

Teaching English for Specific Purposes at a University: Challenges and Facilitative Strategies

Minh Tu Ngo^{1*} 

Bich Ngoc Nguyen¹ 

¹University of Fire Prevention and Fighting, Vietnam

*Corresponding author email: tunm@daihocpccc.edu.vn

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Abstract

For students at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting (UFPF), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays an important role in international integration, as it enables them to access international materials, technical standards, and recent research in the field. Moreover, professional English helps students communicate effectively in international work environments and participate in training programmes and professional seminars related to fire safety and emergency response. Nonetheless, ESP instruction still poses numerous challenges for teachers at the university. This paper analyses the major challenges faced by ESP teachers and proposes supportive strategies to address these issues. Data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten ESP teachers working at UFPF were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The results revealed that academic content knowledge, professional development, and pedagogical strategies were the main challenges faced by ESP teachers. Teachers' recommendations for improving the effectiveness of ESP teaching focus on optimising pedagogical strategies for students across various educational programmes, creating learning activities oriented towards a student-centred paradigm, and increasing university support for ESP teacher training programmes. The findings may help English teachers and universities better understand the challenges of teaching ESP and identify possible solutions to enhance the quality of ESP teaching and learning.

Keywords ESP, teaching challenges, pedagogical strategies, University of Fire Prevention and Fighting

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, globalisation has made English an increasingly important medium of communication (Dang, 2026). In the field of fire prevention and firefighting, there is a growing demand for specialised training and updated modern technology worldwide. English remains a predominant language for disseminating technical knowledge, research innovations, and global standards. Therefore, for students at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting (UFPF), English proficiency is becoming increasingly important for students as they are expected to be able to access technical manuals, international research, and updated guidelines in this field written in English. Consequently, developing competence in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is important for their academic success and future professional practice.

ESP focuses on language tailored to particular academic and occupational contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). This course plays an important role in the curriculum at UFPF because through this course, students can understand specialised terminology and theories relevant to fire prevention and fighting operations. This knowledge and these skills are necessary for their academic pursuits and professional careers, especially in an international environment. However, despite its importance, the teaching and learning of ESP at UFPF face several ongoing challenges. Instructors are often required to teach specific knowledge without formal training in fire science in English. Moreover, there are still limited opportunities for curriculum collaboration and professional training.

Research on ESP has developed over the past decades, particularly in fields such as business, engineering, healthcare, and aviation (Hyland, 2006; Belcher, 2009; Basturkmen, 2010). However, ESP in fire prevention and firefighting education has received relatively little attention in previous research. Professionals in this field must regularly engage with international safety standards, technical documents, and emergency communication in an international environment. This gap therefore requires a closer investigation. Moreover, previous studies have identified challenges faced by ESP instructors, including limited subject knowledge and difficulties in curriculum design. Teaching ESP in safety-critical settings may involve additional pressures, particularly when misunderstanding terminology or procedures could lead to serious consequences. Another problem is that research tends to identify difficulties more often than the practical solutions teachers develop in response to them.

The present study examines both the challenges encountered by ESP teachers and the strategies they use to address them at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting. By focusing on this specific institutional context, the study seeks to offer a more grounded understanding of ESP pedagogy in high-risk professional education.

Research Questions

A qualitative research design was used for this study to explore the perceptions and experiences of ESP teachers at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting (UFPF). This approach was chosen to identify the challenges faced by ESP teachers and to understand their perspectives on effective teaching strategies, as recommended by Creswell (2013) in qualitative research. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions were raised.

1. What challenges have teachers faced in teaching ESP courses?
2. What are teachers' suggested strategies for improving the quality of ESP courses in the future?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed significantly since the 1960s when there was an increasing demand for language instruction for academic and professional purposes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP is broadly defined as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19). This emphasis on purpose differentiates ESP from general English.

Widdowson (1983) states that ESP is “essentially a training operation” (p. 55) designed to enable learners to perform specific roles in their respective professional settings. Similarly, Basturkmen (2010) expands this idea by emphasising that ESP is not simply teaching a collection of technical vocabulary or phrases, but rather an educational training that integrates language acquisition with operational knowledge and real-world professional practices. Anthony (2018) highlights that ESP involves not only language but also genre awareness, cultural competence, and critical thinking skills that are important in international working environments.

Overall, ESP can be understood as an approach to teaching language that connects language learning with the demands of particular academic or professional contexts. ESP courses are designed to integrate language instruction with subject matter knowledge, enabling learners to acquire both communicative competence and professional understanding. It is also adaptable to a wide range of fields, from business and engineering to healthcare and emergency response.

The Role of ESP in Professional Education

ESP plays an important role in professional education because it connects language learning to the workplace environment. ESP supports international collaboration and professional development in various fields such as business, engineering, healthcare, aviation, and law as English is generally used to access technical documents and international standards (Hyland, 2006).

