Reframing Authenticity in ESP: Vocational Students' Perceptions in Engineering-Focused English Courses

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Abstract - English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has evolved to meet the dynamic demands of globalized industries by fostering learners' ability to use English in discipline-specific contexts. In vocational education, particularly for engineering students, the authenticity of learning materials and tasks is crucial in bridging classroom instruction with real-world professional communication. While existing studies have examined authenticity broadly in ESP, limited research has focused on students' lived experiences within technical vocational settings at the secondary level. This study investigates the perceptions of authenticity among Grade 12 engineering students in an ESP course at a private vocational high school in Indonesia. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, quantitative data were first collected via an online questionnaire administered to 259 students across various engineering majors. Subsequently, qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews with five students representing different engineering disciplines. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the Level of Respondent Achievement (LRA), while qualitative data were interpreted through Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) analytical framework encompassing data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. Findings revealed an average LRA of 71.4%, suggesting a moderate perception of authenticity. However, qualitative analysis surfaced significant gaps, including minimal integration of workplace-relevant content, lack of alignment between classroom tasks and professional practices, and absence of authentic assessment strategies. These findings underscore a misalignment between pedagogical design and students' future professional realities. This study contributes to the growing discourse on authenticity in ESP by emphasizing the need for contextualized material development and outcome-based curriculum design tailored to specific vocational fields. Implications are discussed for ESP practitioners, curriculum developers, and policy-makers in aligning ESP instruction with the competencies demanded by 21st-century technical professions.

Keywords: *ESP, vocational education, authenticity, students' perceptions, engineering English*

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a central area of inquiry in applied linguistics, particularly in vocational education contexts where students require language competence tailored to their professional fields (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2006; Basturkmen, 2010). A key construct underpinning ESP pedagogy is authenticity, commonly defined as the extent to which instructional materials, tasks, and assessments reflect real-world communicative practices (Carter, 1983; Gilmore, 2007). Authenticity is not simply a methodological preference but a pedagogical imperative, as it directly influences learners' ability to transfer classroom-acquired skills into professional domains (Mishan & Timmis, 2015; Flowerdew, 2013).

In Indonesia, the revitalization of Vocational High Schools (VHS) through Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2016 has emphasized bilingual and vocationally aligned curricula, positioning ESP as a strategic tool for preparing students for global competitiveness (Direktorat Pembinaan SMK, 2017). Yet, despite these initiatives, a persistent misalignment remains between ESP course content and the communicative demands of vocational workplaces (Mahbub, 2018; Kamaruddin, Fitria, & Patmasari, 2021). Research highlights the continued reliance on generic English textbooks designed for senior high schools, which inadequately address domain-specific needs of vocational learners (Albiansyah & Minkhatunnakhriyah, 2021; Widodo, 2016). This lack of contextual relevance diminishes authenticity, reducing learner engagement and restricting the applicability of language skills in professional contexts, particularly in engineering-related programs where students require specialized exposure to technical documentation and workplace communication (Mostafavi, Mohseni, & Abbasian, 2021).

The centrality of authenticity in ESP is emphasized across multiple frameworks. Tsou and Chen's (2014) ESP program evaluation model identifies authenticity—alongside learner needs and autonomy—as a core determinant of ESP effectiveness. They operationalize authenticity across three dimensions: materials, tasks, and assessments. This triadic framework aligns with broader applied linguistics perspectives, which argue that authentic input and performance-based evaluation enhance both communicative competence and learner motivation (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010; Ellis, 2003; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Yet debates persist over what counts as "authentic": unmodified real-world texts, pedagogically adapted materials, or the situated interaction between learner, task, and context (Breen, 1985; Gilmore, 2019).

While authenticity has been extensively theorized, empirical studies exploring vocational students' perceptions remain limited, especially in the Indonesian context. Evidence suggests that when students perceive a clear alignment between ESP content and vocational aspirations, they demonstrate stronger engagement, improved confidence, and

enhanced language performance (Liu, Chang, Yang, & Sun, 2011; Saeed, 2021). Conversely, a perceived lack of authenticity may erode motivation and weaken readiness for workplace communication.

This study seeks to reframe authenticity in ESP by foregrounding vocational students' perceptions in engineering-focused programs at Indonesian vocational high schools. Specifically, it investigates how students perceive the authenticity of ESP materials, tasks, and assessments, and how these perceptions influence their preparedness for workplace communication. By situating authenticity within students' lived experiences, this study contributes to bridging the gap between ESP pedagogy and the communicative realities of vocational education, while extending Tsou and Chen's (2014) framework into a developing-country vocational context.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, prioritizing quantitative data collection followed by qualitative exploration. The quantitative phase involved administering a questionnaire, while the qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews. This design allowed measurement of vocational students' perceptions of authenticity and deeper clarification through interview narratives (Creswell, 2012).

