

## ONGOING RESEARCH INTO SPEAKING SKILLS

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### Abstract.

The aim of this research is to explore the students' attitudes to developing speaking skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. Speaking is a productive skill which is difficult to master. The research method employed the questionnaire on learner attitudes to different speaking activities in the classroom. It was administered to the students who study psychology at tertiary level. The students were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty they had with the various speaking activities on the Likert's scale ranging from "very difficult" (1) to "very easy" (5). The results included the students' responses obtained in three academic years of 2010, 2011 and 2012. The attitudes of students to different activities vary: they are more positive to short talks and discussions than to spontaneous speaking. The short talks and Power Point Presentations (PPPs) have been mandatory and graded in the ESP classes, so the correlations between grades in short talks and PPPs have been computed. Students' contributions to discussions and impromptu speeches have not been graded because basically self-confident students take part in these activities while passive students fail to contribute. The excerpts of written self-assessments of learners' achievements in improving speaking skills have been reproduced.

**Key words:** English for Specific Purposes, ongoing research data, attitudes to speaking activities.

### Introduction

Non-native speakers of English seek to develop fluency and accuracy in speaking. Each generation of students is taught the important skill of structuring and delivering their oral talks. Nevertheless, the problems in learning good speaking skills persist as new generations of learners arrive at university. It is well known that English proficiency of majority of school-leavers has been going downhill for the last ten years. This leads to students' difficulties in applying general language skills to mastering professional language. Learners must be taught fluency and accuracy during classroom activities as it is essential for them to learn how to speak well on professional issues in English. In order to achieve this objective, it

is important to find out what difficulties students have in developing English speaking skills at university. Current classroom activities focus on the issues of communication and include discussions, spontaneous speaking, giving short talks and delivering Power Point Presentations (PPPs). Short talks and PPPs are ready-made speeches prepared in advance and presented in the classroom. The duration of short talks is about 5 minutes, while the length of PPPs usually takes up to 15 minutes to deliver.

**The aims of the research:** to investigate learners' attitudes to the level of difficulty in speaking activities.

**Research methods used:** 1) a relevant part of the questionnaire to examine students' opinions, 2) learners' self-reported reflections that are available in their weblogs.

**The respondents** in this research are the students who studied English for Psychology in 2010, 2011 and 2012 at a tertiary level.

### **Research Background**

The ability to speak fluently implies knowledge of language features as well as the ability to process information and language 'on the spot', and success in spoken production depends on rapid mental and social processing skills (Harmer, 2001). Language processing involves the retrieval of words and phrases from memory. Moreover, speaking involves interaction with other speakers, i.e. understanding how to take turns and how others feel about the topic under consideration. Finally, information processing on the spot, i.e. the ability to respond immediately, is important and may not be appreciated by the non-native English speakers, who seek to develop the ability to speak fluently and accurately. The term 'fluency' has two different meanings in English language teaching (Hedge, 1993): the first meaning of fluency relates to competence in the learner; a second meaning focuses on natural language use and a pattern of language interaction as close as possible to native speakers' use in everyday life. It means that students must be taught speaking skills during classroom activities. Good speaking is not effortless and it must be effective. To be an effective speaker is a skill which can be learnt by practicing (Stuart, 1989): before speaking students should plan and prepare their talks, practice and rehearse, learn to cope with nerves, control their body language, volume of the voice, pitch and speed of the speech. It is known that speaking is a high-risk activity which can make some learners worry about losing face.

A novel methodology 'Small Talk' is explored by J. Hunter (2012), who suggests encouraging communicative language use and developing accuracy and fluency. This activity

involves groups of students in the conversation on the chosen topic without teacher's intervention. Teacher's role is to observe the interactions and to suggest ways of their improvement. 'Small Talk' was found to be effective in increasing the students' pragmatic competence. The level of error identification by different teachers ranged from 24% to 57%, i.e. on average of 40%. It is a consistent methodology for analyzing and responding to learner language, but it is time consuming and might be hard to implement within limited classroom time.

The relationship between spoken language research and ELT practice over the last 20 years was examined by I. Timmis (2012), who showed that the majority of students prefer native-speaker norms on a general level. It is argued, however, that more classroom research is needed in order to determine how explicit the treatment of spoken language should be and what activities are beneficial.

The idea of teaching spontaneous speaking through short talks was applied and specified in online article (Kavaliauskienė, 2004). It proved to be helpful as the first step to teaching presentations. Later more findings referring to good practice in teaching presentations were published, and students' strengths and weaknesses in delivery of presentations were summarized (Kavaliauskienė, 2006). However, the problems in learning good speaking skills persist as new generations of learners arrive at university. It is essential for them to be able to speak fluently on professional issues. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to find out which activities are the most difficult in improving speaking skills. Current speaking activities focus on the communication issues and include discussions, spontaneous speaking, i.e. without preparation, short talks on professional themes and delivering Power Point Presentations.

### **Research methodology**

The results were obtained from two sources: 1) a survey completed by nine groups of Psychology students, who studied English in 2010, 2011 and 2012, and 2) students' written self-assessments of speaking activities. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the accepted standards of constructing surveys (Dörnyei, 2003). The relevant part of the questionnaire consists of 4 statements (Appendix), to which students responded on a 5-point Likert's scale ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Statistical processing of the findings by a means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) included the

computations of frequencies of responses, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of reliability, and Spearman's correlation coefficients. Students' self-assessments have been used as a means of encouraging learners to reflect on their learning experience, achievements or failures. Students' weblogs contain their written self-assessments of performance in speaking activities such as making Power Point Presentations (PPPs), participating in discussions on professional issues, giving short talks and speaking spontaneously.

The topics for PPPs covered the contents of the course book and included the key professional issues. Each student could choose a theme, prepare a PPP and deliver it in front of the audience in the classroom. Presentations were followed by peers' questions and discussions and provided opportunities for each student to express his /her opinions and argue the points. "Short talks" are mandatory in English for Psychology classes. Here "short talk" is used in the meaning "brief", up to 5 minutes, and describe a phenomenon from the psychological point of view. For example, in the short talks about "Psychology of Luck" students refer to the research by the well-known scientist of Richard Wiseman, reveal four scientific principles of luck, ways of attracting good fortune and increasing levels of luck, confidence and success. In other words, suggested themes for short talks included different areas of psychology and were of professional interest to students.

## **Respondents**

The participants in this project were full-time students, who studied English for Psychology (9 groups, 135 students) at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania. The design of the ESP course reflected the students' needs in professional language, and the course was adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. The level of proficiency was either B2 or C1, in accordance to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

## **Results and discussion**

This section reports the students' responses to the survey and discusses the main points that emerged. The reliability was estimated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which is equal to .936. This value suggests that the survey items are reliable. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty they had with the speaking skills on the Likert's scale ranging from "very difficult" (1) to "very easy" (5). For the sake of clarity in visual

displays of the data, the positive responses (very easy and easy) and the negative responses (very difficult and difficult) have been added up. In order to visualize the differences in the respondents' perceptions, the frequencies of positive responses in percentage are plotted in Chart 1, and negative responses in Chart 2.

