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An Analysis of English for Specific Purposes among University Students

EDITA BEKTESHI and BRIKENA XHAFERI

Abstract

The study gives an account of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within the engineering field, students' willingness to learn professional English vocabulary, and ESP issues related to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study investigates students' need to learn English through data analyzed in a descriptive and exploratory study, focusing on the students' perceptions about ESP based on their English language level and ESP learning practices, and its integration within HEIs. A questionnaire was completed by 239 university students and 16 face-to-face interviews were held. The collected data were subjected to SPSS statistical analysis and the results were then analyzed and discussed. The study identified that university students can acquire professional vocabulary in English language classes, providing high levels of stimulus for future job opportunities in the engineering field. The highest priority for the students was learning ESP for employment purposes, with the primary focus being the enhancement of their communicative skills.

Keywords: Higher education, university, ESP, students.



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Introduction

English Language Learning (ELL) fulfills the role of bestowing non-native speakers of the language with significant advantages as students of Higher Education (HE), placing them in a more privileged position in terms of securing future employment. Starting from English for Science and Technology (Swales, 1985), the needs and developments of the 21st century have impacted considerably on English language learning and teaching in different specific fields. As such, “English for Specific Purposes” (ESP) has become an indispensable and integral course of many fields of learning. One of these fields is engineering, and this disciplinary vocabulary remains one of today’s most challenging areas for language learners (Gablasova, 2015; Wu & Lou, 2018). English has become the international language of almost all professional spheres of international communication (Rackevičienė, Janulevičienė, & Mockienė, 2019).

Nowadays, teaching English to engineers is considered a very detailed and demanding course (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001). The teachers’ role in ESP courses is crucial, as the criticality of teaching English in the field of engineering is significant in terms of its content, methods, and also technique (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001). Engineering terminology includes topics that deal with the understanding of technical manuals, as well as shapes and sizes, dimensions, equipment and tools, and everything else that requires knowledge of engineering-based English language. However, today’s focus is on the learner, with the saying “teachers know best – what to teach and how to teach it,” now being replaced by “adopting the learners’ needs, wants and deficiencies,” in order to learn (and acquire) the expected level of the English language. As indicated by Nunan (1999) and also Brown (2000), the teaching today is designed and conducted so as to respond to the learners’ needs; that is, “the focus is now on the learner” (Gözüyeşil, 2014). As such, it is crucial to include learners into the decision-making process through preparation and adherence to a learner-centered curriculum within a learner-centered approach (Gözüyeşil, 2014).

When discussing the combining of English teaching and engineering, it is difficult to decide what aspects of the English language to teach to engineering students. Offering students the ESP teaching-learning opportunity helps them to develop adequate and comprehensive professional engineering and English language skills, which has increasingly become a necessity for today’s learners. Such ESP teaching and learning opportunities help students to develop specific professional English language proficiency through exposure to discipline-specific language (Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015).

In today’s job market, having superior knowledge of professional engineering vocabulary may be considered notable. As such, when discussing the purpose of learning English language for the engineering field, the features, vocabulary, and the layout are recognizably different from general English language classes. This makes English language teaching in engineering classes somewhat different when compared to general classes, and which justifies the need for a different teaching method and approach. As pointed out by Cheremissina and Riemer (2001), Rackevičienė et al. (2019), and Wu and Lou (2018), learning is achieved where the student is focused on particular terminology and communication skill areas that are required by their particular professional field, or through the application of a collaborative teaching and learning approach (Bekteshi, 2017; Little & Dieker, 2009). This implies the need for teaching and learning approaches that employ the most up-to-date

methods of teaching; specifically those that include the use of multimedia and Internet technologies as unlimited learning resources, or more often referred to as “Computer-assisted language learning” (CALL). As Brown (2000) pointed out, this area of teaching requires the use of collaborative projects, peer editing of compositions, computer-adaptive testing, and speech processing.

