INDEPENDENT AND CREATIVE LEARNER
IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

Viktorija Mažeikienė

Mykolas Romeris University, Institute of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages
Ateities st. 20, LT 08303 Vilnius
Tel. No.: (8 5) 2714 613
E-mail: viktorija.mazeikiene@gmail.com

Giedrė Valūnaitė-Oleškevičienė

Mykolas Romeris University, Institute of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages
Ateities st. 20, LT 08303 Vilnius
Tel. No.: (8 5) 2714 613
E-mail: gentrygiedre@gmail.com

Dr. Galina Kavaliauskienė

Mykolas Romeris University, Institute of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages
Ateities st. 20, LT 08303 Vilnius
Tel. No.: (8 5) 2714 613
E-mail: galina_kavaliauskiene@yahoo.com
Tel. No.: +370 5 2714613

Abstract

One of the aims of university education is to prepare an independent researcher who is able to process and manage information flow and think critically. The task of making an oral presentation is very effective in developing indispensable professional skills and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) skills. In addition, it allows an ESP teacher to combine autonomous learning with social interaction in the classroom. The *object* of the research is focused on the ESP teaching/learning. This object has been chosen due to its importance and relevance in the overall academic setting as well as for the formation of individual professional skills of students. The main *question* raised in the research is how presentation preparation task and its outcomes add up to the improvement of professional skills. Thus the *research* was carried out aiming to reveal that preparation for a presentation stimulates learner independence (autonomy), the follow-up tasks (prepared by students) and discussion enhance social interaction and students gain valuable research skills. As a research tool *a questionnaire* was designed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. The main questions addressed were: (1) how does preparation for a presentation stimulate learner independence (autonomy)? (2) how do the follow-up tasks and discussion enhance social interaction? and (3) what skills do students gain while implementing the task? The research proved that preparation for a presentation and the subsequent performance supplemented by language use tasks designed by students themselves (i) catalyse learner independence (autonomy), (ii) assist the learner and his group mates in acquiring indispensable scientific research skills and ESP skills, and (iii) develop critical thinking.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), autonomous learning, social interaction, oral presentation, critical thinking, scientific research skills.

Introduction

Tell me and I forget,
Teach me and I remember,
Involve me and I learn

Benjamin Franklin

One of the aims of university education is to prepare an independent researcher who is able to process and manage information flow and to think critically. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, a part of studies at Mykolas Romeris University (MRU), is focused on developing both an independent and competent language user and independent critical thinker and creator. The object of the research is focused on ESP teaching/learning. This object has been chosen due to its importance and relevance in the overall academic setting as well as for the formation of individual professional skills of students. The main question raised in the research is how presentation preparation task and its outcomes add up to the improvement of professional skills. The task of making an oral presentation is very effective in revealing a student's hidden abilities and in developing indispensable professional skills. In addition, the task of planning, modelling, developing and making an oral presentation allows us to combine autonomous learning with social interaction. Moreover, as Paiva Franco (2008: 2) claims, 'the role of social interaction in the development of cognition is fundamental for learning to take place, either in face-to-face or online classroom'. To prove the value of public presentation with supplementary tasks, the research was carried out aiming to reveal that preparation for a presentation stimulates learner independence (autonomy), the follow-up tasks and discussion enhance social interaction and students gain valuable research skills. As a research tool a questionnaire including open and closed-ended questions was designed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. The respondents were second-year students majoring in social work at MRU.

1. Theoretical Framework

Firstly, motivation, self-confidence and preparation stage arise as crucial factors of successful performance by students making oral presentations. The degree of control offered to students also raises both motivation and self-confidence; it occurs through conscious personal involvement of students in task design, development and implementation. Speaking about self-confidence, it involves judgments and evaluations about one's own value and worth. It can be positively influenced by giving the learner freedom of choosing the complexity of the target language to be used in his/her presentation. In addition, it is expedient to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Halušková, 2009). The student's natural interest is related to intrinsic satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. Posing questions and problems in the field of social work (which can be extended to other related fields such as sociology, psychology, law, and others) in the preparatory stage involves students in choice making and topic selection according to their own preferences, interests and needs. It is often surprising how imaginative, creative and productive students are when they are given the possibility to decide for themselves on the subject they would like to investigate. They are even more motivated when all necessary teacher support is offered and provided. And this leads us to extrinsic motivation which basically refers to teacher praise and expectations. According to Halušková (2009: 3), 'teacher praise is a powerful motivator although its effect depends on skilful use. Praise should be linked to students' effort and attainment, conveying sincere pleasure on the teacher's part and should be used with credibility. Well judged, consistent, frequent and targeted use of praise that identifies the individual or group's specific behaviour or attributes and celebrates them with positive unconditional language is very powerful'. As regards teacher expectations, Halušková (2009: 3) succinctly observes that the teacher has to 'ensure the tasks are challenging and offer students a realistic chance of success, taking into account their ability and previous learning.… Expectations need to convey that the activities are worthwhile and of interest. [The teacher also hast to] monitor students' progress closely providing quick and supportive feedback when a student has encountered major difficulties. High expectations which are too demanding will not foster greater progress'.

