

Bridging Classrooms and Careers: Exploring Students' Perspectives on English for Specific Purposes Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has heightened the need for English proficiency in specialized fields such as economics, hotel management, and tourism. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses aim to equip students with relevant language skills, but questions remain about their effectiveness and alignment with industry needs. This study investigates students' perceptions of ESP course design and delivery across five universities in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Data were collected through surveys and interviews with 108 students, focusing on course credit hours, instructional materials, teaching strategies, and the use of technology. Findings show that 65% of students preferred interactive methods, such as simulations and case studies, over traditional lectures. Students also emphasized the need for more practical writing tasks and role-playing opportunities. Limited access to technological tools, including virtual trading platforms, was identified as a barrier to effective learning. Using Activity Theory, the study examines the interplay between students, instructional tools, institutional rules, and learning goals. It highlights challenges such as insufficient credit hours and unequal access to technology. Interactive methods and collaborative tasks emerged as effective strategies for building job-relevant language skills. Enhancing ESP programs requires increasing credit hours, integrating advanced technological tools, and aligning content with professional contexts. These recommendations aim to improve the impact of ESP education and better prepare students for global careers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of education has obviously heightened the demand for English proficiency, particularly in specialized domains such as economics, hotel management, and tourism. The prevalence

of English as the primary language for international communication underscores the necessity for students to proficiently utilize English in professional and academic settings, which is increasingly recognized as an essential skill for career advancement (Crystal, 2003). This trend highlights the significance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs for students in English departments, aimed at addressing the linguistic and professional requirements of particular disciplines through focused language instruction (Hutchinson & Water, 1987). Unlike general English courses, which focus on broad language proficiency, ESP emphasizes context-specific communication skills, enabling students to excel in professional and academic environments. This distinction highlights the importance of aligning ESP programs with industry requirements and students' career objectives.

ESP programs equip students to address the specific requirements of various specialized disciplines. The course on English for Islamic Studies facilitates in-depth engagement with religious texts, interpretation of Islamic teachings, and effective communication of these concepts in global contexts. English for Hotel and Tourism emphasizes customer service excellence, intercultural communication, and promotional strategies, which are essential in the global hospitality industry. Studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) equips students with specialized linguistic competencies while improving their employability and adaptability. This integration of academic instruction with professional requirements ensures that graduates are adequately prepared to make significant contributions in their respective fields (Evan & John, 1998). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) customizes its curriculum to meet the distinct communicative and linguistic requirements of students in a specific field (Hyland, 2006).

Despite its potential, ESP instruction faces several challenges that delay its effectiveness. A significant issue is the misalignment between course content and students' professional objectives, resulting in a lack of practical relevance (Basturkmen, 2010). Additionally, differences in access to advanced technological tools limit the implementation of innovative teaching strategies, while variability in lecturer expertise affects the quality of instruction (Sharma, 2010). These challenges highlight the urgency of optimizing ESP programs to meet the diverse needs of students and ensure their readiness for global workforce demands.

The relevance and contextualization of course materials are critical to the effectiveness of ESP programs. Evan & John (1998) emphasize that materials designed to meet learners' specific needs and real-world applications can greatly improve engagement and learning outcomes. For example, economics students must incorporate contemporary topics, including global trade, digital finance, and economic policies, into their curriculum. Outdated or generic materials may impede students' capacity to link theoretical knowledge with practical applications.

Theoretical frameworks, including Vygotsky's constructivist principles, offer critical insights for addressing these challenges. Vygotsky (1978) focus on the significance of collaborative learning and social interaction in cognitive development aligns closely with the interactive approaches central to effective ESP instruction. Incorporating these principles enables educators to create student-centred activities that foster critical thinking and facilitate the practical application of skills. Likewise, Activity Theory provides a holistic framework for analysing the dynamic relationships among learners, tools, and goals, while also finding tensions and highlighting areas for improvement within ESP curricula.

This research examines the facets of ESP instruction as perceived by students in the English department. This study also includes data from both public and private universities in West Sumatra: UIN Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi and UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar as public universities, and Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin Solok, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat, and Sekolah Tinggi Ekonomi Syariah Manna Wa Salwa Tanah Datar as private universities. The research seeks to identify strengths and areas for improvement by analyzing perceptions of credit allocation, quality, course materials, pedagogical approaches, and technology use. The findings will offer significant insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers aiming to improve the quality and relevance of ESP programs. This will enhance the discourse on optimizing ESP instruction to address the specific needs of students in a globalized context.

