English for Teacher Trainees: Increasing Motivation and Preparedness Through an ESP Workshop Design

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Received: October 24, 2025 Accepted: December 11, 2025 Online Published: December 27, 2025

doi:10.5430/jct.v15n1p1 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v15n1p1

Abstract

Many pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teachers struggle with motivation and self-efficacy due to a lack of alignment between the English instruction they have received as learners and the specific linguistic and pedagogical demands of teaching EFL and CLIL. To address this, an Action Research (AR) project was conducted to redesign the English for Education II course at a Spanish university, shifting it from a General English to an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach with a workshop-centered methodology. Over four years, iterative cycles of planning, intervention, and evaluation guided the development of targeted workshops and reflective journal writing. Data from student surveys, focus groups, and instructor interviews indicate increased motivation, stronger perceived utility, and greater preparedness for pedagogical coursework and teaching practice. Findings highlight the benefits of ESP-based instruction for pre-service teachers and the role of collaborative AR in higher education curriculum innovation. This study underscores the need for English-for-Teaching courses in initial teacher education to bridge the gap between general language proficiency and professional language needs.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), pre-service teacher education, initial teacher education, action research, English language teachers

1. Introduction

This study seeks to contribute to the largely unexplored field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Education, or English-for-Teaching (Freeman, 2017), by identifying factors that support, or impede, the successful implementation of such an ESP approach with a mixed language ability student population. English language proficiency has long been considered one of the most important factors to successful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teaching (Pérez-Cañado, 2018), and focus has traditionally been given to improving General English in initial teacher education (ITE) (Graves, 2009). In general, teacher trainees are motivated to improve their English, yet this motivation is greatly affected by the L2 learning experience and classroom environment (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018). At the same time, experts have also stressed the importance of specific English needs for future teachers (Freeman, 2017), and trainees in different contexts have complained that their degrees do not effectively prepare them for the classroom (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). In this context, our proposal focuses on the implementation of an ESP course as part of the EFL specialist track within ITE, in an effort to further motivate trainees and contribute to their teacher self-efficacy through the specific aims and utility of the course.

The secondary aim of this paper is to describe a case of Action Research (AR) that led to the design, implementation, and systematic assessment of an innovative ESP course aimed at future pre-primary and primary teachers. In what follows, the authors describe and analyze a case of collaborative action research in which a team of English language instructors and teacher trainers worked together for a period of five years, in a cyclical process of planning, intervention, observation and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) aimed at improving their own practice and better addressing student needs. We hope to show that AR can provide an effective strategy to help bridge the gap between the needs of EFL and CLIL teacher trainees and the current provision of English improvement courses in

their ITE, especially in contexts in which proficiency in the English language cannot be taken for granted. While AR has been used profusely to improve both EFL course design (see, for example, Edwards' 2020 review), and the ITE of English teachers (e.g., Banegas & Consoli, 2020), we believe that this is the first study that addresses the role of ESP in addressing the specific needs of prospective EFL and CLIL teachers in Spain. Moreover, the results of this study are not only relevant locally, but can be extrapolated to most global regions in which teachers do not possess native-like language competence and where EFL and CLIL classes are compulsory and/or prevalent (see Richards, 2017).

2. Literature Review

This study addresses the effectiveness of foreign language instruction in preparing teachers who will teach EFL at the pre-primary or primary stage and their resulting motivation and self-efficacy. Therefore, context is provided on the importance of language proficiency for EFL and CLIL teacher trainees, as seen in recent studies, especially within the context of Spain and Europe. Then, motivation in language learning is defined in order to create a framework through which to discuss possible changes in the trainees' perceptions.

2.1 Language Proficiency in Initial Teacher Education

Experts and teachers agree on language proficiency as one of the most important factors that prepares non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) for their positions as English or CLIL instructors in primary education (Richards, 2017; Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). The teachers' level of English is considered important for several reasons. Firstly, it significantly affects their ability to conduct a class taught in English, especially when teaching EFL in a communicative paradigm (Freeman, 2017), or in cases of CLIL (Pérez-Cañado, 2018). Moreover, as reported by numerous studies (e.g., Faez et al., 2019; Morton, 2016), high competence in the language of instruction positively affects EFL and CLIL teacher efficacy, defined as "teacher's individual beliefs in their capabilities to perform specific teaching tasks at a specified level of quality in a specified situation" (Dellinger et al., 2008, p. 752). Finally, it will contribute to shaping the instructor's identity as a language or CLIL teacher (Pennington & Richards, 2016), and their engagement with the English Language Teaching (ELT) community (Young et al., 2014), both of which can be negatively affected by the traditional native/non-native English teacher dichotomy (Selvi et al., 2023). For all these reasons, it comes as no surprise that English language improvement courses are included in the ITE of teachers, especially in countries, such as Spain, where the average level of English of students entering higher education is lower than in most European countries (English First, 2024).

As to the content and design of such language improvement courses, research over the years has identified a bias toward teaching General English (GE) (Graves, 2009), a trend that persists in European higher education where ESP provision has declined in the wake of the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) (Costa & Mastellotto, 2022). However, there is an increasing number of voices arguing for the inclusion of a stronger ESP component in the ITE of EFL and CLIL teachers (Pérez-Cañado, 2018; Richards, 2017). Indeed, ESP, defined as focusing on "the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English" (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013, p. 2) can be critical in providing NNESTs – especially those with a modest level of English competence – with the tools they need to teach English and other subjects through English (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). This is because an ESP approach can contribute to developing the specific discourse skills used in the mode of instruction in specific areas such as classroom management, communicating lesson content, and assessing students (Freeman, 2017).

