

Students' Perceptions of the Challenges of ESP Courses: A Study from an Indonesian University

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Abstract:

The current study aims to investigate challenges experienced by ESP students. Conducted at the University of Hamzanwadi (East-Lombok, Indonesia), this study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods with two instruments to collect data, questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was electronically sent out to 100 ESP students to discover challenges they have been dealing with, which was then statistically analyzed. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a representative of 20 ESP students to examine their perceptions of the challenges, which were then qualitatively analyzed using a coding system. The results of quantitative data revealed that the students have been experiencing 5 types of challenges in learning ESP with Linguistic Competence and University Support being the two most challenging issues for over 90% of students. Meanwhile, the qualitative data showed that the five challenges were intercorrelated and affected each other. Pedagogical implications gained from this study include university officials should provide support to facilitate ESP students with potential challenges and to help them eradicate the challenges. Despite these, several limitations in this study are found including it recruited a relatively small number of participants, and it missed to explore solutions that students have employed to tackle the challenges as it can provide us with meaningful insight into the general overview of ESP courses from students' perspectives.

Keywords: *ESP courses, students' perceptions, study challenges*

1. INTRODUCTION

ESP can be defined as the English language teaching and learning, either as a second or foreign language, to students in universities or to employees in their workplaces (Hyland, 2022; Salmani-

Nodoushan, 2020; Xia, 2020). As mentioned by Rafiq et al. (2021), the purpose of ESP programs is essentially to enable learners to use English in a particular study field or in the work environment. It is therefore, ESP teachers are suggested to employ a learner-centered approach which allows them to help students develop their communication skills (Asgari & Ganji, 2020). In other words, ESP courses are expected to help increase learners' English proficiency skills in specific study programs or work areas.

With globalization and standardization nowadays, the English language has been a priority to learn and people are widely able to get prestigious jobs, travel the world, and attend international seminars or conferences. To achieve this global status, as mentioned by Basturkmen (2019), the English language should be a prime concern to learn through an appropriate program, which is the ESP courses. Different from General English programs which focus on developing students' basic knowledge of the English language, ESP courses have several absolute characteristics. One of them, as highlighted by Stoyanova (2021), is ESP courses meet learners' specific needs from specific study or work areas. In addition to this, Doiz & Lasagabaster (2021) argued that ESP program is designed to specify as closely as possible what students need through the medium of English language instruction. Aside from these absolute characteristics, some scholars (Farmati et al., 2022; Toshpulatova, 2022) have highlighted several variable characteristics of ESP programs. First, ESP is developed for primarily intermediate or advanced students. It means that ESP students should have been previously exposed to basic knowledge of the English language in General English programs. Second, ESP is designed for adult learners at the level of tertiary education. In this sense, ESP students have previously received English language exposure in the level of primary or secondary education. Third, ESP may be intended for people in certain fields or workplaces. It means that ESP programs may employ different ways of teaching instructions from that of General English programs.

Considering that ESP employs such specific features, it is not surprising that many educational institutions have established ESP courses to accommodate learners' different needs. However, as reported by many scholars (Enesi et al., 2021; Kholmatova, 2023; Park, 2021; Saraa, 2022), it is found that ESP practitioners face challenges and constraints when designing ESP programs. Those challenges may include ESP teachers limited subject knowledge, inadequate ESP source of materials, and ESP students' limited English knowledge. In relation to the last issue, very few studies have examined students' perceptions of ESP course programs, particularly in the context of Indonesian higher education institutions. It is therefore, the current study attempts to explore challenges that Indonesian ESP students have experienced, and their perceptions of the challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Studies on ESP Programs

Over the past few years, many researchers have examined challenges experienced by ESP practitioners, particularly students, across the globe. For example, Behzadpoor and Nezakatgoo (2017) conducted qualitative research in Iranian medical universities. The purpose of their study was to investigate challenges faced by 25 ESP stakeholders (teachers, students, and educational policymakers). Each group of these stakeholders was found to have dealt with different types of challenges. With regard to the students, they were reported to have been going through several challenges including a lack of English learning motivation, limited basic knowledge of English

language, and unavailability of needs analysis. Likewise, in the Cambodia universities setting, Petraki and Khat (2022) examined challenges faced by ESP stakeholders such as students, teachers, subject teachers, and graduate employees. As for the students, they were reported to have been dealing with several challenges with low levels of English proficiency being the most challenging issues for students. It is, therefore, several solutions for this particular issue were offered including facilitating students with English language courses before study commencement and mixing low and high-proficient students to allow them to learn together. Meanwhile, Almathkuri (2022) investigated the challenges by ESP students in Saudi Arabia. Using a questionnaire as the instrument of his quantitative study, he found that the students had encountered several challenges. These included ESP materials that did not meet students' level of English proficiency, students were less engaged in classroom learning activities, and ESP instructors' teaching methodology was outdated and needed to improve.