English Language at Engineering Faculties in Kosovo

With the English language recognized not as “a” global language, but as “the” global language (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001; Rackevičienė et al., 2019), in recent years Kosovan Higher Education has implemented a Professional English Skills Development course in order to complement specific programs of learning such as engineering. Therefore, engineering students in Kosovo today are provided with specific English language learning taught in the classroom setting. This five-credit course (or four credit depending on the department), serves to bridge language issues not only between different cultures but also between General English and Specific English (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001; Wu & Lou, 2018). As such, this course is required across all departments, and the students are generally aged between 18 and 21 years old, and whose first language background is Albanian.

Although students can choose between two foreign languages, English and/or German, in Kosovan faculties of engineering, the priority preference is English. However, large student groups and a lack of English language entry tests at these faculties make English teaching in engineering classes rather challenging. Instructors face varied and difficult problems, that is: different levels of English proficiency, with mixed groups of weak, average, and advanced students in terms of the English proficiency level, students’ continued use of their first language, as well as some students who are active and some that are passive, and equally introverted or extrovert. It is clear that such diversity in classes (Brown, 2000) produces a variety of interests and also a variety of studying paces (Gupta, 2013), according to each students’ particular needs. Based on these factors, it is difficult to determine the aims and expectations of the students (Gözüyeşil, 2014).

Despite most ESP teachers experiencing acute difficulties when teaching to such diverse student groups, English is still considered as an important factor that enhances students’ development (Nilsson, 2017). Brown (2000), Ginting (2017), and Lightbrown and Spada (1999) all pointed out that interaction in the language classroom is the key to successful communication, and can be achieved through the use of a collaborative teaching approach (Bekteshi, 2017; Little & Dieker, 2009). However, Kosovan HE students lack the opportunities to use the English language for daily interaction due to the large numbers of students in each class, as well as the wide variety of the students’ language proficiency. More precisely, Kosovan engineering students follow a syllabus that includes the “English for Specific Purposes” (ESP) course at the undergraduate level which is delivered to large student groups. All Kosovan engineering faculties, both state and private, generally introduce the ESP course during the first year (1st and 2nd semester), but that can vary depending on the program; such as in some engineering departments it is given in the first year (1st semester) and the second year (3rd semester). On the whole, it is a two-semester course that is comprised of communicative, collaborative, and theoretical classes.

English is taught as from age eight (i.e., third grade) in Kosovan schools according to the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) for languages, and which continues as ESP in

HE as a mandatory subject at the undergraduate level for two semesters. The primary aim of the current study, therefore, is to understand first-year (undergraduate) students' needs related to their English language learning, and the requirement for them to take responsibility for their own learning, as is expected at the HE level, and to help enable students to succeed professionally beyond HE. Similar studies have been conducted in Spain and Austria (Arnó-Macià, Aguilar-Pérez, & Tatzl, 2020), as well as in Lithuania (Rackevičienė et al., 2019), Russia (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001), Turkey (Gözüyeşil, 2014), and China (Wu & Lou, 2018), and it is therefore hoped that the results of the current study will help the English language teachers working in Kosovan HEIs to adapt their teaching material and teaching approach based on their students' specific needs and interests. In this way, the students will be better able to accept responsibility for their own language learning and to become more autonomous learners. The current study aims to shed light on the ESP activities and strategies that can make the most of today's ESP courses in engineering, and to highlight what and how Kosovan HE students can benefit from ESP courses in the engineering context.

The aim of the current study is to examine how an English language course for engineering affects the students' language development based on their language background and their interest to further their language learning. For this reason, the study aims to provide insight on the use of ESP according to the following attributes:

- the ability of engineering students to learn ESP at the HE level based on their English language proficiency level;
- engineering students' perceptions on professional vocabulary; and,
- the effects of tailoring English language courses at the HE level according to the students' needs.

Methodology

Based on the aims of the study, an online survey was adapted and modified from the works of Gözüyeşil (2014) and also from the Questionnaire for Non-English-Background Students that was implemented at the University of Auckland, New Zealand (Gravatt, Richards, & Lewis, 1997). Additionally, questions for face-to-face interviews were also prepared.

