

National Report (Estonia)

1. Status of EFL in Higher Education (country-specific)

1.1. System overview

1.1.1. The outline of the general organisation of the education system

The higher education system in Estonia comprises three cycles, following the Bachelor-Master-PhD model of the European Higher Education Area. Bachelor's programmes are first-cycle higher education programmes. The nominal duration of the programmes is generally 3 years. As an exception, it may be up to 4 years. The qualification gives access to master's programmes. Master's programmes are second-cycle higher education programmes. The nominal duration of programmes is 1 to 2 years. The qualification gives access to doctoral programmes. Doctoral programmes represent the third cycle of higher education. The nominal duration of the programme is 3 to 4 years. There are also Integrated Bachelor's and Master's programmes which comprise both basic and specialised studies. Such long-cycle programmes are offered in the field of medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, architecture, civil engineering, and teaching in primary school.

Higher education institutions in Estonia also have a high level of autonomy within the limits set out by the Higher Education Act.

Schools shall ensure in their curricula that instruction in the Estonian language comprises at least 57 courses, or 60% of the minimum permitted course load for the upper secondary level, whereby Estonian literature, Estonian history, civics education, music and geography must be taught in Estonian.

The performance gap between Estonian and Russian-medium basic schools persists, worsening regional disparities and hindering mobility across the country because of the language barrier. The proficiency in Estonian of students with a different mother tongue remains well below the national target of 90%. Estonia's efforts to improve equality of access to HE include, for example, reforming and monitoring financial support arrangements for students and, in 2013, abolishing tuition fees for full-time students studying in Estonian.

1.1.2. Numerical Data - no of students/programmes/ international students, how the system is structured

There are 18 higher education institutions in Estonia: 6 universities under public law and each regulated by their own Act, 1 privately owned university, 4 private professional higher education institutions, 7 state professional higher education institutions. 11 of those higher education institutions are located in Tallinn and 7 in Tartu, with colleges in other towns.

There are 5236 international degree students in Estonia in the 2020/2021 academic year, which is 292 less than in the previous academic year. International degree students currently make up 11.6% of the students in Estonia compared to 12.2% in the previous academic year. The number of international students in Master's programmes is the highest - 2184 or 41% of all international students currently enrolled at universities in Estonia - due to internationalisation efforts of higher education being focused especially on Master's and PhD studies.

Tallinn University offers 6 Bachelor's programmes, 17 Master's programmes and 13 PhD programmes fully in English. The University of Tartu has 3 Bachelor's programmes, 24 Master's programmes and 35 PhD programmes almost fully in English. Estonian University of Life Sciences offers 4 full English-language degree programmes as well as doctoral programmes.

Although tertiary educational attainment in the 30-34 age group was above the EU average in 2019 (46.2% against 41.6%), the rate may worsen if the high dropout rates from higher education and falling enrolment rates persist. The gender gap in tertiary attainment is significant. Graduates' competences are insufficiently aligned with labour market needs. The actual number of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics is insufficient to meet the needs of the labour market. The funding system, accompanied by incentives to increase enrolments in certain study fields, aims to increase the quality and labour market relevance of higher education, but impact is yet to be seen.

1.2. Policy Issues Regarding EFL in Higher Education (including EU regulations)

1.2.1. Structural, curricular pedagogical considerations

Estonian higher education is regulated by several laws: Higher Education Act, University Acts of 6 public universities, Higher Educational Standard, Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy, Language Act.

1.2.2. Implementing Institutional Language Policy: Existing Measures

In the Estonian context, one can find traces of the concept of ‘parallel language use’ in HE documents. It is important, in the first place, to keep in mind that the Estonian language is at the core of the Estonian nation and sense of belonging (Soler 2013). Notably, the Estonian Language Act was passed initially in 1995, shortly after the country’s re-independence in 1991 and has been renewed as of 2011. In this context, like in other countries in the Baltic states (e.g. Bulajeva and Hogan-Brun 2014), universities in Estonia have recently felt the need to tackle the ‘language question’ from a policy point of view in order to adapt to the increasing demands of internationalisation. As we shall see, Estonian universities feel compelled to draw a framework of protection for Estonian as the national language in academia, while promoting the use and knowledge of other ‘foreign languages’ (Soler-Carbonell 2015).

