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BALANCING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN ESP TEXTBOOKS: UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

This article examines the representation of language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbooks across various academic fields. By using a mixed-methods approach, the study gathered quantitative data through evaluation scales and qualitative insights via semi-structured interviews with ESP teachers in technical, medical, natural sciences, and humanities. Quantitative analysis, by using SPSS 21, included descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis of interviews provided deeper context to the findings and further elaboration of responses. The study reveals that speaking and listening skills are often underrepresented compared to reading and vocabulary-focused tasks related to it, whereas writing falls somewhere in between. These results underscore the need for textbooks to incorporate a balanced approach to language skills development, ensuring students are well-prepared for real-world communication in their respective fields. The article concludes with recommendations for textbook designers and educators, emphasizing the integration of interactive and skill-specific activities tailored to diverse professional contexts.

Key words: ESP, English for specific purposes, textbook evaluation, language skills

1. Introduction

Language skills serve as a cornerstone of effective communication in both academic and professional settings. Traditionally divided into four core competencies—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—these skills are essential for comprehensive language acquisition and functional language use. Reading and listening are considered receptive skills, as they involve the interpretation of information, while speaking and writing are productive skills, focusing on the generation of content (HARMER, 2007), i.e. on the production of information in a foreign language. Mastery of all four skills is crucial for achieving fluency and adaptability in diverse linguistic contexts. However, in practice and in teaching and learning context, these skills are often unequally emphasized, with certain competencies receiving greater attention depending on the learning context and objectives.

In English language teaching, particularly in ESP, the integration of these skills becomes even more critical. ESP learners require a balanced development of skills to meet

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the specific demands of their professional or academic disciplines. For example, technical professionals may prioritize reading technical documents and writing reports, while medical practitioners need advanced speaking and listening abilities to communicate effectively with patients and colleagues (DUDLEY-EVANS & ST. JOHN, 1998). Despite their importance, speaking and listening skills are frequently underrepresented in teaching materials, creating a significant gap between academic preparation and real-world application (RICHARDS, 2006).

This study aims to explore the representation of language skills in ESP textbooks across diverse academic disciplines. By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, the study seeks to identify patterns in skills coverage and provide insights for improving textbook design to better align with learners' needs and professional demands. In doing so, the research highlights potential gaps or imbalances in skill emphasis, shedding light on areas that may require pedagogical adjustments.

2. Literature Review

ESP focuses on equipping learners with language competencies tailored to specific professional or academic fields, especially bearing in mind that different language skills might be relevant for different scientific fields. For example, technical fields often require precise terminology and report-writing skills, hence writing skill might be more important for IT field, when compared to other fields. On the other hand, medical disciplines emphasize communication with patients and colleagues, which implies that speaking skill is crucial for them. Therefore, some studies (e.g. GU & REN, 2019) underline the importance of tailoring textbooks to these diverse requirements, ensuring that all language skills are adequately represented. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 69) also emphasize the need for balanced skills development to meet real-world communication demands. However, existing literature highlights that many ESP textbooks prioritize reading and grammar over speaking and listening (DUDLEY-EVANS & ST JOHN, 1998). This imbalance can be traced back to traditional approaches in language teaching, which often emphasized linguistic accuracy over communicative competence (RICHARDS, 2006).

Another recurring issue in ESP materials is the lack of integration across skills. For example, Basturkmen (2010) notes that ESP materials frequently fail to integrate skills holistically, instead compartmentalizing them in ways that may not align with real-world use. This lack of integration of language skills not only hampers comprehensive language acquisition but also limits learners' ability to apply their knowledge in dynamic professional settings. Innovative approaches, such as incorporating multimedia resources and interactive tasks, offer some potential to address these gaps (MISHAN, 2022), among other things. Ideally, ESP textbooks should provide a balanced and integrated approach to reading, writing, listening, and speaking, ensuring that learners can transfer their skills seamlessly into professional contexts. However, in practice, achieving such integration remains a challenge.

