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COMPARISON OF TEACHER'S AND STUDENTS' RANKING OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES SUB-TOPICS

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Abstract. *Ranking implemented in the English for Academic Purposes course helps in selecting appropriate sub-topics to be obtained by students. The aim of the present research is to compare teacher's and students' ranking of topics of the English for Academic Purposes course delivered to master of engineering students underpinning the elaboration of implications for the advancement of the English for Academic Purposes course. Research methods applied include the use of theoretical as well as empirical methods. Theoretical methods imply analysis of theoretical sources and theoretical modelling. The empirical study was characterized by its explorative nature. The empirical study was based on a survey carried out with 10 engineering master students of the Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" at Hochschule Wismar, Germany. The data were interpreted and summarized. The summarizing content analysis allows proposing that the students positively evaluated the majority of the sub-topics of the delivered English for Academic Purposes course. The hypothesis was formulated. Implications for the advancement of the English for Academic Purposes course were identified. Directions of future work were proposed. The novelty of the research is revealed by the formulated hypothesis as well as implications.*

Keywords: *comparison, course advancement, course evaluation, English for Academic Purposes course, ranking, students' ranking, sub-topics.*

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Introduction

Students' success in knowledge obtaining within a course is primarily ensured by satisfying the students' needs in knowledge. However, a new knowledge is construed jointly with other learners (Niemi, 2008, p. 12). As, on the one hand, students' needs vary from year to year as well as from students' group to students' group, etc, and, on the other hand, a new knowledge is co-constructed, a course has to be advanced. Consequently, course advancement implies the integration of

- the satisfaction of students' needs in knowledge as well as
- students' participation in knowledge co-creation.

Ranking in higher education is implemented for the analysis of quality and productivity (Gonçalves & Calderón, 2017). Ranking refers to a course evaluation used for the advancement of the evaluated course. Another application of ranking deals with making a choice from a number of options or candidates (Tofallis, 2014, p. 118). By ranking, the act of summing up one's judgment of a performance or person into a single, holistic number or score is meant (Elbow, 1994). Ranking tends to emphasise vertical differences between the options or candidates (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). At the same time, they obscure horizontal differences, differences of purpose and type (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

The aim of the present research is to compare teacher's and students' ranking of topics of the English for Academic Purposes course delivered to engineering master students

underpinning the elaboration of implications for the advancement of the English for Academic Purposes course.

The present research was of the qualitative nature. The applied research methods included the use of theoretical as well as empirical methods. The theoretical methods implied analysis of theoretical sources and theoretical modelling (Ahrens, Zascerinska, & Melnikova, 2019). The exploratory type of the comparative study was implemented within the empirical analysis. The empirical study was based on a survey carried out with 10 engineering master students of the Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" at Hochschule Wismar, Germany. The data were collected via a survey based on the questionnaire. The gathered data were interpreted and summarised.

Conceptual Framework

Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories, practices (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 16) and concepts (Žogla, 2001a, p. 4).

Knowledge is conventionally created through the content transmission from educator to student (Niemi, 2008, p. 12). Consequently, the terms "knowledge" and "content" are used synonymously in this work.

The dimensions of content in education comprise

- content of education (Beļickis, Blūma, Koķe, Markus, Skujiņa, & Šalme, 2000, p. 74),
- content of teaching/learning (Žogla, 2001b, p. 96; Andersone, 2007, p. 127) and
- subject/discipline content (Beļickis et al., 2000, p. 96).

Content is dynamic (Zaščerinska, 2011a, p. 222). The nature of content changes from static transmitted content to knowledge that is ever renewable and often construed jointly with other learners (Niemi, 2008, p. 12). Knowledge creation is socially shared, and emerges from participation in socio-cultural activities (Niemi, 2008, p. 12).

As the contents and processes are intermediating (Niemi, 2008, p. 12), content development is of the cyclic nature (Zaščerinska, 2011b). The content development gradually proceeds from teaching in Phase 1 through peer-learning in Phase 2 to learning in Phase 3 as shown in Figure 1 (Zaščerinska, 2011b). Each phase of the process of teaching and learning content is separated from the previous one, and the following phase is based on the previous one (Zaščerinska, 2011b).