In Spain, the context of this study, following the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the redesigned generalist teacher training degrees dedicate fewer English improvement and pedagogy credits as part of their EFL specialist tracks (*menciones*) than the pre-EHEA specialist degrees (De la Maya Retamar & Luengo González, 2015). At the same time, Spain has been described as one of the most hectic contexts in terms of CLIL and bilingual program implementation (Durán-Martínez & Fernández-Costales, 2025). In this context, research has shown that teacher trainees feel that the current degrees do not provide the necessary training for them to teach English, or in English, effectively (Cortina-Pérez & Pino Rodríguez, 2021; García-Manzanares et al., 2025). In particular, they demand more language improvement, with an emphasis on communicative practice (Martínez-Agudo, 2017), language related to their profession (Fernández-Viciana & Fernández-Costales, 2017), classroom management skills (Martínez-Agudo, 2017), and a clearer understanding of how to integrate language and content in bilingual instruction (Zayas Martínez et al., 2024). Regarding the design of language improvement courses, an ESP approach is conspicuously absent (Torres-Zúñiga & Carrasco Flores, 2020).

2.2 Motivation in Language Learning

Although it is clear that proficiency in the foreign language is essential, teacher trainees will also need to be motivated in order to efficiently improve the necessary language skills. One of the most common frameworks for language learning motivation is the L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2009), which is made up of three constructs: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and language learning experience. The ideal L2 self refers to the learner's vision of what they would like to ideally achieve as a language user. The ought-to L2 self is what the learner considers to be expected of him by important others or external influence. Finally, the language learning experience describes the environment of the classroom or situation in which the person is actively learning a language.

The ideal L2 self has been related to higher effort investment (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Brady, 2019), and higher ultimate proficiency (Dunn & Iwaniec, 2021), except when this vision takes on dreamlike qualities (Lamb, 2013). This first construct has also been linked to the idea of self-concept (Iwaniec, 2014), a perception of oneself and one's ability in a given domain (Shavelson et al., 1976). Mercer (2011a) looked at self-concept in relation to language learning, and found that language self-concept can fluctuate over time, but tends to be relatively stable. The ought-to L2 self seems to have more effect on learners in more collectivist cultures, but less so in others, suggesting an overall lesser influence on student achievement in the Spanish context (Dunn & Iwaniec, 2021). There is no clear picture of how the L2 learning experience affects motivation due to its dependence on spatial and temporal boundaries and a lack of definition of the characteristic traits of the L2 learning experience (Österberg et al., 2022). However, in a study specific to pre-service teachers in the context of Spain, the L2 learning experience and ideal L2 self were found to have substantial influence on learners' motivation toward English as a foreign language, while the ought-to L2 self was found to be the least influential variable (Amengual-Pizarro, 2018).

3. Methodology

The main question that drove this research is how to best prepare students as future EFL and CLIL teachers within our specific context while also motivating and empowering them with a useful English language course. The study was framed as action research, guided by a series of research questions, and implemented a multi-informant, mixed-methods approach, details of which are described below.

3.1 Research Context

The action research described in this paper took place in a medium-sized university in Madrid, Spain, which offers teacher training degrees leading to qualifications to teach in pre-primary (ages 3-6) and primary (ages 6-12) education. Moreover, all teacher trainees must complete the specialist track (*mención*) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, which prepares them to teach English in the corresponding education stage.

While students enter the university setting with a wide range of linguistic ability (A2-C1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference), the aim is to develop their level to B2 or higher so that they may certify the level and be able to teach English and/or CLIL in schools. All students take a number of courses in English, including English language improvement and EFL and CLIL pedagogy. A summary of these courses can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the Courses in English within the Education Degrees at This University

Year	Semester	ECTS	Course
1	annual	12	English for Education I
2	annual	6	English for Education II
3	2	6	Teaching English as a Foreign Language I
4	1	6	Teaching English as a Foreign Language II
4	2	5	Content and Language Integrated Learning

Following a restructuring of the specialist track coordination team, the department sought to evaluate students' perception of the effectiveness of the courses taught. To do so, surveys and focus groups were conducted in the Spring of 2019 with a total of 15 fourth-year students who had already completed all the courses of the specialist track. The results suggested that, while participants valued the inclusion of a language improvement component, their motivation in those courses was significantly lower than when studying TEFL and CLIL in years 3 and 4. In

particular, they perceived it (negatively) as a continuation of high school English classes, with a perceived focus on grammar and "following a textbook". When asked for suggestions of improvement, most of them proposed incorporating more educational topics and, in some ways, "anticipating" some of the specialized language skills required in the TEFL courses, such as classroom management or storytelling. The results of this study were presented at a conference, and subsequently published (López-Hernández & Buckingham, 2021).

3.2 Initial Cycles of Action Research

In the following four years, a team of instructors would embark on the cyclical process of planning, intervention, observation, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) in an attempt to improve the language courses of the EFL specialist track. The needs analysis described above (López-Hernández & Buckingham, 2021) was the first step of exploration and fact-finding (Burns, 2010), and led to the next step, in which they brainstormed possible responses to the following overarching question: How can the EFL specialist track be improved, by including an ESP component that will raise student motivation and help prepare trainees for the demands of the language pedagogy courses and their teaching internships?

The intervention stage involved a re-design of the second-year course, English for Education II. After some deliberation, the team proposed a flexible "workshop-centered" approach that would be combined with a series of journal writing tasks centered on reflecting on students' teaching experience. Within the intervention stage, the application was iterative, as reflected in Burns' cyclical AR model (2010), applying the new design to the groups with a higher level of English and gradually introducing the approach in other levels through a trickle-down effect.

The observation stage occurred in a cyclical way together with the intervention stage, as the teacher-researchers applied simple surveys to ask students' opinions of the redesigned course at the end of each academic year (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). Students were asked to rate each workshop and the journal writing project on a Likert scale, whether they would have preferred a textbook over the workshop format, and to identify what they most and least liked about the course.

