ADDRESSING CLIENTS' COMPLAINTS THROUGH WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: PEDAGOGICAL IDEAS FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF ESP

Anis Idayu Aziz
Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia.

Nur Syamimi Zahari
Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia.

Nor Hairunnisa Mohammad Nor
Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia.

Nor Syamimi Iliani Che Hassan*
Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia.
syami@uitm.edu.my

Abstract: Services that do not meet clients' expectations are at risk of receiving complaints. Addressing clients' complaints require tactful strategies to maintain professionalism, prevent escalation of the issues. Responding to complaints in an emotional manner could harm the rapport between service seekers and service providers. This article offers strategies of teaching effective written communication in addressing clients' complaints. The teaching strategies are built upon the adaptation and integration of several theories related to andragogy, English as a second language, English for specific purposes and genre. Focusing especially on written communication through letter, email and review response, these teaching strategies are appropriated for English for Specific Purposes courses. As they align well with the course objective of ESP, they can be implemented as supplementary classroom activities or as a type of formative assessment. These strategies are especially practical for adult learners of workplace communication courses who frequently deal with clients from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: andragogy, ESL, ESP, written communication.

1. Introduction

In today's globalised world, English plays a key role as the main language of international business. As companies expand across borders and work more closely with global partners, being able to communicate effectively in English is no longer just an added advantage; it has become an essential workplace skill. This shift has triggered a marked surge in demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly among working adults and employees whose professional advancement depends upon mastery of job-specific communicative competencies (Bolton & Jenks, 2022; Chan & McGrath, 2024). Despite this clear market signal, the pedagogical response has often been misaligned. For decades, the dominant model in higher education and adult language training has been English for Academic Purposes (EAP). While EAP has successfully helped students enter English-medium universities, its utility often ends at graduation.

The predominant challenge confronting contemporary ESP pedagogy lies in the persistent misalignment between educational provision and authentic workplace communication needs. Many EAP programmes for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners concentrate on decontextualised general English skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing without sufficiently tailoring instruction to the specialised communication tasks that characterise specific professional contexts (Chen, 2025). Since these skills are not tailored to the pragmatic, fast-paced needs of the employee, a significant competence gap remains. This highlights a primary problem in current linguistic training: EAP curricula designed for ESL learners fail to adequately prepare students for the realities of workplace communication.

Existing research on EAP and ESP has primarily focused on university students and academically oriented language development, with comparatively little scholarly attention to ESP practices in

authentic workplace settings (Saputro et al., 2025; Virginiya & Handoko, 2025). The present study addresses this gap by giving particular attention to ESP practised in a real workplace setting. By shifting the investigative lens from the classroom to the office, the primary objective is to analyse the specific linguistic needs and communicative strategies of employees in specific situations, contrasting them against traditional EAP preparation. In addition, the primary purpose of this conceptual paper is to rethink pedagogical approaches to ESP writing instruction, with particular focus upon workplace complaint handling as a case study through which to reimagine how adult learners can be prepared for this universal yet underexamined professional communicative task.

By integrating andragogy, the theory of adult learning championed by Knowles and further developed by contemporary scholars, with established ESP frameworks and genre theory, this analysis proposes a more learner-centred, context-responsive approach to workplace communication instruction (Peterson et al., 2023; Ghafar et al., 2021). Rather than treating complaint handling as a peripheral customer service skill confined to entry-level roles, this paper positions it as a sophisticated communicative practice requiring explicit instruction in genre conventions, register variation, pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness (Iwao & Kanazawa, 2024). Through examining how genre theory, particularly its application within ESP contexts, illuminates the rhetorical structures and socially constructed purposes of complaint-related texts, educators can better understand how to scaffold adult learners' acquisition of these critical professional competencies (Belcher, 2024).

