

## **Preparing Students for the Delivery of Poster Presentations in English**

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### **Abstract**

The paper highlights the need for developing poster presentation skills among university students as this form of academic performance becomes more and more common in academic settings and in the world of multimodal incentives. Poster presentations become an attractive alternative to traditional presentations which students dislike as they usually involve the stress of public speaking. On the other hand, poster sessions can turn into dynamic and interactive form of presentation or final assessment.

The paper presents a detailed description of an English poster competition that was organised law students of Warsaw based universities. The paper is a description of good practice, analyses strengths and weaknesses of the first edition of the competition and contains practical information about designing conference posters.

**Key words:** conference poster, study skills, EAP, ESP, Legal English.

### **1. Introduction**

In the era of mobility, internationalisation and globalization of higher education and record high university attendance, as Poland occupies the third position in Europe (after the UK and Germany) according to the total number of students in tertiary education (2,166,000 in December 2010 as presented on [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Tertiary\\_education\\_statistics](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics)), the need for developing academic skills in students is specially justified. In Poland nearly half of the students choose social sciences, business or law related studies, therefore language courses they attend at universities are highly specialist, often leading to international certificate examinations and structured to satisfy the highly professional target needs of the course participants. Even though undergraduates are

not precisely aware of these needs, they are formulated by the employers and professionals and find their reflection in the course syllabuses designed by the experienced ESP teachers. Pre-experienced learners face a huge challenge as they have to master a *complex web of disciplinary specific text types, assessment tasks and presentational modes* (Hyland 2006: 8) if they want to be successful in the workplace. Before that, however, there is a fan of study skills which they might need to master if they wish to pursue their education in an international context. Study skills overlap in many aspects with professional (business or legal) skills. For example, reading is a very important skill for future lawyers, interpreting graphs and diagrams is often a problem area when teaching students presentation skills, while developing writing techniques will always pay off, no matter what purposes our students will be writing for: business, academic or legal ones. The skills of paragraphing, linking ideas or summarizing are a must of any tertiary level foreign language course.

A comprehensive list of classic study skills and activities may be long and detailed (Jordan 1997, Wallace 2004). In practice teachers and course designers should select the skills and activities which their students will most likely need during the course of studies either at their native country or abroad. Due to time constraints, a selection of study skills has to be made and only the most significant of them can be woven in the syllabus. These might include the following study situations and the study skills needed:

1. Lectures/talks
  2. Listening and understanding
  3. Note-taking
  4. Asking questions for: repetition, clarification and information
  
2. Discussions/seminars
  1. Listening and note-taking
  2. Asking questions
  3. Answering questions
  4. Agreeing and disagreeing
  - 5. Giving presentations**
  
3. Individual reading
  1. Scanning and skimming
  2. Understanding and analysing data

3. Note/list-making; arranging notes logically
4. Summarising and paraphrasing

**4. Writing**  
(essays/reports/projects/dissertations/research papers/articles)

1. Planning, writing drafts, revising
2. Paragraphing, organising writing
3. Linking words
4. Punctuation
5. Paraphrasing
6. Using quotations, footnotes, bibliography

**5. Research**

1. Conducting interviews
2. Designing questionnaires

**6. Examinations**

1. Preparing for exams
2. Revision
3. Understanding questions
4. Writing under time pressure
5. Answering questions
6. Explaining, describing, justifying

**2. Conference poster as a new genre**

It is hard to find poster presentation skills on the available lists of study skills. Many authors notice (Swales and Feak 2000, MacIntosh-Murray 2007) that poster presentations are treated as second class participation or “a poor country cousin” compared to oral presentations.

Although poster presentations have been traditionally reserved for science, they are becoming more and more popular in the academic environment of social sciences and linguistics as an alternative way of presenting research results at conferences as well as a substitute for lecture like appearances which often do not leave time for the interaction between the speaker and the conference participants. As a regular conference attendee I cannot fight the impression that still they are not treated as “valid” as oral presentation sessions. These sessions are usually left for presentations which do not exactly match the leading theme of the conference or for the submissions that are not as relevant, original, scientifically significant or practical

