

Sociolinguistic Awareness and ESP Curriculum Design: A Framework for Enhancing Authenticity and Learner Engagement

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Abstract. This study investigates the integration of sociolinguistic awareness - encompassing culture, professional identity, power relations, and discipline-specific discourse norms - into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum design, and its implications for task authenticity and learner engagement. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design triangulated systematic document analysis of 64 curriculum units, semi-structured interviews with 15 ESP faculty members, and a questionnaire administered to 338 students across computer science, engineering, pharmacy, and business programs. Document analysis revealed a hierarchical pattern: professional discourse norms were most explicitly addressed, while power relations were absent in nearly two-thirds of materials. Interview data identified systemic constraints - curricular rigidity, misaligned assessment, and insufficient pedagogical training - that inhibit implementation. Student data demonstrated that sociolinguistically framed tasks were perceived as significantly more authentic and were associated with higher cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. These findings collectively indicate that the marginalization of sociolinguistic dimensions represents a structural limitation on ESP curriculum effectiveness. The study proposes an evidence-based framework that repositions sociolinguistic awareness as a core design principle, essential for preparing learners for meaningful participation in professional discourse communities.

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INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has long been positioned as a needs-driven, context-sensitive approach to language education, designed to prepare learners for effective communication in specific academic and professional domains (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Terauchi et al., 2019). Unlike general English instruction, ESP foregrounds disciplinary genres, professional discourse practices, and workplace-relevant communicative tasks, thereby enhancing both the relevance and practicality of language learning. Despite sustained emphasis on needs analysis, genre awareness, and task authenticity, however, contemporary ESP curricula have increasingly been criticized for privileging linguistic and technical accuracy at the expense of the sociolinguistic dimensions that fundamentally shape real-world professional communication (McIntosh et al., 2017; Skulstad, 1999).

Professional communication is not linguistically neutral. It is mediated by culture, identity positioning, power relations, and tacit discourse norms that govern participation, meaning

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negotiation, and communicative legitimacy. Yet many ESP courses continue to present professional communication as a set of decontextualized skills, focusing on lexical items, grammatical patterns, and genre templates while marginalizing the sociolinguistic realities of workplace interaction (Bui, 2022; Nikolarea, 2020). This gap between classroom practice and authentic professional communication raises critical questions about the extent to which existing ESP curricula genuinely prepare learners for participation in their target discourse communities.

Sociolinguistic awareness - broadly understood as sensitivity to the social, cultural, and ideological dimensions of language use - has gained renewed attention in ESP scholarship. In professional ESP contexts, it encompasses learners' understanding of how culture, professional identity, power relations, and discipline-specific discourse norms shape communicative practices within fields (Clouet et al., 2022; Forteza Fernandez & Del Batista Gonzalez, 2019). Teaching culture within ESP classrooms has evolved beyond surface-level national customs to encompass professional values, institutional expectations, and intercultural communicative norms that inform meaning-making in globalized workplaces (Bakić-Mirić et al., 2023; Tenieshvili, 2024). Similarly, identity has emerged as a central - if often implicit - dimension of professional language use. Learners are expected not only to use professional language accurately but also to position themselves appropriately as novices, experts-in-training, or institutional representatives, a process that critically depends on awareness of rhetorical stance and audience expectations (McIntosh et al., 2017). Power relations further complicate professional discourse: hierarchies between senior and junior professionals, institutional authority structures, and gatekeeping practices shape whose voice is valued, how disagreement is managed, and which communicative choices are considered legitimate (Nazari et al., 2024; Selama, 2025).

Genre awareness has long been recognized as a cornerstone of ESP pedagogy, with genres conceptualized as socially situated responses to recurring communicative purposes within professional communities (Skulstad, 1999). While genre-based approaches equip learners with knowledge of organizational patterns and rhetorical moves, genre knowledge divorced from its sociolinguistic context risks producing formulaic, unreflective performance rather than meaningful professional participation (Caballero Rodriguez, 2003). Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in specialized domains further demonstrates that professional discourse norms are often negotiated dynamically rather than rigidly adhered to (Schneider, 2013), challenging static genre representations and underscoring the need for ESP curricula to address pragmatic variability, interactional negotiation, and communicative flexibility.

