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Integrating learner needs into ESP curriculum development: A comprehensive approach to syllabus design and adaptation

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Abstract: Development of ESP courses—including curriculum planning, resource selection, teaching methods, assessment, and evaluation—is typically guided by an analysis of students' needs. This study aims to identify the English language requirements of students, with particular attention to specific language skills and their integration into ESP syllabus development. It explores both linguistic competencies and related non-linguistic needs. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study collected data via an online survey administered to 140 first-year students during the 2022–2023 academic year. The findings show that although most students recognize the value of English proficiency for their studies, a notable proportion remain unsure of its importance. Writing and listening emerged as the most demanding skills according to students, followed by speaking and reading, indicating critical areas for targeted improvement. Furthermore, while many students foresee needing English for future academic or professional endeavors, a significant number are uncertain about its long-term relevance. These results highlight the necessity of designing an ESP syllabus that strengthens essential language skills while aligning with students' academic goals and career aspirations. Addressing these language needs can enhance students' access to knowledge and professional growth, which are vital for sustainable development and global engagement.

Keywords: Curriculum development, English for Specific Purposes, Needs analysis, Syllabus design.

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) represents a vital and specialized area within English Language Teaching (ELT), focusing on addressing the particular language requirements of specific learner groups within distinct communicative contexts. Over time, various interpretations of ESP have emerged. Some researchers define ESP broadly as teaching English for particular reasons or needs, while others offer a narrower perspective, describing it as instruction tailored for academic, professional, or vocational aims [1]. Despite these nuances, all definitions emphasize purposeful and context-driven use of the language.

Strevens [2] differentiates ESP by highlighting both its absolute and variable characteristics. The absolute characteristics include customizing English instruction to suit learners' particular needs, selecting content relevant to specific fields, emphasizing language suited to practical activities, and clearly distinguishing ESP from general English teaching. The variable characteristics involve limiting the language skills taught (for instance, focusing solely on reading) and not adhering to a single prescribed teaching method [2].

In recent years, needs analysis has gained prominence as a foundational element in curriculum development, helping educators define precise learning objectives. This trend is reaffirmed by Shahedadpuri [3] who emphasizes that a well-executed needs analysis significantly informs syllabus structure, enhances course relevance, and directly impacts learner motivation in ESP contexts. Although defining "needs" in foreign language education can be complex, a widely accepted

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understanding is that needs represent a gap between current abilities and desired future competencies [4]. Needs analysis plays a fundamental role in planning lessons, designing syllabi, selecting materials, and structuring instruction. ESP instructors often begin course development by exploring the question: Why do learners require English? Hutchinson and Waters [5] which guides the creation of courses tailored specifically to the targeted learners.

The nature of these needs varies based on learners' proficiency, disciplinary focus, skills, types of discourse, genres, and situational factors [6]. For instance, Ahmed, et al. [7] emphasize that engineering students frequently require intensive development in productive language skills—particularly oral and written communication—due to their relevance in technical presentations and industry-specific documentation. This reinforces the idea that a uniform curriculum cannot meet all learners' demands, making needs analysis a central concern within ESP.

Teachers are responsible for crafting learning activities that align with the expected learning outcomes outlined in the syllabus. They develop lesson plans and select resources by gaining a deep understanding of their students' requirements. Careful planning based on genuine student needs encourages instructors to identify and address any mismatches between the current syllabus and learners' interests or expectations. Teachers actively choose materials, set objectives, and select teaching methods that correspond to their students' profiles, needs, and goals.

Curriculum designers gather data from multiple sources to perform needs assessments, which inform topic selection and pedagogical arrangements. Damayanti, et al. [8] argue that needs analysis should inform not only course content but also the design of targeted professional learning programs for ESP instructors. Based on this analysis, curriculum content is adapted, challenging the traditional view of teachers merely as implementers of pre-designed curricula [9]. Instead, teachers become curriculum developers who creatively adjust and enhance course content and delivery. Approaches to curriculum adaptation driven by needs analysis foster motivation and vision among both teachers and students, making ESP learning more applicable to local conditions and resource availability. Needs should be seen not only as gaps but also as motivational drivers that encourage learners to take ownership of their education and reach specific goals [10]. This dynamic curriculum integration blends grassroots, school-based development with top-down educational initiatives, positioning teachers as key agents of change within the classroom environment [10].