Recent research has also suggested the potential of technology-enhanced learning to bridge these gaps by incorporating interactive, multimodal tasks that promote skill integration (MISHAN & TIMMIS, 2015). For example, simulations, gamified activities, and virtual role-plays have been shown to significantly enhance the acquisition of speaking and listening skills, particularly in contexts requiring active engagement (MOT-

TERAM, 2013). Task-based and problem-solving activities that simulate real-world professional scenarios can enhance the cohesion of language skills, making learning more relevant and engaging. There is often not enough time or resources for implementing this type of activity in the classroom, so technology can help here by including accessible, on-demand learning opportunities that extend beyond the limitations of classroom instruction. Online platforms, virtual reality (VR) environments, and adaptive learning systems can provide learners with immersive experiences that mirror authentic workplace interactions, which is the whole point of ESP, as many teachers would argue. Moreover, digital tools facilitate self-paced learning, allowing students to practice and refine their skills in a flexible manner. Additionally, learner-centered approaches that integrate collaborative tasks have proven effective in fostering both linguistic competence and critical thinking (HYLAND, 2006). Interactive activities, in general, have numerous benefits and they should be prioritized in ESP and ELT teaching. It might be the case that a textbook does not cover all four language skills, but with interactive tasks it can be improved, to a certain extent.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and instruments

The study involved five ESP university teachers (N=5) from technical, medical, natural sciences, and humanities disciplines, aged 38-58. For the purpose of this study, the participants evaluated the textbooks that they use in their ESP classes and were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives. The research was conducted at the University of Kragujevac, in 2023, during the second part of the academic year. In this way, we wanted to ensure that the teachers in our sample had at least one semester behind them in which they had used the books that they would evaluate. All participants gave their consent for their answers to be used for scientific purposes and their participation was voluntary.

Data collection was conducted by using two main instruments: an evaluation scale, where participants rated textbook content on skill representation by using a Likert-scale instrument (values were from 1: absolutely not present, to 7: absolutely present) and a semi-structured interview, where teachers provided qualitative insights into the strengths and weaknesses of ESP textbooks concerning skill coverage. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 21, with descriptive statistics summarizing means and standard deviations, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns in teacher feedback.

3.2. Textbooks (corpus)

In the field of medical sciences, the analyzed textbook was *English in Pharmacy,* by Leontina Kerničan, which focuses on terminology through reading texts, phrasal verbs, and writing exercises. It lacks grammar explanations and tasks, as well as comprehensive reading and speaking practice. The teacher from the field of medical sciences supplements the book with additional materials for grammar and conversational activities. The textbook is estimated to align with B1 proficiency level according to the CEFR.

As for the humanities, specifically the field of economics, the textbook which

was analyzed was *Business English in Use – Finance,* by Ian Mackenzie. This textbook consists of 50 modules covering finance-related topics and each module includes reading and vocabulary exercises, with some discussion questions. However, writing and listening skills are absent, and grammar is not explicitly included. Despite these gaps, the textbook provides answers and a glossary, making it partially self-contained.

In technical sciences, the textbook that was used was *Professional English in Use – ICT,* by Santiago Remacha Esteras and Elena Marco Fabre, which features 40 modules on topics like internet communication and programming. It primarily focuses on vocabulary and reading comprehension, with minimal support for speaking and other skills. Visual aids enhance the understanding of terminology and texts, which is one of the advantages of this textbook. This resource targets learners at B2 proficiency level.

Finally, natural sciences differ from other fields in that students rely on a teacher-compiled script rather than a formal textbook. The script contains 12 modules with a strong emphasis on vocabulary and reading. Speaking is practiced through debates, while listening and writing are not represented. Grammar exercises are integrated but at a B1 level, contrasting with the B2-level vocabulary.

