

## Azerbaijani and Ukrainian Students' Attitudes towards Their English Skills: a Case Study

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### Abstract

*Due to the demographic situation in Lithuania, local universities receive fewer Lithuanian students who enter their study programmes. This is the reason why the universities try to enter the international student market and take a share of it by attracting student from abroad to study in Lithuania. Consequently, more study programmes at all study cycles are offered in English. This qualitative research focuses on first year Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania and their attitudes towards their English skills, because at the time of the research they were studying English as a foreign language (EFL) and English was also used as a medium of instruction (EMI) in their study programmes at the same time. The research, which was based on a printed questionnaire, shows that the research participants were critical towards their English skills. They thought that they had not had enough knowledge of English before their studies at VMU and also were dissatisfied with the level of English they had nine months after that (when the research was carried out). On the other hand, they emphasised that good English skills were necessary for communication and important in their future careers, but to speak in English was reported to be easier than to write. The importance of English in their study programmes taught through English was not mentioned at all. In general, all the Ukrainian research participants wanted to improve speaking skills, while all the Azerbaijani students thought they needed to enrich their English vocabulary.*

**Keywords:** higher education, VMU, studies in Lithuania, EFL, EMI, English skills, Azerbaijani students, Ukrainian students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, not only have many people emigrated to search for economic benefits, but also a certain proportion of school leavers have chosen to study in other EU member states. Some of the most popular destinations include England, Scotland, Scandinavian countries, Germany, Holland, and others. Because of the demographic situation in Lithuania, which has probably been a cause of emigration and low birth-rate, fewer students enter and graduate from high-schools, and local universities and colleges receive fewer students. This is one of the reasons why Lithuanian universities try to attract foreign residents (especially from non-EU member states) to study in Lithuania. Such countries as the United Kingdom or the United States have always attracted foreign students from all over the world, but this is a new challenge for Lithuania, which is not as well-known as the two countries that have been mentioned. Its universities do not necessarily have many study programmes in English, for the majority of study programmes use Lithuanian as the language of instruction (with an exception of some philological study programmes) but would like to take at least a modest share of the international student market. It is expected that the trend of population decline will prevail, and “experts point out that attracting international students might be one of the measures helping to keep a stable number of students” (International Organization for Migration & European Migration Network, 2012, 15).

The statistics shows that the number of foreign students studying in Lithuania has been rising, since Lithuanian institutions of higher education position themselves as awarding diplomas that are acknowledged in the EU and elsewhere. The target regions from which Lithuanian universities could attract students are former Soviet republics and rapidly developing Asian countries (International Organization for Migration & European Migration Network, 2012, 19). For instance, in 2012 students from ninety-five countries were studying in Lithuanian universities, but it is important to note that the number included both exchange programme students and those who had arrived for full studies (Study in Lithuania, 2). The biggest proportion of those students was studying at the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences and Kaunas University of Technology

(Study in Lithuania, 2). At that time 3% of all students studying in Lithuania were foreign nationals, while in 2018 the number increased to 6% (Mosta 2018, 2). According to the data provided by the Research and Higher Education Monitoring Centre, in 2017 the majority of foreign students in Lithuania were from India, Belarus, Ukraine, Germany and Georgia (Mosta, 2018, 3). Thus, it is evident that more and more students from abroad choose to study in Lithuanian institutions of higher education.

Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) has received bigger numbers of non-Lithuanian students who arrived for full degree studies in recent years. Naturally, the university has also raised its number of study programmes whose language of instruction is English. For instance, in 2017, students from fifty-five countries were studying at VMU in twelve (9 in 2016) bachelor and twenty-two (16 in 2016) master's degree programmes (*2017 m. Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto veiklos ataskaita*, 21-24). The programmes that were most frequently chosen by non-Lithuanian students in 2017 were the following: International Politics and Development Studies, a bachelor's degree programme at the Department of Political Sciences and Diplomacy, and Sociolinguistics and Multilingualism, a joint master's degree programme at the Faculty of Humanities (*2017 m. Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto veiklos ataskaita*, 24). Even though the language of instruction in the mentioned study programmes is English, most of the students in bachelor's degree programmes (sometimes in other study cycle programmes too) often also study levels of English as a foreign language (to reach level B2) and later English for Specific Purposes (C1/C2).

