

Synergy and challenges in team-taught ESP courses in tertiary education

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Abstract. *Given that the modern approach to teaching English for special purposes (ESP) determines the course content and methodology based on the students' reason for learning, the presentation focuses on the opportunities and risks of an integrated course taught by an English teacher and specialism lecturers in a team. Synergistic benefits of sharing a course by both the subject and language specialists are illustrated by the decade of experience, classroom observation, and stakeholders' feedback. Team-teaching and course integration challenges are outlined for further professional debate.*

Keywords: *ESP, content integration, team-teaching, tertiary education, interdisciplinary synergy, teaching methodology.*

Introduction. Recent developments in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy have marked a clear shift toward learner-centered, purpose-driven instruction, where course content and methodology are increasingly tailored to the students' academic and professional needs. Within this evolving framework, one of the central challenges is how to effectively enhance learner motivation and ensure the relevance of instruction, particularly in contexts where students may lack direct professional experience. Integrated teaching models—where ESP instructors collaborate with subject-matter experts in a team-teaching format—offer a promising, yet complex, solution to this issue. This paper aims to investigate the pedagogical opportunities and institutional risks associated with such integrated ESP courses taught by an ESP teacher and specialism lecturers in a team, focusing on their potential to bridge the gap between language instruction and disciplinary knowledge. A lot of scholars studying ESP have come to the conclusion that ESP cannot but make use of the methodology and activities of the discipline it serves. The exploration is timely and significant, as it aligns with broader trends in tertiary education that emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration and the cultivation of job-related competences in response to the demands of increasingly globalized professional environments.

Theoretical Background. The tertiary students' motivation to study a foreign language is directly connected to their future occupation. In order to motivate them, promote their autonomy, and cater to their different abilities and learning styles, modern ESP teachers are expected to be linguistically and culturally competent, and equally competent on the discourse level. Without the background knowledge of the learners' specialism, the language teacher may be unable to interact effectively with

the learners because of unfamiliarity with the discourse that is unfolding in class. ESP teachers usually turn to the subject content in order to provide opportunities for the students to develop their fluency, produce extended spoken discourse, and effectively share their knowledge of the subject, even if this knowledge goes beyond the teacher's command of the subject [2; 3].

The integration of language and content instruction is considered to be ideal for learners' development. It is especially topical for pre-experience students who do not have occupation-focused communicative experience to build the course on. Besides, it can simulate the authentic communication environment in countries where English is not a medium of communication [7].

Integrated ESP courses and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology are both content-based language instruction approaches, yet they differ in focus, target audience, teaching format, and pedagogical goals. Integrated ESP is primarily designed for tertiary-level or professional learners who require English in specific academic or occupational domains such as medicine, engineering, or business. Its goal is to develop profession-oriented communication skills through tailored instruction aligned with the learners' future job tasks. These courses often involve team-teaching by an ESP teacher and a subject-matter expert, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. The ESP teacher may not be a specialist in the field, but must understand the relevant discourse to scaffold language learning effectively. Course content is discipline-specific, and assessments focus on learners' ability to use English in real-life professional scenarios. In contrast, CLIL adopts a dual-focused model that gives equal importance to both subject content and language learning. While increasingly present in tertiary education, CLIL is more commonly used in primary and secondary contexts, where students study traditional subjects like history or science through a foreign language. Unlike ESP, CLIL often involves a single teacher—either a content teacher using English as the medium of instruction or a language teacher with some subject knowledge. Its aim is broader than ESP, focusing on developing both academic content knowledge and general cognitive-academic language proficiency. The language focus in CLIL includes functions such as describing, analyzing, and hypothesizing, often supported by scaffolding aligned with Bloom's taxonomy [1]. Curriculum and assessment in CLIL follow the existing subject program, and language outcomes are typically secondary. While both approaches rely on content-language integration and promote communicative competence, ESP is highly purpose-driven and tied to professional identity formation, whereas CLIL is more generalist and educational in scope. ESP prioritizes relevance to specific workplace communication needs, while CLIL aims at holistic language development through meaningful content engagement. Ultimately, both methods benefit from collaboration across disciplines and can simulate authentic language use, but ESP demands closer alignment with job-specific discourse and tasks. Their effectiveness depends on context, learner needs, and institutional support. In tertiary education, integrated ESP offers greater specialization and professional readiness, while CLIL fosters academic thinking and flexible

language use [6]. Together, they reflect contemporary trends in language education that emphasize relevance, authenticity, and learner-centered approaches.

