

Beyond the Textbook: Pedagogical Challenges and Curriculum Opportunities in Designing an ESP for Business Course at a Private Indonesian University

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Abstract: Despite the expanding scholarship on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), insufficient attention has been given to the pedagogical and curricular consequences of developing ESP for Business courses in contexts where textbooks are unavailable, unsuitable, or intentionally excluded. Much of the existing literature remains anchored in textbook-dependent models, thereby overlooking how curriculum design, instructional practices, and learning coherence are negotiated in textbook-free settings. Addressing this gap, this study investigates the pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities emerging from the design of an ESP for Business course at Universitas Cipta Wacana, a private Indonesian university. Adopting a design-oriented qualitative research approach, the study examined iterative processes of course planning, materials development, and instructional enactment over one academic semester. The participants comprised 38 undergraduate Business Administration students and two ESP instructors, selected through purposive sampling. Data were generated from instructional design artifacts, teaching reflections, learner feedback instruments, and focused interviews with instructors, and were subjected to systematic qualitative analysis. The findings indicate that the absence of a prescribed textbook fostered curricular adaptability, contextual authenticity, and closer alignment with disciplinary communication practices, while simultaneously generating tensions related to instructional consistency, assessment benchmarking, and increased cognitive and temporal demands on instructors. These findings highlight the dual pedagogical implications of textbook-free ESP design and suggest the need for institutionally supported frameworks to sustain innovation while ensuring curricular coherence.

Keywords: curriculum development; English for Specific Purposes; higher education; materials design; textbook-free instruction

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Introduction

The flourishing growth of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses has increasingly gained scholarly attention due to its relevance in reconciling general English proficiency with the linguistic demands void in specific professional or academic domains (Nurmetov, Bakić-Mirić, & Chaklikova, 2025). ESP for Business, in particular, focuses on equipping learners with targeted communicative competencies required in the business environment, including business writing, negotiation, presentations, and professional correspondence (Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, 1998; J. Swales, 1988). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of contextually tailored ESP curricula that reflect authentic workplace tasks and industry-specific language, highlighting that alignment between learner needs and instructional content is central to effective ESP pedagogy (Chan, 2019; Hidayati, Novianti, Khansa, Slamet, & Suryati, 2023; Slamet, Basthomi, Ivone, & Eliyanah, 2025b). Despite these

insights, a predominant focus on textbook-based ESP instruction has been reported in multiple contexts, often constraining instructors' ability to adapt materials to local learner needs or emergent professional practices (Kočović, 2025; Nguyen, Marlina, & Cao, 2021; Suwarno, Sulis, & Ashadi, 2021). Textbooks, while providing structural guidance and standardized content, frequently exhibit limitations in authenticity, flexibility, and responsiveness to learners' immediate learning goals, leading to a pedagogical tension between prescribed content and real-world applicability (Cheng, 2021; Han, Xian, & Li, 2025; Yang, 2020). Consequently, the reliance on commercial textbooks may inhibit curriculum innovation and restrict instructor autonomy, highlighting the need to explore alternative approaches that enable adaptive and context-sensitive ESP course design.

Curriculum development in ESP has been acknowledged as a complex, iterative process that requires careful integration of learner needs analysis, pedagogical strategies, and assessment practices (Ellederová, 2022; Pramila et al., 2025; Slamet, Basthomi, Ivone, & Eliyanah, 2025a). The literature underscores that effective ESP curricula should move beyond mere language transmission to encompass task-based, learner-centered, and reflective practices that are dynamically responsive to professional or disciplinary demands (Hyland, 2022; Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Marcu, 2020). Empirical research, however, indicates that the practical implementation of ESP curricula often faces significant challenges, including insufficient institutional support, limited teacher training in ESP-specific pedagogy, and scarce availability of authentic or contextually relevant instructional materials (Harwood, 2025; Martín-González & Chaves-Yuste, 2024; Meristo & Heero, 2026). Moreover, assessment practices in ESP frequently emphasize generalized language proficiency rather than domain-specific competencies, creating misalignments between learning outcomes, classroom instruction, and professional expectations (Chan, 2021; Gimenez, 2014). These findings suggest a need for integrative frameworks that not only incorporate targeted linguistic skills but also foster curriculum flexibility, learner autonomy, and alignment with discipline-specific professional standards.

Pedagogical challenges are further compounded in contexts where commercial textbooks are unavailable, inappropriate, or misaligned with local institutional and learner contexts. While textbook-free ESP courses provide opportunities for instructor-driven materials development and curriculum customization, they also introduce practical constraints, such as increased preparation time, the need for authentic materials curation, and potential inconsistencies in content delivery (Chan, 2024; Xie, 2021). Studies examining textbook-free ESP environments indicate that instructors must engage in iterative design processes, balancing theoretical principles, learner needs, and practical constraints, which can simultaneously enhance pedagogical creativity and exacerbate instructional complexity (Petraki & Khat, 2022; Tuzlukova & Heckadon, 2020). Furthermore, research highlights that textbook absence necessitates proactive decisions regarding course sequencing, task selection, and assessment strategies, demanding high levels of instructor expertise and reflective practice (Alhassan, Ali, & Ali, 2021; Ávila-Cabrera & Corral Esteban, 2021; Dou, Chan, & Win, 2023). Despite these insights, there remains a scarcity of empirical studies investigating the nuanced dynamics of textbook-free ESP course design, particularly how instructors navigate challenges while leveraging curricular opportunities to achieve learner-centered outcomes.

The variables operationalized in the present study include pedagogical challenges, curriculum opportunities, and course design in textbook-free ESP contexts. Pedagogical challenges are conceptualized as instructional difficulties encountered in materials development, classroom delivery, and assessment alignment, while curriculum opportunities refer to the potential advantages of flexibility, contextualization, and learner-centered innovation that emerge when textbooks are not the primary instructional resource. Course design encompasses the integrated processes of curriculum planning, instructional enactment, and assessment implementation, reflecting both instructor agency and responsiveness to learner needs. Collectively, these variables provide a coherent framework to

examine the dual dynamics of constraint and opportunity inherent in textbook-free ESP course development. Based on the identified gaps, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1. What pedagogical challenges are encountered in the design and delivery of a textbook-free ESP for Business course?
2. What curriculum opportunities emerge from the development and implementation of a textbook-free ESP for Business course?

