

**An analysis of the English language program at the Institute of  
Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR:  
teachers and students' perception**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the learners' needs and characteristics and the perspective of English Language teachers towards English Language Program at the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR. The data was obtained using the questionnaires. The analysis identified participants' perceptions of the various functions of the English language program as stated in the Institute of Foreign Affairs, curriculum guidelines, the teaching methods, the textbooks and the assessment practices used in the program. The results indicated that the learners had the positive views toward the methods and materials used in the program. They believed that the textbooks and materials used in the program did help them not only to improve their professional skills relating to whether diplomats or politicians but also to develop their English competence. In terms of the teachers' perspectives, the findings suggested that their knowledge of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching needed to be strengthened. The participants also supported the use of communicative language teaching methods, for which using group work, technical materials, challenging activities, peer feedback, and accepting students flexible answers were applied to develop students communication skills. The finding provides a contribution to adjust the English language training course in order to closely meet the learners' needs.

**Keywords:** English Language Program/Learners' Needs/English for Specific Purpose/ Needs Assessment/ Communicative Language Teaching

## **1. Introduction**

In today's globalized world, English is used as a medium of communication of thoughts and ideas. Approximately 359 million people speak English as their first language and around 375 million people speak English as a second language in the world (Crystal, 2006). English is playing a major role in many sectors including science, arts, commerce, sports, communication, culture etc. in nation building process as well as in globalization. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. The use of English is promoting the social and economic exchange between people of different communities and cultures. With a rapid change led by globalization, English language has been largely taught and learned in the world as a foreign language and it is recognized as the main instrument for international communication (Warschauer, 1995). Therefore, millions of people today want to learn and improve their knowledge of English language to make sure that they have enough English competence (Richard, 2006). In order to respond to the demands of learners in using English for trading and communicating, many EFL countries have shifted their English language teaching pedagogy to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Littlewood, 2007).

In the Lao PDR, English is necessary for job opportunity and career advancement. The needs of English language is currently increasing among Lao people in terms of employment, particularly in the public sector which looks for staff with good English competence (Bouangeune, Sakigawa & Hirakawa, 2008). Many careers require the applicants who have the competence of English language (Ratana, 2007; Young, 2008). The inflow of foreign investment and assistance from many countries and international organizations making English language more important, because those foreign investors and donors use English as a medium for communication and working language. Therefore, English is recently taught as the main foreign language in both public and private institutes throughout the Lao PDR (Ton & Pham, 2010), including the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA).

The Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) is an institution of the Lao government which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR. It provides English language teaching for the public staff throughout the country with the aim to develop English language proficiency of the public staff. Every year, there is an increasing number of public staff attending the program. In contrast, the number of staff from the host ministry (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), whose English language proficiency were expected to higher extent, has been decreasing from 36 people per batch to 28 people per batch in the previous years (Institute Annual Report, 2014 & 2017). Moreover, the English language proficiency of the trainees, who attended the programs, do not seem to accomplish the purposes of the program. Their English proficiency cannot meet the social needs as they have trouble communicating, and doing the required jobs in their professions. In this regards, it has always been criticized that the staff of each department in the ministry, as well as organizations, pay less attention to the program (MoFA Internal Meeting Report, 2016).

To anticipate the source of the problem, the lack of sufficient and proper syllabus for learning and developing English might partially explain this circumstance. Rao (2002) highlighted that, in the Lao PDR, English teaching methods find plenty of determinants affecting the low language proficiency of the learners. In addition, the weakness of the English language curriculum, teachers' English competence and teaching experiences and the improper textbooks and materials could affect the success of English Language instruction. Moreover, the demands of the learners also have to be considered as the main factors contributed to the accomplishment of the program. It means that it is necessary to conduct a research on the learners' needs as well as English language use of the public staff in their professional and social life, and teachers' perspective of the syllabus in order to adjust the English language training course to closely meet the learners' needs.

Since English has gathered momentum as the key language of international communication, it is considered as the language of job opportunity, so the increased pressure of teaching is more relevant to the employment and the focus on the learner's demands increase. In order to do so, English for a specific purpose is one of the descriptors which is greatly employed to identify such program and solve these problems. Therefore, there are two objectives in this study paper. The first objective is

to analyze the learners' needs and characteristics of English Language Program at IFA and the second objective is to analyze the perspective of English Language teachers towards English Language Program at IFA.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 English language teaching in the Lao PDR**

Laos is one of the ASEAN member nations where English is used as a foreign language in its education system. Laos had been colonized by France and America between 1893 and 1975. At that time, the English language was limitedly used in Laos because French was largely used in official documents of the government. French was a medium of teaching and learning method in most organization of secondary and higher education including business (Thongma, Sam, Mohamad, & Leong, 2013). In public school, students learned English language a few hours per week which is insufficient for English learning. Most learners were unmotivated to learn English language. Moreover, every English document was destroyed because the significance of this language was ignored after Laos gained its independence from America in 1975 (Siphong, 2008). In 1986, Lao PDR adopted a new policy that brought national economy towards the world market economy. In 1996, English gradually returned to be a significant language in Lao educational system because Lao PDR has opened its country to the world. In 1997, Lao PDR has become a member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since then English language has become the key priority of foreign language in Lao PDR which is demanding in every sector.

