POSITIVE VIEWS AND CHALLENGES
OF USING PROJECT WORK IN ESP LESSONS

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Abstract. *ESP lessons in higher education develop foreign language competences of university students and prepare them for their professional lives. This paper brings views of university students on using projects in the classroom within their ESP lessons. As a part of the research through methods of focus groups, their analyses, the results and interpretations uncover positive and negative sides of using projects in ESP classroom from students' points of views. The results show that project work on the one hand strengthens and builds responsibility for learning and thus leads towards autonomous learning as one of the educational objectives of 21st century schooling. On the other hand, the research shows that the students see themselves as still not ready to take over responsibility for their own learning, they do not feel competent to give presentations, feel anxious to speak a foreign language in public and do not see themselves competent enough to develop their own projects in foreign languages within the topics of their future professions even though their language level reaches B1 level according to CEFR. Interpretation of these findings show insufficient or ineffective use of projects in earlier educational level, not enough attention given to development of productive skills and confidence in a foreign language use.*

Key words: *ESP lessons, project work, higher education, focus groups*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tendencies and views of education in the third millennium show the direction of modernization in education that it should serve as a means of cross-connection of subjects with the problems of the world around us and the lives of students with the aim to develop knowledge mainly through skills and abilities needed for solving life situations, that education together with the development of learners' autonomy, adaptability, creativity and ability to solve problems are priorities (Kovacikova, 2020). Townsend, Clarke, Ainscow already in 1999 (p. 366) summarized the shifts of 3rd millennium thinking that can be projected in educational environment. These authors named the competences for further development, such as possibilities of students to learn from many sources, understand the learning process and gain basic skills in learning, being aware of the content and curriculum of what is learnt, accepting the fact that success is based on how well learners learn as individuals, as well as how well learners work together as a team. They highlight the fact that formal education

is only the basis for lifelong learning and thus schools are only one of a multitude of steps in their educational journey. They also say that formal education provides a range of interactions between learners and the world of business, commerce, and politics. The final point comments on the two qualities of successful people that should be, in their eyes, capability and adaptability (Townsed, Clarke, Ainscow, 1999, p. 366).

When we add the foreign language competence as one of the key competence of today's global world, the vision of a learner is to be autonomous, able to think critically, competent enough to evaluate the source and skilled in both macro- and micro- skills. The necessity of foreign language learning cannot be doubted in the modern world. In Slovakia, the compulsory language learning starts in the third class of elementary schools with the aim to reach B1, B2, or C1 level (CEFR) when leaving secondary schools (https://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/nove_dokumenty/cielove-poziadavky-pre-mat-skusky/ anglicky-jazyk_b1b2.pdf). Thus, in higher education, colleges and universities apart from philological universities, other professional educational institutions usually provide English language lessons within language classes according to their specializations covering academic and professional foreign language competences.

According to Raisanen et al. (2008) the main distinction of ESP is that the English taught caters to the needs of learners in specific disciplines other than the arts and languages. The focus of ESP is on terminology used in specific fields such as law, medicine, technology, finance, etc., highlighting the importance to remember the usage of English language in a specific context. In higher education, especially at non-philological education, ELT is covered by ESP courses. However, relations of professional specializations of students with language preparation must be maintained. Convergence of ESP with other disciplines is discussed by Stojkovic, Chmelikova, and Hurajova (2018) who claim that a balance of content and linguistic issues when designing a particular ESP course are inevitable for ESP teachers.

Coming back to the introduction part of this paper, modern trends in education lead to approaches that aim to gain knowledge more effectively, teaching students how to use this knowledge in real situations and how to become more autonomous in learning beyond the school walls. Project work can be seen as one of the possible ways of applying the above mentioned principles in ESP classes. Tracing back the roots of projects to the beginning of the 20th century (Dewey, Kilpatrick, etc.), they can be viewed as a method, form or strategy of teaching. Ulrich (2016) claims that project-based learning has been one of the most inspiring and sustainable educational approach nowadays. Kovacikova (2020) understands project work as the one following the principles of the learner-centered approach and content (CBLL) and task-based learning (TBL). The basis for project work is a project as a purposefully organized summary of ideas focused on an important centre of practical knowledge. It should be a clearly designed approaching a real activity and thus it emphasizes its utilitarian and practical character. Skalkova (2000) and Kozuchova et al. (1997) shed light on empirical side of project work. These authors are convinced that due to a project practical side, its preparation and presenting may draw natural interest out of students' cognition. They present three main features that should be followed in project work:
- learners' responsibility for self-learning,
- learners' autonomy in gaining knowledge,
- learners' effort put in goal achievement (product=project).