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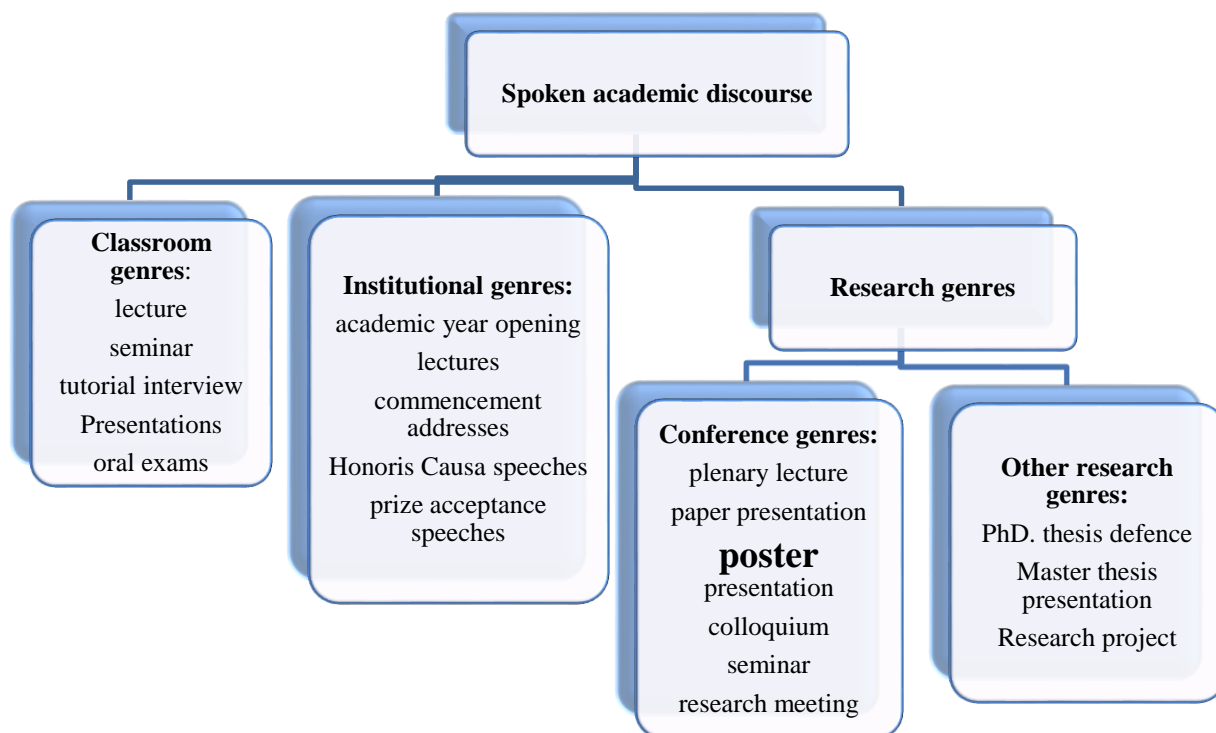
as those accommodated for the regular oral sessions. The above conviction has been created on the analysis of the notification e-mail received from the organisers of an international conference on language teaching held in Warsaw in 2010 who wrote:

*In view of substantial amount of submissions we received and the very high average quality, the blind refereeing process had to be rather competitive. While we could not accommodate your contribution as an oral presentation, we will be happy to accept your submission as a poster.*

The growing interest in poster presentations could have been observed in the last two decades of XX century. Therefore in the first decade of XXI century researchers tend to mention posters as a new genre emerging in academic and professional settings. Swales (2004: 64) pointed out that:

*the birth and the growth of a conference poster as a genre can be ascribed to the increase in numbers of those who want or need to make “conference presentations”, a push to encourage fuller participation of graduate students, a greater opportunity for reporting on work-in-progress, and a semiotic shift in recent decades from the verbal to the multimodal.*

Belles & Fortanet (2004: 65) include posters in their classification of the oral academic genres in the category of research genres:



**Figure 1. Spoken academic discourse (Belles & Fortanet, 2004).**

The need for including posters in AEP syllabus as one of the classroom genres can be identified on the basis of experience built in science field where poster presentations have been used long as an alternative method of assessment in various courses of study. Language teachers as educators tend to use very similar methods of assessment that include: multiple choice tests, grammar tests, short answers tests, gapped text tests, essays, reports, oral presentations, etc. All of these methods are usually intimidating and stressful for students. They do not generate much creativity and usually involve individual rather than group work. Poster presentations may constitute an innovative and attractive alternative to traditional presentations which are usually disliked by students as stressful and fear generating situations. The author of this paper offered her students attending her lecture on Business Culture the choice of an oral or poster presentation as a final assessment. Out of 50 students who attended the lecture only 10 decided to deliver a “traditional” oral presentation. This solution seemed especially appealing to students whose English was at the lower level of proficiency and for whom public speaking in front of 50 other students generated high level of anxiety. During the course one of the lectures was devoted to workshop on poster preparation techniques.

