Do ESP teachers need to be subject specialists? A critical examination

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Article Info

Abstract

This study examines the necessity of subject-matter expertise for effective English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction within higher education. Using a qualitative document analysis approach, twenty theoretical and empirical studies published between 1977 and 2025 were synthesised through thematic analysis. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) collaboration and interdisciplinary insight, (2) teacher attitudes toward subject knowledge, and (3) teacher training and professional development. The findings indicate that effective ESP instruction in universities does not depend primarily on teachers becoming subject specialists. Rather, authenticity and disciplinary relevance are most successfully achieved through structured collaboration with field experts, instead of individual mastery of specialised content. Teacher disposition, particularly openness, adaptability, and respect for learners' disciplinary expertise was found to strongly mediate instructional success in tertiary classrooms. In addition, corpus-based pedagogy, discourse and genre awareness, digital literacy, and intercultural communication emerged as core areas of professional preparation for ESP teachers. The study concludes that ESP teacher competence in higher education is best characterised by collaborative engagement, pedagogical flexibility, and reflective professionalism rather than disciplinary expertise alone underscoring the need for universities to establish sustainable collaboration frameworks and continuous professional development systems to support the academic and professional demands of ESP in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher education is intended to satisfy particular student requirements in professional, academic, or occupational settings (Paltridge & Starfield, 2012). According to Belcher (2009), ESP comprises several branches, including English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), and English for Legal Purposes (ELP). Related to that, Basturkmen (2010) mentioned that every ESP instruction is goal-oriented, and teachers must concentrate on the communicative needs of their students in those specialised sectors. This discussion remains central in ESP research and practice today since every purpose of the specific purposes needs different language appropriate for these tasks in terms of syntax, vocabulary, register, study skills, discourse, and genre. The majority of prior research also asserted that the learner's goals and specialised areas should determine their English requirements, leading to the development of resources, learning objectives, and teaching strategies.

However, these increasingly specialised expectations create a complex challenge within higher education. According to Papadima-Sophocleous et al. (2019) ESP could be very specific in the learning objectives, materials, teaching methodologies, and curricula which makes the ESP teachers feature complex construct identities since the teachers will need to deal with both the subject knowledge and language and pedagogy. One of the debatable issues in the ESP field is whether an English language teacher is appropriate to teach ESP since they are sometimes not considered a subject specialist for the specific purposes being studied. According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), the role of an ESP teacher is quite distinct from that of a typical English teacher. One critical issue is that students are sometimes more knowledgeable than teachers because they are the ones who are learning the subject-specific knowledge. The teacher will no longer be regarded as the 'primary knower'. Therefore, this situation is sometimes considered a challenge for teachers' credibility in the classroom. Reflected on the specific needs of ESP, the question that appeared is who should teach ESP? Do we need to be a subject specialist to be able to teach ESP?

According to proponents of topic specialists, educators with deep disciplinary knowledge can better understand a field's specific language, discourse, and communication conventions (Ferguson, 1997; Harding & McNamara, 2018). This point of view holds that teachers of ESP courses should be able to appropriately evaluate technical information and serve as role models for real-world communication in the field of study. Therefore, subject-matter expertise is crucial for credibility and aligning instruction closely with learners' professional realities (Basturkmen, 2019). Meanwhile, based on the research in language teacher perspective, ESP teaching is fundamentally a language-driven activity. ESP teachers should be proficient in requirements analysis, syllabus design, materials adaptation, and language pedagogy, according to (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998a). Belcher (2009) asserts that language teachers are trained to help students acquire communicative competence, which goes beyond technical knowledge to include the broader skills of speaking, writing, and understanding English in context. Moreover, Anthony (2018) notes that language teachers can effectively teach ESP by focusing on the linguistic patterns and discourse structures that underlie professional communication with proper collaboration and exposure to the target field.

