Do We Teach Skills? An Insight into the ESP Classes

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The need to teach more skills and not just knowledge is mandatory these days. We have to equip our students with professional, digital and even survival skills for the current society and the labour market. Therefore, besides teaching them vocabulary, grammar structures, academic writing required in their field of study, we should teach them the skills required by the labour market. The paper presents some theoretical background for the use of ESP in the educational field and reveals the results of a study conducted among students. We wanted to investigate their opinion on skill development through ICT, on the apps they like to use and on the type of activities that they prefer.

ICT; skill development; ESP; digital natives; performance.

Introduction

We find ourselves immersed in the digital age, surrounded by technology that increasingly dominates our lives. The rapid advancement of technology has brought significant transformations to various aspects of our society, including the economy, communication methods, and even the way we acquire knowledge. However, our educational institutions were primarily designed for an industrial era rather than the digital era we now inhabit.

Consequently, educators face numerous challenges on a daily basis. The future of graduates is becoming increasingly uncertain, volatile, and unpredictable. Teachers and instructors are confronted with the daunting task of ensuring that their students are prepared for the ever-changing world. Furthermore, they must grapple with the difficult decision of what elements of their teaching methods should be retained, what should be adapted, and what should be completely changed.

The utilization and integration of technology in both the teaching and learning processes offer a multitude of benefits and advantages. Some of the most commonly cited ones include:

- technology provides new ways to:

– interact in and out of class (e.g. discussion forums, chat rooms, polls);

– collaborate, share, and create (e.g. wikis, social bookmarking, and collaborative documents);

– showcase, feedback, and peer review (e.g. e-portfolios, online rubrics);

– reflect and plan (e.g. journals, shared calendars);

- Students have the advantage of enhanced flexibility in terms of study time, location, and learning speed, thanks to the availability of recorded lectures and other online educational materials. This allows them to access resources at their convenience and customize their learning experience to match their preferred pace.
- Various opportunities to discover (e.g. 3D immersive environments, interactive role-plays);
- Enhanced monitoring of student learning and engagement, along with improved capacity to identify students with learning difficulties;
- Increased effectiveness in locating, creating, and disseminating educational materials.

In addition to the previously mentioned benefits, there are also drawbacks to consider. Firstly, it is important for teachers to acknowledge that not all students are good at technology simply because they were born in the digital age. Despite the majority of students being digital natives, there exists a small percentage who struggle with utilizing technology and lack proficiency in its usage. Furthermore, other disadvantages include:

- technology can fail. Heavy reliance on technology is risky without a backup plan;
- technology is not automatically productive. The work required to get used to a tool, troubleshoot, or provide technical support can outweigh the desired effect;
- technology changes evolve rapidly and/or goes out of date very quickly;
- the costs of technology.

Digital learning and skill development in ESP

In 1987, Hutchinson & Waters firstly proposed that EFL (English as Foreign Language) consist of two branches: GE (General English, known as EGP) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Later, Jordan (1997) further divided ESP into EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). Similar to other forms of language instruction, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) primarily revolves around the process of learning. However, this process is tailored to meet the requirements of particular learner communities—specifically, those individuals aiming to acquire professional skills and engage in job-related tasks. ESP sets itself apart from English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for General Purposes (EGP) through its targeted focus. One key aspect of ESP is its contextual approach. This necessitates learning within real-life situations, scenarios designed to mirror the particular working or professional environments that ESP students are either connected to or interested in. In contrast to concentrating on general grammar, vocabulary, and language structures, the interaction between teaching and learning in ESP underscores the significance of honing the essential skills most relevant to students' prospective fields. When juxtaposed with ESL learning contexts, ESP students are expected to be more motivated due to their familiarity with the subject matter. Their passion for the field drives active participation in English classes. As Lorenzo Fiorito asserts, ESP not only assesses learners' needs but also integrates motivation, subject matter, and content to facilitate the instruction of pertinent skills.

