THE ROLE OF AN ENGLISH COURSE
IN TRANSFERABLE SKILL ACQUISITION

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Transferable skills (TS) have become an important part of the Higher Education agenda, and the English language department contributes to their development as well. However, there is little information on students' perceptions of TS development in subject disciplines, not to mention the role of a language course in the TS framework. 53 self-completion questionnaires of the 3rd year bachelor degree engineering students were analyzed in order to understand the patterns of TS acquisition. The majority of respondents feel that they have developed TS mainly through solving problems in their subject disciplines. The main mission of the Department of Modern Languages and Communication is perceived primarily as building confidence in public speaking as well as in discussions within a group. There is little evidence of generalization from writing IELTS exam type assignments in the English class and writing in the discipline, and this fact needs closer attention.

Key words: transferable skills, communication, subject disciplines, English language course.

Higher education (HE) worldwide has undergone a change in focus, away from pure knowledge acquisition to the abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life (Assister, 1995).

In many countries these skills are taught and assessed independently of the core disciplines, while in Higher education institutions in Russia they are 'embedded' in subject teaching and no direct references to developing personal or non-academic skills are made. However, Russian Federal State Educational Standard for the engineering disciplines metallurgy, material science and nanomaterials outlines such graduate competences as 'level of thinking', 'standard of written and oral speech', computer literacy, learner autonomy, 'readiness to cooperate with colleagues', ability to lead people and obey, information literacy and ability to think creatively (www.fgosvo.ru).

As English teachers at National University of Science and Technology NUST MISiS), we observe that many our students struggle not only with English, but have a wider range of problems, many of which related to insufficient development of TS. Student population here is diverse, with some coming from lyceums, gymnasiums or other types of specialized schools and thus having a

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wide repertoire of study skills, while others struggle with both Russian and English languages and are used to receptive acquisition of knowledge in a teacher-centered classroom.

Before this research had been done, we saw our mission as to teach not only the language but information literacy, problem solving and critical thinking as well. As a result, a scheme of project work was embedded in the syllabus on order to ensure the progression from basic study skills to higher order thinking skills (Stoller, 1997).

This situation prompted our research into students' perception of the development of TS through university education in general and how the English course, which takes a substantial place in the university curricular, can contribute to this development. In other words, we were interested to understand what else, apart from language skills as such our students generalize from the English course.

The skills mentioned above go under different terms – 'generic or core skills' (Assister, 1995), 'soft skills', 'personal or personal transferable skills' (Drummond et al, 1998) or 'life skills' (Cottrell, 2013), but by any term transferable skills (TS) constitute an essential part of the curriculum of any English for Academic English (EAP) course (Alexander et al., 2008; Gillet, 1996; Jordan, 1997). Chadha (2006, p.19) defines these abilities as ' those skills that are central to occupational competence in all sectors and all levels and include project management, leadership, communication, working in teams and problem solving'.

Another important issue being discussed in relation to TS is their place in the university curricular and approaches to their development (Drummond et al, 1998; Wingate, 2006). The key distinction is between embedded and bolt-on approaches. The embedded approach involves skills being developed through subject-specific learning, not taught independently as a separate course as in the bolt-in approach.

At NUST MISiS, TS are not taught explicitly as a credit-bearing course except single initiatives of some subject departments to teach 'Personal effectiveness' or 'Presentation Skills'. As a result, the system of direct assessment of TS is not implied by any departments and TS might only constitute the rubrics for final task assessment.).

As the university name suggests, the undergraduate students major in the fields of metallurgy, material science, nanotechnology, semiconductors, IT technologies, electronics, economics and management. All compulsory subjects are taught in the Russian language, but the English language course holds a prominent place in the bachelor's degree curriculum. The course integrates General English modules, EAP modules, and IELTS exam preparation modules, which supersede each other as students progress from semester 1 to semester 7.

The entry levels were mostly beginners and elementary (more than half), and these learners encounter EAP only in the format of IELTS materials. A small proportion of the 1st year students were tested as high intermediate, and by the end of the 3rd year they had already completed two EAP modules.

The subjects of the research were 3rd year students in the 6th semester of the undergraduate course, who presumably had already had a clear vision of what TS and how they had acquired.

120 students overall participated in the research. The first cohort were 67 the most proficient in English students from the EAP module. Each college- Material Science and Semiconductors, IT Technologies, Economics and Management – has one group of this kind with

about 15 students in each. The second cohort (53 participants) were low- intermediate and intermediate students from five language groups, also stratified by institute.

