



## The Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Language Skills for Non Major English Students at Tertiary Level of Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh most of the public and private universities offer ESP courses for non-major English students which are seem to be beneficial as it stresses on particular language needs of the students. So, this paper tries to shed light on the importance of ESP courses to improve language skills for non-major English students of both private and public universities of Bangladesh. English is the compulsory course for non-major English students of almost every private and public universities in Bangladesh. The main objective of this paper is to explore the significance role of ESP courses for developing English language skills in Bangladesh context and to what extent the ESP courses aid the students to expand their English language skills. Moreover, the problems English language teachers are facing to ameliorate their students' language skills along with the prospects and students' understanding on their development. The paper finally suggests some measures that can be taken to make the course more effective.

**Keywords:** ESP Courses, Effectiveness, Productive Skills, Receptive Skills, Communication Skill

### 1. Introduction

At present, the demand of English has been changed in language education and it requires expertise in specific field which is known as ESP as well as it has been identified by Paltridge and Starfield (2013) as 'Teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language and in which the goal of learners is to use English in a particular domain.' So, ESP courses are practiced to be equipped for 'employment preparation or occupational mobility' identified by Kuo (2016) and now a day's occupational achievement depends on being skilled in English language as in 21<sup>st</sup> century English has obtained the prestige of becoming international language. In addition, Jenkins (2001) in her book identified the importance of English by mentioning it not only as 'England's language' but also 'world's treasure'. Moreover, according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) English plays a vital role both on educational and occupational sector and Bangladesh is not odd out of this belief. So, the importance and needs of ESP courses are increasing day by day as it is believed that ESP courses help to improve English language skills which are mandatory both in educational and occupational sectors. Every language comprises four skills as well as to master over a particular language requires to master over the four skills of that target language. Besides, countries like Bangladesh where English has been used as a foreign language is using English as medium of instruction and communication both in academic and professional fields and it enhances its use in

'diverse academic context' (Çelik, 2018). In this regard, ESP courses concerned with developing students' language skills through 'sets of transferable generic language and literacy skills that are seen to be applicable in the majority of academic and workplace setting' (Paltridge and Starfield 2013, p.31). Bangladesh have 53 public universities along with 106 private universities where 96 private and 46 public universities out of them are functioning as active institutions and most of the universities offer ESP courses for non-major English students. The study tries to identify the significant role of ESP for non-major English students at tertiary level of Bangladesh to improve their language skills through answering the following questions:

- I. Do ESP courses improve non-major English students' productive skills?
- II. Do ESP courses develop non-major English students' receptive skills?
- III. To What Extent ESP courses are important for non-major English students at tertiary level of Bangladesh to improve their Communication skill?

## 2. ESP

From the early 1990's English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has become the prominent area of teaching for EFL learners. At first it was known as English for Special Purpose and it was first introduced in the Makerere conference in 1960. The term Special means 'special needs of group of learners' (Vu Thi Thanh Nhã, 2015). On that time the main focus of ESP was to identify special linguistic needs of learners' target situation. However, there was a criticism made by Starfield (2013) where he indicated the shortcoming of claiming learners' target situation as it only focuses on sentence level and form as well as reading materials are not authentic. This criticism emphasizes the importance of offering learners' content related program. This debate makes another contradiction between highly specialized ESP courses and general ESP courses, for instance, Hutchison and Waters (1980) give preference to general linguistic competence rather than specialized discourse knowledge in ESP courses as it is difficult for non-native speakers. It starts with general language and tries to focus on learners' communicative needs. Spack (1988) is more concerned with subject related writing skill in specialized ESP courses unlike other researchers. According to Vu Thi Thanh Nhã (2015) 'in the 1980s, the concept of specificity was challenged when more attention was given to the learning situation and learners' transferable skills.' From the beginning of 1990 ESP practitioners and researchers focus both on target situation and present situation along with needs analysis. Hyland (2002) also identifies ESP as learner centered not teacher centered approach. To sum up, all the researchers give more preference on mastering over language skills to deal with not only occupational communication but also general communication in workplace. Moreover, Dudley-Evans (1998) modifies the definition of ESP by stating that it identifies the specific needs of the learners and the methodology of using in specific teaching situation is also different. In addition, Brunton (2009) recognizes ESP as an umbrella term under which EAP, EBP, EOP, EMP and so many others have been included.

