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Assessing The Effectiveness Of An ESP Course In Higher Education

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Abstract:
English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses play a crucial role in equipping university students with the language skills required for academic and professional success. This study assesses the effectiveness of ESP courses for nursing students at a university in northern Viet Nam, focusing on their learning experiences, perceptions, and language development. Using surveys and student interviews, the research examines how ESP courses contribute to discipline-specific vocabulary acquisition, professional communication skills, and confidence in clinical interactions. The findings reveal that while ESP courses enhance students' ability to engage in patient communication and medical documentation, challenges such as curriculum relevance, engagement strategies, and real-world application persist. Based on these insights, the study proposes recommendations to improve ESP course design, including more interactive learning methods, simulation-based training, and context-specific language practice. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on ESP curriculum enhancement in healthcare education, ensuring that nursing students develop the linguistic competencies necessary for professional success.

Keyword: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Nursing Students, Higher Education, Curriculum Effectiveness, Vietnam, Language Learning Outcomes.*

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I. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized academic and professional environment, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a crucial component of higher education curricula. Unlike General English courses, ESP is designed to equip students with discipline-specific linguistic skills, enabling them to effectively engage with their academic coursework and future professional fields (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). For students in specialized domains such as medicine, engineering, business, and law, the ability to communicate fluently and accurately in English is essential for accessing technical literature, collaborating in international work settings, and succeeding in professional interactions (Basturkmen, 2010; Hyland, 2006).

Despite its growing importance, the effectiveness of ESP courses in higher education remains a subject of debate. While many students report improvements in technical vocabulary, professional communication, and academic writing, challenges persist regarding curriculum design, teaching methodologies, student engagement, and the real-world applicability of ESP instruction (Flowerdew, 2013; Goh & Burns, 2012). Some studies suggest that ESP curricula often fail to fully align with students' actual linguistic needs in professional settings, leading to gaps in practical communication skills and workplace readiness (Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Additionally, student motivation and engagement can be hindered if ESP courses rely too heavily on traditional, lecture-based instruction rather than interactive, task-based learning approaches (Belcher, 2006; Orr, 2002).

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of ESP courses in higher education by examining student perceptions, learning experiences, and language development. Specifically, the research focuses on nursing students at a university in northern Vietnam, a group for whom effective communication in English is critical for patient interactions, medical documentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration in global healthcare settings. Using surveys and student interviews, the study will explore how ESP courses contribute to discipline-specific vocabulary acquisition, professional communication skills, and confidence in clinical settings.

By analyzing students' perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of their ESP courses, this study seeks to identify gaps in curriculum design, instructional effectiveness, and engagement strategies. The findings will provide practical recommendations for improving ESP course delivery, including the integration of interactive teaching methods, simulation-based learning, and real-world application of medical English. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing development of ESP pedagogy in higher education, ensuring that students receive the necessary linguistic training to succeed in their academic and professional endeavors.

II. Literature Review

ESP curriculum design and needs analysis in higher education

Curriculum design in ESP is a critical factor in determining course effectiveness, as it must align with students' academic and professional language requirements. Scholars have emphasized the importance of needs analysis as a foundational process in ESP course development, ensuring that instructional content meets the linguistic demands of students' fields of study. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) highlight that ESP curriculum design should be data-driven, incorporating insights from students, faculty, and industry professionals to create a course that effectively bridges the gap between university education and workplace communication. Needs analysis is typically conducted through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations to assess students' current proficiency, challenges in professional communication, and expectations for language learning.

Despite the theoretical emphasis on needs-based curriculum design, several studies indicate that many ESP courses in higher education fail to fully address students' actual language requirements. Research by Flowerdew (2013) and Hyland (2006) suggests that ESP curricula often prioritize general linguistic competence over specialized communicative tasks, leading to a misalignment between classroom instruction and real-world professional expectations. Furthermore, Goh and Burns (2012) argue that many ESP programs continue to rely on traditional, grammar-based instruction rather than adopting communicative and task-oriented approaches that reflect students' future workplace needs. These findings suggest that ongoing evaluation and adaptation of ESP curricula are necessary to maintain relevance in rapidly evolving academic and professional fields.

Instructional approaches in ESP: Task-based and communicative strategies

Effective ESP instruction relies on pedagogical frameworks that emphasize real-world language application. Traditionally, ESP courses have been taught through a lexical and grammar-focused approach, where students engage with specialized vocabulary and technical language structures relevant to their fields. However, more recent research advocates for task-based learning (TBL) and communicative language teaching (CLT) as more effective methodologies in ESP education. Ellis (2003) and Basturkmen (2010) argue that TBL enhances students' ability to use English in practical, job-related scenarios, fostering deeper engagement and retention of discipline-specific vocabulary.