Two major perspectives exist regarding the definition of "needs" and the role of needs analysis in teaching English as a foreign language. The first is a goal- or product-oriented approach, which describes the language required in a target context and designs courses based on those specific communicative needs. The second is a process-oriented approach, which considers needs as part of the learning experience itself, factoring in psychological and cognitive elements such as learner attitudes, motivation, prior knowledge, personality traits, desires, expectations, and learning preferences [11]. These differing viewpoints mirror a broader shift in language education from teacher- and language-centered approaches to learner-centered methodologies.

Needs assessments serve as a foundation for designing curricula and classroom practices that respond directly to learners' interests, capabilities, and knowledge. Students also benefit by evaluating their own progress toward language goals, fostering awareness and self-regulation. This assessment focuses primarily on learners' existing strengths and achievements rather than deficiencies, enabling them to express and demonstrate what they already know. Needs analysis is an ongoing process that extends throughout the curriculum's duration, influencing decisions related to student placement, course content, instructional design, and teaching methods. It guides the selection of language course content initially, helps ensure alignment of program goals with learners' needs during instruction, ensuring course objectives and outcomes reflect learners' real-world language demands, and informs future adjustments [12]. At the conclusion of the program, the same principles apply to evaluating progress and planning next steps.

When designing an ESP course, conducting a thorough needs analysis is essential to identify learners' specific reasons for learning English and to clarify their learning objectives. Nunan [13]

defines needs analysis as the techniques and procedures employed to gather relevant information for language program design and can inform the development of outcome-based ESP [14]. In essence, it is the systematic process of identifying the language requirements of a particular group of learners.

2. Literature Review

Needs analysis is a vital process in curriculum adaptation, enabling curriculum developers and educators to make adjustments that suit the specific school or classroom context [9]. It supports the development of a responsive and flexible educational system capable of addressing current demands in industry and society [15]. Since no single top-down policy can fully address diverse local requirements, teachers play an active role in modifying institutional and programmatic structures to better fit their unique classroom settings. Both teachers and students engage collaboratively with curriculum materials, and their combined knowledge, experience, and skills shape the interactions with those materials [16].

Needs analysis highlights the detailed planning, interpretation, and execution of program curricula, linking educational programs to both school environments and real-world applications. It transforms curriculum development from a purely institutional process into one that actively involves classroom practice. This approach positions teachers as curriculum creators who adapt and supplement teaching materials creatively, deciding what and how to teach within the framework of existing textbooks and exploring innovative pedagogical methods [9]. For a curriculum to remain relevant and effective, it must continuously evolve to meet the changing needs of learners and the broader community [17].

Richards [18] explains that needs analysis in language teaching serves multiple purposes, such as:

- Identifying the specific language skills a learner requires to perform a particular role (e.g., sales manager, tour guide, university student);
- Evaluating whether an existing course adequately addresses potential students' needs;
- Determining which students need targeted training in specific language skills;
- Recognizing shifts in focus considered important by a reference group;
- Identifying gaps between students' current abilities and required competencies;
- Gathering information about particular difficulties learners face (p. 52).

The goal of needs analysis is to find resources that align with students' experiences, needs, desires, interests, and goals, making it a fundamental element in developing effective ESP programs. This process enhances teachers' creativity and flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of their learners. Needs analysis is inherently dynamic because ESP instructors work with various learner groups, each with distinct requirements and motivations. It guides the design and use of textbooks, workbooks, lesson plans, teacher-made materials, software, and audiovisual resources. These materials influence how different student groups experience pedagogy, fostering educational innovation and improvement. Moreover, needs analysis positively impacts classroom quality and supports the interpretation of curricular materials mandated by higher authorities. As mentioned earlier, ESP is characterized as a program design approach centered around the question: "Why do students need to learn English?" The language curriculum is always shaped by the specific needs identified for each learner group. Unlike general English learners, whose needs may be broader and less defined, ESP learners' needs are more precise and directly inform course design. Although ESP is distinguished from general English courses by the content of teaching materials, the core remains the students' needs — their reasons for learning English. Consequently, ESP syllabus must be developed and delivered based on a thorough needs analysis of the target student group. Needs analysis goes beyond assessing linguistic strengths and weaknesses; it also uncovers learners' non-linguistic needs and interests. The data collected informs improvements to the English language syllabus and helps define course objectives, ensuring alignment between students' real needs and interests and the lecturer's perceptions. This will influence course design aspects such as teaching activities, methodologies, material selection, and assessment tools, ensuring they reflect the identified needs.

