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Understanding ESP Learners' Views on the Importance of the Four Language Skills in Professional and Business Settings

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how English for Specific Purposes ESP learners' view on the importance of the four macro-skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening in professional and business settings among Indonesian university learners. Despite widespread recognition of English as a key medium in global workplaces, empirical evidence regarding students' prioritisation of these skills remains limited, particularly in Indonesia. A quantitative survey was conducted among 47 university learners enrolled in ESP programs employing a structured questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale to capture perceptions across the four skill areas. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, and the questionnaire had been reviewed through expert validation to ensure content appropriateness. Descriptive statistical analyses showed that reading had the highest mean score (3.553), followed by speaking (3.547), writing (3.542), and listening (3.516), indicating consistently high perceived importance across all four macro skills. The findings underscore the need for ESP curricula to integrate all four skills and cohesively align instructional practices with workplace expectations. This study contributes to the literature by providing a holistic view of learners' views on English macro-skill importance and offers practical implications for curriculum designers and educators seeking to enhance learners' readiness for global professional communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has become a key medium of communication in professional and business environments, shaping how organisations operate and collaborate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In Indonesia, this role has expanded as companies increasingly interact with regional and international partners, making English a practical requirement in many workplace contexts[1]. Companies in diverse sectors rely on English to coordinate work with

international partners, serve global clients, and interact with colleagues from different language backgrounds. For university learners preparing to enter these settings, the ability to use English effectively influences participation in meetings, comprehension and production of business documents, engagement with presentations, and management of everyday workplace exchanges. Empirical evidence highlights a strong relationship between English proficiency, participation in global professional activities, and broader career opportunities [2], [3]. These demands create considerable pressure on students enrolled in English for Specific Purposes programs, who are expected to develop communication skills that directly support their future professional roles.

Research in ESP has examined language needs in various disciplinary and occupational contexts. Studies have documented English use in engineering [4], hospitality and tourism [5], healthcare [6], and maritime industries [7], demonstrating that workplace communication requires forms of English that vary according to professional purposes and activities. Although this work contributes meaningful insights into context-specific language demands, many investigations tend to focus on particular skills in isolation, such as speaking for workplace interaction [8] or writing for professional documentation [9]. Other research describes overall language needs without examining how students evaluate the importance of the four core skills comprehensively as a foundation for communication in business settings. Consequently, evidence remains limited regarding how ESP students perceive speaking, reading, writing, and listening when considered together as 4 language skills components of workplace readiness.

In Indonesia, interest in ESP continues to expand in universities preparing students for employment in business and other professional domains. Despite increased scholarly attention, existing research provides only a partial understanding of how students prioritise the importance of each core skill, and findings across studies show notable inconsistency regarding which skills are perceived as most essential [10], [11]. Such variation suggests a need for further empirical inquiry. Clarifying students' views is important because these views influence learning approaches, motivation, and confidence in meeting communication demands in real professional environments. Speaking enables meaningful interaction with colleagues and clients; reading supports engagement with business texts and industry information; writing underpins the preparation of reports, emails, and memos; and listening facilitates comprehension in presentations, meetings, and negotiations. Understanding how students collectively value these skills can provide important guidance for designing ESP instruction that closely aligns with professional realities.

Self-efficacy theory offers a relevant conceptual basis for interpreting these views. Self-efficacy is defined as individuals' beliefs about their capability to perform tasks successfully, shaped by mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional states [12]. In ESP contexts, self-efficacy plays a central role because learners' confidence influences their willingness to participate in demanding communicative tasks and their resilience in high-stakes interactions. Empirical studies show that higher levels of self-efficacy in speaking are associated with greater active participation in discussions and improved performance in professional communication [13], [14], [15]. Similarly, self-efficacy contributes to strategy use in reading [16], [17], [18], confidence in managing professional

writing genres [19], [20], and persistence in handling real-time listening tasks involving diverse accents or rapid delivery [21], [22]. Viewing ESP students' views of 4 language skills through a self-efficacy lens, therefore, enables a deeper understanding of why certain skills are prioritised and how perceived importance may correspond to perceived capability or readiness.

