

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of communicative competence in Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly for non-philological students. In modern higher education, learners from technical and non-linguistic fields require English not only for academic purposes but also for professional communication. The study discusses key theoretical frameworks of communicative competence and examines its role in ESP classrooms. The research highlights that communicative competence improves students' ability to use English in real-life professional contexts, enhances speaking confidence, and supports task-based learning. The findings suggest that integrating communicative activities into ESP instruction significantly increases learners' linguistic and pragmatic performance.

Keywords: Communicative competence, ESP, non-philological students, English language teaching, task-based learning, higher education

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as one of the most significant and rapidly growing areas in the field of applied linguistics and language education over the past several decades. Unlike General English, which aims to develop broad language proficiency across all domains, ESP is specifically designed to meet the targeted communicative needs of learners in particular professional or academic fields. This distinction makes ESP particularly relevant in today's globalized world, where English has become the dominant medium of communication in science, technology, business, medicine, and numerous other professional sectors.

The foundational definition of ESP, as articulated by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), positions it not merely as a collection of specialized vocabulary or subject-specific texts, but rather as a comprehensive approach to language teaching in which every pedagogical decision — from course design to material selection and assessment — is grounded in a systematic analysis of learners' specific needs. This needs-based philosophy represents a fundamental departure from traditional language teaching paradigms, placing the learner's professional and academic goals at the center of the instructional process.

Within this framework, one of the most critically important objectives of ESP instruction is the development of communicative competence. The concept, originally introduced by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes in 1972, challenged the prevailing Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence, which focused exclusively on a speaker's abstract grammatical knowledge. Hymes argued that knowing a language means far more than mastering its grammatical rules — it requires understanding how, when, where, and with whom to use language appropriately in real social and cultural contexts. This insight proved transformative for language teaching, shifting pedagogical attention from form-focused drills to meaningful, context-embedded communication.

For students enrolled in non-philological disciplines such as engineering, economics, law, medicine, and information technology, the ability to communicate effectively in English is not merely an academic requirement — it is a professional necessity. These students must be capable of reading and comprehending technical literature, participating in international conferences, writing professional reports and academic papers, and engaging in collaborative projects with colleagues from different linguistic backgrounds. In this light, communicative competence becomes not an abstract educational goal, but a concrete, practical skill with direct implications for students' future careers.

This paper examines the role of communicative competence in ESP instruction for non-philological university students, drawing on established theoretical frameworks and empirical findings to argue that interaction-based, communicative approaches to language teaching are significantly more effective than traditional grammar-centered methods in preparing students for real-world professional communication.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of communicative competence has a rich and evolving history within linguistics and language pedagogy. The concept was first systematically articulated by Dell Hymes (1972), who introduced it as a response to Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. While Chomsky's model emphasized the idealized, internalized grammatical knowledge of a native speaker, Hymes argued that this model was insufficient for understanding actual language use. He proposed that true linguistic ability encompasses knowledge of what is grammatically possible, what is feasible given the means of implementation, what is appropriate in relation to a social context, and what is actually performed in real communicative situations. This multidimensional understanding of language ability laid the groundwork for all subsequent theoretical developments in communicative language teaching.

Building on Hymes' foundational work, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a more structured and pedagogically applicable model of communicative competence, comprising four distinct but interrelated components. The first, grammatical competence, refers to knowledge of the linguistic code itself — phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. The second, sociolinguistic competence, concerns the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, taking into account factors such as the relationship between speakers, the purpose of the interaction, and cultural norms. The third component, discourse competence, involves the ability to connect sentences into coherent written or spoken texts, using appropriate devices of cohesion and coherence. Finally, strategic competence refers to the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that speakers employ to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance the effectiveness of interaction. This four-part model has remained highly influential in both language testing and curriculum design, providing a comprehensive framework for defining and assessing communicative ability.

In the specific context of ESP, the theoretical contributions of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have been particularly instrumental in shaping curriculum development and classroom practice. Their learner-centered approach emphasizes that language teaching must be grounded in a careful and systematic analysis of the target situation — that is, the communicative contexts and tasks that learners will encounter in their professional or academic lives. Rather than teaching language as an abstract system, ESP instructors are encouraged to identify the specific genres, registers, and discourse conventions that characterize communication in a given field, and to design learning activities that replicate or simulate these authentic communicative demands.

This approach aligns closely with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which, as Richards (2006) explains, treats interaction as both the primary means and the ultimate goal of language learning. CLT represents a significant methodological shift away from structural syllabi and audiolingual drills toward more holistic, meaning-focused approaches that engage learners in genuine communicative tasks. Within a CLT framework, accuracy remains important, but it is understood as a means to effective communication rather than an end in itself.

