

Undergraduate Students' Perseverance in the Context of Foreign Language Studies: a Case of Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to examine the factors influencing undergraduate students' perseverance during the ESP study course at the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. The curriculum of the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies includes content-based ESP courses in the first and second years of undergraduate studies which are integrated in the whole study process. Foreign language skills are of special importance for obtaining versatile professional and scientific information. Academic staff of the university has recently observed that many students are not ready to accomplish complicated tasks but rather choose to be content with a lower grade without trying to put an effort to achieve the goal. Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify factors influencing students' perseverance in the context of foreign language studies. The study is based on the focus group discussions. The mini focus groups discussions were conducted with the 1st year undergraduate students from different faculties of LLU. During the discussions factors influencing students' perseverance were identified and ranked according to their importance. The analysis of the research results shows that students choose passive rather than active role in language studies in university. They lack the necessary perseverance in order to achieve better results in studies. The 1st year students sometimes do not have motivation to study professional terminology as they do not see the link between the language and its practical application. Another issue is that students often lack learning skills and motivation to make an effort.

Keywords: perseverance, ESP, academic performance, focus group discussions, higher education.

Introduction

The curriculum of the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LLU) includes content-based study courses of Professional Foreign Language studies in the first and second years of undergraduate studies, which are mostly implemented in English (English for Specific Purposes, ESP) due to the fact that most students have chosen English as their foreign language. ESP courses are an integral part of the whole study process where students of agriculture, forestry, IT, engineering, social sciences and other fields gain new skills and knowledge necessary not only for the academic environment, but also for their future careers. English for specific purposes (ESP) researchers (Dudley-Evans, St. John, 1998; Hutchinson, Waters, 1987) define ESP teaching/learning as a study course that is designed to meet specific needs of adult learners and is related in content, methodology and activities to a specific subject field or occupation improving students' knowledge of syntax, vocabulary, text structure, semantics, and so on, that are appropriate to such content. The Latvian researcher I. Luka (2010) argues that the competence of a foreign language for special purposes consists of communicative, intercultural and professional activity competencies, and these components interact in a definite socio-cultural context. The focus during the study process at LLU is on learning terminology in the subject field and the development of knowledge and skills necessary for reception of professional and research literature. In addition, the students' productive skills, speaking and writing, are developed mainly through professionally oriented tailor-made tasks and activities (Ozola, Grasmane, 2012).

As regards the organization of the ESP study process at LLU, several problems have been identified which are necessary to describe in more detail. The English Language Centralized Examination results of the secondary school students in Latvia show that in 2017 the proportion of the English language proficiency levels A2 and B1 dominated over the English language proficiency levels B2 and C1 (the ratio is 61.84 % for A2 / B1 compared to 38.15 % for B2 / C1) (Eiropas valodu prasmes..., 2017). Since the score of this examination is not included in the university admission requirements, students enrol with different English language entry proficiency level. The concern about the results of centralized secondary school results has been expressed in mass media as well as in various research publications. For example, O. Krasnopjorovs

(2017) in his study proved that the positive results at the school-leaving examinations correlate with the number of the students in schools suggesting that there is a gap in results between large urban schools and small rural schools where students show worse results at the examinations (Krasnopjorovs, 2017). It should be noted that LLU provides studies for many young people from rural areas of Latvia. Due to the fact that there is a great variety in the students' proficiency level, one academic group at LLU contains the students with very varied English language knowledge.

Language teachers at university have observed that recently many students lack sufficient speaking and presentation skills, some students are too shy to present in front of the audience. The students' autonomous learning skills could be more developed: they are not willing to work with the texts and study the terminology in the subject field individually by themselves. In addition, some students complete tasks in a superfluous manner unwilling to elaborate on the quality of the outcome either oral or written. They lack perseverance to deal with challenging for them tasks. They are not ready to accomplish complicated tasks but rather choose to be content with a lower grade without trying to put an effort to achieve better results.

