

Bridging the ESP Gap: Assessing Workplace English Communication Challenges in a South African Municipal Internship

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Abstract

This expanded article critically assesses the design, implementation, and potential evolution of an Internship Program between an Eastern Cape University and a District Municipality (DM), examined rigorously through the frameworks of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Genre Pedagogy. Existing research on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) predominantly emphasizes macro-level policy and overall graduate employment outcomes. This study contends that the program's ongoing failures are fundamentally attributable to a significant pedagogical and linguistic misalignment between graduates' English for Academic Purposes (EAP) competencies and the intricate, high-stakes, genre-specific Workplace English Communication (ESP) requirements within public administration. This study provides a significant contribution by conducting an in-depth analysis of the relationship between a university and a municipality in a resource-limited, multilingual African context, emphasizing the distinct challenges posed by English as a medium of governance. The study employs a mixed methods design, incorporating structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and policy document analysis, to examine the systemic and linguistic dissonance within the university-municipality-graduate triad. Even though there was a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2016, the findings show that systemic barriers, which we define here as a serious lack of structured linguistic mentorship, a curriculum that doesn't cover enough genres, and a failure to do a basic ESP needs analysis, are the main things that are keeping the program from being effective. The article concludes by advocating for a policy-aligned, resource-supported, and strategically coordinated ESP-integrated curriculum model, outlining the necessary steps for institutionalizing effective professional communication training and providing essential, transferable insights for African TESOL policy and practice within public sector domains.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Curriculum Alignment; Genre Pedagogy; African TESOL Context; Work Integrated Learning (WIL); Multilingualism; Discursive Competence.

Introduction

In the South African Sociolinguistic and Economic Necessity English has been regarded as a significant obstacle to public sector employment. The current socio-economic situation in South Africa is characterized by ongoing structural unemployment, especially among university graduates. In response, policy tools like the National Development Plan (NDP) and the Skills Development Act encourage internships as important ways to share skills. But the problems with placing graduates in jobs in South Africa are made worse by an important language issue. English

is a minority language that only a small number of people speak as their first language. However, it has always been and still is the official language of high-stakes communication, business, and government in the public sector. This linguistic reality imposes a significant, frequently unacknowledged, burden on graduates from historically marginalized and multilingual educational contexts. Success in the public sector requires more than just administrative knowledge; it requires showing that you can communicate professionally in the right English register. The skills gap is mostly due to a lack of English proficiency in a certain area.

Academic English Compared to Workplace Communication. Most of the time, students who graduate from the Eastern Cape University with a degree in Public Administration are able to speak English for Academic Purposes (EAP). They learn how to do things like summarize research, write argumentative essays, and put together scholarly arguments (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2007). But this EAP competence often doesn't work well for the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that the District Municipality (DM) needs. In a municipal setting, you need to know how to use legal terms, the imperative voice for giving instructions, and highly structured, often formulaic, rhetorical patterns that are typical of official documents. The required register is formal, exact, and often legally binding. It requires a level of language accuracy and rhetorical skill that is much higher than EAP standards.

The 2016 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) set up a formal partnership to help close the general skills gap. This study contends that this partnership, in its present condition, overlooks the most essential component: the requisite linguistic and pedagogical bridge. The inability to implement the program—demonstrated by low participation and inadequate institutional collaboration—is regarded as a failure to establish an effective environment for learning and applying English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where graduates can securely and systematically acquire the necessary professional discourse. This inability to gain the necessary professional communication skills is a big problem for the youth employment pipeline, making it harder for local economies to grow.

This study needs the Eastern Cape Province as a background. The challenges to effective WIL implementation, including the provision of high-quality linguistic support, are most pronounced in this resource-constrained, predominantly rural area. This study focuses on a rural District Municipality, providing a contrast to frequently referenced studies conducted in metropolitan or corporate environments. It offers a comprehensive examination of the distinctive linguistic and pedagogical challenges associated with public sector capacity building in a disadvantaged African context. This work makes a big difference in the fields of Applied Linguistics and TESOL by showing with real-world examples why ESP should be included in higher education programs that prepare people for jobs in the public sector. It goes beyond general discussions about employability to focus on specific ways of communicating.