In the reflection stage, there was joint reflection among teacher-researchers at yearly summer meetings during which survey results and instructors' impressions of the new approach were shared. Given that the individual results were generally positive, each year additional instructors applied the workshop approach to their student groups to varying degrees (see Table 2 for details.) Implementation was not always uniform as it also depended on instructors' individual preferences. In this stage, input from the instructors of the third- and fourth- year pedagogy courses led to the implementation of three core workshops (Classroom English, Storytelling and Metalanguage I), as well as journal writing (with a goal of a minimum of three entries), with each group. In 2021, an additional core workshop was agreed upon (Writing for B levels / Advanced sentence structure for C levels).

Table 2. Application of Workshop Approach by Student Group

	2019-2020			2020-2021			2021-2022			2022-2023		
Student group	works hops	Journal writing (# entries)	text-book	works hops	Journal writing (# entries)	text-book	works hops	Journal writing (# entries)	text-book	works hops	Journal writing (# entries)	text-book
B1.1	2	no	yes	2	4	yes	5	yes*	yes	8	4	yes
B1.2	1	3	yes	1	3	yes	5	yes*	yes	8	4	no
B2.1	5**	2**	yes**	no	no	yes	11	4	no	11**	4**	no**
B2.2				11	4	no	7	yes*	no			
C1.1	7	4	no	8	2	no	7	1	no	13***	5***	no***
C1.1										13***	5***	no***
C1.2	9	5	no	9	4	no	11	5	no	12	5	no

*Some data is incomplete regarding the exact numbers of journal entries completed.

**There was only one B2 group in 2019-2020, 2022-2023 due to varying numbers of students.

***There were two C1.1 groups in 2022-2023 due to varying numbers of students.

In summary, the initial stages of our AR project were consistent with the main features of AR, as outlined by Burns (2010). What began as a small-scale, local experience of teacher-researchers seeking to improve their own practice, grew to incorporate the participation of the whole team of instructors of the course. The team reflection was fed by data collected systematically, as well as by the academic input provided by the teacher-researchers. From early stages, the project also involved a reporting stage whereby the findings of the research were "socialized" with other researchers and practitioners (Banegas & Consoli, 2020), chiefly in the form of conference presentations.

3.3 Research Questions

After four years of gradual implementation of the new course design, now reaching all groups, the teacher-researchers decided to conduct a systematic assessment of the effectiveness of the redesigned course, as perceived by both students and instructors. This paper focuses on reporting the results of this last cycle of research, as a culmination of the AR project.

In this last cycle of the AR, the research questions were the following:

RQ1: Is the redesigned EFE2 course affecting motivation and self-efficacy (as teachers) among trainees?

RQ2: Do they see the course as useful within their training and in their future as EFL teachers?

RQ3: What are the main factors that contribute to, or impede, its effectiveness?

3.4 Research Tools

To answer the above questions, the teacher-researchers implemented a multi-informant, mixed-methods approach. Students in all groups were asked to complete a common questionnaire at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, which was based on the original surveys that some student groups had completed in previous years. The survey was piloted with two groups in 2020 and presented to other instructors and groups gradually each year, incorporating slight modifications, mainly in the specific workshops done with each group. A total of 56 students (of 96 students that took the course) completed the survey (n=56) (see Table 3 for details).

Table 3. Number of Students Who Completed the Survey

Student group	2020	2021	2022	2023
B1.2				12
B2.1			10	15*
B2.2		6	1	
C1.1a	14*	2*		15
C1.1b				9
C1.2	11	11	11	5

*There was only one level group due to varying numbers of students.

In order to inquire further into students' opinions, focus groups were conducted with students who had experienced the workshop design in the past two years. One group was conducted with students that had just completed the course, after having been evaluated and final marks posted. Two other groups were held with students who had taken the EFE2 course during the previous academic year, and who had gone on to take the first EFL methodology course in their third year of study, to judge the utility of the innovation.

3.5 Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, since the teacher-researchers sought to include representatives of different English-level groups, asking volunteers to invite their friends. See Table 4 for the characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups, including the degree they were studying, and the academic year and their student group in which they took EFE2.

Table 4. Characteristics of the Students Who Took Part in Focus Groups

Focus group	Participant code	Degree	Year in EFE2	Student group in EFE2
FG1	S3A	Pre-primary Education	2021-2022	C1.1
FG1	S3B	Pre-primary Education	2021-2022	C1.2
FG2	S3C	Primary Education	2021-2022	B2
FG2	S3D	Primary Education	2021-2022	B1.2
FG2	S3E	Primary Education	2021-2022	B2
FG2	S3F	Primary Education	2021-2022	C1.2
FG3	S2A	Primary Education	2022-2023	B2
FG3	S2B	Primary Education	2022-2023	C1.2
FG3	S2C	Pre-primary Education	2022-2023	C1.2
FG3	S2D	Primary Education	2022-2023	C1.1b
FG3	S2E	Primary Education	2022-2023	C1.2
FG3	S2F	Primary Education	2022-2023	B1.1

Interview questions focused on students' own interest and motivation in the course, perceptions of the utility of the course for their future courses and as future teachers, their preferences regarding course design and materials, and their suggestions for the future.

Finally, four instructors were interviewed about their observations of their students' level of engagement and their own opinions of the new design. The interview questions focused on instructors' opinions of the approach in general, their planning procedure for the course, materials preparation, collaboration with colleagues, and their suggestions for the future. Instructors were asked to participate through purposive sampling in order to obtain complementary perspectives. See Table 5 for the characteristics of the participating instructors.

Table 5. Characteristics of the Instructors Who Were Interviewed

Participant code	Group taught in 2022-2023	Years teaching EFE2 with workshops	Years teaching EFL pedagogy	Workshop designer	Action researcher in this project
T1	B2	2	0	no	no
T2	B1.2	4	0	yes	no
T3	C1.1b	1	8	no	no
T4	C1.2	4	9	yes	yes

Interviews with both students and instructors were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, which allows for automatic transcription in both Spanish and English. Student interviews were conducted in Spanish to allow them to express their opinions freely, while instructor interviews were held in English or Spanish, according to the language in which the interviewer and interviewee were accustomed to speaking together, to ensure comfort. The automatic transcripts were then downloaded and corrected as necessary by the interviewer, using the audio recording as support, and anonymized using the participant codes reported in Tables 4 and 5.