### 2.1. ESP and Language Skills

Language skills contain both productive and receptive skills and it is proved that in this time of globalization, it is necessary to master over all four skills of a target language specially if it is English. Though ESL emphasizes to focus on all four skills of English language ESP only gives preference to learners' specific needs. However, recently ESP also focuses on the English language skills as it is important for occupational mobility. According to Hyland (2002) 'ESP must involves teaching the literacy skills which are appropriate to the purposes and understandings of particular academic and professional communities.' Moreover, Vu Thi Thanh Nhã (2015) states 'English for specific purpose enhances the importance of learners' communication in a specific academic and professional settings.' Similarly, Aliakbari and Boghayeri (2014) investigate some particular issues to identify the effectiveness of ESP courses for Architecture students where they have focused on language skills along with some other issues such as course book, topic and length of the study. In another study Chostelidou (2011) & Hatam and shafiei (2012) both of them identify the effectiveness of ESP courses at tertiary level. Moreover, Hatam and Shafiei (2012) describe how they examine the importance of ESP courses for engineering students to improve their skills which are related to their job field. So, the purpose of ESP courses is changing due to the

high demand of mastering over English language and it shows its significance role in students' academic and professional life.

### 3. Methodology and Instrument

The purpose of this study is to explore the importance of ESP courses to improve language skills for non-major English students at tertiary level of Bangladesh. In this empirical study questionnaire has been used to collect quantitative data as well as for collecting qualitative data a focused group interview has been taken as a tool. In addition, the questionnaire comprises twenty-one items within four domains which have been also divided into two sections entitled as importance of ESP courses for productive skills and importance of ESP courses for receptive skills. The items are intended to bring out responses following five-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly agrees to strongly disagree. For collecting qualitative data, a focused group interview has been taken as well where five ESP practitioners from different public and private universities have been participated.

#### 3.1. Sampling

Random sampling method has been used to select 245 participants from three public universities namely; RUET, KUET and SUST and four private universities namely; Bangladesh University, University of Asia Pacific, Bangladesh University of Business and Technology and United International University of Bangladesh. The participants are from different technical (EEE, CSE, Architecture, Civil) and non-technical (BBA, Bangla, Political science, Sociology) departments and all of them are in first year and second year. Furthermore, for focused group interview five ESP practitioners have been selected from different public and private universities of Bangladesh.

#### 3.2. Data Processing and Analysis

The researcher administers the questionnaire and distributes it through email and explains the purpose of the study to the participants. The quantitative data has been analyzed through using Microsoft Office Excel (version 2010). To analyze each variable descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) are used. Data collected through focus group interview has been categorized through a process of qualitative thematic analysis. The researcher at first reads the data carefully; then transcribing the data; then identifying key issues with them and organizing these issues into a set of broader categories. Mixed method was used to collect and analyze the data.

### 4. Findings

To evaluate the importance of ESP courses for improving language skills for non-major English students, both quantitative and qualitative studies are presented. Additionally, items with means above 4.00 and with 4.00 have been considered as highly satisfactory to interpret quantitative data. Whereas means between 3.99 and 3.00 are considered as satisfactory. At first, the findings collected through the scale are presented according to the umbrella terms of productive and receptive skills where in the productive skills importance of ESP courses for improving speaking and writing skill have been retained then in receptive skill the importance of ESP courses for improving listening and reading skill have been presented.