Data Analysis

Data was collected directly from the participant students via an online survey that was developed in order to determine HE students' ESP needs for engagement in learning professional English, as well as to enhance their communicative skills within the classroom learning context. More precisely, the online survey was applied as the study's focus was according to a particular kind of analytical method commonly used in language classrooms to teach ESP in the field of engineering. The survey included 16 questions regarding ESP, as well as the respondents' level of English language knowledge, their age, gender, and background. The students' responses were analyzed through SPSS statistical analysis.

Background of participants and study context

The first-year and second-year undergraduate students who participated in the study ($N = 239$) were from the Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Computer Sciences, Architecture, Construction Engineering, and Food Technology departments.

These engineering faculty students were contacted directly by their ESP instructor during their ESP course lessons and asked if they were willing to participate in the current study. The online survey was then distributed to the participants in May 2019, and a total of 239 students completed the survey on a voluntary basis.

In order to add a qualitative aspect to the study, face-to-face interviews were also held with 16 of the students who were selected at random. A set of 12 interview questions were prepared in advance and related to the students' opinions and perceptions about learning English in the field of engineering, and, as previously mentioned, was based on a questionnaire applied at the University of Auckland (Gravatt et al., 1997). The collected qualitative data were systematically analyzed by employing qualitative analysis techniques. Audio recordings of the interviews were carefully transcribed, and then the transcripts clarified with the interviewees before the interview statements were summarized.

Results

The first part of the online questionnaire gathered demographic information about the participants, followed by questions about their level of competence in English language proficiency based on a scale where 1 = "Elementary," 2 = "Pre-intermediate," 3 = "Intermediate," 4 = "Upper-intermediate," and 5 = "Advanced." In the second section, the respondents were asked questions based on a 5-point, Likert-type scale that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

With regards to English language proficiency, the participants' levels varied, with xx% as Elementary ($n = 21$), xx% as Pre-intermediate ($n = 40$), 42.2% as Intermediate ($n = 96$), xx% as Upper-intermediate ($n = 57$), and xx% as Advanced ($n = 25$). As can be seen, 42.2% was the largest group of students who self-reported as being at the Intermediate level, followed by the 23.8% at the Upper-intermediate level. All students were attending public HEIs; however, none of the students had previously studied ESP. The participants' gender split/ratio was found to be 59% male ($n = 142$) and 40.6% female ($n = 97$), with their ages ranging from 18 to 25 years old, with an average of 20 years old. Also, the responses showed that over 41% of the participants stated that they were able to freely communicate in the English language with their siblings.

The collected data also showed the student numbers according to their department, as Mechanical Engineering, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Computer Sciences, Construction Engineering, Food Technology, and Architecture.

Table 1. Students' participation in the survey

Department	Number	%
Mechanical Engineering	114	47.0
Electrical and Electronics Engineering	60	25.0
Computer Sciences	27	11.2
Construction Engineering	20	8.3
Food Technology	13	5.4
Architecture	5	2.0
Total	239	100

As seen from the results, participants from all five language proficiency levels, i.e., Elementary, Pre-intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-intermediate, and Advanced agreed with the claim: “The topics in English language engage my interest.” Cross tabulation analysis showed that out of the 239 participants, 48.5% “agreed” whilst 33.1% “strongly agreed” with the claim.

Similar responses were also seen for the other claim: “After the class, I always revise what we have just learned.” Based on the results, the Elementary level students expressed greater interest in revising what they had learned. However, all students across the different language levels either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they revised their learning following their English classes. More precisely, Table 2 presents the Cross-tabulation Chi-Square test results of the participants’ responses.