3.6 Data Analysis

In the survey, participants were asked to rate each workshop using a Likert scale and give their preference of textbook vs. workshops. The workshop ratings were converted to numerical results to facilitate analysis (not at all useful = 1, not very useful = 2, somewhat useful = 3, very useful = 4), and mean scores and standard deviation (SD) were calculated. For the question regarding preference of textbook or workshop approach, percentages were calculated of students who preferred the workshop approach to using a textbook for each student group.

For the qualitative data, open-ended answers from the surveys and transcripts from the interviews were imported to a project using Lumivero's NVivo (12th edition) software to enable analysis. Using a deductive, a priori approach

(Azungah, 2018), the two researchers brainstormed an initial set of codes that were informed by three starting points: the needs analysis (López-Hernández & Buckingham, 2021), the literature review (above), and the initial cycles of research. Then the two researchers compared notes and created the final coding structure which was divided between the student perspective and teacher perspective (see Figure 1).

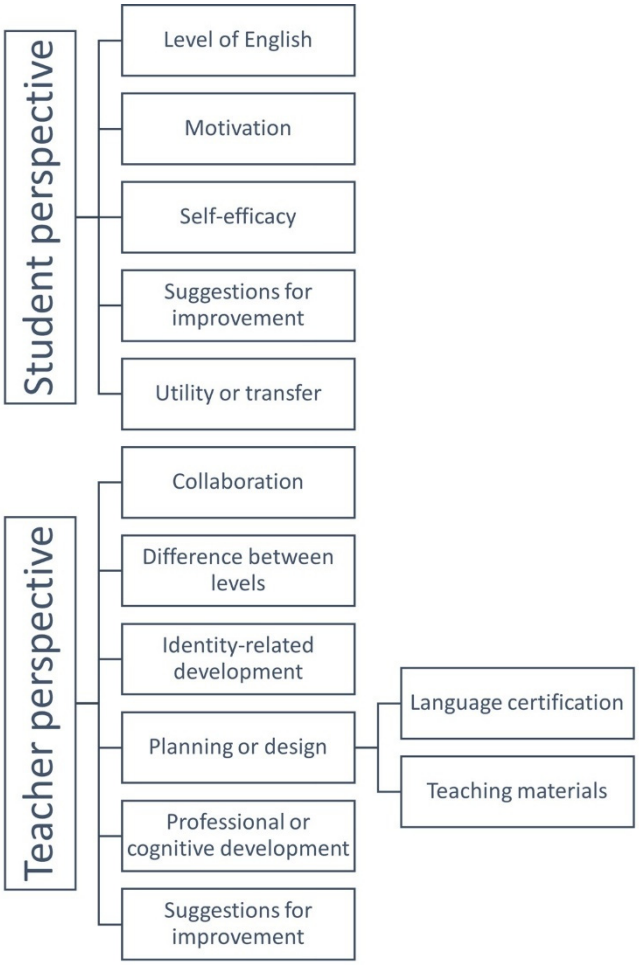

Figure 1. Final Coding Structure

Once the final coding structure was defined, both researchers conducted an initial analysis of one student focus group transcript and one instructor interview transcript. This initial coding was manually compared to ensure mutual understanding of the established coding structure, adjusting as necessary and agreeing upon the finer points of each code. Then the researchers proceeded to code the rest of the transcripts and open-ended answers from the surveys. After all coding was completed, the inter-coder reliability between researchers was calculated with a Cohen Kappa value of 0.6322 (substantial agreement) with an average 94.54% of agreement.

Researchers then read through the coded data and searched for emerging themes to report. Given the focus on improving student experience in the research questions, themes were identified mainly from student focus groups and open-ended answers from surveys. Data from instructor interviews were used to triangulate the results and strengthen the study's validity.

4. Results

Results are reported by first presenting data obtained from the questionnaires, which were mainly quantitative and descriptive. Next, qualitative results from the focus groups are presented, in order to complement and help explain the former.

4.1 Student Assessment of Workshops and Materials

Results related to student assessment of individual workshops and materials are reported below. When open-ended answers are reported, language is slightly adapted to standard English usage to ensure comprehension. Those answers written in Spanish have been translated to English by the researchers.

4.1.1 Assessment of Workshops and Journal Writing

As seen in Table 6, the overall ratings of the workshops are generally positive, all with a rating of more than 3 out of 4, and an overall mean rating of 3.48 (SD=0.76). The core workshops, including the journal writing project, have an overall mean rating of 3.55 (SD=0.71), and the difference between levels is not significant ($p>0.05$ in t-tests for all workshops, as seen in Table 6). The journal writing project has an overall mean rating of 3.47 (SD=0.74) with very similar ratings at all levels.

