Teaching sustainability communication in higher education: Applying case study method based on social media

DALIA GULBINSKIENĖ
GIEDRĖ VALŪNAITĖ OLEŠKEVIČIENĖ

Abstract

The article aims to introduce the role of foreign language teaching while using social media in fostering sustainability communication (SC) in higher education (HE) institutions. Foreign language learning enables students to analyse actual topics about sustainable development on social media, to discuss problems, to share personal emotions and experiences. Moreover, ESP curriculum aims to build students' basic language communicative skills with the focus on sustainability communication when students recall gained information. The article overviews the importance of the SC development on the theoretical level as well as introduces the challenges of SC development relying on social media texts in foreign language classes on the empirical level. One of the most innovative methods of learning/teaching a foreign language is a case study method. It integrates such skills as one's ability to analyse, think critically, search for solutions and make decisions. The article deals with concepts of professional English development and case analysis based on social media. It presents the findings of the research into students' attitude towards case study method based on social media texts for developing their professional English commu-

nication. The research highlights the problems and peculiarities of applying the method. It has revealed that students have a positive attitude towards assignments involving case study method based on social media texts. They believe that such assignments help develop one's communication skills of the professional English language.

Keywords

Nauczanie komunikacji dotyczącej zrównoważonego rozwoju w szkolnictwie wyższym: zastosowanie podejścia studium przypadku opartego na sieciach społecznościowych

Abstrakt

Artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie roli nauczania języków obcych z wykorzystaniem portali społecznościowych w promowaniu zrównoważonej komunikacji (SK) w szkołach wyższych. Nauka języków obcych daje możliwość analizowania aktualnych tematów zrównoważonego rozwoju, omawiania problemów oraz dzielenia się osobistymi emocjami i doświadczeniami w sieciach społecznościowych. Ponad to, program nauczania ESP ma na celu rozwijanie podstawowych umiejętności komunikacyjnych uczniów, z naciskiem na trwałą komunikację, w której uczniowie zapamiętują informacje, których się nauczyli. Artykuł dokonuje przeglądu znaczenia rozwoju SC na poziomie teoretycznym, a także przedstawia wyzwania związane z rozwojem SC w oparciu o teksty z mediów społecznościowych na lekcjach języków obcych na poziomie empirycznym. Jednym z najbardziej innowacyjnych sposobów uczenia się/nauczania języka obcego jest metoda studium przypadku. Integruje takie umiejętności, jak umiejętność analizowania, krytycznego myślenia, znajdowania rozwiązań i podejmowania decyzji. W artykule przeanalizowano koncepcje profesjonalnego rozwoju języka angiels-

kiego i analizę przypadku w oparciu o sieci społecznościowe. Przedstawiono również wyniki badania postaw uczniów wobec opartego na tekście studium przypadku w mediach społecznościowych w celu rozwijania profesjonalnej komunikacji w języku angielskim. W pracy zwrócono uwagę na problemy i specyfikę zastosowania metody. Okazało się, że studenci mają pozytywne nastawienie do zadań, które wykorzystują podejście studium przypadku oparte na tekstach z mediów społecznościowych. Poza tym, studenci wierzą, że takie zadania pomagają rozwijać umiejętności profesjonalnej komunikacji w języku angielskim.

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja zrównoważonego rozwoju (SC), media społecznościowe, angielski do określonych celów (ESP); wykształcenie wyższe (HE), studia przypadków, umiejętności komunikacyjne

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions play a significant role in the attainment and demonstration of sustainability communication in which proficiency in a foreign language is an essential prerequisite for acquiring desired results for sustainability communication competence development. In today's globalised world there is an increasing need for students to improve foreign language competences at university. There has been an ongoing discussion on how to help students be more adaptable to the new environment and more focused on sustainability communication (SC). According to Godemann (2011), Tilbury (2011), Iwaniec et al. (2014), the four-dimensional (economical, environmental, social and institutional) the concept of sustainable development has been determined. Furthermore, the fourth SC dimension, which is related to the complex challenges of contemporary society, has modified the SC structure including institutional dimension and emphasizing an autonomous activity, the use of interactive foreign language through participation in

dialogues for the present and future of global society. These constructs are used in different environments and contexts as they are assumed to be significant elements of communication. Case study method based on social media is a major tool in teaching sustainability communication in higher education.

