НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ НА УНСС (2) 2026, АКАДЕМИЧНО ИЗДАТЕЛСТВО УНСС
ISSN (online): 2534-8957; ISSN (print): 0861-9344; http://unwe-research-papers.org/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37075/RP.2026.2.08

TEACHING ESP ALONGSIDE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Isida Shehu[1], Anjeza Brahja[2]
e-mail: isida_shehu@yahoo.com, e-mail: anjezabr@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, we aim to highlight the general and professional development learners obtain while learning English for Specific Purposes. Their exposure to English classes is not limited to language proficiency, but also includes other skills regarded as complementary to one's professional knowledge in today's globalised world and labour market. Our paper is based on a qualitative approach, specifically class observations of Informatics engineering students at the Polytechnic University of Tirana, their feedback after completing the classroom-based English course, two successful online English modules on soft skills, and experience exchange among colleagues. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that with a dedicated and professional approach from ESP lecturers, learners are equipped to a considerable degree with skills beyond the English language. Communication, presentation, problem-solving, critical thinking and professional etiquette skills are among those widely taught in English for Specific Purposes classes, considered fundamental for success in the workplace, increasing employability. Throughout the paper, we have defined some teaching techniques directly linked to the acquisition of these skills.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), teaching, professional skills, engineering students

JEL: I23

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes is widely applied as a teaching approach tailored according to the learners' needs. Teaching in this case, being genre-oriented, is not focused on proficient language skills only. It incorporates many other employability and mobility skills, useful to future professionals, such as communication skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, analytical skills, etc. These are competences that, to exact science students, such as engineering ones, are not taught in their field-related subjects. Based on the school curriculum, there is a tendency to expose engineering students to technical subjects (Reimer

[1] Assoc. Prof., PhD, Centre of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Mathematical Engineering and Physical Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana, ORCID: 0009-0002-9996-5832
[2] Assoc. Prof., PhD, Centre of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Mathematical Engineering and Physical Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana, ORCID: 0009-0007-6485-141X

2007), leaving little space for language development or other academic skills. Consequently, acquisition of such skills can be achieved in humanities courses such as ESP classes or Communication ones (when they are part of the curricula). Agzamovna (2024) supports the idea of ESP continuing to be the key component for learners in equipping them with the linguistic and professional competences necessary for their future success and regards the fusion of language learning with professional skill development as the key element and purpose of ESP. Egglestone and Rabb (2018) consider professional communication skills as vital as technical competence. The purpose of this paper is to state and highlight the role of ESP classes in the Albanian context in teaching engineering students' complementary skills, besides the technical skills they are exposed to throughout the entire academic year, to better position themselves in the future labour market.

The dynamic and various activities introduced in ESP point out specific professional skills, starting with the role-play activities in which students practice branch-related terminology while simulating real-life situations. Common instructional activities include technical report writing, oral project presentations, participation in meetings, and the interpretation of technical documentation and research articles. These activities allow students to engage in purposeful language use that closely reflects real-world engineering practice (Hyland, 2006). While learning how they should address each other either orally or in a written form, they elaborate more on the communication skills essential for a proper understanding in a workplace environment. In these scenarios, special attention is paid to non-verbal communication and emotional intelligence, too, with the instructor teaching and showing students how to behave and react under certain circumstances while retaining a formal and mature attitude towards their colleagues.

The cultural element is inevitable, as language cannot be taught separately from the culture of a place. In the case of the English language, apart from the cultural difference of the learner's mother tongue, there is the differentiation of the two most common and widespread English variants, thus transmitting either the American or British attitudes and psychology, with sometimes one variant being more formal and different in style than the other. Awareness and recognition of cultural differences help in having appropriate and correct communication and correspondence with professionals coming from various cultural backgrounds. The various topics and situations covered in each unit pack the learners with a conglomerate of issues to be analysed and thought from another point of view, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The ESP teacher, too, has to be well-qualified and, if possible, continuously trained to better suit the current needs of the learner. Nazeer et al. (2023) recommend promotion of professional development opportunities for educators related

to ESP methodologies since it has a direct impact on teaching skills. Supunya (2023) points out some of the challenges ESP teachers face by listing up-to-date language and content knowledge, along with pedagogical and technological knowledge, in order for the teacher to be an effective ESP instructor. Continuous professional development should be provided by institutions through training. In the Albanian context, ESP teacher trainings are not provided, and the lecturers resort to online ones when such opportunities are given. The role of the ESP instructor extends beyond traditional language teaching. ESP instructors function as facilitators who support students in applying language skills to professional and technical contexts. In the case of ESP, diverse pedagogical strategies are applied, depending on which ones are regarded as valuable in the respective context. The instructors' responsibilities in ESP are to teach learners vocabulary (discipline-related) and discourse while teaching them communication skills, critical thinking skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills, etc. These competences are increasingly recognised as core learning outcomes in engineering education (ABET, 2023, p. 6). All of this work is done by encouraging learners to delve into professional practices such as giving presentations, writing memos, emails, reports, or simulation meetings/conversations in a workplace context.

