

Exploring Speaking-Anxiety Triggers in Polytechnic ESP Course: An Inductive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the specific moments and conditions that trigger speaking anxiety among engineering undergraduates in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at a Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. Drawing on open-ended responses from 101 students, the primary goal was to uncover the classroom scenarios—beyond general anxiety scales—that most disrupt learners' oral performance. Narrative data were repeatedly reviewed following Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis procedures; provisional codes for anxiety-provoking incidents (e.g., more comfortable in a small group, fear of being laughed at, nervous when unprepared) were generated and organized into coherent themes. It is anticipated that speaking anxiety will be found at a moderate level, with the greatest distress being associated with lexical retrieval under time pressure and unprepared, impromptu speaking tasks. Secondary triggers are expected to include concerns about grammatical accuracy and pronunciation, while social factors—such as instructor scrutiny or mixed-gender audiences—will likely play a smaller role. These predicted patterns underscore the dual burden of technical content mastery and language production in ESP contexts. By pinpointing discipline-specific anxiety triggers, this work aims to inform targeted pedagogical interventions—like scaffolded vocabulary drills, brief planning aids, and supportive feedback practices—to help ESP instructors foster more confident, resilient speakers.

Keywords: Speaking anxiety; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); thematic analysis; engineering undergraduates; anxiety triggers

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of spoken English is an essential objective in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, where learners must not only achieve general communicative competence but also master the specialized vocabulary and discourse conventions of their academic or professional fields. In engineering, business, medicine, and other technical domains, oral tasks often involve high-stakes activities—such as delivering technical presentations, negotiating project details, or participating in peer-review discussions—that can raise learners' affective filters and hinder their communicative performance (Ma, 2022). Although numerous quantitative studies have documented that ESP students frequently report moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety (Gjergo & Meçe, 2023; Topalov et al., 2023a). These investigations tend to rely on Likert-scale instruments and thus stop short of revealing the specific classroom moments when anxiety spikes.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) refers to “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning” that arises from the unique emotional challenges of acquiring a new language (HORWITZ et al., 1986). Researchers commonly employ the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to gauge learners' overall anxiety levels, consistently finding that ESP groups exhibit significant unease during oral

presentations and impromptu speaking tasks (Gao, 2022). However, while such scales offer valuable snapshots of anxiety magnitude, they offer limited insight into the situational cues—like encountering unfamiliar technical terms or anticipating negative evaluation—that actually trigger anxiety in ESP settings.

Recent survey-based studies underscore the prevalence of speaking anxiety within ESP populations but leave unanswered questions about its origins. For instance, Meçe and Gjergo found that

56.9 percent of 176 Albanian ESP undergraduates experienced moderate to high FLA, with anxiety levels strongly correlated to perceived difficulties in oral presentations (Gjergo & Meçe, 2023). Likewise, Topalov et al. compared anxiety across video, audio, and text-based online modalities among Indonesian ESP learners, revealing significant modality-related differences yet focusing solely on quantitative measures (Topalov et al., 2023b). While these studies highlight how widespread and multifaceted ESP speaking anxiety can be, they do not delve into students' own descriptions of the classroom scenarios that provoke their distress.

Qualitative work on speaking anxiety has mostly centered on general English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) learners rather than ESP students. Nurilahi and Suhartono, for example, analysed Grade-12 EFL learners' open-ended survey responses to uncover a dozen anxiety triggers—ranging from psychological fears like “being laughed at” to situational stressors such as “formal test conditions” (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022a). More recently, Ch'ng applied thematic analysis to examine public-speaking anxiety among 65 ESL undergraduates, identifying fear of negative feedback, unpreparedness, and error-making as primary triggers during live presentations. Yet, none of these inquiries target the ESP context, where the dual demands of technical content knowledge and precise language use can create unique emotional pressures (Ch'ng, 2025).

