ESP Performance and Interview Strategies among Information Systems Students of Varying Academic Achievement

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Abstract

As the global technology sector becomes increasingly integrated, Information Systems (IS) graduates must possess both technical mastery and the linguistic competence to navigate international professional environments. This research investigates the intersection of technical academic achievement and communicative performance by analyzing the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) usage and interview strategies of IS students. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study stratified 24 undergraduate students from one of universities in Indonesia into three groups i.e., high, medium, and low achievers. Data were elicited through semi-structured mock job interviews and analyzed using the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2013). The results reveal a significant pragmatic gap between achievement levels. High achievers demonstrated professional agency, characterized by the use of lexical anchors and proactive rhetorical strategies that linked academic projects to business outcomes. Conversely, lower achievers exhibited template dependency, relying on rigid scripts and generalist language that often masked their technical potential. Significant First Language (L1) interference and phonetic slips were observed across all levels, though high achievers displayed superior self-monitoring and mitigation skills. These findings suggest that high academic achievement provides the content for professional success, but it does not automatically confer the linguistic voice required for global employability. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations for integrating industry-specific pragmatics into ESP curricula to ensure that all IS graduates are effectively prepared for the demands of the global technology workforce.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Information Systems, Interview Strategies, Academic Achievement, Workplace Readiness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global economic landscape is currently undergoing a rapid and profound digital transformation, placing Information Systems (IS) at the very heart of industrial progress. It requires the adjustment on the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) for the IS students. As we move through the global era, the Information Technology (IT) and IS sectors have become inherently globalized, necessitating seamless cross-border collaboration and the integration of diverse, multidisciplinary technical teams (Shonubi, 2025). In this environment, technical expertise only is no longer a sufficient guarantor of professional success. IS professionals must navigate complex international projects where English serves as the essential lingua franca (Meristo & Heero, 2026). The stakes of linguistic competence are exceptionally high in this field, as poor communication can lead to project failure, critical system errors, and significant financial loss. This globalized workforce and the overwhelming use of English as a working language have created a significant demand for workplace-specific language training (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Thus, IS students need to be supported through appropriate classroom instruction.

Recent reports, such as those from the (World Economic Forum, 2024), consistently highlight English proficiency as one of the top five employability skills in the global job market. For IS graduates, this proficiency is not merely a supplementary skill but a foundational requirement for professionalism and career advancement. Research by (Suhartina, 2025) indicates that English proficiency, alongside intrinsic learning motivation and robust institutional support, is positively associated with students' academic and professional readiness. Students themselves increasingly recognize this reality; many perceive reading, writing, and speaking skills as essential for accessing international standards and maintaining professional communication (Suhartina, 2025). Their awareness must be facilitated through sufficient English practices.

In this highly specialized context, General English (GE) instruction often proves insufficient for the specific needs of IS students. Unlike GE, which focuses on broad language areas, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is tailored to meet the specific academic and professional demands of a discipline (Kausar, 2025; Palta & Yakışık, 2025). For informatics and IS students, ESP is the primary conduit for accessing technical literature, understanding complex programming logic, and engaging in international collaboration (Bui, 2022). ESP programs aim to bridge the gap between academic settings and professional fields by aligning language instruction with disciplinary content (Palta & Yakışık, 2025). However, a discrepancy often remains between instructional approaches and the actual linguistic demands of the workplace.

Teaching English to IS students presents unique challenges that distinguish it from other ESP domains. Traditional language instruction often fails to meet the rapid evolution of information technology itself, where the lexicon constantly expands with new concepts in software development, data analysis, and artificial intelligence (Novikopa & Suima, 2025). Many learners initially perceive English as a secondary or theoretical subject rather than a practical tool for their future careers, which can hinder the development of real communicative competence. Furthermore, students frequently face constraints such as limited specialized vocabulary and insufficient opportunities for communicative practice in real-world scenarios (Rejeki & Iswahyuni, 2024; Sevrika et al., 2025). It leads to students' confusion when using language-specific terms from their first language while communicating in English.

