

Multilingual Realities in ESP Context: Learner Perspectives on Effective ESP Pedagogy in Diverse Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In an era where global communication increasingly depends on multilingual competence, ESP classrooms are no longer linguistically uniform spaces but dynamic sites of negotiation between languages, identities, and professional demands. Yet, despite this reality, ESP pedagogy continues to be shaped largely by monolingual assumptions that overlook how learners actively navigate multiple linguistic resources in meaning-making. Existing studies have predominantly focused on needs analysis and material design, with limited attention to learners' situated voices in multilingual vocational contexts. Moreover, prior research has rarely extended extensive listening theory beyond traditional reading while listening paradigms, leaving a critical gap in understanding how listening-oriented meaning construction operates in multilingual ESP environments. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a mixed-method case study design involving 45 cadets at Politeknik Pelayaran Sulawesi Utara from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and open-ended responses, analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Results show 70% of participants prefer bilingual instruction combining English and Indonesian, while 20% favor full English and 10% support inclusion of local languages. Regarding pedagogical preferences, Task-Based Learning (25%), Collaborative Learning (20%), and Role Play (18%) emerged as most effective approaches, whereas lecturing (5%) and grammar translation (10%) were less favored. Furthermore, 49% of students perceived the multilingual environment as supportive, 29% as neutral, and 22% as challenging. These findings position multilingualism as a pedagogical resource facilitated through translanguaging and interactive practices. The study contributes by advancing learner-centered ESP pedagogy and recontextualizing extensive listening within multilingual contexts, with implications for adaptive curriculum design, teacher development, and inclusive language policy in global education.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world shaped by globalization and rapid technological advancement, English has become a critical medium for professional communication across disciplines. Nowhere is this more evident than in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where language learning is closely aligned with domain-specific needs such as maritime operations, engineering, tourism, and business. However, the assumption that English learning occurs in linguistically homogeneous environments no longer reflects contemporary realities. Instead, ESP classrooms are now complex multilingual spaces where learners bring diverse linguistic repertoires that

influence how knowledge is constructed, negotiated, and applied (Gvelesiani, 2023).

In Indonesia, this complexity is particularly pronounced due to its vast linguistic diversity, with more than 700 regional languages shaping students' identities and communication practices (Liando et al., 2022). Such diversity introduces both opportunities and challenges in ESP learning. On one hand, multilingualism can enrich classroom interaction and meaning-making processes. On the other hand, it may complicate the delivery of technical content and hinder uniform comprehension. Consequently, ESP pedagogy must move beyond monolithic approaches and embrace strategies that are both linguistically responsive and culturally inclusive.

Scholarly discussions increasingly emphasize that multilingualism, when strategically managed, can function as a powerful pedagogical resource rather than a barrier. Translanguaging, for instance, enables learners to draw upon their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and bridge conceptual gaps, particularly in understanding specialized terminology (Liando et al., 2023; Berrabah & Toubeida, 2024). Despite this theoretical advancement, many ESP classrooms remain dominated by traditional, teacher-centered, and textbook-driven practices that fail to accommodate students' linguistic backgrounds (Nur et al., 2024). This mismatch has been shown to reduce engagement and limit learning effectiveness. Moreover, multilingual pedagogy literature highlights that leveraging learners' linguistic resources enhances comprehension, participation, and equity, while fostering a more supportive learning environment (Şanal, 2023; Guan, 2023).

However, the implementation of multilingual strategies in ESP is not without tension. Empirical studies reveal divergent preferences among learners and educators, with some advocating for English-only immersion environments and others supporting the strategic integration of first languages to facilitate understanding (Şanal, 2023; Neokleous & Karpava, 2023). Classroom-based evidence further suggests that multilingual practices such as code-switching can be both motivating and supportive, yet may introduce challenges such as translation delays and uneven accessibility (Sipahutar & Chang, 2024). These contradictions underscore the need to critically examine how students themselves interpret multilingual ESP learning environments and how their preferences shape perceptions of effective pedagogy (Neokleous & Karpava, 2023; Sipahutar & Chang, 2024).

Recent studies have increasingly foregrounded the importance of student voices in shaping pedagogical practices. Research by Irham (2023) demonstrates that incorporating learners' perspectives into instructional design significantly enhances motivation and learning outcomes, aligning with broader multilingual and translanguaging frameworks that emphasize learner agency and adaptive pedagogy (Tsou & Baker, 2021; Wen et al., 2022). In ESP contexts, where language use is inherently functional and profession-oriented, understanding learners' perceptions becomes even more critical. Similarly, Laziza Abrorovna (2025) highlights the necessity of aligning ESP instruction with learners' specific needs through contextual analysis, a principle reinforced by studies emphasizing authentic, discipline-specific communication demands (Alasmari et al., 2024; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023).