2. Teaching English at the Tertiary Level (country-specific)

2.1. English language provisions at the Tertiary Level

2.1.1. General English

All universities offer courses of general English as in most curricula the graduation requirement is B2 level in a foreign language (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Since English is the first foreign language in most comprehensive schools in Estonia, this requirement is fulfilled in English. However, the universities may apply their own specifications in teaching English. E.g., at Tallinn University of Technology all study programmes taught in Estonian include courses that improve professional written and oral communication skills in English. At the second level of higher education, the university fosters the development of internationally attractive study programmes taught in English. As a rule, doctoral programmes are taught in English. In study programmes taught in Estonian, applicants are expected to have English language proficiency at level B2. Undergraduate students who do not have B2 level proficiency are required to achieve B2 level proficiency during the study period.

At Tallinn University, courses of general English (A2-B1) are taught as preparation courses for students whose placement test results are lower than B2 which is a necessary level to participate in a compulsory ESP course both at BA and MA levels.

At all Estonian universities, foreign visiting students (Erasmus exchange, other scholarships) must prove their English proficiency of at least B2 level.

2.1.2. English as a Medium of Instruction (i.e. regular study programs)

At all universities there are curricula that comprise a compulsory course mediated in English. At some universities these courses are optional, whilst at others, including e.g. Tallinn University, these are compulsory – a vast majority of curricula comprise a compulsory course taught in English.

2.1.3. English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

The status of EAP remains university specific. At different universities EAP may be taught at B1, B2 or C1 levels. EAP can replace both a compulsory course of general English or a compulsory course of English for Specific Purposes. But EAP can also be an elective course.

2.1.4. English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

Most public universities offer ESP courses. With a few exceptions, ESP is a compulsory course in most curricula at Estonian universities both at BA and M levels. At Tallinn University, students are expected to complete an ESP course according to the requirements set in their study programme. ESP is divided into two levels: ESP I and ESP II. In master's programmes there will be the addition of EAP. There is no proficiency exam at the very end of ESP courses, however, the level corresponds to B2 (ESP I), C1.1 (ESP II) and C1.2 (EAP) respectively. All applicants who have an ESP course in their study programme are expected to take a placement test at the beginning of their first school year in order to determine their ESP level. If it turns out that the student's level of English is not high enough in order to take part in the ESP course, they will be offered courses starting from A2. This means that in order to participate in an ESP course, a student may have to complete three general English courses beforehand (A2, B1.1 and B1.2). Students who have taken an international language exam (CAE, IELTS, TOEFL) or graduated from a Bachelor's or Master's programme with an ESP

course within the last year, are exempt from taking an ESP course again, as well as students who have graduated from an International / European Baccalaureate secondary school or a secondary school in an English speaking country (UK, USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia).

2.1.5. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

In the Estonian context, universities do not offer CLIL courses. Moreover, CLIL is taught at lower and upper secondary school level if such a choice has been made by a particular school's authorities.

2.2. Assessment and certification

Tallinn University of Technology offers regularly English level exams for all people who are interested. The exams are charged and a certificate is issued. Other universities issue a certificate stating which English course the student has passed.

The EducationUSA Advising Center at Tallinn University of Technology offers TOEFL iBT exams as well as SAT, GRE GMAT etc exams for those wishing to apply to universities in the USA. Tallinn University Centre for International Examinations offers an opportunity to take international language exams (CAE or IELTS). The Centre also provides admission tests to the best UK universities and colleges.

2.3. Perspectives and Needs

2.3.1. Teachers (including our survey results)

The emerging teacher shortages and the unattractiveness of the profession risk affecting the quality of education. Half of all teachers in primary and secondary education are over 50 years old and almost one in five teachers is over 60. Many schools already report difficulties in hiring teachers in specific subjects. However, teacher education programmes are generally undersubscribed and, according to TALIS 2018, only 26.4% of Estonian teachers believe that their profession is valued in society (see "School Improvement"). An above-average share of teachers report a need for additional continuing professional development. The results of the survey indicate a clear need for in-service trainings in the field of ESP. Especially about creating ESP materials, and teaching multi-level groups. But also training in psychology and educational technology are expected.

2.3.2. Students

Each university organises the collection of students' feedback. Based on the feedback improvements may be made if the suggestions are realistic. Besides the formal feedback teachers often collect some feedback on their own during the course so that they can take students' opinion and advice into account. This kind of feedback often includes questions about study materials and students' preferences on learning methods. Several teachers of ESP at Tallinn University have been acknowledged by students as the "Best teachers of the year". Students' feedback is taken very seriously. In 2019-2020 a survey about students' perceptions of ESP was carried out at Tallinn University. The results will be the basis for future in-service trainings and for minor changes in the management of the ESP courses.

3. Existing Training Opportunities and Educational Resources for English Teachers at the Tertiary Level (country-specific)

3.1. Training Opportunities

All universities offer in-service trainings for their employees, regardless of their contract type. The list of trainings generally include courses about using IT, Moodle or method-specific trainings. However, ESP specific in-service trainings depend on the demand and available resources. The biggest universities attempt to offer them at least once a year to their teachers of English. They mostly focus on the preparation of ESP materials or specific teaching methods.

