



Bridging the Gap between Design and Reality: Challenges in Sudanese ESP Curricula from Students' Perspectives

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Abstract :

This study investigates the challenges of the ESP syllabus in Sudan from the students' perspective, focusing on curriculum effectiveness, learning methods, and practical application. Data were collected through student questionnaires, examining students' motivations, learning strategies, use of resources, attitudes toward the syllabus, and skill development. The findings revealed that: Students take the ESP syllabus mainly to prepare for professional and real-world communication; also, they are motivated to improve their communication and speaking skills. Structured courses and conversation-based activities are their primary learning strategies. Moreover, books, along with digital tools and formal courses, are the main resources used to support learning. . The study recommended that: The ESP syllabus should emphasize career-oriented and real-life tasks. More interactive speaking and communication activities should be included. In addition, teachers should adopt learner-centered strategies combining structured instruction with hands-on practice.

Keywords: *ESP syllabus, curriculum challenges, Sudanese students, communication skills, oral presentations, learning strategies.*

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف التحديات التي تواجه منهاج اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة (ESP) في السودان من منظور الطلاب، مع التركيز على فعالية المنهج وطرق التعلم وتطبيقه العملي. تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيانات للطلاب، حيث تناولت دوافعهم وأساليب التعلم التي يتبعونها، واستخدام الموارد، ومواقفهم تجاه المنهج، وتطوير المهارات. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب يأخذون المنهج بشكل أساسي للتحضير للتواصل المهني والواقعي، كما أنهم يسعون لتطوير مهارات التواصل والمحادثة لديهم. تُعد الدورات المنظمة والأنشطة القائمة على المحادثة الاستراتيجيات التعليمية الرئيسية، بينما تعتبر الكتب إلى جانب الأدوات الرقمية والدورات الرسمية الموارد الأساسية لدعم التعلم. توصي الدراسة بأن يركز منهج ESP بشكل أكبر على المهام الواقعية والمهنية، وأن تُضاف المزيد من أنشطة المحادثة والتواصل التفاعلية، بالإضافة إلى اعتماد المعلمين لاستراتيجيات تعليمية تركز على المتعلم، تجمع بين التدريس المنظم والممارسة العملية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منهج اللغة للأغراض الخاصة، تحديات المنهج، الطلاب السودانيون، مهارات التواصل، العروض الشفوية، استراتيجيات التعلم.

1. Introduction

In recent years, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has gained increasing importance as universities seek to equip students with language skills that directly support their academic and professional needs. In principle, ESP courses are designed to be highly relevant, drawing on learners' specific fields and focusing on practical communication rather than general language use (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). However, in many contexts, there remains a noticeable gap between how these curricula are designed and how they are actually experienced in the classroom. While course designers often rely on well-established principles such as needs analysis and learner-centered instruction, the realities of teaching such as limited resources, large classes, and insufficient training can make these ideals difficult to achieve in practice (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). This situation is particularly evident in Sudanese higher education, where ESP programs are widely implemented but frequently challenged by contextual constraints that affect both teaching and learning. Students may find that course content does not fully match their academic needs, while instructors may struggle to balance language instruction with subject-specific demands, especially when they lack specialized support or materials (Ali, 2020). For this reason, understanding the challenges of ESP curricula requires listening carefully to both students and instructors, as each group brings a different but equally important perspective to the issue. By bringing these voices together through a combination of survey data and in-depth interviews, a more complete and realistic picture of ESP practice can be developed (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). In light of this, the present study seeks to explore the challenges facing Sudanese ESP curricula from the perspectives of those most directly involved, with the aim of narrowing the gap between design and reality and contributing to more effective and context-sensitive language education.

2. Statement of the Study Problems

Despite the growing implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula in Sudanese higher education, there is a noticeable gap between how these courses are designed and how they are experienced in the classroom. Students often face difficulties with course content that does not fully meet their academic or professional needs, while instructors struggle with limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient training in ESP methodology. This gap reduces the effectiveness and relevance of ESP instruction,

highlighting the need to investigate the challenges from both students' and instructors' perspectives to inform more practical and context-sensitive curriculum design.

3. Objective of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Explore the challenges of implementing Sudanese ESP curricula by examining the perspectives of both students.

4. Question of the Study

This study sets out to answer the following question:

1. What are the challenges of implementing Sudanese ESP curricula from the perspectives of students?

5. Hypothesis of the Study

This study sets out to test the following hypothesis:

1. Students in Sudanese ESP programs experience significant challenges that affect the effective implementation of the curricula.

6. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides insights into the challenges faced by both students and instructors in Sudanese ESP programs. The findings can help educators and curriculum designers improve the relevance, effectiveness, and practical implementation of ESP courses, ultimately enhancing students' learning outcomes and instructors' teaching experiences.

7. Literature Review

Importance of ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a cornerstone of applied linguistics, reflecting the need for language instruction that is tailored to the communicative requirements of specific academic disciplines and professional fields (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Unlike general English courses, which emphasize broad language skills, ESP focuses on enabling learners to perform effectively in their chosen fields, whether in science, technology, medicine, business, or tourism. The importance of ESP lies in its direct relevance to learners' immediate academic or occupational needs, allowing for more meaningful engagement and faster acquisition of target skills (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Over the past few decades, the demand for ESP courses has

increased globally, driven by the expansion of higher education, globalization, and the need for professionals to communicate effectively in English within their specific fields (Basturkmen, 2010). This focus on practical application distinguishes ESP from traditional English instruction and highlights the critical role of well-designed curricula that reflect real-world demands.

