Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 25, Issue 1 / 2026

Balancing General English and English for Specific Purposes in ESP Classes

Mirela COSTELEANU*

Abstract: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy continues to grapple with the longstanding challenge of balancing general English proficiency with discipline-specific communication skills. While ESP emerged as a response to the increasing demand for language instruction tailored to academic, professional and occupational contexts, it can only be effective when combined with a solid foundation in General English (GE). This paper investigates the theoretical and methodological tensions underlying this issue, focusing on the heterogeneity of student proficiency levels, curriculum design, and teacher expertise. It further proposes integrative strategies aimed at harmonizing these competing priorities to enhance the effectiveness of ESP instruction.

Keywords: GE, ESP, heterogeneity, balance, instruction

1. Introduction

English has become the lingua franca of academia, science, technology, and business, resulting in an increasing demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) across higher education and professional domains. However, ESP teaching and learning rarely occur in isolation as they are intrinsically linked to General English (GE) proficiency, which provides the essential foundation for successful ESP instruction. A central question that emerges in this context concerns how teachers can balance ESP instruction with GE teaching, particularly in settings where time and resources are constrained. This paper addresses this challenge by reviewing theoretical perspectives on the GE-ESP divide, analyzing common classroom dilemmas, and suggesting strategies for more integrated and effective pedagogical practices.

* Lecturer, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, The National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Piteşti University Centre, Romania. E-mail: mirelacosteleanu@yahoo.com

BUPT

2. Literature review

The long-standing debate between GE and ESP can be traced back to the 1960s, when ESP emerged as a response to the growing communicative needs of professionals in fields such as science and technology (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). ESP is commonly defined as a learner-centred approach that prioritizes the specific linguistic and pragmatic demands of professional and academic communities over the more general communicative objectives of GE. As Hutchinson and Waters note, "ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning" (1987:19).

According to Harmer, "ESP starts with content as its point of departure" (2015:1-2), whereas in general English lessons, teachers typically decide what to teach based on general communicative goals. A defining characteristic of ESP lies in its emphasis on needs analysis, the use of authentic materials, and the systematic incorporation of discipline-specific vocabulary and genres, which enable ESP students to engage directly with the communicative practices and conventions intrinsic to their fields (Dudley-Evans, 1998). However, students with insufficient GE proficiency often struggle to process authentic ESP materials or to participate effectively in academic and professional communication. As Jordan (1997) argues, the ability to comprehend and produce specialized discourse presupposes a threshold level of grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic competence.

Belcher (2009) observes that ESP learners typically enter programs with highly heterogeneous levels of GE competence, a factor that complicates teaching and learning alike. Similarly, Basturkmen (2010) highlights the dual role of ESP teachers, who must address learners' immediate disciplinary needs and foster the development of core linguistic competences such as grammar, listening comprehension, and academic writing.

Hyland (2002, 2009) further underscores that specialized communication is deeply embedded within disciplinary practices and identity formation. Consequently, integrating GE skills into disciplinary learning contexts may help balance general language proficiency with the specialized communicative demands of professional fields (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010).

3. Challenges in engineering classes

Engineers must communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries; therefore, they need both technical vocabulary and general language competence for both social and professional contexts. Ideally, students entering engineering programs already possess a solid foundation in GE, which supports the acquisition of technical English skills required in their ESP courses. In reality, however, many students are not adequately prepared.

BUPT

3.1. Varying levels of language proficiency

One of the main challenges in teaching ESP to engineering students lies in the heterogeneous nature of their GE proficiency. Designing an effective ESP curriculum is complicated by the wide variation in students' linguistic competence and educational backgrounds. Students from rural schools often exhibit lower GE proficiency than their urban counterparts, largely due to limited access to learning resources and weaker emphasis on foreign language study. This disparity is further reinforced by prevailing perceptions that international career opportunities are scarce. Additionally, the absence of national foreign language examinations in recent years has diminished students' motivation to pursue English studies, further widening the proficiency gap.