Theoretically, this study is grounded in four interconnected frameworks. First, adult learning theory (andragogy) provides the pedagogical foundation, emphasising that adult learners are self-directed, bring substantial prior experience to learning contexts, require instruction relevant to immediate professional needs and are primarily motivated by intrinsic factors related to career advancement and occupational competence (Knowles et al., 2023; Merriam & Bierema, 2023). Andragogy is the art and science of adult learning that focuses on how mature individuals process information. It assumes that as people grow, they become self-directed human beings who use their personal reservoir of experience as a resource for learning. According to Merriam and Bierema (2023), adults are more interested in subjects that have immediate relevance, which then give impact on their jobs. Therefore, effective instruction should involve learners in the planning process and allow them to discover knowledge for themselves. Second, ESL and ESP theory illuminate how language is structured differently across disciplines and professional domains and how needs analysis provides essential intelligence for aligning curricula with authentic communicative requirements (Munby, 1978; Upton, 2012). Third, genre theory, which synthesises insights from systemic functional linguistics, the New Rhetoric school and the ESP tradition, offers analytical tools for understanding how specialised texts are structured to achieve particular communicative purposes within their discourse communities (Martin, 2023). These theoretical frameworks converge in suggesting that adult ESP instruction should prioritise authentic tasks, learner agency, genre-specific analysis and explicit attention to the communicative practices of target discourse communities. Therefore, in synthesising these theoretical underpinnings with empirical data from a real-world setting, this study aims to provide a roadmap for evolving English language education from an academic exercise into a vital tool for professional empowerment.

2. Responding to Complaints Through Formal Letter

This section discusses pedagogical ideas that can be implemented in teaching ESP adult learners about ways to respond to complaints through a formal letter.

2.1 *Letter Relay Activity*

One essential skill in workplace communication is letter writing. While memos and emails tend to be brief and conversational, formal letters follow stricter conventions and require more deliberate structure and tone. This next activity will guide learners in transforming key information into a well-organised business letter that meets professional standards. The first activity for letter writing in an ESP classroom for adult learners is the ‘Letter Relay Activity’. This activity promotes collaborative writing skills

among students in the classroom. The Process Writing Approach is the underlying theory for this activity, which views writing as a recursive process involving planning, drafting, revising, and refining ideas to construct meaning across multiple stages of composition (Seow, 2002). The activity is further supported by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which explains how students benefit from social interaction and peer scaffolding during shared tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). As students respond to the scenario and add their sentences during the relay, they provide and receive linguistic and organisational support from one another, enabling them to perform beyond their individual capabilities. Therefore, these two theories justify the activity's emphasis on collaborative meaning-making and socially mediated development of professional written communication skills.

The objectives of this activity are to:

i. help students practise writing a clear and professional complaint-response letter together.
ii. encourage students to build on each other's ideas through collaborative writing.
iii. improve students' ability to organise and refine written messages through multiple drafting rounds.

Steps

The first step of this activity is to divide the students into groups of five. As this activity consists of 2 rounds, in Round 1, each group receives a scenario card, and they need to write a business letter using the relay method. Each group member is given one minute to write before passing it on to the other group member. Once the fifth member (the last member) finishes the writing, the letters of all groups are collected. Round 2 repeats the same process with a new scenario and a new turn for the group members. After Round 2 is completed, the groups present their two letters and compare them with the other groups.

ROUND 1

Group 1	**Request for Company Profile** Write a letter requesting a company's latest profile and product catalog for consideration in a potential business partnership.
Group 2	**Job Interview Invitation** Write a letter inviting a shortlisted candidate to attend a job interview next week at your company.
Group 3	**Acknowledgement of Payment** Write a letter acknowledging receipt of payment from a client and confirming delivery of services.
Group 4	**Meeting Confirmation** Write a letter confirming attendance at a scheduled meeting with a business partner.
Group 5	**Appreciation Letter** Write a letter thanking a guest speaker for giving a talk at your company's professional development session.
Group 6	**Order Confirmation** Write a letter confirming an order placed by a customer, including expected delivery date.

Figure 1: Round 1 Scenario Cards

ROUND 2

Group 1	**Complaint Response** A customer complained about late delivery. Write a letter responding to the complaint and explaining the corrective action taken.
Group 2	**Rejection of Proposal** A vendor submitted a proposal for a project, but your company has chosen another vendor. Write a letter politely rejecting the proposal.
Group 3	**Request for Extension** Your company cannot meet the original deadline for submitting a report. Write a letter requesting an extension from the client.
Group 4	**Promotion Announcement** Write a letter announcing the promotion of an employee to a management position.
Group 5	**Policy Change Notification** Write a letter informing staff about a new workplace policy (e.g., flexible working hours or dress code update).
Group 6	**Apology for Wrong Billing** A client was mistakenly overcharged. Write a letter apologizing for the error and explaining the correction made.