2. METHODS

This research utilized a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the perceptions of English department students regarding ESP instruction. A survey was conducted involving 108 students from both public and private universities in West Sumatra: UIN Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi and UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar as public universities, and Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin Solok, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat, and Sekolah Tinggi Ekonomi Syariah Manna Wa Salwa Tanah Datar as private universities, to evaluate four dimensions: credit hours, course materials, pedagogical strategies, and technology integration. Recruitment was conducted via direct communication with university representatives, minimizing selection bias and ensuring a relevant participant pool.

The survey instrument was designed and validated to capture the dimensions of credit hours, course materials, pedagogical strategies, and technology integration. It consisted of 22 Likert-scale questions and was pretested with a small subset of participants to refine clarity and relevance (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on survey findings and theoretical considerations, with questions focusing on students' challenges and suggestions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Qualitative data were thematically coded using NVivo software, ensuring reliability through inter-coder agreement.

Activity Theory was employed as the analytical framework to examine the interplay among learners, tools, and objectives in the educational process (Engeström, 1987). Tensions between limited access to advanced technological tools and students' aspirations for professional readiness were identified and analyzed. Contradictions within the learning system, such as disparities in lecturer expertise and inconsistent course content, were highlighted as areas requiring intervention.

Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated through triangulation to ensure a holistic understanding of the research problem. Quantitative survey data provided trends and generalizable insights, while qualitative interviews offered depth and contextual understanding. For instance, statistical findings on technology use were enriched by interview narratives detailing students' experiences with digital tools. The integration of these methods facilitated a thorough assessment of ESP instruction, consistent with Denzin (2017) advocacy for mixed-methods in rigorous educational research.

Surveys were distributed online using Google Forms, ensuring accessibility and convenience for participants. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and in person, depending on participants' preferences, and scheduled at times conducive to their academic commitments. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. This approach ensured methodological rigor and replicability of the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Credit Hour Allocation

The distribution of credit hours in ESP courses gathered varied responses from students, indicating important consequences for instructional design. About 61.1% of respondents reported dissatisfaction, suggesting that the current allocation is inadequate for comprehensive coverage of essential content. Some students stated, "*We require additional time to concentrate on practical skills and professional writing,*" highlighting the necessity for longer course durations. On average, ESP courses are allocated only 2 credit hours, which many students perceive as insufficient for achieving the course objectives effectively. This finding aligns with Hutchinson & Water's (1987) observation that insufficient time allocation may restrict the breadth of ESP instruction, consequently impeding the advancement of specialized language skills. Syafitri (2018) noted her students' difficulties in learning ESP for reading context for only two credit hours a week.

In contrast, 30.6% of students indicated that the current credit hours met their needs, highlighting a range of expectations among learners. Several students noted that the course's concise structure

enabled them to manage their academic workload efficiently. The diversity highlights the difficulty of creating a curriculum that meets different learning speeds, supporting Basturkmen (2010)'s claim that adaptable instructional frameworks are necessary for catering to diverse student requirements. Public university students were more likely to accept the current 2-credit-hour structure, whereas private university students demanded an increase to at least 3 credit hours to accommodate practical activities.

The structural component of Activity Theory provides a valuable lens through which to interpret these findings. Engeström (1987) highlights the necessity of aligning the rules of instructional systems with the goals of learners. In the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), achieving this balance necessitates the alignment of course duration with the intricacy of language skills pertinent to specific careers. The dissatisfaction expressed by a substantial number of respondents indicates a misalignment that necessitates curriculum modifications. Increasing credit hours or introducing supplementary workshops may address this gap, improving the alignment between instructional time and learning objectives.

Compared with prior research provide additional context for these findings. Nazeer et al. (2023) found that inadequate course duration frequently results in superficial material coverage, thereby constraining students' capacity to utilize language skills in professional settings. A student's remark, "*The course feels rushed, and we miss out on deeper discussions,*" reflects this concern. Addressing these gaps allows ESP programs to enhance preparation for workplace communication demands, thereby fostering competence and confidence among learners.

3.2. Interactive Learning Activities

Interactive learning activities, such as group discussions, simulations, and case studies, were rated highly effective by over 70% of respondents. These methods were often described as engaging and instrumental in developing practical skills. Some students noted, "*Group discussions really help us build confidence to use English in professional settings.*" This feedback reflects Vygotsky (1978)'s theory of collaborative learning, which posits that social interaction is a critical driver of cognitive development. Such activities not only enhance language skills but also foster critical thinking and teamwork, essential competencies for professional success.