ESP becomes particularly important in technical and vocational education. In this context, learners are expected not only to understand specialised terminology but also understand operational procedures and communicative practices effectively. Flowerdew (2013) states that the significance of ESP is amplified in technical and vocational settings as learners here are required to be familiar with both linguistic matters and professional standards.

The role of ESP is particularly noticeable in high-risk sectors such as fire prevention and emergency response. Proficiency in subject matter English enables employees in this field to comprehend international safety protocols, interpret technical documents, and coordinate international disaster aid operations. For example, in firefighting and rescue, the ability to read and apply the guidelines of international frameworks such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is critical to operational success and safety.

ESP courses also help students develop the ability to communicate effectively in professional and international contexts (Hyland, 2006). Thus, ESP courses not only prepare students’ language competence but also equip them with the capability to participate in global professional networks, collaborations, and lifelong learning. Several pedagogical developments in ESP have been introduced, including the integration of task-based learning and simulation activities in classrooms (Ellis, 2003). These approaches have been shown to improve learners’ motivation and performance. However, the effectiveness of these innovations still depends on institutional support and the teachers’ preparedness.

Recent Trends in ESP Research

Contemporary ESP research has expanded beyond traditional concerns of vocabulary and grammar instruction to include workplace communication, technology integration, and professional identity development. A systematic review of ESP studies published between 2014 and 2023 found increasing attention to teacher-related issues, technology-supported learning, and professional communication practices (Nguyen et al., 2024). The review also highlighted the growing emphasis on vocational and professional contexts where English is used as a tool for accomplishing real-world tasks rather than as an academic subject alone.

An emerging trend concerns the professional development of ESP teachers. Contemporary studies indicate that ESP instructors continue to face challenges related to limited subject-specific knowledge, curriculum design, and needs analysis. Rather than working only as language instructors, ESP teachers are increasingly expected to serve as curriculum designers, materials developers, and moderators between language and disciplinary knowledge (Huang et al., 2024). Several studies also emphasise the importance of continuous professional development, expert collaboration, and institutional support in addressing these challenges (Nguyen & Sit, 2025). Similarly, Huang et al. (2024) argue that ESP teachers require ongoing professional development to respond effectively to evolving workplace demands and specialised communication practices. These findings suggest that ESP teaching requires not only linguistic expertise but also the ability to adapt instruction to rapidly changing professional environments.

Despite these developments in ESP research, studies focusing on highly specialised and high-risk professions remain limited. Most ESP studies have concentrated on business, healthcare, and engineering. Fields such as firefighting, rescue services, and emergency management have received comparatively little attention in the ESP literature. Consequently, there is still an insufficient understanding of the specific challenges encountered by ESP teachers working in these contexts and the strategies they employ to address them.

Challenges in ESP Teaching

Despite the recognized benefits of ESP, its implementation involves several challenges. These difficulties have been identified across different educational contexts. One of the most frequently reported concerns is teachers' limited subject matter knowledge. According to Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991), language teachers are often asked to teach specialised knowledge that is not part of their formal training. This deficiency may create uncertainty about terminology and the accuracy of teachers' explanations, especially in technical training. Basturkmen (2010) also notes that this knowledge gap can affect both teacher confidence and instructional effectiveness, especially in highly technical fields such as fire safety, rescue, engineering, or healthcare. Evidence indicates that they remain common in modern ESP contexts. Bayram and Canaran (2020) found that novice ESP teachers frequently struggle with curriculum development, materials selection, and collaboration with subject specialists. Similarly, Afrezah et al. (2024) in recent investigations into ESP teacher suggests that instructors often experience uncertainty when teaching highly specialised content outside their academic backgrounds.

Another challenge relates to pedagogical preparation. Many ESP teachers have been trained in general English or applied linguistics but receive limited formal preparation for teaching ESP (Richards & Farrell, 2005). They lack guidance on how to conduct needs analysis and design

subject-related materials. Anthony (2018) similarly points out that this challenge leads to a reliance on instinctive approaches that may result in a mismatch between learners' needs and instructional practices. A study by Huang et al. (2024) further indicates that inadequate professional development opportunities continue to constrain teachers' ability to respond effectively to learners' occupational needs.

Materials also place pressure on ESP teachers. Specialised materials remain scarce, especially in less commonly taught fields (Belcher, 2009). This often forces teachers to adapt authentic documents which are time-consuming and require technical consultation from experts. Without consultation, this may lead to a lack of technical accuracy. In the study by Kim (2024), the findings show that although authentic materials are widely recommended in ESP instruction, teachers frequently face difficulties identifying, adapting, and evaluating specialised resources that are both linguistically and professionally relevant.

According to Hyland (2006), ESP learners may not recognise the relevance of English to their future careers, particularly when they expect that their job roles mainly involve local-language workplaces. Furthermore, when the level of language proficiency of learners is unequal, it may be difficult to implement communicative and interactive approaches. After the COVID-19 pandemic, applying digital technologies in language education has become more prominent than ever before. Training and institutional infrastructure therefore play a significant role in bridging this gap.

