The Alignment of ESP in Teaching Activities and Materials at Vocational High School

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the alignment of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in teaching activities and teaching materials at Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Indonesia, especially in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. A descriptive qualitative approach was used to explore teachers' strategies, challenges, and recommendations in implementing ESP. The research participants consisted of three English teachers from three vocational high schools in Magelang City with different expertise programs, namely hospitality, nursing, and engineering. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis model proposed by Naeem et al. (2023), involved a structured six-phase process including data familiarization, coding, category development, theme identification, theme refinement, and model development. The results show that teachers apply several strategies to align ESP with students' needs, such as collaborative needs analysis with vocational teachers and industry professionals, work context-based activity design (e/g/ VR simulation in hospitality, role-play in nursing, and engineering projects), and diversification of material sources by utilizing digital technology. However, the main challenges include the mismatch of the national curriculum which is still oriented towards General English (EGP), limited ESP support facilities, and the gap in teacher competence in mastering technical content in vocational fields. Teachers recommend the development of a structured ESP curriculum based on majors, increased collaboration with industry, and hybrid training to strengthen teacher capacity. This finding confirms the need for multi-stakeholder synergy to optimize ESP learning in vocational high schools to be relevant to the needs of the world of work.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Vocational High School (SMK), Merdeka Curriculum, Student Needs, Contextual Learning*

INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential global language in modern times due to its widespread use in globalization across various sectors, such as business, education, the workplace, and healthcare (Bihari Dash, 2022). As a global lingua franca, English plays a significant role in daily life, particularly in fields like banking, trade, media, transportation, diplomacy, tourism, science, and technology (Bihari Dash, 2022). Hooda (2022) further emphasizes that English proficiency is closely linked to economic opportunities and access to information, reinforcing its dominance in

the globalized era. Without English, navigating the modern world becomes extremely difficult. Therefore, in today's interconnected society, English proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success, especially in vocational high schools, where students are trained for specific careers.

With the emergence of this issue, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is essential for English language learning in vocational high schools. (Ramírez, 2015) defines ESP as an approach that teaches language tailored to professional or vocational needs and serves as a methodology and discipline that can be adapted to the specific needs of students. Widodo (2016) adds that English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), a subset of ESP, is becoming increasingly popular as many English programs now cater to learners seeking vocationally relevant language skills. The main purpose of EVP is to prepare students for entry into the workplace or vocational higher education where English is used as a medium of communication. This suggests that English language teaching in vocational education, especially in vocational high schools, should be treated as an ESP program.

ESP course in Indonesia should focus on communication, subject-specific content, and occupation-oriented materials based on students' needs (Gestanti et al., 2019). Van (2019) points out that ESP materials should incorporate diverse activities to practice communication skills, while Muliyah and Aminatun (2020) argue that English teaching in vocational high schools must align with students' program studies. Aligning English teaching with students' majors ensures that they will be able to communicate effectively in their future work contexts (Dewi et al., 2022). Hyland (2022) further explains that ESP goes beyond general language proficiency and requires students to acquire field-specific literacies and discourse practices. Similarly, Sari and Wirza (2021) find that vocational high school students in Indonesia need ESP to meet the demands of the workplace. Nguyen et al. (2022) found that English in global workplaces (e.g., import/export services) function as a lingua franca, requiring context-specific registers. Consequently, vocational high schools must adopt an ESP approach to equip students with occupation-relevant communication skills.

However, the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in vocational high schools in Indonesia is still inadequate. Okri Ronaldo (2016) identified a critical problem, this problem being that English teaching materials tend to be overly general and misaligned with students' vocational needs and competencies. This problem persist under Curriculum 2013, as evidenced by Purwanti (2018) comprehensive analysis in her study entitled *Revisiting English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Indonesian Vocational High School (VHS): A Current Situation in Curriculum 2013*. In this study, Purwanti (2018) concludes that ESP implementation in Indonesian vocational high schools is still not optimal, as the teaching content focuses disproportionately on general English topics rather than vocation-specific linguistic needs.

