CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) FACED BY ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT HANOI METROPLITAN UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1259

Abstract

The increasing demand for specialized English proficiency among graduates has necessitated a closer examination of the challenges faced by English-majored learners in acquiring English for Specific Purposes (ESP) skills. This study aims to investigate the specific obstacles encountered by such learners at Hanoi Metropolitan University, with the goal of providing insights that can inform the development of more effective learning strategies and support mechanisms. Through a comprehensive exploration of the challenges encountered by senior students majoring in English when learning ESP, this research seeks to contribute to the enhancement of ESP education and facilitate the academic and professional success of this demographic. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, including interviews, surveys, and document analysis. The findings reveal a multifaceted array of challenges faced by the target population, including linguistic barriers, cultural differences, pedagogical limitations, and affective factors. These insights highlight the need for a holistic, learner-centered approach to ESP instruction, which addresses the unique linguistic, academic, and professional needs of English-majored learners.
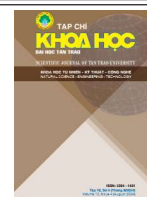
NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH Ở ĐẠI HỌC THỦ ĐÔ HÀ NỘI ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH (ESP)

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https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1259

Thông tin bài báo	Tóm tắt
	Nhu cầu về trình độ tiếng Anh chuyên ngành đối với sinh viên tốt nghiệp ngày càng tăng, đã đòi hỏi phải xem xét kỹ hơn những thách thức mà người học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh (ESP) phải đối mặt trong việc tiếp thu các kỹ năng tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (ESP). Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích điều tra những trở ngại cụ thể mà những người học ở trường Đại học Thủ đô Hà Nội gặp phải, với mục tiêu có một cái nhìn sâu hơn cho việc phát triển các chiến lược học tập và cơ chế hỗ trợ học tập hiệu quả hơn. Thông qua việc tìm hiểu những thách thức mà sinh viên năm cuối chuyên ngành tiếng Anh gặp phải khi học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, nghiên cứu này đóng phần vào việc nâng cao dạy và học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành và tạo điều kiện cho sinh viên cơ hội thành công về mặt học thuật và nghề nghiệp. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp tiếp cận hỗn hợp, kết hợp cả các thủ thuật thu thập dữ liệu định tính và định lượng, bao gồm phỏng vấn, khảo sát và phân tích tài liệu. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy một loạt các thách thức mà người học đối mặt, bao gồm rào cản ngôn ngữ, sự khác biệt về văn hóa, hạn chế về mặt sư phạm và các yếu tố tình cảm. Những hiểu biết này làm nổi bật nhu cầu về một phương pháp tiếp cận toàn diện, lấy người học làm trung tâm đối với hướng dẫn học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, giải quyết các nhu cầu ngôn ngữ, học thuật và nghề nghiệp độc đáo của những người học chuyên ngành tiếng Anh.

1. Introduction

The proficiency in the English language has become paramount for academic and professional success in today's interconnected global landscape. As the de facto world language, English serves as an indispensable tool for communication, enabling global collaboration and cross-cultural understanding. Within this context, the significance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education has gained considerable prominence, particularly

for students majoring in English as a Second Language (ESL).

This research initiative aims to thoroughly examine and analyze the specific challenges encountered by senior English- majored learners with an English-major background as they work towards proficiency in ESP. The investigation delves into the nuanced complexities of the ESP learning process, seeking to provide a detailed understanding of the dynamics shaping this transition from general English to more specialized linguistic demands. Centered on senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University, the study addresses two central research questions:

1) What are the major challenges faced by these students in their pursuit of ESP proficiency?

2) What are the most effective suggestions and interventions to mitigate these challenges and elevate the ESL learning experience?

By addressing these questions, the research provides valuable insights into the multifaceted hurdles encountered by ESL learners and offers practical, evidence-based recommendations to support their language acquisition journey. The findings hold significant implications for policymakers, curriculum designers, and ESP educators, empowering them to create more inclusive and responsive learning environments that foster the growth and achievement of senior English- majored students majoring in English.