The aim is to acknowledge potential discrepancies in how students perceive their needs and to understand their preferences as learners of English for specific purposes. This insight can guide necessary revisions or modifications to the ESP syllabus and assessment practices. Conducting and considering needs analysis may result in significant changes, not only in how credits and evaluations are distributed but also in course content. Obtaining accurate information about effective teaching and learning activities is therefore crucial to bridging the gap between teacher and student perceptions.

3. Background of the Study

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays a pivotal role in equipping university students with the language skills necessary for success in discipline-specific academic and professional settings. Within the context of higher education, ESP courses must be designed not only to address language proficiency but also to reflect the communicative, cultural, and specificities of each discipline. Consequently, ESP syllabus development requires a systematic and ongoing needs analysis process that responds to learners' actual and perceived requirements [1, 5].

In Albania, ESP course design has often relied on generalized models that do not adequately reflect learner profiles or disciplinary contexts. Consequently, in another study focusing on Albanian ESP lecturers and teachers, besides other challenges of their teaching experience such as; proper ESP teachers' training; preparation and use of relevant class materials and class management; students' needs analyses and its implications on course design and delivery was also identified [19].

At the Sports University of Tirana, English is taught as an obligatory course to undergraduate students in the Faculty of Movement Sciences and the process of assessing students' ESP needs is cyclic. However, the existing English syllabus may not sufficiently align with students' academic needs or the language demands of sports science professions. The current study addresses this gap by examining students' perceived needs in the "English for Sports" course and assessing how these needs are—or are not—reflected in the existing syllabus.

This research aims to explore potential discrepancies between students' expectations and the curriculum delivered, with a focus on identifying their language skill priorities, professional communication needs, and preferred learning strategies. Raikhanova and Bakić-Mirić [14] argue that ESP course content should be informed by outcome-based education principles, integrating discipline-specific case-based learning and clearly defined communicative goals. This aligns with the present study's aim to support data-driven syllabus revision that reflects learners' profiles and enhances the practical relevance of the course.

4. Methodology

To investigate students' perceived language needs in the context of English for Sports, a quantitative research methodology was employed. This approach was chosen to collect standardized and generalizable data from a large participant pool, enabling the identification of trends and patterns across the student body.

The study was conducted with first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Movement Sciences at the Sports University of Tirana during the 2022–2023 academic year. English for Sports is a compulsory one-semester course that focuses on the terminology and communicative practices relevant to sports, movement sciences, and physical activity.

An online questionnaire was distributed to 140 students, of whom 131 completed it in full, representing a response rate of 93.6%. The questionnaire was written in Albanian to ensure linguistic accessibility and full comprehension. It consisted of six close-ended items rated on a three-point Likert scale. These items were designed to capture both goal-oriented needs (e.g., academic and professional language requirements) and process-oriented needs (e.g., preferences, interests, and learning attitudes), following frameworks proposed by Brindley [11] and Nunan [13].

The questions targeted students' self-assessed needs across several domains, such as current academic requirements involving English; expected communication needs in real-life professional contexts; personal interest in English and self-reported skill levels; motivation and attitude toward the course content and delivery.

The goal of the questionnaire was to compare students' perceived language needs with the current curricular structure and pedagogical practices. The data will be used to inform revisions to the ESP syllabus, improve teaching methods, and ensure stronger alignment between student expectations and instructor goals.

5. Results

Upon reviewing the results of the questionnaire, it becomes evident what the students' primary needs are. This section will delve into the specific aspects that are crucial to our objective.

Questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 aim to identify 'process-oriented needs' or 'academic needs', as well as English language skills needs for improvement. While questions 5 and 6 focus on students' needs in target situation.

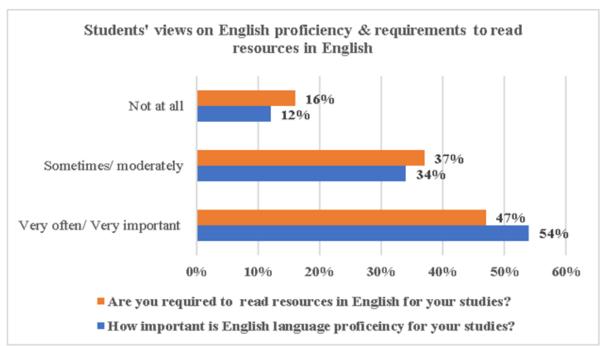


Figure 1.
Students' views on the importance English proficiency & need to use English during their current studies.

