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Monika Kusiak-Pisowacka
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Institute of English Studies
monika.kusiak@uj.edu.pl
ORCID:0000-0002-4043-9144

Investigating Polish Students' Research Competences: A Questionnaire Study[1]

Abstract

The article reports on a questionnaire study which explored how sixty one students of English studies enrolled at a Polish university understood the concept of research and how they evaluated their own research skills in the context of their education. The findings revealed that all the students were aware of the importance of developing research competences. Although most of the respondents were willing to participate in research-oriented activities offered by university programs, there were students who did not approve of this form of teaching. The analysis of students' answers provided valuable information that can be used in adjusting the teaching program to the students' possibilities. The study points to the effectiveness of this kind of investigation in eliciting students' perspectives on this important component of academic instruction.

Keywords: university education, research skills, discourse community, students as researchers

1. Research Competences: In Search of a Definition

There are not many definitions of research skills[2]. As regards applied linguistics research, two definitions are worth discussing. Nunan (1992) defines research as a systematic process of investigation consisting of three components: 1/ a question, problem or hypothesis, 2/ data, and 3/ analysis and interpretation of data. Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik (2010) enumerate three elements of the competence that researchers should demonstrate: 1/ discipline knowledge, *i.e.*, being familiar with the specificity of what can be researched within a given discipline, 2/ research knowledge, *i.e.*, the one concerning research

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2 In this article, the terms "research skills" and "research competences" are used interchangeably.

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methods and techniques and 3/ awareness of ethical issues that need to be considered when embarking on a study. It seems that the two definitions complement each other. Nunan (1992) enumerates the basic stages of a research project; whereas Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik (2010) focus on various types of knowledge which are indispensable in designing and conducting a research study. However, there is one more ability that should be emphasised in a contemporary conceptualisation of research competence – an ability to use English in an international academic context. Taking into account the fact that in Poland the role of English in academic publishing is increasing (Hryniuk 2019), it seems essential that universities develop this academic skill along with discipline knowledge and research skills[3].

2. Developing Research Skills as a Way of Socialising Students

When joining the university, students become members of new social groups. In some of them, students participate as novices; in others as more experienced members, representing different statuses of legitimacy as participants. Students enter the academic community, a group of scholars in which students (as if by default) should be treated as "legitimate" members. Another community that students enter (this time) as peripheral participants is the discourse community, which represents a specific discipline, such as applied linguistics. In this group, students are novices who gain discipline specific knowledge and skills by participating in university education. Since university programs often prepare students for future professions, such as teachers or translators, we can assume that students enter one more community – the community of practitioners, in which they also function as peripheral inexperienced members.

One of the aims of higher education institutions is to facilitate students' efforts to function in the above-mentioned groups (Müller 2022; Niżegorodcew 2010). As regards participating in the discourse community of applied linguists, it is important to teach students "mechanisms of intercommunication among its members" (Swales 2011: 25). It means familiarising students with community specific genres (types of texts), which will enable every member of the group to contact other members. Participatory mechanisms cannot function without developing some specific lexis. Swales (2011) claims that:

> It is hard to conceive, at least in the contemporary English-speaking world, of a group of well-established members of a discourse community communicating among themselves on topics relevant to the goals of the community and not using lexical items puzzling to outsiders. (Swales 2011: 26)

Therefore, practice in discipline specific vocabulary is crucial in allowing students to participate more fully in the life of their community.

As mentioned earlier, students should be prepared to enter one more group – a community of practitioners, which according to Lave and Wenger (1991) is a group of people who share the same interests in a given topic and experience similar problems. Participation in the group involves cooperation, exchanging knowledge, good practices, *etc.* Examples of communities of practitioners which philology students are prepared to enter are communities of teachers and translators.

3 A more detailed discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the dominance of English in scholarship can be found in Hryniuk (2019).

An important goal that university education faces nowadays is to socialize students into new roles and make them realise what knowledge and skills they can develop as members of the new communities. Research skills seem to be an important element of all the three communities discussed before. "Consequently, [they] have been identified by higher education institutions as one of the important graduate attributes that need to be imbibed among and used by students" (Garg, Madhulika and Passey 2018: 2). Let us look at how university programs in Polish higher education approach the task of improving students' research competencies.

