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Reconceptualizing Business English Pedagogy through LifeComp: Collaboration and Critical Thinking as Core Competences

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Abstract: This study examines the pedagogical integration of collaboration and critical thinking within the LifeComp Framework in Business English higher education. Drawing on competence-based education, collaboration is framed as dialogic co-construction and shared agency, while critical thinking is conceptualized as reflective, evidence-based judgement in professional discourse. A structured classroom intervention employing case-based learning, simulations, and technology-mediated tasks was implemented with undergraduate students. The article proposes a competence-aligned model for employability-oriented Business English instruction.

Keywords: transversal competences, LifeComp Framework, collaboration, critical thinking, Business English instruction, competence-based education, employability skills.

1. Introduction

Contemporary professional contexts increasingly require graduates who combine linguistic proficiency with the ability to collaborate and think critically in complex, intercultural, and digital environments. In European higher education, competence-based frameworks such as LifeComp identify collaboration and critical thinking as key transversal skills supporting lifelong learning and employability.

In Business English, fostering these competences extends beyond teaching professional vocabulary and genre conventions. Effective participation in business settings also involves negotiation, shared problem-solving, and evidence-based judgement. From a discourse-oriented perspective, collaboration and critical thinking

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are enacted through interaction, argumentation, and collective decision-making, making them suitable for systematic integration into ESP pedagogy. Despite their prominence in educational policy, limited research has translated LifeComp descriptors into structured classroom practice while examining their manifestation in discipline-specific discourse. This study addresses this gap by implementing a competence-oriented intervention in a Business English course and proposing a transferable, discourse-informed model for aligning language instruction with broader employability objectives.

1.1. Research Problems and Objectives

Recent initiatives aimed at incorporating transversal competences into Business English teaching have underlined the importance of aligning language instruction with the LifeComp Framework. Although communication has received considerable attention in competence-based ESP research, the systematic integration of collaboration and critical thinking remains insufficiently developed, especially in terms of classroom discourse and task design. In Romanian higher education, this challenge is intensified by varied levels of language proficiency, exam-oriented educational practices, and students' limited experience with structured collaborative work. While earlier studies have focused on communication as a LifeComp competence, fewer have examined how collaboration and critical thinking can be deliberately scaffolded, assessed, and embedded within professional discourse activities. This study addresses this gap by approaching these competences from a discourse-informed ESP perspective, implementing a LifeComp-aligned classroom intervention, and proposing a transferable model for integrating collaboration and critical thinking into Business English instruction.

1.2. Preliminary Remarks on Methodology

This study employs a qualitative classroom-based intervention design within a competence-oriented ESP framework. Drawing on a reflective practitioner approach, it combines structured task implementation with discourse-informed analysis. The intervention was carried out over one academic semester with undergraduate Business English students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș-Bolyai University. Data were gathered from multiple sources, including classroom observation, peer assessment forms, and performance-based tasks such as case studies, simulations, and collaborative projects. The analysis integrates descriptive-interpretive methods with elements of classroom discourse analysis to explore how collaboration and critical thinking were enacted through interaction, argumentation, and task engagement. Rather than aiming to establish causal relationships, the study focuses on identifying patterns of competence development emerging from structured pedagogical design. This multi-source qualitative approach provides a context-sensitive yet analytically grounded account of how LifeComp descriptors can be translated into practice within Business English instruction.

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1.3. Ethical Procedures and Research Integrity

This study complied with institutional ethical guidelines for research in higher education. Students were informed about the instructional and research objectives of the intervention, and participation in the use of their data was voluntary. Moreover, research activities had no impact on course grades, as assessment procedures were determined independently of the study. Given the instructor–researcher dual role, specific safeguards were implemented to reduce power imbalances and ensure transparency throughout the research process.

