ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: PODCASTS FOR LISTENING SKILLS

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The most needed ability in everyday communication is skills of listening. Ability to follow a speaker in a foreign language and respond appropriately needs to be taught like all other language skills. A novel approach to perfecting listening skills has emerged due to audio publishing online. It is known as “podcasting” and has become very popular because it offers language learners extra listening practice both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, podcasting as online communication technology is a new way to inspire learning: it provides an exciting way for students and educators to explore and discover educational content. However, the applicability of podcasting to teaching English needs researching.

This paper addresses research into learners’ perceptions of online listening to podcasts, self-evaluation of one’s performance in individual listening practice and reflections on practical ways of improving skills of listening and developing listening competence. Some implications of research are suggested including a blended learning, i.e. combination of multiple approaches to learning by harmonizing online listening with classroom audition activities in teaching / learning English for Specific Purposes.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, podcasts, self-evaluation, reflections.

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The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen.
Rachel Naomi Remen

Introduction

An innovative approach to teaching listening skills has emerged due to the hi-tech developments. One of them is a so-called “podcasting” (a portmanteau of the words iPod and broadcasting), which has recently become very popular. The term “podcast” was first coined in 2004, and it means the publishing of audio materials via the Internet. Audio recordings are designed to be downloaded and listened to on a portable MP3 player of any type, or on a personal computer. Audio files available for downloading and other means of online listening have been around for some time. Podcasts differ from other ways of delivering audio materials online by the opportunity of downloading content automatically. Podcasting offers learners a wide range of possibilities for extra listening practice both inside and outside the classroom. Podcasts enable students to practice listening in a self-directed manner and at their own pace. In 2005 The New Oxford American Dictionary named a “podcast” its official “Word of the Year.”
The object of our research has been the learners’ perceptions of expedience to individual listening to podcasts. The aims of research have been to examine the challenges that students face in listening to various authentic English podcasts, and to analyze learners’ self-evaluation data on various techniques of improving listening skills. The methods of the research include administering an appropriate survey to project participants, the analysis of self-evaluation data on students’ performance in podcasting, and learners’ reflections on their experience of online listening and listening activities in the class. The participants in this study are students of different specializations who study English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. The hypothesis for the present study has been to examine how realistic students are in assessing their listening abilities and skills. The intended outcome of research has been to formulate the recommendations for good practice in helping respondents to perfect skills of listening.

Overview of literature

Language practitioners are well aware that listening activity in English for Specific Purposes is an active and demanding process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. However what is known about the listening process basically emerges from research on developments in native language. In listening, there are several major steps which include determining a reason for listening, predicting information, attempting to organize information, assigning a meaning to the message, and transferring information from short-term memory to long-term memory.

An important feature of listening process is that much of processing of incoming information takes place during the pauses in speech. Pauses in natural speech allow students to gain processing time. Moreover, much of comprehension involves drawing inferences. A characteristic feature of listening is a creation of mental messages which are stored by learners. This phenomenon is known as a false recognition memory (Rivers 1992).

Restrictions on learner’s ability to understand the L2 speech are caused just as much by difficulties of the language as by memory limits (Cook 1996). All comprehension depends on the storing and processing of information by the mind. Unfortunately, the human mind is less efficient in L2 whatever it is doing. In other words, language learners have ‘cognitive deficits’ with listening that are not caused by lack of language ability but by difficulties with processing information in the second language.

The role of vocabulary knowledge and its recognition in listening affects comprehension of information. The number of long words and the number of words in a sentence define comprehensibility of a text. Lexical density is a variable showing the percentage of content words. A vocabulary measure may provide an indication of how easy it will be for learners to understand a spoken text. In listening, it is not just the relative frequency of the content words that affects comprehension but also how concentrated they are in the text.

