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## **Insights into the Application of Action-oriented Approach to Language Teaching and Learning at University Level: a case of Vilnius University**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to clarify how the outcomes of the Action-oriented Approach implemented in ESP teaching at the university level is evaluated and assessed by the students of Vilnius University (Lithuania). To achieve the research aim, the data sample of 150 students' responses, representing three different faculties of Vilnius University (i.e. Life Sciences Centre, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of International Relations and Political Science), to the structured interview were collected in the period of one academic year 2019/2020. The qualitative analysis of anonymous students' responses resulted in 164 statements of positive feedback, 37 statements of negative feedback, and 27 statements of further recommendations. More specifically, the analysis of the qualitative research data has clearly demonstrated that despite the difficulties in implementing an action-oriented approach into ESP teaching at Vilnius University, the changes in the language course have been mostly positively evaluated by the students. Also, the combined approach to analysing scientific discourse with the implementation of various practical tasks related to public speaking and team project has been assessed by the students as an opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills and become more engaged and motivated for further studies.

**Key words:** *action-oriented approach; structured interview; students' responses; tasks; university teaching.*

### **1. Introduction**

Theoretical implications of a new updated version of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume* (2018, 2020) and new language teaching /, learning methodology Action-oriented Approach (AoA) presented by Piccardo and

North (2019) require university language teachers, curriculum developers to rethink and reshape their approach to language teaching. This is a complicated task as it is necessary to take into account all the necessary components of teaching / learning process: students, teachers and the content of teaching, the latter including teaching and learning methods, materials, modes and ways of pedagogical interaction.

The most important thing in the successful implementation of AoA in the process of language teaching / learning is a well-developed understanding of the essence of this approach, and its underlying principles by all the stakeholders of the teaching process at the university level. Besides, it is an undeniable fact that language courses are very suitable for fulfilling the ultimate aim of university education, i.e., to prepare future leaders of our society, which is expected to be accomplished during the entire study process at university. Language courses are very suitable for this aim to be achieved as they can provide favourable conditions for enhancing learners' capacity to become active social agents of our society, especially with an application of AoA.

Following action-oriented approach (AoA) to language teaching and learning, as well as taking into consideration students' feedback on the language courses, ESP courses at Vilnius University have been recently modified and changes have been implemented. Thus, **the aim** of this article is to overview and discuss how Vilnius University students approach the implemented changes of AoA in their ESP course. In order to fulfil this aim, the following research questions have been raised:

- 1) What kind of AoA changes in the language teaching/ learning process at VU were implemented?
- 2) What were the specific steps undertaken to implement the changes involved?
- 3) How did students respond to the implemented changes?

Before the response to the above questions, in the rest of the paper, some theoretical background related to the current study is briefly outlined. It is then that the application of AoA in ESP course of VU is overviewed. In the following section, the research data and methodology are presented. Finally, the research findings are discussed and illustrated, while the concluding remarks are provided at the end of the paper.

### **1.1.Theoretical background of the research**

The on-going research being carried out over the period of three decades by the experts in the field of second language teaching and learning has clearly shown that action-oriented approach is a combination of the communicative approach and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Although this study does not aim at a thorough analysis of all the theories of second language teaching that have evolved over the past century, it should be noted that

the approaches to second language instruction have developed from a strict focus on grammar and reading to an emphasis on the learner's capacity to carry out specific social or interactive tasks in the target language, with the learner's role as an active social agent of a society.

Thus, it is not surprising that action-oriented approach overlaps with communicative and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches; however, some differences have also been observed (Piccardo, 2010, 2014; Delibaş, Günday, 2016; Kaliska, 2016; Piccardo, North, 2019). One of the clear differences is related to the overall aim of a lesson. For instance, communicative approach focuses on the learners' communication in the target language, in the most general fluency terms. Thus, in CTA the learners are engaged in meaningful, authentic language use by following the classroom schema of PPP, i.e. presentation, practice and production with the focus on the development of the fluency of language. By contrast, task-based approach aims at presenting opportunities for learners to master language via learning activities designed to engage learners in the natural, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purpose (Lin, 2009). Regarding, the overall goal of learning

TBLT is thus more specifically oriented, as compared to CTA.

The action-oriented approach goes beyond the communicative approach to emphasize *active language use* with the main purpose to actively engage students in life-oriented tasks. As argued by Piccardo and North (2019), AoA views communication as a social activity designed to accomplish specific tasks taking place in the real world. Similarly, Delibaş and Günday (2016) observe that fulfilling the tasks makes the learning process more effective and the learner more active. Moreover, it is important that the tasks are not only of linguistic nature, but they also integrate pragmatic and communicative skills.