Methodology

This paper is based on the qualitative approach, more specifically, class observations of first-year Bachelor's degree, Information Technology students of the Polytechnic University of Tirana (PUT) and their feedback after course completion, as well as experience exchange among colleagues. In total, the study included 60 student participants and 6 ESP lecturers teaching at PUT. The qualitative method used for feedback collection was through 6 focus groups and selected interviews aimed at gathering participants' perceptions regarding the integration of professional skills in ESP classes. The data obtained were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify recurring ideas, which were grouped into themes such as communication skills, presentation skills, critical thinking, employability, etc.

Among the feedback received by the engineering students of ESP for the traditional face-to-face classes conducted during the first semester of the 2025-2026 academic year, this paper reflects their perception of two online modules in English piloted by the British Council. These modules were incorporated within the ESP classes and lasted for two months. The topics focused on soft skills such as critical thinking, speaking and maximising interaction.

Professional skills taught to engineering students in ESP classes

ESP, ever since introduced as an English teaching approach, is recognised as being communication–oriented for either academic or professional fields. As such, one of the primary and foremost competencies taught in such courses is communication. Role plays are the most frequent activities for teaching the ability to work in pairs or as a team, directly boosting professional *communication skills*. In doing so, the learner is more involved by integrating the newly acquired vocabulary and knowledge in general (Gabriella,2014). Students do these activities for specific purposes such as offering solutions, checking for errors, asking about purpose, asking for help, etc., depending on the objectives of the unit. However, the expected positive results can only be achieved with well-planned role plays which simulate real-life situations and encourage interaction among learners. At PUT, we widely incorporate role-plays in classes, even though at the beginning some learners perceive this activity as either embarrassing, not age-appropriate or not that academic. With time, they understand that role plays are indeed useful for real-life practice and very practical.

With internationalisation and a global economy, *intercultural communication skills* are crucial to engineering students, highlighting the cultural element as one directly influencing communication. Cultural differences may lead to misinterpretations and pose barriers to the receiver or sender of a message. Exposure to, awareness, understanding and embrace of various cultural elements better prepares students for diversified workplaces. One interesting element and unit in the textbooks used with our students is related to the different measurement systems used by engineers worldwide, reflecting the various social developments and daily practices of people coming from different countries and cultures, while highlighting the importance of knowing and specifying which measurement system is agreed upon to be used to avoid catastrophic errors in engineering.

Presentation skills, in the case of project-based learning, are employed in ESP settings when learners are asked to deliver presentations on project results or studies of their own or as a group. Task-based and project-based learning approaches are particularly effective in ESP contexts, as they promote active engagement, learner autonomy, and contextualised language use (Long, 2015). As sometimes a one-way communication, ideas and opinions in presentation deliveries have to be clearly and effectively stated. If working and giving presentations as a group, the activity helps students foster teamwork and coordination among them and indeed serves the learner as a start-up experience in which they break the ice, rather than leave it for a real-situation experience while at work. By the end of the course, the learners (depending on the teaching plan) are asked to deliver presentations in English on any interesting topic to them and a discipline-related topic, putting into practice and experiencing presentation delivery in a foreign language

for the first time. Based on class observation and discussions in class, most of the students fear standing in front of their classmates and the lecturer and giving presentations. Sometimes, they even mistake it for sharing information with others by simply reading what they have prepared beforehand, thus failing to give a proper presentation. Giving them the right instructions and making them follow the instructions by applying such activities in class is the best way for them to have a richer experience, lower performance anxiety and boost their confidence in giving presentations.

Another means of communication among professionals, the more formal one, is the written form. Starting with the simplest one, the email and moving on to more technical writings such as memos, reports, manuals, proposals, instructions, etc., all of which are covered once at a time in each unit, with writing activities constituting 11% of all activities per unit in the ESP textbook used. However, it is up to the lecturer to decide on which language skill to focus more on per class and whether to add other written activities. As well-structured and pre-planned activities, they develop in the learner good *analytical skills* by interpreting, evaluating and synthesising information. The best way to improve this skill is through practice, focusing on a genre-based approach. This way, the student familiarizes with the various specific conventions for each written task and again reverts to specialised and technical terminology.

