



# **Student Feedback on the Implemented Language Learning System of Professional Higher Education Institutions in Estonia**

**Elen Laanemaa, Aida Hatšaturjan, Triin Kibar**

Language Centre at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, Estonia

## **Abstract**

*The current paper discusses the results of the study conducted in 2020-2022 between the three largest Estonian state professional higher education institutions – Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, Tallinn University of Applied Sciences, Tallinn Health Care College. The research provides an opportunity to learn and adopt the best practices, methods and approaches implemented by other higher education institutions. The results of the current research may be of interest to universities practicing LSP teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), student feedback, professional higher education*

## **1. Introduction**

Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (hereinafter EASS), Tallinn University of Applied Sciences (hereinafter TUAS) and Tallinn Health Care College (hereinafter THCC) have a long tradition of teaching the Estonian, English and Russian languages for specific purposes (LSP). LSP stands for the language used in professional communication, where vocabulary, terminology and language elements are determined by specific needs and competences (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley Evans & Saint Johns, 1998; Laurence, 1998; Swales, 2000). The long-term experience in teaching LSP in the institutions gave us the idea to compare the structures of three language teaching systems through the analysis of student feedback.

The role of professional higher education nowadays has changed due to the new challenges in the labor market. Contemporary society requires professionally competent specialists, who must be able to apply their specific skills including different languages. The study was initiated by the need to revise the system of teaching foreign languages, especially LSP, and, if necessary, improve the quality of language teaching in the above-mentioned institutions.

Students were asked to provide feedback on the language teaching system of their higher education institution. Each institution was interested in its students' assessment and feedback on their institutions' language teaching system. Student feedback was also used to highlight and analyze the main problems that students faced when learning a language for specific purposes. A comparison of the results showed the similarity in the problems faced by the language teaching systems of the three higher education institutions.

## **2. The methodological tools of the research**

In order to achieve the research objective, the following research tasks were presented: to compare the language teaching systems of the three institutions of professional higher education; to analyze student feedback; to identify the development areas of language learning systems; to make a list of recommendations to the language teaching systems of the three institutions of professional higher education.



The survey data were collected from January to June in 2021. The survey sample was composed of students from the three institutions: 83 respondents from EASS, 161 respondents from TUAS and 48 respondents from THCC. The research method used was a questionnaire survey (self-fill-in form) and a combined qualitative content analysis and quantitative (statistical data analysis) method (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denscombe, 2010). The questionnaire contained 45 questions and included both open and closed questions. The Likert scale was also employed. The survey was conducted in three stages:

- piloting, during which it was determined whether the eight students of EASS understood the questions (December 2020);
- questionnaire survey in three professional higher education institutions (January 2021);
- second (repeated) questionnaire survey in three institutions (April 2021).

When analyzing the data of the study, a phenomenological method was used, the purpose of which is to study human experience and perception of phenomena (Smith, 2009). Students' responses and comments were grouped into thematic categories and subcategories.

### **3. The results of the study: How satisfied are the students of the three professional higher education institutions in Estonia with the LSP teaching system in their institution?**

#### **3.1. Category I: Benefits of professional language learning**

The students of all three professional higher education institutions found that they have benefited the most from learning professional vocabulary: 94% for THCC, 88% for TUAS and 85% for EASS. The lowest efficiency is shown in gaining experience in international communication and these indicators are respectively 10% at TUAS, 16% at EASS and 17% at THCC. One of the reasons for this result for THCC and EASS is that the students from THCC were unable to participate in student exchange programmes as much as before, and the students of EASS would rather not go abroad as exchange students.

All three institutions have highlighted the importance of linguistic competence: 77% for THCC, 73% for EASS and 71% for TUAS. For students, the ability to express themselves on professional topics is also important: 63% at EASS, 58% at TUAS and 60% at THCC.

Students of EASS appreciate the effort of the institution to contribute to the training of foreign language competences for future officials, while students of TUAS are not very satisfied with the volume and duration of the provided language courses and expect more opportunities for students with a lower language level. The students of THCC would like to learn Russian because there is no Russian language in the curricula anymore and it is possible to study Russian only as a selective subject.

Students highly appreciate LSP courses and are content with the possibilities to learn professional vocabulary and they are mostly satisfied with it. Everyone sees the practical value in learning a professional language. On the other hand, longer courses and a more diverse range of languages are also expected.

#### **3.2. Category II: Motivation of learners**

The respondents were asked to assess their motivation for learning foreign languages (Estonian, English and Russian). The relevant indicators vary from institution to institution, but as a large number of respondents consider it highly necessary (EASS 76%, TUAS 69% and THCC 69%) and none of the students see it unnecessary, the motivation of the students can be assumed.

