
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

English for Specific Purposes: Course Content and Needs Representativeness

Latifa Arharbi¹, Sara Fadli², Souad Jadli³

¹ *Department of Sciences of Communication and Humanities, Faculty of Sciences Ben M'sick, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco*

² *Department of English, Higher School of Education and Training, University Mohammed First, Oujda, Morocco*

³ *Department of Sciences of Communication and Humanities, Faculty of Sciences Ben M'sick, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco*

Corresponding Author: Sara Fadli, **E-mail:** sara.fadli@ump.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

The importance that English is getting as an international language directs the attention to its different aspects and teaching is one of the most essential ones. Currently, English for specific purposes is gaining attention due to the productivity it may offer for the efficient use of English in specific fields. The present research paper examines the course content of master program at the faculty of sciences at university Mohamed the First in Oujda, Morocco. The study aims at investigating the extent to which the course content responds to students' needs of English in relation to their field of study. Content analysis method is adopted to study the selected course content. The findings of the research show that there is a disparity in meeting the needs of the different disciplines taught at the faculty.

| KEYWORDS

English for specific purposes, Teaching, Needs representativeness, Course content

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 15 March 2026

PUBLISHED: 17 April 2026

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2026.8.5.4

1. INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

The transformation and change the world is witnessing has given privilege to some languages over others. English has gained more space thanks to its dominant use in different fields namely technology, research, media and business among others. This prevalent use in multiple realms has raised the question of the effectiveness of general English for each of the fields in which it is used and how it can be useful for areas in which the language is specific to a particular domain. Hence, the need for English for specific purposes has emerged especially that in many non-native contexts, "there is an increasing tendency to use English as the medium of instruction at different educational levels" (Chemir & Kitila, 2022, p.2). This need develops as the use of the language grows and the study of English for specific purposes gains more attention due to its necessity and popularity.

Giving more thought to teaching and learning English for specific purposes becomes a must as it imposes itself as a tool to optimize the efficiency and the employability of the language learnt. Course design is one of the means through which the instructor translates her/his objectives of teaching language into lessons and activities to help learners develop their English in relation to their fields of study. This research paper examines the extent to which the course content introduced to master students at the faculty of science, university Mohamed First, in Oujda, Morocco, meets learners' specific needs.

1.1. Background of the Study

Nowadays, science is taking the lead modifying the different spheres of life. Professionals with highly communicative skills are highly needed in the job market. Communicating effectively in English is one of the skills that may, on the one hand, allow learners have access to job market and on the other hand, reach the scientific community through their research products and exchange novelties and innovation up-dates.

In response to this urge, educational institutions reconsidered teaching programs to fit the present needs. English serving specific purposes for specific disciplines is installed and hence, course syllabi are designed to match the changes. Universities are some of the institutions responding to these changes and university Mohamed First is not an exception.

However, designing a course which meets the criteria of ESP lesson may face some constraints which do not make the task easy.

1.2. Problem Statement

Four-year observation of post graduate students belonging to scientific streams show that they remain unable to communicate with the anglophone academic community fluently, especially in academic events in or outside Morocco. This issue raises the question about the efficiency of their learning during their education or training process, namely, that of master level since it is at this stage that they study English for specific purposes. This learning is supposed to help them get used to the jargon of the field they opt for as specialty for their studies, be it biology, physics, geology, mathematics, computer science, chemistry or other; yet, the observation of students' complaints does not indicate so.

1.3. Purpose and Scope of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the reasons behind the lack of mastery of English language for specific purposes by master students within the faculty of sciences, Mohamed the First University. The research aims at examining whether master course content responds to students' needs of English for specific purposes through its elements or not. The importance of this research lies in the fact that knowing the reasons behind the problem of ESP mastery may help in finding adequate solutions assuming that the course content could be one of the factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1. ESP Emergence and Definition

ESP has gained scholars attention since the sixties. The field went through different historical periods and the perspectives about its meaning varied. Controversy has taken place also about its branches and the relationship between English for academic purposes and English for occupational purposes. Scholars from different areas of the world provided insights about cases they studied about ESP textbooks and previous experiences of teaching ESP.

