

English Skills Acquired from the Collaborative Teaching and Supervision

Lenka LANDRYOVÁ

VSB - Technical University Ostrava, Department of Control Systems and Instrumentation, faculty of Mechanical Engineering, 17.listopadu 15, 708 33, Ostrava, Czech Republic, lenka.landryova@vsb.cz

Christopher IRGENS

Department of Design, Manufacture and Engineering Management, University of Strathclyde, 75 Montrose Street, Glasgow G1 1XJ, UK, christopher.irgens@dmem.strath.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution describes experience acquired during the cooperation with an English speaking visiting professor and different ways of cooperation with the aim of introducing English language into teaching and supervision, and implementing new subjects taught in English into study programmes at Department of Control Systems and Instrumentation.*

It focuses on conditions and prerequisites for such cooperation, and follows tasks which were completed within a development project funded by a Grant Agency for Development Fund of Universities in the Czech Republic. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students were involved.

The experience showed that from a staff point of view such initiatives are not easy to run and succeed in. Close contact with teaching and supervisory staff is required and also extended collaboration beyond the frequent visiting, so that the use of English as a working language becomes de facto. The time frame is also important. The experiment provided important guidelines for the future.

Furthermore, results in form of summarised students' opinions giving an objective picture about the perception and working environment are included.

1 INTRODUCTION

The project was based on several assumptions and considerations, taking into account consultations with university and faculty heads as well as at the level of academic senate. The plan was to execute a project innovating teaching of technical subjects with English introduced within lectures and practical exercises. From the very beginning it was clear, that this type of education would represent a major change in the students' comprehension, since they had not been participating in, or exposed to, such teaching at the faculty. This newly introduced project should encourage other teachers to follow the example, and at the end, the effort should help students increase their knowledge and skills in English communication in the subjects and areas their study.

The first few questions to be answered, when this project was planned, were regarding the organisational point of view: submitting the project for the visiting professorship to the Development Fund of Universities in Czech Republic, receiving the agreement of the visiting professor with conditions for working stay given by statute of visiting professor of VŠB-Technical University Ostrava and the willingness to work in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering with the goal to innovate the study program "Automatic Control and Engineering Informatics" in the Master programme, accredited for its new structured study according to the Bologna Declaration. It was also necessary to have pre-arranged agreement of the Dean of the Faculty to initiate negotiations for visiting professorship status.

From the above mentioned follows that the prerequisites for the submitted project were based on agreed conditions regarding the work and activities required and considered:

1. Creating an understanding of EU research and development programs, the impact these have on higher education. Examining the Bologna Agreement and evaluating its impact on specific higher education in CR.
2. Introducing students to the state of the art using individual and/or group projects. It is important that the students should get access to state of the art research results and are made capable of using these results in problem analysis and solution synthesis suitable the level of MSc.

3. Considering the education as problem oriented, so the students get introduced to basic theory, the state of the art and problem context. The problem context shall always be simple, but nevertheless relevant to current industrial problems and constraints. The students were supposed to work in small groups, analysing the problem and effecting a solution using the basic and state- of - the art methods and theories. Furthermore the students were required to present their solution and argue its validity.
4. Projects results at the department should be discussed, evaluated, and commented upon.
5. Diploma work abstracts to be compiled and published in English at the Department's web sites.

Other prerequisites came from willingness of visiting professor to accept conditions and to oblige to fulfil duties coming from the status of visiting professor at the university, faculty, and department.

The agreement is expressed by a letter of intent written by the professor. The letter was a part of the project submission (attached as appendix).

2 WAYS OF WORKING AND GOALS ACHIEVED

From the description of work and activities required it was necessary to find ways of working suitable for the students as well as the staff. Lectures on Manufacturing and Design emphasizing presentation methods, documented as MS PowerPoint were planned and prepared. Furthermore, each student was asked to work out a one page abstracts of his/her diploma thesis and a seminar was organised within a regular teaching hours to present them in the class. The Department staff appreciated proofreading, done by the professor, of syllabuses for subjects prepared for future teaching of foreign student in English. Since a dictionary had been planned to be published for some time, it was very convenient to have this finalised with the help of a native speaker.