As can be observed, ESP materials differ significantly across fields, with medical and economics textbooks showing the most gaps in comprehensive skills coverage. The technical sciences textbook offers better visual support but still lacks integration of all skills. Natural sciences rely on teacher-curated materials, showcasing the need for well-rounded, standardized textbooks. Considering all the specific features of the textbooks from our sample, this analysis highlights the critical need for ESP textbooks to balance language skills and align with field-specific requirements, suggesting areas for improvement in future editions and instructional materials.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Findings

The analysis of evaluation scales, as can be observed in *Table 1*, revealed notable differences in the perception and coverage of language skills in ESP textbooks across various academic disciplines. Reading emerged as the most highly rated skill, with an overall mean score of 5.72 (out of 7). This finding reflects its fundamental role in ESP courses, where comprehension of specialized texts is critical. In humanities, reading received the highest rating (6.37), highlighting the need to interpret complex discourse and engage with theoretical content. In technical sciences, reading was also a priority (5.0), primarily because vocabulary acquisition in these fields occurs through written materials, such as manuals and specifications. Similarly, medical sciences placed a strong emphasis on reading (6.25) due to the necessity of precise terminology in professional communication and patient care.

In contrast, speaking skills showed considerable variation across disciplines, with an overall mean of 5.22. While humanities (6.37) and medical sciences (6.25) rated speaking highly, emphasizing the need for oral communication in professional settings, technical sciences assigned the lowest rating (1.62). This suggests that textbooks in technical fields underrepresent speaking activities, possibly due to a stronger focus on written documentation rather than interactive collaboration. The ESP teacher in the field

of medicine highlighted the lack of structured conversational exercises, such as role-playing patient interactions, which are essential for developing effective communication skills in healthcare contexts.

Listening skills received mixed evaluations, with an overall mean of 4.1. While technical sciences rated listening as relatively important (6.0), reflecting the need to understand verbal instructions and workplace discussions, medical sciences assigned the lowest rating (2.1), indicating a significant gap in audio-based materials. Across all disciplines, teachers pointed out that textbooks lacked recorded lectures, real-life dialogues, and other listening activities that simulate authentic professional scenarios. This aligns with broader research findings that highlight the consistent neglect of listening skills in ESP material development.

Writing skills were the most underrepresented in ESP textbooks, with an overall mean of 3.05, showing considerable disciplinary variation. While medical sciences rated writing as the most important and present in the materials used in class (6.1), likely due to the necessity of clinical documentation and patient records, humanities assigned the lowest score (1.8), reflecting a greater emphasis on interpretation and discussion over written production. Technical sciences rated writing moderately (4.0), indicating its relevance in drafting reports, specifications, and project documentation. However, teachers across all fields noted that writing tasks often lacked contextualization and were not sufficiently tailored to the learners' real-world professional environments.

These findings underscore the imbalanced distribution of language skills in ESP textbooks, with a strong focus on reading and vocabulary (which is not a language skill per se but cannot be separated from reading) at the expense of productive and interactive skills. Addressing these gaps by incorporating more field-specific speaking, listening, and writing activities could significantly enhance the effectiveness of ESP materials, making them more aligned with students' professional and academic needs.

Table 1. *Results for reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills based on t*eachers' assessments of ESP textbooks across different fields

Language Skill	H (M)	NS (M)	T (M)	M (M)	Overall (M)	Min/Max
Reading	6.37	5.5	5.0	6.25	5.72	5.0/6.37
Speaking	6.37	5.94	1.62	6.25	5.22	1.62/6.37
Listening	3.3	5.0	6.0	2.1	4.1	2.1/6.0
Writing	1.8	2.3	4.0	6.1	3.05	1.8/6.1

H-humanities, NS-natural sciences, T-technical sciences, M-medical sciences

4.2. Qualitative Insights

Within the semi-structured interviews, the teachers highlighted several points, emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses , while also referring to students' needs. The textbooks were commended for their comprehensive coverage of field-specific terminology (vocabulary or lexis) and alignment with professional discourse. Teachers in technical and natural sciences appreciated the focus on industry-specific vocabulary, which was seen as vital for academic and career advancement.

As for the weak points of the textbooks, a lack of interactive activities and insufficient focus on conversational skills were common areas of criticism. The teacher in

the medical field particularly noted the absence of realistic patient-communication scenarios, which are essential for fostering empathy and professionalism, both important for future doctors and pharmacists. The teacher claims that "there are almost no role-plays in the textbook which would help students practice their future realistic workplace communication in English".