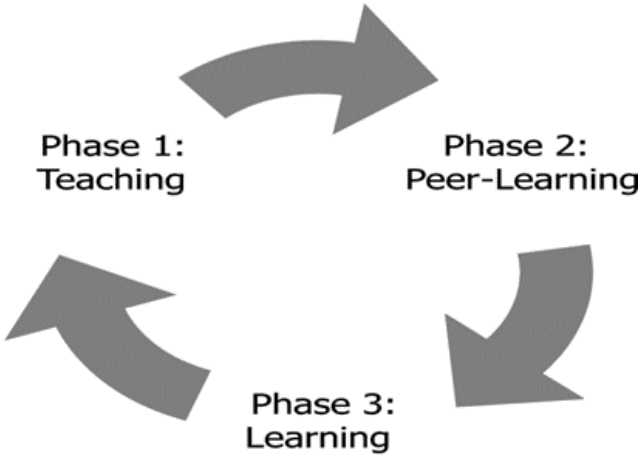

Figure 1 ***Phases of the process of content development*** *(Zaščerinska, 2011b)*

In turn, English for Academic Purposes is defined as content and research integrated studying (Zaščerinska, 2008; Zaščerinska, Aļeksejeva, Zaščerinskis, & Andreeva, 2013). It should be pointed that a course design implies course structuring and planning. A course is structured through the identification of topics. Topics also refer to sequencing the course content. Topics can be divided into sub-topics.

The definition of English for Academic Purposes as content and research integrated studying provides us with two main topics to be covered within an English for Academic Purposes course (Zaščerinska, 2008, 2010; Zaščerinska, Zaščerinskis, Andreeva, & Aļeksejeva, 2013):

• a subject content (engineering, medicine, nature, etc) and
• language research skills.

Analysis of other English for Academic Purposes courses reveals the use of the combination of language skills and academic study skills (English Language Institute, 2020). Language skills include listening comprehension, fluency development, oral intelligibility, reading, grammar, writing, and vocabulary development, while academic study skills include test taking and note taking skills, academic vocabulary usage, critical reading and writing, comprehending academic lectures, research and library skills, formal composition forms and development, including research papers (English Language Institute, 2020). Consequently, the proposed definition of English for Academic Purposes as content and research integrated studying (Zaščerinska, 2008) is in full compliance with other researchers' scientific results on the English for Academic Purposes elements. Further on, the proposed definition of English for Academic Purposes is novel as it includes an innovative element, namely a subject content (engineering, medicine, nature, etc) (Zaščerinska, 2008). This novel definition of English for Academic Purposes allows widening students' learning opportunities for the students' use of English for Academic Purposes in both professional and academic environments.

Two main topics, namely a subject content (engineering, medicine, nature, etc) and language research skills, include sub-topics as demonstrated in Figure 2.

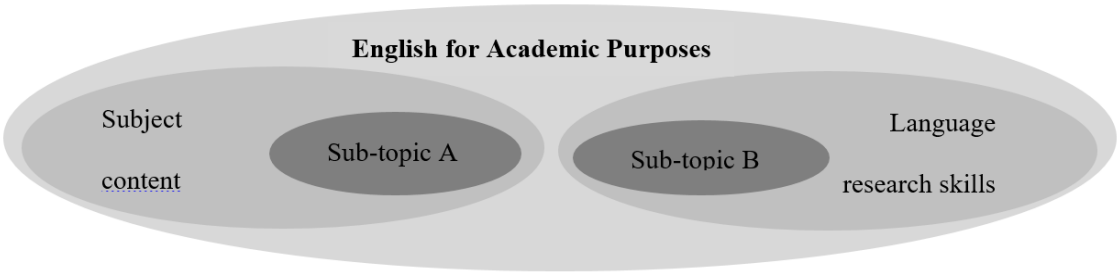

Figure 2 ***The relationship between English for Academic Purposes, its two main topics and sub-topics***

The sub-topics for the English for Academic Purposes course were selected based on the authors' research results reflected in the publications indicated in the list of references and logically introduced by the authors of the present contribution:

• Introduction into presentation preparation (Zaščerinska, 2009, p.160),
• Academic communication (Gruenwald, Ahrens, Zaščerinska, Melnikova, & Andreeva, 2018; Melnikova, Kuprienė, Jurgaitytė, Zascerinska, & Blažulionienė, 2020),
• Passive Voice (Zascerinska, Aleksejeva, Zascerinskis, Gukovica, & Aleksejeva, 2020),
• Presentation skills via making three presentations about
  - Students' native place. It should be pointed that the topic of students' native place is selected for the English for Academic Purposes course due to a couple of reasons: students' presentations skills are conventionally developed, on the

one hand, gradually, and, on the other hand, from simple to complex. Presentation of students' native place is, on the one hand, the first presentation of the proposed three, and, on the hand, it is simple as the place is well known to the presenter. At the same time, both presenting and audience students' language research skills are still trained.