Another important issue in listening comprehension is authenticity of listening materials. Authenticity implies real language, which is the hardest to understand, because no concessions are made to non-native speakers - language is unlikely to be simplified or spoken slowly. For learners, authenticity often means negative expectations, i.e. difficult language. When learners listen to unfamiliar speech they hear an almost continuous chain of sounds. Inexperienced learners do not actually hear the boundaries of words. Experienced learners are able to break down this chain into separate words in their heads because they are familiar with the sounds and can create meaningful words with them.
One of the most difficult tasks for any teacher is to teach the skills of listening, because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice (Rivers 1992). Learning listening skills is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Moreover, listening skills are difficult to quantify. One of the largest inhibitors for students is often a mental block. While listening students suddenly decide they do not understand. At this point, many students just tune out – some students convince themselves they are not able to understand spoken English well and create problems for themselves.

Bottom-up, top-down, and interactive models have been extensively used over the past decades to teach listening. Some researchers (Flowerdew & Miller 2005) believe that these models do not cater to the complexities of the listening process and attempt to introduce a pedagogical model for second language listening that encompasses individual, cultural, social, contextualized, affective, strategic, and critical dimensions.

Therefore, having examined the above mentioned sources on developing students’ listening skills in language classes, it is easier to understand why Internet audio has suddenly become popular now. Recent technical innovations allow subscribers with portable MP3 players to use technology for downloading podcasts and to listen to files at one’s own convenience. This opens up new educational potential of using unproductive time for learning. Research into the student reaction to podcasting is still in progress but early indications from student feedback collected so far and analysis of course tracking suggest that the podcasts were highly appreciated and extensively used by students. According to the online source of the University of Southampton (http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/podcast/index.html), the podcasts were frequently downloaded, and “students reported listening to each several times over both for the listening practice they provided as well as for their entertainment or informational value.”

Podcasts are part of novel online learning and can serve a number of purposes: to enhance the range and register of English language listening practice material available for the students to use in a variety of ways; to provide increased connectivity between different elements of the course; to increase the scope for discussion activity. The podcasts online have given the language teacher a wealth of materials for teaching listening skills. P. Constantine (2007) examines the subject of podcasts on several levels and deals with the questions of the podcast advantages, selection of the most beneficial podcasts, and discusses how to maximize learning from podcasts. The advantages of podcasts are: firstly, learners can benefit from global listening, even if they only listen from three to five minutes a day, secondly, students will be exposed to the new language, thirdly, the intermediate learner has a need for authentic texts and to be exposed to a variety of voices. Moreover, podcasts are not just intended for listening. Often there is a transcript provided along with worksheets. A number of websites interact with the students and ask them to write in with questions or comments. An innovative usage of podcasts is to have a learner listen to a podcast and read its transcript (Constantine 2007). Then the student can make a recording of the material on a cassette tape and submit it to the teacher along with a written journal. The teacher listens to the student’s recording and gives appropriate feedback to the student. This type of activity helps the students to develop fluency in listening, reading, speaking, pronunciation, and to acquire new vocabulary.

The survey of the users of podcasts was published on the BBC world service website. The data demonstrate that out of 285 responses there were 31% of females of various ages: 2% – under 20, about 15% aged 20 to 30,6% aged 30 to 40,8% – 40 to 50. There were 69% of male users: 6% – under 20, 21% – aged 20 to 30,17% – aged 30 to 40,15% – aged 40 to 50, 10% – aged 50 plus. It shows that men are more active in downloading podcasts – 69% versus
The age range of English learners is from 20 to 50 plus. It is assumed that podcasting is especially interesting for English learners as it provides a means for students to get access to "authentic" listening sources about almost any subject that may interest them. Teachers can take advantage of podcasts as a basis for listening comprehension exercises, as a means of generating conversation based on students’ reaction to podcasts, and as a way of providing each and every student diverse listening materials.

A brief overview of how podcasting can be used in English language teaching is provided by T. N. Robb, who suggests that there are three basic modes of activities for podcasting, i.e. students as consumers, when teachers create materials for students or assign them to listen to one of the many available ESL podcast sites, or students as producers or publishers, and teachers have students create material for others to listen to, or students practice listening and accomplish various exercises.

