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ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC STUDY: SPEAKING

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Abstract. The development of General and Academic English skills is crucial for students' educational success. Academic environment is a professional environment where students are expected to communicate their ideas in a clear and consistent way. What enables students to express their thoughts effectively is their critical thinking skills combined with Academic English fluency. Presentations, seminars and discussions are those academic formats that require a high level of Academic English knowledge. To facilitate students' academic interactions, an effective and consistent instructional support is needed. Teaching academic reading and writing is equally important. So, developing Academic English proficiency in all basic language domains should become a priority for the English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors. The aim of the article is to show the importance of mastering and using the skills of Academic English — namely, speaking skills — in the context of academic discourse. Research objectives: 1) to define the concept of “academic discourse”, 2) to identify the main components of Academic English; and 3) to describe and justify the main practices in the context of scientific and professional communication in which English speaking skills are used.

Keywords: Academic English, academic environment, academic discourse, academic speaking skills, academic proficiency

АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ДЛЯ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИХ ЦЕЛЕЙ: ГОВОРЕНИЕ

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Аннотация. Повышение общей грамотности владения ИЯ (иностранном языком) и развитие навыков использования академического ИЯ имеют большое значение для учебных и профессиональных успехов студентов. В академической среде важно уметь четко и грамотно выражать свои мысли, эффективно используя навыки критического мышления и свободного владения академическим стилем иностранного языка. Для формирования высокого уровня владения академическим стилем необходим комплексный и последовательный подход к методике преподавания академического разговорного английского. Нельзя недооценивать и важность обучения навыкам академического чтения и письма. Таким образом, развитие академической языковой компетенции — это комплексный подход, включающий в себя формирование академических навыков всех видов речевой деятельности. Цель статьи — раскрыть важность овладения и использования навыков академической языковой коммуникации, а именно, говорения, в рамках академического дискурса. Задачи исследования:

- 1) Дать определение понятию «академический дискурс»;
- 2) Выявить основные компоненты академического английского языка;
- 3) Описать и обосновать основные способы практического применения навыков устной академической речи в ситуациях научной и профессиональной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: академический английский, академическая среда, академический дискурс, навыки говорения, академическая успеваемость

Studying abroad is a great opportunity for college students to see the world, to experience other cultures and to receive an education at the same time. However, this new experience requires a higher level of English language fluency, both social (general) and academic. While social English is not restricted by any specific language skills and focuses on general language abilities, Academic English, on the other hand, focuses on the students' specific skills and needs and is used in fairly formal situations, such as academic discussions, debates, interviews, presentations and speeches. Besides, educational placement abroad depends on successful IELTS, TOEFL or SAT exam results that test applicants' English language fluency. That is why providing students with solid Academic English knowledge becomes extremely important. Not only does it facilitate students' advancement in formal education but also makes them full-fledged of a professional academic discourse.

Academic discourse encompasses the idea of a dialogue, or communication, the language used, and a precise format that facilitates a high level of communication in the academic environment. According to K. Hyland, academic discourse refers to the ways of thinking and using a specific language which exist in the academy [6]. In her research "Constructive features of academic discourse", Ya. V. Zubkova characterizes academic discourse as a professional pedagogical communication in a higher educational institution aimed at training highly qualified specialists [2, p. 28]. The communicative aspect of academic discourse is emphasized by D. R. Drozdova who views academic discourse as a "dynamic informative language interaction between the manipulator (lecturer) and the recipient (student), on the one hand, and between the manipulator, the recipient and the teaching material, on the other" [1].

With the emphasis on the communicative aspect, well-organized academic discourse becomes essential to students' success and enables progress in all types of academic work. Full and productive participation in academic world requires mastery of academic language.

Academic language refers to the specific and general vocabulary, syntax and sentence structures, discourse genres, and identities what students must be able to manipulate in order to successfully engage in school-based literacies [3, p. 97]. Dutro and Moran believe that students who are proficient in academic language are able to "interpret and infer meaning from oral and written language, discern precise meaning and information from texts, relate ideas and information, recognize the conventions of various genres, and enlist a variety of linguistic strategies on behalf of a wide range of communicative purposes" [3, p. 97]. Moreover, different academic disciplines necessitate the use of specific vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and discourse or register features [3, p. 97].

J. Cummins points out that academic language is more cognitively demanding than everyday interactions, making it difficult for students to master. Moreover, it depends on certain linguistic skills that include subject-specific vocabulary and phraseology, standardized grammar, discourse structures, and certain pragmatic conventions, such as the use of a formal tone or register in both speaking and writing, the use of set structures and procedures for completing tasks, and the demonstration of compliance through certain postures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. [5, p. 1].