ESP Curriculum Design

Curriculum design in ESP is guided by several key principles, including the systematic analysis of learners' needs, the authenticity of teaching materials, and a learner-centered approach (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Needs analysis, in particular, is considered the foundation of effective ESP course design, as it identifies the specific linguistic and communicative competencies that learners require to succeed in their disciplines (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). The curriculum should align content, materials, and teaching strategies with these needs, ensuring relevance and applicability. In addition, ESP curricula emphasize task-based and content-specific instruction, enabling students to practice language in contexts closely resembling their future professional or academic environments (Basturkmen, 2010). Several international studies have highlighted the effectiveness of ESP curricula that integrate real-world materials, such as technical documents, industry reports, and authentic case studies, in enhancing both comprehension and communicative competence (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001).

Challenges in ESP Implementation

Despite the careful design of ESP curricula, their implementation often encounters significant obstacles. Studies worldwide have reported persistent gaps between planned curricula and actual classroom experiences (Hyland, 2006). Common challenges include limited resources, lack of specialized teaching materials, large class sizes, insufficient teacher training, and institutional constraints that hinder flexibility in course delivery (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). These challenges can prevent the curriculum from fully meeting learners' needs, reducing engagement and learning outcomes. Furthermore, teachers often face difficulties balancing language instruction with content-specific requirements, particularly when they are not specialists in the target discipline. This divergence between theory and

practice the so-called "design-reality gap" has been recognized as a central issue in ESP research, as it undermines the overall effectiveness of carefully planned curricula (Hyland, 2006).

Perspectives of Students

Students' perspectives are critical in understanding the practical challenges of ESP curricula. Learners often report that course content may not align with their academic or professional goals, that tasks are overly difficult or irrelevant, and that teaching strategies may not match their preferred learning styles (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001). Additionally, students may face motivational challenges when they perceive the course as disconnected from real-world applications or when the pace of instruction does not accommodate varying levels of prior knowledge (Ali, 2020). Investigating student perspectives through surveys and feedback mechanisms provides invaluable data that can inform curriculum revision and teaching practices, ensuring that ESP courses are both effective and engaging.

Perspectives of Instructors

Equally important are instructors' perspectives, as teachers are responsible for translating curriculum plans into classroom practice. Instructors may face constraints such as insufficient training in ESP methodology, large or heterogeneous classes, and the need to integrate content-specific knowledge with language teaching (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Teachers' experiences provide insights into the practical limitations of curriculum implementation, highlighting the need for professional development, appropriate teaching materials, and institutional support. Studies have shown that when instructors' perspectives are neglected in curriculum planning, ESP programs are less likely to achieve their intended outcomes, further widening the gap between design and classroom reality (Hyland, 2006).

ESP in the Sudanese Context

ESP curricula in Sudanese higher education reflect a growing recognition of English as a tool for academic and professional advancement. However, these programs face contextual challenges, including limited access to authentic materials, large class sizes, insufficiently trained instructors, and variable institutional support (Ali, 2020). Research in Sudan has shown that while students value ESP courses for their relevance to academic and career goals, practical difficulties often hinder effective learning, and instructors frequently report challenges in delivering content-specific language instruction (Ali, 2020). These contextual realities underscore the importance of investigating ESP implementation from both students' and instructors' perspectives to inform practical, context-sensitive improvements.

Research Gap

While extensive research has examined ESP curricula in various international contexts, there is limited empirical evidence focusing on Sudan. Most studies have either explored student difficulties or instructor experiences in isolation, leaving the integrated perspectives largely unexplored (Ali, 2020; Hyland, 2006). This gap highlights the need for studies that combine quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the experiences of both learners and educators, thereby providing a more complete understanding of curriculum challenges in Sudanese ESP programs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study links ESP curriculum design principles with the practical realities of classroom implementation. It positions student and instructor perspectives as complementary sources of insight, helping to identify specific areas where the intended curriculum diverges from practice. By conceptualizing the “design-reality gap,” the study provides a structured approach for analyzing challenges and generating evidence-based recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of ESP curricula in Sudan (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Previous Studies

The first study conducted by Indrapuri, Mahdum, Azhar and Erni (2025). Systematic Review of ESP Challenges. This recent study conducted a systematic literature review of ESP implementation in higher education between 2018 and 2023. It highlights persistent challenges affecting both lecturers and students, such as limited teacher competence, insufficient teaching materials, outdated methods, and inadequate curriculum frameworks. The review underscores how these systemic issues impede effective ESP instruction and points to recurring obstacles in aligning curricula with learner needs, reflecting the broader design-reality gap in ESP programs.

The second study conducted by Sintia, Perdana and Karani (2025). ESP Instruction Challenges for Teachers and Learners. This literature review focuses on the major instructional challenges faced by both ESP teachers and learners. It identifies five core obstacles: gaps in instructor subject-matter knowledge, lack of authentic materials, inadequate needs analysis and curriculum alignment, learners' struggles with technical language, and technological limitations. The study's findings emphasize the interconnected nature of these challenges and the need for curriculum revision and professional support, aligning clearly with the investigation of practical difficulties in ESP curricula.