Literature Review

ESP and Business English Pedagogy

ESP has evolved as a distinct field in language education, emphasizing the alignment of linguistic instruction with the communicative demands of specific academic or professional domains (Albers, Vences, & Nickerson, 2020; Chan, 2019). Within the realm of Business English, the focus extends beyond general language proficiency to include competencies in professional communication, negotiation, presentations, report writing, and cross-cultural interaction, reflecting real-world workplace demands (Chan, 2024; Gimenez, 2014; Xu, Chen, Wang, & Suhadolc, 2021). Previous studies have highlighted that effective Business ESP courses require careful integration of industry-specific language, task-based activities, and authentic materials to ensure learners develop applicable skills (Ávila-Cabrera & Corral Esteban, 2021; Tuzlukova & Heckadon, 2020). However, much of the existing literature demonstrates a persistent reliance on commercially produced textbooks, which may not adequately address the dynamic and contextualized language needs of learners (Albers et al., 2020; Chan, 2019). While textbooks provide structure and a degree of standardization, their limitations in authenticity, flexibility, and responsiveness often constrain instructors' pedagogical creativity and hinder adaptation to learner-specific goals. Research indicates that such constraints necessitate alternative approaches that allow for contextualized content, iterative curriculum design, and reflective instructional practices, highlighting an important gap in the literature regarding textbook-free Business ESP pedagogy.

Curriculum Design in ESP Contexts

Curriculum design in ESP is a multifaceted and iterative process that integrates needs analysis, pedagogical strategies, materials development, and assessment alignment (Marcu, 2020; Pramila et al., 2025; Slamet et al., 2025b). The literature emphasizes that ESP curricula must be adaptable to learner characteristics, disciplinary conventions, and professional standards, ensuring that language instruction is meaningful, goal-oriented, and authentic (Albers et al., 2020; Petraki & Khat, 2022). Empirical investigations into curriculum design have highlighted both opportunities and constraints. On one hand, flexible curricula enable instructors to prioritize learner-centered tasks, integrate authentic materials, and foster professional language practices (Harwood, 2025). On the other hand, research also indicates challenges in achieving coherence across instructional sequences, aligning assessments with specific learning outcomes, and ensuring consistency when materials are developed independently of standardized textbooks (Basturkmen, 2025; Iswati & Triastuti, 2021; Tuzlukova & Heckadon, 2020). While several studies have explored ESP curriculum frameworks and task-based learning approaches, there is limited empirical evidence on the practical implementation of textbook-free curriculum design, particularly in Business English contexts. This gap underscores the necessity for research that examines how instructors navigate tensions between pedagogical flexibility, content coherence, and learning outcome alignment in the absence of structured textbook guidance.

Pedagogical Challenges in Textbook-Free ESP Instruction

Pedagogical challenges in ESP courses are amplified in contexts where textbooks are unavailable or unsuitable for local learners' needs. Literature has shown that instructors in such

environments encounter increased demands in planning, materials selection, and instructional sequencing, as they must curate or develop authentic resources that align with both disciplinary requirements and learner objectives (Chan, 2024; Xie, 2021). Studies highlight the dual nature of these challenges: textbook-free instruction offers opportunities for creative pedagogy, adaptive tasks, and contextualized learning experiences, yet simultaneously requires extensive preparation, continuous reflection, and strong content expertise (Albers et al., 2020; Suwarno et al., 2021). The absence of prescriptive materials may also introduce inconsistencies in delivery, assessment, and learner engagement, posing risks to curriculum coherence and learning outcome reliability (Han et al., 2025; Kočović, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2021). Despite these documented insights, empirical research examining the nuanced strategies instructors employ to manage textbook-free pedagogy, and the ways they leverage challenges into instructional and curriculum innovation, remains scarce. Such investigation is essential to inform evidence-based frameworks for effective ESP instruction in resource-constrained or highly context-specific settings.

Curriculum Opportunities and Innovation in ESP

The literature on curriculum opportunities highlights the potential benefits of adaptive, textbook-free ESP instruction in enhancing contextual authenticity, learner engagement, and instructor autonomy (Han et al., 2025; Kočović, 2025). By moving beyond prescribed textbooks, instructors can integrate real-world tasks, authentic business documents, and technology-mediated resources, fostering learner-centered and task-oriented learning environments (Pramila et al., 2025). Research also indicates that flexible curriculum design can cultivate professional communicative competence, critical thinking, and reflective learning practices, enabling learners to navigate complex workplace scenarios (Chan, 2019; Cheng, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, while these opportunities are recognized theoretically, there is a limited body of empirical work demonstrating how textbook-free curriculum strategies are operationalized in practice, how instructors balance innovation with consistency, and how learning coherence is maintained across tasks and assessments (Basturkmen, 2025; Meristo & Heero, 2026). This gap points to the need for systematic investigation into how curriculum opportunities are realized, negotiated, and sustained in ESP courses absent conventional instructional resources.