Table 6. Overall Ratings by Workshop and Student English Level

	Overall rating			Overall B1-B2			Overall C1			*p*
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	
CR English*	3.64	0.65	123	3.69	0.60	45	3.62	0.69	78	0.57
Meta I*	3.48	0.78	107	3.42	0.84	45	3.52	0.74	62	0.51
Stories*	3.56	0.73	106	3.47	0.76	45	3.62	0.71	61	0.30
Sent struc**	3.59	0.65	122	3.55	0.55	44	3.62	0.71	78	0.57
journal*	3.47	0.74	95	3.50	0.69	28	3.46	0.77	67	0.81
Paragraph	3.69	0.54	32	3.56	0.63	16	3.81	0.40	16	0.19
CR tips	3.67	0.57	58	3.66	0.61	44	3.71	0.47	14	0.78
Meta II	3.21	0.91	38	3.25	0.97	12	3.19	0.90	26	0.85
Icebreak	3.63	0.67	67	3.67	0.64	45	3.55	0.74	22	0.50
Comm strat	3.62	0.68	47	3.67	0.49	12	3.60	0.74	35	0.76
Bullying	3.27	1.00	66	3.34	0.97	38	3.18	1.06	28	0.53
Diversity	3.76	0.50	33	3.76	0.50	33			0	
Present	3.55	0.70	44	3.55	0.70	44			0	
Integrated	3.71	0.49	7	3.71	0.49	7			0	
LP	3.76	0.57	45	3.76	0.57	45			0	
Grammar	3.69	0.60	16	3.69	0.60	16			0	
CEFR	3.08	0.91	62			0	3.08	0.91	62	
Culture	3.15	0.85	62			0	3.15	0.85	62	
Genre	3.40	0.69	62			0	3.40	0.69	62	
Academic	3.27	0.77	62			0	3.27	0.77	62	
Games	3.45	0.69	11			0	3.45	0.69	11	
Creative	3.22	1.05	27			0	3.22	1.05	27	
Subjunctive	3.80	0.45	5			0	3.80	0.45	5	
Life at uni***	3.72	0.54	25			0	3.72	0.54	25	
Mean rating: al workshops	3.48	0.76		3.57	0.69		3.47	0.80		

*Core workshop since 2020-2021

**Core workshop since 2021-2022

***Life at university was taught in 2019-2020, then later only taught in the first-year course.

Regarding the journal writing project, many students (18) focused their open-ended answers on the benefit of receiving direct feedback on their writing and the possibility to improve their writing skills as a result. Five students mentioned being pleased to write about topics that are relevant to their studies and their future career. Three students specifically mentioned journal writing as a practical way to improve their grammar and vocabulary. Another three

students, all in the C1.1a group, mentioned writing as a good way to prepare for external English-level exams, one suggesting that the journal tasks should be more aligned with these exams. A total of six students wrote negative opinions on the journal writing, including two in the B2 group requesting that it be more appropriate for their age and "fun", and two in the C1.1a group failing to see the utility of the assignment.

4.1.2 Study materials

Students were also asked in the survey if they would have rather had a textbook instead of the workshop approach that they had experienced. Overall, most students preferred the new approach, though some would have preferred a textbook, more so in the lower English levels. (See Table 7 for full results.)

Table 7. Results: Percentages of students favoring workshop approach over a textbook

Group	%	N
B1.2	75%	12
B2	80%	15
C1.1	88%	24
C1.2	100%	5

When asked about their preference in open-answer format, students likened a textbook to structure, grammar and vocabulary, and saw them as less relevant to their degrees. One C1.1a student wrote, "with a textbook we do not learn the important things that have to do with our degree. The format we've followed is better and flexible." Similarly, a B1.2 student wrote, "I think it [the workshop approach] is a more fun way to learn English, but I think it is important to learn vocabulary and grammar to[o]." Two students even mentioned the need to pay more attention without a textbook, as seen in this quote: "Because if we can decide about what we are learning, unconsciously, we are paying more attention and it's a lot more dynamic and quite better because we are aware about our knowledge" (B1.2 student).

On the other hand, the main argument given in favor of a textbook-supported design was the textbook's ability to support more systematic, organized work on the different language skills (as cited by 5 students) and structure for the course itself (2 students). For example, one C1.1a student wrote, "I feel that with textbooks we learn a lot of use of English, vocabulary and grammar. A mix of both [workshops and textbook] would be better."

4.2 Overall Assessment of the Course

The following concept maps reflect the most salient themes that could be identified in the analysis of students' qualitative responses from focus group interviews and the open-ended answers to the questionnaire. While Figure 2 displays the codes and emerging themes related to RQ1 and RQ2 (student assessment of the approach), Figure 3 addresses RQ3 (what factors affect a successful implementation of the approach). In the analysis, instructors' views on student perceptions have been included in order to triangulate the data and hence support the validity of the analysis.

4.2.1 Is the Redesigned Course Working?

Following the concept map in Figure 2, each theme is discussed below.

Motivation. Overall, students' reported motivation toward the workshop approach was high, supporting the quantitative ratings of the different workshops (see Table 6). When giving their overall opinions on the course in the open-ended questions, students used words like dynamic, innovative, and motivating. The reasons given for this involved, as expected, a clearer connection with educational topics and situations, especially when compared with previous English-learning experiences. In fact, the data coded to Motivation had the largest overlap with that coded to Utility or transfer, suggesting that what students find useful also motivates them. A C1.1 level student, S2D, said, "Last year we did a lot of work on grammar…It was like in school […] This year we've had many more projects, such as storytelling, which I really enjoyed. It's like this year was more focused on how to teach English, not just learning vocabulary and grammar." Instructors also felt that an ESP approach helped to engage students, as well as make connections with professional situations and, even, other courses. T1, for instance, claimed that students "are a lot more motivated, and they see that it's applicable to them and that they can really learn something from it."

