

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: THE RESULTS OF A STUDY ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING LSP

Anna Dávidovics¹, Tímea Németh²

^{1,2}Department of Languages for Biomedical Purposes and Communication, Medical School, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

¹Doctoral School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

anna.davidovics@aok.pte.hu

timea.nemeth@aok.pte.hu

Abstract: *The number of international students enrolled in higher education worldwide has increased significantly in the past few decades, as one of the effects of globalization, as OECD statistics reveal (OECD, 2018). After finishing secondary education, many students decide to take the opportunity provided by their countries and foreign universities and enrol in the tertiary education system far away from their homes. Inevitably, this leads to numerous intercultural challenges teachers have to face nowadays in culturally diverse classrooms. It is important to note, however, that the particular issues and objectives arising in multicultural and multinational groups tend to differ between the various stages of education. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the findings of the first phase of a longitudinal research study conducted at the Medical School of the University of Pécs, Hungary, throughout the spring semester of the academic year 2018/19. The primary goal of the study is to collect, assess and evaluate the specific teaching methods and attitudes multicultural students deem most effective while studying Languages for Specific Purposes, and make suggestions for their application in multicultural classroom settings. An online questionnaire was filled out by 133 international medical students, who were attending Hungarian for Medical Purposes (HMP) courses at the time of the survey. The results suggest that, in many cases, their needs and requirements are quite similar, regardless of the differences between their cultural background and national heritage. They prefer sitting and working in groups, collaborating rather than competing, writing tests instead of taking an oral exam, and the majority would like to have online access to the course materials. They also, almost unanimously, indicate a strong preference for using their gadgets and devices during classes, and even for homework and individual practice. These findings imply that, no matter the country of origin, international students have shared views and preferences on the methods they find most effective for their learning, which assists teachers in tailoring their classes to their needs and requirements.*

Keywords: international students; multicultural student groups, perceptions of teaching and learning; languages for specific purposes, Hungarian for medical purposes

1. Introduction

"Be stubborn about your goals and flexible about your methods." - Unknown

1.1. Student mobility worldwide and in Hungary

Globalisation, migration, economic crises across the globe as well as the value of obtaining an international education have all led to the significant increase in the number of international students in higher education worldwide in the past few decades. All around the world students in secondary education are presented with information and choices about tertiary education systems in various countries. As a result, students become aware of all the opportunities and differences in quality between universities, which contribute in their decision to continue their education in a different country. Németh *et al.* (2020) explain that students are also aware of the advantages of studying abroad, which could improve many of their skills and abilities (such as problem solving and creativity), traits which are regarded highly and sought by potential future employers. Data imply that the number of international students increased from 2 million in 1999 to 5 million in 2016 (OECD, 2018: 219).

Pozsgai *et al.* (2012) point out that, in Hungary, a demographic decline can be observed in the population growth, resulting in fewer students in formal education each year. As governmental funding decreases and operational costs increase, universities are presented with the option to enrol international students, and thus lessening the effects of reduced governmental funds and the smaller number of native student population. As mentioned earlier, students become increasingly interested in the quality of services at universities, and one important factor contributing to the assessment of performance and quality is the institutions' ability to attract international students. Most governments show support and encourage universities to welcome and enrol international students (OECD, 2018: 223). The rise in the number of international students in Hungary can be observed after the country joined the European Union, and after the Bologna process was initiated. Their number accumulated to 11,187 (in 2001/2002 academic year), and it showed a steep rise to a total of 17,112 by the end of the 2011/2012 academic year (Császár and Wusching, 2014). Many universities offer different programmes for international students, but the Hungarian medical education has displayed an outstanding popularity, being a favoured choice for many students worldwide, therefore the majority of this student population enrol in the programmes offered by the four medical schools in Hungary (Pozsgai, Kajos and Németh, 2012).

