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ASSESSING SOFT SKILLS IN ESP: EVALUATING COMMUNICATION AND TEAMWORK IN PHD ENGLISH COURSES¹

Abstract: This study investigates the integration of soft skills, specifically communication and teamwork, in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses designed for PhD students. Soft skills are increasingly recognized as critical for success in both academic and professional contexts, yet many ESP courses continue to focus solely on technical language and discipline-specific terminology. As a result, PhD students often lack the necessary skills for effective collaboration and professional interactions. The research addresses two central questions: (1) To what extent are communication and teamwork skills incorporated into PhD-level ESP courses? and (2) What teaching methods are most effective in fostering the development of these skills? The study hypothesizes that current ESP courses inadequately emphasize soft skills development. It further suggests that implementing targeted teaching strategies and assessments will enhance students' proficiency in communication and teamwork, ultimately fostering better collaboration, research dissemination, and networking. Adopting an exploratory qualitative methodology, the study collects data through interviews with a sample of 10 PhD students from diverse academic disciplines enrolled in ESP courses at the University Center of Barika. The findings indicate that communication and teamwork are insufficiently addressed in the current ESP curriculum, leaving students feeling unprepared for the interpersonal demands of academic and professional environments. Students highlighted the need for more interactive activities, such as group projects, role-playing, and peer feedback, to strengthen these skills. The results underscore the importance of revising ESP curricula to include tailored instructional methods, ensuring PhD students are equipped with the essential soft skills for their careers.

Keywords: Communication, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), PhD students, soft skills, teamwork

ÉVALUATION DES COMPÉTENCES TRANSVERSALES DANS LES COURS D'ANGLAIS À OBJECTIFS SPÉCIFIQUES : ANALYSE DE LA COMMUNICATION ET DU TRAVAIL D'ÉQUIPE CHEZ LES DOCTORANTS

Résumé : Cette étude examine l'intégration des compétences transversales, en particulier la communication et le travail d'équipe, dans les cours d'anglais à objectifs spécifiques (ESP) destinés aux doctorants. Les compétences transversales sont de plus en plus reconnues comme essentielles pour réussir dans les contextes académiques et professionnels. Cependant, de nombreux cours d'ESP restent centrés sur le langage technique et la terminologie propre aux disciplines. En conséquence, les doctorants manquent souvent des compétences nécessaires pour collaborer efficacement et interagir dans des contextes professionnels. La recherche aborde deux questions principales : (1) Dans quelle mesure les compétences en communication et en travail d'équipe sont-elles intégrées dans les cours d'ESP pour doctorants ? et (2) Quelles méthodes pédagogiques sont les plus efficaces pour développer

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ces compétences ? L'étude émet l'hypothèse que les cours d'ESP actuels mettent insuffisamment l'accent sur le développement des compétences transversales. En adoptant une méthodologie qualitative exploratoire, l'étude recueille des données à travers des entretiens avec un échantillon de 10 doctorants issus de diverses disciplines académiques inscrits dans des cours d'ESP au Centre Universitaire de Barika. Les résultats révèlent que la communication et le travail d'équipe sont insuffisamment abordés dans le programme ESP actuel, laissant les étudiants mal préparés aux exigences interpersonnelles des environnements académiques et professionnels. Les étudiants ont souligné la nécessité d'activités plus interactives, telles que les projets de groupe, les jeux de rôle et les retours entre pairs, pour renforcer ces compétences. Les résultats mettent en évidence l'importance de réviser les programmes ESP afin d'y intégrer des méthodes pédagogiques adaptées, garantissant que les doctorants soient équipés des compétences transversales essentielles pour leur carrière.

Mots-clés: Communication, anglais à objectifs spécifiques (ESP), doctorants, compétences transversales, travail d'équipe

1. Introduction

In today's globalized academic and professional landscape, the ability to communicate effectively and collaborate with others has become essential for success, particularly for PhD students preparing to engage in research, teaching, and interdisciplinary projects. While English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are designed to equip students with the language skills needed for their academic and professional contexts, these courses often focus narrowly on technical language and academic writing, overlooking the development of critical soft skills such as communication and teamwork (Yakisik, 2023).