The third study conducted by Hasan and Abu Qub'a (2025). ESP Teaching Challenges at King Faisal University. This empirical study investigates the difficulties faced by both students and instructors in ESP diploma programs at King Faisal University. Using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews, surveys, observations), it shows that students struggle with technical vocabulary, academic writing, and communication, while instructors face challenges explaining specialized terms, engaging students, and assessing progress. The study also suggests strategies like task-based learning and technology integration to improve ESP outcomes, providing a practical example of challenges and responses that echo the curriculum design-implementation gap.

8. Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the challenges of Sudanese ESP curricula from the perspectives of students and instructors. The participants include students enrolled in ESP courses at Universities of Dongola, with students selected through stratified random sampling. Data are collected using a questionnaire for students to capture their experiences and perceptions of course content, materials, and teaching methods. Thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns and challenges, and ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality are strictly observed. This approach allows the study to provide a detailed understanding of the gap between curriculum design and classroom reality and to suggest context-sensitive improvements.

9. Data Analysis

The data for this study were collected using questionnaires for (56) of students. The researchers employed (SPSS) to systematically analyse the gathered data and identify key patterns and insights.

Students Questionnaire Analysis

The students' questionnaires is a key tool in this study, designed to gather their views, experiences, and perceptions.

Table (1) presented gender.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Meal	31	55.3%	55.3%	55.3%
Female	25	44.7%	44.7%	44.7%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

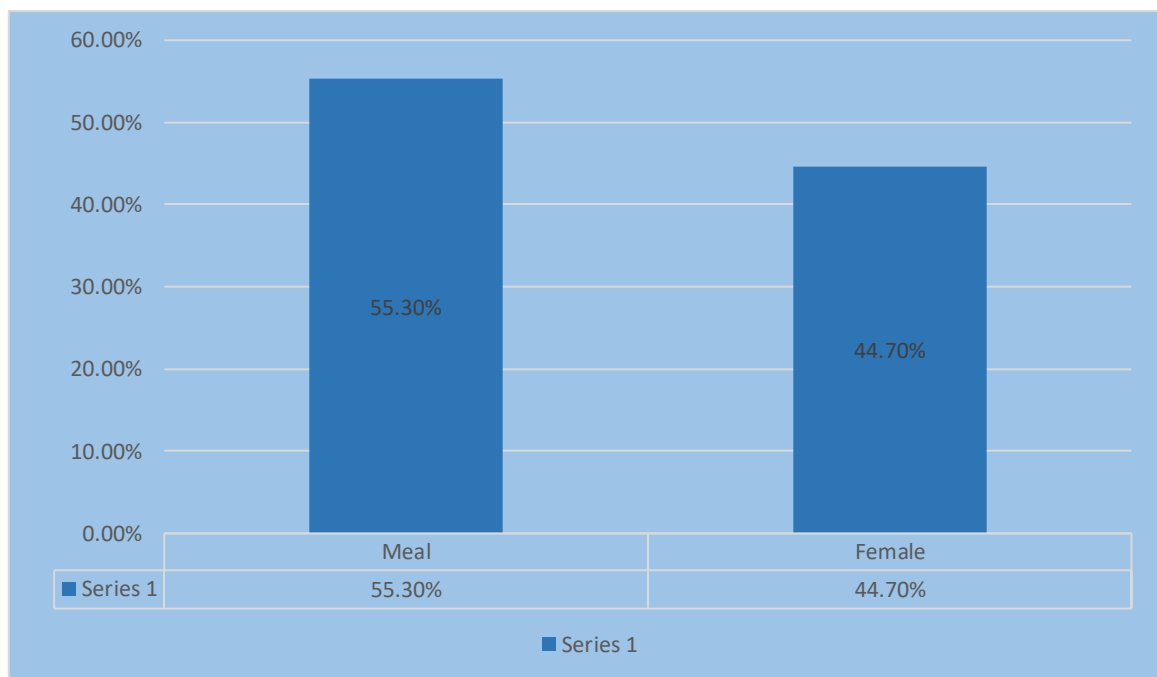


Figure (1) presented gender.

The gender distribution of the participants showed that (55.3%) were male, while (44.7%) were female, indicating a nearly balanced sample with a slight male majority.

Table (2): Teachers encouraged students to use ESP lessons in real-life situations.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	85.7%	85.7%	85.7%
Neutral	2	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%
No	6	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