Figure 2: Round 2 Scenario Cards

2.2 *From Notes to Formal Letter Task*

The second activity for letter writing in an ESP classroom is 'From Notes to Formal Letter Task'. This activity is an advanced activity or task as it requires the students to write a letter. However, this is not an individual task; this is also a group work in an ESP classroom for the students. This activity is grounded in Genre Theory, which views professional texts such as business letters as conventionalised genres defined by recurring communicative purposes and rhetorical "moves" recognised within a discourse community (Swales, 2004). This activity is designed to help students move from notes to a fully developed formal business letter. This is one of the acquired skills for workplace communication; transferring the information from notes to a formal letter. By working from bullet points or notes, students practise organising ideas logically, selecting appropriate language, and applying the conventions of formal correspondence. This activity strengthens the students' ability to structure messages clearly and professionally, especially when transforming notes into a complete letter. The activity also emphasises accuracy in tone, format, and organisation of writing a formal letter in business correspondence. It teaches them to build confidence in preparing professional documents in terms of sequencing, wording, and clarity. By incorporating peer review in this activity, the students happily learn with each other on the real-life workplace scenarios that are given to them.

Therefore, these are the objectives of this activity:

i. to help students transform key bullet-point notes into a well-structured formal business letter.

ii. to improve students' ability to organise ideas and use appropriate tone and format in professional writing.
iii. to develop students' editing and evaluation skills through peer review and group feedback.

Steps

Firstly, the students are divided into groups of five. Then, each group is given one set of bullet-point notes based on a different scenario. Next, the students are asked to write a formal business letter following the given scenario. They need to cooperatively work together to transform the bullet-point notes into a complete and structured letter writing with correct formatting. Once all groups have completed the formal letter, they need to exchange the letters with another group for review. Finally, the groups will be called randomly to read their letters aloud to the class.

GROUP 1
Thanking a Client for Their Purchase

- A customer purchased 100 gift boxes for a corporate event
- Order placed on 2nd August 2025
- Delivered on time and in good condition
- Appreciate their trust in your products
- Offer 10% discount on next order
- Include customer service contact for future inquiries

GROUP 2
Responding to a Product Inquiry

- Received inquiry about eco-friendly notebooks
- Notebooks available in 3 sizes and 4 colors
- Bulk order discount for 50 units and above
- Delivery time: 5–7 working days
- Free custom logo printing for bulk orders
- Invite customers to visit website for full catalogue

GROUP 3
Apologizing for a Delayed Delivery

- Order #1290 placed on 25th July 2025
- Expected delivery: 30th July 2025
- Delay due to supplier issue – shortage of materials
- New delivery date: 6th August 2025
- Apologize sincerely for the inconvenience
- Offer free shipping or 5% refund as compensation