Since the Faculty required accreditation to deliver its PhD programmes in English, the Project facilitated the compilation of the rules, regulations and procedures in English so that the Faculty can focus its international PhD recruitment.

This work took all together one month of stay by the visiting professor, divided over a number of visits. The professor was during that time, in daily contact with colleagues at the department, shared office, a computer, internet connection etc. One of the goals achieved is now documented as diploma thesis abstracts are published at the Department web-site available at <http://www.352.vsb.cz>, see Fig.1.



Figure 1 – One page abstracts of diploma theses presented in English at Department web site

3 EVALUATION AND RESULTS

The cooperation has been evaluated by staff as well as from the students' point of view. The staff and the visiting professor see extensive collaboration with the Department as difficult due to the lack of English skills. The use of English is very limited and leaves effective collaboration with only a minority of the academic staff. This also applies to a considerable proportion of the undergraduates who are not capable of following an English presentation. The contact with undergraduates therefore had to be done in conjunction with a translator from the academic staff in order to effect communications. Contact with postgraduate students was good, their English skills were sufficient to establish two-way discursive communications. Contact and collaboration with academic staff was excellent where staff had sufficient English skills.

The introduction of the use of English to express the abstract- and introduction section of diploma and bachelor projects was generally good. Czech students have good skills in the use of analytical tools and are quite capable of applying these to classical problem domains. It was found that the requirement to express research abstracts was presenting the Czech students with a higher degree of difficulty than was expected. However, how much this was contributed to by purely linguistic problems is uncertain at this stage. In any case, its future use should be extended so that it becomes the norm that a larger proportion of the written work is done in English. The obvious next step is to introduce the requirements to present the conclusions and critical analysis according to the English pattern.

Given the required English skills the collaborative face-to-face teaching and supervision with the department was very fruitful. The establishing of postgraduate seminars was successful as is the initiative of seeking to offer English based PhD programmes outside the Czech Republic, thus creating working relationships with other higher education establishments in English and supervising non-Czech PhD students in English. This will of course concur with the vision of the European Doctorate which is earned, if the degree has been awarded jointly by two university departments in different European countries. The cooperative approaches taken, e.g. the "cotutelle de thèse" by German and French institutions of higher education, lead the way. Diploma and postgraduate PhD co-supervision should become the vehicle for further collaboration so that the use of English becomes the norm. It would be a logical next step to require parts of all PhD dissertations to be presented in English and to hold regular and frequent English based seminars at the Department and the Faculty.

The Department's organisation with respect to the visits was first rate. Accommodation and subsistence arrangements were done effectively and efficiently, transportation is easy and the working conditions and access to equipment and staff is easy and well put in place. All contacted staff took a positive attitude to the visit and did what was necessary to ensure the maximum benefit.

For collecting the students' opinions a questionnaire was designed emphasising presentation methods (see Table 1).

The intent was not only finding out what students think about the idea of introducing English into their lectures and seminars, but their general comprehension about the importance of result presentations and abilities and skills connecting with it as well as establishing any constraints they may have. The questionnaire was anonymous and was chosen as a tool providing an objective way to research students' feedback.

28 students of the doctorate study programme attended the Seminar, all of them completed the questionnaire, and results were worked out into graphs as presented in Fig. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 1. The questionnaire designed for students' feedback

<p>December 4., 2003</p>	<p>Quality Concepts and Customer Focus Seminar for Students of Ph.D. program</p>	<p>Lecture Hall B3 VSB TU Ostrava</p>															
<p><i>Hello,</i> <i>This is a questionnaire which has been prepared to conclude activities carried out through visits of professor Irgens. We kindly ask you to participate in the survey regarding your opinions on teaching, lectures and presentations of results in English. Completing this questionnaire will contribute not only to you by verifying significance and priorities you set for communication in English, but also us, the teachers who plan further improvements of given lectures. This survey is anonymous; it does not refer to personal questions or data. Its completion will take you only a few minutes.</i></p>																	
<p>1. When you think about it, the presentation is an opportunity, when the presenter passes ideas to his/her listeners (usually more than two), who react throughout discussion then, for example with questions, objections, arguments. In your opinion, how important is for the presenter the discussion at the end of the presentation?</p> <table style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Very important</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td>Not at all</td> </tr> </table>			5	4	3	2	1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very important				Not at all
5	4	3	2	1													
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>													
Very important				Not at all													
<p>2. The key for each presentation is to earn listeners attention, because their opinions contribute to the matter. If there is no feedback at the end of a lecture, no questions asked, is it in your opinion because of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> listener did not understand <input type="checkbox"/> listener has no interest to discuss <input type="checkbox"/> listener does not consider it as a contribution <input type="checkbox"/> listener does not want to criticise the lecturer <input type="checkbox"/> other, please specify _____ 																	
<p>3. Please specify, how important the following key steps are for your presentation preparation, mark the options accordingly from the most important (5) to the least important (1):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The ability to present a subject with confidence <input type="checkbox"/> Knowing who are my listeners, what is their main objective in listening to me, what are the key points they should take away from my presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Developing the theme, having the purpose clearly in my mind <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing the presentation script in the opening, the body and the summary <input type="checkbox"/> Selecting the proper visual aids to be simple, clear, and pertinent <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing a story board for giving a general view of the presentation and for communicating the important items to those who are creating and assembling the images <input type="checkbox"/> Rehearsing my presentation, but not memorizing it <input type="checkbox"/> Arriving and setting up early for the presentation day, having an extra copy of my file and/or the handout material 																	
<p>4. The reality most presenters face is that a great deal of their success or failure will most likely be judged by how well they keep their trainees interested. Here are several ways, please check those which you consider as very important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Use my voice effectively- how I say it is as important as what I say <input type="checkbox"/> Tell anecdotes or stories that relate to my topic to keep audiences interested <input type="checkbox"/> Keep moving while I talk– movement is one of the easiest and surest ways to keep audiences interested in a presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Vary the pace of my presentation - the rate at which I speak or my pace can add interest to the presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate names into my discussion – name involvement is a technique that is subtle but effective and useful <p>Please check the most important from the above selected very important ways: _____</p>																	
<p>5. Has this presentation seminar contributed to adopting new experience, has it helped you to verify the known principles and your skills?</p> <p>For presenting dissertation work or projects the following skills are important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> to design, create the presentation; <input type="checkbox"/> to plan and prepare it; <input type="checkbox"/> to present it; <input type="checkbox"/> to receive interest from the listeners. <p>Please, check those which represent skills you would like to improve further.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>We thank you for the time spent with completion of this questionnaire!</i></p>																	