There are multiple components of academic language that depend on a particular context. They are all part of language abilities that have to be mastered by the students to meet academic expectations. These include [5, p. 2]:

1. Language functions: describing, summarizing, categorizing, explaining, comparing/contrasting, recording, etc.
2. Language genres: oral reports, group discussions, debates, choral singing, poetry, drama, textbooks, essays, research reports, etc.
3. Discourse includes the structures of written and oral language, as well as how students talk, write, and participate in knowledge construction in ways that are appropriate

both to their development and to the discipline.

4. Language demands are specific ways that academic language (vocabulary, functions, discourse, syntax) is used by students to participate in learning tasks through reading, writing, listening and/or speaking to demonstrate their understanding.

In this article, we will cover four basic language genres designed to achieve specific academic purposes. These are **presentations, seminars, discussions and thesis defense**. These activities aim to improve students' ability to clearly express their views and ideas on topics related to their fields and to develop their critical thinking skills along with Academic English skills.

Oral presentation can be used in a language classroom as an effective tool for improving students' communicative competence. This activity gives students an opportunity to get to use a foreign language to communicate with others in a natural way. Teachers' task comes down to encouraging their students 'to take initiative, think beyond the mandated textbook, and use language creatively, purposefully, and interactively' [4, p. 202].

For most language teachers, the **five major benefits** of using oral presentations in the classroom are:

- *They are student-centered.* When students are asked to give an oral presentation, it is one of the few times in the language classroom when the students have control over the content and the flow of the class. The students are given the freedom to choose the subject they want to discuss, the vocabulary and to decide on the ways of how to present and explain their topic. Oral presentations also provide students with a process-driven activity that requires them to use English while both preparing and giving the presentation.
- *They require the use of all four language skills.* Speaking is the essential component of giving a presentation. However, a properly structured academic presentation also

requires students to research and plan out their presentations. That involves a higher level of reading comprehension and writing skills. During a presentation, students also have an opportunity to practice their listening skills when they act as audience members. Besides, asking follow-up questions and interacting with the presenter helps them confirm their understanding while practicing their speaking skills.

- *Students are engaged in authentic language tasks.* Presentations also provide students with more *authentic ways* of practicing English than simple speaking drills. That's where students are required to use a foreign language to understand the topic they are presenting and communicate this understanding to others. Besides developing linguistic and communicative competencies, authentic tasks encourage students to actively apply their research and critical thinking skills.
- *They have value outside the language classroom.* Presentation is a great way to improve students' abilities in ways that can be beneficial for their future careers. This is especially true in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context, where there is a much higher chance that students will be asked to use English at their future jobs.
- *Presentations motivate students.* Oral presentations do more than just give students an opportunity to practice language skills. They give them an opportunity to teach something new to their peers. A properly structured presentation encourages students to take initiative and use the language in a more creative way, in areas other than their fields of study.

One of the joys of teaching a presentation class is seeing students gain confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy while they are working independently, or as a small group, to produce and give an effective presentation.

Teaching **Academic Presentation** can involve the following steps [9]:

1. Macro Organization

The macro organization of an academic presentation should consist of *purpose, objectives, outline, introduction, and conclusion*.

- The *purpose* is a statement that suggests the general goal of the presentation.
- The *objectives* are the specific goals that one wants to achieve by the end of the presentation.
- The *outline* refers to the different parts, sections or components in the presentation.
- *Introduction* is a word origin, an interesting question, a definition of a term, an analogy, or even a personal experience.
- The *conclusion* only summarizes the key points of the talk. One can begin the conclusion using the phrases such as: ‘in a nutshell’, ‘the bottom line is...’, ‘what it boils down to is ...’, ‘let me end by saying’, ‘I’d like to finish by emphasizing’, ‘in conclusion, I’d like to say’, ‘and on that final note that concludes my presentation’ or other similar phrases. No new information should be introduced to this part.

2. Micro Organization

The second step is teaching *micro-organization*, which refers to *textual coherence, transitions, and connections* from one part of the presentation to another. A student can try the following useful phrases to make a smooth transition: ‘Let’s move on to the next part’, ‘Next, let’s look at...’, or ‘Next, I am going to talk about’, ‘I now would like to move on to the next part’, ‘This leads me to my next point’, ‘Let’s now turn to’ etc.

3. Thesis and Support

Teaching the idea of thesis and support in an academic presentation is no less important than the first two steps. Students should be able to present their ideas clearly with detailed explanations, plenty of examples and analogies.

4. Strategies to involve the audience

Practical strategies to involve the audience are: *questions, comprehension checks, and tasks*.

- It’s always better to ask specific *questions* instead of general questions.
- *Comprehension checks* are essential tools to get audience involved in presentation.