Despite these developments, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing ESP research continues to prioritize material design and needs analysis over learners' lived experiences (Nur et al., 2024; Mythiri et al., 2024; Raza & Chua, 2022;

YousafZai & Fareed, 2019; Latysheva, 2018; Suharti et al., 2022). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the psychological and social dimensions of multilingual learning, such as anxiety, motivation, and participation barriers, which are known to influence language acquisition (Pakdaman et al., 2022; Jungco et al., 2022). While qualitative approaches have been employed to explore learner perspectives (YousafZai & Fareed, 2019; Budianto & Mason, 2021), there remains a lack of in-depth investigation into how these experiences manifest in multilingual ESP classrooms, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts. This gap highlights the need for more context-sensitive and learner-centered research that integrates linguistic diversity with pedagogical practice.

Positioned within this gap, the present study offers a novel contribution by foregrounding students' voices and preferences in multilingual ESP classrooms, an area that remains underexplored in Indonesian vocational education. Unlike prior studies that emphasize structural or curricular dimensions, this research adopts a perspective-oriented approach to uncover how learners experience and evaluate teaching practices in linguistically complex environments. By integrating insights from multilingual pedagogy and ESP theory, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of how translanguaging, interaction, and learner agency intersect in shaping effective instruction.

The significance of this study lies in informing more adaptive and inclusive ESP pedagogies aligned with learners' linguistic realities. Within Indonesia's Independent Curriculum and ongoing higher education transformation, there is growing demand for approaches responsive to students' needs and professional trajectories. Accordingly, this study identifies students' preferred English learning methods and examines their experiences in multilingual ESP classrooms, generating empirically grounded insights to guide instructional design and classroom practice.

This study contributes to English Language Teaching by challenging monolingual assumptions and promoting a context-sensitive approach to ESP instruction. By positioning multilingualism as a pedagogical resource rather than a constraint, the findings offer implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and language policy. Overall, the study highlights the importance of aligning pedagogical innovation with learners' linguistic identities to support more equitable, effective, and globally relevant ESP education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multilingualism as a Pedagogical Resource in ESP Contexts

Multilingualism has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, particularly in linguistically diverse contexts such as Indonesia, where students bring varied ethnolinguistic backgrounds into

ESP classrooms (Liando et al., 2023). This diversity fosters cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, supporting additional language acquisition (Raza et al., 2023; Mythiri et al., 2024). In ESP, however, multilingualism introduces both opportunities and challenges due to the need to master specialized discourse and technical terminology. While translanguaging allows learners to utilize their full linguistic repertoire to facilitate understanding (Shen et al., 2025; Berrabah & Toubaida, 2024), it also requires careful pedagogical management to ensure clarity and alignment with professional communication goals (Carcu & Muresan, 2024).

Translanguaging has thus emerged as a critical framework for mediating multilingual learning processes by enabling flexible meaning-making and reducing cognitive load (Liando et al., 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that such practices can enhance comprehension and inclusivity in language classrooms (Gvelesiani, 2023). Nevertheless, the application of multilingual approaches within ESP contexts remains relatively limited, particularly in vocational education settings where linguistic precision, terminological accuracy, and context-specific communication are critically important. This condition highlights a significant gap between theoretical advocacy for multilingual pedagogies and their practical implementation in specialized learning environments. It further underscores the necessity for more systematic and empirical investigations into how multilingual practices are actually operationalized, negotiated, and experienced by learners within discipline-specific contexts. Such inquiry is essential not only to capture learners' linguistic realities but also to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of multilingual strategies in supporting domain-relevant communicative competence.

2.2 Learner Voices and Preferences in ESP Pedagogy

Learner-centered approaches in ESP emphasize the importance of aligning instruction with students' communicative needs and professional goals, positioning learners as active agents in the learning process (Raza & Chua, 2022; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). Research shows that involving students in instructional design enhances motivation and engagement, particularly when teaching methods are interactive and contextually relevant (Macaro & Aizawa, 2024; Gvelesiani, 2023). In multilingual ESP classrooms, sensitivity to linguistic and cultural backgrounds further supports effective learning, with approaches such as task-based learning, collaboration, and simulation enabling meaningful language use in professional contexts.