The experience and observations of academic staff of LLU have led to a conclusion that not only cognitive skills determine the success of the students. There are other factors as well. M.L. Gutman and I. Schoon (2013) in their research suggest that perseverance along with motivation and self-control belong to "non-cognitive skills" that refer to attitudes, behaviours and strategies underpinning success in school and at work. Non-cognitive skills can include a very broad range of characteristics (motivation, confidence, tenacity, trustworthiness, perseverance, social and communication skills) which have become more important recently in determining academic and employment outcomes. Perseverance, according to M.L. Gutman and I. Schoon (2013), "involves steadfastness on mastering a skill or completing a task". The authors focus on two manifestations of perseverance: engagement and grit. "Engagement" entitles involvement in academic, social or extracurricular activities which require effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions and contributing to class discussions, willingness to put an effort. "Grit" in its turn is based on a person's desire and perseverance for a long-term goal. "Grit" entitles working towards the goal despite failures or adversity (Gutman, Schoon, 2013). The authors of the present research consider that these non-cognitive skills are important for students in academic environment; learning difficulties the students experienced in the past in their secondary schools might influence their perseverance at the university. Therefore, the authors considered it necessary to study the above-mentioned problem in order to find factors influencing students' perseverance in order to improve the study process and to make it more effective.

The aim of the study is to identify factors influencing students' perseverance in the context of foreign language studies at the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies to help students develop professional language and academic skills.

Methodology

In order to investigate what affects perseverance of undergraduate students in English studies, a qualitative study design was developed. It was assumed that the lack of perseverance in foreign language studies at university is consequences of previous individual experience of English studies at school. Empirical data were obtained during three mini focus group discussions in June 2017 at LLU. Mini focus groups normally involve three to six people (Litosseliti, 2007, 6; Oates, Alevizou, 2018, 10). Group interviews and focus group discussions as a method have gained popularity in social sciences for a number of advantages. For people who do not feel comfortable in face-to-face interactions, focus groups offer more 'safe' and an informal environment where participants can share views, experience, beliefs, and attitudes in a free and opened discussion about a particular topic (Krueger, Casey, 2015). Participants can react to opinions of other respondents and build their arguments upon the responses of others (Wilkinson, 2004, 180). Thus, the focus group method allows group dynamics often raising issues which otherwise would not emerge from an interaction between the single respondent and the researcher. This particularly is important in discussions with students in order to investigate students' opinion about factors affecting their perseverance in language studies. The aim of focus groups is to understand meanings and interpretations of the participants, therefore less structured approach to a group interview encourages people to talk to each other instead of answering a number of questions asked directly by an interviewer. These were the main reasons why the focus group method was chosen for the particular study. The research methods were

focus group discussion and monographic analysis. The research question is the following: what influences undergraduate students' perseverance to achieve better academic results?

The mini focus groups discussions (three and four participants) were conducted with the undergraduate students from different faculties of LLU: the 1st year students from the Faculty of Economics and Social Development, the 1st year students from the Engineering Faculty, and the 1st year students from the Faculty of Environment and Civil Engineering in the time period from June 6 to June 21, 2017. Participation in the discussions was offered to students who submitted home tasks after the first deadline. Those random students who agreed to participate were invited to focus groups discussions. In total, eleven students were involved in three discussions. According to the commonly accepted research practice, the focus group discussions were 'audio taped with the use of accompanying field notes' (Wilkinson, 2004, 179). The participants were asked for a permission to record the conversations and that was received. The average length of the discussions was approximately one hour. The participants of the focus groups were asked about the following issues:

- 1) how much and what type of English lessons they had in the primary and secondary school;
- 2) how English lessons were organized at school (e.g. how much time was spent for reading, listening, speaking, and writing; did students practice speaking in dialogues; did they prepare presentations and practice speaking in front of the group; how was the feedback from the teacher received);
- 3) what learning, and teaching methods would encourage to study professional English at university simultaneously improving perseverance of undergraduate students.

Results of the discussions were analysed according to the methodological requirements (Wilkinson, 2004).

Results and Discussion

The researchers of different countries have investigated the academic performance of students and emerging trends in students' behavior. Thus, a group of professors from the United States (Cherif et al., 2014) did the research about the reasons of students' bad performance at university analyzing the problem and suggesting solutions to help academic staff teach and students learn and succeed. The research identified three main root-cause **factors** for students' failing: 1) student-related factors; 2) life and socioeconomic issues, 3) failures of the educational system. The findings highlight similar problems since student-related factors include not being ready for college, lack of effort among students, lack of motivation or interest. As regards life and socio-economic issues, they include life, work and career problems, as well as an economic situation. The third group of factors mentioned by the group of professors refers to institutional instruction and behavior and institutional facilities, materials and delivery systems. Another research refers to teacher-related factors; the results of the research carried out by S.B. Alos, L.C. Caranto, J.J.T. David (2015) show that teacher-related factors have a high impact on academic performance. They concluded that teachers should use varied strategies to improve students' performance, and also teachers should master their teaching methods in training seminars. In this article the authors focus on student-related factors.