1.4. Limitations of the Study

While this study proposes a structured model for integrating collaboration and critical thinking into Business English instruction, several limitations must be noted. The intervention was conducted within a single institution over one semester, limiting the broader applicability of the findings. Although multiple qualitative data sources were used, the study does not include quantitative measures and therefore does not establish causal impact. In addition, as collaboration and critical thinking develop over time, a short-term intervention may capture only initial stages of competence formation. Despite procedural safeguards, the instructor–researcher role may also have influenced classroom interaction. Future research could employ mixed-method approaches, comparative samples, and longitudinal designs to further validate and refine the proposed model.

2. The LifeComp Framework in Theoretical and Scholarly Context: A Brief Account

The growth of competence-based education marks a shift from knowledge transmission to the practical application of skills and the promotion of learner agency. In European higher education policy, transversal competences are now central to employability, lifelong learning, and professional adaptability. The LifeComp Framework, developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's science and knowledge service, conceptualizes personal, social, and learning-to-learn competences as dynamic, context-dependent capacities that are enacted through interaction and reflection. According to the authors of the framework, it regards "personal, social and learning to learn as a set of competences applying to all spheres of life that can be acquired through formal informal and non-formal education, and can help citizens to thrive in the 21st century" (Sala et al. 2020, 3). LifeComp is made up of three intertwined competence areas: "Personal", "Social", and "Learning to Learn". Each area includes three competences: Self-regulation, Flexibility, Wellbeing (Personal Area), Empathy, Communication, Collaboration (Social Area), Growth mindset, Critical thinking, and Managing learning (Learning to learn Area). Each competence has, in turn, three descriptors which generally correspond to the "awareness, understanding, action" model. These are not to be understood as a hierarchy of different levels of relevance, whereby some are

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prerequisites for others. Rather, all of them are to be considered complementary and necessary (Sala et al. 2020, 8).

The authors of the Lifecomp framework argue that their leitmotif was to identify competences that are teachable. The journey to becoming self-regulated, empathetic, and flexible citizens is one which is always characterised by a social dimension; this is a key element in the European perspective, and distinguishes this framework from others. Becoming critical thinkers, and having a sense of wellbeing, both on an individual and collective level, are competences which can be taught in schools (Sala et al. 2020, 8). Overall, the framework demonstrates a high degree of adaptability across diverse educational contexts. As noted by Sala et al. (2020, 8), LifeComp may serve either to introduce new curricular components or to be integrated into existing subject areas. Building on this flexibility, the present study concentrates on two competences situated within the "Social" and "Learning to Learn" domains of the LifeComp framework, namely collaboration and critical thinking.

According to LifeComp, the social area is associated with learning to live together and with developing awareness of the inherently social nature of human beings. It encompasses the ability and willingness to interact, communicate, and collaborate constructively with others (Sala et al., 2020, 41). Furthermore, social competence entails cultivating an attitude of cooperation, respecting diversity, overcoming prejudice, and demonstrating readiness to compromise in participatory contexts (Sala et al., 2020, 41). Within this broader social dimension, collaboration emerges as a core operational competence. Closely linked to communication, collaboration refers to the capacity to work effectively with others toward shared goals, assuming responsibility for one's contributions while valuing diverse perspectives.

In both academic and professional contexts, collaboration entails trust-building, conflict management, and negotiation—competences that have become increasingly essential as organizations shift from traditional hierarchical structures toward flatter, team-based, and project-oriented models. Contemporary business environments rely heavily on cross-functional teamwork, virtual cooperation, and collective innovation, thereby positioning collaboration as a central professional capability. Beyond mere participation in group tasks, collaboration involves the effective co-construction of knowledge, the management of group dynamics, and the negotiation of roles and responsibilities in pursuit of shared objectives. It further requires openness to diverse perspectives and the ability to address disagreements constructively and productively. As noted by Pruitt and Rubin (1986), "individuals that are focused on maximizing their own results and, at the same time, care about the needs of others, are in a better position to act as good negotiators and problem solvers. People who are willing to collaborate are likely to find compromises and innovate" (1986, apud Sala et al. 2020, 52). The LifeComp framework further emphasizes that the challenges faced by individuals in the 21st century—both on personal and collective levels—are increasingly complex, arising from the dynamic

