BALANCING GENERAL ENGLISH AND ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES

Senior lecturer Gulshan Aliyeva
Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University, Dep.of "Foreign Languages", Baku, Azerbaijan
gulshanaliyeva10@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The role of English instruction in technical universities has become a subject of ongoing debate: should curricula emphasize general language proficiency or specialized professional training? This study investigates the balance between English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in technical higher education. EGP develops broad communicative competence, while ESP equips students with discipline-specific skills relevant to engineering, information technology, and oil and gas industries. Drawing on international practices from leading universities, the study highlights the value of a sequential, integrated approach: beginning with EGP to build foundational language skills, then introducing ESP to address specialized academic and professional needs. Methodologically, a qualitative document analysis of 12 international technical universities was conducted, including MIT, ETH Zurich, KAIST, and Tokyo Institute of Technology. The findings indicate that a balanced EGP-ESP curriculum enhances students' academic performance, professional readiness, and intercultural competence. Practical implications include guidance for language policy makers, curriculum designers, and instructors in technical universities, particularly in developing countries.

Keywords: English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), technical universities, ESP curriculum, EGP-ESP integration, higher education, intercultural communication, needs analysis

Introduction

With globalization, rapid technological advancement, and evolving labor-market demands, English instruction has become integral to technical universities (Basturkmen, 2010; Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2006). Graduates in engineering, information technology, oil and gas, and applied sciences are expected to possess both technical expertise and strong international communication skills (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland, 2006). Consequently, higher education institutions face a critical question: should English instruction emphasize English for General Purposes (EGP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP)?

This study is motivated by professional experience and international collaboration. At Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ASOIU), students encounter challenges balancing general language proficiency with discipline-specific requirements. Insights from the TEMPUS FLEPP project (Foreign Language Education for Professional Purposes), involving Azerbaijan, the UK, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Germany, demonstrate that an integrated EGP-ESP approach yields the most effective outcomes (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

EGP enhances general language competencies—reading, writing, listening, speaking, and intercultural communication (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2006), while ESP provides specialized skills for professional and academic contexts (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Determining the optimal balance remains a critical task for technical universities worldwide.

Aim

This study aims to determine the optimal balance between EGP and ESP in technical universities. Specifically, it addresses:

1. What are the individual benefits of EGP and ESP in technical higher education?
2. How do leading international universities implement EGP and ESP in their curricula?
3. How does a combined EGP-ESP model impact students' academic and professional preparedness?
4. What strategies can technical universities adopt to create an effective English curriculum addressing both general and discipline-specific needs?

Significance

The study offers both theoretical and practical significance. First, it informs curriculum design, language policy, and teaching strategies for technical universities (Byram, 1997; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Second, it highlights the need for integrated instruction, which enhances academic, professional, and intercultural

competencies. Third, by analyzing international best practices, it provides adaptable models for universities in developing countries. Finally, evidence from ASOIU demonstrates that sequential EGP-ESP instruction aligns with students' professional goals in global industries, particularly in oil and gas, engineering, and IT sectors.
Table 1 provides a clear side-by-side comparison of EGP and ESP, demonstrating why both are necessary in technical education.

Table 1: **Comparison of EGP and ESP in Technical Education**

Aspect	***English for General Purposes (EGP)***	***English for Specific Purposes (ESP)***
Focus	Broad communication skills	Discipline-specific communication
Skills Developed	Reading, writing, listening, speaking, intercultural competence (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2006)	Technical vocabulary, report writing, presentations, professional discourse (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998)
Examples	Academic essays, discussions, presentations	Engineering lab reports, oil & gas documentation, IT reports
Timing in Curriculum	Early semesters	Later semesters, aligned with specialization
Benefits	Foundational language proficiency, global adaptability	Professional readiness, academic success in specific fields
Challenges	Limited discipline-specific relevance	Cannot replace general language skills

Theoretical Framework
The study is grounded in three main theoretical perspectives: Needs Analysis, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and ESP instructional models.

