

ACADEMIC PERFECTIONISM IN ESP STUDENTS: A DEVELOPMENTAL AND IDENTITY-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Ivana Juríková¹

e-mail: ivana.jurikova@uniba.sk

Abstract

Academic perfectionism is increasingly evident among university students and may play a particularly significant role in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning contexts. This theoretical article offers a conceptual analysis of academic perfectionism as it may manifest in early bachelor's ESP learning contexts, drawing on a developmental and identity-based perspective. Drawing on research in educational psychology, foreign language learning, and learner identity, the paper conceptualizes perfectionism as a context-sensitive response to the evaluative and professional demands of academic English. The article discusses its potential effects on learning engagement and performance, and outlines pedagogical implications for ESP instruction in higher education, particularly in relation to task design, feedback practices, and the framing of performance expectations.

Keywords: academic perfectionism, English for Specific Purposes, academic identity, higher education, language learning

JEL: I23, I29

Introduction

Research in foreign language learning has increasingly focused on affective factors, including in higher education settings where language performance is closely linked to assessment and students' developing professional identities. Within this line of inquiry, academic perfectionism is often discussed as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, commonly associated with high personal standards, fear of mistakes, and critical self-evaluation (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Although perfectionism has been examined extensively in relation to academic achievement, its role in English language learning – especially in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts – has received comparatively little theoretical attention (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2012; Norton, 2013).

ESP courses place particular demands on students, who are expected not only to develop accuracy and fluency in a foreign language, but also to use that

¹ Assist. Prof., PhD, Department of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, ORCID: 0009-0008-6875-0525

language to meet academic and professional expectations. Academic English and discipline-specific discourse are usually learned in settings where performance is assessed, language use is public, and standards of correctness and competence are clearly present. For many undergraduate students, particularly in the first years of study, these demands arise during a period of transition marked by ongoing identity development, sensitivity to evaluation, and growing responsibility for managing one's own learning (Arnett, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). Under such conditions, emotional responses to learning can play a noticeable role, influencing not only academic outcomes but also students' readiness to participate, take risks, and use the language actively. In this sense, ESP classrooms may intensify existing perfectionistic tendencies rather than simply reflect them.

Research on perfectionism in educational settings has typically treated it as a relatively stable individual characteristic, distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive forms and examining their links to achievement, anxiety, and well-being (Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber, 2011). In foreign language learning research, related affective constructs such as foreign language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and willingness to communicate have been examined in detail (Horwitz et al., 1986; Dörnyei, 2005). By contrast, there has been much less discussion of how academic perfectionism develops in response to students' developmental stage, their sense of academic and professional self, and the demands of using English in academic contexts. As a result, theoretical accounts that consider perfectionism in ESP learning as shaped by both context and development remain relatively scarce.

To address this gap, the article offers a theoretical discussion of academic perfectionism in early bachelor's ESP learning contexts. The paper adopts a conceptual approach and does not present empirical data; rather, it draws on existing research to develop a context-sensitive perspective on the emergence of perfectionism in these learning environments. Drawing on a developmental and identity-based perspective, perfectionism is viewed not simply as a personality trait, but as a response shaped by students' transitional status, their emerging professional self-concepts, and the evaluative demands of academic English. From this perspective, academic perfectionism in ESP can be understood as an identity-regulatory response to evaluative language use, emerging at the intersection of developmental vulnerability, institutional expectations, and the public nature of academic performance. In this context, ESP is understood to include both discipline-specific language practices and broader academic English conventions through which students are expected to perform and be assessed in higher education. Bringing together insights from educational psychology, foreign language learning, and learner identity research, the article considers how perfectionism may influence engagement, participation, and learning behaviour

in ESP settings. It concludes by discussing pedagogical implications for ESP instruction that aim to support language development while reducing unnecessary constraints on learning.

Academic Perfectionism in Higher Education: A Conceptual Overview

This section adopts a conceptual approach to academic perfectionism in higher education, drawing on existing literature to clarify key dimensions of the construct and its relevance for learning contexts. The discussion synthesizes established perspectives in educational psychology and foreign language learning to develop a coherent framework for understanding how perfectionism may operate in ESP environments.