Despite the wealth of theoretical frameworks addressing FLA, a disconnect persists between what these theories recommend and the practices commonly observed in ESP classrooms. Control-Value Theory (CVT) suggests that anxiety emerges when learners perceive tasks as high in personal value but low in controllability, implying that pre-task scaffolding and value reframing should alleviate anxiety (Pekrun, 2024). Positive Psychology approaches further advocate cultivating enjoyment and resilience through supportive feedback, collaborative learning, and strengths-based activities (Ma, 2022). Yet educators often prioritize content coverage and error correction over affective support, overlooking the very situational triggers that students report as most anxiety-provoking. This misalignment highlights the need for detailed empirical data on learners' in-class experiences.

Several complementary theoretical perspectives frame this study. A foundational lens is provided by Horwitz et al.'s tripartite model of FLA—comprising communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—which is used to delineate anxiety's core dimensions (HORWITZ et al., 1986). Control-Value Theory then illuminates how task appraisals shape emotional responses during ESP activities (Pekrun, 2024). Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) and the idiodynamic method emphasize the fluctuating, moment-by-moment nature of anxiety, underscoring the importance of capturing learners' emotions in situ rather than as static traits (Gregersen, 2020; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022). Finally, Bandura's concept of self-efficacy and Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory shed light on how confidence beliefs and positive affect can buffer against anxiety and enhance spoken performance (Lopez-Garrido, 2025).

A systematic review of SSCI-indexed ESP research from 2014 to 2023 revealed that while topics like curriculum design, corpus-based materials, and technology-mediated learning are well covered, learner emotions—especially speaking anxiety triggers—remain underexplored (Yan, 2025). Existing qualitative studies on FLA either focus on general EFL populations or small, non-discipline-specific samples, leaving a clear gap in understanding the unique emotional landscapes of ESP learners (Hananingsih, 2023). No prior study has systematically analysed ESP students' own accounts of the precise classroom events, content demands, and social factors that spark speaking anxiety.

To fill this gap, the present research undertakes an inductive thematic analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses from 101 engineering undergraduates enrolled in an ESP course at Politeknik Negeri Cilacap. By zeroing in on an ESP context—with its heavy reliance on specialized vocabulary, stringent accuracy expectations, and the cognitive load of integrating technical content with language production—this study aims to uncover both common and distinctive anxiety triggers. Its novel contributions include identifying discipline-specific triggers related to domain-specific lexis and technical accuracy, illuminating how instructor behaviours and task designs uniquely impact ESP learners' anxiety, and offering empirically grounded recommendations for aligning instructional practices with theoretical insights from CVT and CDST. In doing so, this study not only advances our theoretical understanding of FLA in ESP contexts but also provides actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to foster more supportive, anxiety-sensitive learning environments.

METHODS

Participants

The study enlisted one hundred and one students (52 males and 49 females) from eight study programs in Politeknik Negeri Cilacap, all of whom were enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes course during the 2024 academic term. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with students recruited through convenience sampling and invited to complete the online questionnaire at their own pace. This group size and sampling approach mirror recent investigations into foreign language anxiety in higher education; for example, Qaddumi et al. surveyed over fifteen hundred Palestinian undergraduates to explore anxiety in virtual language classrooms (Qaddumi et al., 2023), while Véliz-Campos, Villegas, and Veliz collected comparable samples to examine modality-based variations in anxiety among ESP learners (Campos et al., 2023).

