PP-27-41
P-ISSN: 2716-8093 E-ISSN: 2716-8212

Civil Engineering Master Students' Hindrances regarding their Involvement in English for Specific Purposes Courses

Les obstacles rencontrés par les étudiants en master de génie civil quant à leur participation aux cours d'anglais spécialisé

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Received: 21/11/2025 **Accepted:** 11/02/2026 **Published:**15/04/2026

Abstract: ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is a technical subject and an approach that invaded all colleges in the world. Nowadays, Algerian universities are undertaking the same path by implementing ESP in all higher educational disciplines, most particularly the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Yet, this implementation is not without any deficiencies regarding the teaching and learning processes. Starting from this observation, this paper aims at shedding lights on the challenges that civil engineering students encounter in their ESP courses and what may be their needs to attain a better learning process. A quantitative method has been adopted to conduct our research; 60 Civil Engineering Master Students were asked to fill in the questionnaire that we sent through Google Form system. When we gathered data, we used SPSS to analyze them. Our findings show that learners performed bad in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The most salient obstacles they encountered in their courses were related to vocabulary, grammar, and speaking.

Keywords: Deficiencies, Challenges, Courses, ESP, Grammar, Vocabulary.

Résumé: L'anglais à des fins spécifiques (ESP) est une discipline technique et une approche qui s'est généralisée dans toutes les universités du monde. Aujourd'hui, les universités algériennes s'engagent dans la même voie en mettant en œuvre l'ESP dans toutes les disciplines de l'enseignement supérieur, et plus particulièrement dans les domaines des STIM (sciences, technologie, ingénierie et mathématiques). Cependant, cette mise en œuvre n'est pas sans présenter certaines lacunes en ce qui concerne les processus d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. Partant de ce constat, cet article vise à mettre en lumière les défis auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants en génie civil dans leurs cours d'ESP et à identifier leurs besoins pour améliorer le processus d'apprentissage. Une méthode quantitative a été adoptée pour mener notre recherche ; 60 étudiants en master de génie civil ont été invités à remplir le questionnaire que

nous leur avons envoyé via le système Google Form. Une fois les données recueillies, nous avons utilisé SPSS pour les analyser. Nos résultats montrent que les apprenants ont obtenu de mauvais résultats en compréhension orale, expression orale, lecture et écriture. Les obstacles les plus marquants qu'ils ont rencontrés dans leurs cours étaient liés au vocabulaire, à la grammaire et à l'expression orale.

Mots-clés: Lacunes, Défis, Cours, ESP, Grammaire, Vocabulaire.

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Introduction

The last decades had witnessed many controversies about effective ways of teaching foreign languages. So, specialist created several teaching approaches such as Grammar Translation Method, the Audio-lingual Method (derived from behaviorism), the Direct Method, which totally excludes the use of the mother tongue during the teaching-learning process. Despite including many gaps and limitations, all teaching approaches helped instructors to interact with their learners in a systematic way and contributed in enhancing the learning operation.

However, not all English learners (either EFL or ESL) can reach their goals if they attend only General English courses because their needs are not the same. General English courses seem to be not enough for learners who need English for specific academic and professional purposes. For such reason, ESP occurred as a unique approach, which focuses on providing particular needs for learners in several disciplines and occupations, (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Paltridge, 2013).

English for Specific Purposes or ESP is divided into three major branches, which are: English for Social Sciences or (ESS), which deals with humanities-oriented topics like human resources management, psychology, and sociology, English for Business and Economics or (EBE) that targets the branch of management, accountability, economics and English for Science and Technology or (EST), which is concerned with teaching any major that is related to science and technology. Each of these ESP's branches may include both English for Academic Purposes or (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) relying on whether the focus in on academic or occupational purposes, (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Within English for Science and Technology or (EST), a variety of disciplines were dealt with including Engineering fields and particularly Civil Engineering. The present study focuses on MA 1 Civil Engineering students at Adrar University in Algeria, where we have noticed their limited engagement in ESP courses. Our study therefore seeks to find out the

reasons behind their poor involvement in ESP courses and to better understand the factors that struggle their effective contribution.

The research questions of this study are the following:

1. Are the mean students capable of attending ESP courses depending on their English proficiency level?
2. To what extent are ESP course lectures relevant to the students' majors?
3. Ho do ESP courses help in developing the students' General English Skills and technical wording particularly?
4. What are the standards and students' needs that are taken into account when planning the ESP courses?