Objectives of research

In this study we aimed at examining the challenges that students face in listening to various authentic English podcasts individually and analyzing learners’ self-evaluation of performance. The intended outcome of research is to formulate the recommendations for good practice in perfecting listening skills at tertiary level.

Research Techniques and Respondents

The research methods included, firstly, the survey of students’ self-evaluation of their performance in individual listening to various podcasts at upper-intermediate, advanced, or intermediate (for learners of lower proficiency), and, secondly, students’ self-evaluation of performance and, thirdly, their reflections on the usefulness of various types of listening experiences. The application of self-evaluation and reflections techniques aimed at raising learners’ awareness of their abilities to follow authentic speech and feasible ways of improving listening skills.

Listening to podcasts had to serve a number of learning goals: first, to enhance the range and register of English language listening practice material available for the students to use in a variety of ways; second, to provide increased connectivity between different elements of the course; third, to increase the scope for discussion activity in the classroom in pairs after students have shared their listening experiences.

The participants in this study were the 1st year full-time students of two different specializations, i.e. the students who study either psychology, or law and penitentiary activities at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. Podcasts were chosen by learners themselves from the website http://a4esl.org/p/ which included the following sections:

- VOA Special English
- Links to Podcasts for ESL
- Links to Podcasts for Native English Speakers
- Links to Downloadable MP3 Files

Students were asked to carry out the assignments for homework. The deadline of two weeks was agreed with each group, by the end of which learners contributed entries to their weblogs and answered relevant to podcasting questions of a specially designed questionnaire. The collected data are analyzed in the following section.

Results and discussion

Students’ self-evaluation data of online listening experience to podcasts are displayed in Table. The results are presented in percentage, which enables the researchers to compare performance of both groups quantitatively.
As it has already been mentioned, the participants of this study were free to choose two podcasts online and listen to them outside the English classroom. The learners were expected to choose the podcasts of appropriate level of English: upper-intermediate, advanced or for native speakers. However, some of the students chose podcasts at intermediate level. Their excuse was the inability to spot the podcasts of the right level. The learners of two specializations reported their perceptions of listening experiences by filling in a feedback questionnaire which is shown in Appendix 1.

The first entry in Table gives the percentage of students’ estimations of speaking rates. The responses of evaluating recordings at advanced and upper-intermediate English are similar for both groups. The responses of assessing recordings at intermediate level of English differ probably due to generally higher proficiency of students of psychology. Interestingly, learners reported that it had been easier for them to follow American speakers than British speakers (these findings are not included in Table). This can be explained by the research into listening abilities (Sharma and Barrett 2007) which compared speaking rates by BBC, ABC, and CNN broadcasting companies. On average, BBC broadcasters speak faster than CNN broadcasters (172 words per minute versus 153 words per minute), but BBC speakers use longer pauses, which help listeners to process information. However, linguistic complexity on BBC sites can complicate comprehension: on average, the sentence length in BBC broadcasts is 39 words versus 22 words in CNN broadcasts. Nevertheless, speaking rates and linguistic complexity are not the only factors that affect the ease of comprehension. It is thought that listener’s background knowledge, speaking fluency and acoustic factors also affect comprehension significantly.

**The self-evaluation data of listening experience to podcasts. (Submitted by the 1st year students in 2008)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey questions</th>
<th>Specialization of Psychology</th>
<th>Specialization of Law and Penitentiary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students’ perception of the speaking rate in a podcast</td>
<td>Percentage of students (16 students)</td>
<td>Percentage of students (11 students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast (Advanced Level)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (Upper-Intermediate Level)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow (Intermediate Level)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Number of audition to a single podcast</td>
<td>Percentage of audition</td>
<td>Percentage of audition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four times</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students’ self-evaluation of their ability to understand a record</td>
<td>Percentage of students</td>
<td>Percentage of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students’ supported ways of improving listening skills</td>
<td>Percentage of students</td>
<td>Percentage of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– listen to podcasts as often as possible</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– listen to authentic cassette recordings in class</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– listen to your friends in English classes</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– watch English video films or movies on TV</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– speak to the native English speakers</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second entry in Table gives numbers of audition to a single podcast. The learners’ responses also reflect the difference in proficiency: fewer learners of psychology specialization had to listen three times – 6% versus 23%, while almost the same percentage of learners in both groups had to listen twice.