Psychological research shows that giving presentations in class is the source of academic anxiety for students (Wood & Palm, 2000). Raised anxiety level can impair performance (Powers, 1999; Sansgiry, Bhosle & Sail, 2006). There are, however, certain solutions that can help decrease anxiety and they include providing a relaxed environment (Cassaday, Bloomfield, & Hayward, 2002); providing workshops for students has also been shown to reduce anxiety (Roney & Woods, 2003). The results of the research conducted by Johnson & Green (2007) on the reaction of the undergraduate students to poster sessions showed that they enjoyed this experience and preferred this way of assessment as compared to individual oral presentations. This format decreased students' nervousness and they would recommend this form of assessment for use in other classes. The aim of this research was also to investigate whether participation in a poster session in the classroom increases the students' willingness to present at a scientific conference. The results showed that the students' interest in participating in a scientific conference grew significantly as compared to their opinion from before the poster session. Their ratings were compared with the opinions of a control group of students that did not participate in the research who turned out to be less willing to present at conferences.

### **3. An example of good practice: Transylvanian experience**

The author of this paper draws her inspiration for the activities and events presented in this article from a very successful conference organized by Transylvania University of Brasov in Bran in September 2010 (for more information visit: [www.phoenixconf.ro](http://www.phoenixconf.ro)). The whole event was organized around four thematic sections in which the conference participants as usually submitted abstracts, then full papers, but traditional conference presentations were replaced with poster presentations. The authors had to submit posters before the conference in A4 format and they were printed by the organizers and framed for display during the first day of the conference. During the morning session of first day of the event participants worked in small, 10-15 person thematic groups. They were instructed by the organizers to study all the posters in their group, select three most interesting and leave at least three questions for the authors of the selected posters on the post-it notes stuck to the chosen placard. The rest of the day was devoted to individual work of the participants preparing answers to the questions which were planned to be delivered next day during round table meeting in the same thematic groups as on the first day of the conference.

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This way of organising the conference created a unique opportunity to focus on the issues of the special interest and importance for the audience. It eliminated the stress of public speaking in a foreign language and the round table created the climate for extremely fruitful and cooperative exchange of expertise and ideas. Moreover, poster session organization of the event naturally created the informal setting in which conference participants chatted, mingled and networked. The imposed requirement of designing a conference poster undoubtedly forced the participants with no experience in that matter to investigate the issue and make an attempt of creating their first conference poster.

The above experience inspired the idea of implementing poster presentations as one of the methods of final assessment during undergraduate courses run by the author of this article at a Polish business university as well as organising a poster competition among students of law that would familiarize them with the new genre and increase their contact with the English language.

#### 4. An example of good practice: student poster competition

Students graduating from universities rarely have an idea what an academic poster is and how it should be designed. In order to increase the



students' awareness of this form of presentation an English poster competition for students has been organised at Kozminski University in the academic year 2010/2011. It has been a pilot edition of the competition but there are plans to organize it regularly in the coming years. This year's competition has been addressed to students registered at Kozminski University as well as to contestants from other law faculties in Warsaw and attractive in kind prizes have been prepared by the University for the winners. The topic selected for the first poster competition

was: *Libertas in Legibus (Liberty in the Law)*. The intention was to focus at a relatively general issue so that all students would have an opportunity to participate, even the freshmen who have just started their legal education and do not have much expertise in law yet.

The aim of the competition was to:

- a) popularize the knowledge of law and legal aspects of liberty as one of the fundamental human values;
- b) develop the knowledge of Legal English among Polish students of law;
- c) develop the skill of visualizing the knowledge.