Academic perfectionism is commonly defined as the tendency to set and pursue demanding standards in academic performance, accompanied by critical self-evaluation and concern over mistakes or failure. In educational psychology, perfectionism is widely understood as a multidimensional construct rather than a uniform personality trait, encompassing both potentially facilitative and constraining dimensions (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990). Within higher education, academic perfectionism is increasingly viewed as domain-specific and context-sensitive, shaped by institutional expectations, assessment practices, and students' perceptions of academic competence and future success.

Early work on perfectionism distinguished between self-oriented and socially prescribed forms, drawing attention to the interplay between internally set standards and perceived external expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Subsequent research introduced the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, suggesting that high personal standards may support persistence and achievement when they are not accompanied by excessive self-criticism or fear of failure (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Stoeber, 2011). In academic settings, however, this distinction often becomes less clear, as even initially adaptive forms of perfectionism may turn constraining under conditions of ongoing evaluation, uncertainty, and high perceived stakes.

University learning environments are characterized by frequent assessment, comparison, and visible performance. Students are required to demonstrate competence through written assignments, oral presentations, examinations, and classroom participation, all of which contribute to how they position themselves academically. In such contexts, perfectionistic concerns may be activated or intensified, particularly among students who closely link academic success with personal worth or future professional prospects. For this reason, academic perfectionism in higher education is understood as a response to evaluative pressure that arises in specific learning contexts, rather than as a stable dispositional characteristic (Rice et al., 2014).

Academic perfectionism is closely connected to students' developmental stage and transitional status. The early years of university study often bring increased demands for autonomy, self-regulation, and adjustment to largely implicit academic norms, which require students to reconsider how they understand their own academic abilities and expectations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). During this period, sensitivity to error, uncertainty, and perceived inadequacy may be stronger, creating conditions in which perfectionistic patterns of thinking and behaviour are more likely to develop or intensify.

In educational settings, academic perfectionism is better understood as a dynamic construct shaped by the interplay of individual tendencies, developmental processes, and learning environments. High standards and careful engagement can support persistence and academic involvement; however, excessive concern over mistakes, rigid expectations of performance, and fear of negative evaluation may limit learning behaviour, discourage risk-taking, and reduce opportunities for meaningful engagement (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). These patterns are particularly relevant in contexts that require students to perform publicly and through language, as is the case in foreign language education in higher education.

In foreign language learning, academic perfectionism can interact with the specific demands of language use in ways that intensify its effects. Using a foreign language involves making errors, monitoring one's own performance, and comparing oneself with perceived standards of proficiency. When these features are part of courses with clear academic and professional consequences – such as ESP – perfectionism may play an important role in shaping students' engagement, participation, and willingness to use the language. For this reason, understanding academic perfectionism in higher education is an important step in examining how it operates in ESP learning environments, where linguistic demands are closely tied to questions of competence and identity.

ESP and Academic English as Identity-Sensitive Learning Contexts

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses play a particular role within foreign language instruction in higher education, as they bring together language development, academic study, and preparation for professional contexts. Unlike general foreign language courses, ESP instruction asks learners to use language not only for communication, but also as a means of engaging with disciplinary content that is evaluated and assessed. For students in the early stages of their university studies, this combination can be especially demanding, as language performance is closely linked to how they are perceived academically and professionally. In this sense, ESP learning environments are closely connected to questions of identity (Lea & Street, 1998; Norton, 2013).

In many universities, early ESP courses combine discipline-specific content with the development of broader academic English skills, such as genre awareness, argumentation, and appropriate forms of disciplinary expression. As a result, students are expected to demonstrate competence in content, language, and academic literacy at the same time. This combination makes language performance both visible and consequential, as it often functions as a marker of academic credibility and emerging professional competence. For students who are still developing their academic and professional identities, these conditions can increase self-consciousness and sensitivity to evaluation.

In higher education, foreign language learning involves more than acquiring linguistic forms; it also requires participation in academic and institutional practices that carry social value. Students are expected to present themselves as competent users of academic and professional discourse, often in situations where errors are visible and open to evaluation. In ESP settings, this demand is further complicated by the need to use language in ways that align with disciplinary norms that may be unfamiliar or only partly explained. Under these conditions, students may experience tension between their developing professional self-image and their perceived limitations as foreign language users. The pressure to meet perceived standards of correctness, fluency, and sophistication may therefore be felt not simply as a linguistic challenge, but as a challenge to one's sense of academic identity. In such situations, perfectionistic tendencies may serve as a way of protecting academic self-worth by limiting visible error and maintaining a sense of control over performance.

