

A Needs Analysis of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for Business Students in Higher Education

Maya Ulyani¹, Retno Anggraini²

ITSKes Muhammadiyah Selong¹, Politeknik Negeri Lampung²
mayaulyani28@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the learning needs of business students in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) using a qualitative descriptive approach. The participants consisted of 15–20 students from business and professional communication programs who had completed at ESP course. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. To Analysis the data the resercher used thematic analysis. The findings revealed that needs of ESP students are highly contextual and professionally oriented, with a particular emphasis on speaking and writing skills relevant to business communication such as meetings, presentations, negotiations, and report writing. Major challenges identified include limited technical vocabulary, the use of general materials that lack business relevance, and teacher-centered instruction methods. Students expressed a preference for more authentic, interactive, and task-based learning activities that reflect real-world business practices. The study concludes that ESP learning should adopt communicative and participatory approaches aligned with industry demands to enhance professional competence. The results contribute theoretically to ESP needs analysis and curriculum design, and practically to the development of relevant and effective learning materials for business students.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes; Business students; Needs analysis; Communicative learning*

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global means of communication that plays a vital role in various aspects of life, particularly in education, business, and the professional world (Kurniawan, 2024). In today's era of globalization and rapid digital transformation, English proficiency is no longer regarded as an additional skill but as a core competency that must be possessed by individuals who wish to compete globally (Kurniawan, 2024). The modern business world now demands a workforce that not only understands economic and management concepts but is also capable of effectively communicating ideas, strategies, and decisions in English (Agustina et al., 2024). Therefore, mastery of English in professional contexts has become an urgent necessity, particularly for business students who are being prepared to enter the international job market.

In higher education, English instruction can no longer remain general or focus merely on basic skills such as reading and writing. Instead, it must be directed toward the use of language that is relevant to specific academic and professional contexts (Solihah et al., 2023). This is where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays a crucial role. ESP is an approach to English language teaching designed to meet specific communicative needs according to the learners' fields of study or professional domains (Agustina et al., 2024). As explained by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is grounded in needs analysis, which functions to determine what should be taught so that learning becomes truly relevant to learners' real-

world requirements. Thus, ESP serves as a bridge between language instruction and actual professional demands.

Business students represent a group of learners with distinctive linguistic and communicative needs compared to students from other disciplines. They must acquire English skills that are not only academic but also applicable to business contexts, such as negotiation, correspondence, financial reporting, business presentations, and professional discussions (Iswati & Hastuti, 2023). These skills cannot be effectively developed through General English learning, as the context and terminology used in the business world are highly specific. For instance, students must understand terms such as market segmentation, return on investment, brand equity, and competitive advantage, which are rarely encountered in general English instruction. Previous studies indicate that ESP courses designed for business and management programs identify speaking and business correspondence as students' primary needs (Wulandari, 2023). Therefore, ESP course design for business students must consider their authentic communicative needs to ensure effective use of English in professional settings.

However, the reality in many Indonesian universities shows that ESP implementation still faces several challenges. The teaching materials used are often too general and fail to reflect authentic business communication situations (Solihah et al., 2023). Many lecturers continue to rely on General English textbooks or ESP materials that are not adapted to the local needs of students (Fitria, 2023). As a result, the learning process becomes less relevant and fails to fully equip students with the English skills truly required in professional environments (Septiana, 2024). Moreover, most students perceive ESP courses merely as academic requirements rather than as strategic opportunities to develop professional competencies (Fitria, 2023). This situation reveals a gap between the ideal objectives of ESP learning and its classroom implementation, suggesting that its effectiveness requires further examination (Solihah et al., 2023).

Based on these phenomena, several key issues can be identified. First, the ESP learning materials used in higher education often do not fully reflect the actual language needs of business students. Second, the skills developed during instruction tend to focus on linguistic aspects rather than on the functional use of language in business activities. Third, there is limited understanding of students' needs from their own perspectives, leading to course designs that are based on instructors' assumptions rather than on empirical data about learners' actual requirements. Fourth, evaluations of ESP learning effectiveness in higher education remain infrequent and insufficiently comprehensive.

These gaps indicate the existence of a research gap in ESP studies, particularly in the Indonesian context. Most studies on needs analysis in ESP rely on quantitative methods, such as questionnaires or surveys (Yulia & Agustiani, 2019; Dewi & Indriani, 2023). While such methods can provide a general overview of students' language needs, they often fail to capture deeper insights into learners' experiences, perceptions, and motivations (Wulandari, 2023; Simaremare, Sinambela, & Manik, 2023). Meanwhile, qualitative research which allows for a more comprehensive exploration of classroom contexts, interactions, and students' perceptions of ESP materials and teaching methods remains limited, especially in the field of business (Wulandari, 2023). Yet, a qualitative approach is highly relevant for understanding

learners' needs in a contextual and humanistic manner (Guntoro, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by adopting a qualitative approach focusing on business students in Indonesia.