3. Developing Research Competences in a Polish Academic Context: Goals and Expected Outcomes

In Poland students develop research skills at both BA (undergraduate) and MA (graduate) levels of tertiary education. Exit standards, *i.e.*, knowledge, skills and social competences that students should develop, are specified by *National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education* (MNiSW 2011) and *Polish Qualifications Framework* (Chłoń-Domińczak *et al.* 2017). See: Table 1 for an example of specifications concerning MA education.

Table 1. Selected goals for English studies MA students who specialise in linguistics at the Jagiellonian University for 2022/2023

1/ Knowledge about:	A – the connection of linguistics with other science disciplines; B – research conducted in the discipline of linguistics; C – theoretical perspectives and research methods applied in linguistics; D – designing and conducting research in the discipline of linguistics;
2/ Skills:	A – finding, analysing and evaluating information as well as interpreting it in a critical way; B – evaluating critically the materials used in various academic tasks; C – preparing academic texts in English with the use of appropriate style and terminology; D – formulating and testing research hypotheses as well as selecting appropriate research methods to examine them; E – integrating information from various disciplines; F – preparing oral presentations in English also with the use of IT techniques; G – participating in discussions on topics connected with English studies; H – working in a team; I – expanding knowledge and improving research skills in a life long process; J – developing oneself as a professional practitioner with due respect of ethical issues;

3/ Social competences:	A – being prepared to evaluate critically one's knowledge and information found; B – being aware of the usefulness of science in solving theoretical and practical issues; C – being prepared to seek expert advice.

The specifications put a lot of attention to developing several aspects of research competence: students' research literacy (3B), research knowledge (1A, B, C, D) and skills (*e.g.*, 2A, 2B). The need to develop social skills is underlined in 2H and 3C. The role of language competence is emphasised in 2C, 2F and 2G. The list of exit expectations may seem quite demanding both for students and teachers, which raises an important question to what extent the students of English studies are prepared to fulfil the goals specified in the university program. The questionnaire study conducted by the author of this article was an attempt to investigate this issue.

4. Investigating University Students' Research Skills: A Selection of Studies

A number of studies have explored research competences that students develop during their university education. Lankiewicz (2013) and Kusiak-Pisowacka (2016) analysed diploma theses that graduates produced during the final years of their education, viewing them as valuable evidence of students' transitions to new communities. Lankiewicz (2013) evaluated "academicity" of Licentiate projects completed by 23 students in five higher education institutions in Poland. He concluded that many students lacked basic academic and research skills indispensable for designing projects and presenting them in diploma papers. Kusiak-Pisowacka (2016) analysed 17 MA theses produced by pre-service teachers in a Polish university. She found that while focussing on solving educational issues the students experienced difficulties in operationalising the main concepts of their studies and analysing them from a theoretical perspective.

In the light of problems students experience in conducting research studies, certain remedies have been recommended. In teacher education the idea of extending the role of the teacher to that of teacher-researcher has been widely promoted, *e.g.* by Wilczyńska (2009), Piegzik (2009), Yamin-Ali and Sambucharan (2021). It was observed that by participating in action research projects student teachers develop their understanding of the link between theory and practice, gain more autonomy as teachers, and practice courage and objectivity – features indispensable in all research-oriented endeavours[4]. Wilczyńska (2009) and Niżegorodcew (2010) emphasise the role of diploma seminars in educating students. Niżegorodcew (2010) views MA students as fresh researchers, calling the stage of their development *in statu nascendi, i.e.*, the process of their being born as graduates. Niżegorodcew (2010: 237) calls MA seminars "a place of intense negotiation of a written product of substantial length as well as an intense negotiation of identity." Wilczyńska (2009) emphasises the role of seminar meetings in building a culture of dialogue, which involves cooperation of all members of a seminar group and stands in contrast to an individualistic approach promoted in the contemporary academia.

4 The role of reflection skills in professional development of pre-service and in-service teachers, an important component of research competences, has been underlined *e.g.* by Michońska-Stadnik (2019).