Today's students have grown up in an era defined by digital advancements, making them one of the first generations to have constant access to digital tools. They possess the ability to generate knowledge and effectively communicate their findings to a wider audience, while constantly engaging with vast amounts of information. With the internet, portable devices, cell phones, video games, and on-demand videos becoming integral parts of their lives, they rely on digital tools as a daily necessity. It is nearly impossible for them to envision a time when information wasn't readily available through platforms like Google. Moreover, these tools are accessible wherever there is an internet connection. As a result, students now anticipate that educators and teachers will incorporate these authentic, relevant, and interactive characteristics into their education. Despite policymakers and educators acknowledging the long-term benefits of integrating technology into education, there is still progress to be made in achieving this goal.

Skills and content are interrelated yet distinct aspects of knowledge. Content encompasses not only ideas, facts, descriptions, and evidence, but also encompasses procedures and process descriptions. Teachers are well-versed in content and possess a thorough understanding of the subjects they teach. However, the development of skills presents another challenge. Although students receive assistance in skill development, it raises questions regarding the adequacy of their skillset and whether skill development is given sufficient importance in the curriculum.

There is a global concern about whether schools and educational curricula effectively prepare students for the future. In a world of globalization and rapid technological advancements, schools must ensure that learners acquire and enhance skills necessary for the twenty-first century knowledge society. These skills include critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and collaboration, and creativity and innovation. The goal is for learners to possess the ability to thrive and contribute in the twenty-first century society upon graduation. Being cultured and educated in the twenty-first century entails more than just proficiency in writing, reading, and computer skills.

According to the *Partnership for 21st Century Learning*, it is crucial to incorporate information literacy, critical media literacy, and information, communication, and technology literacy across all academic disciplines. These skills are vital for survival and eventual success in today's society. However, in addition to these skills, there are other literacies that need to be integrated to enable students and future employees to adapt to upcoming transformations. Among these, visual literacy, multimedia literacy, and cultural literacy are particularly essential.

Digital learning provides students with an opportunity to cultivate these skills as the learning process itself is digitally infused. In the knowledge society, it is imperative to include the following skills:

Enhancing communication skills: In addition to the conventional skills of speaking, writing, and reading, it is essential to incorporate social media skills into one's repertoire.

Bates highlights several social media competencies, such as the capacity to produce concise YouTube videos to showcase a process or deliver a sales presentation, effectively engaging a broad online audience with one's ideas, incorporating feedback received from online communities, appropriately sharing information, and identifying trends and ideas from external sources (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015, p.36).

The ability to learn independently is a crucial skill in today's society. It involves responsibly seeking and acquiring the necessary information, regardless of academic knowledge. While teachers can educate students about new technologies, tools, equipment, and resources, students must learn how to locate and utilize these sources effectively for their assignments.

Ethics and responsibility play a vital role in fostering trust and reliability, enabling individuals to rely on others to achieve common goals. Teamwork and flexibility are also important skills within a team, as collaboration and knowledge-sharing not only contribute to success but also yield favourable outcomes for the entire group.

Among the essential skills in a knowledge-based society, thinking skills take precedence. Critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, originality, and strategic thinking are highly sought-after abilities. Being able to identify needs, find innovative solutions, and deviate from standard processes are essential for professionals in public services. However, post-graduation, students often face challenges in developing these skills, despite initial encouragement.

Digital skills are crucial in a technology-driven world, but it is important to integrate them with subject-specific knowledge. The rapid advancement of technology and the proliferation of online information have made knowledge management paramount. Being able to find, evaluate, analyse, apply, and disseminate information within a specific context is crucial. Moreover, students need to learn how to validate or question sources of information. Effective knowledge management is a skill that graduates will continuously employ long after leaving school (Bates, 2019, p.37).

The generation gap between users is significantly wide, raising concerns that the older generation's failure to adapt to the learning preferences of the new generation may hinder their growth and development. Traditional methods such as reading, dictating, and relying solely on chalkboards are inadequate and may even be a waste of time and energy. Today's learners seek benefits, interaction, visual communication, and overall satisfaction in their classes. In this context, "Digital immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language, are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (Prensky, 2001, p.52).

Incorporating technology into classrooms provides students with confidence and ease, as they associate its use with their everyday activities. Digital technologies offer valuable tools for teachers to enhance the learning process and for students to engage in learning, research, and multitasking.