This gap between policy and practice is further reinforced by Fadlia et al. (2020) in their study entitled *English Subject on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Vocational Schools*. The study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative methodology involving curriculum analysis, classroom observations, and interviews at two Indonesian vocational high schools. The findings of the research conducted by Fadlia et al. (2020) showed that general English (EGP) dominates classroom instruction at these schools despite having institutional autonomy to tailor their English curriculum to the specific needs of their vocational programs.

This systemic neglect of ESP principles extends to learning materials. Nur and Suhria (2021) in their study entitled *The Analysis of English Textbook for Vocational School in Parepare Indonesia*. This research analyze English textbook used in Indonesian vocational high schools to determine if it's an appropriate ESP or EGP textbook. The results of this study confirm that most vocational high schools in Indonesia use government-provided textbooks that teach General English (EGP) rather than ESP, and the government-provided textbooks strictly follow a Text-Based Approach and neglecting occupation-specific language requirements in critical fields like hospitality, nursing, and engineering.

These studies collectively reveal a concerning contradiction: while vocational education policies theoretically support ESP based on (Kemendikbud, 2013) curriculum, in practice, they still adhere to EGP frameworks and approaches. This misalignment leaves students linguistically unprepared for workplace demands, requiring urgent material adaptations. Consequently, English teachers in vocational high schools must act as material developers by designing appropriate ESP-based resources (Ramírez Salas, 2011; Andrean, 2023). Mohamed and Alani (2022) emphasized that ESP teachers must tailor content to learners' specific purposes, underscoring the need for teacher-led materials adaptation, as the effectiveness of ESP depends on the teacher's ability to align content with learners' specific professional goals. This issue is echoed by Muliyah & Aminatun (2020), who argue that despite policy allowances, practical classroom application often remains rooted in general English instruction.

This necessity is reinforced by the concept of Merdeka Curriculum, the curriculum currently used by all public schools in Indonesia under the authority of the Indonesian Ministry of Education. The concept of the Merdeka Curriculum aims to provide freedom for education implementers, especially teachers and principals, in arranging, developing, and implementing the curriculum based on the potential and needs of students and schools. Merdeka Curriculum frees teachers to arrange learning that emphasizes essential material by considering characteristics so that learning outcomes will be achieved more meaningfully, enjoyably, and deeply (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022).

Given these gaps, this research aims to address these gaps by examining the alignment of ESP in teaching activities and materials at vocational high schools under the current curriculum concept, Merdeka Curriculum. By focusing on ESP teachers in vocational high schools, the objectives of this study aims to *(1) analyze how English teachers innovate and align ESP in teaching materials and activities to meet vocational students' needs, (2) explores the challenges teachers encounter in ensuring ESP alignment, and (3) explores actionable recommendations from ESP teachers to enhance ESP integration in vocational high schools* to ensure that English language teaching effectively prepares students for workplace communication in their specific fields.

By investigating teachers' experiences, approaches, and innovations, this research seeks to enhance ESP teaching practices by ensuring materials and activities meet students' vocational demands. The urgency of this study lies in the global demand for English proficiency as a critical asset for career advancement. Improving ESP alignment in vocational high schools will equip students with essential workplace communication skills, ultimately contributing to educational reform.

METHOD

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative descriptive approach to holistically explore teachers' innovations, challenges, and strategies in aligning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching with vocational students' majors. Qualitative descriptive methods focuses on gathering data to answer questions about the current status of the research subject by aiming to accurately describe events, phenomena, or facts within a specific area or population, and this method also very suitable to capture rich and contextualized information about participants' experiences without imposing a predefined theoretical framework (Kim et al., 2017). This method is in line with the aim of this study to understand pedagogical innovations, challenges, and strategies in ESP alignment.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its focus on the practical implementation of ESP under the Merdeka Curriculum, along with its integration of pedagogical innovations across three distinct vocational sectors. This triangulation of sectoral practices offers a more holistic view of ESP alignment.