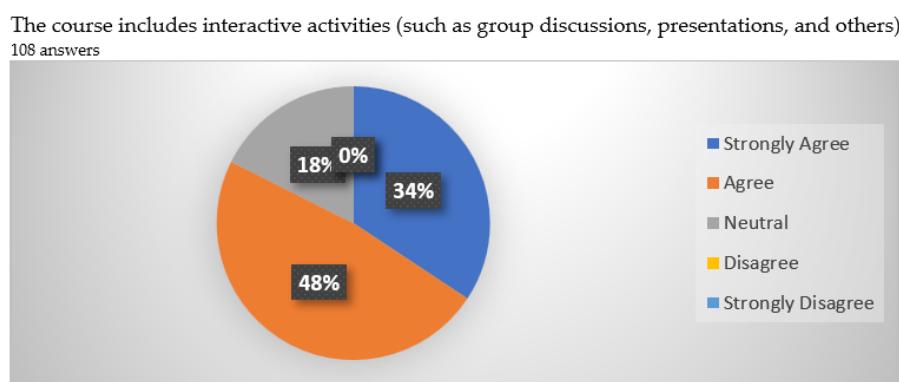


Figure 1. The course includes interactive activities

Simulations and case studies, in particular, were highlighted as valuable tools for bridging theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. Another student shared, "*Simulations make the learning experience more realistic and prepare us for actual workplace challenges.*" This aligns with Basturkmen (2010) assertion that task-based approaches in ESP enhance learners' ability to perform profession-specific tasks. Furthermore, these activities mirror the Activity Theory principle of utilizing tools and practices that closely resemble the context of future job environments (Engeström, 1987).

The high effectiveness of interactive methods found in this study is consistent with previous research. For instance, Rahman (2015) observed that collaborative learning activities in ESP courses

significantly improve students' confidence and fluency in professional communication. Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasized the importance of integrating practical elements that align with students' career goals. The present findings reaffirm that when learning activities are contextually relevant and interactive, they result in higher engagement and skill retention.

Despite these positive outcomes, a small subset of students suggested improvements to maximize the benefits of group-based learning. A participant remarked, *"Sometimes, group discussions lack clear direction, and not everyone participates equally."* This highlights the need for structured facilitation to ensure that collaborative activities remain effective. Incorporating more guided exercises or clearly defined roles within group tasks could address these challenges and optimize the learning experience, as suggested by Basturkmen (2010).

3.3. Technology Integration

The quantitative survey data revealed significant trends across institutions. Cross-tabulations showed that students from institutions with robust technological infrastructure rated their satisfaction with technology integration higher (74%) compared to those from less-equipped universities. This disparity highlights the importance of institutional support in enhancing the learning experience. A notable 25% of respondents were neutral about technology integration, citing restricted access to advanced tools and inadequate instructor training as key barriers. Students highlighted challenges with outdated LMS platforms and the absence of field-specific software, such as virtual trading systems for economics students. These tools, acting as mediating artifacts within Activity Theory, are critical in bridging theoretical knowledge and practical application. Addressing these barriers requires investment in modern technologies and comprehensive training for educators to maximize their potential. Basturkmen (2010) highlighted that the incorporation of technological tools, including Learning Management Systems (LMS) and specialized software, can greatly improve the precision and efficacy of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction. The findings indicate that although technology has potential, it is underutilized in certain contexts, highlighting the necessity for investment in accessible and advanced digital tools.

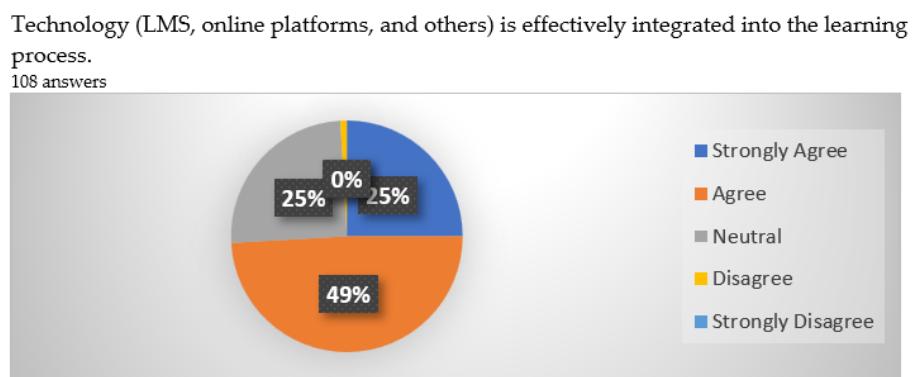


Figure 2. Integrated technology into the learning process

This observation aligns with earlier studies, such as Liaw et al. (2007), which found that while learners often appreciate the flexibility and interactivity provided by technology, its potential is frequently hindered by inadequate infrastructure and insufficient training. More recent research (Asmali & Onyedi, 2022; Daulay et al., 2023; Priyanti & Hadi, 2023; Rohmah, 2024; Rahman & Sandra, 2024; Salisah et al., 2023) further underscores that successful technology integration in ESP instruction requires not only the availability of appropriate digital tools but also comprehensive training for both educators and students. Three students participating in this study stated, *"The LMS platform significantly aids in organizing materials; however, specialized software relevant to our field is frequently either unavailable*