1.2. Teaching Hungarian for Medical Purposes (HMP) in a culturally diverse classroom

Papanna *et al.* (2013) emphasize the bilateral nature of education, where teachers and students cooperate to reach a shared objective through the learning process. These goals are already set, but many routes are available and can be taken to reach them. It is within the teachers' liberty and responsibility to choose the most effective and appropriate one, but it can prove quite challenging in certain scenarios, requiring a lot of flexibility from the teachers while keeping their goals in mind. There is a rising global trend, pointing towards the importance and value of a

task-based, student-centred approach in tertiary education. Yet, it is only one of the numerous challenges teachers have to face nowadays. Due to globalization and student mobility options, many young people decide to enter tertiary education in a foreign country, making intercultural skills and competences increasingly important for teachers, as Aguilar (2018) points out. There is a necessity to assess and analyse the needs of the international students, and then tailor classes to fulfil said requirements in a culturally diverse group, but, as Aguilar argues (*ibid*), it has not been addressed to the ideal extent. Oven *et al.* (2018) adds that international students usually have certain expectations about the quality of education when they enrol in a university's programme. Having international students at an institution will not improve the quality of services or make said institution international, unless these services are tailored to the international students' requirements beforehand. Members in groups and classes formed by this student population are quite colourful, they belong to different ethnicities, follow different religions, speak and have various native languages, carry and nurture diverse cultural traditions. Dubbeld *et al.* (2019) point out, that these inherent factors should all be taken into consideration by the teacher while choosing the methods for these culturally diverse student groups. However, many teachers struggle to do so, even if they come from a culturally diverse society, as during their education, teachers are not prepared to teach and handle multinational and multicultural groups. The hardships and struggles of many teachers in international classes can be even more obvious if said teachers grew up in an ethnically and culturally homogenous society. A lot of these teachers try to utilize and implement the same teaching styles, attitudes and methods they use in the groups of native students, being oblivious or unable to take into consideration the needs and requirements in international groups (Dubbeld *et al.*, 2019).

There is an increasing need to address these necessities at the Medical School of the University of Pécs (UPMS), too, as the university is experiencing a great change in their student population. Németh and Csongor (2018) mention that the percentage of international students studying at UPMS was over 50% in 2016, based on the enrolment data. Students from all over the world arrive at UPMS to pursue various programmes of study. Most of them come from countries like Norway, Iran, Jordan, South Korea, Japan, USA, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Canada, and many more, from all over the world. UPMS offers courses in three different languages: English, German and Hungarian. Students who register for the English programme experience the multicultural aspects the most, since these groups tend to be the most diverse in the national and cultural sense. Understanding the similarities and differences between students in such culturally diverse groups is essential, as Condruz-Bacescu (2018) explains, to achieve educational goals and objectives, and avoid possible conflicts. Finding the best methods applicable in these groups, however, can be quite a challenge for the teacher in numerous occasions, especially if they come from ethnically and culturally homogeneous backgrounds and received little or no specific training on how to handle multicultural groups.

Teaching Languages for Specific Purposes requires different methods than traditional language courses. A big difference can be pointed out between the aims and purposes of the two different courses, and the students have different expectations, too. Most of the international students have little or no knowledge of the Hungarian language before they start their studies at UPMS. The main

objective of HMP courses is to allow international students to communicate in professional situations in Hungarian, to ask the necessary questions and give the required instructions, relying on a practical, rather than a holistic approach towards the target language (Kurtán and Sillye, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a research comprised of both qualitative and quantitative data, conducted at UPMS throughout the second semester of the academic year 2018/19. The aim of this research is to identify and assess the methods and attitudes international students deem most effective, based on their experiences over the track of their formal education.

2. Methods

This longitudinal study is a blended-method research incorporating both an online questionnaire and structured interviews. The aim of this research is to gather an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and cultural variables international students possess, their needs and requirements, and to synthesize all these variables into a common framework, a guideline to be used in multicultural classes. This mixed method survey enables a multidimensional approach to the same subject matter from various aspects. Due to the limitations in extension of this paper, the analysis of the structured interviews cannot be featured here.