The current research makes a big difference in the field of TESOL by showing that the institutional and systemic failures of WIL are actually major failures in the planning and delivery of ESP teaching. The principal research inquiries directing this analysis are:

1. What specific types of English used at work and communication tasks (oral, written, and digital,

along with their associated rhetorical, discursal, and lexico-grammatical demands) are required in the DM, both formally and informally? How do these tasks pose major linguistic and pedagogical challenges for graduates in the internship program?

2. How well do the Public Administration curriculum, institutional support systems, and the current MoU directly address and prepare graduates for these ESP needs, especially when it comes to teaching genres, giving linguistic feedback, and setting up corrective measures?

3. What pedagogical, curriculum design, and linguistic mentorship interventions—firmly rooted in TESOL and Genre Pedagogy theory—can augment the efficacy of professional English communication skills training and institutionalize effective ESP implementation within this particular African higher education context?

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the Fundamental Importance of Needs Analysis: The theoretical foundation of this study is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially the foundational concept of Needs Analysis. As articulated by pioneers such as Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Robinson (1991), an effective ESP program must be anchored in a detailed analysis of the target situation (the DM workplace) and the subsequent identification of the learning needs (the graduates' EAP vs. ESP deficit). This analysis is not just descriptive; it is also diagnostic and prescriptive, setting the standards for what should be taught, how it should be taught, and how it should be tested in the ESP curriculum. In the municipal context, target situations must be meticulously deconstructed into separate linguistic and discursive elements:

Genre Proficiency: The ability to use the specific formal features and rhetorical moves that are common in municipal documents (for example, knowing the difference between a persuasive policy recommendation and a descriptive technical report). This necessitates comprehensive instruction in contrastive rhetoric between academic and professional styles.

Lexico-Grammatical Precision: The level of accuracy needed when using technical terms, legalese, and formal language to make sure that documents are clear and legally sound. In this high-stakes setting, mistakes in articles, tense, or preposition use can change the meaning of a policy.

Discourse Competence: The ability to understand the hidden power dynamics, rhetorical strategies, persuasive moves, and right level of formality needed for high-stakes public sector discourse. This often means using language that is politically sensitive, jargon, and following the specific lexicons of the institutions.

People think that the current MoU doesn't work because it doesn't turn strategic goals into real-world results. This is seen as a sign that there is no formal linguistic needs analysis. This omission makes the whole internship program pedagogically blind, meaning it can't focus on the language skills that are most important for working in the public sector and being efficient.

Genre Pedagogy and the Discursive Divide in the Transition from EAP to ESP

The shift from EAP to ESP is essentially a transition between discourse communities, optimally facilitated by Genre Pedagogy dominantly studied by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (2002). In other words, the researchers proposed that academic writing (EAP) often puts a lot of emphasis on long explanations, hedging, and critical thinking. On the other hand, municipal administration (ESP) needs clear, short communication that focuses on actionable recommendations, procedural clarity, and brevity.

The university's Public Administration program, which doesn't teach specific genres, works on the wrong idea that language transfer happens automatically. Bhatia (2002) calls this "discursive incompetence in a professional field." It means that graduates know the material but can't speak the right way in a professional setting. To help students learn, teachers need to explicitly teach the rhetorical moves and structural rules of genres like "Executive Summary," "Financial Justification," and "Council Resolution," which often follow strict institutional templates. Without this focused instruction, the internship turns into a sink-or-swim language experience, which leads to low performance evaluations and inefficiency.

