Students’ perceptions of difficulties in speaking on professional issues are in the focus of the present article. It is generally assumed that the skill of speaking a foreign language is very difficult to master, while speaking on professional topics involves such difficulties as the usage of specific vocabulary and ability to deal with listeners’ oncoming arguments.

The aims of the current research are to investigate learners’ attitudes to the level of difficulty in speaking activities on a subject matter at university and apply an innovative approach to improving their speaking skills. The methodology applied was focused on guided individual learning (GIL), with gradually increasing amount of spontaneity in public talks on the subject matter, starting with prepared short talks on an ESP issue leading to group discussions; moving on to Power Point presentations, involving spontaneous deviations from the subject and followed by question time; further, adding some complex subject matter, such as a discussion on a problematic professional subject suggested by learning materials; and, eventually, speaking impromptu on an issue, with a high level of control of one’s speaking skills.

The research method of the learners’ attitudes employed the survey on learner attitudes to four different speaking activities in the classroom, which included short talks, Power Point Presentations, discussions and speaking impromptu. The questionnaire was administered to students of two different specializations by the end of the semester. The respondents were students who studied Psychology and Social Work at the Faculty of Social Policy, at Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, Lithuania. The respondents 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 indicated that perceptions of difficulties to developing speaking skills depended, on the one hand, on students’ chosen specialization: students of Psychology were more positive about speaking activities than students of Social Work. The differences of opinions might be caused by the level of proficiency in General English which influences the performance in professional language. On the other hand, the responses depended on the type of assignments: students felt more confident with themselves if they invested more individual learning time for their assignments. By the end of the semester, students self-assessed their achievements in improving speaking skills by contributing written reflections to individual weblogs. The analysis of contributions suggests the usefulness of the approach to perfecting professional speaking skills.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, guided individual learning, attitudes to speaking activities.
Introduction

Each generation of students is taught the important skills 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 an open secret that English proficiency of school-leavers has been going downhill for the last ten years. This has led to the build-up of students’ difficulties in applying general language skills to mastering their 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 encounter in English classes at university. Current classroom speaking activities focus on the issues of communication and include discussions, spontaneous speaking, giving short talks and delivering Power Point Presentations. Presented in a sequence of individual learning activities with high importance on the progress of self-control in speaking, the novel method, in essence, presents a paradigm of speaking activities in which the teacher’s role decreases and the student’s individual learning accelerates towards highly controlled performance no matter what type of speaking is implied: a structured speech or a spontaneous talk on the subject matter.

The aims of the research are to: 1) investigate learners’ attitudes to the level of difficulty in speaking activities, 2) apply a novel approach to improving speaking skills, 3) analyze students’ self-assessments of learning.

The research methods used in this study are: 1) an application of a four step approach to improve speaking skills; 2) a questionnaire to examine students’ opinions, 3) learners’ self-reported reflections that are available in their weblogs.

The respondents in this research are university students of two different specializations, Psychology and Social Work, who studied English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Research background

The ability to speak fluently presupposes not only knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language “on the spot” (Harmer 2001). The necessary elements for spoken production are: 1) connected speech characterized by assimilation, elision, linking, and contractions; 2) expressive devices such as changing the pitch and stress of sentences, varying volume and speed of a speech, showing emotions and attitudes; 3) lexis and grammar, which are important in spontaneous speech to show surprise, approval or disagreement; 4) negotiation language which is used for clarification or reformulation of statements (Harmer 2001: 269). Success in spoken production depends on rapid mental and social processing skills. Language processing involves the retrieval of words and phrases from memory. Apart from it, speaking involves interaction with other speakers and listeners, 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; it is culture-specific and may not be appreciated by the members of non-native English speakers.

It is well known that foreign language learners seek fluency in the language they are perfecting. The term “fluency” has two rather different meanings in ELT (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 normal life. It is clear that students must be taught both aspects of fluency in classroom activities. However it is time-consuming work and its outcomes may not be immediately obvious.

Undoubtedly, good speaking is not effortless, although it should always appear effective.
To be an effective speaker is a skill which can be learnt by practicing (Stuart 1989): before presenting short talks or presentations students should plan and prepare their talks, practice and rehearse, learn to cope with nerves, control their body language, volume of their voice, pitch and speed of the speech.

According to A. Paran (2012: 451), the most obvious changes in teaching spoken English resulted from focusing on naturalistic language data: “teachers now realize how long it takes for learners not just to incorporate elements of socio-pragmatic competence into their linguistic behavior, but even to just develop some awareness of these phenomena”. R. Hughes (2010) emphasizes the fact that speaking is a high-risk activity which can never be retracted or erased, making some learners worry about losing face.

