

# Improving Administrative English Proficiency in Healthcare Settings: A Task-Based ESP Case Study from King Salman Armed Forces Hospital, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In a healthcare environment where English is the primary language for documentation and communication, a lack of proficiency in administrative writing can negatively impact efficiency, patient safety, and institutional reputation.

**Aim:** This study aimed to enhance participants' professional writing skills and improve their ability to handle daily administrative tasks with clarity and confidence.

**Methods:** A qualitative case study methodology was adopted to explore the implementation and outcomes of a six-week course titled "Administrative Writing Skills in English" at King Salman Armed Forces Hospital, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. The study involved 15 administrative staff from various departments. Data were collected through pre- and post-course writing samples, participant feedback forms, instructor observations, and informal interviews with line managers. The curriculum was developed based on authentic hospital documents and role-based simulations to emphasize clarity, tone, and structure.

**Results:** Findings demonstrated a notable improvement in participants' writing accuracy, structure, and confidence. Post-course writing samples showed better sentence construction, appropriate use of tone, and adherence to formal structures. Both participants and their supervisors reported a perceived increase in communication efficiency and clarity.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that targeted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction is effective in enhancing the professional writing skills of non-clinical staff in healthcare settings. The findings suggest a growing necessity for expanding such ESP programs in hospitals across Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. This case study provided a replicable curriculum model for other institutions and contributes to the broader ESP literature on workplace writing in non-Anglophone contexts.

**Keywords:** ESP, Administrative English, Healthcare communication, Workplace writing, Saudi Arabia, Professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background and rationale

#### English as the Operational Lingua Franca in Saudi Hospitals:

Saudi hospitals—especially those seeking Joint Commission International, CBAHI <sup>(1)</sup>, or other international accreditations—conduct the bulk of their documentation, external correspondence and policy drafting in English. Administrative staff routinely interact with expatriate medical teams, global vendors, and regional regulators whose common working language is English. In this environment, clear written communication becomes mission-critical for patient safety, legal compliance, and institutional reputation. Recent studies such as Alhamami <sup>(2)</sup> and Alotaibi <sup>(3)</sup> emphasized the growing reliance on English documentation in healthcare institutions seeking accreditation.

#### Challenges faced by non-native administrative staff <sup>(4)</sup>:

Despite many staff members possessing conversational English, diagnostic audits at the study site revealed recurring weaknesses:

- Register and tone – Emails sometimes sounded either overly casual or excessively formal, causing confusion or perceived discourtesy.

- Grammar and cohesion – Frequent tense shifts, run-on sentences, and vague referencing hindered clarity <sup>(5)</sup>.

- Genre unfamiliarity – Staff were unsure how to structure memos, incident reports, or policy updates <sup>(6)</sup>.

- Time constraints – Busy workloads left little room for self-study or lengthy general-purpose English courses.

This is supported by recent research, including Alhamami <sup>(2)</sup>, which found administrative personnel frequently struggle with clarity, tone, and document conventions. These gaps resulted in delayed approvals, misinterpretation of directives, and additional editing cycles for senior management.

#### Why an ESP course was deemed essential?

An English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) approach targets exactly those communicative events that staff must perform on the job—rather than teaching broad, non-contextualized language skills. By designing a short, intensive course around authentic hospital documents and role-plays, the instructor sought to <sup>(7, 8, 9)</sup>:

1. Improve accuracy and efficiency in everyday writing tasks.

2. Standardize formats to reduce cognitive load.

3. Raise genre awareness so staff can adapt style and tone to audience and purpose.

4. Align with accreditation standards that mandate unambiguous English documentation.

### Research significance:

Few published studies focus on administrative—not nursing or medical—English in the Gulf region’s healthcare sector. This case study therefore fills a documented gap by:

- Providing empirical evidence of ESP effectiveness for hospital administrators.
- Offering a replicable curriculum model that other Saudi hospitals can adapt. Recent work by **Alotaibi** <sup>(3)</sup> has highlighted the overlooked needs of hospital administrators in ESP instruction within Saudi healthcare institutions.
- Contributing to the broader **ESP literature** on workplace writing in non-Anglophone contexts.