After the Organizing Committee had been appointed, the first step was drafting detailed Rules and Regulations which task was accomplished by a law assistant working at the University. Probably, therefore the document eventually consisted of six pages and contained really exhaustive information. The document comprised six parts followed by an appendix and contained the following details in its clauses :

- I. **General Information:** competition theme, information about the Organizer, the aim of the competition;
- II. **Organizational Details:** information about the deadline, competition addressees, electronic format of the submitted works, software available for the design of the posters;
- III. **Conditions of Participation:** information about the maximum size of the submitted posters, entry form, anonymity procedure, possible number of submitted entries for the competition;
- IV. **Assessment Criteria:** information about the composition of the jury, announcement of the deadline for the results, how the participants will be notified about the results;
- V. **Prizes:** the information about the amount of each prize, taxes to be paid and how the posters will be displayed;
- VI. **Copyrights:** information about copyrights assignment to the Organizer, the possible use of the posters for the promotional purposes by the University, statement about no copyright infringement of any third party, participants' consent to publish their personal information.

The Appendix contains basic information about a conference poster. It explains that:

*A conference poster is a graphically attractive way of visualization of a specific theme, in this case “liberty in the law”. Information on the poster should be presented in a vivid, concise, comprehensive and clear way. It should contain clear and comprehensible language, so that*



*the content does not need any other explanation and is easily understood without any extra comments. The poster should not be overloaded with text but whenever possible it should use tables, graphs and graphics. Any references that are made should be mentioned. A model poster can be found on <http://tiny.pl/hwjwd> and more information about conference posters is available on:*

- [http://www.plakatkonferencyjny.pl/jak\\_przygotowac\\_dobry\\_plakat.html](http://www.plakatkonferencyjny.pl/jak_przygotowac_dobry_plakat.html);
- [http://www2.napier.ac.uk/gus/writing\\_presenting\\_academic\\_posters.html#content](http://www2.napier.ac.uk/gus/writing_presenting_academic_posters.html#content);
- <http://gradschool.unc.edu/student/postertips.html>;
- <http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/graduate-skills/preview/presentations/academic-poster-tutorial/poster-tutorial-print.pdf>;
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqgigwIXadA>;
- <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/sd/pgrd/resources/designing-poster>;
- <http://www.is.stir.ac.uk/docs/CreatingAcademicPostersUsingPowerPoint.pdf>.

A brief section on delivering poster presentations can also be found in Blanpain & Laffut (2009: 40).

The invitation for law students to participate in the competition was sent by traditional mail to all Law Faculties of tertiary educational establishments in Warsaw. Law Faculties received printed version of the posters to display on their school premises. Moreover, the competition was also advertised on the Internet on various students' sites.

#### **4.1. Poster presentation workshop**

Posters are undoubtedly a novelty not only for the academics themselves but for the students as well. Therefore, the author of this paper and the originator of the poster competition at the same time decided to run a workshop for the students in order to inform them about the competition and encourage to participate. The workshop was meant to acquaint the students with the techniques and tools available for the preparation of posters. Namely, the general term “poster” may be misleading and ambiguous to people who are not familiar with the idea of a conference poster. According to [www.thefreedictionary](http://www.thefreedictionary.com) a poster is *a large, usually printed placard, bill, or announcement, often illustrated, that is posted to advertise or publicize something* and similarly Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it as *printed paper announcement or advertisement that is exhibited publicly*. In educational or scientific setting, however, a poster is the visual presentation of the research results by an author at a congress or conference with an academic or professional focus. Posters are usually displayed during a scheduled poster session which creates an opportunity for the conference participants to talk to the author, exchange ideas, liaise and build new connections.

The primary aim of the workshop was to make students aware of what is expected from them as competition participants and to clarify what a conference or academic poster should look like. We expected that the ambiguity and the novelty of what an academic poster is could be discouraging for the potential competition participant. As the organizers we did not want to end up with submissions which did not meet our expectations and the formal requirements for a conference poster. The students were supposed to realize that an academic poster is a new opportunity for academic and professional presentations and that *learning to communicate research well through posters involves far more than formatting issues such as font size* (MacIntosh-Murray 2007: 347).