2. Literature review

2.1. *An overview on previous studies on learning ESP*

English-majored senior ESL students, despite having a solid foundation in general English, face particular challenges when transitioning to the study of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). A 2017 study by a group of Malaysian authors identified three key themes: limited English vocabulary, the influence of the students' first language, and socioeconomic status (Mohamad et al., 2017, p. 211).

The primary obstacle is a restricted vocabulary, which impacts all four language skills. To address this, the authors suggest that teachers and families collaborate to enhance vocabulary acquisition, as children's vocabulary development is closely tied to their environmental exposure (Goodson Layzer, Simon, & Dwyer, as cited in Mohamad et al., 2017, p. 211). The researchers also found that the structural familiarity of the students' first language, Bahasa Malaysia, contributes to their lack of interest in learning English. Instructors can overcome this by identifying the impacts of the first language and explaining the differences in language structure and grammar, while also creating a positive, supportive learning environment (Mohamad et al., 2017, p. 211).

Similarly, a 2022 study by authors from the Philippines identified three key obstacles for English major students: unreliable internet access, limited English language ability, and low self-esteem (Guzman et al., 2022, p. 211). Unstable connectivity disrupts lessons, and poor English skills and low confidence prevent students from effectively expressing themselves.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Nam Chi and Nguyen Nhan Ai's 2022 research reveals that students face numerous challenges in learning ESP, including limited proficiency, lack of interest, and ineffective study habits (p.212). The authors note that students often lack motivation, as they perceive the specialized vocabulary as rarely used in daily life, and teachers struggle with unfamiliar terminology. Developing self-directed learning skills is crucial, as classroom instruction alone is insufficient (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022, p. 212).

2.2. *Theoretical Review on Learning ESP*

2.2.1. The concepts of ESP

Prominent scholars have proposed various notions, hypotheses, and definitions of "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP). Robinson (1991) highlights the need for requirement analysis, stating that ESP is "normally goal-directed" and courses are developed based on a needs analysis. Munby (1978) notes that ESP courses

address learners' communication requirements by introducing practical English language. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an approach based on learners' needs and the language required in specific contexts. Strevens (1988) contends that the absolute characteristics of ESP include being designed to meet specific needs, related to particular disciplines, and centered on the appropriate language. Overall, these scholars agree that ESP must fulfill learners' clear and specific aims, unlike General English, which serves the general needs of language students.

2.2.2. The factors affecting students' learning ESP.

There have been various notions, hypotheses, and definitions of "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP) proposed by prominent scholars. While there is no single, universally accepted definition, all interpretations of ESP invariably center around the learners.

Munby (1978, p.2) noted that "ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners." These courses address learners' communication requirements by introducing practical English language. Kennedy and Bolitho (1984, p.3) state that "ESP is based on an investigation of the learner's purposes and the set of communicative needs arising from these purposes," making it learner-centered.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as an approach to language learning based on learners' needs and the language required in specific contexts. Robinson (1991) highlights the need for requirement analysis, stating that ESP is "normally goal-directed" and courses are developed based on a needs analysis. Strevens (1988) contends that the absolute characteristics of ESP include being designed to meet specific needs, related to particular disciplines, and centered on the appropriate language.

Ultimately, these scholars agree that ESP must fulfill learners' clear and specific aims, unlike

General English, which serves the general needs of language students. ESP is particularly crucial in academic and professional settings (Mohamad et al., 2017).

2.2.3. English for Business Purposes (EBP) and English for Tourism Purposes (ETP)

Business English, a specialized branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within English Language Teaching (ELT), has emerged to cater to the unique needs of learners that are not fully addressed by general English courses. Scholars like H.E. Palmer (1964), Peter Strevens (1977, 1980), John Robinson (1980), and Brian Coffey (1985) have made significant contributions to the understanding and development of ESP, emphasizing its focus on equipping learners with the specific language skills and abilities required in their professional contexts.

Contrary to the notion of Business English as a distinct form of language, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue in their book "English for Specific Purposes" (p.19) that it is more accurately perceived as a methodological approach to designing and implementing language courses tailored to specific purposes. Sobkowiak (2008) reinforces this perspective, portraying Business English as a dynamic, goal-oriented process of teaching language and communication within particular contexts, rather than a fixed product.