In the context of Indonesian educational institutions, some people have also examined challenges perceived by ESP students. For example, Abduh and Dunakhir (2020) explored challenges faced by 89 ESP accounting students in Makassar. Their findings showed that the students have encountered various challenges including students limited vocabularies in accounting, shy-feeling in speaking practices, inadequate ESP materials, and monotonous ESP instructors teaching. Although this study provides us with some valuable insights, it merely focused on the challenges faced by students majoring in accounting. Meanwhile, Poedjiastuti (2017) examined challenges encountered by several ESP stakeholders (teachers, students, and policymakers) in a private university in Malang. Her findings reported that each group of stakeholders has been going through different kinds of challenges in the ESP course programs. Despite the insightful information presented, this study failed to specifically focus on exploring challenges experienced by ESP students. Conducting a qualitative study in Tulungagung, Ifanti & Maunah (2021) interviewed 80 ESP students from 21 non-English departments. Their findings revealed that despite a variety of challenges the students have been dealing with, they valued the importance of learning English as it is a global language. Since the data on this study were merely gained from interviews, the findings might have the potential for subconscious bias. To generate a more valid result, therefore, it is essential that the interview process be followed up by other research instruments (Alshengeeti, 2014).

2.2 Research Questions

Based on the literature review above, it is clear that there have been few studies examining challenges experienced by ESP students from various study programs in the context of an Indonesian higher education institution. It is, therefore, the current study attempts to fill in this gap by answering the following questions:

1. What challenges do ESP students experience?
2. What are ESP students' perceptions of the challenges?

It is hoped that the results of this study provide us with some insightful information regarding the challenges experienced by ESP students in Indonesia.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted at the University of Hamzanwadi, a private higher education institution in East Lombok, Indonesia. This particular university has several study programs, each requiring

students to study ESP courses as mandatory subjects in the first year. A total of 100 students were then selected to participate in an online questionnaire by employing a random sampling technique. 20 of these 100 participants were randomly invited to volunteer in semi-structured interviews which can be seen in Table 1 below. It is worth noting that this current study is applying both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Table 1. The Information of the Interviewed Participants

Students	Gender	Study Programs	English Learning Experience
S1	F	Pharmacy	± 6 months
S2	M	Computer Engineering	±1 year
S3	M	Statistics	± 6 months
S4	M	Information System	± 1.5 years
S5	F	Informatic Engineering	± 10 months
S6	M	Primary Teacher Education	± 2 years
S7	F	Tourism	± 6 months
S8	F	Pharmacy	± 7 months
S9	F	Mathematic Education	± 2 years
S10	M	Statistics	± 1 year
S11	F	Pharmacy	± 6 months
S12	M	Computer Engineering	±1 year
S13	F	Statistics	± 6 months
S14	M	Information System	± 1.5 years
S15	F	Informatic Engineering	± 10 months
S16	M	Primary Teacher Education	± 2 years
S17	F	Statistics	± 6 months
S18	M	Pharmacy	± 7 months
S19	F	Biology Education	± 2 years
S20	M	Tourism	± 1 year

3.2. Research Instruments

This study employed two types of instruments. First, an online questionnaire was designed by adapting the Qualtrics questionnaire platform to discover the students' challenges in learning the ESP course. In this sense, the questionnaire contains five dichotomous questions related to challenges that the participants have been experiencing in learning ESP courses. They were then required to rank the challenges by selecting one of the three options: high, medium, or low. It should be noted that this particular questionnaire was previously piloted with five EFL students who had no ESP learning experiences. Several changes were made based on the pilot questionnaire analysis, such as reformulating unstructured statements and omitting irrelevant questions.