- Biography of an outstanding person (Zaščerinska, Andreeva, & Aleksejeva, 2015). It should be pointed that the sub-topic "biography" is paid attention within the English for Academic Purposes course as, on the one hand, master studies engage students with the initial research activities, and, on the other hand, analysis of researchers' biographies and students' own biography building facilitate the development of students' scientific identity (Zaščerinska, Andreeva, Zaščerinskis, & Aļeksejeva, 2016).
- Students' term/course papers (Zaščerinska, 2010)

- Problem Solving (Zaščerinska & Zaščerinskis, 2012)
- Information and Ideas
- Reading sub-skills
- Writing own biography (Zaščerinska, Andreeva, Zaščerinskis, & Aļeksejeva, 2016; Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2019; Ahrens, Zaščerinska, & Melnikova, 2019; Zascerinska, Aleksejeva, Zascerinskis, Gukovica, & Aleksejeva, 2020).
- Academic writing with the focus on master thesis and scientific publication.

The sub-topics for the English for Academic Purposes course are evaluated through students' ranking aimed at making a choice (or ranking) from a number of options (Tofallis, 2014, p. 118). It should be pointed that ranking differs from rating as rating means that the used categories are often given numerical labels, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (Coe, 2010, p. 45).

Methodology

The methodology of the present empirical study was led by the enabling research question: Which sub-topics of the English for Academic Purposes course are positively evaluated by students?

The purpose of the present empirical study was to compare the teacher's and students' selection of the sub-topics for the English for Academic Purposes course underpinning the elaboration of the implications for the advancement of the English for Academic Purposes course.

The empirical study was carried out in August 2020.

The sample was composed on the principles of sample appropriateness, sufficiency and confidence (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2015a). Further on, Table 1 demonstrates the factors that influenced sample size in educational research within the present study (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2014).

Table 1 ***Factors that influence sample size in educational research***

Factors that influence sample size in educational research	
External Perspective	***Internal Perspective***
Surroundings' and resources' factors: - access to the sample - resources: - time, - personnel and its competences and experiences, - technical support, etc	Researcher factors: - aims of research, - research methodologies, - educational research paradigm, - motivation, - interest, - skills, and - experience

Source: Ahrens, & Zaščerinska, 2014.

The sample was composed of 10 engineering students of the Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" at Hochschule Wismar, Germany, for international students. The Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" for international students is popular at Hochschule Wismar, Germany, as it ensures such economic resources, that influence the regional economics, as labour and entrepreneurship (Ahrens, Grünwald, Bassus, Andreeva, Zaščerinska, & Melnikova, 2018). It should be noted that the Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" at Hochschule Wismar involves the students from India only. However, the Master programme "Information and Electrical Engineering" is open for all the interested international students. All the students who participated in the empirical study have obtained a Bachelor Degree in electrical engineering in different universities of different regions of India.

The interpretive research paradigm was used in the study. The interpretive paradigm is characterized by the researcher's practical interest in the research question (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003). The interpretive paradigm is featured by the researcher's interest in a phenomenon. The interpretive paradigm is aimed at analysing the social construction of the meaningful reality. Meanings emerge from the interpretation. The researcher is the interpreter (Ahrens, Purvinis, Zaščerinska, Miceviciene, & Tautkus, 2018).

The comparative study as a qualitative research design was employed (Flick, 2004). Comparative studies are well accepted in the research community for analysis of quality (Hariharan, Zaščerinska, Andreeva, Zaščerinskis, & Aļeksejeva, 2015).

The comparative approach or, in other words, comparative method sharpens the powers of description and plays a central role in concept-formation by bringing into focus suggestive similarities and contrasts among cases (Colliers, 1993, p. 105). Routinely used in testing hypotheses, it can also contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypotheses and to theory-building (Colliers, 1993, p. 105).

The exploratory type of the comparative study was applied (Phillips, 2006). The exploratory type of the comparative study aims to generate new hypotheses and questions (Phillips, 2006) which can be tested for generality in following empirical studies (Mayring, 2007). The exploratory methodology proceeds from exploration in Phase 1 through analysis in Phase 2 to hypothesis development in Phase 3 as illustrated in Figure 3 (Zaščerinska et al, 2016).