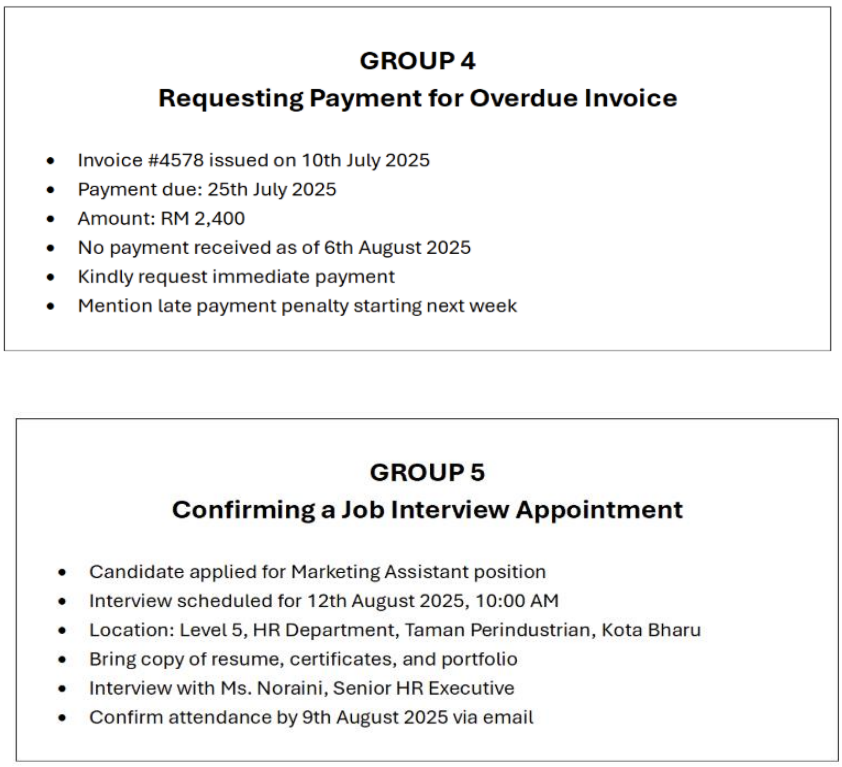

Figure 3: Bullet-Point Notes

3. Responding to Complaints Through Email

The activities in this section emphasise on enhancing students' skills in analysing and responding to workplace emails. They are designed through an integration of principles from English for Specific Purposes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Genre Analysis Theory (Bhatia, 1993). The design of these activities also reflects key principles of andragogy and English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy, ensuring that learning is purposeful, learner-centred and relevant to authentic workplace communication.

3.1 *Email Detective*

This activity introduces students to fundamental principles of effective email writing, including the essential components of an email, the purpose of an email, effective subject lines and greetings and various communicative functions found in workplace emails. The objectives of this activity are to:

i. Develop students' ability to analyse and identify the structural components, purposes and communicative functions of emails
ii. Enhance critical reading and comprehension skills using authentic emails
iii. Raise awareness of discourse functions in digital written communication
iv. Promote collaborative learning through group discussion and shared problem-solving

By the end of the activity, students should be able to identify key components and purposes of workplace emails, recognise and interpret communicative functions in emails, demonstrate critical reading and analytical skills by examining how meaning is constructed and reflect on appropriate language use in digital written communication.

Steps

Students are divided into groups of five. Each group receives three poorly written email samples containing issues related to tone, subject lines, email components or clarity. The emails are labelled E1, E2 and E3. In the group, students assume the role of "email detectives", working collaboratively to analyse the emails to identify mistakes. After discussion, the group agrees on appropriate revisions and rewrites corrected versions of the emails. Each group then presents one revised email to the class, explaining the changes they made.