The studies discussed above present the voices of university experts. Examples of research that focus on students' perspectives are questionnaire studies conducted by Garg, Madhulika and Passey (2018), and Liang, Kim and Kitheka (2022). Garg *et al.* (2018) explored the extent of understanding of research skills by students in India, and their views on the role of research skills in the university curriculum. The results provided the researchers with valuable information on students' needs and enabled them to formulate recommendations concerning fostering students' research skills in their university courses. In a similar study, Liang *et al.* (2022) investigated American undergraduate students' research habits, past research experiences, and self-perceptions of research skills. Their study showed that the students perceived information literacy skills, ethical principles, and communication skills as better developed than research design and statistical skills.

To sum up, a number of publications have explored the voice of academic teachers on how to guide students into new communities as novice researchers. However, there are still not many studies that investigated students' perceptions on this important aspect of university education. The author of the present article is not familiar with any research of this kind concerning philology students conducted in a Polish educational context. The study discussed in the next section aimed to fill this gap.

5. The Study

5.1. Context of the Study and Participants

The participants were students of English Studies of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland: 38 BA students in their 3rd semester and 23 MA students in their 1st semester. Both groups of students were involved in designing their diploma theses. It was assumed that at this stage in their studies they would be more willing to participate in the study and share their opinions concerning research skills, which would result in obtaining more elaborate and honest answers.

5.2. Aims and Research Questions

The aim of the study was to gain more information about the students – the current state of their research knowledge and skills, their previous experience in learning research skills, their understanding of the concept of research, their evaluation of their own research skills and their opinions on the role of the university in fostering research competence. It was assumed that the data gained would lead to a better understanding of students' needs and enable the university instructors to explore to what extent the students were prepared to fulfil the research-oriented goals specified in the university program (see: Table 1). It was believed that the results of this investigation would suggest some procedures that could be implemented in the English studies programs, helping, thereby, the students to achieve the above-mentioned aims. Thus, the study sought to address the following questions:

1. How do the students of English studies define the concept of research?
2. What do the students think about the importance of developing general research skills?
3. What is the students' previous experience concerning acquiring research skills?
4. What do the students think about incorporating research-oriented activities into the university curriculum?

5. How do the students evaluate their general and academic skills?

5.3. The Instrument

The questionnaire (see: Appendix) was in English. It was modelled after the instrument applied by Garg *et al.* (2018), adapted to better reflect the characteristics of English studies in linguistics at the Jagiellonian University. It consisted of 14 questions, which aimed to provide data to answer the five research questions. Items 1 and 2 refer to RQ1; items 8 and 9 – to RQ 2; items 3, 4 and 5 – to RQ 3; items 10, 11 and 12 – to RQ 4; items 6, 7 and 13 – to RQ 5. The skills enumerated in question 13, which asked the students to evaluate themselves, corresponded to some of the abilities listed in the specifications for English studies (see: Table 1). The questionnaire was a combination of both closed and open questions. Open, long-form questions offered the students the opportunity to elaborate on the answers they had provided in closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was administered electronically via the Ms Forms platform. The respondents were allowed as much time as they needed; the average time of completing the survey was 23 minutes. They did not have to sign their questionnaires. They were informed that the main aim of the study was to obtain information that would help the university teachers to adjust their instruction to their needs.

5.4. Analysis

The data from closed questions were analysed quantitatively, *i.e.*, by calculating mean percentages. The answers to open questions were analysed qualitatively. Open-ended questions elicited elaborate answers, in which the students used a range of different terms. Sentences and phrases with similar meaning were clustered and given a common keyword. The keywords identified thereby were used in the final report of the answers to open questions.

5.5. Results

The subjects of the study consisted of two groups of students, *i.e.*, BA and MA students. It is crucial to explain that the first stage of the analysis did not indicate any striking differences between the two groups; therefore, in the final stage of the analysis all the participants were treated as one group. In the next section, the results drawn from the final analysis are presented according to the research questions.

5.5.1. RQ 1. How Do the Students of English Studies Define the Concept of Research?

#1 asked the students to define the term "research". In the data, two types of definitions were distinguished. In the first type (see: Example 1 and 2), the students defined research as a way of discovering new information and expanding knowledge; some students emphasised an innovative character of this activity.

Example 1.

