

# Analyzing the Challenges of Developing English for Specific Purpose (ESP) Courses for Sino-Foreign Cooperative Educational Programs

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## Abstract

With the increasing globalization and internationalization of higher education in China, Sino-foreign cooperative education programs are also flourishing. The English language and English language curricular and teaching are unavoidable topics in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs. The development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses is directly related to the quality of talent cultivation in Sino-foreign cooperative educational programs. To promote the successful implementation of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, this study takes the Sino-German Institute of Industrial Design (IDI) as an example to explore the challenges encountered in the development and practice of the English for Industrial Design (ESP) course under the Sino-foreign cooperative education program. This study aims to identify the current challenges of the ESP courses to enable students better to adapt to the foreign learning mode in advance study and integrate into foreign cultures. This study utilized a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with one IDI director and two faculty members of IDI's ESP course. They were questioned about the problems and difficulties they encountered while conducting the ESP course. The study's results indicate challenges in the IDI's ESP courses concerning the background of course students, the selection of course materials, the quality of course teachers, and the teaching methods of the courses. The study analyzed the current state of ESP course development in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, the challenges that significantly affect students' academic performance and the successful teaching of IDI Sino-foreign cooperative education.

**Keywords:** ESP, Sino-Foreign Cooperative Educational Programs, Challenges, Industrial Design English

## Introduction

The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in the Sino-foreign cooperative education program undertakes the important task of cultivating students' English abilities. The course is important in the talent training program as a basic language course. The effect of English teaching not only affects the bilingual teaching of other subjects and the study of foreign professional courses but also ultimately affects the quality of talent training in Sino-foreign

cooperative education programs. Due to the specificity of Sino-foreign cooperative educational programs, students face the double pressure of English learning and professional learning. Although teachers and students have invested substantial time and energy in English teaching, English teaching remains "time-consuming" and "inefficient", and some students lack interest and motivation to learn English. The prominent phenomenon of boredom negatively impacts the quality of English teaching (Jiang, 2023; Zeng, 2015). Therefore, it is critical to explore the challenges encountered in the ESP courses conducted under the conditions of Sino-foreign cooperative education and to improve the effectiveness of English teaching to ensure the quality of talent cultivation in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs.

In addition, the importance and benefits of the research theme "Analysing the challenges of ESP courses in the context of Sino-foreign cooperation" can be elaborated from the following perspectives:

The importance of improving the quality of education. The development of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs in institutions will undoubtedly place higher requirements for students' English language proficiency, which will inevitably bring many opportunities and challenges for implementing English language courses in Chinese institutions (Jiang, 2023). Therefore, make full use of the great opportunity of Sino-foreign cooperative education, and study the challenges of ESP courses in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs will help educational institutions to better understand the problems and develop corresponding measures to improve the curriculum design and teaching methods, etc., to strengthen the implementation of the teaching of ESP courses in institutions, make the teaching of ESP courses truly meet the needs of the institution's internationalisation construction and the development of certain professions, in order to improve the quality of the courses. This paper focuses on the Sino-German Institute of Design (IDI)'s current Sino-foreign cooperative program as an example to analyze the opportunities and challenges faced by its ESP courses, which is not only beneficial to the students, but also helps to improve the reputation of the co-operative education programs and attract more international students and educational partners.

The importance of improving the career competitiveness of the students. This study is of immense importance for students. In the globalized workplace, having English language skills in a professional field is crucial for obtaining a job (Liu, 2016). ESP courses usually attract students with clear career goals who need to master professional English related to a specific field, such as business, medicine, law, etc. An in-depth understanding of the challenges that may be encountered in ESP courses can help to ensure that these programs are successful in providing field-specific English language training, thereby helping students to be more competitive in their future careers.

The importance of Sino-foreign educational cooperation programs to meet the needs of globalization and to promote cross-cultural exchanges. Globalization has led to increased cross-border cooperation and international exchanges, and the mode of running Sino-foreign cooperative education programs is mainly in cooperation with universities in English-speaking countries. Therefore, the importance of English is evident in Sino-foreign cooperative programs, and the requirements for students' English proficiency can be understood, which is also a prominent contradiction in Sino-foreign cooperative programs nowadays (Zeng, 2015). The Sino-foreign cooperative education programs offer students the opportunity to study across borders, and as a result the demand for internationalised education is increasing. Against this background, it becomes crucial to understand how ESP courses can be effectively

delivered in cooperative education programs to meet the specific English language needs of students from different backgrounds. Furthermore, Sino-foreign cooperative education involves collaboration between different cultures and education systems. By examining the challenges in ESP courses, it can help educators to better understand and meet the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. This helps to promote cross-cultural communication and understanding, which can contribute to harmony and cooperation in the global community.

