

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ESP COURSE TAUGHT IN AN OMANI UNIVERSITY: AN EFFICACIOUS USE OF THE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM AS A RESEARCH TOOL

*Inayat Shah, Sohar University*

## *Abstract*

*This paper assesses ESP students' perceptions of the course book and the course material involving the integration of the Learning Management System (LMS) at Sohar University in Oman. A survey research method was adopted in a case study exposing the ESP student groups of Business, IT and Engineering faculties to the questions posted on the forum of University LMS. With the aim to ensure that the students liked the course book and course material, they were asked two questions on the LMS and asked to write their perceptions. The findings suggest that although the respondents mostly appreciated the book and the materials, some were against using them. The findings also illustrate the themes of relevance or irrelevance of the course materials, the importance of workplace English, students' acknowledgement of their low level of English and a tendency to prefer having their own business over other jobs. The study also suggests using online learning systems differently to get students' opinions in an open environment.*

**Key words:** Students' Perceptions, Curriculum, ESP, Learning Management System

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the students' perceptions of the ESP course book and course materials used in Business, IT and Engineering at Sohar University. Assuming that the responses gathered through SULMS and their findings would lead to different levels of curriculum development and effectiveness in students' learning process, this study compares and contrasts both positives and the negatives of the course book and the material and aims to improve the ESP course in the light of students' suggestions. UNIR 2000 Communication Skills is one of the three English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses offered in the Faculty of English and Language Studies at Sohar University, Oman. UNIR 2000 is a credit bearing course and a prerequisite for a higher course UNIR 3000. The

course is offered to level 2 students of Business, IT and Engineering majors. Recently, the managers at the university wanted to know if the course fulfills students' academic requirements so they asked the faculty to bring their suggestions regarding the positives and negatives of the course. The present study aimed to get students' perceptions of the course taught to them.

UNIR 2000 is designed to provide students with the specific skills required to communicate effectively and efficiently at their future work place and increase their career prospects. Being directed towards the work environment, the course intends not just to familiarize students with the functional language they will need to use in their future jobs, but also to build up their confidence in communicating in English. The purpose of the course is to equip students with the necessary skills/tools that are required in communicating within an organization or business. Upon successfully completing this course, the student should understand and effectively use a wide range of work place vocabulary, adhere to conventions of construction and format in business correspondence, write informal and formal work related emails, letters and reports using appropriate language, read and write common types of business messages, acquire job seeking skills, write applications and cover letters, understand and effectively interpret the relevant vocabulary for describing graphs, charts and trends.

The recommended textbook for UNIR 2000 is Market Leader Pre-Intermediate by David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent, published by Pearson Longman, 2012 (3rd Edition) & Market Leader Pre-Intermediate 'Practice File' (3rd Edition). In addition to that, students are also given handouts and instructions about writing standard CVs and Cover Letters so that they learn job searching skills to their benefit. The present study raised questions as to whether the course book and the materials given to the students are appropriate and sought students' perceptions through the SULMS.

The researcher asked two questions of undergraduate level 2 students at the forum on the Sohar University Learning Management System (SULMS) and collected students' responses in terms of positives and negatives. The study also encouraged the students to suggest any changes required in the course book and course materials taught to them. Through this study the researcher aimed to understand, refine, develop, evaluate and improve the ESP course materials and student comprehension in the university setup. The study also suggests the effective use of LMS in providing students with an opportunity to express their opinions as well as an instrument for collecting data for research purposes. This research was motivated by the works of Benson et al., (2012) as cited in Belwal (2015) and Birch and Burnett (2009) who stressed identification of approaches that assist staff to use emerging technologies in teaching. The objective of the present study was to determine whether the students considered that the ESP course book and the materials taught at this particular university provided enough