2.2 Research Population and Sampling

The research population consisted of Grade 12 students from a private engineering vocational high school in Central Java, Indonesia. These students were chosen because of their advanced stage in vocational education and their prolonged exposure to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. A cluster random sampling technique was employed to select the school, while purposive sampling was applied to identify participants for the qualitative phase. In the quantitative phase, 259 students completed the questionnaire, representing five majors: Motorcycle Engineering and Business, Automotive Light Vehicle Engineering, Computer and Network Engineering, Audio Video (Electronics) Engineering, and Automotive Body Engineering. In the qualitative phase, five students— one from each major—were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (S1–S5) were used in the analysis.

2.3 Data Collection Instrument

Two instruments were employed in this study: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Tsou and Chen (2014) and Mostafavi, Mohseni, and Abbasian (2021), focusing exclusively on authenticity-related items. It consisted of three main dimensions, namely authentic assessment, authentic materials, and authentic tasks. Responses were gathered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 30 students, and items that failed to meet validity criteria (r-hit < r-table, $p < 0.05$) were removed. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interviews were carried out with five participants to obtain deeper insights into their perceptions of authenticity in ESP. The interview questions explored students' experiences with authentic materials, tasks, and assessment in their English classes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and returned to the participants for verification.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two stages, combining quantitative and qualitative procedures. In the quantitative phase, responses were processed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive statistical analyses, including frequency, mean, and percentage, were applied to examine students' perceptions of authenticity. To classify the results, the Level of Respondent Achievement (LRA) index (Sugiyono, 2017) was employed, dividing responses into categories of Excellent, Good, Sufficient, Poor, and Very Poor. A reliability test was also carried out using Cronbach's Alpha, which indicated excellent internal consistency for the authenticity-related items ($\alpha = 0.922$). In the qualitative phase, interview data were analyzed following the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic coding was further employed to identify recurring patterns and insights related to authenticity. The qualitative findings were then used to elaborate, clarify, and, in some cases, challenge the quantitative results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Overall Perceptions of Authenticity

Sub-domain	Item Number	Statement
Authentic Assessments	Item 1	I understand what authentic language is.
	Item 2	The assessment was conducted both by English teacher and by specialist in my major.

	Item 3	The assessment is carried out in the form of a written exam using English with topics related to my major.
	Item 4	The assessment is carried out in the form of an oral exam (speaking) using English with topics related to my major.
	Item 5	The assessment involves assignments which require students to use English to communicate in real-life situations according to my major.
Authentic Materials	Item 6	The English course materials are related to my major.
	Item 7	The English course materials enhanced my motivation in learning English.
	Item 8	The English course materials enhanced my comprehension on knowledge related to my major.
Authentic Tasks	Item 9	The tasks in the English course exemplified the authentic language.
	Item 10	The tasks in the English course were similar with real-life situation related to my major.
	Item 11	The tasks allowed communicative interaction with my peers.
	Item 12	The tasks allowed communicative interaction with my teachers and specialists in my major.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items of Students' Perception towards Authenticity

Sub-domain	Statement	M	LRA Index (%)	Criteria
Authentic Assessments	Item 1	3.59	71.8	Sufficient
	Item 2	3.68	73.6	Sufficient

	Item 3	3.59	71.8	Sufficient
	Item 4	3.40	68	Sufficient
	Item 5	3.49	69.8	Sufficient
	Average score for sub-domain of authentic assessment	3.55	71	Sufficient
Authentic Materials	Item 6	3.50	70	Sufficient
	Item 7	3.68	73.6	Sufficient
	Item 8	3.57	71.4	Sufficient
	Average score for sub-domain of authentic materials	3.58	71.7	Sufficient
Authentic Tasks	Item 9	3.64	72.8	Sufficient
	Item 10	3.47	69.4	Sufficient
	Item 11	3.57	71.4	Sufficient
	Item 12	3.61	72.2	Sufficient
	Average score for sub-domain of authentic tasks	3.57	71.5	Sufficient
Average score for authenticity		3.57	71.4	Sufficient

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perception towards Authenticity

Table 2 presents the statistical analysis of students' perception of authenticity in their ESP course. Overall, students had sufficient perception, with an LRA index of 71.4%, derived from authentic assessments (71%), authentic materials (71.7%), and authentic tasks (71.5%). Students particularly valued cooperative assessments with both teachers and major specialists (M = 3.68), and they acknowledged that authentic English supported their language learning and vocational knowledge simultaneously. As one student explained:

"Learning authentic English will really help students, Ma'am. We learn English according to reality… it saves time. I can learn two things at once, the language and the content of my major." (S2-M-ALVE)

Another student emphasized how authentic English provided exposure to natural language use:

"The vibes of authentic English and Indonesian English are different… Authentic English sentences are more natural. Learning an authentic language sharpens our sensitivity to grammar, spelling, word choice, and coherence." (S5-M-ABE)

However, both survey and interview data highlighted gaps in implementation. Students reported that authenticity in their ESP course was limited in scope, overly reliant on written exercises, and minimally connected to their engineering fields. To understand these challenges more clearly, the findings are discussed in three subsections: (1) lack of authentic materials, (2) overreliance on written-form tasks, and (3) minimum exposure to authentic assessments.

