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ENGLISH SPEAKING CLUB AS A MEANS TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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This study investigates the effectiveness of an English Speaking Club as an extracurricular initiative at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University. The purpose of the research is to describe main principles of planning the Speaking Club and analyse how it can boost motivation, enhance communication skills and confidence, and improve language command of the participants. The study employs a descriptive analytic method and student surveys to assess changes in speaking fluency, vocabulary, and overall interaction within the club. Main principles include a focus on student-centered learning, engagement in various interactive activities, and fostering of soft skills such as teamwork and critical thinking. The constituents of the planning process for the Club involve identifying the target audience, meeting frequency, communication channel, and the selection of topics. Event planning requires setting clear goals and expected outcomes for each meeting, designing activities to meet participants' needs and focus on particular skills development. The teacher's role is stated as a facilitator and moderator, providing a supportive learning environment and encouraging student initiative without direct evaluation. Self-evaluation and feedback are to be used to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to monitor progress over time. Results indicate significant improvements in students' fluency, vocabulary expansion, alongside enhanced confidence and satisfaction with their learning experiences. The participants appreciated the informal and engaging setting, meaningful discussions and a collaborative environment. The findings underscore the importance of integrating extracurricular opportunities into language education, and dual benefits of improving linguistic capabilities and fostering essential life skills.

Key words: *English Speaking Club, extracurricular activity, communication skills, motivation, fluency, interactive activities, soft skills.*

Problem Statement. Today university graduates with English language communication skills are in high demand in the Ukrainian labour market, especially those who have mastered sciences including information technology (IT), software engineering, applied math, tourism, management, biotechnologies and food chemistry, telecommunications and many other fields. In June 2023 the

Ukrainian government registered and started the procedure of considering of the draft law on the new status of English, the purpose of which is to facilitate the study and use of the language in Ukraine [12] as adopted in June 2024 and now it provides for fixing officially the status of English as one of the languages of international communication in Ukraine, as well as states a wide

range of solutions to increase the accessibility of learning English language while “confirms the European identity of the Ukrainian people, the irreversibility of Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic course, which imposes on the state the obligation to promote the study of languages of international communication” [10]. Observing trends in Ukrainian economy, students realize that their professional “attractiveness” increases if they demonstrate speaking fluency and the ability to work with information in English at least at the B2 level (upper intermediate), according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [9; 4], still at the stage of applying for a job, and later while fulfilling their responsibilities. This means many learners come to their English language classes motivated to study. Still, 2 main questions arise: (1) Do they enter an institution of higher education with an appropriate level of English to be able to take an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) or Professional English course successfully? and (2) Does an institution ensure that learners have an appropriate number of class hours, resources, etc. to be able to obtain and manipulate the required information, to create, discuss, and analyse an output in English – that is, feel free when communicating with their colleagues and performing their responsibilities at the workplace in the future?

University ESP courses included in traditional curricula are not always sufficiently concerned with developing communicative competence and sometimes focus more on general English and professional-oriented materials and terminology. In the context of learning English, speaking in particular is a complex skill which involves an interaction between a speaker and a listener as an active process. It involves not only accuracy, appropriateness, adequacy of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy and relevance of content, but also fluency. To achieve an adequate level of speaking skills and hence communicative competence to participate in everyday and professional environment interaction students have to master all the above-mentioned components.

Here we will describe how a university and English language teachers can complement the class hours dedicated to foreign language learning provided by an institution with extracurricu-

lar activities, namely a Speaking or Discussion Club, and how they can support their students, either those lacking obligatory basic knowledge of the language since their school years, or some who lack motivation and resources to gain speaking, discussion and teamwork skills in English or those who are highly motivated to access and acquire additional knowledge and practice.

Analysis of recent research and publications. What is English Speaking Club? The researchers suggested their definitions and benefits of the Speaking Club, for example, O. Maksymenko [11] described the English-Speaking Club for sociologists as a way to expand vocabulary and discuss the present-day issues, O. Demydovych, O. Holik [5, p. 9] define the Speaking Club as an effective way to develop not only hard skills but also soft skills that are highly demanded in the XXI century. The foreign researchers suggested the terms “Discussion Club” or “Talk Club” [2], shifting the emphasis from linguistics to public speaking, exchanging thoughts, thinking skills, or “Conversation Club” dwelling on non-formal institutional interaction [6] and language acquisition and integration of refugees/asylum seekers through participation [7].

