

THE FORMATION OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Foreign language (FL) is taught at the universities as a compulsory subject of a curriculum and students with different levels of language competence and degree of motivation have to learn it on equal basis. The hours of classes are usually limited and teachers have to think how to organize a short course properly to achieve the global goal. The latter is defined as developing FL communicative competence in the spheres relevant to the learners' future jobs. Therefore, the generally accepted approach to FLT at the universities described can be defined as a professionally oriented one with the focus on a specific language field (sublanguage).

Actually, this trend is not a new one. It has a long history. Early versions go back to the movement called English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It was the time when English began to be accepted as international language of technology and commerce. English speaking countries expanded their political and economic influence world over and their language acquired a high status. A new generation of learners knew what they needed the English for. To become successful businesspersons they had to read instruction manuals to keep up with the latest developments in their fields.

Most of such books were available in English. They also needed English to communicate with their potential employers and partners. Over time ESP research was extended to other settings, especially those connected with the use of English for different academic purposes. This movement has been initiated in the 1960s in Eastern and Central Europe where English began to be intensively used to promote professionally based instruction. Western Europe also did much to advance second language studies that involve some forms of professional content learning (T. Hutchinson, A. Waters, J. Swales, W. Littlewood, P. Robinson, etc.). As a result a number of bilingual programs and

curriculum formats in a wide range of educational contexts have been introduced in university level instruction. More recently, its role has dramatically increased and nowadays a professionally oriented content-based approach is gaining prominence in a wide range of vocational and workplace instructional contexts.

Universities, which prepare students for different professions, present a peculiar challenge to that of other educational institutions with respect to foreign language teaching (FLT), its methodology, course content, activities, etc. These are the universities where the bulk of the students study for getting professional education in various spheres of national economy such as engineering, agriculture, medicine, law, pedagogy (apart from linguistics), etc.

Professionally oriented course of FLT is organized around content. The challenge lies in the principles of its structuring relevant to the goals of FLT. The problem is not as simple as it may seem. The declared principle of professional orientation does not give a definite idea of the volume and thematic preferences of the content formation. The lack of strict criteria leads to the solution of these questions often dependent on the content of textbooks and manuals. In its turn, textbooks are not always available and English teachers have to compile their own materials that create no systemic view on the content area. The attempts to solve the problem on a scientifically grounded basis resulted in a broadly accepted approach according to which the whole content continuum is subdivided into General Language, Language for Specific Purposes and its variety – Language for Scientific Purposes, which correspond to the modules of social, professional and scientific communication. All of these blocks in this or that way relate to different aspects of professional activity and therefore are included into the content area. The module of professional communication is the largest as it deals with minor business communicative skills. The module of the so-called social communication reflects the structure of specialists' public relations linked to the prospective professional needs [1].

Scientific/research block (primarily master's level) includes practical ability of making reports, presentations, summaries as well as participation in international conferences. Content area becomes relevant to the learners' professional, social and personal needs. Taken together all blocks balance the curriculum in a certain proportion, emphasizing the role of business and occupational environment. In other words the essence of this approach is in including FL activity into the analogue of student's prospective activity.

The model described represents a kind of microsystem, which integrates the main qualities of the whole system. Even in case of some educational gaps in this or that content area, the loss is compensated at the expense of preserving the integrity of the whole system. In didactic purposes minimization of thematic and linguistic content may take place in all three blocks. One of the main principles of selecting content is its accessibility and sufficiency for achieving educational goals.

Content-area approach in FLT is practiced in all branches of knowledge such as history, biology, economics, math, etc. Special curriculum is designed for each of them being based on the discipline-specific language and subject matter. In practice much of

the material is concerned with reading and discussing subject texts. Scholars are convinced that a thorough and systematic analysis of written discourse is essential for creating professional communicative competence.

Deriving from the theoretical assumption methodologists consider FLT content as a mixture of both: knowledge of linguistic units (words, phrases, grammar rules, etc.) and conceptual world they represent [2]. In our case the cognitive structure of «real world» is associated with the professional sphere of knowledge, exemplified above. Thus, language acquisition involves acquisition of the learners' genuine professional subject of interest.