While discussing all three approaches to language teaching and learning, the researchers (Delibaş, Günday, 2016; Kaliska, 2016) compare how the concept of the task can be differently interpreted. In the task-based approach, tasks are focused more on learning the language, while in the communicative approach the task serves communication purposes, finally the action-oriented approach tasks are focused on social life, where learners, as members of society, accomplish both linguistic and pragmatic tasks in a wider social context. According to Van Den Branden (2015, pp. 304-305), *task* within the framework of

TBLT is referred to as "*an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language*". By contrast, a task within the framework of action-oriented approach is a way to launch learners into action in the pursuit of a specific socially-oriented goal. As Piccardo (2014, p. 18) vividly explains:

*"We do not read in order to read,  
nor do we speak in order to speak.  
In real life, we read or speak as a  
means of achieving a specific  
goal other than (or in addition to)  
a language goal"*.

Thus, one of the major characteristic features of AoA is its engagement of learners into socially oriented action with the purpose of achieving an authentic goal. In that context, Piccardo (2014, p. 28) clarifies that "*the action-oriented task seeks to break down the walls of the classroom and connect it with the outside world.*" Such an accomplishment of goals requires learners' understanding what kind of linguistic and non-linguistic activities are to be performed as well as one's personal involvement and collaboration with others.

More importantly, the real and socially meaningful interaction that occurs in a language classroom (Piccardo 2010, p. 20–35; Kaliska, 2016) necessitates conditions for learners' creative and critical thinking development. In order to develop

students' critical thinking, tasks have to be cognitively challenging and engaging. In AoA language classroom, learners have to draw on all their linguistic resources and general competences to accomplish the provided tasks. The focus of attention in such a classroom is shifted from a mere analysis of linguistic items towards learners' performance of tasks within the area of professional content and context with learners' existing linguistic resources available, and with teachers' linguistic scaffolding provided, when necessary.

Another issue to be considered is teacher's role in AoA, and how this role is approached from the perspective of different teaching approaches. Piccardo (2014, p. 30) points out to a different role of the teacher in the action-oriented approach, where the teacher guides learners gradually toward the accomplishment of the pre-set task. Thus, in the action-oriented approach, the learner becomes an agent in one's own learning by guiding oneself to the accomplishment of an authentic task. In the action-oriented approach, student's role has thus changed to the learner, who is expected to act effectively and autonomously, make choices, exchange ideas, knowledge, experience while interacting with a group of peers, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. This type of task performance requires students to put down their

textbooks and explore authentic texts from real life (Piccardo, 2014, p. 30).

A similar idea is expressed by M. Kaliska (2016) who argues that in order to achieve didactic goals of action-oriented approach, course syllabuses and materials need to be organized on the basis of authentic data. By authentic data materials here is meant what refers to actual language use within a sociocultural context that enables learners to take more responsibility for their own learning outcomes. This is how this idea is supported by Kaliska (2016, p. 31):

*"Using one course book does not suit the actual conditions of the learning/teaching process. In the era of the Internet and rapid sociocultural changes, teachers should avail themselves of a variety of materials and resources which represent a real life language use. But, instead of composing all tasks and activities on their own, they should assign a certain part of work to learners, making them responsible for their own learning process. Learners can both carry out the research on language use and accomplish different tasks which require their active attitude as well as personal involvement in the learning process."*

Naturally, all language teaching textbooks contain various tasks, the so-called "consciously constructed pedagogical activities" that the learners have to perform under the teacher's guidance. However, as Bygate (2015) points out that the performance of such tasks does not necessarily empower learners to use their language skills outside the classroom successfully, as the conditions where learners practice them are decontextualised or artificial. It seems appropriate to refer to the recent research carried out by Jordan and Gray (2019, p. 7), who have criticised the use of coursebooks in ELT learning.

Despite the need for authentic learning and teaching materials, researchers still tend to acknowledge some positive factors of coursebooks. This is explained by the sense of familiarity textbooks can provide. The use of a textbook is commonly associated with a certain kind of order, security, purpose, direction, a beginning and an end, and a clear way through, and above all it saves time. Nevertheless, AoA focuses on the tasks and the decreasing reliance on textbooks, which naturally ignites fears and uncertainty of language teaching among teachers. Some teachers might feel that they are losing their expertise and knowledge, while moving into the "unknown land" of uncertainty

without any specific textbooks and pre-defined trajectory of action.