To combat these during the workshop the students were familiarized with the following guidelines:

- a) models of the academic posters available on the internet, plenty of which can be accessed on Google Graphics and authentic posters designed by the author which were presented during conferences in Poland and abroad;
- b) assessment criteria for the submitted posters that include: content, structure, visual impact and clarity;  
The need for clear, visual impact was stressed. Students should be made aware that posters must be self-explanatory and the audience should not need any notes to understand them.
- a) software available for designing the poster which might include more advanced ones such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Corel Draw but also the popular and well known to students Power Point. The basic functions of Power Point that may be useful when creating the poster can be learned from the video uploaded by University of Northern Colorado: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqgjgwIXadA>;
- c) 3 P's Rule, i.e. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare. Namely, the way the actual work on the poster should be allowed plenty of time for careful planning stage during which several questions should be answered. The author should think about the audience and what they already know.

During the workshop the following questions were emphasised as preliminary in the process of designing the poster:

- What is your message?
- What are your key points?
- What does your viewer need to know?

- How are you going to present your message?
- d) In the academic context the posters are used to report on the research results in a visual, compact and graphically attractive way. In such situations the poster might be based on the layout typical of a report, i.e.:
- Title
  - Introduction
  - Methods
  - Results
  - Discussion
  - Conclusions
  - References

However, the structure and layout of a poster will always depend on the theme and that is why any logical choice of headings and subheadings as long as the whole is well organised and clear to the viewer is possible. Designing posters is, therefore, a test for students analytical and critical thinking skills.

- e) Posters are supposed to convey message quickly and efficiently. They should attract attention by attractive layout. Therefore, a poster must have a focal point that will focus interest. This might be a key flowchart or diagram, or an appealing and prominent main title or a heading, since words are sometimes more powerful than graphics. Whenever it is possible to replace words with graphics, it should be replaced.
- f) The art of designing posters is not just about using appropriate font and beautiful colours but it is important for the author to be aware that audience will analyse posters from a distance, so the text should be legible from about one metre and attract interest of the scrolling audience from about five metres. Sans serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica are easier to read than serif fonts like Times New Roman. The main title should be about 70-100 points, subheadings around 36-40 points and body text around at least 24 points. It is better to use light background and dark letter than dark background and light letters as this combination may be tiring to read.
- g) Headings and subheadings should be formatted consistently and numbered or arrows should be used if doubt may arise about the order of reading them, directing viewers logically from the clear entry point and helping them find key sections at a glance.

- h) Authors should avoid oversimplifying the content by providing too little useful information or overcomplicating by providing too much information. Phrases rather than full sentences should be used. The content should be given some negative / white space, i.e. posters are not easy to read when information on them is cramped without “room to breathe”.
- i) Key words that students leave the workshop with might be: prepare, plan carefully, present suitably, balance text and graphics, it is the content that counts.

The workshop was run twice and was attended by about 100 students. The response to the invitation to participate in the competition was not however numerous. We received only ten posters submitted by seven students, since each competition participant could present two posters. All participants were registered students of our University and there were no submissions from law students from other Warsaw universities. Such very low response was very puzzling as the University authorities guaranteed very attractive money prizes:

I price	– PLN 2,000	(an equivalent of € 500)
II price	– PLN 1,500	(an equivalent of € 375)
III price	– PLN 500	(an equivalent of € 125)

Manifold reasons for such low response can be identified. The first cause can be the possible unfriendly attitude of the authorities of the invited universities towards the Organizers who are their competitors after all which resulted in their decision not to advertise the contest on their premises. Thus the information was not spread effectively and did not reach as many recipients as it possibly could.

