTC courses run by his university. He found the TTC course to be very useful, as it equipped him with language teaching methods, principles of, and strategies for teaching language skills.

3.2. Risk-taking

Three participants employed the strategy of risk-taking to tide over the CIs that they experienced. P5 was one of them.

Three years ago, in my ESP class for students of physics, a student asked me for the English equivalent of a Persian word. Unfortunately, I did not know the English equivalent of that word. I just gave a sham answer by randomly picking a word. Without giving my student any opportunity to ask me to spell the word or write it on the board, I moved quickly on to the next activity, where I asked them to work in pairs and find the meaning of new words in a text. I noticed the disappointment on that student’s face but I could not do anything at that moment. While the students were working on the task, I went online and found the English translation of the Persian word. I went to that student and wrote the word in his notebook. He brimmed with gratefulness for my attention. I think I should improve my general English proficiency (CI5; P5).

The CI arose for P5 because of not knowing the English equivalent of a Persian word. P5 believed that as a reputable physicist and ESP instructor, maintaining his face was of high importance. He handled the CI well and his students did not see or judge him as an incompetent teacher. Although he managed the CI successfully, P5 himself was disappointed about his vocabulary knowledge and felt the need to improve his general English proficiency. In the interview, P5 confided that “overall, my limited knowledge of general English vocabulary always disappoints me” and that it was time to do something about it.

P6 also underwent a CI arising from three English words that she did not know. As she described,

About 8 years ago, a group of Human Resources students was in my class. In one session, while we were working on a text about “human rights” and “voluntary practices”, they asked me questions about words related to “human”. One such question was “What are the Persian equivalents of ‘anthropologist’, ‘anthropoid’, and ‘anthropomorphic?’” These words were not part of the lesson. [Sadly, I forgot the differences between their meanings and my mind went blank]. Luckily, I knew the meaning of the first one. I used the first to elicit the second and the third words from my students. [I said “‘anthropology’ means ‘the study of humans’ and ‘-ist’ means ‘a person who does a specified action’, So ‘anthropologist’ means ‘an expert in or student of anthropology’”].] [all these explanations were done in Persian]. Then I went on and said “now it’s time for you to crack the meaning of the second and the third word”. As they started talking and checking their cell phones, I went online to check the meaning of those two words. I was able to manage this challenging moment successfully, but I then realized that, I needed to know grammar well, learn more words and continually brush up on my vocabulary (CI6; P6).

P6 believed that her vast content knowledge would buttress her ESP teaching. In her own words, “I always thought that content knowledge is more important than general language knowledge in ESP classes”. However, she was asked a question for which she was not prepared and this made her change her mind: “I was wrong. Students are naturally curious, particularly in English classes”. Students asked her about the Persian equivalents of three words but she did not know the differences and her mind went blank. Since it was the first day of the term, she did not want to leave a bad impression by telling them the truth. She adopted a risk-taking strategy by exploiting what she did know, that is, one of the three words identified by the student. Using that word to introduce an impromptu vocabulary task for the students, she gained time for herself. Her reflection on the CI led her to see gaps in her vocabulary and grammar knowledge and the need to take action to bridge the gaps.

Likewise, P7 also took risk in her response to a CI that resulted from a lack of genre knowledge.

Around two years ago, I was teaching BA students in civil engineering. In one session, one of the students asked me about the genre of introductions in academic papers. I explained to him how he should write an introduction. To my surprise, he said his dormmate, a PhD student of applied linguistics, had told him about a “CARS” model for introductions. I had not heard of that

model before. I decided to take risk and said that “the CARS model says the exact same thing”. He did not look satisfied with my answer but stopped asking more questions. The rest of the class did not notice what was going on in my mind, and I believe they did not notice that I did not have the slightest idea of what the CARS model was. This CI compelled me to learn more about academic writing (CI7; P7).

Like some of the other participants described above, the image of a competent teacher was important for P9, and consequently, owning up to her lack of familiarity of the CARS (Create a Research Space) model was not an option for her. So, she decided to take a chance by insinuating that her instruction in writing introductions was based on the CARS model. She did not stop at that but conducted Internet searches to find out about the CARS model, showing her willingness to expand her existing knowledge. She was happy because “there was a great overlap between what I told my students about introductions and what the model presented”. This willingness was also reflected in her effort to “learn more about academic writing from academic writing books”. In the interview, she explained that ESP teachers should go beyond the immediate content that they are supposed to teach and be ready to answer different questions.