information for them to fulfill their learning objectives and whether any changes were required in the course materials taught to them. Simultaneously the present study also employed SULMs as a tool for students to write their opinions in an online setting that provided them with easy access to express their opinions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers surveying the body of research on learning in higher education would ultimately find a plethora of studies investigating students' experiences of studying and learning from the viewpoints of the students themselves. An understanding of students' learning experiences may provide valuable data for understanding the nature of content taught to them and its efficacy in academic contexts. Research on student perceptions on learning has provided rich accounts of how students experience and deal with studies in higher education, Language teachers, lecturers and researchers (Al-Smadi 2013, Belwal et al. 2015, Brett 2011, Earl 2013, Ice et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2010, Landrum 2010, Omar et al. 2012, Heng-Tsung et al. 2013, Hiew 2012, Hung 2011, Earl 2013, McNaught et al. 2012, Rodchua et al. 2011, Scheja 2006, Yang et al. 2014, Xinga et al. 2008) have made significant attempts to explore and utilize these tools to enrich their teaching, assist learners in improving their language learning (Lockyer et al. 2008) and conduct academic research. Findings gathered through students' perceptions about course, course materials, teaching and learning experiences tend to influence the way in which they handle the given tasks in higher education (Marton et al. 1976a as cited in Belwal et al. 2015), and the approaches that students typically adopt in their studies tend to influence the quality of the understanding reached, with a deep approach often being associated with a more sophisticated understanding and better academic results than that of a merely outward approach.

Although much of the research on approaches to studying at university has been based on interviews with students, the recent research (Al-Smadi 2013, Brett 2011, Earl 2013, Ice et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2010, Omar et al. 2012, Heng-Tsung et al. 2013) in the field has increasingly come to use modern, innovative methodologies to enable large scale investigations of students' study patterns in higher education (Belwal et al. 2015, Heng-Tsung et al. 2013, Hiew 2012, Hung 2011, Earl 2013, McNaught et al. 2012, Rodchua et al. 2011, Scheja 2006, Yang et al. 2014, Xinga et al. 2008). These instruments have been developed with the aim of producing quantitative scores on particular scales designed to capture main characteristics of studying and learning in higher education. Much of the recent research effort has been aimed at describing and classifying study patterns among groups of students as well as perceptions of individuals in higher education. Belwal et al. (2015), Omar et al. (2012) and Earl (2013) emphasize mainly on how to bring about conceptual change in instructional settings, that is, the process through which students come to understand their courses and the relevant concepts in various disciplinary settings. Learners' perceptions of the

course books and materials have had a very profound impact on learning and teaching.

Whether the course effectively serves the purpose and students' needs or any modifications are required is a research question that needs to be addressed. Earlier Hiew (2012) used Facebook to conduct her research at a university to see whether students' responses were reflected in their understanding of the given task. The method was used to ensure that all respondents contributed their opinions and suggestions pertaining to a question posted by the researcher. Hiew suggests that "students' perceptions should be taken seriously, reviewed seriously as it is a two-way process involving teachers and learners" (161). It is through students' perceptions of the course that the teachers take the initiative to ensure their teaching plans are effective while students' learning becomes meaningful through the understanding of the students' preferences. McNaught et al. (2012) in their study indicate the importance of relationships between features of learning design and students' perceptions of their learning outcomes.

The provision of learning resources and the engagement of students relate to various aspects of learning such as acquisition of knowledge and skills and enhancement of learning motivation. The interesting result of McNaught's study is that students differ in their perceptions yet these differences in opinions are considered valid indicators of student learning outcomes. Scheja (2006) in a study of Swedish undergraduate students' recorded the students' experiences and understanding in relation to the observed barriers of the teaching-learning environment and the course work. The analyses of the students' written accounts suggested that the majority of the students reported problematic first-year experiences and testified they were lagging behind because of the course material offered to them in engineering education did not meet their requirements. Hung (2011) in his study set out to examine the implementation of a video blog (vlog) project in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course that aimed to increase students' opportunities to use the target language while stating their perceptions about the use of vlog. The results indicated that the students, while discussing vlogs' merits and demerits perceived their use favorably. Hung concludes that this type of online questionnaire promotes expression of viewpoints, fosters discussions of issues and cultivates critical thinking.