Research Hypotheses

1. We think that the target students have a good background in English, so they can attend ESP courses.
2. We hypothesize that the ESP courses are relevant and fit the students' majors.
3. It enriches the students' technical vocabulary and helps them back up their GES (General English Skills).
4. The planning of ESP courses is based on the students' needs and their forthcoming work necessities.

1. Literature Review

French, as the language of the Algerian former colonizer, used to be the primary language of both technical and scientific instruction particularly in higher education in our country. But, during "Covid 19" pandemic period (2020 onward), the Algerian Government adopted English to be the first foreign language and started a gradual shift from French to English. Extensive programs of teaching English were designed to university lecturers not only to make them master English but also to enable them either to teach certain subject modules in English or to be teachers in charge of ESP courses related to their specialties. This shift aims to globalize local higher education and enhance graduates' qualifications worldwide, it also raises the lecturers and students' pedagogical awareness especially in particular fields like Civil Engineering. Hence, checking how ESP is dealt with and managed in the field Civil Engineering becomes crucial for researchers.

ESP researches have focused on showing the value of arranging instruction language and the students' needs side by side. Many ESP scientists discussed the application of this learning approach in the field of engineering. In this concern, Nekrasova-Beker T published a paper called "Vocabulary Demands for Engineering Students Studying English in Russia: Comparing ESP Course Materials across Three Engineering Disciplines". The study tries to seek how similar the teaching materials used in three disciplines (Thermal Power, Chemical Engineering, and Computer Sciences) were in ESP lectures in Russian Higher Education and the rate of fulfilling the needs of the target students. The researcher used corpus-based method to analyze

texts; he derived his approach from previous investigations (e.g., Hsu, 2011; Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). It was clear through the results of the research that the three branches did not use the vocabulary similarly in spite of the fact that they belonged to the same principal field (they were all parts of engineering). Moreover, those who studied chemical engineering were more concerned with technical vocabulary because they help them understand texts and reports in their field. In short, the study represented a deep search of how ESP teachers taught and developed materials for several specialties of Engineering. (Nekrasov A-Beker, 2020)

Likewise, the link between ESP teaching and employment skills has been investigated by Clement, A., and Murugavel, T who were interested in EST, namely engineering because they produced an article entitled in "English for Employability: A Case Study of the English Language Training Need Analysis for Engineering Students in India" in 2015. The principle goal of their study was to test the efficiency of ESP lectures taught for engineering students in Indian faculties and their research affirms that the effectiveness of ESP courses relies on an overall analysis of students' needs. The researchers found that weaknesses in performance of engineering students in General English had a negative impact on their abilities to profit from ESP courses. As a result, the problem was obvious in this case because of the wrong choice of teaching methodology and the bad performance of students in GE. These findings confirm that the students need a course combined with both their specialty needs and their abilities of the current language. (Clement, A., & Murugavel, T., 2015)

We can also support our work and make of it remarkable if we go back to Gömleksi's investigation "*Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning (Jigsaw II) Method in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Engineering Students (Case of Firat University, Turkey)"*. This is another perspective that focuses on pedagogical methodology. Gömleksi dealt with the effect of cooperative learning strategies "*Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning (Jigsaw II) Method in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Engineering Students"*.

Briefly, this approach is learner-oriented since this latter is the one who dominates the session and makes of the instructor as a follower or evaluator who notices his learners teaching one another in a collaborative way. The target population subdivided into an experimental group and a control one. The experimental group advocated learner-centeredness (the so-called Cooperative Jigsaw), but the second one relied on the teacher and made of him a unique individual and a source of knowledge. The students sat for an achievement test, as a pre-post and delayed post-test. The findings show that learners who belonged to the first group were more autonomous in terms of learning; they could learn much vocabulary and master their active voice and passive voice background in English. Comparing the technique (learner-centered) used by (Jigsaw II) with teacher-centered control group, demonstrates that collaborative learning enhanced students' vocabulary learning and grammatical competence, particularly in the use of active and passive different forms and structures. These

findings propose that methodological regeneration can improve ESP learning by increasing learners' interaction and autonomy. (Gömleksi, 2007)

These studies spotlight on three major key proportions of ESP in engineering which are: specialty-specific vocabulary, needs-based course designing and learner-centered teaching methods. However, there is no ideal ESP course neither for engineering and its specialties nor for the other branches because no course can gauge what all learners of a single specialty think about, needs, or perceive the type of English s/he is learning. In other words, we cannot develop a single syllabus for each single individual. However, the shortages of the previous ESP courses will be beneficial for novice ESP course elaborators to design better courses. This point of view is relevant particularly in the Algerian context where the shift towards English as instruction language requires appropriate ESP programs for Civil engineering students.

