

Teaching English to Engineering Students in the Contemporary World: A Case Study on a Ukrainian and Turkish Universities

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Abstract

This article discusses language instructors' perceptions of teaching English to engineering students in Turkey and Ukraine. The case study was conducted at two public Universities with the purposive sample comprised of 14 English instructors. Semi-structured interviews allowed for getting the insights of the practitioners to objectives, structure, and challenges of English programs for engineering students. The findings revealed critical issues in ELT as viewed by the English teachers as well as challenges the educators face in the classrooms. The application of the study for policy makers and academic community is that practitioners should be more involved in the discourse and have more voice in decision making about the issues in English teaching at the University level.

Keywords: engineering education, English teaching, lingua franca, ESP, needs analysis.

1. Introduction

With globalization as one of the predominant terms in the academic and public discourse about the trends and prospects for economy, politics, and culture in the contemporary world, the critical role of global communication issues and language learning is intensifying. Language learning acquires different features due to changing motivational factors and social underpinnings. It makes the questions raised for the language teaching professionals both "diverse and complex" (Block & Cameron, 2002, p.6). Language teaching in this context usually presumes English, for it is viewed as the main medium for facilitation of global communication (Riemer, 2002; Warschauer, 2000) and the dominant language in many fields and areas, including higher education (Bjo`rkman, 2011). To meet the demands of social mobility of people more and more universities are becoming bilingual (Bjo`rkman, 2008; Murray, 2010).

Teaching English to engineers is a "delicate and demanding matter" (Riemer, 2002, p.94) in decision making about the approaches, curricula, methods, and techniques. While the objectives for engineers' English competencies are generally agreed on, the higher education institutions face the challenges of hiatus between the society's demand for professionals with good command in a foreign language and insufficient level of preparation of the graduates with technical majors (Korol, 2008). In the discussion of the issues in ELT to engineers, Barabash (2011) argues that the gap between the declared objectives and practical approaches of policy makers in higher education resulting in very slow changes in the curriculum is one of the main causes for this discrepancy.

The literature is abundant in studies considering the advantages and challenges of two approaches to educating future engineers: English as lingua franca and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The number of Universities adopting English as a medium of instruction for engineering majors is increasing which serves as evidence of recognition of advantages of this approach to meet the demands of the world's workforce (Atef Al-Tamimi, & Munir Shuib, 2009; Bjo`rkman, 2008; Bjo`rkman, 2011; Coşkun, 2013; S.Thivviyah Sanmugam, 2013). However, some researchers argue that more investigation on its effectiveness is needed (Bjo`rkman, 2011).

English for Specific Purposes is an alternative approach for the universities which cannot yet offer English medium instruction due to different reasons. The challenge for teachers under this mode of instruction is to select necessary supplementary materials for existing textbooks to make them relevant to a particular engineering major. Furthermore, due to the time constraints of the program of study, the instructors also have to prioritize the foci of the course according to the learners' needs and interests (Bondar, 2009; Nordin, 2013; Riemer, 2002; Warschauer, 2000).

The complexity and diversity of the issues ELT professionals face manifest in the wide array of questions considered in the literature: assessment, curriculum development, needs analysis, and motivation to name a few. Extensive body of literature examines motivation patterns of engineering students in their English learning. The research shows evidence that instrumental motivation (getting in the college, career and job opportunities in the future) tends to dominate over the integrative (learning the culture, social interaction) in students' attitude to learning English (Atef Al-Tamimi, & Munir Shuib, 2009; Bobkina & de Caleyá Dalmau, 2012; Gürsoy, 2013; Wang, Bor-Tyng, Sheu, Tian-Wei, & Masatake, Nagai, 2011). Furthermore, Gürsoy (2013) argues that language instructors' attitudes play a critical role in assisting the learners to develop and boost their motivation in the classroom. Teachers' positive attitude leads to continuous search and implementation of effective techniques and approaches to ELT.