Based on the results for Question 1 (see Figure 1): "How important is English proficiency for your studies?", we identify that: a majority of respondents (54%) clearly feel that English proficiency is important for their studies, indicating that over half of them recognize the role of English as essential in their academic experience; about one-third (34%) are uncertain about the importance of English for their studies. This suggests that, while they may recognize some benefits in mastering English, they may not see it as crucial, or they might not have fully encountered situations where English proficiency is necessary; and a minority (12%) do not believe English proficiency is important for their studies. This could reflect specific fields or study environments where English may not be essential, or where they feel their current level is sufficient for their needs.

Considering the students' responses for Question 2 (see Figure 1): "Are you required to read resources in English for your studies?", the results indicate the following:

- Nearly half of the respondents (47%) report that their professors very often recommend or require them to read literature or resources in English/ foreign language. This suggests that, for a substantial percentage of students, foreign language materials are commonly used in their courses and are likely considered essential for engaging with course content or academic research.
- 37% state that they are sometimes required to read foreign language resources, thus indicating that, while these students encounter foreign language requirements less consistently, foreign language materials still play a meaningful role in their studies.
- A minority (16%) say that their professors never require or recommend foreign language resources. This group may be in fields where sufficient resources are available in the students' primary language, or the academic focus may not heavily depend on international literature.

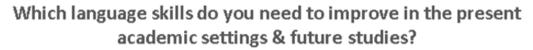
Table 1. Students' perceptions regarding their comprehension of resources in English.

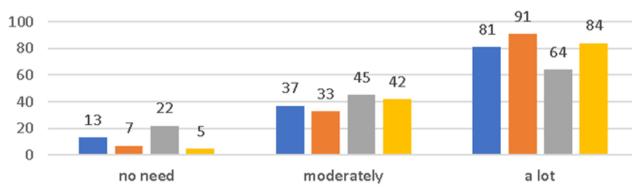
Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Easily	48	37%
Moderately easy	66	50%
With difficulty	17	13%
Total	131	100%

Based on the results (see Table 1 above) of the answers gathered for Question 3: "Do you understand with ease/moderation/difficulty when you read/listen to resources/literature in English/FL for your academic requirements?", the findings are as follows:

- Half of the respondents (50%) find understanding academic materials to be moderately easy, indicating that they are generally able to comprehend readings or lectures, but may occasionally encounter challenges. This group likely has a sufficient level of proficiency but could benefit from targeted support to improve comprehension.
- A smaller percentage (37%) report understanding academic content easily. These students likely have strong language skills and rarely face difficulties in academic reading or listening comprehension. They are likely well-equipped to handle their academic requirements independently.
- Only a few of the respondents (13%) experience huge difficulties in comprehending academic English, which suggests that they struggle considerably with reading or listening for academic purposes. This group may require additional language support to meet academic demands, as their current comprehension level poses a significant challenge.

The majority of students (87%) feel they can understand academic material with either ease or moderate difficulty, suggesting a reasonable level of proficiency across the group. However, the 13% who experience significant difficulty indicate a need for additional support to help them meet academic requirements.





- Speaking to facilitate communication in the academic setting
- Writing to complete course assignments/professional requiremnts
- Reading so that I can comprehend related resources
- Listening to understand content in related academic activities

Figure 2. Needs regarding the language skills.

This section of the survey (see Figure 2) aims to identify which of the four language skills students think they need to improve more for one of two reasons: 1- they think it is an important language skill that is mostly required currently in the academic process; 2- they are not confident and need to put more efforts in order to master the skill. The results for this question show that 64% of the students feel that they need to improve their listening skills "a lot" and 32% feel they need "moderately" improvement while only 4% do not see the need to improve their listening skills. It seems that students are more confident when it comes to the reading skills, as is suggested from their answers, i.e., 49% need "a lot" of improvement in reading; 34% feel they need to improve this skill "a little more", while 17% do not feel the need to improve their reading skills.

Whereas, the students' answers regarding the writing skills are as follows: 69% need "a lot" of improvement in writing, suggesting that it is the most needed skill to master; 25% feel the need to improve the skill "a little more", and only 5% don't see writing as an area that they should improve. An explanation regarding this might be that actually, during their Bachelor studies, they are not requested to turn in written assignments in a foreign language. The need for improvement of the speaking skill has received the following percentage for each scale: 62% of respondents feel that they need to improve their speaking skills "a lot"; 28% seek "a little more" improvement, while 10% of the students do not feel the need to work more on their speaking skills.