2. Research Method

This current study used a quantitative research method to collect and analyze information taking into account the challenges that block the good engagement of MA 1 Civil Engineering students in ESP course at Ahmed Draia University of Adrar during the academic year (2024-2025). To make our survey more specific and exact, we targeted only 60 (sixty) MA 1 Civil Engineering students.

2.1 Respondents

As we have already mentioned, the target informants of our study were MA 1 Civil Engineering students at Ahmed Draia University of Adrar. We distributed the questionnaire to 60 students but only 29 of them filled it out. Thus, we were convinced that the number of respondents legally represents the whole group of students. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms.

2.2 Instruments

We used the questionnaire because it was a helpful instrument to look up the suitability of ESP courses to the target population and their impressions and attitudes towards this module. Data were collected using a well-structured questionnaire to investigate students' engagement in ESP courses. The questionnaire that we used consisted of 16 questions divided into two sections: The first section targeted the learners' personal and academic backgrounds, while the second one was more important; it was concerned with the students' points of views and perceptions towards ESP courses, the teaching method and the content of the lectures, the breakdowns, and the possible solutions, which could promote the courses and make them easier to be acquired.

2.3 Data Analysis

We found SPSS application suitable to calculate the obtained data. It helped us to process their replies and interpreted them numerically and inserted them in tables. This operation guided us to the main aim of the article: the challenges we discovered in ESP courses, and the procedures which could lessen those obstacles. We noticed that most of the responses focused on the teaching methods used in the course, the complexity of the lessons, and the

deficiencies the course and the learners themselves hope to fulfill in order to be active members in the ESP sessions. When we finished data analysis and interpretation, we drew a conclusion.

3. Findings and Discussions

The present study examined students' perspectives on how English learning materials were delivered in their ESP courses. This section presents the outcomes of our analysis, highlighting the areas where students faced difficulties and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies employed in English-taught mathematics lessons. In addition, the findings provide insights that can help civil engineering instructors design more effective ESP courses for master-level students.

3.1 Personal Information

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	14	58,3	58,3	58,3
	Male	9	37,5	37,5	95,8
	no answer	1	4,2	4,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 1: Gender of Students

Type of Baccalaureate

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Scientific	14	58,3	58,3	58,3
Valid Technical	10	41,7	41,7	100,0
Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 2: Type of Baccalaureate

The answers provided by the participants in the first rubric are summarized in Table 1. The results show that the majority of the respondents (58.3%) were females, whereas males represented 37.5%. This means that female students were more represented in our sample, which is a common trend in similar surveys. As for the second item, the data indicate that most students (58.3%) had obtained a scientific baccalaureate before joining the university while the remaining part came from technical backgrounds.

3.2 ESP Courses: Challenges, Needs, and Solutions

The second part was so large in comparison with the first one since it contained 14 questions; they resulted in the following:

How long have you been learning English?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Eight years	3	12,5	12,5	12,5
More	3	12,5	12,5	25,0
no answer	2	8,3	8,3	33,3
Valid Seven years	3	12,5	12,5	45,8
Six years	12	50,0	50,0	95,8
Ten years	1	4,2	4,2	100,0
Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 3: The Number of the Years of Studying English

The results shown in the table indicate that half of the participants (50%) had been learning English for six years, which means they were exposed to the language mainly during middle and secondary school. Only a small number reported longer experience, such as ten years of study. This question aimed to determine whether the duration of learning English, whether long or short, could reflect the learners' level of competence in the language.

How would you evaluate your level of English?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**Average**	14	58,3	58,3	58,3
	Good	3	12,5	12,5	70,8
	Low	7	29,2	29,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 4: Students' Level in English

The fourth table presents the students' self-assessment of their English proficiency. The majority (58.3%) described their level as average, which means most of them consider themselves intermediate learners. A noticeable proportion (29.2%) reported having a low level, and this point will help us later understand the source of their difficulties and think of ways to address them. Only a small group (12.5%) stated that their level was good. The remaining options were not selected by any of the participants.

How often do you use oral English in your branch of study?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative

					Percent
Valid	Never	3	12,5	12,5	12,5
	Often	2	8,3	8,3	20,8
	Rarely	19	79,2	79,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 5: The Frequency of Speaking in English

The fifth table illustrates how frequently master's students in civil engineering use English orally in the classroom. The data reveal that a large majority (79.2%) did not practise speaking English during their sessions. A small group (8.3%) reported that they often communicated in English with their peers and lecturer during ESP classes in order to improve their oral fluency. The remaining students (12.5%) admitted that they never spoke English, neither during ESP courses nor outside the classroom.