Case study method is based on descriptions of real decisions made in the real world, which were introduced to learners as cases. Learning/teaching based on this method focuses on co-operative learning principles grounded in the mechanism of self-regulation as well as using cases in conceptual, analytical, and presentation learning dimensions. It develops the main eight transferred abilities, namely analytical thinking, decision-making, application, oral communication, time-planning, interpersonal/social, creative, written communication. Currently case study method, already acknowledged as the alternative to traditional forms of learning and teaching, is gaining more popularity. Case study method is regarded as the method which develops one's communication competence. It is a method based on active participation, cooperation, and democratic discussion within a group. Discussion, if applied appropriately, encourages acquisition of knowledge, abilities and approaches. There is no unanimous method of case study. There are plenty of them to be applied in different situations for dealing with various problems.

Research object is teaching sustainability communication in higher education by using social media. Research aim is to identify the importance of case study method when teaching sustainability communication skills by using social media in higher education. Research objectives are as follows: a) investigate the phenomenon of sustainability communication; b) highlight the impact of case study method based on social media and c) to find out students' opinion about the use of case study method in training sustainability communication by using social media. Research methods are the analysis of scientific literature was conducted in order to theoretically base the concepts of case study based on social media; written survey, which helped identify what impact case study method makes on the development

of students' sustainability communication skills in higher education.

2. Theoretical background

Sustainability communication is a wide and complex interdisciplinary phenomenon and covers many social, economic, environmental, institutional, emotional and spiritual spheres of human life. Moreover, the internal structure of sustainability communication (knowledge, talents, abilities, skills, moral values, attitudes, behavioural intentions and their interrelations) is profound as well as external elements – institutional, social, economic and environmental dimensions – emphasizing their role which they play in designing the needs to be acquired by students in higher education institutions. However, researchers have not established the finalized SC definition or unifying theory and concept. For this reason, interpretations are different, based on ideological and educational perspectives involving aims related to the application of the concept both in scientific and policy making discussions. Godemann (2011) defined sustainability communication as a complex process of information and knowledge exchange between sender and receiver. Its structure comprises language, knowledge, abilities, skills, moral values, potential, and talents, all of which allow learners to achieve mutual understanding in communication and undertake various activities or tasks (which is referred to as competency) related to challenges of sustainable development and education. What is more, the notion of sustainability communication might be referred to the necessity and desire to fulfil the needs of leadership, professional career, social status, and/or other personal achievements. Furthermore, it is also significant to figure out if learners, who have some targets, are able to establish a possession of certain level of competences to overcome obstacles in order to reach their goals. Therefore, it is important not to limit the development of competences to their cognitive elements and learners should be informed about internal elements of a desired competence, too. This conceptualization is essential for

sustainability communication as it is based on holistic and humanistic philosophy combining all necessary elements such as moral attitudes, internal and external motivation, learning environment and mentors' support that are significant for an effective performance. Therefore, pedagogues have a very important mission in empowering students to contribute to a more sustainable world while equipping them with the ideas of sustainability communication as a forceful and useful tool. The sustainable development paradigm ensures a concrete context of university mission and vision signifying a new stage of study quality achievement. Moreover, based on developments by European Commission (2017) researchers of the institutionalism (Filho et al. 2013) and social constructivism theories, Tilbury (2011) analysed activities of institutions, their structure, formal rules and informal rituals as well as relationships between higher education institutions and their importance. A university is an organizational unit which foresees and ensures university sustainable development and sustainability communication at all institutional levels. The university carries out social, economic, environmental politics: uses energy, transport and performs other activities related to infrastructure. In order to improve the learning environment of students, the university infrastructure is constantly renewed.