Students of the EAP module were given an assessed writing assignment, a reflective essay as a response to the task: 'Choose 3-5 transferable skills which are the most important for you. Write a description of where you obtained them and how you use them in your studies. You should write at least 300 words'. Students were given a list of TS compiled from Cottrell (2013) and university websites (http://www.ncl.ac.uk; http://www.careers.qut.edu.au) as a prompt and participated in a teacher-led class discussion on written and oral genres they have experienced at the university.

The essays were analyzed on the contexts of transfer. As a rule, there was one dominant area or activity described, and the contexts were tallied and presented in Fig 1. Unfortunately, the essays did not provide us with any meaningful information on the contribution of the English classes to skill transfer as perceived by students. This led us to design a self-completion questionnaire, with mostly closed questions. 53 students from other modules completed these questionnaires in class under the supervision of their teachers and returned them immediately after completion.

Contexts of transfer

There was not a single essay where students described TS as useless or unimportant, but the answers varied in how students feel they have developed TS. The key distinction known from literature is between embedded and bolt-on approaches (Chadha, 2006; Conlon, 2008; Wingate, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the bolt- on approach was realized in some departments at MISiS as a single institutional initiative. However, only three students who majored in economics and management wrote that they benefited from such modules:

Whether you are a freshmen in college look to get ahead or a high school student just trying to survive you will find study skills guides, tutorials and resources very useful (economics major [2]).

However, the consensus view of more practice and research-oriented students was in favour of embedded approach, where TS are integrated into the core discipline and are developed as technical abilities. They highlighted that a technical course 'needs more practical lessons and integration of theoretical skills into practice' *(IT major):*

The tradition of technical education is such that students learn these skills on their own, struggling with their homework and working at seminar, interacting and networking with their group mates and dormitory neighbors. Feeble attempts of introducing general-purpose and introductory courses are made, but, truth to be told, most students receive addition such training as separate disciplines rather aggressively (material science major).

A common theme of reflection essays was students' intuitive understanding of transfer as 'life skills' acquired in many different contexts - in a football team, at school struggling to combine 'academic life with private life', 'dancing, sport and singing with studies in a lyceum', or just living in a new environment:

When you share your household with someone you will surely be involved in some conflicts. What I learned from living in a dormitory is that you can't fight over everything and I often do something to ease up the atmosphere (metallurgy major).

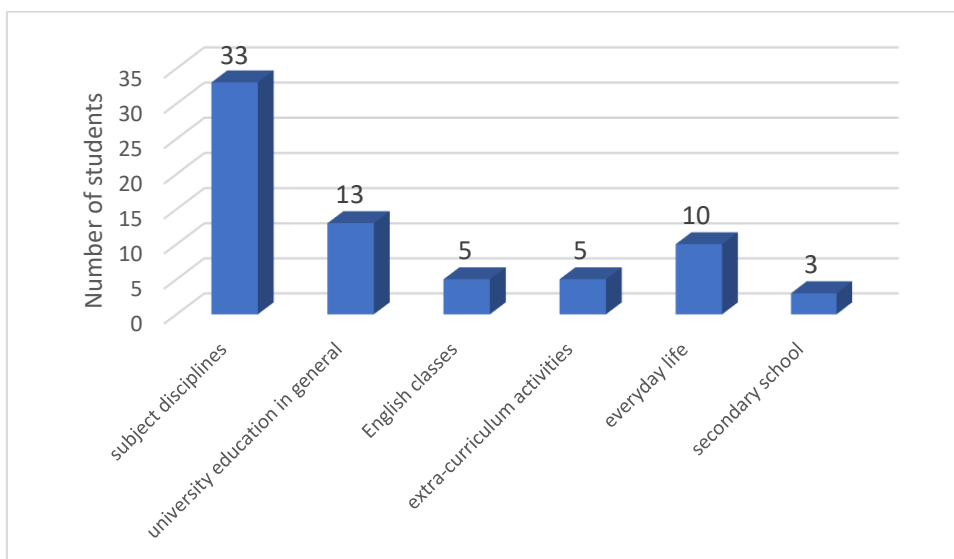[2] grammar, wording and style of the authors here and further on are retained

Fig 1. Contexts of transfer

Another domain which five students see as the key TS training area is extra-curriculum activities, either connected with studies or not. Such events as Arts and Humor Contest (KVN) or Case Solving Competition (CUP MISiS) could be the main theme of an essay:

In my KVN team we have conflicts very often, so we must solve problems without quarrels…. Meeting deadlines is a significant skill too. Before the KVN game teams have to send all materials by mail, and if you miss the deadline, you will have sanctions like less time on the stage (metallurgy major).