Despite the fears and doubts teachers might experience, universities across Europe and in the rest of the world continue to explore the possibilities provided by language teaching approaches that favour the use of authentic texts for language learning. A task-based approach to language teaching has already been implemented in many curricular at university language centres in Europe. This change is due to the fact as it is seen as an effective way of improving learners' communicative competence (Fischer, Musacchio, Standring, 2009; Fischer, et al., 2011). A recent meta-analysis by Bryfonski and McKay (2017) (cited in *Geoff Jordan and Humphrey Gray*, 2019, pp. 8-9) of TBLT implementation has determined high levels of success and stakeholder satisfaction. Following the successful experience of other European universities, Vilnius University has also made an attempt to upgrade ESP courses with the focus on both task-based and more specifically action-oriented approach to be implemented in undergraduate teaching. The steps of implementing the changes in ESP course are discussed in the following section below.

## **1.2. Application of AoA approach to ESP course at VU**

The principles of AoA and task-based teaching and learning have been adapted to the curricular of languages for specific purposes at Vilnius University and all the English language courses have been upgraded and updated accordingly since the academic year of 2019 / 2020. In order to answer the first research question raised in the introductory part of this paper, it is important to overview the reasons that led to the application of AoA in the ESP courses at VU.

The first reason, why curriculum changes seemed to be inevitable, was related to the students' survey results at Vilnius University. Every academic year VU Department of Study Quality Assurance and Development carries out students' feedback surveys on all the subjects at the end of each semester. The results of the surveys are accessible for each lecturer and the administrative staff. The results of the surveys on language courses were meticulously followed and analysed for several consecutive years, and the emerging tendency of students to complain about language courses as being too easy and bearing no difference from secondary schools has been established. In spite of the fact that some remedial actions have been taken by the administrative staff

of the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Philology of Vilnius University in the recent years, the results of the surveys have led to a bottom-up as well as top-down reflection about them with the teaching staff of the Institute of Foreign Languages leading to the conclusion that needs and expectations of students have not been adequately met, and the decision that changes in ESP curricula have to be imminently implemented was taken.

The second reason was the appearance of a newly updated version of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume* (2018, 2020) with its extended implications for language teaching, learning and assessment and a new understanding of a learner as a social agent also inspired us to rethink and reshape the whole approach to ESP curricular. We have started rethinking and reshaping our ultimate aims, objectives and competences to be developed, as well as updating the content, methods of teaching and assessment criteria for evaluation of students' achievements. With the breadth and depth of research-informed description of the AoA, a new updated version of CEFR (2018, 2020) has extended our perception of the notion of competence itself and the kind of competences, apart from the linguistic one, i.e. sociolinguistic and

pragmatic, to be developed in language courses. The new CEFR (2018, 2020) has broadened our views on the ESP curricular planning and strengthened our determination to make changes in ESP courses at VU.

Our next step was to benchmark our ESP language courses with the ones delivered at other European universities. The investigation was limited to gathering information from universities belonging to the League of European Research Universities (LERU) (Kortmann, 2019), while visiting their websites and looking into their language policy documents. Our investigation of the available information of LERU led us to the conclusion that language courses that are offered at these universities are targeted at academic English and scientific discourse in order to meet and satisfy the needs for undergraduate students to obtain an international perspective on the discipline of their studies and their future profession. Following this, the titles of most of our ESP courses have been changed into *English for Academic Purposes and Research*.

The next step in our changes was the curriculum development. A model template of a Course Description Unit for the course *English for Academic Purposes and Research* was developed. The main aim was to develop general as well as linguistic-

communicative competences with a specific scenario as an overarching aim of the course, followed by the objectives and expected learning outcomes. The Course Description Unit has been divided into the

following parts which consisted of teaching components and were complemented by a list of specific tasks, as summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** The components and tasks of the course description

<i>English for Academic Purposes and Research</i>		
Course components	Course tasks	Assessment
1. Scholarly/scientific discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject-specific research article analysis</li> </ul>	ORAL EXAM Case study (25%)
2. Academic writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research-based academic essay writing within a subject-specific area</li> <li>• Research proposal writing</li> </ul>	WRITTEN EXAM research proposal (25%)
3. Academic communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team research proposal presentation</li> </ul>	[End of semester] team project presentation (40%)
4. (Subject-specific) media discourse and news briefings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debates and public speaking tasks</li> </ul>	[During the semester] public speaking tasks (10%)

As can be seen from Table 1 above, the main tasks alongside four structural parts (i.e., scholarly/scientific discourse, academic writing, academic communication, media discourse) are as follows: subject-specific research article analysis, research-based academic essay writing within a subject-specific area, research proposal writing, team research proposal presentation, debates and public speaking tasks. The assessment of students' achievement is aimed to be 50%

accumulative, and the rest of 50% is intended for the oral and written examination via case study analysis and a research proposal.

