

Exploring ESP-Teaching Approach to Improve Speaking Proficiency in Islamic Studies L2 Students

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching approach on improving speaking skills among Islamic Studies L2 undergraduates through oral presentations. Conducted at a state university in Malaysia, the research involved 60 participants who underwent a 14-week intervention. The program was designed with content specifically tailored to their Islamic Studies background, aiming to enhance their language proficiency in a context relevant to their studies. Pre- and post-test oral presentations were used to assess participants' speaking skills, with performance evaluated using an adapted rubric. The data were analysed using Paired T-tests to compare the results from the pre- and post-tests. The analysis revealed significant improvements in speaking skills across both the experimental and control groups. Statistically significant increases were found in the mean scores for both groups, with the experimental group showing a greater overall improvement (experimental: $p=.001$, control: $p=.007$). These findings suggest that while ESP interventions have a positive impact on language proficiency, the results did not fully align with the anticipated level of improvement. Despite this, the participants demonstrated notable progress in key

speaking components, particularly in vocabulary usage and comprehension during the post-presentations, indicating positive changes in their speaking abilities.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Oral presentations; Islamic Studies; Speaking skills; Anxiety

Introduction

Speaking skills encompass a variety of competencies including the ability to convey information effectively and engage in interpersonal communication. Theories and types of speaking skills are diverse, ranging from the development of foreign language speaking abilities in educational settings to the specific communication skills required in professional domains such as law and nursing (Kho & Ting, 2023). Rao (2019) argues that speaking ability is one of the most challenging skills to be acquired because it requires a speaker to devise immediate utterances. Ahmed (2020) considers speaking ability as the capability to make speech to communicate with others, convey thoughts and feelings, and transmit information verbally or nonverbally in social environments.

Speaking proficiency among students with an Islamic studies background is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors (Abdullah et al., 2023). Most of the

past studies for instance Fahmi et al. (2021), Ayuningtyas (2020) and Quinto and Macayan (2019) have examined psychological factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and shyness, which also play a critical role in shaping speaking abilities and can either hinder or facilitate the development of speaking proficiency. Attitudes also believed to be one of the contributors to anxiety when performing public speaking in English due to their negative experiences (Hamzah & Alsaleem, 2023). In contrast, instead of the psychological factors, this present research focuses on the empirical investigation on the effectiveness of ESP-teaching approach in improving the speaking skills by assessing the oral presentations of Islamic Studies L2 undergraduates from a selected private university in Malaysia.

The relation to the above-mentioned issue is the educational background of the undergraduates that majority of them were from Tahfiz religious schools. Commonly, as proposed by Ahmad Othman and Anas (2020), Tahfiz school's syllabus is focusing more on the Islamic related subjects and Arabic language because most of the materials used are written either in Malay or Arabic since the education framework is prioritizing on memorization of the Holy Quran. Due to lack of exposure on English language during their secondary school, most of the students are having poor English proficiency (Abdullah et al., 2022).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are tailored to meet the specific linguistic needs of learners in particular fields, which can significantly enhance L2 students' speaking skills by providing relevant vocabulary and context for practice (Lubis et al., 2020; Takács & Czar, 2021). ESP courses focus on the specialized language and situations students will encounter in their professional or academic lives, thus making the learning process

more meaningful and directly applicable to their goals (Singh, 2018). There are various key theories and concepts proposed by the previous eminent researchers that have shaped the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As suggested by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), a core principle of ESP is the concept of needs analysis, which involves identifying the specific linguistic capabilities and competencies that learners require within their contexts. Meanwhile, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) acknowledge that ESP courses focused on the specific language, genres, and discourses of fields. This specificity ensures that learners gain the language skills directly relevant to their professional or academic contexts. Courses tailored to the specific needs and goals of learners are emphasized in ESP. This involves selecting and creating relevant materials and activities based on the learners' particular fields (Basturkmen, 2010)

