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Authentic Tasks and Professional Genres in Technical ESP: a Task-Based Curriculum for Business Information Systems Students

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Abstract: This study evaluates a task-based English for Specific Purposes curriculum for Business Information Systems students at Babeș-Bolyai University. The 14-week course, designed based on workplace needs analysis, combined task-based teaching with explicit instruction in professional writing genres. Students worked with authentic business cases including data breach scenarios, cross-cultural management situations, and e-commerce models. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods with 80 students, results showed substantial improvements in business English proficiency, specialized vocabulary knowledge, and professional writing quality. Student feedback indicated increased confidence in professional communication and enhanced ability to adapt their writing style for different audiences and purposes.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Business Information Systems, task-based language teaching, authentic materials, curriculum evaluation.

1. Introduction

The current global technological environment heightens the expectations for English proficiency among the technical discipline graduates. Thus, Business Information Systems (BIS) future professionals find themselves at the crossroads of complex communicative demands: they function as intermediaries between technical and business communities, requiring command of multiple specialized discourses simultaneously (Hyland, 2016). In other words, they sit at the intersection of computer science, business strategy and organizational communication. English for

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General Purposes instruction has proven inadequate for developing this kind of competencies (Basturkmen, 2019).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides a systematic framework for addressing specialized language needs, yet curricula for hybrid technical disciplines—fields integrating content from multiple professional domains—remain inadequately researched (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Upton & Connor, 2001). The 'level of specificity' in ESP instruction has been a persistent source of debate (Upton & Connor, 2001, p. 315), with courses gravitating toward either broad transferable skills or narrow disciplinary focus. Technology-focused ESP typically bifurcates into business-oriented courses that sacrifice technical rigor, or technically-focused courses that neglect business genres and interpersonal communication (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Yet research suggests this bifurcation is pedagogically unnecessary: Lambert (2010) found that high-priority workplace tasks—locating information, summarizing, editing documents, and facilitating communication—are remarkably consistent across business and educational domains, with less divergence than traditionally assumed. BIS students require what current ESP provision fails to deliver: integrated competence across technical and business domains, with the pragmatic flexibility to transition responsively between them as professional contexts demand.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) may offer a productive approach to this challenge. By grounding instruction in authentic professional tasks rather than isolated linguistic forms, TBLT has the potential to develop linguistic competence, genre knowledge, and situational judgment simultaneously—capacities that professional communication inherently requires (Long, 2018; Ellis, 2018). Yet to date, rigorous empirical evaluations of TBLT in technically hybrid ESP contexts have been limited.

This paper seeks to address that gap. It reports on the design, implementation, and evaluation of a task-based ESP curriculum developed for BIS students at a technical university in Romania. The curriculum combines authentic professional cases—data breach analyses, cross-cultural management scenarios, digital ethics dilemmas—with explicit genre instruction, with the aim of developing the communicative competencies that characterize BIS professional practice.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on ESP curriculum design, TBLT, and genre-based pedagogy. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework and needs analysis findings. Section 4 details the research methodology. Section 5 reports quantitative and qualitative results. Section 6 discusses pedagogical implications, and Section 7 concludes, while Section 8 emphasises limitations and future directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. ESP in technical and professional contexts

ESP has, since its emergence in the 1960s, been characterized by its focus on learners' specific professional and academic needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). What

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distinguishes ESP from broader content-based approaches is its systematic attention to the discourse communities and genre conventions that define particular professional fields (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Recent scholarship has emphasized the need for interdisciplinary ESP approaches that address increasingly complex workplace communication demands (Chan, 2021; Aguaguiña Pilla *et al*., 2025).

Technically hybrid disciplines like BIS, however, resist easy categorization within existing ESP subfields. Business English scholarship has developed sophisticated accounts of commercial discourse (Charles, 2007), yet these typically lack the technical depth that BIS contexts demand. Conversely, technical communication research addresses IT documentation effectively (Stoller, 2006) but tends to underemphasize business genres and stakeholder management. Recent empirical work confirms this gap persists: Roshid and Kankaanranta (2023) document significant misalignment between industry expectations for integrated business-technical communication and university ESP provision, while Varlakova *et al*. (2023) report ongoing challenges in designing business English curricula for technical university students. BIS professionals operate at this intersection, facing what might be called a "tripartite register demand": technical precision, business rhetoric, and interpersonal pragmatic competence—each governed by distinct genre conventions yet requiring simultaneous deployment (Chan, 2021).

