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Подготовка студентов неязыковых специальностей к участию в академических конкурсах по иностранному языку

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Аннотация. Цель данного исследования - представить технологию, способствующую эффективному развитию навыков говорения у студентов неязыковых специальностей в процессе их подготовки к участию в академических конкурсах на английском языке. Авторы описывают принципы, методы, подходы и содержание предлагаемой технологии, а также определяют базовые организационно-педагогические условия, необходимые для подготовки данных студентов. Научную новизну исследования представляет технология развития навыков говорения у студентов неязыковых специальностей как таковая, разработанная с применением практико-ориентированного, комплексного подходов, позволяющая студентам неязыковых специальностей с высоким уровнем подготовки - участникам академических конкурсов на английском языке - улучшить свои навыки говорения с помощью комплекса заданий и упражнений. В результате авторы характеризуют отличительные особенности раздела «Говорение» академических лингвистических конкурсов, выявляют основные трудности, которые испытывают студенты при продуцировании высказывания на английском языке, отбирают соответствующие содержание и методы, используемые в процессе обучения студентов устной речи на иностранном языке.

EN

Training Non-Linguistic Students for Participation in Foreign-Language Academic Competitions

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to present a technology that contributes to the effective development of speaking skills in students from a non-linguistic university while preparing them for participation in English-language academic competitions. The authors describe the principles, techniques, approaches and content of such technology and reveal basic organizational and pedagogical conditions necessary for training the above-mentioned students. The scientific novelty of the research is represented by the technology for the development of speaking skills in students from a non-linguistic university itself, elaborated by the authors using a practice-oriented, holistic approach, the application of which allows gifted non-linguistic students to improve their speaking skills through a set of practical tasks and exercises for participating in academic English-language competitions. As a result, the authors characterize the main features of the “Speaking” section of linguistic academic competitions, identify the main obstacles typical for students of a non-linguistic university while speaking English and select the appropriate content and techniques for foreign-language oral speech training of advanced students.

Introduction

One of the topical trends of the national project “Education” is to support talented young people (Национальный проект «Образование». URL: <https://edu.gov.ru/national-project>). According to it, the primary task of the state and of society in general should be creating adequate conditions to identify and foster gifted students while giving them the opportunity to unravel their true potential. In this regard, subject-specific academic competitions (often called Olympiads) occupy their rightful place within a holistic system for educating promising students.

Foreign-language academic competitions are considered a traditional form of extracurricular work. On the one hand, their purpose is to test the knowledge of the participants; on the other hand, such intellectual competitions are an effective means of motivating students to engage in self-development (Куламихина, Пестова, Лебеденко, 2018). The command of a foreign language at high levels increases the status of future graduates on the labor market, revealing promising outlooks for their further professional advancement.

English-language academic competitions are a well-established tradition in Russia. As a rule, participants can demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competencies in all types of linguistic activities. It should be noted that the "Speaking" section poses the greatest difficulties for the vast majority of participants; therefore, preparing students for this type of activity in English should be considered a very relevant issue.

The research included the following tasks:

- 1) determining which features characterize the "Speaking" section of foreign-language academic competitions for students of non-linguistic specialties;
- 2) elaborating the theoretical foundations for training future participants in foreign-language academic competitions and the corresponding set of practical tasks and exercises aimed at developing the students' speaking skills within the framework of selected topics.

The theoretical background of the study is represented by the works of both Russian and foreign scientists on the problems of communicative-oriented approach in teaching foreign languages. Y. I. Passov (Пассов, 1991) developed the principles and features of the communicative method, I. A. Zimnaya (Зимняя, 1989) and A. A. Leontyev (Леонтьев, 1986) studied the psychological bases of communicative-oriented approach in foreign-language teaching, M. N. Vyatutnev (Вятютнев, 1977), R. P. Milrud (Мильруд, 2004), W. Littlewood (2009) and R. Mitchell (1994) explored its practical aspects.

The object of the study was the process of training students from Omsk State Agrarian University (thereafter OmSAU) for both planned and spontaneous speaking tasks in English. To collect and study the necessary information, we used research methods commonly applied in pedagogical diagnostics, such as the observation, questioning and testing of 38 OmSAU students who participated in English-language academic competitions in 2021-2022, as well as statistical and mathematical methods for processing quantitative data.