Another trend which has emerged in the last decade is dividing generations into groups. Present day students are called the millennials or representatives of Generation Y. The metaphor "digital residents" is used to describe young people who have technologies at their fingertips. It is considered that millennials prefer to work with superiors who are approachable, supportive, good communicators, and good motivators (Epstein, Howe, 2006). They enjoy trial and error and do not highly value reading and listening to lectures (Mangold, 2007).

Having summarized the above described recent trends, the authors carried out the study by conducting mini focus groups discussions. The obtained recordings of the students' spoken texts from the discussions were transcribed and analysed to identify factors influencing the students' perseverance during the studies at the university. The analysis of interviews showed that the students referred to different experience of language learning and teaching in primary and secondary schools. Thus, some of the respondents have had English once a week while other had even 10 lessons per week (two hours a day). One of the students remembered that lessons were missing for a long time as a teacher was not available. In most cases student groups in school were between 10 and 15 children; however, in one case bigger group was mentioned (more than 20 people in a classroom). Regarding language learning process in school, respondents named different methods and tasks. Most commonly used practice was reading

small texts followed by a task, writing new words, speaking short dialogues in pairs (five to ten minutes), word tests, monologues or dialogues about the particular topic, listening to CD, using workbooks. Lesson plans often followed a particular routine (speaking, writing words). The students have got used to work with 'interesting materials' comprising pictures, small texts and excerpts, what in turn they lack in university. During the focus groups this was mentioned as a reason negatively affecting students' perseverance. This actually is dilemma and a challenge: the students at the university need to study professional language and terminology (legislation, technical concepts) which is more 'boring' than 'interesting'. However, pedagogical skills should solve this dilemma.

Asked about effectiveness of the learning process at school, the respondents expressed varied opinions. Some admitted that the process was well organized; however, their own attitude and efforts were insufficient to gain adequate language skills and knowledge. Now this has an adverse impact on language learning at the university. Others named interesting approaches that teachers used to motivate students, for example, every student had to read one book throughout the school year and had to pass specific test based on the topic and words of the book. Some students agreed that they lacked English environment in terms of opportunities to speak and use language practically while others mentioned opportunities to practice language in summer camps or international visits abroad.

In the study the authors assumed that previous individual experience of English studies at school influenced the undergraduate students' perseverance. The former experience and learning skills are influenced greatly by the professionalism as well as personality of language teachers at schools. Involvement of the students in the learning process during lessons in classrooms at school was varied: those who were self-confident and performed better, behaved more actively and in an interactive manner whereas those who lacked encouragement and had learning difficulties were shyer and therefore passive. This behaviour has been transferred also to the university.

As it was noted above, language teachers at university have observed that many students lack speaking, and presentation skills therefore focus group participants were asked about their experience to speak English in lessons at school. According to responses of focus group members, number and length of speaking tasks differed from school to school. Some respondents referred to cases when speaking in English classes happened rarely and few classmates almost did not speak at all. Some teachers corrected mistakes carefully whereas others did not pay a sufficient attention to imperfections in the students' speech. This attitude did not motivate the students to improve (they did not know what to improve), speaking became rather formal. In general, the respondents assessed that speaking was practiced around 20 % or less of the total time in English classes. Some students remembered that a teacher required oral presentations on particular topics in front of the class while other students never presented in English classes. Sometimes presentations were used as a tool to improve final mark for the language course. Speaking tasks as rather formal requirement were implemented in those cases when language skills were trained with an aim to pass the final exam. Another issue observed both at school and university was that speaking in pairs was not treated seriously by the students. This diminished the role and effectiveness of the tasks. Still, some of the respondents referred to strong discipline in the classroom. Some teachers paid attention to those students who tend to speak less and motivated them to get involved in activities. Other teachers worked more with active students.

As it was assumed that the students at university follow their language learning practices and habits based on previous individual experience of English studies at school, they were asked to discuss this topic. The analysis of the students' opinion about factors influencing their perseverance in language studies at school is reflected in Table 1. After the factors were identified, the students were asked to rank them. Factors with both a positive and negative influence were identified. It should be emphasized that the same factors, for example, the group size or number of language lessons per week in different circumstances have opposite effect. Therefore, some factors appear in both sides of the Table 1 but with commentary.