Empirical studies support the effectiveness of communicative and task-oriented approaches in ESP. Hyland and Shaw (2016) demonstrate that students who participate in problem-solving tasks, role-playing exercises, and interactive simulations exhibit higher proficiency in professional communication than those who engage solely in lecture-based instruction. Similarly, Belcher (2006) emphasizes the importance of authentic materials, such as case studies, workplace communication samples, and field-specific documents, in ensuring students gain hands-on experience with the type of language they will encounter in their professions. However, despite the benefits of communicative approaches, many university ESP courses still lack interactivity and student-centered learning, limiting their effectiveness in preparing students for professional communication demands.

The integration of technology in ESP instruction has also been widely discussed as a means of enhancing student engagement and language acquisition. Research by Hauck and Stickler (2015) and Liu et al. (2020) highlights the role of digital platforms, AI-powered language assistants, and virtual reality simulations in providing interactive learning experiences that mimic workplace communication. Studies have found that ESP students who engage with technology-enhanced instruction demonstrate improved fluency, listening comprehension, and specialized vocabulary acquisition, particularly in fields such as healthcare and business communication. However, the implementation of digital tools in ESP remains inconsistent, as lack of resources, instructor training, and institutional support continue to pose challenges in many higher education contexts.

Assessment strategies in ESP: Measuring language competence and real-world application

Assessment is a crucial element in evaluating the effectiveness of ESP courses, as it determines whether students have achieved the required communicative competencies for their academic and professional pursuits. Traditional assessments in ESP have often relied on written exams and grammar-based testing, which, while useful for measuring linguistic accuracy, fail to capture students' ability to communicate effectively in real-world settings. Douglas (2000) and Hyland (2011) advocate for the adoption of performance-based assessments, such as simulated workplace interactions, oral presentations, and industry-specific writing tasks, as more accurate measures of ESP proficiency.

A growing body of research suggests that Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) and scenario-based evaluations are particularly effective in assessing ESP learners in specialized fields such as medicine, engineering, and law. These assessments require students to demonstrate their ability to use language in professional contexts, making them more relevant and applicable to their future careers (Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Additionally, Belcher (2006) notes that portfolio-based assessment, where students compile case studies,

self-reflections, and recorded interactions, provides a comprehensive view of their linguistic development over time. Despite these advancements, many university ESP programs continue to rely on standardized language assessments, which do not fully reflect students' ability to apply English in discipline-specific settings.

Student perceptions and learning outcomes in ESP courses

Student engagement and motivation play a key role in determining the success of ESP instruction. Research has shown that students who perceive their ESP courses as relevant and practical are more likely to engage actively and retain learned skills (Goh & Burns, 2012). However, studies also indicate that many students find ESP courses to be overly theoretical and disconnected from their professional realities (Flowerdew, 2013; Orr, 2002).

Student feedback on ESP effectiveness has highlighted several key areas for improvement, including more interactive and industry-relevant content, integration of technology, and increased opportunities for real-world practice (Basturkmen, 2022). Additionally, Liu et al. (2020) found that students prefer blended learning models, where traditional instruction is combined with online platforms, virtual simulations, and digital resources, allowing for more flexible and engaging learning experiences.

Despite these insights, research suggests that institutional constraints, lack of specialized ESP instructors, and limited funding for course development continue to hinder the ability of universities to offer high-quality, student-centered ESP programs. Addressing these issues requires greater interdisciplinary collaboration between language educators, subject specialists, and industry professionals to design more effective and applicable ESP curricula.

In sum, the existing literature on ESP in higher education underscores its importance in equipping students with specialized language skills for academic and professional success. However, challenges in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, and student engagement continue to limit its effectiveness. Research strongly supports task-based learning, communicative teaching approaches, technology integration, and performance-based assessments as key factors in enhancing ESP instruction. Nonetheless, misalignment between ESP curricula and workplace communication needs, along with institutional barriers, remains a concern. Moving forward, universities must prioritize dynamic, needs-driven approaches to ESP course design, ensuring that students develop the linguistic and professional competencies required for their respective fields.

III. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to assess the effectiveness of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in higher education, focusing on nursing students at a university in northern Viet Nam. The participants of this study consist of second-year and third-year nursing students, as they have already been introduced to foundational medical knowledge and are concurrently developing professional communication skills in their coursework. A total of 100 nursing students participated in the survey phase and 30 students are selected for in-depth interviews

The questionnaire used in this study is adapted from established ESP course evaluation frameworks commonly used in higher education research. (Basturkmen, 2010; Hyland, 2006; Long, 2005). To ensure contextual relevance, the questionnaire has been modified to focus on ESP for nursing students in Vietnam, incorporating questions related to individual perspectives on course content relevance, instructional methods, language skill development, and overall engagement with ESP instruction. An overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 confirms high internal consistency, indicating that the questionnaire items reliably measure students' perceptions of ESP effectiveness. The semi-structured interview questions used in this study are adapted from established frameworks in ESP research, drawing from studies that explore student experiences, learning outcomes, and challenges in ESP instruction. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview questions, a systematic validation process is conducted, including expert review, pilot testing, and qualitative reliability analysis. After expert validation, some questions are refined or reworded to ensure greater specificity and alignment with students' actual learning experiences. The collected data is analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative statistical analysis of survey results and qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts, the analysis provides a holistic understanding of the effectiveness of ESP courses in preparing students for academic and professional communication.

IV. Results And Discussion

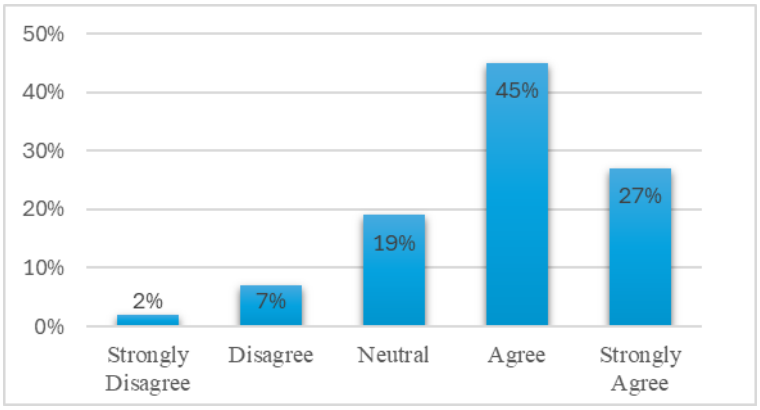
Results from the questionnaire

Table 1 below shows the majority of students (72%) agreed or strongly agreed that the ESP course content was relevant to their academic and professional needs, particularly in terms of medical terminology acquisition and patient communication. A breakdown of responses shows that 45% agreed and 27% strongly

agreed, while 19% remained neutral. However, 9% of students (7% disagreeing and 2% strongly disagreeing) expressed concerns about the curriculum's real-world applicability.

Open-ended responses indicate that while the course effectively introduces key medical English concepts, some students felt it lacked sufficient exposure to authentic healthcare communication scenarios. Suggestions for improvement included integrating more clinical case studies, patient simulation exercises, and interdisciplinary collaboration tasks to enhance practical engagement with medical English.

Table 1. Course Content and Curriculum Relevance



A total of 65% of students rated the teaching methodologies as effective or very effective (40% agreed, 25% strongly agreed), citing the benefits of interactive learning activities such as role-playing, case studies, and multimedia-enhanced lessons. However, 22% of students remained neutral, suggesting that the instructional approach was neither particularly engaging nor ineffective for them.

Notably, 13% of students (10% disagreeing, 3% strongly disagreeing) reported dissatisfaction with the instructional methods, highlighting overreliance on lecture-based teaching, limited opportunities for spoken interaction, and insufficient personalized feedback. Several students suggested a more communicative, student-centered approach with greater use of digital tools, clinical simulations, and teacher-facilitated discussions to enhance engagement and real-world application.