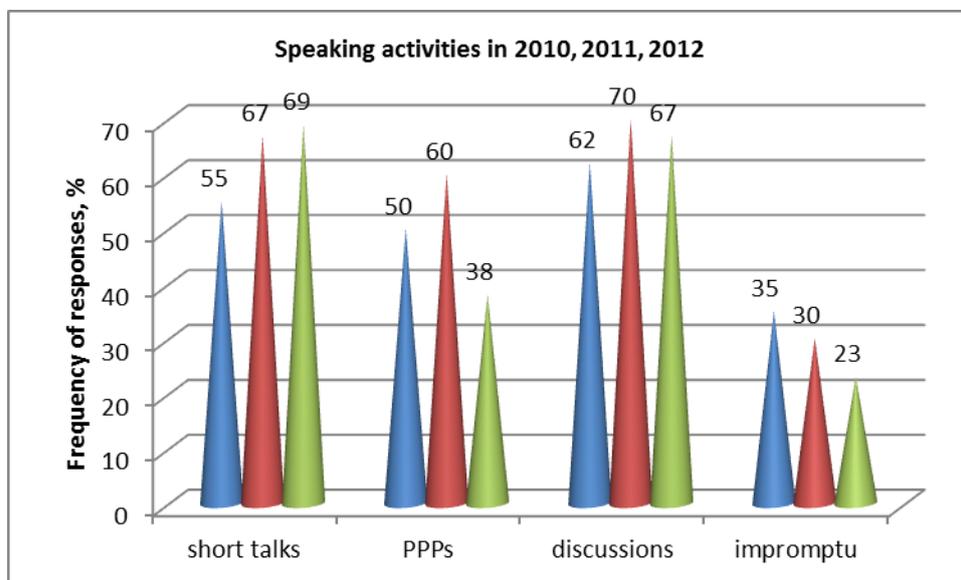


Chart 1 Students' positive (very easy & easy) attitudes to speaking activities. 1st cones: data collected in 2010; 2nd cones: data collected in 2011; 3rd cones: data collected in 2012.

1<sup>st</sup> cones (blue) in Chart 1 show the data collected in 2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> cones (red) refer to the results collected in 2011, and 3<sup>rd</sup> cones (green) – to 2012. It is evident that students have become more positive to presenting short talks: the number increased from 55 % to 69%. Attitudes to participating in discussions vary between 62% and 70 %, which indicates that majority of learners like this activity. Students' positive opinions on PPPs dropped in 2012 to 38% in comparison to 50% in 2010 and 60% in 2011. Moreover, students' attitudes to spontaneous speaking have worsened – decreased from 35% in 2010 to 23% in 2012. This fact is probably due to the deterioration of general proficiency in English, which makes students dislike speaking spontaneously and losing face.

Chart 2 displays the frequencies of negative responses in 2010 (blue cones, 2011 (red cones) and 2012 (green cones). It is seen that about the third of students dislike short talks and discussions. Spontaneous (impromptu) speaking causes a particular dislike: the number of students increased from 65% in 2010 to 77% in 2012. The reason is quite obvious: inability to present ideas accurately, briefly and clearly.

