

STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) GROUP DISCUSSIONS: A CASE STUDY AT A UNIVERISTY

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Abstract: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) constitutes a pedagogical approach to English language acquisition. It provides students by learning language in a certain context. Studies on implementing group discussion have been done, but not focusing on their engagement. Thus, this study investigates student engagement in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) group discussions at a university level. ESP courses are designed to meet the specific language needs of students in professional or academic contexts, enhancing their communication skills relevant to their fields. The research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing thematic analysis to explore students' experiences and perspectives. Data were collected through classroom observations and interviews with eight undergraduate students from two higher education institutions in Indonesia. The findings reveal that group discussions in ESP classes significantly enhance students' oral communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. However, challenges such as unequal participation and language anxiety were also identified. The study underscores the importance of effective moderation and structured discussions to ensure equitable participation and maximize engagement. These insights have practical implications for improving instructional strategies in ESP courses, ultimately fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, group discussion, students' engagement

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most dominant international languages, English serves as the main communication tool between individuals from various countries and cultural backgrounds. In an academic context, English is commonly used as the language of instruction in research, scientific journals, and international conferences. (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 2013). Students who have good English skills will have broader access to learning about the latest research and actively participating in academic forums (Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015). In the professional sphere, English is deemed an exceedingly crucial proficiency and is anticipated from individuals aspiring to engage in a global work environment (Martín-González & Chaves-Yuste, 2024). English is utilized across various international industries such as commerce, management, technology, and finance. A robust proficiency in English often constitutes one of the principal criteria in employment selection processes, given that the capacity to communicate with clients, colleagues, and business partners from various nations is imperative for forging successful professional relationships. Achieving fluency in English provides individuals with a competitive

edge in career development, international cooperation, and access to broader learning and research opportunities.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) constitutes a pedagogical approach to English language acquisition aimed at fulfilling the distinct necessities of learners within specific domains, such as science, business, or technology. (Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015; Asmali, 2021; Lesiak-Bielawska, 2015). The implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides an opportunity for students to refine their English language proficiency within a professional context (Bolton & Jenks, 2022; Kamberi et al., 2020). They can acquire knowledge of business communication ethics, compose employment application letters, or prepare for presentations at international academic conferences. All these elements contribute to equipping students for entry into an increasingly globalized workforce (Bekteshi & Xhaferi, 2020), wherein the capability to communicate in English constitutes a competitive advantage.

Integrating group discussions within ESP (English for Specific Purposes) enables learners to not only enhance their language abilities but also to develop academic and professional competencies through active participation and engagement (Bui, 2022). The purpose of group discussions in ESP learning is to fortify oral communication skills, cultivate teamwork and problem-solving abilities, and broaden learners' understanding of their field of study (Ertmer, 2006). Through active interaction in group discussions, learners can improve their English language skills in accordance with the needs and demands of professional or academic environments (Wester, 2020).

By studying ESP, students can not only gain proficiency in general English language skills, but also absorb specific linguistic capabilities tailored to their respective discipline or profession. These acquired skills will assist them in maintaining competitive edge in an increasingly global workforce (Anthony, 2018). In his writings, Anthony delineates four primary tenets of ESP, namely Needs Analysis, Material Development, Methodology, and Stakeholder Involvement. These pillars aid ESP instructors in comprehending the specific language requirements of learners, developing pertinent materials, selecting appropriate teaching methods, and engaging stakeholders to ensure the efficacy of the ESP program.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for General Purposes (EGP) represent two distinct approaches in English language education. Since the emergence of ESP in the 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been regarded as more efficacious than English for General Purposes (EGP) owing to ESP's more specialized and directed focus (Anthony, 2009). The teaching methods and learning materials in ESP are specifically designed based on students' needs and learning motivations. Meanwhile, English for General Purposes (EGP) refers to the teaching of English intended for general usage in daily life, not associated with specific academic

or other specific needs. EGP focuses on the development of English language skills that can be applied across various everyday communication contexts, such as informal conversation, letter writing, or general article reading (Dobakhti, 2021). Biria & Tahririan (1994) examines several methodologies within the pedagogy of ESP. The methods employed encompass the translation method, the reading method, the rhetorical method, the communicative approach, and the rhetorical approach.

Student engagement refers to the multifaceted aspects of student involvement in the learning process at the higher education level, encompassing three primary dimensions: active engagement, which relates to the participation and effort of students in learning activities; emotional engagement, which emphasizes students' feelings towards their learning and educational institution; and behavioral and emotional engagement, which combines aspects of students' actions and emotional responses towards learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Kahu (2013) defines student engagement as the time and effort that students dedicate towards activities with an educational purpose, both in terms of student behavior and the institution's pedagogical practices.

Student Engagement plays a pivotal role in learning outcomes. This is due to student engagement referring to the extent to which students interact and participate in the teaching-learning process, which directly influences their understanding and mastery of the learning material. Various research findings indicate a significant and strong correlation between overall student engagement and their academic achievement (King, 2015; Lei et al., 2018; Zhu, 2010). Engagement in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects has been found to positively correlate and have a significant impact on students' academic success (Lei et al., 2018; Pietarinen et al., 2014).