Instrument

Data collection was conducted via a Google Forms survey that integrated fifteen Likert-type items adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (HORWITZ et al., 1986) alongside three open-ended questions. The Likert items ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” targeting dimensions of speaking anxiety such as fear of making grammatical errors or negative evaluation. The qualitative component prompted students to describe the classroom situations that usually make them feel nervous when speaking English, focusing specifically on the question, “What usually makes you feel nervous when speaking English in class?”. Similar online implementations of FLCAS-derived instruments have been validated in recent research, with Dong, Liu, and Yang employing a 33-item electronic FLCAS to investigate anxiety and motivation among Chinese secondary students (Dong et al., 2022), and Qaddumi et al., using a comparable digital delivery to assess Palestinian university learners (Qaddumi et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was carried out in line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines to ensure a systematic and transparent coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, all narrative responses were read repeatedly to become intimately familiar with the data. Meaningful excerpts were then highlighted and labelled with provisional codes that captured key concepts, such as a fear of mistakes (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) or a lack of preparation/spontaneity. These initial codes were clustered into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined against the complete data set to guarantee internal consistency and distinctiveness. The final themes were then named and exemplified through representative quotations, culminating in a cohesive narrative report. This analytic approach has been employed effectively in recent second language acquisition research, notably by Ch'ng in their thematic study of public-speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates (Ch'ng, 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The group of engineering students in our ESP course exhibited a clear pattern of moderate but meaningful speaking anxiety, with an overall mean of 2.97 on a five-point Likert scale ($SD = 0.71$). This central tendency aligns closely with Cabansag's findings of moderate anxiety among ESL engineering undergraduates, where mean scores similarly clustered around the mid-point of the scale (Libratar et al., 2025), and echoes the descriptive results reported by Nurmasitah et al. in a sample of Home Economics and Engineering-Faculty students at Universitas Negeri Semarang, who observed mild to moderate anxiety across communicative classroom activities (Nurmasitah et al., 2024). The relative consistency of these moderate levels—whether in face-to-face ESP settings or online modalities—suggests an affective baseline in technical English courses that instructors can anticipate and address systematically (Libratar et al., 2025).

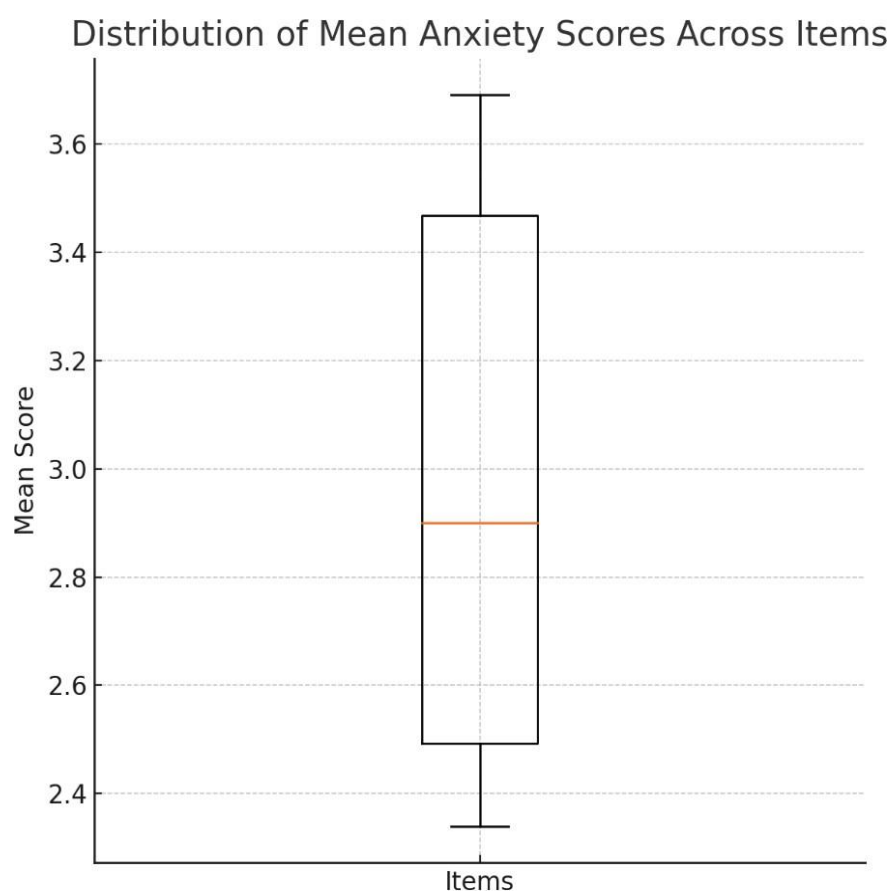


Figure 1. The distribution of the mean anxiety score across items

Although the aggregate score sat squarely in the moderate zone, the dispersion of item means revealed substantial variability in how different speaking tasks influenced student comfort. The distribution of the mean scores in Figure 1 shows an interquartile range from approximately 2.5 to 3.5, with whiskers stretching roughly between 2.35 and 3.68. This shape—moderately wide but without extreme outliers—mirrors the typical profile of foreign language speaking anxiety measures reported in a recent multifaceted exploration of higher-education learners across disciplines, which found that anxiety items generally cluster around the mid-range with few extreme values (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Such a distribution underlines that, while no single speaking scenario uniformly terrifies or soothes the entire class, particular tasks stand out as

notably more or less anxiety-provoking.

