AGRONOMY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Bojović, M. D.
University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Agronomy Čačak, Serbia

The study examines agronomy engineering students' evaluation of speaking activities in the language for specific purposes classroom and potential effects of the length of language for specific purposes instruction on students' evaluation of speaking activities. The participants were engineering undergraduate students in the field of agronomy and biotechnical sciences, learning English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Agronomy in Čačak, University of Kragujevac, Serbia. The students who were exposed to different length of instruction generally had similar perceptions of speaking activities. More experience in learning language for specific purposes may play a role in shaping students' ability to evaluate speaking activities.

Introduction

The ability to speak a language is the product of language learning; speaking is also a crucial part of the language learning process. Speaking presents the productive language skill in the oral mode. It is very often considered most demanding and anxiety-provoking language skill (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986: 126; Young, 1990: 539).

Speaking is more complicated than it seems at first. It involves more than just pronouncing words, using stress, rhythmic and intonation patterns of the language – it includes using the correct form of words, putting words together in correct word order, using appropriate vocabulary and register or language variety, making the discourse hang together so that people can follow what you are saying and making the main ideas stand out from supporting ideas or information. Moreover, it involves learners and their personality, their emotions, beliefs and experiences (Flavell, 1979), and self-perception of their foreign language speaking ability (Gkonou, 2014) and evaluation of learning/teaching process.

Speaking in a foreign language, both in academic and social context, entails challenging, risk-taking activities; students and learners who are not fluent in the target language experience cannot fully express their knowledge of particular issues in specific professions, and thus they are not able to communicate appropriately and efficiently. Practicing foreign language speaking skills in education context is important for developing students' communication skills in a foreign language, particularly in foreign language for specific and professional purposes.

The focus of the research is the study of the agronomy and biotechnology students' evaluation of their own speaking performance in language for specific purposes (LSP) - more precisely, in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom context. The aim of this study is to determine the levels of evaluated parameters of speaking foreign language performance in the classroom and potential differences in students' evaluation considering the length of ESP instruction. The

assumption is that the length of ESP instruction may affect students' evaluation of foreign language (FL) speaking activities in the classroom context.

Research method

The participant*s* were 60 students of the Faculty of Agronomy Čačak, University of Kragujevac, Serbia, who were prospective engineers in the field of agronomy and biotechnology, learning ESP (English in agronomy, agricultural economy, and food technology,).

The variables used in the research are as follows:

1) students' evaluation of speaking activities in the ESP classroom considering the following categories: the frequency of speaking activities in FL classroom; the effects of FL speaking practice on foreign language communication; the difficulty of FL speaking exercises; the frequency of FL speaking activities - previous experience; and finally, students' self-confidence in successful FL speaking performance; and

2) the length of ESP instruction at university education level – four, six, and eight semesters (sophomores, juniors, and seniors, respectively).

The instrument *Students' oral practice classroom activities evaluation scale* (Bojović, 2012) was applied in the study. The instrument measures students' perception of the frequency of speaking activities in the FL classroom, the effects of FL speaking practice on FL communication, the difficulty of FL speaking exercises, students' past experience considering speaking practice at primary and secondary education levels, and students' self-confidence in successful FL speaking performance. It is a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1-5 – the low end indicates low frequency of FL speaking activities, negative effects of FL speaking practice on FL communication skills, high level of difficulty of FL speaking exercises and low level of students' self-confidence, and vice versa.

The instrument was used for collecting the data in the study. It was administered to the participants by their English language teacher during their regular lectures. The teaching process reflects the contents, methods, tasks, and procedures typical for the agronomy and biotechnology engineering profession including development of speaking skills through diverse activities (e.g., descriptions, presentations, discussions, simulations, negotiations, conflict resolving, role-plays).

The measures of descriptive statistics (mean values and standard deviation) and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used for data processing. The obtained data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0 Package for Windows.

