



## Challenges in Designing and Developing English for Specific Purposes in ELT

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><b>Received:</b> 2026-05-16 <b>Revised:</b> 2026-05-20 <b>Accepted:</b> 2026-06-06</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>English For Specific Purposes, ESP, English Language Teaching, Learner Needs, Literature Review, ESP Challenges</i></p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10638</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Ester Kinasih Silalahi <a href="mailto:est.kinasiih@gmail.com">est.kinasiih@gmail.com</a> English Language Study Program, Faculty of Language and Arts, State University of Medan</p>	<p><i>This article reviews and discusses the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly focusing on learner needs, teacher and learner roles, instructional challenges, and current pedagogical developments in ESP instruction. The study employed a literature review method by analyzing previous studies published between 2016 and 2025 from various scholarly sources related to ESP implementation in educational contexts. The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring issues concerning curriculum development, instructional materials, teacher preparation, learner challenges, and institutional support. The review reveals that ESP plays an important role in developing learners' professional and academic communication skills through contextualized and learner-centered language instruction. However, ESP implementation continues to encounter several challenges, including limited teacher training, insufficient instructional materials, unequal learner proficiency, curriculum constraints, and technological adaptation issues. The findings also indicate that the integration of blended learning, project-based learning, and digital technologies has significant potential to improve ESP instruction and learner engagement. This article highlights the importance of stronger theoretical grounding, continuous teacher professional development, learner-centered curriculum design, and institutional support to ensure effective ESP implementation in contemporary educational contexts.</i></p>

## **1. Introduction**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching and learning of English that is specifically designed to meet learners' academic or professional needs (Fitria, 2019). The term "specific" in ESP emphasizes the particular purpose for which learners study English, enabling them to develop language skills that are directly relevant to their fields of study or occupations (Hans & Hans, 2015). Unlike General English, ESP integrates language instruction with discipline-specific content, such as business, tourism, medicine, information technology, and other professional domains. This integration allows learners to apply English meaningfully in real-world contexts while strengthening both their language competence and subject knowledge.

The development of ESP is closely associated with the growing demand for English as a global lingua franca in academic and professional communication. As international interaction in business, technology, education, and government continues to expand, learners are increasingly required to demonstrate not only general English proficiency but also the ability to perform occupation-specific tasks using English effectively. Consequently, ESP emphasizes practical communication skills that support learners' future careers and professional responsibilities.

One of the central principles of ESP is needs analysis, which serves as the foundation for curriculum design, material development, and instructional practices. Through needs analysis, educators identify the language skills, terminology, and communicative competencies required by learners in specific professional or academic settings. This approach reflects the framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters, which highlights that language learning should be based on learners' actual purposes and target situations. Therefore, ESP instruction focuses not only on grammar and linguistic knowledge but also on meaningful communication relevant to learners' fields.

In ESP classrooms, both teachers and learners play significant roles in achieving learning objectives. Teachers are expected to facilitate contextualized learning experiences and connect language instruction with professional content, while learners actively apply their prior knowledge and experiences to support language acquisition. This contextualized learning process often increases learner motivation because students can immediately recognize the relevance of English to their academic and career goals.

Despite its importance, ESP implementation still faces several challenges. Limited instructional resources, insufficient teacher preparation, curriculum constraints, and mismatches between teaching materials and learners' professional needs remain common issues in many educational contexts. In some cases, institutions also encounter difficulties in providing specialized ESP programs that adequately address diverse learner backgrounds and workplace demands.

These conditions suggest that effective ESP instruction requires not only appropriate curriculum design but also institutional support and continuous adaptation to evolving professional needs.

Therefore, this article discusses the implementation of ESP in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly focusing on learner needs, teacher and learner roles, instructional challenges, and the relevance of ESP in supporting professional communication skills in various academic and occupational contexts.