The transition from a student identity to a professional one often occurs during internships and mock interview simulations. Experiences in Professional Community Internships (PCI) have shown that students gain notable specialized vocabulary and an increased ability to interact with native professionals through hands-on practice (Long, 2017). For IS students, integrating various ICT tools and platforms within ESP instruction can further promote the development of these competences (Nikolić et al., 2024). Despite these benefits, many higher education programs, particularly in Indonesia, continue to rely on GE materials that inadequately address IT-specific requirements, leaving graduates unprepared for the linguistic rigors of the global professional context (Sevrika et al., 2025). It indicates that there is a need for IT-specific ESP materials to better prepare graduates for global professional demands.

A significant research gap remains in understanding the relationship between a student's academic success in technical subjects and their performance in professional ESP communication. While existing literature explores students' general needs (Sevrika et al., 2025) and the benefits of blended or flipped classroom approaches (Gerasimova et al., 2022; Hsiao et al., 2021), few studies investigate whether high technical achievement (GPA) correlates with effective professional interview strategies. There is a need to explore the pragmatic gap, where even academically gifted students may struggle to apply speech acts, politeness strategies, and adaptive language use during high-stakes job interviews (Afifah & Maftukhin, 2024). This study addresses this gap by analyzing the ESP usage and interview strategies of IS students across varying levels of academic achievement. It aims to investigate the intersection of technical proficiency and communicative competence by answering the following research question: How does the use of ESP and professional interview strategies differ among IS students of varying academic achievement?

The objectives of this research are to identify the distinct linguistic patterns and rhetorical strategies employed by IS students and to determine how these are influenced by their academic standing. By doing so, this study provides significant theoretical and pedagogical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the knowledge of how technical lexical items and rhetorical moves are internalized in non-native speaking contexts (Duong, 2022). Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of developing context-specific, communicatively oriented ESP materials that align with real-world industry demands (Sevrika et al., 2025). Ultimately, this research offers a diagnostic roadmap for educators to enhance the employability and workplace readiness of the next generation of global technology professionals.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative research is ideal for exploring the subjective meanings and complexities of human experience. This design allows for a detailed exploration of the linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies Information Systems students utilize during professional simulations.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 24 undergraduate IS students at a prominent university in Indonesia. To maintain the highest standards of research ethics and ensure the confidentiality of the participants, all identities have been pseudonymized using a numerical coding system, ranging from Student 1 to Student 24. They were purposively selected and stratified into three distinct categories based on their academic achievement i.e., high achievers, medium achievers, and low achievers. This anonymization allows for a candid analysis of the linguistic errors and strategic shortcomings identified in the transcripts without compromising the participants' academic standing or personal privacy.

Data Collection

The primary data were collected through semi-structured mock job interviews. As Braun and Clarke (2013) note, semi-structured formats provide a clear set of topics while allowing the flexibility needed to capture spontaneous language use. During the ESP learning, the students applied for discipline-specific roles related to job for IS professionals e.g., Data Analyst and UI/UX Designer at multinational corporations to ensure a professional ESP

environment. The interview protocol focused on key professional moves, including self-introductions, descriptions of technical projects, and handling questions regarding professional weaknesses. All 24 interview sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions served as the raw data for the subsequent thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2013). First, it is started with familiarizing the data. The researcher immersed in the 24 transcripts and noting initial ideas regarding the linguistic differences between achievement groups. The second step was generating initial codes. The researchers identified and labelled recurring features in the data, such as specific technical vocabulary and interview strategies. The third one was searching for themes by grouping related codes into potential themes that describe the communicative patterns of the students. Then, reviewing themes by checking the themes against the original dataset to ensure they accurately represent the transcripts. After that, the researcher defined and named themes by refining the specifics of each theme to tell a coherent story about the data. Finally, the last step was producing the report. The final analysis related the identified themes back to the research question and academic literature.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Following the methodology described in the previous chapter, this section presents the results derived from the thematic analysis of the 24 interview transcripts. This chapter aims to illustrate how students with varying academic achievement levels navigate the linguistic and strategic demands of a professional IS job interview. By synthesizing the results with current ESP and TEFL theories, the discussion illuminates the pragmatic gap between technical knowledge and communicative performance. The results are organized into three core themes i.e., technical lexical density, rhetorical competence, and pragmatic mitigation strategies, providing a comprehensive answer to the research question while highlighting the implications for future IS graduates.

3.1. Results

The analysis of the 24 interview transcripts reveals a significant divergence in communicative competence that aligns with the students' academic achievement levels. The following sections provide a detailed account of these findings across the three identified themes.