This section of the survey aims to investigate what students perceive to be their future needs for academic and training purposes, as well as for their future profession.

Students' EFL target needs

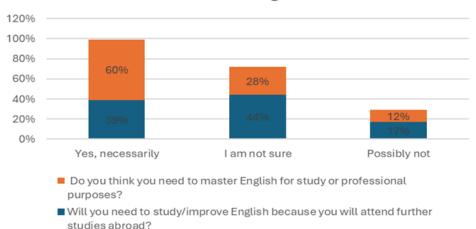


Figure 3. Students' target needs.

Based on the results obtained from this question (see Figure 3), it is evident that a majority (60%) believe that they will necessarily need to read literature or research studies in a foreign language for future academic or professional purposes. This shows a strong awareness among students about the likely importance of foreign language skills, especially in academic and professional contexts where access to international research or studies may be critical. 28% are uncertain if they will need foreign language reading skills in the future. This group might be unsure about the language requirements of their chosen fields or may not yet have a clear picture of their future professional needs. Only a small percentage (12%) feel they will probably not need to read in a foreign language for their studies or careers. This may reflect certain fields or career paths where foreign language proficiency is less crucial, or it could indicate a belief that translations or resources in their native language will suffice.

The results for the other question are as follows: A significant portion of respondents (44%) are not sure if English will be necessary for their future studies or jobs. This indicates that a significant number of students are uncertain about the importance of English in their future academic or professional paths. They may lack information about the language requirements in their field or about potential international opportunities.

- 39% of respondents believe that English will be necessarily required, either for future studies abroad or in their careers. This group likely sees English proficiency as a critical skill for advancing academically or professionally, especially in global contexts.
- A minority (17%) think it is possibly not necessary to have English proficiency for their future studies or jobs. This may reflect specific career paths or academic fields where English is less emphasized, or where opportunities exist primarily in their native language.

6. Discussions

This study successfully identified the students' perceptions of their current academic English language needs as well as their anticipated future requirements in both academic and professional contexts. The findings reveal that a majority of students (54%) recognize English proficiency as important for their studies, highlighting its integral role in academic success. However, the notable proportion of students who are uncertain (34%) underscores the need for enhanced awareness and clearer communication about the practical relevance of English proficiency across disciplines.

The data also demonstrate that foreign language materials, particularly English, are frequently required in students' coursework, with nearly half of respondents regularly engaging with such

resources. This highlights the critical importance of developing strong reading skills to access and comprehend international academic literature.

Regarding language skills, writing emerged as the area where students feel the greatest need for improvement, followed closely by listening and speaking skills. While reading was perceived as the skill students felt most confident in, a substantial portion still expressed a desire for enhancement. These insights suggest that language support programs should prioritize writing, listening, and speaking skills to better prepare students for academic challenges.

Looking toward future needs, the majority of students anticipate requiring foreign language reading skills for academic or professional purposes, reinforcing the importance of foreign language training. Yet, a significant percentage remain unsure, indicating a gap in understanding that can be addressed through targeted guidance about language expectations in specific fields. Furthermore, although a smaller group believes they will not need foreign language skills, raising awareness about the advantages of English proficiency could broaden their academic and career opportunities.

The findings regarding future plans to study or work abroad reveal considerable uncertainty about the role of English, with only 39% affirming its necessity and 44% uncertain. This uncertainty points to the need for clearer information and counseling about the value of English proficiency in global academic and professional environments.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of tailored language support that addresses both current academic demands and future career needs. Educational institutions should consider implementing targeted language programs and orientation initiatives to clarify the role of English and support students in developing the competencies essential for success in an increasingly internationalized academic and professional landscape.

7. Conclusions

After analyzing the results, we successfully met the study's objective of identifying students' perceptions of both their current process-oriented needs and their future target needs. This study identified that the majority of students consider English proficiency essential for academic success. However, the fact that a significant portion (34%) are uncertain suggests room for better communication or experiences that might illustrate the importance of English proficiency in an academic context. Tailored support or orientation sessions might help clarify the role of English in their studies and its potential benefits in various academic and professional contexts.