Several empirical studies also support the language teacher perspective. Rather than teaching content independently, Bocanegra-Valle (2016) discovered that many successful ESP programs depend on language teachers collaborating closely with subject experts during course design. Similarly, Hyon (2024) argues that language teachers have a more profound knowledge of discourse aspects and genre rules than subject matter specialists, which helps students overcome communication barriers. Even though topic knowledge can enhance contextual relevance, the literature as a whole indicates that other factors define effective ESP education. Collaboration between language and subject experts, ongoing teacher development, and flexible pedagogical approaches are increasingly recognised as key factors in successful ESP teaching (Anthony, 2018; Basturkmen, 2019; Belcher, 2017).

Despite this growing body of research, a clear consensus is still lacking regarding the extent to which ESP teachers must be subject specialists to be effective. The current literature tends to frame the debate as a binary comparison between subject-expert teachers and language-expert teachers, while less is known about how ESP teachers actually negotiate these dual expectations in real classroom practice, how their perceived credibility impacts teaching and learning, and what balance of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge most benefits students. Furthermore, there remains a limited empirical body of work on how ESP teachers perceive their professional identities and how

institutions support the development of both subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise. This unresolved issue forms the basis of the research gap addressed in this study. Therefore, this article critically examines the extent to which ESP teachers must be subject specialists. It argues that, while disciplinary knowledge offers clear advantages, language-specialist teachers are equally, if not more equipped to meet the communicative needs of ESP learners because of their linguistic expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and capacity for collaboration. The paper draws on theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and classroom practices to clarify teacher roles and to propose implications for ESP pedagogy and teacher education.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine whether ESP teachers must be subject specialists. Qualitative research allows an in-depth understanding of complex social and educational phenomena by focusing on meanings, interpretations, and contexts rather than numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Dornyei, 2007). This study uses a literature-based qualitative strategy that looks for trends, arguments, and theoretical stances by methodically reviewing and interpreting previous academic publications (Snyder, 2019). The scope of the study is limited to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) drawing on secondary data from published research on ESP practices, teacher training, and collaboration models. The study focuses on the operational concept of ESP teacher competency, which includes three components: (1) attitudes toward topic content, (2) readiness to work with subject specialists, and (3) knowledge of English language pedagogy. Peer-reviewed journals, academic monographs, and conference proceedings all represent the academic area of ESP, which serves as the research context.

In this design, the authors and studies that are part of the analysis act as indirect data sources, representing the informants. Document analysis and literature synthesis are the research tools that enable the integration and interpretation of results from many sources (Bowen, 2009). Approximately twenty academic works were purposefully selected to represent both seminal theoretical foundations and contemporary viewpoints. The soirces span publications from 1977 to 2025, allowing the study to capture the evolution of ESP teacher competence from classical perspectives through modern discussions on specialized registers, collaboration practices, and the professional identity of ESP teachers (Anthony, 2018; Askar, 2009; Basturkmen, 2010, 2012, 2019, 2024; Belcher, 2009; Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Bojović, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998a; Ferguson, 1997; Harding & McNamara, 2018; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2002; Hyon, 2024; Johns, 2013; Paltridge & Starfield, 2012; Rachayon, 2020; Raftari et al., 2021; Strevens, 1977; Widdowson, 2003).

Several recent studies were also examined in addition to these fundamental sources to capture new trends and modern viewpoints in ESP instruction. Supunya systematically reviewed the focus areas, cooperation styles, and sustainability practices of ESP teachers (Supunya, 2023). Murtafi'ah (2025) examined the authentic needs of Indonesian ESP teachers, highlighting pedagogical skills, adaptability, and collaborative engagement as key competencies. Fitria (2024) explored the challenges faced by ESP teachers in balancing linguistic and content knowledge, while Basturkmen (2024) proposed a renewed research agenda emphasising the importance of teaching specialised registers within professional discourse. The inclusion of these studies was guided by three main criteria supported by established methodological literature. First, the relevance of each work to the central research question on ESP teacher specialisation was considered essential for ensuring conceptual alignment (Papaioannou et al., 2016). Second, as advised by a comprehensive literature-based study, selecting highly referenced or peer-reviewed sources guarantees academic excellence and reliability (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). Third, the theme focus followed rules for deliberate sampling in qualitative synthesis and was based on research that addressed teacher training, professional development, collaboration between language and topic specialists, or teacher attitudes toward subject matter (Patton, n.d.). This literature-based qualitative approach integrates both descriptive and analytical data to construct a well-rounded understanding of how ESP teacher competence has been defined, debated, and applied in different teaching contexts. This approach supports the goal of qualitative synthesis, which is to find recurrent patterns in the corpus of existing knowledge and provide conceptual understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003).

