

Original Research Article

# The Influence of Students' Knowledge on English for Specific Purposes Learning Outcomes of Vietnamese Economics Students

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the influence of students' knowledge on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning outcomes among Vietnamese economics university students. Drawing on data originally collected for a doctoral dissertation, the article focuses on the composite construct of students' knowledge, which integrates specialized vocabulary (TVCN), disciplinary knowledge (KTCN), and communicative English (TAGT). Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency for all four scales (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.833 to 0.929). Exploratory factor analysis demonstrated that the nine indicators of students' knowledge loaded onto a single latent factor, explaining 57.3% of the total variance. PLS-SEM further established construct reliability ( $CR > 0.87$ ) and convergent validity ( $AVE > 0.60$ ). Structural equation modeling revealed a significant positive relationship between students' knowledge and ESP learning outcomes ( $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), with students' knowledge accounting for 15% of the variance in the outcomes ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ). These findings highlight the pivotal role of specialized vocabulary, disciplinary content knowledge, and communicative English competence in shaping ESP achievement. The study contributes to ESP pedagogy and applied linguistics by underscoring the necessity of integrated knowledge development rather than isolated skill training. Practical implications for curriculum design and teaching practice are also discussed.

**Keywords:** English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Students' Knowledge, Specialized Vocabulary, Disciplinary Knowledge, Communicative English, Learning Outcomes, SEM.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown into a central field of applied linguistics and English language education since the 1960s, responding to the rising demand for English as the global medium of science, technology, and professional exchange (Hyland, 2018). Unlike general English instruction, ESP focuses on the language, skills, and discourse practices necessary for learners to function effectively in specific academic and occupational domains. In many non-English-speaking contexts, ESP has become a compulsory component of higher education curricula because it enables students to access disciplinary knowledge, engage in academic study, and prepare for globalized workplaces (Basturkmen, 2023; Johns & Cortes, 2023).

universities and vocational institutions (Tran & Le, 2022). However, despite its institutionalization, ESP pedagogy in Vietnam continues to face challenges. Multiple evaluations have highlighted a misalignment between ESP curricula and workplace communication needs, with graduates reporting difficulties applying classroom English to authentic professional contexts (Chi & Vu, 2023; Lam, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2014). Instruction often remains textbook-driven, grammar-oriented, and lacking in interactive tasks (Pham, Tran, & Smith, 2024). These shortcomings reflect broader issues in ESP globally, where balancing linguistic training, disciplinary content, and communicative competence remains a contested pedagogical goal (Timothy & Lin, 2022; Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2022).

In Vietnam, ESP courses are mandated in most undergraduate programs, especially in technical

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the most widely acknowledged components of ESP competence is the mastery of specialized vocabulary. Mastery of technical terminology not only facilitates comprehension of subject-specific texts but also enables effective production of disciplinary discourse (Nation, 2013). Studies across multiple contexts have consistently shown that vocabulary breadth and depth strongly predict ESP reading and writing performance (Nguyen & Hung, 2021; Schmitt *et al.*, 2022). In Vietnam, Le and Bui (2023) demonstrated that engineering students' familiarity with academic word lists was positively associated with their success in interpreting technical documents. Nevertheless, focusing narrowly on vocabulary lists without contextual disciplinary engagement may lead to superficial learning, as words are memorized but not integrated into meaningful knowledge frameworks (Pham & Nguyen, 2025).

A second dimension is disciplinary knowledge, which provides the conceptual scaffolding for understanding ESP texts and tasks. Disciplinary knowledge allows learners to map specialized vocabulary onto domain-specific schemas, thereby supporting comprehension and problem solving (Johns & Cortes, 2023). Research has emphasized that ESP instruction divorced from disciplinary context risks reducing language learning to rote memorization (Huong *et al.*, 2024). In contrast, integrated approaches—where disciplinary content is taught alongside language—are shown to foster deeper learning outcomes and stronger transferability to professional practice (Nguyen, Vu, & Thu, 2025).

The third essential dimension is communicative English competence, encompassing oral, aural, and interactive skills. Canale and Swain's (1980) foundational framework of communicative competence remains influential, and recent research continues to affirm the centrality of communication for ESP learners (Timothy & Lin, 2022). In industry-linked majors such as tourism and hospitality, oral fluency and interactional competence are ranked by employers as even more critical than grammatical accuracy (Nguyen & Dung, 2024). However, communicative practices remain under-emphasized in many Vietnamese ESP programs, where lecture-based delivery dominates (Chi & Vu, 2023; Pham *et al.*, 2024).