The second instrument was semi-structured interviews which were administered with the 20 representative participants. The participants were first asked a general question (ex: what do you know about ESP courses?) and followed by specific questions listed in an interview protocol. Additional questions were raised to elicit elaborate answers if necessary. It should be noted that each interview was audio-recorded to be analyzed later and conducted for about 30-45 minutes. All of these interview sessions were carried out in the participants' first language (Bahasa Indonesia) with the purpose to enable them to express their thoughts and opinions without any English language barriers.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data gained from the online questionnaire were statistically analyzed in relation to the data analysis procedure. Meanwhile, the data gained from the interview transcriptions were qualitatively analyzed using a coding system.

Table 2. Coding Scheme for the Qualitative Data

Themes	Sub-themes	Topics	Codes
A. Internal Challenges	1. Linguistic Competence	a. Basic Knowledge	A-1-a
		b. Specific Terminologies	A-1-b
	2. Digital Literacy	a. Technology Access	A-2-a
		b. Relevant Trainings	A-2-b
B. External Challenges	1. ESP Materials	a. Internet Download	B-1-a
		b. Textbooks Purchases	B-1-b
	2. Instructors' Teaching Methodology	a. General English	B-2-a
		b. Grammar Competence	B-2-b
	3. Institution Support	a. ESP Courses	B-3-a
		b. Financial Aid	B-3-b

It is worth noting that for the coding system (see Table 3 above), the technique used was an inductive coding approach in which codes were generated from the students' answers in the online questionnaire and the interview sessions (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). For example, first, the challenges that come within the participants were put into the theme "Internal Challenges" (A). Then, the students' answers which relate to language barriers were put into the sub-theme "Linguistic Competence" (1). Last, the students' answers which relate to language skills and knowledge were put into the topic "Basic Knowledge" (a). These three components (theme, sub-theme, and topic) generated a final code A-1-a.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Challenges Experienced by Indonesian ESP Students

The quantitative data gained from the online questionnaire revealed that the students have been dealing with five major challenges in learning ESP courses (see Figure 1 below).

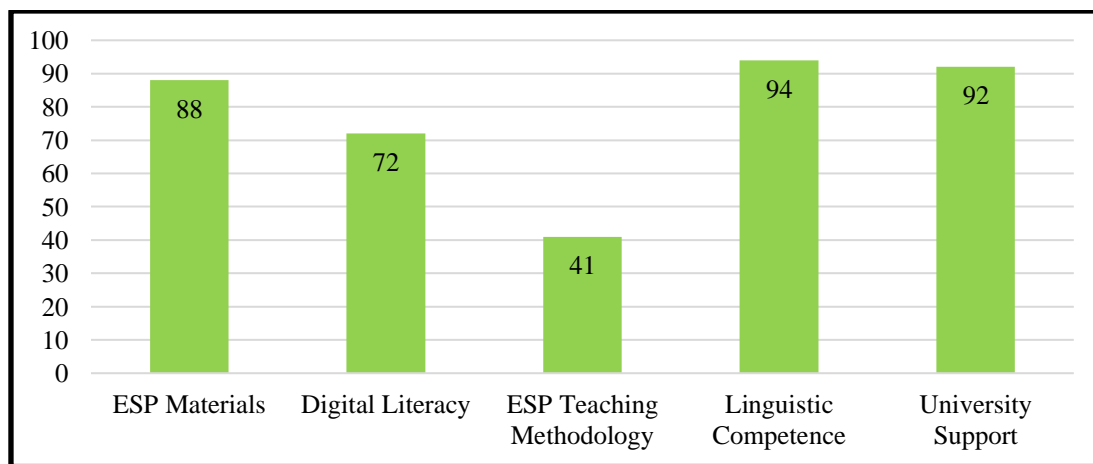


Figure 1. Types of Challenges for ESP Students

Based on Figure 1 above, it can be clearly seen that Linguistic Competence and University Support were perceived as the two most challenging issues by 94% and 92% of participants respectively. Following these, two other issues, ESP Materials and Digital Literacy were considered challenging by between 70% and 90% of participants. The least challenging issue, ESP Teaching Methodology, was voted by less than 50% of participants.