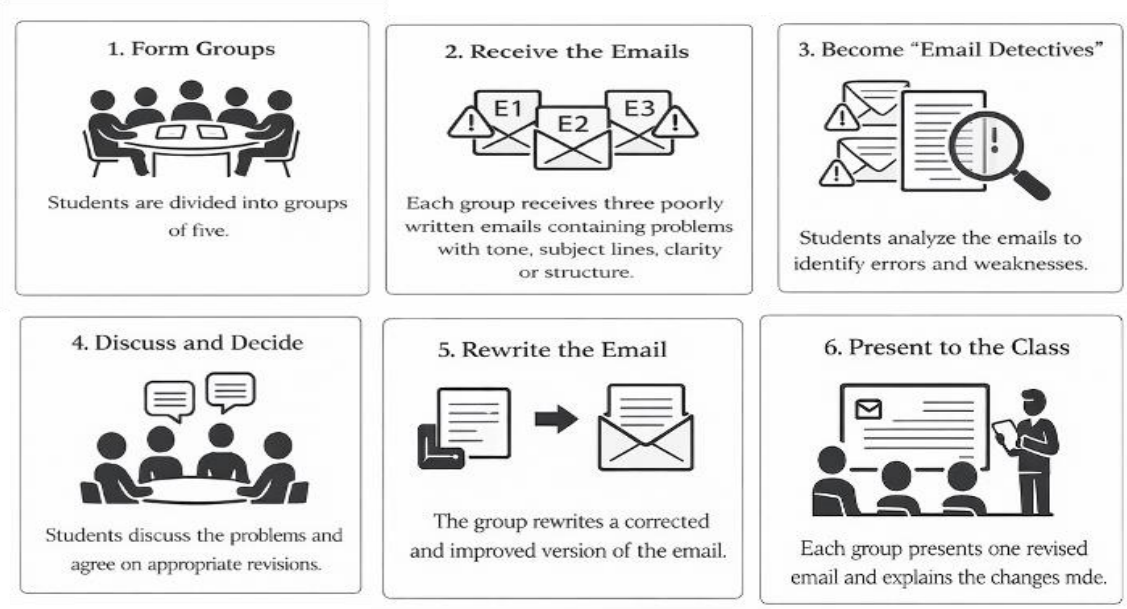

Figure 4: A Step-by-Step Guide for the Email Detective Activity

3.2 *Email Improvisation Game*

This activity extends the learning from the Email Detective task. While the previous activity focuses on developing students' skills in critically reading, analysing and identifying the purpose of workplace emails, this activity shifts the focus to producing appropriate responses to workplace emails. The objectives of this activity are to:

i. Analyse workplace situations and match them with appropriate responses using contextual and linguistic clues
ii. Organise and sequence information clearly and coherently
iii. Justify their choice of tone and content in email communication

By the end of the activity, students should be able to identify relevant information in workplace emails, maintain clarity and coherence in written responses and produce logically organised and contextually appropriate email responses.

Steps

Students are divided into groups of three. Each group randomly picks three scenario cards from a box. In the group, students discuss and draft email responses based on the chosen scenarios. After discussion, the group presents the drafted emails to the class and explains the reasoning behind their choice of tone, content and organisation.

Scenario Card		
A client complains about a late delivery and demands immediate action.	A colleague asks for help with a task outside your responsibility.	A client requests urgent changes to a nearly completed project.
You need to inform a client of a delay due to unforeseen circumstances.	A coworker repeatedly interrupts your work, you need to address it in writing.	A colleague asks for help with a task outside your responsibility.

Figure 5: Email Scenario Cards

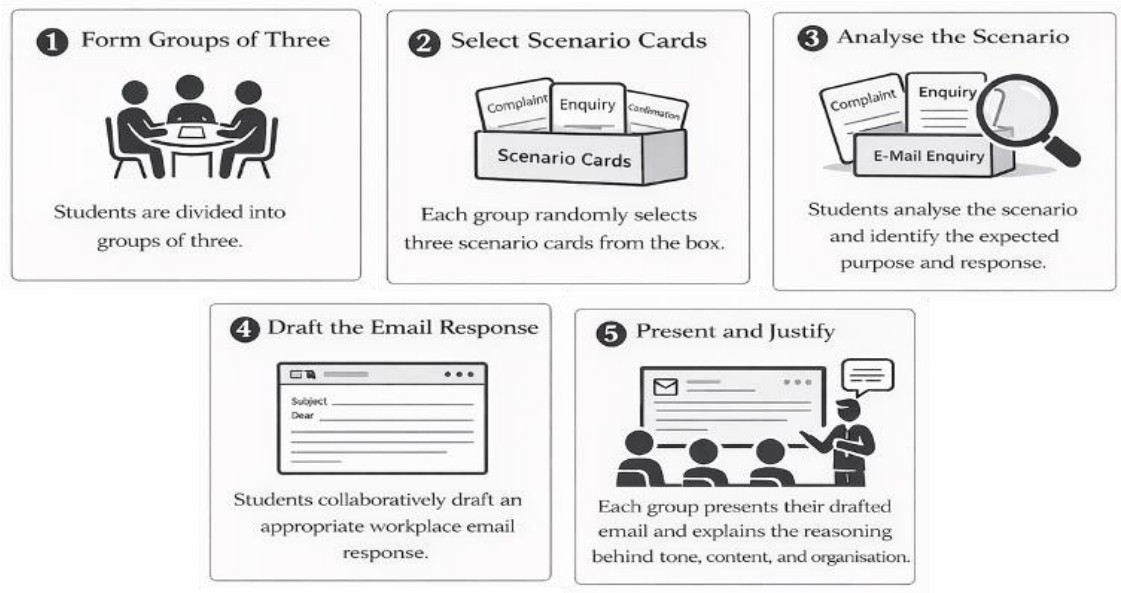

Figure 6: A Step-by-Step Guide for the Email Improvisation Game

4. Responding to Complaints Through Online Review Responses

The activities in this section focus on enhancing students' skills of responding to client online feedback or specifically termed as online review. The activities are designed based on an integration of teaching approaches and principles of English for Specific Purposes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), Communicative-Based Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching, as well as incorporation of genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993). The design of these activities also gives careful considerations of the characteristics and principles of andragogy and English as a second language.