Interestingly, while ESP courses are beneficial, they must be complemented with other strategies to address common challenges such as confidence, motivation, and anxiety in speaking English. Several studies such as Lubis et al., (2020), Sasabone et al., (2021), Bilotserkovets et al., (2022), Chotimah, (2022) and Wulandari et al., (2019) have been conducted in this specific area, each exploring different aspects of how ESP can enhance speaking abilities in various professional and academic contexts. Interestingly, while all the studies address ESP and speaking skills, they approach the topic from diverse angles and with different methodologies. For instance, Lubis et al., (2020) examine the effectiveness of ESP in improving speaking skills among Room Division Management students, using descriptive and quantitative approaches, and concludes that ESP is beneficial for student learning outcomes. Sasabone et al., (2021) employ Classroom Action Research

to demonstrate the positive impact of ESP on the speaking skills of Economic and Business students. Bilotserkovets et al., (2022) highlight the efficacy of online ESP classes in developing oral communication skills for International Law students. Chotimah (2022) explores the use of a specific application to improve speaking skills in an ESP context. Lastly, Wulandari et al., (2019) conduct a needs analysis to determine the speaking and listening skills required by nursing students in their ESP materials. In comparison, this present study used different method in determining the effectiveness of the ESP-teaching approach on speaking skills by employing pre- and post-tests oral presentation and highlighted more on the ESP in Islamic Studies field of study. In summary, the previous studies collectively underscore the importance of ESP in enhancing speaking skills across various disciplines and educational settings. They provide evidence that ESP tailored to specific fields can significantly improve students' communicative abilities, which are crucial for their professional development. The studies also suggest that both traditional classroom settings and online platforms can be effective in delivering ESP instruction aimed at speaking skills enhancement.

Oral presentations are widely recognized as an effective tool for measuring and enhancing students' speaking skills (Suardika et al., 2023). For instance, Ati and Parmawati (2022), suggest that students perceive oral presentations as beneficial for evaluating and improving their English-speaking abilities, increasing motivation, and fostering critical thinking in language use. Additionally, oral presentations have been shown to boost students' confidence, correct language use, vocabulary expansion, and the development of other language skills and soft skills (Nguyen, 2020). Nordin et al. (2021), propose that the effectiveness of oral presentations as a learning tool can be

influenced by various factors, including the mode of delivery, with suggesting that physical classroom settings may be more conducive to learning than online environments. The above studies reviewed consistently report positive outcomes associated with the use of oral presentations in educational settings.

The assessment of students' speaking skills through pre and post oral presentations is a widely recognized method for measuring improvement in oral communication abilities. Several studies have employed this approach, utilizing various tools and methods to gauge the effectiveness of different instructional strategies on students' speaking skills. For instance, the use of online video tours (Eissa, 2021), flipped classroom models (Sidky, 2019), and video cover letter exercises (Sautter & Zúñiga, 2018) have all been shown to significantly improve speaking skills. Additionally, the use of videotaped feedback was found to enhance public speaking skills, and peer collaborative learning methodologies were effective in reducing speech anxiety and improving oral communication (Zulhermindra & Hadiarni, 2020). The findings of previous studies suggest that a variety of instructional strategies can be effective in improving speaking skills which employed a variety of methods, including pre-and post-tests, to measure the improvement in speaking skills after specific interventions. Despite of the similar methods of intervention, the present study attempted to fill in the research gaps as the previous ones did not specifically utilize ESP-teaching approach to measure the participants' speaking improvement as part of learning strategies and catered L2 undergraduates from Islamic Studies background. The objective of the present study is to determine the effectiveness of ESP-teaching approach on speaking skills through oral presentations.

Methodology

A quantitative method was employed through a quasi-experimental study on 60 participants which consisted of control and experimental groups. The participants were selected based on purposive sampling method that specifically targeted undergraduates from Islamic Studies course enrolled in one of the state tertiary educations in Perak in which English for Specific Purpose subject is part of the requirement structure of their academic programme.

The present study conducted an experimental design over 14 weeks to examine the impact of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching approach on the speaking skills of students with an Islamic Studies background. The independent variable in this study was the type of teaching approach (ESP-teaching versus general English teaching), while the dependent variable was the improvement in speaking skills as measured through pre- and post-test assessments. The study involved two groups of participants, each consisting of 30 students. The experimental group comprised 30 students who were enrolled in the ESP subject. These students had an Islamic Studies background and were exposed to the ESP-teaching approach, which emphasized specific content-based learning tailored to their field of study. While the control group consisted of 30 students from the same Islamic Studies background who were not enrolled in the ESP subject. Their curriculum focused on general English subjects and did not incorporate the ESP-teaching approach.

