

ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This article examines strategic methodologies for enhancing English language proficiency within the tertiary education sector. By evaluating the transition from general communicative competence to advanced academic literacy, the research identifies the cognitive and psychological barriers that impede student progress. The analysis focuses on the efficacy of specialized pedagogical frameworks in bridging the gap between student capability and the rigorous demands of globalized academia. Findings suggest that a comprehensive institutional approach—incorporating targeted instructional design and reduced affective barriers—is essential for fostering academic equity and professional readiness among university students.*

Keywords: *ELP, Tertiary Education, Academic Success, ESP, Task-Based Learning, career mobility.*

In the contemporary higher education landscape, English has evolved from a secondary language requirement into the primary vehicle for academic and professional discourse. For university students, the mastery of English is no longer a peripheral skill but a fundamental prerequisite for accessing global research and achieving career mobility. However, a significant disparity often exists between the “General English” acquired in secondary schooling and the “Academic English” required at the university level. According to Ken Hyland, a leading Professor of Applied Linguistics, university students must master “Academic Literacy,” which involves navigating the specific rhetorical conventions and discourse communities of their chosen fields.[1]

This research indicates that many students experience “linguistic shock” upon entering university because the communicative English used in social settings does not prepare them for the “hedging”, “boosting” and complex citation practices required in scholarly writing. The enhancement of English proficiency at the university level must be informed by established linguistic theories that account for the unique cognitive profile of adult learners. Unlike children, university students possess advanced analytical skills but often face higher emotional barriers to learning. A primary consideration is the Input Hypothesis developed by Stephen Krashen, an influential Linguist and Educational





Researcher. Krashen suggests that linguistic progress occurs when learners are exposed to “comprehensible input”. [2]

If the material is too simple, no growth occurs; if it is too complex, the student becomes discouraged. Central to this theory is the "Affective Filter". That variables such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence and boredom act as a mental block that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition center of the brain. In a high-stakes university seminar, the fear of being judged by peers or professors can raise this filter, effectively "shutting down" the student's ability to process or produce language, regardless of their intellectual capacity. The Socio-Educational Model identified by Robert Gardner, a renowned Social Psychologist, highlights the role of motivation in successful acquisition. [3]

Gardner's extensive data categorization distinguishes between two types of drivers:

1. Instrumental Motivation: Seeking language proficiency for utilitarian goals, such as passing an exam or securing a high-salaried position.

2. Integrative Motivation: A genuine interest in the target language community and a desire to integrate into its culture.

While university students are predominantly driven by instrumental factors, Gardner's research proves that those who cultivate an integrative interest in their academic community (e.g., wanting to sound like a professional architect or scientist) maintain higher levels of persistence through the difficult "intermediate plateau". Generic language instruction often lacks the relevance required to maintain the engagement of university students. Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John both esteemed Experts in Applied Linguistics and ESP Practitioners, argue that language instruction should be tailored to the specific lexicon and discourse of a student's major. [4] They suggest that an ESP curriculum must be based on a "Needs Analysis," identifying the specific tasks a student will perform. For example, a medical student requires "bedside manner" communication and technical Latinate vocabulary, whereas a business student requires mastery of persuasive negotiation and executive summaries. By focusing on these high-utility areas, ESP programs maximize the "Instrumental Motivation" defined by Gardner, leading to faster and more durable proficiency gains. Moving away from rote memorization and grammar-translation methods, Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers, distinguished Professors of Applied Linguistics, provide extensive evidence that Task-Based Learning (TBL) is superior for adult learners. [5]

In the TBL model, the “lesson” is not a grammar rule, but a functional objective — such as solving a case study or designing a lab experiment in a group. This methodology relies heavily on the Interaction Hypothesis proposed by Michael Long, a prominent Professor of Second Language Acquisition. [6]





Long posits that language is acquired most effectively when learners must “negotiate meaning”. When a student attempts to explain a technical concept and fails to be understood, they are forced to modify their output. This cycle of feedback and correction—occurring in real-time during a task—is more effective at consolidating grammar and vocabulary than any textbook exercise. A common challenge in tertiary education is the “intermediate plateau”, where students possess enough English to function but fail to reach the sophisticated levels required for high-level research. To overcome this, the following mechanisms are essential:

Instructors should provide temporary support structures (like “sentence starters” or “academic phrase-banks”) that help students construct complex arguments. As the student's confidence grows, these supports are gradually withdrawn. Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL): Modern platforms allow students to receive immediate, private and low-stakes feedback on their writing. This is crucial for lowering the Affective Filter, as it allows students to correct errors without the social shame of being corrected in public.

Corpus Linguistics: Students can be taught to use digital “corpora” (databases of real-world English) to see how words are actually used in their specific fields. This allows them to move beyond dictionary definitions to understand “collocation” (how words naturally fit together). Linguistic enhancement cannot be the sole responsibility of the English department. It must be an institutional priority. Successful universities often adopt a “Writing Across the Curriculum” (WAC) approach. In this model, a Biology professor and an English professor might collaborate to grade a lab report, signaling to the student that clear communication is an inseparable part of being a scientist. Furthermore, the establishment of English Language Centers (ELC) provides a “safe haven” for practice. These centers offer one-on-one tutoring where students can bring drafts of their work. This individualized attention directly addresses the motivational and emotional needs identified ensuring that the student feels supported throughout their academic journey.

Enhancing English language proficiency is a multi-dimensional challenge that requires a shift from passive instruction to active, task-oriented learning. By aligning language curriculum with specific academic disciplines and utilizing frameworks that prioritize meaningful interaction over rote memorization, institutions can significantly improve student outcomes. The integration of technology and the reduction of psychological barriers are equally vital in ensuring that students move beyond basic fluency toward a level of academic literacy that allows them to compete on a global scale. Ultimately, the goal is to transform English from an academic hurdle into a powerful instrument for professional and intellectual growth.





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