

English for Specific Purposes at the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Vietnam: A Mixed-Methods Study of Teaching Methods, Needs Analysis, and Pedagogical Effectiveness

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Abstract:

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become increasingly vital in Vietnamese higher education, particularly at specialized institutions where English instruction must align with distinct professional domains. This study investigates the current state of ESP teaching methods at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC) in Hanoi, Vietnam, a premier institution training professionals in journalism, media, and political communication. Employing a mixed-methods design combining surveys (n = 186 students, n = 12 lecturers), semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the research examined the alignment between existing pedagogical practices and the professional English communication needs of journalism and media students. The findings reveal a significant gap between the predominantly grammar-translation and lecture-based methods currently employed and the task-based, project-oriented approaches that students and industry stakeholders report as necessary for professional readiness. Three key challenges emerged: (1) insufficient integration of authentic journalistic materials and real-world communicative tasks, (2) limited application of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and project-based learning (PBL) frameworks, and (3) a mismatch between assessment practices and the communicative competencies demanded by the media industry. The study proposes a context-sensitive pedagogical framework that combines needs analysis, task-based instruction, and genre-based approaches tailored to journalism and communication disciplines. These findings contribute to the growing literature on ESP pedagogy in Asian higher education contexts and offer practical implications for curriculum design at specialized communication universities.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), journalism education, needs analysis, task-based language teaching, project-based learning, Vietnamese higher education, Academy of Journalism and Communication.

1. Introduction

The role of English in global journalism and mass communication has expanded dramatically over the past two decades. Contemporary journalists and communication professionals are expected not only to consume international news sources in English but also to produce content for global audiences, conduct interviews in English, and engage with multilingual digital platforms [1]. This reality places considerable pressure on journalism schools worldwide - and particularly in non-English-speaking countries such as Vietnam - to equip students with domain-specific English competencies through well-designed English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs.

English for Specific Purposes emerged as a distinct branch of English language teaching in the 1960s,

driven by the recognition that learners in specialized fields require language instruction tailored to their specific academic and professional needs [2]. Unlike general English instruction, ESP is characterized by its focus on the language, genres, and communicative practices of particular disciplines or occupations [3]. Within this framework, needs analysis has been consistently identified as “the cornerstone of ESP”, serving as the foundation for course design, materials development, and pedagogical decisions [4][5]. Hutchinson and Waters [2] proposed a learning-centred approach that distinguishes between target situation needs - what learners need to do in their professional contexts - and learning needs - how learners can most effectively acquire the necessary language and skills.

Dudley-Evans and St John [6] further refined this framework by integrating multiple dimensions of needs analysis, including target situation analysis (TSA), present situation analysis (PSA), and learning situation analysis, creating what many scholars consider the most comprehensive model for ESP course design [7]. This multidimensional approach requires educators to examine not only the linguistic demands of the target profession but also learners' current proficiency levels, preferred learning styles, and the constraints of the educational context.

In Vietnam, the demand for ESP has grown substantially alongside the country's deeper integration into the global economy and its expanding media landscape [8]. The Vietnamese government's National Foreign Language Project 2020 (renewed through 2025) explicitly emphasized the need for improved foreign language competencies in professional domains. Within this policy context, the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC) - one of Vietnam's leading institutions for training in journalism, media, and political communication - has been tasked with producing graduates who can operate effectively in both Vietnamese and international media environments.

However, despite this strategic importance, the pedagogical approaches employed in ESP courses at AJC have not been systematically examined. Preliminary observations suggest a persistent reliance on traditional teaching methods - including grammar-focused instruction, translation exercises, and lecture-based content delivery - methods that may not adequately develop the communicative competencies students will need in their professional careers [9]. This gap between instructional practice and professional need is not unique to AJC; studies from other Vietnamese universities have similarly reported challenges in implementing learner-centred, task-based approaches in ESP contexts [10].

The current study addresses this gap by investigating three research questions:

- 1 What are the professional English communication needs of journalism and media students at AJC, as perceived by students, lecturers, and industry professionals?

- 2 What teaching methods are currently employed in ESP courses at AJC, and to what extent do they align with students' identified needs?
- 3 What factors facilitate or constrain the implementation of more communicative, task-based approaches to ESP instruction at AJC?

By answering these questions, this study aims to provide both a diagnosis of current practices and a practical framework for pedagogical improvement that can inform ESP curriculum development not only at AJC but at similar institutions across Vietnam and the broader Southeast Asian region.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the complexity of ESP teaching and learning at AJC [11]. A convergent parallel design was adopted, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then synthesized during the interpretation phase. This triangulation of methods was intended to enhance the validity and depth of findings [12].