Table 2. Chi-Square Test – “After the class I always revise what we have just learned”

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.065a	16	.739
Likelihood Ratio	11.971	16	.746
No. of Valid Cases	239		

When analyzing the responses dealing with General English and English for Engineers, the responses are in line with the findings of Rackevičienė et al. (2019), who pointed out that general English and field-specific terminology is stressed as an essential requisite in today’s professional communication. In the current study, students with self-reported lower levels of English language knowledge (i.e., Elementary and Pre-intermediate) showed more interest in General English, with 76.2% of students from the Elementary level and 70.0% of Pre-intermediate level students agreeing with this claim. However, students from the higher language proficiency levels reported a different story, with 53.2% of students from the Intermediate level, 49.2% from the Upper-intermediate level, and 52.0% from the Advanced level agreeing with this claim. This finding is explained through a Chi-Square Test, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Chi-square Test – “General English is more important than English for Engineers”

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	21.221a	16	.17
Likelihood Ratio	17.043	16	.383
N of Valid Cases	239		

Table 4 reports the One-way ANOVA Test findings according to the participants’ responses to the following three claims: “The ESP has helped me improve my communicative skills,” “I think that the English course is an engineering supporting material,” and “The ESP is effectively utilized for my future job experience.”

Table 4. One-way ANOVA Test

Claim		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
The ESP has helped me improve my communicative skills	Between Groups	2.224	6	.371	0.44	.851
	Within Groups	191.16	227	.842		
	Total	193.385	233			
I think that the English language coursebook is an engineering supporting material	Between Groups	2.391	6	.399	0.707	.644
	Within Groups	127.955	227	.564		
	Total	130.346	233			
The ESP is effectively utilized for my future job experience	Between Groups	5.794	6	.966	1.187	.314
	Within Groups	184.668	227	.814		
	Total	190.462	233			

Whereas cross tabulation for the items “The ESP has helped me improve my communicative skills” and “The ESP is effectively utilized for my future job experience” showed a strong positive correlation ($r = .531, p < .05$), the items “The ESP has helped me improve my communicative skills” and “I think that the English language coursebook is an engineering supplemental material” were found to be positively correlated ($r = .417, p < .05$). Similarly, the items “The ESP is effectively utilized for my future job experience” and “I think that the English language coursebook is an engineering supplemental material” were also found to correlate ($r = .407, p < .05$).

The majority of the responses indicate that ESP for engineers is a “must.” This is shown in the item: “As an Engineer, English for Engineering is a ‘must,’” with 54.4% of the respondents who “strongly agreed” and 36% “agreed.” Additionally, for the claim: “The English material is consistent with the 21st century’s engineering well-known facts,” 54.8% of the respondents “agreed” and 21.8% “strongly agreed,” reflecting the high level of books and topics offered to engineering students. This also corresponds to the item: “English classes make the students take specific learning steps about engineering.” More positive opinions about ESP being seen as a ‘must’, and more interesting books being made available reveals yet more positive opinion that ESP helps to further students’ specific learning steps in engineering. Future engineers’ familiarity with specific professional vocabulary and their professional-level, user-friendly communication with their colleagues emphasizes the need for ESP courses the engineers of tomorrow.

Based on the described analytical procedures, the findings revealed that approximately 72% of the engineering students identified collaboration (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001) as being an important factor in ESP learning. In addition, engineering students in Kosovo regard speaking skills, and collaboration as being of significant importance.

Table 5. Students’ collaboration

“In English classes I try to present the information to my friends”	Number	%
Agree	120	50.2
Disagree	16	6.6
Neutral	48	20.0
Strongly agree	52	21.7
Strongly disagree	3	1.2
Total	239	99.7

These findings show a similar response to studies conducted in Spain and Austria (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020) and in Lithuania (Rackevičienė et al., 2019), i.e., that Kosovan students also perceive ESP as relevant for future academic and professional purposes, and that they were satisfied with the teaching. Primarily they pointed out that they wanted to improve their English language speaking skills in order to become more confident in their future engineering profession.

Additionally, one alarming response was to the item: “I am satisfied with the English level of the coursebook,” in which 97 students “agreed” and 24 “strongly agreed”, which shows that the teaching and learning material needs to be taken more seriously. Likewise, it relates to another item to which 175 students “agreed,” which was: “The English material is consistent with the 21st century’s engineering well-known facts.”

When compared the students’ level of proficiency and the appropriateness of the English coursebook, the findings (see Table 6) reveal that students from all five language proficiency levels showed higher percentages for “agree” and “strongly agree.”

