

Tipo: Artículo original

Dosier: Real Issues in Real English Classrooms - Problemáticas reales en aulas reales de enseñanza del Inglés

Exploring English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Physical Education Students

Exploración del Inglés para Fines Específicos (ESP) en Estudiantes de Educación Física

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Recibido: 21/9/2025
Aprobado: 1/12/2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact and outcomes of integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into an English for General Purposes (EGP) course for Physical Education (PE) learners in a Colombian higher education English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The research addresses the problem that students in this discipline often perceive English as a simple graduation requirement, recognizing its professional benefits only towards the end of their studies when they encounter specialized academic materials and career opportunities. This qualitative action research study included 30 undergraduate participants. Data collected from surveys, interviews, and the teacher-researcher's field notes were analyzed, revealing four main categories of findings: Increasing My Confidence and Improving English Language Skills Through ESP Content, Expanding My Vocabulary by Accepting The Vocabulary Challenge, Learning for the Future, and Innovating The Traditional Classroom Through Active Learning. As the core of this research involved strategically integrating ESP methodology within a traditional EGP course, this incorporation brought significant benefits to the language teaching and learning path. The findings indicate that integrating content from the students' discipline, Physical Education (PE), enhanced their confidence, motivation, and oral communication skills. The findings also reveal that students engaged more actively and their anxiety decreased when topics were directly connected to their professional interests, moving beyond a focus on grammar or structures. In terms of vocabulary, learners successfully acquired essential technical terms in an engaging atmosphere, exemplified by activities like the "Vocabulary Challenge." Furthermore, student-centered methods such as roleplays and project-based learning transformed classroom dynamics, promoting active learning and preparing students for real-world professional contexts. Finally, these results support the importance of contextualized ESP instruction in addressing real EFL challenges by balancing language teaching with learners' specific academic and career learning needs and goals.

Keywords: ESP, EGP, PE, Active Learning, Vocabulary, Student Motivation

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora el impacto y los resultados de la implementación del Inglés para Fines Específicos (ESP) dentro de un curso de Inglés para Fines Generales (EGP) para estudiantes de Educación Física (EF) en un contexto de educación superior colombiana de EFL (Inglés como Lengua Extranjera). La investigación aborda la problemática de que los estudiantes de esta disciplina a menudo perciben el inglés como un simple requisito de grado, reconociendo sus beneficios profesionales solo hacia el final de sus estudios, cuando se enfrentan a materiales académicos especializados y oportunidades laborales. Este estudio de investigación-acción cualitativa involucró a 30 estudiantes de pregrado. Los datos, recolectados a través de encuestas, entrevistas y las notas de campo de la docente-investigadora, se analizaron, revelando cuatro categorías principales de hallazgos: Aumentando mi Confianza y Mejorando mis Habilidades en Inglés a través del Contenido ESP, Ampliando mi Vocabulario al Aceptar el Reto de Vocabulario, Aprendiendo para el Futuro e Innovando el Aula Tradicional a través del Aprendizaje Activo. Dado que el tema central de esta investigación implicó la integración estratégica

Conflictos de Interés: ninguno que declarar

Fuente de financiamiento: sin fuente de financiamiento.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47133/NEMITYRA20260801b-A11>

BIBLID: 2707-1642, 8, 1, pp. 120-132

Editores responsables: Beatriz Erazo (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8929-2825>) y Araceli Salas (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1092-3568>).

de la metodología ESP dentro de un curso EGP tradicional, esta incorporación trajo beneficios significativos en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje del idioma. Los hallazgos muestran que esta integración de contenido de la disciplina de los estudiantes, la Educación Física, mejoró la confianza, la motivación y las habilidades de comunicación oral de los aprendices. Los hallazgos también revelan que los estudiantes participaron más activamente y su ansiedad disminuyó cuando los temas estaban directamente conectados con sus intereses profesionales, yendo más allá de un enfoque en la gramática o las estructuras. En términos de vocabulario, los aprendices adquirieron con éxito términos técnicos esenciales en un ambiente participativo, ejemplificado por actividades como el "Reto de Vocabulario" (Vocabulary Challenge). Además, los métodos centrados en el estudiante, como los juegos de roles y el aprendizaje basado en proyectos, transformaron la dinámica del aula, promoviendo el aprendizaje activo y preparando a los estudiantes para contextos profesionales reales. Finalmente, estos resultados apoyan la importancia de enseñar ESP de manera contextualizada para enfrentar los desafíos reales de EFL. Esto ayuda a equilibrar la enseñanza del idioma con las necesidades y objetivos de aprendizaje específicos de la carrera académica y profesional de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: ESP, EGP, Educación Física, Aprendizaje Activo, Vocabulario, Motivación Estudiantil