Similarly, English for Tourism Purposes (ETP) has received substantial academic attention due to its widespread use as a lingua franca in international tourism and travel. Proficiency in ETP is crucial for professionals in the tourism and hospitality sectors, as it facilitates effective communication and cultural understanding with international tourists. ETP materials are distinguished by their contextual examples and focus on meeting the specific language needs of the industry.

2.2.4. Differences between ESP and General English

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue in their book "English for Specific Purposes" (p. 53)

that while there may be no theoretical distinction between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and General English (GE), the practical implementation reveals significant differences. Robinson (1980) underscores that GE courses often revolve around education for life, culture, and literature, whereas ESP is learner-centered, prioritizing the individual needs and goals of adult learners who seek to acquire English proficiency tailored to their specific professional contexts. This contrast in learner demographics and motivations is the most prominent distinction between ESP and GE.

2.2.5. Classification of ESP
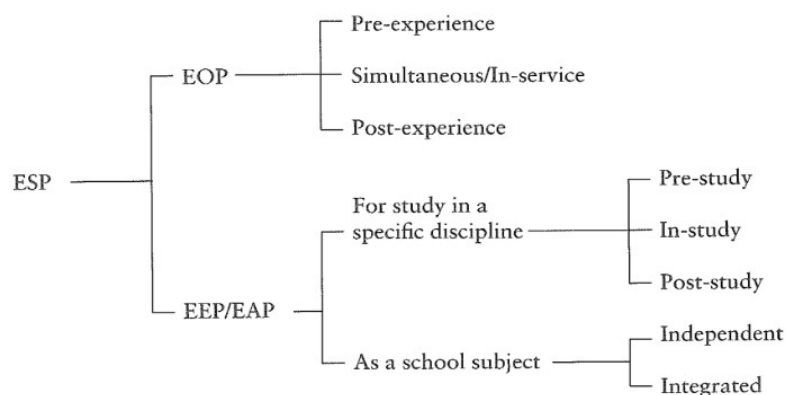
Figure 1. A tree diagram

The categorization of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is commonly depicted through a tree diagram, as exemplified in Figure 1 (adapted from Robinson, 1991, pp. 3-4). This diagram distinguishes between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses, providing segmentation based on timing and influencing the specificity of each course. Pre-experience or pre-study courses exclude discipline-specific content, catering to students' unfamiliarity with the subject matter, while courses concurrent with or after formal study or work integrate instruction to suit learners' evolving needs.
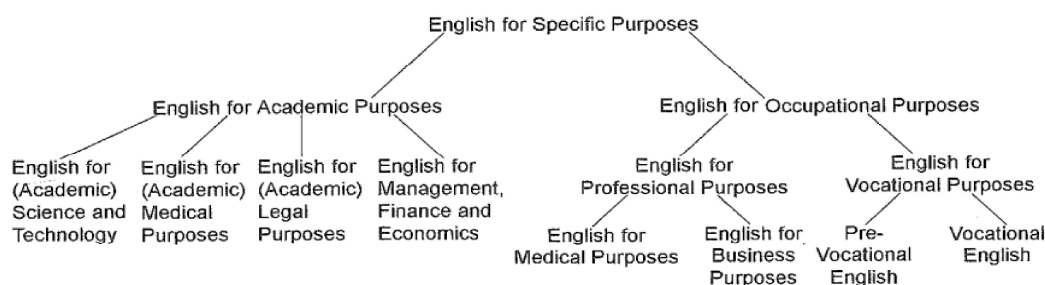
Figure 2. Dudley-Evans' classification of ESP

Tony Dudley-Evans, a notable figure within the realm of ESP, introduced a more nuanced categorization framework in his book "An Introduction to English for Specific Purposes" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 6-7). Dudley-Evans' classification of ESP, as shown in Figure 2, is rooted in the communicative functions served by language in specialized fields. EAP, a fundamental component of language instruction, aims to cultivate language skills essential for effective communication within educational settings such as universities, colleges, and research institutions. EOP, on the other hand,

encompasses language usage beyond academic contexts, covering professional and vocational spheres, including professions like administration, medicine, law, and business, as well as non-professional work or pre-employment scenarios.

