

UDC 378.81'24.111

DOI:

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ACADEMIC MOBILITY: SOME CHALLENGES FOR NON-LINGUISTIC STUDENTS

The article is motivated by the problems which are seen as obstacles on the way to joining academic mobility projects. Among these problems we define unacceptable level of language proficiency of an average school leaver as well as unsatisfactory status of foreign languages both at schools and University faculties not majoring in English. The examination in foreign languages at the External National Evaluation (ENE) for the Ukrainian school leavers is optional and, accordingly, it forms the pupils' attitude towards this school subject and only few of them, seeking for higher education at non-linguistic faculties, take this examination. The research conducted across 2013/2014-2018 years proved that only 44, 8 % of first grade students had B1-B2 benchmarks in EGP (English for General Purposes). Moreover, English, as a discipline, at the faculties not majoring in this subject, is considered, at the best, obligatory for the first grade students or, at the worst, is not taught at all. As a consequence, the ignorance of some senior students in foreign languages prevents them from participation in learning mobility projects at outbound Universities.

Keywords: academic mobility; foreign languages; the External National Evaluation (ENE); ESP (English for Specific Purposes); university students; non-linguistic faculties.

Tabl. 3. Ref. 12.

Тамара Бабенко, кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент, завідувач кафедри іноземних мов факультетів психології та соціології Інституту філології Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка

АКАДЕМІЧНА МОБІЛЬНІСТЬ: ЩО ЗАВАЖАЄ СТУДЕНТАМ НЕФІЛОЛОГІЧНИХ ФАКУЛЬТЕТІВ

Однією з проблем, що не дає студентам нефілологічних факультетів у повній мірі скористатися перевагами академічної мобільності, є недостатнє володіння іноземною мовою. Як свідчать багаторічні тестування, лише 44,8 % вступників мають рівень володіння мовою B1-B2. Корені цієї проблеми полягають у тому, що для більшості нефілологічних факультетів іноземна мова не є конкурсною дисципліною, що й впливає на ставлення учнів до цього предмету під час навчання у школі. Недостатній рівень володіння іноземною мовою у подальшому заважає активній участі студента у проектах з академічної мобільності та негативно впливає на професійне зростання.

Ключові слова: академічна мобільність; іноземні мови; ЗНО (Зовнішнє Незалежне Оцінювання); професійно-орієнтована англійська мова; студенти університету; нелінгвістичні факультети.

Statement of the problem. Being part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Ukrainian universities are reforming their educational systems to achieve competitiveness within home universities as well as to attract foreign students and enforce academic mobility process, one of the means of cultural exchange and scientific development of nations. Academic mobility is especially valuable for such countries as Ukraine, the people of which hope to improve their lives by introducing genuine democratic reforms in all spheres of life. In this regard, mobility gives opportunities to estimate the experience of European countries, evaluate the advantages of democratic societies, overcome cultural and educational diversities, and to set the aim, Ukrainian universities should move to. One of the most urgent

preconditions of academic mobility is a good command of the English language. The proficiency in English language skills is a kind of a marker showing the level of preparedness for entering the European community, but a great part of Ukrainian students are deficient in foreign languages and experience great difficulties while participating in academic activities, such as lectures, workshops, international conferences conducted in English. The aim of the article is to disclose the problems which hinder a number of Ukrainian students to participate in academic mobility projects; to highlight the necessity of improving English language teaching for school children; to prove the need of introducing ESP (English for Specific Purposes) as a normative discipline into the University Curriculum for students doing their Bachelor's degree at all the faculties not majoring in English.

Analysis of recent researches and publications.

Different aspects of academic mobility problems are being discussed in all European countries – members of European Higher Education Area (EHEA): general impact of academic mobility on the process of integration into the world scientific area (Hrishchuk U., 2014) [2]; its financial problems (Byram M. and Dervin F., 2008) [8]; the influence of academic mobility and the English language on cultural enrichment and professionally oriented knowledge (Platkova A., 2014) [3]; teaching a professionally oriented foreign language to the students of non-linguistic universities as “a means of intercultural and international communication” (Tymoshchuk N., 2019) [7]; the role of foreign languages teaching and learning for academic mobility and gaining professional success (ET National Report for Estonia, 2016) [11]; vocationally oriented foreign language learning as a premise for students’ scientific activity (T. Babenko, 2015) [1]; the difficulties universities face while preparing mobility projects (O. Zabolotna, 2015) [12]. Still, some of the problems underpinning the reasons of non-linguistic faculty students’ deficiency in foreign languages – the benchmarks with which they enter the university and how they influence their further language acquisition and learning mobility – have not been researched yet.