ESP has emerged in the 1960s as a branch of English language teaching within applied linguistics (Liu et al., 2021, p. 97). Since then, literature about ESP has been extending and research has linked "the old and the new" (Swales & Leeder, 2012, p. 145). The knowledge available on ESP is of a great use for researchers and practitioners. Nonetheless, most of reviews are traditional or narrative ones that depend on their writers' experiential and intuitive stand points (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) or "the preferences and predilections of individual editors of edited collections" (Swales & Leeder, 2012, p. 145). While a limited number extant ESP works yielded objective and/or quantitative accounts, they were published in the early days of the field (e.g., Hewings, 2002; Robinson, 1991), focused on only a selected area such as genre analysis (Liu et al., 2021, p. 98).

Perspectives about the definition of ESP differed. Robinson (1989) defines it as: "Goal oriented language learning"; this means that the learners have particular objectives to be achieved. "Those specific goals are closely linked with learners' interest in various disciplines, or faculties they are enrolled in" (Saliu, 2016, p. 746). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) present "ESP to be an approach not a product that means language learning and not language use is highlighted". They add, it is a "learning centered approach" according to which "all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19). In the same respect, Paltridge and Starfield (2013) define ESP as "the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain" (p. 2).

Robinson (1991) argues that what is considered as specific about ESP in a certain area in the world might not be regarded in the same way in another place. Hence, it is not easy to give a fixed definition for ESP which is correct everywhere. Hutchinson and Allan Waters (1987) would rather use the expression "what ESP is not" (p. 18) rather than what ESP is. They state that ESP does not mean using one special aspect of language, it is not teaching a series of words and structures and it is not different from other teaching methods, in terms of educational methods (Ahmadi & Rahimi Bajelani, 2012). Strevens (1977) bases the difference between general language teaching and ESP teaching on three fundamental criteria: paramouncy of language-using purposes, alignment of curricular content with the learner's purposes, and appropriateness of the employed methodology to the teaching/learning situation.

2.2. Historical Phases of ESP and its Branches

Johns (2013) divided the history of ESP research into four periods: “the early years” (1962–1981) that moved away from text-based counts of grammatical features to rhetorical analysis, “the more recent past” (1981–1990) that introduced central ESP concepts (e.g., genre and rhetorical move) and widened the field's scope through the establishment and expansion of English for Specific Purposes Journal, “the modern era” (1990–2011) that was dominated by genre and corpus studies and ushered in another major outlet for ESP research (i.e., JEAP), and “the future” (2012-) that has been characterized by international authorship, varied methodologies, and growing attention to multimodalities. (Johns, as cited in Liu et al., 2021, p. 98)

English for Specific Purposes is a field that encompasses other sub-fields. Ahmadi and Rahimi Bajelani (2012) argues that:

ESP is a branch of English Language Teaching (ELT) which in its turn is divided into two main branches of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) such as Medicine, Engineering, Theology, etc. and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) such as English for secretaries, technicians, etc. (p.793)

There is a debate among language academicians about if EAP is part of ESP or not. Some scholars think that ESP has two fundamental parts: English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP). In this respect, Robinson states that in EAP learners have educational objectives, whereas in EOP students have occupational objectives. “But EAP sounds to have an extensive range because the contents are considered for different courses of study. In this case, we can call EAP as an extensive expression with ESP being one of its branches” (Robinson, 1991, p. 100). In contrast, Hyland and Shaw argue that being part of ESP since the late 1970s, EAP “focuses on the communicative needs and practices of individuals working in academic contexts” (Hyland & Shaw 2016, p. 1). On another hand, Hamp-Lyons (2011), JEAP's co-founding editor, states that EAP can be seen as both a branch of ESP and a discipline in its own right in the field of language teaching.

2.3. ESP Experiences in Different Places

Research raises debate about different experiences of ESP teaching. Experiences of teaching the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) from an ESP angle varied. Buck (2020) argues that students’ “high school writing experiences did not prepare them for the writing tasks they would need to complete in college” (p. 42). In Brazil, Souza Gomes (2020) argues that ESP classes are not supposed to be exclusively technical. Instead, they should be in coherence with the critical literacy perspective, ESP instructors are supposed to instil skills of reflection and critical thinking and tend to improve their learners’ citizenship consciousness. In a Japanese context, Rubrecht (2020) looks into the causes behind an unsuccessful ESP syllabus in the School of Commerce English Concentration Program. He discusses a couple of weaknesses, encompassing not being able to control program conditions, not involving all department members in setting the map for the program, not considering learners’ abilities each year. Kocol's (2020) Chapter 7 on the evaluation of an ESP course for student nurses showed that learners preferred language activities concerned with social competencies in ESP to typical language activities.

