

## Strategies for improving ESP learners' language skills

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**ABSTRACT.** In this era of globalization, the demand for ESP instruction is increasing. ESP instructors must develop instruction suitable to the student's needs. This research aims to explore the strategies of the lecturer in teaching ESP students, to acknowledge the improvement in English language skills, and to gain the students' perceptions of the implemented strategies. The participants are the lecturer and the students who take Early Childhood Islamic Education and Islamic Elementary School Teacher Education programs. This research used classroom action research design. The data were obtained by observing the ESP instruction implemented during the learning process, pre and post-tests, and the students' responses. The results of the study revealed that ESP instructions or strategies used by the lecturer improved the English skills of students such as ability in speaking, pronunciation, and language use. The students' perceptions of the strategies were also positive. They viewed that these strategies helped them understand the learning concept. Overall, the implementation of these strategies led to enhanced student learning outcomes and proficiency in English speaking skills.

**Keywords:** *ESP Students, ESP Lecturer, Improving, Strategies, Language Skills*

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## INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is integrated into tertiary education and the students must learn from non-English departments such as business, engineering, and others. It is expected that tertiary students will have English competence after graduating from the university. To achieve that goal, learners and other stakeholders should acknowledge the need for English for present and future careers. It is not a simple case because they are English foreign language (EFL) learners who learn English for specific purposes (ESP). ESP is a teaching design made to help the learners study based on what they need or focus on the target (Hyland, 2022). Indasari & Mubin (2023) stated that it requires hard effort to teach ESP students. In the class, most of them speak in their first language or mother tongue. Moreover, based on the results of research conducted by Mahendra (2020), it was found that ESP teachers had to make much effort before teaching. They had to design lesson plans that could cover the students' needs and decide the activities regarding the students' language skills.

Enesi et al. (2021) claimed that English becomes a substantial subject for ESP students for several reasons such as communication, searching for jobs, and others. Therefore, for educators, several aspects should be considered to teach ESP students such as learning materials that have

to be under their field of study and media used in the class (Mahmudjonovna et al., 2022). Moreover, students' motivation becomes an important case. The way of teacher delivers material, builds communication with students, and attracts students' attention determines students' motivation to learn English. These can be achieved if the teacher prepares everything well. Making a lesson plan is one of the best techniques before teaching an ESP class. It plays an important role in learning (Farhang et al., 2023). Through lesson plans, the lecturer can design activities that can stimulate students to be active in the class, to understand the material well, and to be able to use English during learning. ESP instruction involves designing courses, materials, and activities that address the language needs of learners within their chosen field or area of study. This may include teaching specialized vocabulary, communication skills, and discourse patterns specific to the professional context in which the learners will use English. The goal of ESP instruction is to equip learners with the language skills necessary to communicate effectively and confidently within their specific domains of work or study.

Several studies have been conducted concerning strategies or ways of teachers teaching ESP students. Poghosyan (n.d.) examined the attributes of ESP instructors' classroom language interaction, focusing on socio-emotional skills, pedagogical expertise, subject-specific knowledge, and personal traits. Then, Farhang et al. (2023) investigated how to prepare and implement lesson plans and to know their significance in the learning process. In this study, they only explore those cases theoretically so it requires real practice in the field. Stan (2022) also conducted a study about integrating content and language-integrated learning (CLIL) in ESP teaching. In this study, the researcher describes the students' activities by applying CLIL but he does not explore how the students' involvement and the results of activities. Bui (2022) examined the beliefs of students and teachers regarding effective English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching in Vietnam. The research found that while both groups agreed on certain aspects such as the importance of the educational process and relevant skills, there were discrepancies in their beliefs about task-based language teaching, corrective feedback and assessment, discipline specifications, and integration of culture. Fitria (2023) investigated the responsibilities of educators and the difficulties associated with instructing English tailored for particular purposes. The study reported that instructors must undertake various duties, including overseeing learning activities, formulating learning goals, fostering a conducive classroom atmosphere, and assessing student progress.

