

# **Enhancing Professional Writing Skills through English for Professional Purposes (EPP) Instruction: A Case Study of Undergraduate EFL Learners**

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of teaching professional conventions in English as a Professional Purpose (EPP) to undergraduate students. This investigation involved whether learners could effectively incorporate their professional learning conventions in style, grammar, and clarity into their writing tasks or in their oral performance through guidance. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) lays the major theoretical framework of this research, where learners require scaffolding in their zone of proximal development (ZPD). This theoretical perspective aligns with this research's focus on guided instruction and feedback to enhance learners' professional writing skills. A mixed-method case study was adopted to get qualitative insights through observation, role play, behavioral analysis, and quantitative data through writing tasks and survey responses. Analytical and observable approach was adopted to analyze their writing tasks, such as memorandum, complaint letter, and cover letter. In addition, behavioral patterns such as role playing through interviewing were observed and recorded during the course, which they undertook over six months to assess their learning outcomes. In the role-playing, learners alternated the role of interviewer and interviewee after receiving adequate guidance on how to conduct and respond to interviews. Additionally, a survey questionnaire was designed to accumulate learners' perceptions regarding how effectively they incorporated and applied their learning into their professional setting throughout the course. The result indicated significant improvements in several writing genres along with strong acquisition of professional communication skills. The study contributes to both the field of pedagogy and ESP (English for Specific Purpose) by emphasizing the value of explicit and feedback-oriented instructions in preparing learners for real-world professional communication.

*Keywords:* EPP Instruction, guidance, professional, writing, EFL learners

## **Introduction**

In this competitive, globalized world, the importance of communicating in English has been increasing. It has surpassed all other languages in the world in global communication. That's why the significance of learning communication etiquette and norms in business settings has been growing fast among the non-native English-speaking countries. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) addresses the adaptation of English in multiple contexts. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) are two directives where individuals use diversified English for different purposes (Evans & St. John, 1998). English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is also referred to as English for Professional Purposes (EPP) focuses on equipping learners with the communication skills necessary for professional environments. From elementary to tertiary level education usually learners are taught English for their academic needs, whereas in tertiary level education EPP course is though directly offered in many institutions, but at other levels of education partly serves this purpose. In Bangladesh, EFL learners struggle a lot to use these two domains of English for respective purposes, where the importance of conducting this study.

Professional writing is a genre of writing where individuals produce texts to meet specific professional needs in workplace contexts. English for Professional Purposes (EPP) is a specialized course which is usually offered in different universities in Bangladesh to assist learners to grow professionally before transitioning in their workplace. In professional writing usually colleagues, concerned authorities transfer their message on various modes of communication like letters, applications, notices, emails etc. where particular professional standards must be incorporated to make them more acceptable and formal. It emphasizes on clarity, conciseness, practicality based on the needs of specific organization. Different professional writing like memorandum, cover letter, business letters, job application letter, email etc. are issued in different institutions for various needs that adhere to institutional goals. As learners have been writing in an academic context for academic purposes, they struggle a lot to transfer their academic English to professional English, though both carry similarities. Here, learners who undertook the course English for Professionals in their undergraduate they write for academic purposes, but their writing is completely professional.

Evans & St. John, (1998) in their model have specified the two major categories of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (ECP). English for Professional Purposes (EPP) covers English for Medical Purposes, English for Business Purposes which fall under

the ECP. In most tertiary institutions in Bangladesh, English for Professional Purpose and English for Professional share the same goals and contents.

The significance of the study lies in EFL learner's adaptation from academic writing skills to the professional standards. By examining their performance in professional writing and role play simulations, the researcher provides insights into how instructions and guided feedback can help learners to equip the necessary professional communication skills. Most stakeholders agreed that graduates who are entering the workforce are found underprepared for the writing demands in their own professions (Knoch et al., 2016). Knoch et al. (2015) in their research paper investigated the reasons why undergraduate students cannot improve their writing after undertaking their degree and found that students received very little feedback on the language aspects of their assignments from lecturers who generally focused on the subject content when marking.