Project work in ESP classes according to Sheppard (1995) is to be effective mainly due to the reasons that it lends itself to:

- authentic language use,
- focus on language at the discourse level rather than the sentence level,
- authentic tasks,
- learner centeredness.

What is more, project work provides purposeful language use as it needs active personal involvement from students. They choose a project, after that they elaborate it and then present it. In case that the project is evaluated fairly and under the criteria that have been known before, the students may actually see also the objective value of their work and necessary feedback. Based on Stoller's suggestion (1997), the following steps are to be taken when incorporating project work in ESP lessons:

1. Students and their teacher agree on a topic for a project and a final outcome (e.g. a report, poster, display, presentation, video, etc.).
2. Students and their teacher agree on a structure of the project, starting with gathering necessary information, evaluating the relevance and trustworthiness of the information. They also organize their time management and in case of a team work, they divide their roles. As these are ESP lessons, the sources of data are mainly and if possible, searched in English language.
3. Teacher informs and prepares the students for the language demands and supports them with activities mainly when they search and gather the information. They learn how to skim, scan, take notes, cite, etc.
4. Students gather the information.
5. Teacher teaches students how to compile, analyze and interpret the data.
6. Students compile, analyze and interpret the data.
7. Teacher provides the students with presentation techniques and helps them succeed with the presentation of their final products.
8. Teacher together with the students sets the criteria of project evaluation that could be done as a whole class activity and then compared with the teacher's evaluation taking into consideration the content, language and performance of the project.
9. Feedback should be given on everybody who has taken part in presentation of the project.

By integrating project work in ESP lessons, students develop language skills while becoming more knowledgeable about the particular topic that goes hand in hand with their professional specialization. These specializations are by far beyond the professional limits of English teachers who teach ESP, therefore project work might be mutually resourceful and inspiring. Hutchinson and Waters (1993) conclude that the relevance of an ESP course to the needs of the learners will make learning better and faster. In addition, project work in ESP courses adds additional value of experiencing the foreign language use in real tasks within a safe environment. Thus, stress from presenting and negative emotions such as anxiety in using foreign language might be gradually overcome. Horwitz (1996) claims that it is human and natural to feel stress or anxiety in certain situations, however, it is inevitable to learn how to cope with the negative feelings. As commented by Kralova (2019), anxious language learners are less effective learners. She presents several foreign language anxiety coping strategies that can be applied also in ESP classes.

2. Research

The research part describes partial results of the design-based research that focused on using project work during ESP lessons at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Slovakia. This university is a unique one in the Slovak Republic as it covers several faculties ranging from Faculty of Technical Faculty, Horticulture and Landscape Engineering Faculty, The Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Sciences, The Faculty of Agrobiology and Food Resources. Students studying at this university may choose from various professional fields of study, such as Agricultural Technologies and Commerce Activities, Operation of Transport and Manipulation Machinery, Garden Architecture, Urban Agriculture, Agro-Food Science, Applied Biology, Food Technology, Food of Animal and Plant Origin, Management of Plant Production, Management of Animal Production, Nutrition, Special Breeding, Hippology, Sustainable Agriculture and Country Development and many others.

These study programs vary a lot in their specializations, however, ESP lessons are organized in a form of a mixed group of students from different study programs and specializations. Thus, it places a difficult task for a teacher to design an effective ESP course. ESP courses at SUA focus on the development of communicative competence and it is guided by the Department of Foreign Languages. The current situation of language classes shows that the level of language competence of students enrolling the course varies from A2 to B1 (CEFR). The study material that is used during ESP lessons compiles texts on various topics related to the specializations of the students with the list of vocabulary, vocabulary and grammar exercises developing writing, speaking skills, and translation tasks. This textbook is updated by the authors from the Department of Foreign Languages once every two- to three-year span depending on students' needs. Contact ESP classes are provided once a week and take 90 minutes. The whole course is finished and evaluated usually with a test designed from vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing activities sourcing from the textbook. The course usually finishes after 12-13 weeks, so in total, students take approximately 26 academic lessons (1/45 minutes) per semester. ESP classes are compulsory depending on the study specialization, but usually within 1 or 2 semesters.

The whole study employed 104 students in total. These students joined ESP lessons in three groups. Two of them (project groups) and one 'traditional' (textbook-based group).The research started with a diagnostic test of language competences through the standardized Quick Placement Test (OUP, 2001) that covers grammatical, vocabulary and reading section. The aim was to find out the initial language level of students taking ESP course. Apart from two students who reached B2 level, the average of B1 level enabled the researchers to work with almost homogenous groups.