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interplay of numerous interconnected and often unpredictable factors (Sala et al. 2020, 52). Successfully navigating these complexities requires fostering effective collaboration across individuals, organizations, and networks, underscoring the pivotal role that collaborative skills play in meeting contemporary societal and professional demands. Furthermore, collaboration contributes not only to achieving shared goals but also to psychological well-being, as "the sense of shared accomplishment in collaboration and the bonds among group members can help build caring relationships and to fight negative psychological states such as depression, anxiety or repressed anger, fear of failure, hopelessness and meaninglessness" (Johnson and Johnson 1989, apud Sala et al. 2020, 52).

Building on the foundational role of collaboration, the second LifeComp competence selected for this study is critical thinking. This competence, "just like creativity, is seen as a higher-order skill crucially related to learning dispositions or attitudes to learning that can be taught or stimulated" (OECD 2019), and it enables individuals to effectively navigate complexity by systematically evaluating information and making well-reasoned decisions. Critical thinking is also defined as the capacity to assess information, arguments, and ideas systematically and reflectively, to form reasoned judgments, and to question assumptions. It is crucial for decision-making, problem-solving, and the responsible use of information in both academic and professional domains. According to Deakin et al. (2014, apud. Sala et al. 2020, 64), "critical thinking is a higher-order thinking skill that is crucial to cope with uncertainty, complexity, and change. It is tightly interwoven with L3 (Managing Learning) and a "mindful agency", which involve managing the process of learning, the feelings associated with a challenge, and agency in taking responsibility in the learning process." As per Paul and Elder (2002), "critical thinking entails a self-directed, skillful analysis of information, beliefs or knowledge, with an ongoing reconstruction of one's thinking" (apud. Sala et al. 2020, 64).

In today's fast-paced and information-rich environments, the ability to think critically is more important than ever. Individuals are constantly confronted with vast amounts of data, conflicting viewpoints, and rapid changes that require not only comprehension but also the discernment to identify credible sources and reliable evidence. Sala et al. underline that "the amount of information available online in the so-called "post-truth" era, in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs is reaching us almost limitlessly" (2020, 64). The authors draw on Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018), who conclude that "it is critical for citizens to be able to distinguish between real facts, propaganda, opinions, and rumors, and to be committed to stopping the spread of misinformation, inverting the trend that sees false news spreading online farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth" (apud. Sala et al. 2020, 64). Sala et al. (2020, 64) point out that "critical thinkers endeavor to develop intellectual virtues such as intellectual integrity to recognize areas of inconsistency and contradiction in one's thought, intellectual humility to recognize possible flaws in one's own thinking, intellectual empathy to make genuine efforts to understand others' perspective, and an

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intellectual sense of justice and confidence in reason." Veugelers, Groot and Stolk (2017) conclude that "critical thinking, thus, involves the awareness that personal values influence the process of comparing, evaluating and weighting different arguments" (apud. Sala et al. 2020, 64).

Collaboration and critical thinking function as interconnected competences that support effective participation in academic and professional settings. While collaboration fosters shared problem-solving and knowledge construction, critical thinking enables reflective judgement and informed decision-making in complex environments. Their development aligns with European employability agendas that prioritize adaptability, transversal skills, and lifelong learning. Within this framework, LifeComp serves as a policy reference linking educational practice to labour market expectations. In this study, it provides the conceptual basis for integrating collaboration and critical thinking into discourse-oriented Business English instruction, supporting competence-based pedagogical innovation.

2.1. Collaboration and Critical Thinking as LifeComp Competences in Business English and Employability Contexts

This section explores the relevance of collaboration and critical thinking as key LifeComp competences in Business English education and their contribution to employability-oriented higher education. Beyond communicative proficiency, contemporary workplaces require graduates capable of collective problem-solving, evidence-based judgement, and informed decision-making. Competence-based paradigms therefore emphasize interactional agency and analytical reasoning alongside language skills. In Business English, these competences are developed through case studies, negotiations, and project-based tasks that reflect authentic professional discourse. As organizations increasingly rely on cross-functional and digitally mediated collaboration, integrating these skills into ESP instruction extends language learning toward reflective and professionally relevant engagement.