Most of the previous studies above provide insights into teachers' strategies for teaching ESP students. Unfortunately, only a few studies describe the activities or the involvement of ESP students and teachers during the teaching and learning process. Their language improvement required to be investigated to acknowledge the effectiveness of ESP instruction and the student's point of view about the way of ESP teachers delivering the materials are also investigated. These become the research problems that are analyzed further. Therefore, the present study is conducted to combine theoretical explanation with practical implementation to ensure effective teaching tailored to the specific needs of students.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach using the Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, which can involve one or multiple individuals to address a problem (Fraenkel et al., 2012). According to Cresswell (2012), action research designs are systematic methods utilized by educators (or other individuals within educational settings) to gather information and enhance the educational process. Building upon these definitions, CAR allows teachers to investigate their teaching practices. The objective of this research was to elucidate the practical implementation of ESP instruction in the classroom; the student's perception of the teaching; and the improvement of student's language skills.

The research was conducted in a city located in East Java, involving thirty-eight ESP students in the 2022/2023 academic year. These students were majoring in Preschool Islamic Education and Elementary School Teacher Education programs, indicating their target to become teachers in the future. Related to their field of study, they have to be able to use English for early childhood and elementary students. After giving a test to acknowledge their English proficiency level, they are categorized into beginner level. It means that the lecturer requires effort to teach them. She has to prepare strategies to improve their English skills. Seven meetings after getting the result of the mid-term test in which most of the students have low scores and low ability to speak in English in the class, the lecturer starts to think of ESP instruction or learning design for them.

Arikunto (2012) outlines four steps in conducting Classroom Action Research (CAR): planning, implementing (or acting), observing, and reflecting. These steps can be carried out in multiple cycles. In the initial cycle, before planning, the researcher conducts a pre-test to identify the issues faced by students and their English competence. During this phase, the researchers develop the lesson plan, criteria for success, and observation sheet to gather data during the teaching and learning process. The next step involves implementing the planned activities. In the context of this study, this phase explores and describes the strategies implemented by the lecturer; ice-breaker, pre-teaching, presentation, drilling, board stage, and practice. Observations are conducted during this stage to collect relevant data. The final step is reflection, which involves analyzing the collected data. The researcher determines whether to continue or revise the cycle through this process. If the criteria for success are met, the cycle may be concluded. However, if the criteria are not met, adjustments to the cycle are necessary.

For the first research problem, data were collected through observation of ESP instruction. For the second research problem, a test was conducted to analyze further whether there was an improvement or not in students' English language skills after the strategy was implemented. Lastly, data for the third research problem were obtained from the results of the questionnaire. These were described and analyzed in detail.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **The implementation of ESP instructions in the ESP class**

This research was carried out in two cycles. Prior to detailing each cycle, it was conducted a pre-test to acknowledge the students' level of English skills. The test was taken from the British Council website. The results were shocking because thirty-six students had low scores whereas the level of the test was for beginners. It meant that many things required improvement such as grammar and vocabulary. Based on this result, the lecturer prepared a strategy for teaching that could improve and enhance students' English skills. The implementation of the strategy was explained in detail in each cycle.

#### **Cycle 1**

At the planning stage, the lecturer has to think strategy to motivate the students to learn English first. Raising students' spirit and motivation become important points. Some techniques can be used by the lecturer such as giving ice-breakers and warming up. These can be in the form of songs, game, quizzes, or others. Then, before delivering the main material, the students are given concepts about the subject matter such as visual aids, multimedia presentations, or others. The next step is presentation. In this step, the lecturer has to struggle to be able to achieve the target learning or objective of learning. After that, drilling is conducted to make the students

memorize the material, and improve the vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects. Next, the board stage is conducted. The lecturer utilizes the whiteboard to write down the key points. The last is doing practice. From these activities, it can be evaluated the problems faced by the students in learning English and the progress after getting those teaching techniques. All activities are designed and written in the form of lesson plans.

