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RESEARCH PAPER

Effective Workplace Communication: Integrating Soft Skills into an ESP Course for Administrative College Staff

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the development of a customized ESP course, based on a multi-method needs analysis, that incorporates soft skills modules for the administrative staff of the college. Administrative staff in higher education institutions are required not only to be fluent in English but also to possess interpersonal and professional soft skills. The staff are assigned specific roles, including front desk officers, accounts officers, admission team members, and exam coordinators, who interact with students, faculty, directors, and external stakeholders. These interactions need not be solely functional; rather, there is a critical need for professionalism, adaptability, empathy, and workplace readiness. This study employs a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Using communicative language teaching and experiential learning theory, the course designs modules that simulate real-life workplace situations and conversations common in the workplace. Findings reveal that professional communication skills and workplace confidence are improved by combining language instruction with soft skills development. It is suggested that higher education should introduce ESP courses that integrate soft skills to enhance the professionalism of administrative staff.

| **KEYWORDS** | ESP, Soft Skills, Need Analysis, Administrative Staff, Course Design |

Introduction

Higher education has become more global, focused on quality, and centered on students, which has changed the roles of administrative staff. These staff members require communication skills for the smooth functioning of institutions. Although institutions focus on staff training in vocabulary, grammar, and business writing, they overlook skills such as persuasion, negotiation, and maintaining a professional tone in the workplace. This study provides a sample for the training module designed through needs analysis, which helps close the gap between the present and demanded English, thus increasing staff confidence.

Though multiple English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses have been designed for higher education institutions, a critical gap remains in how these courses and programs address the real-time communication needs of administrative staff. There is a bulk of studies on ESP that stress the need for technical language instruction for specific fields like medicine, law, engineering, business, translation studies, fashion design, and Psychology (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2013; Islam & Irshad, 2025; Naveed, Irshad, Sadia, 2025), but soft skill development for communication in the workplace is a dimension that has not been focused on. Soft skills include negotiation, persuasion, emotional intelligence, professional tone, and diplomacy. All of these are essential in academic institutions where daily interactions take place.

College staff members have a unique role that requires them to handle challenging interactions and communicate clearly, tactfully, and professionally. However, traditional ESP courses neglect such realities, leading to misalignment between the curriculum focus and institutional expectations (Yasmin et al. 2016). These courses provide technical preparation to learners, but do not address social skills due to the absence of soft skill

integration. This study presents a model of an ESP course that introduces soft skills in communicative instruction. The need analysis does not just explore how English is used currently, but also investigates how often it should be used. By setting up such goals, this study also highlights the communication barriers that are ignored.

The importance of this study lies in providing administrative staff with linguistic and interpersonal tools that enable them to perform confidently and professionally in workplace settings. This is especially crucial when interacting with students and handling service tasks, where communication competence directly affects stakeholder satisfaction and the institution's credibility. Additionally, this study offers a curriculum framework and training strategies that other institutions can adopt. In doing so, this research makes a valuable contribution to ESP, positioning it not just as a tool for completing tasks but as a platform for professional growth that combines language learning with adaptability and competence.

Literature Review

Administrative staff play a crucial role in higher education institutions. These staff members act as a communication bridge between internal and external groups of people. Although professional communication requirements have increased, the training of administrative staff is still limited to technical language skills with no focus on the soft skills required for proper functioning in the workplace environment. This gap highlights that ESP is not just a tool for language improvement but also a platform for developing soft skills.

The ESP course fulfils the communication needs of people belonging to specific fields, such as medicine, engineering, law, or, as in the case of the current study, higher education administrative staff (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). ESP focuses on developing tasks that mimic the real workplace environments. Belcher (2006) argued that ESP is not about the learners' current needs; rather, it aims to prepare them for their future roles as well. As the workplace environment is constantly changing, there is a need for professional readiness among the learners, and simple language training does not suffice.

In the past, ESP courses focused on grammar and vocabulary to fulfill the field-specific vocabulary needs of learners. However, this approach has shifted, and now integration of soft skills is also considered equally important, alongside language development. Soft skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, empathy, and professional communication have not been considered in traditional language development courses. However, they have a great impact on communication in workplace situations, especially when staff address sensitive issues.

Many researchers have highlighted this gap, as Lavrysh (2016) argued that integrating soft skills through an ESP course, especially in technical fields such as engineering, enhances learners' confidence. Linguistic competence is insufficient without critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and active listening. Absence of these things impeded effective connection with others in complex situations, and even an excellent speaker would struggle in professional settings.

Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) highlighted that miscommunication did not occur due to grammatical mistakes, but due to misunderstandings conveyed through tone, level of politeness, or assertiveness. This type of communication is crucial for administrative staff, as they encounter such situations. Cross-cultural studies of politeness show how Pakistani and British English speakers diverge in gendered and cultural strategies (Saleem, Yasmin & Saleem, 2021), underlining the need for culturally embedded ESP training. Akinbode et al. (2023) also suggested that institutions should focus on developing social and emotional competence among their staff. Similar to how gendered subjectivities in Pakistani fiction negotiate religious–secular binaries (Safdar & Yasmin, 2021), professional discourse

in offices reflects broader cultural and ideological negotiations. Comparable religio-cultural inscription of communicative practices has been observed in everyday genres such as Pakistani wedding invitations (Yasmin, Naseem & Sohail, 2019). Need Analysis (NA) is the heart of curriculum design, as its purpose is to ensure that language instruction is relevant to the field, based on the real-world use and according to the demands of the learner's work. This view is echoed in the Pakistani context by Yasmin and Sohail (2018) and Yasmin et al. (2020), who found that institutional constraints and learner preferences are central to ESP course alignment. However, most needs assessments focus on the current use of language rather than on the expected use of language. The current study not only fills this gap but also uncovers the deeper challenges that staff face in professional communication. Hyland (2013) also emphasizes the combination of "target situation analysis" and "present situation analysis" to gain a comprehensive understanding of learners' needs.

Reynolds et al. (2017) stated that language teaching should be aligned with the professional demands of the 21st century. They were in favour of outcome-based approaches where grammatical accuracy was not the only focus; rather, real-world effectiveness and adaptability were valued. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which is used in this study to design the tasks. The staff are not merely taught, but are expected to engage in real-time work performance.

Collectively, the findings from the literature reveal that ESP courses should not only create professionals, but also competent language users.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs two interrelated approaches, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). These approaches complement each other and also provide a design for developing an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for administrative staff in higher education institutions.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a teaching approach that prepares learners to use language effectively. It does not focus on learning grammar and vocabulary like traditional methods of language teaching; rather, it emphasizes the effective use of language, preparing people for real-life communication. This does not emphasize knowing grammatical rules but also using language smoothly and efficiently, especially in social and professional settings. Fluency in communication, appropriateness of context, and meaningful interaction in everyday situations such as conversing, writing emails, and participating in meetings are the targets of CLT. These skills are required in the workplace. Therefore, this approach aligns with the objectives of this study, which aims to equip the administrative staff with practical skills. English skills that they can use while performing their daily tasks, such as dealing with an enquiry, speaking in meetings, conversing, and writing emails or letters.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), a complement to CLT, explains how learners acquire knowledge. Learning is most effective when it occurs in a natural cyclical process (Kolb, 1984) in which people engage in an experience, then reflect on it and make sense of their experiences, and then utilize it to develop new ideas. These ideas are further tested and applied in new situations. This cyclic process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation is the same way we learn in our daily life when the target is practical, real-life skills.

Thus, the above discussion highlights that communicative language teaching (CLT) and experiential language theory (ELT) serve as effective theoretical frameworks for both language teaching and the development of soft skills. CLT makes language learning effective by focusing on real-world communication, such as handling inquiries, writing emails, and speaking in meetings. Thus, whatever participants learn is directly connected to what they

perform at work. As communicative language teaching focuses on the use of language in context, staff develop confidence and the ability to use the English language accurately in work situations. Experiential language theory makes learning a more active process that involves active participation where participants learn by performing in real situations, reflecting on their performance, and identifying ways to perform effectively in upcoming situations. This involves not only practicing English but also developing interpersonal awareness and emotional intelligence that helps in dealing with interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

The study adopts a holistic language view by combining the two approaches. The objective is to help staff grow as professionals, not just as English speakers, who can listen and express themselves properly and also handle complex situations confidently and efficiently. Through this practical and experience-based learning, participants develop language and the human skills required in their roles at work.

The theoretical framework justifies the integration of soft skills alongside the development of language. It highlights the importance of creating a learning environment where language is not learned in isolation but rather is experienced and practised in participants' work-life contexts. This approach creates a dynamic and comprehensive learning experience, which is the focus of the ESP course in the present study.

Material and Methods

This study employs a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach is suitable as it helps analyze participants' hidden perspectives, which cannot be explored through a quantitative approach alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using multiple tools, including structured surveys, focus group interviews, and task mapping, this study analyzes participants' communication needs.