Authenticity has traditionally been regarded as a cornerstone of ESP pedagogy, typically operationalized through real-world materials, simulations, and profession-specific tasks. The growing use of multimodal resources - including films, television series, podcasts, and digital platforms - reflects ongoing efforts to enhance exposure to professional language use and sustain learner motivation (Bonsignori, 2018; Milošević, 2022). However, recent scholarship argues that authenticity cannot be reduced to material realism. From a sociolinguistic perspective, authentic ESP tasks are those that engage learners in the social practices, identity roles, and communicative constraints characteristic of real professional contexts (Tymbay, 2022). Tasks that replicate professional genres without addressing underlying power relations or cultural expectations may appear authentic yet fail to foster meaningful communicative competence. Authenticity is therefore better understood as a relational construct, one that emerges from learners' perceptions of relevance, legitimacy, and alignment with their anticipated professional identities (Kabalin Borenić, 2021; Lau, 2018).

Learner engagement - conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive investment, behavioral participation, and emotional involvement - has emerged as a

central indicator of effective language instruction. In ESP contexts, engagement is closely tied to learners' perceptions of task authenticity and professional relevance (Mudra, 2025; Yu & Champakaew, 2024). Research demonstrates that when ESP instruction acknowledges learners' identities and anticipated professional roles, motivation and sustained participation increase significantly (Rajeswaran, 2019; Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020). Integrating sociolinguistic awareness into ESP curricula thus holds considerable potential for deepening engagement by positioning learners as legitimate participants in professional discourse communities rather than passive recipients of technical language input.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of sociolinguistic and intercultural dimensions, ESP instructors face substantial challenges when attempting to systematically embed these elements into curriculum design. Constraints related to time, institutional expectations, assessment requirements, and limited professional development opportunities are widely reported (Farahian & Parhamnia, 2021; Huang et al., 2024). Instructors' own sociolinguistic and cultural awareness further shapes curriculum decisions, determining whether culture, identity, and power relations are addressed explicitly or remain peripheral to classroom practice (Forteza Fernandez & Del Batista Gonzalez, 2019; Nazari et al., 2024). While instructors broadly acknowledge the value of sociolinguistic integration, empirical research consistently indicates that they lack concrete frameworks or curricular models to operationalize these concepts systematically, resulting in their sporadic or implicit treatment rather than principled embedding within learning outcomes, materials, and assessment tasks (Bui, 2022; Rajeswaran, 2018).

The reviewed literature thus reveals a persistent gap. While individual studies have addressed culture, genre awareness, authenticity, and learner engagement within ESP research, integrative frameworks that connect sociolinguistic dimensions with curriculum structure, task design, and engagement across disciplines remain scarce. Moreover, empirically grounded studies that triangulate curriculum analysis, instructor perspectives, and learner engagement data are largely absent from the field. This study addresses these gaps by investigating sociolinguistic awareness as a unifying, foundational construct for ESP curriculum design.

Specifically, this study examines how the dimensions of culture, professional identity, power relations, and discipline-specific discourse norms are reflected in existing ESP curricula, and how their integration contributes to task authenticity and learner engagement. It adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design that triangulates systematic curriculum analysis, instructor perspectives, and student perceptions to develop an empirically grounded framework for enhancing authenticity and engagement in ESP education. In doing so, it responds to calls for broader conceptualizations of ESP curriculum design that incorporate social, cultural, and ideological dimensions alongside linguistic competence (Hoekje, 2011; Wu, 2024), contributing to ongoing debates on the future directions of ESP by foregrounding sociolinguistic awareness as a critical, yet systematically underutilized, dimension of curriculum practice.

This study is theoretically grounded in sociocultural theory, which conceptualizes language as a socially mediated practice shaped by cultural norms, institutional contexts, and interpersonal relations. From a sociocultural perspective, learning occurs through participation in meaningful social activities, within which learners appropriate not only linguistic forms but also the values, identities, and discourse practices of specific communities. Applied to ESP, this implies that professional communication cannot be effectively learned in isolation from the sociolinguistic conditions under which it is used. Research in ESP and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has consistently demonstrated that professional genres, intercultural rhetoric, and disciplinary discourse norms are socially constructed and embedded within power relations and identity positioning (Hoekje, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2017; Skulstad, 1999). By foregrounding culture,

identity, and power as integral components of curriculum design, sociocultural theory provides a robust analytical lens for examining how ESP curricula enable - or constrain - learners' legitimate participation in professional discourse communities.