The third entry in Table shows learners’ self-evaluation of their listening abilities. Only 6% evaluate their ability as “very good”, 59% versus 45% – as “good”, and 35% versus 55% – as “satisfactory”. As a matter of fact, listening ability of an individual learner is comparable to his/her performance in listening tests in English classes. This proves that students’ self-evaluation is quite realistic.

Finally, participants’ positive attitudes to the techniques of improving skills of listening include listening to podcasts (76% and 64%, respectively), watching English video films and movies on TV (88% and 73%, respectively), improving listening by talking to native speakers of English (70% and 91%, respectively) and listening to authentic recordings in the classroom (41% and 55%, respectively). However, listening to peers in English classes is the least favourite activity – 18% versus 9% depending on students’ specialization.

On the issue of comprehensibility (the data are not included in Table), students mentioned the following techniques they had used for clarifying the questionable parts of podcasts. Here are the most common answers: a) looked up the meaning of unknown words in a dictionary; b) recognized the words by sight from having read the available transcript; c) used a dictionary while reading a recorded text; d) guessed the meaning from the context.

**Reflections on listening activities**

There are diverse ways of developing listening skills in a foreign language. The most common listening activities in English for Specific Purposes classes are the activities of listening to authentic recordings either on CDs or on cassettes. However, not every learner is keen on such practice basically because of the disparity in language proficiency. What seems beneficial to some students might be problematic to others, and some learners are reluctant to admit their difficulties in front of the class.

An innovative way of practicing listening skills is podcasting which enables learners to conduct the activity at their own pace and at the convenient time. Real life listening, e.g. socializing with the native speakers of English, is not feasible on the daily basis in this country, but it is highly appreciated by learners at tertiary level. Passive listening by watching TV films is also ranked high and can be easily exercised due to the availability of cable TV that broadcasts various English channels.

In this study, the participants self-evaluated their listening skills by writing self-assessment entries in their weblogs. Some excerpts from students’ entries are being reproduced in Appendix 2. The language has not been corrected for the authenticity reasons.

The learners’ weblogs can be found in one of the researcher’s weblog http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com.

**Conclusions and implications of research**

The extent to which learners consciously focus on aspects of language and the degree of noticing its particular features have been currently debated by linguists and practitioners. This study documents the ways of raising language awareness through the listening to authentic podcasts which is important for language processing and learner development.

In this paper, the authors infer that there is an opportunity for raising language awareness by employing podcasting. It allows learners to carry out homework assignments at their own pace and under non-threatening conditions. The online methodology involves downloading
a variety of podcasts and listening to them at the convenient time. A follow-up classroom discussion on benefits or failures of listening to podcasts enables each learner to evaluate their ability to understand authentic records. Summarizing various types of listening experiences in individual weblogs allows learners to store written records of their achievements.

The implications of this research are numerous. First, individual online listening to podcasts at one’s own pace and at the convenient to a learner time prompts and motivates learners to improve skills of listening without being intimidated by possible failure. Second, raising learners’ awareness of suitable individual ways of perfecting skill of listening promotes language learning. Third, the novelty and diversity of outside class listening motivates learners to perfect their skills without being observed by peers or teachers. Fourth, harmonizing online listening with classroom audition activities in teaching/learning English should benefit all learners. Fifth, learners become aware that listening skills can be improved through a lot of practice of their own choice. Finally, self-assessing one’s achievements and publishing a self-evaluation report in individual weblogs encourage learners to keep improving.