> research may be associated with some discovery, something innovative, so not only getting to know something that other scholars investigated

Example 2.

> the development of new knowledge or the inventive application of already existing knowledge to the development of novel ideas, approaches, and insights

In the other type of definition, the students viewed research as a process consisting of several steps associated with a scientific investigation (see: Example 3).

Example 3.

> The systematic process of exploring new knowledge or ideas about a specific topic or problem. It involves collecting information, analysing data, and drawing conclusions to answer questions or solve problems.

In #2 the students were asked to provide three aspects of research that they considered the most important. The skills enumerated most frequently were critical thinking and the ability to evaluate information (65%), ability to search for information (34%), metacognitive skills: planning, managing, organising (30%), collecting data (22%), ability to use information for one's purpose (18%), analysing data (13%). (The numbers in brackets refer to the percentages of students who found the skills important.) The results show that the students attached greatest importance to the abilities connected with information needed for research purposes, such as seeking information and evaluating it.

5.5.2. RQ 2. What Do the Students Think About the Importance of Developing General Research Skills?

#8 and #9 explored the students' opinions about the usefulness of research skills. All the respondents agreed with the statement that research skills are useful. They explained that research skills are useful for academics and students in their academic tasks, *e.g.*, BA theses; in everyday life, *e.g.*, in critical evaluation of information, especially the one found on the Internet; in future professional life; in learning new things. See: Examples 4, 5 and 6 below.

Example 4.

> Obviously, research skills are very useful at university and for people working either as scholars or scientists. However, I also believe that people can benefit from research skills in everyday life.

Example 5.

> I think research skills are useful because we live in an era of misinformation. The ability to conduct your own research, even if it is a brief one, can help you avoid taking information at face value, and think critically before forming your own opinion on any topic.

Example 6.

> There is a wide range of information in the era of the internet and it is important to know how to find your way through it and reach what is valuable.

5.5.3. RQ 3. What Are the Students' Previous Experiences Concerning Acquiring Research Skills?

The results show that 64% have been taught research skills, 9% have not received this kind of instruction and 27% chose the answer "hard to say''. When asked to say at what level of education they were taught research skills, the BA students pointed to the following: Primary school (2%); Secondary school (21%); BA studies (71%); Others (26%). The MA students selected the following: Secondary school (8%); BA studies (73%); MA studies (39%); Others (13%). The results clearly show that both groups pointed to the university as the main source of instruction. As regards the "others" option, the students pointed to self-study, the role of the Internet and their "research" experiences that they considered conducive to learning research skills (see: Example 7, 8).

Example 7.

> I got into research at high school level, when I watched a lot of YouTube videos concerning conspiracy theories. I realized that conspiracy theorists like to throw the term *research* around while in reality they are biased and often fail to fact-check their findings and sources. Creators that disagreed with the CTs often pointed to the importance of quality research skills.

Example 8.

> I was not taught, but rather learned on my own by observing what other people included when writing about something. I used to write for a number of blogs back in primary school and middle school and would follow a number of other blogs too. … Looking back, I can see that I gradually developed the skills to evaluate the reliability of the sources, finding them, scanning for specific info etc. and I continued to develop them throughout my high school and university years.

5.5.4. RQ4. What Do the Students Think About Incorporating Research-Oriented Activities into the University Curriculum?

Eighty seven percent of the students agreed with the statement that developing research skills should be included in the curriculum of their university courses; 13% of the students disagreed with this statement. When explaining their opinion, the students presented the following arguments:

- Primary and secondary education do not focus on research competences; therefore, tertiary education should devote due attention to this element of education.
- Research-oriented instruction can make the process of preparing diploma theses and other academic assignments easier and more enjoyable.
- Well developed research skills can be useful in future careers.

- More focus on research skills can help students to develop critical thinking skills, which are necessary in the process of searching for information and filtering it.
- Building research competences is important for one's personal growth.
- It is difficult to learn research skills on one's own; therefore, instruction conducted by experienced researchers (university teachers) will be very beneficial.

Those who did not like the idea of incorporating research-oriented activities into the university curriculum explained that teaching theoretical principles of conducting research could be confusing and the university probably would not have time to provide the instruction in a more practical manner.

