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ENGLISH LEARNING TRAJECTORY OF TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

This article explores English learning experience of first-year technical university students during wartime in Ukraine. To achieve the aim the research questions about English learner background of first-year students, frequency of using English in their daily lives, their goals, possible obstacles and their expectations of an ideal English lesson had to be answered. The study used a mixed method research design, which implied obtaining quantitative and qualitative data. More than half of first-year students were proud of learning English for more than ten years. However, a third of the students either just started learning English recently, or it was not effective. In spite of the fact that majority of first-year students used English in their everyday life regularly, a third avoided doing that. At the same time practically all first-year students were able to define their goals for their course of English. The main obstacles to achieving students' goals were laziness (22%) and their characteristics as learners (22%), followed by technical problems and poor timing. Describing their ideal lessons of English, students emphasized the importance of developing speaking skills, interactive tasks, mentioned a friendly atmosphere, teacher's support and compassion.

Thus, comprehensive understanding of technical university students' English learning trajectory necessitates a keen awareness of their unique backgrounds, the role of English in their daily lives, targeted academic goals, potential obstacles, and their concepts of an ideal learning experience. Tailoring lessons to address specific needs of students creates a supportive learning environment, especially needing during wartime. Being informed, teachers of English can adjust their pedagogical approaches fostering a holistic integration of English not only in a classroom, but in the life of technical university students.

Key words: *learning trajectory, motivation, learning English, technical university, first-year students.*

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ТРАЄКТОРІЯ ВИВЧЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ СТУДЕНТІВ ТЕХНІЧНОГО УНІВЕРСИТЕТУ: ОЧІКУВАННЯ ТА РЕАЛЬНІСТЬ

У цій статті досліджується досвід вивчення англійської мови студентами першого курсу технічного університету під час війни в Україні. Щоб досягти цієї мети, необхідно було дати відповіді на дослідницькі запитання щодо досвіду вивчення англійської мови першокурсниками, частоти використання англійської мови у повсякденному житті, їхніх цілей, можливих перешкод та їхніх очікувань щодо ідеального уроку англійської мови. У дослідженні використовувався змішаний метод, який передбачав отримання кількісних та якісних даних. Більше половини першокурсників пишалися тим, що вивчали англійську більше десяти років. Проте третина студентів або нещодавно почали вивчати англійську, або це було неефективно. Незважаючи на те, що більшість першокурсників регулярно використовували англійську мову в повсякденному житті, третина уникала цього. Тим не менш практично всі першокурсники змогли визначити свої цілі для курсу англійської мови. Основними перешкодами для досягнення цілей студентів є лень (22%) та їх індивідуальні характеристики (22%), також технічні проблеми та нестача часу. Описуючи свої очікування щодо ідеального заняття з англійської мови, студенти наголошували на важливості розвитку говоріння, виконання інтерактивних завдань, відзначали дружню атмосферу, підтримку та взаєморозуміння викладача.

Таким чином, повне розуміння траєкторії вивчення англійської мови студентами технічного університету вимагає глибокого осмислення їхнього унікального досвіду, ролі англійської мови в їхньому повсякденному житті, академічних цілей, потенційних перешкод та їхніх уявлень про ідеальний досвід навчання. Розробка занять з урахуванням конкретних потреб студентів створює сприятливе навчальне середовище, особливо необхідне під час війни. Отримавши інформацію, викладачі англійської мови можуть коригувати свої педагогічні підходи, сприяючи цілісній інтеграції англійської мови не лише під час заняття, а й у житті студентів технічного університету.

Ключові слова: *траєкторія навчання, мотивація, вивчення англійської мови, технічний університет, студенти першого курсу.*

Introduction. Formulation of the problem.

Understanding students as language learners is essential for both motivation and design of effective ESL classes. Curriculum design and development should be based on evidence if learners are supposed to be in the center of curriculum change (OECD, 2018: 8). The society expects teachers to meet students' different needs, promote students' involvement and responsibility, provide continuous contribution and feedback (Schleicher, 2018: 256). Recognizing the diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and individual goals within an ESL classroom fosters a more personalized approach to instruction. Building rapport with technical university students by learning more about their academic backgrounds, the role of English in their specialized disciplines, and acknowledging the unique challenges they face, it is possible to establish a connection beyond language instruction. Tailoring lessons to incorporate technical relevance and addressing specific needs creates a supportive learning environment. This personalized approach not only enhances students' confidence in their language skills but also fosters a rapport founded on mutual understanding, creating a more effective and engaging ESL learning experience. Moreover, acknowledging students as unique learners allows educators to address their specific needs and challenges.