In Lao PDR, English has not been taught until secondary school level. According to the Lao National Curriculum, the English program was introduced at lower secondary school level (Siphong, 2008). Though English program was introduced into private primary schools, most schools were located in the central areas, particularly in Vientiane Capital.

There were several factors affecting the instructional approaches of the English language in EFL countries. Lao PDR also finds plenty of factors that cause a low level of English language proficiency among Lao students. Some of those factors are the unsuitability and weakness of the English language curricula, the level of teachers' English proficiency and teaching experiences, the lack of facilities and

shortage of materials, students' low level of English literacy and inappropriate learning strategies (Ahmadi & Bajelani, 2012; Khattak, Jamshed, Ahmad, & Baig, 2011; Loae, 2011; Rao, 2002). As a result of these factors, the majority of Lao students could not use English to communicate effectively. Many schools try to organize several English learning activities to respond to the different interest of students (Ratana, 2007). Teachers, language schools, and experts in language education of Laos complained that the condition of English language teaching, including the quality of English used generally in schools in Laos are still unsatisfying (Abbasi, Ahmad, & Khattak, 2010). Particularly, speaking and listening skills are extremely difficult for Lao students to master the English language learning (Attapol, 2010). Moreover, Lao English learners heavily relied on their English instructors. The majority of students lack understanding to deploy a variety of strategies to facilitate their learning. Thus, it can be said that Lao students lack knowledge and skills of learning strategies to help them in English language learning (Kanchanit, 2009).

#### 2.1.1 English language teaching at the institute of foreign affairs

The Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), which consists of Research Division, Training Division, International Cooperation Division, and Office Administration Division, is an academic research institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Lao PDR. The institute has two main tasks: (i) to conduct strategic studies and research on foreign policies and international relations; and (ii) to plan and train diplomats, government officials and individuals from the private sectors at both central and provincial levels in international relations, diplomatic skills and foreign languages across the country (Role of IFA, 2019). The English teaching programs provided at IFA consisted of short-term (a month) and long-term (6 months) programs (IFA Annual Report, 2017). The short-term programs provide English language teaching which is related to the titles: Integration, Education, Agriculture, Mining, Health Care and Environment (IFA Annual Report, 2016). The long-term program is organized every six months at IFA. It aims to provide English competence to the public staff. There are many subjects provided such as Core Text (English for Lao government Official which include writing, reading, speaking, listening and Grammar), social English, current affairs, project work and so on (Training division, 2018). Some of the textbooks

and materials were drafted and designed by the Vientiane College, the famous English institution in Lao PDR, under the assistance of the Australian government.

Regarding the English teacher at IFA, there are two types of teacher, Lao English language teachers and foreign English language teachers. Lao English language teachers are the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who graduated in the bachelor or master degree in the major of International Relation, Public Policy, and Letters in domestic or on abroad. Some of those might have teaching experience before as their part-time job, but some might not. Those staff have two main tasks to perform, the IFA English teacher and the Lao Diplomat. Regarding the foreign English Language teachers, they are the volunteers provided by International organizations and non-intergovernmental organizations. Those teachers have at least 4 years of English Language teaching experience and their majors have to relate to Public Policy, International Relation, Linguistic, and Social Development. Moreover, they have to have the certain English language.

It is obvious that English language plays a significant role in the area of external cooperation, economic development and education in the Lao PDR. The demands of English language learning of the learners increase in accordance with the Lao economic development and its foreign cooperation growth. In this regards, the Lao government attempts to develop its educational system by promoting English language teaching in the primary and tertiary schools. However, the quality of English language teaching and the English competency of the learners did not meet the social needs. This may be affected by the lack of quality and appropriate textbooks and material as well as English language teachers. Therefore, in order to responds to these matters, IFA have to take responsibility to plan and train public staff from both central and provincial levels in English languages which are used in the government works in general, in particular foreign affairs (Role of IFA, 2019).

## 2.2 Adult learners

Adult learner is a mature student who is acquiring new knowledge and skills, developing new attitudes after having reached mature intellectual, physical and social development. Adult learner is also used to describe any person socially accepted as an adult who is involved in a systematic learning process, whether it is formal education informal learning, or corporate-sponsored learning as a fulltime or part time learner

(Kapur, 2015). Adult learners are a various group, generally 30 years and above (Wikipedia, 2019) with a diverse background of education, work experiences, culture and so on. They come back to institutional education in order to stay in the competitiveness at a workplace and preparing for the change of occupation. Bradley and Graham (2000) revealed that most adult learners usually attend institutional education and learn on a part-time basis by taking a few courses at term while maintaining work and family responsibilities. Normally, adult learners are interested in learning once they found that they will get the benefit from what they have invested (Thrap, 1988). Adult seriously works during the class (Graham and Donaldson, 1999), and prioritizes the chances to apply what they have learned to their life and careers (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992). Many adult learners have specific goals that they are trying to accomplish. They have specific needs for the activities of instruction. If their needs have not been met, they often leave the program voluntarily.