How often do you use written English in your branch of study?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	9	37,5	37,5	37,5
	Often	2	8,3	8,3	45,8
	Rarely	13	54,2	54,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 6: The Frequency of Writing in English

Similarly, the sixth question is related to challenges in English courses. We focused on how often learners wrote in English within their field of study. Adverbs of frequency were used to obtain more precise responses. The results reveal that none of the students engaged in daily writing in English. The largest proportion (54.2%) stated that they rarely wrote in English while studying their English courses. However, a small group (8.3%) reported that they often wrote in English, both in relation to civil engineering and to everyday topics.

Do you have any problems while using English?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	5	20,8	20,8	20,8
	Yes	19	79,2	79,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 7: Hindrances Encountered while Using English

This question is considered a key inquiry for achieving our objective. We asked whether engineering students at Adrar University faced any difficulties in English in general. As expected, the majority (79.2%) answered "yes" while only 20.8% of the respondents stated that they did not encounter any difficulties.

If yes, to which skill does it belong?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Listening	4	16,7	16,7	16,7
	no answer	5	20,8	20,8	37,5
	Reading	4	16,7	16,7	54,2
	Speaking	7	29,2	29,2	83,3
	Writing	4	16,7	16,7	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 8: The Skill that Makes a Challenge

The eighth question, which was also close-ended, aimed to identify the linguistic skill that most hinders learners when using English. As shown in the table above, the largest proportion of students (29.2%) reported that speaking was the most challenging skill. The remaining skills (listening, reading, and writing) received equal responses, with 16.7% of learners indicating difficulty in each.

Problems Confronted in English Learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Both	10	41,7	41,7	41,7
	no answer	1	4,2	4,2	45,8
	your lack of vocabulary	7	29,2	29,2	75,0
	your low level in grammar	6	25,0	25,0	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 9: The Source of the Problems

Next, we aimed to determine the reasons behind the difficulties students faced with each language skill. As usual, the question was close-ended and offered two main choices. The majority of respondents (41.7%) indicated that their problems were caused by both a lack of vocabulary and a weak level in grammar. In addition, 29.2% stated that their challenge was

mainly linked to limited vocabulary while the remaining 25% attributed their difficulties to poor grammar knowledge.

How many sessions of English courses do you have per week?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	5	20,8	20,8	20,8
	one session	15	62,5	62,5	83,3
	three sessions	3	12,5	12,5	95,8
	two sessions	1	4,2	4,2	100,0
Total		24	100,0	100,0	

Table 10: The Number of English Sessions per Week

Moreover, when we reviewed many previous studies about ESP in Algeria in particular and the low number devoted to this course, we worded a question about the number of sessions students had per week. The statistics in table 10 revealed that most groups (62.5%) studied only one session per week. We deliberately asked such a question because we think that the more students had ESP sessions, the more their level would promote.

Are you satisfied with the way by which your English teacher teaches you?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	8	33,3	33,3	33,3
	no answer	4	16,7	16,7	50,0
	Yes	12	50,0	50,0	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 11: Approval or Disapproval with the Teaching Strategy

The teaching techniques used by ESP instructors can influence learners' proficiency either positively or negatively. For this reason, we wanted to know how students perceived the approaches or methods adopted by their teachers. A simple "Yes/No" question was used for this purpose. The results indicate that half of the students (50%) appreciated their teachers' strategies, whereas 33.3% expressed a negative opinion.

Does she/he follow certain methods in the classroom in order to make you more involved in the course and develop your English level?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

Valid	No	13	54,2	54,2	54,2
	no answer	3	12,5	12,5	66,7
	Yes	8	33,3	33,3	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 12: Teaching through Given Methods

Considering the three main teaching approaches (Behaviourism, Cognitivism, and Structuralism) teachers are expected to rely on methods such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM), The Direct Method (DM), Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT), or the Natural Approach (NA) when teaching English. If this element is overlooked, learners may easily feel lost. According to Table 12, more than half of the students (54.2%) stated that their teachers did not use any method that could capture their attention or help improve their level in English.

By which course type would you prefer to be taught in your English course?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Choose a module to be taught purely in English	1	4,2	4,2	4,2
	grammar rules	6	25,0	25,0	29,2
	learning new vocabulary about civil engineering	17	70,8	70,8	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 13: Students' Favourite Course Type

The suitable choice of course type can play a crucial role in meeting learners' needs in ESP lessons. The statistics on students' preferences regarding course categories indicate that the majority of postgraduate civil engineering students (70.8%) at Adrar University prefer learning vocabulary related to their field of study. Meanwhile, a smaller proportion (25%) expressed a preference for grammar-based English courses. The remaining students believed that it would be more beneficial to select a module themselves to be taught entirely in

English. If this latter option is taken into account by lecturers, it would represent a shift from ESP to EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction).