It has evaluated how effectively learners can integrate professional writing conventions into their assigned tasks through the completion of this EPP course. Moreover, it has examined whether learners can apply those professional skills to their oral simulation task or not. It has analyzed the role of guided instructions and feedback in shaping students' formal behavior and written communication. Furthermore, it has explored learners' perceptions on the effectiveness of the EPP instructions in preparing them for real-life professional communication.

Though previous studies focused on instructor's perspective on ESP or on curriculum implementation very few have directly examined how EFL learners integrate professional conventions in their oral and written performance through a structured EPP course. This adds a new perspective on holistic understanding of EPP's instructions in preparing learners for workplace communication.

### ***Research Questions***

1. To what extent do EFL learners incorporate professional writing conventions into their written and oral tasks through the instruction and activities provided in the EPP course?
2. What are the learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of the EPP instruction in preparing them for professional communication?

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is grounded in the theoretical foundation of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), where knowledge is constructed through scaffolding with the help of peers, teachers, and instructors within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Here in this study, learners refine their writing, such as a complaint letter, memorandum, and job application letter, through the instructor's guidance and feedback, which helped them develop professionally. Vygotsky argued that learning can occur effectively by engaging learners in real-life assignments and simulation tasks like oral performance if a real-life context is created. In Bangladesh, undergraduate learners who have prior experience in academic writing have very limited access to professional writing. By providing targeted instructions, feedback, and modeling, instructors acted as more knowledgeable others (MKO), which assisted learners to internalize more professional norms and gradually scaffolded them to perform tasks more autonomously. Scaffolding served as a key instructional strategy that facilitated learners' development both in written and oral tasks.

### *Effectiveness of EPP instruction in Developing Professional Writing*

Different researches on EPP have investigated the effectiveness of the guidance on developing their workforce excellence by incorporating professional norms and etiquette. Several studies have highlighted the importance of integrating role-playing, such as simulated interviews, which improves learners' exposure to professional communication in English in real-life contexts. Moreover, it develops communicative competence, which enables learners to communicate both verbally and non-verbally. Interviewing, which is one of the vital simulated role-playing activities, allows students to speak confidently and to express themselves freely in English. Teachers always need to provide feedback with appropriate corrections by taking notes to show them once the activity is done without embarrassing the student who made the mistake (Cisneros Gallardo & Reino Huaraca, 2022).

### *Relevant Studies*

Herida & Enriquez (2020) conducted a study on the senior high school students' perceptions of English for Academic and Professional Purposes but did not focus on university-level EFL learners' application to writing or oral performance. Rahman (2022) provided an overview of the current condition

of ESP in Bangladesh, but it was neither evaluative nor learner-focused. In the subsequent year, another researcher, Younus (2023), investigated the challenges and prospects of professional development for English language teachers at the tertiary level in Bangladesh but did not emphasize students' performance or the course impact. Abbot, Lee, and Rossiter (2018), in their research paper, evaluated the effectiveness of professional learning communities in adult ESL programs but did not evaluate EPP or undergraduate EFL learners in Bangladesh. Tawalbeh in 2015 examined how instructors perceive their professional development programs but did not examine learners' outcomes. While Bangladeshi researcher Hamid (2007) conducted a study on Bangladeshi English teachers' perceptions of their professional practice, it did not address how students apply professional norms in oral or written tasks, which are central to the current study.

Several studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of ESP instructions on various levels of students, but very few have focused on EPP. Moreover, limited research has investigated how Bangladeshi EFL undergraduates incorporate their professional learning norms into their real-world context. Besides, several studies explored writing tasks, but few have examined learners' applicability of their professional learning conventions to their oral performance. Additionally, limited research has been conducted on the role of guided instruction and feedback in shaping students' professional behavior and learning, which addresses the research gap of this study. Ayon (2013) conducted a study on the effectiveness of two advanced ESP courses at a private Lebanese English-speaking university to determine whether their acquisition of essential skills through collaborative learning efforts could prepare them for the required workplace or not.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluate whether EFL learners could effectively incorporate guided English for Professionals conventions into assigned professional writing or not. Both analytical and observational methods were taken into consideration for in-depth data collection and analysis. Primary data were collected from assigned written tasks on professional topics like complaint letters, memoranda, and job