In today’s increasingly globalized healthcare systems, the ability of administrative staff to communicate effectively in English has become a critical component of hospital efficiency and service delivery. English is widely used in Saudi hospitals for documentation, internal communication, coordination with international partners, and compliance with accreditation standards. However, many non-native English-speaking administrative employees face challenges in producing written documents such as memos, emails, meeting summaries, and formal reports, which can lead to miscommunication, delays, and reduced quality of service.

This paper presented a case study of a specialized course titled “Administrative Writing Skills in English”, delivered to a group of hospital administrative staff in Saudi Arabia. The course was designed and taught by the researcher, who was an experienced ESL instructor working in a healthcare environment. The aim was to enhance the participants’ professional writing skills in English and improve their ability to handle everyday administrative communication tasks with confidence and clarity.

The study explored the context in which the course was developed, the methodology used in its delivery, and the outcomes observed. It also discussed the broader implications of targeted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in healthcare administration, offering insights for language educators, hospital management, and policymakers interested in strengthening workplace communication and staff development.

### English for specific purposes and workplace communication <sup>(7, 8)</sup>:

The concept of English for Specific Purposes emerged in response to the growing need for language instruction tailored to real-world occupational or academic contexts. In contrast to general English, **ESP** courses focus on learners’ immediate language needs, integrating content and context into instruction. In workplace settings, ESP plays a critical role in enhancing employees’ ability to perform job-specific

communicative tasks with precision, particularly in environments where English serves as the medium of professional interaction. In healthcare institutions, ESP is most associated with medical professionals. However, the administrative workforce — including coordinators, clerks, HR officers, and departmental secretaries — often requires just as much linguistic support, especially in writing tasks where ambiguity or miscommunication can disrupt workflows.

### Administrative writing in English: Key skills and challenges:

Administrative writing refers to the ability to produce a wide range of documents including memos, formal emails, notices, incident reports, meeting minutes, and standard operating procedures. Research showed that many second-language users struggle with register, tone, and genre conventions when producing such texts. **Flowerdew & Wan** <sup>(10)</sup> highlighted these challenges, and more recent work confirms persistent issues with register and genre conventions among administrative staff. According to **Bhatia** <sup>(6)</sup>, mastering professional writing genres involves not just grammatical correctness, but also an understanding of purpose, audience, and organizational structure. Administrative staff in hospitals may lack exposure to such genre features, particularly in English, which results in inefficient communication, misaligned tone, or even procedural errors.

### English in Saudi healthcare contexts:

Several studies have highlighted the dominance of English in Saudi Arabia’s private and government hospitals, both in clinical and non-clinical settings. While efforts have been made to train nurses and medical staff in English communication, the needs of administrative personnel remain underrepresented in research and practice. Furthermore, **Alrabai** <sup>(11)</sup> and **Elyas & Picard** <sup>(12)</sup> observed that Saudi learners often exhibit high anxiety levels when expected to write formally in English, especially in hierarchical organizations like hospitals. This anxiety can lead to communication avoidance, over-reliance on templates, or excessive dependence on bilingual colleagues. Findings sent findings (e.g., **Alhamami** <sup>(2)</sup>) confirm this trend among administrative staff, showing a tendency toward over-reliance on templates due to lack of confidence in writing.

### The Case for contextualized, task-based writing instruction:

Studies in ESP methodology advocate task-based learning using authentic materials and simulations to foster functional writing skills. When learners practice producing documents, they are likely to encounter in their real jobs—such as internal memos or complaint letters—they gain practical competence and confidence <sup>(13)</sup>. Within

healthcare, few ESP programs address the writing needs of administrative departments, despite their role in policy enforcement, interdepartmental coordination and patient services. This gap signals the importance of the current study and its course, which is tailored to both linguistic and institutional realities. **Alotaibi** <sup>(3)</sup> advocates for context-specific task-based writing models tailored to non-clinical staff roles in multilingual medical environments.

