



NON-PHILOLOGICAL HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS: SPECIFIC FEATURES, PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES, AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The article examines the specific features of non-philological higher education programmes and their implications for the development of students' linguistic and communicative competences. In programmes such as engineering, information technology, medicine, architecture and economics, language is not the central object of study, yet it functions as an essential mediating tool for acquiring disciplinary knowledge and participating in professional communication. Drawing on the frameworks of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), competency-based education and constructivist pedagogy, the study explores how curriculum design, didactic organisation, assessment systems and digital learning environments shape the status of language subjects in non-philological contexts.

Keywords: Non-philological education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), CLIL, curriculum design, competency-based learning, professional communication, disciplinary literacy, higher education.

Introduction

In contemporary higher education systems, non-philological programmes occupy a strategic position in the preparation of professionals for the global knowledge economy. Engineering, information and communication technologies (ICT), architecture, medicine, economics and related disciplines are expected not only to provide advanced technical expertise, but also to cultivate a set of transversal competences that include critical thinking, teamwork, intercultural awareness and effective communication in one or more foreign languages.



However, in many institutional contexts, the organisation of non-philological curricula still reflects a traditional, subject-centred model in which language education is treated as an auxiliary component, loosely connected to the core disciplinary modules. Language courses are frequently allocated a minimal number of credits, scheduled in peripheral semesters and assessed through formalistic examinations that do not mirror real professional tasks. This structural marginalisation stands in stark contrast to the communicative demands imposed on graduates by the international labour market, where participation in multinational teams, processing of English-language documentation and engagement in cross-border projects have become routine.

From a theoretical perspective, the problem can be described as a tension between the **communicative reality of professional practice** and the **institutional representation of language** within non-philological programmes. While frameworks such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) explicitly address the intersection of language and content, their systematic implementation in non-philological contexts remains limited and uneven.

The aim of the present article is therefore twofold: first, to explore the specific structural, pedagogical and linguistic characteristics of non-philological higher education programmes; and second, to analyse how these characteristics affect the development of students' communicative and disciplinary literacy. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the role of language education conceptualised and implemented within non-philological curricula?
2. What linguistic and communicative difficulties do students in non-philological programmes encounter?
3. Which pedagogical and organisational practices prove effective in integrating language and content in such programmes?

Methods

To address these questions, a multi-method qualitative research design was adopted, combining document analysis, empirical data collection and interpretative analysis.



Firstly, a **content analysis of curricula** from selected universities was carried out. Syllabi and study plans from faculties of engineering, ICT, economics and medicine were examined with particular attention to the following parameters: credit allocation for language courses, learning outcomes, links to professional competences, assessment formats and the presence (or absence) of ESP/CLIL-oriented modules. This analysis made it possible to identify systemic tendencies in the institutional positioning of language education.

Secondly, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with 18 instructors: 10 foreign language teachers working in non-philological faculties and 8 subject specialists (e.g., in engineering, computer science and economics) who regularly interact with students using English-language materials. The interview guide focused on perceived student needs, typical communication tasks, challenges in collaboration between language and subject teachers, and attitudes towards integrated approaches such as CLIL.

Thirdly, **classroom observations** were carried out in 12 sessions of language classes and 10 sessions of subject-specific courses where English-language materials were used. Observation protocols documented patterns of interaction, the use of terminology, the balance between teacher talk and student production, and the integration of multimodal resources (slides, diagrams, technical drawings, software interfaces).

Finally, a **needs-analysis survey** involving 215 students enrolled in non-philological programmes was administered. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended items concerning self-assessed language proficiency, frequency and type of professional communication tasks, perceived difficulties and expectations regarding language courses.

The data obtained from these methods were analysed using thematic coding. Particular attention was given to convergences and divergences between the perspectives of students, language teachers and subject specialists, as well as to discrepancies between the declared curricular objectives and the actual classroom realities.



Results

The analysis revealed several interrelated clusters of findings that characterise non-philological higher education programmes from a linguistic and pedagogical standpoint.

First, at the **curricular level**, language education is generally framed in broad, generic terms (e.g., “develop communicative competence in a foreign language”) without explicit reference to the discursive practices of specific disciplines. Learning outcomes rarely mention concrete genres such as laboratory reports, design briefs, feasibility studies, clinical case descriptions or technical specifications. Language courses are predominantly taught as general English, relying on textbooks with limited relevance to students’ future professional contexts. As a result, there is a structural gap between the institutional description of language learning and the actual communicative tasks that graduates will face in their fields.

Second, the **survey of students** indicates a high degree of awareness of this gap. While many respondents rate their overall linguistic competence as “intermediate” or “upper-intermediate”, they report considerable difficulties in specific areas. These include reading and interpreting complex multimodal texts (combining graphs, tables, formulas and verbal explanations), following technical presentations delivered in English, and participating in interactive formats such as stand-up project pitches, poster sessions and online meetings. Students also emphasise the challenge of mastering specialised terminology and phraseology, particularly in areas such as mechanical engineering, software development, financial analysis or clinical diagnostics.