Previous studies have focused on several issues related to speaking clubs as media to improve speaking skills and one of the possible solutions to assist students in practicing speaking the foreign language. O. Demydovych, O. Holik [5] managed to assess the effectiveness of the Speaking Club as an interactive extracurricular activity in learning English for professional purposes at medical universities and proved an overall improvement of the four basic language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking of the Speaking Club participants during a 5-year experiment). The authors stated that the main didactic principles applied to the preparation, organisation and hosting the meetings include accessibility, visualisation, active participation, systematisation and continuity [5]. The research by N. Wahyuniati, M. Qolbia [8] investigated the effect of English club on students’ speaking ability which appeared to be positive. The scholars pointed out the prerogative of fluency as the property to deliver information quickly

and with expertise and stated that fluent speakers can express themselves effectively and without hesitation and do not worry about making mistakes that is crucial for being confident when using the language of communication. The study conducted by A. Abdala (2021) concludes that English club helps Saudi students to overcome language anxiety and traditional boring routine classroom activities, it helps them practice speaking English joyfully and English club fosters critical thinking, persuasive and argumentative skills among students [1].

The purpose of our research is to describe the main principles of planning and running English Speaking Club and analyse how this extracurricular activity can boost motivation, enhance students' communication skills and confidence when communicating in English, and improve learners' language proficiency. The article describes a 2-year experience of the English Speaking Club for science students at Yurii Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University. It covers club meeting planning, goals, topic choice, learning activities, and results. This study also aims to identify the advantages of the English club in promoting speaking skill and increasing university English teachers' awareness of its importance.

A descriptive-analytic method was used in this study. The study also used a survey method, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of students' feedback obtained through questionnaires completed after attending club meetings.

Results and discussion. We consider the Speaking Club a form of extracurricular activity that provides opportunities to practice English language communication skills, encourage students to speak the language, improve their listening and comprehension skills, and boost soft skills like teamwork, critical thinking, and creativity. It also helps students develop higher-level cognitive skills, such as applying knowledge, analyzing information, evaluating, arguing, and debating. Here we refer to Bloom's Taxonomy, a classification system developed in 1956 by educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom to describe and rank intellectual skills and behaviors important to learning [3].

Only a thoroughly and carefully planned event, where a teacher clearly defines the goals and

expected outcomes, can be successful. Additionally, the Speaking Club is intended to be an enjoyable, informal activity, not a traditional lesson; therefore, fluency and active participation, rather than strict accuracy, should be the focus. Personal satisfaction with the results achieved and skills gained, along with a sense of having spent time enjoyably together, are the best indicators of the Club's success for both students and the teacher.

Before starting a Speaking Club, several questions should be considered. The most important are: a) the target audience – number of participants, age range, and year of study; b) meeting duration and frequency – how long each meeting will last and how often it will be held; additionally, selecting a convenient time for all participants is essential; c) communication channels (e.g., a messenger); and d) planning – identifying goals to determine the range of topics to cover, planning relevant activities for the meetings, and gathering necessary resources; and e) code of conduct or club rules.

This article presents one and a half years of experience running an English Speaking Club with science students, particularly those studying at the Institute of Biology, Chemistry, and Biore-sources, as well as the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at Yurii Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University. The Club was launched to expand the institution's offerings, helping students develop their English language skills and enabling them to communicate comfortably on a wide range of topics that might be of interest and importance to them.

The key principle of the Speaking Club is student-centered learning grounded in constructivism, where students actively shape their own learning experiences. Here, students' unique perspectives, knowledge, and motivations guide the learning process, with the teacher serving as a guide rather than a director. Student voice plays a crucial role, offering learners choices in what and how they learn while also promoting engagement. Additionally, students are empowered to be self-directed, setting goals, tracking progress, and developing competencies. Student-centered learning is highly collaborative, encouraging peer interaction and hands-on activities that apply skills to real-world situations. The teacher

acts as a guide, moderator, and facilitator, fostering independence, adaptability, and personal growth while supporting students' individual interests and needs.

The scheme below suggests the combination of planning process components to consider when starting a Speaking Club.



Fig. 1. Speaking Club Planning

Hence, some planning process constituents and principles to be followed included:

English clubs provide an informal, casual setting for English language students to communicate and improve their speaking skills. For this reason, the target audience should be no more than 10–12 participants, allowing all club members to engage fully in the suggested communicative practices. This size ensures active language practice and fosters a productive environment for effective interaction during each meeting. Our Speaking Club hosted 10 participants – students in their 2nd and 3rd years of university. A frequency of one meeting per week (1 hour long) provided sufficient connection among participants to build a friendly, united community where students could communicate in a foreign language without anxiety, tension, or discomfort.

Communication Channel: A Viber page was used where students could learn about upcoming topics, access topic-related vocabulary useful for the discussion stage, find shared links on discus-

sion issues, suggest ideas, seek information, ask for advice, and provide feedback.

Range of Topics: Each semester's topics were selected from a list of 30 themes suggested by club participants and later refined by the teacher to suit the club's purpose and encourage interactive discussion.