Facilitative Strategies in ESP Teaching

While these challenges are significant, previous research has also identified several ways to enhance the quality and effectiveness of ESP instruction. Collaboration between ESP teachers and subject experts is highly recommended. Basturkmen (2010) states that working with subject specialists ensures the accuracy and relevance of the syllabus, materials, and assessments. Even informal cooperation may help teachers clarify unclear terminology and professional procedures. Therefore, co-teaching or consulting with field professionals bridges teachers' subject-knowledge gaps. Researchers have further suggested that interdisciplinary partnerships contribute to more authentic learning experiences and help bridge the gap between language instruction and professional requirements (Huang et al., 2024).

Professional development plays a crucial role in supporting ESP teachers. According to Anthony (2018), training in needs analysis, materials design, and technology integration can help teachers adapt effectively to specialised contexts. Ongoing professional development increases ESP teachers' confidence and competence. In their study, Nguyen and Sit (2025) found that professional development opportunities increase teachers' confidence in handling specialised content and adapting instruction to learners' occupational needs.

Using authentic materials is another strategy that the teachers mentioned. Rather than relying only on textbooks, ESP teachers are encouraged to adapt real-world documents such as technical manuals, safety protocols, and case reports that match learners' proficiency levels (Hyland, 2006). This approach not only guarantees content relevance but also enhances learner motivation by helping students recognise the connection between classroom knowledge and professional tasks. Similarly,

Kim (2024) argues that ESP materials should be evaluated not only for linguistic appropriateness but also for their relevance to workplace communication and professional tasks.

Related to teaching practice, some research recommends activities to engage learners in the lesson. Ellis (2003) points out that task-based and scenario-based activities encourage students' participation in the classroom. In addition, research suggests that learner motivation tends to increase when English learning is clearly connected to students' future professional needs and career development (Hyland, 2006). Connecting classroom tasks directly to learners' future professional contexts helps enhance engagement and participation. Contemporary ESP studies continue to support this view, suggesting that career-oriented tasks and authentic workplace communication activities increase learners' participation and investment in learning (Nguyen & Sit, 2025). In high-risk professions such as firefighting, simulations of emergency calls or reading international safety standards (e.g., NFPA guidelines) can provide opportunities to practise workplace communication in realistic situations.

Technology may support ESP learning when it is implemented appropriately. Technologies such as digital tools and interactive online platforms promote learner engagement (Dang & Robertson, 2010; Hyland, 2006). Therefore, training teachers in these tools enhances their ability to deliver motivating and effective instruction. Several studies suggest that technology can significantly enhance ESP instruction when aligned with professional communication needs. Nguyen et al. (2024) found that technology integration generally has positive effects on learners' language achievement and engagement in ESP courses. Digital platforms, simulation-based learning, and AI-supported tools can provide learners with authentic workplace experiences while reducing teachers' materials-development burden (Crompton et al., 2024). However, successful implementation requires adequate teacher training and institutional support.

While ESP faces several challenges, existing research suggests a variety of facilitative strategies ranging from teacher development, collaboration, contextual adaptation to innovative pedagogical approaches that can inform the improvement of ESP courses. These strategies can inform the adaptation and improvement of ESP training at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

A qualitative research design was employed in this study using semi-structured interviews to explore ESP teachers' perceptions and experiences. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is suitable for investigating participants' perspectives in depth in a particular social and institutional context. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow participants the flexibility to clarify their answers and experiences while still ensuring consistency throughout the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Participants

A group of ten English teachers participated in this study. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, and they were between 33 and 46 years old. Participation in this study was

completely voluntary. All participants were currently teaching English for Fire and Rescue courses at UFPF. Among them, eight were female and two were male, with general English teaching experience ranging from 10 to 23 years and at least three years of ESP teaching experience at UFPF.

In terms of educational background, two of the participants held PhD degrees in Applied Linguistics or related fields, while the remaining eight earned master's degrees in English Language Teaching. Despite differences in academic qualifications, all of them were experienced in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in the context of fire prevention and rescue operations, which helped ensure that the provided information would be insightful.

Table 1. *Demographic information of participants*

Participant	Gender	Degree	Years of General English teaching	Years of ESP teaching
T1	Female	MA	13	3
T2	Female	MA	14	5
T3	Female	MA	15	6
T4	Female	MA	12	3
T5	Male	MA	13	3
T6	Female	MA	14	5
T7	Female	MA	15	6
T8	Male	PhD	23	13
T9	Female	PhD	20	10
T10	Male	MA	15	6

Note. MA = Master of Arts; PhD = Doctor of Philosophy; ESP = English for Specific Purposes.