Highlighting the place of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in teaching sustainability communication, Sterling (2004) points out that 'it requires an understanding of the role that language and culture play in the construction of environmental, social, economic, institutional, cultural and religious systems, the impact of these systems which support life'. Therefore, it could be stated that ESP might ensure students to become more motivated to develop their sustainability communication through English learning activities. The problem is how to foster the development of sustainability communication through the ESP curriculum within the context of tertiary level. In the system of higher education of Lithuania, the ESP curriculum aims to build students' language skills, to improve their knowledge about sustainability communication and to enable them to apply sustain-

nable development ideas with respect for the environment, in which cultural reproductions have major implications not just for the content of the curriculum, but for forms of pedagogic interactions. For this reason, it is challenging for pedagogues to believe that ESP will improve students' sustainability communication.

Today university students are supposed to gain skills of independent work, be able to apply their skills and knowledge in newly encountered situations, use social networks and social media, and up to date technologies. European Commission document states that linguistic competences are a part of general abilities, which ensure opportunities of each citizen's employment, education and personal improvement. These abilities should be regularly renewed and replenished. When teaching foreign languages, we develop learners' social and cognitive performance and creativity. When communicating with people, students are supposed to take into account persuasiveness, culture and style of their language and being able to use the newest sources of social media. Inefficient communication can cause the problems such as lack of innovations, poor performance, failure in the case of a problem, and threats when dealing with it. Employers, who have faced communication problems, try to improve their sustainability communication skills, correct their own mistakes and eliminate drawbacks. For this reason, not only, existing methodologies are used but also new ones are designed.

Aiming to equip students with the possibility to develop their sustainability communication competence is a big challenge of higher educational institutions. When presenting the study programmes, it is important to introduce students with the concept of sustainability communication, its elements, teaching methods and learning strategies that could be used to provide effective sustainability communication competence development through ESP learning processes. According to Godemann (2011), Flowerdew (2013) and Wiek, et al. (2014), it could be claimed that the content of sustainable development is connected with communicative (native and foreign language skills),

cross-cultural (foreign language skills and knowledge about different cultures) personal (ability to manage internal and external elements), methodological – instrumental (knowledge and skills of a particular profession), social (demonstrating ability of environment protection), transformative (demonstrating ability of positive change) as well as core competences (IT, mother tongue, mathematics and etc.). Similarly, to sustainable development competence and its components, sustainability communication is strongly influenced by social and mass media and therefore has a variety of characteristics.

The characteristics of sustainability communication encompass reflexivity in relation with various problems; successful ability to deal with difficult situations, medialisation as an effort to counter the tendency to normalization in sustainability discourse by matching it with the forms of mass media. Tendencies to normalization with the possibility that the more sustainability becomes a topic and norm, the less stress and pressure there is to reach mutual understanding. Establishment of sustainability as an intrinsic social value and the related issue of creating agreement, the possibility of various interpretations of sustainability have significant influence and should be taken into considerations when curriculum development processes are made and ESP teaching processes are designed. Moreover, social networks, made up of individual and group actors with their "bridges", are increasing. The examples in the mediated forms of communication and social interaction processes are part of these ties with their own specific online practices, rules, network relationships and technical possibilities. Therefore, handling this complexity of interdisciplinarity plays a crucial role in the discussion about sustainability. Moreover, communication about sustainable development is sustainability communication about sustainable development knowledge and experiences. However, simply emphasizing the importance of the concept of sustainability is not enough to raise students' awareness about sustainable development. Knowledge needs a practical value, for this reason systemic knowledge must be acquired, i.e., the knowledge of functions, processes and interrelationships. Sust-

ainable development knowledge needs to be assimilated with values, ethical orientations towards the links between humans and nature, with direct experiences that involve emotionality and meaningfulness. ESP teaching has the medium and a long-term goal to assist students not only to improve their foreign language skills, but also to acquire basic knowledge about sustainability to actively communicate its ideas and link them with actions. Teaching ESP in higher education aims at developing and enhancing communication about sustainability that allow students to sharpen their awareness in both private and working life of what is ecologically responsible, economically feasible, socially acceptable as well as enabling them to discuss their ideas in classroom, using and analysing ideas expressed on social media. SC is classified as a "soft" tool, and is one of a number of popular instruments, therefore, involving students in the solution of their own problems opens up opportunities for them making corresponding changes in their behaviour for influencing the present and future life.