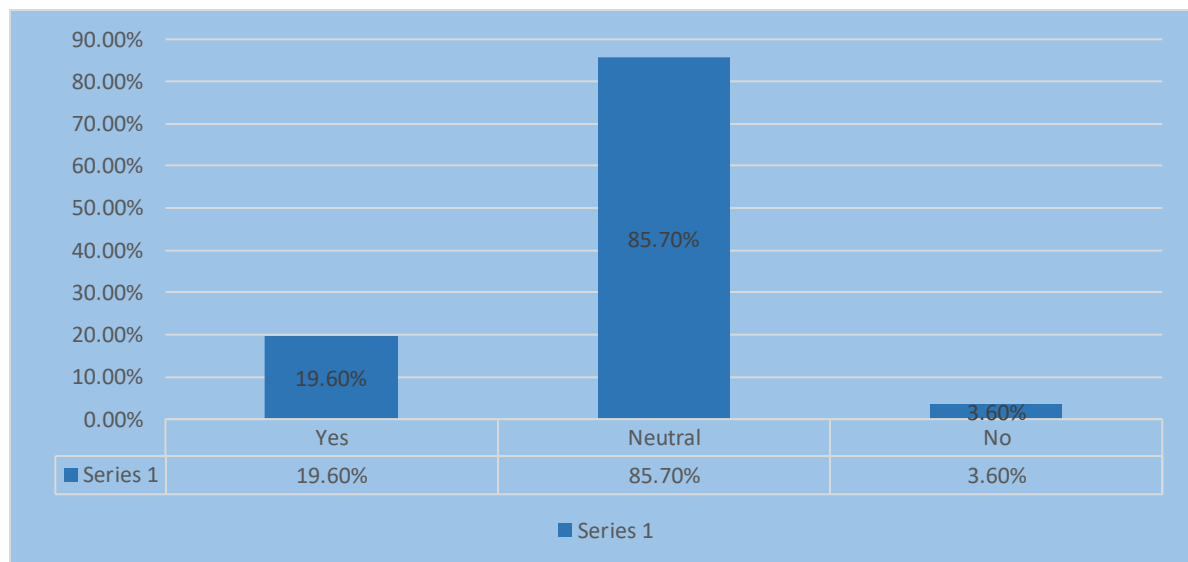


Figure (2): Teachers encouraged students to use ESP lessons in real-life situations.

The data show that (85.7%) of students agreed that teachers encourage students to use ESP lessons in real-life situations, reflecting strong support for practical application in learning. Only (10.7%) disagreed and (3.6%) were neutral, this indicate that while most students see active teacher support, a small minority feel less encouraged.

Table (3): Students have a positive attitude toward the ESP syllabus.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	71.4%	71.4%	71.4%
Neutral	2	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%
No	6	8.9%	8.9%	8.9%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

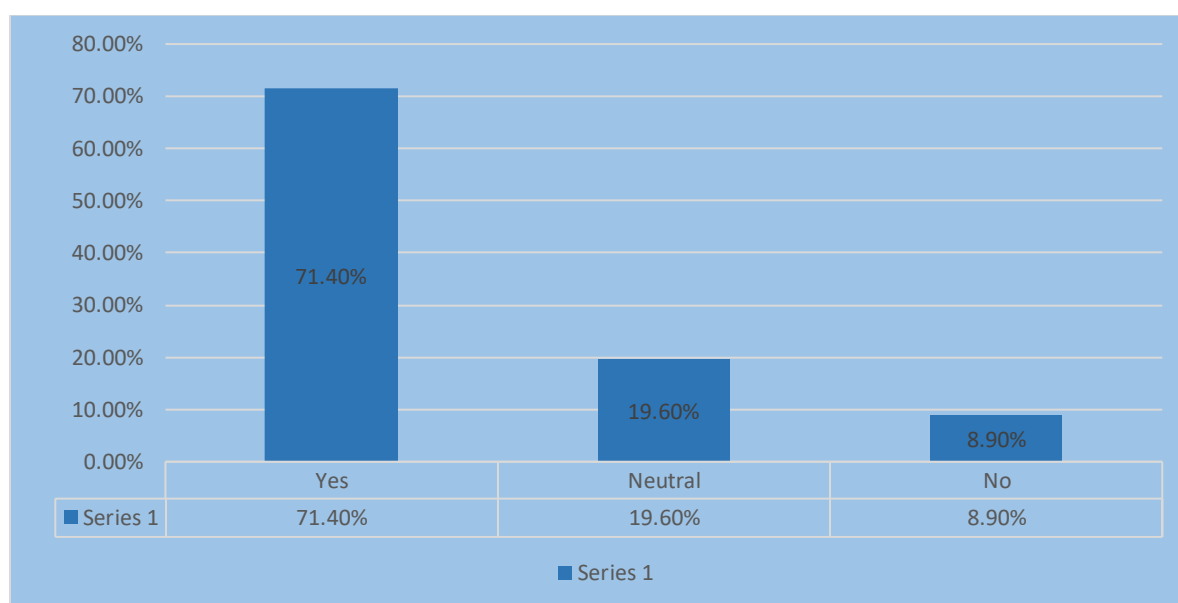


Figure (3): Students have a positive attitude toward the ESP syllabus.

From table and figure above (71.4%) of students expressed a positive attitude toward the syllabus content, suggesting overall satisfaction. However, (8.9%) disagreed and (19.6%) remained neutral, this show that there is stillroom for improving engagement with the material.

Table (4): The ESP syllabus content is appropriate for the students' level.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	82.1%	82.1%	82.1%
Neutral	2	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
No	6	5.4%	5.4%	5.4%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