The importance of the promotion of academic research. With the development of Sino-foreign cooperation in higher education, ESP courses are particularly important because they are related to successfully implementing the entire Sino-foreign cooperation program (Li, 2020; Pan, 2015; Hong, 2018; Lin, 2021). Examining the challenges in ESP courses helps to advance academic research in the field of education and provides new perspectives and experimental results for educational policy and practice. This is because most researchers have conducted studies on ESP curricula in general institutions to investigate the impact, benefits, and challenges of ESP curriculum delivery in universities, providing quantitative or qualitative insights. However, few papers have focused on the opportunities and challenges of ESP courses conducted under Sino-foreign collaborations. With the addition of the specific "Sino-foreign cooperative education" and "industrial design major" conditions, the ESP curriculum's objectives differ from the ESP curriculum implemented in general institutions. Hence, it is worth exploring whether the challenges of the industrial design ESP curriculum under Sino-foreign cooperative education conditions differ from those of the industrial design ESP curriculum in general institutions. The resulting insights can also contribute to the field of education and help develop more effective educational policies and practices.

This study's purpose was to design an interview protocol by conducting in-depth interviews with the director and teachers of ESP courses at IDI. The four components of context, input, process, and product from the CIPP evaluation model developed by Stufflebeam (2007) were used as a case study to analyze the challenges encountered in each of the different aspects of the ESP courses offered at IDI. This study decided to identify the causes of problems and challenges by obtaining data and to contribute to improving ESP courses under Sino-foreign educational cooperation programs in China, where few ESP courses are currently offered. In conclusion, the study "Analysing the challenges of ESP courses in the context of Sino-foreign cooperation" is important because it contributes to meeting the need to improve the quality of education, the professional competitiveness of students, the need for globalisation and the promotion of cross-cultural exchanges, as well as to the development of academic research and practice. The research on this topic emphasises its relevance and effectiveness, and has important implications and benefits for students, educational institutions, policy makers and educational researchers.

### **The Significance of IDI's ESP Course for Industrial Design Majors**

The Industrial Design Sino-German Institute of Design (IDI) established the Industrial Design ESP course starting from the first semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. The course was a new attempt to improve students' professional English skills under the premise of Sino-German cooperation, to achieve comprehensive development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and for students to communicate with foreign teachers and learn professional knowledge in the context of full English classes (Wang, 2020). Additionally, studying English for Industrial Design can provide students with a good foundation for further study abroad and employment in foreign companies and multinational enterprises after graduation.

An ESP course is an English course designed to meet the needs of teaching English in a specific field. An ESP course in industrial design refers to applying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in industrial design. In the context of globalization, ESP courses in industrial design have become an increasingly important area of education (Jiang, 2023). The background and significance of ESP courses in industrial design are mainly reflected in the following aspects: The internationalization trend of industrial design majors: with expanding economic globalization, industrial design majors have gained widespread attention and development in the global context. To better meet internationalization, mastering English has become an essential skill for industrial design students (Zhou et al., 2018). Therefore, the ESP course for industrial design majors can meet students' English skills needs and lay the foundation for their future international development.

Specialization and practice in industrial design: industrial design is a highly comprehensive discipline that involves knowledge and skills from diverse fields. The application of English plays a critical role in the industrial design profession, especially in international communication and cooperation (Gao, 2018). Therefore, ESP courses in industrial design at IDI can enhance the application of students' professional knowledge and practical skills and strengthen students' comprehensive quality.