Table 2. Instructional Effectiveness

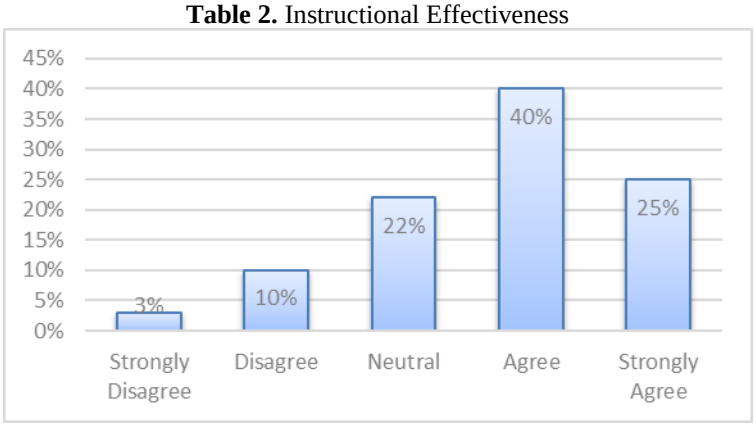
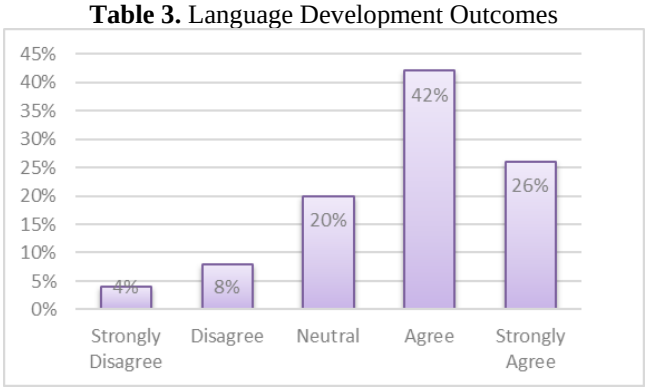


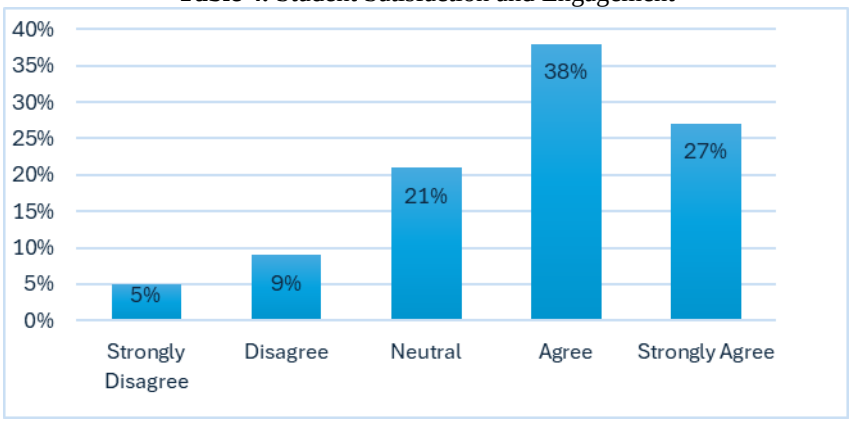
Table 3. Language Development Outcomes



Findings from Table 3 above reveal that 68% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the ESP course improved their vocabulary acquisition, professional communication skills, and confidence in using English in healthcare contexts. Among them, 42% agreed and 26% strongly agreed, indicating that most students experienced noticeable language improvement.

However, 20% of students were neutral, meaning they did not perceive significant progress in their language skills. Additionally, 12% (8% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing) expressed concerns that the course did not adequately prepare them for real-world professional communication. Some students mentioned difficulties in applying medical English in patient interactions and clinical documentation, emphasizing the need for more scenario-based learning, structured speaking practice, and real-world case applications to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Table 4. Student Satisfaction and Engagement



In terms of overall engagement, 65% of students expressed satisfaction with the ESP course (38% agreed, 27% strongly agreed), indicating that they found the course beneficial for improving their English skills and preparing them for professional communication. However, 21% of students were neutral, suggesting that while the course was somewhat helpful, it lacked elements that could make it more engaging and impactful.

A small but notable proportion (14%, with 9% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing) expressed dissatisfaction, citing a lack of interactive elements, passive teaching styles, and assessments that did not accurately reflect real-world English use in nursing. Students recommended more peer interaction, hands-on learning experiences, and tailored assessments that focus on spoken and written communication in clinical settings to make the course more engaging and applicable.

In sum, the questionnaire survey reveals that while the ESP course is generally effective in improving nursing students' English proficiency, there are significant areas that require enhancement. The primary strengths of the course lie in its content relevance, vocabulary development, and structured approach to learning medical English. However, challenges related to instructional methods, speaking practice, and engagement strategies indicate a need for curriculum adjustments that integrate more real-world applications and interactive learning techniques.

Results from the semi-structured interview

The majority of students found the ESP course content relevant to their field, particularly in terms of medical vocabulary acquisition and patient communication. However, a common issue raised was that the course focused too much on theoretical learning without sufficient practical application.