Motivation to study English is closely connected to learners' needs. Therefore, needs analysis is called to provide background and rationale for the particular choice of programs or curricula (Akyela, A., & Ozeka, A., 2010). Conversely, its absence results in the problems the language instructors encounter with the development and implementation of the curriculum for the language courses (Mansoor Ahmed Channa, Songsri Soranastaporn, Karan Supamas Engchuan, & Yuwadee Tirataradol (2013). The literature review does not allow to claim that needs analysis gets sufficient attention in engineering education. Among 100 reviewed articles available at www.sciencedirect.com only five focused on this aspect. The level of English competency of future engineers by the time of their graduation is the key question in the continuing discussion about the structure and instructional models. Both academic scholars and policymakers in Turkey, for instance, agree that B1 level instead of existing B2 as a requirement might be sufficient for engineering graduates (Coşkun, 2013; Hayriye, 2008).

Furthermore, the suggestions include shifting the focus from extensive study of grammar and drill for tests to improving speaking skills, maximization of group work, and developing presentation skills (Hayriye, 2008). Such shifts amplify the issue of learning outcomes assessment through the entire program: from post enrollment assessment for students' placement in the groups (Gonzalez Ardeo, 2010; Murray, 2010) to the format of assessment tools to measure academic performance of the students in the programs (Cheng, Rogers, & Huiqin Hu, 2004; Coşkun, 2013).

1.1 Problem

With ever growing globalization and integration processes in the world's workforce market, the importance of the English language in professional life of engineers is getting more recognition. Consequently, it affects attitudes and approaches to the engineers' education and preparation. The higher education establishments in different countries utilize two approaches: using English as lingua franca in engineering courses instruction and teaching English for specific purposes. The literature provides for and against arguments for both approaches.

While there is abundance of research for evaluation of programs and curricular, the English instructors' perceptions do not seem to get sufficient attention in the literature. However, knowing the voice of practitioners might help in better understanding of issues and challenges the higher education faces now, in general, and engineering education in particular.

Moreover, it is important to have more research on the topic about practices and experiences in different countries published and discussed not only at the local level but also in international journals to gain a more holistic picture about engineering education in the contemporary world.

The purpose of this study was to get the insight of ELT instructors from higher education institutions in Ukraine and Turkey on the goals, curriculum, and challenges in teaching English to engineering students.

1.2. Research questions

1. What are the beliefs and views of the Ukrainian and Turkish instructors about the goals and objectives of ELT for engineering students?
2. How do they recognize the curriculum to meet both the students' and instructors' needs and expectations?
3. How does the educational context affect the vision and approaches to ELT in higher education?

2. Methodology

This study employed a case study approach and as such focused on the specifics of a program, individual, or place (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

2.1. Site and participants' selection

The sites, two public Universities in Ukraine and Turkey were selected on the following criteria: entry to the site, probability of mix of processes, people, and interactions which are part of research questions and reasonable warranty of data quality and credibility (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 54). The choice of countries was based on several considerations. Similarities of some social, structural, and policy making factors allowed for comparison. These geographically neighboring countries have many things in common in the higher education structure and governance: clearly defined centralized hierarchy of the higher education with the top authority of the government body (ministry or council) in the decision making; levels of tertiary education and degrees granted, and expectations and requirements to academic personnel to meet the terms of their contracts. Both countries are members of Bologna process, thus they adhere to the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). This factor allows considering the priorities in terms of curriculum development and standards for language teaching.

The researcher had served as an assistant professor in a Turkish University for a year when she started this study. As a native Ukrainian she had knowledge, experience, and network in higher education system in Ukraine. These facts assisted in entry to the sites. Different approaches to teaching English to engineering students in the countries and purposeful sampling of the participants who had wide range of teaching experience and preparation ensured mix of processes and interactions.

2.2. Institutions

The participants of the study represented the midland Universities in Turkey and Ukraine. The Ukrainian University is a higher education institution located in a heavily industrialized region of Ukraine. This Technical University specializes in training engineers for different industries with the focus on the mining and civil construction industry. The language of instruction for the engineering departments is Ukrainian. The English language teaching is done by the faculty of the Foreign Language Department. English learning is part of the general curriculum for the engineering departments with mandatory English study for the students in the first year and optional (elective) for the following four years at the university. The curriculum for ELT is approved by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine for all higher education establishments of the similar profile. Along with general English, the curriculum requires teaching terminology, technical writing in the field, and other aspects of the language related to the students' professional competencies.