Theoretical Framework and the Study Context

The present study is grounded in design-oriented qualitative research principles, which prioritize iterative curriculum development, reflective practice, and context-sensitive pedagogical decision-making, enabling a systematic examination of how instructional interventions are conceived, implemented, and refined in authentic learning environments (Almquist & Lupton, 2010; Verschuren & Hartog, 2005). The theoretical framework integrates ESP curriculum theory, emphasizing alignment between learner needs, disciplinary language requirements, and professional communication practices, with task-based learning principles that foreground active engagement in authentic business-related tasks, and authentic materials pedagogy, which highlights the use of contextually relevant and industry-specific resources to foster transferable skills (Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, 1998; J. Swales, 1988; John Swales, 1987). This framework positions the interaction among instructor agency, curriculum design, and learner engagement as central to understanding how pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities are negotiated in textbook-free contexts. The study is situated in an ESP for Business course at Universitas Cipta Wacana, a private Indonesian university, selected due to its representative challenges of limited access to commercially aligned textbooks, diverse student proficiency profiles, and institutional flexibility allowing experimental curriculum interventions. Adopting a design-oriented qualitative research approach enables iterative cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection, thereby producing contextually rich findings that capture

the nuances of curriculum innovation, instructional adaptation, and learner responsiveness. The insights generated are intended to be analytically generalizable to similar higher education ESP contexts, particularly in resource-constrained settings, by elucidating principles and strategies applicable to textbook-free course design, materials development, and task-based pedagogical decision-making, while acknowledging contextual variations in institutional structures, learner demographics, and disciplinary focus.

Method

Research Design and the Participants

The current endeavour deployed a design-oriented qualitative research approach, a methodology particularly suited for investigating pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities within authentic educational settings (Verschuren & Hartog, 2005). Design-oriented research emphasizes the iterative cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection, allowing researchers to systematically examine the development and enactment of instructional interventions while generating contextually grounded insights. The approach is particularly appropriate for this study as it facilitates the exploration of dual dynamics: the constraints imposed by textbook-free ESP course design and the opportunities for curriculum innovation, pedagogical creativity, and learner-centered instruction. The current endeavour may investigate and document the observable processes, practices, rationale, decision-making, and reflective considerations, underpinning course design and delivery (Almquist & Lupton, 2010).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they could provide rich, relevant, and context-specific insights into the ESP course under study. The sample included 38 undergraduate students enrolled in the Business Administration program and two ESP instructors responsible for course design and delivery. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants were actively engaged in the textbook-free ESP environment and could provide in-depth perspectives on both pedagogical and curricular aspects. The students represented a range of English proficiency levels, academic performance histories, and prior exposure to business communication tasks, providing a heterogeneous sample that enhanced the comprehensiveness of the data. The instructors were selected based on their experience in ESP instruction, involvement in course development, and willingness to participate in iterative reflections throughout the semester. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variables		Details	Participants (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Participant Group		Undergraduate Students	38	95%
		ESP Instructors	2	5%
Gender (<i>Students</i>)		Female	22	58%
		Male	16	42%
Gender (<i>Instructors</i>)		Female	1	50%
		Male	1	50%
Age Range (<i>Students</i>)		19–20 years	14	37%
		21–22 years	24	63%
Age Range (<i>Instructors</i>)		32–41 years	2	100%
Academic Year (<i>Students</i>)		2nd Year	12	32%
		3rd Year	16	42%
		4th Year	10	26%
English Proficiency (<i>Students</i>)		Intermediate	18	47%
		Upper-Intermediate	20	53%
English Proficiency (<i>Instructors</i>)		Advanced	2	100%

Variables		Details	Participants (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Relevant Experience	ESP/Business (<i>Students</i>)	Limited formal ESP exposure; prior general English courses	38	100%
Relevant Experience	ESP/Business (<i>Instructors</i>)	5–10 years of ESP teaching; prior curriculum development experience in Business English	2	100%

Stages of the Research Design

Three interconnected stages were directed in this study, reflecting the iterative design-oriented qualitative framework: course planning, materials development, and instructional enactment. Each stage was conceptualized, executed, and analyzed to capture both the challenges and opportunities inherent in textbook-free ESP course design.

Stage 1: Course Planning

The first stage focused on establishing the course framework, objectives, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies. This involved a comprehensive needs analysis, drawing on both the instructors' professional judgment and preliminary student feedback regarding English proficiency, business communication requirements, and prior exposure to ESP content. During this stage, instructors systematically mapped out the course syllabus, sequencing content to align with key business competencies, such as professional correspondence, presentations, report writing, and negotiation communication. The planning process also included establishing assessment rubrics, learning goals, and criteria for task-based activities to ensure alignment between learning outcomes and instructional interventions. Observational notes and reflective logs were maintained to document the decision-making process and any anticipated challenges, such as balancing task complexity with student proficiency and ensuring content relevance without relying on preexisting textbook structures. This stage provided foundational insights into pedagogical challenges, particularly regarding the need to integrate authentic business materials and create coherent sequences of learning tasks in a textbook-free environment.

Stage 2: Materials Development

The second stage emphasized the creation, adaptation, and curation of instructional resources tailored to the identified course objectives. This stage was characterized by the selection of authentic business materials, including company reports, business emails, case studies, and professional presentations. Materials were evaluated for their alignment with both task-based learning principles and the specific communicative competencies targeted in the ESP curriculum. Instructors documented their process of material selection, adaptation, and scaffolding, reflecting on the alignment of each activity with learning outcomes and potential challenges in implementation. Particular attention was given to ensuring that tasks provided sufficient scaffolding for students at varying proficiency levels while remaining relevant to professional business practices. This stage also highlighted opportunities for curriculum innovation, as instructors could tailor activities to contextual needs, integrate real-time feedback mechanisms, and experiment with task sequencing. Teaching reflections, meeting notes, and design artifacts generated during this stage were systematically collected for analysis, providing detailed evidence of both instructional constraints and emerging curricular opportunities.

Stage 3: Instructional Enactment

The third stage involved the implementation of the ESP course over one academic semester, during which materials were delivered, tasks enacted, and student engagement observed. Instructional enactment included classroom observations, instructor reflective journals, and ongoing formative assessments, allowing for iterative adjustments to instructional strategies and task design. Challenges

documented in this stage included managing student engagement across varying proficiency levels, ensuring consistency in task difficulty, and addressing unanticipated gaps in content or task clarity. Conversely, opportunities emerged in the form of increased responsiveness to learner needs, enhanced contextualization of tasks, and greater autonomy for instructors in adapting activities. Student feedback instruments, including reflective questionnaires and focus discussions, provided complementary perspectives on the effectiveness of instructional strategies and the perceived value of the textbook-free curriculum. This stage was crucial in illustrating the interplay between pedagogical decision-making and curriculum opportunities, demonstrating how iterative reflection and adaptive instruction contributed to achieving learning coherence and relevance.