2.2 Task-based language teaching (TBLT): theory and evidence

Long's (2018, p. 6) characterization of tasks as "bounded, coherent, goal-oriented, real-world activities" articulates design criteria that differentiate tasks from decontextualized exercises: tasks prioritize meaningful communication, engage cognitive processing, and yield outcomes that extend beyond linguistic practice. In ESP settings, tasks approximating target professional activities can create learning conditions difficult to achieve through traditional exercises (Ellis, 2018; Van den Branden, 2016).

TBLT draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks within second language acquisition research. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis proposes that negotiation of meaning during task completion facilitates acquisition by focusing learners' attention on problematic linguistic forms within communicatively rich contexts. Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis argues that language production under communicative pressure promotes deeper cognitive processing and heightened awareness of linguistic gaps. Doughty and Williams' (1998) focus-on-form principle provides pedagogical justification for embedding explicit language instruction within task-based frameworks, demonstrating that form-focused and meaning-focused instruction need not be mutually exclusive (Ellis, 2016).

Empirical evidence for TBLT effectiveness has accumulated substantially. Plonsky and Kim's (2016) meta-analysis of 72 studies reported mean effect sizes of d = 1.23 for task-based instruction, with particularly robust gains for fluency and complexity. More recent syntheses confirm these patterns while noting considerable

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heterogeneity in implementation quality (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019). In ESP contexts specifically, task-based approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in medical English (Huang, 2010) and business English settings (Chan, 2021; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023). However, technically hybrid ESP contexts like BIS—where communicative demands simultaneously span technical, business, and interpersonal domains—remain under-researched empirically (Varlakova et al., 2023).

2.3 Genre pedagogy and professional discourse

Genre theory has shaped ESP pedagogy significantly since Swales' (1990) foundational work establishing genre as socially recognized communicative action within discourse communities. Bhatia (1993) extended this framework to professional settings, showing how business and legal genres use predictable rhetorical moves that serve particular communicative purposes. Genre-based instruction provides a systematic way to make implicit discourse conventions explicit—a function that appears particularly valuable in ESP contexts where learners have limited exposure to target professional communities.

However, technically hybrid ESP contexts present distinct pedagogical challenges. Students in fields like Business Information Systems must develop competence across multiple professional discourse communities rather than mastering conventions from a single domain. When a BIS professional writes a data breach notification, for instance, they draw simultaneously on IT security discourse conventions, crisis communication norms, and business correspondence formality requirements. Genre instruction in such contexts needs to address more than isolated genres; it must develop students' pragmatic capacity to combine and adapt genre resources across communicative situations. Recent work on genre knowledge frameworks (Tardy, Sommer-Farias, and Gevers 2020) suggests that explicit instruction in the relationships between form, purpose, and context may foster this adaptive capability, though the specific pedagogical mechanisms for developing cross-domain genre flexibility in hybrid professional fields warrant further investigation.

3. Theoretical framework and Needs Analysis

3.1 Needs analysis methodology and findings

Following Long's (2010) comprehensive needs analysis framework, the study examined multiple sources to establish what BIS students need to learn. Data came from analyzing 50 job advertisements for BIS positions at regional technology companies and examining authentic workplace documents from the field.

Six key communication areas emerged from this analysis: requirements analysis (interviewing stakeholders, documenting needs, writing use cases); technical documentation (writing system specifications, explaining data flows, technical reporting); business communication (client emails, executive presentations, proposals); cross-cultural management (leading international teams, virtual collaboration, adapting to cultural differences); problem analysis (identifying root

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causes, assessing risks, making evidence-based recommendations); and crisis communication (notifying stakeholders about incidents, communicating under pressure, writing post-incident reports).

One finding stood out as particularly important: the need for register flexibility—the ability to adjust how formally or technically one writes depending on who will read it and what the situation requires. The job advertisement analysis showed that 43 of 50 positions (86%) explicitly mentioned the need to communicate with multiple types of people (technical teams, management, clients, end users). The workplace document analysis reinforced this pattern, showing that professionals routinely wrote multiple versions of the same information for different audiences within the same project. This ability to adapt communication style appears to require repeated practice writing the same content for different audiences rather than simply learning individual genres in isolation.

Initial assessment of the 80 entering BIS students confirmed they needed this training: their average English level was B1+ (intermediate), they knew only 42% of specialized business vocabulary, they had minimal experience with professional writing beyond basic emails, and they scored low on intercultural awareness measures.

3.2 Integrating TBLT and genre pedagogy

The curriculum combines TBLT and genre-based approaches, using the strengths of each. TBLT provides realistic communication situations that encourage meaningful language use and active engagement, while genre pedagogy explicitly teaches the conventions of professional writing and provides clear frameworks for understanding complex texts. This combination follows Samuda and Bygate's (2008) model, where tasks create motivating contexts for teaching genres rather than eliminating direct language instruction altogether.

