

ENHANCING ‘SOFT SKILLS’ IN THE ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COURSE WHEN RECORDING A VIDEO

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Abstract: It is known that the aim of any English for Specific Purposes course is to prepare students to function effectively in their professional environment, which makes the development of ‘soft skills’ inalienable. Recent findings of the leading researchers have highlighted interpersonal and higher-order cognitive skills among the crucial ones for a successful career.

This study was undertaken at Zaporizhzhia National Technical University (Ukraine) within the Socializing in Academic and Professional Environments Module of the English for Specific Purposes course. With the focus on enhancing their ‘soft skills’, the 1st-year students of technical specialisms were given the tasks to record a video presentation of the university they were studying at and of their native city. The criteria for peer feedback were agreed on, and the ways of giving it were analyzed with the students in terms of their being constructive, positive, and having the ultimate aim to inspire and lead to further progress.

The data on the efficiency of the task was collected via students’ feedback and teacher’s observation. Challenges of such a work were outlined for both the students and the teacher (e.g. students’ unwillingness to collaborate, their preference to individual mode of performing the task, the necessity for the teacher to moderate the feedback process). The study revealed that the practice of peer feedback enabled students to see the benefits of their collaboration (e.g. self-expression, peer support, interpersonal connections, and exchange of experience) and find appropriate solutions to the issues that arose. This way peer feedback enables to make the English for Specific Purposes, as well as any other, classroom a safe place for collaborative learning with each participant contributing to the shared pool of knowledge and expertise.

Introduction

Education and skills have been acknowledged to be ‘a core strategic asset for growth’ of the European Union (Rethinking education 2012, 2). Skills, such as critical thinking, team work, problem solving and creativity, digital or language skills are acknowledged ‘essential prerequisites for personal and professional fulfilment’ (Decision 2018).

The analysis carried out in Ukraine (Carpio, Kupets, Muller and Olefir 2017, xviii) reveals a finding that is in line with the evidence from around the world – the workers need a mix of advanced cognitive, socioemotional, and technical skills. Even though the Ukrainians are admitted to have high levels of basic cognitive skills, it is stated that the higher education and the training system does not produce enough skills relevant for today’s labour market.

However, it should be noted that the system of higher education in Ukraine has been undergoing radical transformations with the aim of better meeting the requirements of the stakeholders and making university graduates more competitive in the global setting where not only technical excellence is required, but also the abilities to solve problems, to communicate with international partners, to manage their time efficiently, and contribute to the team work are to be demonstrated.

Since a Language for Specific Purposes course puts the needs of the students into the foreground, integrating soft skills into it is of paramount significance to ensure better career prospects for our students.

A substantial positive impact on teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at Ukrainian universities has been made by the English for Universities Project that was run by the British Council Ukraine in 2015-2018 (see the impact study by S. Borg (Borg 2018)). Initially, the baseline study emphasized “a pressing

need for a more modern and flexible syllabus for English at university level, taking into account a focus on English as a means of international communication, the academic and professional needs of undergraduate and graduate students and ... standards in the CEF.“ (Bolitho and West 2017, 82). Hence, teaching soft skills has become one of priorities, but it is yet to be further instilled into the syllabus.

The necessity and possibilities for implementing soft skills training methods as an integral part of a Language for Specific Purposes course has been highlighted by various scholars both abroad and in Ukraine (Urs and Catelly 2010; Tevdovska 2015; Lavrysh 2016; Kic-Drgas 2018; Hradilová 2018). However, the research on fostering soft skills in ESP classes is still scarce. The variety of approaches to soft skills and their classification complicates the discussion of the relevant teaching methods. Conducting soft skill-oriented tasks for a Language for Specific Purposes class is an issue as appropriate methodology and instruments have not been worked out yet (Kic-Drgas 2018). Thus, further development of the strategies and tools for enhancing soft skills in Language for Specific Purposes classes, ESP in particular, is to be carried out.

Literature review

Soft skills have been prioritized in numerous researches, but there is still a multitude of terms to name them: core skills, skills for employability / employability skills (see Brewer 2013, 41-45), transferable skills for life-long learning (Davies 2009, 564), etc.

When speaking about soft skills, we rely on the understanding of their nature as of ‘qualities that do not depend on the acquired knowledge and that are harder to quantify due to being related to one’s emotional intelligence and personality traits’ (Calanca et al. 2019, 1).