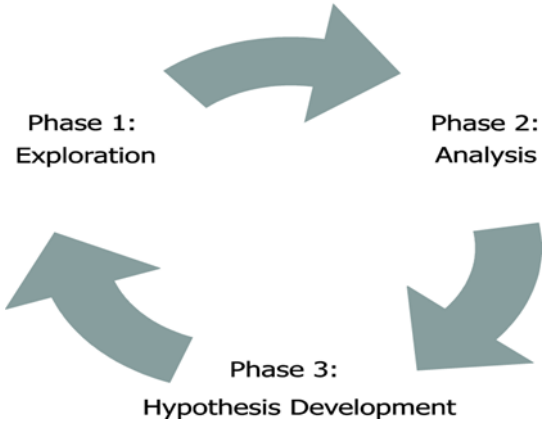

Figure 3 ***Phases of the methodolody of the exploratory research***
(Zaščerinska, Andreeva, Zaščerinskis, & Aļeksejeva, 2016)

Phase 1 Exploration is aimed at data collection, Phase 2 Analysis focuses on data processing, analysis and data interpretation, and Phase 3 Hypothesis Development is oriented to the analysis of results of the empirical study and elaboration of conclusions and hypotheses for further research (Hariharan, Zaščerinska, & Swamydhas, 2013; Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2015b).

The data were collected through a survey. The survey was based on the questionnaire that included one question: Could you mark three sub-topics which are the most important for you from the following list? The list included such sub-topics:

- Introduction into presentation preparation
- Academic communication
- Passive Voice
- Making three presentations about
- Problem
- Information and Ideas
- Reading sub-skills
- Writing own biography
- Academic writing?

The data were collected by asking respondents to rank only three alternatives (Coe, 2010, p. 45). The options available were placed in order without any attempt to describe how much one differs from another or whether any of the alternatives are, for example, good or acceptable (Coe, 2010, p. 45).

The collected data were processed via the summarizing content analysis. The summarizing content analysis seeks to reduce the material in such a way that the essential contents are preserved, but a manageable short text is produced (Mayring, 2004, p. 269).

Research Results

Table 2 presents the results of the empirical study.

The results of the comparative analysis of the teacher's and students' ranking demonstrate that mostly the choice of sub-topics by both the teacher and students is similar.

The summarising content analysis reveals that the students positively evaluated the majority of the sub-topics of the English for Academic Purposes course selected by the teacher. This finding indicates that the English for Academic Purposes course is qualitative

Table 2 ***Results of the students' ranking of the sub-topics in the English for Academic Purposes course***

Sub-topic	Students' ranking
Introduction into presentation preparation	XXXXXX
Academic communication	X
Passive Voice	-
Making three presentations	XXXXXX
Problem solving	XX
Information and Ideas	XXXX
Reading sub-skills	X
Writing own biography	XXX
Academic writing	XXXXXXX

Source: by the authors

However, the sub-topic "Passive Voice" has not received the students' positive evaluation. This could be explained that the students had only three choices for pointing the most important sub-topics. Another explanation could be that despite the students had some mistakes in writing their own sentences with the use of Passive Voice, the students showed the attitude to the use of Passive Voice as not something for learning as well as already natively existing in their spoken and written language. The researchers' interpretation of this finding reveals that,

• on the one hand, this attitude to the use of Passive Voice differs depending on a student experience, and,

• on the other hand, more teaching efforts should be put into explaining the importance of Passive Voice in academic communication and writing.

Conclusions

The theoretical findings allow concluding about the inter-connections between a course quality and similarities in the teacher and students' selection of sub-topics of the English for Academic Purposes course.

The empirical results show the students positively evaluated the majority of the sub-topics of the English for Academic Purposes course proposed by the teacher. The top three sub-topics ranked by the students refer to

- Introduction into presentation preparation,
- Presentation skills via making three presentations, and
- Academic writing.

The empirical results validate the research results that an English for Academic Purposes course should include

- students' making presentations as well as their public presentation, and
- students' writing own biography.

As the results of the comparative analysis of the teacher's and students' ranking demonstrate that mostly the choice of sub-topics by both the teacher and students is similar, the conclusion is drawn that the English for Academic Purposes course is qualitative.

The following hypothesis has been formulated: an English for Academic Purposes course is qualitative if

- ranking of the sub-topics by both the teacher and students is similar,
- students positively evaluate the sub-topics of the English for Academic Purposes course
- if a sub-topic is
  - clearly explained,
  - obviously illustrated by the teacher to the students, and
  - permanently revised.

Implications for the advancement of the English for Academic Purposes course imply

- Reconsidering the inclusion of the sub-topics that have not received the positive evaluation from the majority of the students such as "Passive Voice" and "Reading sub-skills" in the English for Academic Purposes course,
- Segmentation of the sub-topic "Academic Writing" as well as
- Allocating more time to the sub-topic "Academic Writing".

The present research has some limitations. A limitation is the use of ranking aimed at making choices. Another limitation is that only one student group at one higher education institution took part in the study. Also, the students were limited by choosing three most important sub-topics.

The future work tends to increase the number of respondents. A comparative analysis of results of different groups of students could be beneficial, too.

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