We did a wonderful job because we worked as a team. I understood that there is no point in trying to change a person, but you can always prove your point (business informatics major).

Despite the fact that we gave much attention to non-academic contexts of transfer, the dominant domain for developing TS for the majority of our students is obviously their studies in the subject disciplines (Fig 1). These are skills gained from their teachers, 'by method of trial and error', 'by doing laboratory work reports, struggling with homework', passing weekly online tests or coping with exam questions, communicating and collaborating with group-and roommates.

The role of the English language course was not obvious in these essays as such question was not asked explicitly. The main conclusion that can be drawn from the essays is that students do not perceive the language course as very important in developing TS.

The role of the English course in TS acquisition

In order to receive more information on generalization from out discipline we designed a self-completion questionnaire for students studying on less advanced modules. 53 students from 5 language groups answered given questions and wrote short comments. The skills which students ranked first as transferrable from the English course and other university subjects are shown in Fig.2.
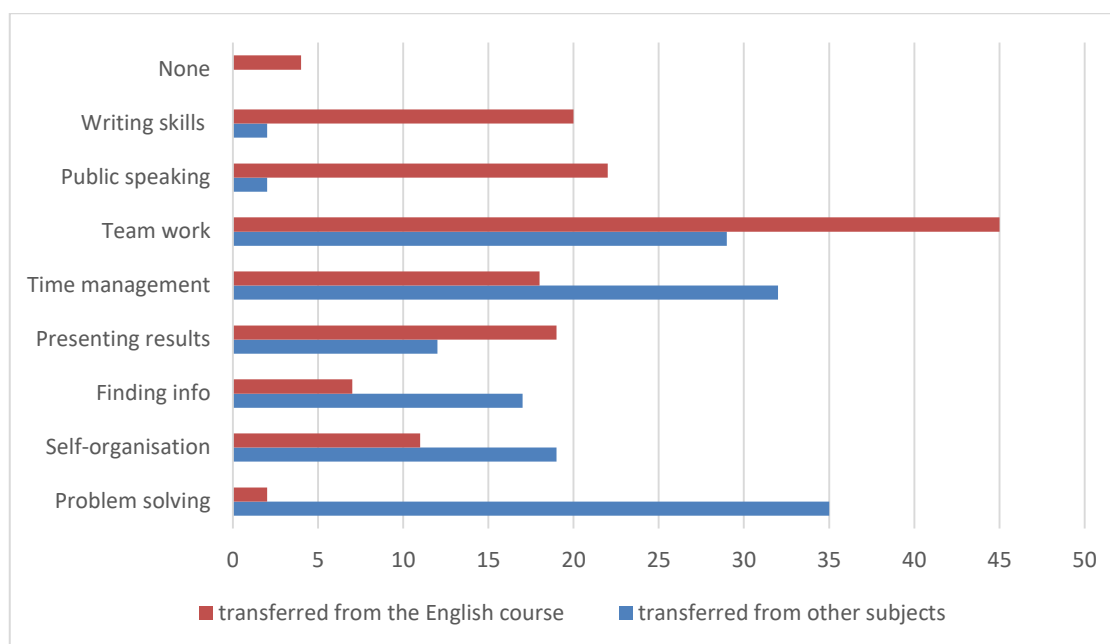
Fig 2. Sets of TS ranked first in the English classes and other subjects.

This cohort of lower level students demonstrated different attitude to the role of the English classes as compared to those from the EAP module. They were more concerned about learning the English language rather than developing other skills and reported about having grave problems with English grammar and speaking in the foreign language. 4 respondents even wrote that they improved 'nothing but the language itself'.

However, the other 49 students outlined TS which they felt they had derived from the English classes and among the skills ranked first were team work, public speaking, academic writing and presenting results. Public speaking and academic writing were mentioned by 42% and 38% respondents respectively as skills transferred almost exclusively from the English class (Fig 2). Public speaking means getting the message across and overcoming fears. Many students wrote about building confidence and generally becoming 'more communicative' through group work.

Team work, public speaking and presenting results are the TS many students (19%) associate with project work in English class. Despite the fact that 70% of respondents reported doing projects in core disciplines, the English classes are seen by many as the main practice of real communication and collaboration within a team. Surprising in the view of the above is a high proportion of students (49%) who feel they do not use this experience in other disciplines. The reason might be a different format of projects. In some subjects   a big task, for example, a laboratory project or a set of exam questions, is divided between team members and each of them has to complete their own part, or students prepare different exam questions to share with team mates and call this group work, although in these cases no real communication occurs.