At the implementation stage, the six steps above were conducted by the lecturer. They were ice-breakers or warmer, pre-teaching, presentation, drilling, board stage, and practice. At every meeting, students had different materials. The first meeting was conducted on December 2, 2023. The theme was about daily activities. As opening activities, the students are given the game “chain story”. The first student wrote down one sentence about everything in their mind on a sheet of paper. The next student had to continue the sentence until the last sentence. Each student only had fifteen seconds to think and write it down. The result was not satisfactory since the students made many mistakes in writing such as spelling, grammar, and content. This game was for fun. They laughed after the lecturer read the story because it was unrelated story. However, from this game, the lecturer can assess or understand the students’ competence in writing. From pre-activity, it was not run well. Some students did not understand the instructions.

After giving an ice-breaker, pre-teaching was conducted. The lecturer gave visual aids to make the students easily mention the daily activities. They knew and mentioned the activities in English but some errors in the grammatical structure were made such as *he breakfast*. Some students also did not know the English words from the picture. Then, the lecturer gave clues by writing the initial letter on the whiteboard. Some students guessed the correct word *has*. In this case, all the vocabularies were introduced in the beginning. The next activity was the presentation phase. The lecturer started to show the picture and expected all students to achieve the target language that was asking and answering about daily activities such as *what do you usually do at 6 a.m.? I have breakfast at 6 a.m.* Here, they made errors in pronunciation and grammar. The lecturer corrected them.

At the drilling stage, the students were given a chance to do yes and no questions. They answered the question given by the lecturer. Some students could not answer because they were confused with the use of to-be and auxiliary verbs such as *Is he go to work?* Then the lecturer gave a correction *does he go to work?* At the board stage, the lecturer wrote down the material learning or the pattern of daily activities by using simple present tense. After that, they were given practice about daily activities from website British Council. They could check directly the feedback if they made a mistake.

Based on observation in cycle 1, the planning and criteria for success were not successfully reached. Some problems were found in the teaching and learning process. First, the students had difficulty to use English in the class. Several English aspects were not mastered well by the students such as pronunciation and grammar. Then, the role of the lecturer was more dominant than students in the class. It made them less active in the class. Based on the result of cycle 1, it is required to conduct cycle 2.

## **Cycle 2**

At the second meeting, six strategies for teaching ESP students were implemented. The theme was about ongoing activities. For the icebreaker, the students were given song *one little finger*. They were enthusiastic. They should touch the correct part of the body. This game could train their focus before they learn the main material. After doing this activity, they were given a picture of ongoing activities and were asked to mention them in English such as hiking the mountain, playing kite, playing badminton, and others. Almost all students could mention them well. When one of the students did not know the English word, another student was given a chance to answer. In this activity, they learned new vocabulary because some students previously did not know the English words. They searched the words in Google Translate and online dictionaries.

The target language from this theme that was the students could speak in English about asking and answering ongoing activities such as *What are you doing now? I am hiking the mountain.* Here, the students were more active than in the previous meeting because they knew the concept well. The lecturer stimulated them to answer the questions correctly. All the time the lecturer spoke in English. It was conducted to trigger them to use English in the class, make them to be able to understand the instruction in English, and make them familiar with English speaking.

The next step was drilling. All students had a turn to do yes/no questions. The lecturer just facilitated them in this activity. The students repeated how to ask and answer yes/no questions. This was quite successful because all students were involved in this activity even though some students made mistakes in pronunciation and grammar, another student directly gave feedback or corrections. Then, the lecturer asked the student to repeat the sentence. At this step, the lecturer also gave a reward for a student who could answer the question correctly. At the board stage, the students were stimulated to summarize what they learned at that meeting. The lecturer only wrote down (note taking) on the whiteboard what the students uttered. This activity could help the students memorize and comprehend what they learned that day. They also could re-read it at home.

Principally, *ongoing activities* are talking about simple present continuous tense. However, the lecturer did not explain the pattern or formula of tense in the beginning like usual or traditional methods. She showed the formula in the end because the learning target was speaking in English. So, they did not feel bored or burdened. In the last, the students were given exercises related to the theme. In this case, they utilized their note to do the exercise. Most of the students got improvement on the practice provided by the lecturer. Notably, the lecturer's strategic approach prioritized practical language use over traditional grammar instruction, resulting in sustained student engagement and performance improvements in subsequent exercises.