The motivation of students to learn **Estonian** is the highest at EASS compared to the other two institutions, with 92% of the respondents rating it with maximum points on a five-point scale. The



indicators of sufficiently high motivation at THCC are 59% and at TUAS 54%. According to the data there were no very low-motivated and unmotivated students at any of the three institutions. Only 7% of students manifest very little motivation. The reasons given for high motivation include the importance of having a sufficiently good command of Estonian as the official language, including the necessity to speak Estonian at least at C1 level (THCC and TUAS), the need to cope with future work-related situations and communication (EASS and THCC), and the intention to be competitive on the labor market (TUAS).

Respondents' motivation to learn **English** is also high: 60% of EASS students rate their motivation as 5 out of 5, and 27% as 4. In TUAS, 51% of respondents rated their motivation to learn English very high and 34% high. The respective indicators for THCC are 47% and 45%. TUAS and THCC have 2% respondents with very low motivation and none with no motivation. At EASS, the latter indicators remain at 0%.

Students at EASS are motivated by the need to use English in work-related situations, professional development and participation in international communication. The high motivation indicators for TUAS are due to the need to improve their language skills, as language proficiency is essential in their field of specialization in order to communicate successfully on an international level and to improve their professional knowledge. The use of English in everyday work is also mentioned as a motivating factor for language learning. Students at THCC emphasize the importance of the English language skills in professional situations, working in an international company, reading professional literature and for self-development as a reason for their motivation.

The motivation to learn **Russian** is the lowest in all three institutions, with 26% of respondents rating their motivation as 5 on the scale of 5, 40% as 4, and 11% of respondents rate their motivation extremely low. At TUAS, 33% of the students are highly motivated to learn the Russian language, 27% are motivated and 7% are unmotivated. The respective figures for THCC are 35%, 39% and 4%. There are no unmotivated respondents at EASS and THCC. Respondents emphasize the practical need to use Russian at a sufficient and good level in work-related situations as a motivating factor.

### **3.3. Category III: Comparison of teaching methods**

A comparative analysis of students' assessments of teaching methods at the three institutions revealed both similarities and differences between the institutions. Learners of all institutions rated highly the usefulness of vocabulary games and vocabulary learning applications (e.g., Quizlet). The tasks in the online environment actively engage learners and allow vocabulary acquisition through interactive activities. The activities can be done on smart devices and on the computer, and learners can do them at a time and place of their choice. Pair work and discussion were also seen as effective learning methods, and the importance of simulation was highlighted. These learning methods require collaborative skills, which are needed in all disciplines.

The students of TUAS and THCC would rather not do project writing and role-playing, as these methods were rated with average scores. The learners at TUAS indicated that they do not like traditional teaching methods, such as filling in worksheets on texts, as they were considered uninteresting, but at the same time they would like to learn grammar in depth. On the other hand, the students of EASS do not prefer to study grammar in depth, claiming that it reduces the motivation to learn the language. Students at EASS and THCC rated home reading very low, whereas students at TUAS rated it higher. The students of THCC also mentioned peer teaching as an effective method, while the students of TUAS and EASS did not rate that as high. Writing professional texts is difficult for the students and requires specific knowledge of grammar and professional vocabulary, which is why report writing is not regarded as important. The lowest rated is video-related tasks: for instance, video dubbing, as it is time-consuming and requires technical skills that learners may not be experienced in. The learners at EASS are not in favor of using smartphones in language learning.

To sum up, students at the three institutions provided relatively similar assessments for the effectiveness of similar teaching methods. Although the specifics of the three institutions differ, it seems that learners equally value teamwork and mastering the professional vocabulary. There is a



greater preference for practicing professional language in active and real-life communication situations, where attention is paid to the message to be conveyed rather than to its grammatical correctness.

#### **3.4. Category IV: Barriers to student motivation**

The factors hindering the motivation of learners in the three universities of applied sciences were analyzed according to four subcategories: motivation, teaching methods, learning environment and the role of the learner and the teacher in the language learning process. A comparison of the results of the survey reveals that students from all three institutions have similar perceptions. In the category of motivation, students from the three institutions agree that the main factors hindering motivation are: fear of speaking in a foreign language and making mistakes, insufficient language skills, lack of interest in the language and students' own laziness. Students at EASS and TUAS have also referred to excessive study workload as an obstacle to dedicated language learning.