The first phase of the longitudinal research consisted of a questionnaire, presented to the students in the form of an online survey, throughout the course of the second semester of the 2018/19 academic year. The online survey consisted of 39 questions around socio-demographic information, and the respondents' perceptions, experiences, thoughts and ideas about teaching styles and attitudes.

Convenience sampling was applied, as a method for the data collection, in order to achieve the results, as it was deemed to be the most practical for the following reasons. "Convenience sampling is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study" (Etikan *et al.*, 2016: 2). International students attending classes offered by the Department of Languages for Specific Purposes were asked to participate in the survey.

The questionnaire was shared and distributed via emails or through the Neptun Unified Education System of the University of Pécs. A total of 133 responses were received.

2.1. Respondents

All students involved in the research were studying at the University of Pécs Medical School (UPMS) when the survey was completed, either in the general medicine track (87%), or the dentistry (8%) and pharmacy (5%) tracks. Regarding their studies, 27% of the students were in their first year, whereas 61% in their second. The least represented groups were the third- and fourth year students. Most of the students (58%) were female, 41% were male, and one student identified as other. The majority of the participants were aged 19-20 (32%), and 21-25 (57%). There were only 3 students above the age of 31, which means most of

the students belong to the same generation. They were from 27 different nationalities, with Norway, Iran, Jordan, South Korea being the most frequent countries of origin. International students from Cape Verde, Japan, Switzerland, Vietnam, Egypt and Nigeria were also represented in the survey, albeit in fewer numbers. The survey included questions inquiring about the second- and other languages the students could speak. As expected, all of them indicated English as a second language; however German (12%), French (9%) and Spanish (8%) were also listed as additional foreign languages spoken by them. Altogether, 133 students, enrolled in the English programme of UPMS, filled in the online questionnaire throughout the course of the second semester of the 2018/19 academic year.

2.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was created, using the online platform *Google Forms*, which the students were able to access via their mobile phones and other portable devices. The questionnaire, which was pre-tested by four students, contained 39 questions and was divided into four main sections. First, the students filled questions inquiring about socio-demographic information (gender, year of studies, faculty, nationality, native language and other spoken languages). Then they could express their opinions and views regarding statements about teaching and learning. The questions and statements were organized in three subgroups, namely classroom management from the students' perspective, teaching methods, and tasks they find most useful. Respondents were asked to reply to the questions by indicating their level of agreement using a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", with a "neutral" option in the middle in order to get a holistic view and better understanding of students' views and opinions. Four open-ended questions were also included, where the respondents had the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas in their own words. These open-ended questions were the following:

- What was your best/worst classroom experience at university?
- The teacher should... to make classes more effective. How would you complete that sentence?
- What was the classroom activity you loved/hated the most?
- What activities/tasks helped the most with your studies?

3. Results

The first set of questions inquired about optimal classroom management. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the majority of the students (55%) expressed a preference for sitting and working in a group, 32% was neutral, and only 13% preferred to work alone. One of the students commented: "*I love having to interact with all students.*" Many others also expressed in favour to cooperate with others, regardless of nationality.

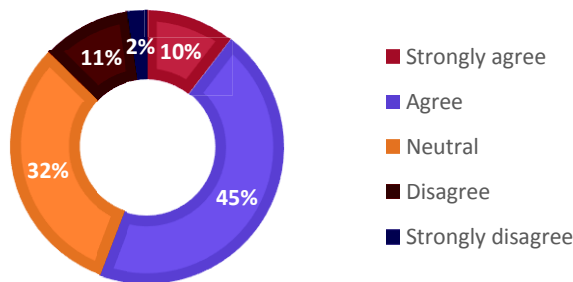


Figure 1: *Students' preference for sitting with the others in groups*

The majority, 80%, liked taking notes during classes, and many students (41%) agreed that homework was a necessity (38% were neutral). Lectures were disliked by most of the students (57%), as it can be seen in Figure 2, while 22% expressed neutral feelings. One of the students wrote: *"I like interactive classes. We will learn for first part and then we get asked questions in the second part"*. Another student wrote: *"I like classes where you can be active."* Many others expressed their preference for inclusive and interactive classes, where active participation is required.

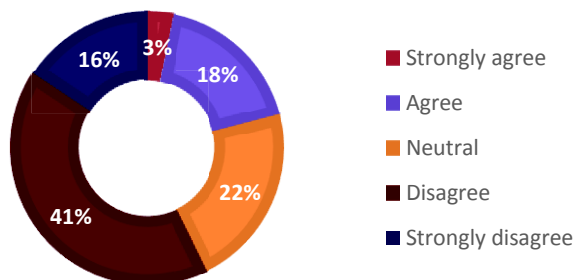


Figure 2: *Students' preference for practices vs lectures*

Most of the students (54%) felt that it is harder to work in a strict learning environment, only 17% answered in favour. Regarding exams, 47% preferred written exams over the 20%, who expressed a preference for oral exams. The rest of the students had no preference in the matter. An obvious preference (45%) was expressed for frequent, low-stakes tests during the semester, instead of one end-term exam (either oral or written). Some students (26%) wanted both mid-semester and end-term exams, while 15% wanted only one examination at the very end of the semester.

The next set of questions was about the teaching practice and attitudes. The results indicate, as Figure 3 displays, that 58% of the students preferred to a certain extent if the teacher was more like a facilitator during classes, whereas 39% of the respondents were neutral.

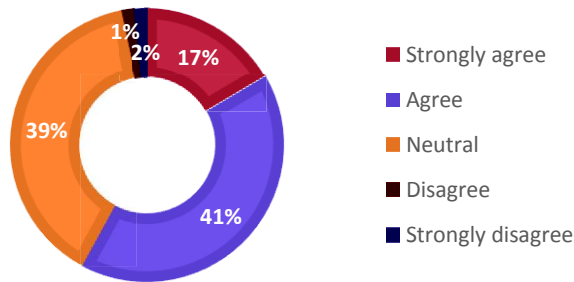


Figure 3: *Students' preference for a facilitator-like teacher*

Interestingly, many students expressed a dislike for PowerPoint presentations, only 22% answered in favour. The great majority of the students (73%) thought the teacher should ask questions during the classes, and 67% agreed that mistakes should be addressed directly and immediately for a better understanding. The majority of the students (88%) preferred course materials to be shared online, as Figure 4 demonstrates, making it possible for them to access anywhere on their portable devices. It is worth mentioning that no one chose the “strongly disagree” option in this case.

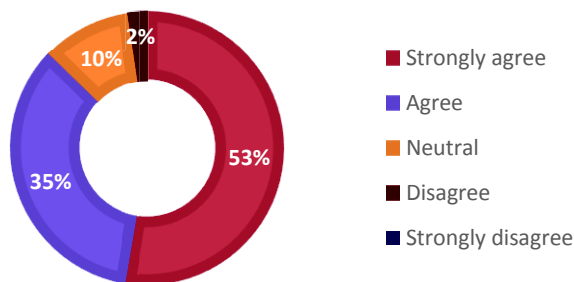


Figure 4: *Students' preference for course materials to be shared online*

The last part of the questionnaire was about tasks students found most helpful during their studies. A greater number of them (42%) indicated a preference for being involved actively during classes, 38% did not have a preference, and only 20% preferred passive, less immersive classes. Most of the students (38%) liked tasks where they had the opportunity to speak in front of the others, 29% would have avoided it. They expressed, almost unanimously (78% preferred, and 18% of the students were neutral) a wish to use online websites like Quizlet and Kahoot as much as possible (both during classes and in their study time), to enhance their classroom work and to help them practise on their own, too. Quizlet and Kahoot offer a multitude of tools, such as quizzes, flashcards and polls, which can enhance the learning experience. One of the students wrote: “I use both Quizlet and cram to make flashcards and I have felt that it has helped me a lot. I also like Kahoot

because it gives an impression about what the teacher finds important during the semester.” They also find these applications useful for acquiring new vocabulary or specific terminology. Another student commented: *“Quizlet and games which made it easier to learn between the classes and on the way to and from home. It’s timesaving and enhances the learning of new vocabularies quicker.”* Most students, to put it concisely, expressed in favour of Quizlet.

