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FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN TECHNICAL HIGHER EDUCATION: A TASK-BASED METHODOLOGICAL SYSTEM

The article presents a task-based methodological system for developing the professional English communicative competence of students in technical higher education institutions. The system combines the principles of task-based language teaching and English for Specific Purposes and shifts the focus of instruction from working on language forms to performing authentic communicative actions in professionally modelled situations. Professional English communicative competence is operationalised through five interrelated components: linguistic accuracy, professional vocabulary, fluency, interactional competence, and professional appropriateness. On this basis, an original model – the Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle – is proposed, comprising nine sequential stages, from presenting a professional situation and preparing to perform an authentic technical task through professional interaction, decision-making, feedback, reflection, self-assessment and language consolidation. Ten types of authentic communicative tasks corresponding to typical kinds of engineering activity are systematised: technical problem-solving, information exchange, decision-making, troubleshooting, technical presentations, professional meetings, client interaction, negotiation, project management and collaborative decision-making. A five-component assessment rubric is developed, linking the performance of professional communicative tasks to specific competence indicators and providing a basis for assessing observable communicative performance. The proposed system integrates professional context, authentic communicative tasks, technical content, professional interaction, decision-making and outcome-based assessment into a single methodological framework. The empirical effectiveness of the proposed system was not tested within this study and remains a subject for future research.

Key words: *task-based language teaching; English for Specific Purposes; professional English communication; technical higher education; professional communicative competence; engineering education; authentic professional communicative tasks; technical English.*

(статтю подано мовою оригіналу)

English has become the working language of international engineering practice, making communicative competence a practical requirement for engineering graduates. Technical higher education institutions, including in Ukraine, therefore treat English for Specific Purposes (ESP) – instruction organised around the specific communicative needs of a defined group of learners – as an essential curriculum component oriented toward professional rather than general language demands [10; 14].

Yet knowing professional vocabulary and being able to communicate professionally are not the same thing, and this difference is the central problem this article addresses. A technical student may acquire substantial terminology and complete grammar exercises accurately, while still being unable to explain a fault to a colleague, negotiate a delivery date with a supplier, defend a design decision, or simplify a technical explanation for a non-specialist client. These are communicative actions – explaining, clarifying, negotiating, defending, adapting to an audience – that conventional ESP instruction, oriented toward reading, translation and terminology memorisation, rarely requires students to perform [2]. Professional English competence cannot be reduced to lexical or grammatical knowledge.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) – organising learning around meaningful tasks requiring learners to use language to achieve real-world outcomes – is a natural candidate for this shift [11; 20; 26]. Because engineering practice is itself task-oriented, TBLT offers a principled way to move instruction from language knowledge toward communicative performance [5]. However, general TBLT frameworks were not designed with the specific communicative architecture of technical professional life in mind. This article addresses that gap through an original model, the Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle (TPCTC).

TBLT has been extensively theorised and researched over the past three decades [1; 11; 12; 18; 21; 23; 24]. ESP needs analysis has repeatedly documented the professional language demands of technical and engineering students [2; 3; 7; 14; 15]. Communicative and interactional competence have been theorised in detail [8; 13; 16], and performance-assessment methodology is a mature field [4; 19; 25]. Task-based oral-proficiency interventions for engineering students have also begun to appear [5; 6].

What is missing is not any one strand, but its integration into a single, transferable framework connecting: (1) authentic professional communication contexts; (2) a task typology; (3) an operationalised, multidimensional competence model; (4) a principled instructional sequence; (5) an aligned, performance-based assessment framework. Existing studies typically address one or two of these elements – a needs analysis, a single intervention,

a competence model – without connecting them into a reusable pedagogical system. This integrated framework is the central contribution of the present article.

The aim of the article is to develop and theoretically substantiate a task-based methodological framework for professional English communication in technical higher education.

To achieve this aim, the study: 1) operationalises professional English communication competence as a multidimensional, assessable construct; 2) analyses the theoretical foundations of TBLT relevant to ESP for engineering education, including task complexity and sequencing; 3) distinguishes authentic communicative tasks from language exercises; 4) develops an original model – the Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle (TPCTC) – and differentiates it from conventional TBLT task cycles; 5) systematises authentic task types corresponding to real engineering communication genres; 6) develops a performance-based assessment framework.