Comparison of the results in the category of learning methods reveals that for the students of EASS and TUAS the factors hindering motivation include the lack of up-to-date and boring study materials and unmotivating assignments that do not involve the students enough. Students at EASS also mention an excessive focus on grammar. Learners do not perceive grammar as a necessary element of language proficiency, however, without grammar proficiency it is complicated to acquire and develop linguistically correct and competent speech. According to the students of THCC, the main obstacle is that the teaching materials used tend to be designed for students with a higher language proficiency.

In terms of the learning environment, students from all three institutions consider that the main factor hindering motivation is the heterogeneous level of language skills in the classroom. Students at TUAS similarly point to overly large language groups. Students also mention the ineffectiveness of distance learning in language learning, despite the wide range of technical facilities in the e-learning environment and the software supporting active learning. Distance learning is considered by respondents to be only one form of learning and not suitable as a permanent language learning environment. The students of EASS also consider the irregularity of the timetable a problem.

Comparing the results of the categories of the role of the learner and the role of the lecturer, it is apparent that the communication skills of the lecturer are considered essential by the students of both EASS and TUAS. According to the respondents from the latter institutions, unfriendly communication of the lecturer and the excessive demands on students hinder motivation the most and create a feeling of fear in the students. Furthermore, students mention the fast pace of instruction in classes. The students of EASS also consider that the lecturers' lack of involvement of all students is a hindrance to learning. The students of TUAS claim that motivation is also hindered if the lecturers are not sufficiently prepared for the class. THCC does not have this category at all.

## **Conclusion**

A student satisfaction survey carried out by the three institutions of applied sciences showed that the overall satisfaction with the language learning system is above average in all institutions: 72% at EASS, 84% at TUAS and 54% at THCC. At EASS and TUAS, 6% are not satisfied with the language learning system at all, while in THCC only 2% are not satisfied.

Students in all institutions found learning foreign languages to be useful and necessary, and they felt that they had benefited most from learning professional vocabulary: 94% at THCC, 88% at TUAS and 85% at EASS. Professional language skills and the competency of self-expression in a foreign language in professional topics were also considered important. International communication is assessed to be less important for various reasons: students' lack of motivation and opportunities in TUAS; lack of opportunities in THCC due to Covid-19.



The motivation of students to study Estonian is very high at EASS (92%), at THCC it is 59% and at TUAS 54%. The reasons given are the importance of attaining a sufficiently good level of Estonian as the official language, the necessity of language skills in connection with professional duties and the desire to be sufficiently attractive on the labor market. The motivation to learn English is also high: 87% at EASS, 85% at TUAS and 92% at THCC. Students are motivated to use English in their daily life and for self-development. Compared to English, the motivation to learn Russian is lower in all three institutions: 66% in EASS, 60% in TUAS and 74% in THCC. The motivation for learning Russian is the practical need to use Russian at an independent user level in professional communication.

Teaching methods include vocabulary games, tasks in the online environment, interactive activities and collaborative tasks: pair work, discussion, simulation exercises. Less value is placed on project work, role-play, traditional learning methods (fill-in-the-blanks, grammar and homework), video-related tasks.

Fear of speaking in a foreign language and of making mistakes, insufficient language skills, lack of interest in a particular language, laziness and excessive workload were considered as factors hindering learners' motivation. Learning materials that are boring and not up-to-date, unmotivating tasks that do not sufficiently involve learners, and learning materials that are not appropriate for the language level are also seen as obstacles. Motivation is similarly hampered by the heterogeneous language level of learners in the classroom, large language groups, distance learning, the fast-paced learning, unfriendly communication and excessive demands from the lecturer.

Students see the practical value of LSP and appreciate the institutions' contribution to the training of professionals but make suggestions for improving the language learning system. They expect a more homogeneous classroom, less distance learning, a more varied choice of foreign languages, more sustainable language learning process throughout their studies, and more language courses at different levels.

## References

- [1] Denscombe, M., 2010. *The Good Research Guide: For small-scale social research*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education; Open University Press.
- [2] Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y., 1994. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications Inc.
- [3] Dudley-Evans, T., & Saint John, M. J., 1998. *Developments in English for specific purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A., 1987. *English for specific purposes: A learner-centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Laurence, A., 1998. Defining English for Specific Purposes and the Role of the ESP practitioner. *Annual Review of Aizu University Center for Language Research*.
- [6] Smith, D. W., 2009. Phenomenology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2009 Edition)*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/search/search?query=phenomenology>
- [7] Swales, J. M., 2000. Languages for specific purposes. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 20, pp. 59–76.