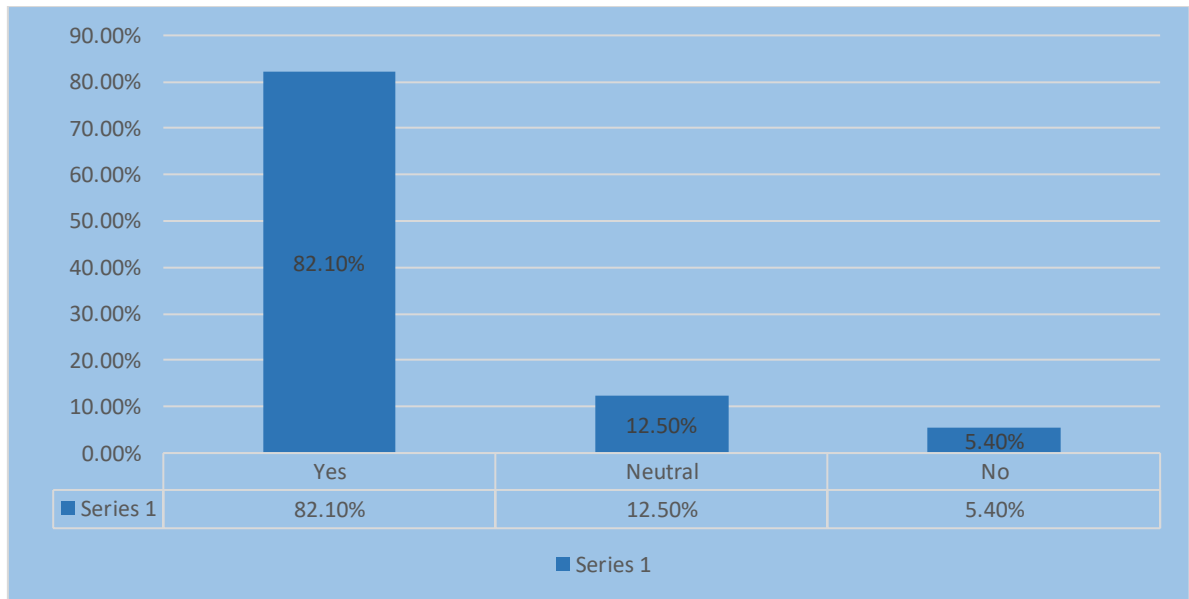


Figure (4): The ESP syllabus content is appropriate for the students' level.

The results show that (82.1%) of students believe the syllabus content aligns with their level, indicating overall curriculum suitability. In contrast, (5.4%) disagreed and (12.5%) remained neutral, suggesting a minor area for potential adjustment.

Table (5): Students demonstrate clear awareness of the syllabus content.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	55.4%	55.4%	55.4%
Neutral	2	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%
No	6	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

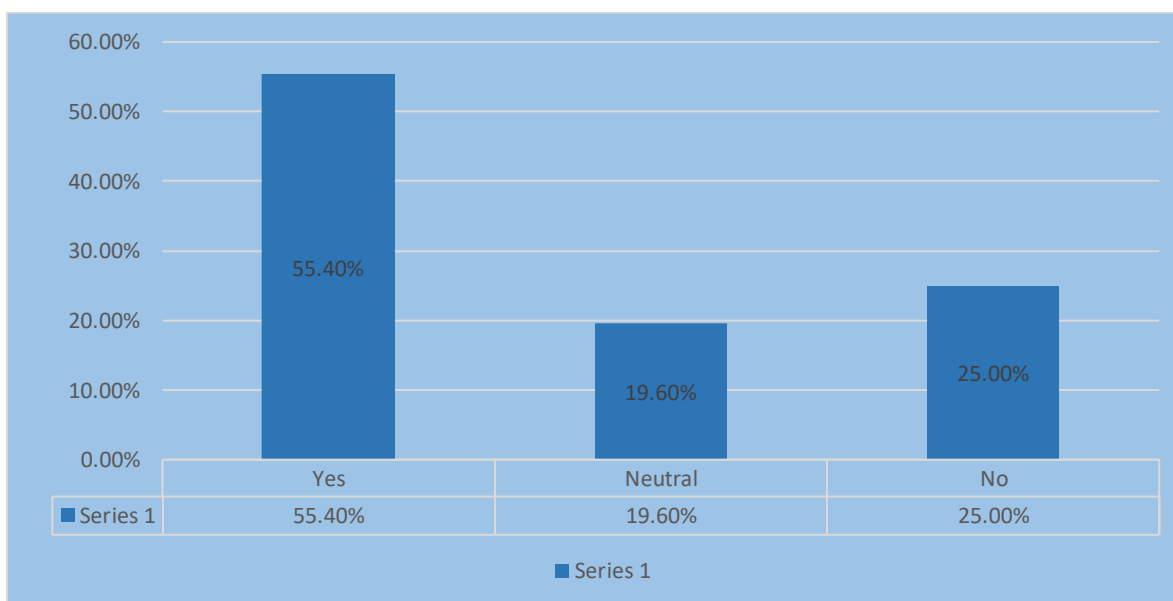


Figure (5): Students demonstrate clear awareness of the syllabus content.

Students' awareness of the syllabus content was mixed, with (55.4%) acknowledging awareness, (25%) reporting they were not aware, and (19.6%) neutral, highlighting the importance of improving communication of syllabus objectives.