In line with the LifeComp framework's emphasis on employability and lifelong learning (Sala et al., 2020), aligning its descriptors with Business English pedagogy supports broader educational objectives related to professional adaptability. From this perspective, collaboration and critical thinking should be viewed not as supplementary "soft skills," but as core elements of professional discourse competence in contemporary business contexts. Collaboration is particularly central to employability, as modern workplaces depend on shared decision-making and collective problem-solving. In academic settings, it can be developed through group tasks, case analyses, presentations, and simulations that reflect professional practice. Such activities support language development while promoting negotiation, coordinated interaction, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Complementing collaboration, critical thinking constitutes an equally essential competence for both academic achievement and professional effectiveness. Demonstrating criticality, or critical thinking, is vital for success in academic work (Wallace and Wray 2006). According to Woodward-Kron (2002) and Moore (2013),

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for a student studying at a university – or preparing for university– in addition to gaining sufficient discipline knowledge, they also need to develop a skill that enables them to think critically about the knowledge they have gained and information they have obtained. Pithers and Soden (2000) argue that "such a skill is even more demanding in today's society as students live in an information-loaded era. Additionally, critical thinking is now considered a key skill required by many employers."

In Business English education, it involves the ability to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and formulate reasoned conclusions within discipline-specific discourse. Through engagement with case studies, debates, critical reading, and reflective writing, learners are encouraged to question assumptions, assess source credibility, and consider alternative viewpoints. Yet, the integration of critical thinking into subject matter instruction is not a straightforward process. Ennis (2013, 28) points out that "the actual infusion of critical thinking in subject matter instruction is affected by the nature of the subject matter, as well as many institution-specific factors, such as student and teacher backgrounds and interests, teacher style, teacher grasp of critical thinking, student grasp of the subject matter, class size, cultural and community expectations, student expectations, colleagues' expectations, and the amount of time available to teachers." Ennis (2013, 28) argues that "critical thinking is often best taught in ways that call for students to interact with each other and the teacher in activities that call for critical thinking in resolving issues in which they feel involved." The author continues along the same line stating that "although interaction with the primary instructor is less likely with large classes, it often can still occur among students in discussion sections and small group work" (2013, 28). Nevertheless, Atkinson (1997) points out that developing such a skill is not easy, particularly for those who do not speak English as their first language. There are two prevailing, identified reasons: firstly, critical thinking is a western concept, which is deeply rooted in western culture. According to Chan, Ho and Ku (2011) and Durkin (2008), "those who grew up and were educated in other cultures might find this concept difficult to grasp because criticism is not strongly reflected in their own culture." However, as educators, we can aim "to recognize "good" thinking and pay attention to the development of it in learning situations" (Wegerif, Li and Kaufman 2015).

All in all, these contextual variables underscore the need for a structured pedagogical design that explicitly scaffolds critical thinking within Business English tasks, rather than assuming its automatic development through content exposure alone.

2.2. Practical Perspectives on Fostering Competencies in Business English

Drawing on over six years of teaching experience in the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, this study combines theoretical reflection with sustained pedagogical practice. Instructional

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strategies were systematically aligned with key LifeComp competences—communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. The materials discussed are based on classroom implementation and authentic student work produced in face-to-face seminars and via Moodle, the faculty's online learning platform.

To develop communication competence, students engaged in realistic professional tasks such as mock interviews, business presentations, and intercultural meetings. These activities required structured preparation, adaptation of language to audience and purpose, and effective use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. One recurring activity, for example, involves a simulated product pitch in which students present a new product within a competitive international market context. Beyond strengthening business-specific vocabulary and persuasive discourse strategies, this task supports the development of public speaking confidence and professional interactional competence (see Ene 2025, 296-298).