There is a wide range of soft skills such as adaptability, open-mindedness, problem solving, decision making, communication skills, self-learning and knowledge discovery, empathy and team work, motivation, attitude and a spirit of enquiry, knowledge of interacting with transnational cultures, business etiquette, expected and acceptable behaviour in new geographies (Urs and Catelly 2010, 42), leadership, management, negotiation (EP 2017), etc.

As for the skills that employers in Ukraine value most, they are consistent across sectors and occupations (Carpio et al. 2017, 5). The top five skills are job-specific technical skills, professional behaviour, problem solving, ability to work independently, and teamwork.

In the professional sphere of Information Technology, Internet, and Telecommunications in Ukraine (Carpio et al. 2017, 133), in addition to education, experience, computer skills, and foreign language skills, the job requirements include such cognitive skills as communication (including presentation), learning, time management, and thinking skills; and the following socioemotional skills: responsibility, teamwork, self-management, goal orientation, attention to detail, and stress management.

Interestingly, the skill of giving constructive feedback, as well as team building and leadership, is listed (Calanca et al. 2019, 10) among the skills with the highest salary award in the UK, which proves the value attributed to this skill by the employers.

It should be emphasized that soft skills are interconnected. For example, as Smith K. (Smith 1995) points out, to develop teamwork skills, students must have and use the leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills. In its turn, the effect of peer feedback interventions on learning is considered (Sridharan and Boud 2019, 894) ‘a crucial determinant of the success or failure of collaborative group work’.

In this study we focus on teamwork as one of the top skills listed by the employers not only in Ukraine, but worldwide. This skill encompasses peer feedback, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, etc. Within the scope of this paper, we will consider mainly peer feedback and self-reflection.

Feedback literacy, ‘the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies’, is one of the core capabilities for the workplace and lifelong learning. Four inter-related features constitute a framework underpinning students’ feedback literacy: appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing affect, and taking action (Carless and Boud 2018, 1315-1323).

If feedback processes have the potential to facilitate students to better self-assess, develop and showcase a range of soft skills, enhance student engagement and autonomy, foster students taking responsibility for their learning, and develop self-assessment aspects of self-regulated learning, peer feedback, “a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards” (see Sridharan and Boud 2019, 896), is not less powerful.

Providing comments to peers is seen as often more beneficial than receiving them because it triggers ‘powerful mental processes’, involving critical thinking, the active interpretation and application of assessment criteria, reflection (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin 2014, 112). Moreover, through these processes peer review supports collaborative interaction (Carless and Boud 2018, 1320). Therefore, providing students with the opportunities to practice peer feedback is essential for the development of other soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, reflection, and collaboration, in the first place.

Among the benefits of peer feedback, D. Nicol (2010, 509) lists the following: teachers realize what students value most in feedback, students see examples of good/bad works and act as assessors, which is important for developing their ability to evaluate their own work.

The positive effects of giving peer feedback for the students also include the development of critical thinking, communication, self-reflection and collaboration skills. At the same time, via peer feedback,

students help a teacher to set new goals and improve the teaching methods, identify if the teaching practice is good.

The inalienable features of efficient feedback are as follows: understandable, selective, specific, timely, contextualized, non-judgmental, balanced, forward-looking, transferable, personal (Nicol 2010, 512-513), goal directed (Shute 2008, 157). The forward-looking, constructive nature of feedback was brought to prominence in the concept of ‘feedforward’ (Goldsmith 2015), which helps people to ‘envision and focus on a positive future’.

For efficient feedback the tone and atmosphere matter a lot. The researchers note that if a trusting atmosphere is established, learners are more likely to develop the confidence and faith to reveal what they do not fully understand (Carless and Boud 2018, 1318). This seems relevant for peer feedback as well. Students will be eager to collaborate and exchange their opinions if they feel safe.

The vitality of being able to give feedback for the future career growth is reflected in the learning objectives for Professional English stated in the Global Scale of English (see GSE 2018, 13-53). The document profiles a learner’s proficiency across four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening and showcases that, in various professional settings, the learner should be able to understand feedback, ask for and give it in both written and spoken form.

The challenges of peer feedback should also be taken into account. The problems of ‘social loafing’ and ‘free-riding’ (See Davies 2009, 567) may arise. The teacher should make the benefits of peer feedback clear: if students realize them, they will eagerly use this tool for their self-development. The teacher should also facilitate the process of peer feedback so that students were not inhibited by their groupmates.