3.3. Avoidance

Three of the CIs drew forth an avoidance strategy from the participants concerned. In one case, P8 reported that:

Around 10 years ago, I had an ESP class with students of accounting. [Many of them were not as motivated and interested in learning English and as a consequence, they were not as attentive as I expected them to be.] To gain their attention, I decided to give them some tasks every session to keep them focused and attentive. I reminded them that how they completed the tasks would constitute a major part of their final score. One task required them to write reflection journals in English summarizing whatever they learned during each session and email the journals to me. I consider this a critical incident because the students asked me to teach them some summarizing and writing tips so that they could write up their reflection journals. I did not feel confident taking on that responsibility. So, I quickly decided to change the activity to another one (CI8; P8).

P8 designed some classroom tasks with the intention of sparking her students’ interest and capturing their attention. However, when the students

sought guidance on one of the tasks, she realized she needed further pedagogical knowledge to provide the necessary support. As she did not want to lose her face, she abandoned it and asked the students to work on another task instead. The task was “preparing PowerPoint slides in English on topics that I covered during the course and presenting a 15-minute lecture in groups of five”. As P8 reported, her students appeared more interested in this task because it required a lower level of knowledge in English. When asked about her reaction to the CI, she explained that “if you lose your face, then you are in big trouble”.

P9 also resorted to the strategy of avoidance in her response to a CI that she experienced.

About 3 years ago, classes were held online due to the spread of coronavirus. [Various teaching platforms, which were particularly designed for online education, including Adobe Connect, Big Blue Button, etc., were utilized for this purpose.] I was teaching a group of educational sciences students online. While I was speaking in English, I mispronounced two words, ‘analytic philosophy’ and ‘chaotic ordering’. I noticed that after I said those words, one of the students was writing the Persian pronunciation of those words in the chat box. At first, I couldn’t understand her goal for doing that but after a while, other students tried to do so with a sense of mockery and they used “:)” which made me feel irritated. [I figured out that there was a problem. Looking back at the previous messages, I realized my pronunciation of those words was wrong; so,] I decided to ignore their messages and avoid using those two words anymore in that session. This incident encouraged me to devote time to listening to English podcasts daily (CI9; P9).

Like P1 and P2, P9’s pronunciation of English words led to a challenging moment in her classroom. Unlike P1 and P2, she did not use the strategy of admitting ignorance to deal with this CI but chose to avoid those words. After the class, she checked the pronunciation of those two words in an online dictionary and learned the correct pronunciation. To prevent her pronunciation from becoming a source of students’ mockery, she took actions to improve her English lexical knowledge and pronunciation by listening to podcasts.

Finally, P10 experienced an assessment-related CI and similarly avoided talking about his problem.

In my first year of teaching, I had an ESP class with students of industrial engineering. I prepared a midterm exam to assess my students’ progress. The

test included some questions that required students to translate a few words or phrases into Persian and answer some multiple-choice vocabulary questions. Everything was good until the head of our department saw the questions later that week. He criticized me for constructing a poor test. I reassured him that the final exam would be a standard one. I did not feel good about this. Later that day, I was thinking of finding a way out. The only thing I could do was to go online and search for ESP testing to learn more but it was not helpful. I was under a lot of pressure until I accidentally found some sample tests. I spent a lot of time, preparing my final exam questions following the same format. There should be some type of education on how to prepare ESP tests (CI10; P10).

P10's limited knowledge and experience concerning ESP test construction resulted in a mid-term exam that the head of department found seriously wanting. He considered the test poor because it included many translation items and failed to include a variety of test types. P10 did not understand what the head of department meant by 'a variety of test types' and confided that "I did not have the right skills to prepare a standard test". He felt vulnerable as a novice teacher and was in dire need of support to develop a "standard" English test. Although he modeled his final exam on a few sample tests that he found on the Internet after much struggling, his product was likely to resemble those sample tests only in format but not in essence. In the interview, P10 told us that the head of the department was happy with the final exam. However, he did not feel good about it because "this is only one of the most basic skills that I need to possess as an ESP teacher". This CI points to the importance of teacher education for ESP practitioners.