This new Course Description Unit was developed in a top-down manner, and discussed with the academic staff of the Institute of Foreign Languages. It was also circulated to the experts including the representatives of major universities of Lithuania such as Kaunas University of Technology, Mykolas Romeris University,

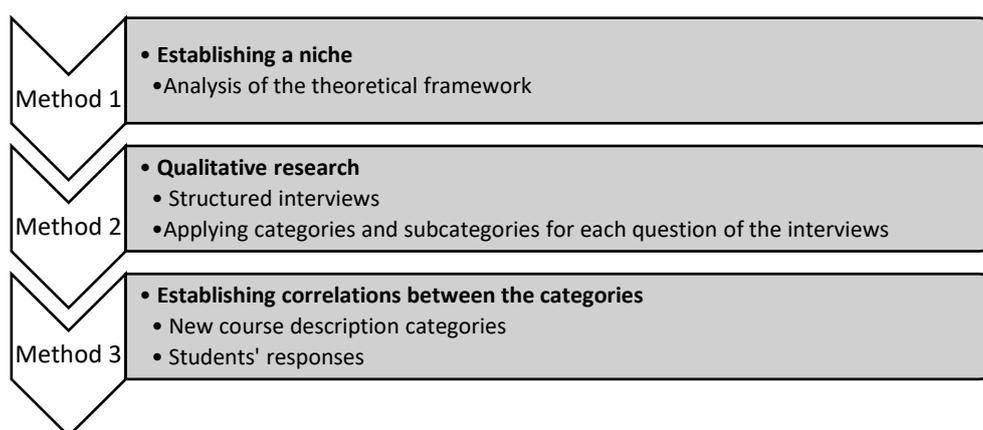
Vytautas Magnus University, and the experts from Vilnius University. Their feedback was the most valuable and their remarks have been taken into consideration and corrections in the Course Description Unit have been made accordingly. Finally, an external expert from Göttingen University (Germany) Dr. Johann Fischer was invited to evaluate our preparation for changes and to deliver a 40-hour workshop on *University Language Teaching, Learning and Assessment within the Context of the CEFR Companion Volume: implementing changes in university language teaching and assessment* to our teaching staff. After a few sets of intensive workshops, our curricular were reviewed once again, with course scenarios being specified and slight adaptations being made to meet the subject-specific needs of the

study programmes at different faculties, where our courses were to be delivered. The updated courses of *English for Academic Purposes and Research* were also presented to the administrations of the faculties of Vilnius University and heads of study programme committees.

The process of implementing the changes was intense and challenging, and the results of these changes were also approached from the perspective of the qualitative analysis that will be discussed below.

## 2. Research data and methodology

In order to assess the quality of the changes and their contribution to improving learning outcomes of ESP course in VU the following research **methods** were used, as shown in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1.** Research methodology

As shown above, the first step of the procedure was implemented by analysing

*theoretical literature* and implemented recent studies in the context of Action-

oriented Approach and its application. Secondly, the *qualitative research* of structured interviews with the students of Vilnius University from three faculties (i.e., the **Faculty of Philosophy**, the study programme of *Childhood Pedagogy* (N=30), **Life Sciences Centre**, the study programme of *Genetics* (N=70), and the **Institute of International Relations and Political Science** (N=50) were carried out. The qualitative data was collected in January of 2020, at the end of the autumn semester of 2019 at Vilnius University, Lithuania. The students who took part in the research were asked three open questions concerning the application of AoA in their English language course “*English for Academic Purposes and Research*”. The questions were specifically targeted students' evaluation of the course, drawing their attention to the following questions:

- **Q1:** What did you like about the course?

- **Q2:** What did you dislike about the course?
- **Q3:** What should be improved?

All the participants' responses were anonymous. Finally, the data of the structured interviews was analysed by applying categories and subcategories for each question of the interviews. In the following section, the research findings will be discussed.