### The improvement on students' language skills

These strategies (icebreakers, pre-teaching, presentation, drilling, board stage, and practice) were conducted continuously until the last meeting of the semester. The results were satisfying for the lecturer and the students. The goals of learning which were to make them speak English in the class, understand English instruction, and get improvement in the test were achieved. The following table shows the results of the pre-test and post-test.

**Table 1** Results of pre-test and post-test

No.	Name	Pre-test	Post-test
1.	AFS	54	67
2.	AS	21	65
3.	AWY	50	81
4.	DWM	40	72
5.	DWI	50	34
6.	DYQA	50	40
7.	GI	50	58
8.	HNK	40	52
9.	H	20	67
10.	IA	50	46
11.	MMN	30	23
12.	MRDL	60	96
13.	NRP	40	49
14.	NSB	66	67
15.	NZ	16	30
16.	NS	40	49
17.	NKN	56	76

18.	NAF	38	39
19.	PD	88	75
20.	RSM	66	84
21.	RJ	50	38
22.	SA	25	67
23.	SJA	54	90
24.	UK	82	73
25.	WNH	21	47
26.	WAR	53	54
27.	YNH	60	77
28.	ZM	74	74
29.	FMT	50	70
30.	IB	50	23
31.	KW	50	65
32.	MHH	60	67
33.	NFL	60	70
34.	NAA	95	91
35.	NFZ	65	39
36.	NHI	50	80
37.	NI	70	70
38.	NS	90	94

These results indicated the participants' scores on the pre-test and post-test assessment. Based on Table 1 above, the results showed that 26 of 38 students had improvement on the test. The test items are about grammar, and reading text which are in accordance with their needs. Sixteen students got a score above 70. Only eight students got a lower score on the post-test while two students got the constant score. It meant that the strategies used by the lecturer in teaching ESP students were successful. The students got improvement in understanding the material or the concept. Each participant's score increases, suggesting an improvement in their understanding or proficiency in the subject matter being tested.

### **The students' perception of implemented strategies**

After conducting the test, the questionnaire was spread out. It was about the students' opinions or perceptions related to the strategies used by the lecturer. The researcher focused on the use of ice-breakers or warming up, pre-teaching, presentation, and drilling. There are ten questions. Question no. 1 is about the frequency of student's involvement in ice-breaking or warming u. secondly, it is about the usefulness of icebreaking or warming up. Thirdly, it is about the student's knowledge about pre-teaching. Fourthly, it is about the effectiveness of pre-teaching. Fifthly, it is about the students' opinion about presentation techniques in teaching. Sixthly, the effectiveness of presentation. Seventhly, it is about the student's involvement in drilling. Eighthly, it was the effectiveness of drilling. Ninthly, it was about all the strategies used by the lecturer. The last is about the students' recommendations for English learning. Those are positive questions and use a scale 5 to 1. 5 is for the best response. There were 38 respondents. The table includes participant names abbreviated for anonymity. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Results of questionnaire

No.	Name	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
1.	P	4	5	Yes	4	4	3	3	4	4	-
2.	AR	3	4	Yes	3	2	4	1	2	2	Time
3.	A	3	5	Yes	3	4	4	3	5	5	-
4.	L	3	5	Yes	3	3	3	2	3	4	-
5.	I	4	5	Yes	4	5	5	3	4	5	Pronunciation