4. Discussion

ESP practitioners are likely to face numerous challenges due to the complexity of ESP teaching. This study investigated the types of CIs that content teachers are likely to experience. As found in our study, a sizeable proportion (about 37%) of such CIs may concern language proficiency or ELT methodology. Although as content experts the teachers in our study rarely encountered challenges concerning the disciplinary content of their ESP courses, their English proficiency and/or limited knowledge of language teaching methodology triggered CIs in their classrooms. Our findings are different from those of Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) who found that 25% of all the CIs reported by their participants (i.e., language

teachers) were triggered by their unfamiliarity with content knowledge. While most CIs reported in Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) were related to the practitioners' lack of familiarity with technical English words, disciplinary meanings of words, or discipline-specific conventions of academic writing, most CIs in our study centered on difficulty in pronunciation, grammar, teaching reading and writing, language testing, and research on academic genres. Thus, while ESP practitioners with ELT degrees often undergo CIs triggered by content knowledge that they usually lack (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), our study revealed that ESP practitioners with content degrees were more prone to encountering language-related CIs. However, it is important to note that this finding should not be generalized to all ESP teachers.

Our findings revealed that one strategy used by several content teachers to handle their CIs was to admit ignorance of language-related issues. Similar to language teachers in Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) who excused their lack of content knowledge by emphasizing their background as language experts, the content teachers in our study tried to justify their limited language knowledge by highlighting their background as content specialists. In almost all cases, this strategy had positive outcomes and helped them tide over the CIs. Wu and Badger (2009) found that their Chinese participants tended to avoid the strategy of admitting ignorance to save their face. However, similar to Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014), our findings indicated that the Iranian ESP teachers were as likely to use this strategy as the other strategies, though face did figure prominently in some teachers' considerations. These differences hint at contextual differences and culturally shaped perceptions of face (Wu & Badger, 2009).

ESP teaching is a complex endeavor requiring practitioners to fulfill different tasks such as needs analysis, setting of learning objectives, choice of materials and methods, and evaluation (Anthony, 2018). Some practitioners may face challenges and feel uncomfortable acknowledging their limited knowledge or training in certain areas. For these teachers, either risk-taking or avoidance offers a way out. Three participants in our study took risks in their response to the CIs and another three chose to avoid the issues that triggered the CIs. Although these teachers were able to manage the CIs successfully without losing their face, they did come to see that content expertise alone would not suffice for effective ESP teaching and that language expertise would be indispensable.

There is no ESP teacher education in Iran; nor is there much research on the preferred ESP methodologies among ESP instructors (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). As Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017) point out, this situation has led to a ‘fuzzy state’ where language teachers and content teachers follow their own conceptualizations of teaching ESP, and subsequently, there are no consistent patterns of their actual teaching practices. Our findings provide further evidence of this problem: our participants appeared to be unfamiliar with (research on) ESP methodology (see CI9), were not confident in teaching reading or writing skills (see CI4), and faced challenges in ESP testing (see CI10). These findings are in line with those of Bocanegra-Valle and Basturkmen (2019), who found that 15 out of 19 Spanish ESP teachers participating in their study perceived needs for and expected support in knowledge of language use, including genres and text types. These findings support the argument that content teachers cannot teach ESP alone because they do not have enough language (teaching) skills (Anthony, 2018). Given the difficulties of team teaching in many contexts (Anthony, 2018) and considering the fact that ESP methodology and teachers’ knowledge of the academic language are the most important ingredients of efficient ESP courses (Hyland, 2006), there is a dire need for ESP teacher education in Iran and similar contexts.

In one of the CIs, a question rose about the part-genre of introductions in research articles (see CI7). P7’s response to the question led to a further question about the CARS model for the generic structure of introductions, which she had never heard of. She appeared to have some intuitive understanding of the part-genre but lacked an explicit knowledge to articulate it with reference to a widely researched generic model (see Hyland, 2022). Although genre is “probably the most important item in the ESP toolbox” (Hyland, 2022, p. 6), P7 lacked grounding in research on genre analysis and, consequently, did not have the metalanguage to make it “available to those outside the circle of expert producers of the texts” (Shaw, 2016, p. 243). P7’s knowledge base is epitomic of a wider problem: that content experts who teach ESP are often not cognizant of research developments in ESP. This finding again underscores the need for ESP teacher education programs in Iran and similar contexts which can introduce best ESP instructional practices to them and inform them of the latest research findings in the field.