Data Collection

To explore teachers' perceptions, challenges, and suggestions related to ESP instruction, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 English language teachers currently involved in teaching ESP. Prior to the data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Each teacher was provided with a brief explanation of the study's objectives, assurance of confidentiality, and estimated interview duration (30–45 minutes). Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

The interview was conducted between January and February 2025. Six interviews took place in a quiet room at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting, while four interviews were conducted online through Google Meet due to scheduling constraints. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to express their

ideas comfortably. All interviews were conducted by the researcher, who had prior experience teaching ESP in the same institution.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher introduced the purpose of the study and confirmed consent to record the conversation. The interview questions for teachers were based on the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework proposed by Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters (1987). This is an approach that emphasises that ESP teaching should be guided by learners' needs, target situations, and appropriate teaching strategies. In ESP instruction, teachers play an important role in adapting materials to match students' needs, identifying learners' professional language requirements, and identifying challenges. Therefore, the interview questions were designed to explore teachers' experiences in teaching ESP, including the challenges they face in the classroom and the strategies they use to support students' professional language development.

An interview guide containing two core research questions and several follow-up prompts was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for open, flexible responses such as "What kind of support or training have you received (or not received) from your institution?", "In what ways do student English proficiency levels affect your teaching?", "Can you share a successful classroom strategy you have used for teaching technical vocabulary?", "How do you assess students' progress in ESP?", "What tools or resources (e.g., online content, visuals, simulations) have helped you?", "What kind of professional development or training would be most helpful?". All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition, field notes were taken during the interviews to capture key ideas. To enhance credibility, interview transcripts were returned to participants for member checking.

Data analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore ESP teachers' perceptions and experiences. After data collection, the transcripts were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This framework involves familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; generating initial codes related to challenges, perceptions, and recommendations; searching for themes and patterns across the dataset; reviewing the themes; defining and naming themes, and producing a report.

First, the researcher read the interview transcripts several times to become familiar with the data and identify common ideas related to teachers' experiences in ESP teaching. During this process, important points and initial observations were noted. The researcher then highlighted meaningful statements and assigned codes to different parts of the data. For example, responses such as "I often struggle with technical terminology", "Some terminology is quite hard to understand and explain" and "I do not have a background in fire science" were coded as a lack of technical knowledge and difficulty understanding specialized terms. Similarly, comments about "no workshops or seminars" were coded as lack of ESP training opportunities. Another example was the phrase "Students don't see the value of learning fire-related English" was coded as low student motivation.

After the coding process, similar codes were grouped into broader categories according to their shared meanings. For example, codes related to difficulties with technical content, explaining professional concepts, and using online resources for self-study were grouped under the category

insufficient subject-matter knowledge, instructional difficulties, and self-directed learning strategies accordingly. The researcher then reviewed and refined these categories to develop themes that reflected the major issues that the participants faced. Three main themes related to challenges in ESP teaching were identified, namely limited academic content knowledge, inadequate professional development, and pedagogical challenges. Similarly, themes related to facilitative strategies were also developed, including curriculum innovation and active learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and support for ESP professional development.

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the researcher compared the themes with the original interview transcripts to check that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' responses. Quotations from participants were selected to support each theme in the findings section. To ensure credibility and confirm the accuracy of interpretations, participants were later invited to review and validate the summary of their responses. During the analysis process, initial codes were generated from the interview transcripts and grouped into categories and themes. The coding procedure followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Examples of the coding framework, including representative codes and sample citations from the data, are provided in Appendix A. Participants are identified by using code T1 to T10, where T refers to "teacher" and the number identifies each participant.

FINDINGS

Identified Challenges

The challenges that were faced by most teachers in ESP courses could be categorised into three groups, namely limited academic content knowledge, inadequate professional development, and pedagogical challenges. Each of these categories is discussed in detail in the following sections.

Limited Academic Content Knowledge

A key challenge identified by participants in teaching ESP was their limited academic knowledge of the subject matter, particularly in technical fields such as fire prevention and rescue. Eight out of ten participants were trained in English language education, and all of them reported having minimal or no background in the specialized content areas their students were studying. The remaining two participants, who obtained their bachelor's degrees from Hanoi University of Science and Technology, stated that "Although I had taken ESP courses at university, the content was not directly relevant to the field of fire prevention and rescue" (T2, T6). These two teachers had previous exposure to ESP courses that were not closely aligned with the specific fields of fire and rescue. However, their experience with technical subjects nevertheless helped them become familiar with certain concepts.

Several teachers highlighted difficulties in understanding and explaining technical terms and procedures. One teacher shared, "My bachelor's and master's degree specify in English and Language teaching. I don't have a background in engineering or fire science, so I often struggle with the terminology" (T3). Another remarked, "Some terminology is quite hard to understand and explain to students. Especially the operating principle of some fire alarm systems or the working principle of some equipment or fire apparatuses" (T6). One teacher said, "It's hard to explain the

characteristics of some chemicals used in fire suppression as I barely have an idea myself” (T5). These examples reveal the difficulties that teachers face when engaging with unfamiliar subject matter in addition to delivering language instruction. However, not all teachers shared the same views. Some teachers, especially the teachers with more than 5 years of experience, stated that although they lacked formal technical training, they became more familiar with terminology and subject matter after years of repeated teaching and self-study. “The more you are exposed to ESP materials, the better you are”, said (T8).

