



## Research Article

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# Incorporating Intercultural Competence Components in ESP Syllabus (Case Study: Agricultural University of Tirana)

Enkeleda Jata

Elsa Zela

Erion Shehu

Agricultural University of Tirana,  
St. Paisi Vodica 1025,  
Tirana,  
Albania

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## Abstract

*This research reconsiders the designing of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabus based on the current syllabus applied at the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT). It is widely known that we live in a globalized world, where language and intercultural skills are necessary among professionals in different fields. Through a case study approach, we explore how intercultural awareness, communication, and adaptability can enhance students' language learning experiences. The findings contribute to curriculum development and pedagogical practices, emphasizing the importance of intercultural skills in preparing students for global communication and collaboration. This research aims to understand the extent to which intercultural competence is developed during the ESP course and suggest new approaches to learning/teaching ESP. Purpose: The purpose of this article is to suggest the integration of intercultural elements into the current English for Specific Purposes syllabus at AUT. The aim is to enhance the development of intercultural competence skills among students. Methodology: The methodology involves a critical review of the existing ESP syllabus used at Agricultural University of Tirana. Findings: The analysis shows that the current syllabus provides some cultural aspects but does not develop students' intercultural competence. The syllabus's primary goal is to develop linguistic skills and includes very little factual knowledge regarding business culture. Suggestions: It is suggested to adapt the current syllabus and incorporate intercultural elements into each unit of the textbook. This adaption requires the inclusion of additional materials that enhance intercultural competence through various tasks such as discussion, comparisons, and assignments. Value: the integration of intercultural activities in ESP courses means a shift towards a more contemporary educational approach and preparing the students for the global market.*

**Keywords:** English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Intercultural Competence (IC), ESP Syllabus

## 1. Introduction

It is widely known that we live in a globalized world, where language and intercultural skills are necessary among professionals in different fields. The learning of a foreign language has gone beyond

learning vocabulary and grammar. It is quite evident that learners must go through a deep understanding of a language by taking culture into consideration as an important element for interaction. Therefore, it is important to equip students with this essential skill, enabling them to operate effectively in their future professions. The main aim of this research is to understand the extent to which intercultural competence is developed during the course and to suggest innovative approaches to learning and teaching ESP.

Intercultural competence, which significantly enhances the ability to interact effectively with individual from different cultural backgrounds, is an essential skill in today's globalized world. Deardorff (2006) defines "intercultural competence as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on five elements: attitude, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes and external outcomes". Byram (1997) defines the components of intercultural communicate competence as knowledge, skill, attitudes, and critical awareness.

This study adopts a case study approach to investigate the degree to which intercultural competence is developed based on the current syllabus and textbook used at Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT). In line with the aim of this paper, this study proposes the following research questions:

1. To what extent is intercultural competence integrated in ESP courses at the Agricultural University of Tirana?
2. How can intercultural competence be effectively incorporated into ESP courses?

Through this research, we analyze the current state of intercultural competence in ESP courses and provide practical recommendations to enhance students' skills. The significance of this research lies in its potential to encourage curriculum development and pedagogical practices.

## 2. Literature Background

In today's globalized market, English has become the predominant language used worldwide. As it is widely known, English is the international lingua franca, especially in the academic world. Academics consistently emphasize the significance of English for Specific Purposes to ensure success in learners' professional fields. The approaches used in ESP teaching today are far different from those used in the past. In the 1960s, ESP practitioners believed their task was to teach a list of technical vocabulary of a given field or profession (Somak, 2003). Learning a foreign language has gone beyond learning vocabulary and grammar. It is quite evident that learners must achieve a deep understanding of a language by considering culture as an important element for interaction. Therefore, it is important to equip students with this essential skill, by enabling them to operate effectively in their future professions.

Before designing an ESP course, it is crucial to understand what kind of English skills students need. As Li Li (2018, p.9) highlighted, "ESP is designed for learners with specific needs, which means a need analysis is the most important step in teaching ESP". However, the most difficult part in designing the ESP syllabus is how to incorporate intercultural competence skills and which aspect of the culture to include in the educational framework. These challenges arise from different cultural categories, often conceptualized as "layers of culture", and which "co-incidences of culture" to be incorporated into the educational process (Komorowska, H., 2006 p.61). Individuals usually operate through various cultural layers simultaneously, but when conflicts are encountered in values, norms, and beliefs challenges may arise, making the situation more complex. The process of selecting which cultural elements to include in the curriculum is an overwhelming task for teachers. The integration of Intercultural Competence (IC) components into the English for Specific Purposes syllabus requires a lot of work. One method is through authentic resources, defined as materials created for native speakers, widely acknowledged as beneficial for learners. Additional consideration extends to the adaptation of these materials to suit the specific requirement of ESP classroom environment. (Cit. Romjue, A., & MacDonald, 2018).