2.2 Participants

The study involved three participant groups:

Students (n = 186). Undergraduate students from four academic programs at AJC - Journalism (n = 52), Television Broadcasting (n = 44), Public Relations (n = 48), and Political Communication (n = 42) - were recruited through stratified random sampling. All participants had completed at least two semesters of ESP instruction. The sample comprised 128 females (68.8%) and 58 males (31.2%), reflecting the gender distribution of AJC's student body. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23 years (M = 20.7, SD = 1.2).

Lecturers (n = 12). All English-language lecturers currently teaching ESP courses at AJC participated in the study. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 18 years (M = 7.4, SD = 4.1). Six held master's degrees in TESOL or applied linguistics; six held bachelor's degrees. Two lecturers had completed formal training in ESP methodology.

Industry professionals (n = 15). Fifteen professionals working in journalism, public

relations, and media production in Hanoi were recruited through purposive sampling. This group included editors ($n = 4$), reporters ($n = 5$), PR managers ($n = 3$), and media producers ($n = 3$), with professional experience ranging from 5 to 22 years.

2.3 Instruments

Four instruments were developed and validated for this study:

Student survey questionnaire. A 38-item questionnaire was designed based on established ESP needs analysis frameworks [2][6]. Items covered five dimensions: (a) perceived importance of English skills for professional work, (b) current English proficiency self-assessment, (c) preferred learning activities and teaching methods, (d) satisfaction with current ESP courses, and (e) perceived gaps between instruction and professional needs. Items used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire was piloted with 30 students (not included in the final sample), yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

Lecturer interview protocol. A semi-structured interview protocol comprising 14 open-ended questions explored lecturers' current teaching practices, their understanding of ESP methodology, perceived challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to ensure full expression of ideas.

Classroom observation scheme. An adapted version of the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) observation scheme was used to capture pedagogical practices across 18 observed sessions (six lecturers, three sessions each). Observations focused on: type of activities, participant organization (whole class, group, pair, individual), student discourse initiation, and materials used.

Industry professional survey. A 12-item survey asked industry professionals to rate the importance of specific English skills and tasks in their workplaces, the proficiency level they expected of new graduates, and the gaps they observed in recent hires from AJC.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over two academic months (February–March 2026). Student questionnaires were administered in paper format during regular class time with a 98% response rate. Lecturer interviews were scheduled individually, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Classroom observations were conducted unannounced to minimize the Hawthorne effect; the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and took detailed field notes alongside the structured observation scheme. Industry surveys were distributed via email and returned electronically.

2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the student and industry surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) and inferential statistics (independent t-tests, one-way ANOVA) through SPSS version 27. Qualitative data from interviews and observation field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's [13] six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Two rounds of coding were conducted - descriptive coding followed by pattern coding - with inter-coder reliability of 87% established through independent coding of 30% of the data by a second researcher.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Professional English Needs of Journalism and Media Students

The first research question examined the professional English communication needs of AJC students as perceived by the three stakeholder groups. Data from the student survey revealed that students across all four programs rated “reading and understanding international news sources in English” as the most important skill ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.67$), followed by “writing news articles and reports in English” ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.72$) and “conducting interviews in English” ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.81$). Speaking skills - particularly “presenting news in English on camera” ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.88$) and “participating in editorial meetings conducted in English” ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.91$) - were also rated highly.

These findings align with previous research. A study of 78 Croatian journalists [1] similarly identified reading comprehension and news writing as the most frequently performed English tasks in journalism workplaces. Tatar [14] also emphasized that ESP courses for journalism should focus on the language used in common professional events - such as communicating with editors, interviewing sources, and producing news content - rather than decontextualized language exercises.

Interestingly, industry professionals ranked the skills in a slightly different order of priority. For them, “writing in English for digital/multimedia platforms” received the highest importance rating ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.46$), followed by “cross-cultural communication competence” ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.51$) and “oral communication in editorial and production meetings” ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.52$). The emphasis on digital and multimedia English skills reflects the ongoing transformation of journalism in the digital age, where journalists increasingly produce content for multiple platforms - web, social media, video, and podcasts - often simultaneously [15].

Lecturers, when interviewed, demonstrated awareness of these professional needs but noted that they lacked detailed, empirical data about the specific English tasks their students would encounter in the workplace. One lecturer commented: “I know they need English for their future jobs, but I'm not always sure exactly what they need to be able to do - whether it's writing press releases, editing English-language video scripts, or just reading international wire services” [Lecturer 4, interview].

This finding underscores a critical issue: the absence of systematic, ongoing needs analysis at the institutional level. While needs analysis is theoretically recognized as foundational to ESP [4][5], its practical implementation at AJC appears inconsistent. Without regular engagement with industry stakeholders and systematic data collection on evolving workplace demands, ESP curricula risk becoming disconnected from professional realities [16].