Third, **interview data from instructors** confirm that language-related difficulties frequently interfere with the learning of disciplinary content. Subject teachers report that students struggle to extract relevant information from English-language sources, to compare alternative technical solutions based on documentation, and to formulate well-structured written or oral arguments in project work. Language teachers, in turn, note the tension between the expectations of their students—who request “practical, profession-oriented English”—and the constraints imposed by existing syllabi and textbooks, which are not fully aligned with these expectations. Fourth, **classroom observations** demonstrate that, in many cases, language courses remain dominated by teacher-centred explanations and closed-form exercises, with



limited opportunities for extended student production or collaborative problem-solving. In contrast, where project-based or CLIL-inspired approaches have been implemented, there is a noticeable increase in student engagement, use of discipline-specific vocabulary and development of genre awareness. Positive examples include courses in which language and subject teachers jointly design tasks that require students to prepare technical presentations, write simplified versions of research abstracts or simulate workplace communication scenarios. Overall, the results highlight a systematic misalignment between institutional structures, pedagogical practices and the real communicative demands of non-philological professions.

Discussion

The findings can be interpreted in light of several theoretical frameworks. From an ESP perspective, non-philological programmes should ideally offer language instruction that is closely tailored to the discourse practices of particular professional communities. This involves the analysis of target genres, communicative events and lexico-grammatical patterns, followed by the design of learning tasks that simulate or approximate these practices. However, in the contexts examined, ESP principles are only partially implemented, and language courses often remain at the level of generic communicative training.

The CLIL framework, which advocates for the simultaneous development of content and language, offers another useful lens. In theory, CLIL provides a powerful solution for non-philological programmes: disciplinary knowledge is constructed through the medium of a foreign language, thereby integrating conceptual understanding and communicative competence. In practice, however, several obstacles hinder CLIL implementation: limited collaboration between language and subject teachers, insufficient institutional support for team teaching, and a lack of training in CLIL-specific methodologies.

From the perspective of **competency-based education**, the current positioning of language courses can be seen as problematic. While policy documents frequently emphasise “communication skills” and “foreign language competence” among graduate attributes, these competences are not consistently operationalised in the design of modules and assessment regimes. In many cases, language competences



are evaluated in isolation from professional tasks, which undermines their perceived relevance in the eyes of students and subject teachers alike.

The study also raises questions about **disciplinary literacy**—that is, the ability to participate in the specific ways of meaning-making characteristic of a discipline. In technical and medical fields, this involves not only the mastery of vocabulary, but also the interpretation of diagrams, the understanding of formulaic expressions, the use of hedging and modality in research writing, and the adoption of discipline-specific rhetorical structures. When language education is disconnected from these practices, students are effectively left to “discover” disciplinary literacy on their own, often through trial and error.

At the same time, the results demonstrate that more integrated and student-centred approaches can yield tangible benefits. Where project-based learning is implemented, students report increased confidence in presenting their work, negotiating roles within teams and explaining technical concepts to non-expert audiences. Digital tools—including learning management systems, corpora and AI-based feedback systems—can support the development of writing and speaking skills, provided they are embedded in meaningful tasks rather than used as an add-on.

Consequently, the discussion points towards the need for institutional reforms that go beyond individual teacher initiatives. Such reforms should include joint curriculum planning between language and subject departments, the recognition of interdisciplinary teamwork in workload models, and the allocation of time and resources for professional development in ESP and CLIL methodologies.

Conclusion

The study has shown that non-philological higher education programmes possess a set of distinctive features that significantly affect the development of students’ linguistic and communicative competences. Despite the centrality of communication in modern professional practice, language education in many non-philological curricula remains marginal, structurally isolated from core disciplinary modules and conceptually confined to generic language teaching.

Empirical data from curricula analysis, interviews, classroom observations and student surveys converge to reveal three key problems: the under-specification of discipline-specific communicative outcomes, the insufficient integration of



language and content, and the limited use of pedagogical and technological resources that could enhance disciplinary literacy. At the same time, the study identifies promising practices, such as project-based ESP courses, CLIL-oriented modules and collaborative terminology work, which can serve as models for wider implementation.

In order to align non-philological education with the communicative demands of the globalised labour market, higher education institutions should reconceptualise language not as a secondary “service” subject, but as a transversal competence that underpins professional identity and participation in expert communities. This reconceptualisation requires coordinated efforts at the level of curriculum design, assessment policy, teacher education and digital infrastructure.

Future research may extend the present study by conducting longitudinal investigations of students’ communicative development across the entire duration of their programmes, as well as by comparing different national and institutional models of integrating language and content in non-philological education.

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