

Efficiency of English for Academic Purposes Activity in Students' Language Education: Developing the System of External and Internal Perspectives

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Abstract

The paradigm change from an input based teaching/learning process to an outcome based process (D. Bluma, 2008, p. 673) reveals efficiency of contribution applied to enhance students' learning outcomes to become particularly important for the development of education and culture change in the constantly changing environment. Aim of the research is to analyze efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence in language education. The analysis involves a process of analyzing the meaning of the key concepts *English for Academic Purposes activity* and *outcome evaluation*. Moreover, the study demonstrates how the key concepts are related to the idea of *efficiency*. The qualitative evaluation research has been used. The sample involved 10 master students of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy, Latvia, in 2007-2008. The students' communicative competence was a criterion of efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity. Descriptive statistics was implemented for primary data analysis. Secondary data processing included test reliability. The findings of the research allow drawing conclusions on efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence. Directions of further research are elaborated.

1. Introduction

English for Academic Purposes activity provides students with the appropriate skills and competences for innovation and creates new knowledge within the "knowledge triangle" of education, research and innovation (Life Long Learning for Creativity and Innovation, 2008, p. 3). The paradigm change from an input based teaching/learning process to an outcome based process (D. Bluma, 2008, p. 673) reveals efficiency of contribution applied to enhance students' learning outcomes to become particularly important for the development of education and culture change in the constantly changing environment.

Aim of the research is to analyze efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence in language education. The research involves a process of analyzing the meaning of the key concepts *English for Academic Purposes activity* and *outcome evaluation*. Moreover, the research demonstrates how the key concepts are related to the idea of *efficiency*. The research presents how the steps of the process are related: English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence in language education → efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity → empirical study within a multicultural environment.

The conceptual framework of the present research is based on the approach to efficiency as the relationship between inputs and outputs. The methodological foundation of the present research to analyze efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence is formed by the System-Constructivist Theory based on Parsons's system theory (Parsons, 1976) on any activity as a system, Luhmann's theory (Luhmann, 1988) on communication as a system, the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1973; Goffman, 1977) and the theory of subjectivism (Groeben, 1986). The System-Constructivist Theory emphasizes that human being's point of view depends on the subjective aspect, namely,

- everyone has his/her own system of external and internal perspectives that is a complex open system and
- experience plays the central role in a construction process (E. Maslo, 2007, p. 39).

Furthermore, the approach of the development of the system of external and internal perspectives as highlighted in Figure 1 (Ahrens, Zaščerinska, 2010, p. 181) is considered to be applicable to the present research.

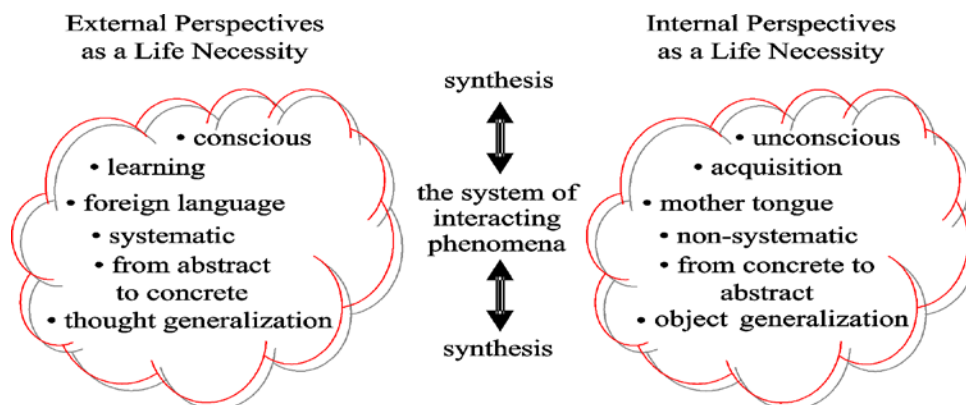


Figure 1: Development of the system of external and internal perspectives

The paper is organized as following: Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework on efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the improvement of students' communicative competence. Research design is revealed in Section 3. The findings of the research are presented and interpreted in Section 4. Finally, some concluding remarks and directions for further studies are elaborated in Section 5.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining English for Academic Purposes Activity

English for Academic Purposes activity based on the Activity Theory (A. Leont'ev, 1978, p. 7) comprises the use of terms such as *English for Academic Purposes activity*, *English for Academic Purposes studies*, *English studies for academic purposes* and *use of English for Academic Purposes*. The terms *activity*, *studies* and *use* should be used synonymously.