The Turkish participants represented the faculty of the School of Foreign Languages in the University in the south east of Turkey. It is a preparatory school for the students who did not get a passing score in the English Proficiency Test necessary for their departments at the University. The language of instruction at the professional schools is English, so the students have to get a year course of English to improve their language to B2 level. Most of the students in the school are engineering majors. There were 11 groups of engineers in the school in 2012-2013 academic year with 170 students enrolled. Unlike the Ukrainian colleagues, the Turkish instructors teach general English with little exposure to the technical language.

2.3. Participants

The participants of this study were seven Ukrainian and seven Turkish instructors who teach English to engineering students at their universities. The demographic profile of the participants is comprised of the information about their education, years of experience, levels taught, and curriculum development and learning assessment training they had. The summary of this information is presented in Table 1:

	Ukrainian	Turkish
Education	BA, MS, Kandidat nauk	BA, MS.
Years of Experience	7-25 years	7-25 years
Classes/Levels Taught	"all levels"	Beginners, elementary, pre-intermediate, advanced (A2, B1, B2)
Training in curriculum development and performance assessment	No formal training, occasional workshops or seminars, self-education	No formal training, occasional workshops or seminars, self-education

Table 1.

2.4. Instrument

The primary data collection technique in this study was semi-structured topical interviewing of the participants that uncovered their perspectives and perceptions of the role of English teaching in educating engineers (Glesne, 2006). The interview protocol contained four main areas based on the research questions: 1) the objectives of ELT in higher education in Ukraine (Turkey) in the context of globalization; 2) practices and techniques of learning assessment and validity and reliability of the forms; 3) administration of the tests and exams, and 4) suggestions, thoughts, considerations.

3. Findings

Analysis of the interview responses revealed the themes which presented insights of the ELT instructors to the goals, practices, challenges and expectations of teaching English to engineering students. The themes were examined to identify convergent points with the previous research and the aspects which did not get due attention in the literature.

3.1. Different approach to the view of goals and objectives

The participants in Turkey and Ukraine considered the question about goals and objectives from different perspectives. Turkish instructors viewed the goals through the lenses of the state policy and European framework objectives. They were very well familiarized with the concepts, terminology, and underpinnings of the framework. Each instructor started with the statement about level B-2 as a required prerequisite for further study in the chosen engineering field. Ukrainian participants did not mention any normative documents or state policy provisions. Rather they were discussing the goals from their personal approach to teaching which is based on the state curriculum. They presented a detailed array of objectives. Almost every instructor differentiated between short and long term goals in ELT to engineering students. All participants mentioned motivation of students as a goal of ELT in preparing engineering students. They believed that the students need more encouragement to meet both short and long term objectives. The instructors saw their goal also in providing the students with the information about opportunities to advance in English.

3.2. Academic freedom in curriculum development

Both Ukrainian and Turkish instructors ground their curriculum on the standards and recommendations developed and approved by corresponding higher education authorities and supervision entities: the Ministry of Higher Education in Ukraine and Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in Turkey. Those standards are the road map for the instructors in their choice of resources, methods, and techniques. Ukrainian and Turkish participants mentioned that they felt like they had their say in decision making on the curriculum even though everything should be approved by the administration. Curriculum development at the Turkish university is coordinated by two bodies: Curriculum Unit and Testing Office. Those bodies collect suggestions about objectives, content, pacing list, assessment, outcomes, and course books and hold regular faculty meetings at which the decisions about the curriculum for the school are finalized.

The Ukrainian instructors take the primary responsibility in decision making about the content, pacing list, forms of assessment, etc. to meet the standards. All suggestions and curriculum outlines should be discussed at a general department meeting and then approved by the Department Head. The instructors have to become experts in English terminology in certain engineering fields. The participants claimed the challenges of making decision on the course books for each major: they had to rely mostly on Ukrainian publishers while they would prefer to use authentic materials. The instructors were not satisfied with the content of the existing books; so they developed their own manuals (*metodichka*) in which they tailored the material according to the student's needs. Extracurricular activities with the students, supervision of students' research, their own research are also job responsibilities and duties for the Ukrainian instructors.