Adult learners would like to attend teaching and learning activities that help them to achieve their expectations. Knowles (1980) stated that adult learners consider themselves being able to make decisions, responsible for the results of choices, as well as capable of life management. Knowles and Associates (1984) stated that adult learners are responsible for making the personal decision in their daily life.

### 2.3 Communicative language teaching.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been extensively applied in English teaching since it was introduced in the 1970s. Apart from English as a Second Language (ESL), CLT was also applied and widely enlarged in a context in which the English language is learned as a Foreign Language (EFL). Ozsevik (2010) stated that EFL is different from ESL in that English is taught in the context of another-native language. For instance, Lao learners who study English language are viewed as EFL learners. What should be aware in order to differentiate ESL and EFL is to get the better insight into the relationship of using and implementing CLT in each different instructional environments. European linguists saw the need for language instructors to focus on communicative competence rather than on the mastery of structures alone (Savignon, 1991; Littlewood, 2007). The term communicative competence was first used by Hymes, who referred to it as “that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within

specific contexts” (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 246). Since then, researchers have sought diligently to define and redefine the construct of communicative competence and finally found the most widely accepted definition by Canale and Swain (1980), which stated that there are four different components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. CLT primarily aims at developing language learners’ communicative competence (Tsai, 2007). Pei-long (2011) also argues that language teaching should focus on communicative proficiency rather than mastery of sentence structures. Therefore, several researchers identify CLT as one of the most influential and effective language teaching methodologies that increase learners’ communicative competence (Laio, 2000; Savignon, 2002; Ying, 2010). By the 1990s, various EFL countries have adopted CLT in order to enhance the number of students with productively communicating English (Littlewood, 2007). In general, EFL instruction emphasizes the competence of English structure and grammar, rather than the ability to communicate. Traditional methods no matter the grammatical-translation and audio-lingual approaches, which are generally employed for teaching the English language, were recognized. This is because the learners in EFL contexts have less opportunity to use English in real-life communication. However, because of the increasing demands of using English for trading, communicating and among other, most learners in EFL context now want to learn English for communicative purpose. Therefore, these traditional methods are seen as unsuitable for EFL learners. It can be stated that the most favorite means in ESL and EFL teaching context is a communicative approach. The most advanced teaching approaches are focused on communicative language teaching and most language teaching curriculum have been created for it (Anderson, 1993). Relating to this matter, various institutions in EFL countries provided programs emphasize the combination of English skills or particular disciplines. CLT course was likely a tool which was proposed for solving a problem in tertiary school (Liao, 2000).

#### 2.4 English for specific purpose

The majority of language teachers today, when asked to identify the methodology they employ in their classrooms, mention “communicative” as the methodology of choice. However, when probed to give a detailed account of what they means by “communicative”, explanation varies widely. It can be understood as at



set of principles about the goals of language teaching that belong to the learners' needs. Therefore, the concept of English for Specific Purpose was raised.

The meaning of English for specific purpose (ESP) has been considerably debated over the past several decades. Many linguists have studied and given the meaning of ESP since the early 1960s. ESP was defined as a means for language teaching in which all decisions regarding the content and methods will depend on the learner's reason for learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Strevens (1988) defined ESP as a special case of the general category of teaching language for special purposes. The same principles employ regardless of which language is learned and taught. He insisted that in defining ESP, it was imperative to differentiate four absolute characteristics, and two variable characteristics. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) defined ESP based on the definition of Strevens (1988). However, they took an absolute characteristic out and added some variable characteristics into it. In accordance with their definition, the absolute characteristics are; first, ESP is designed to meet the particular demands of the learners; second, it takes advantage of the methods and activities of the disciplines; and third, ESP focuses on the language which is appropriate to the activities of register, discourse, and grammar. In terms of the variable characteristics, ESP is designed for specific fields and/or disciplines. It is applied in specialized teaching condition and its teaching materials are also different from the teaching materials of General English. ESP is designed for adult learners who are in a professional work situation as well as intermediate or advanced learners. Most ESP programs are applied the basic knowledge of professional, but it can apply with the beginner-students, too. As suggested by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), English for Specific Purpose has been created to respond to the unique demands of the students. ESP emphasizes the proper language, skills, and discourse and it does not need to involve specific discipline. Harding (2007) pointed out that ESP emphasizes language in context rather than grammatical structures. English for a specific purpose is not taught as a discipline which separates from the actual world of learners, but it is included in topics related to learners.