English for Academic Purposes activity in the context of the present research is defined as shared aim oriented joint activity according to certain common norms, over some period of time that provides joint social interaction and cognition for each participant and increases opportunities of gaining social experience. The scientific novelty of English for Academic Purposes activity reveals the content development / the content process / procedural aspect of the content within the gradual tertiary teaching/learning, namely,

- from the educator-student interaction with the existing knowledge,
- through the peer-interaction with the knowledge variety and
- to the student's action for the knowledge improvement.

The implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity comprises three phases.

Phase 1 of implementing English for Academic Purposes activity is aimed at a safe environment for all the students. In order to provide a safe environment, the essence of constructive social interaction and its organizational regulations are considered by both the educator and students. The present phase of English for Academic Purposes activity is organized in a frontal way involving the students to participate, namely,

- Educator makes previous experience rational. The activity includes choice of forms and use of resources that motivates the students. Teaching process is under the educator's guidance.

- Peers do not participate in guidance of the teaching/learning process. Activity is carried out qualitatively only with the help of the educator. Dependence on the educator is observed. The students study alongside but not together.
- Students develop the system of external and internal perspectives, create the system of the aim and objectives, search for a variety of information source and obtain techniques of information compiling. Students fulfil the activity qualitatively only with the educator's help. Dependence on the educator is observed, not dependent on peers.

Phase 2 of implementing English for Academic Purposes activity is designed for the students' analysis of an open academic problem situation and their search for a solution. The same materials can be prepared for all of the group students but they are different whereas learning styles and opportunities are different (I. Maslo, 2006a, p. 30). This phase of English for Academic Purposes activity involves the students to act in peers, namely,

- Educator functions as a resource and moderator. Educator delegates his/her duties to the students.
- Peers regulate each other: it is typical for students to regulate each other. The students study together, study from others and teach others. The teaching/learning process is under peer's guidance. Activity's forms and methods are exchanged.
- The students fulfil the activity qualitatively with the peers' help. Partial independence is observed. The relevant activity is performed jointly with other students and with shared responsibility. It is typical for students to regulate each other.

Phase 3 of implementing English for Academic Purposes activity emphasizes the students' self-regulation with use of assessment of the process and self-evaluation of the results, namely,

- Educator functions as a consultant and an assistant. Educator delegates his/her duties to the students.
- Peers have consultative and advisory functions. Students' self-regulation is typical. The students study independently.
- The students fulfil the activity qualitatively on their own, and their independence is observed. The participants' self-regulation on the basis of the process assessment and the result self-evaluation is used. The relevant activity is performed with a high sense of responsibility. Self-regulation is typical, and a student does not depend on peers.

English for Academic Purposes activity is characterized by its efficiency.

2.2 Determining Efficiency of English for Academic Purposes Activity

Efficiency involves quality and effectiveness as depicted in Figure 2 by the author of the present research. Quality is an idea of what are the "right things" that we are doing, and procedures for checking that we are "doing things right" (L. Muresan, 2003, p. 82). Effectiveness is the aim achievement at a certain quality spending minimal time and energy (I. Žogla, 2001, p. 197).

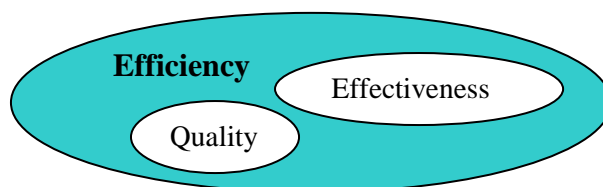


Figure 2: The elements of efficiency

English for Academic Purposes activity is efficient if the inputs (opportunities of gaining experience, namely, English for Academic Purposes activity) produce the maximum output (a level of quality of student's activity (I. Maslo, 2006b, p. 54) (European Commission, 2006, p. 2). Therein, students' communicative competence is the outcome criterion of English for Academic Purposes activity.