applications in academic settings. Moreover, guided observation with some specific criteria was conducted directed to observe an assigned professional genre like interviewing, whether they are able to exhibit appropriate professional standards like greeting, gesture, posture, small talk, clarity, coherence, questioning, answering, maintaining professional tone, etc. A rubric was circulated ahead of interviewing, where they received sufficient instructions and guidance for focusing on specific norms. During this role-playing, learners alternated their roles of interviewee and interviewer, and the observer here was not a passive recipient but actively observed and documented their performances based on the evaluation rubric and criteria.

### ***Participants***

In this focused group research 54 EFL learners attended their English for Professional course in two consecutive semesters. All the participants here shared common needs to learn professional English for their future career pursuit alongside academic English and their English proficiency ranged from intermediate to higher intermediate, which was determined by the instructors by their previous academic records and performances. For completing the course effectively, learners here demonstrated their highest enthusiasm and participation. The instructor at the beginning of the course investigated their needs in learning professional writing and equipping them with professional behavior. All the enrolled learners voluntarily performed their structured writing assigned task as a part of their course progress alongside the oral performance, which simulates their job preparation. To receive a comprehensive understanding of their progress in their job interview a rubric-based assessment tool was given to them in advance to focus more on these professional norms. Participants were not informed ahead whether their writing tasks and simulation performance would be considered for research purposes, considering all ethical guidelines, but in the survey they were informed in advance.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data collected for this study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively to assess the effectiveness of EPP instruction to adapt from academic to professional one. Data were accumulated on three areas: learners' assigned tasks, oral performance, and their perception through a survey questionnaire.

**1. Quantitative Analysis on Written Assignments:** Three writing genres were assessed to measure whether learners could effectively apply appropriate

formal vocabulary retaining formal and polite tone with sufficient clarifications after receiving constructive feedback from their previous writings on the same genres. The scores were extracted from cover letter writing, complaint letter writing and memorandum writing for which they had received explicit instructions and feedback before taking their mid-term examinations.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

This section highlights the findings of the study in relation to its research goals. It highlights whether EFL learners are able to effectively incorporate professional writing norms into their written and oral tasks after completing the English for Professional Purposes (EPP) course. In addition, it explores how well learners could prepare themselves effectively during the EPP courses for real-world professional communication. Data were collected through mid-term written scripts, guided classroom observations of oral performances, mock interviews, and a reflection-based perception survey. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were combined to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' progress.

The discussion has been organized thematically on 3 key areas: (1) performance in written assignments (2) application of professional standards in oral communication tasks and (3) learners' perceptions of the EPP instruction during the course. Each section has critically examined the results in light of the theoretical framework and previous studies highlighting both achievements and areas for improvement.

#### 1. Performance in the Written Assignment

##### 1.1 Scores on Writing Performances:

Genre	Total Marks 20	Excellent (85–100%)	Adequate (50–84%)	Poor (Below 50%)
Cover Letter	8	6-8	4-5	0-3
Complaint Letter	8	6-8	4-5	0-3
Memorandum	4	3-4	2-3	0-1

Table 1: Rubric on their performance

## 1.2 Learner's Performances:

Genre	Assessment Criteria	Excellent	Adequate	Poor
Cover Letter	Appropriate formal vocabulary, Formal tone, Vocabulary, Clarity, Politeness	87.5% (24)	5.09% (1)	7.41% (2)
Complaint Letter	Appropriate formal vocabulary, Formal tone, coherence, Clarity, Politeness, Professional	62.96% (17)	29.63% (8)	7.41% (2)
Memorandum	Appropriate formal vocabulary, Formal tone, Clarity, Politeness, organization, brevity	51.85% (14)	40.47% (11)	7.68% (2)

**Table 2:** Learner's performances based on the rubric

## 1.3 Interpretation of Written Assignments:

To assess written assignments, 27 mid-term scripts were thoroughly analyzed. The exam carried 20 marks, requiring learners to produce three genres of professional writing tasks: cover letter (8 marks), complaint letter (8 marks) and memorandum (4 marks).