3.1.1. Technical Lexical Density and ESP Precision

The first finding suggests that academic achievement in IS classes is closely linked to the precision of technical English usage. High-achieving students consistently utilized lexical anchors which is specific, high-level technical terms that signalled their domain expertise to the interviewer. This theme illustrates the contrast between the high-precision lexical anchors and the generalist language as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Transcripts Related to Technical Lexical Density

Achievement Level	Student ID	Transcript Excerpt
High	Student 21	*"I have been working on several projects using C++ and Python... specifically for the MMORPG community and gameplay balancing."*
High	Student 22	*"The project required Agile methodology and Scrum sprints to manage the software development life cycle."*
High	Student 11	*"I utilized Figma to create high-fidelity prototypes that follow UI/UX best practices."*
Medium	Student 9	*"I built a website for a local shop using HTML and CSS to make it look professional."*
Medium	Student 3	*"I understand how to manage a database and create a system that can store user information."*
Medium	Student 12	*"My technical skill is programming and I can fix errors in the code efficiently."*
Low	Student 18	*"I like technology and I have background in debt [data] and also processing."*
Low	Student 7	*"I can use the computer and I know about the software for making the application."*
Low	Student 15	*"I learned about IT in my class and I can do coding for the final project."*

As evidenced in Table 1, high achievers demonstrate a mastery of ESP lexis. For example, Student 21 demonstrated a sophisticated command of the ESP lexicon by stating: *"I have been working on several projects using C++ and Python... specifically for the MMORPG community and gameplay balancing."* Similarly, Student 5 used precise collocations such as *"clean engineering principles"* and *"scalability."* In these cases, the ESP was used as a tool for building professional credibility.

In sharp contrast, the transcripts of low-achieving students were marked by generalist language, where broad terms replaced specific technical concepts. Student 18, for instance, struggled to articulate their background, stating "*I like technology and I have background in debt (it supposed to be "data")...*" This pronunciation confusion between *debt* and *data* suggests that lower-achieving students may understand technical concepts in their L1 (Indonesian) but lack the phonological and lexical precision to express them in English. Medium-achieving students occupied a middle ground; while they could identify broad categories like *database* or *web design,* they lacked the specific naming of frameworks e.g., *SQL, Figma*, or *React* that allowed high achievers to sound like industry specialists.

3.1.2. Rhetorical Competence and Professional Agency

The second theme focuses on the rhetorical moves students made to persuade the interviewer. This theme captures how students use impact verbs versus the template dependency as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Transcripts Related to Rhetorical Competence

Achievement Level	Student ID	Transcript Excerpt
High	Student 24	*"I managed a team of 55 members for a large event... we reached 6,000 attendees, so I understand how to handle large stakeholders."*
High	Student 16	*"By implementing a new algorithm, I reduced the processing time by 20%, which improved the user experience."*
High	Student 20	*"I am not just a coder; I look at the business requirements to ensure the IT solution adds value."*
Medium	Student 8	*"I worked in a group for my project. I was the leader who assigned tasks to my friends."*
Medium	Student 13	*"My strength is that I am hardworking and I always finish my assignments on time."*
Medium	Student 19	*"I want to work here because your company is big and I want to improve my skills in this field."*
Low	Student 6	*"Okay, the question number two, what is your strength and weakness? My strength is I am a fast learner."*
Low	Student 10	*"I don't know... maybe my strength is I can work together with other people."*
Low	Student 4	*"I am a student of Information Systems and I want to apply for this job today."*

Table 2 clearly illustrates the template-dependent nature of lower-achieving students. High-achieving students exhibited rhetorical agency, treating the interview as a strategic dialogue rather than a passive examination. A prominent strategy among this group was the linking move, where academic projects were framed as professional assets. Student 24 exemplified this by quantifying their experience *"I managed a team of 55 members for a large event... we reached 6,000 attendees, so I understand how to handle large stakeholders."* By using terms like *stakeholders* and *managed*, the student successfully pivoted from a student persona to a professional persona.

Conversely, the transcripts of low-achieving students revealed a significant template dependency. This was most evident in the transcript of Student 6, who was recorded reading the mock interview prompt instructions aloud *"Okay, the question number two, what is your strength and weakness? My strength is I am a fast learner."* This behavior suggests that for these students, the cognitive load of translating thoughts into English is so taxing that they lose the ability to engage in professional strategizing. Rather than using the interview to showcase their skills, they focused entirely on the correctness of their answers, often resulting in circular or one-sentence responses that lacked evidence or depth.