4.1 *Online Review Under the Lens*

This activity introduces students to the structure of online reviews which often consists of various communicative functions that indicate clients' level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The objectives of this activity are to develop students' ability to analyse and identify the communicative purposes conveyed in online reviews, to enhance students' critical reading and comprehension skills within the context of authentic online reviews, to inculcate awareness of discourse functions in digital written communication, and to foster collaborative learning through sharing and discussion of findings. By the end of the activity, students should be able to accurately identify communicative purposes in online reviews, demonstrate critical reading and analytical skills by interpreting the communicative function

of each sentence in authentic online feedback, and reflect on language use in digital consumer communication.

Steps

Each student is given 10 online reviews which are labelled individually from OR1 to OR10. The issues addressed in the online reviews are related to students' workplace experiences. As each sentence in the online reviews conveys a different purpose, students need to read each sentence in each online review carefully. Next, they will pick out the label that most appropriately indicates the purpose of every sentence. After all sentences in the online reviews have been completely labelled, they will present their findings to the class.



Figure 7: A Step-by-Step AI-Generated Visual Guide for the Online Review Under the Lens Activity

4.2 *Review Response Puzzle*

This activity is related to the Online Review Under the Lens activity. While the previous activity aims to reinforce students' skills to critically read, analyse and evaluate the content and communicative purposes of online reviews, this activity pays particular attention to developing students' skills of responding to client feedback by writing online reviews. The first objective of this activity is to enhance students' ability to analyse and match review responses with the appropriate online reviews using contextual and linguistic clues. Second, to develop students' critical thinking by identifying and removing irrelevant sentences. Third, to improve the skills of organising and sequencing information for clear and coherent written communication. The last objective of this activity is to foster justification skills through the presentation of reconstructed review responses. By the end of the activity, students should be able to accurately match review responses to the corresponding online reviews using textual and contextual cues, identify relevant information in a review response to maintain clarity, and reorganize sentences logically to produce coherent and appropriate review responses.

Steps

Each student is given 10 review responses which are related to the online reviews they have read. The online reviews are labelled individually from RR1 to RR10. Students first need to match each review response to the correct online review by highlighting clues that help them identify the connection. The sentences in each review response convey different purposes. However, the sentences are arranged in a

random order and some of the sentences are also irrelevant to the online reviews. Students need to read each sentence carefully and remove the irrelevant ones. Next, they will rearrange the remaining sentences to create clear and appropriate review responses. Students will present their review responses to the class.

