

## **English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Higher Education in Kerala: A Study on Scope and Challenges in Implementation**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper explores the current scenario of English language teaching and the extent of ESP implementation in the selected undergraduate programmes in Kerala. The study also aims to examine the scope and challenges of implementing ESP in professional higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Kerala. The study advocates a learner-centred ESP curriculum across all professional disciplines that enhances learners' language skills and career prospects. The study concludes with recommendations and scope for further research.

**Keywords:** ELT, ESP, higher education

### **ESP in the Higher Educational Landscape of Kerala**

The higher education sector in Kerala is diverse and extensive. It comprises one central, fifteen State and three Deemed universities. The numerous Aided, Government, and Self-Financing Colleges in Kerala can be broadly categorised into Arts and Science Colleges and Professional Colleges. The Professional Colleges in Kerala cater to a wide range of disciplines, including engineering, law, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, polytechnic, and architecture. ESP in higher education refers to teaching English explicitly tailored to learners' needs in a particular professional field. ESP, a branch of ELT, is "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It focuses on the contextual use of language to meet the specific needs of learners in professional

or academic fields by identifying their distinct linguistic characteristics. Over the past few decades, the demand for ESP has surged worldwide due to economic globalisation, privatisation, and the need to cater to workplace-specific language requirements (Georgy, 2023). Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of ESP in enhancing language proficiency and employability across various disciplines, particularly in higher education contexts. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) found that ESP instruction in engineering significantly enhanced technical vocabulary and oral communication abilities. Boshier and Smalkoski (2002) showed that ESP curricula improved healthcare communication skills for medical students. Belcher (2006) stated the role of ESP in preparing learners for the workforce, noting that ESP courses that focus on industry-specific communication skills can enhance employability by meeting the expectations of employers. The various professional sectors and the increasing demand for specialised language skills in the state stress the need for implementing ESP in higher education.

### **The Context and Significance of the Study**

Being the global lingua franca, English proficiency is imperative for professional communication. It plays a substantial role in career advancement and opportunities. Within the wide range of disciplines offered by various Professional Colleges in Kerala, a significant discrepancy exists in language instruction. While undergraduate learners are enrolled in specialised fields with distinct professional and workplace language requirements, they are predominantly offered General English (GE) courses. GE differs from ESP as the former covers various subjects, including literature (poetry, prose, drama, etc) and some aspects of LSRW (listening, speaking, reading and writing) skills. In contrast, the latter is more focussed and structured and caters to the specific needs of the target group of learners. ESP courses are particularly relevant, given the diversity of disciplines in the higher education sector in Kerala. The ESP courses are designed to equip learners with the specific language skills required in their respective fields, such as medical terminology for medical students or technical jargon for engineering students. This targeted approach enhances their academic performance and significantly improves their employability and readiness for the professional world. However, despite the relevance of ESP to their career prospects and workplace demands, most undergraduate learners

enrolled in professional courses in Kerala are not provided with ESP instruction as part of their curriculum.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate and evaluate the current scenario of English language teaching and the extent of ESP implementation in the selected undergraduate programmes in Kerala.
2. To explore the scope of ESP in the higher education sector in Kerala and to identify the challenges in implementation.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach and a qualitative research design. The target population includes undergraduate students enrolled in Engineering, Law and MBBS programmes in Kerala. A purposive sampling method was employed and the sample size included 60 participants, with 20 from each of the three selected disciplines. The English course syllabi of the three selected programmes were subjected to detailed examination. The specific aspects examined included course objectives and outlines, the distribution of theoretical and practical components, textbooks, instructional strategies and assessment, the inclusion of relevant LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, writing) skills and the incorporation of discipline-specific terminology and contexts. With insights from the syllabus analysis, a needs analysis was conducted to address the gaps identified in the syllabus. Qualitative data collection methods were employed to gather student perspectives on the relevance and effectiveness of English language instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, either in-person or virtually, with sixty learners, twenty each from the selected disciplines. The learners were asked about the importance of specific language skills, interdisciplinary approaches, classroom activities, learner-centred methods, subject-specific language use etc. Similarly, focus group discussions (FGD) focussed on the scope and challenges of ESP implementation in Kerala higher education. FGDs were conducted with learners and language teachers of the select disciplines and the FGD guide included questions on the importance of needs analysis, designing and implementation of ESP courses in HEIs in Kerala. Data relevant to the research objectives were extracted, analysed and reported in the study.

### **The Present Scenario of English Language Teaching in the Selected Disciplines**

In the engineering field, the HEIs offer an extensive range of courses with diverse specialisations. Consequently, the syllabi and their implementation vary across institutions. A thematic analysis by the researcher supported by the data collected through interviews revealed common patterns and insights, leading to the observation that Communicative English courses are offered to learners. Notably, the colleges under Kerala Technical University (KTU) provide professional communication and life skills. While most syllabi aim to equip students with knowledge in their chosen field, a needs-based framework tailored to each diverse stream is currently unavailable. Syllabus analysis revealed that the engineering programmes still rely heavily on GE rather than fully integrating ESP into their curriculum. Students perceive limited opportunities to practice English in professional settings and sense a gap between classroom learning and real-world application. In the field of law, three-year unitary LLB degree programmes and integrated five-year LLB programmes are available in the state. As per the three-year unitary LLB degree, general language and legal language are dealt with as small modules. In the integrated LLB courses, learners are introduced to English language teaching during their first two semesters. From the student responses, it was evident that the language teaching in this field does not fully cater to the specific language needs of law students. In the medical field, HEIs offer undergraduate programmes in medicine, nursing and paramedics. Syllabus analysis revealed that the curriculum for MBBS and many paramedical programmes does not incorporate English language teaching currently. However, the BSc Nursing students receive 'Communicative English' teaching during their first semester. From the student responses, the challenges they face due to lack of exposure to English language teaching were analysed as limited exposure to medical register, lack of linguistic competence to cater to the academic and professional demands and lack of confidence.