Table 6. Crosstab – “I am satisfied with the English level of the coursebook”

Proficiency		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Elementary	<i>f</i>	0	2	8	7	4	21
	%	0.0	9.5	38.1	33.3	19.0	100
Pre-Intermediate	<i>f</i>	0	3	15	20	2	40
	%	0.0	7.5	37.5	50.0	5.0	100
Intermediate	<i>f</i>	0	4	47	37	8	96
	%	0.0	4.2	49.0	38.5	8.3	100
Upper-Intermediate	<i>f</i>	2	3	22	24	6	57
	%	3.5	5.3	38.6	42.1	10.5	100
Advanced	<i>f</i>	1	4	7	9	4	25
	%	4.0	16.0	28.0	36.0	16.0	100
Total	<i>f</i>	3	16	99	97	24	239

	%	1.3	6.7	41.4	40.6	10.0	100
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NOTE. “&” = % within Level of English Proficiency

The findings also revealed that students across all levels of English proficiency reportedly benefit from the ESP classes, although the Pre-intermediate level students lead the table, with 55% having either “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” On the other side, the Advanced and Elementary level students showed almost the same percentage, with 52% for Advanced and 52.3% for Elementary, which suggests that the Advanced level of students are satisfied, although, as previously mentioned, they stated needing less revision time. However, whilst the Elementary level group were satisfied, they conducted more revision following their classes (as shown in Table 2). This suggests the need for additional ESP teaching materials (Cheremissina & Riemer, 2001), greater modification to the existing teaching materials, as well as increased adaptation, which should all be based according to the students’ various needs and deficiencies. Any new or modified ESP teaching material should fit all students’ deficiencies, aspiring to elicit greater satisfaction of learners whilst they learn professional English. This suggests that students should take part in the decision-making process, even when choosing the right type and content of teaching and learning materials (Gözüyeşil, 2014).

Table 7. Crosstab – “The ESP has helped me improve my communicative skills”

Proficiency		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Elementary	<i>f</i>	2	2	4	9	4	21
	%	9.5	9.5	19.0	42.9	19.0	100
Pre-Intermediate	<i>f</i>	2	2	16	19	1	40
	%	5.0	5.0	40.0	47.5	2.5	100
Intermediate	<i>f</i>	1	5	35	39	16	96
	%	1.0	5.2	36.5	40.6	16.7	100
Upper-Intermediate	<i>f</i>	1	1	13	28	14	57
	%	1.8	1.8	22.8	49.1	24.6	100
Advanced	<i>f</i>	0	1	7	7	10	25
	%	0.0	4.0	28.0	28.0	40.0	100
Total	<i>f</i>	6	11	75	102	45	239
	%	2.5	4.6	31.4	42.7	18.8	100

NOTE. “&” = % within Level of English Proficiency

Although there are certain limitations to the current teaching material, the results in Table 7 show that communicative skills have improved due to the ESP classes. The group of

students who agreed the most that their communicative skills had improved were from the Upper-intermediate level students, with 73.7% stating that they either “agreed” (49.1%) or “strongly agreed” (24.6%). However, students from the other proficiency levels were not left behind. Those from the Intermediate level were also satisfied with their new communicative skills, whereas those from the Advanced level was the group least satisfied with their communicative skills following their ESP classes. These results suggest that certain changes should be applied to the classroom management settings, i.e., the division of the group based on their levels of language proficiency, in which each group would be able to address different topics and communicate at a more appropriate level to that of the group.

Additionally, 16 students were interviewed face-to-face, and responded to preset interviews questions as shown in Table 8. The interviewees were three students from Electrical Engineering, seven from Mechanical engineering, four from Computing, one from Architecture, and one student from Food Technology.

Table 8. Interview questions

<i>Interview questions</i>
What is your department?
What is the proficiency level of your English?
What would you like to change in the ESP classes?
What are the main difficulties you faced in the ESP classes?
Is the ESP coursebook appropriate for you?
What are you most interested in: learning more professional vocabulary, or general English? Explain why.
Do you collaborate with your colleagues in ESP classes? Explain why.
Why are you learning ESP?
Do you use other learning material? Explain why.
How do you learn best?
Do you agree that communicative competencies (in English) are crucial for engineers?