This finding aligns with that of Abduh and Dunakhir (2020). They reported that the students in their study experienced a variety of challenges in learning ESP courses. They classified the challenges into four categories called linguistic and content challenges, methodological challenges, practical challenges, and psychological challenges. Different from the current study, their study mainly focused on the challenges of ESP courses encountered by students majoring in accounting. Similarly, a study by Ozkan and Sandal (2022) revealed several challenges in learning ESP courses experienced by engineering faculty students. Although the students were competent in grammar, they had been struggling with specific terminologies. Meanwhile, a study by Petraki and Khat (2022) reported challenges faced by ESP stakeholders (students, subject teachers, English teachers, and graduate employees). Although their study provides us with a comprehensive finding related to challenges in ESP courses, they did not focus on certain groups of target participants as the opposite of the current study.

4.2. ESP Students' Perceptions of the Challenges

The quantitative data obtained from the online questionnaire reported that the students ranked the five challenges differently (see Figure 2 below). In terms of the two most challenging issues, Linguistic Competence, and University Support, more than 90% of students reported that the level of these two challenging issues was high and less than 50% of students ranked them medium and low. The complete opposite happened with the least challenging issue, ESP Teaching Methodology. As shown in figure 2 below, its level of challenge was highly ranked by only 46% of students and was ranked in the medium and low level by over 55% of students. Meanwhile, two other issues, ESP Materials and Digital Literacy, over 60% of students reported that the level of these two challenging issues was high, and under 50% of students ranked them in the level of medium and low.

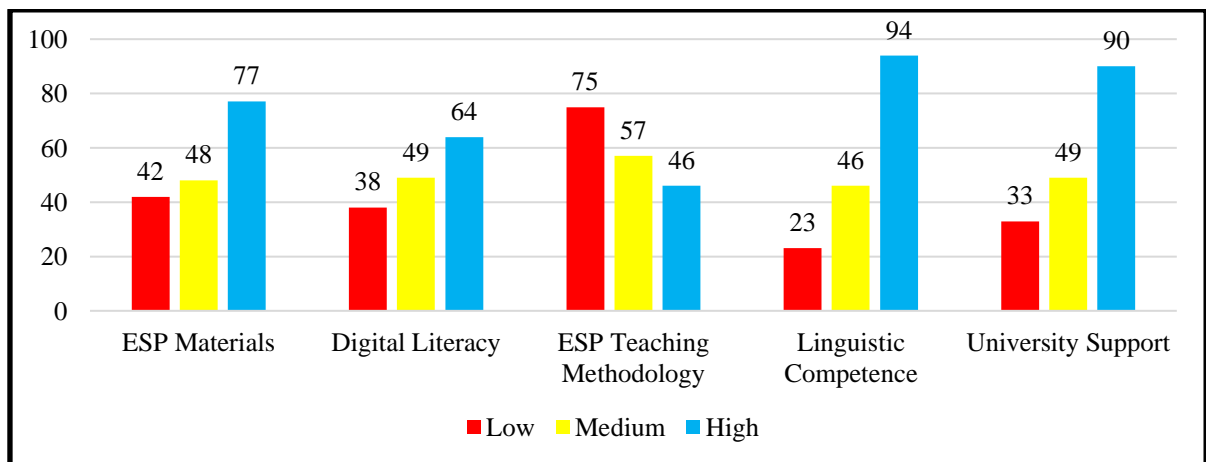


Figure 2. ESP Students' Perceptions of the Challenges

The qualitative data gained from interview sessions also revealed the students' perceptions of these challenges. In relation to the issue of Linguistic Competence, S1 and S4 mentioned that:

"Honestly, I don't have any basic knowledge of the English language. It is therefore I always feel difficulty in learning the ESP course." (Code: A-1-b)

"I am majoring in Computer Engineering at the moment. But there have been many specific vocabularies which are very hard to understand." (Code: A-1-a)

The interview excerpts above show that the students have struggled with English language knowledge and skills in the ESP course. This finding aligns with that of Abduh and Dunakhir (2020) who reported that almost half of the participants (45.5%) in their study experienced challenges in linguistic competence. One of the challenges regarding linguistic competence was the students had very limited English vocabulary. In the current study, this aspect is found to become the highest challenge in learning ESP courses.

With regard to the issue of Digital Literacy and ESP textbooks, S6 and S12 in the interview session recalled how they were struggling with digital access to relevant sources of ESP materials.