More often than not, however, the task is associated with difficulties by students. According to King (cited in Webster, 2009: 1), the major problems highlighted by students are the perception of oral presentations as 'a face-threatening activity' and 'speech anxiety and limited presentation skills'. Obviously, for an inexperienced presenter the task seems threatening since it entails additional stress

caused by performing in front of the audience. As regards anxiety, it seems to arise due to students not being sure about the mastery of their English as well as the skills of managing their voice and gestures during their presentation. Webster (2009: 1) further offers valuable and reasonable stages that help students to overcome the perceived difficulties:

When we use language, we employ particular genre, which are like pre-determined linguistic formulae for achieving an outcome. Therefore, learners need to be equipped with these formulae in order to communicate effectively, in this case in the context of an oral presentation. Taking the cue from Halliday's genre approach, analyzing generic staging of various texts (in this case the oral presentation genre) is an essential step in the so-called teaching-learning cycle (Hammond et al:17), consisting of four stages: Stage 1: Building knowledge of the field (learners discuss field, tenor and mode features of oral presentations); Stage 2: Modelling of the text (teacher gives model oral presentation to class), learners then analyse staging; Stage 3: Joint construction of the text (learners work together on developing their talks); Stage 4: Independent construction of the text (learners give their presentation to the class).

Furthermore, the role of social interaction cannot be overlooked here. As Paiva Franco (2008: 2) in his article on e-learning claims, 'the role of social interaction in the development of cognition is fundamental for learning to take place, either in face-to-face or online classroom'. His viewpoint is based on the Vygotskian theory of zone of proximal development. Paiva Franco (2008: 3) further observes that '[t]he Vygotskian theory of zone of proximal development, i.e. the distance between what students could accomplish by themselves and what they could accomplish when assisted by others, enables us to understand how socioconstructivist environments can provide fruitful learning opportunities. E-learners stand to benefit from the sociocultural approach, because it is through interaction with peers or teachers that they can develop understanding'.

It is not coincidental that much of what is said about e-learning can be applied to the task of making an oral presentation since the preparatory stage—besides classroom instruction—involves a lot of individual work related to information search, processing, managing and critical thinking. Thus, this brings us to the issue of learner autonomy and what stimulates the development of learner autonomy.

The description of the term 'autonomy' as provided by Paiva Franco (2008: 4) seems to be the most appropriate and comprehensive explanation of the notion:

Autonomy is a complex socio-cognitive system, subject to internal and external constraints, which manifests itself in different degrees of independence and control of one's own learning process. It involves capacities, abilities, attitudes, willingness, decision making, choices, planning, actions, and assessment either as a language learner or as a communicator inside or outside the classroom. As a complex system it is dynamic, chaotic, unpredictable, non-linear, adaptative, open, self-organizing, and sensitive to initial conditions and feedback. From the moment students have achieved autonomous learning, they are able to decide which learning objects will facilitate learning and attend to their needs. By using online search engines such as Google, they can choose from a wide range of learning objects available.

One more important aspect related to autonomy as it is defined above is the fact that autonomy provides a student with a possibility to decide for oneself what material is note-worthy and meaningful for him/her and for the group. Regarding this matter, Stevick (1989) discusses two sides of using language: verbal and non verbal. Sounds, letters, words, phrases, sentences are the physical form of a language, i.e. verbal. By itself, this formal side of language use is worthless. The non-verbal side of using language involves meaning in the sense that the physical forms of language 'become valuable only as they convey meanings: only as they enable us to tell other people what we have seen, or to describe skills that we have and want to teach to them, or to convey what we want them to do or think or feel' (Stevick, 1989: 139)

2. Research Methods and Techniques

On the basis of our teaching experience, we have found out that public presentation, as a task enhancing social interaction, could be supplemented by additional assignments which develop learner autonomy and add to social interaction in the subsequent discussion. We would like to propose some suggestions for achieving better results in developing students' speaking skills.