A student with strong English proficiency (B2 level) acknowledged the value of the course but highlighted its limitations:

"I learned a lot of medical terms from the course, and it helped me with understanding patient charts. But when I actually tried to talk to an international patient, I still struggled because we never practiced real conversations."

Another student (A2 level, struggling with spoken communication) expressed frustration with the lack of interactive content:

"We read a lot of texts and memorized medical words, but I feel like I need to practice with real cases. Maybe if we had hospital-based role-plays, I would feel more confident using English in my job."

These responses indicate that while the ESP course succeeds in vocabulary development, it lacks opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in realistic clinical scenarios. Many students suggested integrating patient simulations, case-based discussions, and exposure to real medical settings to make the content more practical.

Regarding instructional effectiveness, students had mixed opinions on the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. While some appreciated the structured approach, others found the instruction too passive and overly focused on lectures and written exercises. A recurring concern was the limited speaking opportunities and lack of personalized feedback from instructors.

A student who enjoyed multimedia-based instruction commented:

"I really liked when the teacher used videos of actual medical staff communicating in English. It gave me an idea of how professionals speak in real situations. But we need more of that, not just written exercises."

On the other hand, a student who felt disengaged stated:

"The class feels too much like a traditional English course, just with medical words. There is not enough interaction. I wish we could do more case-based speaking activities instead of just reading texts and answering comprehension questions."

These responses emphasize the need for more interactive teaching strategies. While students responded well to multimedia-based lessons, they felt restricted by the lack of hands-on practice and teacher engagement. Recommendations included more role-playing, peer discussions, and real-time feedback on communication skills

In terms of Language development outcomes, when asked about the impact of the ESP course on language skill development, students generally reported improvement in understanding medical English and writing patient-related documents. However, confidence in spoken communication remained a major concern, particularly in handling patient conversations and interdisciplinary teamwork.

A student who experienced significant improvement in writing but struggled with speaking explained:

"I can now write medical notes much better than before, and I understand patient reports easily. But when I have to explain a medical condition to a patient, I panic. I need more real-time practice speaking in English."

Another student highlighted difficulties in spontaneous conversation:

"I know the words, but when I have to answer a patient quickly, I hesitate. We never had enough speaking drills where we could practice responding to real patient questions."

These insights suggest that ESP courses are effective in developing passive language skills (reading and writing) but insufficient in fostering active skills (speaking and listening). Many students requested more role-playing, real-time patient simulations, and interactive speaking exercises to bridge this gap.

Student engagement and motivation depended largely on the teaching style and classroom activities. Those who experienced interactive and technology-supported lessons reported higher satisfaction, while those who found the course too lecture-heavy felt disengaged.

A highly motivated student who enjoyed the group-based learning format remarked:

"I really liked working in groups during case studies. It helped me learn how to explain things better. I wish we had more group discussions and peer feedback activities."

In contrast, a student who found the course repetitive and passive expressed dissatisfaction:

"It's just memorizing vocabulary and filling in blanks. That's not how I'm going to use English in my job. I want to practice real conversations with patients and doctors, not just take grammar tests."

These findings indicate that engagement is closely linked to teaching methods. Students who experienced real-world applications of ESP concepts found the course more useful, while those who only engaged in traditional textbook-based activities reported lower motivation and engagement.

Discussion

The findings from both the questionnaire survey and student interviews provide a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of ESP courses in higher education, particularly for nursing students. The discussion explores key themes emerging from the results, comparing them to previous research on ESP instruction, and identifies areas for improvement. The results indicate that while ESP courses are largely effective in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and written communication, there are notable challenges regarding real-world applicability, instructional effectiveness, and student engagement.

The survey results revealed that 72% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the ESP course content was relevant to their academic and professional needs, with students acknowledging the importance of discipline-specific vocabulary and medical documentation training. However, qualitative findings from student interviews provided further nuance, highlighting a significant gap between classroom learning and real-world communication demands.

Several students expressed concerns about the theoretical nature of the curriculum, noting that while they could understand medical texts, they struggled to use English effectively in patient interactions. This aligns with findings by Flowerdew (2013) and Hyland (2006), who argue that ESP courses often prioritize terminology memorization over communicative competence. Similar to Basturkmen's (2010) assertion that ESP curricula must balance academic and occupational communication needs, students in this study suggested integrating

more scenario-based learning, clinical case studies, and exposure to authentic professional discourse to enhance practical application.

The findings suggest that while curriculum content meets students' linguistic expectations, it requires pedagogical adjustments to ensure alignment with workplace communication challenges. In line with Hutchinson & Waters (1987), the study reinforces the importance of ongoing needs analysis to refine ESP curricula based on industry demands.