Although specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative competence are individually acknowledged as important, few empirical studies have modeled them together as an integrated construct. Recent scholarship has called for more multidimensional approaches to ESP learning that reflect the complexity of actual professional and academic communication (Basturkmen, 2023). In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen, Vu, and Thu (2025) demonstrated that disciplinary comprehension and vocabulary mastery

exert stronger effects on ESP achievement than affective factors such as motivation, but communicative competence was not included in their analysis. Similarly, Hoang and Tran (2022) examined metacognitive strategies in ESP writing but did not incorporate disciplinary or communicative components.

To address this gap, the present study conceptualizes students' knowledge as a latent construct composed of specialized vocabulary (TVCN), disciplinary knowledge (KTCN), and communicative English (TAGT). By combining these three interrelated dimensions, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of ESP learning outcomes.

The study draws on data from a doctoral dissertation conducted in Vietnam and employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to validate the measurement and structural models. Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha (ranging from 0.833 to 0.929 across scales). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) showed that the nine indicators (TVCN1–3, KTCN1–3, TAGT1–3) loaded onto a single factor explaining 57.3% of the variance. PLS-SEM further established convergent validity, with composite reliability (CR) exceeding 0.87 and average variance extracted (AVE) above 0.60. The structural model revealed a significant positive effect of students' knowledge on ESP learning outcomes (KQHT), with  $\beta = 0.30$  ( $t = 4.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and  $R^2 = 0.15$ .

This article contributes to ESP pedagogy and research in three ways. First, it provides a theoretically grounded conceptualization of students' knowledge as a multidimensional construct, integrating vocabulary, disciplinary content, and communicative skills. Second, it offers empirical evidence from Vietnam, an underrepresented context in ESP scholarship, thereby extending the geographic and cultural scope of ESP research. Third, it delivers practical implications for curriculum design, suggesting that effective ESP instruction should integrate specialized vocabulary learning with disciplinary knowledge and communicative competence, rather than treating these skills separately.

By foregrounding the integrated role of students' knowledge in shaping ESP achievement, the study responds to recent calls for holistic approaches in applied linguistics (Schmitt *et al.*, 2022; Huong *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, it argues that ESP programs that emphasize isolated language skills risk inadequately preparing students for the demands of professional and academic communication. A comprehensive approach, supported by empirical validation through SEM, offers stronger promise for enhancing ESP outcomes in Vietnam and comparable contexts.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the influence of students' knowledge on ESP learning outcomes in the Vietnamese higher education context. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to validate the measurement model and to test the hypothesized relationship between the latent construct *students' knowledge* and ESP achievement. SEM was chosen because it enables simultaneous assessment of measurement reliability and structural relationships between latent variables (Hair *et al.*, 2022).

#### 3.2 Participants

A total of 445 undergraduate students participated, all from economics and business-related majors where ESP courses are mandatory. Participants ranged from first-year to third-year students, with a gender distribution of approximately 56% female and 44% male. All students had completed at least one semester of ESP instruction prior to participation. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across majors.

#### 3.3 Instruments

The survey instrument consisted of four multi-item scales adapted from validated ESP measurement tools and contextualized for Vietnamese students.

Responses were recorded on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree).

- Specialized Vocabulary (TVCN): Three items measuring knowledge of technical terms relevant to students' fields of study. Reported Cronbach's alpha = 0.916. Example item: "I can understand the technical vocabulary used in my ESP textbooks."
- Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN): Three items assessing conceptual understanding of subject-specific content. Cronbach's alpha = 0.929. Example item: "I have sufficient background knowledge in my discipline to comprehend ESP texts."
- Communicative English (TAGT): Three items reflecting students' self-reported ability to use English communicatively in academic and professional contexts. Cronbach's alpha = 0.864. Example item: "I can confidently present subject-related information in English."
- ESP Learning Outcomes (KQHT): Three items measuring students' achievement and performance in ESP courses. Cronbach's alpha = 0.833. Example item: "I perform well in ESP-related assessments and tasks."

Reliability results for each scale exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), confirming strong internal consistency.

**Table 1: Measurement Scales and Reliability**

Construct (latent variable)	Indicators	Example item	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Specialized Vocabulary (TVCN)	3	I can understand technical terms in my ESP textbooks.	0.916
Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN)	3	I have sufficient background knowledge to comprehend ESP texts.	0.929
Communicative English (TAGT)	3	I can confidently present subject-related information in English.	0.864
ESP Learning Outcomes (KQHT)	3	I perform well in ESP-related assessments and tasks.	0.833

#### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The survey was administered in classroom settings under the supervision of trained facilitators. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was ensured. Ethical approval was granted by the host institution, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The average completion time was approximately 15 minutes. Out of 461 distributed questionnaires, 445 were deemed valid, resulting in a response rate of 96.5%.2.5.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Reliability analysis: Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for each construct. All exceeded 0.83, indicating good to excellent reliability.