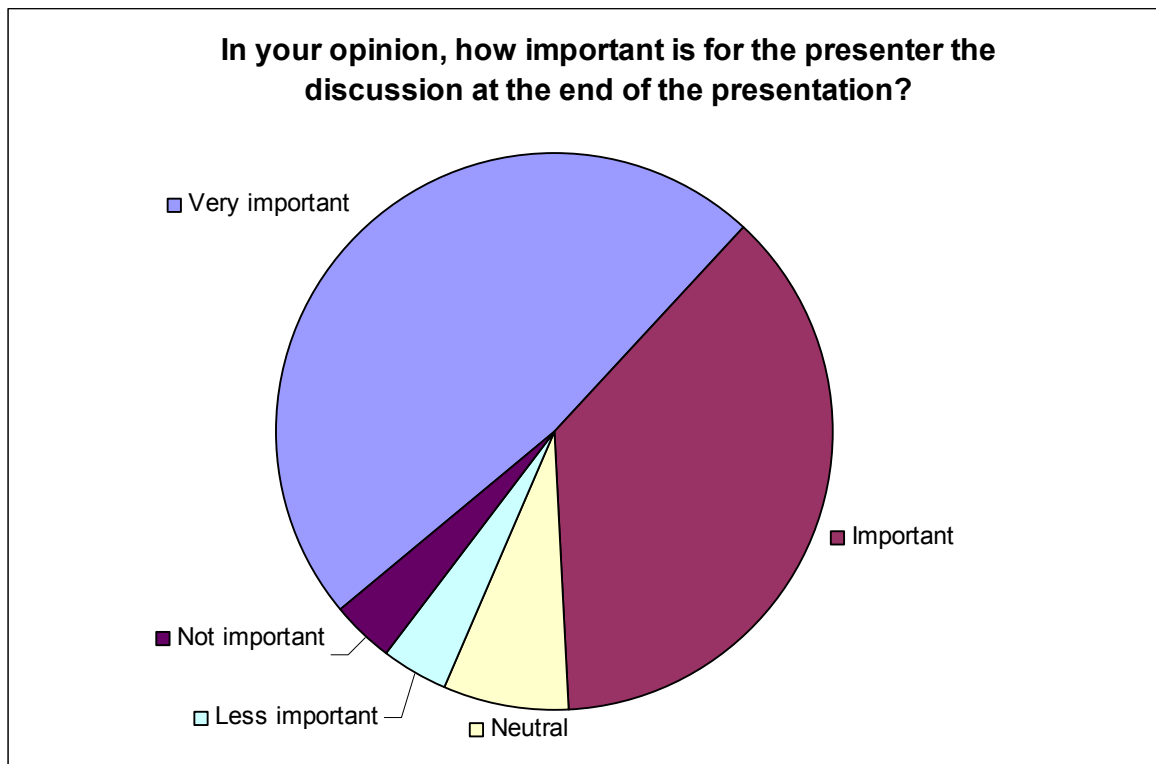


Fig. 2: The answers of students to the question show, that discussions after lectures or seminars are considered very important, so it is interesting to observe their reasons for no feedback (see below).