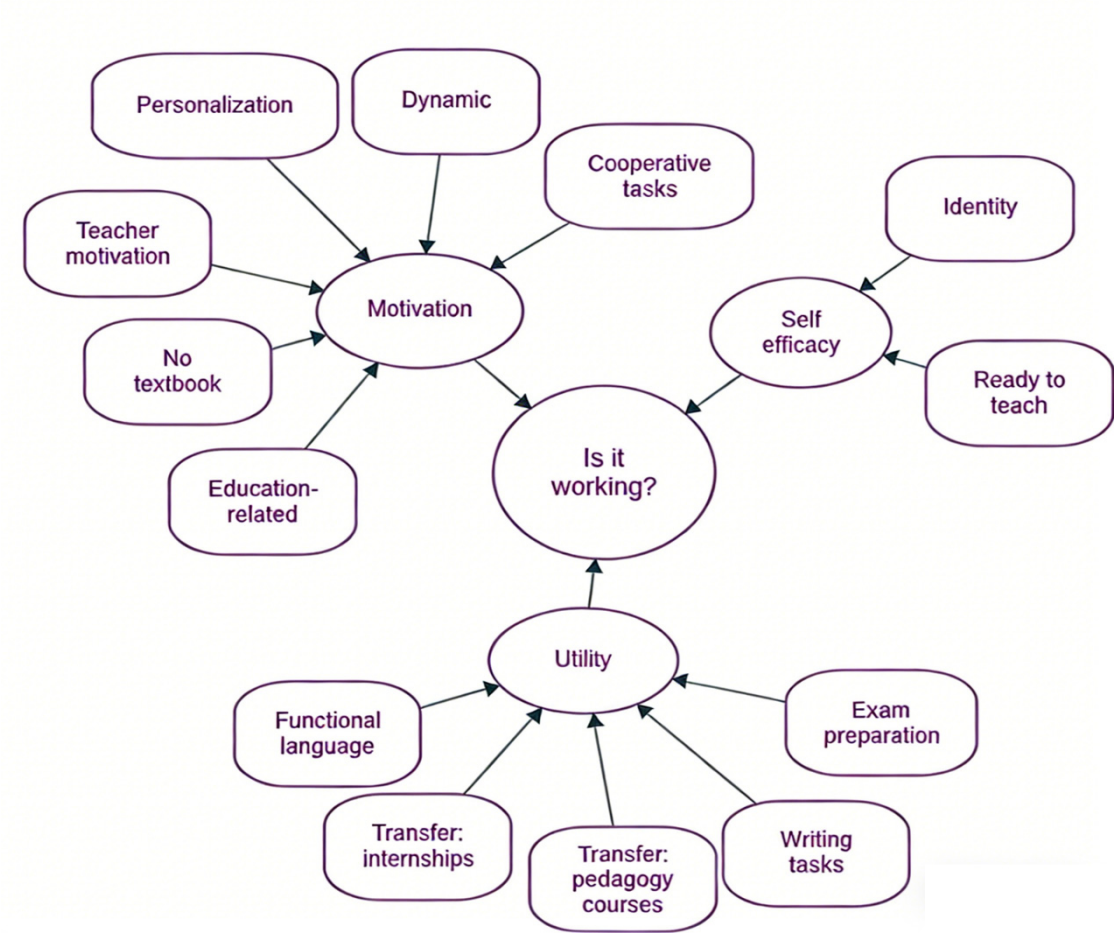

Figure 2. Concept Map: Is the Redesigned Course Working?

In line with the results of the survey, focus group participants also pointed to the absence of a textbook as positively affecting motivation. As in our previous study (López-Hernández & Buckingham, 2021), participants associated textbook use with grammar contents, routine, and, generally, school-like learning. In contrast, participants agreed that the current approach leads to a more hands-on, collaborative environment (S3A, S2C): a more "university-like experience" (S2C), in which students have more autonomy regarding their own learning process (S2B) (e.g., note-taking, managing classroom materials, etc.).

Flexibility and freedom were also frequently mentioned. Many students felt that the contents were more "personalized", allowing more room for innovative practices, and for classroom discussion. "This format leads you to know more about everything and not just about what the textbook says," reported S2C, a second-year C1.2 student. Moreover, students generally valued being able to pick some of their workshops and, in one case, have an instructor plan and deliver a new workshop based on their requests.

Finally, all the instructors interviewed claimed that this flexible, personalized approach enhanced their own levels of motivation. In fact, the largest overlap with the coding of instructor interview data to Motivation was with the code of Planning or design. T3 claimed that this approach encouraged them to create their own materials, and that this was highly valued by the students.

Self-efficacy. Although there were not many references for the code, "self-efficacy", students occasionally reported on their perception of themselves as present-day or future English teachers. Particularly, participants in the third-year focus groups (S3A, S3B), commented on their preparation in relation to what they saw in their third-year internships. S3A claimed that "as of now, I feel prepared and motivated [to teach an English class]…The second-year course really helped in this; not so much the year before." In terms of perceived identity as foreign language teachers, T2 (instructor of the B1.2 group) reported that many of her students did not see themselves as English teachers, despite

studying the EFL specialist track. Moreover, this appears to have had an effect on their perception of some of the more linguistically-oriented workshops, such as Metalanguage.

Utility or transfer. In agreement with the survey comments, focus group participants referred to the practical value of some of the workshops. S2E, for instance, claimed that "EFE2 has been very helpful, as we have learnt how to give instructions to kids, how to manage the class and speak to the kids in a correct and clear way." As T3 explained, this type of learning is especially meaningful, as workshops effectively attempt to "replicate, to some extent, situations that students will have to face when teaching a primary or pre-primary class." Such comments suggest that students appear to have identified that one of the main goals of the course was to train them in functional discourse skills, that is, the language they need to conduct a class effectively.

The question of a possible transfer of these skills to their language pedagogy courses, or to their teaching internships, was less clear. "Maybe some of the skills we worked on last year have helped me in TEFL," claimed S3A, "but I didn't think too much about it during this year." From a different perspective, T4, who is also a language pedagogy teacher, believes that the positive contribution of the workshop approach can especially be noticed in higher-level TEFL students. As to the internships, some references were made to the utility of work on storytelling, classroom language, and, especially, icebreakers. As reported by T2, an instructor teaching lower intermediate students, sometimes the students would report transferring these skills and strategies to classes taught in Spanish. All in all, it is not clear that most classes are actively connecting the workshops to their experiences at school. S3C, a third-year student, suggested that "it would be useful to spend some class time reflecting on the internship experiences."

4.2.2 What Makes the Course Work (or not)?

Within the discussion of the reasons for the course's relative success, two main themes were identified: students' levels of English and their suggestions for improvement. They are represented in the concept map in Figure 3.