The present research is a case study on Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students' attitudes towards their skills of the English language. The research participants enrolled in bachelor study programmes at Vytautas Magnus University in the fall of 2017. As the research took place in May 2018, they were about to finish their first year of studies at VMU and were taking the course of English as a foreign language at B2 level. They were asked to fill out a printed questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions concerning their opinion on their own skills of English. The research aimed at finding out whether the students actually had enough knowledge of English when they started studying at their programmes taught in English while studying levels of English at the same time, for it was assumed

that the students should have had enough skills and thus faced no difficulty in studying their speciality subjects in English. At the same time, it intended to find out if they thought they still needed to study English and improve their skills of general English.

## **2. ON EFL, EMI AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

Jolanta Urbanovič et al. have done a case study on Lithuania as a small country that aims to attract international students. The researchers enlist three reasons why Lithuania faces more challenges than other countries: the first one is the fact that it is not a first-choice country for international students, the second one is related to financial and marketing capacity, and the third one is related to language and culture (Urbanovič et al., 2016, 494). Since language is one of the challenges, the authors of the study note that “more higher education programmes are being delivered in Lithuania in languages other than Lithuanian” (Urbanovič et al., 2016, 498). The majority of such study programmes are taught through English as a medium of instruction. Julie Dearden defines English as a medium of Instruction (EMI) as follows: it is the “use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden 2014, 4). Dearden questions how it is possible to measure the success of the use of EMI at university level and whether it helps learning and / or understanding of national or international students or both (Dearden, 2014, 3). The research that Dearden and her colleagues carried out included teachers in fifty-five countries, and one of the interests of the investigation was “teachers’ perceptions of the level of English needed by students to follow a course in EMI and how they could reach that level” (Dearden, 2014, 5). The present research takes the opposite approach, for it focuses on students, international students studying at VMU in Kaunas to be precise, and their attitude towards their English skills.

According to Zubeyde Sinem Yildiz-Genc, university “[s]tudents should be competent in reading, writing, understanding and speaking English, especially in topics related to their major fields of study” and “need to be trained to use English language for special purposes required by their future careers” (Yildiz-Genc, 2011, 87-88). However, as the article by Urbanovič et al. states, “small countries,

being newcomers in the international higher education market, must reduce students' selection threshold", which means that "academic quality might decline as a result of students with lower English language skills, who are also less motivated, choosing to study at universities in smaller countries" (Urbanovič et al., 2014, 501). It is necessary to emphasise that university programmes taught through English in Lithuania usually have various English-related study programme entry requirements, but unlike universities in the United States or the United Kingdom, Lithuanian universities tend to be rather flexible about them. If an applicant provides proof of necessary proficiency in English but the testing administered at the university shows the applicant actually has lower skills of English, the applicant is still admitted, because other requirements are met, but needs to study lower levels of English as a foreign language (EFL) while studying other subjects of his/her study programme at the same time. Only later such students can study English for specific purposes (ESP) at C1/C2 levels. This will be discussed further in relation to the research results in the next part of the article.

### **3. METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As noted earlier, the present research is a case study on Ukrainian and Azerbaijani students' attitudes towards their skills of the English language. Six non-Lithuanian students studying at Vytautas Magnus University participated in the research: three of them were Azerbaijani and the other three were Ukrainian. The Azerbaijani students were 19-23 years old (a 19 year-old female, a 19-year old male and a 23 year-old male), while the Ukrainian students were 17-19 years old (a 17 year-old female, an 18 year-old male and a 19 year-old female). In other words, the Ukrainian research participants were slightly younger, for the age average of the Ukrainian students was 18, while the age average of the Azerbaijani students was 20.

The research participants were selected using quota sampling, for the research intended to be able to compare the perspectives and experiences of students of at least two different nationalities from non-EU countries and thus needed to have an equal number of representatives. The main limitation of the research is a relatively small number of the research participants, but it is hoped that it will provide valuable insight into teaching and learning of English and

encourage further research in the future, since the number of foreign nationals studying in Lithuania is increasing, and the topic of the quality of higher education is of great relevance, especially at the time of the undergoing higher education reform in Lithuania.