Furthermore, according to Tapscott (2008, p.17), individuals from the Net Generation are reshaping the Internet's purpose. Instead of being solely an information source, it has become a platform for sharing information, collaborating on mutual projects, and generating innovative solutions for pressing issues. They accomplish this by creating content, either through personal blogs or by combining their contributions with others. As a result, the Net Generation is democratizing content creation, and this transformative mode of communication is poised to have a revolutionary impact on various domains, including music, movies, politics, business, and education.

Tapscott (2008, p. 24) also argues that general online activities entail more intellectual engagement than commonly assumed. Contrary to popular belief, children and young individuals are not simply engaging in mindless browsing. They are actively reading, though with a shift towards nonfiction materials online rather than literary books. Online reading demands similar cognitive skills as reading a physical book, and even additional skills. It necessitates constructing one's own narrative and scenarios, while simultaneously critiquing the content being consumed along the way.

As seen, the need to teach skills in constantly growing and the ESP field is not an exception. Our learners, should be taught what to do with the language not just vocabulary and structures pertaining to their field of study. All, or at least, most of them will use the foreign language in their professional activity and thus, developing various skills besides knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and structures is mandatory. At this level, namely the ESP classes, teachers should focus on the development of practical, digital and thinking skills more than on the already traditional skills, reading, speaking, writing and listening.

We have noticed that students prefer more practice-oriented tasks, more inter or multi-disciplinary activities when it comes to ESP classes. They like to transfer knowledge from one subject to the other and when it comes to ESP, they like to put into practice the theory they learn during the field-related subjects. Learning field-related vocabulary in English, having theoretical knowledge in the field and using them to develop practical skills in English, is appreciated by most of the students.

Currently, an increasing number of individuals are displaying heightened enthusiasm for their education and training, using the latest technology available to pursue self-learning. This includes utilizing platforms, online courses, applications, digital libraries, and any other technological resources. As the job market becomes increasingly competitive, possessing technological knowledge, skills, and expertise has become essential. Consequently, in addition to the prevailing student preferences, educational institutions must promptly embrace technology. Failing to integrate digitalization into education not only denies students a superior learning experience but also jeopardizes their prospects for a successful professional future.

Research findings

In order to investigate the students` opinion about the development of skills through ESP classes, as well as other aspects related to their training, we applied a questionnaire at the end of the second semester. The research sample consisted of students enrolled in the Pre-school and primary school education programme, all in the first year of study, all female and with ages ranking between 18 and 54. In terms of educational background, some are high school graduates, whereas 35% of the respondents are or were employed after completing another Bachelor programme. The reasons beyond their enrolment in another BA programme are various: no jobs on the labour market, too time-consuming jobs, desire to spend more time with their families, vocational aspects that hadn`t been taken into consideration at younger ages. The high-school graduates chose this field of study out of vocation, mother/family member in the field, or job security reasons.

The 1st year of study consists of 130 students. Of these, 38 had studied English at the first undergraduate programme and were assessed based on a portfolio and the grade obtained at the other field of study. Of the remaining 92 students, 54 completed the questionnaire submitted via Google Forms. The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of 12 questions. Below, we shall present the most relevant answers given by the students.

The first question investigated their level of English. As stated before, their ages vary and consequently, their English level. Some have studied other foreign languages at school (German, French), others took only some tutoring classes, or attended a language course.