Based on the aforementioned background and research gap, this study focuses on analyzing the learning needs of business students in the context of ESP instruction using a qualitative approach. The research seeks to answer three main questions: (1) What are the English learning needs of business students within the ESP learning context? (2) Which language skills are considered the most important and relevant for supporting their academic and professional activities? and (3) How do students perceive the effectiveness of ESP courses they have taken in higher education?

The objective of this study is to obtain a deeper understanding of the learning needs of business students in ESP and to provide a contextual overview of how such instruction can be improved to better meet professional demands. The findings of this research are expected to provide practical contributions to the development of curricula, syllabus design, and the preparation of ESP teaching materials that are more relevant to students' needs. Additionally, this study aims to offer theoretical contributions to the field of needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes, particularly within the context of higher education in Indonesia. Thus, this research not only contributes to the improvement of ESP teaching practices but also to the enhancement of overall English language education quality in globally oriented academic environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions, experiences, and learning needs in a natural and contextual setting (Quilliam et al., 2023). This approach allows the researcher to explore the meaning behind students' experiences in taking English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and to examine the relevance of such learning to their professional needs in the field of business. The participants were students from the English for Business and Professional Communication study program, as well as students from business-related majors who had taken ESP courses at a state higher education institution. Participants were selected purposively, consisting of active students from the third to sixth semester who had completed at least one ESP course. A total of fifteen to twenty participants were considered sufficient to represent the range of English learning needs within the business context (Hidayat, 2024; Simaremare et al., 2023).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews explored students' perceptions of their English learning needs, the challenges they encountered, and their expectations regarding ESP materials and teaching methods. Classroom observations were conducted to identify teaching practices and real-time use of English in academic interactions, while document analysis included syllabi, teaching materials, and students' assignments to evaluate the alignment between learning content and professional business needs. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorizing, and identifying main themes that represent students' overall language needs (Soysal & Türkmen, 2024). The analysis was conducted iteratively, involving

repeated data reviews to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected the empirical realities (Quilliam et al., 2023).

To ensure data validity, several strategies were applied, including triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from multiple data collection techniques to ensure consistency (Ramakrishnan et al., 2023). Member checking involved asking participants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations, while peer debriefing included discussions with colleagues to obtain critical feedback on the analytical process and conclusions (Soysal & Türkmen, 2024). Through these measures, the credibility and dependability of the study were strengthened, ensuring that the findings could serve as a reliable basis for developing more contextual, effective, and relevant ESP instruction for business students in higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that business students' English learning needs are oriented toward professional contexts, particularly in business communication activities such as negotiations, presentations, and formal correspondence. Based on the interview data, most students emphasized the importance of mastering speaking skills in formal situations. One participant stated, *"We need to know how to speak in meetings or present a product in English, not just make simple sentences"* (M2, interview, 2025). This statement was reinforced by M5, who commented that ESP learning should focus more on workplace communication skills: *"We need speaking practice like in a meeting, not just reading ordinary paragraphs."* Another student (M9) added, *"Sometimes we learn topics unrelated to business, so it feels irrelevant to our major."* These findings indicate that students' learning needs encompass not only linguistic aspects but also the functional use of language in professional communication.

Classroom observations showed that students demonstrated a higher level of participation during practice-based activities such as meeting simulations or product discussions. Their engagement increased when learning activities allowed them to interact authentically using business terminology, such as market analysis or brand positioning. However, most learning sessions were still dominated by teacher explanations focusing on grammatical structures. This condition illustrates a gap between students' actual learning needs and classroom implementation. This finding supports Hidayat's (2024) view that relevance and professional context are fundamental in ESP learning, as students learn more effectively when instructional materials align with the work environments they are preparing for.

Speaking and writing skills emerged as the two most essential aspects identified by students in ESP learning. According to M6, *"Speaking skills are very important because later we will have many presentations and discussions in English."* Similarly, M11 stated, *"Writing financial reports or business emails in English is also essential, especially when working in international companies."* M13 further emphasized the importance of effective communication skills: *"If we can speak well, we can explain business ideas and attract potential partners."* Nevertheless, several students noted that speaking practice remains very limited. As M8 said, *"We rarely get the opportunity to speak freely; we do more writing exercises."* Observations showed that students were more enthusiastic when assigned presentation tasks or business meeting simulations. However, document analysis

revealed that most assessments still focused on writing rather than speaking. This indicates a need for balance between productive and receptive skills, as suggested by Wulandari (2023).

Another finding highlights significant challenges in ESP learning, particularly related to limited technical vocabulary and the lack of authentic business examples. Some students admitted having difficulty understanding terms such as liability, brand equity, and gross margin. M3 mentioned, *"I often find it hard to understand those terms because they are not explained in real business contexts."* Meanwhile, M10 stated, *"Lecturers often teach grammar more than business communication strategies,"* and M14 added, *"The textbooks used are still too general; they don't reflect our needs as business students."* Observations confirmed that classroom activities were largely dominated by teacher explanations, while professional simulation exercises were rarely implemented. This condition aligns with Solihah et al. (2023), who found that the lack of contextual materials and relevant teaching strategies reduces ESP's effectiveness in equipping students with professional competencies.

Furthermore, data triangulation revealed that students expect a stronger connection between ESP learning and real-world workplace demands. Several participants emphasized the importance of incorporating real business contexts in the classroom. M4 expressed, *"If the materials are linked to real business practices, it's easier for us to understand how English is used at work."* This was supported by M7, who said, *"I want to learn how to write business proposals or create product presentations in English,"* and M12 added, *"So far, the examples used are too general; we need case studies relevant to our field."* Observations showed that when instructors integrated lessons with real business simulations, students appeared more active and enthusiastic. This supports Simaremare et al. (2023), who emphasized that the use of authentic materials can enhance engagement and learning motivation.

Students' perceptions of ESP learning effectiveness also revealed that the teaching approach used was not yet fully participatory. According to M2, *"The lessons are mostly about theory and grammar. We rarely get tasks that develop our speaking skills."* M9 added, *"If lecturers gave us more practice, the results would be better,"* and M6 remarked, *"ESP learning is not yet effective because it doesn't match our workplace needs."* These statements highlight the necessity of adopting a more interactive teaching approach. Classroom observations indicated that project-based activities such as marketing presentations successfully boosted students' confidence in formal speaking situations. This finding aligns with Dewi and Indriani (2023), who emphasized the importance of active student participation in task-based learning to achieve optimal outcomes.

Classroom interaction dynamics also played a crucial role in learning effectiveness. Observations revealed that teacher–student interaction tended to be one-way. M1 stated, *"We mostly listen to the lecturer rather than have discussions,"* while M7 suggested, *"If lecturers often invite debates or ask for opinions, we would be more active."* This was supported by M5, *"The class feels passive because students are afraid of making mistakes,"* and M13 added, *"Lecturers should provide more pair-speaking exercises so we can be more confident to interact."* Nonetheless, several group activities, such as business topic discussions and team presentations, were found effective in increasing engagement. These findings indicate that implementing student-centered learning could be a potential solution for creating a more interactive learning environment (Agustina et al., 2024).

In addition, students expressed expectations that ESP learning should be more aligned with modern business developments. M8 stated, *"We hope to learn about digital marketing terms because many businesses are now conducted online,"* while M10 added, *"It would be more interesting if lecturers invited business practitioners to share real experiences."* M2 also suggested, *"ESP materials should be related to real work situations, not just classroom theory."* These expectations reflect students' desire to develop English skills that are adaptive to the dynamics of economic globalization and digitalization. Quilliam et al. (2023) also highlighted that collaboration between educational institutions and industry can enhance the effectiveness of need-based curricula.

Analysis of syllabi and students' assignments indicated that most curriculum content has not yet fully reflected the needs of professional communication. For example, although the syllabus stated a focus on "business communication," most learning activities remained centered on grammar exercises and text translation. M5 stated, *"The syllabus says it focuses on business communication, but in class we still study tenses,"* while M12 added, *"We are often asked to write general paragraphs instead of project reports or business emails."* This finding demonstrates a misalignment between curriculum planning and implementation. Consistent with Simaremare et al. (2023), ESP curricula should be designed based on measurable and applicable communicative competencies to meet global professional standards.

Triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and document analysis strengthened the validity of the study's findings. Students' statements regarding the lack of relevance in materials and teaching methods were reflected in both classroom observations and document content. Member checking confirmed that the researcher's interpretations accurately represented the students' perceptions. As M3 stated, *"The interview results written by the researcher match my experience,"* and M7 added, *"The interpretation truly reflects what happens in class."* Peer debriefing sessions with colleagues also confirmed the consistency of data interpretation, in line with qualitative research principles proposed by Soysal & Türkmen (2024) and Ramakrishnan et al. (2023).