Introduction

In the world of higher education, the level of engagement that students may have when studying a subject depends on the perceived usefulness of the content, as well as the methodology applied by the professor. For students working to earn a degree in Physical Education (PE), English sometimes feels like an abstract, academic obstacle, especially in their early semesters. Students often perceive English as a graduation requirement rather than a direct connection to their primary field of study. One of the results this study aims to highlight is that the importance of English only becomes clear towards the end of their educational path. At that point, when they are exploring national or international job offers or engaging with academic materials in English, they suddenly realize they are missing something crucial, particularly advanced reading and writing skills and the specialized vocabulary necessary for professional development. This study also emphasizes that from a teaching-learning perspective, there is a need to change these students' mindset. It is mandatory to help students see the value of learning English for their long-term career growth. This research explores how an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach can bridge this gap by directly addressing the fact that Physical Education is often marginalized in the context of language teaching, even though it is a global and interactive field.

To explore this necessity further, a focused ESP intervention was integrated into the final educational levels of a traditional EGP course at a private university in Colombia, shifting the course syllabus from its original grammar focus to a real-world application approach, such as using sports terminology, coaching instructions, and leading athletic events, among others. This teaching transformation was driven by a key principle: when students perceive a real connection between what they learn and their future careers, their motivation grows, their anxiety levels lower, and their engagement in class increases. Therefore, this study demonstrates the impact of implementing this pedagogical intervention. Some of the areas that are under examination include communicative confidence, the acquisition of technical vocabulary, and a change towards viewing English as a practical, essential skill for their future professions.

Methodological framework

This study was carried out based on a qualitative research framework, which, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), emphasized exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups attach to social or human problems. This perspective was ideal for the current research because it aimed to obtain the experiences, perceptions, and voices of students

regarding the pedagogical intervention. As part of this paradigm, an action research approach was used. Burns and Richards (2015) described this approach as a systematic process of self-reflection by educational practitioners oriented at improving practices. This approach allowed the teacher-researcher to assess and adjust the pedagogical strategies through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. As a result, the strategies implemented were directly answering the needs appearing in the classroom context.

The research was conducted at a private university on the Caribbean coast in Colombia. The participants included 30 undergraduate students from the Physical Education program, who were enrolled in their fifth and sixth semesters. This group was composed of 22 males and 8 females, with ages ranging between 20 and 23. Data was collected by implementing three instruments: surveys to obtain a general overview of student perceptions, semi-structured interviews for a deeper dive into their personal experiences, and the teacher-researcher's field notes to make direct observations of classroom dynamics and student progress. Strict ethical considerations guided the entire process. Participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. It was emphasized that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their academic grades.

Theoretical framework

From English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Today, many professionals want to be able to communicate well in English, not just as a skill on their CVs. Within the English Language Teaching (ELT) field, two sub-branches can be highlighted: English for General Purposes (EGP) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). On one hand, EGP provides learners with the tools to build the language skills they need in a regular day-to-day interaction with the language, such as holding conversations, understanding basic grammar structures, and facing common social or cultural situations. Early on, pillars like Hutchinson & Waters (1987) defined General English (GE) courses with a goal of simply 'learning English' without considering learners' needs. Following the same line, Anthony (2018) defines EGP as language teaching that does not have any professional or academic component in the course design; its goal is to develop general communicative competence in learners in everyday situations. In this way, we embrace ESP in the learning and teaching path since it goes a step further. It transforms learning into a personalized path, oriented to what students truly need in their professional or academic lives.

In line with the above, going through an academic process of studying GE is not enough for individuals who have specific language learning needs. In contrast, ESP is another branch of ELT and has a learner-centered, goal-oriented approach that focuses on teaching English linked to the specific needs of learners, often related to their profession, academic discipline, or vocational context. Basturkmen (2022) describes ESP as an approach to language teaching, where, based on a learner's needs analysis, the content, methodology, and materials can be chosen for particular academic or professional contexts. The definition suggests that ESP is not just about changing textbooks; it is about changing mindsets according to a specific context. As teachers or educational institutions, we cannot assume what learners need; there should be a listening and observation process.