Building on these considerations, the present study examines how ESP learners perceive the importance of speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills for professional and business communication. The investigation seeks to provide empirical evidence that can inform curriculum development and the design of instructional practices that better reflect workplace expectations. The study addresses **the following research questions:**

RQ1. **How do ESP learners perceive the importance of four language skills for communication in professional and business contexts?**

The aim is to provide a clearer understanding of how learners prioritise these four macro language skills in preparation for future employment. Insights generated from the findings are intended to support ESP educators and curriculum designers in enhancing instructional approaches that foster readiness for real workplace communication demands.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine ESP learners' views on the importance of four English macro-skills in professional and business settings. A quantitative survey approach was selected because it enables researchers to measure attitudes, perceptions, and tendencies across a defined set of variables in a structured and systematic manner [23]. This design aligned with the objective of the present study, which required numerical evidence representing learners' evaluations of speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills.

The research was conducted at a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. English for Specific Purposes courses at this institution are embedded within business-related academic programs and emphasise workplace-oriented communication tasks. Learners in Management and Accounting programs routinely engage with professional texts, presentations, and business scenarios in English. This learning environment provides direct exposure to the skill areas examined in the questionnaire and reinforces the relevance of selecting ESP learners as the study population, consistent with previous ESP research situated in vocational and business education contexts.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Study Program	Management	29	61,7%
	Accounting	18	38,3%
Gender	Male	16	34%
	Female	31	66%

The participants consisted of 47 undergraduate learners enrolled in the Management and Accounting programs. Purposive sampling was used to recruit learners who met the inclusion criteria: active enrollment in a business-related study program and completion of at least one ESP course. Learners from English language programs or those who had not yet

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undertaken ESP courses were excluded. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the aim is to access individuals with the specific experiences needed to provide informed responses to the research questions [24]. Participation in the study was voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, students were presented with an introductory statement outlining the study's purpose, the estimated completion time, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Learners indicated consent by choosing to proceed with the questionnaire. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were treated anonymously. A summary of the participants' demographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of sixteen items representing the four core English language skills. Each skill area, speaking, reading, writing, and listening, was assessed through four evaluative statements. Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Survey questionnaires are widely used in quantitative research because they provide a standardised instrument for collecting measurable data from a defined population [23]. To ensure clarity, relevance, and content accuracy, the questionnaire underwent expert validation by two specialists in ESP and applied linguistics. Expert review is a widely recognised procedure for establishing instrument suitability in perception-based research [25], [26]. The final questionnaire was distributed to learners via Google Forms, and responses were collected during a designated administration period.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each item and for each skill category to determine the perceived degree of importance. Frequency distributions were examined to identify overall patterns of responses within the sample. Descriptive statistics are appropriate for research that seeks to provide a clear representation of learners' perceptions rather than establish predictive or causal relationships [27]. All responses were coded and processed using SPSS. The analytic procedures included calculating means, standard deviations, and percentage distributions for each questionnaire item. Nee and Yunus proposed a four-point Likert scale interpretation, which was adopted to analyse the central tendency results in this study [28]. The mean scores for each item and construct were interpreted using this scale to determine learners' levels of perception, and results were grouped to identify overall tendencies and variations among constructs. The data analysis procedures followed guidelines for quantitative data analysis recommended by Creswell, which emphasise organising the dataset, conducting statistical computations, and interpreting numerical patterns in relation to the research objectives [23].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

This study aimed to describe ESP learners' views on the importance of the four English language skills in professional and business communication contexts. The quantitative data describe how the participants viewed the relevance of English speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills for business settings. Overall, all measured skills fell within the Strongly Agree range (4.00 to 3.00), though with varying degrees of emphasis

across items. The following subsections present the results by skill category, with item codes included for clarity.

Speaking Skills

The responses for speaking skills show consistently high agreement, with three items positioned in the upper range of Strongly Agree. The item with the highest mean was S1 (3.765), indicating that participants placed significant importance on speaking competence for building communication networks in global business contexts. This high value suggests that learners perceive spoken English as a direct gateway to professional interaction beyond local settings.

Similarly, S4 (3.744) reflects a strong recognition of the demands of international communication, especially when interacting with clients or colleagues from different linguistic backgrounds. The proximity of means between S1 and S4 shows that learners do not separate general business communication from specific intercultural encounters, implying an integrated understanding of speaking as both a strategic and interpersonal requirement.