The demand for these skills is growing, as PhD students are increasingly expected to present their research at conferences, participate in international collaborations, and publish in high-impact journals. However, without adequate training in communication and teamwork, students may struggle to meet these expectations effectively (Horta & Santos, 2015). Recognizing this gap, the present study explores the integration of soft skills into PhD-level ESP courses, focusing on two key areas: oral communication and teamwork skills. This research addresses two central questions:

- 1) To what extent are communication and teamwork skills incorporated into PhD-level ESP courses?
- 2) What teaching methods are most effective in developing these skills?

The study hypothesizes that current ESP courses insufficiently address these skills and that incorporating targeted teaching strategies—such as role-playing, group projects, and simulations—can significantly enhance students' proficiency. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, this research gathers insights from PhD students enrolled in ESP courses at the University Center of Barika.

Findings aim to identify curricular gaps and propose actionable recommendations to enhance ESP programs, preparing students not only for linguistic challenges but also for the communicative and collaborative demands of academia.

2. Literature Review

The integration of soft skills into education has gained increasing attention as these competencies are recognized as essential for 21st-century career readiness and success (Ngo,



2024). Soft skills, often defined as interpersonal, communicative, and transferable skills, play a pivotal role in complementing hard skills—discipline-specific technical and academic expertise. Research suggests that while hard skills contribute to approximately 15% of career success, soft skills account for the remaining 85% (Cimatti, 2016; Laker & Powell, 2011), highlighting the importance of a balanced skillset.

2.1. Soft Skills in Education and Employment

Soft skills are critical for employability, with employers prioritizing attributes such as effective communication, resourcefulness, ethical behavior, and a positive attitude (Jabri, 2023). These skills are referred to by various terms across countries: *key competencies* or *employability skills* in Australia, *key skills* in the United Kingdom, and *workplace know-how* in the United States (Boroujeni & Fard, 2013). Despite differences in terminology, the consensus is that integrating soft skills into higher education curricula enhances employability and improves overall quality of life (Konobeiev, 2022).

Recent studies emphasize that soft skills not only influence professional performance but also significantly impact personal development and social adaptability (Lippman et al., 2015). Attributes such as adaptability, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence enable individuals to navigate complex workplace dynamics effectively. These skills are particularly relevant in the context of globalization, where employees often interact with culturally diverse teams and face rapidly evolving work environments. Educational institutions must align their programs with these realities by incorporating activities that simulate real-world professional scenarios, such as case studies, internships, and peer collaboration (Sharma, 2020).

To address industry expectations, educational systems must balance the development of technical knowledge with higher-order soft skills. Curricular and extracurricular interventions, including role-playing, teamwork exercises, and professional communication practice, can effectively bridge this gap (Kenton, 2021). By fostering both technical and interpersonal skills, students are better equipped for workforce readiness, as well as for fostering stronger social and cultural relationships (Lippman et al., 2015). Embedding soft skills into education also benefits society, cultivating ethical and empathetic individuals who contribute positively to their communities.

2.2. The Role of ESP in Higher Education

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are integral to higher education, offering students tailored language training that aligns with their academic and professional needs (Alshayban, 2022). ESP emphasizes the integration of language skills with content knowledge, enabling learners to develop discursive competence specific to their fields (Mao & Zhou, 2024; Sukying et al., 2023). Needs analysis plays a key role in designing ESP curricula, ensuring that courses address the precise language and interaction skills required within particular disciplines (Ahmed et al., 2023).

In recent years, ESP programs have evolved to address the growing demands of globalized work and academic environments. Methodologies such as task-based learning and content-based instruction are particularly effective in preparing students for academic and



professional challenges. By tailoring courses to address the specific needs of students in fields such as engineering, medicine, or business, ESP ensures that learners acquire not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of professional norms and practices (Le et al., 2021). For bilingual and multilingual students, who often face additional challenges, ESP courses serve as a bridge to enhance their English proficiency and help them navigate competitive environments (Farea & Singh, 2024).

Moreover, ESP courses often incorporate multimodal teaching approaches, such as the use of digital tools, video simulations, and collaborative projects, to enhance learning outcomes. These methods help students engage with course materials in diverse ways, fostering deeper comprehension and practical application of skills. Thus, ESP extends beyond language acquisition, equipping students with professional norms and communicative strategies essential for success.