Group discussions refer to the interactions between group members in creative sessions where they discuss and debate emerging ideas and issues, playing a crucial role in shaping the students' creative processes and influencing the group's creative performance (Sibo et al., 2023). Group discussions as a creative learning strategy are exceedingly beneficial during speaking classes as they foster interaction and learning, encourage motivation, and cultivate respect for others' ideas (Rahmat & Jon, 2023). Furthermore, group discussion proficiency is associated with oral English language skills and reading comprehension (Zhang et al., 2016).

Several studies have previously been conducted on group discussions. One such study by Asri, et al., (2021), who investigated the implementation a collaborative learning in students' English speaking. The research found that there were positive result of the implementation. Although insignificant, the practice of this technique cannot be considered a failure. The insignificance were caused by the education background of the students and mostly, the use of

bilingual language from both the lecturer and students were still allowed that the students did not feel the urgency in using English. This finding is in line with Kahu (2018) which states student engagement is viewed as a variable state influenced by various student and institutional factors, as well as the socio-political context in which the students, faculty, and institution exist.

Moreover, the research conducted by Sibero et al., (2023) stated that student engagement does not only refer to the level of activity or participation of students during group discussions, but also how they interact, provide feedback, and contribute to the overall creative process. This study shows that the use of challenging arguments rather than objections can encourage collaboration in creative discussions, thereby increasing the level of student engagement because challenges prompt them to seek new solutions and open up space for new ideas.

This research is delineated with the objective of comprehensively describing student' engagement within group discussions in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses within a university setting. Student engagement will be observed based on their active participation, inclusive of the frequency and quality of contributions within discussions. Additionally, this study aims to identify the factors influencing their engagement levels, including but not limited to teaching methodologies, discussion structures, technological support, individual student motivation, and group dynamics.

METHOD

The qualitative approach was chosen as the suitable method for this study, aiming to thoroughly explore the students' understanding and experiences related to the teaching methods applied and their connection to their learning processes within the ESP group discussions. The collected data was analyzed using a qualitative analysis approach, specifically using thematic analysis to identify and elucidate themes and patterns of students' engagement in ESP group discussions. This study was conducted in two higher education institutions located in two different regions in Indonesia, namely in Malang and West Kalimantan, sampling from a group of undergraduate students. A total of eight respondents, comprising first-year and third-year undergraduate students from both universities, were involved in this research. Respondents were selected through a random process with their participation being voluntary. From the initial 10 respondents who consented to participate, only 8 students were available for interviews, which included 3 female and 5 male students. The researchers actively engaged in group discussions and recorded behaviors, interactions, and the level of student engagement through participatory observation. This observation provided profound insights into how students engage in discussions and the factors influencing this.

Additionally, semi-structured interview techniques were employed to gain further understanding of students' perspectives regarding their engagement. Individual interviews were

conducted with students who participated in the group discussions. Data was also collected through document analysis including discussion notes, transcripts, or written or oral assignments produced by students during the discussions. In analyzing the data, each interview was video recorded and subsequently fully transcribed by the researcher. Following this, a thematic analysis procedure was employed for data analysis and interpretation. This allowed for the identification of themes and patterns within the transcribed (recorded) qualitative dataset, where these themes were categorized based on the interview questions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the students' shared experiences and perspectives during group discussions, several key outcomes related to their engagement emerge, namely:

1. How do you feel when the teacher asks you to have a group discussion?

The opportunity to participate in group discussions often generates excitement. This is evidenced by the respondents' answers, which is

"In my opinion, I feel excited. Especially when I am in groups with my active classmates so that I can really hear about their POV." (S6)

The respondents (S5, S6) introduce their excitement about group discussions, especially when paired with active classmates, for the diverse perspectives offered. Not only because of the various points of views, group work also allows them to gain the opportunity to share their knowledge as stated by (S3). In general, the respondents testify that group discussion motivates them for it is interesting to be able to speak their minds and to find some new ideas from other classmates.

Meanwhile, (S1; S2; S4; S7; and S8) confessed that group discussion is not something enthusiastic for them. (S1 dan S4) feel that a group discussion is a burden since there will be irresponsible group members for the task. They revealed that there are often people who only rely on other members. On the other hand, (S7 and S8) point out that even though group discussion is burdensome, they agreed that it makes the task easier and quicker to finish.

2. What do you like when having a group discussion?

A significant benefit of group discussions is the exposure to a multitude of opinions and knowledge bases. The diversity of thoughts enriches the discussion and provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This is supported by the statement of (S5), who states that:

"I see a different POV and it is really valid in my opinion. And the opinion that was given by my friend is an opinion that I never thought about before. So it's really, really a good opinion with the knowledge that I have never heard before. Skills that I have improved during the group discussion that I have experienced is to respect another perspective."