S2 (3.553) reinforces this pattern. Although slightly lower, it still shows that fluent speaking is regarded as essential for conveying business ideas and concepts. This indicates that learners associate speaking skills not only with social or interpersonal purposes but also with cognitive and professional expression.

Among the speaking items, S3 produced the lowest mean (3.127). Even though it remains within the Strongly Agree range, this value stands out because it reflects a degree of hesitation about their confidence in professional or business speaking situations. This contrast between perceived importance (high means in S1, S2, S4) and personal confidence (lower mean in S3) suggests a gap between awareness and self-efficacy, a recurring pattern in EFL contexts where learners value English but feel underprepared to use it spontaneously in formal settings.

Reading Skills

The participants showed strong recognition of the relevance of reading for business communication. R2 achieved one of the highest means in the entire dataset (3.723), indicating that learners saw reading proficiency as vital for keeping up with international market trends. This shows that reading is not merely a classroom task but a gateway to global information sources that students may depend on for their future careers.

R1 (3.574) and R3 (3.468) further indicate that learners view English reading as a practical tool for processing the kinds of documents commonly encountered in business environments, such as reports, emails, and market analyses. The difference between R1 and R3 suggests that learners distinguish between current reading demands and anticipated future responsibilities, with slightly higher confidence in present tasks.

R4 (3.446) underscores the need to understand formal or technical documents. This slightly lower value compared to R2 suggests that technical reading may be perceived as more demanding, even though learners still strongly agree on its importance. Taken together,

the reading items indicate a robust awareness of English reading demands across both routine and specialised business tasks.

Writing Skills

The writing domain shows steady and consistent values, with all items falling in the Strongly Agree range. The highest means appear in W1 and W4, both at 3.595. These items relate to composing business emails and conveying ideas in a global setting, indicating that learners view written English as a tool for maintaining professional clarity and ensuring their messages are understood across contexts.

W2 (3.531) highlights that learners recognise the role of written English in preparing reports, proposals, and presentations. This suggests that learners perceive writing as a skill tied not only to communication but also to documenting formal business processes.

W3 (3.446) underscores the belief that clear written communication enhances professional credibility. Although this value is slightly lower than the others, it still aligns with the general pattern, showing that written English is viewed as essential for building a trustworthy professional presence. The consistently high means across writing items reveal that students see writing as both a communicative and reputational asset in business environments.

Listening Skills

The listening skill items also showed high agreement. L1 (3.659) indicates that learners understand the critical role of English listening for following business conversations, presentations, and negotiations. This high value suggests that learners view listening as a fundamental part of participating in fast-paced or information-rich business interactions.

L2 (3.638) reinforces the communicative role of listening by emphasising the need to understand client expectations. This points to the perception that listening is not a passive skill but one that demands active interpretation and responsiveness.

L3 (3.553) reflects a belief that listening skills can improve through practice. This slightly lower mean, compared to L1 and L2, shows that learners may view listening development as a gradual process, potentially reflecting their own experiences with comprehension challenges.

L4 (3.212) has the lowest mean among listening items. Although still within the Strongly Agree range, the value suggests that familiarity with vocabulary or business terminology plays a major role in determining how well learners understand spoken English. This reflects a practical recognition that comprehension varies with situational and lexical demands, suggesting that vocabulary is a perceived barrier in certain listening contexts.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate a layered picture of how ESP learners interpret the demands of English communication in professional and business settings. Although the results indicate strong acknowledgement of the importance of speaking, reading, writing, and listening, the data also reveal noticeable gaps between learners' recognition of these

demands and their personal sense of preparedness. This divergence offers meaningful insight into how learners situate themselves within the increasingly globalised communicative expectations of the workplace.

Starting with speaking, the responses confirm that learners regard oral communication as the most visible and immediate measure of competence in business. They associate speaking ability with persuasion, leadership, negotiation, and professional credibility. This resonates with earlier ESP research emphasising the centrality of oral interaction in globalised work environments [29], [30]. Nevertheless, despite this strong valuation, several indicators point to a lack of confidence, particularly in unfamiliar or high-stakes situations [31]. This tension between perceived importance and self-doubt has appeared in previous research on EFL and ESP learners, where high speaking anxiety often coexists with strong recognition of speaking as a gateway to career advancement [32]. A plausible explanation is that many learners have not had sustained exposure to task conditions approximating real professional encounters. Bandura's framework on self-efficacy is helpful here: without repeated mastery experiences and realistic performance environments, learners struggle to internalise the belief that they can successfully navigate professional speaking tasks [12]. Similar findings in Hastini et al. and Liu also demonstrate that structured speaking practice anchored in realistic communicative demands can substantially elevate learners' speaking efficacy [33], [34]. This suggests that the discrepancy observed in the present study is neither accidental nor isolated; rather, it reflects a wider pedagogical gap in preparing learners for authentic professional engagement.