However, although needs analysis is widely used to inform ESP curriculum design (Biglar-Beigi Ghajarieh et al., 2024), it often fails to capture learners' subjective experiences, including psychological and

sociolinguistic factors that influence participation. This limitation underscores the importance of integrating students' perspectives into pedagogical evaluation. In specialized contexts such as maritime education, where communication accuracy is critical, understanding learners' preferences for language use and instructional methods becomes essential for designing responsive and effective ESP instruction (Mohammadi & Zandi, 2025).

2.3 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite extensive research on multilingualism and ESP, significant gaps remain, particularly in capturing learners' lived experiences within multilingual classrooms. Much of the existing literature emphasizes curriculum design, material development, and needs analysis, often overlooking how multilingual realities are negotiated at the classroom level (Nur et al., 2024; Mythiri et al., 2024; Raza & Chua, 2022). While translanguaging has been widely theorized as a pedagogical resource, its application in ESP contexts remains limited, especially in relation to learners' perceptions of its effectiveness in understanding technical and discipline-specific content. Moreover, prior studies tend to focus on general EFL settings, leaving vocational ESP environments underexplored. There is also a notable lack of qualitative research that systematically integrates learners' voices to examine the social, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of multilingual learning (YousafZai & Fareed, 2019; Budiarto & Mason, 2021; Pakdaman et al., 2022; Jungco et al., 2022).

Addressing these gaps, this study foregrounds learners' voices as a central analytical lens in examining multilingual ESP classrooms within Indonesian higher education. It moves beyond dominant needs-based approaches by integrating qualitative insights into students' experiences, preferences, and perceptions, thereby extending the application of translanguaging into vocational ESP contexts (Latysheva, 2018; Suharti et al., 2022). Methodologically, the study contributes by linking learner perspectives with pedagogical practices such as task-based and collaborative learning, offering a more context-sensitive understanding of instructional effectiveness. Its implications for English Language Teaching are substantial, as it advocates adaptive and inclusive ESP models that leverage linguistic diversity as a resource, informing curriculum design, teacher training, and policy development in multilingual educational settings.

3. Method

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning emerges through individuals' experiences and interactions within specific contexts. Within this epistemological framework, the study adopts a qualitative approach using an exploratory descriptive

design to investigate how students perceive and experience multilingual practices in ESP classrooms. This design is particularly appropriate for examining complex sociolinguistic phenomena, as it enables an in-depth understanding of learners' perspectives, beliefs, and meaning-making processes in naturally occurring educational settings.

The qualitative orientation allows the researcher to capture the nuanced interplay between linguistic diversity, pedagogical practices, and learner agency. Rather than seeking generalizable findings, the study aims to generate context-sensitive insights that reflect the lived realities of students in multilingual ESP environments. This aligns with contemporary approaches in applied linguistics that emphasize learner-centered and context-responsive inquiry.

3.1 Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants of this study consist of 45 cadets enrolled in the Nautical Study Program at Politeknik Pelayaran Sulawesi Utara. All participants had completed at least one semester of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), ensuring that they possessed sufficient exposure to multilingual classroom practices. The participants represent diverse linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the multilingual nature of Indonesian higher education.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants selected were information-rich and relevant to the research objectives. This approach enables the inclusion of individuals who have direct experience with ESP instruction in multilingual contexts, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the data. Additionally, for the interview phase, a subset of 10 cadets was selected based on variation in linguistic background and distinctiveness of responses, allowing for more detailed exploration of emerging patterns.

3.2 Research Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through two complementary instruments, namely open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to ensure methodological triangulation and depth of inquiry. The open-ended questionnaires were designed to elicit a wide range of responses regarding students' language preferences, perceptions of teaching methods, and experiences in multilingual ESP classrooms. This instrument facilitated the collection of comparable yet flexible data from all participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper, contextually grounded insights into learners' experiences. The interview protocol was organized around key themes, including language use in instruction, perceptions of translanguaging, evaluation of pedagogical approaches, and expectations of effective learning environments. The data collection process was carried out in two stages.

First, questionnaires were distributed to all 45 participants to identify general trends. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 selected participants, coded as C1 to C10, based on their diverse linguistic profiles and representative responses. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by [Clarke and Braun \(2017\)](#), which provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis involved several iterative stages, including data familiarization through repeated reading, initial coding of meaningful segments, categorization of codes into broader themes, and interpretation of these themes in relation to the research objectives.