Thus, a clear distinction between EGP and ESP starts to be observed, putting learners' needs first in the teaching and learning process. As reinforced by Feak & Chan (2025), general English competence is incomplete for learners who work in specialized domains such as business, healthcare, engineering, or tourism; they should follow the ESP approach as a key

component in their career development. In those contexts, the teacher must engage with the students' professional fields to facilitate more meaningful and effective interaction. In the same way, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) argue that a key difference between EGP and ESP is the methodology used by the teacher. For these experts in the field, in general ESP classes, the methodology and interaction may be similar to the EGP setting, and in more specialized ESP courses, the teacher should take the role of a language consultant.

Therefore, professionals from all fields and occupations should be involved in learning processes that offer the development of particular skills that EGP does not offer, such as the learning of technical vocabulary, functionality of the language, and more effective communication within their professional field. This contrast leads us to rethink and redefine learning and teaching processes, especially in the process of identifying our learners' needs, a step that we must not omit since it is crucial for creating accessible, relevant, and engaging learning experiences that guide us to have better outcomes. Azalmad (2023) highlights the importance of identifying linguistic needs. This scholar states that EGP focuses on developing broad linguistic competence through everyday topics and grammar drills, while ESP addresses teaching English for a professional, vocational, or academic purpose, focusing always on the language learners' needs for their particular job or field of study, such as business, medicine, or engineering. In a field like Physical Education, this focus is very important, as it shifts the curriculum from generic language skills patterns to the functional language needed to instruct, motivate, and give instructions that involve the mental and physical body.

This pedagogical change reflects a wide reformulation of language teaching, one that moves from isolated grammar activities toward meaningful and real-context learning. In line with the above theoretical positions, Jande and Ibrahim (2021) also identified learners' needs as the priority in the language learning process, together with the participants' context and goals, particularly when generating learning material for them. This perception guided the design of the present pedagogical The intervention focused on learners' communicative needs as its foundation, moving beyond the conventional, rule-based framework of the General English textbook. Another view is the one proposed by Lee et al. (2014), in which they reported positive outcomes from a hybrid form of ESP and EGP instruction. They concluded that integrating ESP into an EGP course helped students strengthen their knowledge in their field (engineering) as well as improve their English skills. This contrast demonstrates the importance of identifying students' needs and adapting resources to make the learning and teaching process more meaningful and centered on the context.

English for Physical Education (PE)

While ESP has grown more in fields like business, medicine, and engineering, areas such as Physical Education and Sports (PES) have not received the same level of attention in language teaching research. It seems surprising, given the worldwide nature of sports culture, where coaches, athletes, fitness and PE teachers, and fitness professionals often work across different countries and languages. In the majority of scenarios, English as the lingua franca plays a key role in the communicative interaction among those speakers. English for Physical Education belongs to the EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) branch of ESP, as it prepares learners to use English in professional teaching, coaching, or instructional contexts rather than academic research settings. As Basturkmen (2025) states, occupational ESP is related to the language needed to address the communicative demands of specific professions or job contexts. In this regard, fields such as PE are included in this definition, since teachers and coaches require English to give instructions, manage activities, and communicate with students and colleagues.

Other scholars that have spoken about PE as an understudied and ‘marginalized’ research area are Forey and Cheung (2019), who point out that PE as a subject in all the education levels has been one of the subjects with moderate debate and research in terms of language learning, even though students in this field need to understand instructions, training plans, and international guidelines in English. This gap means that many PES students finish their degree without explicit support to develop the English language skills they will actually use in their future profession. The current study aims to address this breach by showing the significance of the inclusion of ESP in general English courses and specialized ESP for PE students, teachers, and trainers. It also supports Krashen’s (1985) theory of $i + 1$, where learners are given input that is just beyond their current level to allow them to grow naturally. When students engage with real content from their field, they expand their abilities without feeling overwhelmed, because their interest helps them to continue learning.