### 3. Qualitative research findings

As it has been mentioned above, the first question that students had to answer in order to evaluate our English language course “*English for Academic Purposes and Research*” was to identify positive aspects of it. The results of their answers are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Students positive responses about the course of “English for Academic Purposes and Research”

Category:	Subcategories	Nr. of statements	Examples
Positive aspects of the course	1. All themes were in line with the course scenario	15	<i>All the topics were related with the programme; The themes were very useful for the development of our personalities; Very useful that we were discussing and getting deeper into the social impact of science, the researchers' role in society; All the time we were getting new knowledge; information will be useful later in the course; a well-</i>

- structured course; the tasks were good and motivating to learn; The information that we have received was very valuable; lectures were informative; interesting lectures; there was no monotony in lectures; very clear and connected with genetics; lectures were well-planned, they were in line with the genetics course; the course was well-balanced, interesting presentation of subjects; much information that could be applied later in the studies; the course was valuable for other subjects; we are taught more how to think as future researchers.*
2. Application of different teaching / learning methods 23  
*Pair work, group work, listening, reading tasks, dilemma discussions, debates, interesting video materials, it was possible to develop different skills during the module; variety of teaching methods, not only reading and listening, but viewing videos was useful; writing tasks were very useful; various forms of learning were applied; news briefs were good opportunity to improve your speaking skills; much new information presented in different modes of teaching; Reading research papers Was useful, interesting, very useful for further studies; lecture structure is very good.*
3. Debates 11  
*Good opportunity to improve your speaking skills; a more academic approach to debates, studying English allowed me to take part at the Debate Tournament; debates were very useful to overcome fear of speaking in public; debates were very good for my speaking in public skills; a very good task as it teaches you how to ground your opinion; debates were good as you learn how to clearly formulate you speech, there should be more tasks like this at university; debate topics were very good.*
4. Difference from previous language studies 14  
*We learnt new useful things: summaries, research proposals, academic essays, improvement of academic style; different from what we had previously.*
5. Team work, team projects; 22  
*Helps with public speaking, helps to manage to work in groups and share*

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research proposals, case studies		<i>responsibilities; very good valuable tasks, there could be more of these tasks; the task was very useful as I learnt a lot of new things; I learnt how to plan time better; very useful; very good; helped to learn how to look for necessary information and how to find it and assess it; teamwork was useful as it helped to know friends, classmates better; case studies were very good for learning a language, it was new, different from other studies; topics were very difficult.</i>
6. Vocabulary and concept learning	28	<i>Very useful definitions; it was OK that vocabulary coincided with the themes of other study subjects; learning the concepts helped to understand the subject of study genetics; very valuable test on vocabulary, it extended my knowledge of the study subject; developed vocabulary a lot; vocabulary learning was useful for other subjects; it was useful for genetics course; learnt many new things from English classes; very good for other lecturers; good as it coincided with cytogenetics subject; learnt much of new vocabulary; was good; good for other lectures; learnt new concepts.</i>
7. Favourable learning environment	18	<i>Atmosphere in the class was good for studies; no pressure, friendly environment; you are not afraid to make mistakes; lectures were not only informative, but transmitting good energy and friendly; very relaxing atmosphere.</i>
8. Lecturer	17	<i>Non- judgemental, never offends, she helps in any way she could, good sense of humour; very helpful; explained everything very clearly; information transmitted in a clear and concise way; a lecturer was a very warm personality; a very good lecturer, then the learning is easier.</i>
9. Achievement and evaluation	16	<i>I feel that I have learnt a lot during these lectures; lots of obligatory tasks that you accumulate during the semester; the evaluation is well-wishing for students; the lecturer was always very understanding and helpful; always gives feedback about tasks; the teacher evaluated not only our</i>

*knowledge, but our efforts as well; accumulative score was good; different assessment strategies.*

**Total 164**

As can be seen from the examples of the statements provided by the students, one of the most positive things about our modified English course is that the students seem to understand the course scenarios and their meaning, which is an essential component of the course description. While preparing scenarios for their courses, lecturers were trying to offer such themes that were in line with students' professional study area and focused on the social impact of the research carried out in the field of their studies as well as on the current issues of our society, or putting it in E. Piccardo's (2014, p. 30) words, continues its existence

"outside the classroom walls". Following the Action-oriented approach all the tasks of each course were harmonised to be in line with the course scenarios. Thus, an attempt was made to meet the requirements of AoA to address current social issues and empower learners to be the social agents of our society, who are socially responsible professionals and / or researchers in the fields of their studies.