As it has been mentioned above, the textbook *ESP in Agriculture (Pre-Intermediate)* (Holúbeková, 2012) that is used with the students, covers various topics and its aim is to improve student language knowledge, improve communicative competence, and provides development of reading skills of general and specific texts. The offered topics are as follows:
- Travelling and Transport (aimed mainly at the students from the Faculty of Engineering),
- City Greenery (the Faculty of Horticulture and Landscape Engineering),
- Nutrition (for the students of the Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Production),
- Natural Environment (for the students of the Faculty of Agrobiology and Food Resources),
- Jobs and Careers (applicable to all the study fields).

The students working with this textbook had the same structure of the ESP lesson, during which they went through Pre-reading exercises to Text 1, that was either specific or general. It followed with the List of vocabulary related to the text, then Text 2, that was mostly specific in its nature, followed with some activities. In the second part of the lesson, English grammar was presented and practiced. Grammar topics were usually connected with an appropriate language level and connected to the texts from the textbook.

The other two groups worked on the above mentioned topics, with the difference that their *'working instrument'* was project work with the final product - project. These topics were taken only as frame topics and were narrowed with the specific sub-topics of students themselves taking into consideration their own research ideas and themes that they were working on within other specialized courses. Most commonly, they chose subjects of their bachelor or master theses as a scope for their projects. In the introductory class they were exposed to an example of such a project, along with the rules and criteria agreed on together.

The authors of each project were asked to fill in an evaluation form in a form of unofficial questionnaire, where they answered questions on how much time they devoted to project elaboration; which sources they chose; in case of a team work, the question was whether the work on the project was fairly divided among team members; and last but not least, their opinion on project (ranked from 'very interesting' up to 'totally uniteresting' added with their open answers if applicable. This questionnaire, firstly used only for teacher's needs, they served as a helpful tool for the comparison of data analysis of focus group meetings that are discussed further in the paper as a main research method.

The holistic approach to this study was covered by a triangulation of three research techniqeus that were employed in the reserach. In the first phase, diagnostic test 1 was applied in order to get to approximate level of English language competence with the help of a standardized test. The development of students' communicative competence was searched through the comparison of the test results in both groups (a textbook-based with a project-based one) and then processed statistically.

Diagnostic test 2 was a tool for this part of research and it was designed and constructed by the researcher and with the help and advice of the experts teaching ESP at the Department of Languages, SUA, in Nitra. Even though this part of the study is not the aim of this paper, we assumed that it is necessary for the better understanding of the whole process of the research. Apart from testing, the content analysis was used. The results provided the answer to the question regarding the increase in gained specific vocabulary in the project-based group compared to the textbook-based one. By analysing the projects presented by the students, vocabulary usage was ranked into specific groupings according to its purpose of use. The words were identified within the list prepared by Coxhead (Gillet, 2011) – *A Guide for Students in Higher Education.* Coxhead's classification ranked the words into a general or specific word families in fields such as Environmental Science, Computer Science, Technology, etc. Coxhead studied over 3.5 million words in total from 28 subject areas. This tool helped us distinguish the vocabulary in the projects and it was used as a framework for this vocabulary which was then divided into the general or specific one. After that it was quantified and then compared in each group. After examining each project regarding the vocabulary it offered, compared to the related topic in the textbook, helped find out the answer on a research aim to find out how application of project work in ESP affects learner's knowledge of professional vocabulary.

As the aim of this paper is to find out students' opinions and attitudes towards implementation of project work in ESP classes, the research method of focus group was used. Cohen et al. (2007), Jarell (2000) and Cozma (2007) consider focus groups to be a form of group interview. However, it is not in the sense of 'back-and-forth' responses between an interviewer and a group. It is rather an interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher with the aim to reach a collective, rather than an individual view. The participants interact with each other instead of the interviewer and the data emerge from the interaction of the group. It is an explorative technique, connecting a smaller number of people together as they are led by a moderator who facilitates the group. As Jarell (2000) suggests, when a group is formed, moderator takes the lead. After the introduction, the participants are explained the purpose of the focus group. The moderator also establishes the group rules for the group, briefly describes their roles, and informs them about recording of the discussion, explaining the confidentiality of participants' comment. Participants are also indicated that their opinions are neither wrong nor right, and requested to speak one at a time. After that, the moderator introduces the focus group concept. Then, the moderator begins to elicit information from participants by presenting them with the question. In the end, the obtained information is summarized and the group is closed.