Writing for general and academic purposes might be a field where the English department takes a leading position, because subject departments do not provide writing classes even in the Russian language. The questionnaire confirmed that students see the English language course as an almost exclusive source of writing skills. However, 63% of respondents felt that they were not going to use this expertise elsewhere besides the final English exam:

I've also learned how to write essays and prepare for IELTS, but these skills are not important for me (material science major).

In our context this obvious lack of generalization could be explained by different formats and genres of writing in the disciplines and in the English class. The English department teaches writing mostly in the IELTS format, that is the description of one piece of graphical information and a 250-word essay. It has been demonstrated, though, that the type of writing the test elicits should not be thought as an appropriate model for university writing as it is based more on opinion and real-life phenomena rather than research data and academic sources (Moore, Morton, 2005). On the other hand, the IELTS essay assumes some critical analysis, which is not always required in the most common core discipline genres, such as 'referates' and laboratory reports.

The reason for modest optimism is 37% of students who reported using certain meta-awareness about writing in writing in their disciplines. At least they realize that they must plan and organize their writing to achieve clarity.

This research was prompted by the observations of the teachers from the Department of Modern Languages and Communication on the underachievement of a large proportion of undergraduate students in the English language subject. We felt that not only the language proficiency is the cause, but also the underdevelopment of basic study skills in early years and academic skills in upper-division studies. As a result, we felt that our responsibility apart from teaching English and communication was to help students with development of TS, with the focus on the ability to select, process and present information applying critical analysis and evaluation.

The findings obtained from reflection essays and questionnaires written and completed by the 3rd year students made us reconsider these views and realize that the English course certainly contributes to TS development, but in a different from to subject departments way.

Generalization seems to occur not only across academic disciplines, but 'across various forms of social organization' (Beach, cited from Wardle, 2007), or what students call 'life itself'. The contexts can be living in the dormitory, participating in extra curriculum activities or taking part in semi-professional contests. However, for the majority of NUST "MISiS" students the main practice ground for TS is their studies at university in general and in subject disciplines in particular.

The attitude to bolt-on and embedded approach to TS teaching seems to vary according to students' core discipline. Those whose major implies research have a rather skeptical stance about stand-alone TS courses, saying they learn in the process of practical work, both in the laboratory and outside it. Project work in subject disciplines, extra-curriculum semi-professional contests and in English classes received many positive comments as the practice ground for the 'future employment'. These data conform observations of other authors that students generally do not appreciate the value of stand-alone courses as being divorced from their real learning experience (Drummond et al, 1998).

English classes were not often mentioned in the reflection on TS if not asked about explicitly, which indicates that students' experience in engineering subjects seem more important for them. A separate study on generalization from English class revealed that the range of TS is not the same as that in the subject disciplines. Meeting deadlines and related self-management skills for home assignments and larger projects have high ranks in the inventory of TS, but the overwhelming majority of answers were about communication.

English classes helped students to become more confident when speaking in public or taking part in group discussions. The fact that this communication takes place in a foreign language tends not to downplay its value for personal development. Both more and less proficient in their language skills students wrote about 'overcoming fear of speaking in front of the audience' or breaking their habit of 'sitting quietly in the corner and waiting to be asked'. Team work might be the main asset of our department as through team work students reportedly learn to collaborate, listen to each other, lead and motivate people, resolve conflicts, solve problems and analyze and evaluate arguments and solutions.

Written communication could be the second domain after public speaking and group discussions, where English classes have a leading position. However, little evidence of generalization was obtained, at least according to 63% of respondents. Students either feel that they will not need the knowledge and experience they acquired practicing IELTS-format writing elsewhere beyond passing this exam or they fail to find the common ground between writing for the exam and writing in their disciplines due to much difference between the two. Only a small proportion of respondents realize that they could generalize meta-awareness about writing to make their assignments in subject disciplines more organized, logical and clear.

This problem has been widely discussed in literature (Assister, 1995; Hilgers et al, 1999; Wardle, 2007), but the solutions seem not to have been found yet. Wardle (2007) gives directions for further research which should include writing samples, interviewing students and subject professors and finding the common ground for generalization.

Overall, the current research suggests that the TS which the English department at the university can and should develop seem to be primary related to communication in its all forms. Currently the emphasis is being made on different forms of oral communication as discipline faculties overlook soft skills for the sake of subject knowledge, practical and self-management skills and critical thinking. Although students generally appreciate their experience in writing obtained in the English course, the transfer between exam-format writing and writing in the disciplines is not evident due to great difference in format and genres. This fact needs further research before the measures to bridge the gap could be suggested.

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