During the process of data collection, the researcher addressed various questions, such as "How do you think an ESP course could better support your learning needs?", "What are your needs and expectations regarding ESP courses?" etc. Most students expressed a desire for more interactive and real-world activities. They articulated their specific needs and expectations regarding ESP courses through responses such as "I

want to learn English that is useful for my profession” and “I expect this course to include vocabulary and scenarios that I will encounter in my future job”. These responses stress the need for practical language skills, field-specific terminology, and contextualised learning experiences. The insights from qualitative data analysis showcase a significant gap in traditional GE courses, which often fail to address the specialised needs of learners in specific disciplines, illustrating the necessity of designing and implementing field-specific ESP courses that cater to the professional needs of the students.

### **The Implementation of ESP in Higher Education in Kerala**

The insights from the FGDs discussed the need to revise the present GE-based syllabi and strategies to implement ESP that align with the professional needs of the learners. Through needs analysis which is a procedure for collecting information about learners to design a syllabus (Nunan, 1988), tailor-made ESP courses can be developed and administered across all disciplines within Kerala’s higher education sector. Implementing ESP in higher education requires applying theories and subject-specific textbooks practically. As ESP emphasises the development of situation-specific linguistic skills, including LSRW, it necessitates an experiential, interdisciplinary approach integrating English with specific subjects. English classrooms that lack relevance to core subjects need to transition towards integrated language learning—a transition from the prevailing teacher-centred methodology to a learner-centred activity-oriented approach. Educators should foster an environment where learners have opportunities to use subject-specific language. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities can significantly enhance constructivist classroom activities. Upon graduation, learners should possess English language skills that align with their professional aspirations and workplace requirements. The educators should identify language skills based on learners’ undergraduate majors, which may require designing or modifying coursebooks.

### **The Scope of ESP in Higher Education in Kerala**

A tailor-made ESP course could significantly enhance learners’ ability to meet workplace demands, bridge the gap between academic learning and industry requirements, and foster greater student success

and employability. The incorporation of ESP into the undergraduate curriculum is an opportunity that merits serious consideration by educational policymakers and curriculum developers. It can significantly enhance the quality of education and the career prospects of graduates in the state. Integrating ESP into the curriculum aligns with global educational trends and the increasing focus on specialised skills in the job market. Moreover, introducing ESP into the curriculum could develop a more globally competent workforce capable of effectively participating in the international professional community. It also supports the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for a more holistic and multidisciplinary approach to education. By addressing this discrepancy, Kerala's HEIs can enhance the overall quality of education and better serve the needs of the students.

### **The Challenges of ESP Implementation**

The insights from the qualitative data analysis revealed the innumerable challenges, to be tackled by HEIs and educators in incorporating ESP effectively into the curriculum, which include limited availability of resources and teaching materials, constraints on time, the lack of qualified ESP practitioners, issues with funding, and insufficient infrastructure. It has been observed that the learners also face difficulties such as discrepancies between the expected and actual outcomes of the course, difficulties concerning cognition, practice and assumptions insufficient resources and inappropriate teaching methodologies. Designing ESP courses can be challenging as the higher education sector in Kerala involves a wide array of disciplines, each with its unique language needs. Such ESP course designs often fail to cater to the demands when the learners of the target group, within any discipline of the higher education sector, exhibit variation in language proficiency.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the global job opportunities, a profession-specific ESP syllabus needs to be incorporated into the curriculum of the UG programmes of the professional courses in Kerala. Such an ESP course could be designed through needs analysis, validated by ESP experts and field tested through an intervention using a pre-test post-test design or a pilot study. Suitable methodologies such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and

Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) could be employed according to the field to address the learner needs through collaborative learning, guided discovery and constructive feedback that offer the effective practice of the useful language learnt in real-life professional situations. Formative and summative assessments, workshops, and seminars could be incorporated into ESP curriculum. A blended learning approach could accommodate learners' busy schedules. As not all HEIs in Kerala may have the resources to offer all foundation courses, learners could be permitted to select elective courses from any competent HEI, including recognised discipline-specific Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which offer comprehensive graded evaluations.

### **The Limitations of the Study**

This study, being qualitative research, has certain limitations. While it analyses ESP implementation in Kerala's higher education, a mixed-method approach could have offered a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The scope of the study is confined to examining only three professional undergraduate programmes, which may not fully represent the diversity of undergraduate programmes in Kerala. A broader analysis encompassing all undergraduate programmes across various disciplines was beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, the potential for participant bias in self-reported data and the limited generalisability of findings due to the purposive sampling of specific programmes in Kerala.

### **Scope for Future Research**

Future research could investigate the link between ESP training and global employability, assess ESP's long-term impact on career prospects, and compare ESP effectiveness across disciplines in Kerala. These research possibilities could provide valuable insights and contribute to the continuous improvement of ESP training in Kerala's higher education sector.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study revealed that while the Engineering programs rely heavily on GE rather than integrating ESP, the language instruction in law does not fully address the specific needs of law students and

the MBBS programme lacks English in its curriculum, with a notable absence of ESP to meet professional demands. From the qualitative data analysis, it is evident that the content of the GE courses does not align with the professional needs and relevance of the learners and the limited ESP offered in a few programmes lacks proper design, implementation and instructional strategies. The study advocates for customised and engaging ESP courses developed through comprehensive needs analysis. However, challenges like varying linguistic competence, limited resources, and seamless integration with general education necessitate adapting the appropriate ESP methodology to learners' levels, backgrounds, and discipline-specific needs.

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