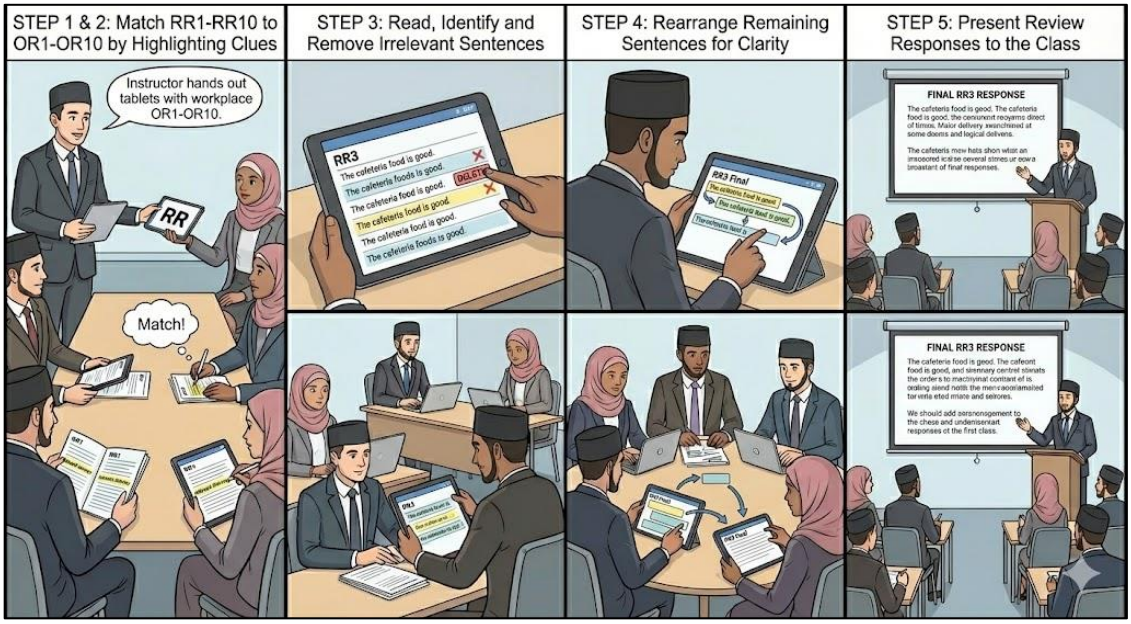

Figure 8: A Step-by-Step AI-Generated Visual Guide for the Review Response Puzzle Activity

Through these activities, students will develop higher discourse awareness through the use of specific linguistic choices that can satisfy their clients. It enables students to move beyond superficial reading to function-oriented interpretation of clients' feedback. Furthermore, students become more active in reading and analysing clients' intent, tone and implied meaning which is crucial in workplace communication. As this communication transpires completely on digital platforms, these activities will improve students' digital communicative competence. They are able to gain insights into the way language operates in digital environments for them to produce effective online communication.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study emphasises the need for English language pedagogy to move away from traditional academic models toward a more pragmatic, workplace-oriented English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework by focusing instruction on authentic professional tasks such as complaint handling, email correspondence and business letter writing. The proposed approach effectively bridges the persistent competence gap faced by adult learners in globalised corporate environments. Based on the principles of andragogy and genre theory, these teaching strategies go beyond isolated language exercises and equip employees with the language skills and confidence needed to handle real-world situations effectively. The incorporation of collaborative activities in this paper demonstrates how social interaction and task-based learning can enhance the acquisition of professional communication skills. By shifting the investigative focus from the university classroom to the workplace setting, this study provides a vital roadmap for aligning educational delivery with the actual linguistic demands of multinational industries. This shift not only addresses the immediate professional needs of self-directed adult learners but also positions English language education as a strategic tool for career advancement and long-term professional empowerment.

References

Belcher, D. D. (2024). An ecological model for genre-based instruction in ESP. *English for Specific Purposes, 73*, 45–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2024.01.003

Bolton, K., & Jenks, C. J. (2022). English as a global language in the digital age. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca, 11*(1), 131–155. https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2022-2080

Chan, M., & McGrath, I. (Eds.). (2024). *English for specific purposes (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.

Chen, S. Y. R. (2025). Enhancing ESP writing skills through the use of Termsoup: A qualitative study on AI-assisted language learning. *ERIC*, ED1484504.

Ghafar, Z., Ismail, K., & Jaafar, W. (2021). Andragogy in context: The role of needs analysis in adult ESP programmes. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *71*(4), 378–398.

Iwao, S., & Kanazawa, M. (2024). The rhetorical turn in defensive communication: Improving complaint handling through strategic communication. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *39*(2), 189–216.

Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2023). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (9th ed.). Routledge.

Martin, J. R. (2023). Genre, discourse and literacy. *Applied Linguistics Review, 14*(2), 189–212.

Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2023). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. Jossey-Bass.

Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative syllabus design*. Cambridge University Press.

Peterson, C., Vecchione, M., & Seligman, M. E. (Eds.). (2023). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.

Saputro, D. A., Arianti, A., Putri, A. R., & Kuswoyo, W. (2025). Need analysis on English for specific purposes of visual communication students: An ethnographic approach. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 21*(2), 456–475.

Seow, A. (2002). The writing process and process writing. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 315–320). Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge University Press.

Upton, T. A. (2012). Specializing in languages for specific purposes: Practical perspectives. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 11*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.11.001

Virginiya, P. T., & Handoko, B. (2025). Investigating the integration of employability skills in ESP courses for vocational higher education. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4987654

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.