2.3. Soft Skills in ESP Contexts

The inclusion of soft skills within ESP courses can significantly enhance students' readiness for global academic and professional engagement. Soft skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, and intercultural fluency are increasingly vital in an interconnected world (Claxton et al., 2016; Wróblewski & Petrenko, 2021). These competencies complement ESP's focus on professional communication, making courses more holistic and relevant to students' real-world needs (Muhammad & Raof, 2020).

Incorporating frameworks for soft skills development into ESP courses ensures that students are prepared not only to meet the linguistic demands of their disciplines but also to succeed in collaborative and dynamic environments. Activities such as collaborative writing, peer review, and role-playing enable students to practice these skills in simulated professional settings, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world applications (Mousavi et al., 2019).

Additionally, intercultural competence is vital as students navigate international collaborations. By incorporating global awareness into ESP curricula, educators can prepare students for diverse, multicultural environments (Hofstede & Minkov, 2020). Through strategic curriculum design and innovative methodologies, ESP courses can foster well-rounded, adaptable graduates capable of thriving in dynamic professional settings.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a structured interview comprising four sections, each with two items aimed at exploring PhD students' experiences with communication and teamwork in ESP courses. The structure ensured consistency and relevance to the research questions:

- a. **General Questions About ESP Courses:** This section aims to gather insights into the students' overall experience and perceptions of their ESP courses.
- b. **Focus on Communication Skills:** This section investigates how well the ESP courses address communication skills and their relevance to academic and professional settings.



- c. **Focus on Teamwork Skills:** This section explores the extent to which ESP courses incorporate teamwork activities and how these contribute to developing collaboration skills.
- d. **Course Evaluation and Improvement:** This section assesses the students' evaluation of their ESP courses in addressing soft skills and solicits suggestions for improvement.

Ten PhD students from the University Center of Barika participated in the study, providing insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their ESP course design.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Responses were thematically coded to identify recurring themes and draw structured conclusions across the four interview sections.

Section 01: General Questions about ESP Courses

Item 1: Can you describe your experience with the ESP course you are currently enrolled in?

Most participants described the ESP courses as overly focused on grammar and terminology. While they found the courses moderately useful for improving their understanding of subject-specific terminology, they expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of focus on practical language skills.

- **Answer's Example:** *"The course helps with vocabulary, but it doesn't teach us how to actually use the language in discussions or presentations."*

Item 2: What aspects of the ESP course do you find most beneficial for your academic or professional needs?

Students identified learning technical terms and academic writing skills as the most beneficial aspects. However, they noted that these elements alone do not fully address their professional or academic needs, particularly in contexts requiring interaction or collaboration.

- **Answer's Example:** *"The writing tasks are helpful for publishing papers, but speaking and interacting in academic settings are not covered enough."*

Section 02: Focus on Communication Skills

Item 3: How well do you think the ESP course helps you improve your communication skills in English, especially for academic or professional contexts?

All participants agreed that their ESP courses did not effectively improve their oral communication skills. Activities were limited to reading and writing, with minimal opportunities for speaking or practicing professional interactions.

- **Answer's Example:** *"We don't practice speaking at all. I feel unprepared for conferences or even discussions with colleagues."*

Item 4: Are there specific activities or assignments in the course that have enhanced your ability to communicate effectively in academic or professional settings?



Students reported that few, if any, course activities directly addressed communication skills. They suggested that role-playing or simulated professional scenarios, such as research presentations or academic discussions, would be beneficial but were not part of the current curriculum.

- **Answer's Example:** *"The course lacks activities that make us speak or present ideas. We only focus on grammar exercises."*

Section 03: Focus on Teamwork Skills

Item 5: How often does the ESP course include activities that require teamwork or collaboration with other students?

Most participants noted that teamwork activities were either rare or entirely absent from their ESP courses. The courses were predominantly individual-focused, with few opportunities for collaboration.

- **Answer's Example:** *"There are no group projects or teamwork exercises. We work alone most of the time."*

Item 6: Can you provide examples of group projects or activities in the course that helped you improve your teamwork skills?

Those who mentioned group activities described them as minimal and ineffective, often limited to sharing resources rather than true collaboration. Students expressed a need for more structured and meaningful teamwork exercises.

