

A CASE STUDY EVALUATION OF ESP SYLLABI FOR BUSINESS GRADUATES AT IBA, UNIVERSITY OF THE PUNJAB (2024)

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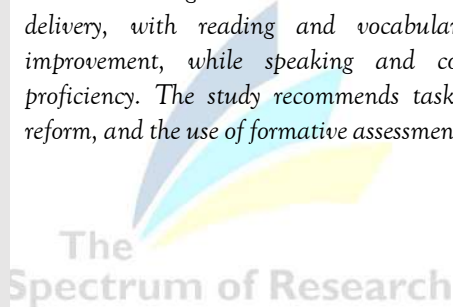
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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) aims to address the linguistic needs of learners within their academic and professional contexts. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the 2024 ESP syllabus for business students at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Using a mixed-methods approach, it examines student and teacher perceptions, skill development, and curriculum design. Results reveal a disconnect between learner needs and course delivery, with reading and vocabulary identified as key areas requiring improvement, while speaking and comprehension skills showed moderate proficiency. The study recommends task-based learning, needs-based curriculum reform, and the use of formative assessment rubrics to enhance syllabus effectiveness.



INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a significant domain within English Language Teaching (ELT), aimed at catering to the specific communicative needs of learners in particular fields such as business, engineering, medicine, and law. Unlike General English, ESP is rooted in the idea that language learning must be directly aligned with learners' academic or professional objectives. It recognizes that students require specialized vocabulary, discourse practices, and linguistic competence to perform successfully in their domains of study or work (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). This makes ESP an indispensable tool for equipping students in business studies with the relevant language needed for academic achievement and workplace readiness.

The significance of ESP has grown over the years due to globalization, which has increased the demand for effective English communication in professional settings. In Pakistan, where English serves as the official language of business and higher education, there is a growing emphasis on aligning English curricula with industry expectations (Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012). Business graduates are expected not only to demonstrate theoretical knowledge but also to communicate it fluently and persuasively in both spoken and written English. ESP instruction bridges this gap by introducing learners to realistic contexts, such as presentations, negotiations, report writing, and email communication relevant to the business environment.

Despite its global relevance, the implementation of ESP programs in Pakistani universities remains

underdeveloped. Many institutions follow outdated syllabi that emphasize grammatical accuracy over communicative competence. Furthermore, the lack of industry collaboration in curriculum development results in a mismatch between what is taught and the language skills needed in the workplace (Basturkmen, 2010). This study, conducted at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab in 2024, seeks to evaluate the current ESP syllabi for business students in terms of effectiveness, relevance, and practical applicability.

The importance of aligning ESP curricula with students' actual needs cannot be overstated. Needs analysis serves as the cornerstone of ESP course design, ensuring that the course reflects learners' goals, expectations, and professional aspirations (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Without a comprehensive needs analysis, ESP courses risk becoming too generic and failing to address the nuanced requirements of business communication. Unfortunately, many business English courses in Pakistan continue to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, neglecting the specific linguistic and pragmatic challenges faced by business students.

Furthermore, the role of the teacher in ESP is multidimensional. Teachers act as facilitators, materials developers, evaluators, and often subject matter collaborators. Their ability to tailor materials and teaching strategies to suit learners' specific goals significantly influences the success of an ESP program (Anthony, 2018). However, insufficient teacher training in ESP pedagogy remains a persistent issue, contributing to inconsistent course delivery and ineffective learning outcomes. There is a pressing need for faculty development programs to train instructors in modern ESP methodologies and instructional technologies.

This study identifies the gaps between the intended objectives of ESP syllabi and the actual language needs of business students. By evaluating students' performance in core language skills and gathering feedback through tests and interviews, the research aims to inform more effective ESP curriculum development. In doing so, it contributes to improving the quality of English language instruction at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, and beyond.