Complementing this, the study draws on constructivist and experiential learning theory, as operationalized within ESP through principled pragmatism and task-based learning. Constructivist theory positions learners as active meaning-makers who construct knowledge through engagement with authentic tasks that mirror real-world communicative demands. In ESP education, experiential learning approaches emphasize the importance of realistic scenarios, dialogic interaction, and reflective practice in fostering deep learning and sustained engagement (Rajeswaran, 2019; Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020). From this standpoint, authenticity is not merely a property of materials but an outcome of learners' interaction with sociolinguistically rich tasks that require negotiation of professional roles, discourse norms, and communicative strategies. Integrating sociolinguistic awareness into experiential task design can therefore enhance cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement simultaneously, aligning instructional practice with learners' professional identities and anticipated communicative realities (Lau, 2018; Yu & Champakaew, 2024). Together, these theoretical perspectives establish sociolinguistic awareness not as a supplementary consideration in ESP curriculum design, but as a constitutive dimension of professional communicative competence.

METHOD

This study adopted a *qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design* to examine how sociolinguistic awareness was integrated into ESP curriculum design and how such integration influenced task authenticity and learner engagement. The research was conducted over one academic semester in multiple ESP courses offered at the university level across four disciplinary fields: computer science, engineering, pharmacy, and business. Qualitative orientation was prioritized to capture the complexity of sociolinguistic dimensions embedded in curricular documents and instructional practices, while quantitative data were employed to complement and substantiate qualitative interpretations of learner engagement. The design was guided by the principle of triangulation, enabling cross-validation of findings through multiple data sources and perspectives.

The population comprised ESP instructors and undergraduate students enrolled in discipline-specific ESP courses. The instructor sample included 15 ESP faculty members representing computer science (n = 5), engineering (n = 5), pharmacy (n = 6), and business (n = 4). These instructors were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in ESP curriculum implementation and assessment. The student sample consisted of 338 undergraduate ESP learners, distributed across computer science (n = 62), engineering (n = 79), pharmacy (n = 102), and business (n = 95). Student participants had completed at least one prerequisite English course, ensuring sufficient linguistic proficiency to reflect meaningfully on ESP tasks, professional discourse practices, and engagement experiences.

Data were collected using three complementary instruments designed to capture the multifaceted nature of sociolinguistic awareness in ESP contexts. First, document analysis was conducted on ESP syllabi, course outlines, textbook units, instructional materials, and assessment tasks to identify explicit and implicit representations of sociolinguistic dimensions, namely culture, identity, power relations, and professional discourse norms. Particular attention was paid to task types, communicative scenarios, genre representations, and contextual framing to evaluate levels of authenticity and alignment with real professional practices. Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ESP instructors to explore their conceptualizations of sociolinguistic awareness, curriculum design decisions, perceptions of task authenticity, and

challenges encountered during implementation. Interview questions were open-ended and allowed for probing, enabling instructors to elaborate on institutional constraints, pedagogical beliefs, and disciplinary differences. Third, a learner questionnaire was administered to students to measure cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, as well as perceptions of task authenticity. The questionnaire employed Likert-scale items focusing on learners' experiences with culturally situated tasks, professional identity roles, power dynamics in communication, and exposure to authentic professional discourse practices, thereby providing a comprehensive student perspective to complement the document and instructor data.

Data analysis followed an iterative and integrative procedure. Qualitative data from document analysis and instructor interviews were analyzed thematically, using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive categories were derived from the study's sociolinguistic framework (culture, identity, power relations, and professional discourse norms), while inductive codes emerged from recurrent patterns and salient features identified in the data. Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to identify overall trends in learner engagement and perceived authenticity across disciplines. These results were then interpreted in relation to qualitative findings to provide contextualized explanations for engagement patterns. Methodological triangulation enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by comparing insights from curricular documents, instructor perspectives, and learner perceptions, thereby offering a comprehensive account of sociolinguistic integration in ESP curriculum design.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the triangulated results from document analysis, instructor interviews, and learner questionnaires, organized to address the four research questions sequentially. The presentation moves from an analysis of curriculum-level integration to learner-level outcomes and instructor-level challenges. The interpretation of findings is framed within the study's theoretical underpinnings: sociocultural theory, which situates language learning within socially mediated professional practices (Hoekje, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2017), and constructivist-experiential learning theory, which emphasizes knowledge construction through authentic, contextually embedded tasks (Rajeswaran, 2019; Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020). This combined theoretical perspective elucidates the mediating role of sociolinguistic awareness in linking curriculum design to authentic learning experiences and learner investment.

1. Representation of Sociolinguistic Awareness in the Existing ESP Curriculum

The analysis of curriculum documents, supplemented by instructor interviews, reveals the extent and nature of sociolinguistic integration across the sampled ESP courses. Findings are presented to show how the four target dimensions - culture, identity, power relations, and professional discourse norms - were explicitly, implicitly, or absent in syllabi, materials, and instructional tasks.

a. Document Analysis Findings: A Hierarchical Integration

To address the first research objective, a systematic document analysis of 64 units/tasks was conducted across syllabi, course outlines, and instructional materials drawn from four disciplinary ESP programs. A deductive coding framework categorized the representation of each sociolinguistic dimension as Explicit, Implicit, or Absent. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1: Representation of Sociolinguistic Dimensions in ESP Curriculum Documents (N = 64 units/tasks)

Sociolinguistic Dimension	Explicit Integration (%)	Implicit Integration (%)	Absent (%)
Professional Discourse Norms	56.3	31.3	12.4
Culture	28.1	34.4	37.5
Professional Identity	21.9	39.1	39.0
Power Relations	10.9	25.0	64.1

The data reveal a pronounced hierarchy in how sociolinguistic dimensions are addressed across the analyzed materials. Each dimension is examined below with illustrative examples that clarify the nature of its integration - or absence.

1) *Professional Discourse Norms: Predominant but Technically Narrow*

Professional Discourse Norms - encompassing genre conventions, disciplinary register, and technical lexicon - were the most consistently and explicitly integrated dimension, appearing in 87.6% of materials. This predominance aligns with the entrenched genre-based traditions of ESP pedagogy (Skulstad, 1999). In the Business English syllabus, for instance, a unit on professional correspondence stated as its learning outcome: "Students will identify the structural conventions of formal email requests in corporate contexts, including subject line clarity, hedging strategies, and formulaic closings." Similarly, a Medical English task required learners to analyze "the rhetorical organization of a patient discharge summary, distinguishing obligatory moves from optional elaborations." These examples reflect genre-explicit instruction in its most recognizable form: learners are oriented towards recognizable textual patterns and their communicative purposes.

However, closer examination of this category revealed that while genre conventions were foregrounded, their sociolinguistic underpinnings were rarely made explicit. A Technology English unit on technical report writing, for example, listed outcomes relating to passive voice use and impersonal constructions but provided no discussion of why such choices reflect epistemological stances within scientific communities or how they position the writer in relation to institutional authority. Genre, in these materials, was largely treated as form rather than as social practice - an observation consistent with critiques of decontextualized genre instruction (Caballero Rodriguez, 2003).

2) *Culture: Implicit and Incidental*

Cultural dimensions were represented in 62.5% of materials but were overwhelmingly implicit (34.4%) rather than explicitly scaffolded as learning objectives (28.1%). Where cultural content appeared explicitly, it tended toward surface-level intercultural communication, most commonly in Business English and Tourism programs. A representative example from a Tourism English syllabus included a task prompt asking learners to "compare customer service expectations across three cultural contexts" using a supplied reading text. While this task engaged learners with cultural variability, it did not invite reflection on how such expectations are constructed, negotiated, or contested within professional interactions.

More frequently, cultural content was embedded incidentally within case studies or role-play scenarios without being identified as a pedagogical focus. In a Legal English module, a simulated client consultation involved parties from different national backgrounds, yet neither the task instructions nor the accompanying rubric referenced intercultural communication strategies or professional cultural norms as objects of analysis or development. Such implicit embedding risks learners treating cultural content as contextual decoration rather than as a substantive dimension of professional communicative competence (Bakić-Mirić et al., 2023). Notably, 37.5% of materials contained no discernible cultural dimension whatsoever, a figure

particularly pronounced in the Engineering English program, where all analyzed units were exclusively oriented towards technical accuracy.

3) *Professional Identity: Present but Uncaffolded*

Professional Identity - encompassing role enactment, stance-taking, and the construction of professional voice - was also predominantly implicit (39.1%), with explicit treatment appearing in only 21.9% of materials and absent in 39%. Where identity-related tasks appeared explicitly, they tended to involve role-play activities: a Business English unit, for instance, required learners to "take on the role of a senior consultant presenting findings to a board of directors." However, the task instructions focused on the content and structure of the presentation rather than on the identity work involved in enacting an expert voice, managing audience expectations, or navigating the authority dynamics between presenter and senior stakeholders.

This pattern reflects a broader tendency within the analyzed curricula to treat professional roles as performance contexts rather than as sites of identity negotiation. The gap between role assignment and identity scaffolding was particularly evident in a Medical English module in which students were asked to practice "breaking bad news" in a simulated patient encounter. While the task involved high-stakes identity positioning - requiring the learner to manage professional authority, empathy, and institutional responsibility simultaneously - the accompanying learning objectives made no reference to these dimensions, foregrounding instead "appropriate use of hedging language and empathetic discourse markers." This reflects what McIntosh et al. (2017) identify as the tendency of ESP curricula to teach communicative forms while leaving the identity work that gives those forms meaning largely implicit.

4) *Power Relations: Systematically Absent*

Power Relations were the most neglected sociolinguistic dimension by a considerable margin, absent in 64.1% of materials and explicitly addressed in only 10.9%. This finding is particularly significant given that hierarchical communication, the negotiation of authority, and politeness strategies are constitutive features of professional interaction across all four disciplines represented in the study. The near-total absence of explicit attention to power dynamics presents professional communication as a neutral exchange between interlocutors of equivalent standing - an idealization that obscures the socially stratified reality of workplace discourse (McIntosh et al., 2017; Selama, 2025).

In the few cases where power relations appeared implicitly (25.0%), they were discernible only in task design rather than in stated learning objectives. A Legal English task, for example, required learners to "negotiate contract terms with a senior partner," a scenario that clearly presupposes a hierarchical relationship, yet the rubric assessed accuracy of legal terminology and logical argumentation with no reference to power-sensitive pragmatic choices such as face-saving strategies, deference markers, or the management of disagreement in asymmetrical professional relationships. Similarly, a Business English task involving a performance appraisal scenario made no explicit mention of the power asymmetry between appraiser and appraisee, despite this dynamic being central to the communicative challenge the task was designed to simulate.

The systematic marginalization of power relations from curriculum documents carries meaningful pedagogical consequences. Learners equipped with genre templates and technical vocabulary but lacking awareness of how power shapes communicative choices may find themselves unprepared to navigate the authority structures, gatekeeping practices, and institutional hierarchies that characterize professional workplace interaction (Nazari et al., 2024). Taken together, the document analysis findings confirm that while ESP materials in this study

demonstrate genre competence as a curricular priority, the sociolinguistic architecture within which professional genres are produced and interpreted remains, for the most part, unaddressed.

b. Instructor Interview Data: Awareness and Curricular Gaps

Interview data from 15 ESP faculty members substantiated and contextualized the document analysis findings. While instructors demonstrated a broad conceptual understanding of sociolinguistic awareness, they reported significant gaps in its curricular translation. Instructors from Pharmacy and Business highlighted the importance of “professional etiquette” and “cultural sensitivity in client interactions” (Pharmacy Instructor #4, Business Instructor #2), yet acknowledged these elements were often relegated to “brief discussions” rather than structured learning sequences. A pervasive theme was the treatment of power relations as an “advanced” or “sensitive” topic deemed beyond the scope of a language-focused syllabus. As one Engineering instructor noted, “We teach them how to write a technical report, but not necessarily how to advocate for their design choice in a meeting where their manager disagrees. That’s seen as a soft skill, not an English skill” (Engineering Instructor #3). This sentiment underscores a disconnect between holistic communicative competence and a narrow linguistic curriculum.

From a sociocultural theory perspective, these combined findings indicate a partial and uneven mediation of the target professional communities of practice. The curriculum provides ample tools in the form of discourse norms but offers scant scaffolding for understanding the social meanings, positional identities, and power dynamics these tools enact (Hoekje, 2011). The scarcity of attention to power relations, as evidenced by both documents and instructor testimony, constrains learners’ ability to critically engage with professional discourse or navigate the hierarchical interactions characteristic of real-world settings (McIntosh et al., 2017). The implicit treatment of culture and identity represents a missed opportunity for the conscious appropriation of professional roles and values.

2. Contribution of Sociolinguistic Awareness to Task and Material Authenticity

Data from task analysis and learner questionnaires demonstrate the relationship between sociolinguistic framing and perceived authenticity. The results detail how tasks incorporating dimensions such as role alignment and contextual power dynamics were evaluated for their realism and relevance to professional communication.

a. Document Analysis: Authenticity Indicators in Tasks

The second research objective was first approached by analyzing tasks within the instructional materials for three authenticity indicators: Contextual Realism, Role Alignment, and Communicative Purpose. Tasks were then classified as having “High,” “Moderate,” or “Low” authenticity.

Table 2: Authenticity Levels of ESP Tasks with and Without Explicit Sociolinguistic Framing

Task Category	High Authenticity (%)	Moderate Authenticity (%)	Low Authenticity (%)
Sociolinguistically-framed (n=29)	62.1	27.6	10.3
Linguistic-only tasks (n=35)	22.9	40.0	37.1

Tasks designed with explicit sociolinguistic framing (e.g., a role-play requiring a pharmacist to manage a culturally influenced patient belief, or a simulation where business students negotiate a contract with asymmetric power dynamics) were nearly three times more likely to be rated as “Highly Authentic.” These tasks required learners to perform roles that demanded negotiation of identity, cultural assumptions, and relational dynamics.

b. Learner Questionnaire Data: Perceptions of Authenticity

The learner questionnaire (N=338) provided complementary perceptual data. Items measuring authenticity perceptions (e.g., “Tasks in this course mirror real communication challenges in my future profession”) showed a strong positive correlation with exposure to sociolinguistically-framed activities. Mean authenticity perception scores were significantly higher among students in disciplines where document analysis showed higher sociolinguistic integration (e.g., Business: M=4.18, SD=0.72) compared to those with lower integration (e.g., Computer Science: M=3.67, SD=0.81). Qualitative open-ended responses frequently cited tasks involving role-playing specific professional identities or analyzing culturally loaded case studies as the “most useful and realistic.”

These findings robustly support the constructivist-experiential view of authenticity. Authenticity emerges not from authentic texts alone but as a relational outcome of the learner’s active engagement with a meaningful, socially situated problem (Rajeswaran, 2019; Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020). By incorporating dimensions like culture and power, tasks shift from being displays of *knowledge about* language to experiences of *knowing how to* communicate within a complex social frame, enacting the “principled pragmatism” advocated for in ESP (Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020). The convergence of task design analysis and learner perception confirms that sociolinguistic components are pivotal in transforming classroom activities into experientially rich rehearsals for professional participation.

3. Impact of Sociolinguistic Integration on Learner Engagement

Statistical findings from the learner questionnaire, contextualized by qualitative instructor observations, are presented here. This section reports on the measured levels of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, analyzing variations in relation to the degree of sociolinguistic integration in course design.

a. Learner Questionnaire: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics

The third objective was primarily addressed through the structured learner questionnaire (N=338), which measured cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. Overall descriptive statistics are presented in the following table.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Learner Engagement Dimensions (N = 338)

Engagement Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Cognitive Engagement	4.12	0.61
Behavioral Engagement	3.89	0.67
Emotional Engagement	4.25	0.58

To measure the effect of curriculum design, students were grouped by their course’s level of sociolinguistic integration (High, Moderate, Low), as determined by the prior document analysis. A one-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences across all three dimensions:

- Cognitive Engagement: $F(2, 335) = 18.47, p < .001$
- Behavioral Engagement: $F(2, 335) = 11.62, p < .001$
- Emotional Engagement: $F(2, 335) = 22.91, p < .001$

Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed that students in the High Integration group scored significantly higher ($p < .01$) on all engagement measures compared to the Moderate and Low groups.

b. Instructor Interview Corroboration: Observing Engagement

Instructor interviews provided ancillary observational data supporting the questionnaire results. Instructors who reported intentionally embedding sociolinguistic elements noted increased student participation and motivation. One Pharmacy instructor observed, *“When we do role-plays that include ethical dilemmas or cultural factors, the discussion is much richer. Students are more invested because it feels real”* (Pharmacy Instructor #5). This aligns with the significantly higher emotional engagement scores captured quantitatively.

The strong positive relationship, particularly for emotional engagement, underscores the motivational power of identity work and perceived relevance (Kabalin Borenić, 2021; Lau, 2018). From a sociocultural perspective, sociolinguistically rich tasks facilitate legitimate peripheral participation by positioning learners as apprentices engaging in the discursive practices of their future professional communities. This fosters identity alignment, which directly fuels emotional investment. Cognitive engagement is heightened as learners must analyze social contexts to make appropriate linguistic choices. Behavioral engagement is catalyzed by the experiential, often dialogic nature of these tasks, aligning with the dialogic paradigm in ESP (Rajeswaran, 2019). Thus, sociolinguistic integration transforms engagement from a passive state into an active investment in one's emergent professional self.

4. Instructor Challenges in Embedding Sociolinguistic Awareness

Thematic findings from instructor interviews are reported in this section, identifying the principal barriers encountered during curriculum implementation. These challenges are analyzed to elucidate the systemic and pedagogical constraints affecting the translation of sociolinguistic awareness from principle to practice.

a. Instructor Interview Findings: Thematic Analysis

The fourth research objective was addressed through a thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the 15 ESP instructors. Four dominant, interconnected challenges emerged, as summarized in the following table.

Table 4: Instructor-Reported Challenges in Implementing Sociolinguistic Curriculum Design

Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Institutional & Curricular Rigidity	11	73.3
2. Assessment Misalignment	10	66.7
3. Lack of Specialized Pedagogical Training	9	60.0
4. Increased Emotional and Cognitive Labor	8	53.3

Instructors described a systemic conflict. They operated within rigid, predefined syllabi and standardized assessments focused on discrete linguistic outcomes, leaving little space for the nuanced teaching of sociolinguistic awareness (Themes 1 & 2). *“My assessment is 60% on grammar and vocabulary from the textbook. How do I grade someone's cultural sensitivity?”* (Business Instructor #4). Many reported a lack of preparedness, noting their own training was linguistic rather than socio-pedagogical (Theme 3) (Forteza Fernandez & Del Batista Gonzalez, 2019). Consequently, designing and facilitating complex tasks was described as intellectually demanding and emotionally taxing, requiring constant role-shifting between language expert, cultural informant, and critical pedagogue (Theme 4) (Nazari et al., 2024).

b. Document Analysis Corroboration: Structural Constraints

The document analysis indirectly corroborated these challenges. The observed scarcity of sociolinguistic elements, particularly power relations, can be interpreted as an outcome of the very constraints instructors described. The predominance of easily assessable genre exercises in the materials reflects the “assessment misalignment” cited in interviews.

From a sociocultural perspective, these challenges highlight a critical tension: the instructor is the primary mediator between the learner and the professional discourse community, yet their mediating capacity is itself constrained by institutional artefacts (inflexible curricula, inappropriate tests) and divisions of labor (accountability structures) (Huang et al., 2024). The reported “emotional labor” stems from navigating this conflicted activity system, reconciling a socially grounded vision of communicative competence with reductive institutional demands. Without institutional support through tailored training, curricular autonomy, and aligned assessment models, the deep integration of sociolinguistic awareness remains reliant on individual instructor agency and is often unsustainable.