The main parts of the research. Speaking about learning mobility, the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training mentions that: “Limited financial resources and inadequate language knowledge are a brake to learning mobility” [9]. It seems obvious nowadays to consider the knowledge of a foreign language as a must for every graduate and school leaver, but, nevertheless, a poor command of foreign languages remains one of the obstacles which rather often hinder Ukrainian students to join academic mobility projects. If M. Byram and F. Dervin consider finance “a major factor in student’s mobility” [8, 3], the Ukrainian university funding students experience one more difficulty that cannot be solved in a couple of days. And it is a foreign language.

Special subjects are the main factors that count for being selected for any academic mobility project, but the language proficiency is, comparatively, neglected. At some non-linguistic faculties a foreign language is treated as second-rate both in the process of selecting internationally mobile students and while designing the curriculum. Sure, professional academic subjects should be in favour, but without good command of at least one foreign language, mobility projects would be rather unproductive.

The idea of introducing ESP into the university

curriculums is supported by many Ukrainian scholars who consider language course one of the first conditions of preparing for a mobility project [12, 49], a precondition of forming professional mobility of future specialists [4, 130] and a premise for future scientific activity [1, 37]. Grounding on the objectives of the Foreign Language Strategy, National Report for Estonia, for example, declares that “the majority of population should be fluent in, at least, two languages in addition to their native language, because it “enables graduates to be more successful in the labour market and creates preconditions for national mobility” [11, 14].

The reason for neglecting foreign languages at Ukrainian universities is based on the assumption that all the school leavers attain, at least, B1 level in one of the foreign languages [6], though, in reality, this level is mostly achieved by city school leavers, while their peers from villages, rather often, gain A0-A1 levels. Moreover, only part of Ukrainian school leavers take an External National Evaluation (ENE) in a foreign language as it is not major or optional for most non-linguistic university faculties. Thus, the knowledge of a foreign language of the majority of students, who enter such faculties, is not properly evaluated.

Each year at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv is started for the first grade students with a diagnostic test (Assessment on Entry), which gives a chance to determine their levels in one of the foreign languages* and “facilitate streaming” [5, 44]. So, we had a possibility to collect the data and conduct a qualitative research in a span of 6-7 years across 2013/2014-2018. The results are displayed in *Fig. 1* and *Fig. 2*.

The presented table (*Fig. 1*) shows that in 2013-2017 at the Faculty of Psychology the percentage of students having B2-B1 is much lower than of those whose level was determined as A0. Besides, in 2013-2014, the most powerful was a group of students with A1-A2 entry levels while, according to the recommendations of the National Curriculum for Universities [5,2], the level which allows productive teaching of ESP is B1. The obtained data show that the number of the first grade students, who needed some preparatory language training, is rather discouraging to let the students “bridge the gap” [5, 29] on their own without any support. For example, in 2013 the percentage of students who needed to be taught EGP (English for General Purposes) first before taking ESP course was 79,4%; in 2014 – 68,9%; 2015 – 74,6%; 2016 – 69,6; 2017 – 57,6% and in 2018 – 32,9%. In 2018, the situation started changing for the best, but it is too early to speak about a positive tendency.

Fig. 1.

Year	Number of test takers	Benchmarks			
		B2	B1	A2 -A1	A0
2013	145	5 (3,4%)	25 (17,2%)	37 (25,6 %)	78 (53,8%)
2014	132	13 (9,9%)	28 (21,2%)	35 (26,5 %)	56(42,4%)
2015	130	4 (3,1%)	29 (22,3%)	28 (21,5 %)	69(53,1%)
2016	115	5 (4,3%)	30 (26,1%)	18 (15,7 %)	62(53,9%)
2017	92	9 (9,8%)	30 (32,6%)	19 (20,7 %)	34(36,9%)
2018	79	21 (26,6%)	32 (40,5%)	12 (15,2 %)	14(17,7%)

*English, French, German, Spanish – till 2015; since 2016 – only English

The data obtained at the Faculty of Sociology (Fig.2) demonstrate a bit better results in language* proficiency. The percentage of students with A2-A1-A0 is not so high as at the Faculty of Psychology: in 2014 – 56,1% ; 2015 – 55,4%; 2016 – 43,5%; 2017 – 9,1%; 2018 – 46,8%. But still the results demonstrate that the entry levels of nearly half of the students, with the exception of 2017, did not achieve an expected benchmark in a foreign language (B1), and students needed some extra training.

Taking into account that the students of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv arrive from all the regions of Ukraine, we suppose that the data obtained in the span of 5-6 years are rather common for all the country. For instance, in 2018 2889 University entrants out of 4627, came from different regions of Ukraine and the rest – from Kyiv and Kyiv region. As far as the language proficiency of test takers was assessed on entry, the achieved results demonstrate their language benchmarks attained at school (End-of School-Course Assessment). It is hard to overestimate a negative influence of these results on further language acquisition at the University. As far as for obtaining each next level in language proficiency 200 contact hours are needed [5, 29], we can acknowledge that a student with poor command of a foreign language will require a lot of extra training, self-study, persistence and time to attain the level which enables him to join a mobility project.