- **Answer's Example:** *"The teamwork tasks, if they exist, don't help us learn how to collaborate or solve problems together."*

Section 04: Course Evaluation and Improvement

Item 7: Do you think the ESP course adequately addresses the soft skills (communication and teamwork) needed for your academic and professional development? Why or why not?

Participants unanimously agreed that the ESP courses do not adequately address soft skills, particularly communication and teamwork. They emphasized that these skills are critical for academic and professional success but are often overlooked.

- **Answer's Example:** *"The course is too focused on grammar and technical terms. It doesn't prepare us for real-life interactions."*

Item 8: What improvements or changes would you suggest for the ESP course to better integrate communication and teamwork skills?

Suggestions for improvement included integrating more interactive teaching methods, such as:

- Role-playing scenarios for presentations or meetings.
- Group projects requiring problem-solving and collaboration.



- Simulations of professional contexts like conferences or peer reviews.
Students stressed the importance of balancing technical language learning with soft skills development.
- o **Answer's Example:** *"We need courses that teach us how to present, collaborate, and communicate professionally, not just write papers."*

The study reveals significant gaps in the current ESP curriculum regarding communication and teamwork skills. While students appreciate the focus on technical language, they report that the courses fail to equip them with the practical skills necessary for effective collaboration and professional communication. This highlights a pressing need for curriculum reform to integrate targeted activities that foster these essential competencies.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight critical shortcomings in the design and delivery of PhD-level English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, particularly concerning the integration of communication and teamwork skills. The results, organized across four sections, provide a comprehensive picture of how these skills are perceived, developed, and neglected within the current ESP curriculum.

- **General questions about ESP courses:** Students expressed appreciation for the technical focus of their ESP courses, particularly in terms of discipline-specific vocabulary and academic writing. However, they consistently reported that these courses fell short in preparing them for the broader communicative demands of academic and professional contexts. This finding aligns with Mao and Zhou's (2024) assertion that while ESP programs are designed to be context-sensitive, they often privilege written discourse at the expense of interactive language use. The students' experiences highlight a disconnect between the curriculum and the holistic communicative competence advocated by Sukying et al. (2023), underscoring a need for more balanced instruction that mirrors real-world academic practices.
- **Focus on communication skills:** The near-universal dissatisfaction with oral communication instruction reveals a critical oversight in the implementation of ESP programs. As students pointed out, their courses did not prepare them for conferences, professional discussions, or teaching responsibilities—key components of PhD training. These findings resonate strongly with the theoretical stance of Lippman et al. (2015) and Ngo (2024), who stress the necessity of interpersonal and presentation skills in modern academic and work environments. Furthermore, this gap contradicts the goals of communicative competence frameworks, which emphasize the integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic skills in language education. The absence of role-playing or speaking tasks undermines ESP's potential to develop well-rounded communicators, as advocated by Claxton et al. (2016).



- **Focus on teamwork skills:** The findings also reveal a lack of structured teamwork opportunities in ESP courses, despite the growing emphasis in the literature on collaborative competencies. Students' accounts of minimal or ineffective group work illustrate a significant gap in instructional design. This corroborates Cimatti's (2016) and Kenton's (2021) arguments that higher education often underestimates the value of team-based learning, even as collaboration becomes more critical in interdisciplinary and multicultural settings. The absence of collaborative tasks in these courses undermines the development of soft skills essential for co-authorship, research teams, and international academic partnerships—a reality increasingly prevalent in today's academia (Hofstede & Minkov, 2020).
- **Course evaluation and improvement:** Student suggestions for course reform—such as role-playing, simulations, and group projects—reflect a clear understanding of the competencies they are expected to demonstrate in professional settings. Their dissatisfaction with the narrow focus on grammar and writing reinforces Wróblewski & Petrenko's (2021) claim that ESP courses must go beyond technical training to nurture transferable skills like adaptability, teamwork, and oral fluency. These student voices align with pedagogical recommendations from Boroujeni & Fard (2013), who argue for contextualized learning environments that simulate real-world professional interactions. As such, the findings suggest a compelling case for redesigning ESP curricula to be more responsive to learners' needs and labor market expectations.

5.1. Answering the Research Question

The study sought to evaluate the extent to which communication and teamwork skills are integrated into PhD-level ESP courses and to identify the most effective teaching methods for fostering these essential competencies. Below is a detailed discussion of each research question, supported by insights from the participants.