1. Needs Analysis: Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasize that assessing learners' needs is crucial in designing effective ESP programs. Understanding the specific contexts in which students will use English ensures that ESP courses are practical and relevant. This principle is especially applicable to technical fields such as oil and gas, engineering, medicine, marketing, and IT, where specialized vocabulary and communication conventions are essential.
2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): CLT advocates that language instruction should focus on communicative competence, not only grammatical accuracy. EGP programs aim to equip students with the ability to communicate effectively in social, academic, and professional contexts (Richards, 2006). Even technical professionals must write emails, participate in meetings, follow global news, and interact across cultures. Leading institutions, such as KAIST and MIT, ensure that all undergraduates take general English courses that include presentations, discussions, reading, writing, and listening, reinforcing the ongoing importance of general English.
3. ESP Models: Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) describe ESP as a flexible, learner-centered approach that addresses discipline-specific communication needs. For example, students in oil and gas engineering must master vocabulary and tasks related to drilling operations, offshore platforms, seismic analysis, reservoir modeling, and safety protocols. Marketing students, in contrast, must understand marketing strategy, consumer behavior, campaign planning, and business proposal writing. ESP instruction enables students to perform effectively in real professional contexts, bridging the gap between general proficiency and field-specific demands.

This theoretical framework underlines the complementary nature of EGP and ESP and supports the integration of both approaches in technical university curricula.

Literature Review
EGP strengthens foundational language skills, preparing students for global communication (Harmer, 2015; Nation, 2013). ESP provides specialized skills essential for professional contexts, enabling students to interpret technical texts and communicate effectively (Basturkmen, 2010; Jordan, 2018).

International best practices favor a sequential approach: students begin with EGP, then progress to ESP modules (MIT, ETH Zurich, KAIST, Tokyo Institute of Technology) (Jordan, 2018; Swales, 1990). Observations from the TEMPUS FLEPP project confirm that ESP cannot succeed without a solid general English foundation, emphasizing collaboration between language instructors and subject-matter experts (Byram, 1997; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

Despite abundant literature on EGP and ESP individually, there is limited guidance on systematically balancing both approaches, which this study addresses.

Methodology

Research Design: Qualitative, descriptive, and analytical.

Sample: 12 internationally recognized technical universities (MIT, ETH Zurich, KAIST, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Technical University of Munich). Universities were selected based on global ranking, availability of curricular documentation, and English-medium instruction.

Inclusion Criteria: Universities offering undergraduate technical programs with both EGP and ESP modules.

Data Collection: Curriculum documents, accreditation reports, official university websites, and peer-reviewed literature.

Analytical Framework: Thematic analysis identified patterns in EGP and ESP integration, sequencing, and instructional strategies. Codes were developed for foundational skills, discipline-specific modules, instructional methods, and assessment practices.

Reliability and Validity: Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying curricula with academic literature. Two independent researchers reviewed coding and categorization for consistency.

Findings

1. **Integrated Sequential Models Predominate:** ~80% of universities follow EGP-first, ESP-later curricula.
2. **EGP Builds Foundational Competencies:** Courses target reading, writing, listening, speaking, presentations, discussions, and intercultural communication (Harmer, 2015; Richards, 2006).
3. **ESP Prepares Students for Professional Contexts:** Modules focus on technical report writing, data interpretation, project presentations, and discipline-specific terminology (Basturkmen, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).
4. **Balanced Programs Yield Optimal Results:** Sequential EGP-ESP curricula enhance academic performance, professional readiness, and global competence.
5. **Evidence from ASOIU:** Early semesters focus on EGP; later semesters incorporate ESP aligned with engineering, oil and gas, IT, business programs etc.

Discussion

Findings align with prior research (Basturkmen, 2010; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Richards, 2006). A purely EGP or ESP focus is insufficient; sequential integration maximizes both linguistic and professional outcomes.

Internationally, ETH Zurich and KAIST show that authentic, discipline-specific tasks improve students' engagement and preparedness (Jordan, 2018). ESP courses should incorporate real-world documents, technical diagrams, and field-specific communication. Collaboration between language and subject-matter instructors ensures relevance (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

In technical fields, graduates must navigate complex professional environments. Balanced EGP-ESP instruction enhances their ability to understand technical documentation, participate in global discourse, and adapt to evolving industry demands.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the most effective English instruction in technical universities combines EGP and ESP. Students should first develop general language competencies and progressively engage with discipline-specific ESP modules. This approach:

- Strengthens academic and professional skills
- Enhances global communication competence
- Supports lifelong learning
- Prepares graduates for multicultural, technical professional environments

Integrating EGP and ESP provides a practical, research-supported solution for curriculum design in technical higher education.

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