Dudley-Evans further refines the classification by introducing English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), which focuses on the language skills necessary for specific vocational or trade occupations, such as tourism, hospitality, and aviation. This classification underscores the importance of tailoring language instruction to the unique communicative demands encountered in vocational settings.

2.2.6. Characteristics of ESP Courses

According to Carter (1983), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are characterized by three key features: authentic material usage, purpose-related orientation, and self-direction. Dudley-Evans (1997) asserts in his book "An Introduction to English for Specific Purposes" (p. 9) that ESP should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level, making the incorporation of authentic learning materials highly feasible.

ESP materials typically encompass authentic content, either in its original form or slightly modified, especially prevalent in self-directed study and research tasks. Purpose-related orientation in ESP courses entails simulating communicative tasks relevant to the target setting, while self-direction emerges as a hallmark, aiming to transform learners into proficient users of English. These distinctive characteristics of ESP courses emphasize the utilization of authentic materials, purposeful orientation towards target settings, and fostering self-directed learning to empower learners in their language acquisition journey.

3. Methodology

This study investigates the challenges faced by English-Majored Senior English- majored students in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) during the academic years of 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. The researchers employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative, qualitative, and descriptive methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The researchers designed and administered a comprehensive survey to 100 third-year English majors. The survey included four sections: background information, open-ended questions, Likert-scale assessments of challenges, and suggestions for overcoming them. The data was collected through Google Forms over three months to accommodate the students' schedules.

The analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarize the background information, quantitative assessment of the challenges, and qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses. By integrating these methods, the researchers aimed to provide a holistic exploration of the challenges faced by English-Majored Senior English- majored students in learning ESP at Hanoi Metropolitan University. The findings are expected to inform strategies and interventions to address these challenges and enhance the learning outcomes for this population of students.

4. Research findings

4.1. Student's information

Table 1. Enrollment in ESP course

Options	Percentage
English for Business 1	70%
English for Business 2	70%
English for Tourism 1	73%
English for Tourism 2	65%
Others	0%

The data presented reveals insights into the participation rates of English-Majored Senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University in various specialized English courses. English for Business 1 and 2 each have a high participation rate of 70%, indicating a substantial student interest in acquiring English language skills relevant to the business domain. English

for Tourism 1 has the highest participation rate at 73%, suggesting a particularly strong interest among students in English language instruction tailored for the tourism sector. In contrast, English for Tourism 2 has a slightly lower participation rate of 65%, implying a relatively diminished emphasis on this specific course compared to English for Tourism 1. Notably, the "Others" category shows 0% participation, suggesting that no other specialized English courses were offered or attended by the respondents.

Table 2. The participants' level of English proficiency.

Options	Percentage
Pre-intermediate	13%
Upper intermediate	45%
Intermediate	42%

The data reveals the distribution of English proficiency levels among English-majoring senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University. The majority (45%) are at the upper intermediate level, indicating a relatively advanced command of English. This could be advantageous in tackling the challenges of learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The intermediate level constitutes 42% of participants, suggesting a significant portion of students with a moderate English proficiency. These students may require additional support to bridge the gap to the upper intermediate level, as they could face difficulties grasping complex ESP concepts and effectively applying language skills in specialized contexts.

The pre-intermediate level accounts for 13% of participants, potentially facing significant challenges in learning ESP due to their limited foundational English language skills. Addressing the diverse proficiency levels among students is crucial to supporting the academic success and language development of the entire ESL program.

4.2. Perception of students about ESP learning

Table 3. Impact of Class Size on ESP Learning and Participation

Option	Yes	No
Does the class size impact your ESP learning?	66%	34%

The open-ended responses from English-majoring senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University reveal nuanced perspectives on the impact of class size on their ESP learning experiences. The majority (66%) acknowledged that class size does affect their learning, while 34% indicated otherwise.

The students who affirmed the impact of class size provided detailed insights to support their views. They emphasized that large class sizes hinder individual attention from instructors, limiting personalized feedback and guidance that is crucial for deeper understanding and targeted language instruction. Additionally, respondents noted that smaller classes facilitate increased interaction, discussion, and collaboration among students, which positively influences learning outcomes. Concerns were also raised about the distractions and disruptions inherent in larger class settings, as well as the general discomfort and intimidation experienced by students in such environments.