Table 1: Productive Skills (Students' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Speaking Skill)

Students' perspective	M	SD
Developing communication skill without grammatical error	4.08	0.94
Improving pronunciation	4.14	0.95
Enhancing vocabulary knowledge	4.19	0.9
Accelerating confidence level for public speaking	4.2	0.96
Providing the scope of practicing to meliorate fluency	4.11	0.88

The table above shows the students' perspective on ESP courses to develop their speaking skill based on different viewpoints such as developing communication skill, pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge, confidence

level for public speaking, and fluency. Some issues are found highly satisfactory, for instance, developing confidence level for public speaking ( $M= 4.20$ ) and vocabulary knowledge ( $M= 4.19$ ). Similarly, some other issues are followed very closely, such as, developing pronunciation ( $M= 4.14$ ), fluency ( $M= 4.11$ ), and communication skill ( $M= 4.08$ ). Lastly, the standard deviation (SD) value of the items are from 0.88 to 0.96 which indicates the diversion is not heterogeneous.

Table 2: Productive Skills (Students' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Writing Skill)

Students' perspective	M	SD
Accelerating the improvement of academic writing	4.32	0.89
Aiding to organize writing	4.22	0.82
Instructing to maintain the cohesion and coherence in writing	4.12	0.82
Developing the sentence structure	4.12	0.79
Indulging to understand the appropriate word choice	4.29	0.81
Improving freehand writing	4.13	0.9

The table above shows the students' attitudes towards ESP courses to develop their writing skill which has been grounded in developing academic writing, aiding to organize writing, maintaining cohesion and coherence, helpful to understand appropriate word choice, and improving freehand writing. In general students' perception is highly satisfactory in writing skill, especially in improving academic writing ( $M= 4.32$ ). Students regard organizing writing ( $M= 4.22$ ), maintaining cohesion and coherence ( $M= 4.12$ ), developing sentence structure ( $M= 4.12$ ), understanding appropriate word choice ( $M= 4.29$ ), and improving freehand writing ( $M= 4.13$ ) are also highly satisfactory. Here the highest SD value is 0.90 and lowest SD value is 0.79 which specify students' more divergence in improving freehand writing and less divergence in developing sentence structure.

Table3: Receptive Skill (Students' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Listening Skill)

Students' perspective	M	SD
Helpful to understand spoken instruction	4.24	0.84
Recognizing others when conversing	4.15	0.86
Expanding listening skill	4.24	0.88
Helping to understand native speakers' speech	3.96	1.04

In this section, the focus is on receptive skill and the students' concern on improving listening skill through their offered ESP courses. Their evaluation for understanding spoken instruction, recognizing others when conversing, and expanding listening skill is highly satisfactory as the means are in order 4.24, 4.15 and 4.24. On the other hand, the most significant perspective is on their regard of understanding native speakers' speech ( $M= 3.96$ ) which is not highly satisfactory at all. Besides, the standard deviation value is relatively noticeable in this issue also as it is higher than 1.00 which recommends the divergence within students is high and should be under examination.

Table 4 demonstrates students' point of view of improving their reading skill through offered ESP courses in public and private universities in Bangladesh. The result shows that they are highly satisfied in this section as the mean values are highly satisfactory, for instance, improving reading strategies ( $M= 4.20$ ), scanning of any reading passage ( $M= 4.13$ ), skimming of reading passage ( $M= 4.20$ ), understanding word meaning through the context ( $M= 4.20$ ), increasing reading skill ( $M= 4.29$ ), and helpful to read with correct pronunciation ( $M= 4.15$ ). However, students are not highly satisfied in identifying inference as the mean value of this issue is 3.92. Furthermore, the SD value for the issue mentioned above for *helpful to read with correct pronunciation* is a matter of concern as it shows divergence among students' view point as the value is 1.00 compare to the SD values of other issues.