Event Planning: The teacher carefully planned goals and expected outcomes – what students should be able to achieve by the end of each meeting. All activities and resources (handouts, on-screen projector, video and audio materials, and more) were prepared and differentiated as needed, taking into account participants' needs, meeting objectives, and the focus on extensive communication.

Activities and Skills: Activities and materials were designed to be adaptable for all participants in a mixed-ability group. The sessions included warm-up exercises, vocabulary pre-teaching, various discussion formats, and collaborative tasks that utilized different interaction patterns (such as group work, teamwork, mini-projects, mini-presentations, role-plays, debates, games, etc.). Incorporating student feedback into planning helped create a comprehensive framework for organizing and delivering each Speaking Club meeting.

Teacher's Role: The Speaking Club should adopt a participant-centered learning approach, with the teacher acting as a facilitator and moderator rather than an instructor or evaluator, allowing students as much freedom of expression and initiative as possible. As facilitators, teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive learning environment and guiding students in their language journey to ensure communication and interaction flow smoothly and naturally. A facilitator helps the group understand shared goals and plan how to achieve them, while remaining neutral and avoiding taking a position in discussions. During Speaking Club activities, we refrain from providing "correct" answers or judgments; instead, we ask prompting questions to encourage further conversation and debate, guiding students to find their own answers through dialogue and available resources – both online and offline. When moderating, a teacher acts as a neutral participant, giving clear instructions, explaining

goals, keeping time, and maintaining focus on the discussion topic. Key skills practiced by students include the ability to follow instructions, adaptability, collaboration, cooperation, communication, reliability, proactivity, resourcefulness, and creativity.

Monitoring is especially important in a Speaking Club, as it helps identify students' language levels for effective pairing and grouping. Teachers should be prepared for mixed-ability groups and have backup plans in case misunderstandings arise. While traditional grading should be avoided, well-organized, thoughtful assessment can offer valuable feedback, helping students recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, identify knowledge gaps, inform targeted interventions, monitor progress, and reward achievements. The outcomes can be measured by students' satisfaction and self-evaluation regarding what they achieved and their ability to apply practical skills in real-life situations that were studied and practiced.

Participants of the Speaking Club met once a week to communicate on various topics, express their opinions and feelings, and have fun. They learned in an engaging, collaborative environment to converse, present, participate in role-plays, discuss, debate, justify their points of view, create slogans for environmental campaigns, plan budgets, play games, sing songs, watch and discuss videos, write poems, and more.

The chosen motto of the Club was "Neither boring nor bored be!" There were 15 meetings of the Club per semester. As an example, we share the list of the topics covered in one semester,

which included: (1) Globalization: Pros and Cons. (2) Student Life Constituents. (3) Happiness and Sense of Life. What Makes us Happy. (4) Positive Thinking and Superstitions. (5) Financial Independence. Money and Wellbeing. (6) Honesty: Pluses and Minuses. Truth, Lie and Social Ethics. (7) Thanksgiving Day Celebration with English Drama Club. (8) Environmental Problems. Future of the Earth. (9) Food and Restaurants. Healthy Lifestyle. (10) Great Britain. Facts. Culture. Peculiarities (11) The US – Country of Diversity. (12) Canada – People and Nature. (13) British English vs American English Vocabulary and Pronunciation. (14) Movie Review. (15) Poetry: Reading, Discussing and Writing.

At the end of each semester, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of two parts. In the first section, students evaluated their improvement in English language and soft skills, rated the level of interaction during the meetings, and indicated whether their confidence in communicating in English had increased. They also assessed the extent to which they felt a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from their experiences and achievements by the end of the third semester. Thus, the participants answered 7 questions and rated their 1) speech fluency, 2) vocabulary expansion, 3) improvement of listening and comprehension skills, 4) level of interaction during the meetings, 5) enhanced soft skills (teamworking, critical thinking and creativity, etc.), 6) confidence gaining and 7) sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, where a minimum score of '0' was assigned if no changes had occurred, while a maximum score of '5' indicated the highest expected result (Table 1).

Table 1

Student feedback results based on individual questionnaires (third semester)

	Rating (number of participants out of 10)					
	0 points	1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points
Speech fluency improved					1	9
Vocabulary expansion				1	1	8
Improvement of listening and comprehension skills					2	8
Level of interaction during the meetings						10
Enhanced soft skills (teamworking, critical thinking and creativity, etc.)						10
Confidence gaining				1	1	8
Sense of accomplishment and satisfaction						10

As the results reveal the majority of the participants are completely satisfied with the experience gained and skills improved. Most of them became more fluent and confident when communicating in English. In the second part of the questionnaire, students were encouraged to provide brief feedback on their favourite activities, which they found useful or less useful, interesting or less interesting, and to share their thoughts and comments on the experience. Some of their opinions and suggestions are included below.

