

Communicative Approach in Teaching English for Specific Purposes: A Classroom Observation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms at the English Education Department of a higher education institution in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative classroom observation design, data were collected from three ESP classes involving a total of 109 students taught by a single lecturer across 12 observation sessions. The findings reveal that the lecturer consistently integrated communicative principles — including task-based activities, authentic materials, learner-centered interaction, and meaning-focused instruction — into ESP pedagogy. Students demonstrated active participation through role-plays, peer discussions, oral presentations, and problem-solving tasks aligned with their target professional contexts. The study concludes that the communicative approach is both applicable and effective in ESP settings, fostering not only linguistic competence but also the genre awareness and discourse community membership that 21st-century ESP demands. Implications for ESP curriculum design and teacher professional development are discussed.

Keywords: *communicative language teaching, English for specific purposes, classroom observation, learner participation, ESP pedagogy.*

1) INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has undergone profound transformation since its emergence approximately five decades ago. Originally conceived as a response to post-war demands for fast-paced language training in occupational and professional settings, ESP has gradually evolved into an autonomous subfield of Applied Linguistics, moving well beyond its origins in register analysis and rhetorical description (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2020; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). At the center of this evolution has been a persistent question: what pedagogical approach best serves learners who need English not as an end in itself, but as a tool for professional and academic participation?

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which prioritizes meaning-making, authentic interaction, and learner agency over grammatical accuracy for its own sake, has emerged as one of the most theoretically compatible frameworks for ESP instruction. CLT aligns with ESP's foundational commitment to purpose, specificity, and learner needs (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2018). Yet the translation of CLT principles into ESP classrooms — particularly in English

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as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia — remains underexplored empirically. Most discussions of CLT in ESP remain theoretical, and direct classroom observation evidence is scarce.

This study addresses that gap through systematic classroom observation of ESP instruction at the English Education Department of a higher education institution. Three classes, comprising 109 students taught by a single experienced lecturer, were observed across multiple sessions. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: (1) How does the lecturer implement CLT principles in the ESP classroom? and (2) How do students engage communicatively with ESP content and tasks? By documenting and analyzing naturally occurring classroom interactions, this study contributes empirical grounding to ongoing debates about effective ESP pedagogy in the 21st century.

Literature Review

a. English for Specific Purposes: Conceptual Foundations

ESP is fundamentally defined by the intersection of five core elements: purpose, specificity, learner needs, target situation, and authenticity (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Anthony, 2018). Unlike English for General Purposes (EGP), which prioritizes broadly applicable communicative competence, ESP orients its content, methodology, and assessment toward the specific professional or academic domains in which learners will use the language. Salmani-Nodoushan (2020) describes this distinction through a useful analogy: EGP is the competence of driving, while ESP is the application of that competence to a specific vehicle — requiring genre-specific adjustment rather than the learning of an entirely different language.

Genre analysis, particularly as theorized by Swales (1990) and extended by Bhatia (2004, 2017), has become the dominant analytical framework in contemporary ESP. The concept of the discourse community — a socially-defined group with shared communicative goals, conventions, and genres — positions ESP not merely as language instruction but as socialization into professional practice. This theoretical shift has profound pedagogical implications: learners must acquire not just vocabulary and grammar, but the rhetorical moves, metadiscursive conventions, and interactional norms of their target communities (Johns, 2008; Hyland, 2005).

b. Communicative Language Teaching in ESP

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach emerged in the 1970s from dissatisfaction with structural and audio-lingual methods that emphasized form over function.

Drawing on the sociolinguistic work of Hymes (1972) and the notional-functional syllabus of Wilkins (1976), CLT repositioned language learning as the development of communicative competence — the ability to use language appropriately in real social contexts. Its core principles include: (1) language use as the primary goal, (2) authentic materials and tasks, (3) learner-centered interaction, (4) tolerance of errors in service of communication, and (5) integration of the four language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The alignment between CLT and ESP is theoretically compelling. Both approaches are driven by learner needs, both prioritize authentic language use over decontextualized drill, and both conceptualize language as a social practice embedded in specific communities and contexts. Savignon (2018) argues that CLT provides ESP with a principled pedagogical framework precisely because it foregrounds the communicative acts — explaining, arguing, negotiating, presenting — that ESP learners must master. Jacobs and Farrell (2003) further note that CLT's emphasis on collaborative learning aligns well with the cooperative discourse practices of professional communities.

However, the implementation of CLT in EFL contexts, including Indonesian higher education, is not without challenges. Curriculum constraints, large class sizes, assessment pressures, and teachers' own communicative competence can limit the degree to which CLT principles are realized in practice (Hamied, 2012; Zacharias, 2005). These challenges make empirical observation of actual CLT-informed ESP classrooms particularly valuable.

2) METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using non-participant classroom observation as the primary data collection method. Qualitative observation is appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to document naturally occurring pedagogical practices in their authentic context, capturing the complexity and nuance of classroom interaction that survey or interview methods cannot fully access (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study is descriptive in nature, aiming to document and interpret rather than to measure or compare.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of a higher education institution in Eastern Indonesia. The setting was selected purposively on the basis of its established ESP program

and the availability of a lecturer with documented experience in communicative ESP instruction. Three classes at the undergraduate level participated in this study, all taught by a single lecturer to enable cross-class comparison of a consistent instructional approach.