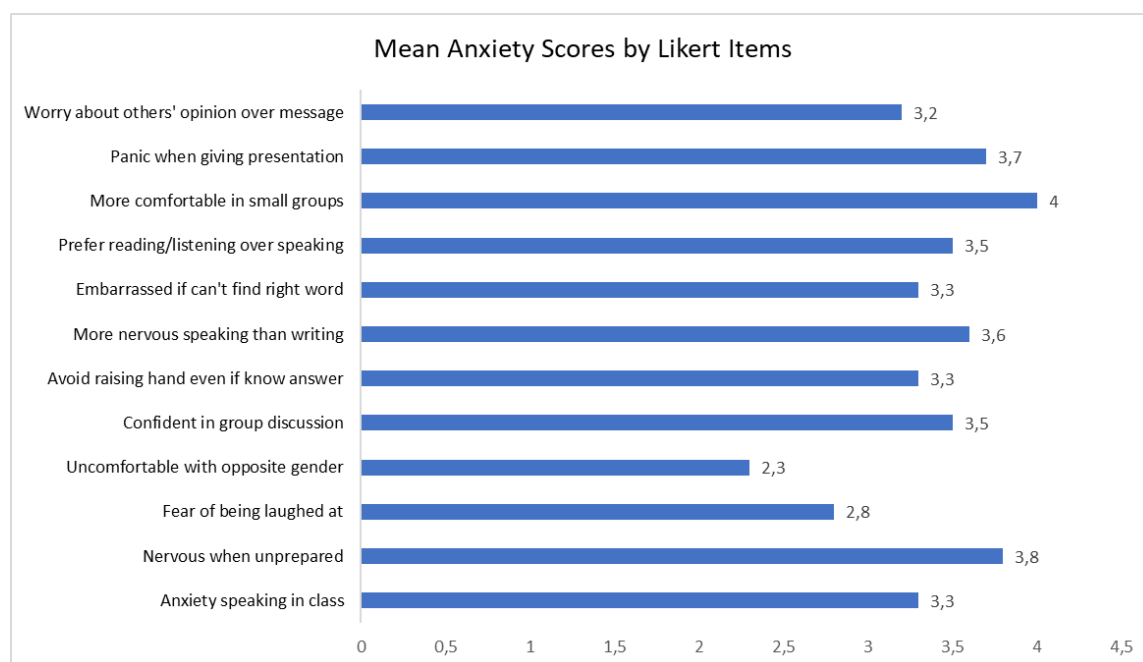


Figure 2. The mean anxiety score by Likert items

Figure 2 brings those task-specific differences into sharp relief. The highest anxiety mean ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.07$) emerged for impromptu speaking: “I get nervous when I have to speak without preparation.” This peak aligns with broader pedagogical research that emphasizes the role of perceived control in task-related emotions. Control-Value Theory posits that learners’ anxiety intensifies when they appraise speaking events as low in controllability and high in value, such as unplanned, cold-call exchanges (Pekrun, 2006). Empirical case studies in L2 contexts have shown that even brief planning intervals or cue-cards prior to spontaneous tasks can reduce anxiety by enhancing learners’ sense of preparedness (Maulida et al., 2024). Indeed, interventions embedding low-stakes, scaffolded planning have yielded moderate effect sizes ($g \approx 0.40$ – 0.45) in lowering spontaneity-related anxiety, suggesting a clear path for pedagogical adjustment (Z. Zhang, 2024).