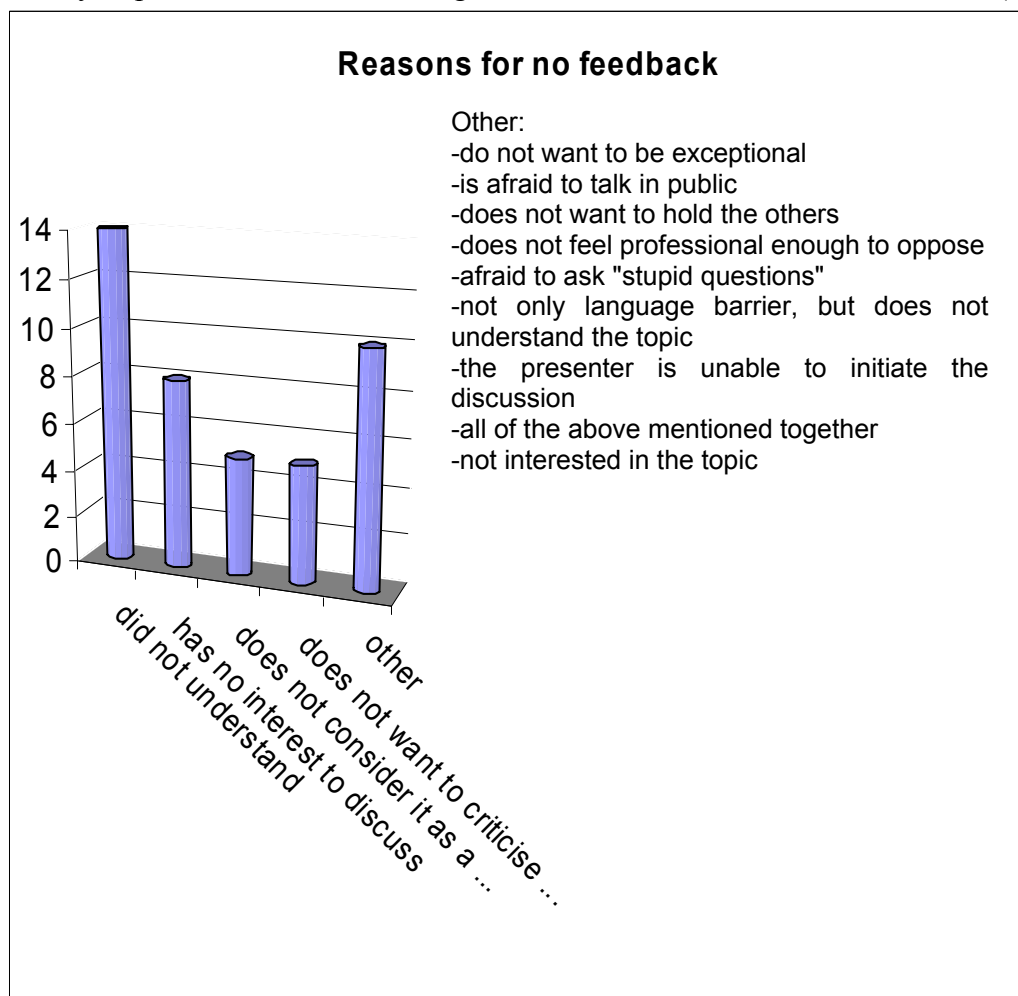


Fig.3 Students do not participate in a discussion after lectures, and they have several excuses, which show in the figure.