J. Hunter (2012) explores a methodology under the term “Small Talk”, which aims at encouraging communicative language use and developing accuracy and fluency. This activity involves groups of students in conversation on the chosen topic without teacher’s intervention, who gives feedback at the end of the session. The 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.

The relationship between spoken language research and ELT practice over the last 20 years was examined by I. Timmis (2012). Sociocultural relevance of spoken language findings showed that the majority of students prefer native-speaker norms on a general level. It is claimed that spoken language research has filtered to course books. However, more classroom research is needed in order to determine how explicit the treatment of spoken language should be.

The useful instruction on perspectives, content, structure and delivery of short talks is described by C. Van Loan (1990). The idea of teaching spontaneous speaking through short talks was applied and specified in an online article (Kavaliauskienė 2004). It proved to be beneficial as the first step to teaching presentations. Later, more findings referring to good practice in teaching presentations were published (Kavaliauskienė 2006).

In the 21 century, the problems of 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 mastering speaking fluency and whether the specialization makes any difference in this respect. Current classroom speaking activities focus on the communication issues and include discussions, spontaneous speaking, i.e. without preparation, delivering Power Point Presentations and short talks.

**Research methodology**

We have employed an innovative approach for improving speaking skills, which includes the following four stages:

- **Stage 1.** Individual short talks on professional topics followed by class discussions.
- **Stage 2.** Individual Power Point Presentations on a professional topic followed by class discussions.
- **Stage 3.** Class discussions on a covered topic from the course book with emphasis on pros and cons of the issue.
- **Stage 4.** Spontaneous speaking on a current professional issue, either by individual students or by the representative of a small group.

The methodology applied was focused on guided individual learning (Grow 1991; Kreber *et al.* 2005; Schunk 2005; Reinders, Balcikanli 2011) with gradually increasing amount of spontaneity in public talks on the subject matter, starting with prepared short talks on an ESP issue leading to group discussions; moving on to Power Point presentations, involving
spontaneous deviations from the subject, and followed by question time; further, adding some complex subject matter, such as a discussion on a problematic professional subject suggested by learning materials; and, eventually, speaking impromptu on an issue with a high level of control of one's speaking skills. Presented in a sequence of individual learning activities with high importance on the progress of self-control in speaking, the novel method, in essence, presents a paradigm of speaking activities in which the teacher’s role decreases and the student’s individual learning accelerates towards highly controlled performance no matter what type of speaking is implied: a structured speech or a spontaneous talk on the subject matter.

This technique was successfully tested in the ESP courses that lasted for 3, later for 2 semesters. Recently, when the span of the ESP course has been reduced to one semester, and the proficiency of school-leavers has deteriorated, the implementation of the 3rd and 4th stages has become problematic, basically because students are reluctant to speak impromptu.

The findings presented below were obtained from two sources: 1) a questionnaire survey completed by two samples of respondents of two different specializations, psychology (PS) and social work (SW), and 2) students’ self-assessment of improving English speaking skills. The survey 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 means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) included the following computations: frequencies of responses, Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients of reliability, the Means and Standard Deviations, and Pearson’s correlation coefficients aimed to find out if there are any correlations between the studied samples. Self-assessment has been used as a way of encouraging participants to reflect on their learning experience, achievements or failures. Students’ weblogs contain their reflections: self-assessment of performance in various activities such as making Power Point Presentations, participating in discussions on professional issues, giving short talks, speaking spontaneously and communicating ideas clearly and fluently.

The topics for PPPs covered the contents of the ESP course book (Feldman 2010) and included the following issues: sensations and perception, states of consciousness, hypnosis and meditation, memory, cognition and language, intelligence, motivation, development, personality, stress and coping, psychological disorders and social psychology. Each student could choose one 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 their opinions and argue the points. Some PPPs can be viewed in the weblog http://gkaval.home.mruni.eu in the sections “Studentų prezentacijos” in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012.

Suggested themes for short talks covered different areas of the subject, i.e. they were of professional interest to students, but not described in the course book. After having spoken on chosen topic in the class, students described the key points of their short talks in weblogs. The themes that students have chosen included such areas as “anxiety”, “luck”, “happiness”, “handwriting”, “games”, “self-esteem”, “laughter”, etc. The key contents of short talks may be viewed in the weblog http://gkaval.home.mruni.eu in the sections “Studentų rašto darbai”.