The current research can be of practical value, as it proposes a technology for training non-linguistic students with a specific focus on speaking skills. Such technology may be successfully implemented by high school, college and university teachers for improving students' speaking skills through extracurricular and in-class unsupervised work. Our research findings corroborate the potential of the proposed technology for improving students' speaking skills. So, it should be recommended both for students intending to participate in foreign-language academic competitions or creative linguistic competitions and for those who want to improve their command of a foreign language through extracurricular and in-class unsupervised work.

Results and Discussion

OmSAU advanced students are interested in their English-language proficiency and regularly take part in various foreign-language academic competitions of different types and levels. Such contests always include tasks in English oral communication. A systematic analysis of these tasks from previous years (2019-2022) has shown that the "Speaking" section usually includes some kind of conversation on a given topic. The technical conditions for this type of task can vary:

- Skype conversation;
- telephone interview;
- group discussion (or dispute);
- oral presentation (Положение о проведении XV городской олимпиады для студентов нелингвистических специальностей ФГАОУ ВО «Омский государственный университет». 2021; Положение о конкурсе профессионального мастерства для обучающихся ФГБОУ ВО «Омский государственный аграрный университет». 2022; Положение о проведении международного онлайн-конкурса профессионального переводческого мастерства «Язык есть дух народа» ФГБОУ ВО «Российский государственный аграрный университет – МСХА имени К. А. Тимирязева». 2019).

The criteria for evaluating speaking activities may include such parameters as:

- communicative task fulfillment (different levels);
- linguistic speech design (pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary range and accuracy, grammar range and accuracy);
- extralinguistic speech design (interacting with the interviewer, fluency and coherence, emotional background).

Thus, the participants must demonstrate not only their ability to answer questions within the proposed topic correctly, but also to argue their point of view, using different set phrases according to the situation, which can be rather difficult for those who have no special training.

Therefore, in 2021 (autumn term) we conducted testing and questioning of 38 OmSAU first-year advanced students to reveal the obstacles they come across while speaking English and learning how to speak English. A focused group of the first-year advanced students from different faculties of OmSAU was formed after their successful passing a compulsory English entry test, which included 30 tasks on English grammar and academic vocabulary. The students' motivation in English learning and their intention to participate in linguistic competitions were key factors for further selection. These students were interviewed by their teachers on the problems of student life, career prospects, interests and other personal details. The participants, along with high results of the entry test (more than 75% of the correct answers), demonstrated their ability to have a free dialogue at different levels.

To have a complete understanding about the students' obstacles in learning English, we conducted questioning of the students of the focused group. They took part in a survey concerning their previous English learning experience

and attitude to learning foreign languages and personal motivation. The questionnaire consisted of 10 issues of closed and open type. The most relevant question for our study was connected with the choice of the most problematic type of foreign-language linguistic activities among speaking, listening, reading and writing and the corresponding types of tasks (making up a monologue/dialogue; listening to a text and answering related questions; reading a text and answering related questions; writing an essay/composition). The majority of the advanced students (31 out of 38 students) marked speaking and listening as the most problematic for them. They pointed out their personal reasons for this choice (e.g., difficulties with proper pronunciation, fear of making a mistake), which were analyzed by us.

Thus, the analysis of the respondents' answers and their test/interview results helped us to identify 3 main groups of obstacles for students participating in foreign-language academic competitions. Depending on their origin, these obstacles can be correlated to *psychological*, *linguistic* and *methodic* factors.

The *psychological* factor is represented by the so-called "language barrier", a certain psychological discomfort when producing the statement. The *methodic* factor is caused by the lack of systemic and properly-organized development of various skills through all linguistic activities at different stages of the students' previous training. The *linguistic* factor results from limited vocabulary and problems in the perception of foreign-language speech by the students. Diagram 1 illustrates these data for 2021-2022, when 38 students were interviewed and observed.

