A COMPETENCY-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING ESP LEARNERS' PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Annotation

This article explores the design of a competency-based framework aimed at enhancing ESP learners' professional skills in higher education. As global labour markets increasingly demand graduates with strong domain-specific communication abilities, ESP instruction must evolve from traditional language teaching toward an integrated, practice-oriented model. The proposed framework incorporates linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, digital, and task-based competencies, ensuring learners develop both disciplinary language proficiency and job-relevant skills. The study synthesizes recent pedagogical theories, including competency-based education, outcome-driven curriculum design, and workplace-aligned assessment. It also highlights the importance of authentic materials, scenario-based tasks, and collaborative learning environments in shaping learners' professional identity. Findings suggest that implementing a competency-based ESP model significantly strengthens learners' communicative preparedness, adaptability, and performance in real professional contexts, thereby improving employability and overall academic success.

Keywords

competency-based education, ESP, professional skills, higher education, communicative competence, task-based learning, digital literacy, employability.

Introduction. In contemporary higher education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a critical component of preparing students for the professional demands of their future careers. As industries evolve and labour markets prioritize graduates capable of performing complex tasks in multilingual and multicultural environments, ESP instruction must shift from traditional language-focused teaching to a competency-oriented paradigm [5]. A competency-based approach emphasizes measurable outcomes, practical relevance, and the integration of linguistic, cognitive, intercultural, and digital skills necessary for effective

professional performance. This aligns with global educational reforms promoting learner autonomy, employability, and workplace readiness.

Despite the recognized importance of ESP, many university programs still rely on generic syllabi, limited authentic materials, and assessment practices that fail to evaluate real-world communicative competence. Consequently, learners often struggle to transfer classroom knowledge to professional contexts. There is a growing need for frameworks that systematically develop job-specific communication skills through authentic tasks, scenario-based instruction, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

A competency-based framework addresses these gaps by organizing learning around clearly defined professional outcomes, integrating domain-specific discourse practices, and embedding tasks that simulate workplace communication [7]. It also encourages the use of digital tools, collaborative learning, and reflective practices that enhance both technical and soft skills. This article proposes such a framework and explores its pedagogical implications for strengthening ESP learners' professional competence in higher education. By aligning curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment with the realities of modern professions, the competency-based ESP model offers a comprehensive pathway for improving learners' readiness for employment and their ability to perform confidently in specialized fields.

Literature review. Research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) increasingly emphasizes the need for competency-based models that align language instruction with professional practice. T.Hutchinson and A.Waters identify ESP as a learner-centered approach shaped by communicative needs emerging from specific disciplines, stressing that effective ESP instruction must integrate linguistic, pragmatic, and situational features of professional discourse [2]. T.Dudley-Evans and St. John further expand this view, highlighting the importance of genre awareness and authentic communication tasks for developing field-relevant competence [3]. J.Richards argues that competency-based curriculum design requires measurable outcomes and authentic performance indicators, positioning learners' workplace readiness as a central educational goal [1].

K.Hyland also underscores the disciplinary nature of language, suggesting that success in ESP depends on the systematic teaching of disciplinary conventions, textual structures, and rhetorical strategies [4]. More recent studies in language pedagogy stress the integration of digital literacy, collaborative learning, and multimodal resources as essential components of professional competence. Additionally, M.Eraut notes that professional competence encompasses not only knowledge but also problem-solving, decision-making, and contextual judgment

skills that must be embedded in ESP instruction [6]. Collectively, the literature demonstrates a clear shift toward practice-oriented, outcome-driven ESP models that support learners in transferring classroom skills to real professional environments.

Research methodology. This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research methodology to develop and justify a competency-based framework for enhancing ESP learners' professional skills in higher education. The methodological design integrates document analysis, expert evaluation, and thematic synthesis. First, key international frameworks such as competency-based education models, ESP curriculum guidelines, and workplace communication standards were examined to identify essential professional competencies relevant to various disciplines. Second, semi-structured consultations with ESP instructors and industry specialists were conducted to determine the practical communicative demands faced by graduates in real professional environments. Third, thematic analysis was applied to categorize linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, digital, and task-based competencies into a coherent framework. The study also incorporates comparative analysis of existing ESP syllabi to reveal gaps between academic instruction and workplace requirements. This multi-layered methodology ensures that the proposed framework is pedagogically grounded, empirically informed, and adaptable to diverse higher-education contexts.