Instruments

Data were collected through multiple complementary instruments to ensure triangulation and depth of insight, reflecting the design-oriented qualitative framework (Verschuren & Hartog, 2005):

1. **Instructional Design Artifacts:** Course syllabi, lesson plans, task sequences, and assessment rubrics were analyzed to understand the planning rationale, alignment with ESP competencies, and integration of authentic materials. These artifacts provided tangible evidence of both pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities.
2. **Teaching Reflections:** Instructors maintained reflective journals throughout the semester, documenting decisions, observed student responses, perceived difficulties, and adaptations made to materials or tasks. These reflections were critical for understanding the iterative processes of course design and implementation.
3. **Learner Feedback Instruments:** Structured reflective questionnaires and short written reflections were used to capture students' perceptions of task relevance, engagement, and learning outcomes. Feedback focused on students' experiences navigating tasks without prescribed textbooks and their perceptions of curriculum coherence and utility.
4. **Focused Instructor Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with the two instructors provided in-depth insights into course planning, instructional enactment, challenges encountered, and opportunities leveraged. Interviews also explored instructors' rationale for materials selection, task design, and adaptations during the course.
5. **Observational Notes:** Classroom observations captured student engagement, participation, and interaction patterns, as well as real-time implementation of instructional strategies. Observational data complemented reflections and feedback instruments, providing a holistic view of instructional processes.

Data Collection Procedures

A comprehensive multi-method approach was designed to capture the intricate dynamics of pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities in a textbook-free ESP for Business course, following the principles of design-oriented qualitative research, which emphasize iterative cycles of planning, implementation, and reflective refinement (Almquist & Lupton, 2010). The data collection process began with the compilation and analysis of instructional design artifacts, including course syllabi, lesson plans, task sequences, and assessment rubrics, which documented curriculum decisions, task sequencing, and intended learning outcomes, allowing a systematic evaluation of alignment with targeted business English competencies. Instructors maintained detailed reflective journals throughout the semester, recording observations on student engagement, instructional effectiveness, emergent challenges, and adaptive strategies employed in real time, providing insight into the iterative decision-making processes that underpinned course enactment. Complementary learner feedback instruments, such as structured reflective questionnaires and open-ended prompts, were administered at multiple intervals to capture students' perspectives on task relevance, materials

effectiveness, and learning coherence, highlighting the experiential dimensions of navigating a textbook-free environment. Focused semi-structured interviews with instructors were conducted before, mid-, and post-semester, probing instructional planning, materials development, task sequencing, and assessment practices, while classroom observations documented participation, interaction patterns, and real-time instructional adjustments.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, an approach suitable for identifying patterns, relationships, and emergent themes within complex educational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with thorough familiarization, involving repeated readings of transcripts, reflective journals, observational notes, and instructional artifacts to identify initial patterns and recurring issues. A coding framework was then developed, combining deductive codes based on study variables, including pedagogical challenges, curriculum opportunities, course design, instructional planning, task adaptation, assessment alignment, materials selection, learner engagement, and reflective decision-making, with inductive codes emerging from unanticipated phenomena such as student strategies and instructor improvisation. A systematic multi-stage coding procedure was applied, beginning with open coding to generate initial labels, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes, and selective coding to synthesize core themes addressing the research objectives. Triangulation across multiple data sources, independent researcher review, member checking, analytical memos, and structured reflexivity ensured trustworthiness, mitigated bias, and supported rigorous, credible, and contextually grounded thematic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study to ensure participant protection and research integrity. The study gained an ethical approval from Universitas Cipta Wacana review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through secure data storage, de-identification of participant information, and restricted access to research data. Students were assured that participation would not affect academic evaluation, and instructors could provide candid reflections without repercussions. Bias mitigation strategies included reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, data triangulation, and member checking to ensure credible, trustworthy, and ethically responsible findings.

Results and Discussion

Pedagogical Challenges in the Design and Delivery of a Textbook-Free ESP for Business Course

To address RQ1, the study explored the pedagogical challenges in designing and delivering a textbook-free ESP for Business course using a design-oriented qualitative approach. Iterative processes of course planning, materials development, and instructional enactment were examined, with multiple data sources, including instructional artifacts, teaching reflections, learner feedback, and instructor interviews, triangulated to provide a nuanced understanding of recurring challenges, emergent issues, and contextual constraints.

Instructional Design Artifacts

The analysis of instructional design artifacts, including course syllabi, lesson plans, assessment rubrics, and task sequences, revealed challenges primarily related to the alignment of learning outcomes with task-based activities, the selection and sequencing of authentic materials, and the management of instructional coherence across the semester. In a textbook-free context, instructors needed to ensure that each activity was pedagogically sound, appropriately scaffolded, and aligned

with business English competencies. The artifacts indicated iterative revisions, reflecting ongoing adjustments to balance complexity, relevance, and learner proficiency levels.

Table 2. Pedagogical challenges from instructional design artifacts

Challenge Category		Details/Description	Frequency of Occurrence in Artifacts (<i>n</i>)
Learning Outcome Alignment		Difficulty aligning tasks with measurable learning outcomes, particularly in business writing and presentations	5
Materials Selection		Challenges in curating authentic materials suitable for varied proficiency levels	6
Task Sequencing		Ensuring logical progression of tasks without textbook guidance	4
Assessment Design		Developing assessment rubrics aligned with tasks and outcomes	3
Integration of Real-World Contexts		Incorporating business scenarios that are both authentic and pedagogically feasible	5

Table 2 illustrates the pedagogical challenges identified from the analysis of instructional design artifacts, highlighting key areas where instructors encountered complexities in a textbook-free ESP for Business course. Learning outcome alignment emerged as a critical challenge, reflecting the difficulty of ensuring that tasks, particularly in business writing and presentations, directly corresponded to measurable competencies. Materials selection was frequently problematic, as curating authentic resources suitable for diverse proficiency levels required careful consideration. Task sequencing posed additional challenges in maintaining logical progression and scaffolding without textbook guidance. Assessment design required alignment with tasks and outcomes, while integration of real-world contexts demanded balancing authenticity with pedagogical feasibility. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the intricate interdependencies between curriculum design, task planning, and learner engagement in a flexible, textbook-free instructional environment.