Table 1. *Participant Overview*

Class	Number of Students	Observation Sessions
Class A	36	4 sessions
Class B	37	4 sessions
Class C	36	4 sessions
Total	109	12 sessions

Source: Primary data, 2024

As shown in Table 1, a total of 109 students participated across the three classes. The lecturer, a female instructor with over eight years of experience teaching ESP at the tertiary level, had received training in communicative approaches and had participated in curriculum development workshops focused on needs analysis and genre-based instruction. Students ranged from second- to third-year undergraduates, all of whom had completed general English courses prior to enrolling in ESP.

Data Collection

Data were collected through structured and unstructured classroom observation across 12 sessions (four sessions per class), each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The researcher used an observation protocol adapted from the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) instrument (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995), focusing on: (a) the types of activities employed, (b) the nature of student participation, (c) the use of authentic materials and target-domain content, and (d) the lecturer's management of communication and error correction. Field notes were recorded during and immediately after each session, supplemented by reflective memos. No audio or video recording was employed, consistent with the institution's ethical protocols.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Field notes and observer memos were transcribed and coded inductively in the first cycle, generating descriptive codes related to observed pedagogical behaviors and student responses. In the second

cycle, codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with CLT principles, enabling interpretation of the degree and form of communicative orientation present in the observed instruction. Trustworthiness was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field, member checking with the observed lecturer, and peer review of emerging interpretations.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of CLT Principles

The observation data reveal that the lecturer implemented CLT principles consistently and purposefully across all three classes, albeit with variations in emphasis reflecting each class's specific ESP focus. Table 2 summarizes the CLT principles observed and their manifestation in classroom practice.

Table 2: *CLT Principles Observed in ESP Classes*

CLT Principle	Classroom Evidence	Frequency
Communicative activities	Role-plays, pair discussions, debates	Observed in all 3 classes
Authentic materials	Journal articles, TED Talks, case studies	Observed in 2 of 3 classes
Learner-centered interaction	Student-led presentations, peer feedback	Observed in all 3 classes
Meaning over form	Content-focused tasks with language support	Observed in all 3 classes
Task-based learning	Problem-solving activities in target domain	Observed in 2 of 3 classes

Source: Classroom observation data, 2024

The most consistently observed principle was learner-centered interaction. In all three classes, the lecturer structured activities such that students were the primary communicative agents: they initiated discussions, negotiated meanings with peers, and presented their analyses of target-domain texts. This is consistent with CLT's foundational emphasis on learner agency and aligns with Kampen et al.'s (2018) finding that student-centered pedagogical approaches are central to effective language-and-content integration.

Authentic materials were employed in Class A and Class B but were less prominent in Class C, where the lecturer relied more heavily on coursebook excerpts. In Class A, students analyzed published academic journal articles from their field, identifying rhetorical moves consistent with Swales' (1990) CARS model. In Class B, TED Talks were used as models for oral presentation structure, consistent with Mattiello's (2017) observation that science popularization genres are becoming significant resources in ESP pedagogy. These uses of authentic materials directly address what Salmani-Nodoushan (2020) identifies as one of ESP's three main features: authentic materials, purpose-related orientation, and self-direction.

Student Participation and Communicative Engagement

Student participation was notably active across all three observed classes. The 109 students demonstrated a high degree of voluntary involvement in classroom activities, asking clarifying questions, extending discussions beyond the immediate task, and challenging each other's interpretations of target texts. This level of engagement is particularly significant given the large class sizes, which are typically cited as a constraint on communicative teaching in Indonesian EFL contexts (Hamied, 2012).

In Class B, a session involving student-led oral presentations generated particularly rich communicative data. Students peer-assessed each other's presentations using a rubric developed collaboratively with the lecturer at the beginning of the course — a practice that reflects what Johns (2008) calls genre awareness pedagogy: the explicit teaching of evaluative criteria enables learners to develop both productive and receptive genre competence. The discussion that followed individual presentations often moved beyond surface feedback into substantive negotiation of disciplinary norms and communication strategies.

Across all classes, error correction was handled in a manner consistent with CLT principles. The lecturer consistently prioritized meaning over form in communicative activities, intervening on linguistic errors only when they impeded comprehension or when a natural pause in communication permitted recasting. This approach reflects what Lyster (2007) terms a counterbalanced approach: maintaining communicative flow while ensuring that form-focused attention is not entirely neglected. The students appeared comfortable with this tolerance, producing extended communicative contributions without the anxiety that characterizes more form-focused classroom environments.

4) CONCLUSION

This classroom observation study demonstrates that the communicative approach can be effectively implemented in ESP instruction at the tertiary level. The lecturer successfully incorporated key CLT principles, including communicative activities, authentic materials, learner-centered interaction, meaning-focused instruction, and task-based learning, while adapting them to the specific discourse and genre requirements of each ESP class. The active participation of 109 students indicates that large class sizes do not necessarily hinder communicative learning when instructional design is purposeful and aligned with learners' needs. These findings provide empirical support for communicative ESP pedagogy and reinforce previous arguments that effective ESP instruction should be context-sensitive, learner-oriented, and grounded in authentic discourse practices.

The study also offers important implications for ESP curriculum development and teacher professional growth. Training in needs analysis can help lecturers design communicative tasks that reflect learners' real-world target situations, while genre-based instruction can effectively connect communicative competence with genre awareness. In addition, collaborative activities such as peer assessment appear to support both communication skills and genre understanding simultaneously. Future research should explore the long-term impact of communicative ESP instruction on genre competence through longitudinal studies, compare implementation strategies across different lecturers, and incorporate students' perspectives through reflective methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of communicative learning experiences in ESP classrooms.

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