

Exploring English Learning Challenges among Culinary Students: An English for Specific Purposes Perspective

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ABSTRACT

English communication skills have become increasingly important for culinary professionals due to the growing interaction between the culinary industry and international communities. However, many culinary students still experience difficulties in developing English competence that supports their academic activities and future workplace communication. This study aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by culinary students in learning English from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. This research employed a descriptive mixed-method approach involving fourteen Diploma 1 Culinary students at Akademi Komunitas MAPINDO. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to identify students perceived difficulties and learning experiences. The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while the interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes. The findings reveal that students faced several challenges, particularly in culinary-related vocabulary mastery, speaking confidence, pronunciation, and limited exposure to contextualized English learning materials. The study highlights the importance of implementing ESP-based instruction that integrates culinary contexts and workplace communication activities. The findings provide practical implications for English instructors in developing more relevant learning strategies and materials for culinary education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing globalization of the culinary and hospitality industries has influenced the demand for professionals who possess not only technical competence but also effective communication skills (Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021). In contemporary workplaces, English serves as an important medium for professional interaction, particularly when culinary practitioners communicate with international guests, understand foreign culinary references, interpret recipes, and collaborate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Basturkmen, 2010; Andres & Holguín, 2022). Therefore, English proficiency has become one of the supporting competencies that should be developed among vocational students to prepare them for future professional environments.

Vocational education aims to equip students with practical knowledge, skills, and competencies that are relevant to workplace demands (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, English learning in vocational contexts should be connected with students' academic fields and future professional requirements. In Indonesian vocational education, English instruction is expected to support students' workplace communication by developing language skills related to their specific fields (Cahyono & Widiati, 2011). However, developing English competence among vocational students remains challenging. Many students experience difficulties in applying English for meaningful communication because of limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient speaking practice, pronunciation difficulties, lack of confidence, and limited exposure to authentic English materials.

These challenges become particularly significant among culinary students because their future professions require communication skills related to specific culinary contexts. Culinary students are expected

to understand specialized vocabulary related to ingredients, cooking methods, kitchen equipment, food presentation, and customer service (Fadilah & Anggraini, 2025). They may also need English to explain menu descriptions, communicate cooking procedures, interact with customers, and understand professional terminology used in culinary workplaces. Without appropriate learning experiences that connect English with culinary practices, students may experience difficulties in applying their language knowledge to professional situations.

Therefore, identifying students' learning challenges is an important step in improving the quality of English instruction in vocational education. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides a relevant theoretical perspective for examining these challenges because it emphasizes the relationship between language learning and learners' specific purposes. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) explain that ESP is not merely a specific type of English but an approach to language teaching that begins with understanding why learners need English. This perspective highlights the importance of considering learners' necessities, lacks, and wants before designing language instruction. In this regard, English learning should consider students' needs, expectations, and learning objectives to ensure that the language provided is relevant to their intended contexts. Furthermore, Basturkmen (2010) states that ESP courses should be developed by considering the relationship between language use and professional contexts, allowing learners to acquire language skills that are applicable to their fields.

In culinary education, ESP is particularly relevant because students require English skills that are different from those needed in general academic contexts. Their English learning should involve language functions, vocabulary, and communication activities related to culinary practices and workplace situations. Through an ESP approach, English instruction can be connected with students' professional contexts, enabling them to develop language skills that support their future careers.

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of contextualized English learning for vocational and culinary students. Siregar et al. (2025) investigated the English learning needs of culinary students and found that students required English skills related to future professional communication. The study highlighted the importance of understanding students' learning requirements in developing appropriate English instruction for culinary learners. Similarly, Dewi and Amri (2019) reported that culinary vocational students required English materials that were relevant to their field of study, particularly materials containing culinary-related vocabulary and communication activities. Recent research has also emphasized the importance of adapting English instruction to vocational contexts. Simanjuntak and Ratmanida (2024) highlighted that culinary English materials should be customized according to students' learning needs and industry expectations.

In addition, studies in hospitality education have shown that English competence contributes to students' professional preparation because communication skills are essential in service-oriented industries (Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021). Ma'fiah and Sumardiono (2023) further emphasized that ESP-based instruction can support vocational students by providing language learning experiences that are relevant to professional contexts. However, although previous studies have explored ESP development, English learning needs, and contextualized materials, limited attention has been given to the specific challenges experienced by culinary students during the English learning process, particularly in vocational higher education contexts. Most previous studies have focused on identifying students' needs or developing instructional materials, while fewer studies have examined the difficulties that students encounter when learning and applying English.