2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): Conducted with principal component extraction and varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.927, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 5123.4$ ,  $df = 276$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Nine items representing students' knowledge loaded on a single factor with loadings ranging from 0.608 to 0.766, explaining 57.3% of total variance.
3. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM): The hypothesized structural model was tested using SmartPLS to evaluate both measurement and structural models. Results showed a significant positive path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $t = 4.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with students' knowledge explaining

approximately 15% of the variance in ESP outcomes ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ).

*The reliability of the measurement instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and construct validity was examined through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Subsequently, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to evaluate the measurement and structural models, using SmartPLS.*

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Reliability Analysis

The reliability of all constructs was first assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Results indicated that all scales exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, demonstrating strong internal consistency.

- Specialized Vocabulary (TVCN):  $\alpha = 0.916$  (CITC range = 0.825 - 0.833).
- Communicative English (TAGT):  $\alpha = 0.864$  (CITC range = 0.714 - 0.773).
- Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN):  $\alpha = 0.929$  (CITC range = 0.843 - 0.863).
- ESP Learning Outcomes (KQHT):  $\alpha = 0.833$  (CITC range = 0.663 - 0.728).

**Table 2: Reliability of Measurement Scales (Cronbach's Alpha)**

Construct	Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CITC (range)
Specialized Vocabulary (TVCN)	3	0.916	0.825 – 0.833
Communicative English (TAGT)	3	0.864	0.714 – 0.773
Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN)	3	0.929	0.843 – 0.863
ESP Learning Outcomes (KQHT)	3	0.833	0.663 – 0.728

### 4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

To assess construct validity, an EFA was conducted.

- Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = 0.927
- Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:  $\chi^2(820) = 10,199.379, p < .001$

This indicates sampling adequacy and supports factorability. Five components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, accounting for 57.3% of the total variance.

The factor loadings for the construct Students' Knowledge (TVCN, TAGT, KTCN) are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3: Factor Loadings for Students' Knowledge (EFA)**

Indicator	Loading
TVCN1	0.766
TAGT1	0.727
KTCN1	0.716
TVCN2	0.711
TVCN3	0.700
KTCN2	0.697
TAGT3	0.693
TAGT2	0.692
KTCN3	0.608

### 4.3 Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)

The hypothesized structural model was estimated using SmartPLS 4. Reliability and validity indicators met recommended thresholds. Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.87 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.60 for all constructs, confirming convergent validity.

Outer loadings showed that most indicators loaded strongly ( $> 0.70$ ) on their intended constructs.

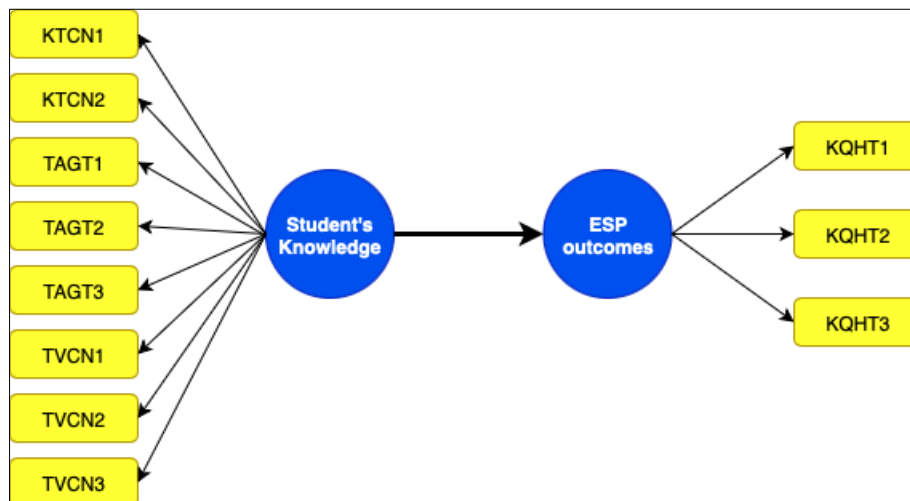
However, KTCN3 had a loading of only 0.608, below the 0.70 cutoff. Following Hair *et al.*, (2022), indicators with loadings below 0.70 may be retained if theoretically important and if CR/AVE remain acceptable. Nevertheless, in line with the doctoral dissertation results and to maintain measurement rigor, KTCN3 was excluded from the final model. The construct *Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN)* was thus measured by two items (KTCN1, KTCN2).