All the research participants were first year bachelor students who had arrived for full studies, not on exchange programmes, at VMU in fall 2017: five of them were studying in the programme of International Politics and Development Studies and one student was studying in the English Philology bachelor degree study programme at the Faculty of Humanities. They confirmed that their studies in the study programmes were delivered in English. The research took place in May 2018 and was based on a questionnaire including open and closed-ended questions concerning EFL and EMI.

The students were asked if, in their opinion, they had had sufficient knowledge of English when they started their studies at VMU. They explained their answers as follows (the language here and elsewhere in terms of the answers provided in the questionnaire has not been corrected):

**Table 1. Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students on their English skills at the beginning of their studies at VMU**

Azerbaijani	Ukrainian
Yes. "Because easily I can understand teacher what she said." (a female student)	No. "I hadn't whole understanding of English language and I hadn't practice in it." (a female student)
No. (No explanation given) (a male student)	No. "I had level A2-B1, it was difficult for me to talk because I had not enough practice." (a female student)
Yes. "Of course I had English knowledge when I started as I have learned English since 5th grade of school." (a male student)	No. "It used to be a bit difficult to understand all the information delivered during the lectures." (a male student)

Even though the research was in a way subjective, since it enquired about attitudes and opinions, it seems that the students tried to evaluate the knowledge of English they had had before joining their study programmes taught through English as a medium of instruction sincerely and objectively. Four out of six research participants did not have enough knowledge of English when they started their studies at VMU, and if they said they did have, their answers in English show that their English skills could still be improved very much. In addition, the answers suggest that the Ukrainian respondents tended to evaluate their English skills rather poorly, which, in other words,

suggests that their level of English was not sufficient to start studying in their study programmes in English.

Now it is important to look at programme entry requirements at VMU in relation to English skills at the time these students joined the university. The access requirements of the English Philology programme indicated that the “applicant for this programme should have obtained High School graduation certificate / diploma or equivalent degree” (BA. English Philology, 2018, 1). That is, there were no indications of the level of English the applicant should have had before enrolling in the programme. However, the online application system indicated that there were language-related requirements, because applicants needed to present “proof of proficiency” such as “Cambridge English, IELTS, TOEFL or other equivalent” certificate (BA. English Philology, 2018, 2), but there was no specification about the scores or levels. The access requirements of the International Politics and Development Studies programme were the following:

[An] applicant has to present [a] document proving B2 level (TOEFL 87 iBT/534, IELTS 5.5 or any other document proving B2 level) if the applicant had not received education in English. After admission all students will be tested for English language level at the Institute of Foreign Languages at Vytautas Magnus University. If English level will be below B2 students will have to study English to reach B2 level (in [the] first four semesters of Bachelor studies). (International Politics and Development Studies, 2018, 1)

In other words, while applying for the two bachelor study programmes, English Philology and International Politics and Development Studies, applicants needed to prove their knowledge of English, although the levels could differ, as the English Philology programme supposedly should have had higher language requirements, because it prepared future teachers of English and translators. The students of International Politics and Development Studies should have had a proof of English B2 but could be sent to study English at B2 or lower levels if the testing administered at VMU showed their level was lower than B2. In fact, this was the case with all the six research participants, for they started their English studies at VMU at B1 level in the fall semester of 2017 and were continuing their studies at B2 level in spring 2018. When they were filling out the questionnaire of this research, they did not know if they

would pass the course of English as a foreign language at B2 level, because they took their final exams later. As a matter of fact, two research participants from Azerbaijan did not pass. This is rather surprising, since they felt more confident about their English skills rather than the Ukrainian respondents.

The research participants were also asked to evaluate their own English skills in comparison to other students in their study programmes. They were given a multiple choice question with these options: a) a lot better, b) slightly better, c) equal, d) slightly worse, e) a lot worse. Three Azerbaijani students and one Ukrainian saw their English skills as equal to those of other students in their study programme, while two Ukrainian female students thought their English skills were slightly worse. The same two students also reported earlier that they had not had sufficient knowledge of English before starting their studies at VMU and were very much concerned about their knowledge of English.