Besides, the study found mixed opinions on the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. While 65% of survey respondents rated instruction as effective, student interviews indicated that passive teaching methods (e.g., lecture-heavy instruction) reduced engagement and limited language acquisition opportunities.

Many students praised multimedia resources and structured lessons, yet they reported a lack of hands-on practice, particularly in oral communication exercises. This supports Dudley-Evans & St John's (1998) assertion that ESP instruction should prioritize authentic communication experiences over passive knowledge transfer. Additionally, research by Ellis (2003) on task-based learning (TBL) in ESP highlights that students acquire language skills more effectively when engaged in real-world, problem-solving activities, a perspective strongly echoed in student responses.

The qualitative findings revealed that students who were dissatisfied with instruction desired more role-playing, real-world case simulations, and feedback-driven learning experiences. These recommendations align with Hyland & Shaw (2016), who argue that ESP instruction must transition from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches, emphasizing task-based, experiential learning methods. The study reinforces the need for interactive, scenario-based pedagogies that encourage active participation, professional discourse engagement, and communication skills development.

Regarding language development outcomes, a significant portion (68%) of students reported that the ESP course enhanced their vocabulary acquisition, medical writing, and reading comprehension skills. However, the 12% of students who disagreed and qualitative feedback from interviews highlight a critical issue: the lack of speaking confidence and real-time communication ability.

Students frequently reported that they struggled with spontaneous patient interactions, despite understanding medical terminology and written communication formats. This aligns with Orr (2002), who found that ESP learners often develop strong technical vocabulary but lack oral fluency due to limited conversational exposure. Research by Goh & Burns (2012) similarly emphasizes that ESP courses should integrate reflective speaking activities to bridge the gap between knowledge acquisition and communicative competence.

The results suggest that while ESP courses in higher education effectively enhance technical language proficiency, they fall short in developing students' ability to use English dynamically in professional contexts. The findings highlight an urgent need for structured speaking drills, real-world oral practice, and pronunciation coaching, aligning with Douglas (2000), who advocates for performance-based ESP assessments that measure real-world communicative competence rather than passive language knowledge.

In terms of student satisfaction and engagement, while 65% of students reported satisfaction with the ESP course, a notable 14% dissatisfaction rate highlights concerns about traditional teaching methods, repetitive exercises, and assessment structures that do not reflect professional communication challenges.

Students who engaged in interactive learning activities, such as group case discussions and role-playing, found the course more engaging and beneficial. However, students who experienced predominantly textbook-based, memorization-heavy lessons expressed boredom, disengagement, and lack of confidence in language application. These findings are consistent with Belcher (2006), who argues that ESP instruction should be participatory and student-driven rather than text-heavy and teacher-centered.

Assessment methods were another area of concern. Many students stated that exams focused too much on grammar and vocabulary recall, rather than evaluating their ability to communicate effectively in real-world settings. This aligns with research by Hyland (2011), which emphasizes that ESP assessments must measure practical language competence, including oral fluency, written clarity, and professional communication strategies. Several students suggested integrating oral assessments, medical report writing exercises, and simulated consultations to enhance authenticity and relevance in evaluation processes.

The findings reinforce the importance of engagement-oriented teaching and assessment methods, suggesting that ESP courses in higher education should incorporate more dynamic, workplace-relevant evaluation strategies to ensure students are well-prepared for their careers.

V. Conclusion

The study confirms that while ESP courses effectively build vocabulary and writing proficiency, they are less effective in developing speaking confidence and real-world communication skills. Both quantitative and qualitative findings highlight the importance of curriculum innovation, interactive teaching methods, and assessment reform to ensure ESP instruction aligns with the demands of the professional world.

By shifting towards more communicative, practical, and engagement-driven ESP pedagogies, higher education institutions can better equip students with the language skills necessary for success in globalized professional environments. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of ESP instruction on workplace performance, ensuring that ESP courses continue to evolve to meet students' professional communication needs.

This study underscores the need for practical, communicative, and student-centered ESP instruction to enhance both linguistic proficiency and real-world application. ESP curricula should integrate case studies, task-based learning, and simulations to bridge the gap between theory and workplace communication. Teaching should shift from lecture-based methods to interactive, technology-enhanced strategies, while assessments should prioritize real-world proficiency through oral exams, role-plays, and workplace writing tasks. Higher education institutions must continuously adapt ESP programs to ensure students are professionally and linguistically prepared for global careers.

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