Traditional teaching methods in Romanian schools have also contributed to this situation as they have historically placed limited emphasis on communicative competences such as speaking, writing, and real-life communication. As a result, students have had few opportunities to use English in authentic contexts, which hinders the development of functional language skills. Furthermore, negative prior experiences with language learning can weaken students' motivation and reduce their level of engagement in subsequent English classes.

Among engineering students, there is also a significant cohort with well-developed English proficiency. These learners approach the study of English with commitment and clear motivation for several reasons. Some demonstrate a natural aptitude for language learning and acquire it with relative ease, while others have benefited from high-quality instruction. Many recognize that proficiency in at least one foreign language is a valuable asset for anyone intending to travel extensively, access English-language media, and engage with global communication platforms. They further develop their skills through self-directed learning, using English-language films, video games, and podcasts as authentic contexts for language use. Such students view English not as a peripheral subject, but as a key instrument for academic and professional success.

Given this disparity in students' language proficiency, teachers must address the needs of both low-proficiency students, who require reinforcement of foundational language skills, and high-proficiency students, who are eager to engage with complex disciplinary tasks. If teaching materials are not appropriately calibrated, lower-proficiency students may become demotivated, whereas higher-proficiency students may experience boredom and disengagement. This situation underscores the importance of differentiated instruction, scaffolded learning tasks, and ongoing needs analysis to ensure that all students can develop both general and discipline-specific communicative competence.

In addition to variations in language proficiency, engineering students often encounter difficulties in transferring GE knowledge to technical or professional contexts. For instance, a student who performs well on grammar exercises may find it challenging to apply these structures effectively when explaining complex technical concepts or composing technical reports. Students' engagement with ESP classroom

BUPT

activities also depends on their perception of the course's relevance to their academic and professional goals. Moreover, learners' cultural and educational backgrounds significantly influence their learning preferences and interaction styles. The integration of tailored materials and activities supported by continuous formative assessment can help bridge the gap between general language competence and specialized disciplinary communication.

3.2. Field-specific requirements

ESP teaching is further complicated by the inherently specialized nature of technical communication. Engineering texts and manuals employ highly specialized vocabulary, complex syntax, and discipline-specific genres that are rarely encountered in general English instruction (Basturkmen, 2010). Consequently, engineering students must be able to recognize and appropriately use discipline-specific terminology, understand technical texts and documentation, extract information from tables and diagrams, and produce lab reports and project documentation. They must also adapt general academic English to specialized engineering tasks. Instruction in GE alone is insufficient to meet these demands in ESP contexts; students need targeted ESP instruction that integrates general language skills with the rhetorical and lexical demands of their discipline.

It is widely recognized that close collaboration between ESP teachers, industry practitioners, and recent engineering graduates is essential for the ongoing updating and refinement of the ESP curriculum. Such collaboration ensures that the curriculum remains aligned with technological advancements and current professional practices. Engineering graduates can provide valuable insights into the challenges students typically face in work-related contexts, while industry practitioners can highlight the specific communicative demands of the profession. By incorporating this feedback, ESP teachers can adapt their materials and strategies to reflect emerging trends in engineering practice and technology, thereby enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of the curriculum.

3.3. Time limitations

A third notable challenge concerns the rigid structure of engineering programs, which are typically highly content-intensive and centred on disciplinary coursework. As a result, teachers often have limited opportunities to reinforce GE proficiency, which can be particularly demotivating for students with lower proficiency levels. To address this issue, it may be pedagogically effective to embed GE instruction within ESP contexts rather than treating them as separate components. Such an integrative approach allows learners to develop general language proficiency alongside the specialized communicative competences required in their field.

Research consistently shows that limited English skills impede students' academic success, career development, and access to global resources (Daiu, Mihali & Spaho, 2005). ESP courses are designed to enhance domain-specific vocabulary, grammar and communicative competence. Integrating GE instruction into ESP has

BUPT

proven effective, enabling students to develop both linguistic and disciplinary competences simultaneously without requiring additional curricular time.