Close on the heels of impromptu demands are the items reflecting a preference for receptive modalities rather than speaking. Students reported being more nervous speaking than writing ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.18$) and preferring reading or listening over speaking ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.18$). These peaks underscore a broader trend identified in meta-analytic work on FLSA interventions: learners often gravitate toward comprehension-based tasks when oral production feels affectively taxing. That same meta-analysis found that targeted fluency-building drills—such as timed monologues with peer feedback—can shift learners’ attitudes, gradually narrowing the gap between receptive comfort and productive anxiety by promoting repeated, supported speaking practice.

By contrast, the lowest anxiety mean ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.08$) corresponded to discomfort speaking in front of the opposite gender, indicating that gendered audience effects played a relatively minor role for this group. This finding diverges from some early EFL research that linked female learners to heightened anxiety in socially evaluative contexts (Cassady et al., 2025), but is consonant with recent ESP studies in STEM fields where the technical complexity and specialized content of speaking tasks eclipse demographic influences (Kakepoto et al., 2022). In such settings, the cognitive demands of articulating domain-specific terminology appear to be the predominant affective trigger, effectively leveling the anxiety landscape between male and female students.

Delving into the thematic underpinnings of these quantitative contours, our inductive analysis of open-ended responses identified seven principal sources of speaking anxiety. Lexical

limitations led the list (32.6% of respondents), with students lamenting their struggles to retrieve precise technical vocabulary under time pressure. This mirrors findings by Nurilahi and Suhartono (2022) in an ESP context, where vocabulary gaps imposed a heavy cognitive load and activated affective filters that stymied oral fluency (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022b; Yanti et al., 2025). Incorporating corpus-informed glossaries, quick retrieval drills, and pre-task modeling has been shown to mitigate lexical anxiety by familiarizing learners with high-frequency technical lexis and reinforcing retrieval pathways. Almost as prevalent were general proficiency apprehensions (31.5%), captured in students' global self-efficacy doubts such as "I really cannot use English well." Bandura's self-efficacy framework underscores how such overarching beliefs infiltrate task-specific confidence, predicting that low-efficacy learners will interpret routine speaking tasks as insurmountable. A meta-analysis of self-efficacy interventions in language learning (2021–2024) reported effect sizes of $g \approx 0.35$ – 0.40 for strategies that foster mastery experiences—incremental task complexity, guided peer collaboration, and structured positive feedback loops—suggesting that targeted confidence-building can shift both belief and affective baseline (Shao et al., 2023).

Concerns about grammatical and pronunciation accuracy accounted for 15.2% of thematic mentions. Rooted in Horwitz et al.'s original FLA model, error aversion remains a potent anxiety driver when linguistic precision is prized, as in technical discourse contexts where mispronounced or misused terms can distort meaning (Riaz & Riaz, 2022). Research on error feedback timing in ESP settings suggests that initial phases emphasizing fluency with delayed, moderated corrective feedback yield lower anxiety without compromising long-term accuracy gains (Kakepoto et al., 2022). The quantitative prominence of impromptu pressure (7.6%) resonated with thematic accounts of "feeling nervous when called on suddenly." Control-Value Theory again provides insight: the unpredictability of unplanned speaking erodes learners' appraised control and elevates stress (Pekrun, 2024). Pilot interventions introducing optional response planning sheets and brief think-time protocols have demonstrated moderate anxiety reductions in such scenarios (Z. Zhang, 2024).

Instructor-related intimidation (4.3%) and acute performance panic in formal presentations (2.2%) were less frequently mentioned but carry outsized consequences for participation and course performance. Fear of negative evaluation by authority figures is a core dimension of FLA that can trigger avoidance behaviors and inhibit risk-taking (Azmi & Osman, 2024). Empirical work in ESP teacher education contexts shows that private, constructive feedback and explicit positive reinforcement correlate with Hedges' $g \approx 0.35$ decreases in learner anxiety, while public, high-stakes critique can produce lasting deterrents to voluntary speaking. The intensity of stage-fright responses during presentations, though affecting only a minority (2.2%), underscores the need for targeted rehearsal and desensitization practices. Public-speaking pedagogy research has found that multiple low-stakes mock presentations, peer-review workshops, and simple relaxation techniques like diaphragmatic breathing and visualization yield significant reductions in physiological panic symptoms (heart rate, sweating) and raise confidence with effect sizes around 0.40 (Mardesich, 2023).