Understanding these challenges is necessary because students' learning barriers may influence the effectiveness of ESP implementation and the development of appropriate teaching strategies. Therefore, this study aims to explore English learning challenges among culinary students from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to ESP research by providing insights into culinary students' language learning challenges and offering practical implications for English instructors in developing contextualized and student-oriented English instruction.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive mixed-method approach to investigate English learning challenges experienced by culinary students from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. This approach was selected because the study aimed to identify students' perceived learning challenges through quantitative data and to obtain deeper explanations of the factors contributing to those challenges through qualitative data. The qualitative information was used to provide further interpretation of the challenges identified from the questionnaire responses.

The participants of this study were fourteen students enrolled in the Culinary Program at Akademi Komunitas MAPINDO. A total sampling technique was applied because the study involved the entire

population of culinary students in the program. All participants were active students who had experienced English learning activities as part of their curriculum; therefore, they were considered relevant to the focus of this study, which examined students' experiences and challenges in learning English within a culinary education context.

The data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to identify students perceived English learning challenges related to several aspects of language learning, including vocabulary, speaking, pronunciation, grammar, and the relevance of English learning activities to culinary contexts. These aspects were developed based on previous studies on English learning challenges and ESP needs in vocational education (Hou, 2013; Dewi & Amri, 2019). The questionnaire used a Likert-scale format to measure students' levels of agreement regarding the challenges they experienced in learning English.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to further explore and clarify the challenges identified from the questionnaire results. The interview questions focused on students' experiences related to the most frequently reported challenges, the factors contributing to those challenges, and their perceptions of English learning activities in the culinary program. Therefore, the interviews served to provide contextual explanations of the quantitative findings rather than to identify additional needs.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics by calculating the frequency and percentage of students' responses. The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to students' English learning challenges. The integration of questionnaire and interview findings provided a more comprehensive description of the challenges experienced by the participants within the specific context of a culinary vocational program.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the challenges experienced by Diploma 1 culinary students in learning English from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. The results indicate that students experienced difficulties related to vocabulary mastery, speaking confidence, pronunciation, and the availability of contextualized English learning materials.

Students' Perceived Challenges in Learning English

The questionnaire results regarding students' English learning challenges are presented in Table 1. The identified challenges were categorized into three ESP-related aspects, namely linguistic challenges, communicative challenges, and contextual challenges. These categories reflect the gap between students' current English abilities and the language requirements needed in their culinary learning context (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Linguistic challenges include difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence construction, while communicative challenges refer to difficulties in using English for interaction. Contextual challenges involve difficulties related to the relevance and availability of English learning materials for culinary purposes.

Table 1. Students' Challenges in Learning English

English Learning Challenges	Frequency (n=14)	Percentage
Limited culinary-related vocabulary	11	78.6%
Lack of confidence in speaking English	10	71.4%
Difficulty pronouncing unfamiliar English words	9	64.3%
Difficulty understanding English instructions and explanations	8	57.1%
Limited opportunity to practice English communication	8	57.1%
Difficulty constructing English sentences	7	50.0%
Limited culinary-based English learning materials	7	50.0%

Table 1 shows that limited culinary-related vocabulary was the most frequent challenge among students. Eleven students (78.6%) stated that they experienced difficulties in understanding and applying English vocabulary related to culinary activities, including ingredients, cooking techniques, kitchen equipment, and food descriptions.

The second major challenge was students' lack of confidence in speaking English. Ten students (71.4%) felt hesitant when communicating in English because they were concerned about making pronunciation mistakes and producing incorrect sentences. In addition, nine students (64.3%) experienced difficulties in pronouncing unfamiliar English words, particularly culinary terminology.

Students' Learning Experiences Based on Interview Findings

The interview findings provided deeper information regarding students' experiences in learning English. The analysis identified four main themes: vocabulary difficulties, speaking confidence, pronunciation problems, and the need for ESP-based learning materials.

Table 2. Themes Identified from Students' Interview Responses

Themes	Findings
Vocabulary difficulties	Some students reported difficulties in understanding culinary terminology, ingredients, cooking techniques, and menu descriptions in English.
Speaking confidence	Some students expressed that they felt nervous and afraid of making mistakes when using English during communication activities.
Pronunciation problems	Some students stated that certain English words were difficult to pronounce because spelling and pronunciation patterns were different.
Perceived relevance of ESP-based materials	Some students suggested that English learning activities could include more culinary-related situations, such as explaining menus, describing dishes, and communicating with customers.