3. Research Design

3.1 The Research Purpose and Question

The present research was conducted during the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity in the *English for Academic Purposes* course within the master programme *School Management* of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy, Latvia, in 2007-2008 to examine efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence in order to promote the quality of studies. Its topicality is determined by ever-increasing flow of information in which an important role is laid to the communicative competence to get information and gain experience. The research question is as follows: has English for Academic Purposes activity been efficient to promote the development of students' communicative competence?

3.2 Research Methodology

Checking the efficiency of pedagogic interventions and organizational changes in complex and constantly self-regenerating environments (E. Kardoff, 2004, p. 137) employs the qualitative evaluation research (U. Flick, 2004, p. 149). The methodology of the present qualitative evaluation research is depicted in Figure 3 by the author of the present research.

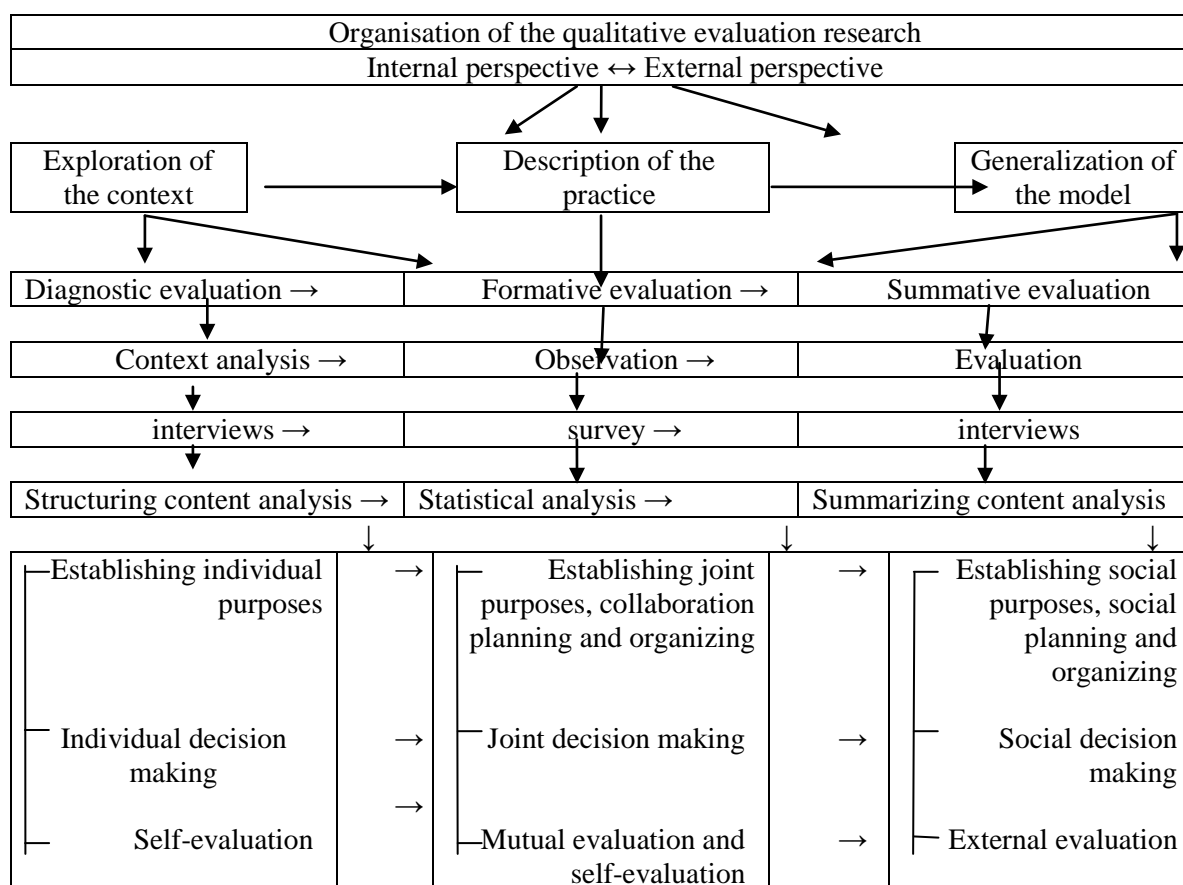


Figure 3: The scheme of the organization model of the qualitative evaluation research to examine efficiency of English studies for academic purposes for the development of students' communicative competence