According to M. C. Gianelli the procedure of creating thematic-based curriculum includes the following steps [3].

1. Selection of themes appropriate for developing professional competence.

2. Identification of the most important content area concepts. A designer chooses the most critical concepts and develops subtopics for each of the main concepts.

3. Identification of the skills to be emphasized. Basic skills are incorporated into each content area. In doing so we give a definite scope and sequence to the curriculum. At this point of the curriculum development, we have a hierarchy of concepts related to a theme and a list of objectives to be achieved and reinforced throughout the year.

4. Identification of strategies. The curriculum may be skill-based or text-dependent. The strategies should be appropriate. In comparison with the Whole Language Approach all teachers need an additional in-service training.

5. Gathering of materials. It's necessary to determine what materials best teach each concept. It can be done by reviewing available textbooks and supplementary materials including audiovisual ones. Certain materials have to be developed and assembled in a resource box for each thematic unit.

Some methodologists suggest the use of all kind of cooperative learning techniques, problem solving tasks, reading and communication [4]. Others speak in favour of extensive group work of any format as it develops communicative skills in situations close to real. Many scholars in our country and abroad think that the most appropriate technique organizing principle is doing special tasks [5]. We define a task as a situation to be solved, a piece of instruction for doing something during the acquisition of a language course.

Usually students practice real practical tasks based on the analysis of learner's needs. They are supposed to interact with content in a cognitively demanding way. The creative tasks involved may be «describe...», «explain...», «give reasons for...». A needs analysis provides an inventory of the target tasks which may be both real world and pedagogic. All tasks are academic in nature and style, for example, essay writing, making presentations, summaries, reading reports, taking lecture notes, participating in class discussions, preparing study summaries, etc. A significant aspect of academic tasks involves comprehending material at a certain level of cognitive difficulty and problem-solving tasks.

In foreign language methodology, special attention is paid to linguistic competence as the basis for any successful communication. Teaching vocabulary in context is its main component. ESP vocabulary is specific in many ways as it consists of professional terms,

common scientific and international words, collocations, etc. There is also radical difference in its character, origin, meaning and use. Despite all of these differences, the main stages to vocabulary teaching remain the same that is presentation, storing and recycling [6]. Ways of presenting new items are considered effective and memorable. The systems of storing should be diverse; not only in chronological order but also in using some alternative ways of organizing vocabulary, such as topics and categories, spidergrams, word trees, etc. Recycling is vital, and it may happen one or two days after the initial input. It is also possible to use task-based learning and recycling.

To meet the requirements of ESP functioning professional vocabulary is trained in context in the process of reading, understanding and discussing. The meaning and collocability is contextualized, new lexical units are practiced, the consistent repeating of new words supported by the tailor-made program of vocabulary exercises aimed at memory training is a perfect supplement to work with texts.

From the point of view of technical assistance, we cannot but mention the role of video in ESP. Its use offers no remedies for all the problems associated with an ESP program, it is recognized as a valuable aid and an effective tool for ESP curriculum specialists, material designers, classroom instructors, and teacher trainers.

By examining authentic samples along with other necessary reference materials, the curriculum specialist is able to more accurately determine the structures necessary to be mastered, the registers desired, which skills are most useful, and what type of language situations the student will be exposed to.

In addition, the valuable paralinguistic, nonverbal features, such as hand movements, eye contact, facial gestures, and deictic reference to charts, diagrams, and graphs can be recorded and prioritized for introduction into the course. These authentic language tapes may also help determine the terminal goals for the student, and aid the inexperienced instructor to better understand the course content.

Summing up all observations and personal experience we would gladly state that nowadays the general orientation at non-linguistic universities could be defined as teaching language in a professional context. As a ESP specialist who has been teaching in a content based curriculum for many years we find this trend valuable especially in the framework of competence approach which has been introduced in our educational standards. What students really need is practical application of their knowledge in real life, professional, academic, social and occupational situations. This approach to FLT teaching and learning is well expressed by Dewey's quotation: «Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself».

References

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