As stated earlier, the medium of LMSs as a tool for gathering data has been conveniently and successfully used by researchers since the advent of modern day technologies such as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). In this context, students' perceptions have been sought, identified, calculated, interpreted, analyzed and brought forth for further research in the field. Wagner, et al. (2008) and Belwal et al. (2015) believe that asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication does not require user participation in real time. CMC refers to delayed written communication or those communications that occur via computer-mediated formats such as email or electronic discussion forums.

Through CMC, information is transmitted by participants at the pace and time most convenient to them. In the context of Omani universities, Belwal et al. (2015) believe that asynchronous CMC seems to be a more feasible and convenient research tool as its flexible features enable learner interactions with instructors, classmates, or peers anytime and anywhere without any spatial or time limitations (68). Online interactions can, therefore, be conducted at a time and place most convenient to learners. CMC provides an electronic forum that allows the user to post a message for others to read and to respond to what others write there. These posted messages are accessible at any time and remain visible until they are deleted. Each participant can read and refer to the posted messages as many times as they wish and make necessary amendments or improvements to their own messages before posting them.

Unrestricted by space and time, a Learning Management System (LMS) is a platform for instructors to extend learning activities outside the classroom. Empirical studies (Belwal et al. 2015, Earl 2013, Iceet al. 2010, Jones et al. 2010, Landrum, 2012, Omar et al, 2010 Heng-Tsunget al. 2013, Hung 2011, McNaught et al. 2012, Rodchua et al. 2011, Scheja 2006) suggest various benefits of LMSs in research and learning. These include increased participation among students with improved quality of language outputs, developed vocabulary, a collective learning environment and individual learner autonomy and a wider environment for the learners' Zone of Proximal Development. It also provides an impartial platform and a less threatening environment for second language discussion. LMSs, therefore, mainly benefit shy or introvert learners as they provide some privacy in interaction.

At an advanced level, researchers have profusely used technology and online forums to collect students' perceptions and while analyzing the collected data material, they have propounded various implications in the area of teaching and learning. Citing Tilis (1998), Xinga et al. (2008) suggest that technology serves as the facilitator for change because of the new opportunities it presents and the new demands it makes on teachers, administrators and students. Omaret al. (2012) in their study of ESL learners' participation in an information-sharing task conducted via Facebook (FB) suggest that learners in similar contexts contribute substantially to group discussions despite their limited language ability and technical problems. The findings in their study revealed that the use of LMS as a platform for the information-sharing task received very positive feedback from the participants, thus suggesting it would be a promising virtual tool to collect students' opinions about course books and materials. Citing Perez (2003) and Supyan et al. (2008), Omar et al. (2012) suggest that online discussion via these tools could help expand learning and knowledge acquisition beyond the four walls of traditional classrooms. Similarly, in her study, Hiew (2012) suggests that students feel more comfortable in giving their opinions on not only teacher's questions but also on the other respondents' views. In his two studies, Earl (2012, 2013) used short-text assignment formats believing that short text assignments

have the potential to meet both teacher and student needs in assessment. In his study (2013), he used a survey of student perceptions of assignments in a fully online undergraduate course offered by the Faculty of Education of The University of Waikato. The survey took place in Moodle, the Learning Management System used across the University. The findings suggested that “short-text formats are potentially more relevant and purposeful for similar research than traditional assignment formats such as essays” (164). Earl states that research of this kind encourages students to identify key knowledge and concepts, evaluate, synthesize and articulate. For Earl (2013), seeking students’ opinions in an asynchronous environment and a valid interpretation of their responses accentuate the quality rather than quantity and provide teachers with reliable evidence of students’ depth of thinking. This kind of assignment has “benefits for tertiary educators for reasons of validity, reliability and manageability” (164). Students’ perceptions gathered through LMSs can help students elaborate, improve and deepen their understandings. In online discussion forums, students get better in the process of self-monitoring, self-managing and self-modifying. For Huag et al. (2013) digital communication modality enhances second/foreign language (L2) learning by facilitating and archiving group interactions in a threaded structure, enabling meta-commenting, fostering higher-order information processing through permitting reflections on peer contributions and so forth. Yanget al. (2014) maintain that in the 21st century digital learning environment has become an essential tool for fostering Critical Thinking (CT) among students. Jones et al. (2010) propound that blended learning successfully contributes to widening participation, entrepreneurship and creates innovative support for non-traditional students. Brett (2011) in his study findings opines that the data collected through LMSs may be reported to administrative departments for further improvement in the learning and teaching methodologies. Taking advantage of the previous studies, the present study used innovations in educational technology (SULMS) and tried to investigate the effectiveness of students’ perceptions of the course book and the materials taught to them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used an online survey of student perceptions of their course book and course materials taught to them in a 12-week undergraduate course offered by the Faculty of English and Language Studies at Sohar University, Oman. The university has a strong reputation as one of the first tertiary level academic institutions in Oman to connect to Internet Learning Management Systems.