In addition to making an oral presentation in front of the class, our students are also asked to prepare a list of key terms, some questions for discussion and language use tasks to be done after their presentation. After several years of this practice it proved to be a very challenging, interesting and very useful activity for all class participants. First, the key terms let the class follow the presenta-

tion more easily. The learner gets a condensed piece of vocabulary on the topic analysed and gets a chance to recycle new vocabulary in context. Next, while doing vocabulary tasks (after key terms have been heard in the context of a presentation), the learner is practicing the use of the new terms. And finally, in the following discussion students use the newly learnt vocabulary with the aim of social interaction in meaningful situations for themselves. In addition, the learner has to apply manifold skills while preparing the tasks for his/her peers. Task development activity involves such processes like critical thinking, sorting out information, prioritizing, synthesizing, developing independent decision making and stimulating learner creativity. All the mentioned processes enhance learner autonomy.

For the teacher, the performance of this assignment provides invaluable information on a student's potential, personality, skills and achieved level of language (in our case ESP) mastery. For the group, it provides a chance to use the knowledge they gain during a presentation in oral discussions and vocabulary practice.

Following the theoretical assumptions discussed above and our personal insights, the main questions addressed in the survey were:

- How does preparation for a presentation stimulate learner independence (autonomy)?
- How do the follow-up tasks and discussion enhance social interaction?
- What skills do students gain while implementing the whole task?

To find the answers to these questions, a questionnaire was designed aiming at achieving a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. For this reason, the questionnaire comprised a variety of closed and open-ended questions.

The participants of the study were students majoring in social work at Mykolas Romeris University. The questionnaires were given to the second-year students, who have one-year experience of studying ESP at university and had already prepared presentations in their language classroom. The survey was carried out in order to obtain first-hand information on their experience. There were 85 respondents. They were informed that the questionnaires were being given in an effort to understand how they think and feel about their learning while making the presentations and to gain some insights into more effective procedures for the future students.

3. Research Findings

According to the collected data, most students found the possibility to choose the topic for their presentation motivating (88%). As the main reason for their motivation, they pointed out the chance to choose a subject of their interest and prepare a presentation according to their abilities.

As one of the respondents said, '*I could do what was best for me, I could choose a topic which was interesting for me and I could take into consideration my own abilities*'.

The rest 12% of the respondents pointed out that the choice did not make any difference to them.

In addition, the survey revealed that teacher participation in the process should be shaped by the students needs and students should get a certain degree of independence (autonomy).

Table 1. **Necessity of teacher guidance**

Necessity of teacher guidance	*Percentage*
Should be provided only when asked by a student	52%
Not necessary	15%
Necessary	33%

The question about the necessity of teacher guidance on narrowing the scope of the research and refining the focus of a presentation was answered by about half of the respondents (52%) in a way that teacher help should be provided only when a student asks for it, 15% of the respondents said that teacher guidance was not necessary at all and only 33% of the students insisted that the guidance was necessary. The survey reveals that the majority of the respondents would primarily rely on their own abilities and knowledge and ask for teacher guidance only in case they saw they could not cope with the assignment on their own. A similar situation is evident in the case of teacher correction during the task planning and preparation stage.

Table 2. **Absence of teacher correction**

Absence of teacher correction	Percentage
Stimulating	43%
Necessary	33%
Causing anxiety	14%
Wrong	10%

The majority of the respondents (43%) said that the absence of teacher correction was stimulating, and 33% of the students questioned considered it as a necessary condition of their successful preparation. Only 14% of the respondents were found to think that the absence of correction causes anxiety, and the rest 10% identified it as wrong. It is evident that students would rather work on their own turning to the teacher help only when they need it.

Speaking about follow-up tasks and discussion, 81% of the respondents pointed out that vocabulary practice tasks designed by their peers were interesting to do and helpful. '*Learnt many new words and it was easier to remember the main points of the presentation*', a student says.

There were few respondents (19%) who thought that the tasks prepared by their peers were not interesting because of being too easy and boring, while 91% of the students questioned found the follow-up discussion stimulating and facilitating the learning process. As one respondent pointed out, '*Interesting, we could tell our opinion about the topic and improve speaking skills*'.

The questionnaire data proves that the students acquired new sophisticated vocabulary, improved their English speaking skills and gained new skills of presenting in public and indispensable research skills aimed at finding, analysing and synthesizing information efficiently ('*I learnt a lot of new terms used in the field of social work*'; '*Improved my English speaking and writing skills*'; '*I learnt to find information and present it for the audience*'; '*Improved information processing skills*'; '*Learnt how to create tasks*').