Many teachers have shared their experience of using case study method when learning/teaching foreign languages. This method is frequently applied in higher education- video examples of simulation cases are provided and discussed, then real cases are selected, i.e., cases which have free access on social media or simulation cases included in specialized publications. Students are divided into groups and analyse the material of the selected case in detail. It is proceeded by acting of the selected case. Case study method is crucial when teaching sustainability communication in higher education.

The use of case study method when teaching/learning ESP positively affects development of active and passive linguistic skills as it is an integrated method. It develops other skills and competences as well, for instance, problem solution, presentation-making, team work, analytical skills. By providing students with a possibility to make decisions, their knowledge in the area under discussion is enriched. They are encouraged to understand the complexity of the situation.

What is more, the use of authentic material of social media enhances teaching/learning experience (Kop 2010; Oleskeviciene 2020) as social media keeps the students engaged and encourages their participation as students not only use the material but also express themselves on social media by publishing their work and discussions. It also encourages their collaboration as it enhances student interaction and information sharing. Besides, social media enables the teachers themselves to share their materials, worksheets or websites.

3.   Research methodology

The research was conducted at the Faculties of Environmental Engineering and Creative Industries at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University. 40 first year students participated in the research. They were coded as students S1-S40 in the research findings below. Respondents were allowed to choose a colleague to work in pairs. The pairs selected the topics for case study on social media. Firstly, they had to analyse the case of sustainability communication, think of solutions and provide recommendations. Two weeks were given for the assignment. Students had to present their assignment in public: introduce their group friends with the case analysed, provide options for solutions and publish their work on social media and collect the feedback. Respondents could individually select the forms of visual aids. The teacher encouraged a creative approach towards the assignment and quest for brave solutions, emphasizing that there are no incorrect answers. The main attention was paid to a foreign language. During the course students learn English terms, using all types of linguistic activity, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening. Research participants were warned that primarily they were evaluated for argument-based solutions, well-made presentation in English using sustainability terminology as well as application of public speech rules and preparation of visual aids and materials for publishing on social media.

The following research questions were formulated according to the theoretical assumptions discussed above and personal insight:

- – How are language skills developed when learning via the case study method using social media?
- – How does case study and using social media promote social interaction?
- – What new skills do students acquire through the case study method using social media?

In order to find out the answers to the research questions, a questionnaire was developed, which included closed-ended and open-ended questions to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was provided to students who have already had one semester of experience of studying English for Specific Purposes at the university and the case study method was applied in these groups. The questionnaire was submitted to 40 respondents and they were informed that it aimed to summarize their authentic experiences in the language learning process and understand what they think about case study method using social media, as well as use their insights to improve the learning process in the future.

4.   Research findings and discussion

According to the results of the student survey, as many as 100 % of the respondents answered that case study method using social media and participation in group discussions create preconditions for a favourable learning environment. According to one of the respondents: 'Case study method using social media ensures a good atmosphere, you can learn from others', another comment: 'Case study method using social media creates a favourable atmosphere for learning, because in a group you learn to collaborate with others, to work in a team'.

Moreover, 95 % of the respondents answered the question whether case study method using social media improves the

relationship between group members and the relationship with the teacher in the affirmative way, stating in the comments that students communicate more with each other and with the teacher, and only 5 % thought that this is not always the case because sometimes disputes can arise, especially when opinions differ widely. Despite possible differences in opinions, 95 % of the respondents said that case study method using social media and group work help learners to get to know and understand other people better. One of the comments stated that 'while working in a group in chat rooms, you do tasks with different people, try to communicate, listen, and understand others.

