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TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Introduction. Studying English is of utmost importance for university students in Ukraine, yet, as a rule, they have just one English lesson per week. Self-study may solve this problem, but devoting their free time to learning English may be challenging for students. Moreover, this class time may be the only opportunity for them to study English [2]. Therefore, it is important to meet the needs of technical university students by focusing on the development of English language skills they consider the most important. The objective of this study was to analyze the perspectives of technical university students on the development of English language skills.

Methodology. The study was conducted at the National Technical University of Ukraine “Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute”. The research is based on a survey completed by second-year university students (No. 74). We used a survey to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Results and discussion. In our study, we collected the responses of technical university students on the development of English language skills. Analyzing students’ responses we can see that speaking is named the most important by half of the students (51%). Listening comes next (22%) while reading and writing have the same significance for the respondents (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Students’ perspectives on the most important skills to develop
According to the students, they “have a lot of English” in their lives which motivates them to develop their English language skills and speaking first of all. To emphasize the importance of speaking, they even use figurative language, providing the argument that it is “a pie in the sky to learn English without speaking”.

Students list several reasons for their preferences. The most frequently mentioned is the necessity to communicate in English with others when they travel or take part in international projects. Students also write about applying for a job, having a job interview, and working at international companies as well. They are aware of the fact that without communication in English their “progress in the working world and also in life would be nearly impossible”.

For some of the students, one of the reasons to focus on speaking in class is the necessity of overcoming their fear of speaking, of making mistakes in particular. They are not confident speaking with people “due to shyness, awkwardness, etc.” Those students, who do not want to look incompetent, prefer keeping silent in class, as one of the students explained, “I’m embarrassed to speak English because I don’t know this language very well.” It is difficult for students to focus on what to say (content) and how to say that correctly (accuracy), but they want to speak fluently.

The speaking skill is difficult for students to develop as it “requires constant practice and needs people to talk to.” Even those students who have no fear of speaking in class, confess that speaking is the most challenging for them because they “don’t have much time to plan” what to say, so they should “think fast and speak fast.” Lack of vocabulary may also be a reason for students to avoid speaking in class, as one respondent wrote that “sometimes I can’t remember words in English, which I want to say.”

Other difficulties in developing speaking skills related to the fact that, according to one of the students, “spoken English at lessons is different” from everyday communication and there are few opportunities to speak in class. Still, according to some students, using the English language in class is productive, as “the more I communicate in English, the more I begin to understand it.”

Analyzing the responses of students, we see that they are aware of other advantages of speaking. According to students, speaking allows them to apply knowledge of the language and rules about the language into practice. Being in their second year of studying a “Foreign Language” course, some students would like not just to speak on general topics, but to focus on professionally-oriented ones, like cybersecurity which they will likely do in real life in the future. These findings are by the results of another research stating that university students are fully aware of the significance of English language communicative skills [3].

In the context of the importance of different language skills, some students write that all skills are interconnected and it is not possible to focus on one single skill. However, speaking and listening are mentioned more often than other skills and described by students as “two sides of the same coin.” Speaking and listening depend on each other as “components of oral communication”. They are unique skills because it is impossible to use supplementary materials, “in speaking and listening you need to rely only on yourself.” As far as communication is a two-way process, it is important “to perceive information almost instantly and respond to it,” “to be mind-flexible.” Besides, different accents of speakers and a lack of vocabulary may impede
understanding. There are some positive aspects though: listening to others helps students to improve their pronunciation, develop intuition, reach understanding, send their messages across, get the information they need, learn something new and enjoy stories they hear. Speaking and listening help to solve problems: you have to name a problem, describe it and ask for help, or just “express your thoughts, feelings, and emotions”.

The results of the survey were informative for teachers of English who managed to respond by meeting the learning needs of the students better, at the same time destroying some stereotypes about learning foreign languages. The most controversial issues were negotiated, which is more effective than making students follow instructions [1].

Conclusion. The results of the research showed the importance of providing an opportunity for students to express their perspectives on different aspects related to studying English, and on English language skills in particular. Highlighting the importance of speaking, university students provided their arguments, listed difficulties they faced in class, and revealed stereotypes. Such feedback was informative for teachers who could improve their teaching practices and meet the needs of technical university students more effectively.

References: