

STUDENT CONFERENCES AS MEANS FOR DEVELOPING ACADEMIC SKILLS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

STUDENTU KONFERENCES KĀ LĪDZEKLIS AKADĒMISKO PRASMJU PILNVEIDEI SVEŠVALODĀS

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Abstract. The aim of the research is to find out how participation of students in international scientific conferences influences the development of their academic skills in foreign languages. The use of foreign languages in the academic study and research has increased in recent years. At the Latvia University of Agriculture in co-operation with three faculties – the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Engineering and the Forest Faculty such conferences have been organized already for six years. The students of all other faculties of the university are also participating with their reports and publications. Student conferences being extra-curriculum activities form the environment where foreign languages play an important role being not only the languages of the contributions but also they are used in the process of communication among the conference participants from different countries. An enquiry among the participants of the conference is presented and the results are analysed.

Key words: academic skills in foreign languages, EAP, extra-curriculum activities

Introduction

With the development of student mobility, student involvement in research activities, their participation in international conferences, the demand for skills necessary for academic environment has increased in recent years. Different studies on foreign language use for academic purposes define new goals for language education at the tertiary level, requiring focusing on foreign language skills significant for research genres. *Foreign languages for academic purposes* prepare students for the specific academic requirements for higher education. English as the language of international exchange usually aims not only to improve the students' level of English, but also to develop useful academic study skills and introduce students to the language skills necessary for academic environment.

The researchers (Dudley-Evans, St.John, Flowerdew, Jordan, Gillet, Wray) consider that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) involves teaching students to use language appropriately for study at the tertiary level. It is a branch of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) which has recently expanded together with the growing number of international students undertaking tertiary studies in English and with increasing participation of students in various international graduate schools, student mobility and student international scientific conferences.

As EAP has the broad aim of helping learners to study or research in English, it refers to a wide range of academic activities including (Gillet, Wray, 2006): 1) pre-university, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching (from materials design to lectures and classroom activities), 2) classroom interactions (tutorials, feedback, seminar discussions etc.), 3) research genres (journal articles, conference papers, grant proposals etc.), 4) student writing (assignments, exams, dissertations etc.). Dudley and Johns (1998:41) name two divisions of EAP: English for General Academic purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic purposes (ESAP). The first type refers to the skills associated with study activities, for example, reading research articles, listening to lectures, taking notes, writing abstracts, time management, etc. The second type integrates general academic skills in foreign languages with the actual subject tasks involving cooperation with the actual subject department.

As regards the situation of EAP in the Latvia University of Agriculture, the subject courses are taught in Latvian, but *Professional Foreign Language* is taught in the first two years as a separate subject. The conventional approach dominates in teaching *Professional Foreign Language* focusing on acquiring specific terminology in the respective field, translation and developing mainly reading, writing and speaking skills (the focus is on oral presentations). However, in the quickly changing world when foreign languages play an increasingly important role in the world of work, the link should be provided between classroom processes and real-world communication processes. The number of foreign language sessions that are planned in the curriculum is, unfortunately, insufficient for acquisition of all the necessary terms in the chosen discipline and for understanding the material that is delivered in a foreign language.

As regards the situation in the labour market, it is dynamic: new products are launched, production management system, equipment, technological processes etc. change persistently. Therefore, the system of higher education cannot provide an individual with the knowledge necessary during the whole professional life. Universal and sustainable knowledge and skills are significant both for university and for further carrier that will be useful in diverse forms of professional and academic activities in the long-term period. Extra-curriculum activities, i.e., student international scientific conferences, can become one of the means of motivating students to acquire the knowledge and competences necessary for long-life learning and to develop academic foreign language skills.

In scientific literature the term “skills” is used in two levels: there are four macro-skills (some sources suggest five macro-skills, adding the combination of listening and speaking) of writing, speaking, reading and listening, each consisting of a number of micro-skills. The authors of

the paper have developed this idea and, using the list of academic skills worked out by the University of Southampton, formed the list of academic skills relevant for student conferences (Table 1).

Table 1

Academic Foreign Language Skills Relevant for Student Conferences (based on the list of academic skills worked out by the University of Southampton)

Macro-skills	Academic foreign language skills
Speaking	delivering an oral presentation, mastering useful language for oral presentations, speaking without hesitating, checking and clarifying when speaking, recognizing academic register, socializing in informal occasions, communicating politely across cultures, being aware of the effect of culture in communication
Writing	writing conference abstracts, essays, summaries, reports, structuring writing, using examples to support written statements, expressing facts and opinion in writing, describing graphs and tables, interpreting trends and changes in graphs, identifying plagiarism and avoiding poor practice, introduction to quoting and paraphrasing, using quotations, using paraphrase in writing, understanding reference lists and bibliographies
Reading	scanning for specific information, reading to identify main points, classifying information, reading and critical thinking, identifying text types, recognizing fact, opinion and evidence in texts
Listening	listening closely to presentations, focusing on the language in a lecture, listening for markers in the language, listening for and understanding vocabulary of the field, listening for theme words and examples, listening for key points in a science lecture, listening to understand more difficult language

It can be concluded that, on the one hand, it is not possible to master all the necessary skills during contact lessons as the preparation and participation in conferences are very time consuming; on the other hand, extra-curriculum activities can provide an excellent opportunity for motivating students.