## 2. Method

This study employed a literature review method to analyze previous studies related to the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly focusing on instructional challenges, teaching practices, and institutional issues in ESP contexts. A literature review was selected because this article aims to synthesize and critically discuss existing scholarly findings rather than collect primary empirical data (Anthony, 2018).

The selection process applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed studies. The inclusion criteria were: (1) articles discussing ESP implementation in educational contexts, (2) peer-reviewed journal articles, (3) studies published in English, and (4) articles published between 2016 and 2025. Meanwhile, articles unrelated to ESP pedagogy, duplicated studies, and non-academic sources were excluded from the review process (Rahman, 2021).

The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher identified recurring themes and categorized them into several major issues, including teacher-related challenges, learner-related challenges, instructional material limitations, curriculum adaptation, and institutional support in ESP implementation. The findings from the selected studies were then synthesized descriptively to provide a comprehensive discussion regarding current issues and developments in ESP instruction (Tsou & Chen, 2019).

## 3. Results & Discussion

### *The Characteristics of English for Specific Purposes*

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is widely recognized as a learner-centered approach that focuses on developing English language skills according to learners' academic and professional needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasized that ESP is not defined by a specific type of language or teaching methodology, but rather by the learners' reasons for learning English. This perspective demonstrates that ESP instruction must be designed based on learners' target situations, occupational demands, and communicative purposes. Consequently, ESP differs significantly from General English because it integrates language learning with discipline-specific knowledge and professional contexts.

The development of ESP has become increasingly important due to globalization and the expansion of international communication across various sectors such as business, tourism, medicine, engineering, technology, and government. In professional settings, English is frequently used as the primary medium for communication, collaboration, negotiation, and information exchange. As a result, learners are expected not only to understand general English structures but also to apply specialized terminology and professional communication skills relevant to their fields.

A major characteristic of ESP is the implementation of needs analysis in curriculum development. Through needs analysis, educators identify learners' target needs, learning needs, and professional objectives before designing instructional materials and classroom activities. This process aligns with Needs Analysis Theory, which highlights the importance of aligning language instruction with learners' real-life communication requirements. Therefore, ESP courses are generally more goal-oriented, practical, and contextually relevant compared to traditional language instruction.

Furthermore, ESP promotes contextualized learning by connecting language acquisition with authentic professional situations. Learners are exposed to tasks such as presentations, report writing, negotiations, technical discussions, and workplace communication practices. This contextual learning environment supports Constructivist Learning Theory, which suggests that learners construct knowledge more effectively when learning activities are connected to meaningful experiences and practical applications.

However, despite its learner-centered orientation, ESP implementation still faces several conceptual and practical limitations. In many educational contexts, ESP courses continue to emphasize grammar exercises and vocabulary memorization rather than communicative competence and professional interaction. This imbalance suggests that some ESP programs have not fully implemented authentic task-based learning approaches that reflect workplace communication realities.

### *The Advantages of English for Specific Purposes*

ESP offers several significant advantages for learners, institutions, and professional development. One of the most important benefits is learning efficiency. Since ESP courses are specifically designed to meet learners' academic or occupational needs, students can focus directly on language skills that are relevant to their future careers. This targeted approach reduces unnecessary learning content and allows learners to develop practical communication abilities more efficiently.

Another important advantage is the enhancement of learner motivation. Students enrolled in ESP courses often demonstrate higher levels of engagement because they can immediately recognize the relevance of English to their academic

disciplines and professional aspirations. Learners in business, engineering, tourism, law, and medical programs frequently perceive English not merely as a compulsory academic subject but as an essential professional skill. These findings indicate that contextualized language instruction can positively influence learners' attitudes toward English learning.

ESP also contributes to the development of professional communication competence. Unlike General English courses, ESP instruction exposes learners to authentic terminology, workplace communication practices, and professional discourse patterns. Students are therefore able to develop practical language skills required for presentations, meetings, negotiations, technical documentation, and professional interactions. This practical orientation strengthens learners' readiness for workplace communication and international collaboration.