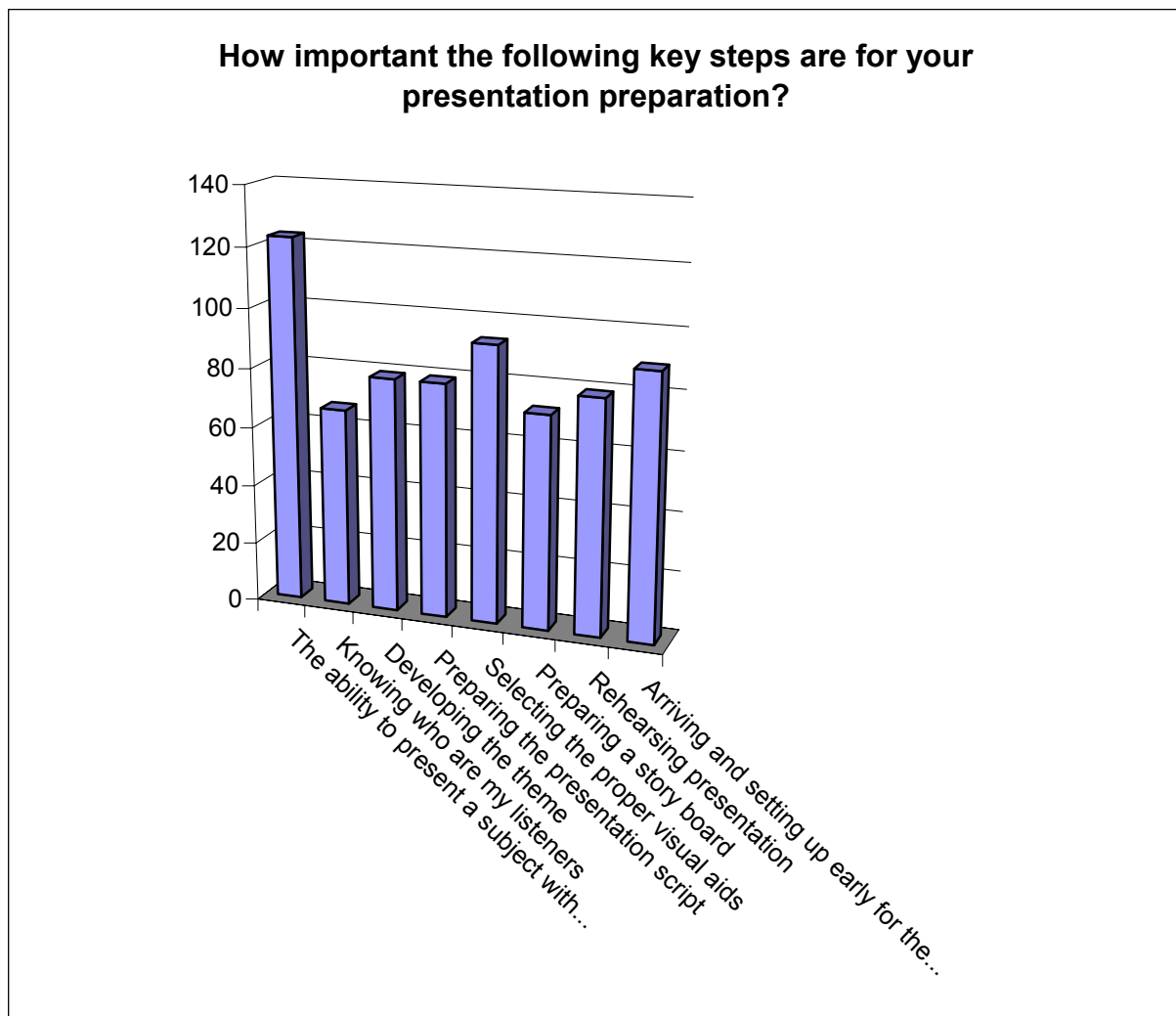


Fig.4 All the key steps were found as quite important, but the most important, of course, is the ability to present a subject with confidence, the students feel their weak point here.

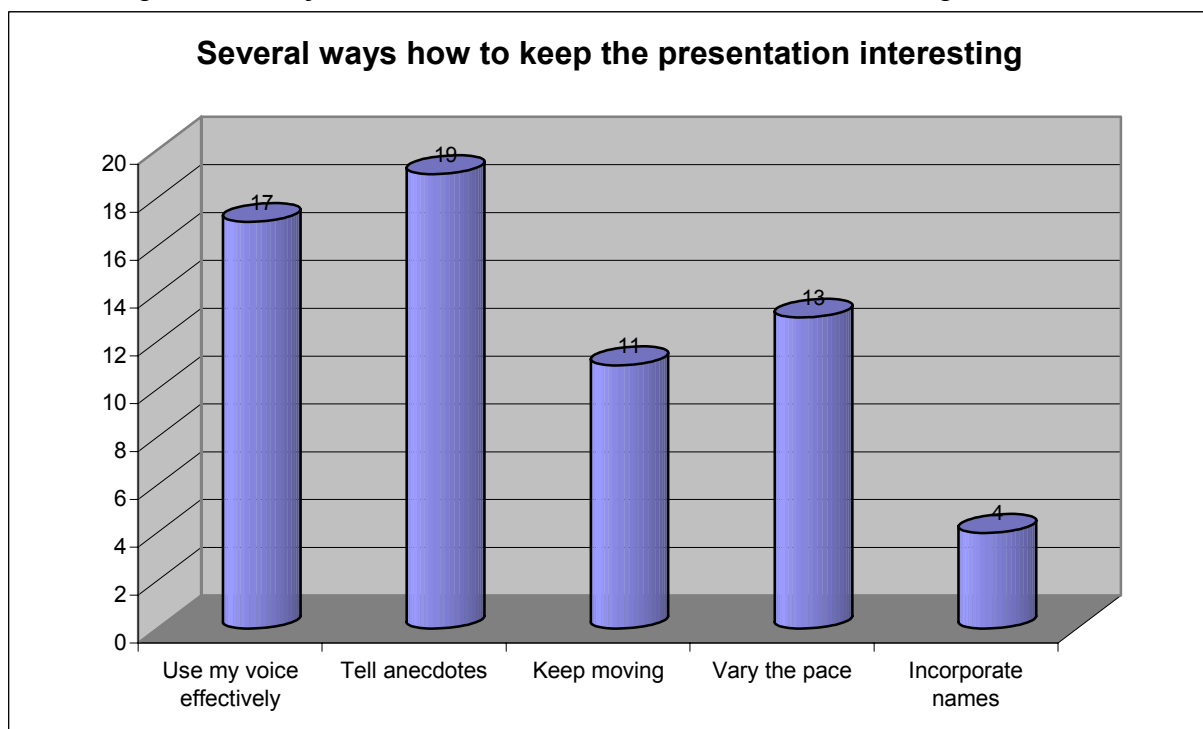


Fig.5 It is interesting, how students perceive ways the lecturer keeps their attention.