3.1.3. Pragmatic Mitigation and L1 Interference

The final theme emerged from the students' ability to navigate linguistic barriers and high-pressure questions, specifically regarding their professional weaknesses. This theme highlights the self-correction strategies used by high achievers and the semantic shifts caused by language barriers as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Transcripts Related to Pragmatic Mitigation and L1 Interference

Achievement Level	Student ID	Transcript Excerpt
High	Student 22	*"My weakness is I am a bit nervous in public speaking, but I am joining presentations now to fix this."*
High	Student 5	*"Sometimes I focus too much on details... I mean, I am a perfectionist, so I use Trello to keep on track."*
High	Student 11	*"I am sorry, let me rephrase that... I mean the interface design was the main challenge."*

Medium	Student 12	*"My weakness is my English is not so good, but I am learning every day to be better."*
Medium	Student 9	*"I have a difficult [difficulty] with time management, but I try to use a schedule."*
Medium	Student 3	*"I am boring [bored] easily if the work is too easy, so I like challenges."*
Low	Student 14	*"I am a very organism [organized] person and I am very focus."*
Low	Student 18	*"My weakness is... [long pause]... I am shy to speak with the foreigners."*
Low	Student 7	*"I am forget the name of the program, but I can do it if I see the computer."*

Table 3 depicts the self-awareness differences among high, medium, and low achievers. High-achieving students demonstrated superior self-monitoring and mitigation strategies. Student 22, for example, provided a textbook professional response *"My weakness is I am a bit nervous in public speaking, but I am joining presentations now to fix this."* This response acknowledges a limitation while immediately providing a concrete solution, thereby preserving professional face.

In the lower-achieving group, however, the transcripts showed a pattern of abrupt termination and significant L1 interference that often-obscured meaning. Student 14 provided a notable example of a semantic shift caused by Indonesian-English phonetic confusion *"I am a very organism (it supposed to be organized) person and I am very focus."* While the student intended to project an image of being *organized*, the use of *organism* created a pragmatic failure that could negatively impact an employer's perception in a real-world setting. Across all transcripts, it was observed that while all students made occasional slips, High achievers were proactive in self-correcting their speech, whereas low achievers were more likely to become paralyzed by their mistakes, leading to long pauses or the total abandonment of a technical explanation.

3.2. Discussion

The results of this study reveal a significant pragmatic gap between technical IS knowledge and the ability to communicate that knowledge in a professional EFL context. While all participants possessed the technical foundations required by their curriculum, their ability to articulate this expertise varied drastically according to their academic achievement. This discussion interprets these findings through the lens of ESP theory, professional identity, and pedagogical readiness.

The high density of lexical anchors used by high achievers suggests that academic success in IS subjects facilitates the transition from GE to ESP. As noted by Kausar (2025), ESP is designed to meet the demands of individuals in specific professional domains. High achievers in this study did not just use English; they used it to build a professional persona by utilizing field-specific vocabulary like *scalability* and *stakeholders*. This aligns with the findings of Suhartina (2025), who argued that English proficiency is positively associated with professional readiness. For these students, the technical concepts they mastered in their IS courses acted as a framework, allowing them to map English terms onto existing mental models of technology.

Furthermore, the rhetorical agency observed in high achievers highlights a sophisticated grasp of Real-World Communication (RWC). Unlike lower-achieving peers, these students were able to employ critical reflection, a concept Afifah and Maftukhin (2024) identify as essential for work preparedness. By linking their 55-member team management or 6,000-attendee event success to professional value, high achievers moved beyond simple linguistic output and engaged in transformative thinking. This suggests that high academic achievement may correlate with a higher capacity for metacognitive strategies, which Duong (2022) found to be the most frequently used and effective strategies among technical students for mastering ESP lexical items.

Conversely, the template dependency observed in low achievers highlights a disconnect between linguistic instruction and professional reality. Sevrika et al. (2025) previously identified a gap in Indonesian higher education where English courses often rely on GE materials that fail to address the specific communicative needs of IT students. This study provides empirical evidence for that gap; students like Student 6, who read prompt numbers aloud, demonstrate that without discipline-specific ESP training, students treat the interview as a classroom reading task rather than a professional exchange. This behavior reflects a student persona that prioritizes academic compliance over professional persuasion.