Benefits of Team-Taught Integrated Courses. Synergistic benefits of the interdepartmental course sharing by subject and language *teachers* include:

- a greater awareness of the learners' real-life needs and target professional situation;
- measurable skills and results to be used for evaluating learners' achievements;
- greater cohesion in the syllabus and materials using up-to-date resources;
- meaningful discourse in the class and priority of long-term goals over day-to-day goals;
- better integration of knowledge, subject-related skills, and study skills;
- more diverse teaching repertoire and pedagogical flexibility;
- a higher status for educators through constant professional development.

At the same time, *students* experience:

- sustained intrinsic motivation to learn;
- real-life simulation in the university classroom;
- integrated and transferable job-related competences;
- active involvement in course design and continuous feedback loops.

Challenges of Team Teaching and Course Integration. Barriers to effective team-teaching can arise at institutional, departmental, and individual levels, limiting the sustainability of such initiatives. Team-teaching and course integration may challenge the participants with:

- a clash between the innovative opportunity and traditional academic culture;
- role ambiguity and dependency among team members, teachers' overload with contact hours;
- time-consuming activity that requires constant analysis and revision of the materials and methodology, continuous feedback, and process observation;
- students' lack of self-study and self-evaluation skills, and a focus on mere reproduction of knowledge.

Conditions for Effective Synergy. Overcoming these challenges requires systematic institutional support and individual initiatives to foster a collaborative environment. By addressing these barriers, universities can improve the effectiveness of foreign language teaching for professional purposes, ultimately benefiting both students and faculty. Researchers maintain that interdepartmental collaborations turn out to be successful if they are a bottom-up initiative involving individual subject and language teachers who develop a shared vision [5].

To achieve a real synergistic effect, the team needs:

- thorough planning, mutual understanding, and readiness to cooperate;
- staffing of the team by volunteers who are competent and comfortable with spontaneous debate in the classroom;
- effective continuous feedback opportunities for all parties in a process;
- long-term cooperation strategy supported by the university administration.

Conclusion. In light of the growing demand for relevance, authenticity, and interdisciplinary collaboration in tertiary education, integrated ESP courses represent a highly responsive and forward-looking pedagogical model. By combining the

expertise of language and subject-matter specialists, such courses address both linguistic and professional development goals, supporting students in acquiring job-related competences in a meaningful communicative context. The synergy achieved through team-teaching enables a deeper alignment between course content and the learners' future professional environment, thereby sustaining intrinsic motivation and enhancing educational outcomes. At the same time, integrated ESP courses provide valuable opportunities for educators to engage in continuous professional growth and curriculum innovation. However, the implementation of this model is not without challenges. Institutional inertia, vague division of roles, time constraints, and student passivity may hinder the effectiveness of team teaching unless supported by a clear strategic vision and cooperative framework. Success depends on thorough planning, shared responsibility, and voluntary engagement of competent, adaptable educators. Sustainable integration further requires systemic backing, including administrative recognition, flexible workload arrangements, and feedback-driven course development. As such, team-teaching should not be seen as a temporary trend, but as a long-term investment in educational quality, employability, and academic collaboration. Integration of language and content is not only desirable but necessary in modern ESP. Despite challenges, with thoughtful planning and institutional backing, synergistic benefits for both educators and students can be achieved. Future discussions should focus on practical implementation strategies and sustainable team-teaching models in tertiary education.

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