6.	Paijo	4	4	No	3	4	2	2	4	4	Vocabulary
7.	MR	4	5	Yes	5	5	5	4	5	5	Consistency
8.	KLSM	4	5	Yes	5	5	5	4	5	5	Consistency
9.	AR 2	3	5	-	5	5	4	4	4	5	Consistency
10.	Ahmad	2	5	Yes	5	4	4	2	3	4	Helpful
11.	Surti	2	4	Yes	4	3	3	2	4	4	-
12.	SK	4	5	-	4	5	4	3	5	5	Useful
13.	Z	3	4	Yes	5	3	3	3	5	4	-
14.	DPA	2	4	No	3	2	2	3	4	4	Motivation
15.	FA	1	5	No	4	4	4	1	5	5	Good
16.	NAF	2	4	Yes	3	3	2	1	2	3	Fighting
17.	Angelia	4	4	-	5	5	3	3	5	5	-
18.	N	4	5	Yes	4	4	3	4	5	4	Effective
19.	SJN	3	5	Yes	5	5	3	3	5	5	Time
20.	Tapu	3	5	Yes	5	4	3	2	4	4	Effective
21.	AKU	4	5	Yes	5	4	4	3	5	5	Good
22.	AR3	3	4	-	5	5	3	4	4	4	Time
23.	JR	3	5	Yes	4	4	4	3	5	4	Effective
24.	W	4	5	Yes	4	5	3	4	5	4	-
25.	Maudy	1	4	-	4	4	3	1	2	2	More fun
26.	Aisyah	4	4	Yes	5	5	4	3	5	5	-
27.	Ayu	2	5	-	4	5	4	3	4	4	-
28.	Nur	2	4	No	3	2	1	1	2	3	-
29.	R	1	4	No	3	4	4	1	4	4	-
30.	Nad	3	5	No	3	4	4	1	4	4	-
31.	NI	2	5	No	4	1	1	1	5	3	-
32.	NAA	1	4	-	4	3	3	2	5	4	Media
33.	NHI	2	5	-	5	4	3	2	3	5	Ice breaker
34.	KW	3	4	Yes	5	4	4	2	5	4	Good
35.	B	2	5	No	3	4	3	2	4	4	Unconfident
36.	NS	3	5	Yes	5	5	5	3	5	5	Good
37.	S	2	4	No	3	4	5	3	4	4	Good
38.	M	2	4	Yes	4	4	3	1	5	4	Good

Based on the results of the questionnaire, presented in Table 2, provide insights into students' perceptions of various teaching strategies employed by the lecturer. The student's involvement in the ice breaker or warming-up activity was positive. They admitted that this activity was helpful for them. In relation to pre-teaching, most of them were familiar with this term. It was effective to be implemented before the students got into the main material. The way of the lecturer in presenting the learning material was interesting for them. It helped them to understand it well. Then, most of the students stated that they were often involved in drilling activity so that it enhanced their fluency and confidence when speaking in English. Thus, overall strategies used in ESP class were satisfying the students.

In addition, the students' suggestions or recommendation showed that many of them admitted that the use of icebreakers, pre-teaching, presentation, and drilling in the teaching and learning process were effective. They showed positive responses. These strategies were helpful and useful for them. They were motivated to learn English. Moreover, some students stated that there should be additional time for English subjects. It meant that they were enthusiastic to learn English by using these strategies. Recommendations for further improvement included utilizing media, enhancing icebreaker activities, and addressing confidence issues.

## **Discussion**

Based on the result of observation of ESP instructions in the class, giving ice breakers such as songs made the students enthusiastic in learning. It was in line with (Indasari & Amaliati, 2023; Putri et al., 2022). They stated that giving songs could motivate and encourage the students to speak up in English learning. Besides, the implementation of pre-teaching vocabulary facilitated the students to understand the concept. (Lawrence, 2014; Years, 2007) wrote that the purpose of pre-teaching vocabulary gave students' comprehension of the concept.

In relation with the approach used by lecturer in learning, she was able to create enjoyable atmosphere. The students were active to use English in the class. It showed that the role of the lecturer in managing the class influenced the students' behavior. As Paolini (2015) stated that improved communication was also heightened by the enthusiasm of the instructor and the level of stimulation in a classroom environment. Good teaching relies heavily on effective communication, with an instructor's communication proficiency during lesson delivery playing a crucial role in determining student learning outcomes.

The improvements from cycle 1 to cycle 2 were influenced by the lecturer's role in developing the strategy to overcome the challenges in cycle 1 such as low motivation in learning English and the student's competence in using English in the class. The lecturer was successful in developing learning activities which made interactive communication between her and the students. This finding was in line with a study conducted by Susanto et al. (2023). They stated that the successful implementation of teaching relied heavily on the interaction occurring between lecturer and students, throughout the teaching and learning process. This interaction constitutes the core of teaching, where the lecturer conducts teaching activities and students engage in learning.