"Honestly speaking, I don't know how to download free ESP materials on the internet. People told me that there are some sites that provide free ESP textbooks to download, but I don't know what they are and how to access them." (Code: A-2-a)

"I often buy ESP textbooks with my own money. This is because I am not used to using electronic devices to access ESP materials." (Code: A-2-b)

The interview quotes above indicate that the issue of Digital Literacy strongly relates to ESP materials, the challenge that was highly ranked by 88% of students in the online questionnaire. In this sense, becoming illiterate in technology has hampered the students to the internet access of ESP materials. In relation to this, some scholars (Arno-Macia et al., 2020; Farmati et al., 2022) mentioned that university authorities need to provide assistance or support for students' learning. The issue regarding university support was also mentioned by S10 in the interview process:

"There has been no financial aid from my university for ESP materials. My friends and I often use our own money to purchase ESP textbooks." (Code: B-3-b)

Other than this, inadequate university support also relates to ESP Teaching Methodology, the issue that was perceived as challenging by less than 50% of students in the online questionnaire. During interview sessions, the students talked about that:

"My ESP teacher often teaches more general English than specific vocabulary about Informatics Engineering, my current major. It is quite monotonous and boring though. I need to study on my own regarding those specific vocabularies." (Code: B-2-a)

"I spend a lot of time to study on my own regarding specific terminologies. This is because my teacher mainly focuses on developing grammar competence." (Code: B-2-b)

The issue regarding ESP Teaching Methodology is also revealed by Sandal & Ozkan (2022). In their study, the students argued that there has been limited feedback regarding their vocabulary learning from their ESP instructors. Consequently, the students found difficulty in mastering ESP courses and became less competent in specific ESP terminologies, as found by Almathkuri (2022).

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings gained from the online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, it can be clearly seen that all five challenges are intercorrelated with each other. For example, the issue of Linguistic Competence which was perceived as the highest challenge (94%), has affected students' perceptions regarding the issue of University Support. Due to the lack of English knowledge and skills, the students argued that ESP training should be provided by their university prior to the commencement of their studies. Additionally, the students mentioned that a placement test should be administered to identify their level of English knowledge and group them based on their English language capacity. Unsurprisingly, the University Support issue was also ranked by the students as one of the highest challenges (92%) in the online questionnaire. This finding aligns with that of Petraki and Khat (2022). Conducted a study in the context of a Cambodian tertiary university, they reported that ESP students were found to have a low level of English language proficiency resulting in their having difficulty in learning ESP courses. Furthermore, 33% of them argued that there should have been an English language pre-course that was intended to equip new students with general and specific vocabularies. Likewise, the students in the current study lack of English language proficiency, and thus need academic support from their university. As this finding revealed, support from university authorities should be more addressed to practical aspects (learning facilities and resources) with the purpose to help both teachers and students with their ESP courses (Bosco et al., 2022; Mostafavi et al., 2021).

In relation to learning facilities, the students also argued that their university provided very few ESP materials, the issue which was relatively highly ranked (88%) by the students in the online questionnaire. Consequently, the students reported that they often used their own money for ESP-textbook purchases. ESP materials, as suggested by Gu (2019) and Syakur et al. (2022), should be developed by curriculum or syllabus designers after conducting a need analysis with the purpose of facilitating students' learning. Interestingly, the students in the current study correlated the issue of inadequate ESP materials with their low level of Digital Literacy, the issue which was perceived as challenging by slightly over 70% of students in the online questionnaire. Due to the lack of skills in using technology, the students could not access ESP material sources in the internet. Based on this finding, it can be assumed that, as mentioned by many scholars (Dashtestani & Stojkovic, 2016; Ramirez, 2021; Rinekso et al., 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2021), not all English language students are familiar with digital tools. As a result, the students in the current study used their own money to buy ESP textbooks. This finding aligns with that of Alvi et al. (2021). Conducted a descriptive-analytical study in Saudi Arabia, they found that 45% of ESP students in their study had low digital literacy. This particular challenge was found to have hindered the students from electronically finding ESP material resources and using digital tools in online learning. Similarly, the students in the current study were found to have limited literacy in technology, making it difficult to find ESP materials on the internet. As this finding revealed, it is, therefore, that university officials need to provide relevant training for teachers and students to enable them to become literate in digital tools (Garcia-Botero et al., 2019; Kohnke et al., 2021).