The research instrument was SULMS, a Learning Management System for Sohar University students. On the SULMS forum 2 questions were posted by the researcher/instructor for the students’ responses. The questions probed students’ responses with regard to their approval or disapproval of the ESP course material taught to them. While this study adopted the principles of a survey research, it also used the principles of case study methodology which seeks to make sense of

phenomena and the shared subjective meanings people bring to them. The data analysis from the survey acknowledges that the research was context dependent and that the researcher was closely involved as the teacher of the course. The researcher's close involvement with the course and face to face interaction with respondents allowed a rich interpretation of student views.

Following Hiew (2012), a qualitative method was used to conduct the research by utilizing the content analysis of forum entries written by 196 students registered in ESP course UNIR 2000. It ensured that the questions asked would prompt students to be reflective in their answers (Heng-Tsung et al. 2013). The participants were given face to face suggestions and required to be reflective in responding to the listed two open-ended items on SULMS. The two open ended questions invited the participants to verbalize their thoughts, with qualitative written responses, on the perceived positives and negatives of the course book and course materials taught to them and suggest any changes they felt were required in the course book or course material.

The study period encompassed a span of 2 weeks. The students vocalized opinions on the questions asked and participated in the forum thread by writing comments on various aspects of the course book and materials such as content, vocabulary, written assignments, language skills, efficacy, relevance, benefits, shortcomings, advantages and disadvantages of the course book and the course materials.

Following students responses on the SULMS, the answers were analyzed in terms of the percentage of positives and negatives, in favor or against the course book and the materials and the emerging themes were identified. This was done mainly to know students' perception of the effectiveness of the course book and the materials taught to them. During face to face interaction with the students, the researcher noticed that the use of SLMS was appreciated because it provided with students an easy way to express their opinions regarding the ESP book taught to them inside the classroom.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In the present study, 196 university students participated. These ESP students were studying with their majors in Engineering, Business and Information technology. All 196 students wrote their responses on the SULMS. The researcher first examined the quantitative information gathered from the number of the positive and negative responses of the students and the qualitative data collected from the reflective responses of the students, and then integrated the results as he set out to interpret the findings.

In terms of the specific analysis procedures, for each response, the researcher simply calculated the number of students who assessed the course book and the

materials favorably (+) and unfavorably (--) for the four different options and then converted the resultant numbers to percentages. With respect to the reflective nature of the question, the researcher examined the responses qualitatively by reviewing and combining several relevant emerging themes and interpreting them. Throughout the entire analysis process, the researcher searched thoroughly for contradictory evidence and made revisions to the interpretations accordingly to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Some pedagogical implications and suggestions to further enhance learners' online interactions were also outlined.

The findings of the study suggested that the majority of students considered the book and material favorably and said that the book fulfilled their academic requirements. Of the 472 students enrolled in the UNIR 2000 course 196 students responded to the questions posted. All these 196 students also belonged to the sections that the researcher taught. The average percentage of respondents was 41%. Since only the researcher's students were asked to participate in the LMS forum questions, the other students are not included in the research. Overall, 149 students responded that the course book and course material are relevant and they fulfill students' requirements. 47 students thought that the course book and the course materials did not cater to their academic needs and that they should be modified or changed. An average of 76% of respondents thought the book and the course materials are good, while an average of 23% of students considered the course book and the material irrelevant.

