



FOSTERING PRODUCTIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

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Abstract

Developing learners' productive language skills such as speaking and writing—is essential in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings, where communication needs are shaped by professional or academic goals. This research investigates how these skills are taught and practiced in ESP classrooms. Data from classroom observations and teacher interviews reveal that contextualized tasks and authentic materials play a significant role in improving learners' performance. The study underscores the importance of aligning instructional strategies with real-life communicative functions relevant to specific fields.

Keywords: ESP, productive skills, speaking, writing, task-based learning, authentic materials.

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focuses on preparing learners to use English effectively within a particular professional or academic domain. Unlike General English courses, ESP emphasizes practical communication tied to learners' specific needs. In such contexts, the ability to produce language—both orally and in written form—is crucial. Speaking and writing are not only tools for communication but also indicators of subject mastery. Therefore, this study explores how productive skills can be effectively developed in ESP environments.

Literature Review

Scholars have consistently highlighted that productive language skills in ESP require distinct pedagogical approaches. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasize that ESP must be need-oriented, prioritizing what learners will use in real contexts. Hyland (2002) points out that writing in ESP involves mastering disciplinary genres, which necessitates both structural and stylistic guidance. Similarly, Basturkmen (2010) argues that speaking tasks in ESP should replicate authentic communicative events, such as meetings, presentations, or consultations.

Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis, 2003) is widely endorsed for ESP, as it encourages learners to engage with real-life tasks using the target language. Authenticity is also crucial—Long (2005) notes that exposure to real-world texts and interactions significantly enhances learners' readiness for actual workplace communication. However, Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) caution that ESP teachers often face challenges such as lack of subject knowledge and appropriate materials.

Methods

This qualitative study was carried out at a tertiary institution offering ESP courses for students in medical, engineering, and business departments. The data collection methods included:

- Classroom observations of 12 sessions (4 per discipline), focusing on productive language tasks;
- Semi-structured interviews with six instructors, exploring teaching strategies, challenges, and perceived learner outcomes;
- Text and audio samples from student presentations and reports were reviewed to evaluate skill development.

The data were analyzed using thematic coding, focusing on instructional approaches, learner engagement, and outcome indicators.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data:

- Task-based activities, such as simulations, business meetings, and clinical report writing, encouraged active participation and real-world skill use.

- Authentic resources, including case reports, engineering diagrams, and business proposals, increased learners' familiarity with field-specific language.
- Students demonstrated more rapid improvement in speaking than writing, attributed to frequent opportunities for oral interaction.
- Writing progress was slower, with learners struggling with formal tone, structure, and vocabulary.
- Teachers cited lack of specialized materials, large class sizes, and time constraints as barriers to optimal instruction.

Discussion

The findings suggest that for productive skills to flourish in ESP contexts, instruction must be practical, relevant, and tailored to learners' future communication needs. Speaking activities were most successful when tied to realistic roles and scenarios, supporting earlier claims by Basturkmen (2010).

Writing, however, requires scaffolding and genre instruction, as learners often lack exposure to specialized formats (Hyland, 2002).

Teachers' ability to design or adapt field-specific tasks played a key role in successful instruction. Ongoing professional development and access to updated materials are necessary to meet these demands effectively.

Conclusion

Productive language skills are central to learners' success in ESP contexts. Teaching approaches that incorporate real-life tasks and authentic materials contribute significantly to learner development. While speaking fluency improves with regular practice, writing remains a challenge that requires focused instruction. Further research should explore digital tools and AI-based feedback systems to support ESP learners in mastering productive skills.

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