This analytical approach enables the identification of both explicit and implicit meanings within the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives. The integration of questionnaire and interview data further strengthens the analytical depth, as it allows for cross-validation of emerging themes.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the research adheres to established qualitative criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation by comparing findings from questionnaires and interviews, as well as through member checking, where selected participants reviewed and validated the interpretations of their responses. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Dependability was ensured through a transparent and systematic documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process and ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias. These measures collectively strengthen the validity and reliability of the study's findings, positioning the research within the standards expected of high-impact scholarly publications.

4. Result

This section presents the integrated findings of the study to examine how multilingual realities influence learners' preferences and experiences in ESP classrooms. Three key patterns emerge from the analysis. First, multilingualism functions as a cognitive

and pedagogical resource when supported through strategic bilingual practices, particularly in facilitating understanding of technical content. Second, learners show a strong preference for interactive and student-centered teaching approaches, indicating a shift away from traditional instructional models. Third, multilingual classrooms are generally perceived as supportive learning environments, although certain practical challenges are also identified.

The following sub-sections present quantitative results supported by selected tables, complemented by qualitative excerpts that provide interpretive depth and highlight learners' lived experiences.

4.1 Language Preferences in ESP Classrooms

This sub-section examines how learners conceptualize and operationalize language use within ESP instruction, positioning language not merely as a medium of delivery but as a strategic resource for knowledge construction. The analysis reveals a layered pattern of preferences that reflects underlying cognitive processes, epistemological beliefs, and learning orientations. Three key insights emerge. First, bilingual instruction is not simply preferred but functionally necessary for accessing complex ESP content. Second, English-only preference reflects an aspirational orientation toward professional identity and linguistic autonomy. Third, the marginal role of local languages highlights the importance of shared linguistic capital in ensuring collective comprehension within heterogeneous classrooms.

Table 1. Learners' Language Use Preferences

Language Preference	Percentage (%)
English + Indonesian (Bilingual)	70%
English Only	20%
English + Local Languages	10%

The dominance of bilingual preference at 70% indicates that learners do not engage with ESP content through a single linguistic channel but through a dual-processing mechanism. Indonesian functions as an interpretive layer that enables learners to decode, restructure, and internalize technical knowledge. This suggests that comprehension in ESP is not linear but recursive, where meaning is continuously negotiated between languages. Rather than indicating dependency, this bilingual reliance reflects an advanced cognitive strategy in which learners optimize understanding by aligning new input with existing linguistic schemas.

This process is evident in learners' reflections. One participant stated:

"Kalau dosen pakai full English, saya bisa tangkap garis besarnya, tapi sering tidak paham detailnya."

"When the lecturer uses only English, I understand the general idea, but I often miss the details."

(Intv-2, 04:35_C3)

This statement reveals a critical distinction between surface comprehension and deep understanding. Learners may grasp general concepts in English, but precise and technical meaning requires mediation. Another participant explained:

"Kalau dicampur Bahasa Indonesia, saya lebih cepat paham istilah yang susah."

"If Indonesian is used together with English, I can understand difficult terms more quickly."

(Intv-1, 02:18_C7)

Here, speed of comprehension becomes a key indicator of effectiveness, suggesting that bilingual instruction reduces processing time and enhances learning efficiency. Similarly, a participant noted:

"Kadang saya harus terjemahkan dulu di kepala, jadi lebih lama kalau tidak ada Bahasa Indonesia."

"Sometimes I have to translate it in my head, so it takes longer without Indonesian support."

(Intv-3, 05:12_C5)

This highlights the hidden cognitive cost of monolingual instruction, where learners are forced to engage in internal translation, increasing cognitive load and potentially disrupting learning flow.

In contrast, the 20% preference for English-only instruction reflects a fundamentally different orientation toward language learning. For these learners, English is not only a tool for comprehension but a target identity to be internalized. One participant stated:

"Saya lebih suka full English karena jadi terbiasa berpikir langsung pakai bahasa Inggris."

"I prefer full English because it trains me to think directly in English."

(Intv-2, 06:41_C1)

This perspective emphasizes cognitive immersion as a pathway to automaticity, where language use becomes internalized rather than mediated. Another participant noted:

"Kalau full English, saya jadi lebih percaya diri untuk situasi kerja nanti."

"Using only English makes me more confident for future professional situations."