Respondents

The participants in this project were full-time 1st year students, who studied English for Social Work (3 groups, 42 students) and English for Psychology (3 groups, 45 students) at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University. 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 majority of learners were in their early twenties. The level of proficiency of Social Work students was B2 and it was C1 for Psychology students, in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Results and discussion

This section reports the students’ responses and discusses the main points that emerged. The respondents were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty they had with the spoken language 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 (easy and very 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 Figure 1 and of negative responses – in Figure 2. Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient computed for positive responses shown in Figure 1 is equal to .913, and for negative responses (in Fig. 2) it is slightly smaller, just equal to .879. These values suggest that the survey items are reliable.

According to Figure 1, 67% and 69% of Psychology (PS) students find participation in discussions and short talks easy or very easy, whereas 35% and 31% of Psychology (PS) students find participation in impromptu speaking difficult or very difficult.
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*Attitudes to improving speaking skills ...*

but only 38% think so about preparing and delivering Power Point Presentations (PPPs). As it is obvious from Figure 2, students of Social Work (SW) overwhelmingly agree that all these activities are difficult or very difficult – 65% dislike discussions, 80% – speaking spontaneously and presenting PPPs, and 85% – giving short talks. The key reason for the respondents of this sample seems to be their weak proficiency in general English, which affects the performance in professional language skills.

As a matter of interest, spontaneous speaking is equally difficult to students of both specializations, 77% versus 80%. Moreover, making PPPs, which are ready-made speeches, is problematic, too: 62% of PS students and 80% of SW students report them difficult or very difficult.

Table 1 displays the Means and Standard Deviations which have been computed for PS and SW samples. It can be seen that the mean values vary from the lowest value of 2.50 obtained for impromptu speaking in PS sample and for short talks in SW sample to the highest value of 3.55 for short talks in PS sample. The range of Standard Deviations is quite narrow – from .97 to 1.20. These results indicate that the Means below 3.00 imply negative attitudes (difficult and very difficult) while the point 3 on a Likert's scale means “not sure”, and the Means above 3.00 imply positive attitudes (easy and very easy). However, due to the value of Standard Deviations around +1.1 (–1.1), the Means may be shifted towards higher (or lower) values. In other words, the data in Table 1 are consistent with the results in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

For Psychology sample, Spearman's correlations coefficients between students’ grades in short talks and PPPs have been computed to find out if there is a linear relationship between the variables. The findings revealed that the data are consistent at the Significance level of 0.01 (2-tailed), i.e. the probability is equal to 99%, and Spearman's correlation coefficients are equal to 1.00. In other words, speaking practice in short talks improved speaking skills in PPPs. However, for Social Work sample correlation is rather weak as both short talks and PPPs present serious difficulties in speaking, probably due to the insufficient proficiency in General English.

**Students’ reflections**

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.

![Image](http://gretamirkyte.blogspot.com)

Making PPP is a very interesting task, because here you could use your creativity skills. I made two presentations per three months. The first was too long, with much information, and music effects. So I made another one, shorter and simpler. I think that I will not have any problems with presentations in the future, because now I know how to make it in the right way.

My performance on short talks was good, I got good marks and I am very happy about that. It improved my rhetoric skills. And a good point is that I had the opportunity to choose every
topic which I want to talk. The preparation was more interesting and I always wanted to go deeper into the theme.

Speaking impromptu in class was the most difficult task for me, because it is hard to express my ideas in English, to remember definitions which you want to use and to remember the right structure of sentences. I must practice more, if I want to improve my speaking skill.

Making PPP was quite a difficult task. Despite the fact that it was one PPP, it took a lot of time. However, my efforts were worth the trouble.

Short talks were really interesting tasks for me. I chose relevant themes of short talks for me. I had never believed that certain type of information can be so engrossing and valuable in my personal life. It was very useful to develop my language skills. My performance in these tasks was very good.

Speaking impromptu in class isn’t very difficult task, because I can easily remember the basic information and I’m not shy to say what I think about it. My weak point is that sometimes it is hard to express myself in English, but I really like to communicate with people and take a part in discussions. So I always try to talk and do my best even if I make grammar mistakes, but I think that speaking practice helped me to improve my speaking skills.

Making PPP is an interesting task. Despite some mistakes, I self-assess myself well, and I think that others found some useful information and enjoyed making PPPs and listening to others. My performance on short talks task was good and I am really happy about it. It was a very good idea to give not just one topic for all students but give several topics so that students can choose the topic that is most interesting for them to talk about.