Additionally, ESP supports independent and lifelong learning. Because learners are encouraged to connect English with their disciplinary knowledge, they become more active participants in the learning process. Learners frequently develop self-directed learning strategies by accessing authentic materials such as professional journals, online resources, workplace documents, and digital communication platforms. This process demonstrates that ESP can support continuous language development beyond classroom instruction.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ESP depends heavily on curriculum quality, teacher competence, institutional support, and the availability of authentic learning materials. Without these elements, ESP courses may fail to achieve their intended practical and communicative objectives.

### *Teacher Roles in ESP Instruction*

Teachers play multidimensional roles within ESP instruction. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), ESP teachers function not only as instructors but also as course designers, collaborators, researchers, facilitators, and assessors. This multidimensional role reflects the complexity of ESP teaching because instructors are expected to integrate language instruction with discipline-specific communication needs.

As instructors, ESP teachers are responsible for facilitating meaningful learning experiences that connect English language skills with professional tasks and authentic communication contexts. Teachers are expected to create learner-centered environments where students can practice language through discussions, presentations, simulations, and collaborative activities. This approach aligns with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes the importance of meaningful communication and real-world tasks in language learning.

In addition to teaching responsibilities, ESP educators frequently act as course designers and material developers. Since commercially available textbooks may not always correspond to learners' professional needs, teachers often adapt instructional materials or create customized resources. This responsibility requires teachers to understand both linguistic knowledge and discipline-specific

content. Consequently, ESP instructors must maintain collaboration with subject specialists and industry practitioners to ensure the relevance of classroom instruction.

ESP teachers also function as researchers who continuously conduct needs analysis and evaluate learners' progress. Teachers often investigate students' academic backgrounds, workplace expectations, and communication difficulties before designing classroom activities. This process demonstrates that ESP instruction requires ongoing reflection, curriculum adaptation, and pedagogical flexibility.

Despite these important roles, many ESP teachers face professional identity challenges. In many institutions, instructors possess backgrounds in general English teaching but have limited expertise in specialized professional disciplines. This situation often creates uncertainty regarding instructional approaches, material selection, and classroom communication practices. As a result, teachers may struggle to balance linguistic instruction with professional content delivery effectively.

#### *Challenges Faced by ESP Teachers*

One of the most significant challenges in ESP instruction is the limited availability of specialized teacher training programs. Many educators enter ESP classrooms without sufficient preparation in needs analysis, curriculum design, or discipline-specific communication practices. Consequently, teachers may experience difficulties when teaching technical terminology or addressing professional communication tasks beyond their academic expertise.

Another major issue concerns instructional materials. Many ESP textbooks continue to emphasize vocabulary exercises and reading comprehension while offering limited opportunities for communicative interaction, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. Such materials often fail to reflect authentic workplace communication demands, reducing learners' opportunities to develop practical professional language skills.

Institutional constraints also contribute significantly to the challenges of ESP implementation. In many educational settings, ESP programs receive limited funding, insufficient classroom resources, and restricted instructional time. Large class sizes and overloaded curricula further reduce teachers' ability to provide individualized instruction and communicative practice opportunities.

A significant concern involves the lack of theoretical consistency in ESP curriculum development. Some institutions treat ESP as a practical language support course, while others position it as a comprehensive academic discipline. This inconsistency creates confusion regarding course objectives, instructional priorities, and assessment standards. Consequently, ESP implementation may vary considerably across institutions and educational programs.

The rapid development of technology presents both opportunities and challenges for ESP teachers. Digital transformation has introduced blended learning models, online communication platforms, and AI-assisted language learning tools that can support independent learning and authentic communication practice. However, many teachers lack sufficient digital literacy and technological training to integrate these innovations effectively into classroom instruction. Furthermore, unequal access to technology remains a serious issue in many developing educational contexts.