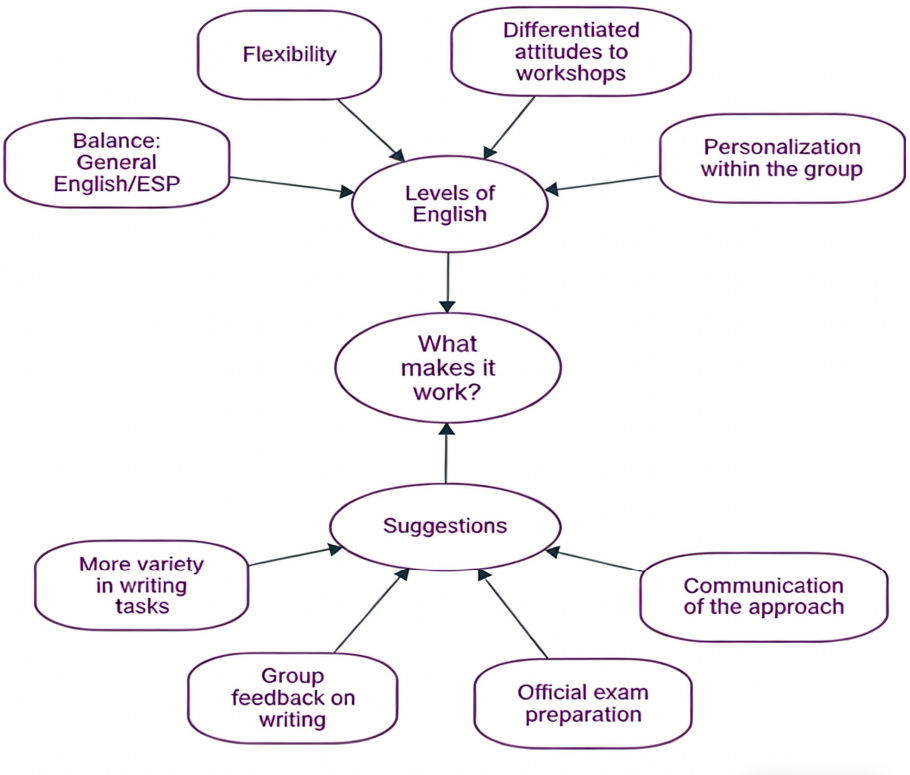

Figure 3. Concept Map: What Makes the Course Work (or not)?

Levels of English. The wide range of levels of English competence, both across the six student groups and within any group, is a fact that was constantly named by students when giving their opinion on the course design. Participants generally welcomed instructors' efforts to personalize tasks and materials to different student levels. S2A, for instance, valued that her instructor, T1, provided a group of stronger intermediates with additional language and

strategies to reach a C1 level of writing. Instructors also highlighted that student levels vary from year to year, and so the workshop approach provided them with the necessary flexibility. As T4 explained, with workshops "it's easier to tailor the classes to their needs and to their exact interests and level."

Different levels also appear to influence student assessment of different workshops, at least in the instructors' eyes. For example, in relation to the metalanguage workshop, T2 claimed that her students' insecurity in relation to English grammar made them see it "as if they were being taught grammar that they were later going to be asked about" and not as knowledge useful for lesson planning.

Finally, one student pointed out the benefit of the combination of a GE and an ESP component. In the words of S2A, "I got the feeling that the goal of year 1 was to consolidate a level such as B2, like…acquire a foundation."

Suggestions of improvement. In relation to the writing project, several students asked for more variety in the writing tasks. "I have the feeling I have been working on the same writing assignment for the last three years," commented S3E, referring to reflective essay writing. Another suggestion was for instructors to devote time for group/plenary feedback to writing tasks as a way of complementing individual comments (S2D).

Another major area of constructive criticism was the role of external exam preparation. While not suggesting that the entire course should be devoted to it, it was mentioned that instructors could take on a counseling role (S2C), providing advice on preparation courses and materials. In the same focus group, S2E and S2A proposed having a voluntary information session, and even offering a dedicated training course. For, as S2A put it, "at the end of the day, even if I speak English perfectly, I'm going to need a certificate."

Lastly, although not an explicit recommendation, the remarks from one of the third-year focus groups shed light on the fact that they had not been sufficiently aware of the aims and design of their second-year English course. When asked for suggestions based on their experience, they asked for more connections with classroom activities (S3E: "for example, how to give instructions") and, ironically, used the word "workshop" as an alternative to the kind of class they had been taught.

5. Discussion

Generally, the results of this study suggest that the changes implemented in the design of the language improvement course over the last five years have succeeded, at least in some cases, in enhancing motivation and strengthening students' self-efficacy as future EFL and CLIL instructors (RQ2). Unlike in 2019 (López-Hernández & Buckingham, 2021), many students now see a clear connection between their language classes and their future professional practice, as reported above in Motivation and Utility or transfer. Moreover, their answers suggest that they developed at least a tacit understanding of the functional discourse skills that they have been taught (Richards, 2017), arguably because they were able to associate them with the content of specific workshops. This English-for-Teaching focus (Richards, 2017) seems to have allowed trainees to see the utility of the proposed tasks, apparently causing motivation levels to increase. When students saw themselves as potential or future English teachers, this may have added to the quality of students' ideal L2 self, reducing any dreamlike qualities by experiencing tangible results (Lamb, 2013), which is consistent with findings by Amengual-Pizarro (2018). Further, by forming part of a group of future teachers, it seems that students may have developed a stronger ought-to L2 self, due to peer influence.

Indeed, the findings related to student motivation (RQ1) are among the most interesting of this study. As seen above, participants reported higher levels of motivation than their counterparts in the 2019 study; furthermore, many claimed to be more motivated by the learning experience of the ESP second-year course than by the first-year GE course. When reviewing student responses, there emerged a clear set of binary oppositions in which terms such as textbook, school and theory appeared on one side, and workshops, university, and practice on the other. While students – especially lower-level ones – acknowledged the possible benefits of using a textbook in terms of offering a clear structure and systematic work on lexis and grammar, all student groups showed a significant level of support for the workshop approach over a textbook-based course (see Study materials above). Compared to GE, a textbook-free ESP course design may be a way of symbolically conveying to the students the message that they are now university students and teacher trainees, and therefore in need of more specialized language (Costa & Mastellotto, 2022). In the same way, this change in self-perception may have contributed to a more defined self-concept (Mercer, 2011b) and a stronger ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009).