Not only (S5) who acknowledges the importance of different viewpoints during group discussions, particularly valuing an opinion from a group mate that they had not previously considered, (S2; S3; S6, S7 and S8) also emphasize how such diverse perspectives can lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive final opinion that represents the group as a whole, not just an

individual viewpoint. This shows the respondents' appreciation for the variety of thoughts and knowledge each group member brings to the discussion, which enriches the overall learning experience and outcomes. (S1 and S4) share a similar perspective about having a group discussion. They revealed that they will feel relieved if the members are responsible and are diligent. Only then, they think, the task can be done sooner. The excitement stemming from group discussions as a teaching method creates a dynamic and engaging learning environment, effectively involving students in a deeper learning process. These results align with the research findings of Aderibigbe, S. A. (2020) and Linneman (2019), which revealed that group discussions not only enhance interactions among students but also deepen their understanding of the course material. In the proper configuration, group discussions facilitate a rich exchange of ideas, enabling students to explore various perspectives and critique their own understanding, which continually enriches their learning experience.

3. What experience do you get during a group discussion?

The respondents interviewed have diverse answers during group discussion when it comes to the experience acquired. (S3 and S4) point out that a group discussion offers them the opportunity to get to know more of their friends' personality. It helps them to build good relationships with others. (S2, S5 and S6) see that group discussion provides them a chance to handle an unexpected situation and find a solution accordingly since there are contradictory opinions. In line with The findings from the research conducted by Sudarmika et al. (2020) provide a strong argument for the significant benefits of engagement in the exchange of diverse perspectives, not just in the academic learning context but also in fostering broader social impacts. The outcomes of Sudarmika's research encourage us to reflect on the crucial role that educational strategies play in preparing individuals not only academically but also socially, by promoting empathy, understanding, and the ability to navigate complex social landscapes with awareness and respect for diversity.

4. What are the challenges in having group discussion?

Respondent (S5) shares the challenge of individuals who may present their opinions strongly but do not show respect for others' perspectives or opinions, essentially dominating the discussion or dismissing alternate views.

"So the challenges I have experienced when I have a group discussion is that there are some person that they really give their opinion really well. But they don't respect another perspective or opinion given by the group mate so that this kind of person thinks that their opinion is the best." (S5)

This leads to a challenge which includes reaching consensus when multiple strong and valid opinions are presented. This situation can test the group's ability to negotiate and collaborate professionally, transcending personal biases. As the respondent describes a scenario where despite all group members having strong individual opinions that are considered good, they must select

just one. This selection process can be challenging and potentially strain relationships, although it is taken as a part of professional group dynamics.

Even though Group Discussion serves as a means for exchanging ideas, it still has its own drawback as conveyed by (S3; S4) in the interview which states that it is harder to finalize the assignment since there are many opinions because task completion tends to take longer time.

"So it is really challenging and really, what do we call it, can make our friendship broken, I think. But no, it's just a professional thing. I think that's all for the challenges."

In addition, another challenge comes from students who are not confident with their skill of speaking English. According to the interview (S1; S2; S3 and S4) the use of English in a group discussion makes them anxious. They confess that they have difficulty in delivering their ideas in English because they are not accustomed to the language. When the other members are more fluent, they become reluctant to speak their ideas because of their fear of making mistakes in speaking English. In line with the research conducted by Fredricks et al., (2004), the highlighted challenges, especially regarding participation and the dominance of a few voices, underscore the need for effective moderation and structure in group discussions. These challenges serve as a reminder of the importance of creating an environment where all participants feel valued and heard, ensuring that discussions remain inclusive and equitable in student engagement.

5. What skills or knowledge do you improve during a group discussion?

Group discussions are fertile grounds for learning and skill development. Exposure to diverse educational backgrounds and areas of expertise within a group allows for the exchange of skills and information that might not be available in a traditional learning environment. As what the respondent transitions from discussing challenges to focusing on the skills and knowledge improvement experienced through group discussions. This section explicitly highlights the diverse learning and skill acquisition opportunities presented by group discussions.

"Challenges I have experienced also I gave in the number two, right? So, we are next to number five. What skill or knowledge do you improve during a group discussion? I have had so many new skills and knowledge from my experience of doing a group discussion."

The respondents (S1, S2, S3, S4 S6 and S7) have similar opinions regarding the skill they gain during a group discussion. It is to practice their speaking skill and to be less anxious in conveying ideas. They agree that their communication skills improve by doing the group discussion. They learn how to appreciate other people's ideas and respect others as stated by (S5). The respondents (S1 and S2) admit that they have the room to speak their mind during group discussion.

CONCLUSION

This research found not only that Group Discussions improve students Engagement in learning English, but it is also a highly valued component of the learning process for students. They elicit a sense of excitement and opportunity, allowing students to engage with diverse perspectives, share ideas, and develop a strong sense of teamwork. While challenges such as

ensuring equitable participation do arise, these serve as catalysts for improving communication and facilitation skills. Through these discussions, students not only deepen their subject matter understanding but also enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills. Nevertheless, team members surprisingly bring off students' engagement in ESP group discussions. Although small group discussions and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) offer many benefits in enhancing student engagement and the teaching of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), there are several drawbacks that need to be addressed and overcome to ensure the effectiveness and success of these methods in various educational contexts. The limitations of time and a population involving only 8 respondents can affect the generalization of the research findings to a broader population. It is hoped that future research can involve more respondents so that it is sufficiently representative for broader generalization.

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