Regarding the development of language skills through case study method using social media, 89 % of the respondents indicated that they developed language skills more efficiently, 74 % also mentioned listening skills and only 16 % thought that they also developed reading skills, while only 11 % mentioned writing skills (Figure 1). Respondents also mentioned other skills such as the ability to discuss, the ability to negotiate, and tolerance.
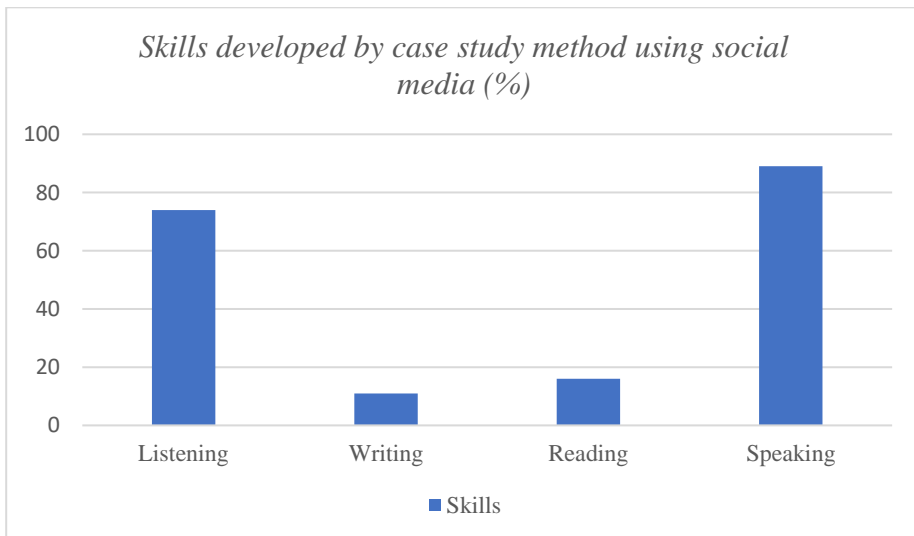
Figure 1
Skills developed by case study method using social media

For comparison, we asked a question about the skills that students develop when performing tasks individually. The majority, i.e., 79 %, of the respondents indicated reading, 30 % of the respondents mentioned listening, 23 % of the respondents mentioned writing and only 13 % mentioned speaking (Figure 2). In addition, none of the respondents indicated any additional skills.

**Skills developed during individual work** (%)
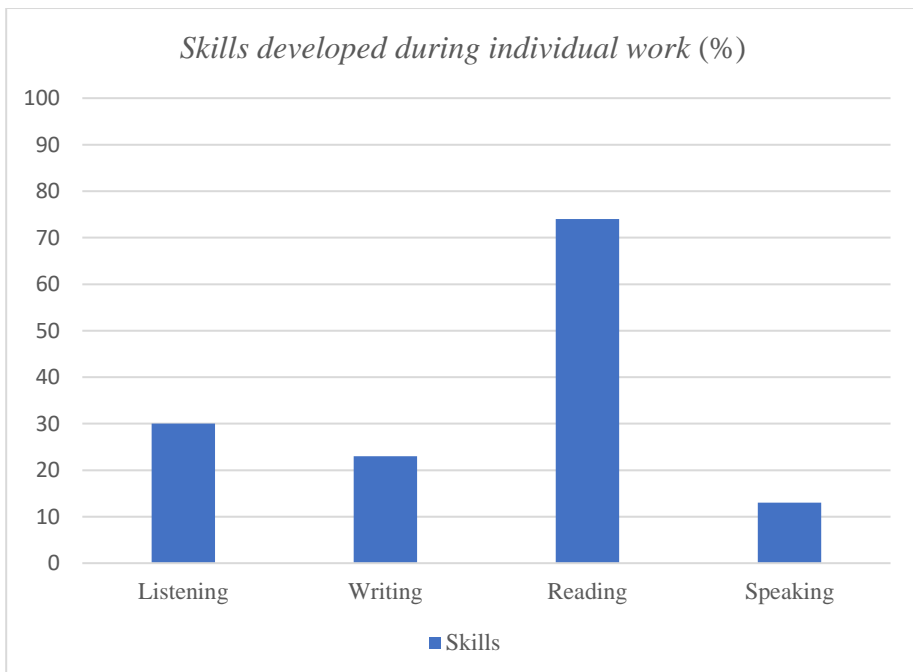
Figure 2
Skills developed during individual work