As for the duration, it depends on the type of participants. Jarell (2000) suggests the time frame that is generally somewhat shorter than one-and-a-half to two hours. However, the shorter meeting calls for a well-planned session. In our research the analyses and conclusions of focus meetings are drawn via SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is an instrument of strategic planning used for the evaluation of strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O), and threats (T). This evaluation technique was first used by Humphrey who conducted his research at Stanford University in the 1960s. Vesela (2012) mentions that SWOT analysis describes positive and negative aspects and identifies the factors in the environment which may positively or negatively influence some projects or strategies. It belongs to the group of tools studying the relevance and possible coherence of specific programmes. This analysis reduces uncertainties and supports the strategy improvements or its general assessment.

3. PROCEDURE OF THE RESEARCH

In our study, two focus group meeting were formed, consisting of 20 and 25 people, all of them had participated in ESP lessons. As the meetings were planned as the last session of ESP course out of 81 respondents, only 45 appeared due to their other commitments. In focus groups, the students were asked to express their opinions on using project work within their ESP course. The discussion was recorded and the participants had been informed and agreed with it. The moderator was not their ESP teacher in order to gain more objective views from the students. The focus group was held in a classroom with tables arranged in a circle in order to develop an open and friendly atmosphere. Each focus group session took approximately 30-40 minutes. Everything was recorded with the prior consent of all the participants. The transcripts were analysed and interpreted through SWOT analysis which answered the questions of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of project work implementation within ESP classes from the point of view of the students. The analysed results are shown further in the SWOT analyses.

Table 1 SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Students´positive attitudes towards project work	Poster as a project presentation
ESP vocabulary extension	Vocabulary (sometimes too difficult and specific)
Students encounter project work also in some other classes	Unfair peer evaluation
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Students focus on a particular problem.	Number of projects (presentations) in one class. If it is more than 2, it is very challenging for attention.
Stress when presenting in front of the class.	Stress and discomfort when presenting. Feeling anxious in front of the class.
ESP vocabulary extension	Vocabulary (too difficult to pronounce, understand)
Every student should work on their own topic.	

In focus groups, the students were asked to express their opinions on using project work within ESP courses. They claimed that, compared to the traditional format of English classes that they had been exposed to previously, project classes were more interesting and they had been more actively involved. Despite some mental discomfort at the beginning at the thought of presenting in English, they afterwards appreciated the valuable experience of presenting in English. This experience made them more confident not only in foreign competences but also in their presentation skills. Moreover, they also claimed that they felt better acquainted with the topic they had chosen for their project and they had learned more than from the times they passively watched and listened to projects. They also criticised the topic limits, and wished to have more freedom in future about the choice of the topic. According to them, one of the drawbacks was the peer evaluation by the students. Most of them were very generous to their colleagues and they did not follow the set criteria for evaluation. Very often, the evaluation sheets of the presenters were more critical than those handed in by their colleagues.

5. RESULT ANALYSIS AND INTERPETATION

When looking at the positive results in the parts of strengths and opportunities (SO), the focus group meetings revealed that:

- **Students perceive project education positively**.

In comparison with the traditional approach where students become demotivated by a textbook dealing with the topics that are far from students' interests. Therefore, the book in ESP classes becomes an ineffective instrument when it is used at every lesson as the main source of knowledge. Attractiveness and increasing interest can be counted among the strengths of project work. Students are forced to be creative and therefore it makes them think differently about their work and subject.

▪ **Students focus on a particular problem.**

In ESP lessons, students are very often in mixed-ability groups regarding their language skills. In non-philological universities students from different faculties with unrelated specializations meet, therefore it is quite difficult for a teacher to select appropriate topics in English classes. Project education allows students to focus on their field of interest, or an issue which is in their study focus. At the same time, they are forced to enrich their vocabulary on a particular topic. It was obvious that the students elaborated the topic according to their study specializations. They did not consider the conditions for projects to be strict and unreal. As for the form of the project, the students were offered to choose from PowerPoint, Prezi, or a poster format. The most popular opinion was to choose either PowerPoint or Prezi due to the fact that visual, audial and dynamic features of these formats are most attractive for audience. Among all the presented project there was only one poster for a garden plan from the students studying garden architecture specialization. The poster was hand-drawn and therefore it caught the attention other students.

▪ **Students encounter projects also in other subjects.**

Project presentation is very common at university environment. However, not many teachers introduce the rules that should be followed in effective presentations and language classes are tailored for teaching and learning adequate presentation techniques. Oral presentations also develop students' confidence in presenting in front of other people.