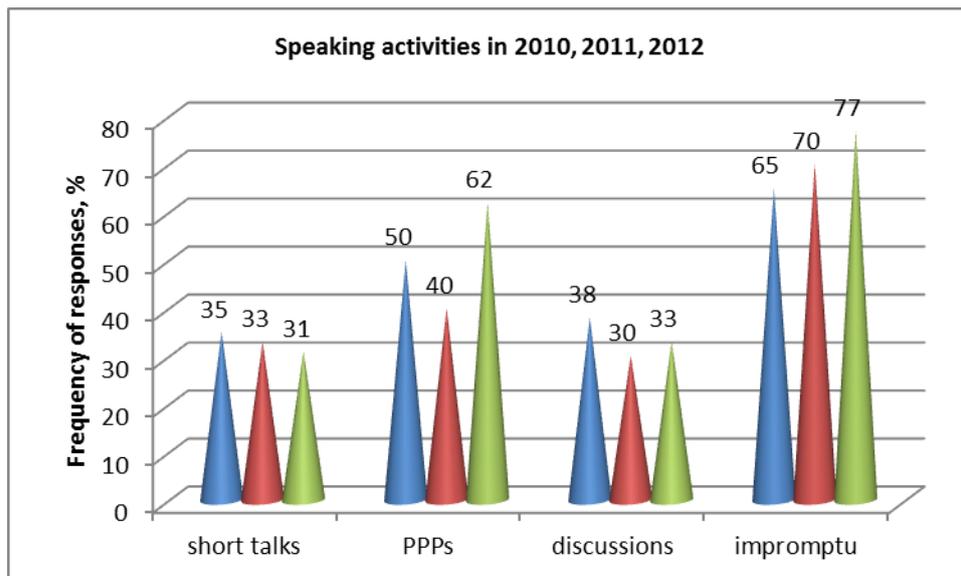


Chart 2 Students' negative (very difficult & difficult) attitudes to speaking activities. 1st cones: data collected in 2010; 2nd cones: data collected in 2011; 3rd cones: data collected in 2012.

In ESP classes, short talks and PPPs have been mandatory, so they have been graded. Chart 3 displays students' grades for short talks and PPPs. Each column consists of 3 parts (blue, red and green), each of which represents one group of students. It can be seen that grades in a 10 point scale vary between 7.9 to 8.8 for short talks and between 7 to 10 for PPPs. One group of students in 2011 (shown in red color) had B2 proficiency in General English, but failed to perform adequately in ESP, so it was awarded rather low average grades of 6.5 for PPPs and 6.6 for short talks.

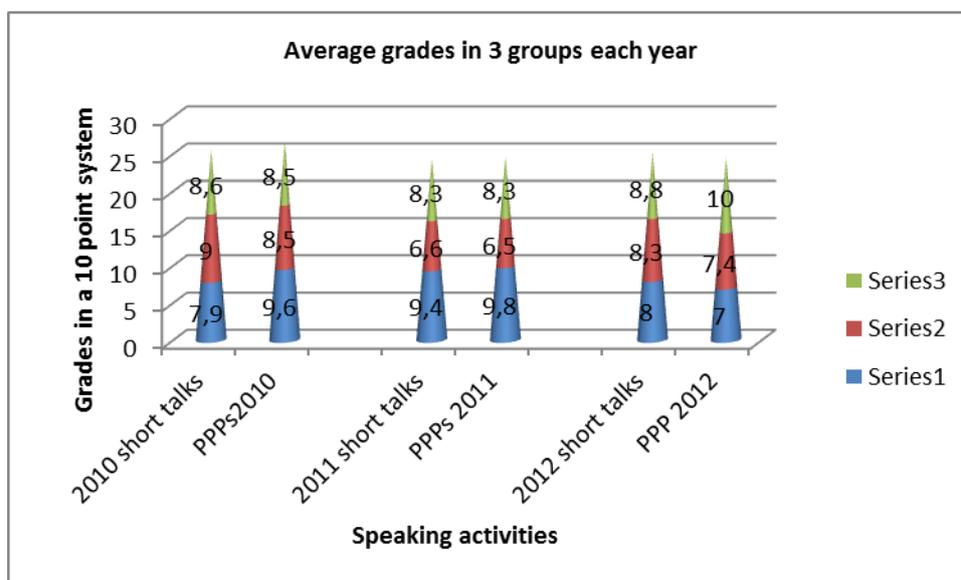


Chart 3 Average grades awarded to students on short talks and PPPs each year.

Computations of correlations between the grades for short talks versus the grades for PPPs have shown that correlations are significant at the level 0.01 (2-tailed), i.e. at the probability of 99%. In all cases Spearman's correlation coefficients are equal to 1.00. This result can be interpreted as follows: there is a linear relationship between performances in short talks and subsequent performances in PPPs. Therefore, it proves the earlier suggested idea of usefulness of employing short talks to teaching PPPs to new generations of university students (Kavaliauskienė, 2006).

### Students' self-assessments

This section reproduces passages from students' weblogs about speaking activities they performed in their ESP classes. The key attention of written reflections is towards making PPPs, speaking spontaneously and giving short talks. For the sake of authenticity, neither style nor register were corrected.