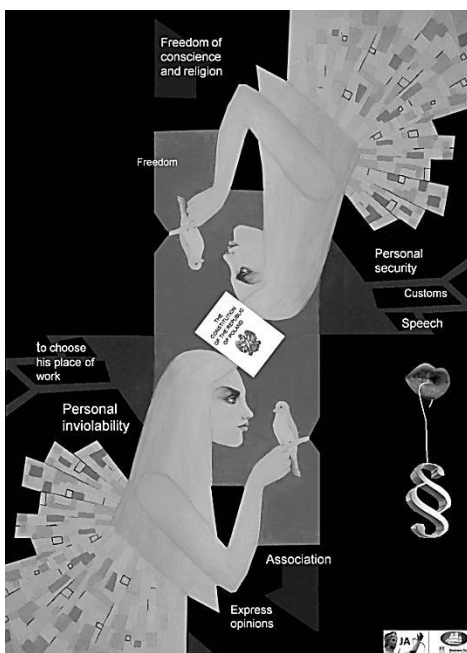
Kozminski University students were, however, very well informed and encouraged to participate. They could attend two workshops on poster presentation skills and could contact the Organizers or their English teachers in case of any doubts. Unfortunately, they did not and the posters which were submitted often did not meet the expectations of what a conference poster should be and occasionally contained spelling and grammar mistakes. The conclusions drawn suggest that attending a workshop did not result in widening the students’ knowledge about conference posters as a genre. Most probably they should have been instructed in more detailed way by their English teachers for example, encouraged to conduct research, present the results of the research in the format of a poster and perhaps then their enthusiasm about the competition and will to participate would have grown. Otherwise, the task seemed to be too challenging.

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All in all, the experience had positive impact on the participants whose works were presented on display during the celebrations of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Law Faculty in March 2011 and especially for the two winners who were handed in the prizes during the opening ceremony in front of the invited distinguished guests, staff and their fellow students. Other participants’ engagement was appreciated by their English teachers with positive extra grades for individual work which constitutes a component (30%) of the overall grade that students are awarded for credit.

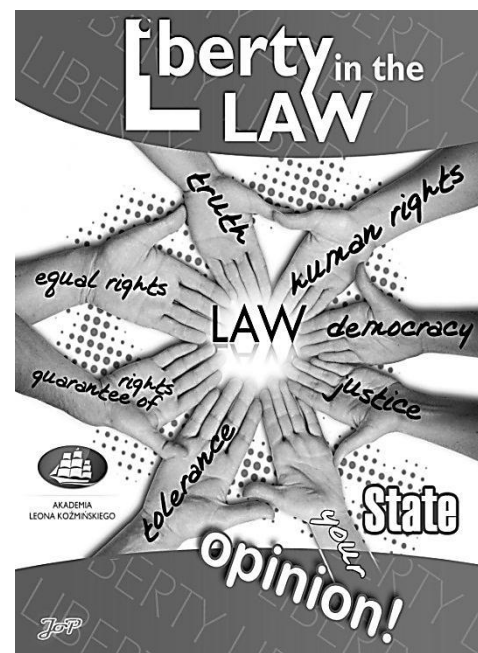
All submitted posters are presented below:

A

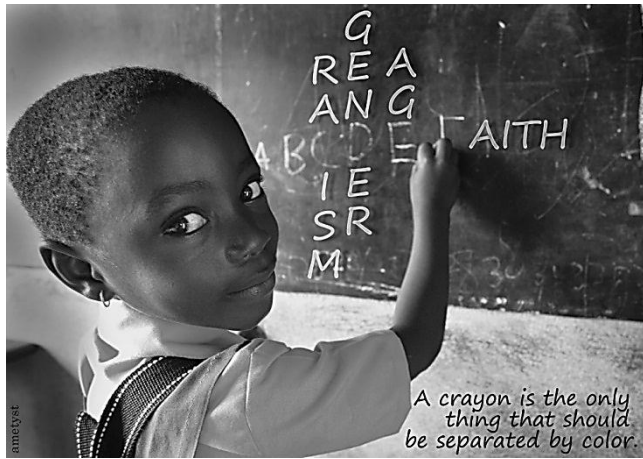
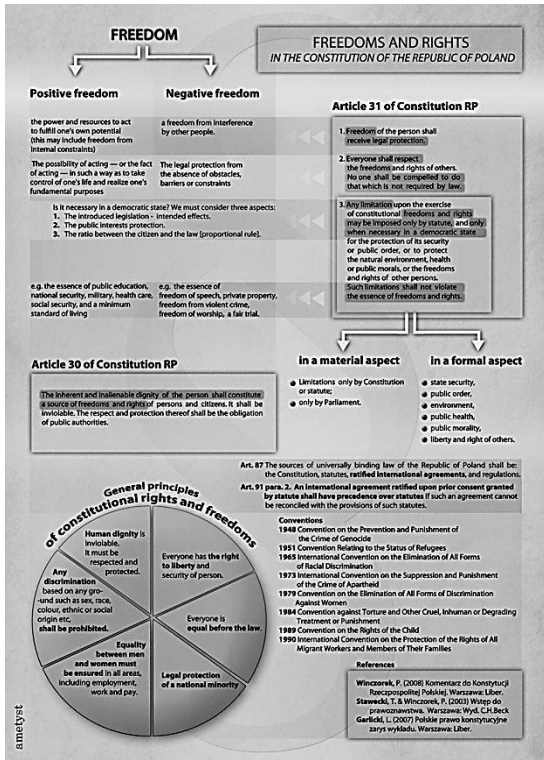