Data for this study were then obtained through document analysis, which involves systematic review and interpretation of textual materials to identify meaningful information and patterns (Bowen, 2009). By examining key words in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and looking through

scholarly databases including Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar for research on ESP teacher responsibilities, collaboration, training, and subject expertise, pertinent materials were found. Once identified, these texts were examined in detail to extract key arguments, conceptual models, and empirical findings related to the research topic. Each selected text's notes and analytical summaries were created to facilitate thematic categorisation. This approach aligns with Creswell & Clark (2017) and Dornyei (2007) recommendations for qualitative data collection, which emphasise systematic reading, coding, and synthesis of textual information. To guarantee validity and reliability, cross-checking and comparison across several sources were carried out in accordance with the guidelines of a systematic literature review (Papaioannou et al., 2016; Snyder, 2019).

Through this procedure, patterns and trends were found in the literature, especially with regard to the discussion of ESP instructors' collaborative responsibilities, professional competence, and subject expertise in both classical and modern academia. By providing deep, contextualised insights, this document analysis method aids the study in achieving its objective of synthesising existing information rather than collecting new empirical data. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the qualitative document analysis conducted to answering the central research question of this study: To what extent do ESP teachers need subject-matter expertise to teach effectively? The analysis synthesises both seminal and contemporary ESP literature to ensure historical breadth and current relevance, drawing on foundational works as well as recent studies that address evolving professional demands. Given that ESP is most commonly implemented in higher education to prepare learners for academic, professional, and occupational pathways, the selected publications were reviewed with particular attention to tertiary instructional contexts. All selected publications were systematically reviewed and categorised according to recurring conceptual patterns, resulting in three dominant themes: (1) collaboration and interdisciplinary insights, (2) teacher attitudes toward subject knowledge, and (3) teacher training and professional development. This thematic structure provides a comprehensive overview of how ESP teacher competence has been theorised, debated, and applied across various instructional contexts. To present the findings transparently and enable precise observation of theoretical intersections and contrasts, the literature is summarised in a table that aligns each source with its corresponding thematic contribution.

Table 1. Mapping of ESP literature to emergent themes in document analysis

Author(s) / Year	Collaboration & Interdisciplinary Insights	Teacher Attitudes Toward Subject Knowledge	Teacher Training & Professional Development
Strevens (1977)	✓	–	–
Hutchinson & Waters (1987)	✓	–	✓
Dudley-Evans & St John (1998a)	✓	✓	✓
Ferguson (1997)	–	✓	–
Widdowson (2003)	–	✓	–
Belcher (2009)	✓	✓	✓
Askar (2009)	✓	–	✓
Hyland (2002)	–	✓	✓
Paltridge & Starfield (2012)	✓	–	✓
Johns (2013)	✓	✓	✓
Basturkmen (2010, 2012, 2019, 2024)	✓	✓	✓
Bojović (2006)	✓	–	✓

Bocanegra-Valle (2016)	✓	−	−
Harding & McNamara (2018)	✓	−	−
Anthony (2018)	✓	−	✓
Rachayon (2020)	−	✓	✓
Raftari et al. (2021)	−	✓	✓
Hyon (2024)	✓	−	✓
Supunya (2023)	✓	✓	✓
Fitria (2024)	−	✓	✓
Murtafi'ah (2025)	✓	✓	✓