Additionally, when entering the field of physical education, it is important to consider a stronger connection between movement and the English language in both teaching and learning this discipline. Slater and Butler (2015) researched PE and its correlation to the English language, and they found that language is expressed in two ways. Firstly, action discourse, or the words that are used while performing physical activities, such as “jump,” “turn,” or “follow the leader,” and secondly, reflection discourse, or the conversation about what took place after performing the activity, such as comments on teamwork, rules, and performance. These authors also add that we are just beginning to understand how language shapes what counts as ‘knowledge’ in PE, and unfortunately, little research has been developed into actual PE classrooms to observe how teachers use language in practice or to measure what happens when language itself becomes an intentional part of the lesson. As teachers, this reflection should lead us to continue adapting lessons, methodologies, and classroom practices, encouraging PE students to use English as a meaningful tool in their academic and professional paths.

With regard to the higher education context in Colombia, there are limited programs that offer PES students the opportunity to use English in professional settings, even though students see the value of learning a foreign language. Mladenova (2024) points out that English is a major communication tool in the world of sports, especially among coaches, teammates, international organizations, and sponsors. The researcher also emphasized that acquiring writing and reading skills in English allows them to stay informed on the latest trends and innovations. By bringing more attention to English for Physical Education, the present study highlights a field that deserves attention and better support not only from the teachers themselves but also from the institutions. Language should not be a second thought in any discipline, especially one as active and international as sports. In conclusion, transitioning from EGP to ESP or including ESP somehow into EGP courses is a fundamental and meaningful curricular adjustment, one that turns language learning from something students “have to do” into something that actually matters to them because it is content-based, relevant, empowering, and effective in achieving authentic communicative outcomes.

Results

After gathering and analyzing the data from the collection instruments, which were surveys, field notes, and semi-structured interviews, this section outlines the systematization and interpretation of the findings. This analysis is supported by theoretical arguments in the field of general ESP, ESP for Physical Education and Sports, EOP, and vocabulary learning, and it is presented in four categories developed as follows:

Table 1. Research Categories

What is the outcome of implementing ESP in the English language learning process of Physical Education students?			
Increasing my confidence and improving my English-language skills through ESP content	Expanding My Vocabulary, Accepting The Vocabulary Challenge	Learning For The Future	Innovating The Traditional Classroom: Active Learning

Increasing my Confidence and Improving English Language Skills Through ESP Content

This first category emerges from the students’ voices in regard to how learning content from their field, Physical Education and Sports, gave them confidence and motivation to communicate an idea in the English language. Specifically, during the academic process observed by the teacher-researcher and in the data collected from all the instruments (survey, field notes, and interview), it was observed how ESP content helped learners to improve their English language skills. According to the data, the participants mentioned that one of the essential benefits that ESP gave them as learners was its power to build confidence and motivation, especially when communicating orally in the foreign language. They knew and could see the direct applicability of what they were learning in terms of their academic and professional goals. The data collected, which was translated to English for this research, shows this:

“ESP activities give me the confidence to construct ideas in English related to my professional field.” (Student 1 - Survey)

“These activities provided me with the tools to feel more comfortable with the language and to use technical terminology from my professional field in English.” (Student 5 - Survey)

“I consider these career-related activities important because they allow us to integrate the language into our professional practice while strengthening our communicative skills in real situations, as well as studying topics that interest and are relevant to us, and at the same time increasing our motivation and commitment to language learning.” (Student 3 - Interview)

“In this session, the students were engaged and motivated to practice the vocabulary for the challenge. Some students who had been a little shy in some of the oral practices performed better in the activity today, and an improvement in their pronunciation and fluency was noticed.” (Teacher’s Field Note - April 10th, 2023)

In this category, apart from building confidence, the data showed that while developing activities related to content from their professional career, such as roleplays, reading comprehension, and short writings, they were also improving their English language skills, especially the ones that were focused on productive skills, speaking, and writing. This improvement occurred smoothly because the students' attention and motivation were primarily focused on learning content they enjoyed; however, they were also unknowingly enhancing their English language skills, which was the main objective of the course. The following comments and observations from the participants confirm their perception regarding this English language skills improvement:

“During this semester, I have improved in listening, oral production, and vocabulary activities, as well as learning activities that are related to our career.” (Student 8 - Survey)

“I feel that studying directly the content of our professional field is very important to me, and I guess for my classmates as well since that is what we are studying, so relating it to learning English, which is a language we need for the future, is very beneficial for all of us. These activities related to content from our professional area allowed us to improve our level of English, which is what we want and what we are studying.” (Student 10 - Interview)