Teaching Reflections

Teaching reflections provided insight into instructors' experiences, revealing challenges that emerged during actual course delivery. Reflection journals indicated that instructors encountered difficulties in time management, adapting tasks for heterogeneous learners, and maintaining engagement throughout interactive activities. The iterative documentation of reflections also captured instructors' strategies for addressing these issues, highlighting the interplay between pedagogical decision-making and real-time classroom dynamics.

Table 3. Pedagogical challenges from teaching reflections

Challenge Category	Details/Description	Instructor Reflections (<i>n</i>)
Time Management	Extra preparation time required for materials creation and task adaptation	8
Learner Heterogeneity	Varied proficiency levels leading to uneven task participation and comprehension	7
Engagement Strategies	Difficulty sustaining interest in complex business tasks without textbook support	6
Real-Time Task	Need to modify tasks spontaneously due to	5

Challenge Category	Details/Description	Instructor Reflections (n)
Adjustment	unexpected student difficulties	4
Assessment Calibration	Challenges ensuring fairness and clarity in task evaluation	

Table 3 presents the pedagogical challenges identified through teaching reflections, revealing the dynamic and labor-intensive nature of delivering a textbook-free ESP for Business course. Time management was a prominent challenge, as instructors invested considerable effort in creating materials and adapting tasks to meet diverse learner needs. Learner heterogeneity further complicated instruction, with varied proficiency levels affecting participation, comprehension, and engagement. Maintaining sustained interest in complex business tasks without a textbook necessitated deliberate engagement strategies, while real-time task adjustments were frequently required to address unforeseen student difficulties. Additionally, assessment calibration posed challenges in ensuring clarity, fairness, and alignment with intended learning outcomes. These reflections underscore the continuous, responsive decision-making essential for effective textbook-free pedagogy.

Learner Feedback Instruments

Learner feedback, collected through structured questionnaires and reflective prompts, revealed that students experienced challenges related to task comprehension, information overload, and uncertainty about expectations. The feedback also indicated areas where students struggled with self-directed learning, particularly when authentic materials presented unfamiliar business terminology or complex case studies. Despite these difficulties, student reflections suggested that engagement increased when tasks were clearly scaffolded and contextualized within real-world business scenarios.

Table 4. Pedagogical challenges from learner feedback instruments

Challenge Category	Details/Description	Frequency of Responses (n)
Task Comprehension	Difficulty understanding task instructions or expected outcomes	21
Self-Directed Learning	Challenges navigating materials and completing tasks independently	18
Terminology & Jargon	Complex business language leading to comprehension issues	15
Resource Navigation	Difficulty identifying relevant information from authentic sources	12
Assessment Clarity	Uncertainty about grading criteria and expectations	14

Table 4 summarizes the pedagogical challenges reported by students through learner feedback instruments, highlighting the cognitive and practical difficulties they experienced in a textbook-free ESP for Business course. Task comprehension was the most frequently reported challenge, indicating that students struggled to fully understand instructions and expected outcomes without structured textbook guidance. Self-directed learning emerged as another significant difficulty, reflecting challenges in independently navigating materials and completing tasks. Complex business terminology and jargon further impeded understanding, while resource navigation highlighted students' difficulties in extracting relevant information from authentic sources. Assessment clarity was also a concern, as

uncertainties regarding grading criteria affected confidence and task performance. Collectively, these insights emphasize the need for explicit guidance, scaffolding, and instructional support to optimize learning in textbook-free environments.

Focused Instructor Interviews

Interviews with the two ESP instructors provided in-depth perspectives on the challenges encountered across the semester. Interview data revealed themes related to curricular coherence, instructional consistency, and balancing innovation with feasibility. Instructors emphasized the tension between creating authentic, engaging tasks and ensuring that all students could successfully achieve learning outcomes. Challenges also emerged in the integration of assessment with task complexity, as well as in sustaining learner motivation without the structured guidance of a textbook.

Table 5. Pedagogical challenges from instructor interviews

Challenge Category	Details/Description	Illustrative Quote
Curriculum Coherence	Maintaining logical flow and alignment of tasks throughout the semester	<i>"We constantly had to check if tasks were building on previous knowledge, which was challenging without a textbook."</i>
Instructional Consistency	Ensuring uniformity in task delivery and assessment across different class sessions	<i>"Even minor changes in materials could affect consistency, so we needed to adapt carefully."</i>
Balancing Innovation & Feasibility	Designing creative activities while considering time and resources	<i>"We wanted engaging case studies, but some required more preparation than feasible within class hours."</i>
Task Complexity	Managing difficulty to match varied student proficiency	<i>"Some tasks were too complex for certain students, requiring on-the-spot adjustments."</i>
Motivation & Engagement	Sustaining student interest in a challenging, textbook-free curriculum	<i>"Without structured materials, keeping students motivated required continuous interaction and support."</i>

Table 5 presents the pedagogical challenges identified through instructor interviews, revealing the strategic and adaptive efforts required to implement a textbook-free ESP for Business course effectively. Maintaining curriculum coherence emerged as a central challenge, with instructors needing to ensure logical progression and alignment of tasks throughout the semester. Instructional consistency across sessions was equally demanding, as minor adjustments in materials could impact uniformity in delivery and assessment. Balancing innovative task design with practical feasibility required careful consideration of time and resources. Managing task complexity to suit diverse proficiency levels necessitated on-the-spot adaptations, while sustaining student motivation and engagement demanded continuous interaction and support. These findings underscore the interconnectedness of curriculum design, instructional strategy, and learner responsiveness in navigating textbook-free pedagogy.