English for Specific Purposes is commonly defined as an approach in which content and methods are determined by the specific needs of a defined group of learners [10; 14]. Unlike general English instruction, ESP is learner-centred: its starting point is a systematic needs analysis [17], not a predetermined syllabus. For technical students this means organising the curriculum around engineering communication genres – documentation, describing processes, reporting faults, meetings, and interaction with colleagues, clients and international partners [2; 3].

A recurring finding in ESP needs-analysis research is the gap between the skills technical students are taught and those they actually need. Alibakhshi et al. found task-based language needs rated highly important by both students and teachers [2], yet often inadequately addressed by curricula privileging reading and vocabulary over productive on-the-job skills. Bekteshi and Xhaferi, surveying 239 university students, similarly found engineering students rating professional vocabulary above test-oriented grammar [7], while Kausar reports that non-native-English engineering students face specific obstacles that generic instruction does not address [15].

ESP for technical students should reflect three characteristics of engineering communication: context-dependence; precision under time pressure; and a collaborative, problem-oriented character. These point toward a task-based, rather than content- or grammar-based, design, since tasks are structured around a communicative outcome under authentic constraints [11].

"Communication skills" is often used in ESP literature as an undefined umbrella term, complicating instructional design and assessment. Building on Canale and Swain's [8] model of communicative competence and extending it with interactional competence [13; 16], this article defines Professional English Communication Competence (PECC) as the learner's demonstrated capacity to use English accurately, appropriately and effectively to accomplish authentic communicative tasks in engineering settings. Interactional competence is treated as distinct because it concerns the co-constructed character of professional exchanges rather than an individual speaker's static knowledge [16] – a dimension that matters for engineers, whose communication is rarely a monologue.

PECC is operationalised through five interrelated, independently assessable components: linguistic accuracy, professional vocabulary, fluency, interactional competence, and professional appropriateness.

Professional appropriateness deserves particular emphasis: the same technical fact must typically be reformulated depending on the listener – engineer to colleague (precise shorthand), engineer to client (simplified, justifying a delay without jargon), engineer to supplier (negotiating cost, clarifying specifications), and engineer to project team (reporting progress, defending a decision under disagreement). None of these audience shifts is captured by grammatical accuracy alone, which is why appropriateness and interactional competence require dedicated assessment (Table 1).

Table 1

Components of Professional English Communication Competence in Technical Higher Education

Component	Definition	Indicators	Relevance	Assessment
Linguistic accuracy	Control of forms sufficient not to distort technical meaning	Correct tense/modality/ syntax; non-standard forms tolerated if meaning is clear	Prevents unsafe misreading of instructions	Rubric rating of recorded performance
Professional vocabulary	Command of field terminology and register; paraphrase when terms are unavailable	Accurate, idiomatic domain terms; successful circumlocution	Discourse is densely terminological	Rubric rating; domain terminology checklist
Fluency	Sustaining communication at a pace that does not obstruct interaction	Few unfilled pauses; strategic hesitation/self-repair	Communication occurs under time pressure	Rubric rating; speech-rate indicators
Interactional competence	Co-constructing exchanges: clarifying, negotiating, turn-taking [16]	Initiates repair, checks understanding, manages turns	Engineering work is collaborative, not monologic	Rubric rating; paired/ group interaction analysis
Professional appropriateness	Sensitivity to register and pragmatic norms across audiences	Register shifts appropriately by audience	Engineers address technical and lay audiences	Rubric rating vs. audience benchmarks

TBLT is grounded in the view that language is acquired most effectively through meaningful use rather than explicit study of forms in isolation [18; 21; 24]. A task is a classroom activity focused on meaning, requiring learners to use their own linguistic resources to achieve a non-linguistic outcome [11; 20]. Willis [26] operationalises this into a three-phase cycle: pre-task, task cycle, and a language-focus phase.