In the case of the least challenging issue (41%) reported in the online questionnaire, the students found ESP Teaching Methodology monotonous and tedious. It was also perceived as ineffective by the students since their ESP teachers primarily focused on developing grammar competence instead of exploring specific terminologies, one of the characteristic features of ESP courses (Basturkmen, 2021; Farmati et al., 2022; Stoyanova, 2021). On the contrary, a study by Avsheniuk et al. (2021) showed that the majority of ESP students highly appreciated their

teachers' teaching performances in online learning. Instead of evaluating teachers' teaching skills, however, the students in their study were asked to assess their teachers' classroom management skills (assigning classroom projects, communicating with students, and attending virtual classes). In the current study, the students appeared to focus on evaluating their teachers' teaching skills which was found ineffective. As this finding revealed, it can be assumed that the ESP teachers seemed to have received limited relevant training. It is therefore support from the university is necessarily important, especially for novice teachers who have no ESP teaching experiences (Basturkmen, 2019; Bayram & Canaran, 2020; Eligindi & Hoque, 2022; Jiang et al., 2020). In brief, all those five challenges experienced by the ESP students should be able to minimize which is intended to help students achieve their ESP learning. It is extremely important that university officials conduct this kind of needs analysis before students commence their studies. It is for the purpose of gaining relevant information regarding potential challenges in ESP courses and possible solutions to tackle the challenges.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study aims to explore challenges perceived by students in the context of Indonesian ESP courses. Based on the data analysis in the questionnaire and interview, it is found that the students have been struggling with five different types of challenges with Linguistic Competence and University Support being the two most challenging issues. Three other challenging issues, ESP Materials, Digital Literacy, and ESP Teaching Methodology were also reported by the students with different levels of challenge. As the findings revealed, these five challenges are found to be intercorrelated and affected to each other.

Pedagogical implications from the current study include university authorities should conduct a need analysis before study commencement with the purpose of anticipating challenges that students might receive such as low-level of English language proficiency, inadequate ESP materials, and illiterate in digital technology. Another implication is that university officials should provide possible solutions to solve the challenges such as providing ESP pre-courses to equip students with specific terminologies, facilitating students with sufficient ESP textbooks, and organizing relevant trainings to help students improve their IT literacy.

Despite these implications, the current study has limitations, including the number of participants was relatively small and gained from one educational institution. Future studies may recruit more participants from different institutions to generate a more comprehensive finding as they may have different learning contexts. In addition, the current study primarily focused on exploring challenges that ESP students have been experiencing. Future research may examine solutions that students have employed to tackle the challenges as it can provide us with meaningful insight into a general overview of ESP courses from students' perspectives.

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APPENDICES

Online Questionnaire Questions:

Please answer the following questions!

1. A. Have you experienced challenges in learning vocabularies in your ESP course?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NoB. How do you rank the challenges?
 - a. Low
 - b. Medium
 - c. High
2. A. Have you experienced challenges in using digital tools in your ESP course?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NoB. How do you rank the challenges?
 - a. Low
 - b. Medium
 - c. High
3. A. Have you experienced challenges in getting ESP materials?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NoB. How do you rank your knowledge level of linguistics competence?
 - a. Low
 - b. Medium
 - c. High
4. A. Have you experienced challenges in relation to your ESP instructors' teaching methodology?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NoB. How do you rank the challenges?
 - a. Low
 - b. Medium
 - c. High

5. A. Have you experienced challenges in relation to support from your university?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- B. How do you rank your skill level of designing grading criteria?
 - a. Low
 - b. Medium
 - c. High

Interview Questions:

1. What do you know about ESP course programs?
2. Have you experienced challenges in learning vocabularies or other aspects of ESP course? If yes, how do you rank the challenges?
3. How do you get ESP materials?
4. Have you experienced in getting ESP materials? If yes, how do you rank the challenges?
5. Have you used digital tools in your ESP learning?
6. Have you experienced challenges in the use of the digital tools? If yes, how do you rank the challenges?
7. What do you think about your ESP instructor's teaching methodology?
8. Have you experienced challenges in receiving your ESP instructor's teaching? If yes, how do you rank the challenges?
9. What do you think about support from your university in your ESP learning?
10. Have you experienced in gaining support from your university? If yes, how do you rank the challenges?