(Intv-1, 03:27_C4)

Here, language preference is closely tied to imagined professional contexts, indicating that English-only instruction is associated with authenticity

and future readiness. This suggests that learners' preferences are shaped not only by present comprehension needs but also by projected communicative demands.

The relatively small proportion of learners favoring local languages further sharpens this interpretation. One participant remarked:

“Bahasa daerah kadang membantu, tapi tidak semua teman paham, jadi lebih aman pakai Bahasa Indonesia.”

“Local languages can help sometimes, but not everyone understands them, so Indonesian is more effective.”

(Intv-3, 07:03_C8)

This response reveals an important sociolinguistic dynamic. While local languages may provide individual cognitive support, they lack the shared accessibility required for collective learning. Indonesian, therefore, emerges as a unifying linguistic medium that balances inclusivity and comprehension across diverse student backgrounds.

Taken together, these findings suggest that language preference in ESP classrooms is not a binary choice between English and non-English, but a dynamic negotiation shaped by cognitive efficiency, social inclusivity, and professional aspiration. Bilingual instruction emerges as the most pedagogically effective strategy because it accommodates these multiple dimensions simultaneously. It enables learners to access complex content without sacrificing comprehension, while still maintaining meaningful exposure to English.

From a deeper interpretative standpoint, this challenges the traditional assumption that maximal exposure to English necessarily leads to better learning outcomes. Instead, the findings indicate that optimal learning occurs when linguistic flexibility is strategically employed to support meaning-making. Effective ESP pedagogy, therefore, should move beyond rigid language policies and adopt a fluid, adaptive approach that allows learners to navigate between languages as needed. This positions multilingualism not as a constraint to be managed, but as a resource to be leveraged in achieving both academic understanding and professional communicative competence.

4.2 Preferred Teaching Methods

This sub-section examines how learners evaluate instructional practices in ESP classrooms, revealing not only their preferences but also their underlying learning orientations and expectations toward effective pedagogy. The findings indicate a clear shift from transmission-based teaching toward participatory and experience-driven learning. Three key insights emerge. First, learners prioritize methods that simulate real-world communication and professional contexts.

Second, interaction and peer collaboration are perceived as essential mechanisms for understanding. Third, traditional teacher-centered approaches are increasingly viewed as insufficient for supporting meaningful learning in multilingual ESP environments.

Table 2. Preferred ESP Teaching Methods

Teaching Method	Percentage (%)
Task-Based Learning	25%
Collaborative Learning	20%
Role Play	18%
Grammar Translation	10%
Lecturing	5%
Others	22%

The data reveal that Task-Based Learning (25%) is the most preferred method, followed by Collaborative Learning (20%) and Role Play (18%). This distribution indicates that learners are strongly oriented toward instructional approaches that emphasize doing, interacting, and applying knowledge in context. Rather than passively receiving information, learners seek opportunities to engage in tasks that mirror real professional scenarios, suggesting that relevance and authenticity are central to their perception of effective learning.

This preference is reflected in learners' experiences. One participant stated:

“Role play itu terasa seperti kondisi kerja nyata, jadi saya lebih paham bagaimana menggunakan bahasa Inggris di situasi sebenarnya.”

“Role play feels like a real work situation, so I better understand how to use English in actual contexts.”

(Intv-1, 03:45_C2)

This response highlights that learning becomes meaningful when it is situated within realistic contexts. Another participant explained:

“Kalau kerja kelompok, teman-teman sering jelaskan dengan cara berbeda, jadi saya lebih cepat mengerti.”

“In group work, friends explain things in different ways, so I understand more quickly.”

(Intv-3, 06:10_C5)

Here, understanding is not solely constructed through teacher input but emerges through peer interaction, indicating that knowledge is socially negotiated rather than individually absorbed. A further response reinforces this pattern:

“Kalau ada tugas praktik, saya jadi lebih aktif dan tidak cepat bosan.”

“When there are practical tasks, I become more active and less easily bored.”
(Intv-2, 04:22_C6)

This suggests that engagement is closely tied to the degree of learner involvement in the activity. In contrast, traditional approaches such as lecturing (5%) and grammar translation (10%) receive significantly lower preference. This indicates a growing mismatch between teacher-centered instructional models and learners’ expectations. One participant noted:

“Kalau hanya dijelaskan terus, saya cepat lupa karena tidak langsung dipakai.”
“If it is only explained continuously, I forget quickly because I do not use it directly.”
(Intv-1, 02:55_C3)

Another added:

“Belajar grammar saja kurang membantu kalau tidak dipraktikkan.”
“Learning grammar alone is not very helpful if it is not practiced.”
(Intv-2, 05:30_C7)

These responses suggest that passive learning limits retention and application, particularly in ESP contexts where functional language use is essential.