3.2. Educational Resources

During the pandemic lockdowns there have been numerous online trainings about using different kinds of educational platforms. All the employees of the universities have an access to the licenced resources of their universities. However, mostly these include licences to research materials and scientific libraries and to a lesser extent to study materials. Research articles are often used as domain-specific authentic materials in ESP.

4. Online Teaching at the Tertiary Level (country-specific)

2.1. Tools and resources

Teachers of ESP (and EAP) at Estonian universities use Zoom, Moodle Blue Button, Microsoft Teams and Skype as teaching platforms. Integrated tools are

often Padlet, Zeetings, Vocaroo, Socrative, Podcasts, Polleverywhere, Zeetings, Kahoot, Quizlet, Mindmeister, Google forms and Drive, blogs.

2.2. Course types (e.g. blended, synchronous, asynchronous...)

The lockdown periods saw very flexible approach. All kinds of course types existed. The universities did not impose any specific way as long as the courses were taught and students were satisfied. Blended, synchronous and asynchronous learning were in use, the decisions were made by the ESP teachers based on their students' digital possibilities and needs. After the lockdown online teaching will remain as an option to enrich the usual classroom teaching for many teachers.

5. Teacher Survey

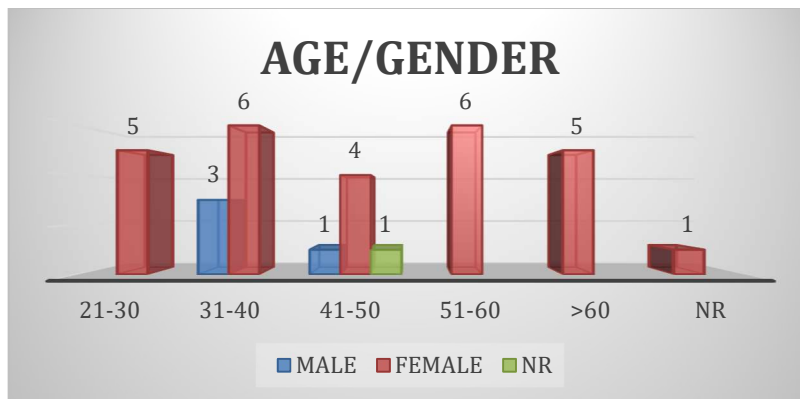
5.1. Study Context, Aim and Instruments

The present study was carried out in Estonia in February 2021 to enrich the theoretical part of the National report with empirical data about the current situation at Estonian HEIs regarding teaching English with a focus on content-based learning. The survey aimed at investigating teachers' institutional opportunities, classroom practices, and needs for the future through a self-report questionnaire. As such, the results of this study shed light on good practices and areas in need of improvement. A questionnaire of 20 open-ended and 24 closed-ended questions (utilising 5-point Likert scale, yes/no and multiple choices).

5.2 Sample

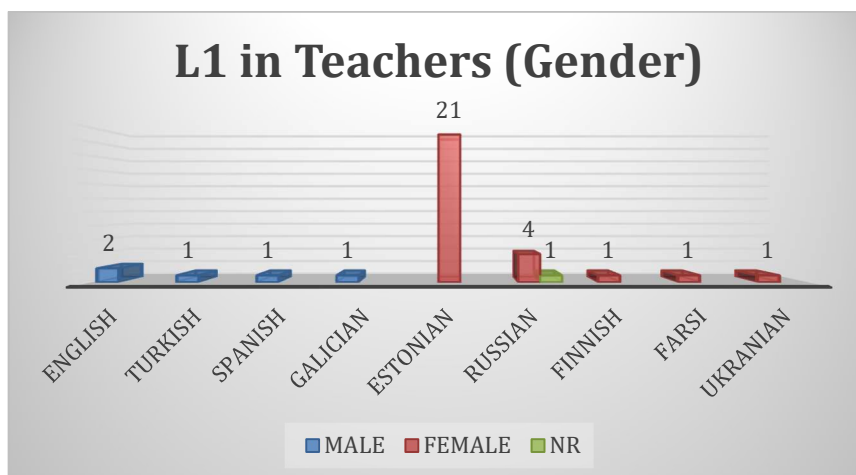
The sample was formed of English teachers working at tertiary level who are involved in teaching ESP, EAP, or EMI courses. The link to the survey together with an invitation to participate was sent to HEIs where above-mentioned courses are offered, including public universities (N=5), HEIs of applied sciences (N=5) and private HEIs (N=3). Altogether 32 teachers out of the total population of approximately 40 ESP teachers responded to the survey (27 females and 3 males). The Table 1 illustrates the participants' age.