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved significantly in recent decades, shifting from a narrow focus on subject-specific vocabulary to a more holistic model that emphasizes communicative competence, task-based learning, and learner-centered instruction. Modern ESP pedagogy recognizes the importance of aligning English language instruction with the academic and professional needs of learners. According to Paltridge and Starfield (2020), ESP courses must move beyond basic language training to equip learners with rhetorical and pragmatic competence relevant to their disciplines. In business contexts, this includes mastery of negotiation, report writing, and email correspondence – communication genres integral to professional success.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of integrating authentic materials and real-life simulations in ESP curricula. Researchers argue that effective ESP courses should be embedded within workplace-related scenarios to foster engagement and practical applicability (Alsamadani, 2021). These findings are consistent with the task-based language teaching (TBLT) model, which has gained popularity in recent ESP research. TBLT encourages learners to complete tasks that mimic real-world situations, thus improving their problem-solving, teamwork, and linguistic skills in context. For business students, this means engaging with financial reports, client communications, and marketing presentations.

Technology integration has become another critical theme in ESP research post-2020. With the global shift toward online and blended learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, ESP programs have adopted digital platforms, video conferencing tools, and AI-assisted language technologies. Research by Belcher and Fang (2021) shows that digital ESP tools not only enhance accessibility but also foster learner autonomy. However, many institutions in developing countries face challenges in infrastructure, digital literacy, and teacher training, limiting the successful integration of technology into ESP classrooms.

A growing body of research also addresses the need for continuous needs analysis and curriculum revision in ESP programs. Needs analysis is now seen as an iterative process that should be conducted periodically to remain aligned with evolving industry demands

and learners' expectations (Flowerdew, 2022). This is particularly important in business English, where market trends, corporate communication practices, and workplace norms change rapidly. The failure to adapt syllabi accordingly results in misalignment between students' skills and employers' requirements – a gap identified in several recent regional studies (Alavi & Hassan, 2023).

While recent research supports the need for authentic, technology-enhanced, and learner-responsive ESP instruction, there is a noticeable lack of empirical studies assessing ESP syllabi at public universities in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan. Most studies are either theoretical or focused on private-sector institutions. Moreover, the extent to which current syllabi reflect learners' real needs, especially in business education, remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the ESP syllabus used for business students at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, through a needs-based and performance-driven lens.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the global acknowledgment of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an essential tool in preparing business graduates for professional communication, there remains a significant disconnect between the intended goals of ESP syllabi and their actual implementation in many public universities in Pakistan. At the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, Lahore, ESP courses are offered to business students; however, these syllabi often rely on outdated teaching methods, insufficient needs analysis, and generic content that fails to reflect the real communicative demands of modern business environments. There is minimal integration of task-based learning, contextualized language use, or technological tools that are now considered essential in global ESP practices. Moreover, feedback from both students and faculty suggests that these courses often prioritize surface-level grammar and rote learning over practical language application in authentic business contexts. As a result, business graduates frequently encounter challenges in performing language tasks such as report writing, professional emailing, and oral presentations in

workplace settings, leading to a gap between academic preparation and professional expectations. This situation calls for a critical examination of the current ESP syllabus to evaluate its relevance, effectiveness, and responsiveness to student needs, industry expectations, and global pedagogical trends.

Research Questions

1. How effective is the current ESP syllabus in improving the language skills of business students at the University of the Punjab?
2. To what extent does the syllabus meet the speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary needs of business graduates?
3. What are the students' and teachers' perceptions of the current ESP course?

Research Objectives

1. To assess the effectiveness of the 2024 ESP syllabus for business students.
2. To evaluate student performance across four language skills.
3. To gather student and teacher feedback regarding syllabus content and delivery.
4. To propose curriculum reforms based on empirical findings.