Similarly, P10’s struggles to construct ESP tests and avail himself of the much-needed guidance necessitate more attention to the real challenges

faced by teachers, especially novice ones, and mutually beneficial collaboration between content and language teachers (Stewart & Perry, 2005). The assessment-related challenges identified in our study are in line with previous studies showing that Iranian ESP teachers perceive ESP testing as a huge challenge and refer to it as an 'enormous responsibility' because they need to construct tests for formative or summative assessment and mark a huge number of papers every semester (Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). They are also consistent with Huang's (2018) finding that ESP teachers in Canada struggle with proper testing and assessment due to their lack of training. Likewise, Canadian ESP instructors demonstrated insufficient assessment knowledge, deficiencies in test development skills, and challenges in aligning assessments with learners' needs. Given their crucial importance in ESP (Charles & Pecorari, 2016), there is a clear need for the inclusion of ESP testing and assessment issues in ESP teacher education curricula.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the language-related CIs that a group of Iranian ESP practitioners experienced, the strategic responses that they made to the CIs and the lessons that they learned. Our analysis of the participants' narratives elicited with a narrative frame and the follow-up semi-structured interviews revealed three broad coping strategies: admitting ignorance, avoidance, and risk-taking. These categories were taken from Wu and Badger (2009), and no new strategy categories emerged. These strategies were realized by a variety of tactics. As a result of their individual experience and strategy, they learned different lessons and took different actions to prevent similar CIs from happening again. Both the nature and type of the CIs experienced by these content teachers differed from those encountered by the language teachers in Atai and Nejadghanbar (2017), though the two groups of teachers adopted similar coping strategies and tactics. These findings add to the scanty literature on ESP methodology (Bell, 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021; Watson Todd, 2003) and provide insights into the challenges faced by ESP practitioners who are content experts.

Due to the limited scope of this study, it would be unjustifiable to draw sweeping conclusions based on its findings. We would like to propose, nonetheless, that it could potentially have implications for the professional

growth of practitioners within the specific setting of the study and, possibly, similar contexts. First, there is an urgent need to develop and offer ESP teacher education programs which can effectively equip ESP content teachers with a sound knowledge of language teaching methodology. Such training is indispensable if the content teachers are to gain the necessary understanding and skills that they need to deliver their teaching successfully. The ESP teacher education programs should also familiarize the participants with, and help them to keep abreast of, ESP research findings, guiding them to apply those findings to their instruction. Second, content teachers can benefit from general English proficiency courses specially designed to address their needs. Third, the findings of this study highlight the importance of studying ESP practitioners' CIs because they can reveal the real challenges faced by these practitioners and, therefore, provide rich information that can be used for professional development work with pre-service and in-service practitioners. Finally, in line with Strevens' (1988) useful reminder that "the teacher who is new to ESP needs advice, help and support from those teachers who already have the necessary experience" (p. 43), the results of this study can be used to help novice practitioners to prospectively reflect on ESP teaching, vicariously experience CIs that they may face, and improve their skills and knowledge in the relevant areas. Examining CIs both individually and collaboratively can be advantageous in promoting practitioners' reflection and facilitating their professional development (Nejadghanbar, 2021; Nejadghanbar & Atai, 2021).

Our study primarily focused on examining the types of CIs faced by content teachers and their corresponding strategies and tactics. Although our findings offer significant insights into the obstacles faced by these educators, we did not delve into the emotional dimensions of their experiences, an aspect that remains largely unexplored within the realm of English medium instruction contexts (Hillman et al., 2023). We believe that our findings have laid the groundwork for future studies to adopt a more critical approach, delving into the sociocultural dimensions of content teachers' experiences. These further studies can investigate how the absence of teacher education programs and pedagogical support, coupled with existing value systems that, for example, prioritize correct pronunciation, may exert emotional pressures on these teachers. The CIs identified in our study reflect the emotional labor involved in navigating and ultimately conforming to these value systems. The fact that some teachers acquiesced to students' requests to adopt more natively like pronunciation without resistance or advocating for the value of

world Englishes may be attributed to the lack of teacher education and pedagogical support. Had these teachers received adequate training and support, they could have advocated for the recognition and appreciation of world Englishes in their classrooms and engaged with students to foster tolerance towards a range of accents and mispronunciations.

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Appendix: Narrative frame

After reflecting on my experience as an ESP teacher, a particular incident stands out in my memory. It occurred when (please provide a detailed description of what happened)

The reason behind this incident can be attributed to (please describe the underlying reason here)

In response to the situation, I reacted by (please describe your specific reaction to the incident)

The students, in turn, responded by (please describe the reaction of your students)

This incident served as a valuable lesson for me, teaching me (please describe the lesson or insight you gained from this incident, if any)