According to Zivkovic (2015), *critical thinking* skills are challenging to both the learner and the lecturer, with the former becoming an active participant in the learning process and the latter providing the students with the relevant framework to help the learner become an active participant. Course activities involve sharing ideas and asking open-ended questions (effective questioning). As stated by Živković (2015), the use of such questions in classroom discussions helps move students beyond surface-level comprehension to higher-order thinking, such as critical, logical, reflective, and creative thinking. Critical thinking aims to create a learning environment in which students actively build their own knowledge and assume responsibility for their learning process. Engineering students implement critical thinking through reading and discussing technical materials as well as writing. Some of the most common tasks listed by Spence and Liu (2013) that are required by engineers in English language and divided by language skills are: reading manuals, office documents, emails, written instructions, manuals; writing emails, reports, memos, minutes of meetings, proposals for projects, memos; listening to spoken instructions, seminars and conferences; speaking by giving presentations, attending meetings, talking about everyday tasks and job duties etc. A clear example of embedding language learning is within authentic engineering tasks and communicative situations. In most cases, we engage our

students in problem-solving tasks since this fully aligns with their main role as future engineers.

A practical approach to incorporating online modules on soft skills in ESP classes

In the context of our University, this academic year, we piloted an online module for our students as part of the English language class and assessment in collaboration with the British Council. The two modules, each consisting of several hours, were on communication skills, interaction and critical thinking, and they were moderated by a representative of the British Council.

Learners who enrolled in the modules had to complete certain tasks in order to successfully complete the module. They had to attend the online sessions and post in the modules' forums and reflections, mirroring the information obtained. The feedback we received from our students was very positive, with the majority of participants accomplishing the two modules. They had a very positive reaction towards the modules, many of them demanding more similar training. First, they enjoyed an almost new-to-them way of intertwining traditional classroom learning and online learning. Second, they appreciated that in those modules they acquired information on soft skills, which they had not been introduced to in other classes. Third, they were also highly motivated to complete the tasks, since by the end of the two modules, apart from affecting their final assessment in English language upon completion of the tasks, they were also granted two certificates of completion for each module with the respective titles.

Many other advantages were noticed regarding the students. We as lecturers witnessed how they were indirectly taught to better organise their time, to stick to deadlines, to network, to be ethical even in online settings, to familiarise themselves with technical issues in effectively using various platforms for the modules and to be active learners and continuous ones. By having the opportunity to incorporate these modules, what we as ESP lecturers do in practice is emphasise the importance of integrating these skills in our classes.

Limitations

Despite the positive attitude of the participants towards all activities conducted in English classes and their role in developing soft skills, the number of hours per week allocated to ESP for engineering students is limited, which limits the time to certain activities, such as presentations or writing, through which learners develop some of the complementary skills. In addition, this study is limited to a single department within our university; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to universities of a different nature.

Conclusions

The integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with professional skills instruction has gained increasing attention in engineering education, particularly in response to globalisation and the internationalisation of engineering practice. Contemporary engineers are expected not only to demonstrate strong technical competence, but also to communicate effectively in English within academic, industrial, and multicultural professional contexts. For these reasons and based on the analysis of the data collected, the majority of our students are fully aware of the soft skills taught in ESP classes, and most of them believe these skills will help them become competent and well-prepared professionals. Only a few of them believe that these skills are taken for granted and possessed by all learners, when in practice (as indicated by lecturers), they lack such skills.

Teaching ESP alongside professional skills involves embedding language learning within authentic engineering tasks and communicative situations. Rather than focusing exclusively on general linguistic proficiency, ESP instruction emphasises discipline-specific vocabulary, genres, and discourse practices relevant to engineering fields. Most of the activities in class allow students to engage in purposeful language use that closely reflects real-world engineering practice.

In conclusion, teaching ESP alongside professional skills represents a practice-oriented approach to engineering education. This integrated approach aligns with current educational frameworks and industry expectations and should therefore be considered a fundamental component of modern engineering curricula. It is therefore essential for ESP lecturers to have a clear understanding of the students' needs to tailor classes accordingly and to be persistent in incorporating all the above-mentioned skills acknowledged as contributing positively to students' education and in their future workplace.

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