In ESP classrooms, this dynamics may be experienced more strongly in learning situations that involve evaluation and public performance. Presentations, group projects, and in-class participation often require students to use a foreign language in front of peers with similar academic goals and trajectories. Although such practices are pedagogically well grounded, they may contribute to a heightened awareness of being assessed, which, for learners already prone to perfectionistic concerns, can encourage increased self-monitoring, avoidance of spontaneous language use, and reluctance to take communicative risks (Horwitz et al., 1986; Dörnyei, 2005).

The identity-sensitive nature of ESP learning does not mean that perfectionism is necessarily maladaptive or always detrimental. Rather, it points to the close connection between perfectionistic tendencies and the meanings students assign to language performance within particular institutional and developmental settings. When academic English is experienced mainly as a high-stakes requirement, perfectionism may take on a limiting role, reducing participation and constraining learning. By contrast, when learning environments recognise the developmental

nature of academic language use and treat imperfection as a normal part of the learning process, the negative effects of perfectionistic concerns may be reduced.

Viewing ESP and academic English as identity-sensitive learning contexts is therefore helpful for understanding how academic perfectionism operates in university-level foreign language learning. This perspective draws attention to the interplay between individual tendencies and contextual demands, including instructional practices, assessment norms, and expectations related to academic and professional identity. It also provides a basis for considering how developmental and generational factors may shape the ways in which perfectionism emerges and is experienced among ESP students in the early university years.

The preceding discussion suggests a conceptual framework in which academic perfectionism in ESP contexts can be understood as emerging through the interaction of three interrelated dimensions: (1) evaluative academic conditions, (2) developmental factors, and (3) identity-related processes. Evaluative conditions shape the perceived stakes of performance, developmental factors influence learners' sensitivity to feedback and uncertainty, and identity-related processes mediate how language use is experienced in relation to academic and professional self-concepts. It is at the intersection of these dimensions that perfectionistic tendencies may become more evident, influencing how learners engage with language use, participation, and academic performance in ESP environments.

Developmental and Generational Factors in Early BA ESP Students

Students in the early years of undergraduate study typically fall within the age range of late adolescence and emerging adulthood. This period is associated with ongoing emotional, cognitive, and social development, as well as with increasing demands for independence and self-regulation in academic settings (Arnett, 2000). For many students, the transition to university involves adjusting to new expectations, unfamiliar forms of assessment, and greater responsibility for learning outcomes. Together, these developmental conditions provide an important background for understanding how academic perfectionism can develop or become more pronounced.

At the emotional level, early bachelor's students often show heightened sensitivity to evaluation and feedback, particularly in situations where performance is visible and publicly assessed. In foreign language learning, where errors are a normal and frequent part of communication, this sensitivity can lead to greater self-consciousness and concern about performance. Such reactions should not be viewed as pathological; rather, they reflect a developmental stage in which external feedback and peer comparison continue to play a central role in how students evaluate themselves (Arnett, 2000).

Cognitive development during this period may also shape perfectionistic tendencies. Students are still consolidating higher-order academic skills, including abstract reasoning, metacognitive awareness, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In foreign language learning, limited tolerance for uncertainty can lead learners to prioritise accuracy over experimentation or to avoid tasks that require spontaneous language use. Perfectionistic thinking may be reinforced by cognitive patterns such as dichotomous evaluation of performance – that is, a tendency to judge outcomes in all-or-nothing terms – as well as by overgeneralising from individual errors (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Social factors also shape students' learning experiences in the early years of undergraduate study. Peer comparison becomes particularly noticeable in seminar-based classes, group work, and assessed presentations, all of which are common in ESP courses. Students often judge their own competence in relation to classmates who appear more fluent or confident, which can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and increase concern about performance (Dörnyei, 2005). This dynamics is often stronger in foreign language classrooms where differences in proficiency are immediately visible.