Empirical research has increasingly supported the effectiveness of communicative activities in ESP classrooms. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) demonstrated that structured communicative activities such as role-play, problem-solving tasks, and group discussions significantly enhance learners' conversational skills, helping them develop not only linguistic fluency but also the interactional competencies needed to manage real-life professional exchanges. More recent research in the field has further confirmed that task-based and project-based learning approaches, when carefully aligned with learners' professional needs, produce

measurable improvements in both language proficiency and communicative confidence (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). These findings collectively suggest that the integration of communicative methodology into ESP instruction is not merely pedagogically desirable, but empirically justified.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research design, which was considered most appropriate given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions. Qualitative methods allow for a nuanced and contextually sensitive examination of how communicative activities influence students' language development and professional communication skills, capturing dimensions of the learning experience that quantitative measures alone would fail to reveal.

The participants in this study were sixty undergraduate students enrolled in ESP courses at a non-philological university. The group comprised students from three different academic departments — engineering, economics, and information technology — all of whom were in their second or third year of study and had been receiving ESP instruction for at least one academic semester prior to the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a representative range of proficiency levels, academic backgrounds, and professional aspirations. All participants provided informed consent for their involvement in the research.

Data were collected through three primary instruments. First, structured classroom observations were conducted over a period of twelve weeks, during which the researcher documented the nature and frequency of communicative activities, patterns of student participation, and instances of both successful and unsuccessful communication. Observation notes were recorded using a structured protocol designed to capture relevant pedagogical and interactional features of each lesson. Second, a written questionnaire was administered to all participants at the beginning and end of the observation period. The questionnaire included both closed-ended items, designed to assess students' attitudes toward communicative learning activities and their self-perceived proficiency, and open-ended items, inviting reflective responses about their experiences with English in academic and professional contexts. Third, speaking tasks were conducted with a representative subsample of twenty participants at two points during the study — before and after a sustained period of communicative instruction. These tasks were designed to simulate authentic professional communication scenarios relevant to each student's field of study, including presenting technical information, participating in a simulated job interview, and engaging in a collaborative problem-solving discussion.

The teaching intervention itself spanned the twelve-week observation period and was implemented by the students' regular ESP instructors, who had been briefed on the study's objectives and had collaboratively designed a communicative curriculum

incorporating role-play, task-based learning, simulation activities, and structured group discussions. All activities were explicitly linked to the students' specific professional contexts, ensuring alignment with ESP's core needs-based philosophy.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. Observation notes and questionnaire responses were coded and categorized according to recurring themes related to communicative development, learner engagement, and perceived challenges. Speaking task recordings were analyzed using a modified version of the Canale and Swain (1980) framework, assessing performance across the four dimensions of communicative competence. Member checking and peer debriefing were employed as strategies to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence in support of the central hypothesis that communicative competence plays a decisive and multifaceted role in the ESP learning process for non-philological students. Analysis of classroom observations, questionnaire responses, and speaking task performances revealed a consistent and coherent pattern of development across multiple dimensions of communicative ability over the course of the twelve-week intervention.

Perhaps the most striking finding concerned the observable transformation in students' willingness to engage in classroom communication. At the outset of the study, the majority of participants demonstrated significant reluctance to speak English voluntarily, often waiting to be called upon rather than initiating communication, and frequently reverting to their first language when encountering lexical or grammatical difficulties. By the midpoint of the intervention, this pattern had begun to shift noticeably. By the study's conclusion, classroom observations documented a marked increase in spontaneous student-initiated communication, more sustained peer interaction during group tasks, and a considerably more relaxed and confident communicative atmosphere overall.

Specifically, the data revealed several interconnected areas of improvement. Students demonstrated substantially greater activity and initiative in classroom discussions, moving from passive reception to active participation as they became more comfortable with the communicative norms and expectations of the ESP classroom. Their use of field-specific vocabulary in professional contexts showed measurable improvement, not only in terms of the range and accuracy of terminology employed, but also in students' ability to integrate technical language naturally into extended spoken discourse rather than simply reciting isolated terms. Most significantly, the pervasive anxiety about speaking English in front of peers and instructors — a concern that had been prominently reported in initial questionnaire responses — decreased considerably, with the large majority of participants reporting in their final

questionnaires that they felt more confident and less fearful of making mistakes during oral communication tasks.