Collaboration and interdisciplinary insights

Collaboration consistently emerges as one of the strongest determinants of effective ESP practice. ESP educators are frequently required to assume multiple professional roles beyond classroom instruction. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) therefore use the term practitioner rather than teacher, outlining five key roles: instructor, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator. These multifaceted responsibilities distinguish ESP practitioners from General English teachers and place them at the intersection of language pedagogy and disciplinary knowledge. Effective ESP practice has consistently been defined by collaboration. Teachers, designers, assessors, and collaborators are all possible roles for ESP educators. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) state that their ability to integrate subject-specific input determines how effective they are. Collaboration between language and topic specialists ensures that ESP instruction reflects learners' professional realities rather than broad language aims, claim (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Collaboration improves the validity of educational materials by bridging the gap between domain knowledge and language proficiency, according to subsequent studies (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Bojović, 2006; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Ferguson, 1997). More recent evidence (Askar, 2009; Chaovanapricha & Chaturongakul, 2020) supports this view by demonstrating institutional collaboration models where content teachers act as consultants and language teachers lead pedagogical design. These findings, echoed by Anthony (2018), Basturkmen (2019, 2024), Belcher (2017) suggest that collaboration, rather than individual specialization is the key mechanism ensuring relevance in ESP education. According to this research, ESP teachers can obtain disciplinary knowledge through professional partnerships rather than individual expertise since cooperation serves as a structural replacement for subject specialisation.

A cross-domain synthesis of the literature underscores that ESP is inherently interdisciplinary. Collaboration with healthcare professionals in medical English ensures communicative realism (Belcher, 2009; Paltridge & Starfield, 2012). In business English, teamwork with corporate trainers provides authentic professional simulations (Bojović, 2006; Crosling & Ward, 2002). Meanwhile, Legal English draws authenticity from cooperation with legal practitioners (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). Across all these contexts, collaboration and adaptability consistently replace the need for individual subject specialisation. Basturkmen (2024) explicitly argues for redefining ESP teacher competence as interdisciplinary rather than discipline-specific, aligning with Anthony's (2018) call for the "flexible practitioner model" of ESP instruction.

Collaboration between language teachers and subject specialists can occur at different levels of intensity. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) propose three phases: cooperation, collaboration, and team-teaching. Cooperation involves information sharing to integrate subject content into language learning activities. Collaboration represents a deeper division of labour, in which language and content specialists work together based on complementary expertise; for example, when language teachers develop ESP materials and subject specialists review them for accuracy. The most intensive phase is team-teaching, where both specialists jointly deliver instruction. In EAP settings, this might involve subject lecturers participating in assessment of disciplinary writing; in EOP contexts, it can include professional trainers co-teaching business communication modules (Ahmed, 2014; Bojović, 2006). Collaboration is not limited to classroom delivery. Since ESP is driven by needs analysis, collaboration is essential in course design as well. Askar (2009) introduces the Collective

Collaboration Model (CCM), in which teachers, students, subject experts, ESP specialists, alumni practitioners, and programme coordinators jointly negotiate ESP curricula through seminars, workshops, and iterative discussion. This model widens collaboration beyond the language–content teacher partnership and ensures that course outcomes reflect both institutional expectations and real-world professional needs.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that the competencies required of ESP practitioners are best achieved through collaborative networks rather than individual subject knowledge. English teachers do not need to become standalone subject specialists to teach ESP effectively; instead, they must work collegially with field experts and other stakeholders to integrate disciplinary insights, maintain authenticity, and address learners' specific communicative needs.