“I consider that the oral production activities, such as the conversations where we practiced fluency and expressions in English, and also the vocabulary activities of our area, such as the vocabulary challenge, were very useful because we developed them without much stress and we learned a lot.” (Student 15 - Interview)

“After three months of having started to combine activities that had a touch of physical education content without leaving aside the improvement of language skills, today, with great surprise, I see that all students worked collaboratively and presented their role play, where an improvement in pronunciation, fluency, body language, and use of vocabulary was observed.” (Teacher’s Field Note - May 17th, 2023)

This category demonstrates that integrating ESP content in English language teaching not only assists language acquisition but also significantly boosts learners’ confidence. This can be supported by Wenger (1998) when he mentions that learners can develop language skills and build confidence when they are immersed with peers from their field. In this way, the relevance of the ESP content towards their field creates a motivating environment where students feel empowered to express their ideas effectively and ultimately prepares them for their professional environments more effectively.

Expanding My Vocabulary, Accepting The Vocabulary Challenge

This second category describes two main outcomes achieved by the students in terms of the implementation of ESP vocabulary in English class activities, technical and representation of a fun and challenging learning strategy. One of the relevant products in the course was the implementation of the Vocabulary Challenge activity, a methodological strategy developed by Professor González (2021), where students are involved in a ‘challenge’ to learn vocabulary in a contextualized and motivating way. Before presenting the challenge, learners are exposed to a set of fifty words, which are studied and internalized through different language skills activities, and when presenting the challenge, they should mention the words in a minute and a half, bearing in mind features such as pronunciation, accuracy of the word in Spanish, and speed to do the challenge by using some flashcards as visuals. By accepting this Vocabulary Challenge, learners demonstrated an increase in their vocabulary related to their professional area, PES. The reflections from participants are presented below:

“The Vocabulary Challenge was an activity in which the vocabulary was related to physical activity, using terms that helped us to take more ownership of the content and also know the concepts related to our career in English.” (Student 3 - Survey)

“The Vocabulary Challenge activity was very significant and productive, as it helped me to improve my vocabulary in terms of pronunciation and fluency, especially in speaking activities. Also, I found that vocabulary useful because it is the one we will use in the future.” (Student 11 - Survey)

“By learning vocabulary from specific concepts of our professional area, we become more apt to understand specialized texts in our field and allow ourselves to understand talks or debates about our field, as well as communicate correctly in professional situations.” (Student 5 – Interview)

“The impact of learning vocabulary and the use of English helped us a lot significantly because it gave us the possibility to know words that were unknown to us but that are essential to know since they are part of our professional context and labor. Also, with the activity of Vocabulary Challenge we expand our own vocabulary and so we can practically learn to master the language” (Student 13 - Interview)

“During the activities developed in class, it was observed that students increased the use of the vocabulary that was being practiced by them through the Vocabulary Challenge. For example, in some speaking and writing tasks, they made use of some of these words without the need of looking them up in the dictionary.” (Teacher’s Field Note - March 28th)

The other outcome to be described in terms of the current category is how the Vocabulary Challenge offers learners a fun learning path to acquire functional content. After implementing this challenge, learners showed positive results not only in language improvement but also in the atmosphere they were involved in. Data and observation mainly communicated that participants felt less anxious because they were enjoying the process of learning content in their field, and at the same time. Participants really felt challenged and entertained by competing with their peers and achieving success in the activity within a comfortable learning environment. Some insights about this category is shown as follows:

Participants rated the vocabulary Challenge in order as *challenging, fun, interesting, and productive*. (Survey - Question 2)

“I think the Vocabulary Challenge was challenging but fun at the same time because it helped us to challenge ourselves and realize what we are able to learn with dedication, and fun since we made it in a didactic way and with images that helped us learn words faster.” (Student 7 - Survey)

“What I liked the most about the Vocabulary Challenge activity was the use of the challenge; since it was really a challenge and not just another activity, I feel that it motivated everyone in the course a little more.” (Student 14 - Survey)

“What I liked the most about the Vocabulary Challenge was the combination of words with images as this helped us to relate images with words, having with this a visual stimulation to learn the words. I also liked feeling challenged, especially when it comes to the pronunciation of the words, their meaning in context and saying them in a minute. In general there was nothing I did not like about the activity.” (Student 1 - Interview)