Due to a lack of specific knowledge, teachers reported relying on external materials and professional support. For instance, several teachers said, “I usually have to consult Google to search to understand the terms clearly, get examples for students and YouTube videos for better understanding” (T1, T4, T5). Other teachers added, “Beside looking for information on Internet, I also ask our colleagues who teach this in Vietnamese to verify the content. It takes quite a bit to prepare for ESP lessons” (T7, T10). One teacher said, “I always have to be well prepared as an ESP teacher but sometimes I still feel a little bit unconfident when I have to explain the text for students, especially students who have onsite experiences with fire rescue” (T2).

Inadequate Professional Development

Besides limited specialised knowledge, the teachers raised another concern, namely the lack of access to professional development opportunities related to ESP teaching. As mentioned above, most teachers indicated that their initial teacher training programmes focused on general English teaching and did not equip them with the skills or knowledge needed to teach language within professional or occupational contexts. Several teachers also expressed frustration about the lack of institutional support to help them adapt to ESP teaching.

One teacher commented, “There are no workshops, seminars or resources offered to help us teach ESP. We have to train ourselves and equip the subject matter knowledge by reading and searching on the internet most of the time” (T2). “I wish we could sit down with professionals in fire safety to plan the syllabus and lesson plan together. However, sometimes it is ongoing matters and cases happen when we are in the class, so I hope that we have one specific expert to have ongoing support for us”, (T4) noted. Other teachers mentioned that practical or on-site exposure to the field could improve their understanding of the content they teach and enrich their experiences to share with students. “We wish we could have on site tour to fire department to have an insight into fire-fighting operation. We teach about the fire apparatus and equipment, but we have not seen those with our eyes. I believe that when we have practical training trips, we will thoroughly understand the content we are teaching”, said one teacher (T9). Nevertheless, one teacher noted that informal learning from other specialists from the Faculty of Specialization partly improved the lack of formal training opportunities. These subject colleagues helped them clarify difficult concepts and improve lesson effectiveness (T6, T8).

Pedagogical Challenges

In addition to content knowledge and training gaps, teachers consistently reported pedagogical challenges when teaching ESP. These included difficulties in balancing language instruction with

technical content, a lack of appropriate teaching materials, and low student motivation or engagement.

Teachers often struggled to find or create materials that are both linguistically understandable and career-relevant to their learners. One teacher explained, “Sometimes I don’t know how much English or how much content I should focus on. I teach my students the language skills to understand the text thoroughly but at the same time I need to explain the fire related content, which takes much more time than I planned” (T4). Another shared, “Fortunately, we have our course book to follow. However, we hope to have extra teaching materials such as teacher guided books or extensive reading materials for students” (T3).

Furthermore, several participants mentioned that the challenges came from students. One teacher said, “Some of the students have limited English competency and they do not see the value of learning about fire in English” (T1). Some teachers remarked, “Most of our students struggle with readings with large numbers of vocabulary from the course book. They prefer learning through communication and activities” (T2, T5, T7). One teacher noted “I find it hard to plan a lesson where students become center of the lesson and they can communicate when teaching ESP as I have to support them to go through the text and the tasks also” (T8). Another teacher remarked “Students ask me why they have to learn this specified knowledge when their job is mostly work with Vietnamese and also the document in Vietnamese only” (T10). While several teachers described students as having low motivation towards ESP learning, some participants suggested that using practical tasks and activities could engage students in the lessons. “Students seem to be more interested when I conduct activities or tasks that are connected to the real workplace”, said one teacher (T3).

Proposed Facilitative Strategies

To cope with the challenges above, the teachers have proposed a number of facilitative strategies to deal with these problems. The strategies include curriculum innovation and active learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and support for ESP professional development.

Curriculum Innovation and Active Learning

Many teachers emphasised the need to reform ESP curricula so that classroom activities and knowledge reflect real-world communicative situations. They felt that the current syllabus and textbooks often focus too heavily on general grammar points, reading skills, or vocabulary lists, which may not meet the practical needs of students for the fire and rescue work environment. Instead, they proposed task-based learning, scenario simulations, and the use of authentic materials such as safety checklists, incident reports, fire reports, and fire codes. As one teacher shared, “We hope that the course book can be renovated to be more updated, reduce the focus on grammar and vocabulary, and create more practical tasks for the students” (T8). Another teacher similarly commented “To meet students’ expectations and let students engage in the lesson, the book content should be more practical, updated with more visual materials” (T6). One participant stated, “Students respond better when we use authentic documents like fire reports or emergency checklists” (T2).

Teachers also noted the benefits of using multimedia tools, such as training videos or workplace simulations, to enhance engagement and retention. One teacher responded, “We used a simulation video of an emergency response or got students to the lab at the university. These kinds of activities made the vocabulary much more memorable” (T4). Another suggested, “I used Artificial Intelligence to create role play tasks for students, and other websites such as Quizizz, Kahoot, and Flashcard to help students learn in a more friendly and exciting way” (T5).