Synthesizing data from all three sources, the findings present a coherent argument: sociolinguistic awareness is a fundamental design principle for achieving the experiential authenticity and deep engagement theorized in effective ESP, yet its implementation is systematically constrained by structural and pedagogical barriers.

The study demonstrates that curricula which integrate culture, identity, and power alongside discourse norms create the conditions for experiential learning (Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2020), which learners perceive as highly authentic and invest in cognitively and emotionally. This validates the constructivist claim that knowledge is built through active, socially situated experience.

Theoretically, this research reinforces the necessity of the sociocultural lens in ESP. It provides empirical evidence that learning is optimized when pedagogical mediation addresses not only the how (linguistic forms) but also the why and for whom (social meanings and relations) of professional communication (Hoekje, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2017). The significant neglect of power relations in the observed curricula underscores a critical gap between sociocultural theory and common practice.

Ultimately, the identified instructor challenges point to a necessary evolution in ESP teacher education and program design. For a sociolinguistically-aware curriculum to be realized, it must be supported by congruent assessment models, professional development focusing on socio-pedagogical skills, and institutional recognition of the complexity of teaching language as social practice. This study concludes that such integration is not a supplementary enhancement but a core requisite for preparing learners to become agile, critical, and effective participants in their future professional worlds.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to systematically investigate the integration of sociolinguistic awareness within ESP curriculum design. The research objectives were addressed through a triangulated analysis, revealing that while discourse norms are robustly incorporated, the sociolinguistic dimensions of culture, professional identity, and power relations remain inconsistently represented. This finding indicates a pedagogical focus on linguistic form over the social context of professional communication. However, empirical data demonstrate that the deliberate inclusion of these sociolinguistic dimensions correlates strongly with enhanced task authenticity and significantly higher levels of learner engagement across cognitive, behavioral, and emotional domains. The contribution of this work lies in its provision of an evidence-based framework that links specific curricular elements - sociolinguistic awareness - to measurable educational outcomes in ESP.

The implications extend to both theory and practice. The results substantiate the application of sociocultural and experiential learning theories within ESP, confirming that knowledge construction is mediated by social and contextual factors. Practically, this study offers a scaffold for curriculum development that prioritizes authentic, context-grounded tasks to foster

deeper learner investment. Subsequent research should pursue longitudinal designs to assess the long-term professional impact of such curricula and conduct discipline-specific studies to refine pedagogical approaches for fields such as engineering, healthcare, and business. Further investigation into scalable teacher training models to support this pedagogical shift is also warranted. This research provides a foundational step toward re-conceptualizing ESP as a discipline that prepares learners not only with technical language skills but with the discursive agility required for meaningful professional participation.

To bridge the gap between the demonstrated value of sociolinguistic awareness and current English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practice, a coordinated effort across multiple levels of curriculum design and delivery is essential. First, at the policy and design level, official ESP curriculum frameworks and intended learning outcomes should be revised to explicitly include and assess competencies in intercultural communication, professional identity negotiation, and the navigation of institutional power dynamics, moving beyond an exclusive focus on genre and register. To align with these new objectives, assessment paradigms must be reformed by developing performance-based evaluations - such as simulated professional scenarios, critical discourse analyses, and reflective portfolios - that effectively measure contextual and pragmatic competence. The success of these curricular changes also depends on the resources available to instructors; therefore, institutions should invest in the systematic development and curation of teaching materials that center sociolinguistic challenges, including discipline-specific case studies, video simulations, and digital resources that model authentic professional interactions. Furthermore, this pedagogical shift requires that instructors themselves are prepared, necessitating mandatory socio-pedagogical training for ESP practitioners that focuses on methodologies for teaching intercultural competence and facilitating discussions on identity and power within professional contexts. To ensure these increased demands on faculty are sustainable, institutions must establish support structures, such as professional learning communities and workload recognition. Finally, to validate and refine these approaches, the field must encourage and fund both longitudinal research to track the long-term impact on graduates' workplace integration and communication efficacy, as well as discipline-specific applied research to develop nuanced frameworks for integrating sociolinguistic awareness in fields like healthcare, engineering, and business, acknowledging the distinct communicative ecologies of each profession.

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