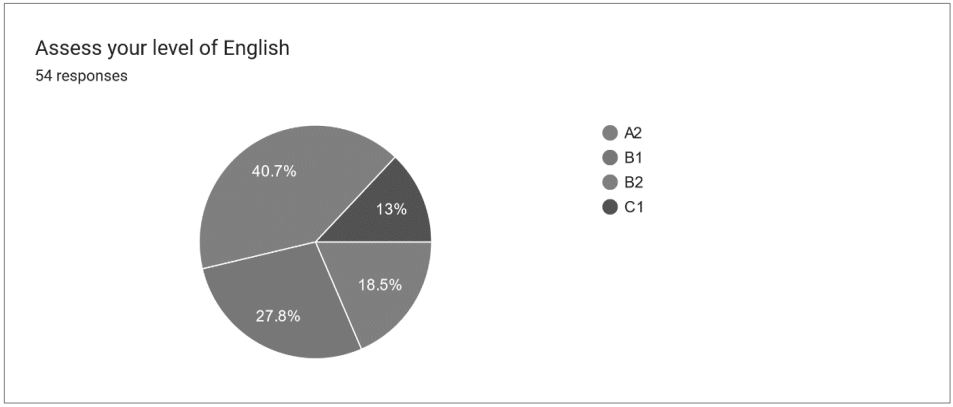

Chart no 1 *Students` level of English*
Source: personal archive

As we can see, most students self-assess their level at B2 level, giving us the possibility and opportunity to use ESP materials that are suitable for the development of competences and skills without fearing that they would not understand.

Questions no 2&3 approach the necessity of studying English and more specifically ESP during the BA studies. The answers are encouraging as most students consider it a very useful idea both in terms of studying English in general and ESP in particular.

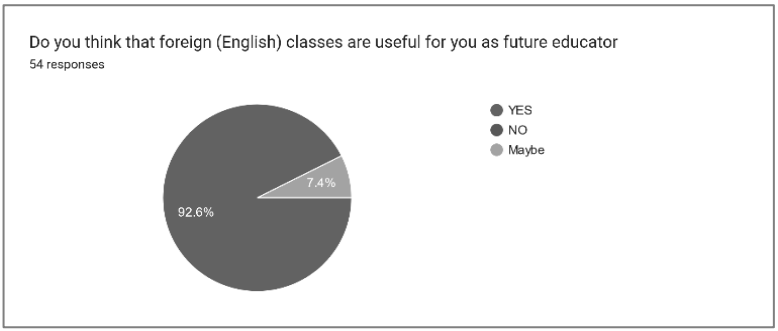

Chart no 2 *Usefulness of English*
Source: personal archive

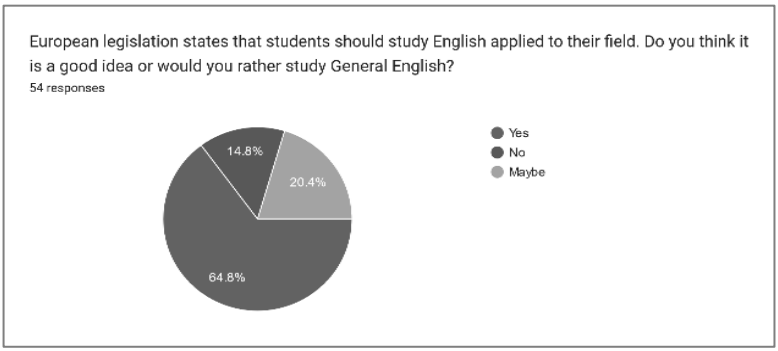

Chart no 3 *Usefulness of ESP*
Source: personal archive

Question no 4 gives us a perspective on the educational apps our students are mostly familiar with. Some were used at the university, others during the pandemic with their high-school teachers. As revealed by the below presented chart, 66.7% are familiar with wordwall, an app that we used in the first semester, 57.4% used Duolingo and still use it on their phones and tablets to practice English. Kahoot is the 3rd app in rank with 48.1% of the users. We use Kahoot for certain activities in the second semester. On the last position in the ranking, we find HotPotatoes (1.9% users). This app, though old, offers some interesting ways of practicing specialized vocabulary. However, it is not very interactive and the digital natives of this generation prefer more interactive and challenging activities.

As a recommendation, I would suggest the use of Memrise, Cram and TalkEnglish, all free of charge with interesting features that can be very nicely adapted to ESP.