Results and discussion. The findings of the study reveal that a competency-based framework significantly strengthens the alignment between ESP instruction and the practical professional needs of university learners. Analysis of international models and expert feedback indicates that traditional ESP courses often focus predominantly on linguistic knowledge, while essential components such as pragmatic competence, intercultural awareness, digital communication skills, and task-based performance remain underrepresented. The proposed framework restructures ESP learning around five integrated competency domains: linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, digital, and collaborative-task competence.

The results demonstrate that embedding authentic professional tasks such as report writing, case-based problem solving, email communication, project presentations, and workplace simulations substantially increases learners' ability to transfer classroom knowledge to real work contexts. Expert evaluations confirm that scenario-based tasks, multimodal resources, and digital tools enhance learners' confidence and improve their readiness for specialized communication demands. Comparative analysis of existing syllabi further shows that introducing measurable competency indicators allows instructors to assess learners' progress more accurately through performance-based assessments rather than traditional

grammar- or vocabulary-focused testing. Participants also reported higher motivation and engagement when learning goals were explicitly tied to future professional roles.

The results support the conclusion that a competency-based ESP framework strengthens employability, fosters independent learning, and develops adaptable communication skills required in contemporary professional environments.

Table. Comparison of traditional ESP instruction and competency-based ESP framework.

Components	Traditional ESP Instruction	Competency-Based ESP Framework
Primary Focus	Language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary)	Integrated professional competencies (linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, digital)
Learning Outcomes	General language improvement	Measurable, job-specific performance outcomes
Teaching Materials	Textbook-based, limited authentic input	Authentic workplace texts, multimodal and digital resources
Task Types	Reading comprehension, controlled exercises	Scenario-based tasks, simulations, problem-solving activities
Assessment Methods	Tests on language forms	Performance-based assessment, competency indicators
Learner Engagement	Passive or semi-active	Active, collaborative, reflective learning
Workplace Relevance	Limited transferability	High transferability to real professional contexts

The findings highlight that competency-based ESP instruction provides a more holistic and practice-oriented learning experience compared to traditional language-focused approaches. By integrating linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, and digital competencies, the proposed framework enables learners to develop communication skills directly applicable to workplace demands. The increased emphasis on authentic tasks and scenario-based activities fosters learners' ability to navigate real-world professional situations with greater confidence and accuracy. Moreover, performance-based assessment ensures a more valid measurement of learners' communicative readiness, addressing long-standing gaps in ESP evaluation practices. The results suggest that aligning ESP curricula with competency indicators not only enhances learner motivation but also improves employability outcomes. Overall, the discussion confirms that competency-based ESP models represent a progressive and effective direction for modern higher education.

Conclusion. This study demonstrates that a competency-based framework offers a comprehensive and impactful approach to developing ESP learners'

professional skills in higher education. As global industries continue to demand graduates who can communicate effectively in specialized contexts, ESP instruction must move beyond traditional linguistic training and embrace models that integrate professional, cognitive, and digital competencies. The proposed framework responds to this need by organizing learning around authentic tasks, measurable outcomes, and interdisciplinary collaboration, thereby bridging the gap between academic instruction and workplace expectations.

The findings confirm that competency-based ESP instruction enhances learners' ability to transfer classroom knowledge to real professional situations, improves their confidence in performing domain-specific communicative tasks, and fosters essential soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. Performance-based assessment also provides a more accurate reflection of learners' readiness for employment, encouraging continuous self-improvement and reflective learning. Furthermore, embedding intercultural and digital competencies ensures that learners are prepared for the realities of modern, technology-driven workplaces where communication occurs across diverse cultural and professional settings. The framework's flexibility allows for adaptation across various disciplines, making it suitable for engineering, business, healthcare, tourism, and translation studies.

Overall, the study concludes that implementing a competency-based ESP model significantly strengthens the professional preparedness and employability of university students. Higher education institutions are therefore encouraged to integrate this framework into curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment to ensure that graduates possess the comprehensive skill set required for success in today's competitive global environment.

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