Furthermore, designing textbooks should be coherent with the objectives of teaching each course in terms of content and methods of compiling. Before designing EAP textbooks, an essential element should be taken into consideration and that is the learners’ background knowledge of English. Ahmadi and Bajelani's (2012) own experience in teaching ESP for students of theology reveals that they do not have the basic knowledge when they study a course.

Ebrahim Zanjani (2003) evaluated ESP textbooks for B.A. learners of Liberal Arts (Persian Literature, Theology, and History) in Zanjan, Abhar, and Takestan Universities. The findings revealed that many parts of textbooks are irrelevant to learners and instructors and need revisiting immediately (as cited in Ahmadi & Rahimi Bajelani, 2012, p. 794). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) shed light on six inquiries about syllabus and elaborating contents for ESP textbooks:

- 1- **Why** do students need special English?
- 2- **Who** is involved in learning process?
- 3- **Where** does this process take place?
- 4- **When** does this process take place?
- 5- **What** do students need to learn?
- 6- **How** is this process accomplished?

The way to have successful content compilation is an accurate and appropriate response to these questions before taking any actions (Ahmadi & Rahimi Bajelani, 2012).

All in all, ESP implications and dimensions differ according to the discipline and the context in which it is taught. ESP went through growing phases throughout time and its branches are various; each needs a special scrutiny to have a global overview that may allow a better understanding of it. In this research we are going to focus on the issue from one angle which is the course content.

3. Research Question and Hypothesis

The present research is motivated by the following research question:

Q1. Does the course content presented to master students of the faculty of sciences respond to their needs?

To answer the previously mentioned research question we hypothesize that:

H1. The course content of the English subject at the faculty of sciences does not respond to master students' needs.

4. Methodology

To answer the research question and confirm or refute the hypothesis, the study adopts a qualitative method. A content analysis method is used to study the elements of the course syllabus. The reason this method is chosen is that content analysis is highly valuable and indispensable for curriculum designers and textbook authors (Manzoor, 2012). Bernard Berelson (1952) states that content Analysis is "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications". Likewise, Manzoor Hussain (2012) argues that:

Content analysis is a research tool focused on the actual content and internal features of media. It is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner (p. 8).

In our case, the content is that of the course booklet entitled Passport to Scientific English. we quantify the exercises items related to specific disciplines belonging to different departments of the faculty of science. Each unit of the course booklet is structured in the following way: an introduction, an entry test, exercises related to the lesson and an exit test. At the end of the course booklet language rules are provided with a list of irregular verbs.

The data is collected through meticulous observation of the course content. The course elements are categorized into units and department specialties, namely physics, chemistry, biology, geology, mathematics, computer science, general English and other. Exercises items are classified according to students' specialties, and they are counted according to the major of departments as well. Excel software is used to have a better visualization of the data collected from the master course syllabus; and Zouali's (2023) evaluation grid is depended on to give a potential evaluation to the course content. The grid consists of an overview, language focus, communication skills, real-world application, assessment, and effectiveness.

5. Results

The content analysis of the course content of master students of the faculty of sciences yielded several findings. The outcomes are displayed in tables, graphs and an evaluation grid. The results are related to the frequency of teaching the four skills and language elements in the ESP syllabus, the frequency of ESP related items in the course exercises and the course booklet evaluation which focuses on the following elements: an overview, language focus, communication skills, real-world application, assessment, and effectiveness.

Figure 1

The Frequency of Teaching the Four Skills and Language Elements in the ESP Course