The experimental study spanned 14 weeks:

Week 1: All participants completed a pre-test to assess their baseline speaking skills.

Weeks 2–13: The experimental group participated in the ESP-teaching approach, while the control group continued with their

standard general English instruction. The ESP-teaching approach in the experimental group integrated activities such as group discussions, debates, public speaking, and other spoken exercises, all of which were designed to cater to the students' Islamic Studies background. Weekly tasks and themes focused on Islamic-related topics, such as misconceptions about Islamic teachings and modern methods of Islamic preaching. These tasks were intended to prepare the experimental group for oral presentation assessments. Meanwhile, the control group also engaged with the similar speaking exercises but with more generic topics which did not emphasise on Islamic-related topic. The materials used in class for speaking skills also did touch on the Islamic Studies themes in comparison to the experimental group.

Week 14: All participants completed a post-test to evaluate improvements in their speaking skills.

Table 1 displays the weekly tasks and themes throughout the 14-week of ESP-teaching approach as to prepare them with oral presentation assessments. In completing the tasks, both control and experimental groups were assigned with specific topics related to the Islamic-related issues for instance misconceptions on Islamic teachings, methods of Islamic preaching in modern days, and other related topics. By adapting this technique, the researchers were able to assess the students with a more central and unbiased evaluation since they had already shared and had been exposed to the same background knowledge. Based on the topics, the participants delivered the presentations in class and assessed based on their grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. The pre- and post-tests were audio-recorded to assist the evaluation process for more detailed data.

Table 1: Tasks and Themes for Intervention

Week(s)	Task(s)	Theme(s)
1	Pre-test	Assigned topic
2 & 3	Intervention (Group discussion, debates, forum, public speaking)	Etiquette of visiting in Islam
4&5		Attributes of Allah
5&7		Habits of a productive Muslim
8&9		Religious festivals
10 &11		Introduction to Method of Dakwah
12&13		Misconceptions in Islam
14	Post-test	Assigned topic

Their oral presentations were assessed based on the adapted rubric from Helmanda and Nisa (2019) and Woodrow (2006), which covered selected speaking skills which comprised the components of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. The rubric was assigned to two assessors selected based on their expertise and experience in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These assessors were the lecturers responsible for teaching both classes involved in the experimental study.

To test the adapted rubric, a reliability and validity test was conducted through a pilot test and expertise review who were selected among the experienced lecturers in English language teaching and ESP field. The lecturers were responsible to check on the suitability of assessments and tasks prepared for the participants. The scores were collected after the pre-and post-tests were conducted and analysed any significant improvements shown by the participants.

The research objective was addressed by employing a paired t-test analysis as the data involved comparison of variables. The main purpose of utilising a paired t-test analysis was to compare the students' performance before and after the ESP-teaching approach intervened with the learning process by both control and experimental groups. Detailed explanations and discussion on the data analysis are

provided in the next section. The paired t-test is an influential statistical method for comparing two related groups, rendering it appropriate for studies in which measurements are obtained from the same participants under distinct conditions (Bevans, 2023).

Results and Discussion

The findings were discussed in assessing the Islamic Studies L2 undergraduates' speaking skills in their English classes (ESP and General English classes) by comparing their performance during the experimental study. The comparisons of the participants' performance were based on the pre-and post-tests (individual presentation) rubric scores that were assessed before and after the oral presentations. The scores were analysed using descriptive together with inferential statistics by employing the paired t-test method to address this research objective to prove the stated null hypothesis (H_0).

H_0 : There is no significant improvement in the speaking skills of Islamic Studies L2 undergraduates (experimental group) after the intervention of ESP-teaching approach.