The structured survey helps analyze how staff use English in their daily routine. Moreover, analysis of interviews provides a detailed understanding of their daily communication experiences. Talking about their experiences revealed the reasons, like anxiety while communicating in English and the difficulty in using a professional tone in complex situations. Furthermore, task role mapping was also done to identify what each role includes in the daily routine. What responsibilities are carried out by the staff, and what communication takes place, whether in written or spoken form, formal or informal. This step was crucial to ensure that the curriculum was related to the actual work people perform in their jobs, making the training practical, relevant, and role-specific.

The administrative staff included participants from various positions within the administrative departments of three different colleges of Jalalpur Jattan. Purposive sampling was used to select a total of 15 participants. Administrative staff are front desk officers, accounts officers, BS coordinators, examination coordinators, and admissions team members. It was ensured that the sample included participants from the different roles with diverse communication demands. This approach aimed to involve members whose work requires them to interact with the internal stakeholders (such as parents, students, colleagues) and external stakeholders. Thus, they would require not only language competence but a set of soft skills for the sake of professionalism and adaptability. Including such a variety of roles was necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of how communication occurs in any institution and the challenges staff members face in their everyday routine while performing different roles.

Results and Discussion

The needs analysis conducted in the study provided information on the extent to which English was currently used and how staff wanted it to be used in multiple institutional

settings. The most common pattern was the use of English while writing emails. 80% of participants reported that they often used English while writing emails, and 20% used it sometimes. However, all participants believed that English should be used often in writing emails. In staff meetings, 67% of the participants reported that English was used sometimes, while 20% believed it was used often. When students were asked about their preferences, 67% stated that it should be used frequently in meetings, and 33% said it should be used occasionally.

In interaction with students, 53% participants reported they used it often, 47% reported that they rarely used it, while 73% were in favour of its use in interactions with students. According to 67% of the participants, English was rarely used in phone calls, while 80% believed that it should be used more frequently in such conversations

In writing reports, 73% of the participants reported they used it often, while all participants were in favour of using English in writing reports. For admission guidance, 27% of participants reported using English, while 80% believed that it should be used often.

According to 80% of participants, English is rarely used when interacting with international students, while all participants informed that it should be used most of the time. In preparation for examination documents and instructions, 93% participants stated that they used English, while all participants considered that it should be used often. 40% participants reported that English was used rarely in financial procedures, 60% informed that it was used sometimes, while 67% said that it should be used often.

Though English is a preferred language, the data analysis reveals that staff use their local or national language in more casual or spontaneous situations, as they feel confident and comfortable when using their native languages. This highlights the multifaceted nature of communication in the workplace. The staff believed that though English was not used in interaction with students and during meetings, they wanted to use it. It highlights their aspiration to communicate in English clearly and professionally. The staff argued that with strong English communication skills, they could perform their roles confidently.

This study highlights soft skills that staff deemed effective in the workplace settings. These skills include assertiveness, emotional intelligence, time management, conflict resolution, and intercultural communication. They posited that these skills are required to address difficult situations.

Interview analysis reveals that many staff members feel anxious when speaking English, particularly where a professional tone is desirable. When they feel a lack of understanding, they prefer using their native language. This indicates that language anxiety can influence language use. Thus, it highlights the need for a training course that provides a workplace environment where staff can effectively enhance their communication skills.

Course Design

An ESP course comprising five modules was designed to address the communication needs of administrative college staff. Each feature is designed with careful consideration of the language and soft skills requirements of the staff. Email & E-Communication is the first module, which emphasizes sentence structure and clarity, time management, and professionalism. The second module, Meeting Participation, emphasizes team skills. The third module, Office Dialogues, requires participants to practice routine workplace interactions, including making requests, providing guidance, and showing sensitivity to cultural factors. The fourth module, Presenting Ideas, addresses the organization of ideas, the effective use of visual aids, and the development of confidence and persuasive communication skills. The fifth module, Conflict Communication, focuses on negotiation and polite handling of complaints, underscoring emotional intelligence and diplomacy.

Engaging tasks and practical activities are included in these modules. These activities and methods include role-playing based on workplace situations, collaborating on writing tasks, simulating meeting scenarios, and writing journals. Through these methods, participants would not merely learn language but also apply it in the situations they face at the workplace. This course design is flexible. It provides them with a clear training schedule while giving them opportunities to apply the learnt skills in workplace settings. The following table presents course contents for the ESP course for administrative staff.