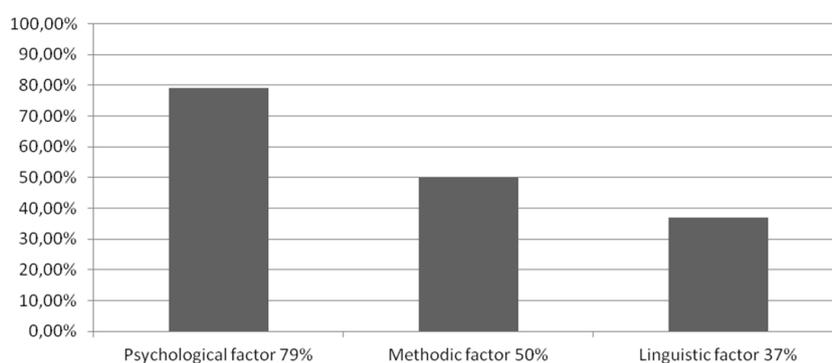


Diagram 1. Main factors of the students' obstacles in English speaking

According to Diagram 1, the majority of the first-year advanced students of 2021-2022 (79%) show an ascertainable language barrier and cannot produce spontaneous statements due to lack of practice and self-doubt (psychological factor). Half of the respondents cannot express and formulate their thoughts in a foreign language because they have never been trained in such activities on a systematic basis (methodic factor). 37% of the students need to study more English words and word combinations on different topics to take part in conversations (linguistic factor). In accordance with our survey results, one student can have obstacles of several types at the same time, for example, poor vocabulary and fear of speaking a foreign language.

The obtained and described above data was used for elaborating a technology for training non-linguistic students with an advanced command of English focusing on their speaking skills. The elaborated technology comprised the theoretical foundations for training future participants in foreign-language academic competitions and a set of practical tasks and exercises aimed at developing the students' speaking skills. The main emphasis was laid on the organization of both in-class and extracurricular work of students in the following areas:

1. Enrichment of the active and passive vocabulary on relevant topics.
2. Development of listening skills of spoken English.
3. Formation of pronunciation and intonation skills for speaking activities.
4. Formation of lexical and grammatical skills in spoken English.

According to E. N. Solovova (Соловова, 2004), speaking can be carried out within the framework of two basic approaches:

- 1) "top-down" processing;
- 2) "bottom-up" processing.

"Top-down" processing assumes the presence of some visual "support" (text, picture, film, etc.), the "bottom-up" processing is focused on the transition from controlled speech to spontaneous one without any support.

Both approaches have served as the basis for tailoring English speaking training process of the advanced students at various stages. Thus, the principles of the first approach ("top-down" processing) were used in a fragmentary manner to remove several linguistic obstacles while training the students' pronunciation, their lexical and grammatical skills, as well as listening and speaking skills. The approach can be illustrated by different tasks, such as reading aloud, listening to a particularly problematic text in order to determine its topic or main idea and express one's opinion on the identified problems.

Elements of the second approach ("bottom-up" processing) were actively applied at the final stage of the students' training, when they had to perform creative tasks, for example, during discussions, conversations with native speakers or proper group projects.

During the research, while elaborating an innovative technology for training students from non-linguistic universities focusing on their speaking skills, we also followed traditional general and specific methodological principles for training students as regards speaking in a foreign language, namely the following principles:

- 1) differentiated approach in teaching foreign languages;
- 2) learning process programming;
- 3) extraction of specific guidelines;
- 4) principle of thematic orientation;
- 5) oral basis of teaching;
- 6) structural-functional approach;
- 7) communicative orientation;
- 8) complexity, and others (Абаева, 2014; Бульдина, 2016).

Since the focused group of the students had an Intermediate or Upper-Intermediate level of language command, the following principles were selected as the most meaningful ones within the framework of our research:

- 1) principle of communicative orientation;
- 2) principle of structural-functional approach;
- 3) principle of thematic orientation.

Following the above-mentioned principles, we determined a range of lexical topics to prepare the future participants of academic competitions as regards speaking in English. Topics are generally recognized to have different functions in the training process for various types of linguistic activities (Канунникова, Лебеденко, 2022; Гаврилюк, Митрофанова, Макфарланд, 2018). So, when training students in speaking and writing, it is easier to draw up a clear plan of speech and select suitable language materials to unfold it (Трубицина, Переверткина, Шегай, 2013; Чикнаверова, 2018). Therefore, based on the tasks of recent academic competitions (Положение о проведении XV городской олимпиады для студентов нелингвистических специальностей ФГАОУ ВО «Омский государственный университет». 2021; Положение о конкурсе профессионального мастерства для обучающихся ФГБОУ ВО «Омский государственный аграрный университет». 2022; Положение о проведении международного онлайн-конкурса профессионального переводческого мастерства «Язык есть дух народа» ФГБОУ ВО «Российский государственный аграрный университет – МСХА имени К. А. Тимирязева». 2019) and the codifiers of the Unified State Examination lexical topics (Демоверсии, спецификации, кодификаторы. URL: <https://fipi.ru/oge/demoversii-specifikacii-kodifikatory>), we identified three general topic areas:

- 1) Youth Problems. Gadgets.
- 2) Internet. Mass Media.
- 3) Ecological Problems. Environment Protection.