3.2. The lack of authentic materials

The concerns conveyed by students regarding the lack of authentic materials highlight an important issue in the ESP classroom. Authentic materials are essential in language learning, especially in ESP courses, as they make the learning process more engaging, relevant, and practical. However, students reported that the course materials were limited and often disconnected from their specialized engineering majors.

For example, Student S4-FM-AVE expressed interest in accessing various types of authentic resources, such as books, videos, newspapers, and recordings. Such diversity can address different learning styles and create a more dynamic learning experience. Similarly, Student S1-M-MEB emphasized that subject matter should be more interesting and engaging, as attractive topics not only capture attention but also encourage active participation in discussions.

These student concerns are consistent with existing scholarship. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2010) argue that authentic materials should immerse learners in language as it is used in real-life situations, rather than merely teaching declarative knowledge. Martinez (2000) highlights that selecting relevant and interesting topics is key to enhancing learner engagement, while Benaven and Penamaria (2011) caution that published texts may not fully satisfy learners' needs, thus advocating for authentic sources taken directly from real-world contexts. Likewise, House (2008) emphasizes the bridging function of authentic materials, connecting classroom instruction with the language students will encounter in professional settings. For engineering-focused ESP, this could include technical manuals, design specifications, or workplace documents that mirror industry practices.

At the same time, using authentic materials presents pedagogical challenges. Some materials, such as industry reports or technical journals, may contain complex grammar and specialized terminology that overwhelm students at lower proficiency levels (Mishan,

2005). Teachers therefore need to adapt or scaffold authentic materials to match learners' linguistic readiness, ensuring that language objectives are met without compromising the authenticity of the content. As Webener (2008) suggests, a balance must be struck between engaging content and language development needs.

The debate over authentic materials has produced both proponents and critics. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001), MacDonald, Badger, and White (2000), and Gilmore (2007) agree that authentic materials expose learners to natural expressions and idiomatic usage, preserving meaning that may be lost in simplified texts. They also prepare students for real-world communication, especially in professional domains like engineering. However, challenges remain: not all authentic texts align with learners' objectives, and their linguistic density may discourage motivation at times. MacDonald, Badger, and White (2000) further suggest that live interaction with teachers can sometimes be more effective than static authentic texts, while Gilmore (2007) points out that authentic materials offer less frequent exposure to target features compared to contrived inputs, thus requiring larger volumes of material to achieve balanced language exposure.

The present study therefore underscores the nuanced role of authentic materials in ESP. On one hand, they enrich learning by providing vocationally relevant input and bridging classroom content with real-world engineering contexts. On the other hand, their effectiveness depends on careful selection, adaptation, and integration. For ESP teachers, the challenge lies in curating authentic materials that are simultaneously motivating, accessible, and aligned with engineering learners' professional needs. By doing so, the ESP classroom can better prepare students for authentic communication in their future careers.

3.3. Overreliance on written form tasks

The students in the ESP course demonstrate a relatively good perception of authentic tasks, as reflected in the 71.5% LRA index. However, they also encounter challenges and hold specific expectations regarding the design and delivery of their course tasks. For instance, Student S4-FM-AVE observed that many of the tasks provided by teachers are not sufficiently authentic and fail to resemble real-life situations. Instead, teachers often rely on written exercises from worksheets or modules, which students perceive as less engaging and disconnected from their language learning needs. This highlights the need for more varied and interactive tasks that foster communicative interaction and support the development of oral communication skills.

Currently, the assignments tend to make students passive learners, offering limited opportunities for active participation and collaboration. Student S4-FM-AVE also pointed out that the volume of coursework is excessive, creating stress and potentially

hindering their learning process. Similarly, Student S2-M-ALVE expressed that students should have more involvement in choosing the types of assignments and their themes. They believe that being part of the decision-making process would increase their motivation and engagement, as they can better judge the relevance and usefulness of topics that align with their interests and future professional needs. Overall, students envision an ideal learning environment where teachers and learners share an equal relationship, with mutual respect for students' opinions and preferences.