Comparison of the results of the responses to these two questions shows that case study method using social media significantly develops speaking skills, thus this method and group work approach should be used more often. This means teachers should practice arranging student collaborative work in chat rooms.

Students were also asked about social skills that they developed through the case study method using social media. 100 % of the respondents indicated that they learnt how to express

their opinion. 89 % of the respondents said they were able to agree or disagree with a colleague. 79 % of the respondents indicated the ability to listen to a colleague, 25 % of the respondents learnt how to praise and encourage, and 17 % of the respondents indicated the ability to intervene into the discussion (Figure 3).
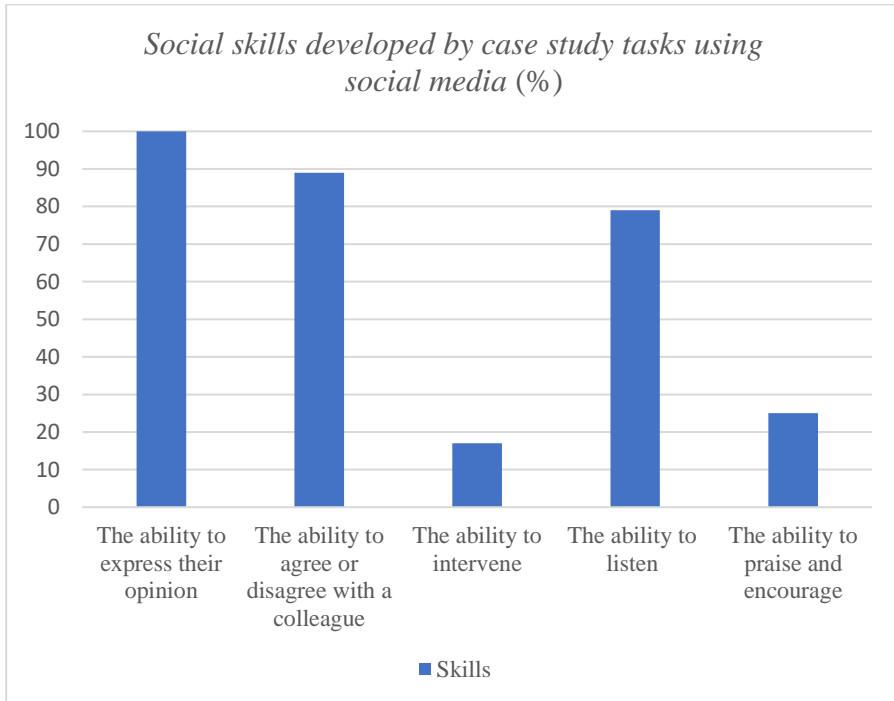
Figure 3
Social skills developed by case study tasks

When asked what they like about the case study method using social media, the respondents mentioned such factors as communication, listening, expressing their opinion, new ideas expressed by the other students, help, and cognition of colleagues as personalities.

When asked what disadvantages the case study method using social media might have, the majority of the respondents, i.e., 94 % said that they liked learning in this way very much and only a few indicated that there could be disputes, inter-

ruptions and lack of attention. Finally, when asked what activities they would like during the seminars, the majority of the respondents, i.e., 89 %, answered that they would like to learn in this way.