C

B



D

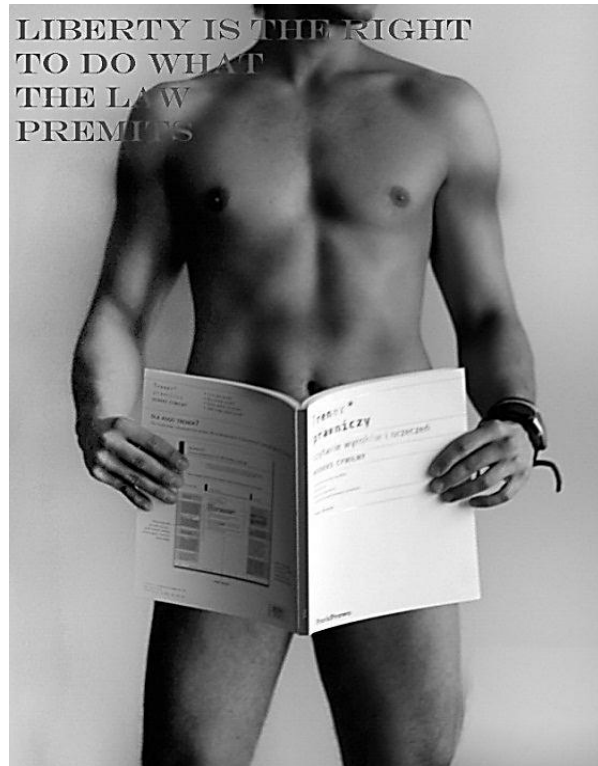
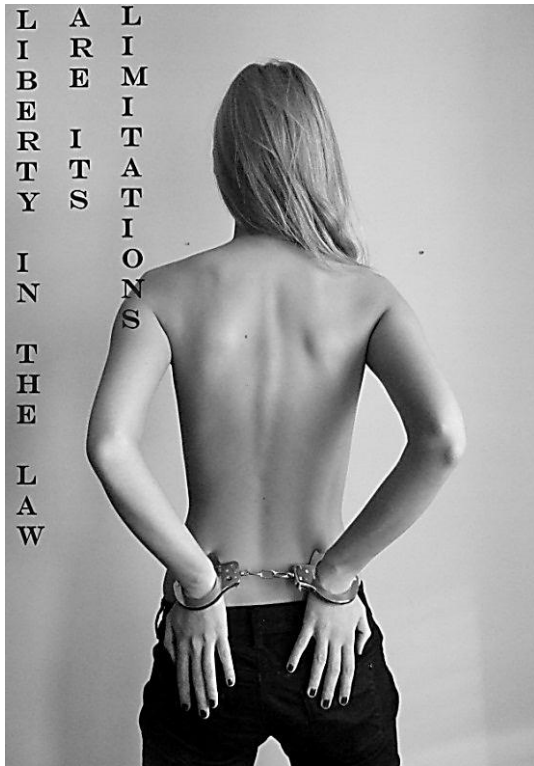