The Sociolinguistics of the African Workplace and the Necessity for Linguistic Mentorship

The linguistic intricacy of the Eastern Cape context necessitates a sociolinguistic analysis of its workforce. For most of the interns and their supervisors, English is a second language (L2). This is a common setting for professional mentorship for Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNEST). Local Englishes add to the rich cultural fabric, but the public sector often uses an internationalized, standardized English for policy clarity and communication with people outside the organization. This can make people feel pressured to conform to the language. This situation calls for specialized Linguistic Mentorship (Hyland, 2007). This support must go beyond just general supervision at work and include specific, helpful feedback on language use, register, and following the rules for different types of writing. Supervisors need special training in how to give effective Corrective Feedback (CF) that helps interns improve their accuracy without hurting their confidence. The DM's failure to provide mentorship, as noted in the initial study, is consequently reinterpreted as a significant deficiency in offering linguistic scaffolding and coaching, an essential pedagogical requirement in multilingual L2 professional environments. This inadequacy converts the workplace into a punitive arena for error rectification rather than a facilitative setting for professional language acquisition.

Intersecting Discourses: Policy, Pedagogy, and Authority

The implementation gap examined in this study exemplifies the convergence of policy discourse and pedagogical practice. At a high policy level, the MoU uses the terms "capacity building" and "strategic partnership." However, the fact that this hasn't led to a funded pedagogical plan (for example, funding for ESP curriculum development and mentor training) shows that the language component is not valued in the system. This devaluation, which happens a lot in L2 professional settings, is a way of showing power that keeps up a standard (perfect English

proficiency) that the EAP system isn't set up to meet, which keeps the cycle of graduate underemployment going.

Method

Research Design, Paradigm, and Contextual Specificity

The research utilizes an embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014), integrating qualitative data on linguistic perception within the quantitative framework of program evaluation. The pragmatic paradigm facilitates the amalgamation of objective metrics (MoU status) with subjective perceptions of linguistic difficulty encountered by stakeholders (interns' self-efficacy, supervisors' frustration) to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical failure. The Eastern Cape, which has a lot of need and not enough administrative resources, makes any targeted pedagogical intervention even more important.

Participants and Sampling

The sampling strategy integrated simple random sampling for graduates (N=158) from the 2017-2021 cohorts and stringent purposive sampling for key informants: academic staff (N=10) and HRD officials (N=8). This deliberate choice of HR and academic staff who worked on curriculum design and placement was necessary to get valuable linguistic and pedagogical feedback on the program's structure and language needs.

Instruments and Reasons for Using Linguistic Proxies

Structured Questionnaires (Quantitative Proxies):

Proxy 1: Awareness of Opportunities (35%): This is seen as a direct measure of how the institution failed to use effective persuasive and professional language to explain the program's value to the people it was meant for. The low uptake indicates ineffective written communication and a failure of institutional discourse.

Proxy 2: Self-Reported Barriers ("Struggles in job applications"): This broad barrier was seen as a sign of discursive incompetence, meaning the person couldn't make the professional genres (CV, motivation letter, interview responses) needed to get an offer because they didn't know the right register and lexis.

Key Informant Interviews (Qualitative Data): Thematic analysis was enhanced to identify specific language-related issues. At first, interviews with academic staff were implemented which were mainly focused on understanding "curriculum gaps" and the lack of "soft skills" as the lack of genre-specific ESP instruction and the failure to apply EAP principles in professional settings. Later, DM Officials Interviews were administered on which the coding focused on finding complaints about the interns' language skills, such as "lack of clarity," "poor formatting," "overly

academic tone," and "grammatical errors." This showed that there is a systemic need for targeted ESP intervention and mentor training.

Data Analysis: Strict Thematic Coding

Quantitative data validated the extent of the administrative and communication breakdown. The qualitative data (NVivo) analysis underwent a stringent coding process employing an iterative, emergent methodology focused on the three newly identified primary linguistic themes.

Theme 1: Discursive Alienation: The sensation of linguistic deficiency and diminished self-efficacy during the transition from the academic to the professional discourse community.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Deficit in Genre Instruction: The Public Administration curriculum's inability to clearly teach the structure and language of required municipal genres.

Theme 3: Mentorship as a Failure of Corrective Feedback: Supervisors not being trained to give constructive, language-focused feedback, which leads to frustration and the end of mentorship.

Findings

Expressions of the ESP Gap

The empirical findings validate the consensus regarding the value of the internship, which is promptly compromised by a debilitating ESP pedagogical failure evident among all three stakeholder groups.

Responses from University Graduates: The Breakdown of Self-Efficacy and Discursive Alienation

The high rate of non-participation (74%) and low level of MoU awareness (35%) show that there is a big problem with communication and teaching. Graduates expressed their challenges regarding linguistic proficiency and self-assurance:

Quote Placeholder 1 (Graduate on Application): "When you apply for a job, they ask for experience, but they also ask you to write a detailed report about yourself. The way we write at university is not how they write in the municipality. I struggled with the professional tone, the short paragraphs, and using the right technical words for policy. I lost confidence." This clearly shows the difference between the long, critical EAP essay genre and the short, formal ESP report genre.

Quote Placeholder 2 (Graduate on Interviewing): "The job interview was the hardest part. I could explain the theory, but it was hard to use the formal, legalistic language of the public sector. My EAP grammar was okay, but my ESP vocabulary was not there in that register. I felt like I didn't belong because of the way I had to speak—it was discursive alienation." This shows that there is a psychological barrier that is directly related to linguistic performance and the inability to command the professional register.

Responses from Academic Staff: The Lack of Pedagogical Skills in Genre Teaching

The academic staff recognized the strategic intent of the MoU but emphasized the inconsistent implementation and deficiencies in the curriculum. Staff concerns pointed directly to a widespread failure in genre pedagogy:

Quote Placeholder 3 (Academic Staff): "We teach the theory of public budgeting, but we don't teach them the specific genre structure of a municipal budget narrative—the mandatory sections, the financial terminology, the required disclaimers. They know what to do, but not how to write it for council approval. We assume transfer, but it's a specific language, and that assumption is failing our students." This is an admission of a curriculum void where content instruction fails to integrate linguistic implementation.

Quote Placeholder 4 (Academic Staff): "The current curriculum is full of long theoretical essays. There are no modules that teach students how to give a formal oral presentation or how to write a legal, concise email to an outside stakeholder. This is an applied linguistics failure; we've focused on content knowledge at the expense of professional communicative competence, failing to meet the explicit needs of the workplace."

Responses from DM HRD Staff: The Burden of Not Giving Corrective Feedback (Lack of Mentorship)

DM staff said they had trouble with resources and didn't have enough time to mentor others. HR managers often complained about the linguistic burden and CF's failure.

Quote Placeholder 5 (HRD Official): "The documents the interns produce are often too academic, too informal, or contain grammatical errors that violate official style guidelines. They lack the required clarity and precision of policy language. We spend too much time correcting grammar, not policy content. Managers are frustrated because they are not teachers, and they lack the skills to explain why the language is wrong." This explicitly frames the issue as a TESOL problem—the need for linguistic training for content experts.

Quote Placeholder 6 (HRD Official): "Managers are policy experts. They are frustrated because they don't know how to correct the intern's professional English without taking over and rewriting the whole document, which eliminates the learning opportunity. We lack a framework for constructive linguistic feedback that would allow the interns to learn from their mistakes." This confirms the lack of specialized pedagogical training necessary to bridge the L2 gap.

Discussion

The results show a serious and long-standing gap, which is really a failure of teaching to connect EAP and ESP in a system with limited resources. The Linguistic Requirement of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Graduates acknowledge the significance of WIL (Dewey, 1938), yet the present unstructured program does not fulfill the linguistic requirement of Kolb's learning cycle. The absence of Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization centered on language use critically undermines the hands-on experience (Active Experimentation). When an intern writes a bad report, the feedback is usually about problems with the policy, not how the

choice of words, rhetorical move, or genre structure made the policy unclear or legally weak. The absence of linguistic scaffolding converts practical experience into an unanchored linguistic challenge, compromising the fundamental tenet of experiential learning.