The next question in the questionnaire asked whether the research participants were satisfied with the level of English they had at the time they filled out the questionnaires, because the spring semester was going to an end and they would take their final exams of English as a foreign language at B2 level in a couple of weeks. This means they would have completed two levels of English since the start of their studies at VMU. They provided the following answers:

**Table 2. Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students' satisfaction with their level of English**

Azerbaijani	Ukrainian
Yes. "Yes because its not hard also." (a female student) "Yes." [no explanation provided] (a male student) No. "I would like to know English 100%" (a male student)	No. "I haven't good speaking skills. Sometimes I speak very slowly." (a female student) No. "I still cannot talk good enough, my vocabulary is quite poor, and my accent is awful. I want to have speech similar to native speakers' one." (a female student) No. "I still need to use dictionary while reading scientific texts or watch some documentary in English." (a male student)

Four out of six research participants were not satisfied with their level of English at the end of the course of English as a foreign language at B2 level. The majority of these students were Ukrainian.



Therefore, it is possible to state that the Ukrainian research participants thought they had not had enough knowledge of English at the beginning of their studies at VMU, later felt their English skills were slightly worse than the skills of their course mates and the students were not able to achieve the level of English that would satisfy their needs in almost a year since their enrolment in the study programmes where courses were delivered in English. This might show that either the students had a really low level of English and were not able to achieve a satisfactory level of English in two semesters or they were objective but critical about their English skills and would like to keep on improving them. In fact, their answers indicate some specific areas, such as vocabulary, pronunciation and speaking, that they were not satisfied with at the time of the research. Interestingly enough, the two students who were satisfied with their level of English failed the course of English as a foreign language at B2 level. This does not necessarily mean that these students were too self-confident but might suggest that they failed to look at their English skills objectively, which might have made it difficult to improve their knowledge of English, since they thought they did not need to.

In addition, the research attempted to find out whether it was easier for the research participants to communicate in written English or spoken English. Spoken English turned out to be easier to use for communication: two Azerbaijani and two Ukrainian survey participants indicated this, while one Ukrainian student found written English easier, because her problems with speaking skills were indicated in several cases throughout the open answers. One Azerbaijani student chose both written and spoken English as equally easy to communicate in. This probably helped while studying in English in Lithuania.

The research also asked the research participants to reflect on the importance to have good knowledge of English to them personally and explain why. They indicated these reasons:

**Table 3. Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students on the importance to have good English skills**

<b>Azerbaijani</b>	<b>Ukrainian</b>
“Because of my work and also when I go somewhere I want communicate with a people easily.” (a female student) “Very important.” (a male student) “Highly important. Because I am gonna build my career in EU where the English language is priority.” (a male student)	“For me it is important step to career.” (a female student) “It is one of my goals for future. I want to travel and communicate with people a lot, read and write books and poems. That is why I need really good, even perfect English.” (a female student) “English is an international language thus it is quite important to know it at least to have access to different point of view when watching some news.” (a male student)

All the research participants noted that good knowledge of English was important to them personally because of their future careers and the necessity to communicate and understand information in English, but none of the students indicated that it was a must in order to achieve the aims and objectives of their study programmes in which lectures were delivered through English as a medium of instruction.

Furthermore, the research participants were asked to indicate which skills of the English language they had improved in the course of English B2 as a foreign language and which ones they still need to improve in the future (more than one answer was possible). In short, five research participants improved their grammar, four - vocabulary, speaking and listening, and one – reading skills, but five out of six research participants still felt a need to improve their vocabulary and writing, four - speaking, three – reading and grammar, and two respondents needed to advance in listening. In general, it seems that the Azerbaijani research participants lacked English vocabulary while the Ukrainian students needed to master speaking skills (vocabulary was indicated as a skill to improve by all Azerbaijani students, while speaking was indicated by all Ukrainian students who participated in the study). In general, the Ukrainian students marked more skills to be developed in the future. Two of them said they would need to improve grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading and writing, which means they would need to improve almost all the skills of English, but at the same time these answers can be seen as related to the previously discussed attitudes on their English skills as being slightly

worse than those of their course mates and the fact that they had had poor English skills at the beginning of their studies at VMU.