### Summary of literature gaps:

While there is ample literature on English for medical professionals, there remains a lack of:

- Research into administrative English needs within hospitals, particularly in the Gulf region.
- Case studies showcasing practical implementation of writing-focused ESP courses for support staff.
- Evaluative frameworks for measuring impact on job performance in such contexts.

This paper contributes to filling those gaps through a grounded case study that links pedagogy, workplace needs, and language performance.

## METHOD

**Research design:** This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the implementation and outcomes of a specialized English writing course delivered to hospital administrative staff. The case study method is suitable for examining complex, real-life educational interventions within specific institutional contexts <sup>(14)</sup>. The research focused on gathering descriptive data from a single training program conducted in a Saudi hospital and analyzing its pedagogical structure, content, and impact on learners.

### Setting and participants:

The study was conducted in collaboration with the **Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Department, King Salman Armed Forces Hospital, Tabuk, KSA.**

There were 15 participants in total, comprising administrative assistants, unit coordinators, front desk staff, and records officers. These individuals came from diverse national backgrounds—including Sudanese, Egyptian, Filipino, and Saudi—and were selected from departments such as Human Resources, Finance, Supply Chain, and Patient Services. All participants were at an intermediate level of English proficiency, as determined by internal placement tests and supervisor recommendations.

All participants had daily responsibilities involving written communication in English, such as sending formal emails, writing memos, and processing internal documentation.

**Course description:** The course, titled "Administrative Writing Skills in English", was developed and taught by the researcher over a period of 6 weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. It was tailored to the specific writing needs of administrative staff in the hospital and based on real samples of workplace documents. Main content areas included:

- Email structure and tone.
- Memo and notice writing.
- Incident reports and letters of complaint.
- Meeting minutes and internal communication.
- Use of templates and professional expressions.

Instruction emphasized functional writing, clarity of message, and audience awareness. Sessions included grammar refreshers, peer review activities, and in-class writing practice with feedback.

**Data collection:** The data collection methods included pre- and post-course writing samples, instructor observations, participant feedback forms, and informal interviews with line managers. Participants completed structured writing tasks both before and after the course, including emails, memos, and short reports. The instructor recorded notes on learner engagement and common difficulties throughout the sessions. Feedback forms were distributed anonymously to capture participants' perspectives on course effectiveness. In addition, informal interviews with three department heads provided insights into changes observed in participants' workplace communication.

### Data analysis

Writing samples were analyzed using a rubric measuring:

- Grammatical accuracy
- Organizational structure
- Tone and register
- Task completion and clarity.

**Ethical considerations:** This study did not involve patients or access to identifiable personal health information. The participating healthcare professionals provided information voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the research. All responses were anonymized before analysis to ensure confidentiality. No sensitive personal data were collected, and no interventions were performed. According to the institutional and national guidelines applicable at the time of the study, this type of research — involving anonymized, non-clinical, professional perspectives — did not require formal ethics committee or Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Permission to conduct the training program and to use anonymized results for academic and educational purposes was obtained from the Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

**Department, King Salman Armed Forces Hospital, Tabuk, KSA. The study was executed in strict adherence to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.**

## Course Design and Implementation

### Course objectives:

The course “Administrative Writing Skills in English” was designed with the overarching goal of enhancing the workplace writing proficiency of hospital administrative staff. Specific learning objectives included:

- Writing professional emails using appropriate tone and format.
- Drafting clear and concise memos and notices.
- Producing incident and complaint reports using standard structures.
- Understanding audience expectations and writing with purpose.
- Applying common workplace templates and formats effectively.

These objectives were aligned with both institutional communication needs and broader English for Specific Purposes frameworks.