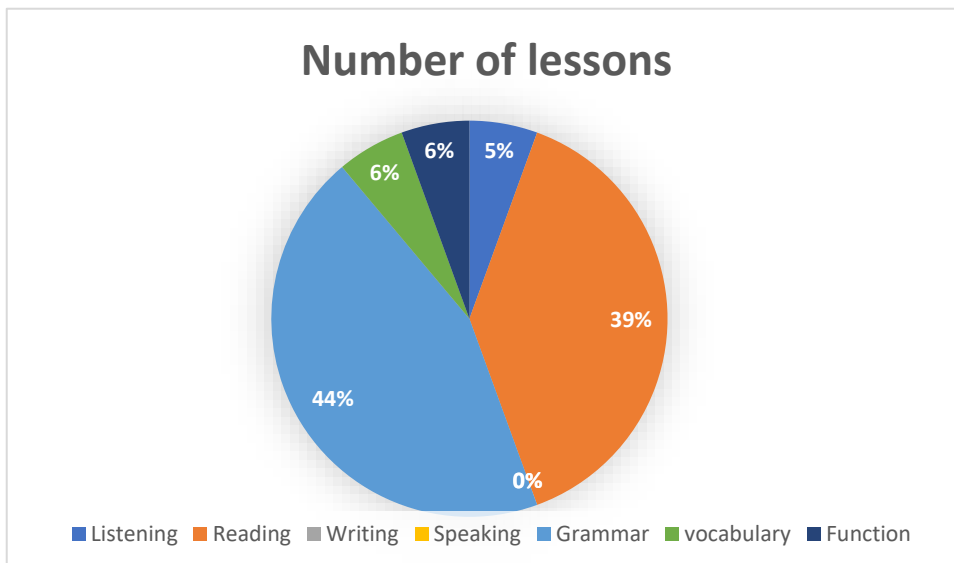


Figure 1 displays the frequency of teaching the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and language elements (vocabulary and grammar) in the ESP course. The analysis of the course content reveals that 44 % of the lessons and exercises is reserved for Grammar lessons; 39 % is reserved for reading; 6 % for listening, 6 % for vocabulary whereas speaking and writing exercises occupy the last position with the frequency of 0 %. The findings show an imbalance in introducing the four skills and language elements used to teach ESP.

Table 1

The Frequency of ESP Related Items in the Course.

	Physics	Chemistry	Biology	Geology	Maths	Computer science	General English	Other
Unit 1	4	3	14	---	---	---	27	---
Unit 2	9	8	10	1	---	3	17	---
Unit 3	2	1	9	---	---	1	3	5 (Medicine) 1 (science)
Unit 4	5	---	1	15	---	---	1	10(Medicine)
Unit 5	1	---	2	---	---	---	44	1 (science)
Unit 6	1	1	11	---	1	---	29	1 (science) 2 (Medicine)
Unit 7	9	---	6	---	---	---	4	1 (science)
Unit 8	5	2	6	1	1	1	30	---
Unit 9	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Unit 10	7	---	34	---	---	15	78	---
Total	43	15	39	17	2	20	237	17 (Medicine) 4 (science)

Figure 2

The Frequency of Occurrences of Items Related to ESP According to the Field of Study.