Table (6): The teacher shows consistent dedication to implementing the syllabus content.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	83.9%	83.9%	83.9%
Neutral	2	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%
No	6	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

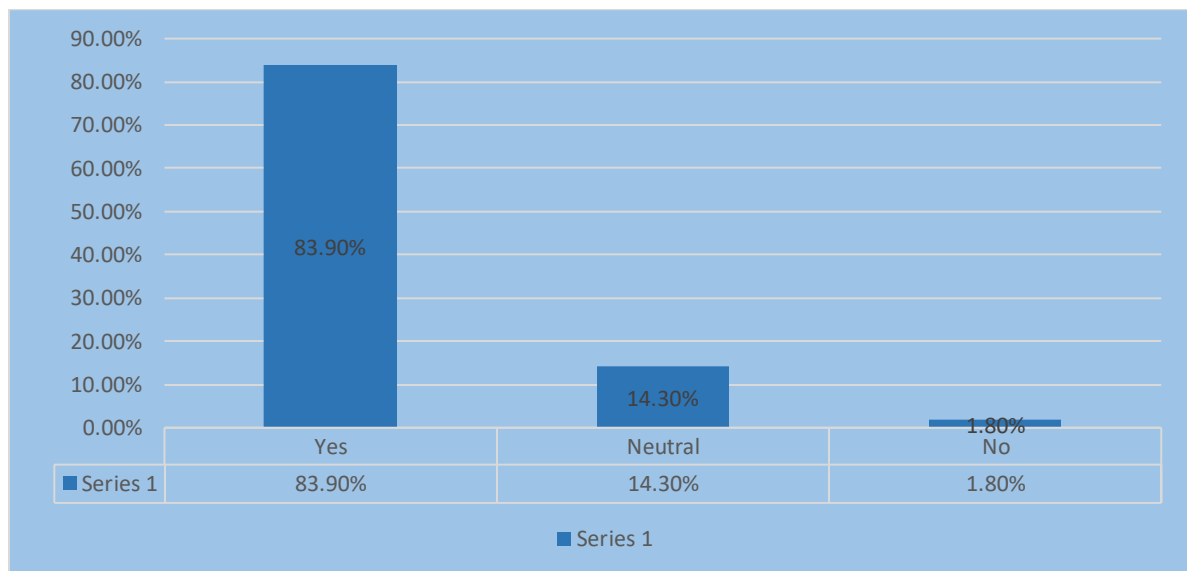


Figure (6): The teacher shows consistent dedication to implementing the syllabus content. The teacher's commitment to the syllabus is widely acknowledged, with 83.9% of students agreeing, 1.8% disagreeing, and 14.3% remaining neutral, reflecting an overwhelmingly positive perception of the teacher's dedication.

Table (7): The teacher shows strong commitment to the ESP syllabus implementation.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	83.9%	83.9%	83.9%
Neutral	2	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%
No	6	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

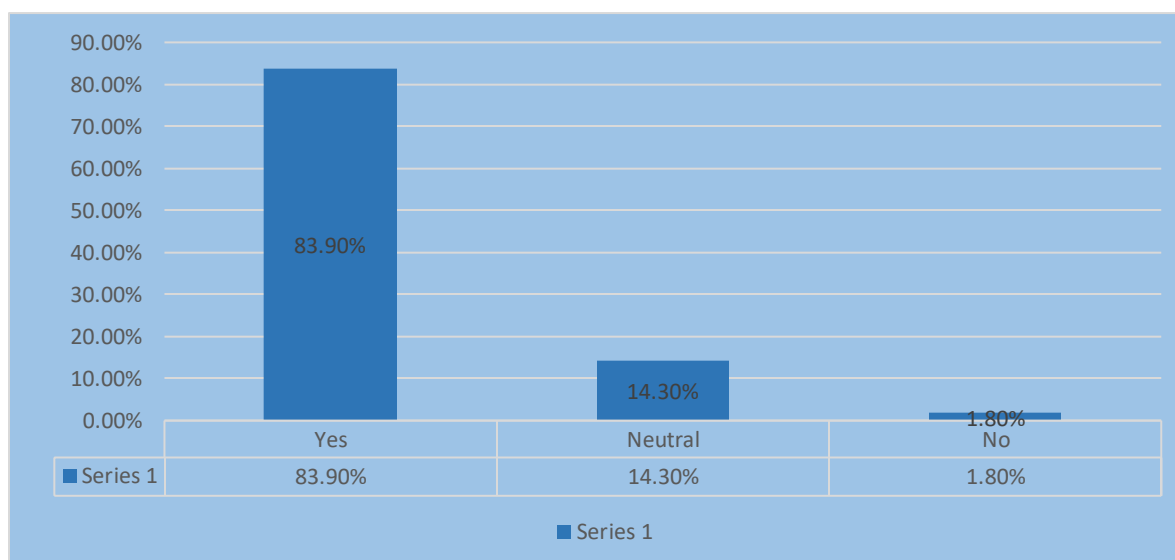


Figure (7): The teacher shows strong commitment to the ESP syllabus implementation. The teacher's commitment to the syllabus is evident, with (83.9%) of students agreeing, while only (1.8%) disagreed and (14.3%) were neutral, reflecting a highly positive perception of teacher dedication.