Course Title: English Communication and Soft Skills for Higher Education Staff
Course Duration: 10 weeks
Course Objectives
After this course, the participants will:

- Communicate more confidently and effectively in English in workplace situations.
- Learn soft skills, including emotional intelligence, assertiveness, and cultural awareness, in daily workplace interactions.
- Write professional emails and letters, and use appropriate tone and structure.
- Participate efficiently in staff meetings and discussions, express opinions, and handle disagreements with diplomacy.
- Handle difficult interactions, such as complaints and misunderstandings, with professionalism and empathy.
  Reference Books
- Guffey, M. E., & Loewy, D. (2015). Business communication: Process and product (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Bovée, C. L., & Thill, J. V. (2016). Business communication today (13th ed.). Pearson. Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. Bantam Books.
- Oshima, A., & Hogue, A. (2006). Writing academic English (4th ed.). Pearson Longman.
- Reynolds, G. (2012). Presentation Zen: Simple ideas on presentation design and delivery (2nd ed.). New Riders.
  Teaching Methods
- Role-playing and simulations of real workplace scenarios (e.g., front-desk inquiries, team disputes, admissions, or meetings).
- Collaboratively writing emails, letters, and notices.
- Holding group discussions to deal with communication challenges and to apply soft skills.
- Arranging feedback sessions to give a supportive review of role-plays and presentations.
  Assessment Methods
- Written assignments (emails, letters, notices)
- Role-play performances and simulations
- Final presentation

Course Modules

Module	Language Use	Soft Skills	Tasks
Email & E-Communication	Clarity, Tone, Structure	Time management, professionalism	Writing internal emails, responding to inquiries, and formatting memos
Meeting Participation	Expressing opinions, Consensus-building	Assertiveness, Collaboration	Simulated staff meetings, note-taking, and follow-up summaries
Office Dialogues	Clarifying, Requesting, Guiding	Empathy, Cultural awareness	Role-playing student inquiries, guiding visitors, managing confusion or conflict

Presenting Ideas	Organizing thoughts, using visuals	Confidence, persuasion	Mini-presentations, delivering updates, speaking in a group setting
Conflict Communication	Negotiation, Polite complaint handling	Emotional intelligence, diplomacy	Handling complaints, resolving miscommunication, and apologizing professionally

Course contents

Session	Lecture Title	Activities/Tasks
1	Course Orientation & role of communication	Group discussion needs mapping
	Writing effective emails	Sample email analysis, writing task
	Email etiquette & time management	Email rewrite exercise, inbox organization tips
2	Polishing written communication	Peer review, formal memo drafting
3	Participating in staff meetings	Meeting role-play, language drill
	Assertiveness in meetings	Role-play with guided feedback
4	Office dialogues & student support	Practice with student inquiry scenarios
	Cultural & emotional awareness	Simulations with international students
5	Writing institutional documents	Draft institutional report/letter
	Managing tone & politeness	Document rewrite with tone check.
6	Structuring presentations	Plan and outline a mini presentation
	Building confidence & persuasion	Group presentations, peer feedback
	Conflict & complaint handling	Complaint response role-play
7	Emotional intelligence in conversations	Journaling and group debrief
8	Communicating across departments & cultures	Departmental communication scenarios
	Negotiation & diplomacy	Conflict resolution role-play
9	Integrated role-play simulation	Multiple role-plays (front desk, meetings, admissions)
	Peer feedback & self-evaluation	Self-evaluation rubric, group reflections
10	Final presentations	Individual 5-minute presentation
	Course reflection	Feedback, certificate distribution

Conclusion

This study presents a model of an ESP course that introduces soft skills in communicative instruction. In today's time, the role of administrative staff is not limited to behind-the-scenes paperwork and schedule management; rather, they are the first point of contact with people who come to the institution (Hyland, 2016). Tasks performed by the staff include writing emails, handling admissions, responding to inquiries, and handling critical discussions. Addressing the issue requires soft skills such as confidence, empathy, situational awareness, and effective response (Robles, 2012). By focusing on both language and soft skills, this study highlights that communication is not just about what is being said but also about how it is being said. The findings reveal that traditional ESP courses merely emphasize the grammar and vocabulary of a specific field, while overlooking the communication skills required for staff in workplace settings. For administrative staff, communication is not limited to sentence structure but to the integration of soft skills. This course is distinctive as it not only examines actual English usage but also explores participants' perspectives on how it should be ideally used. The addition of this in the needs analysis makes this course more than a training program, but a necessary tool for professional growth.

Recommendations

It is suggested that higher education should introduce ESP courses that integrate soft skills modules to enhance the professionalism of administrative staff. There is a need for ongoing training and simulation-based activities to support continuous professional development and enhance workplace preparedness.

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