▪ **Students benefit from vocabulary extension.**

During focus group meetings students admit that when they listen to a presentation, they acquire new vocabulary. By working on their own projects, students stated positively that they enriched their vocabulary with a lot of useful words as they had to go through many references, translations and eventually they learnt and fixed it for the act of performance. At the same time, the words they used were actively searched for their own needs and therefore they remembered them more.

▪ **Every student should work on their own topic.**

During focus meetings students mentioned the issues with team work. It was revealed that some students often free-ride of others' work. Therefore, it is difficult to divide the work evenly. The more hard-working individuals in a group do not want to let down the weaker ones and they often work for them. It seems that the tradition of team working skills is still not very developed in our educational environment. As an opportunity of project work in ESP, students suggested planning of one project for one student under ideal conditions.

As for weaknesses and threats (WT) in SWOT analysis some students mentioned the poster as an inappropriate format of project presentation. This has been discussed above in the text.

▪ **Number of presentations in one class.**

An average presentation took around 10 minutes. A discussion that followed was limited in some cases as it depends on a lot of factors. Firstly, there is vocabulary and pronunciation. Presenters were not able to engage a vivid talk if they do not have adequate vocabulary. Another factor threatening a discussion is no interest from the side of the students listening to a presentation. If the topic is not interesting for them, they have no reason to respond. Another interesting point was that the students did not enter the discussion because they did not want to make any discomfort to their colleagues. Students´ "empathy" with a presenter is very typical

for Slovak students. However, it could be negatively perceived from the point of view of knowledge.

- **Stress from presenting.**

The worst thing for students was to overcome the stress of presenting their projects in front of their colleagues. Students evaluated this experience negatively – it was very difficult for them to present in front of their classmates. Some of them even admitted that it would be just as problematic to do so in their mother tongue. Only few of them had presented before in front of the audience. Another disturbing moment for the students was a high number of students in a group. Therefore, fewer students in the classroom would be more welcoming.

- **Use of unrelated specific vocabulary or problems with pronunciation.**

The students who were in the audience negatively commented on acquiring passive vocabulary that was far from their specialization. If a student was from the technological field or specialisation, the specific vocabulary from agrobiology was far from his/her professional scope. Another issue with vocabulary the uttered the difficulties in pronunciation and identification of the used vocabularies as the words were very specific for certain fields.

As for limitations of this qualitative research it must be said that the focus group method was still very new for the students and not all the students openly expressed their ideas. Some of them were very shy and claimed they had no opinion on the subject. Students in Slovakia in general have not been led to express their attitudes and opinions openly from a very young age. On the opposite, via expressing students' comments openly during focus groups meetings, they felt important and enjoyed the position of being partners in the management and evaluation of their educational process. Also, through the discussion the relationship between the teacher and students reached a higher, more open level. As for the recommendation, the success of a focus group meeting depends on the size of a group and the choice of a moderator who is not a teacher appeared to be more objective.

5. CONCLUSION

The presented paper discusses the attitudes and opinions of the students in ESP classes on using project work. The project work was implemented in ESP classes at non-philological university with a group of students with mixed-abilities and language skills and mainly from unrelated study fields and specializations during one semester. At the beginning of ESP course the students were introduced the idea, aim, and procedure of project work with its final outcomes. The topics of the projects were chosen according to the study specializations of the students and elaborated in a team of maximum three people. The projects were presented during the semester in a form of an oral presentation with the help of Prezi, PowerPoint or poster formats. The students had to take into consideration the timing and content of the presentation with appropriate language, correct pronunciation and use of specific vocabulary related to the topic. After presentation of the project the classroom evaluated the content, form and performance of the project. After 12 weeks of project work performed during ESP classes, the students were asked about their opinions on using projects in their ESP lessons. Two focus groups with 20 and 25 students in total were studied in order to find out the opinions and attitudes of the students that had prepared and performed their projects during ESP lessons, with the help

of the moderator managing the group talks. The students' responses were analysed through SWOT analysis, stating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of project work in ESP from the students' points of view. The results revealed positive attitudes of the students towards project use in ESP lessons when compared with traditional ESP lesson following a textbook. They appreciated their active work on chosen topics. They used vocabulary that was necessary for their professional fields and specific project. They also welcomed the format of visual and audial presentation via PowerPoint or Prezi programs. However, the students critically commented on the format of a poster as they found it static and the use of very specialized words that were mainly in the project far from their professional interests. They also commented the challenges of the team work and fair division of the project planning and realization as well as not very objective peer evaluation. As one of the biggest challenges of the project work was mentioned anxiety of students in presenting in English in front of their peers. Even though the results of the research cannot be generalized as the number of participants in the study was small, this paper reveals positive and challenging sides of project work used in ESP lessons in higher education.

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