The model of the qualitative evaluation research indicates how the steps of the process are related following a logical chain: exploration of the context → description of the practice → generalization of the model. The basic directions of the development of the qualitative evaluation research designed by the author of the present research are determined as following:

- from diagnostic evaluation in Phase 1 through formative evaluation in Phase 2 to summative evaluation in Phase 3,

- from context analysis in Phase 1 through description of the practice in Phase 2 to generalization of the model in Phase 3,
- from interviews in Phase 1 through surveys in Phase 2 to interviews in Phase 3,
- from structuring content analysis in Phase 1 through statistical analysis in Phase 2 to summarizing content analysis in Phase 3 and
- from self-evaluation in Phase 1 through internal evaluation in Phase 2 to external evaluation in Phase 3.

The phase of exploration of the context analysis of the qualitative evaluation research is aimed at determining the present situation of English for Academic Purposes activity in promoting the students' motivation and their readiness to implement the joint activity. The description of the practice analyzes differences in the level of features researched. The phase of generalization of the model determines whether the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity is efficient for the development of students' communicative competence. And it shows directions of further research.

3.3. The Respondents of the Research

The subjects of the present research are 19 respondents, namely,

- two English educators of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy,
- 10 students within the *English for Academic Purposes* course in the professional Master's study programme *School Management* of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy, Latvia, in 2007-2008 and
- seven researchers in the field of educational research from different countries.

The aim of the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity in the *English for Academic Purposes* course is considered within the goal of studies in the two-year master's programme *School Management*, namely, to prepare the master as a university-educated operational professional for school management with a knowledge of the relevant theories and with practical skills. The professional master study programme *School Management* provides the *English for Academic Purposes* course to facilitate students' research success, to support preparation for international Ph.D. programmes in the European Union, to promote further specialization in the chosen field and learning in a simulated environment. The aim of the *English for Academic Purposes* course is to improve students' communicative competence for the participation in international research activities. The objectives of the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity in the *English for Academic Purposes* course are to widen the students' social experience, namely, experience in social interaction and cognitive activity.

The group consisted of eight females and two males which is a typical representation to the proportion of female and male students in school management in Latvia. The age of the sample was from 23 to 48. In order to save the information of the present research confidential, the students' names and surnames were coded as follows: the female students were pointed out as F followed by a number, namely, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7 and F8, and the male students as M followed by a number, namely, M1 and M2.

All 10 students have got Bachelor Degree in different fields of education. Working experience of the students is different, too. The respondents represent different cultural backgrounds and diverse educational approaches that emphasize the study of an individual contribution to the development of students' communicative competence within English for Academic Purposes activity (I. Lūka, S. Ludborza, I. Maslo, 2009, p. 5).

English is a foreign language for all the students in the group. In accordance with the students' self-evaluation the levels of English are presented as follows: two students reached Level 2 (low), three students had Level 3 (critical), one student obtained Level 4 (average) and four students took Level 5 (optimal).

The students' mother tongues contribute to the successful foreign language learning and to become an instrument of bringing the students together more closely under certain conditions, namely, appropriate materials, teaching/learning methods and forms, motivation and friendly positioning of

the language educator (C. Abasheva, 2010, p. 431). The students' mother tongues are as following: Latvian for seven students and Russian for three students.

4. Findings of the Research

4.1 Analysis of the Student Self-Evaluation of the Research Results

In order to find out how each student's communicative competence changed after the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity the analysis of the students' self-evaluation of the communicative competence comprised the structured interviews of three questions, namely,

1. What is your attitude to English for Academic Purposes activity?
2. What have you learned in English for Academic Purposes activity?
3. How can you apply this knowledge in your professional field?

The aim of the interviews was to reveal the students' view on English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence.

No negative expressions were found that leads to a conclusion that the students were satisfied with their communicative competence as a criterion of learning outcome. Comparing the answers of those 10 students in the sample, the structured interviews are focused on the students' positive experience in forming their communicative competence, thereby developing the system of external and internal perspectives. For example, **Student F3** reveals English for Academic Purposes activity as the unity of external and internal perspectives:

"I think it is very good. Although the time for the English course is limited, we spent the time to focus on the presentation. And we gained some knowledge about other culture".