With regard to collaboration, students regularly participate in team-based case study analyses and structured group projects. One representative activity involves small teams researching and evaluating the Code of Ethics of a company of their choice and presenting their findings to the class. This task requires the distribution of roles, negotiation of responsibilities, peer feedback, and the production of a shared outcome, thereby reflecting the collaborative dynamics of contemporary workplaces. Another project consists of simulated managerial communication scenarios in which students assume distinct leadership styles—such as autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transformational, coaching, or transactional—while peers enact employee roles. Beyond linguistic coordination, such activities cultivate interpersonal competences, including empathy, perspective-taking, conflict management, and consensus-building.

Critical thinking is integrated through structured argumentation tasks, analytical writing, and moderated debates on ethically or strategically complex topics, such as outsourcing, corporate social responsibility, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in business. In one module, students evaluated a global brand's marketing campaign, examining its cultural relevance, persuasive techniques, and ethical implications. These activities promote evidence-based reasoning, critical evaluation, and reasoned argumentation, reflecting professional decision-making processes.

Overall, these practices demonstrate how communication, collaboration, and critical thinking can be embedded within Business English through authentic, professionally oriented tasks. By aligning classroom activities with LifeComp descriptors and real-world scenarios, instruction extends beyond language accuracy to foster interactional agency, collective problem-solving, and analytical competence relevant to contemporary professional contexts.

3. Illustrating Transversal Competence Development: A Brief Account of Student Output

This section presents selected examples of tasks from Business English seminars to illustrate how the LifeComp competences of collaboration and critical thinking have

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been deliberately integrated into instructional practice. For each competence, specific tasks are described and pedagogically justified in relation to the course objectives and learning outcomes. The aim is to demonstrate how these activities operationalize transversal skill development within discipline-specific instruction and contribute to students' academic and professional formation.

3.1. Collaboration: Building Trust, Negotiation Skills, and Shared Responsibility

Collaboration was embedded in tasks that required students to work in pairs or small groups toward a shared goal, with an emphasis on negotiation, co-construction of knowledge, and mutual support. Given the post-pandemic context and students' initial reluctance to engage in teamwork—due in part to limited in-person interaction during their high school years—these tasks were intentionally scaffolded to foster trust, accountability, and active participation. The following instances provide concrete illustrations:

Task 1. Work in groups. Look at the following list of airline services and agree on the three most important services for the business traveller (Wood et al. 2013, 118).

a) *Higher airmiles awards for frequent flyers; Valet service airport parking; Additional baggage allowance; Priority status at check-in; Exclusive business lounges; Advanced seat selection; Wider, fully-reclining seats; In-seat phone facilities; Premium food and beverage service; Laptop power points; Individual entertainment systems.*

b) Which of these services do you think help business people to work? Which of these services are not necessary, but just luxuries?

The group task involving the evaluation and prioritization of airline services for business travelers supports the development of collaboration as defined in the LifeComp framework. Set within an authentic professional context, the activity requires collective decision-making and structured negotiation. Students articulate viewpoints, listen actively, and work toward consensus, thereby practicing teamwork and compromise. Through discussion, they co-construct knowledge, refine shared criteria, and exercise collective judgement. The task also encourages balanced participation, role management, and constructive handling of differing perspectives. By distinguishing between essential and luxury services, learners engage with diverse priorities and develop openness to alternative viewpoints. Overall, the activity embeds collaborative competence within a realistic business scenario, reflecting LifeComp's emphasis on cooperation, mutual respect, and constructive interaction. A further illustration is outlined below:

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Task 2. Work in pairs. Your company is considering launching a new healthcare product. They are interested in selling to both men and women and are looking into marketing strategies to reach both groups (Wood et al. 2013, 141).
a) Students have been asked to come up with marketing ideas;
b) Students had to discuss the situation together and decide:

1. Where to advertise the product?
2. Where to sell the product?

The pair-based task of designing a marketing strategy for a new healthcare product supports the development of collaboration as defined in the LifeComp framework. By simulating a realistic business scenario, the activity engages students in joint decision-making aligned with professional marketing practice. Learners negotiate advertising and distribution strategies, articulate and justify proposals, respond to alternative viewpoints, and work toward consensus. These exchanges promote active listening, role negotiation, and constructive management of differing perspectives. The task also integrates Business English terminology with subject-matter application, reinforcing both linguistic and strategic competence. Working in pairs fosters peer interaction, trust, and shared responsibility, while selecting appropriate marketing channels requires analytical reasoning and compromise.