Teacher preparation and professional disposition

Training is another recurring theme in the reviewed studies, addressing how ESP teachers can effectively teach outside their subject expertise. While early research Basturkmen (2010), Ferguson (1997), Orr (1997) identified the lack of specialised knowledge as a challenge, later studies advocate training that builds transferable competencies rather than subject mastery. Basturkmen (2019), (2024) and Anthony (2018) emphasise training in discourse analysis, genre awareness, and needs assessment. Similarly, corpus-based approaches (Kennedy & Miceli, 2001, as cited in (Basturkmen, 2010) equip teachers to design authentic, data-driven lessons. According to Belcher (2009) and Paltridge & Starfield (2012) while intercultural competency training prepares ESP instructors for globalised professional situations, technology and multimodal learning help them model workplace communication tasks. These findings reveal that professional training; rather than prior subject specialisation, builds the necessary pedagogical competence for ESP. Adequate teacher preparation focuses on tools, methods, and reflective practice instead of disciplinary mastery (Bennett, 2005; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Supunya, 2023).

ESP Corpus

The first type of training that ESP teachers should receive is instruction on their subject's corpus. Kennedy & Miceli (2001) define a corpus as a large database containing a large amount of real-world language data. It is intended for computer retrieval and specialist research. In the case of ESP, corpus training is critical because ESP differs from general English in the following ways: first, it has a strong specialty in terms of vocabulary usage, a strict standard in syntactic performance, and a unique logical passage structure constrained by the specific literary form. Learners cannot rapidly and efficiently acquire these features in a typical teaching style, but they can be detected using the corpus. According to Halliday (1989), the terminology used by the students when they are learning ESP consists of both the semitechnical terms, for example, *vector, control, experiment*, etc., and academic terms such as, *example, factor, solution, etc.* Strevens (1977) stated that although learners from that specific subject might not have a problem with the technical words, the language teacher may, in fact, face difficulty in learning those specific terminologies.

Discussion upon who should introduce the technical vocabulary in ESL and EFL settings happened a long time ago. Barber (1964) and Kostadinova & Tabutova (2015) stated that some teachers may sometimes assert that teaching technical terminology is not their responsibility, yet it is the subject teacher's responsibility. However, based on Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), the guidance from ESP teachers on the technical vocabulary is considered necessary. This is because teaching specialised vocabulary/terminology is a necessary, and possibly the most significant component of ESP classes in which students study English through the lens of a subject they are already familiar with and find relevant to them to a certain degree (Georgieva, 2010). There are obvious advantages in terms of the total amount of linguistic materials, veracity of linguistic samples, variety of linguistic data, and acceptability. The development and use of an ESP corpus can highlight ESP qualities in vocabulary, particularly terminology, such as specialization, precision, grammaticalization, writing sentence pattern, and rigorous discourse, which can effectively promote the development of ESP teaching and related research.

According to Chen & Huang (2017), an ESP corpus can highlight various professions' lexical, syntactic, and textual features so that ESP teachers can readily comprehend the important ideas. The instructor is capable of retrieving, reading, swiftly comprehending, and summarising language points and usage characteristics such as vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure from a variety of paradigmatic corpora. The ESP corpus can aid teachers in rapidly learning the exact meaning of

language and in applying principles professionally. Teachers can utilise the ESP corpus to associate the form of comprehensive traits, meanings, and usage rules of language and terminology in order to facilitate the development of corpus-informed ESP instructional resources.

Technology

This is because ESP is a field that is always evolving and improving, and it is expected to continue to do so in the future as well (Jendrych, 2013). Global socioeconomic and demographic changes have produced an enormous demand for professionals who can communicate effectively in their work settings. Due to the rapid evolution of technology, it is critical for the instructor to be knowledgeable with the most recent technology being used in the subject's intended field. One example of how important technology training is for ESP teachers is when we talk about English for aviation. Bennett (2005) explained that the optimal assessment environment would be a simulation-based one that incorporates multimedia tools and relevant technology which allows flight attendants to simulate actual job environments onboard. Assessors would be able to measure problem-solving abilities and associated cognitive structures much more efficiently and effectively if they used multimedia tools that simulated real-world situations. As a result, ESP teachers must be knowledgeable with the technology used in their subject's specific context.