Across all data sources, several interconnected pedagogical challenges were consistently observed. First, alignment of tasks with learning outcomes emerged as a central concern, as instructors needed to ensure that all activities supported targeted business English competencies. Second, materials selection and adaptation required significant time and expertise, particularly to provide authentic resources suitable for diverse learners. Third, task complexity and sequencing posed challenges in maintaining engagement, scaffolding knowledge, and ensuring progression without a standardized textbook. Fourth, assessment calibration was complex, as instructors had to balance fairness, clarity, and alignment with learning objectives. Finally, learner heterogeneity and self-

directed learning capacity influenced task completion and engagement, necessitating ongoing adjustments and scaffolding. These findings collectively underscore the dual demands of textbook-free ESP pedagogy, which require both careful planning and real-time instructional adaptability. The challenges reveal how instructor agency, reflective practice, and iterative design are essential components in addressing pedagogical complexity and ensuring that learners achieve meaningful outcomes.

Curriculum Opportunities in the Development and Implementation of a Textbook-Free ESP for Business Course

To address RQ2, the study examined the curriculum opportunities that emerged from the design and implementation of a textbook-free ESP for Business course. Using a design-oriented qualitative research approach, findings were drawn from multiple data sources, including instructional design artifacts, teaching reflections, learner feedback instruments, and focused instructor interviews. This approach enabled the identification of opportunities that arose from the flexibility, adaptability, and contextual relevance inherent in a textbook-free learning environment. Across all sources, the data revealed several interconnected opportunities related to curriculum innovation, task customization, authentic materials integration, learner engagement, and reflective instructional practices.

Instructional Design Artifacts

Analysis of instructional design artifacts, including course syllabi, lesson plans, task sequences, and assessment rubrics, revealed multiple opportunities associated with curriculum development. Without the constraints of a fixed textbook, instructors were able to tailor tasks and activities to real-world business contexts, select authentic materials aligned with professional practices, and iteratively refine learning sequences to suit student needs. Artifacts also demonstrated the flexibility to adjust assessment criteria, incorporate emerging industry trends, and integrate technology-mediated tasks to enhance learning relevance.

Table 6. Curriculum opportunities from instructional design artifacts

Opportunity Category		Details/Description	Frequency in Artifacts (<i>n</i>)
Task Customization		Ability to adapt tasks to student proficiency and professional relevance	6
Authentic Integration	Materials	Use of business reports, emails, case studies, and presentations	5
Assessment Flexibility		Tailoring rubrics to specific tasks and learning outcomes	4
Real-World Contextualization		Embedding authentic business scenarios in tasks	5
Iterative Refinement	Curriculum	Revising sequences and learning outcomes based on observed progress	6

Table 6 highlights the curriculum opportunities revealed through the analysis of instructional design artifacts, demonstrating the potential of a textbook-free ESP for Business course to foster adaptable and contextually relevant learning. Task customization allowed instructors to tailor activities to varying student proficiency levels and professional relevance, enhancing learner engagement and skill development. The integration of authentic materials, such as business reports, emails, case studies, and presentations, provided realistic contexts that bridged classroom learning with professional practice. Assessment flexibility enabled alignment of rubrics with specific tasks and

intended outcomes, while real-world contextualization embedded business scenarios that reinforced practical application. Iterative curriculum refinement facilitated continuous adjustments to task sequences and learning objectives, ensuring responsiveness to learner progress and promoting coherent, learner-centered curriculum development.

Teaching Reflections

Teaching reflections captured instructors' experiential insights, emphasizing opportunities to enhance curriculum coherence, learner-centeredness, and engagement. Instructors highlighted that the absence of a textbook provided greater freedom to experiment with pedagogical approaches, integrate multimedia and technology-based resources, and design tasks that promoted critical thinking and problem-solving in authentic business scenarios. Reflections also indicated that iterative monitoring allowed instructors to identify gaps in learning and introduce additional scaffolding, fostering a responsive and adaptive learning environment.

Table 7. Curriculum opportunities from teaching reflections

Opportunity Category	Details/Description	Instructor Reflections (<i>n</i>)
Pedagogical Flexibility	Ability to experiment with varied instructional strategies	7
Learner-Centered Adaptation	Adjusting tasks to individual learning needs and preferences	6
Integration of Technology	Use of digital tools and multimedia for task enhancement	5
Critical Thinking Development	Designing tasks that encourage analysis and problem-solving	4
Iterative Support	Continuous modification of tasks and scaffolds based on student progress	6

Table 7 presents the curriculum opportunities identified from teaching reflections, illustrating how a textbook-free ESP for Business course fosters adaptive and responsive pedagogy. Pedagogical flexibility enabled instructors to experiment with diverse instructional strategies, enhancing engagement and addressing varied learning contexts. Learner-centered adaptation allowed tasks to be tailored to individual student needs and preferences, promoting deeper understanding and skill development. Integration of technology through digital tools and multimedia enriched task design, offering innovative avenues for learning. Tasks designed to develop critical thinking encouraged analysis and problem-solving within authentic business contexts. Iterative support through continuous modification of tasks and scaffolds ensured responsiveness to learner progress, reinforcing a dynamic, reflective, and learner-centered approach to curriculum implementation.

Learner Feedback Instruments

Student feedback provided complementary insights into curriculum opportunities, highlighting how the flexibility and adaptability of textbook-free instruction supported engagement, autonomy, and skill development. Students reported that the use of authentic materials and tasks enhanced their understanding of professional business communication, encouraged independent learning, and facilitated the development of critical workplace competencies. Additionally, learners perceived that iterative adjustments in tasks and scaffolding improved their confidence and ability to manage complex assignments.