<http://aadamaityte.blogspot.com/> I found PPP task interesting but also stressful. The process of making presentation was interesting but presenting it caused me a little stress. Even though this task is beneficial because you have to find right information and present it creatively Speaking impromptu was probably the most difficult task for me. I found it hard to express myself and use material that I had read before. I still need more practice in this task.

Short talks were pretty easy to do because we usually had plenty time to prepare for them. Although some themes were not easy to talk about, I am happy with my performance on it.

<http://abajorinaite.blogspot.com/> I would like to think that my PPP was successful. I have enjoyed reading about the topic I had chosen beforehand and talking about it in front of the class. I found it very interesting and fun working on the visual part of my presentation as well. Speaking impromptu has always been rather stressful to me. However, I think my performance on this task has always been quite good. I believe my short talks, prepared at home, had been better, on the other hand, but less useful than speaking impromptu.

<http://jberzanskyte.blogspot.com/> PPP: this year my theme wasn't as interesting as last year's was. So it was not so enjoyable, however I am happy with my presentation. I think that making presentation is the best way to deepen you knowledge.

Short talks and spontaneous speaking is the crucial thing in learning English. However I enjoyed short talks more than speaking impromptu, because I could prepare more and say more.

<http://rburnickaite.blogspot.com/> For me speaking impromptu still is one of the biggest problems but this semester I have tried to speak as much as I could and I believe that has helped me. I am learning from my mistakes so speaking during the oral exam should not be so stressful. As for short talks, I have enjoyed all the themes. It was interesting and beneficial to search for the information and read about different things. I tend to think that my performance during short talks was quite good. Making PPP is definitely not one of mine favourite

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activities. Nevertheless, I found the way to enjoy it. I have chosen interesting module so it was easier to do this task. I believe that PPPs are very useful in various respects, you are improving your speaking skills, learn to arrange information and you learn new things about academic work. These benefits are crucial for further studies so I am satisfied that I managed to take from it as much as I could.

<http://Ikrupaviciute.blogspot.com/> It is easy to make a PPP, but we must present it, which is more difficult. But in my opinion I have done this task quite well.

Speaking impromptu in class: we debated about many themes impromptu and it was quite difficult for me because I am not very good at speaking, my vocabulary is not very rich, but I am trying to improve my vocabulary and my English knowledge, too.

Short talks were relevant to my future profession. I think it is great way to improve English knowledge in performing short talks especially if the theme is interesting.

<http://kmuravjova.blogspot.com/> I enjoyed making PPPs, because an individual has an opportunity to use both creative and analytical thinking. There were some difficulties in presenting my topic in the second term, but I believe that my third term PPP was much better and my presentation was successful. What is more, speaking on ESP topics has become one of the important aspects of my daily routine. Although I have low self-esteem while speaking in foreign language, I have tried to do my best and say everything I could to improve my English.

Summing up presented passages of students' reflections it may be concluded that attitudes to various speaking activities are more positive than negative. Moreover, students believe that class activities have been useful for improving speaking skills.

## Conclusions

The present study is rather limited in one respect. The number of respondents is comparatively small: 42 students in 2010, and 45 students in 2011, and 48 students in 2012. In spite of these limitations, some conclusions can be made. First, the responses to the survey indicate that the students consider the applied speaking activities useful for improving spoken English. Second, it is found that the most difficult activity is speaking spontaneously. Third, the level of proficiency in General English influences the performance in professional language. Finally, there are good correlations between performances in short talks and Power Point Presentations: practicing short talks helps students perform better in delivering long speeches.

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**Appendix.** Relevant part of the questionnaire.

- Participating in discussions is
  - 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Speaking without preparation in front of the audience is
  - 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Giving short talks is
  - 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.
- Making and delivering Power Point Presentations is
  - 1) very difficult, 2) difficult, 3) not sure, 4) easy, 5) very easy.