Participants of the research

The participants consisted of three English teachers from three different vocational high schools in Magelang City, Indonesia, each representing distinct study programs: *hospitality (T1), nursing (T2), and engineering (T3)*. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with diverse expertise and teaching backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive representation of ESP implementation across vocational fields (Palinkas et al., 2015). T1 is an ESP-certified teacher with 23 years of experience and already taught ESP for 20 years. T2, an English teacher with 11 years of experience and has no formal training in ESP, but already integrated ESP into her courses since the beginning of her career. T3, an English teacher with 25 years of experience, has been practicing ESP for more than 22 years with no formal ESP training. This selection provided contrasting perspective regarding ESP alignment strategies and challenges, addressing the study's aim to explore variations in teacher experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Research Instrument

The research used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data collection method. This approach was chosen for its dual advantages of maintaining focus on core research questions while allowing sufficient flexibility to capture detailed participant narratives (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The semi-structured format proved particularly valuable as it allowed participants to articulated their perspectives in their own words, facilitating the disclosure of tacit knowledge about pedagogical practices (Taherdoost, 2022). A structured interview guide was developed to systematically explore three main research objectives: *(1) teachers' innovative approaches in aligning ESP materials and activities with students' majors, (2) challenges faced in achieving effective ESP alignment, and (3) teachers' recommendations or strategies for improving ESP teaching*. All interviews were conducted in English to ensure linguistic accuracy and to simplify the subsequent transcription process, with each session lasting approximately 20-30 minutes to maintain participant focus and engagement.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis process followed the *six-step systematic thematic analysis process model* proposed by Naeem et al. (2023). First, *data familiarization* was conducted through an in-depth review of the raw data, including interview transcripts and field notes, to gain a holistic understanding of participants' perspectives and contextual nuances. This familiarization enables the researcher to identify early patterns and build initial intuitions about the data set. Second, *code generation* was performed by manually labeling relevant data segments (e.g., keywords, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or short descriptions) with descriptive keywords or short phrases, which helped deconstruct the data into analyzable units. Third, *category development* was performed. When developing categories, codes with similar characteristics or conceptual similarities are grouped into broader categories to synthesize recurring ideas. Fourth, *theme identification* was performed. This step consists of interpreting these categories to extract overarching themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences and answered the research questions. Fifth, *theme refinement and validation* was performed. These themes were then refined and validated by repeatedly re-examining the codes, categories, and raw data to ensure coherence, avoid interpretive bias, and maintain alignment with the research objectives. Finally, *conceptual model development* was performed. A conceptual model was developed to visually map the relationships between themes and connect findings to existing theory or practice. This structured and flexible approach ensured precision in the interpretation of qualitative data while maintaining the depth and complexity of participants' narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of interview data with three vocational high school English teachers in Magelang, three main themes were found as answers to the research questions related to the alignment of ESP in teaching activities and materials at vocational high schools: *(1) Teachers' ESP Alignment Strategies in Teaching Materials and Activities, (2) Teachers' Challenges of ESP Implementation, and (3) Teachers' Recommendations for ESP Teaching Improvement*. These findings were organized based on Naeem et al. (2023) systematic thematic analysis model, with coding emerging directly from participants' narratives. An overview of each aspect will be explained as follows.

1. Teachers' ESP Alignment Strategies in Teaching Materials and Activities

1.1 Collaboration-based Need Analysis

All participants agreed that needs analysis is the main foundation in designing ESP materials. They also emphasized the importance of collaborative needs analysis to identify students' specific language needs. This process involves intensive discussion with vocational teachers and industry to identify the language competencies that students need.

> *"... We usually conducted a needs analysis by collaborating and discussing specifically with the vocational subject teacher in each department at our school and we also have discussion with another English teacher form different vocational high schools in this city at the*

(MGMP) forum to determine vocabulary, text types, and activities that are appropriate for students' majors". (T1, T2, T3)

T1 added an explanation regarding the curriculum integration process.