In the focus groups, motivation was often strongly connected to concepts of freedom and dialogue, leading to an increased sense of ownership of the teaching-learning process on the part of both students and instructors. The former valued the increased flexibility and personalization of course contents and teacher-created materials, as well

as the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue with their instructors. Indeed, applying a Bakhtinian interpretation of dialogue, the current course design appears to have enabled "multi-voiced classrooms" leading to a constructive struggle with alternative conceptual systems, the instructors' and the students' (Dysthe, 1996). As a result, students appear to have been more personally invested in the learning process than they were in the first-year GE course, as seen above in Motivation. In fact, the possibility of selecting the workshops that learners wished to study may have empowered students, contributing to a more robust ideal L2 self.

In turn, as expressed in the interviews and reported in Motivation above, the participating instructors felt empowered by the additional freedom to create or adapt their own materials, but also by aligning their teaching with a broader, collegiate reflective project (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2019; Burns, 2010). This increase in motivation for instructors is important, as this is often considered to have a positive impact on student motivation (Dörnyei, 2003). At the same time, such a finding suggests a possible caveat of this open-ended course design, namely, that not all foreign language instructors are necessarily equipped with the skills to teach it successfully. In this AR project, the workshops were designed and implemented by experienced, autonomous instructors with training in ESP and a strong interest in teaching pedagogy; however, it is easy to see how an instructor with a different profile may fail to effectively manage this ESP-oriented, multi-voiced teaching environment.

Additionally, this study can also help to shed some light on the challenges of effectively implementing such an ESP approach in mixed language ability setting as the one described (RQ3). The first lesson obtained is that levels of language competence do matter, as seen above in Levels of English. This is in line with recent literature, which suggests that higher language proficiency underpins teacher efficacy and confidence in EFL/CLIL contexts (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). As reported above, lower-level students may struggle to see the utility of certain workshops and tend to value the benefits of using a textbook more highly, most likely because they associate it with a more explicit language improvement focus. In this sense, the experience of this AR project suggests that a workshop approach such as this one needs flexible implementation, in terms of both quantity and choice of workshops. Moreover, it is suggested that every effort be made to clarify the aims and rationale of each workshop as well as the course structure and, insofar as possible, provide learning materials that, like textbooks, are well organized and consistent in their structure.

Furthermore, the opinions expressed by both lower- and higher-level students in this study seem to support the view that a high level of English positively affects both perceived self-concept as language learners and their own identity as potential EFL or CLIL instructors, which is consistent with recent research on teacher competences (Durán-Martínez & Fernández-Costales, 2025; Faez et al., 2019; Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023). In fact, students with a lower level of English may see their training in TEFL or CLIL as a mere requirement to graduate, and not as a component that is fully aligned with their personal career goals. Although this is a large issue that would require more careful consideration, the experiences described in this paper support the view that, again, a dialogic teaching style that facilitates more personal classroom discussion may help trainees to better understand the role of the EFL specialist track in their own training.

Finally, the data collected throughout this project strongly supports the overall "hybrid" course design of the language improvement courses, by which students are trained in both GE and ESP, as reported, for example, in Levels of English. Such a design appears to allow lower-level students to develop a higher general level of English, sometimes described as a "threshold" level of proficiency (Tsang, 2017), before attempting to learn more specialized language. In addition, students seem to value both components, and instructors welcome the opportunity to focus each course differently. This finding may be of interest in other contexts, in Spain or abroad, where pre-service teachers training to become EFL or CLIL instructors do not all have advanced English language skills (Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023).

Changes will continue to be made to these courses, such as the use of a study guide that provides a clear course structure which includes descriptions of the workshops and the journal writing project. Instructors will be encouraged to continue to offer choices to their students regarding optional workshops with the intention of further developing metacognitive awareness among students. More explicit explanations can be made to students so as to connect the use of the journal writing project to improving general English levels while preparing for the writing portion of external exams, and to reflecting on the teaching experience and the use of more specialized language.

6. Conclusion

All in all, students seem to have benefitted from the change from a General English course to ESP, as seen in their generally increased motivation levels, often heightened awareness of the purpose of the first- and second-year

English courses, and greater specialization in the language required of future EFL and CLIL teachers. While it is true that AR results cannot always be generalized to larger contexts, our positive results lead us to strongly encourage a shift toward including ESP, English-for-Education, courses in initial teacher education in order to more effectively prepare trainees for the classroom.

However, it is important to remember that AR depends heavily on the teachers that are implementing the modifications, so that what works for one may not work for another. Also, the fact that one of the researchers was also an instructor slightly reduces the objectivity of the research. There was an attempt to minimize this effect by also interviewing instructor participants who were not directly involved in the research or creation of workshops, though it still constitutes a limitation. Further research might include longitudinal studies that follow these trainees into their first years of classroom teaching, to determine the effect of this preparation. Moreover, if other universities were to include ESP coursework in their ITE degrees, it would be useful to see whether these positive effects would be replicated. Finally, future studies should explore how participation in this AR project influences instructors' evolving identities and engagement in research, potentially fostering a sustainable community of practice.

As seen in this paper, action research can be a very powerful instrument to enable innovative course design in the largely underdeveloped field of ESP in teacher education, especially when carried out by a specialized group of teachers. In this case, the synergy created by a group of EFL instructors, which included teacher-researchers, pedagogy instructors, former primary teachers and motivated EFL instructors, was effective in producing a cyclical process of listening to students' needs, brainstorming and implementing improvements, and evaluating the results that were afforded by the necessary change.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the instructors who taught the courses mentioned above for their invaluable participation in the various stages of the action research process.

Authors contributions

Dr. Alfonso López-Hernández and Dr. Lyndsay R. Buckingham were equally responsible for the conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and writing of this manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.