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among the four programs on two skill dimensions: Public Relations students rated “writing press releases and media statements in English” significantly higher in importance than Journalism students ($F(3, 182) = 4.87$, $p < 0.01$), while

Television Broadcasting students rated “on-camera English delivery” significantly higher than Political Communication students ($F(3, 182) = 5.23$, $p < 0.01$). These differences suggest that a one-size-fits-all ESP course design - where all programs receive essentially the same curriculum - may be insufficiently responsive to discipline-specific needs, supporting the argument for flexible and responsive ESP curricula [17].

3.2 Current Teaching Methods and Their Alignment with Student Needs

The second research question examined the teaching methods currently employed in ESP courses at AJC and their alignment with identified student needs. Data from classroom observations, student surveys, and lecturer interviews converged on a consistent picture.

Predominance of traditional methods. Classroom observations revealed that 67% of observed class time was devoted to teacher-fronted activities — primarily lectures explaining grammar points (32%), translation exercises (21%), and reading comprehension with vocabulary drills (14%). Pair and group work accounted for only 18% of class time, while tasks simulating real journalistic activities - such as writing a news article in English, conducting a mock interview, or editing an English news video - constituted merely 8% of observed instructional time. Student reactions to these activities, as captured in field notes, ranged from passive compliance to visible disengagement, with off-task behaviour observed in 38% of the lecture segments.

These observations are consistent with findings from other Vietnamese higher education contexts. Ngo [8] reported similar patterns in ESP courses for library science students at a Vietnamese university, where teacher-centred methods dominated despite students' preferences for more interactive, communicative approaches. Research on ESP at Vietnamese universities has consistently documented a persistent gap between the communicative goals of ESP and the traditional pedagogical practices that remain prevalent [10].

Student dissatisfaction with current methods. Student survey data confirmed this misalignment. When asked about their preferred learning activities, students ranked “real-world simulations and role-plays” highest ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.74$), followed by

“project-based activities” ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.79$) and “authentic materials such as news articles and broadcasts” ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.76$). In contrast, “grammar exercises” ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.91$) and “translation tasks” ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.88$) received the lowest preference ratings. The gap between preferred and actual activities was statistically significant across all programs (paired t-test: $t(185) = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$), revealing a substantial disconnect between what students want and what they experience.

This preference for task-based and authentic activities aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of communicative language teaching (CLT), which posits that language is acquired most effectively when learners engage in meaningful communication in authentic contexts [18]. In the context of ESP for journalism, these findings suggest that students intuitively recognize the value of pedagogical approaches that mirror the communicative demands of their future profession.

Textbook dependency and authenticity.

Document analysis of the ESP materials currently used at AJC revealed heavy reliance on published textbooks - primarily *English for Journalists* and *Professional English in Use: Media* - supplemented by lecturer-prepared worksheets. While these textbooks provide useful linguistic content, classroom observations indicated that lecturers rarely supplemented them with authentic, up-to-date materials such as recent news articles, broadcast clips, or digital content from Vietnamese or international media outlets. Only 3 of the 18 observed sessions incorporated authentic materials from outside the prescribed textbook.

This finding is concerning given the central importance of authentic materials in ESP. Lubina [19] demonstrated that adapting authentic, content-based materials for English for Journalism courses significantly enhanced learner engagement and language acquisition by exposing students to the actual language of their professional domain. Similarly, Yuanti [20] emphasized that ESP speaking courses for journalism must draw on real journalistic contexts - press conferences, editorial meetings, interviews - rather than artificial textbook scenarios. The lack of such authenticity in AJC's current ESP courses may partly explain the disengagement observed during classroom observations.

3.3 Factors Affecting the Implementation of Communicative ESP Approaches

The third research question investigated factors that facilitate or constrain the implementation of more communicative, task-based approaches to ESP instruction at AJC. Thematic analysis of lecturer interviews and field notes identified three major themes.

Theme 1: Institutional and structural constraints. All 12 lecturers cited large class sizes (ranging from 45 to 60 students per class) as a significant barrier to implementing interactive, task-based activities. In the words of one lecturer: “How can I do group projects or give individual feedback when I have 55 students in a room designed for 35? The physical space itself doesn't allow it” [Lecturer 7, interview]. Limited contact hours - typically two 90-minute sessions per week per ESP course - were also identified as constraining, with lecturers feeling pressure to “cover the syllabus” rather than invest time in extended project work.

These structural constraints are well-documented in ESP literature from developing country contexts. Trujeque-Moreno et al. [21] found that large class sizes and limited instructional hours were among the most frequently cited barriers to implementing needs-based, communicative ESP curricula in Mexican universities. Similarly, studies from Chinese and Indonesian contexts have highlighted the tension between institutional constraints and the pedagogical ideals of ESP [22].