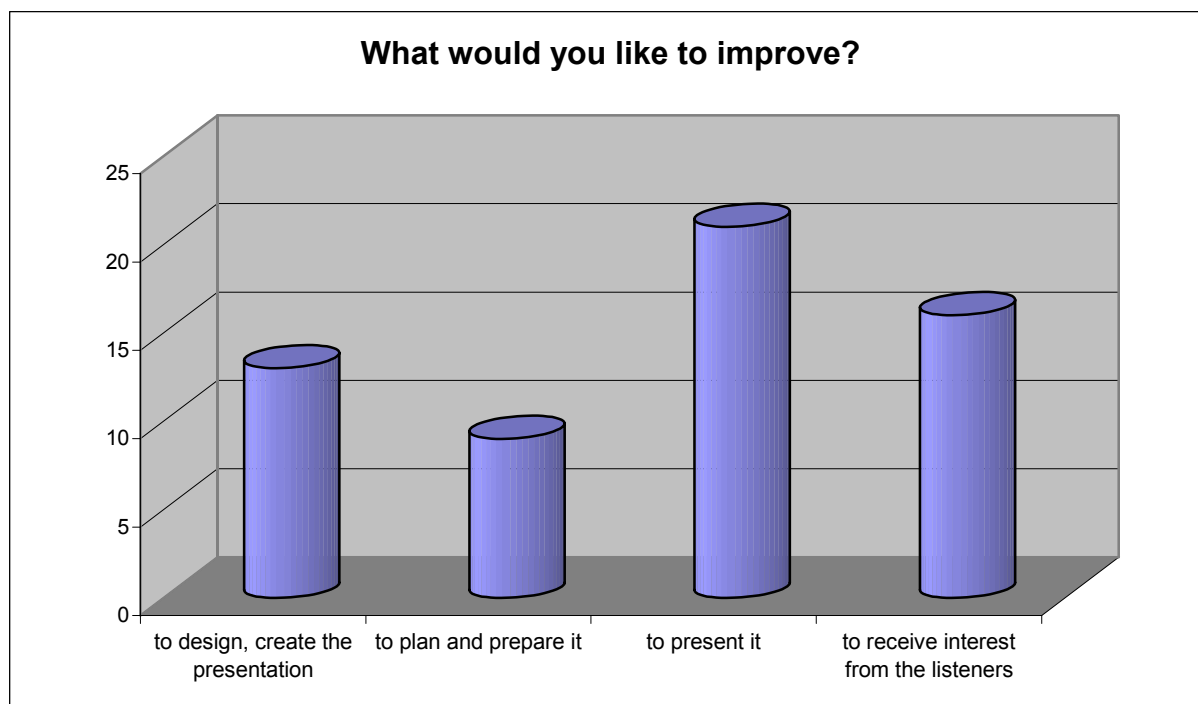


Fig. 6 This question corresponded to needs for improvement in presentations of students dissertation work or projects, which was the idea of this Project.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This paper is summarising a contribution to teaching and ways of cooperation leading to innovative ideas introduced to teaching. It evaluates goals and experience, findings and recommendations. It is important to view this sort of harmonisation of higher education across the EU as more than just a linguistic exercise. There are clear differences in the educational ethos, and the variation observed during this project shows that the objectives of the Bologna declaration require attention beyond the use of common languages, but also that its use is the most important pre-requisite.

The Bologna declaration of June 19th 1999 is quite clear in its objectives: "...Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system..... for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights...Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies...Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research".

This project shows that the use of English as a common language can promote a change in the educational ethos and thus assist in the harmonisation envisaged in the Bologna declaration. The lack of a common language, such as English, clearly hinders the European co-operation in terms of integrated programmes, mobility and thus promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

The use of a common language, such as English, is the necessary pre-requisite for the ambitions of the Bologna declaration and associated objectives. The success of such linguistic harmonisation is entirely dependent on the willingness of students and staff alike to adopt the language as a de facto working language, by introducing limited teaching and supervisory activities in English, and requiring student output to be in the same.

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