#12 asked the students whether they agreed with the statement that participating in the research should be included in the curriculum of their university. 86% agreed with the statement; whereas 14% did not agree with it.

5.5.5. RQ5. How Do the Students Evaluate Their Own General and Academic Research Skills?

#6 asked the students whether they feel that they have developed any research skills. 78% answered "yes"; 1% – "no" and 21% selected "hard to say". Those who chose the answer "yes" enumerated the following skills they had acquired: searching for information; choosing what is relevant and using it for one's purpose; using search engines to find information; critical thinking; time management and organisation skills.

#13 required the respondents to evaluate their research skills on a scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*very good*). The choice of point 1 or 2 from the scale meant not developing a given skill. Selecting point 3, 4 or 5 indicated developing the skill to a satisfactory, high or very high degree. The question lists 19 skills: 3 soft skills (#13c/k/l/), 4 technical skills (#13f/h/i/j/), 3 social skills (#13m/p/q/), 2 metacognitive skills (#13g/r/) and 7 academic skills (#13a/b/d/e/n/o/s/). In this study, the types of skills were defined as follows: *soft skills* – character traits and cognitive predispositions; *metacognitive skills* – skills that involve organising work; *technical skills* – skills that involve coping with information, such as searching, using, reporting; *social skills* – skills that entail cooperating with others, *e.g.*, peers, teachers, librarians; *academic skills* as higher-order skills needed in completing research-oriented tasks, usually based on content knowledge.

For each skill, mean percentages corresponding to each answer from 1 to 5 were calculated. Additionally, to obtain a clearer picture two groups of results were created – one presenting percentages of students who evaluated the skill as poorly developed, *i.e.*, the sum of answers 1 and 2 and the other one presenting percentages of students who evaluated the skill as well developed, *i.e.*, the sum of answers 3, 4 and 5. The results of the analysis are presented in Figure 1, which indicates the extent to which each skill was evaluated as well developed and poorly developed. The skills that received the highest percentage of *well developed* evaluation are searching for information (99%), being flexible (97%), using information sources (94%), critical thinking (92%) and complying with ethical requirements (92%). The skills with the lowest percentage of *well developed* evaluation are knowing current works in the discipline of English studies (51%), using research methods (62%) and self-discipline (63%).

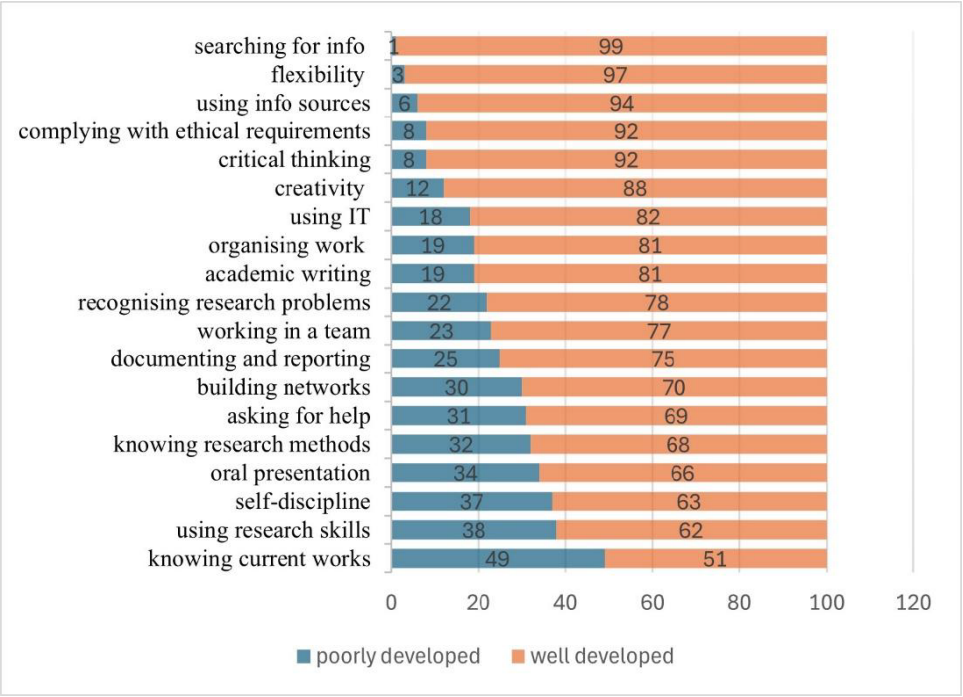

Figure 1. Poorly developed skills vs. well developed skills in mean percentages

The comparison of all the types of skills (see: Figure 2) shows that soft (92%) and technical (88%) skills were evaluated as developed better than academic (72%), metacognitive (72%) and social (71) skills.