The results indicate that a majority of students expect to engage with foreign language materials at least sometimes, with nearly half encountering these requirements frequently. This highlights the relevance of foreign language proficiency, particularly reading skills, in supporting academic success, as professors seem to value international literature and research.

Writing is identified as the area where the highest number of respondents feel they need to master better, while regarding Listening and Speaking students also show a strong need for improvement, with a majority of students aiming to improve in these areas. Reading has the lowest percentage of respondents feeling the need for improvement, though a significant portion still seeks some enhancement.

The majority of respondents anticipate a need for foreign language reading skills, suggesting that there is significant demand for language proficiency training or resources to support these skills. However, the 28% who are unsure indicates a gap in certainty that could be addressed through clearer guidance on language requirements for specific fields. Those who believe they won't need foreign language skills (12%) may be in areas less dependent on international literature, but they could still benefit from understanding the potential advantages of such skills. Programs that focus on foreign language reading skills for academic and professional purposes may be beneficial, especially targeted toward those who anticipate this need or are uncertain but open to learning.

While 39% see English as an essential skill for future studies or career opportunities, a larger portion (44%) remain uncertain. This level of uncertainty suggests that students may benefit from

clearer guidance on the role of English in various fields, especially if they are considering international study or career options. The 17% who believe English might not be necessary could still benefit from awareness of the potential advantages of English proficiency, even if it is not directly required.

8. Implications of Needs Analyses on the ESP Syllabus

The results of the students' need analysis hold significant importance for the ongoing design and implementation of the curriculum in the coming years.

Firstly, the data reveal a notable alignment between the needs expressed by the students and those perceived by the lecturers. Although some inconsistencies exist, these differences are valuable insights that will be carefully considered during the curriculum development process to ensure a more responsive and effective educational experience.

Secondly, the findings provide crucial support and motivation to continue prioritizing key areas of the curriculum, despite encountering some challenges. It is evident that students recognize the importance of acquiring English language skills and regard them as essential for their academic success and future career opportunities within the university context.

Thirdly, the process of conducting a thorough needs analysis underscores the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration between teachers and students. While some educators may find this consultation time-consuming or repetitive, it remains a fundamental step in fostering mutual understanding and tailoring the curriculum to real learner needs.

Finally, needs analysis serves as a valuable tool for educators' professional development, encouraging continuous reflection and self-improvement. By engaging in this process, teachers enhance their awareness of student requirements and strengthen their ability to deliver more effective instruction.

The findings from this study offer practical guidance for adapting and assessing the English language syllabus to better meet students' evolving needs. From these results, several key conclusions emerge:

Understanding how ESP learners perceive their language needs is critical for designing relevant course content.

Recognizing student preferences may prompt necessary adjustments to the syllabus structure, including topics covered, tasks assigned, and credit distribution.

Regular evaluation and revision of the needs analysis process ensure that the curriculum remains dynamic and responsive.

Collecting feedback on effective teaching and learning strategies is essential to bridge the perceptual gap between instructors and learners, fostering a more student-centered syllabus.

These actions contribute to the creation of ESP curricula that not only address immediate learning goals but also support sustainable educational outcomes by promoting lifelong learning opportunities aligned with students' changing needs.

9. Recommendations

To ensure the continued relevance and responsiveness of ESP programs, it is recommended that needs analysis be embedded as a regular and systematic process within curriculum review cycles. This ongoing approach will enable curricula to evolve alongside students' shifting academic, linguistic, and professional demands [20].

Supporting educators through enhanced training and professional development focused on effective needs analysis techniques, curriculum adaptation, and student-centered pedagogic is vital. Empowering teachers as active curriculum developers will improve the design and delivery of ESP courses.

Encouraging active student involvement in curriculum planning and evaluation fosters learner ownership and motivation, ensuring that courses remain relevant to their goals and interests.

Curricula should be designed with flexibility and modularity in mind, allowing educators to customize components to address the specific and changing needs identified through continuous analysis [21].

A collaborative approach involving curriculum designers, teachers, students, and industry stakeholders can bridge the gap between academic instruction and real-world application, enhancing the practical value of ESP programs [22].

The adoption of diverse instructional materials and technologies tailored to varied learner preferences and proficiency levels will promote inclusivity and engagement, enriching the learning experience [23].

Finally, establishing robust monitoring and feedback mechanisms where both students and teachers can regularly provide input on the curriculum's effectiveness will facilitate timely adjustments and ongoing improvement, contributing to a dynamic and learner-centered ESP program.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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