**Table 4: PLS-SEM Results**

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Status
Specialized Vocabulary (TVCN)	TVCN1	0.825	Retained
	TVCN2	0.832	Retained
	TVCN3	0.833	Retained
Disciplinary Knowledge (KTCN)	KTCN1	0.843	Retained
	KTCN2	0.861	Retained
	KTCN3	0.608	Removed
Communicative English (TAGT)	TAGT1	0.741	Retained
	TAGT2	0.773	Retained
	TAGT3	0.714	Retained
ESP Outcomes (KQHT)	KQHT1	0.663	Retained
	KQHT2	0.728	Retained
	KQHT3	0.687	Retained

The structural path coefficient between Students’ Knowledge and ESP Outcomes remained significant and positive:  $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $t = 4.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The

$R^2$  value for ESP Outcomes was 0.15, indicating that students’ knowledge explained 15% of the variance in ESP achievement.



**Figure 1: PLS-SEM Measurement and Structural Model**

#### 4.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the results provide robust evidence that students’ knowledge—comprising specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative English—exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on ESP learning outcomes. The structural path from Students’ Knowledge to ESP Outcomes was estimated at  $\beta = 0.30$  with  $t = 4.21$  and  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that the effect is both practically meaningful and statistically reliable. Although the explained variance in ESP outcomes is modest ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ), this level of explanatory power is consistent with what is typically observed in educational and applied linguistics research, where multiple contextual and personal factors jointly shape academic achievement. Thus, the findings demonstrate that students’ knowledge is one of the core determinants of ESP success, even when other unobserved influences are present.

The three dimensions of knowledge included in the model—specialized vocabulary, disciplinary content knowledge, and communicative English skills—

represent complementary resources that students draw upon in order to comprehend ESP materials, engage in class activities, and perform successfully in assessments. Specialized vocabulary provides access to the technical terminology required in economics and business texts; disciplinary knowledge enables students to make sense of domain-specific content; and communicative English competence facilitates the expression and application of knowledge in both academic and professional contexts. Together, these three components contribute to students’ ability to integrate language and content, a defining characteristic of ESP learning.

While the  $R^2$  value of 0.15 may appear moderate, it suggests that nearly one-sixth of the variance in ESP performance can be attributed directly to students’ knowledge. In the field of second language education, such an effect size is considered meaningful, particularly because language learning outcomes are typically influenced by a wide range of cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors. These findings highlight that enhancing students’ knowledge base is a

necessary condition for improving ESP outcomes, even though it may not be sufficient on its own.

In summary, the results underscore the central role of students' knowledge in shaping ESP achievement. They confirm that language instruction in ESP contexts cannot be limited to general linguistic skills alone, but must explicitly incorporate specialized vocabulary development, strengthen students' disciplinary background knowledge, and provide opportunities to practice communicative English relevant to their field. By integrating these three dimensions, ESP pedagogy can better support learners in meeting both academic and professional demands.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence that students' knowledge, understood as a multidimensional construct consisting of specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative English, plays a significant role in shaping English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning outcomes in Vietnamese higher education. All four measurement scales demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.833 to 0.929, exceeding the 0.70 threshold. The exploratory factor analysis further validated the construct by showing that nine items across the three dimensions of knowledge converged on a single latent factor, supporting the integrated view of students' knowledge. Structural modeling using PLS-SEM confirmed the hypothesized relationship, with a statistically significant path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and an explained variance of 15 percent in ESP outcomes.

These results affirm that stronger vocabulary knowledge, deeper disciplinary understanding, and higher communicative competence collectively enhance students' achievement in ESP courses. This finding aligns with the work of Nation (2013) and Schmitt *et al.*, (2022), who argued that vocabulary breadth and depth are essential for comprehension and academic success. It also resonates with Johns and Cortes (2023), who highlighted the centrality of disciplinary knowledge for interpreting specialized texts, and with Huong *et al.*, (2024), who showed that integrating content and language instruction leads to better retention and engagement. Furthermore, the significance of communicative English echoes Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence and is supported by contemporary research emphasizing the role of oral proficiency and interactional skills in academic and professional contexts (Timothy & Lin, 2022; Nguyen & Dung, 2024). In this respect, the present study confirms long-standing theoretical assumptions while providing empirical evidence from an underrepresented context.

What distinguishes this study from prior research is the conceptualization of students' knowledge

as an integrated construct. While earlier studies tended to focus on one dimension—vocabulary, content, or communication—this research demonstrates that these aspects are interrelated and should be treated as parts of a whole. Basturkmen (2023) has argued that ESP pedagogy must embrace multidimensional perspectives, and the present findings provide statistical support for this position. The integration of vocabulary, content knowledge, and communication highlights the need to move beyond reductionist views that treat ESP as either specialized word lists or generic communicative training. Instead, ESP achievement depends on the synergy between technical terminology, disciplinary schemas, and communicative practice.