4. Discussion

International students had clear and mutual preferences in many aspects. Papanna *et al.* (2013) point out that long, monotonous lectures were deemed less effective, and the results of this survey support that idea, as the majority of the students expressed a dislike against lectures, preferring a learning environment which was less strict, but more immersive and interactive at the same time, where they had the opportunity to speak up, ask and answer questions, and take an active part in the learning process. Dubovicki and Banjari (2016) report that students worldwide are increasingly aware of differences in quality among tertiary institutes. There is a demand for high quality services. Students view content as one of the least important factors and focus more on other aspects, like their relationship with their professors. Students have a high regard for professors who are accessible, easily approachable and enthusiastic about their subjects. Students also expressed a need for the easy access and availability of resources and course materials, as one of their main objectives is, first and foremost, to pass the course and in order to do so, they felt the need to know and be able to access everything they are expected to learn.

Hungarian is neither known, nor studied by international students prior to joining UPMS, and their reasons for studying the language and purposes with the knowledge afterwards is mostly practical. Communicating in Hungarian with patients in medical situations bears a high importance for students both on the general medicine, dentistry and pharmacy programmes, as it is an integral part of their practical education (Nádor, 2017). Aguilar (2018) emphasizes that interaction is also essential in creating engagement. The results indicate that it is indeed true, international students prefer working in groups and getting involved in as many interactions as possible, to improve their skills. The results indicate that the teacher is expected to be more of a facilitator during the lessons, but they should ask questions from the students nonetheless and correct and explain their mistakes right away. Most of the students preferred smaller, mid-term tests during the semester, which would make them practise and revise the material constantly.

Students also indicated a preference and expressed their like in length for online websites which could support their learning, such as Kahoot and Quizlet. These websites are easily accessible, and, belonging to Generation Z, and allow the use of the students’ devices and gadgets for educational purposes.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed at demonstrating the results of the initial phase of a longitudinal research study, which was conducted at the Medical School, University of Pécs,

throughout the 2018/19 academic year. Applying convenience sampling as method, an online survey was filled by 133 international students enrolled in one of the programmes at UPMS.

A number of interesting implications can be drawn from the results of the online questionnaire. International students, in many cases, have quite defined and clear objectives and requirements when it comes to learning HMP. They prefer to be actively involved during classes, ask and answer questions and participate in group activities and interactive tasks. Instead of competing with each other, international students prefer to cooperate. They prefer to have their mistakes pointed out and addressed directly and immediately. As expressed in their answers, they can work best with a teacher who is enthusiastic, easily approachable and acts more like a facilitator during classes. They agree that homework is an important part of their individual practice, and a strong need was indicated for the easy access of the course materials, which are the requirements of said course. Students would also prefer to access these materials online. As members of Generation Z, gadgets play an essential part in their lives; therefore, it is important for them to be able to use their devices both during and outside the classroom. Despite the obvious differences between their ethnicity and culture, international students displayed similar views and opinions about many aspects of teaching and learning.

The relatively small number of participants and the chosen convenience sampling method limits wide scale interpretations; however, these results suggest that, regardless of the country of origin, international students tend to have similar needs and requirements when it comes to the learning process. Methods should be tailored flexibly to meet these requirements, allowing students to thrive and achieve the goals and objectives set by the teachers.

Authors believe that the outcomes of this study will also prove beneficial for teachers working in a multicultural student environment in various other disciplines in tertiary education.

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