The findings of this study align with the theoretical perspectives on task authenticity in language learning. Ellis (2003) and Long (1985) emphasize that tasks should correspond closely to real-world activities in order to promote meaningful communication. Authentic tasks allow learners to use language in practical contexts, thereby strengthening their ability to transfer classroom learning to professional or everyday situations. Long (1985) provides examples of real-world tasks such as painting a fence, dressing a child, or borrowing a library book, while Ellis (2003) notes that even classroom activities such as telling a story based on pictures or describing an image still retain elements of real-world communication. This suggests that while it may be challenging to replicate real-life contexts exactly, tasks should at least embed aspects that reflect learners' professional realities.

Research by Harding (2007) and Ellis (2003) further underscores the importance of authenticity in ESP tasks, stressing the need for learners to engage with activities and materials that mirror those they will encounter in their future workplaces. Authentic tasks not only enhance relevance but also provide a means to assess whether learners can perform practical, real-world activities successfully. The evaluation of task outcomes becomes a motivating factor, as learners can see the direct application of their language skills in realistic contexts. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) add that learners must be engaged both cognitively and emotionally, highlighting that tasks which address learners' specific needs result in more meaningful learning experiences.

Taken together, these perspectives emphasize that ESP learners benefit most from tasks that are both relevant to their specialized fields and practical in application. When teachers provide authentic and engaging tasks, while also respecting students' input in task selection, they foster a more dynamic and motivating learning environment. This approach not only enhances language proficiency but also equips learners with the communication skills required for success in their future professional contexts.

3.4. Minimum exposure to authentic assessments

The research findings indicate that the students in the ESP course feel that the assessment lacks authenticity. Student S3-FM-CNE specifically mentioned that authentic assessment

has not been implemented in their class. The assessment methods used in daily assessments consist of multiple-choice questions, descriptions, and fill-in-the-blank exercises on worksheets. The recent test used a similar format of multiple-choice questions, which the students completed at home.

One significant concern raised by the students is the lack of collaboration between the English teacher and the major specialist during the assessment process. They mentioned that other subject teachers are not directly involved in front of the students during assessments, which may lead to assessments that do not fully address the specific language needs of the students' specialized majors. For semester exams, a team of teachers is responsible for creating the exam questions, aiming to provide consistency across all majors. While this approach ensures uniformity in the exam process, it may not fully consider the individual language demands and authenticity required for each specialized field.

The finding of the study aligns with the work by Dwisnu (2019), emphasizing the importance of authentic assessment in the ESP course. The use of authentic assessment in the classroom should be implemented more effectively to enhance student learning and accurately measure their progress. According to O'Malley and Pierce (1996), authentic assessment involves multiple forms of assessment that reflect various aspects of student learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes related to classroom activities. Unlike traditional testing formats that focus on simple recall of information, authentic assessment provides ongoing feedback and allows students to demonstrate their specific skills, behaviors, and problem-solving abilities. It is a process that documents students' learning comprehensively.

Dudley-Evans and John (1998) view assessment as a means of measuring students' progress and providing feedback to improve learning. Authentic assessment, particularly in a task-based setting, emphasizes language mastery and criterion-referenced performance, which can be highly motivating for students and foster the use of effective learning strategies. The study reveals that both students and teachers encounter similar challenges in assessment practices and that more effective assessment are needed to evaluate students' abilities in using English as a foreign language.

As pointed out by McKay (2006), the impact of assessment can be transformative, either positively or negatively. The effectiveness of assessment procedures relies on their design to provide valid and fair information about students' abilities and progress. To ensure the objectivity and consistency of assessing students' competencies, teachers should establish clear scoring criteria and maintain inter-rater reliability to avoid discrepancies in rating students' performance.

Denisa's (2016) recommended steps for authentic assessment provide a practical framework for designing and implementing such assessments. The four steps include establishing clear standards, creating authentic tasks that reflect real-world challenges, defining criteria to evaluate student performance, and using rubrics to assess students' work based on specific criteria. By following the recommended steps, educators can create meaningful and relevant evaluation methods that better prepare students for real-life language use and foster their language skills and problem-solving abilities.

Overall, authentic assessment contributes to a more comprehensive and effective language learning experience. When implemented well, it engages students actively, motivates them to achieve, and enhances their language acquisition journey by connecting classroom activities with real-world professional demands.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that vocational students perceive the authenticity of their ESP courses as only partially realized. While authentic elements are present, materials, tasks, and assessments often remain disconnected from engineering-specific professional contexts, thereby limiting students' readiness for workplace communication. By reframing authenticity through the lens of student perceptions, the study underscores the importance of aligning ESP pedagogy with learners' vocational realities. The findings highlight that authentic ESP practice requires workplace-relevant materials adapted to learners' proficiency, interactive and practical tasks that foster communication and learner involvement, and performance-based assessments developed collaboratively with vocational specialists. Practically, these insights call on teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers to enhance ESP authenticity in vocational schools, as doing so will not only improve learner motivation and autonomy but also better prepare students for meaningful participation in the engineering workforce.

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