"... We also analyze the CPs or we can say the learning outcomes and the syllabus, then consult with vocational teachers and industry professionals to align the materials with industry standards so we could give our students the more specific learning materials and activities according to our students' vocational majors". (T1)

Then, T3 gave a concrete example of the adaptation of general material to a vocational context that she often does as a way of applying ESP in her teaching.

"... for examples, if the CPs or the learning outcomes is about procedure text or descriptive text, we will modify it to become engineering topic procedure text or descriptive text. The example of engineering topic descriptive text and procedure text is when I ask my students to describe their lathe machine or their welding tools, and when I ask my students to write a procedure text about how to use their lathe machine or their welding tools". (T3)

Collaborative needs analysis empowers teachers to contextualize materials according to specific vocational demands. This aligns with Gestanti et al. (2019), who emphasize the importance of stakeholder input in curriculum design. By integrating insights from vocational experts and industry professionals, teachers bridge the gap between general English and job-specific communication.

1.2 Industry-based Contextual Activity Design

Teachers design learning activities that simulate real work situations. T1 uses virtual reality (VR) technology for conversational training in hospitality.

"... we use VR or virtual reality activities to teach front office and food services conversations activities. The students facilitated by the VR tools in order to practice and enhance their communicational ability in the hotel and restaurant settings". (T1)

Moreover, T2 developed a contextualized role-play in nursing.

"... me personally, usually use role-play simulations in hospital settings, for example I ask my students to make some nurse-patient conversations about medical procedures". (T2)

While T3 implements project-based learning in mechanical engineering.

"... sometimes I ask my students to do a project-based learning. The example is when I ask my students to create an Advertisement video about their welding product or the other vocational product". (T3)

Teachers designed context-specific activities to mirror real workplace scenarios. T1 used VR tools to simulate hotel and restaurant interactions. T2 implemented hospital role-play exercises, while T3 used project-based learning to have students create advertisements for engineering products.

1.3 Source Material Diversification

In this way, teachers combine conventional and digital resources to increase relevance.

"… we use and combine any kind of materials as long as that materials suits and aligned with our students' needs according to their majors. We combine textbooks, digital materials from YouTube, and AI to develop course-specific content. AI helps identify specific vocabulary needs". (T1, T2, T3)

Then, T3 exemplifies the use of technical videos.

"… sometimes I used English language YouTube videos about the welding fabrication or other engineering topic videos, then asked comprehension questions. My reasons give this kind of videos and materials is to attract the attention of my students". (T3)

All teachers used a mix of textbooks, YouTube videos, and AI-generated content to enhance their materials relevance with the students' needs according to their majors. T3, for instance, incorporated YouTube videos on welding techniques and followed up with comprehension tasks to enhance relevance and engagement.

1.4 Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration

Cooperation with vocational teachers, industry, and teacher communities (MGMP) is key to successful ESP alignment.

"… we have collaboration and discussion through MGMP forum, we discuss with other vocational high schools English teacher about the ESP alignment into the teaching activities and materials so we can decide what kind of materials and activities that appropriate for our students based on their vocational major". (T1, T2, T3)

T1 added that he also collaborates with the industry.

"… We also have a collaboration with the hospitality industry professional that cooperate with our school by bringing them to our school to discuss about the learning materials that are tailored to the requirement and expectations expected from the industry". (T1)

Teachers engaged with other English teachers through MGMP (teacher working group) forums and consulted with industry professionals to co-design relevant ESP content.

2. Teachers' Challenges of ESP Implementation

2.1 Limited Facilities and Infrastructure

T1 revealed that he had technical constraints in using VR (virtual reality) as a supporting tool for ESP implementation in his classroom.

"… our ESP supporting tools like VR facilities that available in our school is very limited, we only have 10 VR units for hundreds of students. They have to be used alternately, reducing the intensity of the training". (T1)

Meanwhile, T2 and T3 face limited access to specific equipment.

"… our school has not provided ESP specific tools to certain majors in the school, so we rely on general technology like the internet or another source to support our ESP implementation in the class". (T2, T3)

T1 reported insufficient VR tools, limiting simulation activities. T2 and T3 faced a lack of specific tools aligned with vocational needs, forcing reliance on generic digital resources.