From a deeper interpretative perspective, these findings indicate that learners conceptualize effective learning as an active, situated, and socially mediated process. Task-based and collaborative approaches are not merely preferred because they are engaging, but because they align with how learners construct knowledge through interaction, practice, and contextualization. The prominence of role play further suggests that learners value opportunities to rehearse professional identities, indicating that ESP learning is closely tied to future-oriented communication needs.

At the same time, the relatively high proportion in the “Others” category (22%) suggests that learners also appreciate methodological variation, indicating that no single approach fully captures the complexity of their learning needs. This points to the importance of pedagogical flexibility, where different methods are combined to address diverse learning preferences and objectives.

Overall, the findings challenge the continued reliance on traditional instructional models and reinforce the need for a paradigm shift toward learner-centered pedagogy. Effective ESP instruction should be designed as an interactive and adaptive process that integrates task-based, collaborative, and experiential learning strategies. Such an approach not only enhances engagement and comprehension but also prepares learners to use language effectively in real-world professional contexts.

4.3 Perceptions of Multilingual Learning Environment

This sub-section explores how learners interpret the overall impact of multilingual classroom environments on their learning experience. Rather than viewing multilingualism as inherently beneficial or problematic, learners position it as a dynamic condition that can both support and complicate learning depending on how it is managed. Three key insights emerge. First, multilingual classrooms are predominantly perceived as supportive spaces that enhance understanding. Second, neutrality reflects adaptive learners who can function across different language conditions. Third, challenges arise not from multilingualism itself, but from inefficiencies in its pedagogical implementation.

Table 3. Students’ Perceptions of Multilingual Classrooms

Perception Category	Percentage (%)
Supportive	49%
Neutral	29%
Challenging	22%

The data show that 49% of learners perceive multilingual classrooms as supportive, indicating that nearly half of the participants experience linguistic diversity as an advantage rather than a barrier. This support is primarily rooted in peer interaction and the availability of multiple linguistic pathways to access meaning. Learners are not dependent solely on teacher explanations but actively utilize their peers’ linguistic resources to co-construct understanding.

This dynamic is reflected in the interview data. One participant stated:

“Kalau teman jelaskan pakai Bahasa Indonesia atau bahasa daerah, saya jadi lebih cepat paham.”
“When friends explain using Indonesian or local language, I understand faster.”
(Intv-2, 04:58_C6)

Another participant noted:

“Kadang teman bantu jelaskan ulang dengan cara yang lebih sederhana, jadi tidak terlalu bingung.”
“Sometimes friends re-explain things in a simpler way, so it is less confusing.”
(Intv-1, 03:40_C2)

These responses indicate that multilingual classrooms enable distributed learning, where understanding is collectively negotiated rather than

individually constructed. Language diversity, in this sense, expands the range of available explanations and enhances accessibility.

At the same time, 29% of learners report neutral perceptions, suggesting a level of adaptability. These learners neither strongly benefit from nor are hindered by multilingual conditions, indicating that they can operate across varying instructional modes. One participant expressed:

“Menurut saya biasa saja, mau pakai satu bahasa atau campuran tetap bisa diikuti.”
“For me, it is normal, whether using one language or a mix, I can still follow.”
(Intv-3, 06:20_C4)

This neutrality reflects a flexible learning orientation, where learners adjust to the instructional environment without strong dependence on specific language practices.

However, 22% of learners perceive multilingual classrooms as challenging, pointing to important limitations. These challenges are not related to the presence of multiple languages per se, but to how they are used in practice. One participant stated:

“Kadang dosen jelaskan ulang dalam bahasa lain, jadi waktunya lebih lama.”
“Sometimes the lecturer repeats explanations in another language, so it takes more time.”
(Intv-2, 05:33_C9)

Another added, *“Kalau terlalu banyak bahasa dipakai, jadi sedikit bingung fokusnya di mana.”*
“If too many languages are used, it becomes confusing to know what to focus on.”
(Intv-1, 04:12_C7)

These responses reveal that excessive or unstructured language switching can disrupt learning flow and reduce efficiency. Multilingualism, therefore, becomes problematic only when it lacks clear pedagogical direction.