Practical needs of industrial design majors: IDI industrial design students must be able to use English for their professional courses and career development. English is an essential requirement for students to bridge the gap between their courses taught by foreign teachers and their work in domestic and international companies. An ESP course in industrial design can help students better adapt to the needs of the field, assist them in learning their courses taught by foreign teachers, and enhance their competitiveness in the workplace (Liu, 2016). In conclusion, the background and significance of the ESP course in industrial design are vital. Its offering can effectively improve students' ability in English application, promote the success of Sino-foreign cooperative education, meet international development needs, and enhance students' comprehensive quality and competitiveness.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research method was utilized in this study. Qualitative research is considered the most appropriate design because it allows the researcher to explore and analyze the expected problems that respondents face (Bell & Waters, 2018). This study aims to achieve the following objective: to analyze challenges encountered by ESP courses at the IDI under the conditions of Sino-foreign cooperation. It enables researchers to gain insight into the various issues explored or dilemmas ESP courses face during the teaching and learning process at IDIs. The significance of this study is to analyze the conflicting issues or perspectives encountered by stakeholders involved in the ESP course in understanding the overall course delivery process. The challenges encountered by the ESP courses could be from the contextual culture, teaching and learning, institutions, and needs, all of which were collected from the interview data.

In addition, a case study was used in this research to understand the multifaceted issues and challenges encountered in conducting IDI's ESP course. A case study of IDI's ESP course was identified using purposive sampling to explore and investigate this case further (Patton, 2014). The sample for this study was one IDI director and two ESP course teachers of IDI.

The in-depth interview method was used in this study. In-depth interviews use semi-structured, open-ended questions to complete the narrative of the identified cases. According

to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews are characterized by: 1) a formal interview between the interviewer and the participant, and 2) the interviewer developing and using an interview protocol. Therefore, this interview is based on the CIPP evaluation model that divides ESP courses into four aspects: course context, course content and materials, course instructional process, and course evaluation, and explores the difficulties and challenges faced by the teachers and course developers from their perspective in each of their sections, respectively. The informants were provided a set of questions related to the process of conducting the ESP course. Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyze the data until themes were generated to illuminate the various types of issues faced in the study of ESP courses (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

There was a total of three respondents in this study, who were a director of IDI and two instructors of IDI's ESP course. The IDI has a total of two faculty directors, both directors have been working with IDI since its inception, one of whom has retired; There were two Chinese teachers are responsible for the design and teaching of the ESP courses (only two English teachers have taught ESP courses at IDI).

The findings show that the ESP courses of IDI under the conditions based on Sino-foreign cooperative educational programs face challenges such as the background of IDI' students, the selection of course materials, the quality of course teachers, and the teaching methods, which will lead to the decreasing quality of the ESP courses to assist the professional courses.

The current situation and problems of teaching ESP courses for IDI are as follows:

The first major challenge IDI's ESP courses face is the students' status issue, most obviously because students enter IDI with different English proficiency levels. Therefore, students of varying English levels will be in the same ESP course, making it more difficult for teachers to teach, thereby affecting students' learning progress. Respondent 1 – C\_SB\_01 commented that:

*"A small percentage of IDI's student enrollment comes directly from the Chinese college entrance exams, and the majority of students come in from the university's already existing freshman and sophomore classes on campus. The admissions process includes an English interview with a foreign professional teacher, but this is not the primary basis for determining whether a student will be admitted to IDI. The main basis is the results of their pre-entry industrial design exams; however, the English interview is only a small part of the grading criteria. Therefore, students' English proficiency can be uneven, and because students' English proficiency is highly differentiated, it makes it difficult and challenging to conduct the ESP course."*

The selection of teaching materials is also a challenge for ESP courses in Sino-foreign educational cooperation programs, as the lack of relevance and timeliness of teaching materials has significantly challenged the implementation of ESP courses. Sino-foreign cooperative programs must consider the academic background and cultural differences between local students and foreign teachers, and the required teaching materials are different. There are currently no textbooks on the market that are entirely appropriate for ESP courses in different majors. Furthermore, most textbooks that are chosen are outdated in content and contain difficult English (Zhao, 2019).