The ways to get the audience’s attention at this point are: ‘Is everyone with me so far?’, ‘Are we on the same page?’, ‘Can you repeat the definition of...?’

- *Tasks* are small exercises to check the audience’s understanding. The presenter can throw a question to the audience and encourage them to discuss it with the person sitting next to him/her for approximately thirty seconds to one minute. The audience will be asked to share their thoughts with others.

5. Feedback

It’s important to give the audience appropriate feedback. The ways to respond are: ‘good try’ or ‘good guess’ if the answer is incorrect. If the answer is correct, a positive response like ‘good’, ‘excellent’ or ‘terrific’ would be appropriate. The presenter should never use the words ‘incorrect’ or ‘wrong’ that could potentially embarrass those who try. Sometimes, the presenter may not know the answer to the questions coming from the audience. In this case, he or she can say ‘I don’t know an immediate answer to your question’, ‘I am not sure about that’, ‘Let’s look it up’, etc.

6. Non-verbal communication

Facial expressions, movements and gestures are basic means of non-verbal communication. It’s important to teach students to approach the audience during the presentation and even encourage them to come closer to them from time to time while speaking.

7. Visual materials

Besides PowerPoint, pictures, illustration or even real objects are a great supplement for a presentation.

8. Pacing

It’s also very important to teach students to balance the amount of information they have to present with the speed of presentation and with the amount of time allotted. It would be wise to present the most important information first, and cut the least important parts if there is no time left.

Excellent oral presentation skills are crucial for the students’ successful **thesis defense**. They have to be able to follow a specific defense procedure that involves presenting the subject

and answering the follow-up questions. A thorough preparation will provide them with an opportunity to not only defend their diploma successfully but to properly respond to criticism and to discuss the subject and interact with the examiners.

There is a set of expressions that can be used to make a presentation or a thesis defense sound coherent and flow smoothly:

1. The subject / topic of my paper (thesis) is ...
2. The relevance of this topic / thesis is / lies in the fact that ...
3. The objective / purpose of the study is to evaluate/ assess / analyze ...
4. To achieve this objective, the following tasks have been set and accomplished ... / The tasks of the study are ...
5. Materials and methods of our research / The following methods have been applied ...
6. The following conclusions have been made / We draw the following conclusions ...
7. To sum it up ...

There is also some basic vocabulary the students can use to make it easier for the examiners to follow their train of thought:

- Here you can see ... / as you can see ...
- In that slide you can see ...
- The slide / diagram / graph / table shows / illustrates ...
- First of all / first, then / second, next / third, in addition, besides, moreover, finally, due to / as a result of / it results in ...

Participation in **seminars and discussions** with other students is also a part of academic studies. Usually, **seminars** take various formats. Some of them are led by the instructors, in others the students themselves take charge. In either case, the students are required to be able to state their viewpoint clearly, with a certain confidence.

A presentation on a given topic followed by a whole class discussion is the basic component of a **student-led seminar (SLS)**. SLS works loosely around the *peer-led team learning approach* proposed by Gosser et al. (2000)

where students teach others in small groups [7, p. 4]. A successful outcome is guaranteed if the students are able to do the following:

- explain the concept in their own words;
- identify and use examples to illustrate the concept;
- relate it to familiar concepts;
- describe its application in real-life contexts, and
- indicate its relevance to personal interest.

In addition, student-led seminars illustrate the Feynman learning technique which emphasizes the way to learn something by teaching it to others. Teaching a concept to someone who lacks knowledge of that concept helps one understand that concept better [7, p. 4]. SLSs are, thus, different from presentations where students read out carefully written reports in front of a class and where reports are based on a topic chosen by the teacher. Such presentations do not expect a very active peer participation.

SLS can include the following phases:

1. Students plan and structure the seminars on a given topic. At this stage, materials are located and shared among the students; PowerPoint presentations are being prepared; debate, quizzes, discussions, role-play, problem-solving activities and other tasks are being designed.
2. Pre-seminar conversation with a course instructor. These discussions function as seminar rehearsals. Content competence alone does not guarantee an effective delivery of what is learned; teaching effectively requires a different kind of language or *metalinguage* to deliver the seminar topics.
3. The actual seminar.
4. Post-seminar assessment and teacher's feedback. This can include the assessment of the content learned and understood by the students as well as the assessment of the seminar itself.

Group **discussions** is another format where Academic English speaking skills are required to generate a productive conversation. During this activity, students are engaged in a variety

of cognitive and linguistic tasks during which they actively apply abstract ideas and critical thinking skills, interact with each other, defend their point of view and exchange ideas.

Discussion skills are essential both for students in their study process and for teachers in their professional work. Both students and teachers have opportunities to participate in international projects, students and teachers' exchange programs, international conferences and seminars. Academic English knowledge and discussion skills are necessary for participation in these kinds of activities.