Regarding the Course Scenarios, they were offered to the students from three different study programmes in accordance with their professional and academic needs, as provided in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Course Scenarios

Course scenario for the course of "English for Academic Purposes and Research"		
<b>1. Study programme of Genetics</b>	<b>2. Study programme of Childhood Pedagogy</b>	<b>3. Study Programme of International Relations and Political Science</b>
<i>"You are students of genetics at the University. Your final goal is to evaluate critically the Lifestyle vs. Genetics of young adults: social and cultural paradigms; and to propose a set of specific recommendations to young adults in the form of research proposal and conference talk."</i>	<i>"Students are members of a university research team. Their aim is to make a critical evaluation of the quality of teaching in primary schools in Lithuania and to present their research results and propose recommendations to the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sports in the form of a research</i>	<i>"You are members of the research team for the independent public policy institute that raises critical public awareness on a range of social, economic and political issues. Your major aim is to critically evaluate the content of political discourse and its features in the analytical media and direct political</i>

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*proposal and a conference talk/representation and to talk.”*  
*propose a set of specific recommendations to the analytical forum in the form of a written research proposal and a conference talk.”*

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The inclusion of scenarios was an innovation that has been evaluated most positively by our students. Under the subcategory of “*All themes were in line with the course scenarios*” (Table 2), which emerged in the process of the analysis of the collected students’ responses, it has been clarified that, overall, the courses were in line with other subjects taught during the semester, they were interesting, motivating, well-structured and planned with different tasks, useful for their future careers, helped to have a better understanding of the researcher's role in our society, provided in-depth insights into the social impact of their representative discipline. To sum up, most of the students found this course useful for their future studies.

Another subcategory of “*Application of different teaching / learning methods*” confirmed students' positive evaluation of different modes of teaching, the application of a variety of methods aimed to develop reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills. Students expressed a positive attitude towards reading research papers within the area of their future profession. Although the inclusion of research papers in the courses

was a debatable issue among the teaching staff of the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Philology of Vilnius University, the students’ response to this method of scholarly discourse analysis was the most positive one.

It should also be pointed out that debates emerged as a very well-valued mode of teaching, therefore it has been included separately under the subcategory of *Debates*. The debate task was included in nearly all course descriptions with the aim of developing students' critical thinking skills, which is one of the most important general competences among other subject specific competences that all university courses target to develop. Although the inclusion of debates task in the courses caused a lot of discussion among the lecturers in terms of its effectiveness and its appropriateness, students appreciated it a lot. They highly valued a possibility to develop their public speaking skills, and they also considered debates to be a unique opportunity for them to take part in an annual University Christmas Debate Tournament, organized by the staff of the Institute of Foreign Languages, Faculty of

Philology (VU). Students also expressed an opinion that the debate motions were very interesting and encouraged discussions, and presumably they helped to improve students' critical thinking skills.

The next subcategory under the analysis is that of “*Difference from previous language studies*” (see Table 2). As mentioned above, one of the reasons for upgrading the ESP course at Vilnius University was students' unfavourable evaluation, as they had considered them to bear no difference from their language studies in secondary schools. Thus, students' responses have confirmed that the undertaken changes were adequate and justifiable. They acknowledged that the tasks were very innovative and creative, and that they had not practised them before.

Another subcategory of “*Team work, team projects, research proposals*” (see Table 2) also proves that the changes made in the ESP curricular were the righteous ones. Students' responses revealed that they enjoyed working in teams, which was a new experience for them. They also learned how to better manage time, and learned how to perform tasks collaboratively by gaining knowledge from each other, which demonstrated their mediation skills as well.

The next subcategory of “*Vocabulary and concept learning*” showed students' satisfaction with the acquisition of new

terms and concepts in the area of their studies. The students of the Study programme of Genetics expressed their undoubtedly positive evaluation of learning new concepts within the area of their studies. They mentioned that this was helpful for their other subjects as well as extended their knowledge to cover more subject-related topics.

Finally, the students' positive responses have shown that they enjoyed favourable learning environment and valued lecturers' work a lot. The respondents' answers grouped under the subcategories of “*Favourable learning environment*” and “*Lecturers*” (see Table 2) demonstrate that it is important for the students to study without any stress in a calm and relaxed atmosphere with a lot of support and encouragement and positive attitude from their teachers. The students' answers clearly indicate that the teacher's scaffolding and encouragement are necessary for attaining better learning outcomes.