Under such circumstances, it is proposed to

introduce preparatory or intensive language optional courses before taking ESP “specialism-related” course [5, 34]. In this regard, taking into account financial problems of most students, the words of Evans and Green (2007) about “language support at university” [10, 5] are very topical for Ukraine. The division into groups, in accordance with the English Language Proficiency levels, helps to meet the students’ needs and to successfully design the syllabus, select appropriate teaching materials and develop assessment tasks. But it is impossible to attain the target level in ESP within one year if the initial level is A1. Besides, the learning needs of some students suffer because of the great diversity of proficiency levels within one group, and impossibility to form a separate group for each level, as it happened in 2015, 2017 (Fig.1), 2018 (Fig.2). The lack of streaming was partially influenced by insufficient number of students at the faculty, as in 2017 – 2018 (Fig.2) when only two ESP groups were formed.

At most non-linguistic faculties, English is a compulsory educational subject only in the first year of studies, for the rest years it is optional. Second year students should get at their Placement test at the beginning of the year, at least, 75 points out of 100 to be enrolled to the optional group. The task becomes rather arduous for those whose results at the entry test were A0 – A1. Moreover, there exists one more group of “unhappy” students who studied German, French or Spanish at school. The elimination of these languages at the University faculties makes

Fig. 2.

Year	Number of test takers	Benchmarks			
		B2	B1	A2 -A1	A0
2014	57	11 (19,3%)	14 (24,6%)	15 (26,3%)	17 (29,8%)
2015	65	4 (6,2%)	25 (38,4%)	18 (27,7%)	18 (27,7%)
2016	62	5 (8,1%)	30 (48,4%)	19 (30,6%)	8 (12,9%)
2017	44	19 (43,2%)	21 (47,7%)	3 (6,8%)	1 (2,3%)
2018	32	3 (9,4%)	14 (43,8%)	6 (18,7%)	9 (28,1%)

*English and German – till 2016, since 2017 – only English

Fig. 3.

Quantity of certificates got by the graduates annually								
Year		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Number of students		31	42	43	51	56	50	11
Percentage		14,8	20	20,5	24,3	26,7	23,8	5,3

the students to switch to English and, to the end of the first year, they usually reach only A1 level which is not enough to take ESP optional course in the second year. The students, who fail to join the ESP group, are supposed to study the foreign language independently, without any University support, at their own expense, which is problematic for most of them.

Optional courses are very challenging both for a lecturer and a student for several reasons. Firstly, the subject is not included into the Syllabus; lecturers have themselves to find the time and study rooms for classes trying to adjust them to the time-tables of other subjects. Secondly, the absence of exams or credits across four terms in the second and third years is a rather discouraging reason for some students. Such “language policy” often leads to neglecting home tasks, missing lectures and, as a result, to a very slow progress in developing language skills.

Trying to pay more attention to the majors and to satisfy the most urgent requirements of the University Curriculum, senior students often drop the language course and to the time of obtaining the Bachelor’s degree lose their language skills. All these factors taken together influence the quantity of students who attend ESP – course practical lessons, and, as a result, less and less fourth-year students receive certificates of foreign language level on the basis of the End-of-Course Assessment exam. Though, the number of applicants in 2010 – 2015 was rather stable and made on both faculties about 210 students, the yearly obtained number of certificates considerably decreased (Fig.3).

Conclusions. Participating in academic mobility projects by the students of non- linguistic faculties is complicated by many reasons, the most apparent of which are: low school-leaving proficiency levels; the absence of obligatory language course for senior students; the lack of exams or any other forms of control across second and third grades.

The problem cannot be solved at the individual level, at students’ expense only, as it would not introduce apparent changes into the situation in a whole. Breakthroughs in vocationally oriented language proficiency can be paced under the following conditions: 1) the language proficiency of the school-leavers who are going to enter universities should be tested and the applicants’ proficiency level cannot

be lower than A2; 2) the ESP course for the students doing their Bachelor’s degree must be obligatory during all the years of study; 3) an optional EGP course can be introduced additionally for learners whose entrance level is below B1.

All these steps will help the non-linguistic faculties to meet the requirements of the globalised world, observe the students’ professionally oriented language needs, get them prepared for academic mobility projects and their future academic and professional careers.

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Стаття надійшла до редакції 26.07.2019



“Корисним для себе (і для суспільства) буде тільки той, хто пізнав свою природу. Тоді людина розуміє свою місію. Своє покликання на землі й виробляє для себе спосіб життя, в основі якого лежить “споріднена праця”. Тільки так людина може самоствердитися і самореалізуватися, а значить стати щасливою”.

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