4. Effective strategies for balancing GE and ESP

4.1. Needs analysis

Conducting a thorough needs analysis enables ESP teachers to identify the specific linguistic and professional requirements of engineering students. Such an analysis assesses students' proficiency in both GE and ESP while highlighting individual strengths and weaknesses. Teachers can make use of diagnostic tests, interviews, surveys, and self-assessment questionnaires. However, it is important to move beyond evaluating vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, writing or communication skills. It is equally essential to consider students' professional goals, career paths and the types of communication tasks they are most likely to encounter in their future workplaces. Gathering feedback from industry specialists and recent graduates also provides valuable insights into the communicative demands engineers are expected to meet. This information enables teachers to tailor course content, select appropriate materials, and design tasks that integrate reinforcement of GE skills with discipline-specific ESP instruction. Such an approach ensures that all students – regardless of their initial proficiency – can successfully achieve their learning objectives.

4.2. Differentiated instruction

Given the heterogeneity of ESP students' proficiency levels, teachers can design flexible learning pathways that meet diverse linguistic and communicative needs. For low-proficiency students, the focus may be on consolidating foundational skills through targeted grammar practice, vocabulary scaffolding, guided reading activities, and structured writing templates to boost confidence and motivation. In contrast, high-proficiency students may benefit from advanced technical writing tasks, presentations, and research-based projects, aimed at enhancing critical thinking and discipline-specific communication.

4.3. Task-based learning

To successfully complete authentic professional and academic tasks, engineering students need a solid foundation in both GE and ESP. Genre knowledge alone is insufficient if students lack the linguistic resources necessary to express their ideas accurately and fluently. Consequently, GE should not be treated as a separate component; instead, it should be integrated into and reinforced through ESP tasks that are often more engaging and contextually relevant. This integrated approach helps students recognize the immediate relevance of core linguistic features to field-specific communication. For instance, writing a clear standards-comparison memo requires not only technical expertise but also effective use of grammatical structures such as degrees of comparison with adjectives and adverbs. Integrating GE into ESP teaching

BUPT

ensures that language acquisition is meaningful, contextualized, and transferable to real-world engineering contexts.

4.4. Raising language awareness

Many engineering students exhibit fossilized GE errors, such as incorrect verb tense usage, overuse or omission of definite and indefinite articles, misuse of the passive voice, which is common in technical contexts, and inaccurate preposition choice. These errors often become ingrained over time, making them difficult to remediate. They are particularly noticeable in engineering communication, where the focus is placed on technical content and limited attention is given to formal language development. To avoid overloading ESP courses with disconnected grammar instruction, teachers should prioritize GE aspects that have a direct and measurable impact on professional communication. In many ESP classrooms, students receive limited feedback on their English usage because content-related objectives are prioritized over linguistic accuracy. Even when feedback is provided, correcting mistakes can be challenging because students often believe that their intended message is conveyed adequately despite grammatical inaccuracies. Raising language awareness is therefore essential because it helps students identify recurring errors, reflect on them and understand their effect on the accuracy, clarity and professionalism of their communication. Moreover, it encourages students to take responsibility for monitoring and improving their own language use over time.

4.5. Collaboration with subject matter specialists

ESP teachers should collaborate closely with subject matter experts to select and adapt authentic texts for classroom use, ensuring both relevance and disciplinary accuracy. By creating role-play activities based on real workplace scenarios, they can encourage students to practice both General English and field-specific English in realistic contexts.

5. Case study

The objective of this case study was to examine the extent to which current ESP instruction balances GE and domain-specific language teaching for Mechanical Engineering students. It aimed to explore students' perceptions of the current teaching approach, determine whether their GE proficiency and professional communication demands are appropriately addressed, and identify areas for pedagogical enhancement. The research participants were 50 Mechanical Engineering students who were asked to respond to the following twelve questions.

1. To what extent do your English classes provide a good balance between General English skills (grammar, vocabulary, conversation) and engineering-related English?
2. How does improvement in GE help you better understand technical materials?