Table 1. The participants' age



The Table 2 displays the participants' mother languages and its division by gender. 66% of the participants speak Estonian as their first language. It is followed by Russian (4), English (2) and 6 more languages each by one representative.

Table 2. The participants' mother languages



Besides teaching ESP, the participants have previously taught or are still engaged in the following fields: export business; arts, film and media; translation; IT; library work; or teaching other subjects.

The Tables 3 and 4 present the participants' educational background according to their age and gender. 63% of the respondents hold MA degree; 3.9% PhD which is a required degree for lecturers (starting from 2020), associate professors and professors. Since not all teachers have not yet been attested according to the new tenure track system, there are many who have a lecturer's position with MA. At the same time there are teachers with BA degree who are currently doing their master level studies and there are teachers with MA degree enrolled in their doctoral studies.

Table 3. Educational background (gender)

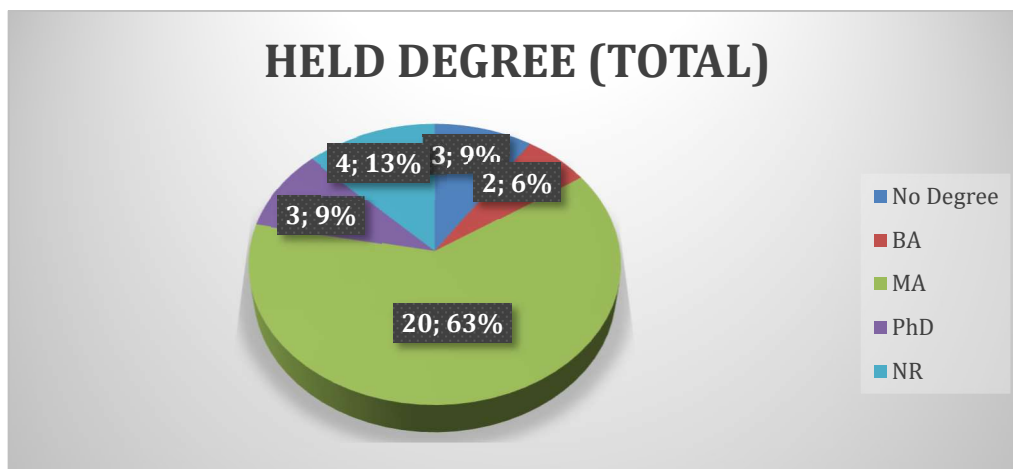
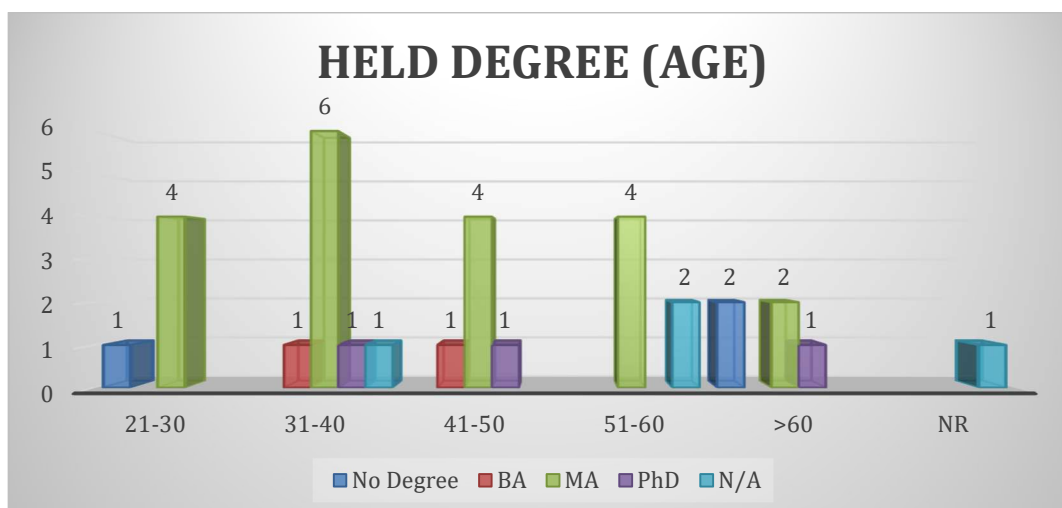


Table 4. Educational background (age)



3.2. Analysis

The Tables 5 and 6 show which skills and skill components are prioritised by the teachers of ESP. It can be seen that 'speaking' is practiced always by the majority of participants, followed by 'reading', 'writing' and 'listening' practiced sometimes by half of the respondents. 'ESP vocabulary' and 'collocations' are also always and 'pragmatics' sometimes practiced by half of the respondents, whilst 'grammar' is taught sometimes and 'pronunciation' rarely.