Despite being acknowledged as important, the implications of student feedback literacy for teaching and course design have not been sufficiently considered either abroad (Careless and Boud 2018, 1315), or in Ukraine. It seems reasonable that ‘a productive feedback ethos’ (Careless and Boud 2018, 1322) is to be established in the first-year of study so that students could experience the value of feedback and appreciate its benefits from the onset.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the efficiency of a video recording task for the development and further improvement of soft skills (critical thinking, teamwork / collaboration, leadership, problem-solving, creativity) in the ESP course. The task was designed to provide the opportunity to foster peer feedback which develops students’ soft skills such as critical thinking, their ability to reflect both on their peers’ and their own performance. The requirement to comment and evaluate their peer’s output made it necessary to exercise empathy, tolerance, and creativity when some improvement was to be recommended.

Research

The ESP syllabus at Zaporizhzhia National Technical University contains 4 modules: Socializing in Academic and Professional Environments, Searching for and Processing Information, Presenting Information, Application Procedure. The tasks under consideration were set within the Socializing module so as to enable students to tell their English-speaking colleagues about Zaporizhzhia National Technical University and the city of Zaporizhzhia. Students were to record 2 videos: one was about the university, the other one about the city.

Two groups of first-year students were involved, 16 people overall. One group comprised the students of the Faculty of Radio Engineering and Telecommunications (Group 1); the other one consisted of the students who study at the Faculty of Computer Sciences and IT (Group 2). The average level of English language proficiency was B1 in Group 1 and B2 in Group 2. In each group there were 2 subgroups. The students had the freedom of choice who to work with. The tasks were performed collaboratively over the period of 2 weeks each.

After watching the video of the other group, the students were invited to give their group feedback by filling in an online table. In order to improve the quality of the peer feedback and ensure its being positive, efficient, actionable, some scaffolding was provided beforehand. For that purpose, the extensive list of recommendations on giving feedback (Shute 2008, 177-181) was taken into account. It was emphasized that the feedback was to be constructive; praise and criticism had to be balanced, and suggestions for improvement were to be given.

Before the first video recording task, the students brainstormed the criteria for a good video. They were finalized into a set of criteria in an online form. It also served as a check-list for the students, a guideline that helped them to approach the recording and the peer feedback.

The rubrics for peer feedback were as follows:

1. Content.

- 1.1. Good scenario.
- 1.2. Pithiness (Informative video).
- 1.3. Relevant information, real facts.
- 1.4. Range of vocabulary, phrasal verbs.
- 1.5. Cohesive (no “blank” moments).

2. Presentation.

- 2.1. Dubbing (correct pronunciation, clear / understandable speech). Correct use of English (grammar and vocabulary).

- 2.2. Choice of video shots (eye appeal, quality and variety of background pictures, varied locations, picture of the university).
 - 2.3. Quality of pictures / video shots (clear, stable).
 - 2.4. Quality of sound.
 - 2.5. Background music.
 - 2.6. Video effects (optional).
3. General impression (interesting, tedious, creative, etc.).
 4. Time limit (2-3 min).
 5. Points (max 100).
 6. Other comments (optional).

The table for peer feedback also included the total score for the task completion so that students could further exercise their critical thinking, and analyse the correspondence of the work presented to the established criteria.

On submitting the 2nd video, the students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire whose aim was to enable students to reflect on the lessons learnt and identify some area for their self-development. It contained the following open-ended questions:

- What was the most important thing that you learnt while working on the task?
- How was this work different from the work on the first video about Zaporizhzhia National Technical University?
- What was the most challenging thing for you when working on this task?
- What was your contribution to the task?
- How did you benefit from the work on this task?
- What skills did you develop / improve while performing the task?
- What would you do differently if you were given a task to record another video?

Results

Upon the analysis of the students' answers, the findings were as follows.

When giving peer feedback by filling in a document online, the students were rather moderate in their comments: e.g. "relevant information", "good range of vocabulary", "quality of content is good" [sic]. There were a few cases of criticism: "poor pronunciation and incomprehensible speech throughout the video", "low variety of background pictures and locations", "weak effects", "an interesting idea of the video but the video itself is quite tedious" [sic]. However, there were some attempts to soften the

negativity: “sometimes pronunciation was unclear, but in general it’s ok”, “sound was good in general, sometimes a bit loud” [sic]. Some comments were highly positive: “a variety of phrasal verbs”, “excellent scenario”, “video effects are excellent” [sic].