In the cover letter, among 27 participants, 24 successfully integrated professional norms such as appropriate formal vocabulary and formal tone with clarifications, which illustrates the highest success rate (87.5%) as "Excellent." The results demonstrated that through getting explicit instructions and guidance on cover letters, they effectively internalized and applied professional standards in the cover letter genre. This result aligns with the findings of Anson and Forsberg (1990), who found that, through sufficient scaffolding and real-world examples, learners can effectively transfer their knowledge from academic to professional contexts. This high success in cover letters illustrates that if learners receive guidance and formative feedback, they are able to succeed in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Moreover, it indicates that as the instructor acted as more knowledgeable other (MKO) by breaking down the genre's conventions and reducing support gradually, that could make them autonomous as well.

In complaint letter writing, learners were guided and provided with constructive feedback during their class activities. When their performance on the same genre was later assessed, whether they could fully apply all the instructions and integrate all the standards, 17 (62.96%) participants among 27 were found to be receiving an “excellent” rating. It demonstrates that the majority could effectively integrate taught professional norms, such as appropriate formal vocabulary, while retaining a formal, polite, and professional tone when making a complaint. However, 8 participants (29.63%) demonstrated partial adherence to the conventions, which suggests more practice and reinforcement to integrate all of these criteria properly. The variation of the result suggests that though scaffolding helped learners, some still required mediated practice to completely integrate professional norms. Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD explains that in the potential development stage, learners require more time and assistance until meeting the genre’s requirements.

In memorandum writing, learners were expected to demonstrate appropriate formal vocabulary with a formal and polite tone through clarification and proper organization. Despite receiving adequate guidance and feedback, only 14 participants (51.85%) among 27 received an excellent rating, indicating that only this group could meet the expectation set for the task. Nearly half of the participants (11) fell into the “adequate” category, indicating partial mastery over the professional conventions and possibly struggling with precision, form, and clarity. The remaining (2) participants (7.41%) were rated as “poor,” which indicates they were not able to grasp the functional purposes and formal features required in their memorandum writing. The result suggests that learners may find the genre of memorandum writing more challenging for its distinct features, precision, and some more stylistic features in comparison to other common academic genres. It further suggests that learners may require additional guidance and scaffolding to achieve full command of memorandum writing. Bhatia and Bremner (2014) argued that because of implicit rhetorical rules, institutional genres like the memorandum often are challenging to novice writers. This result reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) idea that learners improve from assisted to independent activity at different rates based on the complexity of the task. Therefore, they require extended scaffolding in less familiar rhetoric genres, which aligns with Vygotsky’s idea.

## ***2. Qualitative Analysis of Role-Playing Activity (Interview Simulation)***

Students participated in this simulation task as interviewers and interviewees, which was documented based on the criteria of the given rubric.

In this session, participants were observed based on the rubric and were given constructive feedback on their performance. The rubric was shared with learners in advance to guide their preparation. The task carried 10 marks for each individual. A total of 26 participants took part in this task by forming 13 pairs for the activity.

### 2.1 Professional Interviewing Role-Play Rubric: (10 Marks)

Criteria	Description	Marks
1. Professionalism and Preparedness	Demonstrates professionalism by being well-prepared (attire, knowledge of company/job role, punctuality),	2 marks
2. Body Language, Posture, and Interview Etiquette	Maintains positive body language (e.g., eye contact, posture, gestures) and shows engagement.	2 marks
3. Response Structure and Clarity	Providing well-structured questions and clear responses	4 marks
4. Communication Skills, Professional Tone & Language	Communicates clearly and effectively, uses appropriate vocabulary and tone. Active listening and clear, direct response. Uses a polite, respectful, and formal tone throughout the interview. Avoiding slang or informal language.	2 marks