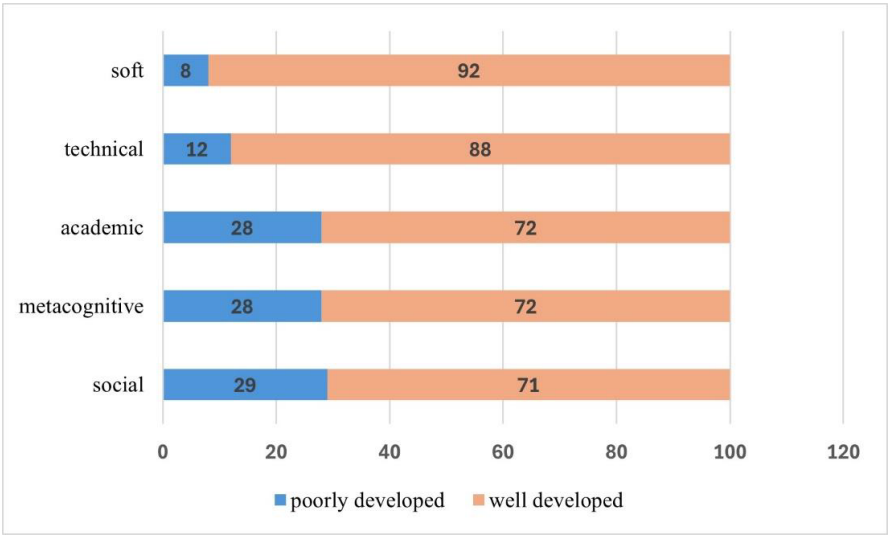

Figure 2. Students' evaluation of soft, technical, social, metacognitive and academic skills in mean percentages

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The study aimed to elicit English philology students' self-perceptions of their research abilities and their opinions on developing research skills at university. The results seem to complement the findings of university teachers, *e.g.*, Kusiak-Pisowacka (2016), Lankiewicz (2013), Niżegorodcew (2010), discussed in the earlier section of this article, who pointed to English philology students' poor research skills. Although the present study was conducted some time later than the above-mentioned studies, all of them concern the same educational context and can contribute to obtaining a more complete picture of fostering university students' research competences.

The unquestionable advantage of the present study is that in contrast to the above-mentioned studies it provides more details about the students' strong and weak points and allows us to understand better their needs. When self-evaluating their research skills, the students pointed to technical and soft skills as the abilities they had developed better than academic, metacognitive and social skills. The students perceived the following skills as well mastered: being able to look for information, also by means of search engines, critical thinking and management skills. Critical thinking was considered as the most important research skill. The students were aware of the Internet as a valuable source of information and were prepared to use it with due caution. It seems that the students have acquired a number of general research skills, which can serve as the foundation for further development of academic skills. These results are similar to the ones obtained by Liang *et al.* (2022), in which students perceived their basic research skills as better developed than academic ones.

Most of the students recognized the importance of research skills not only in their education but also in their everyday life and future careers, which is certainly a motivating factor in developing their abilities during university studies. When asked about their previous research-oriented experiences, both BA and MA students pointed to higher education as the main source of instruction. Some of the students viewed academic teachers as mentors and appreciated their expertise as researchers. Most of the students (87%) approved of the idea of incorporating research-oriented activities into the university curriculum. They also liked the idea of participating in research activities. These results seem very optimistic in the light of fostering academic research skills in the university.