The pattern becomes even more interesting when considering reading. Learners consistently described reading as a key channel for accessing industry knowledge, market trends, and specialised information. Their responses show that they view reading not merely as an academic exercise but as a practical form of literacy tied to professional judgement. Such interpretations align with ESP scholarship that describes reading in professional settings as a sophisticated interaction with genre, discourse, and domain-specific vocabulary [35], [36]. However, learners also expressed reservations about dense or technically written materials, suggesting that the sophistication of business texts poses recurrent challenges. Prior studies have documented similar struggles, particularly among learners moving suddenly from general EFL curricula to genre-heavy ESP environments [37]. What distinguishes the present findings is the clear sense that learners are aware of the relevance of these texts but feel unequipped to navigate them at the level of depth required in professional situations. This indicates that while their cognitive understanding of relevance is solid, their strategic reading skills may not yet be sufficiently developed to manage genre conventions, specialized terminology, or rhetorical complexity.

The findings related to writing further reinforce this theme. Learners repeatedly emphasised that writing carries reputational and interpersonal weight in business communication [38]. They described written texts such as emails, proposals, and reports as opportunities to project professionalism, accuracy, and competence. This perspective echoes arguments that workplace writing functions as both communication and identity performance [39], [40]. Nevertheless, learners also acknowledged that complex writing tasks remain difficult, especially when required to adhere to specific professional formats. This

discrepancy has been noted in ESP literature, where learners often feel comfortable with sentence-level or paragraph-level writing but are less prepared for longer or genre-specific documents [41]. The present findings suggest a similar disconnect: learners recognise the social impact of writing but lack consistent exposure to tasks that simulate real workplace demands. Without such exposure, their awareness of importance does not necessarily translate into confidence or competence.

Listening presents another point of tension. Learners clearly understood its role in business contexts, particularly for meetings, negotiations, and professional presentations. At the same time, they felt that domain-specific vocabulary and fast speech patterns significantly reduced their ability to interpret spoken information accurately. This problem is not new; research has consistently shown that listening in ESP contexts demands far more than linguistic decoding, requiring contextual knowledge, familiarity with professional discourse, and rapid processing of specialised terminology [42], [43], [44]. The present results confirm that these hurdles persist and continue to shape learners' confidence. What stands out is that learners were not dismissive of listening tasks. Instead, they approached them with a sense of reasonable caution, acknowledging that improvement requires continued exposure to authentic discourse rather than textbook-mediated exercises.

Overall, the findings contribute to theory by illustrating that ESP competence is not merely a combination of language skills but an interplay among self-efficacy, genre awareness, and perceived communicative legitimacy. The results support the argument that ESP instruction must be situated in activities that capture the complexity, unpredictability, and multimodal nature of actual workplace communication[38]. Overall, the findings contribute to theory by illustrating that ESP competence is not merely a combination of language skills but an interplay among self-efficacy, genre awareness, and perceived communicative legitimacy. The results support the argument that ESP instruction must be situated in activities that capture the complexity, unpredictability, and multimodal nature of actual workplace communication[31], [38]. From a practical standpoint, the findings point to several considerations for curriculum design. Speaking instruction would benefit from simulations of pitches, negotiations, or roundtable discussions that replicate authentic communicative pressures. Reading modules should include market analyses, reports, and industry briefs that provide realistic exposure to professional discourse. Writing tasks could emphasise documents learners are likely to encounter in future careers, complemented by explicit modelling of rhetorical expectations. Listening activities should include unscripted business interactions, multi-accent recordings, and domain-specific audio materials, with assessment focused on comprehension, accuracy, and interpretive ability. Sample tasks and rubrics can be provided in an appendix to guide practitioners in implementation.

