

GENDER ASPECT OF LINGUISTIC DIFFICULTIES OF ENGLISH MEDIUM STUDENTS

Nowadays English medium instruction becomes more and more popular due to a number of reasons: 1) enhancing role of English as a language of international communication; 2) constantly growing number of people whose level of English is quite high; 3) greater opportunities for better employment of graduates offered by a high English proficiency level; 4) English proficiency is regarded as a factor of successful life-long learning and consequent career development.

At the present, the peculiarity of English medium instruction is a dynamic development of this form of education in the countries where, firstly, the English language is a foreign one and, secondly, the number of people speaking English is quite small. One of these countries is Ukraine where Kharkiv is leading in the number of international students at higher education institutions and Kharkiv National Medical University ranks first among medical institutions of Ukraine as for the number of international students.

At Kharkiv National Medical University English medium instruction was launched in 1996. Almost all English medium students come from the countries which belong to the second and expanding circles [1, 2], i.e. English is not the first language for them, thus difficulties of English medium instruction in Ukraine are for this group of students inevitable.

Having regard to the above and taking into consideration importance of this group of students for development of our university as well as the number of female students entering Kharkiv National Medical University, it is necessary to investigate the issues (including those associated with the language) these students face in the process of adjusting to life in Ukraine and English medium instruction.

The purpose of our study was to analyze the linguistic difficulties which are typical for first-year English medium students of Kharkiv National Medical University in gender aspect.

The study was carried out in the context of initiative research work of Foreign Languages Department of Kharkiv National Medical University under the title “Linguistic Difficulties of English Medium Students”. In May 2015 the survey of first-year students of the 6th Faculty for Training International Students majoring in medicine and dentistry was conducted. It enrolled the students from thirty countries; the majority was made up by those who came from India (45.3%), Israel (8.1%), Lebanon (7.6%) and Nigeria (6.7%). The students from Egypt, Ghana, Palestine, Namibia, Iraq, Brazil and other countries took part in the questionnaire survey as well. The respondents were predominantly male (64.5%). The rate of female students was 35.5%.

In order to specify linguistic difficulties and factors they result from, a questionnaire was developed. It was aimed at estimation and analysis of language difficulties the first year English medium students face while studying and living in Ukraine. The questionnaire consisted of five sets of questions:

- I. Demographic data
- II. First language
- III. Factors determining the choice of English medium training
- IV. Linguistic difficulties
- V. Attitude to the subject English Medical Terminology

The questionnaires were distributed among 382 students; 223 questionnaires were filled in and returned to the department, i.e. the return rate made 58%. The survey was carried out anonymously.

As this article deals with analysis of linguistic difficulties namely in gender context, this will concern common, typical language problems for both genders as well as those ones typical separately for male and female students.

According to the findings obtained, the most pronounced linguistic difficulties were experienced by the respondents in the process of communication in public places (shop, drugstore, hospital) because the local citizens did not speak English well enough. These issues were specified by 122 students: 46 girls and 66 boys, which made 58.2 % of female respondents and 45.83% of male ones. In this case an evident difference in the proportion of boys and girls who gave positive answers was observed. It should be noted that such difficulties were predominantly specified by female students who had come from India and Nigeria (where the English language has the status of the second one) as well as MENA countries. The issues associated with communication with Ukrainian students occupied the second place in the order of importance. This difficulty was pointed out by 93 students, of them 40 girls and 53 boys that made 50.6% of female students and 36.8% of male ones. The difficulties which were considered by students as language ones were more probably caused by adaptation to new conditions. Similar to the first case, significant prevalence in the number of female students was observed. This fact can be closely associated with gender aspects of psychological, communicative, adaptive barriers of international English medium students.

Adaptation difficulties of international students were studied by a number of researchers, teachers and psychologists from all over the world as training international students is a profitable sphere of economy in many developed countries. For example, the study carried out at Western Oregon University (the USA), showed that international male students were more confident and satisfied with a new culture, than were women. This fact may prove the idea that sociocultural adaptation may depend on gender [3]. Similar findings were obtained by J.A. Wang in the result of a larger study at one of the universities in the south of the USA, which showed that women experienced more difficulties associated with adaptation in comparison with men [4]. The study of P.J. Pederson showed that international female students who were provided with

culturing mentoring had much higher intercultural gains than those who were not mentored [5]. The greater difficulties of adaptation of international female students were also observed by G.P. Wilson [6].