An exercise (e.g., a gap-fill) has practice of a predetermined form as both means and end; a task is oriented toward an outcome external to language itself, with language as the instrument [11; 24]. Learners may use imperfect language during a task, but if the outcome is achieved and understood, the task succeeds; feedback on form is deferred – mirroring workplace communication, where being understood quickly matters more than grammatical perfection.

Authentic technical tasks suit engineering students: they draw on existing subject-matter knowledge, freeing attention for language use [24]. Task complexity and sequencing further inform design: Robinson [22] distinguishes resource-directing task features, which increase complexity when manipulated, from resource-depleting features (e.g., planning time).

Building on Willis's [26] task cycle and Ellis's [11] framework, this article proposes an original model. It extends the classic three-phase TBLT cycle with a professional-context frame and explicit reflection/self-assessment stages, that support learners’ awareness of their communicative performance.

The model comprises nine sequential stages (Figure 1), specifying teacher and student roles: (1) Professional Situation – the teacher presents an authentic scenario; (2) Pre-task Preparation – students activate technical knowledge while the teacher clarifies the goal without a scripted solution; (3) Authentic Technical Task – students use English to achieve a genuine outcome; (4) Collaborative Problem-Solving – students exchange information and generate solutions while the teacher notes but does not correct language issues; (5) Professional Interaction – students present, defend or negotiate their solution with another group, a role-played "client", or the class; (6) Decision / Product / Solution – a concrete, outcome-oriented product; (7) Feedback – the teacher addresses success and the issues noted in Stage 4 (Willis's [26] language-focus phase); (8) Reflection and Self-Assessment – students evaluate performance; (9) Language Consolidation – focused practice of the forms identified in Stages 7–8, feeding into the next cycle.

Conventional TBLT cycles – pre-task, task, post-task language-focus [26] – are deliberately generic: content-neutral by design. This suits general-purpose teaching, but leaves unaddressed what a technical course needs: a professional situation, a technical problem, role-appropriate interaction, an explicit decision stage, and reflection against a defined competence model. Table 2 makes this comparison explicit.

Table 2

Conventional TBLT Task Cycle and the Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle: A Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Conventional TBLT	TPCTC	Added value for technical higher education
Context	Generic communicative situation	Explicit professional engineering situation	Grounds the task in students' target profession
Task orientation	Meaning-focused, general real-world outcome	Meaning-focused, technical problem-solving outcome (Stage 3)	Aligns the task goal with actual engineering work
Technical content	Not built into the cycle itself	Embedded from Stage 1 onward	Narrows the gap between language knowledge and disciplinary knowledge
Interaction	Pair/group task performance	Structured professional interaction: client, team, supervisor roles (Stage 5)	Simulates the specific audiences engineers address
Decision-making	Optional, task-dependent	Explicit, dedicated stage (Stage 6)	Mirrors engineers' responsibility for justified decisions
Feedback	General language-focus phase	Feedback tied directly to issues noted during Stage 4	Targets errors that most impede professional communication
Reflection / self-assessment	Not typically included	Explicit, rubric-referenced stage (Stage 8)	Supports learners’ awareness of their performance across the five PECC components
Professional appropriateness	Not specifically addressed	Embedded via audience-varied Professional Interaction	Prepares students to shift register across audiences

Consistent with the TPCTC model, task design should be organised around the communicative genres technical students are likely to encounter, rather than around linguistic forms. Table 3 presents a classification of ten authentic task types for technical students, developed by synthesising the task typologies of Willis [26] and Ellis [11] with the professional-context findings of ESP needs-analysis studies in engineering settings [2; 3; 5] (Table 3).

Step	Stage transition
1 → 2	Professional Situation → Pre-task Preparation
2 → 3	Pre-task Preparation → Authentic Technical Task
3 → 4	Authentic Technical Task → Collaborative Problem-Solving
4 → 5	Collaborative Problem-Solving → Professional Interaction
5 → 6	Professional Interaction → Decision / Product / Solution
6 → 7	Decision / Product / Solution → Feedback
7 → 8	Feedback → Reflection and Self-Assessment
8 → 9	Reflection and Self-Assessment → Language Consolidation
9 → 1	Language Consolidation → (feeds into the next Professional Situation)