Table (8): The ESP syllabus effectively enhances students' communication skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	71.4%	71.4%	71.4%
Neutral	2	16.1%	16.1%	16.1%
No	6	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

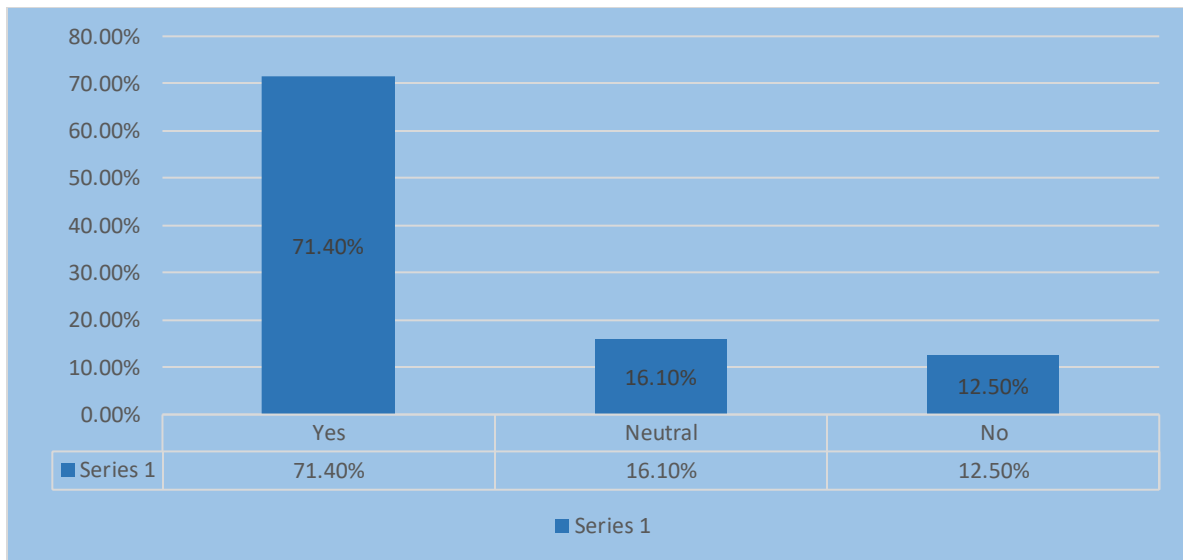


Figure (8): The ESP syllabus effectively enhances students' communication skills.

A majority of students (71.4%) believe the syllabus enhances their communication skills, while 12.5% disagreed and 16.1% were neutral, indicating room to further strengthen communication-focused content.

Table (9): The ESP syllabus effectively develops students' oral presentation skills in tourism contexts.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	48	55.4%	55.4%	55.4%
Neutral	2	14.2%	14.2%	14.2%
No	6	30.4%	30.4%	30.4%
Total	56	100%	100%	100%

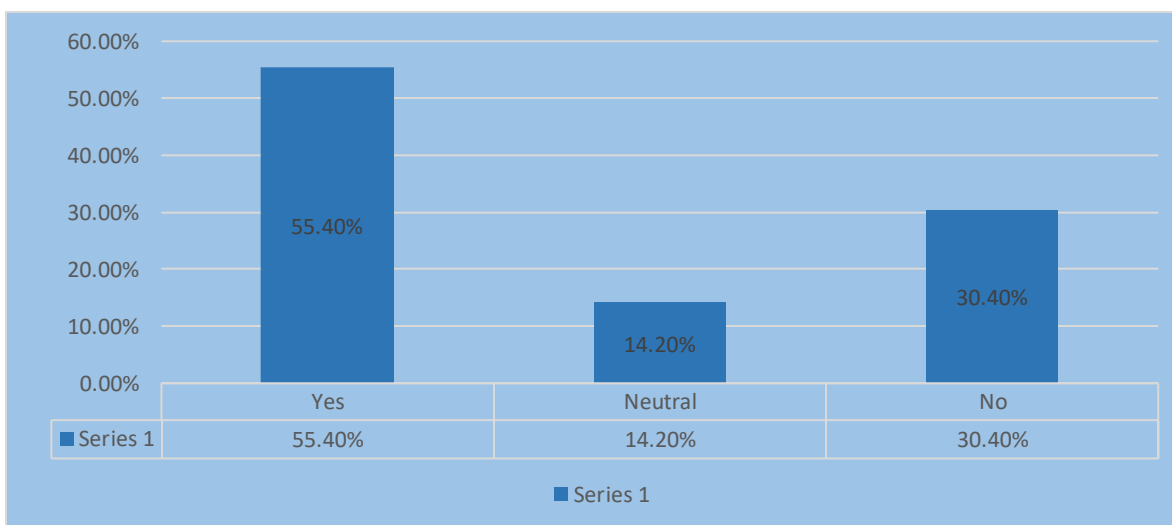


Figure (9): The ESP syllabus effectively develops students' oral presentation skills in tourism contexts.

About (55.4%) of students agreed that the syllabus supports their ability to deliver oral presentations in English, while (30.4%) disagreed and (14.2%) were neutral, indicating a need for greater focus on developing presentation skills within the ESP curriculum.

Section (2) Open-ended Questions Analysis

Open-ended questions encourage detailed responses and capture nuanced opinions, providing rich qualitative data that reveals participants' thoughts, experiences, and perspectives, making them valuable for exploring complex issues and identifying key themes.

Q1: What are reasons for learning the ESP syllabus, and how do you expect it to support your academic and professional goals?

The analysis of responses to question (1) indicates that students' primary motivation for taking the ESP syllabus is its perceived value for interacting with foreigners and advancing future career prospects, representing (60.7%) of respondents. Additionally, (19.6%) are driven by the desire to broaden their general knowledge, while 16.1% aim to improve their conversation and speaking skills. A smaller proportion, (3.6%), reported taking the course simply because it is part of the curriculum. These findings reveal a strong practical and career-oriented motivation among students, alongside a significant interest in developing their communication abilities, reflecting the syllabus's relevance to both academic and professional goals.