“Teacher, this challenge activity was a very useful activity because many of my colleagues and I believe that we will not forget this contribution of English that you gave us and we will use it if God wants in the not too distant future and at the same time was a challenging activity because we all wanted to make the best time and break the record” (Student 15 - Interview)

“During this session, students were very active when practicing the Vocabulary Challenge, they used their stopwatch to measure their time and check how long they spent mentioning the vocabulary challenge. It was also noticed a collaborative work

among peers to help each other learn and practice pronunciation patterns.” (Teacher’s Field Notes - April 27th)

This category demonstrates that the acquisition of specialized vocabulary in an ESP setting is greatly improved when teaching integrates targeted content with a methodology that involves some didactic resources, such as those used for the Vocabulary Challenge. This methodology is linked to recent research in the field, particularly in the work developed by Reinhardt (2019) on gameful language learning. This scholar believes that if a teacher adds some real game elements, such as objectives, rules, some level of difficulty in the activities, and a clear challenge component, it will increase the learners' level of engagement, reduce anxiety levels, and they will be more concentrated on the language structures that are being practiced. In consequence, the Vocabulary Challenge activity followed the previous principles since it promoted confidence and the acquisition of a lexicon related to their professional context.

Innovating The Traditional Classroom: Active Learning

Expanding thoughts about the methodology that was used during the course for implementing ESP Physical Education and Sports activities, participants highlighted that the activity design was non-traditional and innovative because they were actively learning, and the content had a practical application. It denotes that engaging learners in methods that involve real-life scenarios, such as roleplays where they play the roles of Physical Education teachers, future coaches or fitness trainers, athletes, or sports narrators, enhances their English language skills through a deep and reflective understanding of content related to their career field. Additionally, methodologies such as the one used for the Vocabulary Challenge enable learners to embrace their learning process, which can be highlighted within student-centered learning. Finally, the data showed some key aspects regarding methodological strategies, which are presented below, and they are related to cooperative learning and effective communication in a dynamic classroom environment.

From the survey, all the participants stated that it was their first time involved in this type of methodology in the English courses because:

“This is the first time that I have participated in learning English in this way and especially vocabulary with this methodology, which is very good because I have learned a lot.” (Student 1- Survey)

“Learning English was always in a common and normal way, without any kind of activities to help us learn faster, and I loved this methodology.” (Student 6 - Survey)

“I had never really paid attention to English, but the university and this specific level, the activities that the teacher has worked with us has made me change my mind.” (Student 9 - Survey)

Delving deeper into the findings regarding the participants’ opinions or descriptions of their process while being involved in this methodology, they mentioned:

“What I liked the most about the activities developed in the course was that I was able to have a different learning experience because I took an active role in it since I was the one who had to be responsible for carrying the projects forward.” (Student 2 - Survey)

“The activities of the course in general caught my attention because they were mostly focused on things of the career, it was not the same traditional activities of grammar or filling out sheets, we faced activities that were satisfactory and that we really learned,

and because we had good disposition to do them and therefore a better learning.” (Student 3 - Survey)

“The methodology that was used was productive and fun because it helped us to expand our English vocabulary, we studied things from our career and we also worked in groups, especially for the speaking activities.” (Student 7 - Survey)

“The impact of relating the activities especially with vocabulary learning is that they are essential words, it is language that we can understand and learn and take it to our seminars, whether in practice or in a school where we are already working.” (Student 5 - Survey)

“In these last classes of the course, as a teacher, I could successfully observe the improvement of my students, most of them overcame the fear of public speaking in a foreign language, showed a dynamism in the activities, they really wanted to participate and to work collaboratively to move forward the activities and therefore the aims established for the course.” (Teacher’s Field Note - June 02nd)

This category demonstrates that the methodological transition from a passive, teacher-centered teaching to an active, student-centered learning was a fundamental element that made this course successful. Several students expressed satisfaction because their learning moved from a typical workbook rooted in grammar exercises to active participation in collaborative practical activities related to their field. According to Freeman et al. (2014), active learning methods are proven to help students achieve better results and lower failure percentages than traditional classes. Thus, the current research demonstrates that students achieve superior learning outcomes when they are involved in activities that require higher-level cognitive processes connected to collaborative talk with their peers, and then, these can have a real-world application. The intervention implemented this active methodology to restructure the classroom, which both enhanced language skills development and transformed student perceptions about English learning into something meaningful and professionally applicable.