Research methods

As the method of research a small scale inquiry was used. The enquiry was performed among Latvian and international students who participated at the student international scientific conference in 2011 organized by the Latvia University of Agriculture. The questionnaire was sent electronically to 120 undergraduate and graduate students, 82 students responded. The questionnaire contained nine questions. The purpose of the inquiry was to find out participants' opinion regarding academic skills in foreign languages necessary for the preparation and successful participation in the conference.

Results and Discussion

In 2011, already the 6th international scientific conference for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students "Students on their Way to Science" was organized in co-operation with three faculties – the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Engineering and the Forest Faculty. There were 149 participants present from 13 countries – Latvia, Lithuania, France, Germany, Russia, Belarus, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Greece, Ukraine, the USA and Ireland. The conference was aimed at dissemination of scientific research results, sharing experience, improvement of foreign language skills and cross-cultural competences, and establishment of international contacts. The only possible way to communicate for the contributors among themselves obviously is the English language as they are representing different countries having different languages and being carriers of different cultures. The working languages of the conference were English, French, German and Russian. Nevertheless, there were only a few reports in Russian, two in German and one in the French language; the other reports were delivered in English. It gives an opportunity to analyze the academic competences of the English language that are acquired and mastered at such international conferences.

Analyzing the results of the enquiry, it was possible to get an insight in the importance of participation at international conferences and presentation of reports in foreign languages for the development of academic skills in foreign languages, as well as formation and improvement of other necessary competences.

Almost all of the respondents had delivered reports in the English language before (except for one student). But not all of them had participated at international scientific conferences (50 %). At the university, the students have to make presentations in the foreign language taught at the sessions of foreign languages. It explains the answers of the respondents.

One third of the respondents had difficulties participating at the conference due to the lack of adequate foreign language skills. The rest did not encounter any such difficulties. Today students are motivated to acquire foreign languages as they have many opportunities to use them in their professional sphere as well as in everyday life.

As regards the question about the time they spent for preparation and participation at the conference, the answers of the respondents differed; there were students who did not consider this activity to be time consuming (two thirds of the respondents), the others think that it took much time. The respondents ranked the following tasks according to the time consumed for the particular task to be completed:

1. Collection and selection of information
2. Formatting the presentation
3. Writing the report
4. Training for the presentation
5. Learning of the text for presentation in a foreign language.

The question about the promotion of the acquisition of the foreign language (see Figure 1) through participation at international scientific conferences was answered quite unanimously.

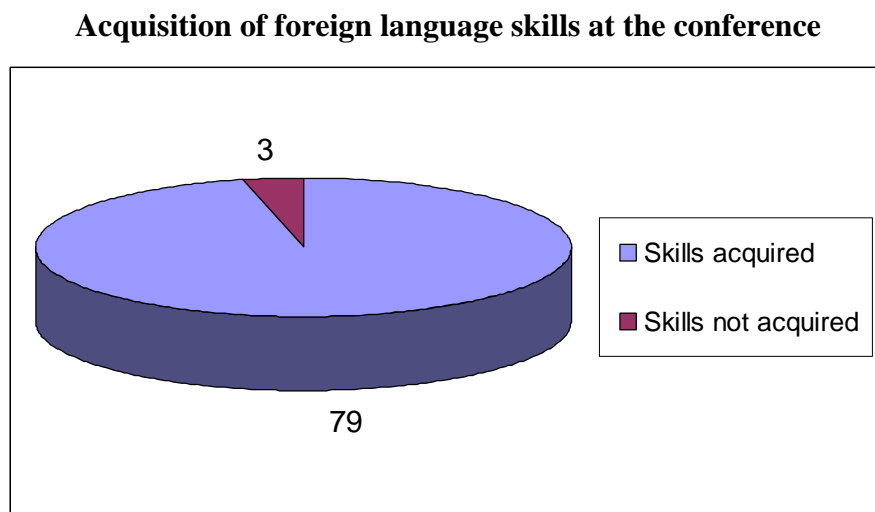


Figure 1. Acquisition of foreign language skills at the conference

The respondents agree that pertaining to all of the above mentioned activities they apply the macro-skills of reading, writing and speaking in the foreign language in which the report is to be prepared. At the conference, the students deliver their reports, and during the work at the sections

they also listen to the reports of their peers. Thus participants consider that mostly the macro-skills of speaking and listening skills have been acquired during the conference (see Figure 2).