Research Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the English language needs of final-year Business students. The rationale for adopting this methodology was grounded in the belief that neither qualitative nor quantitative data alone could fully capture the complexities of language learning requirements in professional legal contexts. Quantitative data were collected through structured language proficiency tests focusing on integrated skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening to assess the students' academic English competency. Qualitative data, on the other hand, were gathered through unstructured interviews conducted with both students and faculty members to explore perceptions, challenges, and expectations regarding the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course. The study involved a purposive sample of 30 final-year students and four experienced

faculty members from the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, in 2024. Participants were selected based on their advanced stage in academic study, age range (22–37), and prior exposure to English language instruction at both secondary and higher education levels. Teachers included in the study had expertise in Business Administration, with 5 to 10 years of teaching experience. Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation based on gender and age across existing academic groups. The mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to triangulate findings, combining numerical results from tests with nuanced qualitative insights from interviews. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of students' target needs and learning needs, aligning with the framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Furthermore, the integration of different data types was carefully planned using strategies such as merging and embedding, as discussed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), to produce richer interpretations and validate findings. The research thus aimed to evaluate not only the current efficacy of the ESP syllabus but also to identify gaps and recommendations for its future improvement based on the actual linguistic demands of professionals.

Data Analysis and Findings

Score Distribution Table:

Sr. No.	No. of Students	Marks Obtained (/10)
1	1	10
2	2	9
3	2	8
4	1	7
5	3	6
6	10	5
7	8	4
8	2	3
9	1	2
10	0	1

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the English language proficiency test administered to Business students, focusing on the four core language skills: reading, writing, vocabulary, and speaking. Each section of the test is discussed in detail, supported by statistical analysis and performance data.

Section 1: Sentence Completion (Grammar and Syntax)

The first section of the test aimed to assess students' understanding of grammatical structure and their ability to comprehend written sentences. Students were asked to complete sentences by selecting the most appropriate words or phrases from given options. This section carried a total of 10 marks.

Performance Overview:

- 10% of the students scored above 80%.
- 20% scored between 60–80%.
- 60% scored between 40–60%.
- 10% scored below 40%.

These results indicate that only a small proportion of students demonstrated strong grammatical competence, with the majority performing at or below an average level.

Section 2: Reading Comprehension

This section was designed to assess students' reading and writing skills through a comprehension passage followed by multiple-choice questions. Students were required to extract answers from the text without relying on prior knowledge. This section also carried 10 marks.

Performance Overview:

- 20% of the students scored above 80%.

- 50% scored between 60–80%.
- 20% scored between 40–60%.
- 10% scored below 40%.

The results show that while 70% of students performed at or above an average level, a significant portion struggled with deeper comprehension, often copying text verbatim without demonstrating analytical understanding.

Score Distribution Table:

Sr. No.	No. of Students	Marks Obtained (/10)
1	2	10
2	4	9
3	5	8
4	10	7
5	0	6
6	6	5
7	0	4
8	2	3
9	1	2
10	0	1

Section 3: Vocabulary Test

This section assessed students' vocabulary knowledge through multiple-choice questions focused on synonyms and antonyms. The section carried a total of 20 marks.

Performance Overview:

Score Distribution Table:

Sr. No.	No. of Students	Marks Obtained (/20)
1	0	10
2	0	9
3	1	8
4	2	7
5	2	6
6	4	5
7	3	4
8	18	3

- 0% of students scored above 80%.
- 10% scored between 60–80%.
- 20% scored between 40–60%.
- 70% scored below 40%.

The majority of students exhibited limited vocabulary proficiency, highlighting a serious gap in lexical development within the curriculum.

Sr. No.	No. of Students	Marks Obtained (/20)
9	0	2
10	0	1

Section 4: Spoken Proficiency (Interview Analysis)

Spoken skills were assessed through one-on-one interviews. Although students demonstrated a basic level of oral communication, several issues were noted, particularly related to phonology, intonation, stress, and fluency. Overall, the performance was moderate, with evident room for improvement in spoken interaction.

Key Findings:

1. Curriculum Misalignment:

The curriculum did not cater to the diverse needs of students. A comprehensive needs analysis was not conducted before curriculum design, and the content appeared to be teacher-centered rather than learner-oriented.

2. Reading Proficiency:

Only 20% of students demonstrated strong reading comprehension. About 50% performed at an average level, with many relying on surface-level understanding. The remaining students failed to grasp even the basic meaning of the text, suggesting a need for more targeted reading instruction.