The purpose of the article is to explore English learning experience of first-year technical university students during wartime in Ukraine. To achieve this aim we have to answer research questions:

- What kind of English learner background do first-year students have?
- How often do they use English in their daily lives?
- What are their goals for the academic year?
- Which obstacles prevent or may prevent them from reaching their goals?
- How would they describe an ideal English lesson?

To answer research questions, we carried out the empirical study (students' survey) at the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", collected data, analysed and presented results.

Materials and methods. This study used a mixed method research design, which implied obtaining quantitative and qualitative data through online Classtime platform. The survey consisted of five prompts regarding their English learner background, daily language exposure, the targeted goals for the academic year, potential obstacles, and their concepts

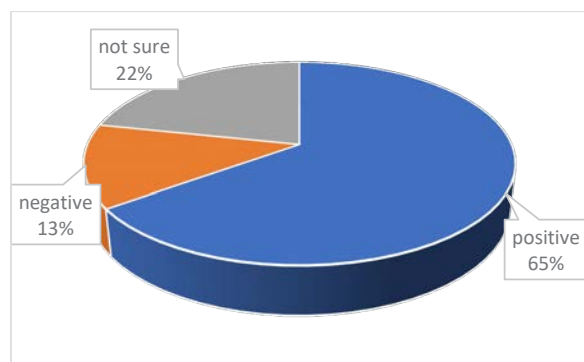
of an ideal English lesson. Participation of first-year students (N=83) was voluntary and anonymous.

State of the research. Understanding of students' specific needs and challenges enables designing activities that ensure engagement and participation. By incorporating elements that reflect students' interests and expectations, teachers of English can create lessons that are linguistically enriching and personally meaningful. In addition, by sharing their individual learning experiences and their vision of English classes, students take responsibility for their own learning and become more autonomous which is a key component in sustaining motivation (Harmer, 2007: 21). Identifying the students' previous language learning experiences and their beliefs is the initial step in the process of autonomous individualization for students of engineering specialties (Lavrysh, 2023: 48). Aimed at boosting motivation of students, learning more about technical university students' experiences as English learners becomes especially imperative during wartime, as the experience of studying in Ukraine under martial law is about finding balance between safety and quality of educational process (Ameridze et al., 2022: 51).

Results and Discussion. The paper presents the results of the survey completed by first-year technical university students at the beginning of the first semester of 2023/2024 academic year highlighting their English learner background, daily language exposure, the targeted goals for the academic year, potential obstacles, and their concepts of an ideal English lesson.

1. Background as a Learner of English. Technical university students are generally characterized by their preferences of precision and specialization. Their interest to learning English is preconditioned by the necessity to access and comprehend technical literature, research papers, and documentation. Thus, technical university students are characterized by a pragmatic and application-driven approach to language acquisition.

First-year students shared their experiences and background related to learning English as a second language (ESL). More than half of the respondents were positive about their learning background (65%), mentioning when they started learning English (as a baby, in kindergarten, preschool, primary school, etc.), indicating number of years spent learning English (11-13), attending language schools (London School of English, IQ school, DuoLingo, Green Forest, British Council), taking additional classes with tutors, living abroad for some time, taking part in English language competitions, as well as travelling abroad (See Picture 1).



Pic. 1. First-year students' responses about their experience as ESL learners

The rest of students were quite negative about their background stating that “distance learning didn’t work out”, “I know English so bad”, “My English language skills are very low”, “... additional classes yielded nothing. It was awful”, “I almost don’t speak English”, “I hardly studied it in school for certain reasons”, “Very bad”, “At school I was taught it poorly and now it is very difficult to adapt to the institute”. Some respondents just recently started to learn English, confessing that “I study English 1 year with a teacher”, “I have been studying English for 2 years”, etc.

2. Daily Usage of English. For technical university students English is a part of their daily academic and professional routine. It opens access to complex technical texts, communicating with peers on international projects, presenting research findings.