Teachers act as facilitators in developing students' learning aims towards intercultural

competence. As mentioned by Romjue & MacDonald (2018), teachers need to develop their own intercultural competence through “questions of identity development”. This involves developing new activities to get students to study the host culture. Nowadays, “a wide range of skills is expected from graduates apart from professional knowledge or knowledge of the product” (LSPAEmployability, p.14). This means that they are looking for graduates with problem-solving skills, interpersonal communication skills, creativity and teamwork skills (LSPAEmployability, p.14). If intercultural competence is developed through the curriculum and is considered a learning goal at university, this will significantly contribute in preparing students for the global market. According to Marcu. N.A (2020, p.311), “Every course should be designed according to the results of needs analysis and make sure that materials are properly selected for the purpose of meeting the learning objectives”. According to Vysotka (2005), the curriculum should aim to develop language skills in a way that integrates with the socio-cultural background; emphasizes language intercultural awareness and comprehension; promotes lifelong learning and autonomy, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The ESP curriculum aims to “develop the students’ language, pragmatic and intercultural language competence, and thereby their capacity for independent language learning”. (Vysotksa.,O., Zuyenko.I., Skyrpnyk.T., Khodtseva.A., 2005, pp.44-46).

### 3. Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this paper involves a careful evaluation of the current syllabus. This means a thorough evaluation of the course description, the coverage of topics, and the learning outcomes and objectives. The focus is on identifying these elements and, consequently, suggesting ideas to improve these aspects within the educational framework. Thus, the research aims to prove the efficiency of incorporating culture-related element in ESP syllabus. Several steps are followed in order to ensure an in-depth analysis. This include:

#### 3.1 Course Syllabus Analysis

- Objectives and learning outcomes
- How cultural aspects are integrated into the curriculum

#### 3.2 Textbook Content Analysis

- Identifying the presence of intercultural elements
- Examining units and exercises to determine if cultural knowledge and skills are incorporated

### 4. Importance of Intercultural Competence in Esp Courses

The goal is to introduce another element in teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), to enhance understanding of communication within the professional work environment. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to develop a syllabus that is not only motivating but also problem-based and thought-provoking, as emphasized by Sinkus and Ozola (2023). Therefore, interactive teaching methods should be selected to enhance their foreign language communication skills tailored to a professional context (Sinkus,S. & Ozola,I. 2023). Students will be exposed to various aspects of intercultural communication (verbal and non-verbal) in real-life professional settings. By examining the syllabus carefully, we can determine how to incorporate intercultural competence in ESP courses in order to enhance students’ intercultural skills.

Special attention must be dedicated to the selection and arrangement of cultural topics in the curriculum. The ESP course offers students the opportunity to cultivate the skills needed to operate in their respective field. Beyond a mere focus on the development of linguistic skills, ESP syllabus

should emphasize the importance of cultural background. ESP syllabus needs to be aligned with modern language teaching trends. However, the course developers need to carefully investigate the learners' needs. Before designing an ESP syllabus, teachers need to analyze and gather information about the ESP course. Therefore, it is important to answer these questions:

1. What is the module duration?
2. What are the intended learning outcomes?
3. What topics are relevant to include in the syllabus?
4. How can we develop linguistic competence and intercultural competence?
5. How will the evaluation process occur and the methods used?

Answering these questions will facilitate the process of designing an ESP syllabus based on learners' specific needs and objectives.

Syllabus should include activities that help students to:

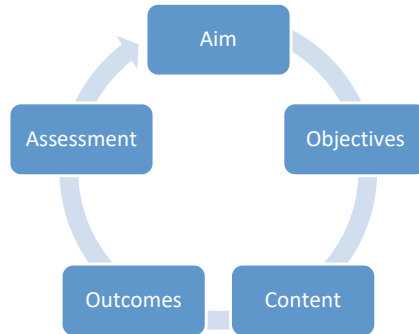
1. Understand your own culture and the target culture they are dealing with.
2. Being flexible in the way they communicate with people from other cultures; being open-minded, and having teamwork skills.
3. Ability to adapt their style of communication to fit the situation.
4. Having interpersonal skills and multicultural experience.
5. Developing cognitive skills (critical thinking, decision making, creativity)
6. Social and emotional skills (interpersonal skills, empathy, adaptability, and continuous learning) (LSPAEmployability, pp.11/37)