However, a few teachers also stated that integrating such tools and activities always requires additional preparation time and technical resources and skills at the same time. Moreover, teachers tend to create and prepare these tasks by themselves as these resources are not always available (T8, T7).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Participants frequently mentioned another strategy, namely the need for closer collaboration between English teachers and subject-matter specialists in fire prevention and rescue. Teachers noted that their limited technical background sometimes made it difficult to ensure the accuracy of the content presented in ESP classes, and collaboration with experts could help address this issue.

Teachers noted that due to their limited technical knowledge, co-designing materials or syllabuses with professionals from the fire prevention field would significantly improve the accuracy of instruction. Such collaboration was seen as not only practical but necessary as one teacher remarked, “We need professionals involved when developing ESP materials so we can make them more accurate and useful” (T3). Another teacher supported the idea, “We did have the support from our colleague; however, we hope to have a group of experts to support us to develop more relevant materials to teach ESP” (T10). One teacher suggested, “I think inviting the expert as a guest lecturer could engage the students and create a diverse learning opportunity” (T2). Nevertheless, some teachers raised collaboration challenges, such as time constraints and formal institutional support for implementation (T8).

Support for ESP Professional Development

Teachers in the interviews reported a significant lack of training and institutional support specific to ESP instruction. As discussed earlier, most teachers reported that their initial teacher training focused primarily on general English teaching and did not adequately prepare them for teaching language within a technical or occupational context. Acknowledging their limitations in specialised subject knowledge, they tended to equip themselves with further content knowledge through self-study and informal learning. Online resources were found useful for finding information about the subject matter. Also, exchanging ideas with those working in the field was another effective way to get needed information. According to the teachers, people with practical experience and content knowledge could provide useful information because that is their area of expertise. One teacher shared, “I often consult lecturers in specialized departments about technical terms in fire science, as they may have received formal training and have a thorough understanding of these terms” (T6).

For teachers who lacked ESP teaching experience, they found it useful to exchange information with experienced teachers who could offer useful tips on dealing with problems. As one teacher indicated,

“to get more experience, I sometimes attend experienced colleagues’ classes. I study a lot from them, especially their teaching methods and the way they deal with technical texts and problems” (T2). Another teacher shared the same opinion and said “Observing other teachers is also a good way to learn from each other and improve your teaching skills” (T9).

Despite these informal learning strategies, many teachers still expressed a strong desire for more structured professional development opportunities. In addition, the participants expressed a strong desire for ESP-focused workshops, mentorship, and communities of practice where they could share resources and strategies with peers. One teacher stated, “We hope to have the opportunities to join course for teaching technical or vocational English” (T9). Another teacher suggested, “We hope that our university can work with other universities and academies to organize workshops or seminars on ESP methodology, especially the universities in Police Force” (T5).

DISCUSSION

Discussion of challenges

The findings revealed that ESP teachers encountered considerable challenges related to limited academic content knowledge, inadequate professional development opportunities, and pedagogical demands in teaching English for Fire Prevention and Rescue.

Regarding limited academic content knowledge, these challenges are consistent with previous ESP research, which has identified the gap between language expertise and subject-matter expertise as a major issue in ESP instruction. As Basturkmen (2010) points out, one of the defining tensions in ESP teaching is the divide between language teachers and subject-matter specialists. Language instructors often feel underprepared to teach technical content because their training focuses on teaching general English rather than specific knowledge (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). ESP teachers often experience a complex transition from general English teaching to specialised content, particularly when they are required to engage with unfamiliar disciplinary knowledge (Kim, 2024). Similarly, Huang et al. (2024) emphasised that effective ESP teaching depends on teachers’ ability to integrate language expertise with disciplinary understanding through ongoing professional development and collaboration with subject specialists. The experiences reported by participants in this study support these findings, as many teachers relied on self-study, external resources, and consultation with specialists to compensate for gaps in technical knowledge.

This present study extends previous ESP research by demonstrating how these challenges emerge in a highly specialised and safety-oriented educational context. Unlike many ESP settings where communication is the primary concern, English courses in fire prevention and rescue programmes involve terminology, procedures, and operational concepts directly related to emergency response and public safety. Therefore, teachers not only face linguistic challenges but also experience pressure to ensure the accuracy of technical lesson content, where the consequences of insufficient subject-matter knowledge may be significant in safety-critical education.

Concerning the lack of structured professional development opportunities specifically designed for ESP teachers, participants reported limited access to ESP workshops, training programmes, and institutional support that could help them develop both pedagogical and disciplinary expertise. This

issue has been raised by Richards and Farrell (2005), who emphasised the importance of teacher development in specialised contexts. The findings reflect a global issue in ESP teaching, not only in Vietnam, namely the underdevelopment of professional training systems tailored to the unique demands of ESP educators. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) observed that many teachers are “reluctant ESP practitioners” who are assigned to teach ESP without proper preparation or support. This situation can affect teachers’ confidence and the effectiveness of instruction. Recent research from Bayram and Canaran (2020) also identifies a similar problem of insufficient preparation for specialised demands of ESP teachers. Particularly in Vietnam, continuous professional development remains an important challenge for language educators, especially in rapidly developing education (Nguyen & Sit, 2025).