Responding to the question about using English in everyday life, seventy-six percent of first-year students confirmed that they were engaged in watching movies, playing games, listening to audio podcasts, using social networks and taking part in discussions etc. (Chugai, 2023: 201). They highlighted benefits of learning English like not using translating apps anymore, speaking to people when travelling abroad, watching short videos without subtitles, playing computer games online with foreigners. In their comments some first-year students regret that use English only at the lessons, “...speaking remains a problem for me.... I am embarrassed to speak, because I speak with terrible mistakes” and think about changing this situation, “I want to devote more time with English speaking people” (Chugai, 2023: 202).

3. Goals for the Academic Year. Setting goals for technical university students is related to the practical demands of their field developing technical

writing skills, mastering effective presentations, interacting within the international community in their specific area of specialty. It is undisputable that goal-setting and feedback are closely connected as “feedback is the information about the attainment of learning goals related to the task or performance”. It is advisable for both teachers and students to address the questions “Where am I/are they going? How am I/are they going? Where to next?”. By integrating these three questions it is possible to make feedback effective (Hattie, Timperley, 2007: 88-90).

According to our research, ninety-eight percent of the respondents provided detailed answers to the question about their goals for this course of English focusing on improving their “English level”, “becoming fluent in English”, “upgrading English”, “speaking English fluently”, “becoming better at conversation”, “articulating my thoughts”, “getting level B1-B2”, “raising the level of grammar and vocabulary”, “having excellent pronunciation”, “professional English”, listening, writing, learning something new, revise the rules, “get my marks for a good grade”. Some students wrote about English needed for studying abroad, “discovering many different resources” for themselves, “studying cybersecurity”. The results of our research are in accordance with the results of “Online Self-Regulated Learning Questionnaire” conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, which indicated that ESP students had a high level of setting goals in their learning (Kustini, 2022: 120).

4. Potential Obstacles. English language mastery for technical university students demands dealing with disciplinary intricacies, specialized terminology, technical coursework. They need targeted scaffolding to bridge the gap between technical expertise and linguistic proficiency. It is important to motivate technical university students by appealing to their understanding of what they will need in their professional lives (Master, 2004: xvii). Distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemics added the necessity to adapt the learning process to a digital space, which demanded flexibility and independence, social emotional support and technological resources first of all (Jurs, Kulberga, 2021: 954).

Responding to the question about possible obstacles which could prevent them from achieving their goals, students confessed that the main obstacles were related to laziness (22 percent of all the possible choices) and to their characteristics as learners, “myself” (20 percent) (See Picture 2).

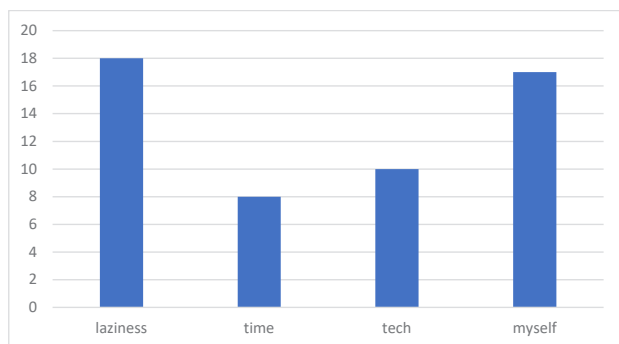


Fig. 2. First-year students' responses about obstacles which prevent them from achieving their goals

Two more obstacles were technical problems (12 percent) and timing (10 percent). Some students do not think there may be any obstacles (8 percent), others think about combination of laziness and their characteristics as learners (8 percent), laziness and timing (6 percent), laziness and technical problems (5 percent), timing and their characteristics as learners (5 percent).

Respondents supported their answers by explanations, "...it mostly depends on me. If I work as I should, I will achieve y goals", "Nothing can stop me", "Do not be lazy and work hard", "foreign languages are not easy for me", "It is difficult to build a logical chain while learning any language", "I'm lazy and it's difficult to memorize" new words, "if we don't have enough time, it can be fixed with making a plan and time management, but, unfortunately, we can't repair and fix electricity". A few students wrote about technical and psychological problems because of wartime "depression, social anxiety because of the situation in our country", "blackouts", "constant firing of rockets", "war in our country". The results of our research are in line with findings which indicated that ineffective time management (30.7%) was the most serious problems for students during Covid-19 quarantine (Ameridze et al., 2022: 51).

