# A case for LSP

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## Abstract

*Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) has long been perceived as an "add-on" only relevant to vocational courses and/or reserved for learners who had already reached a certain level of proficiency, therefore relegating it to an anecdotal position within any language centre's provision. Pedagogical and economic considerations have further contributed to hinder the implementation of LSP courses. However, we believe that this is about to change and that the coming years could witness the revival of these courses.*

*If a compelling case for LSP is to be made, one needs to consider the remit of this provision and to dispel some misconceptions attached to it. Language teachers and their managers also need to design strategies to support such initiatives at local, national and European levels. This is precisely what has led three European institutions (Cambridge University – U.K., KTH Royal Institute of Technology – Sweden and the research laboratory Institut Mines Télécom-Didalang – France) to join forces and launch the Global Engineers Language Skills (GELS) project.*

*This paper will review the nature and role of LSP in the tertiary sector, before delving into theoretical and practical considerations in order to describe and place the GELS project within its wider context. The final part will offer some leads to be explored further, based on first-hand experiences, preliminary research and observations as well as reflexions that emerged prior to and during the data-collection phase of the project.*

## 1. Introduction

In a recent report, the British Academy (2016) mentions the reluctance of employers to offer language training to their employees before concluding that the latter should "have those linguistics skills before they enter the workplace" (p. 15). It is precisely a desire to achieve the above that led three language teachers from three different countries to join forces and establish the Global Engineers Language Skills (GELS) project, with the shared objective to best prepare their engineering students to operate in an increasingly globalised market. Only a true Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) approach, where languages and other relevant skills are developed side by side, can put this goal within reach. This paper will expand on this definition and our understanding of this concept before explaining how the GELS project intends to apply its guiding principles. In the final part of the paper, we will share some of the observations and reflections that have emerged from the first few months of the project as well as explore some of the issues to consider and the challenges to be expected when setting up an LSP provision in the tertiary sector.

## 2. Towards a definition of LSP and its aims

The relevance of LSP to a general programme of engineering may be difficult to perceive in the first instance. In some cases, it might even seem irreconcilable with the breadth of its target audience. If one considers for example the case of the *Language Programme for Engineers* (LPE) offered by the Engineering Department at Cambridge University, its provision is common to engineering students regardless of their year of study or field(s) of specialisation, includes undergraduates and postgraduates and is open to postdoctoral students as well as members of staff. Despite the

challenges this diversity presents, an LSP provision has been in place for over twenty years and regularly receives very positive feedback from the students. So what is an LSP course for engineers? It is a course that engages a wide audience, ranging from first year students, who explore very general topics to researchers who may be leaders in a very specialised field. Language teachers, curriculum designers and managers must therefore be aware of what constitutes transversal features in order to identify the smallest common denominator to the broad audience described above.

Although it may appear counter-intuitive initially, a direct consequence of the above is that LSP courses cannot be solely driven by discipline-specific lexis, at least not in the sense that we should restrict our teaching to the vocabulary related to the students' field(s) of expertise. As Gollies-Kies, Hall and Moore (2015) write it, "successful communication involves far more than establishing the meaning of individual lexical items and phrases" (p. 14). In order to successfully address the needs of all learners engaged on LSP courses, may they be students, researchers or other staff, we must look more carefully into the skills and competences they (will) need to apply regardless of their status, area of expertise or level of study. So we can state, therefore, that the language is neither specialised nor specific but that its purpose is – which is nothing more and nothing less than what the acronym LSP stands for. This purpose may be communication between engineers (who may share the same field of expertise – or may not), between engineers and technicians, or between engineers and any lay audience (general public, policy makers, interest groups, etc.) in order to successfully complete their tasks, whether it is building a bridge, obtaining a research grant or working on a collaborative project.

Finally, it should be noted that "general" language and LSP courses are not mutually exclusive. As Richer (2008) writes, "providing a response [to students' language needs] limited to the professional sphere does not necessarily constitute a suitable solution" (p. 24, our translation).This means that if we are to fully prepare future engineers, our courses should also include a non-LSP component. This will facilitate the students' social interactions inside and outside their working environment, be it over the occasional business lunch or their daily interactions with lab colleagues during coffee breaks for instance. This should include promoting a good understanding of body language, time or space perception across different cultures, for instance, since they can be crucial for smooth and effective communication.

## 3. The GELS project's genesis and raison d'être

The GELS project aspires to be a truly European enterprise on several accounts. Its approach presented above clearly echoes that promoted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) when it states that "it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (Council of Europe, 2003, p. 9). The European dimension of the GELS project is not limited to the CEFR: it involves three European countries with very distinct traditions and attitudes towards language learning, and the GELS team met thanks to the Erasmus + programme (via their involvement with the student mobility programme or through staff mobility agreements). This has naturally led to an application for some European funds to pursue the project further (the outcome is as yet unknown).