Most of the student's expressions on the positive experience in cognitive activity are as follows:

"I made the presentation and compared with others", "I can know the disadvantage of my presentation", "I learnt how to communicate to people in a proper way" and "I learned a lot of new words, presentation and communication skills".

The summarizing content analysis (P. Mayring, 2004, p. 269) of the structured interviews shows that English for Academic Purposes activity promotes the development of students' communicative competence. Moreover, English for Academic Purposes activity contributes to the safe and friendly teaching/learning environment for all the participants and provides the opportunities of constructive social interaction and cognitive activity.

4.2. Analysis of the Internal Evaluation of the Research Results

Internal evaluation involves internal evaluators, namely, students and educators of the educational establishment (R. Hahele, 2006, p. 151). Analysis of the internal evaluation of the students' communicative competence comprised the data processing, analysis, interpretation and analysis of the results of the pre-survey and post-survey of 10 first-year master students.

First, the use of the Cronbach's Alpha test shows the average level of reliability of the present questionnaire with the coefficient of reliability 0,828.

Then, the summary of the results of frequency reveals that the level of all the students' communicative competence has enriched, namely,

- one student from Level 2 (low) to Level 3 (critical),
- one student from Level 2 (low) to Level 4 (average),
- one student from Level 3 (critical) to Level 4 (average),
- two students from Level 3 (critical) to Level 5 (optimal),
- one student from Level 4 (average) to Level 6 (high),
- one student remained at the same Level 5 (optimal) and
- three students from Level 5 (optimal) to Level 6 (high).

Finally, the *Mean* results of the descriptive statistics demonstrate that the level of the students' communicative competence has changed in the post-survey (5) in comparison with the pre-survey (3,7).

Hence, considering judgment to be part of the art of statistics (G. Gigenzer, 2004, p. 603), the conclusion has been drawn that English for Academic Purposes activity influenced the development of the students' communicative competence demonstrated by the difference between the levels of the students' communicative competence in the pre- and post-survey.

4.3. Analysis of the External Evaluation of the Research Results

The external evaluation comprises seven researchers from different countries. It should be mentioned that all the researchers participated in the external evaluation of the research results are professors in the fields connected with educational research. All the seven researchers have decisively contributed to their fields of research. For example, the present research employs the finding of a researcher on the *quasi-concept*. The other investigates the use of external and internal perspectives in empirical studies, namely, the external perspective means viewing the world from the researcher's or scientist's view and the internal perspective – from the subject's view. All the seven researchers have got extensive experience in teaching through English for Academic Purposes. For example, three researchers provide teaching English for Academic Purposes to the students of educational sciences at tertiary level.

The analysis of the external evaluation of the research results comprised the non-structured interview of one question as following: What is the researcher's view on the present research on English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence? The aim of the non-structured interviews was to reveal the researchers' view on English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence.

For example, Researcher *EER3* considered the organization model of English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence to be a transformative methodology. The researcher stressed the following advantages of the present transformative methodology:

- focus of establishing a system,
- the fascinating idea of positioning the *quasi-concept* within the *quasi-autonomous zone*,
- viewing the overall personality of the learner,
- the fact that educators can indeed change the typical classroom environment, and that the theory could be highly successful in practice,
- good point to connect the external with the internal,
- Vygotsky's Law of Development selected,
- the scheme titled *Organisation of Productive Professional Environment*, including both external and internal factors,
- the unique approach: the basic directions of the development of the organization model of tertiary teaching/learning designed by the author of the present research are as follows: from existing concept to concept through quasi-concept that determine the essence and sequence of the implementation of the organization model for tertiary teaching/learning,
- developing newer constructs that will truly help the student to internalize new material and
- the student having the "ability to create knowledge".

The summarizing content analysis (P. Mayring, 2004, p. 269) of the data reveals that the respondents evaluate English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence positively. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that English for Academic Purposes activity enhances students' communicative competence.

5. Conclusions and Directions for Further Studies

The findings of the present research allow drawing conclusions on the efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity applied to enhance the students' communicative competence.