Q1. To what extent are communication and teamwork skills incorporated into PhD-level ESP courses?

The results indicate that communication and teamwork skills are minimally incorporated into the current ESP curriculum. Students unanimously reported that their courses are primarily focused on technical language acquisition, grammar, and academic writing, with limited or no emphasis on practical communication or collaborative skills.

Students expressed frustration with the lack of oral communication practice, stating that their courses did not prepare them for real-world academic settings such as conferences, research collaborations, or professional networking. Similarly, teamwork activities were either non-existent or superficial, with students working individually for most of their coursework. Collaborative tasks were described as minimal and ineffective, often lacking clear objectives or meaningful interaction.

Q2. What teaching methods are most effective in developing these skills?



Students provided several suggestions for teaching methods that could better integrate communication and teamwork skills into ESP courses. The following methods emerged as the most effective approaches:

- Interactive Role-Playing and Simulations
- Group Projects and Problem-Solving Tasks
- Presentation and Public Speaking Exercises
- Peer Review and Collaborative Writing

These methods align with best practices in soft skills training and highlight the importance of balancing technical language instruction with practical skill development.

5.2. Addressing the Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the study stated that ESP courses insufficiently address soft skills development and that integrating specific teaching strategies and assessments would improve students' proficiency in communication and teamwork, fostering better collaboration and professional interactions. The findings strongly support this hypothesis:

- Current ESP courses focus on technical aspects, neglecting essential soft skills.
- Students clearly articulated the need for more interactive, collaborative, and practical activities in their courses.
- The suggested teaching methods (e.g., role-playing, group projects, and presentations) offer practical solutions that could significantly enhance students' soft skills, preparing them for academic and professional success.

6. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the shortcomings of PhD-level ESP courses with respect to communication and teamwork skill development, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the research relied primarily on self-reported data collected through interview, which may be influenced by participant bias or subjectivity. Students may have emphasized negative aspects of their experience due to frustration or unmet expectations, which could skew the findings toward a more critical perspective.

Second, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a specific institutional and disciplinary context. As such, the results may not be fully generalizable to all PhD-level ESP programs or across different academic fields. Variations in curriculum design, teaching approaches, and institutional support may lead to different outcomes in other settings.

Third, this study focused primarily on students' perspectives without incorporating viewpoints from instructors or curriculum designers. As a result, it offers a learner-centric analysis that may overlook institutional constraints, pedagogical intentions, or alternative explanations for the gaps identified.

Finally, the study did not directly observe classroom practices, which limits the ability to corroborate student perceptions with actual teaching methods or curriculum materials. Future research could benefit from triangulating data sources, such as including classroom observations, instructor interviews, or curriculum analysis to provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges in ESP course delivery.



Despite these limitations, the findings serve as a meaningful foundation for curriculum reform and further research, particularly in addressing the integration of soft skills within ESP education at the doctoral level.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of ESP courses in addressing communication and teamwork skills for PhD students:

- ESP courses should be restructured to balance technical language instruction with the development of communication and teamwork skills. This can be achieved by incorporating modules explicitly focused on soft skills, such as academic presentations, professional communication, and group collaboration.
- To address the gaps in communication skill development, ESP instructors should adopt interactive and practical teaching methods. It is important to introduce activities that simulate academic conferences, research meetings, or professional networking events to practice speaking and interaction. Also, students need to prepare and deliver research presentations, followed by constructive peer and instructor feedback.
- Assessments should reflect the emphasis on soft skills by evaluating both individual and group performance in communication and teamwork tasks.
- Instructors may require additional training to effectively teach and assess soft skills:
- Technology can support the development of communication and teamwork skills by enabling innovative teaching and learning approaches.

Implementing these recommendations will enable ESP courses to better address the communication and teamwork skills essential for PhD students' academic and professional success.

8. Conclusion

The study underscores a critical gap in PhD-level ESP courses which concerns the inadequate incorporation of communication and teamwork skills. Addressing this gap requires a shift in instructional practices to include interactive and collaborative methods that mirror real-world academic and professional scenarios. By integrating these approaches, ESP courses can better equip PhD students to navigate the complexities of research collaboration, academic presentations, and professional networking, thereby meeting the demands of academia and professionalism.

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