Overall, the activity illustrates how collaboration is enacted through structured dialogue and collective problem-solving, consistent with LifeComp's view of collaboration as a transversal competence supporting employability and lifelong learning.

3.2. Critical thinking: Developing Reasoned Judgment and Problem-Solving Skills

The second competence—*critical thinking*—was integrated into tasks that required students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, often in relation to real-world business problems. Critical thinking was particularly targeted through case study analyses, argumentative writing tasks, and ethical dilemma discussions. Here are some examples:

Task 1. Students are asked to read some comments about market research and say which opinion(s) they agree with (Gore 2007, 18). After that, they have to answer the follow-up questions:

a) How do you analyze your competitors?
b) Do you think market research is worth doing in your company (or industry)? Why? Or why not?
c) What are the advantages of doing your own market research versus outsourcing it?

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This activity, which requires students to evaluate diverse perspectives on market research and respond to reflective questions, supports the development of critical thinking as defined in the LifeComp framework. By identifying agreement or disagreement with specific viewpoints, learners engage in careful analysis rather than superficial acceptance of information. The task further promotes reasoned judgement, as students justify their positions on issues such as the value of market research or the choice between internal and outsourced approaches. It also encourages comparison of alternatives, anticipation of outcomes, and evaluation of advantages and disadvantages, reflecting professional decision-making processes. In addition, the activity reinforces the precise use of Business English terminology to articulate complex ideas. By requiring students to defend their own viewpoints, it fosters analytical reasoning and intellectual autonomy. All things considered, the task develops reflective and argumentative skills essential for academic performance and professional practice. A subsequent example is discussed below:

Task 2. Speaking task: "Late payers" (Brook-Hart 2007, 75)

1. Students are assigned the following task: *Your manager has asked you to give a short talk (of about one minute) to the finance department of your company on one of these two subjects:*

a) How to deal with late payers?

b) How to avoid taking on clients who are late payers?

2. Students are asked to work with a partner. They have to choose one of the subjects and together prepare what they are going to say.
3. Students have to change partners and give their talk to someone who has prepared the other subject.

This speaking task supports the development of critical thinking within the LifeComp framework in Business English seminars. It requires students to address a realistic financial issue—late payments—by selecting and analyzing one of two approaches: managing existing late payers or preventing them. Learners must evaluate practical implications, propose feasible solutions, and justify their recommendations, thereby engaging in structured problem analysis and reasoned judgement. Working in pairs encourages discussion, comparison of strategies, and refinement of arguments prior to presentation. Exchanging partners further introduces alternative perspectives, promoting flexibility of thought and evaluative response. Overall, the task strengthens students' ability to assess business challenges critically, formulate informed conclusions, and communicate them effectively in professional contexts.

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4. Conclusion

This study has explored how collaboration and critical thinking, as defined in the LifeComp framework, can be systematically integrated into Business English through competence-oriented and discourse-based task design. Rather than treating transversal skills as incidental outcomes, the research demonstrates that they can be purposefully developed through structured activities such as case studies, simulations, collaborative projects, and reflective tasks grounded in authentic professional contexts. Qualitative findings from classroom observation, student work, and reflective practice indicate that such design supports not only language development but also interactional agency, evaluative reasoning, and shared responsibility. Business English classrooms thus provide a productive setting for aligning language instruction with employability objectives. The study proposes a transferable pedagogical model that connects European competence-based frameworks with classroom practice. By positioning collaboration and critical thinking within discipline-specific discourse and professional simulation, it contributes to ongoing efforts to reconceptualize ESP pedagogy as an integrated space for language learning, transversal competence development, and professional preparation.

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