In conclusion, English for specific purposes (ESP) is a subset of English as a second or foreign language. It usually refers to teaching the English language to university students or people already in employment, with reference to the particular vocabulary and skills they need. As with any language taught for specific purposes, a given

course of ESP will focus on one occupation or profession, such as Technical English, Scientific English, English for medical professionals, English for waiters, English for tourism, etc. Despite the seemingly limited focus, a course of ESP can have a wide-ranging impact, as is the case with Environmental English

### 2.5 Needs analysis and learners' needs

It is generally accepted needs analysis is included in a course design process (Robinson, 1991). In Strevens (1980) extensively acknowledged definitions, Johns and Dudley Evans (1991) indicated needs analysis as a part of four absolute characteristics being called "needs assessment". Then, needs analysis is intended to determine the learners' needs as precisely as probable in order to identify the distinct utilization of English for seeking academic or professional objectives: "...which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English" (Robinson, 1991). In addition, it was "...designed to meet specified needs of the learner" (Johns and Dudley Evans, 1993).

Once identified, it is significant to describe where needs analysis is used in the entire procedures of English for specific purpose instruction as well as the role in which needs analysis plays as the significant way of examination and information collecting. Strevens (1977) highlighted that needs analysis is the significant procedures to design and develop English for specific purpose. The English for specific purpose has been stated to be a "reaction against conventional foreign language instruction". Moreover, the past decades had seen an appearance of the new trends being specifically emphasized on the students and their demands. While trying to define the meaning of needs, most experts agreed that it can convey meaning and be understood in many ways. With the fact that ESP courses are designed by the involvement of many participants, namely the institution that the language courses are conducted, teacher and learners as well as stakeholder in some cases and the one who are specialized in linguistics. It is true that these meanings look unclear as well as inaccurate. In addition, it is viewed as desires that can cover a variety of essentiality, needs. It is clear that the word "needs" is ambiguous and indeterminate. This inaccuracy permitted a relevant profusion but it is not similar matters which are generally referred to as "needs" (usually there are adjectives that have some qualities), demands, or purposes and being treated as if they were alike. However, the main question is, how do it fit and match the distinct appreciations. That is to perform

an analysis in which generally refer to scientific carefulness (Chambers, 1980). With these reasons, Chambers stated that the value of needs analysis may not occur until having obscurity and be lacking of accuracy in using terminology is cleared away.

In conclusion, it can be said that the most useful tool for examining learners' needs is needs analysis, however needs analysis is a difficult job. Sometimes, a terms "Needs" is looked as demands, essentialities, requirements, and lacks. Thus, in order to achieve this difficulty job, it is essential to look needs as "priorities" which are proposed by needs analysis. These priorities would define in fact the utmost purpose that must be attained and form the way and the duty in which English is used.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to investigate the perspective of teachers and learners towards the English language program at the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), both quantitative and qualitative methods, were employed because the objective is to explain a phenomenon by gathering numerical data (Muijs, 2006). There were 50 participants who are working at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR. These participants were consisted of 10 English language teachers and 40 alumni of the English language program. The independent variables include gender, age, educational degrees, and working and teaching experience, whilst the dependent variables were teachers' and learners' perspective towards instructional issues and delivery and institute working environments. These aspects were measured.

This research study's instrument was a survey questionnaire, which consisted of five points Likert scale items and open-ended questions. There were two different sets of questionnaires, one for teachers and the other for alumni, each of which consisted of approximately 37 questions. Every item in the questionnaires was related to the research questions, mainly addressing the learners' needs towards the English Language Program at IFA and the teachers' perspective towards the English Language Program at IFA.

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1 Profile of the English Language Program's Alumni**

As shown in Table 1 below, most of the alumni who took part in this study were Master's degree holders (80%). Bachelor's degree holders were the lowest

number (20%). As far as their major is concerned, the largest number of alumni were specialized in International Relation (40%) and Public Policy was the second largest number of participants (32.5%). While the lowest number was Law (5%).

**Table 1** Alumni’s Educational Background

Field of Education	No. of Respondents	Educational background			Percentage (%)
		Ph.D.	M.A.	B.A.	
International Relation	16	0	10	6	40
Public Policy	13	0	13	0	32.5
English Language	6	0	5	1	15
Law	2	0	1	1	5
Others	3	0	3	0	7.5
Total	40	0	32	8	100

The question “What are the learners’ needs towards the English Language Program at IFA?” was designed to analyze the learners’ needs and characteristics in English language program at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR.

In order to answer this question, the perspective of the alumni who took part in the study were analyzed. The data obtain in this section were computed into means which were interpreted into ranges as shown in the following table.