BUPT

3. Do you think there is sufficient emphasis on industry-specific vocabulary and communication relevant to engineering?
4. In which context do you feel more confident – using ESP or using GE?
5. Which aspects of ESP do you feel you need additional support with?
6. Which aspects of GE do you feel you need additional support with?
7. Does the current balance of GE and ESP meet your academic and future professional needs?
8. How do your ESP classes help you collaborate and communicate effectively within engineering teams?
9. What changes would you suggest to improve the balance between GE and ESP instruction?
10. What types of activities are most helpful for developing both ESP and GE?

When asked about the perceived balance between GE and ESP in their courses, twenty students indicated that their classes provide a strong combination of both. They emphasized that integrating general language foundations with technical communication skills enables them to progress academically while also preparing for workplace requirements. Another eighteen students reported that the teaching process places emphasis on technical English, which is understandable given that effective communication in professional environments is their primary learning objective. However, twelve students considered that GE is largely neglected, a situation which they found frustrating and demotivating due to their lower proficiency in GE skills. These respondents noted that their weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary and general communication hinder their ability to fully understand technical content. They expressed a clear need for more explicit GE instruction, believing that limited overall proficiency in GE creates significant challenges in developing industry-specific language competence.

Regarding the impact of GE on understanding technical content, most respondents (40 out of 50) acknowledged that high GE proficiency enhances their comprehension of engineering-related materials. They emphasized that participating effectively in classroom discussions or understanding complex technical topics is extremely challenging without a solid foundation in grammar, general vocabulary, and reading skills. For these students, GE serves as the foundation upon which specialized language is built. Eight students, however, argued that developing technical vocabulary and learning to apply it appropriately in professional and academic contexts is more critical than improving their GE skills. In their view, exposure to industry-specific language equips them with the communicative skills necessary for their future careers. Two respondents stated that low GE proficiency does not necessarily hinder comprehension of technical materials. They argued that, as long as students are familiar with technical concepts in their first language, they can learn technical words in isolation without extensive GE support.

As for the focus on industry-specific language, forty students reported that technical vocabulary and related authentic tasks are well integrated into classroom

BUPT

activities. Six students highlighted a need for more applied exercises to strengthen their ability to use this vocabulary in practice. In contrast, four students stated that the current approach is overloaded with technical vocabulary, which makes the course feel overwhelming and demotivating.

With respect to the emphasis on domain-specific language, thirty-five students reported that technical vocabulary and authentic examples are effectively integrated into classroom activities, noting that the use of real-world materials greatly benefits their learning. Ten students, however, offered a different perspective, expressing interest in more applied, hands-on exercises that would enable them to actively use the language in realistic professional scenarios. In contrast, five students considered that the current approach gives insufficient attention to the acquisition and development of industry-specific terminology and professional communication skills. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a flexible, blended approach that combines exposure to authentic materials with structured practice and communication tasks.

As for students' confidence in using ESP versus GE, their responses reveal significant differences closely linked to their backgrounds, learning styles, and learning objectives. Twenty-eight students reported feeling more confident using ESP. These students demonstrated a strong command of complex technical concepts, which enables them to learn and use the corresponding technical terms with ease. They are particularly interested in engineering-related topics, which enhances their comfort when speaking and writing about them. In contrast, twenty-two students reported feeling more comfortable using GE, citing their longer exposure to it. These findings highlight the impact of both prior experience and personal interest on students' confidence levels, emphasizing that while ESP instruction effectively supports technical communication, continued practice in GE is essential to ensure that students can function confidently in all academic and professional settings.

When asked about aspects of GE in which they need additional support, most students (34) identified speaking fluency and everyday communication skills as their main challenges. They explained that, while they generally have no difficulty in following engineering-related discussions, they lack confidence when participating in non-technical interactions. Eleven students reported difficulties with grammar accuracy, while the remaining five students struggled with listening tasks, especially when dealing with fast-paced speech or various accents. These responses highlight the importance of ongoing GE instruction in developing a strong linguistic foundation that supports students' ESP progress.