The interview findings indicated that some students perceived the need for English learning activities that were more directly connected with their culinary field. Some students explained that English materials focusing mainly on general topics, everyday vocabulary, and language exercises without sufficient connection to culinary contexts were sometimes difficult to apply in their field of study. They expected more practical activities that incorporated culinary-related situations, such as describing dishes, explaining ingredients, and communicating with customers. This finding suggests that students' expectations were not related to the replacement of general English components, but rather to the integration of English language skills with their professional context.

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by culinary students in learning English from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. The findings revealed that students encountered several challenges related to culinary vocabulary, speaking confidence, pronunciation, and the contextual relevance of English learning activities. These findings indicate that students' difficulties were not only related to linguistic aspects but also to the extent to which English learning was connected with their culinary learning context.

The most frequently reported challenge in this study was limited culinary-related vocabulary. Most students experienced difficulties in understanding English terms related to ingredients, cooking methods, kitchen equipment, and food descriptions. This finding suggests that although students had received basic English instruction, they still required greater exposure to specialized vocabulary used in culinary contexts. In line with Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP emphasizes that language learning should be related to learners' specific purposes and contexts. Therefore, culinary English instruction should provide opportunities for students to encounter and use vocabulary that reflects their academic and future professional environments.

Speaking confidence was another challenge identified among the participants. Some students reported feeling nervous and afraid of making mistakes when communicating in English. This finding supports Hakim (2019), who explained that affective factors, such as anxiety and confidence, influence students' willingness to communicate. Similarly, Mohammad et al. (2022) found that vocational students often experience difficulties in English communication due to limited practice opportunities and concerns about language accuracy. These findings highlight that culinary English instruction should not only focus on linguistic knowledge but also provide supportive communication activities that encourage students to use English actively.

Pronunciation difficulties were also reported by some students, particularly when encountering unfamiliar English words with different spelling and pronunciation patterns. This challenge may affect students' confidence when using English in oral communication. Therefore, pronunciation practice within culinary contexts can be considered an important component of ESP-based instruction, particularly when students need to communicate professional terms accurately.

Regarding the contextual relevance of English learning activities, some students expressed the expectation that English lessons could include more situations related to their culinary field. The interview findings showed that some students found materials focusing mainly on general topics, everyday vocabulary, and language exercises without sufficient connection to culinary contexts less applicable to their field of study. However, this finding does not indicate that general English components are unnecessary; rather, it suggests that students perceived the importance of integrating English skills with culinary-related situations. This finding is consistent with Dewi and Amri (2019), who reported that culinary vocational students required English learning materials that were relevant to their field of study. Hou (2013) also emphasized the importance of needs analysis in ESP development to identify learners' specific language requirements. Furthermore, Simanjuntak and Ratmanida (2024) highlighted the importance of adapting culinary English materials according to students' learning needs and professional expectations.

From an ESP perspective, the findings demonstrate that culinary students' English learning challenges involve both language-related difficulties and contextual factors. Therefore, English instruction in culinary programs should consider students' specific learning contexts by integrating relevant vocabulary, communication practice, pronunciation activities, and culinary-related situations. Such contextualization may help students perceive English as a meaningful skill that supports their academic learning and future professional communication.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the English learning challenges experienced by culinary students enrolled in a Diploma 1 (D1) Culinary Program at Akademi Komunitas MAPINDO from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective. The findings revealed that students experienced several challenges in learning English, including limited culinary-related vocabulary, difficulties in speaking and pronunciation, challenges in constructing grammatical sentences, and limited opportunities to practice English in authentic communication contexts. These challenges indicate that English learning experiences should be more closely connected with students' culinary field and future professional contexts.

The findings also suggest that contextual relevance plays an important role in English learning for culinary students. Some students expressed the expectation that English learning activities could incorporate more culinary-related situations and practical communication practices. This indicates that ESP-based instruction can provide a meaningful framework for connecting language learning with students' academic backgrounds and professional contexts. By considering students' learning challenges and experiences, English instructors may develop more responsive and contextualized instruction for culinary programs.

This study contributes to the field of English for Specific Purposes by providing insights into the English learning challenges of vocational culinary students in an Indonesian higher education context. The findings may assist English lecturers in designing learner-centered ESP instruction that considers students' linguistic difficulties and professional communication requirements. However, this study is limited by the small number of participants and its focus on one vocational institution, namely Akademi Komunitas MAPINDO. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this specific educational context. Future research is encouraged to involve participants from different vocational institutions and to explore the implementation and effectiveness of ESP-based instructional approaches in supporting students' English development.

Overall, this study emphasizes that identifying students' English learning challenges is an important step in developing more relevant and meaningful English instruction. Through an ESP perspective, English learning in culinary education can be designed to better reflect students' academic needs and future professional communication contexts.

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