Table 5. The four skills.

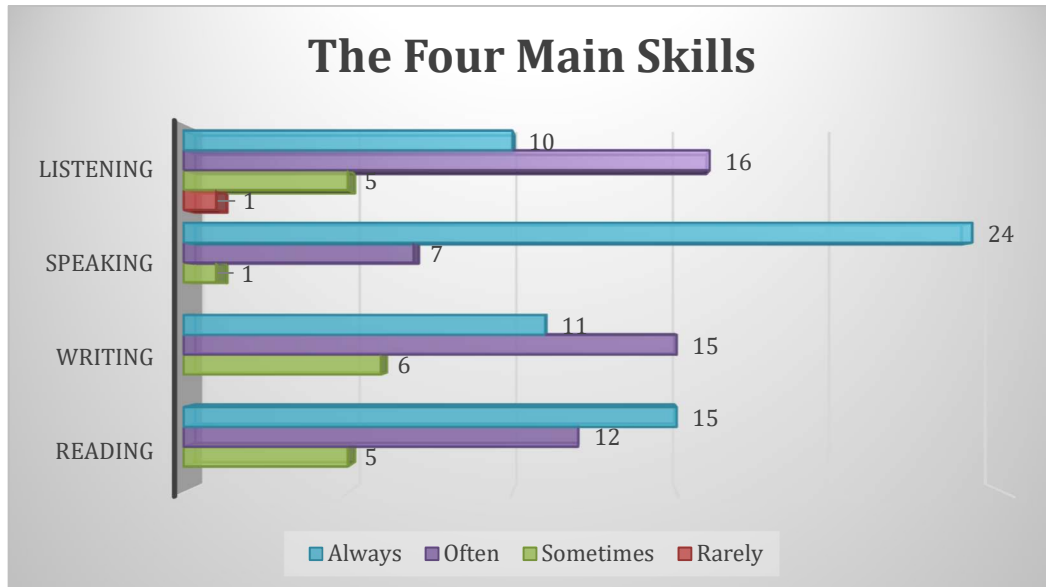
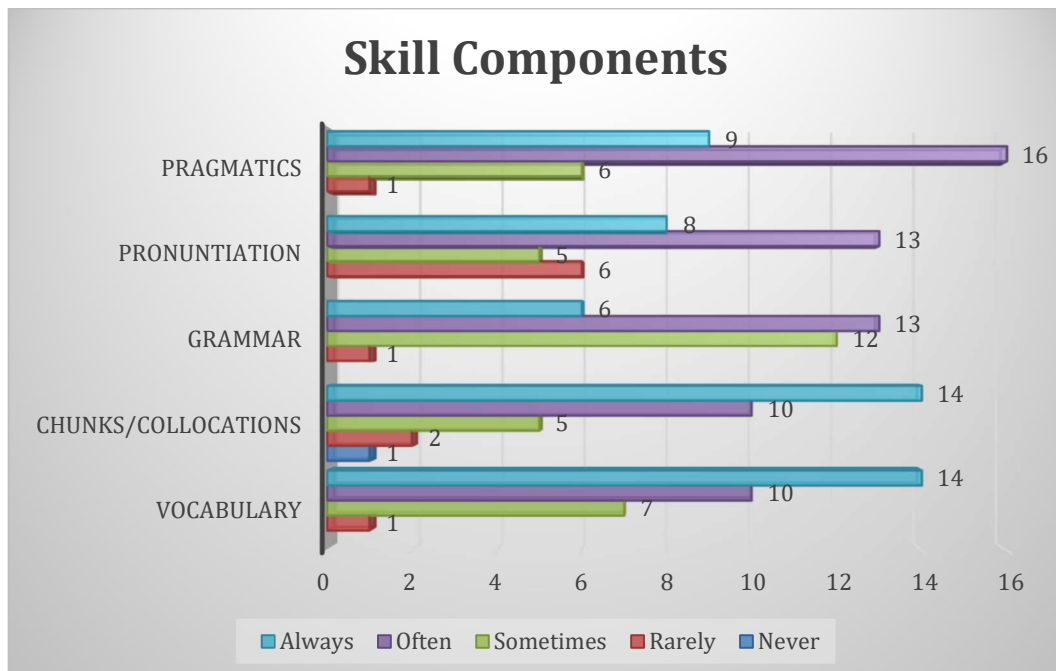


Table 6. Skills components



The Tables 7 and 8 display the four main skills and skill components across the specialised content. Here, 'reading' deserves a little more attention than 'listening', 'speaking' and 'writing'. Teaching 'vocabulary' is the most dominating skill component, followed again by 'collocations' and 'pragmatics'.