Theme 2: Limited teacher training in ESP methodology. Eight of the 12 lecturers (66.7%) reported that their pre-service and in-service training had focused primarily on general English language teaching (ELT) methodology, with little to no specialized preparation in ESP theory and practice. Only two lecturers had received formal training in needs analysis, and only three had experience with task-based language teaching (TBLT) or project-based learning (PBL) design. This finding echoes broader concerns about ESP teacher preparedness in Vietnam, where most English teachers enter ESP classrooms with general ELT qualifications but limited understanding of discipline-specific pedagogy [8].

The absence of ESP-specific training has practical consequences. Several lecturers, when asked about task-based approaches, expressed uncertainty about how to design tasks that would develop both

language skills and journalistic competencies simultaneously. As one lecturer noted: "I understand the idea of tasks in theory - you give students something to do with language. But in practice, for journalism, what does that look like? How do I design a task that teaches both conditionals and how to write a news lead?" [Lecturer 3, interview]. This comment reveals a perceived dichotomy between language instruction and professional skill development that more thorough ESP training could help resolve.

Theme 3: Assessment misalignment. The study found a significant misalignment between the communicative goals of ESP and the assessment methods currently employed. Analysis of course syllabi and examination papers revealed that 72% of assessment weight was allocated to written tests measuring grammatical accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension, with only 28% allocated to communicative or performance-based assessment (e.g., oral presentations, writing portfolios, simulated professional tasks). Students, when surveyed, expressed frustration with this imbalance: 74% agreed or strongly agreed that "the exams do not test the English skills I will need in my actual work."

This assessment misalignment is a known challenge in ESP. Basturkmen [23] argued that assessment in ESP must reflect the specific communicative purposes of the target domain, incorporating performance-based tasks that simulate real professional activities. In journalism ESP, this might include asking students to submit a portfolio of English news articles, complete a timed news translation task, or participate in a simulated editorial meeting conducted in English. Without such alignment, students receive mixed signals about what truly matters in their English learning, and assessment-driven backwash effects can undermine even the most well-designed curriculum.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated ESP teaching methods at the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Vietnam, through a mixed-methods examination of needs, practices, and challenges. The findings lead to several conclusions with implications for both theory and practice.

First, the professional English needs of journalism and media students at AJC are multidimensional and discipline-specific. Students require not only

general English proficiency but a constellation of specialized skills: reading and analyzing international news, writing journalistic content for multiple platforms, conducting interviews and presentations in English, and navigating cross-cultural communication contexts. These needs vary significantly across sub-disciplines (journalism, television, public relations, political communication), suggesting that ESP curricula must be differentiated rather than uniform.

Second, a substantial gap exists between these identified needs and the pedagogical practices currently employed. ESP instruction at AJC remains dominated by traditional, teacher-centred methods with limited integration of authentic materials, task-based activities, and project-based learning. The mismatch between what students need and what they experience in ESP classrooms contributes to disengagement and may limit the development of profession-ready communicative competence.

Third, multiple factors constrain the implementation of more communicative approaches - large class sizes, limited contact hours, insufficient ESP-specific teacher training, and misaligned assessment systems. These constraints are structural and institutional, not merely pedagogical, and addressing them will require coordinated efforts across multiple levels - from national policy frameworks to institutional curriculum reform to individual teacher development.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a context-sensitive framework for ESP pedagogy at AJC and similar institutions, comprising three interconnected components:

- 1 **Systematic, ongoing needs analysis.** An annual needs analysis mechanism should be institutionalized, involving surveys and consultations with students, recent graduates, and industry partners. This process should inform curriculum updates and ensure that ESP courses remain responsive to the rapidly evolving demands of the media industry.
- 2 **Task-based and project-based integration.** ESP courses should progressively incorporate authentic professional tasks - news writing, interview simulations, editorial meetings, multimedia content production - as core instructional activities rather than supplementary exercises. Where constraints

prevent full-scale adoption, sequenced micro-tasks can provide scaffolded entry points [24].

- 3 **Assessment reform.** Assessment frameworks should be redesigned to include performance-based and portfolio-based components that directly evaluate students' ability to perform professional communication tasks in English, alongside traditional measures of linguistic accuracy.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from a single institution, and findings may not be fully generalizable to other Vietnamese universities or to journalism schools in different national contexts. The student self-report data on proficiency may be subject to over- or under-estimation. Finally, while this study focuses on ESP teaching methods, it does not directly measure learning outcomes; future research should examine the relationship between specific pedagogical approaches and measurable gains in English for journalism competencies.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence on ESP pedagogy in Asian higher education and provides practical guidance for curriculum designers and ESP practitioners at specialized communication institutions. In an era of globalized media, the ability to equip journalism and communication students with domain-specific English competencies is not merely an educational goal - it is a professional imperative.

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