When asked about the language(s) research participants usually used in order to communicate outside the classroom, they provided very different answers. The research participants from Azerbaijan used either their native language or English and Turkish, while the Ukrainian students used either their native language or English and Russian. This question was linked to the last one in the questionnaire on whether the research participants improved their English skills outside the classroom and if yes, how they did it. Five out of six research participants answered positively to this question:

**Table 4. Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students on how they improve their English outside the classroom**

Azerbaijani	Ukrainian
- [no answer given] (a female student) "I spend time with friends" (it probably means these friends speak English)." (a male student) "By communicating with others in English." (a male student)	"I try to speak with international students." (a female student) "I talk to some people in English, listen to music and read articles." (a female student) "I attend some speaking clubs activities and use English to communicate with people from foreign countries." (a male student)

Except for one, the research participants did try to improve their English skills by speaking with others (friends or other international students) in English, listening to music, reading texts or joining various activities of speaking clubs. This informal way of improving their English skills shows their effort to become better in English, even though some of them believed they already had satisfactory skills of English.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This small scale case study aimed at investigating Azerbaijani and Ukrainian students' attitudes towards their English skills. In autumn 2017, these students started studying at VMU (Lithuania) in the study programmes whose language of instruction was English. Even though the number of research participants was low, the results provide valuable insight. In general, the students thought they had

not had enough knowledge of English before their studies at VMU and also were dissatisfied with the level of English they had nine months after that when the research was carried out. On the other hand, the majority of them believed their English skills were of the same level as those of their course mates who may or may not have been Lithuanians. Moreover, they emphasised that good English skills were necessary for communication and important for their future careers, but to speak in English was reported to be easier than to write in English. However, in terms of practicing English outside the classroom, all the research participants indicated they practiced speaking in English rather than writing, although the latter skill seemed to be a more difficult skill to master for them. In general, all the Ukrainian students would like to improve their speaking skills, while all the Azerbaijani students thought they needed to enrich their English vocabulary. Other skills were also indicated, but they varied greatly depending on the student.

The Azerbaijani and Ukrainian research participants were critical towards their English skills. This could make one wonder how successful these students were in their studies, because the medium of instruction in their study programmes was English, which meant their lectures, oral and written assignments were in English. It is possible to assume that a low level of English should have had impact on the quality of their studies. In fact, one of the research participants failed not only the course of general English at B2 level in 2018 but also other two study programme courses. This became known only several months after the research. It does not necessarily mean that the failure had anything to do with the English skills, but it is likely and could be seen as a possible direction for further research. In fact, this publication is published three years after the research to see what happened to the research participants. It is important to point out that not all of them reached year four, which is the last year, in their bachelor studies. In fact, only 50% of them did, which means in the spring of 2021 only three students (two Azerbaijani and one Ukrainian) are still studying and are expected to defend their bachelor theses. The reasons for dropping out are not known to the author of this publication. Thus, further research into this topic could reveal why foreign students drop out (whether it is related to students' skills of English) and help to prevent this.

One of the key issues in the outgoing reform of higher education is the quality of studies in Lithuania that is intended to be improved. On the one hand, local universities face a challenge to attract more students from Lithuania and abroad, but on the other hand, they are required to admit the students who have higher grades and state examination scores. Foreign nationals do not apply for studies through the main admission system but rather directly through university admission systems, which allows more flexibility in terms of scores that do not necessarily lead to the admission of well-prepared students and a high quality of studies. It does not mean that a lower level of English should be a great problem in order to apply for study programmes taught through English as a medium of instruction, but there could be intensive English classes offered before students actually start studying in their study programmes in English. Some countries have the so-called preparation schools in which students study English for a year or so in order to get the knowledge of English they need for their future studies in English. This may be seen as an idea of good practice that could be implemented in Lithuanian institutions of higher education, but at the same time, it could make the studies in Lithuania less attractive to foreign students. Therefore, Lithuanian institutions of higher education will have to make a decision in the future of whether they want a high quality of studies or a large quantity of students (this, of course, should be applied in relation to Lithuanian and foreign students). Probably both can be achieved, but the quality should go first and could potentially lead to larger numbers of students in the long run.

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