It should be noted, however, that these topic areas are not included in the English-language curriculum for first-year students at OmSAU.

While developing a technology of training students in English speaking, a set of suitable exercises was selected on the basis of topical vocabulary. At different stages of our technology realization, we used such types of exercises as warm-up (pre-speech), training (conditional), proper communicative (speech) ones in accordance with the base typology of exercises in communicative-oriented approach by Y. I. Passov (Пассов, 1991).

The integration of all the above-mentioned aspects allowed us to organize and systematically train our students in four areas identified earlier in our study, namely enrichment of the active and passive vocabulary on relevant topics; development of listening skills of spoken English; formation of pronunciation and intonation skills for speaking activities; formation of lexical and grammatical skills in spoken English. Thus, the functional content of the learning process for students focused on speaking includes:

- extracurricular individual unsupervised work (developing English listening skills using audio recordings from authentic sources);
- in-class individual unsupervised work (improving the lexical and grammatical skills for speaking in English by doing training test assignments from authentic textbooks);
- extracurricular group work (forming phonetic speaking skills by working with audio material from modern works of music).

All aspects of the content of foreign-language training of students are represented in Table 1.

The primary factors in selecting the training content included the use of relevant authentic materials, as well as a significant share of the students' unsupervised work, integrating at the same time elements of intensive and distance learning.

Extracurricular group work was organized by means of the elective. The elective "Speaking Club" was offered to the first-year and second-year advanced students and lasted 36 hours (October-April). The curriculum of the elective "Speaking Club" was developed on the basis of the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education (FSES HE 3++) (ФГОС ВО (3++) по направлениям бакалавриата. URL: <https://fgosvo.ru/fgosvo/index/24>).

After completing this course, the participant students were expected to be able to:

- remove their psychological obstacles in producing speech;
- improve their spontaneous foreign-language speaking skills.

The elective included 3 modules in the topic areas we have identified before (Module 1. Youth Problems. Gadgets; Module 2. Internet. Mass Media; Module 3. Ecological Problems. Environment Protection). The lexical and grammar content on each topic was represented in blocks, it gave students the opportunity to learn a new content of each following block, at the same time basing it on the skills received after studying the previous one.

Here is the example of a block (Module 3).

Table 1. Content of foreign-language training of students

Extracurricular individual unsupervised work	In-class individual unsupervised work	Extracurricular group work (elective)
<p>Improving English listening skills by listening to texts from authentic sources: <i>BBC Podcasts: https://vk.com/wall-110864332_506;</i> <i>YouTube channels: BBC Learning English; English. Listening and Reading.</i> <i>Task examples:</i> <i>Listen to a morning briefing to practise and improve your listening skills. Listen to the audio and do the exercises.</i> <i>1. Are the sentences true or false?</i> <i>2. Put the sentences in the correct group.</i> <i>3. Discussion. Who do you have to give information and instructions to? What about?</i></p>	<p>Improving lexical and grammatical skills in spoken English through training testing tasks using authentic materials: <i>“English Vocabulary in Use” (Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate) by Michael McCarthy (Cambridge, 2008);</i> <i>“Oxford-Word-Skills” (Intermediate) by Ruth Gairns (Oxford University Press, 2020);</i> <i>“Essential Grammar in Use” (Intermediate) by R. Murphy (Cambridge, 2018).</i> <i>Task examples:</i> <i>1. Read the newspaper report and put the verbs into the most suitable form.</i> <i>2. Use your own ideas to complete the sentences.</i> <i>3. Write sentences about yourself using the following adverbs.</i></p>	<p>I. Formation of pronunciation skills by working with audio materials of modern musical works from the following sources: <i>English Study Cafe: https://english-study-cafe.ru;</i> <i>“Learning English with Songs”.</i> <i>Task example:</i> <i>1. Listen to the song and fill in the gaps. Listen again and sing together!</i> II. Development of the skills of planned and spontaneous foreign-language speaking through the preparation of projects, mini-expressions and participation in discussions within the “Speaking Club”. <i>Task example:</i> <i>1. Describe the picture. What do you think about the people in the picture? What are they doing? How are they feeling? What kind of relations do they have?</i></p>
<p>Enrichment of the active vocabulary on relevant topics by training testing tasks on the basis of authentic materials: <i>“Test Your Vocabulary” (Pre-Intermediate-Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate) by Peter Watcyn-Jones (Pearson Education Limited, 2008);</i> <i>“Boost Your Vocabulary” by Chris Baker (Pearson Education Limited, 2011).</i> <i>Task example:</i> <i>1. You’ll have 10 seconds to answer each question. The faster you answer, the higher your score is. The harder the question is, the higher your score is.</i></p>		

Block 2. Topic: Endangered Animals.