Table 4: Receptive Skill (Students' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Reading Skill)

Students' perspective	M	SD
Beneficial to learn reading strategies	4.2	0.89
Advantageous to do scanning of any reading passage	4.13	0.86
Ameliorating skimming skill of any reading passage	4.2	0.86
Teaching how to identify inference	3.92	0.89
Helpful to understand the word meaning through the context	4.2	0.88
Increasing reading speed	4.29	0.86
Helpful to read with correct pronunciation	4.15	1

#### 4.1 Comparative Analysis on Productive and Receptive Skills

Table 5: Students' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Productive and Receptive Skills

Students' Perspective	M	SD
Productive Skills	4.15	0.038
Receptive Skills	4.19	0.001

The table above indicates a comparative analysis on students' attitudes on the importance of ESP courses to improve their productive and receptive skills where the mean values are highly satisfactory as it is higher than 4.00. In addition, the SD value indicates that there is divergence in their view point on productive skills in compare to receptive skills as the SD value of productive skills is 0.038 while SD value of receptive skill is 0.001.

#### 4.3. Findings of Focused Group Interview

A focused group interview has been conducted with five ESP practitioners from different public and private universities of Bangladesh to get an insightful evaluation of the effectiveness of ESP courses to improve language skills of non-major English students. The participants are being aware of the research topic as well as they have participated in a spontaneous discussion. Three questions have been asked to get their perspective on ESP courses. The interview has been recorded and analyzed to identify the imperative issues and organized the issues categorically.

##### Teachers' Perspective on the Importance of ESP to Improve Communication Skill

All the practitioners have identified the research topic as an imperative issue that should be a matter of concern. All most all technical and non-technical universities offer ESP courses for non-major English students, however, to what extent it is beneficial to ameliorate students' communication skill which is a significant phenomenon in 21<sup>st</sup> century of globalization. Two of the practitioners demonstrate ESP courses as a beneficial tool for students for improving communication skill. Whereas, three of them describe the courses are not functioning in a satisfactory level which can create an impact on the students' communication skill. One of them have added, *in public universities because of the large class size it is very difficult for us to focus on their communication skill.* They have also added *we go for presentation only to examine their communication skill which not the only criteria of accelerating their communication skill, moreover, most of the students memorize and present.*

##### Teachers' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses to Improve Language Skills

In this part of the discussion it is found that all of them are agreed with ESP courses' effectiveness on language skill except listening skill. They explain that to some extent the courses improve their productive and receptive skills, while in receptive skills listening part has been ignored because of lack of logistic support. Two of the practitioners are from technical universities and they think *it is impossible to practice listening task in the theory class but we can do it in our lab class.* The another three from non-technical universities agree with them and complement their discussion by adding the problems they are facing in practicing listening task in classroom.

##### Teachers' Perspective on the Importance of ESP Courses on Job Field

All the practitioners think that ESP courses have impact on job sector, not only for getting job but also for using he received skills in the job field. They add there are some topics in ESP courses which are *directly connected with their job field*. Moreover, some of their students confess that some topics they have covered in the tertiary level are really helping them in their job sector.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study above shows the importance of ESP courses to develop language skills for non-major English students at tertiary level of Bangladesh where the students are highly satisfied with the courses as according to them ESP courses are beneficial to develop their productive along with receptive skills. Moreover, in some issues like developing correct pronunciation and understanding native speakers' speech, students have divergence thought. Besides, ESP practitioners describe ESP courses are beneficial, however, it does not improve communication skill and language skills at all, specially listening skill. On the contrary, all most all of them agree with the issue that the courses create a positive impact on job field. According to the research universities should give importance to improve students' listening skill and provide the logistic support and materials support based on students and teachers' needs. Moreover, universities should also focus on the class size to accelerate English language practice. The study has some limitations, for instances, ignorance of course materials, ignorance of needs analysis, and open ended questionnaire for the participants. Above all, the study indicates that ESP courses are important for the students of tertiary level as it focuses on developing students' language skills. So, both universities and practitioners should give more importance to this issue.

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