Discussions have a lot of advantages:

- they help to develop organized thinking skills such as: analyzing, synthesis and evaluation;
- they develop students' motivation and interest in English learning process;
- they provide an opportunity to receive an immediate response;
- they provide an opportunity for everyone to work actively with ideas and concepts;
- they help students gain the feeling of belonging [4, p. 202].

During a discussion, an instructor has to be a facilitator and a counsellor. It means that s/he has to join the discussion when it is necessary. More able students can be trusted to lead the discussion themselves. They can choose a topic, find appropriate material, prepare questions and manage the whole discussion procedure. Feedback on both content and language is an extremely important component. It gives students a sense of closure and validates what they have done.

Discussions can have different formats. The most common of them are *problem solving*, *brainstorming* and *open discussion*. Whichever the format, it requires a high level of verbal and non-verbal communication skills of both instructors and students.

The choice of *appropriate questions* is an essential part of the discussion. Clear, open, well-structured questions always facilitate any discussion. Besides, discussions are very beneficial for the learning environment and students' personal growth and success. While collabora-

ting, students are learning to respect others and perceive themselves as part of a group.

For the discussion to be effective and engaging, proper lexical skills are needed. In this respect, students should constantly be encouraged to broaden their vocabulary, understand the nuances and become more competent in the choice of words and idioms. W.M. Rivers believes that students won't be able to use language structures and functions for comprehensible communication without a well-developed vocabulary [8, p. 203].

To successfully participate in any of the speaking activities mentioned above, one is required to have a proficient Academic English background. To achieve English language fluency in an academic environment can be very challenging. Thus, providing an effective instructional support is an urgent task for the educators. After studying the teaching experience of other English instructors and using our own experience, we have come across some **practices** that we can use to help students improve their academic speaking skills:

- *To explicitly state language objectives.* The students should have a clear understanding of how and where they can apply the new knowledge and how to integrate Academic English into the learning environment. Besides, students should be required to actively participate in academic discourse arranged by the instructor.
- *To teach academic and some of content vocabulary.* It would be technically correct to frontload the essential vocabulary which students need to engage in academic discussions or presentations. Sometimes, a few key vocabulary units, both academic and content, are enough to aid a discussion and deepen students' comprehension. This vocabulary can be introduced with the help of word banks, visuals, graphic organizers, etc. that students can reference when asked to speak. Referring to students' cultural and educational background as well as their experiences will boost their confidence and will encourage them to voluntarily engage in various academic interactions.

- *To provide patterns to structure the conversation.* For students to engage in productive conversations, instructors should model and explicitly teach the ways of how to engage in academic discourse. To accomplish this, instructors can offer sentence frames that include both academic and/or content vocabulary. For example, a frame such as, “After reading and analyzing the chapter, I ...” By offering a sentence frame, students are equipped with the proper language to begin the conversation. To consolidate this speaking skill, pair work can be used in which students interact with each other recreating certain academic situations. Another way to structure an academic conversation is to use a fishbowl conversation technique. In this group work, students are separated into an inner and outer circle. While the inner circle is having a discussion, the outer circle is listening and taking notes. It’s a student-centered discussion format that improves students’ comprehension and develops their group discussion skills.
- *To motivate students to use authentic reading materials.* This will help students expand their English vocabulary and advance in both specific and general knowledge.
- *To reduce students’ anxiety while they talk.* Speaking in public is not an easy thing to do for many. Speaking a foreign language in front of others makes it twice as hard. Therefore, instructors should provide multiple opportunities for the students to engage in pair or small groups work.

Such work is a good background for the students to improve their speaking competency and help them overcome their speaking barriers.

When giving a speech or making an academic presentation, students are expected to be able to effectively justify their point of view, analyze, draw conclusions, argue, and use their critical thinking to evaluate information. For many students, the concept of academic discourse (oral and written) and academic language as its critical component is not self-evident. Therefore, effective instruction is essential to give students insight into academic discourse and equip them with the right tools to interact successfully in the academic environment. It is also important to keep in mind the particular needs and contexts in which students are learning. For example, in a seminar, students need to practice the conventions for group discussion, while for presentations, students need help planning and organizing the content. Effective work on communicating the content should also serve to provide visual clarity and a good level of persuasive argumentation. An engaging and productive discussion comes from the equal participation of all students. Therefore, it is important to provide students with techniques that will enable them not only to participate in a discussion, but also to lead it. In conclusion, it is critical to emphasize the importance of teaching academic speaking because it gives students a structure, a rationale, and a focus for what they want to convey. All of these are effective tools for a successful academic and everyday communication.

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