Institutional Misalignment and the Gap in the ESP Curriculum is another challenging factor. The failure of the MoU (Cloete et al., 2015) is directly related to the university's failure to create a shared ESP curriculum. The university operates under a model where the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learned in general courses is assumed to suffice. But the data clearly show that the DM needs to be able to speak and write in a specific way for Public Administration (EPA). This basic pedagogical mismatch is the main reason why the MoU failed in terms of governance. It means that the product (the graduate) does not meet the needs of the consumer (the municipality). To fix this, we need to make big changes to the curriculum that include genre pedagogy throughout the degree program and teach the language of governance directly.

The lack of mentorship resources is a major problem for TESOL researchers working in L2 professional settings which refers to sociolinguistics of CF Failure. The DM staff's failure to provide effective CF is not an individual shortcoming, but a systemic deficiency. To give constructive feedback on an L2 professional document, you need to know when to focus on global (structural) errors and when to focus on local (grammatical) errors. You also need to know how to use hedging and encouragement (Hyland, 2007). This study strongly suggests that any future WIL policy should clearly require and pay for TESOL training for all public sector mentors, since they are acting as language teachers on an ad hoc basis. This is the only way to make the workplace a safe and helpful place for L2 professionals to grow.

There is a major need for a unified genre pedagogy and policy alignment. To find a solution, we need to use a model that combines different types of teaching. This method requires that the Public Administration and Applied Linguistics faculty work together to redesign modules so that the learning goals require students to use specialized software or templates to create real municipal genres. This makes English more than just a general skill; it is now an assessed, core competency. This way, the DHET's policy goal of employability is supported by a strong, context-specific ESP pedagogy. The only way to permanently close the gap between academic theory and workplace practice in the Eastern Cape is through this integration.

Therefore, a complete plan for implementing ESP based on the evidence and TESOL and ESP principles, the following practical and complete suggestions are made. They are laid out as 'a Multi-stage Implementation Roadmap':

Phase 1: Building the institution and figuring out what it needs (Year 1: Diagnosis and Planning)

A. Set up a Joint ESP Task Team:

Action: A task force made up of people from Public Administration, the Applied Linguistics/TESOL Department, and the DM's HRD/Policy unit must be set up to formally oversee the MoU.

Linguistic Mandate: The main job of this team is to set the linguistic curriculum components and make sure that policies are followed.

B. Make a formal, detailed analysis of your linguistic needs:

Action: The Task Team needs to hire someone to do a formal, in-depth linguistic needs analysis (LNA) of the DM's communication needs. This should include shadowing, document analysis, and interviews. The output would be the LNA which must produce a list of the required genres, their specific rhetorical moves, the most important technical vocabulary, and the most common grammatical mistakes. This list will be the basis for the new ESP module's curriculum.

Phase 2: Integrating the curriculum and improving teaching (Year 2: Development and Training)

A. Make a credit-bearing ESP module as a permanent part of the school. The required action would be adding a required, credit-bearing "Professional Communication for Public Service (ESP)" module to the last year of the Public Administration degree. Focus on teaching is the key point as the module must focus on genre pedagogy, explicitly teaching the production of authentic, high-stakes municipal genres (e.g., policy briefs, budget narratives) based on the LNA findings, using a communicative task-based approach.

B. Create a TESOL-Informed Mentorship Certification:

Action required for this phase is to start a required certification program for DM supervisors that focuses on language-based mentoring and corrective feedback (CF) methods. While the pedagogical focus would be on training which must stress clear, non-judgmental, and genre-specific CF, and coaching supervisors on how to help interns find the right professional register and structure without taking on the role of the main editor.

C. Making and sharing resources:

Action: The Applied Linguistics Department at the university should work with the DM to make a collection of real municipal documents with notes (with permission) that can be used as model texts and case studies for the new ESP module.