When discussing student life, the Club participants particularly enjoyed creating a pie chart of student life elements (such as studies, extracurricular activities, balancing work and studies, entertainment, etc.). Debating predictions about the future of the Earth and creating a slogan for a social, environmentally oriented ad campaign were among the favourite and most memorable activities when covering the topic “Environmental Problems and the Future of the Earth”. The session “Food and Restaurants: Healthy Lifestyle” brought a lot of enthusiasm, with students discussing eating habits, solving crossword puzzles, playing Food Bingo, role-playing restaurant scenarios, and preparing and enjoying British tea with sandwiches. The students also explored new information on geography, history, capitals, sights, traditions, notable people and scientists, cultural diversity, and interesting facts about Great Britain, the USA, and Canada. They reported that discussing differences between British and American English pronunciation, watching and discussing

a movie, and writing their own poems were both useful and enjoyable. The most frequent student comments when asked for feedback included remarks like: “Our meetings are much more than typical English lessons; we enjoy what we do”, and “Can I bring a friend next time?”.

Conclusion. Through a two-year case study at Yurii Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, this article details the planning, execution, and evaluation of the Speaking Club, providing valuable insights into best practices for educators. By documenting the positive impact on student language proficiency and personal growth, this research highlights the significance of allowing students to select discussion topics, thereby promoting engagement and ownership of their learning experience. The findings enrich the discourse on language education by offering practical recommendations and evidence of the Speaking Club’s effectiveness in fostering communication skills among university students.

Based on the results obtained, we conclude that the English Speaking Club proved to be an effective extracurricular activity for practicing English to improve fluency and confidence. English clubs provide students with the opportunity to communicate in English in a relaxed, informal environment, meet new people, and, by being participant-centered, allow students to appreciate the freedom from syllabi and evaluation criteria. This environment fosters students to express themselves freely and creatively on topics they have chosen.

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АНГЛОМОВНИЙ КЛУБ ЯК ЗАСІБ РОЗВИТКУ КОМУНІКАТИВНИХ НАВИЧОК СТУДЕНТІВ

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Вступ. В Україні випускники закладів вищої освіти з високим рівнем володіння англійською мовою користуються зростаючим попитом на ринку праці, що сприяло закріпленню статусу англійської як інструменту міжнародного спілкування на законодавчому рівні. Ця стаття аналізує ефективність англомовного клубу як позанавчальної діяльності на базі Чернівецького національного університету імені Юрія Федьковича.

Мета дослідження – описати основні принципи планування англомовного клубу та проаналізувати, як він може сприяти підвищенню мотивації і покращенню мовної компетенції учасників. Англомовний клуб був організований для студентів природничих спеціальностей з метою доповнення обов'язкового університетського курсу «Іноземна мова за професійним спрямуванням (англійська)», який часто зосереджується на загальних мовних навичках та фаховій термінології більше, ніж на комунікативній компетенції.

Методи дослідження. Використано описово-аналітичний метод та метод анкетування студентів для оцінки змін у рівні мовленнєвої компетенції, розширенні словникового запасу та впевненості застосування іноземної мови.

Основні результати дослідження. Базовими принципами клубу є студентоцентричність, використання інтерактивних видів діяльності та розвиток навичок, таких як командна робота і критичне мислення. Ключові аспекти планування включають визначення цільової аудиторії, частоту зустрічей та каналів комунікації для забезпечення активної участі й ефективної взаємодії учасників. Вибір тем та планування заходів передбачають чітке формулювання цілей і очікуваних результатів для кожної зустрічі, а також

розробку активностей і ресурсів, які відповідають потребам студентів. Роль викладача визначається як роль фасилітатора і модератора, який забезпечує сприятливе навчальне середовище, заохочуючи ініціативу студентів без прямого оцінювання. Самооцінка та зворотний зв'язок допомагають учасникам усвідомити свої сильні та слабкі сторони, а також відстежувати прогрес.

Наукова новизна. Це дослідження робить внесок у іншомовну освіту, аналізуючи роль англомовного клубу як позанавчальної діяльності, спрямованої на підвищення комунікативних навичок студентів.

Висновки та пропозиції автора. Результати свідчать про значне покращення комунікативних навичок і розширення словникового запасу, а також зростання впевненості і задоволення від отриманого навчального досвіду. Учасники високо оцінили неформальну атмосферу клубу, яка сприяла змістовним обговоренням різних тем і створила комфортне навчальне середовище. Результати підкреслюють важливість інтеграції позанавчальних можливостей для практики мовлення у систему мовної освіти, що сприятиме як покращенню мовної компетенції, так і розвитку життєво важливих навичок.

Ключові слова: англомовний клуб, позакласна діяльність, комунікативні навички, мотивація, вільне володіння мовою, інтерактивні діяльності, *soft skills*.

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