Due to diverse personalities of learners, teachers must acknowledge the fact that not all learners enjoy using digital technology in learning. Therefore, blended learning, which is a combination of multiple approaches to learning, is preferable (Sharma and Barrett 2007). A typical example of blended learning is a combination of e-learning and face-to-face sessions in the classroom. Students’ reflections, which are presented in Appendix 2, prove the importance of such an approach.

References


Appendix 1.
Podcasting Assignment and Questionnaire of Students’ Self-Evaluation of Listening Online.

Assignment: Online listening to podcasts Website: http://adesl.org/p Number of podcasts: 2 Level: Upper-intermediate or advanced Write the title of the 1st podcast title and its website address: Write the title of the 2nd podcast title and its website address:

Self-Assessment of Listening to Podcasts.

• The rate of speaking (tick the answer you agree with): a) very fast, b) fast, c) average, d) slow, e) very slow, f) other (specify).
• The speaker’s accent (tick the answer you agree with): a) British, b) American, c) non-native (specify).
• How many times have you listened to a podcast for the complete understanding? (tick the answer you agree with: a) once, b) twice, c) 3 times, d) other (specify).
• How has the reading of a transcript helped you to understand the contents? (tick the answer you agree with): a) looked up the meaning of unknown words in a dictionary, b) recognized the words by sight, c) found difficult to understand a written text, d) guessed the meaning from the context, e) read the transcript, f) other (specify).
• How do you evaluate your ability to understand authentic speech? (tick the answer you agree with): a) excellent, b) very good, c) good, d) satisfactory, e) poor, f) other (specify).
• How can you improve your listening skills? (tick all the answers that you agree with or add your own): a) listen to podcasts, b) listen to authentic cassette recordings in class, c) listen to peers in English classes, d) talk to the native speakers of English, e) watch English films on TV, f) other (specify).

Appendix 2.
Learners' reflections on listening experience.

Here are the entries copied from the weblogs of participants. The names of learners are withdrawn in order to preserve the anonymity.

Student 1. To watch films or to listen to the radio outside class gave me a lot of profit, so listening activities in class became easier and I think, I did it quite well. Of course, then listening task is more difficult, to listen is more complicated, so I think I need more difficult listening tasks. Also, it is quite complicated to understand, then people speak with accent or not so clearly.

Student 2. Listening activity is the most difficult for me. I think that my listening skills are not good and I should improve it. I think that my performance in listening activities in the class is quite bad, because I can not hear the main facts. However, I have really enjoyed listening to podcasts.

Student 3. My performance in listening tasks in class hasn't changed a lot this term. It was quite good before too. Listening to podcasts was a quite difficult task. I had to listen to podcast for several times in order to understand it all. I think that my skills on this task became better. In order to improve my listening skills I've tried to listen to BBC radio programs and also to watch English movies without reading subtitles.

Student 4. Listening in class was not very difficult, almost every time we were listening twice, so it helped to understand as better as possible. I found it not very difficult. Listening to podcasts was more difficult than listening in class. I found much more easier to listen about interesting topic than about politics or something like this. I had a lot of opportunities to listen and use English language outside the class, and again I persuade myself that I can understand quite well, but need to improve my vocabulary and practice more.

Student 5. Listening activities in class were the most difficult task for me. In my view, I could perform better. I need more practice because sometimes I miss some words. Listening to podcasts was a new task. It was difficult for me to do this. I need to listen to podcasts as much as I can if I want to get more practice and perform better.

Student 6. Listening activities in class sometimes is better and sometimes worse. This is unaccountable thing. Of course sometimes the task is harder and sometimes easier but maybe it depends on introversion and the quality of record. Listening to podcasts is interesting task but the stories are sometimes very boring and when you are listening to them you feel asleep, but my performance wasn't bad and I'm happy.
Sometimes I watch English channels and try to understand what they are talking about. If the words aren’t specific I can understand. Although this term I had a lot of practice in speaking and listening because I went to the USA embassy and I needed to have a conversation with USA embassy employee. Everything was good and I understood everything what they have said to me.