Together, these thematic and quantitative insights point to a pressing need for task-specific, theory-informed ESP interventions. The application of Pekrun's Control-Value Theory in recent L2 learning research has extended its utility beyond achievement emotions to encompass language skill-specific affective dynamics, validating new instruments that capture mediating roles of anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom in task performance (Shao et al., 2023). Likewise, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) reminds us that learner affect fluctuates in real time and is sensitive to moment-to-moment task appraisals, suggesting that continuous emotion monitoring—via brief "pulse" surveys or reflection prompts—can guide bespoke, in-class adjustments to support student regulation (Kakepoto et al., 2022).

Pedagogically, these frameworks translate into actionable strategies. Vocabulary scaffolding can leverage corpus-driven activity sequences to boost lexical retrieval fluency. Scaffolded mastery experiences, offered through progressive group tasks and peer-mentoring schemes, can

systematically build self-efficacy. Impromptu tasks can be reframed with optional planning aids to restore a sense of perceived control. Instructors can adopt supportive feedback climates—balancing delayed correction with positive affirmations—to lower affective filter thresholds. Performance skills can be honed through structured rehearsal and simple anxiety-reduction techniques drawn from public-speaking training. Looking ahead, integrating technology-mediated supports offers promising avenues. Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) tools have begun to show efficacy in public-speaking training, particularly for non-native English speakers. A recent AR prototype provided immersive, simulated audience interactions and yielded user-reported confidence boosts and anxiety reductions in pilot trials (Jim et al., 2025). Similarly, VR social-emotional training surveys indicate that non-native English learners benefit from safe, repeatable exposure to speaking scenarios that can be fine-tuned in difficulty and feedback style (S. Zhang & Khalid, 2024). In sum, the rich tapestry of moderate overall anxiety, task-specific peaks and troughs, and nuanced thematic drivers in our engineering ESP group offers a robust foundation for targeted, evidence-based pedagogical design. By aligning interventions with Control-Value Theory's emphasis on control and value appraisals, leveraging CDST's guidance on affective variability, and incorporating technological affordances for safe, scaffolded practice, ESP instructors can move learners steadily toward greater oral confidence and competence. Longitudinal studies should next evaluate the sustained impact of such multimodal interventions on both affective outcomes and real-world communicative performance in technical English contexts.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods investigation has illuminated the multifaceted nature of speaking anxiety in an ESP context, revealing that nearly two-thirds of students' unease centers on lexical retrieval difficulties and broad self-perceived deficiencies in English proficiency. Concerns about grammatical and pronunciation accuracy, impromptu speaking demands, instructor behaviors, and high-stakes performance scenarios surfaced less frequently but nonetheless underscore the complex interplay between task characteristics, individual appraisals, and emotional responses. The absence of significant gender differences in composite anxiety further suggests that these triggers are salient across demographic groups when learners confront the dual challenge of technical content and foreign-language production. Theoretically, our findings reinforce the value of Control-Value Theory in explaining how perceptions of task controllability and personal value shape affective responses, and they underscore the dynamic, context-sensitive insights afforded by Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. Practically, the study points to a number of targeted interventions: integrating discipline-specific vocabulary scaffolds, embedding confidence-building speaking exercises, granting "think time" for unanticipated questions, and fostering supportive feedback practices. These strategies, aligned with positive psychology and self-efficacy principles, can help lower affective filters and empower students to engage more fully in ESP oral tasks. Looking ahead, longitudinal research could track how theme-based pedagogical adjustments influence anxiety trajectories over a semester, while comparative studies across different ESP disciplines (e.g., business, medicine) would clarify the generalizability of these triggers. By continuing to center learners' own voices in the design and evaluation of ESP curricula, future work can ensure that instruction not only delivers technical knowledge but also cultivates the confidence and resilience essential for successful professional communication.

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