or outdated." This viewpoint emphasizes the disparity between the theoretical advantages of technology and its actual application, underscoring the necessity for specific enhancements to guarantee fair access and use.

Meanwhile, public universities had greater access to learning management systems (LMS) and specialized software. Private universities lacked these resources, limiting students' engagement with industry-specific tools. These findings align with Basturkmen (2010) and Hyland (2006), who highlighted the need to align ESP curricula with institutional resources and professional requirements.

3.4. Real-World Applications

Approximately 80% of participants concurred or strongly concurred that the courses effectively integrated real-world applications, including industry-specific terminology and case studies. This finding indicates that students recognize a significant link between course content and the practical demands of their fields. Case studies were emphasized as an effective pedagogical tool, with one student noting, "*Case studies bring the workplace into the classroom.*" This corresponds with the principle of Activity Theory as described by Engeström (1987), which asserts that learning tools must be designed to closely connect with the community and goals of the activity system. Integrating real-world scenarios into the learning process bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby preparing students for workforce challenges.

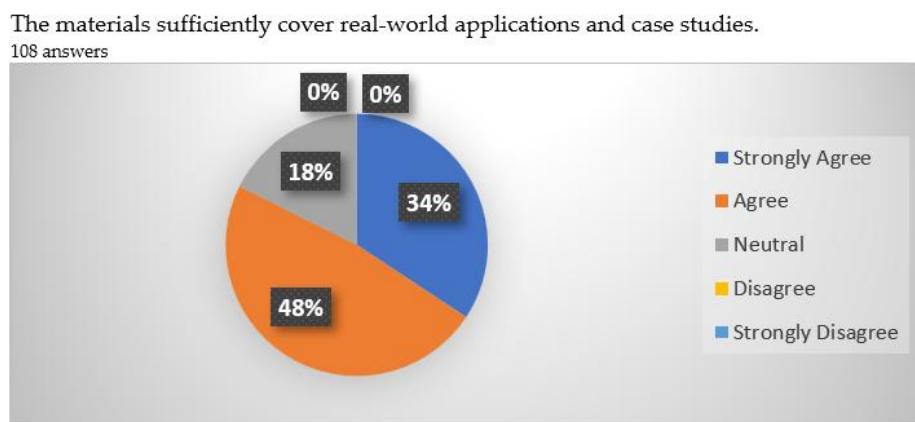


Figure 3. The importance of integrating real-world applications into education

This approach aligns with prior research highlighting the significance of contextualizing learning to improve its relevance and effectiveness. Dabbagh & Kitsantas (2012) assert that authentic learning experiences, including case studies and industry-specific tasks, can enhance student engagement and knowledge retention significantly. A study by Herrington et al. (2010) indicates that real-world applications in education enhance problem-solving skills and increase student satisfaction. Hamzah (2024) utilized VOA (Voice of America) as his authentic material to improve his students' speaking ability. A student noted, "*The case studies facilitated comprehension of the application of theory in real-life contexts, which is essential for our future careers.*" This statement highlights the importance of integrating real-world applications into education, reinforcing the idea that learning must be both theoretically sound and practically applicable to students' career goals.

3.5. Authentic Practice Opportunities

Sixty percent of students perceived the opportunities for speaking and writing in authentic contexts as sufficient, whereas twenty-five percent indicated a need for more practice sessions. This suggests that many students continue to perceive a discrepancy between existing offerings and their

expectations for practical language use. The students' requests for additional role-playing exercises and writing tasks underscore this necessity. A student expressed a desire for increased opportunities to engage in realistic conversations and report writing, highlighting a prevalent call for enhanced alignment between academic activities and professional standards. This finding corroborates Nazeer et al. (2023) assertion that ESP must prioritize practical skills and real-world tasks to adequately prepare students for the specific demands of their future careers. The identified gap indicates the need for a more practical approach that enables students to interact with the language in contexts that reflect real-world professional situations.