### 2.2 Role-Playing Performance Evaluation:

Marks Range	Score Explanation	Performance Level	Percentage
9-10 marks	Outstanding performance by demonstrating high professionalism, effective communication, adhering to professional norms in both the interviewee's and interviewer's role.	Outstanding performance	(34.6%) 9
7-8 marks	Good performance with minor issues in communication or professionalism.	Good performance	(53.8%) 14
5-6 marks	Adequate performance but several areas need to be improved (lack of preparation, unclear responses or poor etiquette).	Adequate performance	(11.5%) 3

3-4 marks	Needs significant improvement in several areas (lacks structure, poor body language)	Needs significant improvement	0%
0-2 marks	Unsatisfactory performance with major issues in professionalism, communication or interview etiquette.	unsatisfactory	0%

### 2.3 Interpretation of Role-Playing Performance:

The table shows that 34.6% of students (9 out of 26) demonstrated outstanding professionalism, which indicates that they are capable of adhering to professional norms both as interviewers and as interviewees. Moreover, it indicates that a significant portion of students could follow the instructions provided to them before taking part in the simulation task. In addition, 53.8% (14 students) performed well, indicating that they need to improve their professional communication by addressing minor issues, but they were observed as good communicators and professionals.

Furthermore, this table also demonstrates that 11.5% (3 students) met basic expectations but demonstrated multiple areas for improvement, which requires better preparation and adherence to the instructions along with clear and well-structured responses. The result demonstrates that though learners received sufficient instructions, some learners embraced challenges on fluency and confidence, which aligns with the findings of Gallardo and Huaraca (2022). In their study they found that in real communication learners suffer from anxiety and fear of making mistakes in their performance.

The results suggest that the majority are within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as they performed well and are capable of further progress with additional scaffolding. The presence of anxiety and fear supports Vygotsky's (1978) claim that it requires social interaction and repeated engagement in authentic situations for internalizing communicative behaviors.

### 3. *Survey Analysis: Learners' Perceptions of the EPP Course*

#### Section 1: Background Information

In the first section of the survey, 72.2% of students recognized that they had no experience in professional writing, whereas 27.8% had some prior experience which suggests that the majority of students required undertaking their EPP course for founding their basics in professionalism. In line with this, (44.4%) identified them as having an intermediate, (33.3%) as upper-intermediate and 22.2% reported themselves at an advanced level in English proficiency which also indicates that they require more improvement to achieve overall proficiency in English.

## **Section 2: Effectiveness of the EPP Course in Applying Real-Life Contexts**

In the second section, when students were asked about whether they could differentiate between academic and professional writing a significant majority (94.5%) agreed which indicates their clear understanding of the learning objectives. To comply with the inquiry whether different writing genres like memoranda, complaint letters, cover letters, CVs, press releases, meeting minutes, and invitation letter are very useful in developing their professional writing skills, nearly all participants (88.9%) perceived them as effective and relevant, which demonstrates that students had a strong willingness to develop various writing genres. Moreover, all the participants (100%) expressed their ultimate confidence in applying the professional standards in real-life context which they have gained throughout the course which suggests the effectiveness of the course in establishing professional norms and etiquette. Furthermore, overwhelmingly 88.9% of the respondents believed the EPP instructions would be highly relevant for their future careers which imply its real-world applicability and utility.

In addition, 94.4% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the instructions during the course made them feel more confident in handling workplace communication, showing the course's success in bridging academic knowledge with practical needs. The survey responses highlighted positive perceptions regarding the course's effectiveness as majority opined that the course provided them with professional essentials to improve their workplace communication skill. However, a significant participant acknowledged that maintaining professional tone with appropriate vocabulary and clarity with proper synchronization is challenging to them when they write or communicate. It indicates that more efforts and dedication should be invested with some additional assistance and practices.

## **Impact of Guided Instruction and Feedback**

Regarding feedback, 100% of students agreed that constructive feedback helped them receive proper guidance, which highlights the significance of feedback in skill development. In addition, whenever they were asked about types of feedback which were effective to them, 50% preferred the instructor's written feedback, 22.2% preferred one-on-one discussions which suggests that written feedback is more effective in developing writing. The study demonstrates that guided instructions and feedback develop professional language as constructive feedback helped them to know about the error, correct the errors, to act in a professional setting. Learners who receive explicit guidance and instructions can demonstrate greater improvement than those who solely depend on self-assessment.