**Table 2** The Scale of Value

Scale of Value	Level of Needs	Level of Opinion
0.1 - 1.49	Not Important	Dissatisfied
1.50 - 2.49	Little Important	Somewhat dissatisfied
2.50 - 3.49	Moderate	Moderate
3.50 - 4.49	Important	Somewhat satisfied
4.50 - 5.00	Very Important	Satisfied

The above scale of value was primarily based on Piwong (2011)’s Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

The findings showed that the majority of the alumni were satisfied with the teaching methods and approaches employed in the English language program that helped them develop their communicative competency as well as English proficiency. Only a few of them were unsure with the methods and approaches employed by their teachers in the program.

The alumni had positive views toward the assessment practices employed in the program. That is to say, all of the alumni believed that their learning progress had been accurately measured by the assessment practices. None of them disagreed or were not sure whether the assessment practices used at the program had accurately measured their progress on the language program. With regard to the textbooks used in the program, the majority of the alumni believed that the textbooks used in the program did help them much to comprehend their profession; whether they are diplomats or politicians; and also to develop their English competency. As it shows in the table below.

**Table 3** Alumni's Perceptions of the Assessment Practice Used in the Program

No	Opinions about the assessment practices used in the English Language Program	Mean	S.D	Meaning
1	The assessment practices accurately measured my progress on the language program course	4.52	.505	Satisfied
2	The assessment practices reflected the listening skills needed in my work or profession	4.57	.500	Satisfied
3	The assessment practices reflected the speaking skills needed in my work or profession	4.60	.496	Satisfied
4	The assessment practices reflected the reading skills needed in my work or profession	4.57	.500	Satisfied
5	The assessment practices reflected the writing skills needed in my work or profession	4.57	.500	Satisfied

Most of the alumni stated that English is one of the main factors for their success at the workplace and profession. Since they work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they have to coordinate with the foreign Embassies, International Organizations, and Development Partners as well as attend the Regional and International meetings. However, they further stated that their English language competence needs to be more developed in order to be a good diplomat or leader in the future.

In terms of the learners needs, the comments provided in the open-ended questions below showed that English language is one of the main factors for their success at workplace and profession. As some of the alumni said that:

*In my workplace, English language is necessary and significant not only for me but also for all of the staff. Working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, you have to communicate with people and countries around the world for politics,*

*security, business, and others. Therefore, the English language is used as the main language and plays an important role in the successful. (Alumni K)*

Another alumni also stated that:

*English language is the most effective language for communicating with foreigners and to read world newspapers. I am the one using English everyday as a diplomat talking with my colleagues, local people and so on. When we have the meeting with international organization, English is used as a means for communication in order to exchange views, experiences and so on. (Alumni L)*

#### 4.2 Profile of the English Language Program's Teachers

The data in Table 2 below indicated that most of the English language teachers who participated in this study were Master's degree holders (80%). While Doctoral degree holders were the lowest number (10%). Furthermore, a substantial number of these teachers (80%) held a degree in Public Policy. Teachers with Literature degrees represented the second largest number of participants (20%). Of these 10 English language teachers, none of them had a degree in Linguistics, Applied Linguistics or Curriculum and Instruction which are related to language instruction.

**Table 4** Areas of Study and Educational Level of English Language Teachers

No	Area of study	No. of Respondents	Educational background			Percentage (%)
			Ph.D.	MA	BA.	
1	Public Policy	8	0	8	0	80
2	Linguistics	0	0	0	0	0
3	Applied Linguistics	0	0	0	0	0
4	Literature	2	1	0	1	20
5	Curriculum & Instruction	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	1	8	1	100

The question “what are the teachers’ perspective towards the English Language Program at IFA?” was formulated in order to study the perspective of the teachers towards the English program at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lao PDR. The findings indicated that a substantial number of English language teachers (80%) were well aware of the various functions of the current English language program as stated in the program curriculum guidelines.

**Table 5** Teachers' Perspectives toward Functional Academic Literacy in ESP Teaching

No	The extent to which the respondent agree with each statement	Mean	S.D	Meaning
1	It is necessary to include content of the subject under study in a language classroom	4.40	.516	Absolutely agree
2	It is necessary for ESP teacher to be knowledgeable in content areas as well as linguistic areas	3.70	1.159	Agree
3	In English for Specific Purpose teaching and learning, the teacher is the primary source of knowledge to be transmitted	2.20	.918	Moderately agree

The findings presented in the Table 5 above indicate that the teachers believed that functional academic literacy in ESP teaching is necessary. However, the English language teachers believed that, in English for Specific Purpose teaching and learning, the teacher is not the primary source of knowledge to be transmitted, while some of the teachers moderately believed that teacher is the primary source of knowledge ( $M=2.20$ ). In terms of teaching methods and learning strategies, the teachers were well aware of the fact that there were appropriate methods and approaches for ESP teaching and learning, and believed that there are approaches and methods specifically designed for ESP teaching. These teachers perceived the communicative approach, task-based learning or problem solving and cooperative learning as the best instructional strategies for the ESP program.