An important question arises how to approach a group of students who presented less optimistic views. Thirteen percent of the respondents did not like the idea of incorporating research-oriented activities in the university program. They were not interested in participating in such activities. A surprising finding was that 9% of the students said that they had not been taught research skills and 27% could not decide whether they had been taught or not. It is difficult to understand why so many students chose the answer "hard to say". A possible reason is that this group of students was not taught research skills in an explicit way, which can explain why they did not recall this kind of instruction. Finding an effective strategy that could encourage this group of students to a more active participation seems to be an important task and calls for a separate investigation.

The study offers some specific teaching implications, which seem to complement the recommendations of a general nature suggested by Wilczyńska (2009) and Niżegorodcew (2010) discussed earlier. The findings imply that more focus should be put on enhancing academic, metacognitive and social skills. The students are not familiar with the current literature connected with the discipline of their studies. They also need more practice in research methods. Instruction should also concentrate

on developing academic writing and oral presentation skills. Although the students evaluated their skills of searching for information as well developed, their abilities to report and document data call for more attention. As regards metacognitive skills, being self-disciplined was assessed as poorly developed by 37% of the students and future instruction should encourage the students to improve systematicity and perseverance in their learning. Other skills that need to be practiced more extensively are social skills that involve working in a team, asking for help and building network groups. It is crucial that teaching draw on the skills that students assess as their strong points; in the case of the present study, it would be technical and soft skills. This approach would empower students and encourage them to participate in the academic and discourse community with more confidence.

As regards future research, it could be useful to delve into students' opinions concerning the role of the English language in developing research skills, *e.g.*, by asking them to self-evaluate their knowledge of English as the language of international academia. More attention should be paid to students' research literacy, *i.e.*, their awareness of the importance of scientific research in developing the discipline of English studies. This kind of investigation can lead to more effective personalisation of teaching programs. It can be useful to conduct a comparative study with students in the first semester of BA studies and the last semester of MA studies. A longitudinal study of changes in research skills' development might enhance our understanding of a dynamic nature of research competences.

More research is needed on how to assist students in developing new competences and how to create an atmosphere in which students will enjoy the freedom to construct new roles in the academia and future professional contexts.

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Appendix[5]

Research skills questionnaire

Dear student!

This set of questions aims to collect information about how English philology students develop research skills. The data obtained in this way will help us to adjust university instruction to students' needs and modify future courses accordingly. Please, answer the questions in an honest way. There are no good and bad answers here. Thank you for your cooperation!

1. What are your associations with the term ''research''? Write your definition of the term ''research''.
2. What would you say are the three most important elements of research skills?

5 The questionnaire presented here does not reflect the layout of the original version given to the students. Spaces provided for open questions were omitted.

3. Have you ever been taught research skills?
   yes /no / hard to say
4. If 'yes', at what level? You may indicate more than 1 answer.
   Primary school / secondary school / BA education / MA education / others
5. If you selected "others" in the previous question, please specify what you mean by "others".
6. Would you say you have developed certain research skills?
   yes / no / hard to say
7. If "yes", what kind of research skills do you feel you possess? Enumerate and describe.
8. How much do you agree that research skills are useful?
   strongly disagree / somewhat disagree / somewhat agree / strongly agree
9. Why? Explain your answer to question 8.
10. How much do you agree that developing research skills should be included in the curriculum of your university courses?
    strongly disagree / somewhat disagree / somewhat agree / strongly agree
11. Why? Explain your answer to question 10.
12. How much do you agree that participating in a research study should be included in the curriculum of your university courses?
    strongly disagree / somewhat disagree / somewhat agree / strongly agree
13. How would you evaluate yourself? Assess each research skill on a scale of 1 to 5.

skill	1 – very poor	2 – poor	3 – satisfactory	4 – good	5 – very good
a/ Recognizing research problem					
b/ Knowing current works in the field related to English studies					
c/ Ability to think critically					
d/ Knowledge of research methods					
e/Using research methods					
f/Documenting and reporting					
g/Organising work					
h/ Searching for information					
i/ Using information sources					

j/ Using IT					
k/ Being creative					
l/ Being flexible					
m/ Asking for help					
n/ Academic writing					
o/ Preparing oral presentations on a scientific topic					
p/ Building relationships and networks					
q/Working in a team					
r/ Self-discipline					
s/ Complying with ethical requirements					

14. Any comments you would like to add about any issue raised in this questionnaire.

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