Phase 3: Putting everything together, testing it, and growing it (Year 3 and beyond: Evaluation and Policy)

A. Make linguistic testing the same for everyone:

Action focuses on creating shared, genre-specific rubrics that the university faculty (for the ESP module) and the DM supervisor (for the internship) can both use. Moreover, the purpose would be on the evaluation which must be ongoing and focused on important aspects of the professional setting, such as rhetorical effectiveness, register accuracy, clarity, and adherence to genre structure. This will ensure a consistent standard for evaluation.

B. Coordinated Linguistic Scaffolding:

Action: Make the first month of the internship a discourse orientation, where the interns will look at the DM's internal communication genres. Output would focus on Interns who should keep a reflective journal about how they use the professional register. The university's TESOL liaison will look over the journal to make sure that the interns' real-world experience is directly linked to their language skills.

C. Policy Advocacy and Repetition:

Action: The results and the new ESP model should be formally presented to national bodies (DHET, DPSA) to push for making ESP modules required for all public service-oriented degrees and to get dedicated funding for TESOL training for public sector mentors. This would turn this pilot into a national policy model.

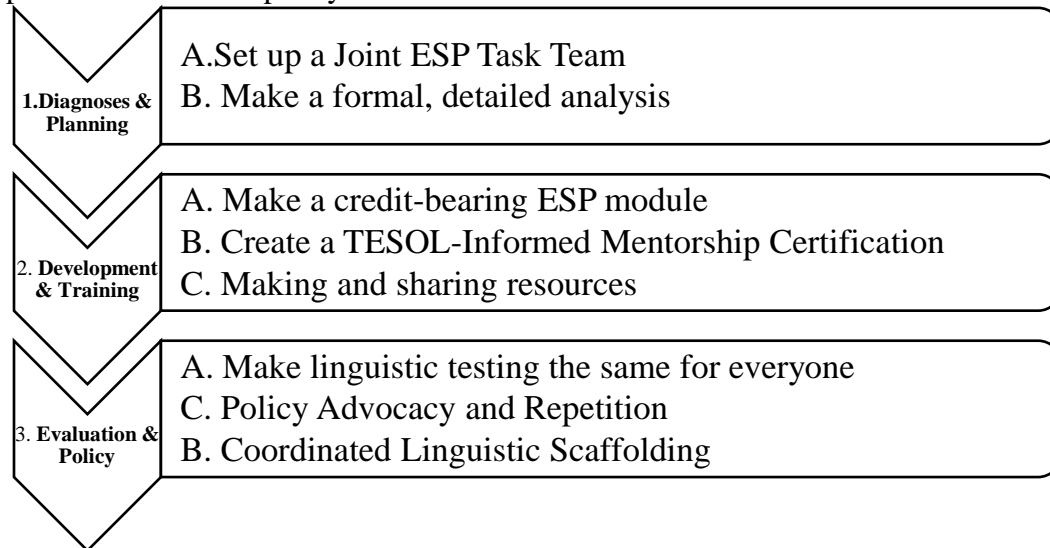


Figure 1
Multi-stage Implementation Roadmap for TESOL training

Conclusion

This article has fundamentally recontextualized the assessment of the Eastern Cape University-DM Internship Program as a pivotal investigation in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The research has established that the principal obstacle to effective graduate placement is the absence of a structured program to bridge the EAP/ESP divide, by reconceptualizing structural, administrative, and operational barriers as indicative of a more profound pedagogical and linguistic deficiency.

The research offers empirical evidence from all three stakeholder groups that the university is generating EAP-ready graduates for a context that necessitates ESP proficiency. The program has not worked because it does not have the pedagogical framework, the genre-specific curriculum, or the trained linguistic mentorship needed to turn academic knowledge into professional discourse. This failure is a systematic devaluation of the language skills necessary for effective governance.

The results strongly suggest that the transformative potential of WIL in enhancing graduate employability and public service delivery in the Eastern Cape can only be achieved through a formally and intentionally structured collaborative ESP program. For TESOL policy to work in

African professional settings, there needs to be a systemic commitment to seeing professional communication as a core, assessed skill.

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