Learning For The Future

This third category shows how, for almost all the students, learning English is a necessity. Their perspective goes beyond the classroom, viewing language acquisition as essential for their professional development. Additionally, students agreed on its significance in their current undergraduate studies, for continuing their postgraduate education, and especially when they start to work in the PE field. Apart from this awareness, they mentioned that the activities developed in the course, particularly those focused on terminology related to their careers, prepared them with better strategies and key vocabulary for long-term learning and application in their professional lives. The following comments from the participants reflect this perspective:

“In the future, I would like to specialize in sports journalism, therefore I know that I must learn English to read and write news from other countries.” (Student 5 - Interview)

“I lean more towards the activities directly related to our professional program since activities like the vocabulary challenge leave us with very useful lessons that will help us throughout our professional life in this career.” (Student 17- Survey)

“As a future teacher, I will take everything I was able to learn in the English class to my professional practice or to a job.” (Student 10 - Interview)

“I consider English to be an important language that is used in different areas and disciplines, so acquiring knowledge in English related to our field allows for better communication and understanding when working in our professional field; furthermore, this can open up job opportunities in international contexts.” (Student 6 - Survey)

“English can open many doors in the job market that we are going to enter, since as we can see there are many of us with a degree in physical education and knowing English makes a big difference in hiring.” (Student 8 - Survey)

“For me it is important to study the English content since with English I can do a master's degree or an English program to be able to teach English either outside of Colombia or here in Colombia.” (Student 9 - Interview)

This category demonstrates that students see the learning acquired in the ESP course as an investment for their professional futures. Their words also reveal an implicit awareness that English proficiency is not an added benefit in their careers; it is a basic professional requirement. This perception is articulated by the linguist Crystal (2003), who considers that English language learning around the world is growing, and knowing the language is an essential ‘passport’ that opens doors to international opportunities in both employment and higher education. The students' goals of earning master's degrees, competing in a limited job market, and working abroad show exactly this reality. By linking language learning to these career goals, the course helped put up English as a vital resource to be acquired for a successful academic and professional future.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study strongly affirm that an ESP approach, based on an active methodology with clear objectives linked to the learners' needs, is exceptionally effective for Physical Education students. The observed improvements in confidence, specialized vocabulary, and overall language skills were the result of pedagogical strategies and syllabus adaptations that impacted the language learning of learners. By adapting traditional PE class structures and content-related activities, students' motivation increased. This principle came to life in the final project of the course, where students took on leadership roles to successfully conduct a physical activity event for the members of the university, entirely in English. Thus, they transitioned their classroom learning into authentic, real-world applications at the same time that they practiced their language skills.

Furthermore, this research provides significant evidence that a targeted ESP curriculum can address a gap in language education for the PE field, which is often overlooked. The intervention was successful and had positive impacts because it was designed to develop key language skills in the students for their academic path and familiarize them with PE content. As Suherman (2024) emphasizes, ESP programs that are well-designed should aim to strengthen students' English proficiency within their specific fields of study or professional environments, a foundation that is supported by the findings of this study. At the end of the course, one of the final outputs that students developed was a promotional video of their Bachelor's Degree in English, recorded by student-athletes representing key sports in the university and the Caribbean region. While producing this video, students completed a language task for the course, applied all the content they studied and language skills, acted as professionals, used English to discuss their careers, represented their faculty, and communicated authentically in English.

In conclusion, this pedagogical proposal goes beyond a simple comparison of approaches to address the fundamental purpose of English language education in higher education contexts. While the institutional choice between EGP and ESP requires careful consideration of context and resources, the results of this study strongly support the efficacy of an ESP approach in fields like Physical Education, especially for students in their last semesters. The ultimate goal, as De Zoysa et al. (2026) suggest, is for students to be involved in English teaching and learning contexts that help them to face challenges that they may find in real work or social contexts. By connecting language instruction directly to the students' professional identities and future aspirations and completing projects with real and high impact, ESP interventions will be more authentic, significant, and insightful for learners, teachers, and the community. It will equip students not only with English skills but also with the confidence and practical ability to use those skills as future leaders and professionals in the global world.

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