Table 7. Four main skills across the specialised content

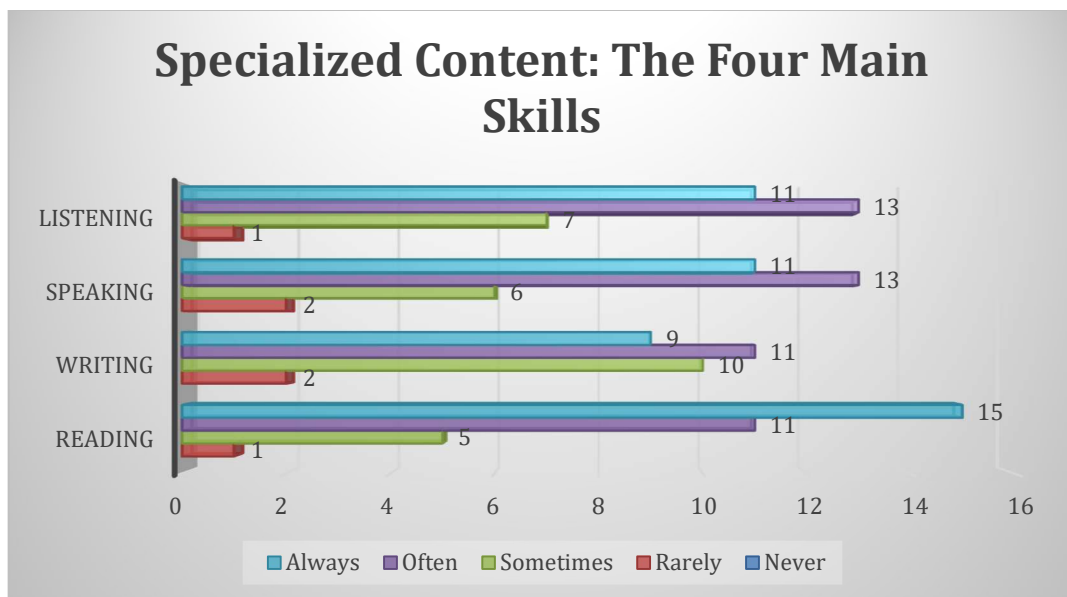


Table 8. Skill components across the specialised content

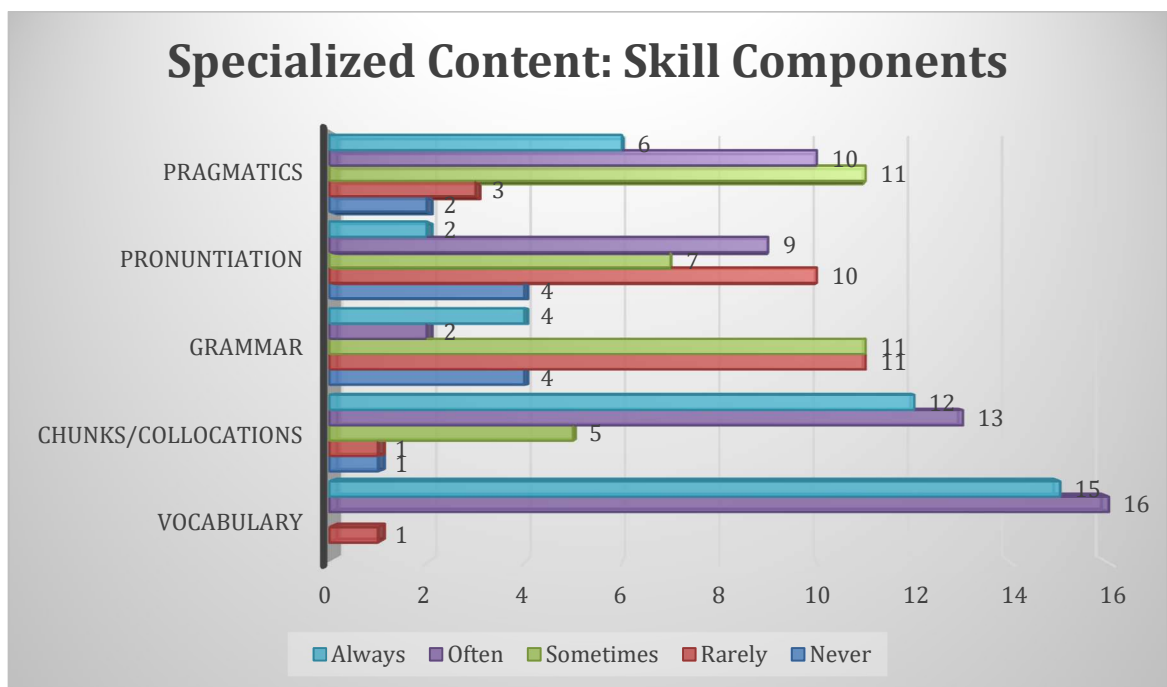


Table 9 illustrates the use of materials. 'Creating own materials' prevails, followed by the use of 'authentic materials' and 'ready-made materials'. 16% never use coursebooks and 32% use them rarely, only 9% use them always which confirms what the teachers claim that only a few