For any other type of ESP, learning to incorporate a variety of social contexts using the technology is considered necessary. Crosling & Ward (2002) explained the study of communication in the workplace setting; different technologies utilize different varieties of communication forms, which might create a complex relationship between oral and written interaction. For instance, ESP students need to learn when is it preferable to use chat or email for working communication, which discourse should they use, what kind of working information could be uploaded to their Facebook status or other social media, and how do these choices affect the relationship between the sender and the receivers of information?

Therefore, by understanding the updated technology being used in the target field, ESP teachers might enhance the learning process, including the learning media, assessment, and learning activities. Integrating technology with language learning might give students experiences inside and outside the classroom, which may be invaluable to their future careers.

Teachers' attitudes in teaching ESP

As in the status quo, there is still a debate on who should be trained to be a subject specialist for the ESP setting. Savaş (2009) argued that teacher graduates from English programs would be more suitable for teaching ESP. It is based on the reason that ESP teaching requires special skills such as dealing with language input, answering questions on terminology, listening to a presentation, and seminar skills training in which English graduates such as EFL teachers have already passed the criteria on those specific jobs.

On the other hand, Raftari et al. (2021) and Rachayon (2020) believed that field specialists should teach ESP courses because discipline-specialist teachers with an adequate command of the English language are more competent than language teachers in teaching ESP courses at all levels, as they are much more familiar with the technical terms and topics of the student's field of study. The researcher continued by stating that the primary goal of ESP courses is to assist students in comprehending the specialised texts contained in their ESP textbooks because these texts contain a large number of technical terms, concepts, and topics. They should be taught by teachers who specialise in those terms and topics rather than language teachers who are unfamiliar with them. There are clearly some differences in the results. The studies indicated, however, that team teaching is still advantageous for ESP activities.

Even though collaboration and training can assist teachers throughout the ESP teaching process, there is an important component that ESP teachers must recognise in order to ensure the success of ESP teaching and learning practises. Apart from teaching skill, Bennett (2005) indicated that students place a larger value on teacher characteristics such as treating learners as individuals, being nice with learners, and having a good comprehension of learners. However, several characteristics were particularly important to field expert students, such as a deep comprehension of the subject matter and the ability to manage the classroom effectively. According to Ewer (1983), ESP teachers must be passionate about the subject. ESP teachers should be willing to examine the genre conventions embedded in the targeted ESP subject, even if they do not need to comprehend all of the specific content. To be a motivated teacher of the subject, one must possess three

characteristics: a positive attitude toward the ESP content, a working understanding of the subject's fundamental principles, and an awareness of how much one already knows.

Overall, one significant factor influencing ESP success was found to be teacher attitudes. Bennett (2005) and Ewer (1983) found that students value respect, empathy, and approachability more than technical proficiency. Subject matter experts and language instructors can thrive in ESP if they are transparent, flexible, and considerate of students' abilities, as shown by Rachayon (2020), Raftari et al. (2021) and Savaş (2009). Recent research suggests that ESP teachers who teach foreign courses should be enthusiastic, curious, and willing to learn (Fitria et al., 2024; Murtafi'ah, 2025). Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) and Basturkmen (2012) both state that effective ESP teaching necessitates reflective practice and a positive mindset. By combining various viewpoints, teacher attitudes seem to regulate the connection between knowledge and practice. When a language teacher has the correct attitude, they can do better than a subject matter expert who lacks pedagogical flexibility.

Implications for ESP practice and teacher education

This study contributed to the understanding of several important implications for the practice of ESP and for the professional development of teachers in this field. First, the emphasis on collaboration across the reviewed literature suggests that institutions should formally integrate joint planning and team-teaching mechanisms into their ESP programs. Language and content specialists collaboration allows teachers to access disciplinary knowledge indirectly, thereby ensuring that materials and tasks remain authentic and contextually appropriate without requiring the ESP teacher to become a subject expert. Studies by Askar (2009), Chaovanapricha & Chaturongakul (2020), and Dudley-Evans & St John (1998b) highlight that institutional collaboration frameworks such as the collaboration model or consultant-based partnerships can sustain high-quality ESP programs that draw from both linguistic and disciplinary expertise.