A paired samples t-test was performed to evaluate whether there was a difference between the pre- and post-test scores for both control and experimental groups. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables (mean and standard deviation) of the participants' pre- and post-scores for

both control and experimental groups. The pre-task score of the control group is recorded (M=9.43), while the post-task score is slightly higher (M=10.70). As for the experimental group, the mean scores for both pre-task (M=11.31) and post-task (M=13.11) were shown to be slightly higher in comparison to the control group. The experimental group's pre-test scores were slightly higher due to the exposure received

in previous English subject which focusing more on Islamic Studies theme-based teaching and learning. Conversely, the control group concentrated on a general English course that emphasized foundational proficiency skills, aligned with the framework outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post-Tasks

Group		Descriptive				
		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	Pre-Score	30	7.00	13.00	9.4333	1.58513
	Post-Score	30	7.50	19.50	10.7000	2.52436
	Valid N (listwise)	30				
Experimental	Pre-Score	30	7.00	23.50	11.3167	3.39493
	Post-Score	30	8.50	24.50	13.1167	4.23386
	Valid N (listwise)	30				

Pearson's correlations were calculated in the Table 3 to check the correlations between the pre-and the post-test scores before and after the ESP-teaching approach intervention. The control group displays a moderate positive correlation [$r(30) = .393, p = .031$] between pre-test and post-test scores, meaning that as the pre-test scores increase, post-test scores tend to increase as well, though the relationship is not particularly strong. In contrast, the experimental group shows a much stronger positive correlation [$r(30) =$

$.786, p = .000$], indicating a more significant relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. This suggests that as pre-test scores rise, post-test scores also increase considerably, with a notably stronger connection than in the control group. Both groups show statistically significant correlations, but the experimental group demonstrates a much stronger relationship, as reflected by the higher correlation coefficient and a p-value close to zero.

Table 3: Paired Samples Correlations for Pre- and Post-Tasks

Group		Correlations		
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Control	Pre-Score & Post-Score	30	.393	.031
Experimental		30	.786	.000

A paired samples t-test was conducted based on the pre- and the post-test scores for both control and experimental groups. The results in Table 4 display both the control [t

(29) = -2.89, $p = .007$] and experimental [t (29) = -3.76, $p = .001$] groups show a statistically significant change from pre-score to post-score, indicating that the

variable was being tested in each group had an effect. The t-value for the control group (-2.897) indicates that the observed difference is significant with a p-value (0.007) which shows a statistically significant difference between the pre-scores and post-scores for the control group. As for the experimental group, the t-value (-3.766) is more extreme than that of the control group, suggesting a stronger effect. Moreover, the p-value (0.001) also confirms that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-scores and post-scores for the experimental group. The smaller the p-value, the more

substantial evidence to reject the null hypothesis as highlighted by the typical guidelines: $p < 0.001$ indicating very strong evidence against H_0 , $p < 0.01$ strong evidence, $p < 0.05$ moderate evidence, $p < 0.1$ weak evidence or a trend, and $p \geq 0.1$ indicating insufficient evidence (Ganesh & Cave, 2018). Thus, the experimental group shows a larger effect, as indicated by the more extreme mean difference and t-value. The differences in scores between the pre and post assessments in both groups are unlikely to be due to random chance, based on the significance values.

Table 4: Paired t-test Results

Group		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Control	Pre-Score & Post-Score	-1.26667	2.39516	.43729	-2.16103	-.37230	-2.897	29	.007
Experimental	Pre-Score & Post-Score	-1.80000	2.61824	.47802	-2.77767	-.82233	-3.766	29	.001

Table 5 shows the students' speaking skills improvements for pre- and post-tests based on each of the components tested in the adapted rubric. The mean scores for all the components (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation and Comprehension) portrayed an incline trend indicated the improvement after the intervention of ESP-teaching approach took place for 14 weeks.

The components of vocabulary (Pre: M=2.36, Post: M=2.85) and comprehension (Pre: M=2.30, Post: M=2.73) shown the

most significant improvement for the experimental group. They demonstrated the ability to use suitable vocabulary when explaining the topics and able to deliver clear and comprehensible presentations. Based on the assessor's remarks on the rubric, in the pre-test, participants commonly used the phrase "share the Islamic knowledge." However, following the intervention, their language shifted to more precise terms such as "propagate," "spread," or "deliver the Islamic knowledge."

Assessor A: Most participants successfully utilized the new vocabulary when expressing their opinions or perspectives. The diverse range of terms demonstrated an upward trend, indicating significant vocabulary development.

This example illustrated their ability to use different vocabulary in specific context related to Islamic Studies field. One possible reason why the participants scored better in vocabulary component might be due to the Islamic terminologies and jargons that they came across, contributing to their existing lexicon through group discussion, debate, and other activities in comparison to the grammar component which indirectly taught during the intervention.