Table 8. Curriculum opportunities from learner feedback instruments

Opportunity Category	Details/Description		Frequency of Responses (n)
Authentic Engagement	Task	Participation in tasks reflecting real business scenarios	28
Development of Autonomy	of	Opportunities to navigate tasks independently and make decisions	25
Skill Enhancement		Improvement in business writing, presentations, and professional communication	22
Reflective Learning		Encouragement to reflect on learning processes and outcomes	20
Increased Motivation		Engagement and interest stimulated by contextualized tasks	23

Table 8 highlights the curriculum opportunities identified through learner feedback instruments, emphasizing the benefits of a textbook-free ESP for Business course in promoting authentic, engaging, and skill-oriented learning. Authentic task engagement allowed students to participate in activities closely reflecting real business scenarios, fostering practical understanding and professional relevance. The course design also supported the development of autonomy, enabling learners to navigate tasks independently and make informed decisions. Skill enhancement was evident in improvements in business writing, presentations, and professional communication, while reflective learning encouraged students to critically evaluate their learning processes and outcomes. Increased motivation emerged as learners reported higher engagement and sustained interest, demonstrating how contextualized, adaptive tasks can enhance both competence and confidence in a flexible, student-centered curriculum.

Focused Instructor Interviews

Instructor interviews offered in-depth perspectives on how curriculum opportunities were realized throughout the course. Instructors highlighted that the textbook-free environment enabled creative task design, promoted adaptability, and facilitated alignment with authentic business contexts. Interviews also revealed that reflective practice and iterative planning allowed instructors to continuously refine task difficulty, materials, and assessment, creating a curriculum that was responsive to learner progress and professional relevance. Instructors further emphasized the benefits of integrating cross-disciplinary tasks, such as combining business case analysis with presentation skills, enhancing learners' holistic competence.

Table 9. Curriculum opportunities from instructor interviews

Opportunity Category	Details/Description	Illustrative Quote
Creative Task Design	Freedom to design innovative tasks suited to student needs	<i>"We could create tasks that mirrored real business challenges, something not possible with a textbook."</i>
Adaptive Instruction	Continuous adjustments to materials and sequencing	<i>"We adjusted tasks weekly based on student performance and feedback."</i>
Professional Relevance	Alignment of tasks with workplace competencies	<i>"Students were able to engage with materials they might encounter in a real company setting."</i>
Cross-Disciplinary	Combining multiple skills	<i>"Presentations, writing, and negotiation tasks were integrated to simulate real"</i>

Opportunity Category	Details/Description	Illustrative Quote
Integration	within a single task	<i>scenarios."</i>
Reflective Practice	Iterative improvements based on observation and feedback	<i>"Reflection journals helped us identify which tasks worked and which needed modifications."</i>

Table 9 illustrates the curriculum opportunities identified through instructor interviews, demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of a textbook-free ESP for Business course. Creative task design allowed instructors to develop innovative activities tailored to student needs, simulating real business challenges and fostering engagement. Adaptive instruction enabled continuous adjustments to materials and task sequencing based on learner performance and feedback, ensuring responsiveness and relevance. Tasks were aligned with professional competencies, enhancing workplace applicability and bridging classroom learning with practical contexts. Cross-disciplinary integration combined skills such as writing, presentations, and negotiation within single tasks, promoting holistic skill development. Reflective practice supported iterative improvements, as instructors evaluated the effectiveness of tasks and modified them to optimize learning outcomes, reinforcing a dynamic, learner-centered curriculum approach.

Across all data sources, several key curriculum opportunities were consistently identified. First, task customization allowed instructors to tailor activities to varying student proficiency levels and professional relevance. Second, integration of authentic materials enhanced realism and provided exposure to actual business contexts, increasing learner engagement and motivation. Third, adaptive assessment strategies enabled alignment with learning outcomes while accommodating task complexity. Fourth, iterative curriculum refinement facilitated continuous improvement, ensuring coherence, relevance, and responsiveness to learner progress. Fifth, promotion of learner autonomy and reflective learning encouraged students to take responsibility for their development, enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulated learning. Finally, integration of technology and cross-disciplinary skills offered innovative pathways for curriculum enrichment, preparing students for multifaceted workplace scenarios. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that a textbook-free ESP course can provide substantial curriculum opportunities, particularly when instructors leverage iterative design, reflective practice, and task-based approaches. The results highlight the dynamic interplay between constraint and opportunity, illustrating how pedagogical creativity, adaptability, and contextual relevance contribute to the development of a curriculum that supports both academic and professional growth.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex landscape of designing and delivering a textbook-free ESP for Business course, revealing multifaceted pedagogical challenges and curriculum opportunities that extend existing knowledge while providing nuanced insights for both theory and practice. The pedagogical challenges identified demonstrate that alignment of tasks with learning outcomes is a central concern, reflecting the intricate interplay between curriculum intentions and real-world application. This requirement for precise alignment underscores that ESP course design necessitates meticulous planning to ensure that tasks do not merely replicate textbook exercises but authentically address professional communication competencies. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of outcome-oriented course design in ESP contexts (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Iswati & Triastuti, 2021; Marcu, 2020), yet the present study advances this understanding by showing that textbook-free settings amplify the need for iterative alignment, continuous reflection, and adaptive modifications throughout the course. The challenges encountered in materials selection further extend

prior findings on authentic resource integration (Albers et al., 2020; Pramila et al., 2025) by demonstrating that instructors must negotiate the dual imperatives of authenticity and accessibility. Authentic materials enrich learning by situating tasks in realistic professional contexts, but without the scaffolding provided by a textbook, the instructional burden increases, necessitating careful task sequencing and the integration of supplementary supports to bridge learner comprehension gaps. This dynamic emphasizes the critical role of instructor agency, reflective practice, and adaptive expertise in managing complexity and maintaining curriculum coherence.

Learner heterogeneity emerged as another significant dimension influencing pedagogical decision-making. The study illustrates that students with diverse English proficiency levels, prior experiences with business communication, and variable self-directed learning capacities demand differentiated instructional strategies. These findings complement research highlighting the challenges of addressing diverse learner profiles in ESP classrooms (Chan, 2019, 2021) while extending it by evidencing that a textbook-free environment magnifies these differences, compelling instructors to develop real-time adaptive strategies. These strategies include flexible task designs, tiered scaffolding, and formative feedback mechanisms, which collectively sustain learner engagement and facilitate meaningful skill development. Furthermore, the iterative observation and reflection embedded in design-oriented qualitative research enabled instructors to continuously recalibrate instructional practices, thereby creating a responsive learning environment that supports both individual progression and collective coherence. The necessity for ongoing reflective practice illustrates that ESP instruction in resource-limited or textbook-free settings is inherently dynamic, requiring a continual negotiation between curriculum intentions, task complexity, and learner readiness (Koćović, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2021; Yang, 2020).