### *Learner Challenges in ESP Contexts*

Learners within ESP classrooms encounter numerous difficulties that influence their language development and learning experiences. One common challenge is the variation in English proficiency levels among students within the same academic program. Learners from language-related disciplines generally possess stronger English foundations compared to students from technical or scientific fields. This disparity often affects classroom participation, interaction quality, and collaborative learning effectiveness.

Another important challenge involves the mastery of specialized vocabulary and technical terminology. Many learners struggle to understand professional language because such terminology is rarely encountered in everyday communication. As a result, students may memorize terms temporarily for examinations without fully understanding their contextual and professional applications. This issue demonstrates the importance of integrating authentic professional tasks into ESP instruction.

Many learners also experience difficulties in applying English communicatively despite possessing theoretical knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Within ESP classrooms, students frequently demonstrate stronger reading skills compared to speaking and listening abilities. This imbalance often results from instructional practices that prioritize grammar exercises and written assessments while providing limited opportunities for oral communication practice.

Overdependence on dictionaries and translation strategies constitutes another common learner challenge. Rather than developing contextual interpretation skills, students often rely excessively on direct translation when encountering unfamiliar terminology. This dependence may limit learners' communicative fluency and reduce their confidence in handling authentic professional communication tasks independently.

Motivational factors also influence learner performance in ESP contexts. Although many students recognize the importance of English for future employment, some learners still perceive ESP as academically difficult and professionally demanding. Anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes may discourage students from actively participating in classroom interaction and communication activities.

### *Pedagogical Innovations and Future Directions in ESP*

To address the challenges associated with ESP implementation, educational institutions and instructors must adopt more innovative and learner-centered pedagogical approaches. One promising strategy is the integration of blended learning and digital technology into ESP instruction. Online learning platforms, virtual simulations, interactive communication tools, and AI-assisted language learning applications can provide learners with greater access to authentic materials and flexible learning opportunities.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) also offers valuable potential for ESP instruction. Through project-based activities, learners engage in collaborative problem-solving tasks that simulate professional workplace situations. This approach encourages learners to apply English meaningfully while developing critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills relevant to their future careers.

Another important future direction involves strengthening collaboration between educational institutions and industry professionals. Partnerships with workplaces, companies, and professional organizations can help ensure that ESP curricula remain aligned with current industry communication demands. Such collaboration may also provide learners with authentic workplace experiences and opportunities to practice professional English communication directly.

Continuous teacher professional development is equally essential for improving ESP quality. Institutions should provide training programs focusing on needs analysis, digital pedagogy, material development, and discipline-specific communication practices. Teacher preparedness significantly influences the effectiveness of ESP instruction and learners' overall language development.

Finally, ESP curriculum development should remain flexible and adaptive to evolving professional and technological changes. The growing influence of globalization, artificial intelligence, and digital communication requires continuous curriculum evaluation and innovation. Therefore, future ESP programs should prioritize communicative competence, technological literacy, critical thinking, and authentic professional communication to prepare learners for increasingly dynamic global workplaces.

## **4. Conclusion**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays an important role in supporting learners' academic and professional communication needs through contextualized and learner-centered language instruction. Unlike General English, ESP integrates language learning with discipline-specific content, allowing learners to develop practical communication skills relevant to their future careers. The discussion demonstrates that ESP offers several advantages, including increased learning efficiency, stronger learner motivation, and improved professional communication competence. In addition, ESP teachers perform multidimensional roles as

instructors, course designers, researchers, collaborators, and assessors to ensure that learning activities remain relevant to learners' needs and workplace demands.

However, the implementation of ESP continues to face various challenges related to teacher preparation, instructional materials, learner proficiency, institutional support, and technological readiness. These findings suggest that effective ESP instruction requires continuous needs analysis, authentic learning materials, innovative teaching strategies, and integration of digital technologies such as blended learning and AI-assisted learning tools. Therefore, collaboration among educators, institutions, and industry professionals is essential to develop ESP programs that are adaptive, practical, and relevant to contemporary professional communication demands.

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