### Curriculum content:

The course consisted of 12 sessions delivered over 6 weeks, each focusing on a key writing function encountered in the hospital’s administrative departments. A sample breakdown of the weekly themes is shown in table (1) below:

**Table (1):** A sample breakdown of the weekly themes

Week	Focus topic	Key skills and tasks
Week 1	Introduction to administrative English	Identifying writing purposes, analyzing real documents
Week 2	Email writing	Subject lines, greetings, tone, requests and follow-ups
Week 3	Memo & notice writing	Layout, clarity, tone, urgency vs. neutrality
Week 4	Incident & complaint reports	Objective reporting, chronology, passive voice
Week 5	Meeting minutes and internal notes	Structuring notes, summarizing key points
Week 6	Templates, revision & practical assessments	Guided rewriting, peer review, course wrap-up

**Instructional methods:** A task-based and learner-centered approach was adopted to maximize relevance and engagement. Strategies included:

- Real-life simulations: Staff practiced responding to internal emails or drafting actual memos.
- Error correction workshops: Anonymous samples were reviewed and edited collaboratively.
- Peer review: Learners exchanged drafts and provided constructive comments using a rubric.
- Model-based instruction: Students analyzed high-quality workplace texts to extract structure and vocabulary.
- Mini grammar clinics: Short reviews on verb forms, prepositions, punctuation, and connectors were embedded as needed.

To accommodate varied English levels, the instructor offered differentiated tasks and individual support where appropriate.

**Assessment and feedback:** Learners also received oral and written feedback on weekly tasks. A reflective self-assessment activity at the end encouraged learners to identify their own progress and areas for continued improvement. The results of the course were analyzed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Writing samples demonstrated substantial improvement in sentence construction, use of appropriate tone and adherence to formal structures. Learners’ confidence grew notably, as reflected in both self-assessment surveys and instructor observation notes. Participants’ ability to complete administrative writing tasks independently improved across multiple genres, including emails, memos, and incident reports. Additionally, feedback from both participants and their supervisors indicated a perceived increase in communication efficiency and clarity. The findings suggest that the short-term ESP intervention had a tangible impact on the quality of administrative communication within the workplace.

**Improvement in writing accuracy and structure:** One of the most visible outcomes of the course was the notable improvement in participants’ writing accuracy and structure. Prior to the course, common issues included incorrect grammar, disorganized sentences, inappropriate tone, and a lack of clarity. Through guided exercises, grammar workshops, and practical writing tasks, learners showed measurable progress. Post-course writing samples demonstrated better sentence construction, appropriate use of passive voice, consistent verb tenses, and a clearer structure in memos, emails, and reports. Participants were better able to organize their documents using standard formats. For example, instead of writing long unstructured paragraphs, they learned to break information into logical sections with appropriate headings and signoffs. The writing rubric used in the course helped learners understand how to improve their clarity and tone. These improvements were supported by

positive feedback from line managers, who noticed fewer grammatical errors and less need for supervisory editing (Khan and Zaki <sup>(14)</sup> and Alhamami <sup>(2)</sup>.

**Table (2):** Common Writing Errors Before and After the Course

Category	Common errors (Before)	Improved practices (After)
Grammar	Inconsistent verb tenses, run-on sentences	Consistent tenses, clear sentence boundaries
Structure	Lack of paragraphing, missing headings	Clear structure with sections and bullet points
Tone	Too informal or overly stiff language	Polite, professional & audience-appropriate tone
Clarity	Vague expressions, unclear requests	Specific language, direct and concise requests

#### Development of audience awareness and tone:

Participants showed increased sensitivity to tone and audience. Many began tailoring their language to suit the formality level required by different recipients. Email writing has become more purposeful, with polite requests and clear subject lines replacing generic or overly informal expressions.

#### Feedback from participants:

Participants shared highly positive feedback at the end of the course. One participant stated, "Before this course, I always hesitated to send emails in English. Now, I can write with confidence and clarity." Another mentioned, "The real hospital examples were very helpful. I finally understood how to structure a memo correctly." A third participant noted, "I hope this training becomes mandatory for all administrative staff—it really helps in our daily work." Anonymous feedback collected at the end of the course highlighted strong satisfaction with the course's relevance and usefulness. Participants particularly appreciated. For instance, one participant uttered:

I used the real hospital P4 (participant 1)

Rather than the use of real hospital documents as model P4 (participant 1).

The other participant said that:

Step-by-step writing tasks and instructor guidance ... P1 (participant 1).