To sum up the results of the survey, we can state that they demonstrate that the case study method significantly improves the development of speaking skills, as well as learners' social skills such as being able to express one's opinion, agree or disagree with colleagues, intervene, listen, praise or encourage; it helps to create a learner-friendly atmosphere, improves interpersonal relationships in the group and is attractive to learners, as most respondents indicated that they would like to learn in a this way.

The research findings section below presents the thematic structure of the phenomenon of applying case study method based on social media in university studies. The process of clustering the statements into subthemes and themes is presented in the research findings together with the analysis of the phenomenon of case study method using social media. While analysing the empirical interview material, two main themes were identified: the benefits of case study method integrated with social media and the challenges of case study method integrated with social media.

The theme of the benefits of case study method integrated with social media splits into subthemes of using social networks and information availability, peer interaction and collaboration, improving English and presentation skills. This theme reveals the skills which are perceived by the research participants as substantially improved during their university studies and applicable in the workplaces. The research participants stress the improved ability to use social media, to interact and collaborate when learning, to solve problems and improve English skills acquired during case study activities. The ability to use new technologies, which is closely related to information processing skills, is also mentioned by the research participants. Overall, the subthemes are related to one of the general domains of the sustainability communication framework which is the media

and information literacy. The following subthemes of the capacity to organize one's ideas, decision making and being able to solve problems are related to the domain of interpersonal skills which are also of the utmost importance in work life and are perceived as substantially improved when applying case study method (see Table 1).

Table 1

The respondents' feedback on the benefits of case study method

Theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Meaning Unit
I. The benefits of case study method integrated with social media	Using social media	Engaging activities	S14, S20, S23 "<...>the task was engaging as I had to use social networks"
		Information availability	S6, S10, S11 " I found out a lot about sustainability communication on social media<...>" S40 "<...>the assignment was useful because I learned about successful companies"
	Interaction	Learning problem solving	S1, S5"it encouraged to look for solutions <...>".
		Learning collaboration	S13, S15"<...>it was much more interesting to work together with my group mate than individually"
		Improving English skills	S17, S12, S39 " I used professional terminology<...>"

	Skills	Improving presentation skills	S2, S19, S37 " <...> I improved my skills of making presentations and publishing material"

It could be seen in Table 1 that the research participants express their willingness to apply case study method using social media during our ESP classes. In the first subtheme research participants stress the need and importance of using social media when learning about sustainability communication. "*The task was engaging as I had to use social networks*" S14, S20, S23.

They also acknowledge the importance of improving English skills which enable sustainability communication. The importance of interaction stands out in the research as the research participants stress the benefits of cooperation skills. "*It was much more interesting to work together with my groupmate than individually*" S13, S15. Research participants also recognize the importance of critical thinking which is of crucial importance in the developing knowledge society, thus the respondents' feedback about case study method is very positive "*It encouraged to look for solutions <...>*" S1, S5.

The theme of the challenges of case study method integrated with social media reveals the skills, which are perceived as necessary in work life, and the need for improvement.

It could be seen that the research participants express their willingness for more improvement of certain skills. First, in the subtheme of the need for critical thinking research participants stress the need and importance of analysing and problem-solving skills. They also acknowledge the importance of foreign languages which enable cross-cultural communication. The importance of subject knowledge stands out in the research. Research participants also recognize the importance of the ability to cooperate and collaborate, the skills which are of crucial

importance in the developing knowledge society. Learning to learn and time management are perceived as useful both in study and work environments and the need for their development is expressed (see Table 2).