Based on the responses, it was revealed that the students sometimes experienced difficulties in understanding the engineering topics and wanted to see more participation in terms of speaking English. In total, 11 of the students stated there being a need for smaller class sizes, whereas 14 of the students pointed to the need to establish smaller groups based on their English language proficiency level, which may relate to 10 of the students reporting their hesitation to public speaking, as mentioned in their respective interviews, in addition to 121 students either having “agreed” ($n = 85$) or “strongly agreed” ($n = 38$). However, a large number of neutral responses ($n = 85$) classifies this question as somewhat problematic and which requires further investigation. These results call for ESP-related needs analysis, as well as changes or additions to the teaching materials, and for teaching methods that aim to include greater time focused on verbal speaking skills. Amongst these, nine of the students pointed out that frequent active participation in lessons was seen as the most important factor in furthering their language learning, and that, as students, they need encouragement to question or express themselves openly in the classroom without undue anxiety. As such, ESP, in its holistic sense, refers to the professional interaction between future engineers. It should therefore be related more to the effective usage of coursebooks that include engineering topics of interest to the student population (Rackevičienė et al., 2019), and

thereby lead to their future professional knowledge. This approach would help future students to respond to different verbal and linguistic engineering problems pertinent to their field of engineering.

From the overall results of the online questionnaire and the interviews conducted in the current study, it can be concluded that ESP learning in HEIs is based on aspects of context; that is, appropriateness of the study topics to in order to be more interesting to engineering students, engineering-related communicative skills, and learning outcomes based on future students' engineering employment opportunities. However, since there exists various different levels of language proficiency among the student population, the teaching focus should be addressed according to the (revised) teaching material. Materials need to be refined in order to fulfill the students' needs to communicate with confidence in the engineering field.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the current study, the importance of learning a foreign language is clear, and that learning through ESP at HEIs in Kosovo needs to be undertaken in accordance with the students' needs and expectations. However, for the purpose of supporting ESP learning at the HE level based on students' proficiency level in English, instructors need to consider various factors when dealing with the diversity of students in their classes.

It is therefore considered essential for L2 teachers to offer students adequate exposure to ESP materials that utilize the most appropriate approaches to teaching ESP (Bekteshi, 2017). Failure to do so results in a disservice towards the students. The students also need to be taught based on a collaborative teaching approach (Little & Dieker, 2009; Rackevičienė et al., 2019) in ESP courses, as such skills will help them to understand professional authentic vocabulary and aid them in discovering professional language patterns in preparation for their future professional lives.

The engineering students' perception regarding professional vocabulary, the selection of engineering topics, and their modification and adoption in the classroom should be based on the students' language knowledge as a group, and the instructors' teaching skills need to be adapted to deliver courses in a more interactive learning environment. The current study suggests that ESP course development requires two equal parties, instructors and students. Being immersed in a specific vocabulary type would assist the students in developing professional skills in a more global context, particularly for students seeking to engage in professional sustained L2 with their student peers. The students can then be able to broaden their understanding of ESP vocabulary as well as to assist the L2 teachers in course development, meaning that the emphasis should be on the topics and methods that are deemed appropriate for each particular area or field of engineering.

The most mentioned reasons for learning and using ESP in the engineering field was that L2 learners need to grasp ESP for the purposes of seeking employment, for job promotion prospects, or for their general professional development. The fact that ESP in engineering courses almost exclusively exists within Engineering degrees, i.e., in Engineering courses which focus on engineering topics, indicates that ESP in Kosovan HEIs is not currently exploited to its full potential, and that additional teaching material should be created and implemented so that instructors can be more proactive in exploring innovative ways and

methodologies in the field (Rackevičienė et al., 2019). As such, future studies should look at ESP courses from the international context in greater detail. In this way it would be possible to understand how these international ESP courses may contribute to further developing ESP learning in the Kosovan HE context, and promoting ESP as an important and preferred course across a wider field of study areas.

Notes

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