Q2: What strategies do you use to learn the ESP syllabus, and how do they help you apply the lessons in real academic and professional contexts?

The analysis of responses to question (2) indicates that the most common strategies students use to learn the ESP syllabus is through structured training courses and programs, representing (60.7%) of respondents. Additionally, (25%) of students reported learning primarily through conversation and speaking activities, while a smaller group, (14.3%), indicated they adopt a gradual, self-paced learning approach. These results highlight that students favor structured learning environments combined with active communication practices, emphasizing the importance of practical, interactive strategies in effectively engaging with the ESP syllabus and applying it in real academic and professional contexts.

Q3: What learning resources are available to you for the ESP syllabus, and how effectively do they support your understanding and practical application of the course content?

The analysis of responses to question (3) reveals that books are the primary resource for learning the ESP syllabus, with (50%) of students citing them. Structured courses are used by (19.6%), while (17.9%) of students rely on the internet and digital applications. Lecturers themselves are mentioned as a resource by 10.7% of students. These findings suggest that students maintain a strong reliance on traditional learning materials, such as books, while also increasingly integrating digital tools and formal courses to support their understanding and practical application of the ESP syllabus.

10. Discussion of the Results

The findings of this study indicate that students' engagement with the ESP syllabus is largely driven by practical and career-oriented motivations, with 60.7% citing its importance for interacting with foreigners and enhancing future career prospects, reflecting similar results in previous studies emphasizing ESP's role in professional preparedness (Hasan & Abu Qub'a, 2025; Sintia, Perdana & Karani, 2025). A notable portion of students (16.1%) highlighted the desire to improve conversation and speaking skills, underscoring the centrality of communication competence in ESP learning (Indrapuri et al., 2025). Analysis of learning strategies revealed that students primarily rely on structured courses (60.7%) and conversation-focused activities (25%), while a smaller group (14.3%) adopts gradual, self-paced approaches; open-ended responses further emphasized the value of interactive, practical classroom activities, demonstrating the importance of hands-on learning in bridging the gap between curriculum design and classroom reality. Regarding learning resources, 50% of students cited books, (19.6%) utilized formal courses, (17.9%) used online platforms, and 10.7% referred to lecturers, indicating that while traditional materials remain central, digital resources are increasingly incorporated, consistent with prior research highlighting technology's growing role in ESP instruction (Sintia, Perdana & Karani, 2025). Students generally held positive attitudes toward the syllabus and considered the content appropriate for their level, though awareness of syllabus objectives was mixed, with only (55.4%) fully acknowledging them, suggesting a need for clearer communication of course goals (Indrapuri et al., 2025). In terms of skill development, the

syllabus effectively enhances communication and presentation abilities, though students indicated that greater focus on oral presentations and interactive practice could strengthen outcomes, echoing global ESP findings on the importance of integrating real-life professional tasks to align curriculum with practical application (Hasan & Abu Qub'a, 2025; Sintia, Perdana & Karani, 2025). Overall, the results reveal that students are motivated by career-focused goals, rely on a combination of traditional and digital resources, and benefit from structured, interactive learning, while highlighting areas for improvement in syllabus awareness and presentation skills, emphasizing the need for curriculum adjustments that bridge the gap between design and classroom reality in the Sudanese ESP context.

10. Findings

In light of the data analysis and discussion, the study revealed the following findings:

1. Students take the ESP syllabus primarily to prepare for professional and real-world communication, supporting the study's objective of examining career-oriented motivations.
2. Students are motivated to develop their communication and speaking skills, confirming the study's focus on practical skill enhancement.
3. Structured courses and conversation-based activities are the main learning strategies, reflecting the gap between curriculum design and classroom engagement addressed in the study.
4. Books are the main resource, supplemented by digital tools and formal courses, showing how students access and apply ESP content in line with learning objectives.
5. Students generally have a positive attitude toward the syllabus, though awareness of its objectives is uneven, highlighting areas for improvement identified in the research questions.
6. The ESP syllabus enhances communication and presentation skills, but more emphasis on oral practice is needed, supporting the study's hypothesis that curriculum design may not fully meet practical classroom needs.

11.Conclusion

The study concludes that the ESP syllabus in the Sudanese context is effective in meeting students' professional and communication needs, motivating learners through career-oriented objectives, and enhancing their speaking and presentation skills. Students engage with the syllabus using structured courses, conversation-based activities, traditional books, and digital resources, though awareness of syllabus objectives remains inconsistent. While the syllabus supports practical language application, improvements are needed in expanding interactive oral practice and clearly communicating learning goals. Overall, bridging the gap between curriculum design and classroom reality is essential to maximize the ESP syllabus's relevance, effectiveness, and alignment with both academic and professional objectives.

12.Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations.

1. The ESP syllabus should focus more on career-oriented and real-life tasks to meet students' professional and practical needs.
2. Interactive speaking and communication activities should be increased to strengthen students' practical language skills.
3. Teachers should use learner-centered strategies that combine structured instruction with hands-on practice to bridge the gap between curriculum design and classroom reality.
4. Digital tools and diverse learning resources should be integrated alongside traditional materials to enhance student engagement and understanding.
5. Clear communication of syllabus objectives and learning outcomes should be ensured so that students are fully aware of the goals and expected achievements.

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