5. Ideal English Lessons. Presumably, envisioning ideal English lessons for technical university students involves technical relevance and practical application. An effective lesson should integrate real-world scenarios, technical vocabulary, and collaborative projects, preparing them to face the challenges in their future professional life. However, teachers and students often have different concepts on factors which make lessons effective. For instance, the previous research confirmed the necessity of critical feedback for students and teachers, but demonstrated the differences as well. While teachers preferred providing feedback after activities, students expected to be corrected during

activities (Chugai, Ogienko, 2021: 10). Eventually, choices of approaches, methods or tools to use in ESL class depend on the attitudes and beliefs of teachers which are predetermined by the particular time and place (Dellar, Walkley, 2017: 8). At the same time students' attitude to games and fun at the English lessons did not change, comparing the results of the surveys during the Covid-19 quarantine and wartime, it was definitely positive (Chugai, 2020: 442).

According to the results of our research, most students (about ninety percent) have some understanding of what an ideal lesson should be. Responding to the question about an ideal lesson students mentioned interesting topics to discuss, practice speaking and listening, acting role plays and dialogues, revision of grammar rules, learning new vocabulary, playing games, watching videos and doing tests, a variety of activities to involve all the participants. Practically every student mentioned importance of speaking, as one respondent write, "pure speaking lessons are my dream come true", "an ideal lesson is a lesson when we talk a lot".

Some students focused on a friendly atmosphere at the lesson, when "a lesson is like conversation with a friend", "when we enjoy our time", "a teacher does not humiliate a student for not knowing the language well". Instead, such students "should be encouraged", "students should respect the teacher, and the teacher should respect the students".

Besides positive attitude, scaffolding is also important, "help in difficult task", "teacher's support is important for me", "with help if needed". Some students confess that they are shy, because of previous negative experience "have a little fear", they would like "to be called infrequently and not at the beginning of the lesson", as it is necessary "to have time to prepare and calm down". Speaking English all the time was also mentioned, which "allows over time to better understand English by ear". An offline mode was mentioned as a must for an ideal lesson. An opportunity for self-assessment was another important feature. One response even had a formula of an ideal lesson, "70% of practice, 25% of theory, and 5% of joy". It was difficult to describe an ideal lesson for about ten percent of students, they either did not know, never thought about that or "do trust a teacher and prefer their way" being not choosy, stating that "I'm fine with everything".

As we can see from students' comments, they have various social-emotional experiences and needs, related to their personal, family problems or hardships caused by wartime. Dealing with social-emotional struggles, learning how to manage and express their emotions, requires teacher's support

and understanding (Pentón Herrera, Martínez-Alba, 2021: 8).

Conclusions and prospects of further research.

Considering their learning background, more than half of first-year students are positive and even proud of learning English for more than ten years and attending additional classes. However, a third of the students either just started learning English recently, or it was not effective. In spite of the fact that majority of first-year students used English in their everyday life regularly, which indicates a high level of their autonomy, practically the third avoided doing that. Therefore, it is necessary to explain the importance of learner's autonomy, which is a starting point for life-long learning. At the same time practically all first-year students were able to define their goals for their course of English, ranging from "upgrading English" to "getting B2 level".

Listing four obstacles to achieving their goals, students most often mentioned their laziness (22%)

and their characteristics as learners (22%), less often were mentioned technical problems (12%) and timing (10%). Obviously, distance learning, implemented after the Covid-19 outbreak, caused some problems related to self-management of students. Describing their ideal lessons of English, students emphasized the importance of developing speaking skills, interactive tasks, mentioned a friendly atmosphere, teacher's support and understanding.

In conclusion, a comprehensive understanding of technical university students' English learning trajectory necessitates a keen awareness of their unique backgrounds, the role of English in their daily lives, targeted academic goals, potential obstacles, and their concepts of an ideal learning experience. Being aware of that, teachers of English can adjust their pedagogical approaches, fostering not just language proficiency, but a holistic integration of English in the life of technical university students.

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