Overall, this study confirms that business students have highly contextual and practical English learning needs. Professional speaking and writing skills are the top priorities that must be developed through communicative, participatory, and project-based learning approaches. The main challenges identified include non-contextual learning materials, teacher-centered instruction, and limited interaction that restricts students' opportunities to use English actively. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed in ESP implementation toward task-based learning and integration with real-world industry practices. Such approaches are believed to enhance the relevance, engagement, and effectiveness of English learning for business students in higher education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the English learning needs of business students in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses focus on mastering speaking and writing skills that are relevant to professional contexts. Students demonstrated a strong interest in practical learning activities, such as business meeting simulations, negotiations, and the preparation of financial reports in English. The main challenges identified include limited technical vocabulary, insufficiently contextualized learning materials, and teacher-centered

instructional methods. These findings indicate that ESP learning in higher education should be directed toward the development of professional communication competence through more participatory, interactive, and task-based approaches.

Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) perspective that the success of ESP learning depends on how far curriculum design is grounded in learners' needs analysis. The findings also support contextual learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of linking academic content with real-world professional situations (Hidayat, 2024; Simaremare et al., 2023). Thus, this research contributes to the development of an ESP learning model based on students' needs, one that integrates linguistic and functional aspects in a balanced manner within the professional business context.

From a practical standpoint, this study provides important implications for lecturers, educational institutions, and curriculum developers. Lecturers are encouraged to adopt student-centered learning and task-based instruction methods to enhance student engagement and provide more authentic learning experiences. Educational institutions should revise their ESP curricula by incorporating input from industry practitioners to ensure that learning materials reflect the real demands of the job market. Furthermore, teacher training programs should be strengthened to equip instructors with the ability to design and implement project-based and case-based learning. Through these efforts, ESP instruction can not only improve students' language competence but also prepare business students to become competent and globally competitive professionals.

REFERENCES

- Agustina, D., Thamrin, R., & Oktoma, M. (2024). The role of English proficiency in global business communication: Challenges and strategies for higher education. *Journal of English Education and Applied Linguistics*, 12(1), 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jeal.12.1.44>
- Dewi, P. R., & Indriani, N. (2023). Students' engagement in task-based ESP classrooms: A case study in Indonesian higher education. *Indonesian Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, 5(2), 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.31258/ijesp.5.2.87>
- Fitria, T. N. (2023). Challenges in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at Indonesian universities. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris*, 11(3), 175–188. <https://doi.org/10.22236/jpbi.2023.11.3.175>
- Guntoro, S. (2021). Contextual understanding in ESP learning: A qualitative exploration. *ELT Perspective*, 9(2), 92–104. <https://doi.org/10.24114/eltp.v9i2.15321>
- Hidayat, L. D. (2024). ESP needs analysis for marketing students in an Indonesian vocational school: Insights from strategy analysis. *Journal on Education*, 7(1), 1844–1857. <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v7i1.6717>
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press.

- Iswati, S., & Hastuti, W. (2023). Developing business English communication skills through authentic materials in ESP classes. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 14(2), 212–221. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1402.05>
- Kurniawan, H. (2024). The importance of English mastery for business students in the digital era. *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Humaniora*, 13(1), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jph.v13i1.3321>
- Quilliam, C., Wong Shee, A., Corboy, D., & et al. (2023). Design and implementation characteristics of research training for rural health professionals: A qualitative descriptive study. *BMC Medical Education*, 23(200), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-023-04169-5>
- Ramakrishnan, V., Nanthagopan, Y., & Piriyaarshan, S. (2023). Beyond methods: Theoretical underpinnings of triangulation in qualitative and multi-method studies. *SEEU Review*, 18(2), 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.2478/seeur-2023-0088>
- Septiana, R. (2024). Relevansi materi English for Business terhadap kompetensi profesional mahasiswa. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa*, 9(1), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.23917/jpb.v9i1.5587>
- Simaremare, Y. N., Sinambela, E., & Manik, S. (2023). Students' needs analysis of business English at ESP class for Business Administration Department at Nommensen HKBP University. *Cetta: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 6(4), 687–700. <https://doi.org/10.37329/cetta.v6i4.2733>
- Solihah, N., Yuliana, A., & Rahayu, D. (2023). The challenges of ESP implementation in higher education: A contextual analysis. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Studies*, 11(2), 66–79. <https://doi.org/10.24071/ijels.v11i2.497>
- Soysal, Y., & Türkmen, S. (2024). Reinterpreting the member checking validation strategy in qualitative research through the hermeneutics lens. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 42–63. <https://doi.org/10.59455/qietp.19>
- Wulandari, S. (2023). English for Specific Purposes in business and management programs: A needs analysis perspective. *Journal of English Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 10(4), 311–325. <https://doi.org/10.22161/jetal.10.4.311>
- Yulia, E., & Agustiani, D. (2019). Needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes: A case study at Indonesian higher education. *Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies*, 6(2), 199–213. <https://doi.org/10.30762/jeels.v6i2.123>