Fig. 1. The Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle

Table 3

Task type	Context	Objective	Language focus	Outcome	Competence
Technical problem-solving	Diagnosing equipment failure	Analysing symptoms, proposing causes	Cause-effect language, modals	Agreed diagnosis	Vocabulary; accuracy
Information-gap tasks	Incomplete drawings shared between pairs	Exchanging missing data accurately	Clarification questions	Complete joint spec	Interaction; accuracy
Decision-making	Choosing between design solutions	Weighing criteria, justifying	Comparatives, hedging	Recorded decision	Interaction; appropriateness
Troubleshooting	Simulated fault report	Structured questioning, hypotheses	Sequencing, conditionals	Troubleshooting log	Fluency; vocabulary
Technical presentations	Presenting a completed project	Explaining process/results	Signposting, technical register	Delivered presentation	Fluency; appropriateness
Professional meetings	Weekly project status meeting	Reporting progress, issues	Turn-taking, agenda language	Meeting minutes	Interactional competence
Engineer–client communication	Explaining a delay to a client	Simplifying content appropriately	Register shifting, paraphrase	Client-ready explanation	Appropriateness; vocabulary
Negotiation	Negotiating scope/cost with a supplier	Persuading, conceding	Negotiation, politeness	Agreed terms	Appropriateness; interaction
Project-management tasks	Planning a timeline with constraints	Sequencing, allocating tasks	Future forms, connectors	Project plan outline	Accuracy; vocabulary
Collaborative decision-making	Cross-team design conflict	Integrating viewpoints	Consensus-building language	Joint resolution	All five components

Because linguistic accuracy and professional appropriateness are not adequately captured by traditional grammar tests, the five PECC components require performance-based, task-referenced assessment rather than discrete-item testing [19]. Table 4 presents a proposed rubric operationalising the model, scored on a five-point scale (1 = very limited … 5 = excellent), with descriptors anchored to observable task performance during the TPCTC Professional Interaction stage rather than to abstract correctness alone (Table 4).

Table 4

Component	1 – Very limited	2 – Limited	3 – Adequate	4 – Good	5 – Excellent
Linguistic accuracy	Errors obscure meaning	Errors sometimes obscure meaning	Errors present, meaning clear	Occasional errors only	Consistently accurate
Professional vocabulary	Minimal/incorrect terminology	Limited; frequent paraphrase needed	Adequate core terminology	Good range, accurate	Precise, idiomatic use
Fluency	Communication breaks down	Halting; effortful for listener	Some hesitation; task completed	Smooth, minor hesitation	Sustained, natural pace
Interactional competence	Cannot sustain exchange	Limited turn-taking/clarifying	Manages basic exchanges	Initiates, clarifies, closes well	Skilfully negotiates meaning
Professional appropriateness	Register inappropriate	Register often inappropriate	Register generally acceptable	Register consistently appropriate	Register precisely calibrated

Scoring should be conducted by at least two trained raters working independently from recorded task performances, using a scoring guide and benchmark performances agreed through prior calibration, following established oral performance-assessment methodology [4; 19]. The rubric is intended for performance-based assessment of recorded professional communication tasks. Its application requires clear scoring descriptors and rater familiarisation to support consistent interpretation of the assessment criteria.

The theoretical coherence of the proposed framework can be considered in relation to three dimensions: its adaptation of conventional TBLT, its alignment with the communicative demands of engineering practice, and its implications for performance-based assessment.

The comparison in Table 2 shows the TPCTC's departure from conventional TBLT is not cosmetic: conventional cycles are content-neutral by design, whereas the TPCTC embeds professional context and audience-varied interaction into its structure. Vocabulary instruction, however accurate, does not itself require students to perform the communicative actions that constitute professional competence; a task architecture is required because these actions must be practised, not studied as facts. Skehan's [24] account of attentional trade-offs supports this: tasks drawing on existing technical knowledge should free resources for the interactional performance PECC targets.

Interactional competence matters for engineers because professional exchanges are co-constructed, not monologues [16]. Professional appropriateness requires dedicated assessment precisely because it cannot be inferred from grammatical accuracy alone.