For question number 1, 'Does the course fulfill the students' requirements?', 79 students responded positively and said the course fulfills students' requirements and 20 students thought that the course did not fulfill their requirements.

As for question number 2, 'Do you think any changes are required in the course or the course book?', 66 students said that they did not want the course book to be changed or the material modified whereas 25 students strongly suggested that the course book needs to be changed.

**TABLE 1**  
**Students' Responses**

<b>Registered Students</b>	<b>472</b>	
<b>Students responded</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Overall Positives</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>76%</b>
<b>Overall Negatives</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Q. 1 (+)</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Q. 1 (-)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Q. 2 (+)</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>Q. 2 (-)</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>27%</b>
<b>Mixed response</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3%</b>



Six students gave mixed responses and appreciated a few features of the course book and the material and at the same time pinpointed the shortcomings in the course too (Table 1).

### **ADDITIONAL FINDINGS**

Although the present research aimed at getting students' perceptions of the ESP course materials taught to them in various faculties and sought the answers to the questions asked on the SULMS forum, it became evident that few latent themes emerged in their responses. The emerging themes suggest how students acknowledge the importance of workplace communication and perceive their courses in the context of their job prospects in the future. The following themes generated from their responses suggest how well they understand the efficacy and relevance of the ESP courses taught to them and how cognizant they are of their academic endeavors that may help them do away with the barriers between them and their future prospects.

#### **Relevance and Appropriateness of the Course Materials**

The majority of students considered the UNIR 2000 book and material to be appropriate and relevant to the course requirements. In this context, students having Business majors considered the UNIR course to be a source of their future success. They considered the book made students understand the types of communication required for their future jobs. The book teaches them how to write an effective CV/resume, a job cover letter, work related emails, reports and official memos. The book and materials enhance their job related communication skills that might help them succeed in their future jobs. It teaches them how to career plan and how to choose the appropriate firm to work with in the future. They considered the book taught them how to be an effective member in a group, how to present themselves at work place, how to communicate with their teachers and peers in the classroom, how to be a team player, how to succeed in exams, how to be a central figure in an official meeting and how to develop critical thinking regarding their future endeavors.

#### **Irrelevance and Inappropriateness of the Course Book and the Materials**

Most of the students who considered the book irrelevant were from the faculties other than Business. They suggested that the UNIR 2000 book and the course material do not contain comprehensive concepts for all colleges such as Engineering and Information technology. The book is meant only for the Business major students. It contains no new vocabulary in respect to other majors. They believed that the course does not have great communication skills and it does not contain a new vocabulary and has not been connected to IT in a good way. The course should add information about communication strategies such as how one can communicate with different types of people. The book needs a lot of examples of the various aspects of working life including manual work in various fields. The book should include different topics for Engineering,

IT, Law, and other majors at university. The course should include interview skills so that the students may get maximum benefit from it.

### **Importance of English as a Workplace Skill**

Almost all of the students endorsed the notion that the knowledge of English and English language proficiency are prerequisites for working in an organization. They agreed that the proficiency level would determine the failure and success of a candidate before the job and after that as a successful employee. The ESP courses and the course materials taught at the tertiary level institutions, therefore, should cater to the needs of the market place as well as students studying and looking for getting employment in those organizations.

### **Acknowledgement of Students' Weak Proficiency Level**

The students truly acknowledged that their English language proficiency level is weak. Therefore, the course book and materials should be modified to enhance their communicative skills and proficiency level. A few students suggested that the course should include real life situations where students should communicate in English with real people working in various organizations. They also suggested that the contact hours of the course could be increased so that students may practice course materials with the teacher for a longer time and get better results in the course.