3. Grammar and Sentence Structure:

The sentence completion section revealed that only 10% of students possessed strong grammatical knowledge. Most students (60%) performed below average, indicating a lack of focus on grammar instruction in their previous education.

4. Vocabulary Weaknesses:

Vocabulary emerged as the weakest area. Only 10% of students performed well, while 70% struggled significantly. This underscores a lack of vocabulary-building activities in the existing syllabus.

5. Speaking Skills:

Interviews showed that students lacked understanding of key phonological elements. However, their overall

performance suggested that with structured speaking activities, substantial improvement is possible.

Discussion and Analysis

The analysis of students' English language proficiency uncovers a critical imbalance in skill development, with glaring weaknesses in vocabulary and sentence construction overshadowing moderate performance in reading comprehension. This disparity reveals not just a lack of grammatical precision but also a fundamental disconnect between academic instruction and real-world communication demands. While some students demonstrate surface-level understanding through rote memorization or basic comprehension, their inability to express ideas fluently or interpret complex texts highlights deeper cognitive and pedagogical gaps.

The data from the sentence completion section reveals a concerning trend in students' grammatical knowledge. Only a small portion of participants scored above 80%, indicating a strong command of sentence structure and grammar. In contrast, a majority of students scored between 40 to 60 percent, and a small but notable portion fell below this threshold. This suggests that while some students have acquired basic grammar skills, most struggle with applying grammatical rules accurately in context. Such difficulties hinder not only their writing capabilities but also their general communication in both academic and professional environments.

Reading comprehension emerged as a relatively stronger skill compared to other areas. Approximately 70% of students achieved scores between 60 to 100 percent, reflecting a moderate to high level of proficiency. However, deeper observation revealed that many students tended to replicate lines from the passage rather than interpreting or analyzing the content. This indicates that while surface-level comprehension is evident, critical thinking and inferential reading skills are still lacking, which are essential for success in higher education and business communication.

Vocabulary acquisition was identified as the weakest skill among the four assessed areas. A large majority of students scored below 40%, and no participant attained a score exceeding 10 out of 20. This considerable deficiency in vocabulary directly affects students' reading, writing, and speaking abilities. Limited word knowledge restricts expression and comprehension, pointing to the need for deliberate vocabulary-building strategies in the curriculum. This shortfall likely stems from a lack of exposure to diverse English materials and inadequate emphasis on vocabulary learning in earlier academic stages.

In interviews, students demonstrated only a basic level of spoken English. They were able to communicate general ideas, but their speech lacked fluency, proper pronunciation, and intonation. Many exhibited hesitations and frequently switched to their native language. These patterns reflect a lack of regular speaking practice and highlight the need for more interactive classroom opportunities that encourage English conversation. The absence of targeted instruction in speaking and listening skills further contributes to poor oral communication, which is critical in business settings.

The overall findings reflect that the curriculum currently followed by the English Language Program does not cater to the real needs of the learners. The structure appears outdated, with little focus on practical language use, and it seems disconnected from students' academic and professional goals. A needs analysis was not conducted before designing the syllabus, and the course lacks adaptability to varying proficiency levels among students. The top-down, teacher-centered approach further limits student engagement and personalized learning.

A significant gap exists between the English skills students learn academically and their ability to use the language effectively in real-world contexts. For example, although students may know grammatical rules or memorize vocabulary lists, they struggle to use these elements in writing reports, participating in discussions, or presenting ideas clearly. This disconnection highlights the importance of embedding real-life communicative activities and functional English practice within academic courses to develop both fluency and confidence.

Many of the issues identified in students' proficiency can be traced to their prior educational experiences, which often emphasize rote memorization over critical thinking or language application. Students arrive at university with weak foundational skills, especially in vocabulary and writing. Without bridging this gap early in their academic journey, students are at risk of underperforming in their degree programs. This underscores the need for remedial English courses or foundation programs that strengthen core language skills before students engage in subject-specific coursework.