Another important challenge concerned pedagogy. Teachers in this study stated that they had to balance the expectations of communicative language teaching to create a positive learning environment and the need to cover highly specialised and technical material. This challenge is even greater when students came to class with unclear motivation or low language competence. Pedagogical challenges are a common theme in ESP literature, especially in contexts where students have limited English proficiency or do not see the immediate value of English in their vocational training (Hyland, 2006). However, in the context of fire prevention and rescue education, pedagogical challenges are even more complicated because of the need to develop students’ communicative competence and their understanding of specialised content at the same time. Therefore, this finding suggests that ESP teachers require an educational approach that integrates language learning with occupational training rather than separate objectives.

Overall, the findings contribute to the ESP literature by providing evidence from the under-researched context of fire prevention and rescue education in Vietnam. While previous studies have documented similar challenges across ESP settings, the present study demonstrates that these challenges become more critical in safety-oriented education where inaccurate understanding of technical content could potentially affect professional workplace performance. This study therefore expands current understanding of ESP teacher challenges beyond traditional academic contexts.

Discussion of strategies

The findings revealed several strategies employed by teachers to address challenges in ESP instruction, including the use of authentic materials and active learning approaches, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ongoing professional development.

Regarding the use of authentic materials, these findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of using authentic materials in ESP teaching. Hyland (2006) argues that ESP instruction must be situated within real communicative tasks to be effective. Ellis (2003) similarly argues that these approaches not only increase engagement but also enhance communicative competence in real-life contexts. Furthermore, integrating active learning strategies like role-plays, simulations, and task-based activities enables students to practise both language and job-specific skills simultaneously. As Basturkmen (2010) notes, ESP is most effective when the learning content mirrors the occupational contexts of learners. This study contributes to the literature by illustrating how authentic materials can be adapted to fire prevention and rescue education. Rather than focusing only on general workplace communication, teachers incorporated authentic

documents and scenario activities and rescue procedures in classroom activities. Such practices play a significant role in helping students develop both linguistic and professional competence.

This need for interdisciplinary collaboration is consistent with literature highlighting the divide between content and language specialists in ESP (Belcher, 2006). When ESP instructors lack technical knowledge, the quality and accuracy of language instruction may be affected. This gap may be bridged with co-teaching models, syllabus co-development, or regular consultation with subject matter experts. These interdisciplinary partnerships could help address the content knowledge gap, as recommended by Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991). Sustained collaboration between ESP teachers and content experts enhances teachers' ability to integrate disciplinary knowledge into language instruction (Yu et al., 2025).

The importance of collaboration was especially evident in the context of fire prevention and rescue education. Given this highly technical educational context, teachers often rely on specialists to verify terminology, explain professional procedures, and ensure the accuracy of instructional materials. The finding from this study extends previous research by demonstrating that interdisciplinary collaboration is not only beneficial but also essential in safety-oriented ESP programmes where inaccurate interpretation of content could affect professional preparation. This collaboration helps ensure the accuracy of technical terminology and increases teachers' confidence in delivering the lessons. In highly technical ESP fields like fire and rescue, accurate interpretation of terminology and procedures is particularly important. The findings therefore suggest that institutions should consider establishing formal support for interdisciplinary planning, such as working groups, joint workshops, or regular consultations between English teachers and field experts.

The findings from this study also highlight the importance of professional development. As Basturkmen (2010) and Anthony (2018) emphasise, providing teachers with opportunities to develop both linguistic and subject matter knowledge can significantly improve their confidence and teaching effectiveness. Participants expressed a strong desire for institutionally supported training programmes, workshops, conferences, and access to updated teaching resources. This observation is consistent with recent research suggesting that ESP teachers' professional growth depends on opportunities to strengthen both pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge (Kim, 2024). Overall, these findings contribute to current ESP scholarship by highlighting practical strategies that can support teachers working in highly specialised vocational education, such as fire and rescue, which has previously received relatively little attention. Moreover, UFPF is the only higher education institution in Vietnam specialising in this field, therefore these findings offer a foundational framework for developing ESP curricula, teacher preparation, and institutional support in high-risk technical and vocational education sectors. In particular, the study emphasises the importance of authentic learning experiences, structured collaboration with subject specialists, and sustained institutional support. These findings provide useful implications for universities seeking to improve ESP programmes in technical and safety-related fields and suggest that successful ESP instruction requires coordinated efforts at both the individual and institutional levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the challenges faced by teachers when teaching ESP at the University of Fire Prevention and Fighting (UFPF). Through interviews with ten ESP teachers, several issues were

identified, including limited technical knowledge related to fire and rescue, a lack of ESP professional training, and difficulties in balancing language instruction with specialised knowledge.