Seven principles guided the curriculum design. First, tasks and texts should be authentic and relevant to the six competency areas identified in the needs analysis. Second, tasks should increase in difficulty gradually across the 14 weeks. Third, activities should integrate multiple skills—reading, writing, speaking, listening—as they occur in real workplaces. Fourth, tasks should involve collaboration, reflecting how professionals actually work in teams. Fifth, explicit instruction about genres and language should be built into each task cycle. Finally, students should engage in regular structured reflection on their learning.

4. Research methodology

4.1 Design and participants

The study compared two groups of students using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Because students were already organized into existing classes, they could not be randomly assigned to groups. Instead, the groups were carefully matched based on their initial English proficiency and background characteristics, with statistical adjustments made to account for any remaining differences.

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Participants were 80 first-year BIS students at Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania, all enrolled in a required English course. The experimental group (40 students) followed the new task-based ESP curriculum, while the control group (40 students) used a standard business English textbook (Business Result Upper-Intermediate, Oxford University Press). Both groups had the same instructor and received the same amount of instruction: one hour and a half a week for 14 weeks. Statistical testing confirmed that the two groups started with equivalent English proficiency levels, with both groups averaging around 52 points on the Oxford Placement Test.

4.2 The experimental curriculum

The 14-week curriculum was organized around six authentic business case sequences, selected to address the competency areas identified through needs analysis and to provide increasing difficulty across the semester:

Weeks 1–2: Management and Leadership (performance evaluation genres; role-play)
Weeks 3–4: Teamwork and Collaboration (case analysis; improvement planning; oral recommendation)
Weeks 5–6: E-Commerce Business Models (business plan writing; entrepreneurial pitch presentation)
Weeks 7–8: Cross-Cultural Management (power distance case; cultural adaptation memo; intercultural role-play)
Weeks 9–10: Ethics in the Digital Era (ethical dilemma analysis; policy memo; structured debate)
Weeks 11–12: Crisis Communication (data breach case; stakeholder notification; simulated press conference)
Weeks 13–14: Integrated Case Study (comprehensive synthesis: team presentation and written report)

Each one hour and a half session followed a consistent three-phase teaching cycle: a pre-task phase (10 minutes) for vocabulary preparation, topic introduction, and background knowledge activation; a during-task phase (60 minutes) for main task completion in pairs or small groups with instructor monitoring and language-focused intervention; and a post-task phase (20 minutes) for explicit genre analysis, targeted language feedback, error discussion, and structured reflection. This cycle draws on the pre-task/task/post-task structure discussed in TBLT research (Ellis, 2003) while maintaining genre-focused explicit instruction as a consistent component.

4.3 Assessment instruments

The study used four different methods to measure student progress and gather feedback.

4.3.1 General business English proficiency

Students took the Business Language Testing Service (BULATS) Reading and Writing test both before and after the 14-week course. This standardized test

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measures overall business English ability and has been shown to produce consistent, reliable results.

4.3.2 Specialized vocabulary

A custom 75-item vocabulary test was designed specifically for this study. The test covered three vocabulary areas that BIS students need: technical IT terms (25 items, such as data breach, API integration, authentication), business management terms (25 items, such as stakeholder, leverage, delegation), and cross-cultural communication terms (25 items, such as power distance, high-context communication, consensus orientation). The test was piloted beforehand to ensure it was reliable.

4.3.3 Writing quality

Students submitted a writing portfolio at three different times during the semester. Each portfolio contained three writing tasks: a professional email requesting information from an external stakeholder; a 500-word case analysis report recommending solutions to a business problem and a 300-word executive memo explaining a technical issue for non-technical management.

The course instructor scored the portfolios using a detailed analytical rubric that assessed five areas: task achievement (how well students completed the communication goal), genre appropriacy (how appropriately they used professional writing conventions), organization (how well structured their writing was), language use (accuracy and appropriateness of vocabulary and grammar), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, formatting). Each criterion was scored on a 5-point scale with specific descriptors for each level to ensure consistent application across all portfolios.

4.3.4 Student feedback

Student opinions and experiences were gathered in three ways: an end-of-course survey, focus group discussions held mid-semester, and individual learning journals that students submitted at weeks 4, 8, and 12.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative findings

Statistical analysis compared how much each group improved over the 14-week period. The results showed that the experimental group improved significantly more than the control group on all three measures.