Table 2
The respondents' feedback on the
challenges of case study method

Theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Meaning Unit
II. The challenges of case study method integrated with social media	Need for critical thinking	Need for analysing skills	S18, S6 "<...>it was difficult to conduct analysis, I needed some help"
		Need for problem solving skills	S10, S16"<...>it was hard to think of solutions and provide recommendations"
	Need for subject knowledge	Need of English skills	S8, S11, S38 "it was a challenge to understand the text in English <...>".
		Need for professional knowledge	S9, S21, S32"<...>I do not have enough professional knowledge on sustainability and engineering, I need to improve it "

		Need for discussion time	*S17, S12, S25"<...> we needed more time for discussing the assignment"*
	Peer communication	Need for better collaboration	*S3, S22 "<...> I am not satisfied with my partner's activity, I expected a better cooperation"*

As can be seen in Table 2, research participants also identify the need to shape focus more on professional English which could be applied in work life in practice *"I do not have enough professional knowledge" S9, S21, "It was hard to think of solutions and provide recommendations" S10, S16.* Despite some challenges of applying case study method, the identified needs by the research participants highly resonate with the needs to develop sustainability communication in university studies discussed by the researchers working in the field (Godemann, 2011, Tilbury 2011, Iwaniec et al. 2014).

5. Conclusions

Sustainability communication is a complex, diverse and mult disciplinary concept, therefore sustainability communication challenges could be analysed emphasizing the involvement of all language pedagogues for the implementation of sustainability communication at university. It is crucial to involve language teachers in solutions to sustainability communication problems, plan, coordinate and perform activities for the development of sustainability communication. English language learning makes a positive impact on students' knowledge and skills about sustainability communication. Sustainability communication education is not the phenomenon which is taken for granted, but on the contrary, has to be developed by pedagogues

and supported by students at higher education institutions. Sustainability communication expands the spectrum of English language teaching and promotes students' opportunities of foreign language learning at all stages at higher education. The practical significance of the research is that it addresses students" needs for the education of sustainability communication and sustainable development that affects students' efficacy of acquisition of sustainability communication knowledge and skills. Embedding sustainability communication content and innovative methods of teaching into ESP classes, pedagogues are encouraged to update their teaching strategies with innovative approach to discuss sustainability communication. The possibility to apply this novelty for English language learning is estimated on empirical study results and such practice is proved to be successful for the development of students' linguistic skills and knowledge about sustainability communication. Moreover, the acquisition of sustainability communication through English language learning is the privileged experience gained while studying at universities, and case study method based on social media is the best tool in teaching sustainability communication in higher education. Theoretical and practical provisions of the research revealed that despite some challenges, case study based on social media is a relevant method when teaching sustainability communication at university level. Case study method helps to develop professional English competence, requires analytical skills, provides numerous solutions and teaches students think positively. Furthermore, it improves knowledge in the area of professional training and helps perceive complexity of the situation. Students learn to describe the existing situation, identify problems, provide arguments and make decisions. They are also able to discuss advantages and disadvantages of selected decisions and draw conclusions. The research has shown that case study is one of the most efficient methods, which helps establish skills of professional English in an easier and more rapid way.

Our research reveals that students' social skills as well as their English language skills are substantially improved by app-

lying case study method based on social media. They especially stress such skills as the ability to express their opinion, the ability to agree or disagree with a colleague, the ability to speak English, the ability to use new technologies, which proves that sustainability communication is of key importance in our knowledge society. Overall, these skills are related to one of the general domains of the sustainability communication framework which is the media and information literacy. The research participants also identify the capacity to use social media, to collaborate with peers, to solve problems, organize one's ideas, make decisions which are important in work life. The research participants express their perceived needs for developing certain skills which are necessary in professional work life. The research participants stress the need and importance of critical thinking and analysing skills, subject knowledge, peer communication, English skills and professional knowledge which enable sustainability communication, which resonates with the ideas expressed by the research carried out in the domain (Godemann (2011), Flowerdew (2013) and Wiek, et al. (2014)).

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Dalia Gulbinskienė
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1284-795X
Department of Foreign Languages
VilniusTech
pl. Saulėtekio 11
LT-10223 Vilnius
Lithuania
dalia.gulbinskiene@vilniustech.lt

Giedrė Valūnaitė Oleškevičienė
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-5688-2469
Department of Foreign Languages
Mykolas Romeris University
pl. Ateities 20
LT-08303 Vilnius
Lithuania
gvalunaite@mruni.eu