Assessment techniques also need reconsideration. While traditional tools such as multiple-choice questions and sentence completions offer insight into discrete language skills, they may not fully capture students' ability to use English in authentic contexts. More formative assessments, including reflective journals, portfolios, and presentations, would not only provide a richer picture of learner progress but also engage students in meaningful self-assessment. Such methods promote continuous learning and help track gradual improvement over time.

Another area requiring attention is teacher training. Language instructors must be equipped with current methodologies that emphasize learner-centered, interactive, and communicative approaches. Many teachers may still rely on grammar translation or lecture-based delivery, which fails to address the diverse learning styles of students. Professional development programs can empower instructors to use multimedia, collaborative tasks, and mobile-assisted language learning tools to create a more dynamic classroom environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that while the ESP syllabus at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, Lahore has succeeded in establishing a framework for English language instruction among business students, there remain significant areas for improvement. The current syllabus partially meets its intended outcomes by providing exposure to essential communication practices and foundational skills, yet it does not fully equip learners with the linguistic capabilities needed in real-world professional scenarios.

The most pressing concern identified in the study relates to the inadequate development of vocabulary and grammatical structures among students. A majority of students scored poorly in vocabulary assessments, highlighting a severe gap between what is taught and what is required. Without a strong lexical foundation, students are unlikely to perform effectively in business environments that demand precise and nuanced communication. This deficiency undermines the overall goal of ESP, which is to prepare learners for professional success through specialized language instruction.

Furthermore, the analysis of classroom practices suggests that the ESP syllabus is currently more instructor-centered than learner-centered. This teaching paradigm limits student engagement and restricts opportunities for practical language use. Students and faculty members alike expressed the need for more interactive content, real-world task simulations, and assessments that reflect professional use of language. These concerns emphasize the importance of aligning curriculum content with the communicative needs of the students through a comprehensive needs analysis.

Another notable issue is the lack of structured assessment methods that provide meaningful feedback to both students and instructors. Rubric-based evaluations and formative assessments are either underutilized or entirely absent. These tools are critical in monitoring student progress and shaping instructional strategies during the course, not just at its conclusion. Their integration could significantly enhance the teaching-learning process by offering ongoing feedback loops and targeted language practice.

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of ESP instruction at the Institute of Business Administration, University of the Punjab, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. Conduct Comprehensive Needs Analysis

- Regularly carry out a detailed needs analysis involving students, faculty, and industry stakeholders to ensure the syllabus reflects real-world business communication requirements.

2. Integrate Vocabulary-Building Strategies

- Incorporate thematic vocabulary exercises, business case studies, and industry-specific terminology to strengthen students' lexical resources.

3. Adopt Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

- Encourage interactive learning through role plays, simulations, and collaborative projects to mirror real-life business scenarios and enhance communicative competence.

4. Implement Rubric-Based Assessment

- Use detailed rubrics for all major assessments to provide transparent, consistent, and actionable feedback to students on their language progress.

5. Provide Faculty Development Programs

- Organize regular training sessions and workshops to equip ESP instructors with updated pedagogical strategies, evaluation methods, and technological tools.

6. Emphasize Receptive Skills Early

- Focus on listening and reading comprehension in the initial semesters to build a foundation for more advanced productive skills such as speaking and writing.

7. Introduce ESP in Early Semesters

- Offer introductory ESP courses in the first or second year to allow students more time for gradual and effective language development aligned with their core subjects.

8. Utilize Multimodal Learning Materials

- Leverage audiovisual content, digital platforms, and online language tools to increase student engagement and enhance understanding of abstract concepts.

9. Include Translation as a Supporting Skill

- Use translation exercises to bridge gaps between L1 and English, reinforcing comprehension and vocabulary retention, especially in legal and business contexts.

10. Regularly Review and Update the Curriculum

- Establish a feedback loop between students, instructors, and industry professionals to continuously revise the syllabus based on evolving language needs and market demands.

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