The practical implications of these findings are considerable. In Vietnam, ESP curricula often remain fragmented, with vocabulary taught in isolation, disciplinary content marginalized, and communicative practice treated as optional. The results of this study show that such approaches are insufficient. To maximize student outcomes, programs must integrate vocabulary learning with content and communicative practice. Role-plays based on disciplinary scenarios, project-based learning that involves authentic technical materials, and assessments that evaluate both linguistic and professional competencies are practical strategies that can operationalize this integration. Such approaches would help close the gap between academic ESP courses and the communicative demands of the workplace, a gap repeatedly identified in earlier Vietnamese studies (Chi & Vu, 2023; Lam *et al.*, 2014). At the policy level, universities should encourage collaboration between ESP teachers and subject specialists to ensure that teaching materials reflect current professional practices and disciplinary realities. Assessment frameworks also need to be revised so that they evaluate not just linguistic accuracy but also students' ability to apply vocabulary and disciplinary knowledge in communicative contexts.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ESP scholarship by providing empirical validation of students' knowledge as a latent construct and by situating it within structural modeling. The explained variance of 15 percent, while meaningful, also highlights the complex, multifactorial nature of language learning. Other factors such as motivation, learner autonomy, and institutional support are likely to play complementary roles. This observation is consistent with recent work in applied linguistics that views language learning outcomes as the result of dynamic interactions between cognitive, affective, and contextual factors (Hoang & Tran, 2022; Pham *et al.*, 2023). The present study therefore opens the door for more comprehensive models that include additional variables while retaining the central role of students' knowledge.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The use of self-reported survey data raises the possibility of response bias, and the cross-

sectional design does not allow for tracing the development of knowledge and outcomes over time. The sample, though reasonably large, was restricted to a few universities in Vietnam, which may limit generalizability. Nevertheless, the consistency of results across different subscales and statistical techniques lends robustness to the conclusions. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative modeling with qualitative insights, and comparative studies across disciplines and countries. Such extensions could illuminate how students' knowledge interacts with motivation, strategies, and institutional environments, as well as how it evolves across academic trajectories.

In sum, this study strengthens the case for treating students' knowledge as a multidimensional and integrative construct. The evidence shows that specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative English are not isolated variables but interdependent dimensions that together explain a significant portion of ESP success. By embracing this holistic perspective, educators and policymakers can design curricula and pedagogical practices that better prepare students for the complex communicative demands of academic and professional life. The contribution of this study is therefore both theoretical and practical, advancing our understanding of ESP learning while offering actionable guidance for improving education in Vietnam and similar contexts.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the influence of students' knowledge—encompassing specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative English—on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning outcomes among Vietnamese university students. Using data drawn from a doctoral dissertation and analyzed through reliability tests, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the findings provide compelling evidence that students' knowledge is a significant and positive predictor of ESP achievement. The structural model indicated that students' knowledge accounted for approximately 15% of the variance in ESP learning outcomes, with a path coefficient of  $\beta = 0.30$  ( $p < .001$ ).

Theoretically, the study advances ESP research by conceptualizing students' knowledge as a multidimensional latent construct rather than treating its components in isolation. This integrated perspective highlights the importance of considering specialized vocabulary, disciplinary content, and communicative competence together, offering a more holistic account of ESP success.

Practically, the results have important implications for ESP curriculum design and teaching in Vietnam. Programs should prioritize integration:

vocabulary instruction contextualized within disciplinary texts, communicative tasks built around authentic subject content, and assessments that measure both linguistic and professional competencies. Such alignment could reduce the well-documented mismatch between ESP courses and workplace demands, ultimately enhancing students' readiness for professional communication.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the explained variance of 15% suggests that additional factors—such as learner motivation, metacognitive strategies, institutional support, and teacher expertise—may also play critical roles in ESP outcomes. Second, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Finally, the sample was limited to several universities in Vietnam, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the model to incorporate motivational, affective, and contextual factors, as well as by applying mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative modeling with qualitative insights from classroom observation and interviews. Comparative studies across different countries and disciplines would also enrich our understanding of how students' knowledge interacts with broader sociocultural and institutional variables.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that students' knowledge—measured through specialized vocabulary, disciplinary knowledge, and communicative English—serves as a cornerstone of ESP learning success. By adopting a holistic approach that integrates these dimensions, educators and policymakers can better prepare students to meet the complex linguistic and professional demands of today's globalized academic and workplace environments.

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