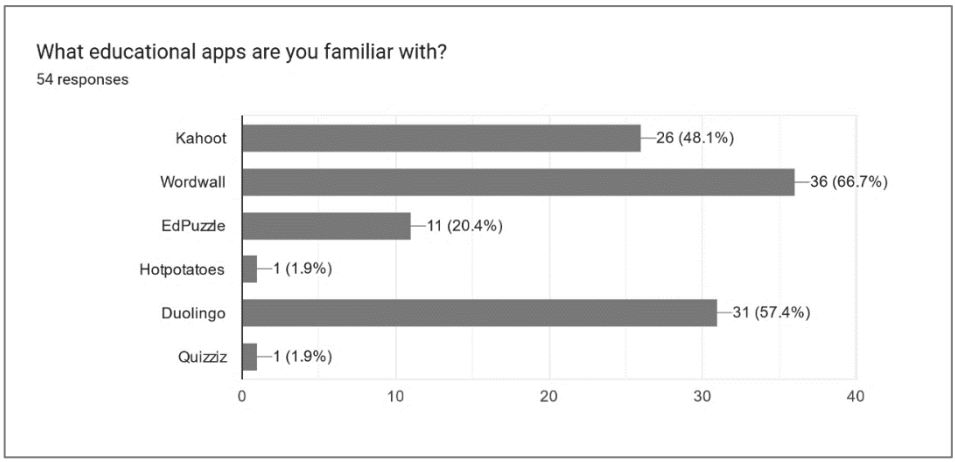

Chart no 4 *Educational apps*
Source: personal archive

Question no 5 dealt with a topic of high interest to us, as teachers, and to the study we conducted. We investigated the skills that students developed after completing one year of ESP (educational field). Encouraging and satisfactory is the fact the most students stated that the speaking skills (63%) were developed although at the initial test (beginning of the first semester) they feared speaking the most. The interactive activities, the need to communicate, present and give feedback in English encouraged them to use the language as much as possible. The fact that they had to deliver presentations, create audiobooks and stories for children helped them overcome the fear of speaking. Reading skills are placed on the second position with 61.1% of the respondents. The preparation for tasks and the activities conducted in the classroom favoured the development of this skills as well as of the listening skills (59.3%). Besides the listening activities presented in the lecture, students listened to their peers` presentations.

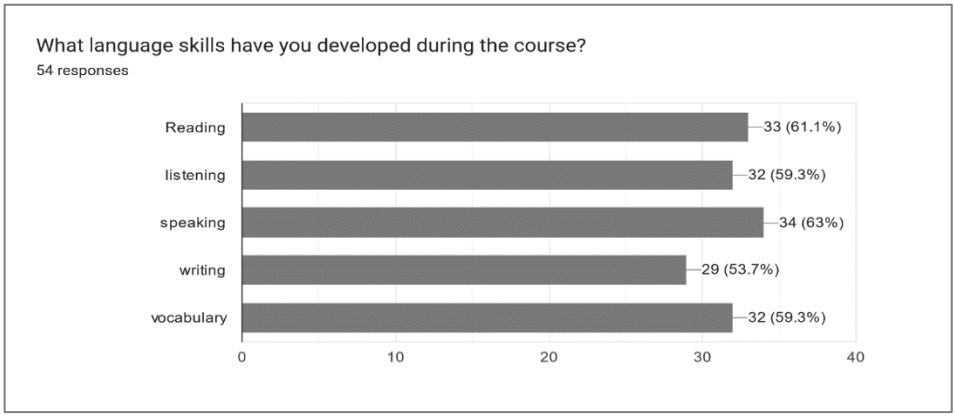

Chart no 5 *Skill development. Source: personal archive*

Question no 6 goes hand-in-hand with the previous one, investigating the students` perception of other skills they developed during the language course besides the language ones. As seen below, communication skills (72.2%), teaching skills (50%) and intercultural skills (48.1%) are placed first. All these skills are useful for their future teaching career, not to mention the research (31.5%) and the specialized terminology skills (29.6%) that also make a good teacher. As seen from their answers, the development of ESP skills and other related skills can be achieved through interactive activities, through activities that promote the use of specialized vocabulary and mostly through activities that contain tasks that they would later on do with their pupils/students.