The study also highlights that pedagogical challenges can generate complementary curriculum opportunities, demonstrating the productive tension inherent in textbook-free ESP design. Flexibility in task design allowed instructors to tailor activities to professional relevance and learner needs, fostering deeper engagement and promoting the development of critical workplace competencies. This finding aligns with literature emphasizing task-based learning and the benefits of authentic, contextually situated instruction (Chan, 2024; Pramila et al., 2025), while extending understanding by showing that iterative design processes in the absence of a textbook provide enhanced opportunities for curricular innovation, including the integration of multimedia resources, cross-disciplinary skills, and real-world problem-solving scenarios. The study reveals that the constraints associated with textbook-free environments, such as the absence of standardized task sequences or pre-structured scaffolding, can be leveraged as opportunities to cultivate learner autonomy, reflective thinking, and adaptive expertise. Such opportunities reflect a shift from conventional content-driven curricula toward a process-oriented and learner-centered paradigm, emphasizing that ESP education benefits from flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and iterative refinement (Cheng, 2021).

Moreover, the integration of authentic materials in this study highlights the potential for curriculum to be both highly contextualized and strategically scaffolded. While prior research acknowledges the value of authentic resources in ESP (Dou et al., 2023; Harwood, 2025), the present study demonstrates that these materials, when combined with iterative planning and reflective adjustments, can serve as a vehicle for simultaneously addressing pedagogical challenges and fostering curriculum innovation. The dynamic adjustment of task complexity, sequencing, and scaffolding in response to learner progress exemplifies how curriculum opportunities emerge directly from challenges, producing a reciprocal relationship between constraint and innovation. This interplay suggests that textbook-free ESP design is not merely a compensatory approach but a strategic modality for developing curricula that are contextually meaningful, flexible, and learner-responsive (Han et al., 2025).

Another salient contribution of the study is the illumination of how iterative reflection and adaptive decision-making contribute to the emergence of curriculum coherence. The design-oriented qualitative approach allowed instructors to continually assess task alignment, materials appropriateness, and learner engagement, thereby maintaining cohesion in a setting without a predefined textbook structure. This finding builds on the theoretical foundations of design-oriented research (Ellederová, 2022; Pramila et al., 2025) and underscores the importance of reflective practice not only as a mechanism for problem-solving but as a generator of pedagogical insights and curriculum opportunities. In particular, the ability to adapt tasks in real time, respond to learner feedback, and integrate emerging business contexts illustrates how curriculum design can be simultaneously structured and flexible, promoting both standardization in intended outcomes and responsiveness to situational contingencies.

The present study also advances understanding by emphasizing the interplay between challenges and professional skill development. By confronting difficulties related to task alignment, materials curation, and learner heterogeneity, instructors were able to strategically craft learning experiences that enhance business communication competencies, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. This extends previous claims on ESP curriculum design (Hyland, 2022; Hyland & Jiang, 2021) by evidencing that textbook-free approaches allow for a more authentic simulation of workplace demands, fostering practical skills in addition to linguistic competence. The iterative cycles of design, reflection, and adaptation not only mitigated pedagogical difficulties but also generated new curriculum opportunities, including interdisciplinary integration, technology-enhanced learning, and increased learner autonomy. Consequently, the study illustrates that challenges in textbook-free ESP course design are not merely obstacles but catalysts for innovation and professional skill cultivation.

Overall, the findings reveal that the textbook-free approach to ESP instruction embodies both complexity and potential. Pedagogical challenges such as task alignment, materials selection, learner heterogeneity, and assessment calibration are intertwined with curriculum opportunities related to authentic task design, learner-centered engagement, reflective practice, and adaptive curriculum innovation. By situating these findings within the broader literature on ESP, task-based learning, and design-oriented research, the study demonstrates that textbook-free environments necessitate a high degree of instructor agency and reflective practice but simultaneously offer enhanced potential for curriculum responsiveness, professional relevance, and learner empowerment. This duality underscores the value of a design-oriented approach for navigating the tensions between constraints and opportunities in ESP course development. The study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how pedagogical challenges can be transformed into curriculum opportunities, offering insights that are transferable to similar higher education contexts seeking to implement flexible, contextually responsive, and learner-centered ESP courses.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the dual nature of textbook-free ESP course design, revealing both challenges and opportunities that shape instructional practices and curriculum development. On one hand, pedagogical challenges such as aligning tasks with learning outcomes, selecting and adapting authentic materials, managing task complexity, and addressing learner heterogeneity required significant instructor effort, reflective practice, and iterative adjustments, highlighting the dynamic and labor-intensive nature of textbook-free pedagogy. On the other hand, these constraints generated substantial curriculum opportunities, including enhanced flexibility in task design, integration of real-world business contexts, promotion of learner autonomy, iterative curriculum refinement, and development of critical professional competencies. The study has implications for both theory and practice, demonstrating that design-oriented approaches enable instructors to transform challenges into opportunities, fostering learner-centered and contextually

relevant ESP instruction while promoting reflective and adaptive teaching skills. Limitations of the study include the small instructor sample and focus on a single private university, which may affect generalizability, and reliance on self-reported reflections and feedback that may be subject to response bias. Future research could expand to multiple institutional contexts, longitudinally examine the sustainability of textbook-free approaches, and explore technology-enhanced strategies to further support task adaptation and learner engagement. Overall, this study underscores the transformative potential of textbook-free ESP design when pedagogical challenges are navigated thoughtfully and strategically, providing actionable insights for curriculum innovation and professional skill development.

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