The generalist language used by lower achievers also points to a lack of lexical precision, which is critical in the IT industry. As Novikopa and Suima (2025)) noted, the IT lexicon is constantly expanding, and students who perceive English as a secondary subject often fail to develop real communicative competence. When Student 18 used technology as a catch-all term, they failed to demonstrate the domain-specific knowledge that recruiters expect. This reinforces the argument by Palta and Yakışık (2025) that proficiency in English is a key competency for professional success in specialized domains, and failing to bridge the gap between GE and ESP leaves learners fundamentally unprepared.

A significant psychological factor revealed in the results is the cognitive load experienced by low achievers. The transcripts suggest that these students were so occupied with basic sentence construction and L1-to-EFL translation that they had no mental bandwidth left for interview strategies. This supports the findings of

Hsiao et al. (2021), who noted that interactive and higher-level skills only emerge when students have high self-efficacy. High achievers, having mastered the technical content and basic English, could focus on scrutinizing new ideas, while low achievers remained trapped in a cycle of linguistic survival, often resulting in the abrupt termination of their responses.

The prevalence of L1 interference, such as the organism for organized slip by Student 14, indicates that even when students have a high motivation to learn, as explored by Maulida et al. (2023), they still face significant phonological hurdles. This suggests that the English for computer science material must go beyond reading and writing to include intensive oral practice. As Fitria (2025a) points out, strong English proficiency is essential for accessing technical literature and securing career opportunities, but if the form of the language is incorrect, the content of the student's technical expertise may be disregarded by global employers.

Moreover, the way high achievers handled the weakness question demonstrates a superior understanding of professional pragmatics. By providing a mitigation plan, Student 22 displayed what Afifah and Maftukhin (2024) call adaptive language use. This ability to navigate difficult professional social situations is a hallmark of work readiness. In contrast, the lack of such strategies in lower achievers suggests that their ESP training has likely focused on correctness rather than effectiveness. This aligns with Prasongko et al. (2025), who argued that ESP curricula must be updated to emphasize practical aspects and speaking communication to meet industry needs.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of integrating technology and professional simulations into the curriculum. As Nikolić et al. (2024) argued, ICT tools can promote all aspects of ESP competence. The fact that high achievers were better at self-monitoring suggests they may have had more exposure to autonomous or digital learning resources outside the classroom. This discussion ultimately proves that while GPA is a strong indicator of technical knowledge, it is not a perfect predictor of communicative competence. As the IT field becomes increasingly collaborative, the pragmatic gap identified in this study must be addressed to ensure that all IS graduates, regardless of their academic rank, can effectively voice their expertise in a globalized market.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Conclusion

The results of this study provide a comprehensive answer to the research question regarding the divergence of ESP performance among IS students. It is concluded that academic achievement acts as a significant predictor for the deployment of lexical anchors and professional agency during job interviews. High-achieving students demonstrated a superior ability to map their technical expertise onto English frameworks, allowing them to move beyond a student persona into a persuasive professional role. Conversely, lower-achieving students often experienced a pragmatic gap, where their actual technical knowledge was masked by a reliance on rigid templates and generalist language. Furthermore, the prevalence of L1 interference and phonetic slips across all achievement levels suggests that technical mastery in the L1 does not automatically confer phonological or pragmatic precision in the EFL. Ultimately, this research underscores that for IS graduates to succeed in the global technology market, they require a specialized linguistic voice that is as robust as their technical GPA.

4.2. Limitations

Despite the depth of the thematic analysis provided, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. This study was restricted to a specific group of 24 students within a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the results to different educational environments or geographical regions.

4.3. Suggestions

Based on these findings, several pedagogical and research-based suggestions are proposed to bridge the identified communicative gaps. Educators and curriculum designers are encouraged to transition from GE instruction toward discipline-specific ESP programs that emphasize rhetorical agency which is training students not just in vocabulary, but in how to persuasively link technical projects to stakeholder value. There is also a critical need for intensive oral practice to address the phonological hurdles and L1 interference that frequently led to pragmatic failure in professional contexts. For future researchers, it is suggested that longitudinal studies be conducted to observe how these ESP strategies evolve during actual employment. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include a comparative analysis of different STEM disciplines or exploring the impact of digital literacy on ESP performance would provide a more holistic understanding of how to prepare the next generation of global IT professionals.

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