### **Learners' Perception of their Role-Playing Task**

When asked whether the rubric-based role-playing task helped them to structure their oral simulation task, 94.4% replied that it helped them to understand key aspects of a professional interview. In the rubric-based role-playing task, learners alternated their roles as an interviewee and interviewer, which provided them the opportunity to apply professional rules and etiquette in real-life contexts. Several key aspects, such as preparedness, greetings, body language, eye contact, clarity, professional tone, etc., were marked separately in a major category by a rubric. The survey results indicate that, though students at the beginning struggled to maintain fluency and confidence, continuous feedback led to notable improvements. This result aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, which highlights that learning occurs through social interaction and support in the ZPD. The role of scaffolding in this interview also supports the idea of Vygotsky.

### **Section 3: Interview Role-Play Evaluation**

In preparing the simulation task, the majority of participants agreed that it helped them to be prepared for real-life communication, most specifically in asking and responding to job-related questions (33.3%) and gaining confidence in speaking English professionally (27.8%), which indicates that this kind of authentic communication helps learners not only to grow professionally but also to boost their interpersonal communication skills. This result implies the effectiveness of the EPP instructions during the course to prepare individuals ahead of professional entrance.

Noticeably, 94.4% reported that the rubric-based evaluation helped them clearly understand the essential criteria of a professional interview. It signifies the importance of structured assessment tools in enhancing learning

outcomes. However, 50% of the respondents agreed that still managing nerves and speaking fluently was the most challenging part for them. It indicates that though huge preparation helps them to be prepared, real performance anxiety still impacts their performance. These results suggest that though preparation and practice are helpful still until reaching a real-life professional setting, complete removal of psychological issues would be challenging.

In addition, when the participants were asked about additional speaking-based skills to include in future versions of the course, the highest number of students (44.4%) suggested extending networking and professional relationship building, followed by negotiation, public speaking, and leading meetings in the instructions. It suggests that students are aware of the broader spectrum of professional communication to expand their skills. Unlike many other studies, this study emphasized a holistic view of how Bangladeshi learners adapt with professionalism both in writing and oral performance.

This study not only supports Herida and Enriquez's (2020) findings that EPP instruction improved learners' awareness of professional writing conventions but also echoes Knoch et al.'s (2015) argument that tertiary-level learners often do not receive sufficient feedback on linguistic and stylistic aspects of writing, which limits their development in professional genres.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

This study provides valuable insights on the importance of undertaking EPP instructions during the course for undergraduate students at any institution to shape students' future performance towards their professional life. The results indicate that to improve students' professional communication skills, EPP guidance is highly effective. Students felt that the course effectively boosted their communication skills; besides, the instructors' observation on their oral performance through guidance made them more prepared and confident for their real-life communication. The findings of this study will assist future teachers in implementing appropriate strategies in the classroom to teach EPP courses by finding the difficulties that learners embrace while transitioning. Educators can also apply effective teaching methods, refine their strategies, and redesign their coursework, which will help them to prepare better professionals. Moreover, this empirical study will provide necessary guidelines for the curriculum developer and policymaker to adopt necessary adjustments in course contents, assessment strategies, and instructional approaches to make teaching-learning more effective.

Furthermore, many employers express their concern about the graduate's lack of professional communication, which can be bridged by the appropriate guidance in teaching and constructive feedback, both in their written and oral performance, to meet the workplace's requirements.

This study had some limitations, including the lack of broader participants from EFL learners, for which this finding may not be generalized to all EFL contexts. In addition, there was no follow-up assessment of whether, after the completion of the course, students could retain their knowledge or apply it in their employment or internship program. Moreover, this study only examined a few professional genres; it did not assess other professional writings like email writing, meeting minutes, reports, or other documents, which might narrow the scope of professional communication. Overall, this study highlights the relevance, practicality, and effectiveness of EPP course building academic knowledge and professional demands.

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