Respondent 3 – C\_MS\_01 said, *"There are not many reference books on English for industrial design. The content of the textbook focuses on the traditional theoretical research of industrial design, mainly from foreign design media and writings of design professionals, which is very timely and faces a crisis, that is, it is easy to not keep up with the development of the times and lack of timeliness. The articles are very difficult to read due to the large number of specialized English vocabulary and difficult sentences. From the teaching effect and students' feedback, the content of the textbook is seriously incompatible with the overall English level of students, and the vast majority of students feel overwhelmed and bored during the learning process and do not effectively learn and understand the relevant knowledge."*

Meanwhile, Respondent 2 - C\_MS\_02 said, *"The selection of teaching materials for ESP courses in Sino-foreign cooperation cannot be simply about the knowledge of English for industrial design, because the objectives of the courses are different, on the one hand, the content of the teaching materials must be linked to the content of the professional courses conducted by foreign teachers at IDI, and the timeliness of the content of the teaching materials is particularly important; on the other hand, the content of cultural differences must also be taken into account. Therefore, the choice of teaching materials is always a problem for our teachers to prepare for the course."*

Another important challenge for ESP is the lack of good bilingual teachers with the right expertise. Professional bilingual teachers need to meet two requirements. Most importantly, teachers must have comprehensive professional knowledge. Second, teachers must be fluent in spoken English. Most teachers of bilingual courses in domestic universities are teachers of design majors; they have strong professional knowledge, but few can speak English fluently. On the contrary, some teachers of bilingual courses they lack expertise in the field and cannot provide students with a more systematic and complete learning experience, however, they have strong professional language (English) knowledge (Zhao, 2019).

Respondent 1 - C\_TQ\_01 said, *"Our two existing ESP course teachers at IDI are both English majors. To be as close as possible to the concept of Sino-foreign cooperative education and to achieve cultural exchange and integration, the two teachers chosen have experience in studying abroad. But for them, I think the main challenge of conducting the Industrial Design ESP course is that they have never been exposed to the knowledge of industrial design-related fields either, so I think it is more challenging and relatively hard for them to conduct ESP course preparation."*

In addition, Respondent 2 – C\_TQ\_02 said, *"When I first started teaching IDI's ESP course, it was a big challenge for me. Since I had never been exposed to industrial design-related expertise before, I often spent a lot of time preparing for the course, researching the relevant expertise and asking questions of the professional teachers, which made it much more difficult to prepare for the course than a general English course with inherent materials."*

Finally, the fourth challenge ESP teachers face is the choice of teaching methods, which is considered the most challenging and influential in conducting ESP courses in IDI. Most ESP classrooms are influenced by the traditional university English teaching model, which usually adopts the teacher-centered lecture method. This method is not rich enough in teaching techniques and places too much emphasis on the training of language foundation knowledge, thereby ignoring students' interests and making students less engaged in the course (Lin, 2021).

Respondent 2 – C\_TM\_01 said, *"When I first started to prepare for IDI's ESP courses, I was a little unused to it because the teaching methods of Chinese and foreign teachers are different. In order to make a good connection and let students adapt to the professional courses of foreign teachers as soon as possible, the teaching methods of ESP courses need to be constantly adjusted, not to copy the Chinese classroom model unchanged. However, IDI's ESP courses are different from the General English courses I taught before, and the teaching methods require flexibility. The teaching methods require flexibility, and it is a major challenge to use exactly what is effective to increase students' interest and motivate them."*

Respondent 3 – C\_TM\_02 agrees that *"I have been teaching General English at the university level for a long time. The university provided regular teaching materials, so the teaching methods were more traditional. However, in the process of teaching at IDI, I found that since the students were not English majors, the traditional teacher-centered approach of teaching General English with passive listening only made the students who were not interested in learning English more passive and passive, and even became bored with learning, which was not ideal."*

## Discussion

### The Challenge of IDI Students' Background

The description reveals that in most Sino-foreign cooperative educational programs, admissions are not based on English proficiency to select students for enrollment. Hence, English curricula usually encounter the problem of significant differences in students' language proficiency, which is often associated with students' educational experiences. This situation creates significant challenges to materials selection, course setting, and curriculum development (Liu, 2017). ESP courses taught fully in English are more challenging than general English courses because aside from language issues that must be addressed, there is also a need to understand and master specialized knowledge. Students who do not understand the professional courses taught fully in English by foreign teachers often place the root of the problem on the English courses. Therefore, ESP courses in Sino-foreign cooperative programs face a double challenge and double pressure to improve and strengthen (Pan, 2015).