This request for additional practice sessions is consistent with findings from various studies emphasizing the significance of integrating more active learning strategies in ESP courses. Belcher (2006) highlighted that effective ESP instruction must incorporate interactive learning experiences, including role-playing, simulations, and practical writing tasks, as these activities improve learners' capacity to apply language skills in real-world contexts. A study by Hutchinson & Water (1987) indicated that effective ESP courses should connect academic language with professional language by promoting the development of communicative competence in practical contexts. A participant in this study stated, "*Role-playing would enhance our comprehension of the language utilized in our field and facilitate our adaptation when we begin our professional careers.*" This perspective highlights the significant issue that inadequate practice in authentic settings may bother students' ability to move from academic environments to professional contexts, thereby supporting the case for a curriculum that emphasizes practical, real-world language application.

3.6. Feedback and Iterative Improvement

The qualitative data from the study supported the findings on the significance of practical applications in the curriculum, with students identifying strengths and areas for enhancement. Twenty-five percent of students noted, "*The simulations and case studies are beneficial; however, there is a need for increased emphasis on writing practice pertinent to our future careers.*" This feedback highlights the necessity for a more thorough approach to ESP, wherein practical activities are integrated with focused practice in essential skills, particularly writing. The student's advocacy for enhanced emphasis on career-specific writing practices indicates a prevalent aspiration to align educational experiences more closely with professional requirements. The integration of case studies and simulations has demonstrated positive impacts; however, incorporating writing exercises designed for real-world contexts would further enhance the learning experience, effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice. This iterative feedback process exemplifies Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987), illustrating how the activity system evolves through participant input to more effectively meet its objectives.

This finding is consistent with research conducted by other scholars in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Belcher (2006) highlights the significance of practical tasks and focused writing practice in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction. The author contends that although simulations and case studies effectively enhance contextual understanding, prioritizing writing skills relevant to students' future professions is essential for adequately preparing them for workplace demands. A study by Evan & John (1998) indicates that ESP curricula must continuously adapt in response to student feedback to meet the evolving demands of the job market. A student participating in the study stated, "*Increased writing assignments that reflect our future job tasks would significantly enhance our preparation.*" This supports the notion that feedback and iterative enhancements are essential for improving the effectiveness of ESP programs, thereby ensuring that students develop the practical skills required for their careers.

The findings align with Activity Theory's emphasis on the dynamic interaction between tools, community, and objectives in learning environments. Interactive and practical activities serve as mediating tools that connect theoretical knowledge to practical use, while group-based activities highlight the importance of collaboration in achieving learning objectives. However, gaps such as underutilization of technology and insufficient practice opportunities reveal areas where the activity

system can be optimized. Addressing these gaps requires collaborative efforts among educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of ESP courses in bridging the gap between academic learning and professional requirements. By analysing students' perspectives, the research provides actionable insights that can inform broader educational practices, including curriculum design, policymaking, and teacher training initiatives. These findings emphasize the need for systemic changes to better align ESP instruction with students' career aspirations and industry demands.

The findings of this study have implications beyond the immediate context of ESP courses. Policymakers can utilize these insights to establish standardized guidelines for credit hour allocation, ensuring sufficient time for skill development. For example, increasing credit hours from two to three per week could provide students with more opportunities to engage in practical tasks, such as professional writing and role-playing activities. Teacher training programs should incorporate modules on integrating advanced technology into ESP instruction, equipping educators with the skills to utilize tools such as augmented reality for tourism students or financial modelling software for economics students.

Activity Theory underpins the proposed recommendations by emphasizing the dynamic interaction between tools, community, and rules in the learning process. For instance, integrating advanced technological tools addresses the tools component by enhancing resource accessibility and practical application. Expanding credit hours aligns the rules with the complexity of ESP objectives while fostering collaborative learning activities and strengthening the community aspect, promoting peer interaction and mutual learning. These adjustments collectively enhance the coherence and effectiveness of ESP programs.

This research offers a student-centred perspective on ESP instruction, addressing gaps in existing literature by combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study's actionable solutions, such as specific recommendations for credit hour allocation and technology integration, provide a practical framework for improving ESP courses. Furthermore, the application of Activity Theory offers a robust theoretical foundation for understanding and addressing systemic challenges in ESP education.

In summary, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning ESP instruction with evolving industry demands and student needs. By implementing the proposed recommendations, institutions can enhance the relevance and impact of their ESP programs, better preparing students for professional success. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of these changes and involve a wider range of stakeholders, including employers, to ensure a holistic approach to ESP curriculum development.

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