disciplines have good coursebooks for ESP and most materials are tailor-made (Meristo & Lopez Arias, 2020). Authentic materials in the ESP include research articles, newspaper articles, broadcasts and charts.

Table 9. Materials

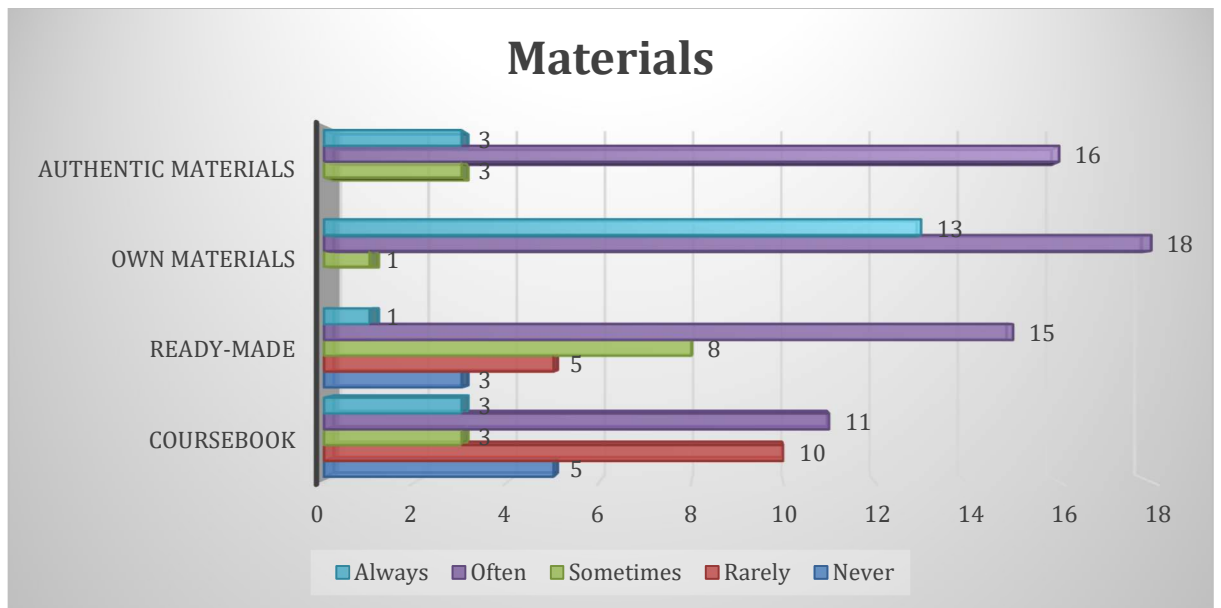


Table 10 shows the methods ESP teacher prefer to use. 'Communicative approach' and 'task-based learning' dominate. 'Flipped classroom' and 'project-based learning' are practiced by a very few ESP teachers.