- Opportunities to practice and receive personalized feedback:

Some sample feedback comments are provided here. For instance, one of the participants expressed that:

"Now I feel more confident writing official emails to my manager." P14

The next one uttered:

"I never understood how to write a memo before this course." P 20

- "This training should be offered to all new admin employees."

The qualitative feedback revealed several recurring themes. Participants repeatedly stressed how the real hospital examples made the tasks easier to relate to. One participant highlighted that the use of practical templates clarified memo writing, while another emphasized the value of step-by-step instruction. These sentiments reflect the overarching theme of authenticity and clarity in task design, which contributed significantly to learner engagement and skill development.

#### Managerial observations:

Line managers also observed notable improvements. One supervisor commented, "I no longer have to correct every email before it is sent out—the quality has definitely improved." Another stated, "I noticed the memos are more structured, and staff now take more initiative in writing documents without waiting for translation support."

Line managers informally interviewed after the course reported noticeable improvements in their staff's written communication. They observed:

- Reduced need for editing written submissions
- More timely and clear internal communication
- Greater initiative taken by staff in composing reports independently.

#### Ongoing challenges:

Despite the positive outcomes, some challenges persisted:

- Some staff still struggled with complex grammar structures, especially conditionals and passive voice
- Time constraints and workload continued to limit post-course writing practice
- A few learners expressed need for more one-on-one support for advanced writing skills.

These findings suggest that while short ESP courses can yield measurable benefits, continued reinforcement and institutional support are essential for long-term impact.

#### DISCUSSION

The outcomes of this case study support the effectiveness of ESP instruction tailored to administrative staff in healthcare settings. Improvements in writing accuracy, tone, and structural clarity were accompanied by increased workplace confidence. These findings are consistent with prior research on task-based ESP instruction <sup>(8)</sup> and reinforcing recent work that was reported by Alhamami <sup>(2)</sup> and Khan and Zaki <sup>(14)</sup> who emphasized the centrality of English communication

skills among hospital personnel. The incorporation of authentic materials and role of specific documents appear to be a driving factor behind learner engagement and skill transfer. Moreover, recent literature of **Alotaibi** <sup>(3)</sup> supports the argument that ESP programs improve job performance, particularly when aligned with institutional goals. However, challenges such as varying English proficiency and limited reinforcement time remain barriers to sustained success.

This study implied that institutional commitment to continuous language development is vital for long-term impact on administrative efficiency and service quality. The results of this study suggested that targeted ESP instruction can lead to significant improvements in the professional writing skills of administrative staff in healthcare settings. Participants developed not only technical writing accuracy but also a stronger sense of audience awareness and organizational structure that are essential traits for effective workplace communication. The results of this case study indicated that targeted ESP instruction may be associated with improvements in the professional writing skills of administrative staff in healthcare settings. These outcomes align with existing **ESP** research emphasizing the value of context-specific language training. The improvements observed in writing by participant and managerial feedback, confirm the effectiveness of the course's design, delivery method, and relevance to learners' actual tasks <sup>(16)</sup>.

**From writing accuracy to administrative confidence:** Beyond linguistic gains, participants demonstrated increased confidence in initiating communication in English. Many began drafting their own memos or reports without needing translation assistance or approval from English-fluent colleagues. This growing autonomy is a critical outcome in a multilingual healthcare environment, where time-sensitive communication can affect service quality and operational flow <sup>(17)</sup>.

**The role of relevance and authenticity:** A key factor contributing to the success of the program was its authenticity: The use of real hospital documents, role-based writing tasks, and feedback grounded in participants' day-to-day responsibilities. Learners found the tasks immediately applicable, which fostered greater motivation and engagement throughout the course. This aligns with task-based learning theory and reinforces the need for real-world alignment in ESP program design <sup>(18)</sup>.

**Institutional implications:** The findings indicated a pressing need for structured English writing training across administrative departments in healthcare institutions. Hospitals often invest heavily in clinical training, while overlooking the non-clinical staff who also

play a central role in policy implementation, internal documentation, and regulatory compliance <sup>(19)</sup>.

Offering such ESP programs on a regular basis could enhance institutional performance, reduce miscommunication and align internal communication practices with accreditation and safety standards <sup>(20)</sup>.