Regarding teachers' perceptions toward instructional issues and delivery ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD= .816$ ), it was found that teachers mostly agreed with the fact that their knowledge of ESP teaching needed to be strengthened for professional development. The participants also supported the use of communicative teaching methods, for which using group work, technical materials, challenging activities, peer feedback, and accepting students flexible answers were applied to develop students communication skills. Additionally, they agreed that student's low English proficiency and large classes made application of communicative teaching methods difficult.

In terms of perceptions towards the textbooks and materials used in the program, the findings showed that the teachers did not have an autonomy to produce

and introduce their own textbooks and materials to meet the specific needs of their learners. These teachers moderately agreed ( $M = 2.50$ ) that they had the freedom to introduce their own textbooks. Although, those teachers didn't have the freedom to introduce their own textbooks, all of them absolutely agreed that they have the freedom to adapt the current textbooks to address certain pedagogical issues in their classroom ( $M = 4.70$ ).

**Table 6** Teacher's Involvement in Textbooks/Materials Selection

No	Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements	Mean	S.D	Meaning
1	Teachers have the freedom to introduce their own textbooks and materials to meet the specific needs of their learners.	2.50	1.080	Moderately agree
2	Teachers have the freedom to adapt the current textbooks to address certain pedagogical issues in their classroom (e.g. mixed-level students)	4.70	.483	Absolutely agree
3	Teachers were consulted prior to the implementation of the current textbooks	3.70	.823	Agree
4	Teachers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the current teaching textbooks at IFA	4.10	.316	Absolutely agree

Regarding the perception of the textbooks used in the program as presented in the Table 7, the English language teachers seemed to feel positive about the outcomes of the current textbooks in terms of developing interpersonal communication skills among the students as well as helping them acquire the vocabulary, expressions and grammatical structures they needed in their chosen disciplines. The teachers believed that the current textbooks helped students gain the ability to read effectively in order to extract meaning from scientific texts used in their specific disciplines ( $M = 4.20$ ). Even though, some of the teachers seemed to be concerned about whether the current textbooks had helped the students gain the ability to write study reports that target a specific audience. However, the teachers agreed that the current textbooks had provided students with the writing skills necessary to accomplish ( $M = 3.70$ ). The teachers responded favorably regarding the outcomes of the current English language textbooks in terms of helping students acquire the specific linguistic skills and knowledge necessary for their chosen fields ( $M = 4.40$ ).



**Table 7** Teachers' Perceptions of the Textbooks Used in the Program

No	The language talks/practices provided in the textbook give IFA trainees:	Mean	S.D	Meaning
1	The ability to engage in a dialogue and collaborate in the acquisition of knowledge in their specific discipline	3.80	.918	Agree
2	The ability to read effectively in order to extract meaning from scientific texts used in their specific disciplines	4.20	.788	Absolutely agree
3	The ability to write study reports that target a specific audience	3.70	.483	Agree
4	The vocabulary, expressions and grammatical structure necessary in their chosen disciplines	4.40	.699	Absolutely agree
5	The ability to participate meaningfully in a variety of problem-solving tasks	4.10	.737	Absolutely agree

In accordance to the open-ended question, some teachers expressed their concerns about the current textbooks from a variety of perspectives: pedagogical, linguistic, political, and policy. As the comments were provided by these teachers in the open-ended questions. *“The current textbooks and materials are reviewed and updated in terms of context and information. However, the variety of activities in the book shall be more creative and attractive to learners by providing new type of activities which boost their excitement and willingness, too (Teacher E).* Another teacher highlighted that *“From my ten-year perspective, IFA is expected to become an academic offering higher, undergraduate and graduate degree in diplomacy and international affairs as if it has sufficient teachers and collaboration with regional and international stakeholders concerned” (Teacher F).*

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 The Qualifications of ESP Teachers

The findings revealed that a substantial number of these teachers (80%) held a degree in Public Policy and none of these 10 English language teachers had a degree in Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and Curriculum and Instruction. From their background, it appears that the pedagogical contributions the majority of the teachers made to the English program may be limited especially to the ESP program, since

ESP teaching “concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structure” (Lorenzo, 2005). In addition, without suitable qualifications of education in English language teaching, their ability to use the language as a medium of communication might not be sufficient to guarantee pedagogical successes, since ESP teaching and learning focuses on the language appropriate to certain disciplines, occupations and activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Unlike general English teaching that entails a general coverage of the language system, ESP requires considerable amounts of knowledge, skills, preparation time and well-seasoned, highly qualified teaching professionals (Strevens, 1980). The primary goal of ESP courses is to teach professional communicative competence; that is, the skills that are necessary to communicate meaningfully in English according to the situation, purpose and specific roles of the learners. The absence of such skills and knowledge among the teachers in English language program may affect the teaching and learning process and the outcomes of the program. This is because these teachers may not be adequately qualified to teach their learners the grammatical, lexical, functional and occupational skills that are required. In this regards, in order to make the English program more effective, the teachers’ areas of study and specialized need to be considered.