5.1.1 Business English proficiency

Both groups improved their general business English skills (measured by the BULATS test), but the experimental group improved much more. The experimental group's scores increased by an average of 18.4 points, while the control group's scores increased by only 5.1 points. The difference between the groups was large (Cohen's d = 1.23), meaning the experimental curriculum had a strong positive effect.

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5.1.2 Vocabulary knowledge

The experimental group showed even larger gains in specialized vocabulary. They improved most in technical IT terms (like "data breach" and "API integration") and cross-cultural communication terms (like "power distance" and "high-context communication"). Their improvement in business management vocabulary was also substantial, though slightly smaller. Overall, the vocabulary effect size was d = 1.45—the largest improvement observed in the study. This suggests the experimental curriculum was particularly effective at teaching specialized vocabulary that typical business English textbooks don't cover well.

5.1.3 Writing quality

Portfolio analysis showed that the experimental group improved more in writing quality than the control group over the course of the semester. The experimental group showed the strongest improvement in genre appropriacy (d = 1.34) and task achievement (d = 1.28)—in other words, they became better at writing in appropriate professional styles and accomplishing the communication goals of each task. They also improved in language use (d = 1.05) and organization (d = 0.98). These patterns align with the curriculum's focus on teaching students how to write effectively in different professional genres. However, because the portfolios were scored by the course instructor rather than independent raters, these writing quality findings should be interpreted with caution.

5.2 Qualitative findings

Analysis of focus-group discussions, learning journals and survey responses revealed three main themes in the experimental group’s learning experience.

5.2.1 Professional relevance and motivation

The most common theme across all student feedback was that the course felt directly relevant to their future careers. Students consistently said the authentic case materials were different from their previous English classes because they felt genuinely connected to real professional situations. Many students commented specifically on the data breach and cross-cultural management cases, saying these scenarios showed them professional challenges they had never thought about from a language perspective before.

5.2.2 Awareness of communication styles

The second major theme was students’ growing awareness of how to adjust their communication style for different audiences. This theme appeared most strongly in learning journals from weeks 7 through 12. Students began to recognize the relationship between who they were writing for, what they were trying to accomplish, and how they should express themselves. Several students described a turning point when they wrote the same information twice—first as a technical report and then as an executive memo. This exercise helped them understand how writing style reflects

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power relationships and serves different purposes. The pre-task and post-task reflection activities seemed to help students develop this awareness explicitly.

5.2.3 Confidence in professional communication

The third theme was increased confidence in professional communication. In both focus-groups and learning journals, students consistently reported feeling more confident. Several described specific moments—especially during the crisis communication module—when they shifted from feeling anxious to feeling competent in handling complex professional scenarios. Many students wrote in their journals that practicing the same content for different audiences helped them realize they could successfully adapt their communication. These confidence gains matched the actual improvement in their performance shown in the quantitative results.

6. Discussion

6.1 TBLT effectiveness in technically hybrid ESP

The substantial improvements across all three measures suggest this curriculum worked well compared to other TBLT approaches in the research literature. The overall proficiency gain (d = 1.23) is comparable to effect sizes reported in recent TBLT reviews (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019), though direct comparisons should be made cautiously since studies differ in design and measurement approaches. What makes this finding particularly interesting is that BIS students faced the added challenge of learning to communicate in three different styles simultaneously.

The vocabulary gains (d = 1.45) are especially worth noting. Students improved most in technical IT terms and cross-cultural communication vocabulary—precisely the areas not covered in the control group's standard business English textbook. This pattern suggests that working with authentic case materials gave students meaningful opportunities to learn specialized vocabulary that traditional textbooks simply don't provide. The finding aligns with research showing that specialized vocabulary is best learned through sustained exposure in realistic contexts (Coxhead, 2000).

The writing quality improvement (d = 1.18), with especially strong gains in Genre Appropriacy and Task Achievement, provides encouraging evidence for the curriculum's genre-based components. Students in the experimental group not only improved their language accuracy but clearly learned to use professional writing conventions strategically to accomplish their communication goals. Recent work on how students develop genre knowledge (Tardy, Sommer-Farias and Gevers, 2020) emphasizes the importance of explicitly teaching the formal features, rhetorical purposes, and contextual factors of different genres—elements that the curriculum's post-task reflection activities were designed to address. However, because portfolios were scored by the course instructor rather than independent raters, these writing quality findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

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6.2 Register flexibility as a curriculum design target

Perhaps the most significant target, which appeared both in the needs analysis as well as in the students' feedback, concerns the importance of register flexibility as a key professional skill. This finding has implications for ESP curriculum design that may extend beyond the BIS context. Many ESP courses are organized around specific text types (emails, reports, presentations) as separate teaching units, addressing each genre's conventions in isolation. The needs analysis findings from this study suggest that professional communicators do not work with genres in this isolated way. Instead, they routinely present the same content to multiple audiences with different levels of expertise and different organizational roles, and their professional success depends on their ability to make these adjustments appropriately.