From a deeper interpretative perspective, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of multilingual classrooms is not determined by the number of languages present, but by the quality of their integration. Multilingualism functions as a pedagogical asset when it facilitates clarity, supports peer collaboration, and enhances accessibility. Conversely, it becomes a constraint when it leads to redundancy, cognitive overload, or fragmented instruction.

This indicates that multilingual ESP classrooms require deliberate and strategic management. Effective pedagogy should regulate when and how different languages are used, ensuring that they serve specific instructional purposes rather than occurring randomly. By doing so, multilingual environments can be optimized as inclusive and efficient learning spaces that support both comprehension and participation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a complex and dynamic interplay between language use, instructional practices, and classroom ecology in multilingual ESP contexts. A central insight is the strong preference for bilingual instruction, which reflects learners' need to mediate complex disciplinary knowledge through familiar linguistic resources. This aligns with prior evidence that multilingual practices, particularly translanguaging, can enhance comprehension, participation, and inclusivity when strategically implemented (Liando et al., 2023; Şanal, 2023; Guan, 2023; Wen et al., 2022). This study extends existing scholarship by showing that learners do not passively receive bilingual input, but actively regulate their language use within a broader self-regulated learning process. They strategically shift between English and Indonesian to monitor understanding, manage cognitive load, and construct meaning, aligning with frameworks of self-regulated learning and metacognitive control in language acquisition (Tsou & Baker, 2021; Wen et al., 2022; Pakdaman et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with metacognitive and multimodal input frameworks. Learners' bilingual engagement reflects awareness of comprehension gaps and efforts to bridge them through linguistic mediation. In ESP contexts, learners integrate linguistic input, peer explanations, and contextual cues to construct meaning (Guan, 2023; Şanal, 2023). This challenges the assumption that increased exposure to English alone leads to better learning outcomes, suggesting instead that effective comprehension depends on how learners orchestrate multiple semiotic resources. In this sense, bilingual instruction functions not as a compromise, but as an optimized learning strategy that enhances depth of processing and conceptual clarity (Liando et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2022).

Importantly, the findings refine ongoing debates surrounding English-only immersion. While some learners associate English-only environments with fluency development and professional readiness (Neokleous & Karpava, 2023), the data indicate that such approaches may overlook the cognitive demands of ESP learning. Rather than rejecting immersion, this study indicates that bilingual support functions as a transitional scaffold that enables learners to progress toward greater autonomy. This view aligns with language pedagogy perspectives that position scaffolding as a temporary yet essential mechanism for bridging gaps between input and understanding (Berrabah & Toubaida, 2024; Tsou & Baker, 2021; Wen et al., 2022). In this regard, reliance on Indonesian or other linguistic resources should not be interpreted as dependency, but as an adaptive cognitive strategy shaped by contextual learning needs (Liando et al., 2023; Guan, 2023).

This study also offers a critical reinterpretation of resource reliance, analogous to debates on transcript use in listening pedagogy. Just as transcripts can function as scaffolds that support comprehension before learners achieve independent listening, bilingual language use in ESP classrooms should be viewed as a transitional mechanism rather than a limitation. Learners' engagement with multiple languages reflects a process of gradual internalization, where scaffolded input facilitates progression toward independent language use (Wen et al., 2022; Tsou & Baker, 2021). This challenges the assumption that maximal exposure to English is inherently optimal, and instead suggests that strategically mediated input may yield more sustainable and meaningful learning outcomes (Şanal, 2023; Guan, 2023).

The findings on instructional methods further reinforce the importance of learner-centered pedagogy. The strong preference for task-based, collaborative, and role-play approaches confirms that learners value experiential, context-driven, and socially mediated learning environments. These results align with research emphasizing authentic communication and professional relevance in ESP instruction (Alasmari et al., 2024; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023; YousafZai & Fareed, 2019). At the same time, this study extends prior work by showing that learners perceive effectiveness not only in terms of authenticity, but also in terms of cognitive engagement and peer-supported understanding. Collaborative learning, in particular, reflects distributed cognition, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, supporting findings that peer engagement can reduce anxiety and enhance participation (Pakdaman et al., 2022; Jungco et al., 2022). Conversely, the low preference for lecturing and grammar translation highlights the limitations of traditional, transmission-based approaches in multilingual ESP classrooms (Nur et al., 2024; Mythiri et al., 2024).