3.3. Scope of English competency modern engineers need

Some Turkish instructors considered the expectation to bring the students to B-2 level "with 700 hours within a year not realistic". They believed that B-1 was more doable; therefore the expectations should be lowered. Both Turkish and Ukrainian instructors agreed that mandatory competency level for all engineering students is not necessary. Related to it was the discussion of language skills the students should master. The instructors at both Universities shared the opinion that speaking was the hardest skill for the learners due to lack of exposure to the language environment in any form: communication with native speakers, travels, internships, etc. One of the participants made a comment, "I do not want even to talk about speaking. It just does not exist; there is very little exposure to the language environment for the students to be able to succeed in it". The instructors emphasized the fact that they are doing their best to work on the improvement of all four skills in the classroom. However, due to a very small load in the Ukrainian institution and lack of time to practice the learned skills because of the need to catch up with the pacing list in the Turkish institution, the instructors do not feel that they are efficient enough in the classroom.

3.4. Students' needs- "no size fits for all"

The participants interpreted the needs from two perspectives: what they thought the students wanted and what they believed the students' needs should be. The responses of the Turkish instructors showed evidence that English as the language of instruction did not serve as a great motivational factor; rather it was viewed by the majority of the students as necessity to be prepared for, not the need. The Turkish participants pointed out that the students were not sure about their needs for studying English; so they had a very pragmatic approach based on the short term immediate goal, "pass the test, get the grade, and forget it." Ukrainian colleagues shared low students' expectations as far as prospects of using English in future as a factor that decreased motivation to study the language. Those students failed to see the value of English for their future plans, "I will work at the mine; why do I need English there?" Such situation frustrates the instructors at both Universities for it augments existing challenges in ELT.

On the other end of the continuum there were students with a very good understanding of the value of the English language competency. They saw English as one of the means "to proceed with their career, be marketable, and be successful in everyday life". These students' needs were certainly broader; they needed to reach B-2 and higher levels of the language proficiency.

It should be noted that in comparison to their Turkish colleagues Ukrainian instructors took more time sharing their thoughts about students' needs. Five of seven Ukrainian participants discussed the dynamics of the students' needs as the schooling year progressed. They provided approximate numbers of the ratio of the students in the shift of their attitude to the language study. According to those instructors, the ratio of the students with low motivation and "I am going to get my grade and forget about it" attitude to highly motivated students would be 80/20 or 70/30; however, by the end of the first year, those numbers would change to 40/60. These estimates did not have any research based ground; rather they resulted from the instructors' personal observations and reflections. Yet, the instructors attributed that change to the progress in academic performance and gaining more information about the prospects and opportunities for the students to benefit from English proficiency.

3.5. Forms of assessment- "something is missing"

The instructors of both institutions use similar traditional forms of students' performance assessment: tests, quizzes, and presentations. The approach to developing and finalizing the materials for the tests and exams is

different. At the Turkish University, it is the job of the staff in the Testing Office; while at the Ukrainian institution, it is solely the responsibility of each instructor to prepare assessing materials. Overall, all participants expressed satisfaction with the assessment procedures in terms of content and structure. However, they shared the feeling of gaps, “missing” points in the process that should be addressed. New creative ways of assessment and more expertise in developing testing materials were mentioned as examples of such gaps.

The most effective forms according to the participants are tests. However, some participants made a point that though the tests are valid, they do not meet the expectation of presenting a “general picture about the student’s level of mastery of the language”. The “ready to go” tests from the course-books are good but “easy to cheat” for the students, in their opinion. Two participants had difficulty answering the question about validity and reliability because they believed, “validity and reliability of our assessing materials should be studied, and they are not.”

Another opinion of assessing tools effectiveness was about the students’ beliefs of the tests. One of the participants pointed out that “tests are mostly important for the students because they think if they study and drill for the tests and quizzes they master the language, which might not be the case”.

3.6. Effectiveness of professional development opportunities

All participants in both institutions emphasized professional growth both in language and curriculum development as one of their major needs. Ukrainian and Turkish teachers were not very satisfied with the professional development they received. The Turkish participants shared similar opinions about PD opportunities. There is no requirement for any formal PD training; consequently, if the instructors want to take some formally structured PD courses they should provide their own finances. In most cases they cannot afford them because of the cost; further, they have to find those opportunities and make all logistic arrangements by themselves which is “too many hoops to jump through”.