## 5. 2 The Involvement of Teacher in the curriculum and materials design

The findings in this research study indicated that the teachers do not have a freedom to produce and introduce their own textbooks and materials to meet the specific needs of their learners. In particular, the teachers moderately agreed that they have the freedom to introduce their own textbooks to meet the specific needs of their students, while only a few of those ( $M = 2.50$ ) stated that they had the freedom to introduce their own textbooks. It is opposite to the role of ESP teachers that many researchers stated so far, for example, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) who defined ESP teachers as the practitioners who have five major tasks, namely instructor, programme-maker and tool keeper, coordinator, evaluator, and researcher. Fiorito (2005) stated that in implementing English for a specific purpose, the teachers must play various roles namely designing the programs, setting the goals and aims, creating a favorable condition, and assessing the learners' performance. The teachers are not only responsible for choosing, determining, and drafting the course approaches with

realistic purposes, but they also provide related strategies to assist learners to achieve language learning and performing (Rogers, 1989). Sysoyev (2000) determined the teachers' role in stages clearly, such as analyzing learners' demands, determining goals and purposes, conceptualizing the content, determining and improving teaching methods, planning the course and evaluating the program. Likewise, Kumaravadivelu (2006) explains, in a foreign language teaching context teachers should work as technicians in the classroom, first diagnosing the needs of their students and then applying the appropriate pedagogical techniques on the basis of their diagnosis. Teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching and Task-based language learning cover a variety of classroom strategies, instructional materials, and linguistic, political and social-cultural experiences affecting the learning process.

However, as mentioned earlier, the textbook and material currently used in the program were not commercially produced. It was drafted and designed by Vientiane College under the assistance of the Australian government provided to the Lao government. Therefore, administrators, coordinators and perhaps teachers accepted their claims (that is, the knowledge proposed by the textbooks) unconditionally. The textbooks were seen as being "beyond criticism and were "reified", despite the fact that these textbooks were at odds with research evidence. Although, those teachers did not have the freedom to introduce their own textbooks, all of them stated that they have the freedom to adapt the current textbooks to address certain pedagogical issues in their classroom. Despite their lack of involvement in the textbook design, the majority of the English language teachers responded favorably regarding the outcomes of the current English language textbooks in terms of helping students acquire the specific linguistic skills and knowledge necessary for their chosen fields. Teachers expressed their concerns about the current textbooks from a variety of perspectives: pedagogical, linguistic, political, and policy. In this regards, it might lead to the mismatches between what is emphasized in the program documents and what is taking place in reality. Moreover, it may have significant implications for the program outcomes. That is, the lack of consistency between what the program documents emphasize and what is taking place in reality may be affecting the quality of formal instruction provided as well as the quality of the learning (Kennedy, 1985; Longroudi, 1999). In any ESP program, the primary functions of the program, that is,

the goals and objectives, should be constantly checked by the institute principal, the general coordinators and the course coordinators in order to ensure that there is consistency between these goals and what is taking place in the classrooms (Nunan, 1989; Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001). This confirms the view of Brown (1995), who states that in any program, ensuring consistency between the goals and the program activities will affect the quality of instruction positively. In the case of the current English language program there is, however, a noticeable gap between the goals of the program and what is taking place in class as reported by most of the teachers. Al-Hawsawi's (2004) research study on Formative Evaluation of the Components of the English Language Program in the Saudi Electricity Company Training Institute (SECTI) from the graduates' perspectives, lends support to this view. It reported that the fact that no needs analysis was conducted prior to the formulation of the various functions of the ESP program had led to numerous pedagogical problems: for example, mismatches between the current goals, textbooks and pedagogical practices. These perspectives suggest that "developing statements of perceived needs into program goals, and these in turn into clear objectives, is an effective way to clarify what should be going in the language classroom" (Brown, 1995). Once what will be taught in the classroom has been established, administrators or program designers will be able to coordinate across courses as well as across an entire language program (Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2001). This is because such processes will ensure consistency among the intended functions of the program, materials, textbooks and teaching activities.

Moreover, the findings obtained from the survey also revealed that some of the teachers demonstrated an inconsistent understanding of the ways in which the program is functioning. Their inconsistent interpretations reflect the discrepancies that exist between the program guidelines and the practical application of these guidelines, as well as the absence of communication among stakeholders in the program, which is similar to Barnawi's (2011) in Examining Formative Evaluation of English for Specific Purposes Programme. In this regards, it might lead to the mismatches between what is emphasized in the program documents and what is taking place in reality. Moreover, it may have significant implications for the program outcomes. That is, the lack of consistency between what the program documents emphasize and what is taking place in reality may be affecting the quality of formal instruction

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### 5.3 The Program's Response to Learners' needs