Asked about the skills that can be acquired through participation at such international conferences, the respondents mentioned cross-cultural communication skills in the first place, and then presentation skills and skills for writing the report and the abstract followed.

Ranking of the macro-skills of the academic language acquired at the conference

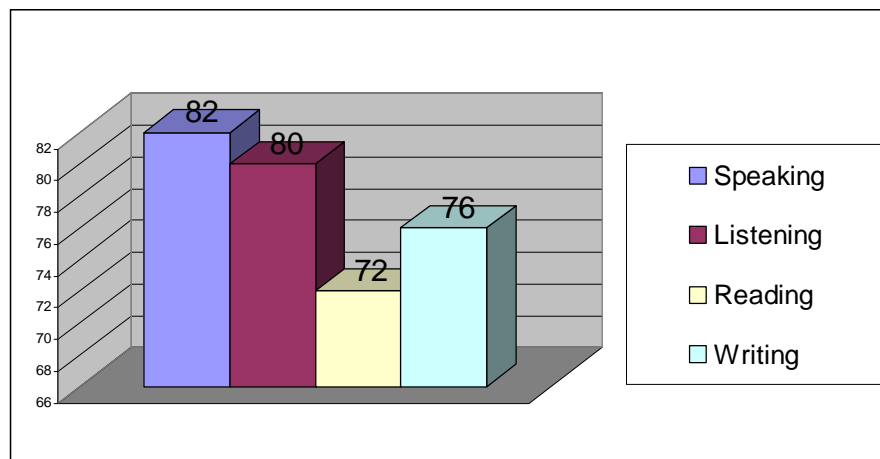


Figure 2. Ranking of the macro-skills of the academic language acquired at the conference

The last question in the enquiry form was whether non-formal communication with foreign students outside the work in the sections promotes mastering of the foreign language. All the respondents (100%) answered this question positively. Usually the first meeting with the foreign students that have come to Latvia for many of our students is already on the previous day. After the plenary session, there is a coffee break during which our students can meet their friends made at the previous conferences and get acquainted with the newcomers. Our students, who are in the steering committee of the conference, are acting like guides for the foreigners; they bring them to the Palace museum and show them the palace. In the evening, everybody after the day's work can communicate in foreign languages at the get-together party. On the next day, the students can go on an excursion and train their skills not only in foreign languages, but also in cross-cultural communication.

The choice to use a foreign language as a working language of student conferences increases their popularity among students, as they have an opportunity to apply their knowledge in international environment and see what level their foreign language competences are in comparison to students from other countries. Such opportunity allows displaying of academic skills in foreign

languages on the professional level. Possession of academic skills in foreign languages will be helpful for the future specialists to integrate in the labour market after graduation from the university and to make a career in their professional life.

Conclusions

1. All of the students have had presentations in foreign languages, but only a half of the respondents have participated at international conferences.
2. Due to the motivation to learn foreign languages, the skills of the students are to a large extent developed.
3. Collection and selection of information, and formatting the presentation are considered, by the respondents, to be the most time consuming tasks in preparation for the conference.
4. Almost all of the students confirmed that participation at international scientific conferences promotes the development of academic skills in foreign languages.
5. The ranking of the macro-skills of foreign languages improved at the conference is as follows: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
6. Among the other skills that are mastered at international scientific conferences, cross-cultural communication skills are mentioned by all respondents.
7. Summarizing the answers of the respondents, it can be concluded that international scientific conferences are extra-curriculum activities promoting development of academic foreign language skills of the participants.

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Appendix 1.

The questions of the enquiry were as follows:

1. Had you delivered a report in a foreign language before?
2. Had you participated at an international scientific conference before? Where, when, how many times?
3. Did the lack of foreign language skills serve as an obstacle in participating at the conference?
4. Did the preparation for the presentation take much of your time?

5. What was the most time consuming?
Collection and selection of information
Writing the report
Making the presentation
Learning the text for presentation in a foreign language
Training for presentation
Other. What?
6. Did the conference in general promote acquisition of the foreign language skills?
7. What language macro-skills did you acquire most?
Reading
Writing
Speaking
Listening
8. Did you acquire also some other of the mentioned skills?
Presentation skills
Report writing skills
Cross-cultural communication skills
Other. What?
9. Did non-formal communication with foreign students apart from the work in sections promote mastering of the foreign language skills?