To sum up, it seems that a presentation with follow-up tasks and discussion makes it more valuable a task, which enhances learner autonomy and preconditions efficient social interaction in the language classroom.

Conclusions

The analysis of the data received from our students shows that public presentation can be supplemented by additional assignments which improve teaching/learning processes. The list of key terms on the topic and the vocabulary tasks facilitate the process of acquiring new terminology. The follow-up discussion adds to the improvement of speaking skills and preconditions successful social interaction in the classroom. In addition, the whole process of preparation for a presentation and task designing catalyses learner independence (autonomy), helps the learner to acquire indispensable scientific research skills, improves the ability to analyse information and use it creatively.

References

1. Halušková, A. Preserving students' motivation when improving oral skills in the foreign language classroom. *Humanizing Language Teaching.* 2008, 10(5): 3 [accessed 05-08-09]. <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/oct08/mart03.htm>.
2. Hammond, J.; Burns, A.; Joyce, H.; Brosnan, D.; Gerot, L. English for Social Purposes NCELTR: Australia, cited in Webster, F. A genre approach to oral presentations. *The Internet TESL Journal.* 2002, 8(7): 1 [accessed 24-07-09]. <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Webster-OralPresentations.html>.
3. King, J. Preparing EFL learners for oral presentations *The Internet TESL Journal.* 2002, 8(3): 1 [accessed 24-07-09]. <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/King-PublicSpeaking.html>.
4. Paiva Franco, C. Autonomy and Complexity, cited in Paiva Franco, C. How to build successful engaging e-learning experiences. *Humanizing Language Teaching.* 2008, 10(2): 2 [accessed 16-07-10]. <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/apr08/sart08.htm>.
5. Paiva Franco, C. How to build successful engaging e-learning experiences. *Humanizing Language Teaching.* 2008, 10(2): 2–3 [accessed 10-07-10]. <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/apr08/sart08.htm>.
6. Stevick, E. W. *Success with Foreign Languages: Seven Who Achieved It and What Worked for Them.* New York: Prentice Hall International Ltd., 1989.

7. Vygotsky, L. S. Mind in Society - the Development of Higher Psychological Processes, cited in Paiva Franco, C. How to build successful engaging e-learning experiences. *Humanizing Language Teaching*. 2008, 10(2): 2 [accessed 10-07-10]. <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/apr08/sart08.htm>.
8. Webster, F. A genre approach to oral presentations. *The Internet TESL Journal*. 2002, 8(7): 3 [accessed 10-07-10]. <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Webster-OralPresentations.html>.

SAVARANKIŠKAS IR KŪRYBINGAS MOKINYS ANGLŲ KALBOS MOKYMO PROCESE

Viktorija Mažeikienė
Mykolo Romerio universitetas
Giedrė Valūnaitė-Oleškevičienė
Mykolo Romerio universitetas
Dr. Galina Kavaliauskienė
Mykolo Romerio universitetas

Santrauka

Vienas iš universitetinio mokymo tikslų – parengti savarankišką mokslininką tyrėją, kuris sugebėtų kritiškai mąstyti ir valdyti informacijos srautus. Parengti pristatymą tam tikra tema yra veiksminga užduotis, tobulinanti kalbinius ir profesinius studentų gebėjimus bei leidžianti dėstytojui taikyti savarankiško mokymosi ir socialinės komunikacinės sąveikos metodus. Remiantis teorinėmis prielaidomis, buvo iškelti klausimai: (1) Kaip pasirengdamas pristatymui ir parengdamas užduotis studentas tobulina savarankiško mokymosi įgūdžius? (2) Kaip sukuriamas palankus socialinis komunikacinis kontekstas ? (3) Kokių įgūdžių studentai įgyja, kaip juos patobulina? Ieškant atsakymų buvo sudarytas klausimynas, kurio tikslas buvo gauti kiekybinius ir kokybinius duomenis. Tyrimu atskleista, kaip parengiant pristatymą pagerinamas mokymo(si) procesas ir kokie veiksniai turi įtakos savarankiškam akademiniam mokymuisi, analizuojant informaciją, lavinant kritiško mąstymo įgūdžius.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: specialybės anglų kalba, autonominis mokymas(is), socialinė komunikacinė sąveika, pristatymas, kritiškas mąstymas.