Reading modules should include market analyses, reports, and industry briefs that provide realistic exposure to professional discourse. Writing tasks could emphasise documents learners are likely to encounter in future careers, complemented by explicit modelling of rhetorical expectations. Listening instruction should incorporate unscripted business interactions, multi-accent recordings, and domain-specific audio materials to mirror real-world conditions.

Despite the strength of these insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. Because the study relied solely on self-report measures, the results reflect learners' perceptions rather than direct assessments of their communicative performance. Self-perception does not always align with actual competence, and this may have influenced the patterns observed. The use of purposive sampling from a single private university also introduces sampling bias, as the perspectives of these learners may not represent those of students in other regions or institutional types. The small sample size further limits statistical power and reduces the extent to which the findings can be generalised beyond the immediate study context. In addition, the survey instrument did not include statistical reliability or validity coefficients, which constrains the strength of its psychometric evidence. Students' backgrounds and experiences within the Indonesian educational and cultural context may also have shaped how they evaluated the importance of different skills. The absence of qualitative data limits the depth of explanatory insight. Interviews, classroom observations, or performance-based assessments would have enriched the interpretation of why students evaluated certain skills the way they did.

Future research should therefore consider adopting mixed-methods designs to explore both perceptual and performance-based aspects of ESP competence. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for examining how learners' perceptions evolve as they gain more exposure to professional tasks through internships, field projects, or early employment experiences. Practically, institutions could explore partnerships with industry to create more immersive communication experiences, allowing learners to encounter professional discourse communities before completing their studies. Such initiatives could help bridge the gap between perceived importance and actual preparedness that emerged so clearly in this study.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how ESP learners perceive the importance of speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills in professional and business contexts, and the findings point to a clear pattern: learners consistently regard all four skills as essential for participating in global workplace communication, yet their sense of preparedness differs across domains. Speaking is viewed as the most crucial because of its role in negotiation and interpersonal interaction, while reading is valued as a gateway to specialised knowledge; writing is associated with professional credibility, and listening is acknowledged as important but more difficult due to the complexity of authentic business discourse. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions in ESP scholarship by showing that although learners understand the demands of professional communication, they do not always feel fully equipped to meet them, highlighting the need for instruction that aligns more closely with real-world communicative tasks and genre expectations. At the same time, the study's reliance on self-report data and its single institutional context limit the generalizability of the findings, suggesting that further research should incorporate performance-based evidence, workplace-linked experiences, or longitudinal designs to deepen understanding of how learners develop communicative competence over time. Even with these limitations, the study underscores the central role of English communication skills in business-focused ESP programs and

offers direction for future pedagogical and research initiatives that can better support learners as they prepare for professional communication demands.

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<https://doi.org/10.58421/gehu.v5i1.857>**APPENDIX****A. Item and Level Descriptive Statistics**

Item(s)	Statement	Mean	SD
S1	I believe that good speaking English skills are very important for effective communication in building networks in global business.	3.765	0.626
S2	Speaking English fluently is essential for conveying ideas and concepts in business.	3.553	0.738
S3	I feel confident speaking English in professional or business situations.	3.127	0.732
S4	English speaking skills are very important when dealing with international clients or colleagues.	3.744	0.667
R1	The ability to read and understand English texts is important for reading business documents, reports, and emails.	3.574	0.736
R2	I believe that proficiency in reading English texts helps in understanding international market trends and industry news.	3.723	0.492
R3	Reading business related content in English is a very important skill for my future career.	3.468	0.647
R4	Good English reading skills are required to understand technical or formal documents in a business context.	3.446	0.708
W1	Writing effectively in English is important for composing business emails and official correspondence.	3.595	0.532
W2	I believe that the ability to write business reports, proposals, or presentations in English is a key skill for my professional future.	3.531	0.578
W3	I feel that writing clear business documents in English can enhance my credibility in the workplace.	3.446	0.646
W4	Writing skills in English are very important for conveying business ideas in a global context.	3.595	0.641
L1	Listening skills in English are very important for understanding business conversations, presentations, and negotiations.	3.659	0.722
L2	I believe that listening skills in English are important for interpreting the needs and expectations of international clients.	3.638	0.633
L3	I am confident that English listening skills in business contexts can be improved with more practice.	3.553	0.738
L4	When listening to English conversations, I am able to interpret well when I am familiar with the vocabulary or business jargon being used.	3.212	0.770