Aligned with the results, Dedi Irwansyah and Yuniarti (2024) examined the views of English teachers and experts in Islamic education and Qur’anic studies on the use

of Qur’anic stories in ELT and later developed a learning material prototype from their views. Their findings showed that the integration of Quranic stories in ELT, equipped reflective thinking activities, suitable language proficiency levels, an effective assessment framework, self-created illustrations, and accurate transliteration of Islamic terms.

However, the participants still committed a few grammatical mistakes when delivering the presentation. Despite that, the mistakes did not immensely affect the tasks, and they managed to deliver the oral presentations with improvements, as proven by the mean scores in Table 5.

Table 5: Mean Comparison on the Components of Rubric

	Pre-grammar	Post-grammar	Pre-vocabulary	Post-Vocabulary	Pre-pronunciation	Post-pronunciation	Pre-comprehension	Post-comprehension
Mean	2.300	2.550	2.367	2.850	2.217	2.550	2.300	2.733
N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Std. Deviation	.6242	.7234	.6149	.6715	.8972	.9680	.7497	.9260

Sasabone et al. (2021) in their study also perceived that the implementation of ESP had positive impacts on improving the students’ speaking skills after being tested in in two cycles of experiment among Economic and Business students of UKI Paulus Makassar. The study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) in collecting the data through four important stages (Planning, Action, Observation and Observation) which later the students were tested with several tests in class which were not specified in the study.

Guo and Yu (2022) also found to produce similar findings in investigating the effectiveness of ESP teaching on Chinese

medical major students by employing a content-based language instruction to the experimental group and traditional grammar-translation method to the control group. The findings showed that the content-based ESP course turned to have more significant effects on the students in improving their English proficiency especially the listening and speaking skills. However, the data were gathered through the responses gauged from the survey and interview results solely without having any intervention in measuring the effectiveness of ESP-intervention. A research study conducted by Hidayati et al. (2023) also found that the intervention of Project-Based

Learning in ESP on 40 samples led to significant improvement in the learning outcomes which indicated by the high mean scores of the students. the participants were measured through an individual presentation for the pre-test and video production for the post -test. After the experimental study, they believed that the ESP-incorporated materials had significant impact on the learners' ability to communicate effectively in English language as demonstrated by the speaking test's results.

Unlike most studies in this field, which tend to focus on general university populations, this research specifically investigated the effectiveness of an ESP-teaching approach for Islamic Studies undergraduates in Malaysia—a group that has been relatively underexplored in the existing literature. While previous studies have generally indicated that ESP approaches can enhance language proficiency, particularly in speaking skills, this study did not find significant differences between the control and experimental groups. This outcome raises intriguing questions about why the expected improvements did not materialize. One possibility is that the duration or intensity of the intervention was not sufficient to create a noticeable shift in language proficiency across the targeted components of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. Another consideration could be that the content and delivery of the ESP program may not have been optimally tailored to the specific linguistic needs of the Islamic Studies undergraduates, potentially limiting its impact. Furthermore, factors such as learner motivation, prior language proficiency, or even the teaching environment could have played a role in moderating the effectiveness of the ESP approach. Given these insights, future studies could explore these variables in more detail to better understand the conditions under which ESP teaching

may—or may not—be effective for specific groups of learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching methods, but also highlight important nuances that warrant further attention. This would not only help refine ESP methodologies but also inform the development of more targeted programs for Islamic Studies students, ultimately strengthening their language proficiency in ways that align more closely with their academic and professional needs. Future research, including exploring innovative teaching methods and technological tools to enhance speaking skills in ESP settings as learners nowadays are prone to utilise modern technology in language learning. This would enable L2 (second language) undergraduates, specifically in Islamic Studies field to develop the communication skills necessary for academic and professional success and at the same to build their interest and motivation in learning the language. For instance, the intervention of Artificial Intelligent (A.I) tools can also be incorporated in improving the students' speaking performance utilising the use of digital avatars in improving speaking skills and confidence. By addressing these limitations and pursuing these suggestions, we can further enrich our understanding and teaching practices related to spoken production and interaction in ESP classes for L2 students in Islamic Studies.

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