The crisis communication module (Weeks 11-12) applied this insight particularly effectively. Students worked with a single data breach scenario but communicated about it from four different perspectives: a technical incident report for the IT team, a notification letter for affected customers, an executive briefing for the board, and a simulated press conference response. This structure of returning to the same content for multiple audiences created learning conditions that single-genre instruction may not provide, and students consistently identified this module as one of the most valuable learning experiences in the course.

6.3 Assessment authenticity and learning impact

The portfolio assessment approach deserves discussion as a potential contribution to ESP assessment practice. Douglas (2000) identifies authenticity as a fundamental principle of language testing in professional contexts, while acknowledging the challenge of balancing authenticity with reliability. The detailed rubric used in this study, assessing five specific dimensions of writing performance, demonstrates that authentic professional writing can be evaluated systematically when assessment criteria are clearly defined and applied consistently. The positive learning effects documented in student feedback—with students explicitly reporting that the portfolio tasks influenced how they engaged with course content—suggest that authentic assessment in ESP can serve as both a measurement tool and a learning opportunity.

Despite the limitation of single-rater assessment, the standardized test results (BULATS and vocabulary) provide strong evidence for the curriculum's effectiveness, and the portfolio findings offer useful supplementary insights into students' genre-specific development.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a task-based ESP curriculum integrating authentic professional cases and explicit genre instruction can produce substantial improvements in language and communication competence for BIS students—a population whose hybrid technical-business communication demands have been underserved by traditional ESP provision.

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Three key pedagogical insights emerge. First, needs analysis for technically hybrid disciplines should extend beyond identifying specific genres to understanding register flexibility demands. BIS professionals continuously adjust their communication across technical, business, and interpersonal registers depending on audience and context; curricula teaching genres in isolation may inadequately prepare students for this reality.

Second, task design should exploit authentic scenarios requiring students to communicate the same content from multiple perspectives. The crisis communication module—where students addressed a single data breach through technical, managerial, customer, and public communication tasks—exemplifies this approach and was consistently identified by students as among the most valuable learning experiences.

Third, portfolio-based assessment using detailed analytical criteria can serve dual purposes: measuring performance while also functioning as learning tools that shape student engagement. The positive effects documented in student feedback suggest assessment design deserves attention as a curriculum component rather than merely an evaluation mechanism.

The findings contribute to broader conversations about TBLT effectiveness, with improvements—particularly for vocabulary acquisition and genre-specific writing—aligning with recent meta-analytic evidence. The results suggest TBLT may be especially suited to contexts where learning goals include not just linguistic knowledge but also the pragmatic judgment to deploy that knowledge appropriately across varied professional situations.

For ESP practitioners working with technically hybrid populations, this research offers an evidence-based, replicable model. As technology sectors increasingly require professionals who bridge technical and business contexts, ESP provision must evolve beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. This study suggests such evolution is both necessary and achievable when curriculum design is grounded in rigorous needs analysis, informed by research on language learning and genre pedagogy, and committed to authentic assessment reflecting actual professional communication demands.

8. Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the portfolios were scored by the course instructor rather than independent raters, which may have introduced bias. Without independent raters, inter-rater reliability could not be established, and the writing quality findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future research should employ multiple blind raters to strengthen assessment validity.

Second, the quasi-experimental design, while appropriate given institutional constraints, limits causal inference. The absence of random assignment means that unmeasured differences between groups could have influenced outcomes. Additionally, the single-site design at Babeș-Bolyai University limits generalizability to other institutions and student populations.

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Third, the 14-week intervention period prevents examination of long-term retention or transfer to actual professional practice. The study documents improvement in classroom assessments but cannot demonstrate workplace application. Longitudinal research tracking graduates into professional employment would provide valuable evidence about real-world transfer.

Finally, because the curriculum integrated multiple components—authentic cases, explicit genre instruction, collaborative tasks, and reflection activities—it remains unclear which elements contributed most to observed improvements. Future research using component analysis could identify essential versus supplementary curriculum features.

Future research should investigate curriculum effectiveness across multiple institutions and student populations, examine applications to other technically hybrid disciplines (e.g., health informatics, engineering management), pursue longitudinal designs following students into employment, and explore optimal task sequencing for developing register flexibility. Despite these limitations, the converging evidence from standardized tests, vocabulary measures, and student feedback provides confidence in the curriculum's effectiveness for addressing the complex communication demands of technically hybrid professional fields.

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