Some of the alumni mentioned in the open-ended questions that the material and textbooks used in the program still need more improvement especially with regard to the authenticity in order to be appropriate and responsive to their workplace and careers. The comments provided by the alumni were quoted below:

*...the content should be formal but it is not at all the time. In my perspective, getting to know about Lao regime, economic, social-culture and lifestyle may be a good topic for teaching. In addition, we should learn more about public speaking skills because it is one of the main task for the public staff. (Alumni I)*

Alumni J' said that: *...public speaking skills, and writing skills (note-taking, correspondence, remark, speech, statement and so on) are very important, it would be great if some of these are included in the English language program. (Alumni J)*

Regarding the above comments, it supports the theory of Thrap (1988) who stated that adult learners are normally interested in learning once they found that they will get the benefit back from what they have invested (Thrap, 1988). Adults seriously work during the class (Graham and Donaldson, 1999), and prioritize the chances to apply what they have learned to their life and careers (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992). In order to respond to these demands, many researchers (e.g., Block & Cameroon, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nunan, 2004) on ESP teaching and learning have emphasized the benefit of using task-based activities, content-based learning and the communicative approach. They believed that such instructional approaches help to improve not only learners' linguistic competency, creativity and critical thinking but also encourage independence among learners. In addition, Ellis (1994) and Nunan (2004), among others, enumerated various pedagogical outcomes of the implementation of task-based language learning in ESP classrooms. They stated that task-based learning promotes the transformation of knowledge between learners rather than from teachers to learners. It encourages collaborative as well as group/pair learning, which develop social communication skills among learners. Nunan (2004) adds that in task-based learning the grammatical and functional items of language recur in various contextual locations, allowing learners to restructure and develop an in-depth understanding of the target language.

Reflecting on the above situation, it is reasonable to argue that when learners are aware of their learning needs it is important for teachers to accommodate these needs. This is particularly true in an ESP program, which is always devoted to meet the pedagogical needs of adult learners. This confirms the view of Strevens (1980), who states, "ESP entails the provision of English language instruction (i) devised to meet the learner's particular needs; (ii) related in themes and topics to designated occupations or areas of study"

## **6. Recommendation**

### **6.1 Recommendation for the Institute of Foreign Affairs**

The findings in this research study indicated that the main reason for the public staff to learn English language is job opportunity and their career advancement.

The staff will be more motivated to attend the program in improving their English competence if the institute set a clear professional goal development related to English proficiency. The English course conducted for the staff should be based mainly on what the staff lack, the necessities in their working situations and the ministry expectations of their English proficiency.

#### 6.2 Principles for ESP Teachers' Development, Materials and Assessment

The field of ESP teaching and learning is burgeoning and is developing at a rate almost equal to that of science, business and technology. These dramatic developments in the field of ESP highlight the importance of ESP teachers' continuous development and acquisition of up-to-date instructional knowledge in the field of ESP. Today, for example, in the field of Business English increasing attention is being given to examining "the genres, the language and the skills involved in business communication. ESP teachers need to be in touch with the research. Teachers carrying out a needs analysis, designing a course, or writing teaching materials need to be capable of incorporating the findings of the research, and those working in specific ESP situations need to be confident that they know what is involved in skills such as written communication.

Although the accepted standards of well-educated ESP teachers vary from context to context, ESP teachers should have continuing responsibility for personal education. They should pursue their own professional development through personal education, pre-service and/or in-service training, peer or team teaching, and attending conferences and workshops on ESP instruction: for example, on ESP teaching methods and assessment practices. There are core principles that all ESP teachers should understand and abide by, which may be summarized as follows:

Teachers should have a) a basic grasp of educational psychology; b) an understanding of the educational system of the country in which they will be teaching; c) high moral standards and enthusiasm; d) classroom management skills; e) knowledge of and ability to use basic instructional techniques and an understanding of teacher-learner interaction; f) an acceptance of the need for the preparation of lessons; g) an understanding of the role of curriculum, syllabus and teaching materials; h) a commitment to keeping in touch with the profession.

Indeed, understanding the above core principles would not only help ESP teachers function well in their classrooms and to design materials which will meet

their students' pedagogical needs, but such an awareness would also allow them to assess their students' learning outcomes in a meaningful way. ESP teachers should have a thorough understanding of ESP assessment practices. They should view assessment practices as an opportunity to scaffold students' learning instead of responding to accountability pressures. ESP teachers should hold a dialogue with other stakeholders in the program (e.g., students and administrators) to inform them about the purposes of their assessment practices. In any ESP program teachers should have an in-depth knowledge of how to link classroom-level assessment with the curriculum and mode of instruction, as well as an understanding of the various types of assessment practice (e.g., continuous –long-term assessment and testing) (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Richards, 2001). In this way, an ESP teacher, as a reflective practitioner, would be able to become involved in various instructional tasks with his or her institution: the testing of students, evaluation of courses and teaching materials, and designing and adapting instructional materials to suit his or her students' specializations.

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