Speaking impromptu probably was the most difficult task for me. Sometimes it was difficult to express myself and recollect the material I had read before, also I found it difficult to remember some definitions. I think speaking impromptu is the task in which I still have to improve my skills a lot.

It was quite hard to make a PPP but also extremely interesting and exciting. Maybe because I love creative tasks and this one was really enjoyable for me. I liked that I was able to arrange all the information by myself and present it as I wished.

Short talks were sometimes easy and sometimes not. It depended on the topic I was talking about. For example, “Psychology of communication” was my favorite short talk and when you like something often you do not see any problems or difficulties doing it.

Speaking impromptu in class was not difficult for me, because I like expressing my opinion and, of course, listening to my classmates’ views.

PPP task was the most interesting in a whole course. I felt pleasure doing it, i.e. searching for information, reading, writing and all that work was really inspiring. There were a few mistakes, but I think I can evaluate myself very well, because it gave me excellent experience. Short talks helped me to improve my grade after my vocabulary tests. There were no difficulties to prepare at home a chosen theme and I have done it quite well, I am satisfied with my performance. It was interesting to look for information over interesting themes. Speaking impromptu was simple for me. I had no difficulties in speaking English, I think I can do it easily. Certainly, it is not always so easy to find words which express the ideas which I want to say it requires experience which I also get in my ESP course.

Short talks were probably the easiest activities for me. I was enjoying it, because I improved my English skills such as vocabulary and pronunciation. Also I learned new information about various things such as psychology of laughter or psychology of luck.

PPP preparation required a lot of time, because I had to know everything about this
theme which I have chosen. But despite this fact, I can say that these themes were interesting, and useful, because I thought that my speaking skills were not so good and also sometimes I didn’t have enough time to think what I want to say. Besides, I can’t overcome fear speaking in front of the audience.

Summing up presented passages of students’ reflections it may be concluded that attitudes to speaking are more positive than negative: students enjoy speaking about the issues of their future profession and sharing opinions.

Conclusions

The present study is rather limited in some respects. First, it describes the perceptions of starting students, undergraduates, about improving spoken English for their specific future profession. Second, the number of respondents is comparatively small: 45 students in PS sample and 42 students in SW sample. In spite of these limitations, some conclusions can be made.

The responses to the survey indicate that the students consider learning spoken English useful as it is demonstrated by an average score from 2.50 to 3.00 for the PS sample and from 2.50 to 2.80 for the SW sample on a 1 to 5 Likert’s scale.

For students of Psychology the least difficult are short talks and participation in discussions, while for students of Social Work the most difficult are short talks, PPPs and spontaneous speaking.

The desire for “security” in public speaking could be traced in the responses, since those tasks which allowed individual learning and preparation were qualified as “easier” than those which required immediate response.

The differences might be caused by the level of proficiency in General English which influences the performance in professional language.

Students confirm that the guided individual learning approach to improving spoken language has been beneficial.

References


**Appendix**

Relevant part of the survey:
- 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.

**STUDENTAI APIE ŠNEKAMOSIOS SPECIALYBĖS KALBOS TOBULINIMĄ: SAVARANKIŠKOS UŽDUOTYS IR JŲ VERTINIMAS**

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psychologijos ir socialinio darbo specialybių bakalaurai, vertino šias veiklas savo tnklaščiuose (jie nurodyti tekste), o straipsnio autorės atliko tų vertinimų analizę, pateikdamos studentams anketą pagal Likerto skalę (nuo „labai sunku“ iki „labai lengva“), ir patikrino duomenų patikimumą bei koreliacijas su SPSS programa. Paaškėjo, jog studentų pasitenkinimas savo darbu priklauso nuo pagrindinių bendrosios anglų kalbos žinių – studentams, studijuojantiems psichologiją, užduotys pasirodė lengvesnės nei socialinį darbą studijuojantiems studentams. Be to, paaškėjo, jog studentų pasitenkinimas atliktomis užduotimis priklauso nuo jų saugumo požiūrio rengiantis kalbėjimo užduočiai – kuo didesnės galimybės pasirengti užduočiai, tuo mieliau studentai kalba viešai, ir atvirkščiai, spontaniško kalbėjimo užduotys buvo įvertintos kaip pačios sunkiausios.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: anglų specialybės kalba, kontroliuojamas individualus mokymas, požiūriai į kalbėjimo pratybas.