The speaking task data further illuminated these developments across the four dimensions of Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence framework. In terms of grammatical competence, participants showed moderate improvement, particularly in their control of tense usage and subject-verb agreement in extended speech. More pronounced gains were observed in the areas of sociolinguistic and discourse competence. Students demonstrated an improved ability to adjust their register and level of formality according to the simulated professional context — for instance, adopting a more formal and structured discourse style during the mock presentation task while shifting to a more collaborative and negotiated style during the problem-solving discussion. Strategic competence also developed meaningfully, with students employing a wider and more sophisticated range of communication strategies to maintain the flow of interaction, including paraphrasing, requesting clarification, and using contextual cues to infer meaning.

These findings are consistent with and extend previous research in the field. The observed improvements in speaking fluency and interactional competence align with Dörnyei and Thurrell's (1994) findings regarding the effectiveness of structured communicative activities in developing conversational skills. The data also support Richards' (2006) argument that CLT, by treating interaction as the central mechanism of language learning, creates conditions in which learners develop not only linguistic accuracy but also the broader communicative resources needed to navigate authentic professional exchanges.

Nevertheless, the study also identified a number of significant challenges that temper an overly optimistic interpretation of the findings and highlight important areas for future attention. A recurring concern raised by both students and instructors was the constraint of limited classroom time. The communicative activities that proved most effective — extended role-plays, project-based collaborative tasks, and multi-stage simulations — were also the most time-intensive, creating tension with the need to cover required syllabus content and prepare students for formal assessments. Several instructors noted that institutional pressures and assessment formats that continued to prioritize grammatical accuracy made it difficult to fully embrace a communicative approach without students feeling that their examination preparation was being compromised.

A related challenge concerned the persistence of deeply ingrained grammar-focused learning habits among students. Many participants, particularly those who had experienced many years of traditional, form-focused English instruction prior to university, initially struggled to reorient their understanding of language learning toward communication and meaning-making. For these students, the early stages of the

communicative activities were characterized by considerable uncertainty and frustration, as they were accustomed to clear right-or-wrong answers and found the more open-ended, negotiated nature of communicative tasks disconcerting. This suggests that a gradual and carefully scaffolded transition from form-focused to meaning-focused instruction may be more effective than an abrupt shift in pedagogical approach.

Despite these challenges, the overall weight of the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that communicative methods are substantially more effective than traditional grammar-centered approaches in developing the practical English skills that non-philological students need for professional and academic success. The challenges identified are real and should not be minimized, but they are ultimately organizational and institutional in nature rather than inherent limitations of communicative pedagogy itself.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of communicative competence in ESP instruction for non-philological university students, and the findings offer clear and consistent support for the central argument that interaction-based, communicatively oriented approaches to language teaching represent the most effective pathway to developing the practical English skills that students in professional and academic fields require.

The evidence gathered through classroom observation, student questionnaires, and structured speaking tasks demonstrates that participation in carefully designed communicative activities — including role-play, task-based learning, problem-solving discussions, and professional simulations — produces meaningful and observable improvements across multiple dimensions of communicative competence. Students become more confident, more fluent, more contextually sensitive in their language use, and more capable of sustaining meaningful professional interactions in English. These outcomes speak directly to the core mission of ESP as a field: to develop not abstract linguistic knowledge, but real communicative capacity in context.

The theoretical framework provided by Hymes (1972) and subsequently refined by Canale and Swain (1980) proved highly productive as an analytical lens for understanding and describing students' communicative development. By conceptualizing competence as a multidimensional construct encompassing grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions, this framework captures the full complexity of professional communication in a way that purely grammar-focused models of language proficiency cannot.

From a practical standpoint, the findings carry clear implications for ESP curriculum design and classroom practice. Course designers and instructors working in non-philological university contexts should prioritize the integration of

communicative activities that are explicitly linked to students' target professional situations. Assessment instruments should be redesigned to reflect communicative outcomes rather than exclusively grammatical accuracy. Institutional policies should provide sufficient classroom time and professional development support to enable meaningful implementation of communicative approaches.

Looking ahead, future research should explore the long-term effects of communicative ESP instruction on graduates' actual professional communication performance, examine how digital technologies and online collaboration tools can expand opportunities for authentic communicative practice beyond the classroom, and investigate the specific adaptations of communicative methodology that are most effective across different non-philological disciplines. As the professional world continues to evolve and the demand for effective English communication across international contexts continues to grow, the development of robust, evidence-based ESP programs grounded in communicative principles will only become more urgent and more consequential.

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