Regarding field-specific needs, humanities disciplines rated grammar and the thematic relevance of activities related to language skills highly, whereas technical and natural sciences emphasized the need for practical, hands-on activities. Teachers in medical sciences stressed the importance of including simulations and case-based discussions to better prepare students for real-world applications. As far as each skill is concerned, reading is one of the most essential ones, according to teachers' responses. Teachers unanimously recognize the pivotal role of reading in ESP textbooks, given its importance in introducing field-specific terminology and fostering comprehension of technical or academic content. However, they note that reading tasks often remain surface-level, primarily focused on vocabulary acquisition without delving into critical analysis or synthesis. For instance, the teacher from the field of humanities emphasizes the need for tasks that encourage interpreting and critiquing complex texts, while the teacher from the technical field advocates for exercises that mirror real-life scenarios, such as interpreting user manuals or technical specifications. Both teachers stated that "reading tasks should be more challenging and engaging" which would contribute to their practical value. Research by Grabe and Stoller (GRABE & STOLLER, 2013) supports these views, highlighting that effective reading tasks should incorporate strategies like summarizing, questioning, and connecting ideas to professional applications.

Listening exercises, often deemed the "weak link" in ESP textbooks, are underrepresented despite their critical role in professional settings. In the medical field, for example, the teacher points out the necessity of audio materials that simulate doctor-patient dialogues or hospital briefings, as these reflect real-world interactions. The teacher from this field once again emphasized that "the importance of realistic input and output, in listening and in speaking tasks". Similarly, the ESP instructor in technical field highlights the lack of exposure to industry-specific spoken English, such as presentations or collaborative meetings and points out that "ESP textbooks need to provide opportunities for students to be exposed to and practice their specific type of discourse, such as discussions in meetings and delivering presentations". According to Field (FIELD, 2009), effective listening tasks should replicate authentic environments, including varied accents, speech rates, and interactive components to prepare learners for diverse auditory experiences. Hence, it is vital to have effective listening tasks incorporated into the textbook.

Speaking skills, essential for effective communication in most professional contexts, are frequently underdeveloped in ESP textbooks. ESP teachers from our sample report that many speaking exercises consist of generic discussion prompts rather than structured activities like debates, role-plays, or project-based presentations. For instance, the teacher from the field of medicine advocates for role-playing scenarios, such as delivering diagnoses or discussing treatment plans, while the teacher from the technical field emphasizes the need for collaborative activities like team problem-solving or explaining technical processes. Richards and Rodgers (2014) suggest that speaking activities in ESP

should be task-based, contextualized, and designed to mirror authentic communication challenges.

Writing tasks in ESP textbooks received mixed reviews. While they are often included, teachers are critical of their generic nature, which fails to address the specific demands of professional writing. As for the field of medicine, the teacher notes the absence of tasks like drafting case reports or patient summaries, while the teacher form the IT field highlights the lack of exercises focused on creating technical documentation or professional emails. Both teachers point out that "writing tasks, if any, rarely help students develop writing skills necessary for their future profession, due to their generic and template-like features". Many authors (e.g. HYLAND, 2003) emphasize the importance of genre-specific writing instructions, which would align writing tasks with professional practices, thus enhancing their relevance and practicality.

Across disciplines, teachers identified some common challenges, such as the lack of integration among these four skills in ESP textbooks. For example, reading tasks rarely lead to speaking or writing activities that require learners to articulate or document their understanding. Similarly, listening exercises seldom serve as a foundation for subsequent discussions or presentations. Most of the tasks are independent and can be done separately, which is not useful enough for students. Some authors (BASTURKMEN, 2010; DUDLEY-EVANS, & ST. JOHN, 1998) argue for a more integrated approach, where textbooks provide seamless transitions between skills, reflecting their interconnected nature in professional environments.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce existing concerns about the imbalance of language skills in ESP textbooks (BASTURKMEN, 2010; GILMORE, 2007). The strong focus on reading and vocabulary acquisition aligns with previous studies, which have shown that ESP textbooks tend to prioritize passive knowledge consumption over active language production (NATION, 2001). This is particularly evident in technical disciplines, where reading materials dominate due to the necessity of understanding complex technical documentation. However, the lack of interactive and communicative elements poses a major challenge for students who will need to collaborate in multilingual professional settings.