The framework does not claim task-based instruction is unconditionally superior: where the goal is rapid terminology acquisition, conventional instruction may remain efficient. The narrower claim is that professional communication competence is unlikely to develop through terminology instruction alone, and TBLT should complement rather than replace ESP content instruction.

For ESP teachers, the framework suggests practical directions independent of future validation. A conventional exercise and its task-based transformation illustrate the shift: instead of "learn vocabulary for machine components," a task might read "your team must explain a machine failure to a client, identify three possible causes, recommend a solution, and answer the client's questions." Instead of "practise phrases for meetings," a task might read "your project team is two weeks behind schedule: hold a meeting, identify the causes, redistribute responsibilities, and agree a revised timeline." In both cases, terminology is introduced in the context of use rather than pre-taught as an isolated list.

Scenarios drawn from students' own specialisations increase authenticity: a civil engineering group might negotiate a schedule delay, a mechanical group might diagnose a bearing failure, an IT group might troubleshoot a network outage, an environmental group might explain a compliance issue to a regulator, and an electrical group might report a circuit fault – Table 3's generic structures should be populated with such discipline-specific content. Teachers should assess against the five-component rubric rather than accuracy alone, focusing feedback on errors that most impede communication.

Professional English competence in engineering cannot be reduced to vocabulary or grammatical accuracy: it requires the capacity to explain, clarify, negotiate, report and defend decisions across shifting professional audiences.

The article makes five principal contributions: (1) professional English communication competence is operationalised as a multidimensional construct – linguistic accuracy, professional vocabulary, fluency, interactional competence and professional appropriateness – grounded in Canale and Swain [8] and Kramsch [16]; (2) TBLT is adapted to the communicative realities of technical higher education; (3) the TPCTC is proposed as an original model, differentiated from conventional TBLT cycles (Table 2); (4) authentic task types are systematised into a typology grounded in real engineering genres (Table 3); (5) a performance-based assessment framework is developed for a construct grammar testing cannot capture (Table 4).

The framework does not claim demonstrated effectiveness. The empirical effectiveness of the TPCTC remains to be examined in future classroom-based research.

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Мудрик Д. П. Формування навичок професійного англомовного спілкування у технічній вищій освіті: завданнєво-орієнтована методична система

У статті представлено завданнєво-орієнтовану методичну систему формування професійної англомовної комунікативної компетентності студентів технічних закладів вищої освіти. Система поєднує принципи завданнєво-орієнтованого навчання мови та англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням і переносить фокус навчання з опрацювання мовних форм на виконання автентичних комунікативних дій у професійно змодельованих ситуаціях. Професійну англомовну комунікативну компетентність операціоналізовано через п’ять взаємопов’язаних компонентів: мовну точність, професійну лексику, плавність мовлення, інтеракційну компетентність і професійну доречність. На цій основі запропоновано авторську модель Technical Professional Communication Task Cycle, яка охоплює дев’ять послідовних етапів – від представлення професійної ситуації та підготовки до виконання автентичної технічної задачі до професійної взаємодії, прийняття рішення, зворотного зв’язку, рефлексії, самооцінювання та мовної консолідації. Систематизовано десять типів автентичних комунікативних задач, що відповідають типовим видам інженерної діяльності: розв’язання технічних проблем, обмін інформацією, прийняття рішень, пошук і усунення несправностей, технічні презентації, професійні наради, взаємодія з клієнтами, переговори, управління проєктами та спільне прийняття рішень. Розроблено п’ятикомпонентну рубрику оцінювання, яка пов’язує виконання професійних комунікативних задач із конкретними показниками компетентності та забезпечує основу для оцінювання спостережуваної комунікативної діяльності. Запропонована система інтегрує професійний контекст, автентичні комунікативні задачі, технічний зміст, професійну взаємодію, прийняття рішень і результативне оцінювання в єдину методичну структуру. Емпірична ефективність запропонованої системи в межах цього дослідження не перевірялася та залишається предметом подальшого дослідження.

Ключові слова: *завданнєво-орієнтоване навчання; англійська мова для спеціальних цілей; професійне англомовне спілкування; технічна вища освіта; професійна комунікативна компетентність; інженерна освіта; автентичні професійні комунікативні завдання; технічна англійська мова.*

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