These findings highlight the importance of carefully considering class size dynamics in designing effective ESP courses. The students' perspectives suggest that smaller class sizes are more conducive to personalized attention, interactive learning, and a supportive environment, all of which can enhance the overall learning experience and outcomes for English-majoring senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University.

Table 4. Evaluation of Exercise Engagement in ESP Textbooks

Option	Yes	No
Do you find the exercises in the textbooks used for ESP courses at Hanoi Metropolitan University interesting and engaging?	21%	79%

The survey results reveal that a significant majority (79%) of English-majoring senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University find the exercises in their ESP course textbooks uninteresting and disengaging. Respondents cited several reasons for their dissatisfaction, including outdated content, lack of visual appeal, and exercises that fail to stimulate critical thinking or active participation.

Specific comments highlighted the textbooks' outdated nature, unattractive presentation, and limited variety, which diminished their relevance and effectiveness. Respondents emphasized the need for more up-to-date, visually engaging, and thought-provoking learning materials that can better capture students' interest and promote active involvement. The findings underscore the importance of regularly reviewing and updating course resources to ensure they align with students' learning needs and preferences, ultimately enhancing their educational experience and outcomes.

Table 5. Perception of Satisfaction with Learning Materials for ESP Courses

Option	Yes	No
Are you satisfied with the current learning materials, such as textbooks, provided for ESP courses at Hanoi Metropolitan University?	24%	76%

The survey results indicate significant dissatisfaction among English-majoring senior English- majored students at Hanoi Metropolitan University regarding the current learning materials provided for ESP courses. A substantial majority (76%) of respondents expressed discontent, highlighting several key concerns.

Respondents emphasized the need for updated textbooks that align with current language usage and industry practices, moving beyond outdated materials. They also stressed the importance of using higher-level, globally recognized resources created and endorsed by experts, rather than self-made materials from the university. Furthermore, students expressed a preference for learning materials that offer diverse perspectives, allowing them to observe different viewpoints and enrich their understanding.

The findings underscore the importance of providing students with current, authoritative, and internationally recognized learning resources to support their academic success in ESP courses. Addressing these concerns is crucial in enhancing the quality and relevance of the curriculum.

4.3. Challenges in ESP faced by English-majored senior students

Table 6. The Questionnaire results for Challenges in Learning ESP

Descriptive analyses of the questionnaire based on					
Statements	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neither Agree nor Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
1. I struggle to maintain engagement during ESP lessons, as I am not genuinely interested in the subject matter.	16%	41%	31%	9%	3%
2. I am not interested in English.	12%	32%	26%	17%	13%
3. The extensive vocabulary required in ESP makes it harder for me to understand and apply the concepts.	21%	42%	25%	8%	4%
4. My shyness or social anxiety hinders my participation in ESP discussions and activities.	18%	42%	22%	15%	3%

5. I learn English because it is required by our school, not because I want to.	18%	29%	27%	14%	12%
6. Understanding some learning content in ESP is difficult for me.	19%	40%	27%	10%	4%
7. My progress in ESP is hindered by a lack of confidence in my language abilities or subject knowledge.	17%	50%	21%	5%	7%
8. When I am in ESP class, I rarely say anything due to my shyness	16%	45%	25%	8%	6%
9. Limited access to relevant textbooks and study materials poses challenges for me in learning ESP.	19%	45%	28%	25%	5%
10. Large class sizes and a high number of students make it difficult for me to engage effectively in ESP lessons.	19%	40%	30%	5%	5%
11. Some ESP courses rely on outdated textbooks or learning materials, hindering my ability to learn current industry practices or trends.	14%	51%	23%	8%	4%
12. I find it challenging to engage effectively in ESP lessons due to large class sizes and a high number of students.	19%	45%	27%	4%	5%
13. The specialized vocabulary used in ESP courses poses a significant challenge for me.	17%	44%	29%	6%	4%
14. It is difficult to understand some long and difficult sentences due to lack of vocabulary.	18%	32%	33%	11%	6%

The study examines the challenges encountered by English-majoring senior English- majored students in their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning at Hanoi Metropolitan University. The data was collected through a questionnaire comprising 14 statements, which explored various aspects of English language acquisition.