Table 10. Methodology

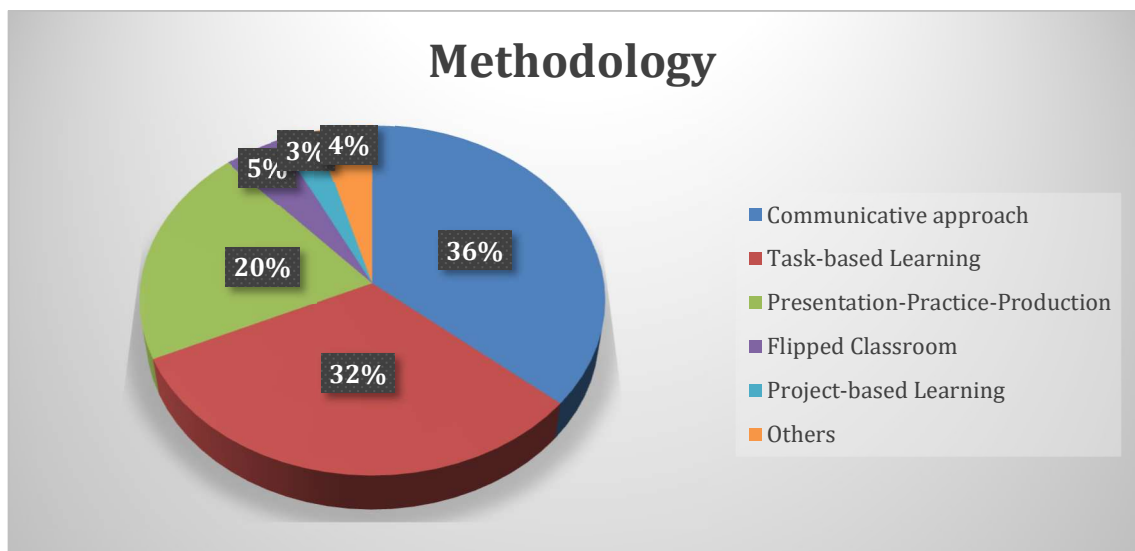
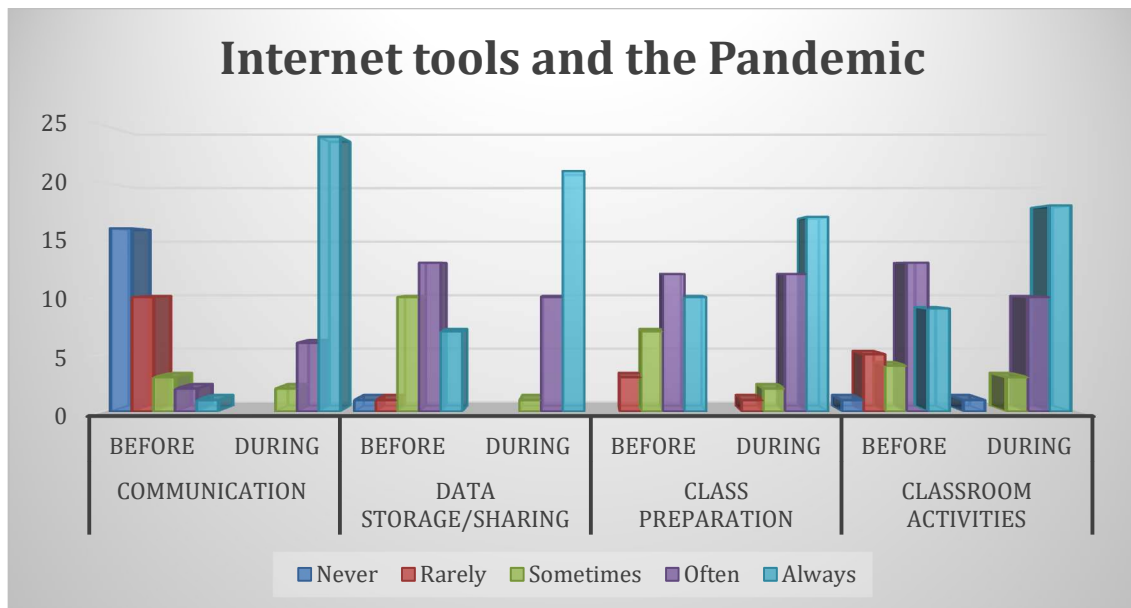


Table 11 illustrates the use of digital devices before and during the pandemic lockdown teaching. Although digital devices were used before the pandemic, it shows a clear growth in the use of IT in the virtual classroom, especially for sharing and storing the data. For communication, internet tools were hardly used before the pandemic, during

the pandemic there were no other choices but digital solutions to communicate with students and with each other.

Table 11. Internet tools and the Pandemic



6. Conclusions

In the Estonian context it is important to bear in mind that both schools and HEIs have a lot of autonomy in deciding about study management. General objectives and principles are stated by the law but educational institutions have a right to determine their own priorities and differentiated nuances. This in turn may create differences between the HEIs of Estonia as there are no centralised decisions. Estonia has been a leading country in developing IT solutions but this does not automatically refer to teachers being highly prepared in IT field. The pandemic lockdown has clearly indicated the shortcomings, especially regarding the need for specific trainings to support the professional development of ESP teachers. Workload remains a continuous problem as well as multi-level classes of ESP with different disciplines together. Teachers of ESP also desire for more recognition by HEI authorities and well-coordinated collaboration between subject teachers and English teachers. Yet, as a concluding remark, all respondents said unanimously that they would continue using more IT devices and educational platforms in the future.

References

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