Regarding *quality assurance* it is evident that the students' communicative competence has been enriched. The students have gained their social experience for the development of the communicative competence, and, thus, the social experience changed into the means of gaining new opportunities and advantages. Irrespective of levels in the students' initial language capacity and different combination of languages, English for Academic Purposes activity has become an effective means of acquiring social experience by the students and has served as a motivating factor to continue language learning in order to improve their communicative competence. English for Academic Purposes activity resulted in the improved students' communicative competence. Therein, the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity has contributed to the development of the students' communicative competence.

Regarding *effectiveness of the educator's contribution to the students' communicative competence* it is evident that the students widened their experience in interaction thereby developing the system of external and internal perspectives with the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity. All the students' expressions of the self-evaluation are positive. Hence, the students' social experience and attitude are positive. That shows that experience and environment influence the studies and the communicative competence.

Data validity has been provided by the method and data triangulation. The validity of the qualitative evaluation research has been shown by the use of the mixed methods' approach to the data processing and analysis. Validity and reliability of the research results have been demonstrated by involving other researchers into the empirical study in several stages of the conducted research. As well as the external validity has been revealed by international co-operation, namely,

- working out this paper in co-operation with the international colleagues as well as the paper assessment by the international colleagues on the basis of co-operation between the universities,
- presentations of the research at international conferences and
- use of individual consultations given by the Western researchers.

Therein, the researchers' external evaluation validates the findings of the present research. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that the implementation of English for Academic Purposes activity enhances students' communicative competence.

Hence, English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence influences and determines the students' success or failure for acquiring tertiary language education and profession as illustrated in Figure 4.

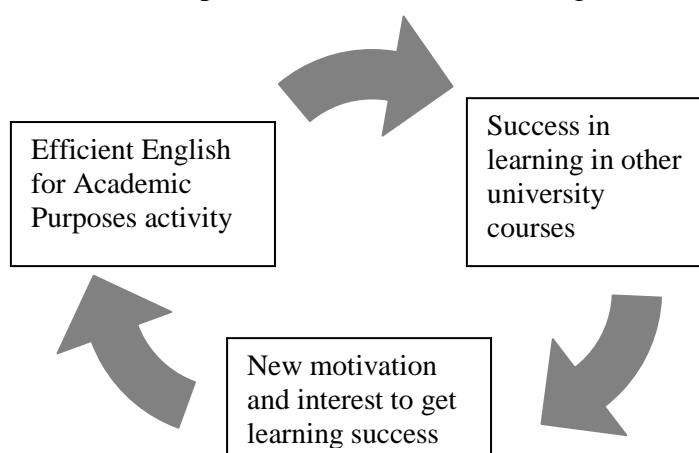


Figure 4: Successful use of English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence in language education

Thus it might be stressed that English for Academic Purposes activity is efficient if it provides student's personal experience in interaction as a condition for creation of new knowledge:

- if students' social experience in social interaction and cognitive activity is supported by English for Academic Purposes activity, students better attain the development of the communicative competence, and
- if students' needs are met and a support system is created that would secure their social experience in social interaction and cognitive activity, students demonstrate better results of the communicative competence.

The present research has *limitations*. A limitation is the empirical study conducted by involving the students and educators at master level of one tertiary institution. Therein, the results of the study cannot be representative for the whole country. As well as the empirical study outlines the opportunities of the development of students' communicative competence. Nevertheless, the results of the research, namely, the organization model of English for Academic Purposes activity and the qualitative evaluation research, may be used as a basis of the development of students' communicative competence at master level of other tertiary institutions. If the results of other tertiary institutions had been available for analysis, different results could have been attained. There is a possibility to continue the study.

Further research on English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence is proposed to focus on

- a relevant set of methods for the evaluation of the development of students' communicative competence,
- empirical studies at master level of other tertiary institutions,
- a comparative research in different countries,
- use of Web technology within English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' communicative competence,
- the development of students' communicative competence within English for Academic Purposes activity based on five phases, namely,
 - teaching with use of existing knowledge,
 - teaching with use of existing knowledge with elements of peer-learning with use of knowledge variety,
 - peer-learning with use of knowledge variety,
 - peer-learning with use of knowledge variety with elements of learning with use of knowledge improvement and
 - learning with use of knowledge improvement,
- the development of both the educator's and student's communicative competence within English for Academic Purposes activity,
- examining efficiency of English for Academic Purposes activity for the development of students' key competences (European Commission, 2004, p. 2), namely, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn competence, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression.

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