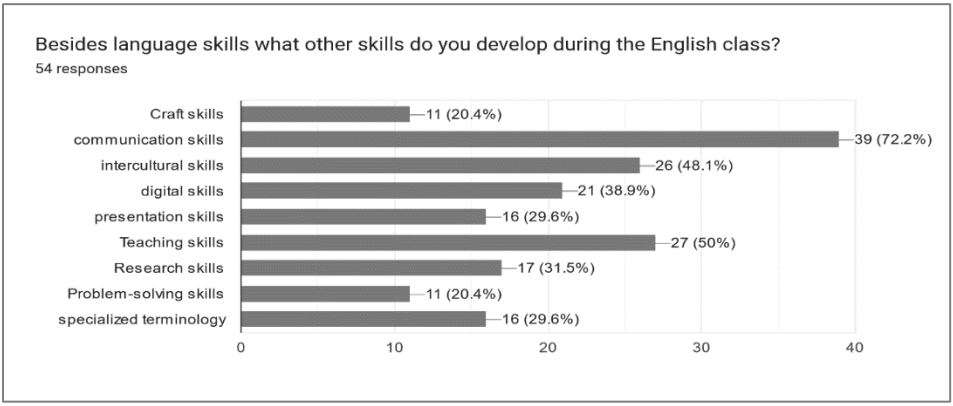

Chart no 6 *Skill development 2*
Source: personal archive

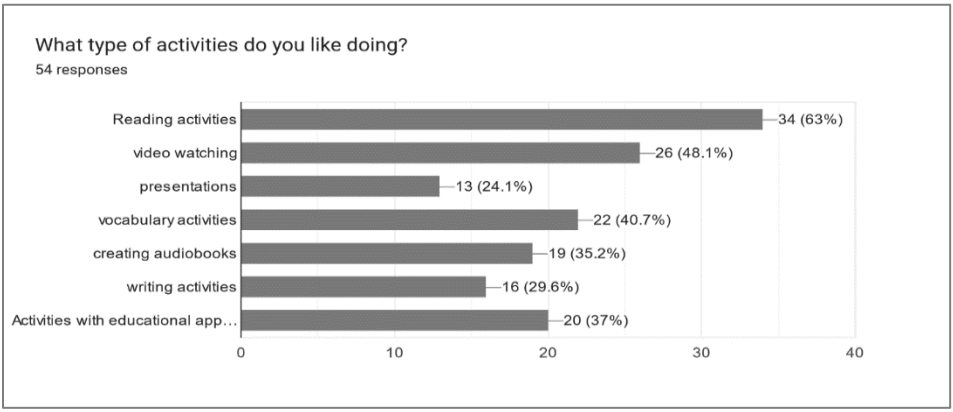

Chart no 7 *Activity preference*
Source: personal archive

Besides investigating the students` preference in terms of activities, we wanted to find out what tasks they enjoy so as to improve or update the curriculum for next academic year. Therefore, we asked them to rank various activities. The results highlight the students` preference for reading activities (63%), video watching (48.1%) and vocabulary activities (40.7%). Last in rank are the presentations with 13 answers, namely 24.1%. The fear of bad pronunciation and insufficient speaking practice are the main causes for the students` dislike for presentations. As presentations are important in a teacher`s career, we will provide some extra classes of training for good presentations.

Most tasks were solved using apps or digital tools. We did not impose a specific digital tool that students had to use. They could select what suits them better but we wanted to find our what they mostly enjoy working with. As revealed by the answers in chart no 8, most of them prefer PowerPoint (88.9%) because it very user friendly, the recent version has a lot of functions that are suitable for education activities. Besides presentations, students used PPT for video making (they had to create a bilingual audio book), vocabulary activities etc. Canva and book creator are also among their preferences, some of them even paying for the extra features these apps offer. Students stated that they paid for the extra features when preparing the audio book and the printed story.

