

## DEVELOPING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

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Oral communication fulfils a number of general and discipline-specific pedagogical functions. Learning to speak is an important goal in itself, for it equips students with a set of skills they can use for the rest of their lives. Speaking is the mode of communication most often used to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Speaking is a significant skill for communication in all social, professional and academic contexts and success, and it is necessary for all language learners. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, various social interactions, academic surrounding and their future professional context, where they will have meetings to attend, presentations to make, discussions and arguments to participate in, and teams to work with. (<http://www.com.uri.edu/comfund/cxc.shtml>)

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a fast developing area of the English language teaching. Speaking in academic contexts is becoming increasingly important due to transition to innovative methods of teaching. Speaking in a foreign language is a double challenge for a university student. Every student can have different needs, depending on the chosen discipline, language skills, cognitive level, cultural background, and many other factors. Developing speaking abilities can be crucial for students' academic success. Presentations are an increasingly important part of undergraduate and postgraduate studies, used for both formative and summative assessments across different academic disciplines, as well as being part of the student seminar experience or any other oral communication activity (e.g. a course paper, Bachelor or Master degree thesis defence) in academic context. The research into EAP has grown (Hyland, 2008), however, academic presentations remain a relatively under-researched area. The above indicates the problems related to foreign language teaching/learning at university level and presupposes the need to transition of teaching a foreign language for academic purposes, and, thus, innovating a foreign language subject syllabus regarding academic speaking skills.

Thus, oral presentations have become an increasingly important feature of Higher Education. The paper aims at presenting how/to what extent/whether developing abilities in making academic presentations can contribute to the development of oral communication skills in academic contexts.

The research methodology is based on the conceptions of modern educational theory of constructivism in language learning. The research methods are descriptive document and scientific literature analysis, surveys (needs analysis questionnaires) and semi-structures interviews for qualitative and quantitative data selection, and statistical data analysis. The analysis of the findings reveals higher education students' needs for academic speaking at university level. Higher education students' needs reveal the following nature of challenges for academic speaking: practical, linguistic, content and knowledge, cognitive/affective, academic, textual, contextual and knowledge based. The nature of challenges for academic speaking presupposes the recommendations for the transition to teaching a foreign language for academic purposes and making innovations in the syllabus of the foreign language subject as regards the development of oral communication skills.