Turning to the point of students' evaluation of their achievements, it could be assumed that their views are very positive. Their answers under the subcategory of “*Achievement and evaluation*” convey that accumulative mark was beneficial for them. They valued teachers' feedback on their achievements, positive attitude, support, different

assessment strategies. Overall, students' answers reveal that they were satisfied with their achievements of the course.

The research participants were also encouraged to point out those aspects of the

course that they were not satisfied with. Their answers are grouped under the category of “*Negative aspects of the course*” that are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Students negative responses about the course of “English for Academic Purposes and Research”

Category: Negative aspects of the course	Subcategories	Nr. of statements	Examples
	1. Lack of clarity and coherence	14	<i>Too much information, confusing; lack of clarity; unclear structure of the course; unclear tasks, clarification of tasks and connection among them; confusion with tasks; explanation of tasks should be more precise, clear; preparation for exam should be more explained, more examples should be given; some information was presented too late; more examples of solving tasks; unclear course tasks or too complex explanation; more time for explanations, text analysis; sometimes the task was not clear till the end; unclear and scattered material for essays and mid-term test.</i>
	2. Lack of clear assessment criteria	4	<i>Assessment of debates was not clear, some students who performed better got lower marks than those who performed worse; evaluation of debates was not clear;</i>
	3. Big workload and lack of time	15	<i>Too much preparation for lectures, too much teamwork tasks; too much work, I was unable to prepare well for all the tasks; too much workload, even more than other serious subject lectures; too many tasks to account; too big workload especially in the last two months. Big tempo, lack of time to prepare, too much work for the last weeks before the semester finished; too</i>

		<i>little time was left to explore the articles; at the beginning of the semester, it was easy and later at the end - lots of tasks to finish; much stress was caused; too much workload at the end of the semester; tasks should be more equally managed throughout the semester; at the end of the course too many tasks to deliver; lack of time to read and prepare for the speech in case studies;</i>
4.	Too much work in groups	2 <i>Unclear purpose of the projects; disliked team work.</i>
5.	Use of different learning online platforms	2 <i>Using Google instead of VMA.</i>
<b>Total</b>		<b>37</b>

As seen from Table 3 above, the analysis of the collected negative responses under the category of *Negative aspects of the course* has demonstrated that the students' main complaint is related to a lack of clarity and cohesion during the course. The subcategory of "*Lack of clarity and coherence*" illustrates students' statements that the course structure was not always clear, and that the tasks were not always fully explained, and / or examples were not always provided, sometimes too much information was given, which was not fully explained, students sometimes did not see the connection between the tasks. Students expressed their wish to have more clarity on examination tasks and more preparation practice for the case studies. Some students also mentioned the criteria of evaluation of

some tasks that were not very clearly explained. These respondents' insights explicitly indicate what improvements in our course delivery should be made in terms of clarity and cohesion. It suggests that task instruction should be more translucent and comprehensible. It appears that teachers have to be more precise in all the stages of AoA task preparation: development, instruction, implementation, facilitation, and evaluation.

The other two issues requiring more attention of course developers were students' disapproval of too much workload and a lack of time. A closer analysis of their comments under the subcategory of "*Big workload and lack of time*" has made it evident that students had too much work to do while preparing tasks and collaborating

on team projects. Students were concerned that at the end of the course there were too many tasks to deliver and suggested that the tasks should be more equally allocated throughout the semester. This is a clear indication that teachers have to plan the course more carefully leaving enough time for explanation of all task stages: preparation, delivery, feedback, evaluation and reflection. Some of the comments were specifically directed at the examination case study tasks, where students complained about the shortage of time. This also should be taken into consideration and more lecture time should be allocated for examination task practice.

The empirical data analysis has revealed that there were two more subcategories in connection with team work and different learning online platforms. Although the majority of the students liked working in teams; however, there were a few who disliked this type of task performance. The students' criticism of using one way of online communication and information transfer is logical and well-grounded and should be necessarily improved in the future. Finally, the last question in this qualitative research was to find out students' opinion about possible improvement of the course of “*English for Academic Purposes and Research*.” Their overview is provided in Table 4 below.