How often does your teacher use Arabic in class?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	4	16,7	16,7	16,7
	Never	1	4,2	4,2	20,8
	no answer	1	4,2	4,2	25,0
	Often	10	41,7	41,7	66,7
	Rarely	8	33,3	33,3	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 14: The Frequency of Using Arabic by the Teacher

After inquiring about the use of specific English language teaching methods by ESP practitioners, we asked students how often their teachers translated technical terms, fragments, or sentences into Arabic. This practice should not be viewed as a deficiency; rather, it may be effective in certain situations, as it aligns with an established method in language teaching (Grammar Translation Method). Most students reported that their teachers frequently used Arabic to support the teaching–learning process. In fact, the majority of respondents (41.7%) observed that their lecturers often resorted to Arabic to convey particular ideas, facilitate communication, or overcome specific breakdowns in understanding.

In your opinion, to what extent should teaching civil engineering focus on?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	giving more attention to the relationship between English and civil engineering	6	25,0	25,0	25,0
	teaching English within civil engineering	13	54,2	54,2	79,2
	using more English and	5	20,8	20,8	100,0

less Arabic by the teacher	24	100,0	100,0	
Total				

Table 15: The Focal Points of Teaching Civil Engineering in English

The worries of ESP teachers constitute a crucial aspect that must be emphasized in their courses. To better understand how students believe these challenges could be alleviated, we invited them to adopt the teacher's perspective and suggest what the teaching of civil engineering in English should primarily focus on. The largest proportion of respondents (54.2%) indicated that instruction should centre on teaching English within the context of civil engineering, as presented in Table 15.

How often do you make vocabulary mistakes?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**Always**	7	29,2	29,2	29,2
	Often	10	41,7	41,7	70,8
	Rarely	7	29,2	29,2	100,0
	Total	24	100,0	100,0	

Table 16: The Frequency of Committing Vocabulary Mistakes

Making mistakes when it comes to vocabulary is considered among the most common types of errors encountered by EFL learners, particularly those whose major is not English. To investigate this issue, we asked our informants about the frequency with which they committed spelling mistakes through a four-option close-ended question. The results show that the majority of students (41.7%) reported often making vocabulary mistakes while nearly one third of them (29.2%) stated that they always committed such errors. In contrast, some students (29.2%) indicated that they rarely faced this problem.

Conclusion

Teaching English to EFL learners at the university level, regardless of whether the instructor is new or experienced, does not automatically ensure the successful delivery of ESP courses. In reality, there is no perfect or universally valid ESP syllabus. An ESP practitioner may even set aside the officially prescribed programme and design an alternative one as long as it is grounded in clear principles and informed by learners' needs.

The results of our study highlight several factors that hinder learners from taking part effectively and actively in their ESP classes. To begin with, the students generally lacked competence in the four language skills, particularly in the productive ones (speaking and

writing). Additionally, many of them showed weaknesses in grammar and possessed a limited range of vocabulary, which affected their participation in ESP tasks. Another issue lies in the insufficient number of sessions allocated to the course; this shortage pressures teachers either to rush through the syllabus or to cover only a small portion of it due to time constraints. Moreover, students expressed negative perceptions of the techniques their teachers used, which also contributed to the difficulty of the teaching–learning process. For this reason, we included several questions to better understand the needs of civil engineering students.

The needs expressed by the participants can be summarized as follows: First, teachers should prioritize the type of content that learners prefer or find most beneficial. In our sample, students clearly indicated that they would rather learn vocabulary related to their field of study. Second, the occasional use of the mother tongue to clarify specific points was seen as helpful rather than unfavourable. In fact, learners valued translation as a supportive tool for understanding.

In a nutshell, expecting an ESP course to be free of shortcomings is unrealistic, and both teaching and learning such a course naturally involve challenges. Nevertheless, improvement is always possible, whether in course design or in instructional practices, particularly when ESP teachers fully understand the components of a proper Needs Analysis (Target Situation Analysis, Learning Situation Analysis, and Present Situation Analysis) and apply them appropriately. Ultimately, an effective ESP practitioner does not need to tailor an individual syllabus for every student, but should instead develop a programme that integrates elements of both General English and ESP in order to build acceptable levels of language competence.

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