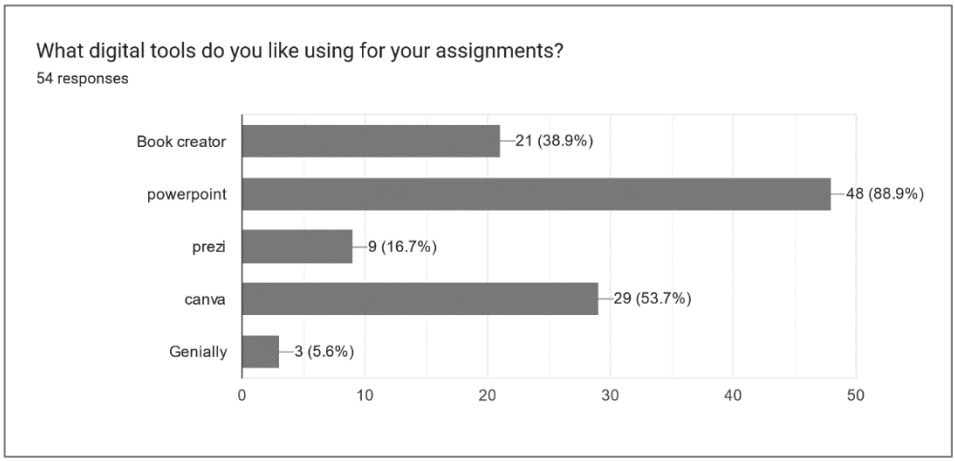

Chart no 8 *Digital tools*
Source: personal archive

Question no 9 reveals the students` preference for certain tasks. Surprisingly, 53.7% prefer speaking activities, though sometimes from subjective reasons, namely no desire to write. 50% like preparing audio material for kids, because they believe that speaking skills can be improved in this manner. If they don`t understand a work, they look it up in the dictionary and the same thing happens with the pronunciation. Online exercises and reading activities share the same score (43.3%) and surprisingly, activities

with specialized vocabulary are placed on the last position (24.1%). Students stated that they prefer other types of activities to enhance the specialized vocabulary, namely in contextualized contexts and not through traditional vocabulary activities. They stated that presentations, though difficult, helped them learn specialized terminology because they had to read specialized texts and write the presentation and, in the end, deliver it. In the chart below, we can see the detailed perspective of students` preference for certain tasks based on the activities we conducted during the 1st year of study.

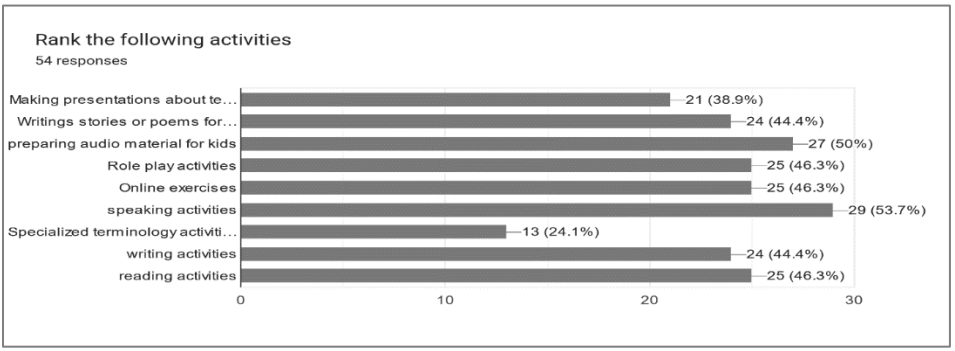

Chart no 9 *Students` preference for tasks*
Source: personal archive

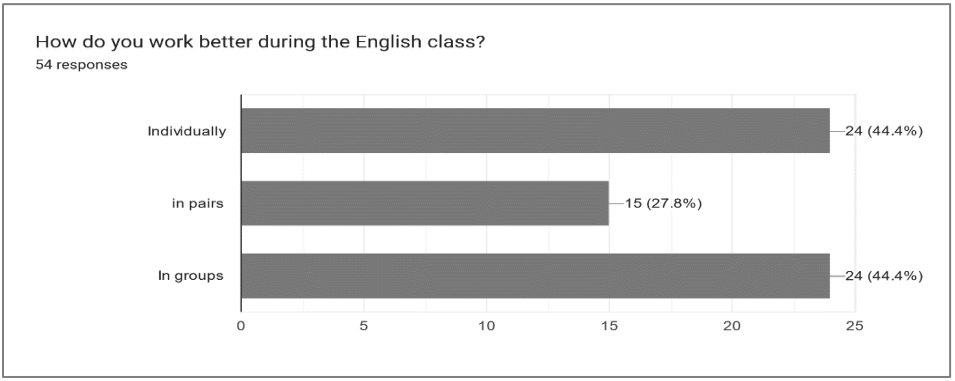

Chart no 10 *Classroom management*
Source: personal archive

The answers to question 10 are quite surprising, diving the sample into two. 44.4% like working individually or in groups, whereas 27.8% like working in pairs. The explanation beyond this selection is quite simple. Students that are good at English prefer working individually because they know that they would complete the task successfully. Those that are not very confident about their English competences, prefer working in