2.2 Curriculum Gaps

All participants highlighted the misalignment between the national curriculum and ESP needs. They explained that the government curriculum is still oriented towards general English instead of ESP.

"… Yes, the current curriculum provided by the government is more text-oriented based on the General English. This situation makes English teachers have to modify the materials to suit the students' major". (T1, T2, T3)

Furthermore, T3 criticized the structure of the government curriculum.

"… The learning outcomes or the CP from the Ministry of Education does not explicitly accommodate ESP, so we have to 'force' the vocational context into the general template". (T3)

All teachers noted that the national curriculum focuses on General English. T3 highlighted that learning outcomes (CPs) do not explicitly accommodate ESP, requiring teachers to adapt general materials for vocational relevance.

2.3 Teacher Competencies Limitations

T2 recognized the challenge of mastering vocational content.

"… The challenges for me personally is my knowledge about the students' vocational majors, my students are nursery students and I am an English teacher. As an English teacher, I lacked understanding of nursery and medical terms. This issue makes me little bit struggling in developing English materials about nursery especially on vocabulary aspect such as specific words in nursery realm. Because of this, I have to learn by myself and look

for sources about nursery through the internet and AI to harmonize the nursery theme with the English materials taught". (T2)

T3 added about the importance of continuous ESP training

"... basically, all of English teacher that teach in the vocational high school only teach and mastering the general English. But, because we teach in vocational high school, we should learn and train to teach the ESP related to the students' needs and their majors. So, our main challenges are located on the adaptation to the vocational focused materials according to our students' majors, so we need a lot of literation related to the vocational field materials to solve this problem. In other words, ESP teachers need to keep updating the technical knowledge of students' majors. This require continuous ESP training, especially for novice English teachers". (T3)

T2 expressed difficulty understanding technical terminology in nursing, while T3 emphasized the need for continuous professional development in vocational content to effectively teach ESP.

3. Teachers' Recommendations for ESP Teaching Improvement

3.1 Structured ESP Curriculum Development

All participants recommended the development of a national ESP curriculum that is fragmented by major.

"... we, as an ESP teacher hope that the government make some curriculum, textbooks, and training that are aimed specifically for the ESP teaching based on each vocational focuses because that will really help a lot of novice English teacher at vocational high school in implementing the ESP in their teaching activities and materials at vocational high school according to their students' majors". (T1, T2, T3)

Teachers called for a national ESP curriculum tailored by vocational major. This would help standardize instruction and support novice English teacher in implementing ESP at vocational high school.

3.2 Increased Industry Collaboration

T1 emphasized the importance of synergy with the professional world.

"... The materials and activities that we teach should be more suitable with the industries, so the first thing we should do is to collaborate our materials with the industry needs. We should be creative in combining the materials from the government's curriculum with the materials that required by some specific industry to support the students' needs. For example, partner hotels can provide English training modules for front-liners such as handling guest complaints or upselling room services, then we combine these materials with the government's curriculum materials". (T1)

T1 recommended industry collaboration to ensure materials reflect real-world needs. For instance, partner hotels could provide sample training modules aligned with curriculum requirements.

3.3 Strengthening Teacher Capacity

T2 suggested a hybrid training program.

> *"... English teacher at vocational high school need workshop or training on ESP and technical literacy of majors mentored by linguists and industry professionals, so they can develop and enhance their ESP teaching ability.* (T2)

T2 suggested hybrid training involving both linguists and vocational experts. Such programs would help bridge gaps in technical content knowledge and instructional design.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the urgency of implementing the ESP approach in vocational schools, as emphasized by Hyland (2022) that language learning should be based on literacy and field-specific discourse practice. The collaborative needs analysis strategy implemented by teachers is in line with the concept of need analysis in ESP mentioned by Ramírez (2015), where teaching materials must be tailored to the professional needs of students. Collaboration with vocational teachers and the industry professionals, as practiced by T1 and T3, reflects the principle of material co-design recommended by Gestanti et al. (2019).