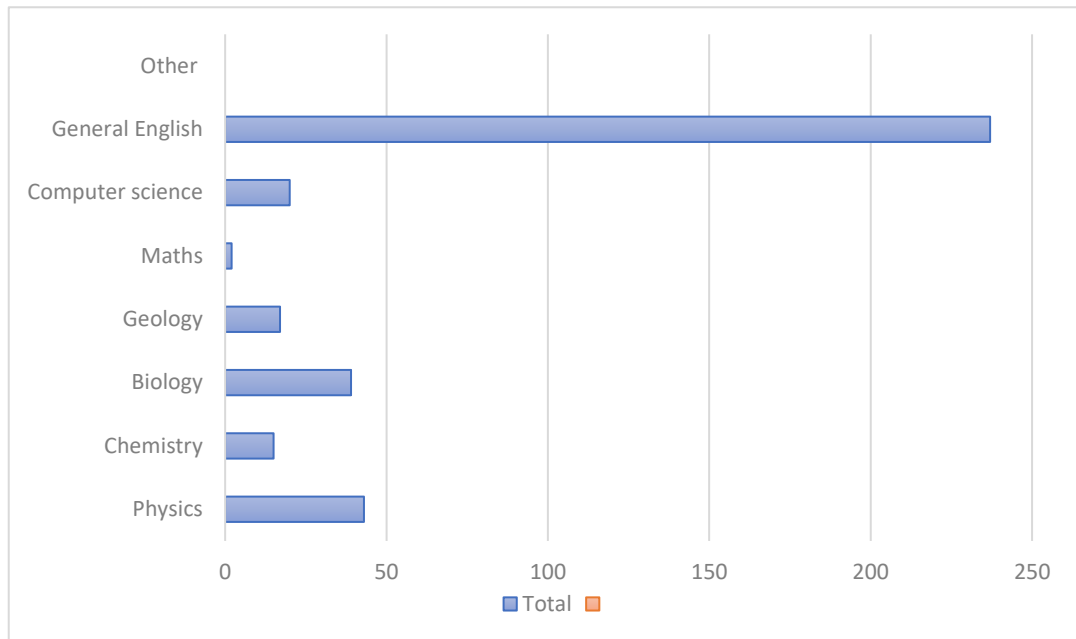


Table 1 shows the distribution of exercises' items related to ESP, namely, to physics, chemistry, biology, geology, mathematics, computer science, general English and other. Likewise, the graph in figure 2 displays the percentage each specialty takes as a share in the Passport to Scientific English course booklet. The two figures indicate a disparity in terms of the shares reserved to every major. Apparently, general English related items occupy the biggest part since 63.53 % of the items are linked to general life situations; the second position is reserved to Physics which takes 11.52 % as a share in the course booklet; while 10.45 % is given to Biology related items and 5.36 % is reserved to Computer science. Geology occupies 4.55 % of the space and Chemistry covers 4 %. The last position is reserved to Mathematics which covers 0.5 %. Other specialties like science in general and Medicine occupy 5.63 % of the exercises' items. Henceforth, the figures unveil a disparity in the percentages and the distribution of ESP related exercises items

Table 2

Course booklet Evaluation

Content analysis	Effectiveness criteria
Overview	The course booklet, to some extent, addresses the specific language needs of students of some specialties. However, it poorly addresses the needs of others.
Language focus	The course booklet succeeds in addressing the specific purpose of being scientific; nevertheless, the needs of each specialty aside are not met. Most of grammar exercises items belong to the general life situations. The course booklet provides opportunities to students to use language belonging to scientific field in general not to their own in particular.
Communication skills	Communication skills are poorly addressed in the course booklet. activities such as role plays, presentations or simulations do not find their way to the course booklet.
Real-world application	Through the course booklet, students have an idea about the jargon of scientific English, especially through reading texts. However, no extending to real world is made and no simulation to this real world.
	The course booklet encompasses assessment tools; namely, the entry test and exit test for each unit. This allows learners track their learning and know the language elements that they need to boost.

Assessment	
Effectiveness	The course booklet is generally effective in terms of teaching scientific English. It may help students develop their knowledge and skills in the field. However, it does not respond to the needs of each specialty aside.

Based on the findings, it can be deduced that the course booklet exposes students to linguistic items related to scientific English in general but not to English related to each discipline by itself. Hence, the hypothesis suggested in this study is partially approved since students benefit from the scientific English jargon used in the course booklet which is indirectly connected to the general field of study; yet, they do not find response to their very particular needs of language which is supposed to be related to their specific realm of study and which is intended to prepare them for the real world application, especially, if they pursue their educational or professional career overseas. Therefore, there was a good intention of specifying the content of syllabus, but more effort needs to be done at the level of considering the disciplines of the different departments of the faculty of science. Coming up with good results while designing a syllabus may be a result of a continuous training from the part of the educator. Gaye (2020) highlights the urge for setting up independent ESP departments for teacher training. She also affirms that ESP instructors need to enhance their teaching expertise and assessment skills to conduct thorough needs analyses and develop a more comprehensive understanding of discourse and genre studies.

The course booklet addresses poorly the communicative skills and focuses on the receptive ones. This lack of focus on the productive skills, mainly, speaking and writing, makes it difficult for students belonging to technical fields to develop their use of language to serve their specific objectives. This may justify or at least may be one of the reasons which make students unable to communicate effectively the what and how they learnt during their educational career and to build easily educational and professional relationships with the academic community outside their home country. A successful considering of the four skills in course design requires a good knowledge of the targeted discipline. Creating ESP textbooks for a specific field and effectively teaching them in class demands knowledge of that field, whereas such expertise is not essential when developing general English textbooks (Ahmadi, 2012).

6. Conclusion

The main aim of this research paper was to examine whether the course content presented to master students of the faculty of sciences of university Mohamed the First, Oujda, responds to learners' needs. The study shows that the course material meets the needs of some disciplines more than others and it is oriented generally to scientific English purposes. It goes without saying that the course content is rich in terms of scientific language and it fairly benefits students; yet there are different steps to improve the course and make it more responding to learners' needs. Each discipline should have its own syllabus; this way even the poorly regarded specialties in the present syllabus may have their share of consideration in future syllabi. Furthermore, productive skills should be given more importance when designing textbooks to allow learners develop their communicative competences. Thus, speaking and writing skills may be given more space through considering diversified activities such role play, educational games, simulations to real world professional situations, presentations, jigsaw and different types of writing among others. Zouali (2023) argues that "incorporating peer evaluation and feedback sessions, collaborative projects and presentations may also improve cooperation and create opportunity for students to participate in meaningful group work" (p. 732). Another way of supporting the course content is to make use of the online platform to introduce interactive materials such as videos, chat spaces and forums. Moreover, the course content should consider the "language skills that are in accordance with specific academic or professional needs, which often require a high learning autonomy level" from students as well (Sujannah et al., 2025, p. 2).