**Table 4.** Students’ recommendations to the course “English for Academic Purposes and Research”

Category: Recommendations	Subcategories	Nr. of statements	Examples
	1. Availability of model examples for tasks	10	<i>It would be good to have not only the frameworks of tasks, but also good, well-done samples; there could have been essay models provided; there should be at least one model example given; examples could be helpful to understand the tasks better; project and essay examples.</i>
	2. Time management	6	<i>There should be more time management in class; sometimes lectures took longer; we sometimes forgot about the brakes; we worked without brakes; task completion</i>

			<i>deadlines should have been more equally planned.</i>
3.	Variation of teaching methods	2	<i>More videos with more interviews and discussions to follow.</i>
4.	Vocabulary	5	<i>More vocabulary tasks to get to know more new words; more tests on vocabulary; more tests for each topic; more vocabulary tasks;</i>
5.	Reading research papers	2	<i>Reading more controversial research papers would be good for the development of speaking and argumentation.</i>
6.	Writing	2	<i>There should be more focus on the process of writing.</i>
<b>Total</b>		<b>27</b>	

As indicated in Table 4 above, the first subcategory is dealing with “*Availability of model examples for tasks*”. In order to have a full understanding of tasks students were willing to have not only clearer framework of tasks, but good examples of how these tasks can be accomplished. In another subcategory of “*Time management*” students' comments show their concern about the length of tasks and necessary time for their fulfilment. The students complained about working longer than usually and sometimes even having lectures without breaks. They were also critical about the deadlines of task completion and offered to develop a more balanced arrangement of deadlines. These insights coincide with the previous criticism

expressed by the students about too much workload and shortage of time for task completion.

There have been several other suggestions expressed in terms of variety of methods applied. Students wanted more videos with more discussions to follow them. Although the majority of students were satisfied with the level of acquisition of new vocabulary, still there were some who wanted more focus on vocabulary development and enhancement. Students also mentioned that reading research papers should include more controversial themes in order to inspire more discussion, and a more critical approach to reading. As it has been observed in Table 2, students were generally satisfied with the development of

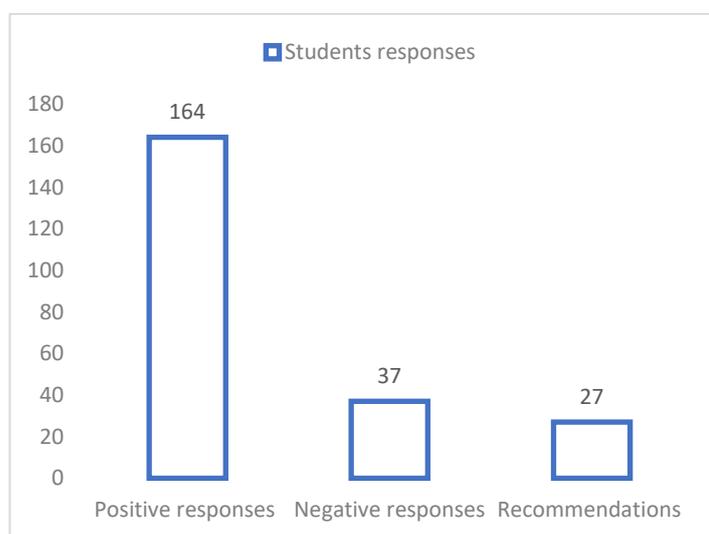
their writing skills; however, they pointed out their need to focus on the process of writing rather than on the outcome of it. As based on the research findings, conclusions and some final remarks will be drawn in the following section.

#### 4. Conclusions

All things considered, it could be argued that students' evaluation of the course of *“English for Academic Purposes and Research”* at Vilnius University were more positively rather than negatively evaluated. The qualitative analysis of students' responses to the structured interview questions demonstrated more

appreciation than criticism of the course, and there were not so many suggestions provided for its improvement. Therefore, it could be concluded that the attempt to apply action-oriented-approach at Vilnius university in ESP course has been successful. Application of the AoA could be continued further by focusing more on reflection of the outcomes of its implementation in language courses and more measurement of its positive aspects.

More specifically, the analysis of the students' responses has also pointed to the overall positive feedback, regarding the overall statistical distribution of the provide responses, as illustrated in Figure 2 below:



**Figure 2.** Summary of the students' responses

As indicated above, the analysis of the structured interviews with 150 students from three different study programmes (i.e., Genetics, Child Pedagogy, International Relations and Political Science) at Vilnius University has resulted in the overall

numbers of 164 positive statements, 37 negative statements and 27 recommendations in the context of the ESP course *“English for Academic Purposes and Research”*.

As the focus of this study was the qualitative analysis of the collected data, one of the main limitations is that more students could have been interviewed to get a more detailed and extensive understanding of the level of their satisfaction with the course. In the future,

this study should be complemented by the combined application of both qualitative and quantitative methods to get a more detailed representation of the positive impact of the Action-oriented approach in the English language course at university level.

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