Student 7. I think I am quite good at listening during listening activities in our classes; however I am still making comprehension mistakes, even though the number of them has decreased clearly in comparison to the previous term. I was pleasantly astonished when I have found that I can easily understand a native English podcasts and to listen to news from BBC or CNN.

Student 8. The most intensive are listening activities in class. It was always one of the most difficult tasks to me, but I’m happy now. It’s a rare success to make an exercise without mistakes, but I feel like I’m a step forward. I’ve listened to podcast just once, so it’s difficult to evaluate my skills objectively. And I should admit I have never practiced listening outside the class. Unless we introduce in this listening practice films or other videos watching in English and listening to English music.

Student 9. I think my level of listening activities in classes is satisfactory. Performance in listening tasks vary and sometimes the results are good, although sometimes the results are quite poor. In this aspect I think I need more practice in listening, especially at advanced level and doing some comprehension tasks. As for homework task, which was listening to podcasts, I personally think I performed well and comprehension was not a difficult task for me. Still I have some problems in understanding and trying to interpret new words, phrases.

Student 10. Listening activities in class are very difficult for me because I cannot understand what is said in records. I need simple records. In addition to this, listening to podcasts is difficult for me, too, perhaps I need to listen more in order to improve listening skills.

SPECIALYBĖS ANGLŲ KALBA: INTERNETINIŲ ĮRAŠŲ NAUDOJIMAS KLAUSYMO ĮGŪDŽIAMS TOBULINTI

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studentai susiduria klausydamiesi įvairių autentiškų specialybės anglų kalbos įrašų, ir išanalizuoti studentų sampratą apie įvairius klausymo įgūdžių tobulinimo metodus. Tam tikslui pastelkta studentų internetinio klausymos rezultatų savianalizė ir studentų požiūris į jų internetinio klausymos bei darbo auditorijoje patirtį.


Šio straipsnio autorės nustatė, kad galimybė gerinti specialybės kalbos supratimą, naudojant interneto portaluose pateiktą medžiagą, yra inovatyvinė. Ši metodika leidžia studentams atlikti užduotis jieems priimtinu tempu, patogiu laiku ir nejaučiant jokios baimės dėl galimų klaidų. Internetinių įrašų klausymo įgūdžių tobulinimas, ugdant studentų sugebėjimą dirbti individualiai, skatina kalbos mokymąsi. Švęs klausymo įgūdžių patirties pateikimas individualiuose tinklalapiuose leidžia studentams kruopščiai išanalizuoti savo rezultatus.

Šiame tyrimo rezultatai padaryti keletą įvadų. Pirma, individualus internetinis klausymas kiekvienam studentui jam priimtinu tempu ir patogiu laiku skatina ir motyvuoja studentus tobulinti klausymo įgūdžius, nejaučiant jokios baimės dėl galimų klaidų. Antra, klausymo įgūdžių tobulinimas, ugdant studentų sugebėjimą dirbti individualiai, skatina kalbos mokymąsi. Trečia, mokymasis be draugų ar dėstytojų kontrolių leidžia studentus mokytis savarankiškai, jie gali pasirinkti individualios užduotis kiekvienam studentui. Ketvirta, internetinio klausymo derinimas su klausymu auditorijoje mokant (-is) anglų kalbos yra naudingas visiems studentams. Penkta, studentai savarankiškai susidomėję klausymo įgūdžiais gali atliekti įvairias praktines užduotis, kurias gali pasirinkti individualiai. Tai suteikia studentams savarankiškai susitarti su savo rezultatais ir darbo vertinimą analizė individualiuose tinklalapiuose skatina studentus tobulinti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: specialybės kalba, savianalizė, klausymo įgūdžiai, individualus internetinio įrašų klausymas.

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