One key challenge relates to learning materials and content. A majority of respondents (59%) found it difficult to understand the specialized content of ESP courses, while 64% reported limited access to relevant textbooks and study materials. Furthermore, 65% agreed that some ESP courses relied on outdated instructional resources, hindering their ability to learn current industry practices.

Another prevalent issue was insecurity and lack of confidence. Over 60% of students indicated that shyness or social anxiety impeded their participation in ESP discussions and activities. Similarly, 67% felt that their progress was hindered by self-doubt regarding their language abilities or subject knowledge. Consequently, 61% of respondents admitted to rarely speaking in ESP classes due to their shyness.

The large class sizes also posed significant barriers to effective engagement. Over 60% of students found it challenging to engage meaningfully in ESP lessons due to the high number of students in their classes.

Vocabulary challenges emerged as another major hurdle. Respondents struggled with the

extensive (63%) and specialized (61%) vocabulary required in ESP courses, which hindered their understanding and application of concepts. Moreover, 50% had difficulty comprehending complex sentences due to their limited vocabulary.

Finally, the data revealed a lack of intrinsic interest among some students. Over 50% struggled to maintain engagement during ESP lessons, as they were not genuinely interested in the subject matter. Additionally, 44% expressed disinterest in the English language itself, and 47% learned English primarily because it was a school requirement, rather than out of personal interest.

4.4. Suggestions to overcome the challenges to enhance the experience in learning ESP for English-Majored Seniors at Hanoi Metropolitan University

Regarding learning materials and content, participants emphasized the need for authentic and up-to-date resources. They highlighted the importance of incorporating relevant, real-world materials that engage students and expose them to professional language use. Customizing and personalizing content to align with learners' specific needs and interests was also recommended, as it increases the relevance and investment in the learning process.

Participants also stressed the value of integrating real-world examples and scenarios into the curriculum. By bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical application, students can develop language skills and problem-solving abilities relevant to their future careers. To cater to diverse learning styles, employing a variety of instructional strategies, such as role-playing, simulations, and project-based learning, was suggested to create dynamic and interactive learning environments.

Additionally, participants advocated for the development of course materials tailored to specific programs at the university. This targeted approach ensures that vocabulary, topics, and exercises directly address the needs of each profession,

better preparing students for the challenges they will face in their respective fields.

Regarding learning facilities and environment, participants expressed the need for access to appropriate technological resources and a conducive, collaborative learning atmosphere. They underscored the significance of modern facilities and infrastructure to support effective ESP learning. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of encouraging collaboration and communication among learners, as well as smaller class sizes to facilitate personalized attention and engagement.

In terms of interest, motivation, and confidence in language learning, participants emphasized the role of consistent practice in enhancing proficiency and self-assurance. They recognized the necessity of patience and persistence, as well as the incorporation of enjoyable activities, to sustain motivation and engagement. Embracing mistakes as opportunities for growth and improvement was also identified as a valuable mindset for language learners.

For vocabulary and grammar learning, participants recommended a gradual, systematic approach, breaking down complex language components into smaller, manageable chunks. Immersive learning through exposure to authentic language materials was also suggested to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and contextual understanding. Setting clear and specific learning goals was highlighted as a crucial strategy for targeted skill development in professional fields.

Overall, the survey results provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by ESP learners and their suggestions for improvement. By addressing these considerations, ESP programs can create a more effective and engaging learning experience that prepares students for success in their chosen careers.

5. Conclusion

The research study examines the challenges faced by English-majoring senior English-

majored students in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at Hanoi Metropolitan University. The key challenges identified include the detrimental impact of large class sizes, feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence, limitations in English skills particularly in vocabulary, and a lack of intrinsic interest in ESP topics. To address these challenges, participants provided valuable suggestions, such as reducing class sizes, implementing targeted vocabulary instruction, providing access to specialized learning materials, and incorporating real-life examples and practical applications to enhance intrinsic motivation and engagement. By addressing these issues, educators and policymakers can create more supportive, engaging, and effective ESP learning environments that cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of students. The findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing ESP learning experiences and the importance of a multifaceted approach to improve the quality of ESP education.

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