Professional development for the Turkish participants is done in the form of workshops and seminars occasionally held in the school. Overall opinion about those activities is fairly favorable, “Some presenters are good”, “It is about old familiar things in a new interpretation”, “It is a nice feeling to realize that I know and use this stuff”. At the same time, Turkish teachers believe that the PD opportunities offered to them, such as original approaches to language teaching, new techniques for classroom instruction, and so on, do not fully meet their expectations. One of the participants shared, “At the end of the day, I do not feel I am developing”. Moreover, there are no opportunities for the teachers to improve their own language competency which is also a very important need for the teachers.

Unlike their Turkish colleagues, the Ukrainian instructors have formal professional development requirements in the form of qualification courses for certification which should be taken every three years. They are dissatisfied with them because they are “boring, too structured, with lots of irrelevant information.” In addition, the teachers must take the courses at their own expenses. Ukrainian participants find informal PD activities more beneficial for their professional growth. Among such activities they named workshops and seminars done at the department, demo classes for the colleagues, conferences, peer classroom observations, and occasional seminars delivered by professional trainers. Like their Turkish counterparts, the Ukrainian instructors would like to get more professional development but in a more interesting format, more informative and less financially burdened. Every third participant could see almost no benefit in the offered PD; consequently, they rely more on self-learning and self-development.

3.7. Change as an agenda

The participants were asked to share their thoughts about the current approach to teaching English to engineers and their ideas about changes and improvements of the process. The Turkish instructors were more eager and enthusiastic in presenting arguments about existing policies, approaches, and challenges in ELT at the university level. All of them expressed criticism of YÖK. The changes coming from it do not ensure progress or improvement. According to the participants “There have been a lot of changes proclaimed recently; however, the proclaimed changes are mostly on the paper”. The participants believed that YÖK officials “do not have any data to really justify whatever change they call upon” and “they spent most of the time on the rhetoric and discussion on the critical issues without taking any further steps to make changes happen.” It is all about “changing the names rather than filling it in with new content and essence”. Therefore, the instructors did not believe that there might be any significant move toward change in the nearest future, “Everything is very tightly linked to YÖK, and there is very little hope to change it.” With all criticism on the policies and structure and putting most of the blame on YÖK, the participants had difficulty to present ideas how to make the system better. As one of them acknowledged, “The system is not very good but I cannot think of a better system to put forward.”

Ukrainian instructors were also focused on the criticism of higher educational officials as a major obstacle in gaining more progress in ESL teaching. They believed that “there is a huge need to acknowledge the importance of ELT at the university level” and policy makers “should not neglect the needs and expectations of both students and instructors.” The participants considered the approach to teaching English to engineers as “awful” pointing to “budget cuts, lack of instructional hours, quotas on good grades to save on stipends, and poor and

ineffective professional development” as impeding factors to improve the English teaching quality.

Overall, in their reflections the participants in both institutions were focused on the policies and structure of the English language programs. All instructors expressed their dissatisfaction with existing systems. The Ukrainian participants were more pessimistic about prospects for the future. In fact, they did not use the word “change” in their answers, while their Turkish counterparts used it extensively.

3.8. Committed professionals

Being discouraged by the system does not prevent the instructors from constant search for the ways to improve and help students to succeed. The Ukrainian instructors think that there should be more alignment of teaching materials to local realities on the one hand and increasing the students’ awareness of career opportunities in the context of globalization, on the other. Among immediate practical steps, they emphasized the importance of decreasing a group size and teacher/ student ratio. The Turkish participants’ ideas about things to do differently resonate with their Ukrainian colleagues’ in several areas, especially in the need to raise students’ awareness of career opportunities and the critical role of English proficiency in advancing on the career ladder. At the same time, almost every participant believed that “there is no need to teach everybody. I am tired of teaching the people who strongly object to it. Teaching should be selective and flexible”. In other words, the Turkish instructors thought it would be beneficial to change the approach and reconsider the policies of English as the language of instruction. Moreover, some participants shared, “it is time for changes. Traditional classes are dying. Seven hours daily sitting in the classroom is not the way to teach a language”.