Linguistic difficulties associated with low level of English proficiency among citizens of Kharkiv, which were pointed by a great number of the respondents (in fact this is the main difficulty for them), can be explained as a component of culture shock experienced on arrival at a country with different culture. In the world presentation of the students from the countries of the second circle the English language is a means of communication inside the home country, the means of mutual understanding for the speakers of different languages. Since their life experience is poor (for the majority of students it is the first trip abroad), they expect everybody to speak English to understand each other in every-day situations, frustrated expectations are actually the shocking factor. Therefore, the students from the countries of the second circle perceive the low level of English proficiency among the population as a problem; this is less typical for the expanding circle representatives (65% and 48% of students, respectively, according to our investigation). This issue is more likely communicative than linguistic one and can be caused by poor informing of the students about the living conditions in the country at the stage of making decision to enter the university.

The third most frequent difficulty according to the respondents' opinion (10 students, 4.5 % of all participants) was experienced by students at lectures (it is difficult to understand lectures). This was indicated by 10.1% of all girls and 1.38% of boys who participated in the survey, besides 6.32% of female respondents and 2% of male ones specified that it was difficult for them to make notes at lectures. Firstly, this fact may be indicative of difficulties with listening comprehension (perception and processing of information). The fact that in the process of foreign language learning girls show better achievements than boys is considered to be a generally accepted one. However, the study carried out by

J.P. Boyle showed that at foreign language classes such aspect of speech activity as listening comprehension is much faster and better mastered by male students than by female ones [7]. As for the respondents of our study, the English language is not the first one, this tendency can (at least partially) be in line with our findings.

On the other hand, absolutely opposite findings were obtained by M. Purdy and N. Newman who studying interrelation of listening and gender concluded that female students are better at perception of the information heard and are more attentive listeners in comparison with male ones. The authors emphasize that though the gender is not considered as the only important factor influencing communication, it is the base which directly affects communication process and perception of speech of other people in different contexts [8].

It should also be noted that 49 students, 21.5% of girls and 22.2% of boys, did not experience any linguistic difficulties in the process of training and everyday life. In this case significant gender differences have not been revealed.

Analyzing our data and the findings of other studies, such factor as gender peculiarities of self-esteem should be considered. The relation between gender and self-esteem was ascertained long ago and it is well known that boys always have higher self-esteem [9]. T. Quatman and C.M. Watson established that female teenagers had lower self-esteem as well as they tended to estimate their intellectual abilities lower than boys. Taking into consideration the age of the majority of the first year students, the above observation can be applied to the data obtained by our study. This work also showed that not only assessment of intellectual abilities, but also general self-esteem of male teenagers was higher [10]. The recently published article by W. Bleidorn et al. [11] reports the data proving that self-esteem increases with aging beginning with late juvenile age; and self-esteem is constantly higher in men. According to the authors, such factor as culture has a great impact on gender-age aspects of self-esteem and its influence is connected with socioeconomic, sociodemographic

indices as well as with gender equality [11]. This remark is of particular importance for us, as according to our data, English medium respondents are representatives of different countries, thus differ in such demographic characteristics as religious confession, nationality, ethnicity, economic conditions, social status.

In conclusion, our findings and the data obtained by other researchers may suggest that there are significant gender differences in experiencing and estimation of language difficulties, which the first year international students face in Ukraine in the process of English medium instruction. These difficulties are not purely linguistic ones, but the challenges of adaptation, different self-esteem and lack of information at the stage preceding entering the university. In order to overcome the existing linguistic difficulties, extra classes of English may be recommended, which may be of help to the students who did their school education in the medium of the language other than English. To cope with the difficulties associated with perception of lecturer's speech, access to lecture notes can be reasonable. The students should be properly informed about linguistic situation in the country they are going to spend 5-6 years. The system of measures of sociocultural and linguistic support for first year international students should include clubs, different events aimed at more successful adaptation of female students, increasing of their self-esteem, confidence in their knowledge and abilities and overcoming linguistic and communicative difficulties.

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Summary. The article deals with analysis of linguistic difficulties which are experienced by international students, namely in gender context. It concerns common, typical language problems for both genders as well as those ones typical separately for male and female students.

Key words: linguistic difficulties, English medium students, gender.

Анотація. Стаття присвячена аналізу мовних труднощів, які виникають у іноземних студентів, саме в гендерному контексті. У роботі розглядаються загальні, характерні для чоловіків і жінок, мовні труднощі, а також мовні труднощі, характерні для кожної статі окремо.

Ключові слова: мовні труднощі, англомовні студенти, гендер.