The result of this study also found that drilling made the students improve their pronunciation. This aligned with the previous studies conducted by (Mendrofa & Wijaya, 2022; Pratiwi & Simorangkir, 2022). They stated that drilling had advantages including giving learners concentrated practice in listening. This method also helped in memorization and the automaticity of common language patterns, offering learners direct feedback and helping them recognize the correct form of pronunciation of words or phrases. Moreover, at the board stage (note-taking), the students were active in summarizing what they had learned that day. This activity had a significant impact on learners' understanding of a lesson. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Islam (2017). The students could visit their notes as many times as needed to fully grasp the content, engaging in activities such as reviewing and summarizing. Additionally, they could correlate their notes with handouts provided by the lecturer.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that students' perceptions towards ESP teaching strategies such as icebreaker, pre-teaching, presentation, and drilling were positive. These were helpful in understanding the learning material. Some previous studies supported this finding. (Al Ghifarah & Pusparini, 2023; Mustafa Kurdi & Sabah Meena, 2023) reported in their study that the use of ice breakers or warming up had merit for establishing a pleasant learning environment, encouraging interaction among peers, and enhancing motivation and enthusiasm for the language.

The students' positive response toward the strategies implemented by the lecturer revealed that the lecturer had pedagogical competence. She was able to manage the class and delivered the material well even the students recommended to prolong English time and being consistent with the strategies used. This result of the study aligned with the previous studies which stated that teachers had to possess pedagogical competence to effectively fulfill their roles in education and instruction (Sudargini & Purwanto, 2020). This competence entailed understanding the unique characteristics of each student. When the teachers grasped the individual situations of their students, they could deliver subject matter in a way that resonated with them. Therefore, a fundamental aspect of pedagogical competence lies in comprehending student diversity.



## CONCLUSION

This study was conducted at the Tarbiyah faculty of the Islamic Institute in Gresik, especially in early childhood or preschool and elementary school education programs. It means that they are teachers' candidates. Having English competence is important for them in the future as a teacher. However, the conditions or characteristics of students are low motivation and skills in English. They learn English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Therefore, the lecturer should provide strategies or solutions to overcome these problems. The strategies used are icebreaker, pre-teaching, presentation, drilling, note-taking, and practice.

The results of the observation of teaching strategies for students effectively engaged the students and primed their focus for learning. Subsequently, students successfully demonstrated improved vocabulary acquisition through collaborative learning and online resources. The targeted language proficiency goal, centered on speaking, was achieved with increased students' participation and proficiency compared to previous sessions. Drilling exercises facilitated active student involvement, albeit with occasional errors, effectively supported by peer feedback and reinforcement.

Based on the results of this study, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, incorporating icebreakers and warming up into the learning process were effective in fostering enthusiasm among students. This strategy had a big influence on the affective and cognitive aspects of students before learning the main material. Secondly, the implementation of pre-teaching vocabulary was found to facilitate the students' comprehension of concepts. In this case, the students were active in using English. This activity could enrich their vocabularies. Thirdly, the lecturer's approach to creating an enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom significantly influenced students' engagement and language use. Furthermore, drilling exercises were observed to improve students' pronunciation skills. The students who had low English skills got better in speaking than before. Lastly, active participation in note-taking activities positively gave impact on students' understanding of the lesson. Moreover, the results of the test showed improvements after the strategies implemented.

The results of the questionnaire also indicated that the students held positive perceptions towards ESP teaching strategies including ice breakers, pre-teaching, presentations, and drilling. These strategies were viewed as helpful for understanding learning materials and fostering a conducive learning environment. These results provide valuable feedback for the lecturer and offer insights into areas of strength and potential areas for enhancement in the teaching approach. Overall, the implementation of these strategies could improve and enhance the students' English language skill. However, this study requires further research to integrate technology into ESP instructions and its benefits for student engagement and learning outcomes.

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