The main purpose of the GELS project is to adapt the CEFR to the needs of engineering students. A particular emphasis will be on encouraging and supporting engineering schools to offer a language provision specific and relevant to their students starting from level A1 of the CEFR. The GELS team made this conscious decision in order to dismiss the misconception that LSP can only be taught from a certain level (often B1), a belief well illustrated by a quick browse through the rare textbooks that exist for engineers or scientists who want to learn French: they mainly address students who have already reached level B1 and we notice a similar target audience on the website www.e-filipe.org that aims to prepare engineering students to study in France. However, some practitioners such as Velkova (2012) have already shown how LSP can be implemented at lower levels. Although designing courses and developing materials relevant to such a specific audience requires time and creativity, the motivational effect on students is worth the effort.

Increasingly, universities across Europe put the emphasis on "employability" and "internationalisation". These two priorities can be addressed by LSP courses as long as they focus on soft and hard skills: in their language classes, students will for example learn to summarise an experiment, analyse statistics or present some findings orally. These are tasks which they are likely to carry out in their career, whether in their mother tongue or in a foreign language. However, in order to equip tomorrow's engineers with the most suitable and comprehensive range of skills, it is essential to gather data from engineers in the field, which the GELS project team has started doing through a survey launched in November 2015. This will be completed by a second stage including interviews with some of the respondents. This needs analysis will then be used as a tool to inform the content of the CEFR-based guide mentioned above. Although the initial work will be mainly carried out by the project initiators, language teachers across Europe will be invited to training days where they can fine-tune the document and the development of scenarios that will constitute the framework for task-based learning activities.

## 4. Reflexions and challenges

Although the survey mentioned above is "work in progress", an early finding is that engineers use a range of skills and that none of the five listed in the CEFR (reading, writing, listening, speaking, interacting) seems to have significantly more importance than the others. Having said that, we feel there are micro-skills that will be particular relevant to our students. The best example is probably that of presenting, describing and analysing a graphical representation or a table containing data. Whether as part of an oral presentation or a written report, it is a skill that any future engineer or scientist will need. Amongst other practical examples of relevant activities is the one that consists in "transferring information from illustration to text, and from text to illustration" (Dlaska, 1999, p. 411). Such tasks could cover labelling a picture, understanding a user's guide, or indeed writing one. These are only examples of what we plan to include and expand upon in the final product of the GELS project.

The ambition of our project is also to address intercultural skills through the creation of a sixth column alongside the adapted CEFR grid in order to put the emphasis on the intercultural dimension and address relevant cross-cultural issues. We hope this will allow our students to develop an "Intercultural Interaction Competence" (ICIC), a term coined by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) to refer to "the competence not only to communicate (verbally and non-verbally) and behave effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural groups, but also to handle the psychological demands and dynamic outcomes that result from such interchanges" (p.51). This will play a key role in helping students in their future professional and social settings, be it abroad or within any multicultural environment.

Finally, one of the main challenges facing LSP teachers and programme leaders is very often their isolation. This is something this project is also hoping to address by bringing in as many teachers and their managers together to exchange ideas and share good practice. This could include helping teachers to overcome the uneasy situation of facing students who are very knowledgeable in a field foreign to the teachers: although challenging at first, this environment is also conducive to genuine communication between experts (students) and a lay audience (teaching staff). Managers should also be able to share arguments they can present to policy-makers in their institutions to remove obstacles to a better LSP provision. Encouraging better integrated language skills and changing the perception of languages - often perceived as peripheral to the core engineering provision - may require putting forward a carefully crafted case in order to convince decision-makers at university level and this is – again - better achieved in a collaborative effort.

## 5. Conclusion

The GELS project is only in its initial phase, which could be described as the needs analysis phase, although it is worth pointing out with Gollies-Kies & al. that "now [as opposed to the early years of ESP/LSP], needs analysis is seen as potentially a continuous process, taking place before, during and even after a course delivery" (p.89). Therefore, even if this project has already acquired momentum by engaging language practitioners across Europe, its outcomes will have to be carefully considered, trialled and evaluated before being disseminated and made freely available. Our belief is that it is only through a collaborative endeavour, which includes all stakeholders, that we will manage to design the best possible materials to enable students - at all levels - to benefit from LSP courses that will truly prepare them to engineer globally. We hope that the GELS project will go beyond benefiting hundreds of teachers - and their students - across Europe and that this scheme for engineers can find an echo in other domains where LSP has a crucial part to play (medicine, natural sciences, etc.).

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