Vocabulary: Words and word combinations on the topic.

Grammar: Modal verbs. Passive Voice constructions.

Listening: BBC Learning: Should Animals Have Human Rights? (URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkQ0QiEsS80>).

Discussion topic: Animal Testing: Pros and Cons.

Russian-speaking expert: M. V. Pervenetskaya, Candidate of Veterinary Sciences, Department of Veterinary Medicine.

Modern educational techniques, such as learning in collaboration, the project method, distance learning, the use of a language portfolio, tandem method, the use of computer and audiovisual technical means, were practiced in the elective classes.

The relaxed atmosphere of the elective classes, personal interest in the students’ problems and their involvement in the integral process of preparation for academic competitions in English played a significant role. Native speakers were invited to the meetings together with Russian-speaking experts on the issues under discussion who had a sufficient command of the foreign language to maintain a discussion. Apart from acquiring new information during each lesson, special musical breaks were dedicated to improving the students’ pronunciation, as well as to creating a relaxing atmosphere among the students themselves.

Among other forms of extracurricular work, the students had to do different projects. By doing so, we managed to include an individual approach to the students, as project work allowed them to choose any topics which they personally found interesting and, thus, boosted vivid further discussion. Being a form of interactive learning, project activities help to ensure the integrated development of different types of linguistic activities on part of the students, significantly increasing at the same time their motivation to learn a foreign language (Куликова, 2013; Старчикова, 2020). For example, while working on the topic “Gadgets”, students had to present in English their own projects on the following issues: “Dependence on Gadgets”, “Digital Generation”, “Internet Addiction”, etc. Since the format of the project work was an autonomous choice of each student, this kind of activity contributed not only to improving their communicative skills, but also to revealing the creative potential of many of the students. Along with more traditional slideshows and video presentations, the starting point for further discussion about different topics took various forms, including paintings, poetic works and photographs by the participants.

As we have already mentioned, our paper aims at introducing a conceptual background for a teaching process focused on oral production (speaking) activities in the English language when training students for academic and other types of competitions. By integrating such theoretical foundations with the content-related and procedural elements, we obtain a suitable technology for preparing students for such competitions. The joint activities of teachers and students from OmSAU throughout the training process allowed us to formulate a number of compulsory organizational and pedagogical conditions that are deemed necessary for its successful implementation:

1. English speaking training of students should be systematic.
2. English classes should be practice-oriented and foster the development of creative thinking in each student.

3. The training program should take into account the individual psychological characteristics of each student and their level of foreign-language proficiency.
4. English speaking training of students should include a variety of autonomous activities supervised by the teacher.
5. From the organizational point of view, the English-language learning process should involve hybrid methods such as online and offline lectures, tests, projects.

Conclusion

To provide effective English speaking training for advanced university students, we determined a range of relevant tasks of the “Speaking” section of academic linguistic competitions and basic criteria for their assessment. In addition, we revealed, analyzed and grouped the obstacles that non-linguistic students encounter while speaking a foreign language.

Based on the theoretical background of our research and a pedagogical diagnostics of OmSAU first-year students, we elaborated such theoretical foundations for training future participants in foreign-language academic competitions as the principles, approaches, organizational and pedagogical conditions of the training process. The corresponding set of practical tasks and exercises based on recent authentic materials and aimed at developing the students’ speaking skills was worked out and successfully applied during the extracurricular and in-class unsupervised work of the Omsk State Agrarian University students. The elective “Speaking Club” as a part of extracurricular group work contributed both to speaking skills development and to overcoming the identified obstacles among the students.

The result of the study is a technology of foreign-language oral speech training of motivated students of non-linguistic specialties that obviously provides a way for preparing future academic English-language competitions participants (the “Speaking” section).

Thus, in 2021-2022, OmSAU involved the students who had participated in academic and other types of competitions, had achieved excellent results and had become prize-winners in such academic competitions as the International Online Translators’ Competition “Word Skills” organized by Russian State Agrarian University – Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy and the Intercollegiate Student Olympiad in the English Language organized by OmSAU, the Global English-Language Olympiad for Non-Native Speakers and others.

Further research perspectives might include the elaboration of special methodological guidelines for speaking practice and their practical approbation involving highly motivated students.

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