Other suggestions included utilizing contemporary teaching methods and techniques, experimenting with other than traditional forms of learning assessment, involving as much technology as possible in the learning process. Two out of seven participants made a point that they considered themselves committed professionals doing their best in the classroom and constantly improving; so, they had difficulty coming up with more ideas about what they would do differently in the classroom. They clarified further that they could not come up with something innovative or extraordinary. They believed it was good enough to work more on what is already developed or achieved. It was not doing something differently, rather it was about polishing and improving what had been built and utilized.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to get insight of English instructors in Turkey and Ukraine on the goals, challenges, and approaches to teaching the language to engineering students.

The findings from this study revealed similarities in views on the role of ELT in educating engineers as well as differences in approaches due to the effect of educational context. The importance of English for the modern engineer was clearly emphasized by the participants in both countries. At the same time, they identified the goals of higher education in ELT from different perspectives: through the lenses of state policies and provisions at the Turkish university and personal expert view on the objectives at the Ukrainian. One of the possible explanations to such variance might be the structure of engineering programs. At the Ukrainian university English is taught as ESP; consequently, the instructors have the responsibility for decision making about the technical language in the curriculum; moreover, they have to become familiar with a particular engineering field to be able to teach those technical aspects. In Turkey, where English is the medium of instruction at engineering departments, the language instructors tend to see themselves more as part of the system which clearly defines the role of the English instructors as ensuring a certain level of general English proficiency.

Among imperative issues inferred from the participants are the necessity to evaluate the ELT programs, forms of assessment, professional growth, and needs analysis as a base for curriculum development and policy making. All participants concurred on their doubts about the required level of language proficiency for the students and the mandatory policy of achieving that level. Educators should get more data about individual needs of both students and instructors in English teaching to get a better understanding of the scope of the language the university is called to provide. The instructors believe that not all the students should be forced to attain a certain level; alternative options can serve as a starting point for the discourse about the approaches to English curriculum at the Universities.

With the overall general satisfaction with assessment tools, almost everyone shared a sense of “something missing”; with that the participants could not identify that “something”. The practitioners would like to have more options of assessment forms to choose from, especially in evaluation of oral proficiency. Furthermore, they would prefer introduction of fresh ideas and approaches to methods and techniques during PD activities.

Another aspect of convergence in the discussion of curriculum development was academic freedom of the instructors. While the participants thought that they had sufficient autonomy in their classrooms, the following factors do not let exercise their freedom in full: students’ load, structure and scope of assessment, methodology of developing certain teaching materials. The educational context in Ukraine and Turkey differs in terms of approach to ELT and curriculum structure. Nonetheless, the instructors expressed similar frustrations about their voices being unheard. Some of them have ideas and suggestions without much hope that something can be

changed. The others give up thinking about suggestions for improvement. Lack of external motivation results in the instructors' apathy and burnout.

The findings from this study do not allow for generalization; however they provide insights to the critical issues in ELT to engineering students from the perspectives of language practitioners. To meet the demands of engineering workforce in the era of global mobility it is important to ensure exchange and sharing of ideas and practices among all stakeholders including, first of all, English instructors. Their perspectives and ideas are a valuable asset to academia and policymakers in improving English learning strategies and approaches. In addition such exchange can positively affect instructors' overall job satisfaction and motivation. International round tables and conferences, university partnership projects and programs, and sequenced workshops can serve as venues for the practitioners to vocalize their needs and offer solutions to meet the challenges.

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Interview protocol

- I. The objectives of ELT in higher education in Turkey (Ukraine) in the context of globalization.
 1. What are the objectives/goals of ELT for higher education students (engineers)?
 2. Who develops the curriculum?
 3. What are the students' needs? What are the instructor's needs?
 4. What resources do you use to teach the language? What are the criteria for choosing the resources?
 5. How would you rank language skills in terms of the importance to meet the objectives?
- II. Practices and techniques of learning assessment. Challenges. Validity and reliability of the forms.
 1. What are the forms of learning assessment which you use in your work?
 2. How valid and reliable are those forms of assessment, in your opinion?
 3. What forms are the most effective? Which forms do not meet the expectation?
- III. Administration of the tests and exams.
 1. Who develops assessment tools?
 2. What training to you have in designing tests, quizzes, and exams (special course, part of the course)?
 3. What are the criteria for test evaluations?
- IV. Suggestions, thoughts, considerations.
 1. What do you think about the current approach to teaching English at the university level and ways of student's performance assessment?
 2. What would you do differently in terms of learning assessment?

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