Many teachers reported that their academic background was primarily in general English language teaching rather than technical fields. Therefore, explaining specialised terminology or technical procedures in fire and rescue operations thoroughly and accurately can be challenging. Teachers often rely on self-study, online resources, or informal consultation with colleagues from specialised faculties to prepare their lessons. In addition, participants pointed out that there are currently few institutional training opportunities that focus on ESP teaching in their field. Another challenge comes from classroom practice. Teachers indicated that they have to balance language development and subject knowledge, which is not always straightforward. While coursebooks provide some guidance, many teachers shared that the available materials do not always reflect the real communication tasks that students may encounter in their future professional work.

Based on these findings, several practical strategies can be considered. First, ESP courses in fire and rescue could benefit from more authentic materials from real professional environments, such as fire incident reports, operational procedures, or safety regulations. These materials may help students better understand how English is used in their field of study and engage them in the classroom. Second, closer collaboration between English teachers and subject specialists could improve the accuracy and relevance of teaching materials. For example, joint curriculum development, guest lectures from fire safety professionals, or occasional observation of technical training sessions or field trips may help teachers gain a clearer understanding of the professional context. Third, teachers expressed a strong need for professional development opportunities related specifically to ESP teaching, particularly in technical or vocational settings.

It is also important to consider the institutional context of this study. The University of Fire Prevention and Fighting is currently the only higher education institution in Vietnam that provides specialised training in fire and rescue. Therefore, ESP instruction at UFPF plays a crucial role in preparing future officers and professionals who may need to communicate in English during international cooperation, technical training, or emergency coordination. These findings provide insight into an ESP environment that differs in several ways from more commonly studied engineering or business contexts and that has not received much attention in previous research.

At the same time, this study also has several limitations as the number of participants was relatively small, with ten teachers involved in the interviews. While their experiences provide useful insights into ESP teaching at UFPF, the findings may not be generalised to all ESP contexts. Future research could involve teachers from other technical institutions to allow for broader comparison. In addition, further studies may examine how students perceive ESP learning in fire and rescue training programmes or explore how technology and simulation-based learning can support ESP instruction in safety-critical professions.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the limited body of ESP research in safety-oriented higher education by examining teacher experiences in a fire prevention and rescue training context. The findings suggest the need to adapt ESP teaching to meet the demands of a professional environment in which students will work in the near future. In highly specialised fields such as fire prevention and emergency response, effective ESP instruction requires not only language expertise but also

closer connections with professional practice. Strengthening these connections may help improve both the relevance and the effectiveness of ESP education in this context.

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APPENDIX A

Table 2 presents example of how interview citations were coded and grouped into categories and themes during analysis process. Participants are identified by using code T1 to T10, T refers to “teacher” and the number illustrates each participant.

Table 2. *Example of Coding Framework for Interview Analysis*

Theme	Category	Initial Codes	Example Extract
Limited Academic Content Knowledge	Lack of technical background	No training in fire science; unfamiliar with engineering concepts	“I don’t have a background in engineering or fire science, so I often struggle with the terminology.” (T3)
	Difficulty explaining technical concepts	Hard to explain equipment operation; difficulty understanding chemicals	“Some terminology is quite hard to understand and explain to students.” (T6)
	Reliance on external resources	Using Google; watching YouTube videos; consulting colleagues	“I usually search Google or YouTube to understand the terms more clearly.” (T1)
Inadequate Professional Development	Lack of ESP training	No workshops; no ESP methodology courses	“There are no workshops or seminars offered to help us teach ESP.” (T2)
	Lack of institutional support	Limited collaboration; no professional guidance	“I wish we could work with fire safety professionals to plan the syllabus.” (T4)
	Need for practical exposure	Desire for site visits; observation of real fire operations	“We teach about fire equipment but we have never seen them in real life.” (T9)
Pedagogical Challenges	Balancing language and content	Too much technical explanation; limited time	“Sometimes I don’t know how much English or how much content I should focus on.” (T4)
	Lack of teaching materials	Need for teacher guides; limited authentic materials	“We hope to have more teacher-guided materials.” (T3)

	Student-related difficulties	Low motivation; limited English proficiency	“Students don’t see the value of learning fire-related English.” (T10)
Facilitative Strategies	Curriculum innovation	Task-based learning; authentic documents	“Students respond better when we use real documents like fire reports.” (T2)
	Use of multimedia	Videos; simulations; digital tools	“Simulation videos make the vocabulary more memorable.” (T4)
	Interdisciplinary collaboration	Guest lectures; consultation with specialists	“We need professionals involved when developing ESP materials.” (T3)
	Teacher self-development	Peer observation; informal learning	“I attend experienced colleagues’ classes to learn from them.” (T2)

Note. Adapted from interview transcripts with teachers T1–T10.