ESP's intrinsic multidisciplinary nature is shown by a cross-domain synthesis of the literature. Communicative reality is ensured through collaboration with medical English healthcare specialists (Belcher, 2009; Paltridge & Starfield, 2012). Teamwork with corporate trainers offers real-world professional simulations in business English (Bojović, 2006; Crosling & Ward, 2002). Working with legal professionals gives legal English its validity (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010). Giving teachers access to these tools enables them to create authentic learning experiences, even in subjects they are unfamiliar with. Furthermore, according to Paltridge & Starfield (2012), Bennett (2005) and Supunya (2023) ESP teacher and all the other elements involved in the end should be aware that the integration of intercultural communication and digital literacy would equip educators to handle the technological and global demands of modern workplaces.

Moreover, the formation of professional identities and teacher attitudes are critical components of ESP competency. Research being analysed in this study suggest that positive attitudes such as openness, adaptability, curiosity, and respect for learners' disciplinary knowledge significantly enhance ESP training (Ewer, 1983; Fitria et al., 2024; Murtafi'ah, 2025; Savaş, 2009). Self-directed learning, reflective practice, technical training, and the development of a collaborative attitude should thus be the main focuses of teacher education. Encouraging ESP teachers to engage in continuous professional learning and dialogue with content experts fosters confidence and a sense of legitimacy in their teaching role, even without deep subject specialisation.

In the end, it would be more important to shift our focus to make educational institutions provide frameworks that promote interdisciplinary collaboration and long-term teacher growth to help the distinction between "subject specialist" and "language instructor" becomes less obvious and more productive. The need to provide such frameworks compatible with the recent assertion of Basturkmen (2024) that the distinguishing feature of ESP education should be interdisciplinary adaptation rather than disciplinary ownership.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the extent to which subject-matter expertise is necessary for effective English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching. Based on a qualitative document analysis of seminal and contemporary ESP scholarship, the findings reveal that disciplinary knowledge, while valuable, is not the central determinant of ESP instructional success. Instead, three interdependent dimensions—collaboration, professional preparation, and teacher attitudes—emerge as the defining contributors to ESP teacher competence.

Collaboration stands out as the most powerful mechanism for ensuring authenticity in ESP pedagogy. The literature consistently demonstrates that relevance in ESP instruction is secured not by transforming language teachers into subject specialists, but by enabling sustained partnerships with disciplinary experts, professional practitioners, and institutional stakeholders. Through collaborative curriculum design, consultation-based material development, and forms of team-teaching, ESP educators gain access to field-specific insights without assuming full ownership of the discipline. Equally important is professional development that prioritises transferable pedagogical expertise over disciplinary mastery. Training in discourse and genre analysis, corpus-based approaches, needs analysis, intercultural communication, and the pedagogical use of technology equips teachers to translate specialised content into communicative, task-based learning experiences across diverse professional domains. The findings also highlight the pivotal role of teacher attitudes. Openness to learning unfamiliar content, intellectual curiosity, adaptability, and respect for learners' professional identities significantly enhance ESP teaching effectiveness and can outweigh subject-matter knowledge in practice.

Viewed collectively, these findings suggest that ESP teachers do not need to become autonomous subject specialists to deliver high-quality instruction in higher education. Instead, sustainable and effective ESP provision depends on universities fostering institutional frameworks that support ongoing collaboration with field experts, provide systematic professional development, and cultivate reflective and adaptable teaching identities. By embedding these structures, higher education institutions can ensure that ESP programmes remain relevant, responsive, and aligned with the evolving academic and professional demands of the twenty-first century.

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