groups because in a group of 4-5 students, they can add value to the task without having the pressure of the language. Some are creative, some are innovative, some have crafting, painting or drawing skills that they can use for task completion and the presentation or English component can be carried out by someone else. In pairs, however, the chances of being paired with a person with the same English skills are quite high.

The 11th and the 12th question took the form of a course assessment and investigated the students` skill improvement as well as their suggestions regarding the activities that would like to do. Most students (66.7%) improved their speaking skills, which is an important achievement of the course because speaking is mandatory in all aspects of a person`s life. Reading (59.3%) and vocabulary (48.1%) were also improved and enriched and we can state here that we refer both to GE as well as ESP vocabulary. In terms of reading, they mostly had to read ESP texts for education. Other skills that had improved can be seen below. We mention only creativity and pronunciation both very necessary. On the last position, students placed better link between English and other subjects, though 12 (22.2%) students consider that the skills that developed during English lectures and the knowledge they gained are useful for other subjects as well. However, in the year to come, we should consider a better link between these subjects.

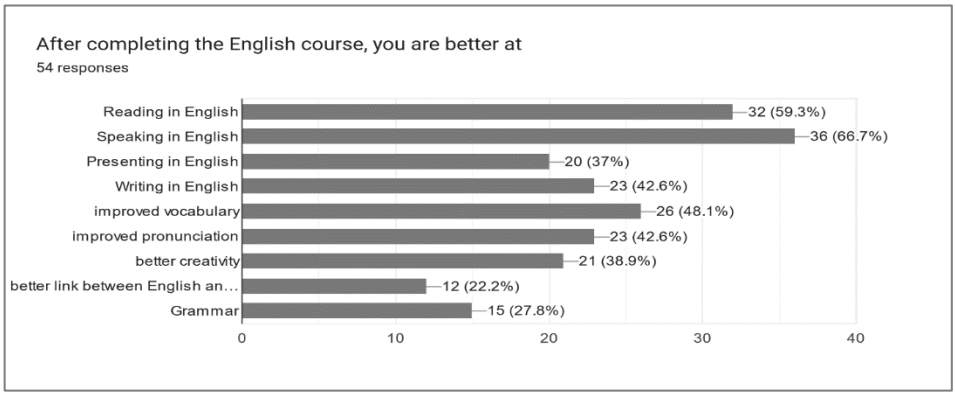

Chart no 11 *Skill improvement*
Source: personal archive

In terms of suggestions for future activities, we only mention some of the most interesting and worth considering ones: "*Role play activities, fairytale writing, storytelling, writing poems and stories for kids, craft activities, learn specific methods to teach English, preparing activities in English for children, creative activities in groups, outdoor activities, more activities about how to teach students English, theatre, writing a story form the beginning, games, playing in a movie that we create, writing stories for kids, making audiobook with stories*".

Conclusions

The article emphasizes that skill development within English classes has far-reaching implications. Beyond language proficiency, these classes contribute to improved communication skills, academic success, cultural literacy, professional growth, adaptability, and cognitive development. Educators, policymakers, and stakeholders should recognize and support the integration of skill-focused approaches within English language instruction, ensuring that students are equipped with the multifaceted abilities necessary for success in the contemporary global landscape. The study's findings demonstrate that students who actively engage with educational apps, create stories for children, and deliver presentations in English experience notable improvements in their language skills. These activities appear to create an immersive learning environment, enhancing vocabulary, grammar, and overall language proficiency. The skills acquired through these activities extend beyond language proficiency. The ability to create engaging presentations, tell compelling stories, prepare teaching materials and crafts and navigate educational apps prepares students for the demands of the digital age and for their future career. These transferable skills are crucial in a world where effective communication and adaptability are highly valued.

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