The students agreed that their previous experience has impact on language studies at university. The results show that students choose passive rather than active role in language studies. Mostly students are not ready to read long texts, to study new words and grammar independently. The respondents referred as 'boring' to the study materials longer than one page and comprising complex professional terminology that in turn diminishes the level of their perseverance. The respondents handle scientific articles related to the subject field they study with difficulties and unwillingly. This means that normally students prefer

using study materials such as vocabulary of professional terminology prepared already by the university teacher instead of working on them by themselves thus improving their language skills and skills to work with information sources. The students admitted that they had to develop written vocabularies for new words in the primary school, and this method gradually disappeared in the secondary school. Respectively, most of the students do not continue writing glossaries and vocabularies in university.

Table 1

Factors influencing the 1st year students' perseverance in language studies during the period of primary and secondary education

Rank	Factors with a positive impact	Rank	Factors with a negative impact
1	Diversity of teaching methods and approaches focusing on different language skills	1	Number of lessons per week
2	Group size: small student groups	2	Group size: too big student groups
3	Feedback from a teacher (e.g., correction of accuracy mistakes in oral presentations and written texts)	3	Shortage of time for practicing speaking skills during classes
4	Number of lessons per week	4	Lack of opportunities to practice English in out-of-class activities
5	Inspiring personality and professionalism of a teacher	5	Unwillingness to learn vocabulary independently (making vocabularies, glossaries)
6	Opportunities to participate in out-of-class activities for the purpose of practicing English more frequently	6	Insufficient feedback from a teacher
7	Time for practicing speaking skills during classes	7	Passive involvement of students in the study process
8	Active involvement of students in the study process	8	Lack of interest
9	Learning vocabulary independently (making vocabularies, glossaries)	9	Inability to switch to different tasks

Asked about the motivation to use e-learning environment (e.g. Moodle) as a supplementary tool in language studies, the respondents expressed positive opinion; however, the students admitted that if the tasks in the Moodle were optional and were not assessed with a mark, they would be used less than in case the tasks were compulsory and included as a part of total assignment for the language course.

The 1st year students sometimes do not have motivation to study professional terminology as they do not see the link between language and its practical application; in other words, the 1st year students have not acquired yet specific knowledge of the profession they study even in Latvian, so they lose interest in English as they find it too complicated. Another issue is that students often lack learning skills and motivation to make efforts in general; language studies in that case is not an exception. Contemporary youth grasp long texts with difficulties; they prefer short extracts supported with visual materials. They would like to receive visual materials in the classroom. Respondents agreed that their perseverance to study English would be increased by stronger control of the teacher, for example, they prefer word and concept tests to tasks of translation professional terminology. The factors influencing students' perseverance in ESP studies at university are reflected in Table 2.

The analysis allows concluding that the students would feel more motivated and with higher perseverance in ESP if they had stronger control of the language teacher. They also expect greater contribution of the teacher instead of active process of self-education. Inability to switch to different types of tasks is characterized by the example that the students are used to very short texts in the English text books accompanied with pictures and therefore are not ready to study scientific articles and legislation comprising professional terminology. Opportunities of e-learning are welcomed but more likely in cases if tasks available in Moodle would be compulsory.

Table 2

Factors influencing the 1st year students' perseverance in ESP studies

Rank	Factors with a positive impact	Rank	Factors with a negative impact
1	Stronger control of the teacher	1	Inability to switch to different tasks
2	Tasks which require compulsory assessment	2	Lack of motivation to study professional terminology if students do not see the link with its practical application
3	Materials prepared by the teacher and teacher-lead study process	3	Lack of sufficient prior English language knowledge and skills
4	Group size: small student groups	4	Unwillingness to learn vocabulary independently (making vocabularies, glossaries)
5	Opportunity to use e-learning environment	5	Group size: too big student groups

Conclusions

1. The results of the research show that students choose passive rather than active role in language studies in university. They lack the necessary perseverance in order to achieve better results in studies. The respondents referred as 'boring' to the study materials longer than one page and comprising complex professional terminology that in turn diminishes the level of their perseverance.
2. Previous individual experience of English studies at school influences undergraduate students' perseverance. Former experience and learning skills are influenced greatly by the professionalism as well personality of language teachers at schools. The behaviour at schools has been transferred also to the university.
3. The 1st year students sometimes do not have motivation to study professional terminology as they do not see the link between language and its practical application; in other words, the 1st year students have not acquired yet specific knowledge of the subject field, so they lose interest in English as they find it too complicated. Another issue is that students often lack learning skills and motivation to put an effort in general.
4. The role of an institution and academic staff should be researched in further studies in increasing students' perseverance, since some studies indicate that teachers and instructors play an important part in the motivating students to improve their academic performance.

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