In order to make the peer feedback actionable, in the class, the students were invited to provide some recommendations to their groupmates so that they could improve the quality of the video in case they had to record another one. This practice turned out to be helpful as the learners felt the necessity of being tolerant and tactful. By using appropriate functional language, the students formulated their recommendations, and it was acknowledged to be useful for avoiding criticism and becoming partners in collaborative learning.

Out of the things learnt while performing the tasks, the majority of the students in Group 1 considered shooting and editing the video to be the most important. They also mentioned working in a team, improving their English skills, and finding out more facts about the sights in Zaporizhzhia.

For Group 2 the aspects related to teamwork turned out to be of more significance. It became evident for them that the team should distribute the work more efficiently to meet the deadline, listen to the leader and involve all team members into the process. The technical skills developed while fulfilling the task were also noted as useful.

When asked to compare their experience of recording two videos, the students in both groups admitted that the second video was easier to produce, and it was of better quality, more professional as they had already got some experience. The possibility to choose the sights was marked by the learners as enhancing their motivation.

As for the challenges, Group 1 pointed out the task being time-consuming, while the students in Group 2 found it difficult to meet the deadline, gather people together and make them work, produce a high-quality shooting as proper equipment was required.

Reflecting on their personal contribution to the task, the students mainly spoke about the technical process, with only one person in each group saying that they gathered the people and organized the group.

According to the students’ questionnaires, the perceived benefits of performing the task were as follows. For Group 1, they were improved English language skills, in particular better expressing their thoughts in English, enhanced skills of working with the video editor, and getting invaluable [sic] teamwork experience. Positive emotions and having good time were on the list, as well. Group 2 benefited by not only improving their English language and video shooting skills, but also by learning more about the sights, and the history of the city. One student expressed the hope that the work could positively influence the mark.

Among the skills developed or improved while performing the task, Group 1 named prevalently language skills (speaking, pronunciation, writing scenarios, making the text laconic and, at the same time, informative), adding teamwork, communication, organizational and video recording skills. On the contrary, Group 2 rated video recording skills the highest, which were followed by improved creativity, coordination with the team and formulating their ideas in English.

When asked what they would do differently if they were given a task to record another video, Group 2 was unanimous that better equipment would be used. Group 1 had a range of suggestions from asking for more time to do the task, including less information into the video, adding more special effects to make the video spectacular, improving their pronunciation to providing more help to their collaborators.

While students were working in the classroom, it was evident that for the completion of the first task there were more people unwilling to work in a team giving preference to the individual mode of performance. Students admitted that they were not used to collaboration. But the situation changed, which was evidently due to the perceived benefits of teamwork, peer support, established interpersonal connections, and exchange of experience. The necessity for the teacher to moderate the feedback process was topical, though some progress in making feedback more constructive with mitigated criticism when discussing the second video was noticed.

Judging by the students' feedback on the video recording tasks, their experience was mainly positive and seen as beneficial in terms of their personal development, self-expression and improved life-related skills.

Conclusion

Enhancing students' soft skills via a video recording task in the English for Specific Purposes course was efficient as the students' feedback and teacher's observation revealed. The students fostered their critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity.

Despite the challenges, such as students' unwillingness to collaborate, their preference to individual mode of performing the task, the necessity for the teacher to moderate the feedback process, the benefits outweighed because the learners exchanged their experience and practiced their skills of self-expression, providing peer support, and establishing interpersonal connections.

As for the lessons learnt, it might be more beneficial for the quality and effect of peer feedback on the video to develop more elaborate, detailed criteria for it. Students should be encouraged to focus on feedback being constructive, goal-oriented, actionable, they should be ready to suggest some solution to a problem. For that purpose, appropriate functional language for giving recommendations should be practised.

Peer feedback on the recorded videos proved to be a powerful tool that ensures the development of the growth mindset, increases students' performance and engagement. This practice empowers students, instills enthusiasm for learning, helps them to improve and progress. Peer feedback enables to make the English for Specific Purposes a safe place for collaborative learning and create a shared pool of knowledge and expertise which all of the learners can contribute to.

Thus, the task of video recording is helpful for the development of students' soft skills and can be suggested for integration into the English for Specific Purposes syllabus. The practice of giving and receiving feedback should be fostered, and feedback literacy should be implemented in the educational process with teacher acting as a facilitator and a coach. In this way students will become the agents of their own change and will be better capable of self-development and life-long learning.

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