In addition to developmental considerations, generational context may also be relevant. Many current BA students belong to what is commonly referred to as Generation Z, a cohort shaped by increased exposure to digital media, continuous access to information, and heightened visibility of performance in online environments (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). While it is important to avoid overgeneralization, some research suggests that these conditions may be associated with increased self-monitoring and sensitivity to evaluation. Within academic contexts, such tendencies may interact with existing perfectionistic concerns, particularly in situations where performance is subject to formal assessment.

Overall, these developmental and generational factors suggest that academic perfectionism among early BA ESP students should be understood within a broader framework of transitional learning conditions. Rather than attributing perfectionism solely to individual predispositions, it is more productive to consider how emotional sensitivity, cognitive development, social comparison, and contemporary educational contexts jointly shape students' responses to academic and linguistic demands. This perspective provides a basis for examining how perfectionism may affect learning behaviour in ESP contexts, and for considering pedagogical responses that are sensitive to students' developmental needs.

Effects of Academic Perfectionism on ESP Learning Processes

Academic perfectionism can shape ESP learning in several ways, influencing how students approach tasks, participate in classroom interaction, and engage with language development over time. These effects are not uniform; they vary

across learners and instructional contexts, as well as according to the extent to which perfectionistic concerns are activated. Even so, certain recurring patterns can be identified that are particularly relevant to foreign language learning in higher education.

One commonly observed effect of perfectionism in language learning is heightened self-monitoring during language use (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Students with strong perfectionistic tendencies often focus closely on linguistic form, accuracy, and appropriateness, which can support careful written work and revision. In ESP contexts, where accuracy and genre conventions carry clear instructional importance, this focus may initially align well with course expectations. At the same time, excessive self-monitoring can interfere with fluency and spontaneity, especially in oral communication, where real-time language processing leaves little capacity for constant self-correction.

Perfectionism can also influence students' willingness to participate in communicative activities (Horwitz et al., 1986; Dörnyei, 2005). Fear of making mistakes or producing linguistically imperfect output can lead learners to avoid speaking, volunteering answers, or engaging in discussion, particularly in front of peers. In ESP classrooms, where participation often carries evaluative weight, such avoidance may be reinforced by concerns about being judged not only as language users but also as future professionals. As a result, students may restrict their engagement to situations in which they feel fully prepared, thereby reducing opportunities for meaningful language practice.

Written academic tasks provide another context in which perfectionistic tendencies may shape learning behaviour. While some students invest considerable effort in drafting and revising written work, others struggle with task completion because of excessively high self-imposed standards. Delayed submission, over-editing, or difficulty finalising texts may occur when learners perceive their work as never sufficiently accurate or appropriate. In such cases, perfectionism may hinder progress rather than support skill development, particularly when feedback cycles are limited.

Perfectionistic concerns often shape how students respond to feedback. Learners who closely link performance to self-worth may experience corrective feedback as threatening (Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber, 2011), even when it is intended to be supportive or formative. In ESP contexts, feedback often addresses both language form and content-related conventions, which can intensify feelings of inadequacy. As a result, students may focus disproportionately on errors while overlooking broader developmental progress, or become discouraged by feedback that highlights gaps between current performance and perceived expectations.

At the same time, the effects of academic perfectionism on ESP learning should not be understood as inherently negative. High standards, persistence,

and commitment to quality can support academic engagement when they are accompanied by realistic expectations and tolerance of error. Difficulties arise primarily when perfectionism limits risk-taking, participation, and openness to feedback, thereby reducing opportunities for language development. In foreign language learning, where experimentation and approximation play a central role, such constraints may have cumulative effects on learning over time.

These influences operate at the level of everyday classroom behaviour rather than as isolated psychological traits. Recognising such effects is therefore important not only for interpreting student performance, but also for informing instructional practices that support sustained engagement and development in ESP contexts. These patterns can be understood as reflecting the interaction of evaluative conditions, developmental sensitivity, and identity-related processes, which together shape how learners engage with language use and participation in ESP contexts.

Pedagogical Implications for ESP Instruction

Understanding academic perfectionism as a context-sensitive and developmentally influenced phenomenon has several implications for ESP instruction in higher education. Importantly, the aim of ESP instruction is not to reduce standards of accuracy or performance, but to recalibrate the conditions under which these standards are pursued. Rather than treating perfectionism as an individual learner problem, it is more productive to consider how instructional practices, assessment norms, and classroom interaction patterns may either intensify or moderate perfectionistic concerns. From this perspective, pedagogical responses focus on shaping learning conditions that support engagement and language development.