The analysis of multilingual classroom environments further deepens this discussion by revealing that perceptions of support or challenge are contingent on pedagogical management rather than linguistic diversity itself. While nearly half of the learners perceive multilingual classrooms as supportive, challenges emerge when language use becomes redundant or inefficient. This finding refines earlier studies that highlight tensions in multilingual instruction (Sipahutar & Chang, 2024; Neokleous & Karpava, 2023) by demonstrating that the effectiveness of multilingualism depends on how it is structured and implemented. Multilingual classrooms function as inclusive and resource-rich environments when language use is purposeful, but may become counterproductive when it lacks clarity and direction (Şanal, 2023; Guan, 2023).

From a research perspective, this study addresses a critical gap in ESP literature by foregrounding learners' voices within multilingual contexts. While

existing research has largely focused on needs analysis and material development (Nur et al., 2024; Mythiri et al., 2024; Raza & Chua, 2022; Suharti et al., 2022), fewer studies have examined how learners subjectively experience and interpret pedagogical practices. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides a more holistic understanding of multilingual ESP learning, capturing the interplay between cognitive processes, social interaction, and instructional design (Pakdaman et al., 2022; Jungco et al., 2022). The novelty of this study lies in its empirical exploration of multilingual classrooms in Indonesian higher education, offering context-sensitive insights into how linguistic diversity shapes learning experiences and outcomes (Liando et al., 2022; Gvelesiani, 2023).

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of multilingual and translanguaging frameworks by emphasizing the role of learner agency, metacognitive regulation, and multimodal meaning-making (Wen et al., 2022; Tsou & Baker, 2021). Practically, the findings suggest that ESP educators should adopt flexible and adaptive pedagogical strategies. Bilingual instruction should be strategically integrated to support comprehension, particularly for complex content, while maintaining opportunities for English-only interaction to foster fluency (Neokleous & Karpava, 2023). Task-based and collaborative methods should be prioritized to enhance engagement and contextual relevance (Alasmari et al., 2024; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023), and multilingual classroom management should be carefully structured to ensure efficiency and clarity (Sipahutar & Chang, 2024). Additionally, instructors should incorporate reflective practices that encourage learners to become more aware of their own learning strategies, aligning with principles of self-regulated learning (Tsou & Baker, 2021).

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size is relatively limited and context-specific, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce subjective bias, and the absence of extensive observational or longitudinal data limits the ability to capture changes over time. Furthermore, the focus on learners' perspectives does not fully account for teachers' pedagogical decision-making processes. These limitations highlight the need for further research that adopts broader samples, multiple data sources, and longitudinal designs (Raza & Chua, 2022; Suharti et al., 2022).

Future research should extend this study by examining multilingual ESP classrooms across different institutional, disciplinary, and cultural contexts to identify broader patterns and contextual variations. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how bilingual scaffolding influences long-term language development and professional

communication competence (Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023). Further investigations could also integrate teachers' perspectives to better understand how pedagogical strategies are designed and implemented in multilingual settings (Alasmari et al., 2024). In addition, experimental studies could evaluate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions, such as structured translanguaging or scaffolded task-based learning (Wen et al., 2022; Tsou & Baker, 2021). Finally, future research may explore the role of digital and multimodal environments in shaping multilingual learning, particularly in relation to how learners engage with diverse input sources in technologically mediated ESP contexts (Guan, 2023; Şanal, 2023).

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that multilingualism plays a pivotal and constructive role in shaping effective English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning within vocational higher education contexts. Drawing on the voices and preferences of cadets at Politeknik Pelayaran Sulawesi Utara, the study demonstrates that linguistic diversity is not a barrier but a valuable pedagogical resource that enhances comprehension, engagement, and inclusivity when strategically managed. The strong preference for bilingual instruction indicates that combining English with Bahasa Indonesia facilitates clearer understanding of complex technical content while still supporting the development of professional English competence. In parallel, the dominance of interactive and student-centered methods such as Task-Based Learning, Collaborative Learning, and Role Play highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are experiential, contextual, and aligned with real-world professional demands. Students' generally positive perceptions of the multilingual classroom further reinforce the notion that inclusive language practices can create a supportive and less intimidating learning environment.

Taken together, these findings provide a clear and evidence-based direction for ESP pedagogy, emphasizing that effective instruction must integrate adaptive language strategies, communicative methodologies, and sensitivity to learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this study underscores the urgency of reorienting ESP curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional policy toward more flexible, multilingual, and learner-centered frameworks that can respond to the complex realities of contemporary education and better prepare students for their future professional communication needs.

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