Teachers have the flexibility to create and choose different materials available on the internet or other forms. They should make an effort to enhance intercultural awareness and communication skills based on specific business topics. To do this, they must have well-formulated objectives and outcomes for the ESP syllabus. It is important to adapt ESP course content and objectives to align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR aims to "facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications and communication concerning objectives and achievement standards" (Anthanasiou, A etc. 2016 p 305) "CEFR appears to be extremely useful in syllabus design" (Anthanasiou, A etc. 2016). The CEFR stresses the importance of "intercultural awareness" in language learning and teaching. "In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favorable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture" (CEFR, 2001, p10)

The designing of the ESP syllabus should embrace the concept of "internationalization at home" (Nilsson, 1999), especially for students who cannot participate in exchange programs. This approach enables students to benefit from the intercultural learning process at home. Meanwhile, access to the internet and other forms of communication has made it easy for students to be exposed to different cultures. "Accessibility is a key issue in the acquiring of intercultural skills." (Rawal, R., Deardorff, D., 2016). Including topics in the syllabus that prompt learners to think about the language, stimulate critical thinking, and make the process of language acquisition productive is essential. However, what actually makes the learning process more attractive and stimulating is the inclusion of creativity in the classroom. Therefore, to enhance students' outcomes, we have to use a mixed approach in the classroom.

- Incorporate authentic materials in the class such as articles and case studies.
- Find opportunities to expose students to various communication styles.
- Encourage collaborative working and independent learning.
- Encourage critical thinking by analyzing and comparison of different materials in the class. (West R., Standford J., 2020)

While designing the ESP syllabus, certain elements need to be taken into consideration. Below are some general elements essential for designing ESP courses. ESP courses should be designed to prepare learners to become successful employees in the future in their respective fields.



**Figure 1.** ESP course organization  
**Source:** Authors' own creation

### 5. Including the Intercultural Element in the Current Esp Syllabus

In this section, we are going to present methods to incorporate intercultural elements into the syllabus, considering the current syllabus and the textbook used at AUT. Our proposal is to adapt the current syllabus and make the necessary adjustments to ensure an effective strategy.

English for Specific Purposes course offered at the Agriculture University of Tirana, is a mandatory 28-week course in the first year of the Bachelor's degree program, comprising a total of 56 learning hours, distributed over both first and second semesters. The syllabus is designed to enhance students' reading, speaking, and writing skills in the field of business. It includes a wide range of business-related vocabulary and grammar exercises tailored to meet the specific demands of the field. By having good knowledge of business terminology, students are equipped with the necessary tools to effectively collaborate and work with people worldwide.

The available textbook used at the university, "English for Business and Finance", is specifically created for students of the Faculty of Economics and Agribusiness at AUT. This textbook teaches students the skills that they will need in the workplace by placing a strong emphasis on vocabulary, grammar, reading, and speaking, offering many opportunities for students to improve these skills. However, it is notable that the current syllabus does not include intercultural competence as a learning outcome. The textbook provides some cultural aspects of conducting business in Albania, such as understanding the local business culture and topics that help to understand the cultural and legal framework in Albania.

Although the textbook has some topics regarding doing business around the world to teach students about different business cultures worldwide, they are not directly linked to the development of intercultural competence skills. The textbook does not offer opportunities for students to critically analyze and compare Albanian culture with that of English-speaking countries. Meanwhile, the current syllabus is focused on teaching language skills, such as grammar and vocabulary, through traditional activities and approaches. The topics covered in the syllabus focus on imparting factual knowledge and historical insights about business rather than encouraging cross-cultural comparisons. Mere presentation of facts or general knowledge does not develop intercultural competence. Possessing knowledge about various cultures is only one component of intercultural competence; therefore, it requires a deeper understanding of the cultural components. For this reason, courses should be designed by highlighting that future graduates will need to develop cultural awareness. As mentioned by Bouzidi (2009) "English Language programs must provide learners with a rich and diverse linguistic and cultural experience".

Updating the current syllabus to include intercultural elements to foster the development of intercultural competence within the educational framework requires considerable effort from the

teachers. The topics outlined in the current syllabus at AUT can be enriched by incorporating intercultural elements, as illustrated in the third column labeled “intercultural elements” in Table 1 provided below. This adaptation requires teachers to incorporate additional materials that encourage the development of intercultural competence within the classroom setting. Through these modifications, we could enhance students’ opportunities to develop cultural awareness through multifaceted approaches such as discussions, comparisons, assignments etc.

Bringing foreign and home cultures together in ESP courses is indeed a challenging task that requires thoughtful choices of strategies and techniques. To incorporate intercultural competence into the current syllabus, we can focus on integrating cultural awareness, communication skills, and fundamental cultural elements into each unit of this textbook. It is much easier for teachers to plan intercultural activities based on the current textbook content. Moreover, by integrating the intercultural element into the current syllabus, teachers can shift towards a more contemporary educational approach with a special focus on integrating intercultural activities in ESP courses. The recommended approach is to include intercultural dimension in developing students’ intercultural skills during seminars session. Upon completion of their studies, students will possess all the skills required in the business world, thanks to the intercultural activities incorporated into the syllabus.