One important area concerns the way expectations about accuracy and performance are communicated. In ESP courses, linguistic precision and adherence to disciplinary conventions are often emphasized, which is both necessary and justified. However, when expectations are presented without sufficient attention to developmental progression, students may interpret accuracy as a prerequisite for participation rather than as a long-term goal. Making explicit distinctions between formative and summative tasks, as well as clarifying when approximation and experimentation are acceptable, can help reduce unnecessary performance pressure.

Feedback practices are also an important element of ESP instruction. Feedback in ESP courses often addresses several aspects of performance, including language form, genre conventions, and content-related appropriateness. Although such feedback is necessary, its effects depend largely on how it is presented and how learners interpret it. Drawing attention to patterns of progress alongside

areas for improvement, and framing errors as part of a developmental process, may encourage more constructive learner responses. Providing opportunities for revision and reflection can further support the view of academic language development as gradual and ongoing, rather than as a single moment of evaluation.

Task design represents another area in which perfectionistic tendencies can be addressed indirectly. Tasks that allow for preparation, collaboration, or staged completion can lower the perceived risk associated with language use, particularly in oral activities. Similarly, incorporating low-stakes communicative tasks alongside assessed performances may encourage participation and experimentation. Such practices do not reduce academic standards but instead provide varied entry points for engagement.

Classroom discourse around error and competence also deserves attention. Instructors can influence how language use is framed by modelling tolerance of imperfection and openness to revision. When errors are approached as expected and informative, rather than as signs of deficiency, students may be more willing to participate actively despite uncertainty. This is especially relevant in ESP contexts, where learners may closely associate linguistic performance with professional credibility.

Pedagogical sensitivity to students' developmental stage is also important. Early bachelor's students are still adjusting to university-level expectations and academic discourse practices, often as they begin to develop a sense of themselves as future professionals. Acknowledging this transitional status may help normalise difficulty and reduce unrealistic self-expectations. While ESP teachers are not responsible for addressing students' broader emotional well-being, awareness of developmental factors can inform instructional choices that support sustained participation and learning.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that pedagogical responses to academic perfectionism in ESP contexts are best approached through instructional design, feedback practices, and classroom interaction norms. By attending to the conditions under which language learning takes place, instructors can create environments that maintain academic rigour while supporting learners' engagement with foreign language use in higher education.

Conclusion

This article has explored academic perfectionism in ESP learning among early bachelor's students from a developmental and identity-based perspective. By considering perfectionism within the conditions of foreign language learning in higher education, it has shown how perfectionistic concerns can arise through the interaction of evaluative academic practices, students' transitional stage of development, and their emerging sense of professional self. Rather than viewing

perfectionism as a stable learner characteristic, the discussion has highlighted its context-sensitive nature and its relevance to everyday learning processes in ESP classrooms.

The analysis indicates that academic perfectionism can shape engagement with foreign language learning in subtle but meaningful ways, influencing participation, willingness to take risks, task completion, and responses to feedback. While high standards and careful attention to language use can support learning, excessive concern with error and performance may reduce opportunities for practice and development, particularly in settings where language use is subject to public evaluation. Recognising such dynamics is therefore important both for interpreting student behaviour in ESP courses and for reflecting on instructional practices that may unintentionally increase performance pressure.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the article points toward approaches that focus on learning conditions rather than on individual learner deficits. Clarifying expectations, framing feedback in developmental terms, designing tasks with varying levels of communicative risk, and acknowledging students' transitional status can contribute to learning environments that support engagement without lowering academic standards. Such considerations are especially relevant in ESP instruction, where language performance is closely tied to academic and professional evaluation.

As a theoretical contribution, this article draws on existing literature and does not include empirical data. Future research could extend the proposed framework through qualitative or mixed-method studies that examine how academic perfectionism is experienced by ESP students and how it interacts with instructional practices in specific institutional contexts. Empirical work in this area would help refine pedagogical approaches that support effective and sustainable foreign language learning in higher education.

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