E

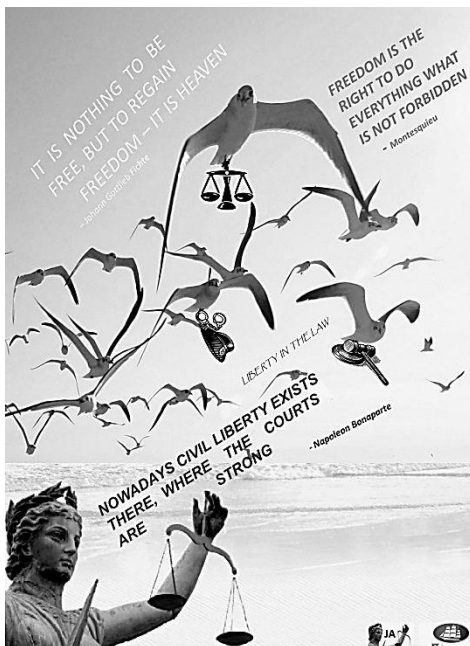
F

G

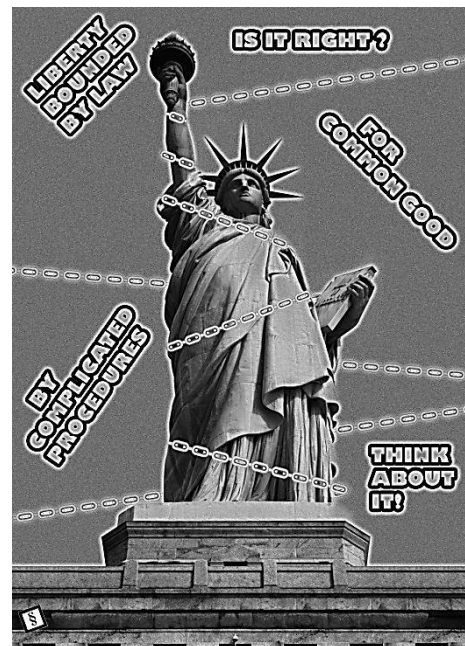
H



I



J



The jury composed of two lawyers, one linguist and one graphic artist decided not to award the first prize but only two equivalent second prizes for posters A and B. The choice was very difficult to make. The lawyers opted for the winning posters most even though they do not fulfil the criteria of an academic poster and are rather a graphic representation of the notion of

liberty. The author of poster A reproduced on the poster an oil painting representing the girl with the bird which she painted herself. The graphic artist appreciated poster G most for its simplicity and visual impact. The linguist juror and the author of this paper at the same time was captivated by the word play on poster D which was not, however, a purely academic or conference poster but rather an artistic visualisation of the notion of liberty and equality in its many variants. In the linguist's opinion the posters C, E and F followed the guidelines for designing conference posters, contained meaningful content and reflected the effort of the in-depth analysis of the subject conducted their authors. Posters E and F were unfortunately quite chaotic in their visual representation and in original contained too many distracting colours. All in all from the linguistic, aesthetic and factual point of view poster C seems to satisfy the requirements set in the invitation to participation in the competition. Its author uses correct English, contains logical flow of thought based on the analysis of liberties and freedoms contained in the Polish Constitution presented on the background of subdued, elegant colours.

## **5. Conclusions**

Overall experience has shown that despite thorough preparation and marketing activities undertaken by the Organizers students were not very keen on the idea of participating in the poster competition. Even attractive in kind prizes did not constitute sufficient incentive. On the other hand students who were offered the possibility of poster final assessment instead of oral presentation final assessment were very enthusiastic about the idea and vast majority of course participants chose that variant. It was necessary to run a workshop on poster preparation techniques to explain to the students what is expected from them and what academic poster is. The most serious problem that was identified at evaluation stage was the issue of plagiarism, since many students copied directly from the internet. Therefore, the lecturer's duty is to check if the submitted posters do not violate the copyrights of the third party. Students who infringed the copyrights and copied text from the internet were penalized with a note on that incident placed in their university file.

Despite a few such incidents the experiment proved that there is strong academic justification for poster presentations in academic English syllabus. Namely, this new genre of academic discourse is still unknown to the present generation of students who might become future academics. Therefore, there is also the practical rationale behind; with the assignments in the format of poster presentation students will definitely:



- immerse in the learning experience, learn from experience and gain deeper understanding of the subject and the foreign language
- develop their learner’s autonomy through empowerment
- develop critical thinking skills
- work in a more relaxed, informal environment
- interact, communicate and collaborate with their peers
- develop their analytical skills as poster is limited by size and has to be concise
- develop research skills
- develop creativity and independent thought.

Poster assignments are very likely to generate positive learning outcome. They may constitute an effective way to motivate students, to increase their confidence in using the foreign language, generate quality final product (poster) even by linguistically lower proficient students. Poster presentations, therefore, need more research on their inclusion in AEP syllabuses as a novel, emerging and prospective classroom genre.

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