Agronomy engineering students' perception of speaking activities

Analyzing the results of students' evaluation of foreign language speaking classroom activities and its factors, it can be concluded that (Table 1): the frequency of speaking activities in foreign language classroom was high (M=4.15); the practice of oral communication in foreign language classroom had highly positive effects on communication in English as a foreign language (M=4.50); the difficulty of speaking exercises in English language classes was moderate (M=3.22); at primary and

secondary education levels, the speaking practice in English as a foreign language was far less frequent (moderate frequency tending to lower frequency where the mean value was M=2.87) compared to higher education; and finally, students perceived themselves as self-confident in successful English language speaking performance in the classroom context (M=3.67).

Speaking activities in ESP classroom - categories	M	SD	Length of ESP instruction Nr of semesters (M)			p
			4	6	8	
Frequency of speaking activities in FL classroom	4.15	0.840	4.02	4.86	4.40	**0.035***
Effects of FL speaking practice on FL communication	4.50	0.624	4.46	4.57	4.80	0.490
Difficulty of FL speaking exercises	3.22	0.691	3.19	3.43	3.20	0.696
Frequency of FL speaking practice - former experience	2.87	1.241	2.79	3.29	3.00	0.605
Self-confidence in successful FL speaking performance	3.62	0.783	3.65	3.57	3.40	0.795
Overall classroom activities	3.67	0.440	3.62	3.94	3.76	0.175
N = 60 *p < 0.05						

Table 1. Students' speaking activities evaluation considering different length of instruction
FL - foreign language, M – mean value, SD – standard deviation, N – number of participants, p – statistical significance

The role of the length of ESP instruction in the evaluation of speaking activities

The results obtained by ANOVA analysis indicate, as shown in Table 1, that students whose training duration in ESP at university level differed had similar evaluation of overall classroom speaking activities. Their evaluation considering the potential effects of speaking activities in English as a foreign language on communication in English language was similar as well as their evaluation of the difficulty of English language speaking exercises and frequency of speaking activities at primary and secondary education level; also, agronomy undergraduates were equally self-confident in their perceived level of success in English speaking activities (statistical significance is $p > 0.05$ for all of the previously mentioned evaluation categories).

However, ANOVA analysis also shows that the length of ESP instruction may play a greater role in students' evaluation of how often speaking activities are practiced in the classroom. The students learning ESP at university level for six semesters evaluated speaking activities as highly frequent (Table 1), which is significantly higher than the evaluation of their peers exposed to ESP instruction for four semesters (F=3.550, $p < 0.05$, p=0.035). It is important to emphasize that senior and junior students were exposed to communicative language teaching approach which naturally includes versatile learners' speaking activities, while sophomores were exposed to content-based approach. It seems that students' experience in EFL/ESP training also plays a role in shaping their ability to evaluate classroom activities.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the agronomy undergraduate students' evaluation of speaking activities in the ESP classroom and to ascertain whether the different duration of ESP instruction may affect the evaluation process.

The results obtained revealed that the English language speaking activities are significantly more frequent in academic learning context than in primary and secondary education context. According to the students' opinion, speaking exercises in the classroom context have significant effect on communication skills in a foreign language. In the classroom environment, where much attention is paid to students' regular speaking activities, the students feel self-confident when they speak in English classes; in addition, they also think that speaking exercises are not particularly difficult.

The findings also revealed that seniors, juniors, and sophomores generally evaluated speaking activities in a similar way, except for the category the frequency of practicing speaking activities in ESP classroom. Namely, the difference between juniors/seniors and sophomores is obvious. Students' longer exposure to instruction can enhance students' evaluation skills of ESP classes and involve them more in their own learning, making them more active in the learning task at hand and thus fostering their autonomy in ESP learning context (Thanasoulas, 2000).

Future research could further investigate the role of length of instruction in learning language for specific purposes across different populations, contexts, and age groups. Also, there is paucity in literature in areas such as the relation between students' perception of speaking activities in foreign language classrooms and their beliefs about foreign language learning and usage of speaking strategies in the language classroom.

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