Medical students' dissatisfaction with the lack of listening materials supports Ferguson's (2013) argument that medical ESP courses should emphasize real-world spoken interactions. Without sufficient exposure to spoken discourse, students risk being unprepared for critical communicative tasks, such as explaining diagnoses, interacting with patients, and collaborating with colleagues. The absence of structured speaking activities further compounds this issue, as students lack opportunities to practice spontaneous communication.

Similarly, students from technical fields highlighted the need for more multimodal learning materials. This finding aligns with research indicating that engineering and technology students benefit from visually supported input, such as diagrams, schematics, and technical flowcharts (BINDER, KRAUSS, & BRUCKMAIER, 2015). While textbooks in these fields often provide extensive reading materials, they frequently fail to integrate speaking and writing tasks that would allow students to articulate complex

technical concepts more clearly.

A notable aspect of the study is the relationship between students' learning experiences and their perceptions of textbook effectiveness, based on teachers' insights. Students in more interactive classroom environments expressed a higher demand for speaking and listening components, suggesting that exposure to communicative tasks increases awareness of their importance. This finding supports the argument that textbook design should align with pedagogical approaches that emphasize task-based learning (LONG, 2015).

Given these insights, the study underscores the necessity of reforming ESP textbook design to offer a more balanced representation of all language skills. One potential solution is the incorporation of digital learning resources, such as interactive audio exercises and online discussion forums, to supplement traditional textbooks. Additionally, textbooks could integrate authentic workplace scenarios, allowing students to develop language skills in a contextually relevant manner.

Ultimately, these findings highlight the pressing need for ESP materials to move beyond passive knowledge acquisition and actively engage students in meaningful language use. By addressing these gaps, textbook developers and educators can ensure that ESP courses effectively prepare students for the linguistic demands of their future professions.

Field-specific variations further highlight the need for tailored textbook design. One size does not fit all in ESP. For example, medical textbooks should incorporate role-plays and case studies to simulate patient interactions, while technical materials could benefit from collaborative problem-solving exercises. Additionally, the lack of integration between skills suggests an opportunity for incorporating innovative approaches. Digital tools such as interactive learning platforms, applications, and virtual simulations could address the identified gaps by providing environments where students can practice conversational skills and listening comprehension. For instance, virtual patient simulators in medical fields could allow students to engage in realistic diagnostic dialogues, enhancing both fluency and accuracy. Similarly, gamified tasks, such as language quests, field-specific challenges or quizzes, can foster motivation and provide immediate feedback, encouraging active participation. By blending these digital innovations with traditional content, textbooks can evolve into comprehensive tools that bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application.

5.1. Recommendations and implications

There are certain recommendations that can be drawn from the research, based on teachers' perceptions and their valuable insights shared in the interviews. For textbook developers, it might be useful to take into consideration including interactive activities that emphasize speaking and listening skills, as well as to tailor content to field-specific scenarios, by incorporating authentic materials. By all means, integrating digital resources, such as QR codes linking to supplementary videos and audio exercises can only have benefits, since it would be interesting for both learners and teachers.

Another area for future research is the role of technology in supplementing traditional ESP materials. Studies investigating the effectiveness of blended learning approaches, which combine textbook-based instructions with digital tools, could provide

important insights into how technological advancements can bridge the gaps identified in this study. As for the teachers and ESP instructors, it would be useful to supplement textbooks with additional materials to address identified skill gaps. Also, when possible, it could be helpful to use collaborative learning strategies to enhance skills development and improve the interactive aspect of tasks.

Additionally, comparative studies across different educational institutions and cultural contexts could help determine whether these findings are globally applicable or if specific regional factors influence the perceived importance of language skills. Research exploring how students in non-English-speaking countries perceive ESP textbooks compared to those in predominantly English-speaking environments would further contribute to the field.

The research has certain limitations and implications for the future. When it comes to limitations, the sample size is the most obvious one, so it would be practical, and it would have more impact to expand the sample size and conduct this type of interview with ESP teachers from all universities in Serbia. Along with that, conducting longitudinal studies to assess the impact of balanced skill representation on learning outcomes would also benefit future ESP development. Since there is room for innovations in ESP, it could also be interesting to explore the use of emerging technologies to enhance textbook interactivity and to see how modern digital tools enhance the development of language skills in the ESP context. More in-depth qualitative research, such as case studies, could provide richer insights into how students engage with ESP textbooks in their day-to-day learning. Investigating classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions would shed light on how pedagogical strategies can either compensate for or exacerbate the limitations of existing textbooks.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the strengths and limitations of ESP textbooks in representing core language skills. While reading and vocabulary related to it are well-supported, speaking, writing and listening remain underdeveloped, particularly in technical and medical fields. Addressing these gaps requires a harmonized effort from textbook developers and educators to design materials that are both field-specific and skills-inclusive. For teachers, this means supplementing textbooks with tasks that encourage interactive and real-world applications, such as role-playing or collaborative projects. For textbook developers, the integration of digital resources, like interactive simulations and multimedia content, can enhance the balance of language skills and foster greater learner engagement. By implementing these practical changes, ESP textbooks can evolve to meet the diverse needs of students, equipping them with the communication skills essential for professional success in their respective fields.

Based on teachers' responses, it is evident that different disciplines prioritize unique skill sets. For instance, medical fields demand strong interpersonal communication skills, while technical fields emphasize precise technical writing and interpretation of complex data. These distinctions underline the importance of customizing textbooks to align with disciplinary requirements. Authentic materials were identified as a critical factor in engaging students and fostering the practical application of language skills. Textbooks incorporating case studies, professional articles, and real-world problem-solving

tasks were more effective in preparing students for professional challenges. Additionally, the study emphasized the value of incorporating feedback from both teachers and students in the textbook development process. Teachers' insights into pedagogical challenges and students' feedback on usability and relevance can guide the creation of more effective materials. Finally, the integration of modern technologies such as learning management systems (LMS), gamified tasks, and learning and teaching applications emerged as promising solutions to skill gaps, since they encourage active participation and continuous learning, both of which are crucial for ESP.

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(RAVNOMERNA) ZASTUPLJENOST JEZIČKIH VEŠTINA U UDŽBENICIMA ZA EJS: UVIDI IZ NASTAVNIČKE EVALUACIJE UDŽBENIKA

Rezime

U radu se ispituje zastupljenost jezičkih veština – čitanja, pisanja, konverzacije i slušanja – u udžbenicima engleskog kao jezika struke (EJS) u različitim akademskim oblastima i naučnim poljima: tehničkom polju, u prirodnim naukama, humanističkim naukama i medicini. Koristeći pristup mešovitih metoda, istraživanjem su prikupljeni kvantitativni podaci kroz skale za evaluaciju i kvalitativnim uvidom putem polustrukturisanih intervjua sa nastavnicima tehničkih, medicinskih, prirodnih i humanističkih nauka. Kvantitativna analiza pomoću SPSS 21 uključila je deskriptivnu statistiku i t-testove za identifikaciju značajnih obrazaca, dok je tematska analiza intervjua pružila dublji kontekst dobijenih rezultata i dalju elaboraciju odgovora ispitanika. Istraživanje otkriva da su veštine govora i slušanja često nedovoljno zastupljene u poređenju sa zadacima čitanja i vokabularom, odnosno leksikom koja je u vezi sa pisanim diskursom, dok je pisanje bilo negde u sredini. Ovi rezultati naglašavaju potrebu da udžbenici sadrže uravnotežen pristup razvoju jezičkih veština, budući da je bitno da studenti budu dobro pripremljeni za komunikaciju u stvarnom svetu u svojim oblastima. Rad se završava preporukama za autore udžbenika i nastavnike, naglašavajući integraciju interaktivnih aktivnosti kao primarni cilj i aktivnosti specifičnih za veštine prilagođene različitim profesionalnim kontekstima.

Ključne reči: EJS, Engleski kao jezik struke, evaluacija udžbenika, jezičke veštine