The challenge of curriculum gaps faced by participants reinforces Purwanti's (2018) findings that the implementation of ESP in Indonesian vocational schools is not optimal due to the dominance of general English materials. Although the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom of adaptation (Hartoyo & Rahmadayanti, 2022), the absence of ESP technical guidance makes it difficult for teachers to transform general learning outcomes or general (CP) into vocational contexts. This can be seen in T3's attempt to "force" the mechanical engineering context into the procedure text template. This finding is in line with the criticism of Fadlia et al. (2020) that many vocational high school English teachers have difficulty integrating ESP without a clear framework.

The use of technology such as virtual reality (VR) by T1 and artificial intelligence (AI) by T2-T3 shows teachers' innovative efforts in overcoming the limitations of teaching materials. However, infrastructure disparities between schools (e.g. VR limitations) exacerbates the inequality of ESP quality, as Nur and Suhria (2021) identified in their analysis of vocational high school textbooks. Participants' recommendations on ESP toolkits are in line with Mohamed and Alani (2022) argument that teachers need to be supported with digital tools to develop contextualized materials.

The hybrid training recommendations for teachers reflect the need for capacity building as emphasized by Ramírez Salas (2011). Teachers' limited technical competence, as experienced by T2, confirms the findings of Dewi et al. (2022) that collaboration with vocational teachers is key to successful ESP implementation. The MGMP forum utilized by participants can be a community of practice model for sharing material adaptation strategies.

This finding also supports Widodo's (2016) argument about the importance of EVP (English for Vocational Purposes) as a subset of ESP. the project of making a video advertisement for

welding products by T3 and a hospital simulation by T2 are concrete examples of the application of EVP that is oriented towards occupational needs. However, without systemic support from government (e.g. structured ESP curriculum development), teachers' efforts will remain partial.

The limitation of this study lies in the geographically limited scope of participants. Further studies are needed to test these findings in vocational high schools with a variety of majors and different infrastructure conditions. Nevertheless, these findings provide an empirical basis for revising English curriculum policies in vocational high school, particularly in integrating ESP principles into the Merdeka Curriculum.

Specifically, all participants were selected from Magelang City, Central Java. While this provides deep local insights, it may not reflect ESP challenges or innovations in regions with different educational resources or industrials partnerships. Future research should expand this geographic scope to validate findings across varied socio-economic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach in English language learning in Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Indonesia requires collaborative strategies, contextual innovation, and systemic support. The main findings show that vocational high school teachers have made significant efforts in aligning ESP teaching materials and activities with students' vocational needs through needs analysis based on collaboration with vocational teachers and industry, activity design based on workplace simulation (such as role-play in nursing, VR in hospitality, and engineering projects), and diversification of material sources by utilizing digital technology. However, these efforts face complex challenges, including the misalignment of the national curriculum which is still oriented towards General English (EGP), limited ESP supporting infrastructure (such as limited access to VR or vocation-specific tools), and teacher competency gaps in mastering technical content in vocational fields.

Strategic recommendations from teachers include developing a structured ESP curriculum categorized by major, increasing collaboration with industry to design materials based on employment needs, and strengthening teacher capacity through hybrid training that combines linguistic expertise and technical literacy. These findings emphasize the urgency of adjusting Merdeka's curriculum policy, which while providing autonomy for adaptation, has not been accompanied by adequate ESP technical guidance. Without systemic support from the government, such as the provision of department-based ESP textbooks, continuous teacher training, and allocation of ESP supporting infrastructure, the implementation of ESP will remain partial and depends on individual teacher initiatives.

The implications of this study emphasize the need for multi-stakeholder synergy (teachers, industry, government, and education community) to transform English language learning in vocational high schools from a generalized approach to a contextual-vocational one. Further studies are needed to explore integrated ESP curriculum models and the effectiveness of current technologies (such as AI) in the development of vocational-based materials, particularly in regions with higher disparities in educational infrastructure. Thus, ESP learning can truly become a bridge for vocational students' professional communication readiness in the global era.

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