When asked about their ESP-related needs, most students (38) highlighted the importance of developing a broad technical vocabulary, noting that it enables them to discuss familiar engineering concepts with greater confidence and precision. Another group (8 students) identified challenges in writing technical documents and professional correspondence, explaining that they often struggle to meet academic and industry standards. The remaining four students mentioned difficulties with oral presentations, largely due to fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of their

BUPT

audience. These responses show that, while students recognize the critical role of ESP in their professional growth, they still need focused support in writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills that are tailored to engineering contexts.

When asked whether the current balance of GE and ESP meets their academic and future professional requirements, most students (42) acknowledged that their ESP class is highly effective in enhancing their communicative skills. They expressed satisfaction with activities involving technical vocabulary, discipline-specific writing, professional presentations, and real-world engineering tasks. The remaining eight students, however, felt that the current balance is somewhat misaligned with the demands of engineering workplaces, explaining that the course places too much emphasis on grammar and general communication, which they perceived as less relevant since ESP courses are intended to address specialized engineering communication needs.

When asked how their ESP class helps them collaborate and communicate effectively in engineering teams, half of the students reported that it provides them with the vocabulary and language structures needed to discuss technical concepts clearly and accurately with team members. They also noted that the course helped them gain confidence in expressing their opinions during interpersonal interactions without fear of making mistakes. Fourteen students acknowledged that the ESP course helped them improve their technical communication, although they still experience difficulties actively participating in technical discussions or interpersonal interactions. The remaining eleven students felt that the ESP course did not adequately equip them with the technical and social communication skills needed for effective teamwork in engineering settings.

In response to the question of what changes should be made to improve the balance between GE and ESP instruction, thirty-six students emphasized that GE should not be eliminated but rather integrated and reinforced within ESP contexts. These students highlighted the importance of using reports and research articles in classroom activities. Ten students stressed the value of task-based learning, involving collaborative projects, simulations, and problem-solving activities that prepare students for workplace challenges. A further four students suggested closer collaboration between ESP teachers and industry experts to ensure that the curriculum aligns with the current professional demands.

Regarding the types of activities they found most helpful for learning both GE and ESP, most students (41) were in favour of interactive, applied, and authentic tasks. They noted that problem-solving exercises and group projects provide the best opportunities to practise technical language while also developing their general language competence. The remaining nine students expressed a preference for traditional exercises, such as vocabulary drills and grammar practice.

6. Conclusion

The long-standing challenge of balancing GE and ESP remains central to the design of ESP curricula for engineering students. Rather than being treated as competing

BUPT

priorities, GE and ESP should be viewed as complementary dimensions of language teaching. GE provides a solid foundation for accuracy and fluency in language use, while ESP equips students with specialized discourse skills, vocabulary, and genre knowledge which are essential for engineering students aspiring to succeed professionally. Such an integrated approach ensures that future engineers are prepared to navigate both general and specialized communication confidently.

References

Basturkmen, Helen. 2010. *Developing Courses in English for Specific Purposes*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Belcher, Diana. 2009. *English for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Coyle, Do, Philip Hood, and David Marsh. 2010. *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cruz, Isel Hijuelos, Emma Medina-Carballosa, and Roberto Perez-Almaguer. 2020. "English for Specific Purposes (ESP): A Theoretical Approach for Syllabus Design." *Luz* 19 (4).

Daiu, Sonila, Krisalda Mihali, and Mishel Spaho. 2025. "Integration of English for Specific Purposes: A Comprehensive Study of Language Needs in Computer and Software Engineering Students." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development* 12 (1).

Dudley-Evans, Tony, and Maggie Jo St. John. 1998. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harmer, Jeremy. 2015. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Hutchinson, Tom, and Alan Waters. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centred Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, Ken. 2002. *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hyland, Ken. 2009. *Academic Discourse: English in a Global Context*. London: Continuum.

Jordan, R. R. 1997. *English for Academic Purposes: A Guide and Resource Book for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BUPT