### The Challenge of Materials Selection for ESP Course

From the descriptions of two respondents, it is evident that the selection of appropriate materials to bridge the gap between ESP courses and professional courses, the requirement of basic academic English for professional courses taught by foreign teachers, the practical requirement for students to understand and listen to foreign teachers' course contents in professional courses in the future, and the interpretation of cultural differences are essential. The content of English materials for industrial design majors comes from foreign literature, and many of the articles are difficult to understand, making them more difficult for teachers and students to read. Simultaneously, most of the materials were published long ago and cannot keep pace with the changing international situation; some of the content is even from the last century and cannot reflect the latest developments in the profession (Zhu, 2017; Meng, 2012).

### The Challenge of Teacher Quality in ESP Courses

The above description demonstrates that the English faculty is one of the key factors that directly affect the effectiveness of the ESP courses. The ESP teachers at IDI lack background knowledge in industrial design, while the ESP course teachers recruited at IDI attempt to be

aligned with the concept of Sino-foreign cooperation and are equipped with foreign study backgrounds which are more conducive to cross-cultural teaching. Similarly, Liu (2017) and Li (2020) argued that English teachers in Chinese universities are mainly English major graduates. Still, they lack the professional educational background of Sino-foreign cooperative programs. At the same time, they lack sufficient professional skills and practical experience in enterprises in Sino-foreign cooperative programs before teaching. Therefore, they cannot impart practical professional skills to students in their teaching. Furthermore, since most English teachers in Chinese higher education institutions have not experienced studying abroad, it is difficult to impart the cultural essence of Western countries to students in the actual teaching process, which leads to difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation in students' communication with foreign teachers (Li, 2020). In practice, Chinese teachers responsible for teaching ESP courses in Sino-foreign cooperative programs should have extensive study abroad experience and professional background training in cooperative programs (Hong, 2018; Yu, 2020).

### **The Challenge of Teaching Methods in ESP Courses**

From what the two respondents shared; it can be found that the English curriculum of Sino-foreign cooperative programs should be significantly different from the traditional ones. Pan (2015) argues that the traditional teaching methods of ESP courses in industrial design tend to be singular, with only traditional classroom lectures, lacking teaching methods and means that combine with actual work scenarios and professional classes of foreign teachers. It is challenging to help students experience real industrial design practice in the classroom. Moreover, based on the factors of Sino-foreign cooperation, ESP courses in industrial design need to fully consider students' actual needs and backgrounds, and a classroom teaching environment integrated with the professional classrooms of foreign teachers is particularly important (Wu & Li, 2019). Therefore, how to enhance students' learning interests and motivate them in the classroom through diversified teaching methods has become a key consideration for ESP course teaching (Zhou et al., 2018). Additionally, universities have not established good communication and training opportunities for Chinese and foreign teachers. Hence, ESP courses are unable to serve the requirements of foreign professional courses, and teachers of foreign professional courses are dissatisfied with students' English proficiency in China (Lin, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that ESP courses in IDI are not easy to implement, especially those based on Sino-foreign cooperative education. The Sino-foreign cooperative educational program brings serious challenges to IDI's ESP curriculum, yet also creates excellent opportunities to reform IDI's ESP curriculum. To overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities, IDI's ESP curriculum can be further explored in four aspects: flexible adjustment of curriculum according to students' actual situation, integration of curriculum materials, effective teacher training, and conversion of teaching mode.

Not only is Sino-foreign cooperative education meant to achieve mutual recognition and credit transfer between domestic and foreign universities in terms of academic qualifications, but also to meet the lack of higher education resources in China. Constructing ESP courses for Sino-foreign cooperative programs can not only improve students' English application ability, help students grow familiar with foreign teaching mode study in advance, improve



connections to foreign professional courses, and deepen students' understanding of cross-cultural communication, but also greatly enhances the effectiveness of practical teaching of Chinese and foreign teachers in cooperative programs (Liu, 2017). To create an effective ESP curriculum, the roles of IDIs, course developers, lecturers, and students themselves need to be strengthened. This can be done by conducting further research to explore the implemented curriculum plans to address the challenges of curriculum development for all parties involved directly in the field. This research is an important guide to improve the effective delivery of ESP courses based on the conditions of Sino-foreign collaborative educational programs.

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