Outlined below is the syllabus of the first semester used at AUT, along with the recommended changes to equip learners with the necessary linguistic and cultural skills. Through interactive activities, students will develop a deeper understanding of how culture can significantly impact their future career.

**Table 1:** First Semester Syllabus Topics with Intercultural Elements (Adapted from: Sinkus,S. & Ozola,I.,2023)

WEEK	Syllabus topics	Intercultural Elements	Activities
I	Introduction	Definition: Culture, Cross-cultural communication challenges, Intercultural Competence	Presentation
II	Business Talk	Discussion in informal business communication, such as greeting, small talk, and business talk across different cultures	Discussion, Culture Comparison, Presentation Video Materials
III	Applying for a job	Discussing how culture-related differences may influence the job application process, CV writing, and cover letter.	Discussion, Cultural values, Behaviors, Attitudes
IV	Job Interviews	Stimulate role-plays and cross-cultural job interviews. Discuss how culture may influence interview etiquette or questioning techniques.	Role-playing scenarios, Presentation
V	Holding on to your job or quitting it	Discussing how culture-related factors influence job retention. Discussing how they manage work-life in different cultures.	Group discussion, Presentation
VI	Returns, Wages, and other Benefits	How compensation, benefits, and rewards are seen in different cultures. Discussion on cultural values.	Text analysis, Pair work activity
VII	Business News	Analyzing how people may interpret and report business news based on their cultural norms.	Video Material , Cultural differences between Albania and other countries, (analyzing different situation and key phrases)
VIII	Doing Business in Albania	Discuss cultural values and norms on doing business in Albania, business etiquette, and negotiation practices. Suggestion: Analyzing Albania as a monochronic or polychronic; individualist or collectivistic and compare it to other countries and the influence it has on doing business in Albania	Presenting and analyzing different situations in the class
IX	Entrepreneurs and Business Leaders	Comparing and analyzing cultural differences in entrepreneurial mindset and leadership style	Discussion , Individual work
X	Launching a new product	How culture influences consumer behavior, marketing strategies, market penetration	Role plays, Oral presentation
XI	The art of advertising	Impact of cultural on advertising campaigns, consumer perception on advertising campaigns.	Presentation, Materials, Discussion
XII	Training Companies	How cultural differences influence training program, learning style	Video, Extra materials, Pair work
XII	The tobacco industry in Albania	Discuss culture-related attitude towards tobacco use, and regulation of tobacco industry in Albania and other English-speaking countries.	Discussion, Group work

As seen in the syllabus above, intercultural elements are included in each unit. Through this inclusion, we aim to engage students in intercultural discussion, raise their awareness regarding the

importance of intercultural skills, and develop their intercultural skills through the comparison and contrast of their own culture with others.

## 6. Recommendations and Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to provide suggestions how to develop intercultural competence through ESP teaching. Universities should reconsider updating their syllabus and incorporate intercultural competence into ESP courses. By including intercultural elements, students will not only attain proficiency in the English language but also master skills, knowledge, and attitudes for effective cross-cultural communication. Presenting students with cultural-based activities can help develop problem-solving skills, analytical skills, interpretive and observational skills, and enable them to communicate their message more explicitly.

The dynamic nature of these activities should foster the development of intercultural competence among students. Broadly speaking, by including intercultural elements in Business English, learners acquire abilities to express their ideas without ambiguity, avoid cultural differences, master the art of speaking and listening, acquire presentation techniques, develop empathy and become more sensitive to cultural diversity. These skills improve their cultural awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. Therefore, acquiring the ability to communicate effectively across different cultures is essential. The syllabus should encourage students to reflect on each topic covered in the class. Through comparison and reflection, students can understand both their own culture and the target culture they are studying, enabling them to express themselves freely in both spoken and written forms.

In order to develop intercultural competence through ESP, several considerations should be taken into account. For example, offering students the opportunity to communicate with students from partner universities through online platforms can significantly enhance their learning experience. Moreover, the course should address both the differences and similarities across various cultures. Also, it is essential to involve professionals from different fields in designing the ESP syllabus to provide insights into real-world language demands that student may encounter in their future careers. Furthermore, for an effective curriculum development, students' needs must be analyzed. Upon completing the course, students will have not only theoretical knowledge but also practical experience, contributing to their complete formation.

Lastly, teachers need to carefully consider the activities and approaches that develop students' intercultural skills. Thoughtful planning is essential in reaching the desired outcome and fostering the development of intercultural skills.

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