In spite of the informing results introduced in the present study, some limitations may have affected the findings of the research paper. A thorough investigation of the in-person delivered lessons, students' perceptions about the learning processes of ESP and the professor's stand may give a global overview about the ESP teaching-learning processes. Studying the issue from different angles may yield more comprehensive research findings and may inspire future course designers for better syllabi conceptions

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4065-6277>

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

Acknowledgements

The authors would express their gratitude to Dr. Fatima Zahra Zouali for her valuable comments and constructive continuous feedback. Her availability whenever asked significantly improved the quality of the paper.

References

- [1] Ahmadi, A., & Rahimi Bajelani, M. (2012). Barriers to English for specific purposes learning among Iranian university students. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47, 792–796.
- [2] Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.
- [3] Buck, R. H. (2020). Undergraduate students' expectations of persuasion and argumentation: A pilot study at a Middle Eastern university. In N. Kenny, E. E. Işık-Taş, & J. Huang (Eds.), *English for specific purposes instruction and research: Current practices, challenges and innovations* (pp. 27–52).
- [4] Chemir, S., & Kitila, T. (2022). Learners' needs analysis for English for academic purposes in Ethiopian higher education institutions: The case of Wachemo University freshman students. *Cogent Education*, 9(1), 2026190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2026190>
- [5] Gaye, A. (2020). Implications of current research in ESP for ESL/ESP teacher training. In N. Kenny, E. E. Işık-Taş, & J. Huang (Eds.), *English for specific purposes instruction and research: Current practices, challenges and innovations* (pp. 203–226). Routledge.
- [6] Hamp-Lyons, L. (2011). English for academic purposes. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 89–105). Routledge.
- [7] Hussain, M. (2012). Content analysis. *Kasheer: Magazine of Sociology Students*, Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir. India.
- [8] Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learner-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press. England.
- [9] Hyland, K., & Shaw, P. (Eds.). (2016). *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes*. Routledge.
- [10] Liu, Y., & Hu, G. (2021). Mapping the field of English for specific purposes (1980–2018): A co-citation analysis. *English for Specific Purposes*, 61, 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2020.10.003>
- [11] Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (Eds.). (2013). *The handbook of English for specific purposes*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [12] Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Blackwell Publishing.
- [13] Pociask, M., & Stefanowicz-Kocot, A. (2020). Language activities aimed at social competencies for nursing students in practice. In N. Kenny, E. E. Işık-Taş, & J. Huang (Eds.), *English for specific purposes instruction and research: Current practices, challenges and innovations* (pp. 127–144). Routledge.
- [14] Robinson, C. (1989). *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge University Press.
- [15] Robinson, P. C. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide*. Prentice Hall.
- [16] Rubrecht, B. G. (2019). Examining the pitfalls behind a failed Japanese university ESP program. In N. Kenny, E. E. Işık-Taş, & J. Huang (Eds.), *English for specific purposes instruction and research: Current practices, challenges and innovations* (pp. 105–123). Routledge.
- [17] Saliu, B., & Hajrullai, H. (2016). Best practices in the English for specific purpose classes at the Language Center. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 745–749. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.101>
- [18] Souza Gomes, R. de. (2020). Processes for instructional material development for ESP classes from the critical literacy perspective in a federal educational center in Brazil. In N. Kenny, E. E. Işık-Taş, & J. Huang (Eds.), *English for specific purposes instruction and research: Current practices, challenges and innovations* (pp. 87–104). Routledge.
- [19] Strevens, P. (1977). Special-purposed language learning: A perspective. *Language Teaching*, 10, 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800005620>
- [20] Sujannah, W. D., Suwarso, P. N., & Unsiah, F. (2025). The correlation between ChatGPT use and learning autonomy among ESP students. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), 2517508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2517508>
- [21] Swales, J. M., & Leeder, C. (2012). A reception study of the articles published in English for Specific Purposes from 1990–1999. *English for Specific Purposes*, 31(2), 137–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2011.10.002>

Zouali, F.-Z., & Houat, N. (2023). Instructional design in an English for specific purposes course: A case study of industrial engineering students at Lille University, France. *Atlantis Journal*, 16, 716–73