### **Business as a Future Prospect for Most of the Students**

One of the frequently recurring themes found in students' responses was the future prospect of students having a personal business. The respondents, almost all of the male students and the majority of female students, thought that the book and the course materials taught them necessary skills to be successful business persons in their future endeavors. The findings also suggest that the students would prefer to establish their own businesses rather than working with a company or an organization as an employee. In their opinion, the book provided them with sufficient knowledge to understand the business related concepts, understand trade and commerce and plan business strategies as future businessmen and businesswomen.

## **DISCUSSION**

A knowledge and understanding of students' learning experiences may provide valuable data for understanding the nature of content taught to them and its efficacy in educational contexts. Findings gathered through students' perceptions of the course, course materials, teaching and learning experiences are most likely to impact the way in which they tackle given tasks in higher education. The methods that students typically adopt in their studies are bound to influence the quality of the understanding cherished, with a deep approach that is often associated with better academic results. This study tries to suggest in Hiew's words (2012) that "students' perceptions should be taken seriously, reviewed

seriously as it is a two-way process involving teachers and learners” (161). Students’ perceptions taken seriously indicate the importance of relationships between features of learning design and student perceptions of their learning outcomes at the same time (McNaught et al. 2012). The provision of learning resources and the engagement of students relate to various aspects of learning such as acquisition of knowledge and skills and enhancement of learning motivation. McNaught (2012) suggests that although students differ in their perceptions, these differences in opinions are considered valid indicators of student learning outcomes.

The students recorded perceptions reflect their experiences and understanding in relation to the observed barriers of the teaching-learning environment and the course work (Scheja 2006). Earl (2013) believes that a student’s response can present and “influence how they feel about the course and course materials, how they see themselves as learners and how they respond to the teacher and the course.” (164). In this context, Earl (2012, 2013) suggests that the course designers might turn to possibilities for utilizing the capabilities of technology. Citing Montero et al. (2007), Huang et al. (2013) recommend a similar methodology in gathering students’ perceptions because online collaborative learning spaces provide opportunities to the student communities to become engaged in the discourse of an academic topic in which they share common interests or goals.

The present study tries to find students’ experiences of being in direct contact with their course materials through their perceptions and it provides evidence concerning the linkage between how students perceive their learning environment and the approaches they adopt to their learning. The purpose of this paper is thus to examine the relationship between the perceptions, the approaches and the outcomes in order to discover how the students learn and thus to provide some strategies which could be adopted to enhance their learning. Similarly, the findings also suggest that the program coordinators and institutions should take cognizance of students’ perceptions in forming syllabi that fulfill students’ requirements in their academic scenario. Students’ perceptions in the context of academic scenario would positively foster the ideas of good teaching, clear aims, goals and standards, appropriate curriculum, teaching load, assessment, and ensure the efficacy and validity of students’ involvement in expressing their opinions. Since most students appear to adopt an approach to studying that they perceive to be appropriate for a particular situation, it is essential to understand the notion that it is the student's perception of the factors that are vital and the student's perception may be different from that of the institution that is supervising the learning process (Hassall et al., 2001). Learners’ perceptions towards the course books and materials have had a very profound impact on learning, teaching and policy making. Whether the course effectively serves the purpose and students’ needs or any modifications are required is a research question that needs to be addressed.

## CONCLUSION

Although the respondents mainly appreciated the book and the materials, some were against the idea of using the course book and material as it did not cater to their academic needs. Perceptions of different students highlighted that the course book fulfilled their requirements and gave them an insight into the purpose of studying the book for their better future while some of them suggested that the book should be changed so that it may cater to the students of other faculties too, not only for business students. The study also suggests using online learning systems differently for getting students' opinions in an environment where they could quickly and easily express their opinions. The findings also illustrate the value of action research for iterative improvement of integrated teaching mechanism which boosts students' learning across courses and disciplines. Based upon the outcomes of this research, the program coordinators can modify, add or take away course materials and educators can plan, experience, experiment, and build an appropriate curriculum, research mechanism and encourage followers to be innovative and open to new ideas.

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