### **Challenges and sustainability**

While the course produced strong short-term gains, long-term improvement depends on continued practice and reinforcement. Some challenges remain:

- High workloads may prevent consistent writing application after training ends.
- Staff turnover requires repeated training cycles
- Mixed proficiency levels within the same department demand differentiated instruction to sustain progress, hospitals should consider implementing:
  - Ongoing writing workshops or clinics.
  - Access to writing templates and guidelines.
  - Mentorship or peer review systems within departments.

### **CONCLUSION**

This case study demonstrated the value and effectiveness of a targeted English writing course for administrative staff in a Saudi hospital. Through a tailored ESP approach, participants developed measurable improvements in writing clarity, grammatical accuracy and awareness of appropriate tone and structure in workplace communication. The course's success was rooted in its real-world relevance, use of authentic materials, and task-based instructional methods. It addressed a previously overlooked segment of the healthcare workforce, non-clinical staff, whose role in operational efficiency, documentation, and regulatory compliance is increasingly critical. By providing these employees with the tools to write effectively in English, the course not only improved communication but also contributed to greater workplace confidence, reduced misunderstandings, and smoother coordination between departments.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for healthcare institutions, language educators, and training departments:

#### **For Hospitals:**

- Institutionalize ESP training for administrative staff as part of ongoing professional development.
- Ensure onboarding programs include English writing orientation for new hires.
- Provide access to templates, guidelines, and models of workplace communication documents.

- Recognize the strategic role of administrative communication in meeting accreditation and safety standards.

#### **For ESP course designers and trainers:**

- Use of authentic materials sourced directly from the target workplace environment.
- Integration of task-based instruction that mirrors real writing tasks.
- Inclusion of formative feedback and peer collaboration activities.
- Designing the content that is modular and adaptable to different departments.

#### **For future research:**

- Investigate the long-term impact of such courses on workplace performance.
- Explore digital delivery formats for ESP writing courses.
- Examine the writing needs of other support departments in healthcare beyond administration.

**Conflict of interest:** None.

**Funding:** None.

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A:** Sample Course Outline

Week	Topic	Focus Skills	Assessment
Week 1	Introduction to Administrative English	Identifying writing goals, tone awareness	Diagnostic writing task
Week 2	Email Writing	Structure, greetings, requests, clarity	Email to supervisor
Week 3	Memo and Notice Writing	Formatting, purpose clarity, tone	Memo to HR
Week 4	Reports and Incident Documentation	Objective language, passive voice, structure	Short incident report
Week 5	Meeting Minutes and Internal Notes	Summarizing, paraphrasing, bullet point usage	Sample meeting summary
Week 6	Templates and Final Review	Revising drafts, using models, final assessment	Post-course writing task + peer feedback

### **Appendix B: Pre- and post-writing tasks**

#### **Pre-Writing Task Example:**

- Task: Write a short email to your supervisor requesting time off due to a personal emergency. Use appropriate structure and tone.

#### **Post-writing task example:**

- Task: Draft a formal memo to the Finance Department informing them of a delay in submitting monthly reports. Include cause, expected date, and appropriate sign-off.

#### **Scoring Criteria:**

- Structure and format.
- Grammar and mechanics.
- Tone and clarity.
- Task completion.

### **Appendix C: Feedback form template**

Participant feedback form end of course: Please rate the following:

1. The course was relevant to my job tasks.
2. I feel more confident writing emails and memos in English.
3. The instructor explained the material clearly.
4. I would recommend this course to other staff.

#### **Open Questions:**

- What was the most useful part of the course?
- What would you suggest for improvement?
- Any other comments?

### **Appendix D: Instructor observation notes template**

Date	Session Topic	Observation Summary	Notes for Adjustment
10/02/25	Email writing	Students actively engaged in role-play, some confusion with tone.	Include more examples of formal vs. informal.
03/03/25	Memo writing	Strong improvement in layout, passive voice still weak.	Add mini-grammar session on passive structures.
17/03/25	Reports and incidents	Learners hesitant with content vocabulary.	Provide a vocabulary handout before next session.

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