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Teaching and learning foreign languages for special purposes at technical universities

ABSTRACT. The main aim of my work is to explore the options and problems connected with teaching and learning ESP at technical universities. I tried to answer questions concerning the right choice of methods enabling students to develop their language skills effectively with an emphasis on professional language competence.

Keywords: English for special Purposes, motivation, professional language, reading professional literature.

The main aim of my work is to explore the options and problems connected with teaching and learning English for Special Purposes at technical universities. I have divided my paper into nine parts, in which I try to characterize the teaching of adult people, discuss their approach and motivation to learn foreign languages, then describe the chosen universities and their structure of language centres. Next, I give the most characteristic features of vocational language, familiarize the reader with the presuppositions of autonomous and semiautonomous forms of teaching/learning languages, and describe the peculiarity of teaching language skills with a focus on the teaching of how to read technical texts. In the final part, I try not only to conclude, but to suggest some solutions concerning the methodological and organizational processes of teaching foreign languages at technical universities, focusing on overcoming the problems.

1. TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN GROUPS OF ADULTS

Long-life learning is an indispensable part of our life and nobody disputes the necessity of widening and expanding our knowledge in different branches. The development of language skills makes people more competitive in the labor market and enables them to get acquainted with the latest vocational literature and acquire specific information.

A report prepared by UNESCO assumes that people learn to know, to act, to cooperate with others, and to be. Therefore, all educational institutions should prepare people to continuously supplement their knowledge. There are a lot of myths and prejudices connected with learning/teaching adults, but according to research, well-motivated adult people who are conscientious and keen to gain knowledge are able to succeed in acquiring foreign languages. Adults have experience in learning, their needs are usually clearly stated, they can think in an abstract way, and they are much more disciplined compared to younger pupils and students. In the case of university students, we have a group of people mostly aware of their needs and the situations in which the knowledge of foreign languages will be necessary. Within ESP one may distinguish EOP (English for Occupational Purposes), i.e., the English language used for professional purposes, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), i.e., English for students studying in countries where English is an official language, and EST, i.e., English for technical universities and school students who acquire the language to be able to read texts connected with their field of study.

2. TEACHING/LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE

Generally speaking the knowledge of the first language, that is usually a native language, has a great impact on acquiring other languages. In the case of people brought up in a multilingual environment we may distinguish a more dominant language, but in most situations, linguists assume that one language has been learnt as the first one. This perspective was developed in the 1990s, supported by the research of Chomsky, who claimed that every person is equipped with LAD, i.e., *Language Acquisition Device,* the ability to acquire a language, which is typical for humans. However, there are a lot of elements common for all languages (they are used as a means of communication, words describe objects, phenomena, activities, etc). One of the main factors differentiating learning the second language from the first one is the knowledge of (of course on various levels) the general rules typical for the use of the first language examples. It is worth mentioning that learning a first lan-

guage is not accompanied by the stress and frustration connected with learning other unknown languages. One may distinguish differences between the learners of the first and second language – the latter are much more aware of development and have a stronger tendency to abstract ideas and structures.

In the case of learning another language, we deal with so called guided learning, i.e., under control of a teacher. The choices made by a teacher concerning the methods and techniques of teaching, the textbook, and the syllabus influence the process of learning in a meaningful way. In a later part of the chapter I focus on human memory, its work, and the phases during which we learn different notions and words, and I discuss some factors influencing memory in the processes of learning.

3. DIFFERENT KINDS OF STUDENTS/PUPILS

Indisputably, the characteristics of learners play a significant role in achieving success in learning foreign languages. Yet the theories stating that a linguistic test may help teachers predict the language development of their students was abandoned, as this test examined only general intellectual skills and its structure gave analytical students an advantage over holistic students. The ability to analyse does not guarantee success in learning a foreign language. One of the main problems examined by psycholinguists is the style of learning. The variety of student characteristics and student behavior in classroom conditions have a great impact on the work of teachers. Of course, all characteristics of various types of learners should be treated only as a point of reference and an introduction to further discussion. The fundamental point is to be aware that all learners are a group of individuals who require different forms, methods and techniques used in class. It means that a teacher is obliged to balance between the needs and requirements of a group and an individual learner.

4. MOTIVATION

Motivation may be defined as a set and a structure of different kinds of motives. A motive is a conscious activity done to fulfill someone's needs (Pfeiffer 2001).

There are many definitions and interpretations of motivation but all share a few common features in which motivation is said to be a driving force determined in relation to its aims. There are numerous divisions of motivation depending on various factors. Nevertheless, teachers should remember that motivation and motivating are quite separate issues. While

motivation is rather steady/stable, motivating is a dynamic, active and conscious process. Motivation appears in the heads of students, whereas motivating is influenced and changed by a teacher. Harmer (2001) depicts motivation as an internal drive encouraging activity within particular fields. In contrast, Pfeiffer (2001) suggests a list of motives significant in the process of learning, such as cognitive motive, usefulness, communicative, emotional, prestige, social as well as the motives of a teacher and parents. Furthermore, there a number of other factors determining motivating, among which one should mention materials and books used during a course, types of exercises, individual attitude of learners, some external conditions.

It should be noted that a teacher is one of the vital factors in the process of motivating learners. Adults treat a teacher with much understanding, however a teacher does not have a meaningful impact on adult learners. According to the English philosopher George Bertrand Russell, the profession of teaching is one of the oldest professions in the world and its history comprises noble tradition, a permanent seeking of methods suitable for learners, but adjusting to the needs and requirements of learners, overcoming problems as well. The popular conception is that a teacher should be open-minded and creative, independent in thinking as being responsible for shaping characters and opinions of other people, and focused on effectiveness. Also it is interesting that the latest tendencies in teaching/learning imply the shift of the teachers' role from the central position to the role of a facilitator, and it is evident from this that greater focus is put on a learner himself. It redefines the teacher's role in the classroom. Teaching becomes more a matter of educational challenge than a matter of practicing language skills.

The next motivating factor is the aim of teaching/learning. The more clearly targets at the beginning of the educational process are stated, the higher efficiency is achieved. Since the learning of foreign languages seems quite a difficult and time-consuming process, it is vital that the most important aims be established and presented to learners. In addition to the factors mentioned so far, the contents of the language courses belong to one of the significant motivating factors, and they should meet the learners' expectations and needs. When we consider motivating factors in learning a foreign language, it is worth noting techniques and rules of teaching as well.

5. PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE – ITS CHARACTERISTICS

It seems very difficult to define precisely what a professional/vocational language is, and even among researchers dealing with the subject there are many extremely different opinions. According to one opinion it is a part of

general language, as lexis and syntax are integral parts of it, whereas in contrast to those who oppose assumptions insist on treating a professional language as one of many existing languages.

Without question, both languages, general and professional, are strictly connected, as there is a permanent flow of words and expressions between them, and they influence each other. Of course, for readers a professional text, even if they are acquainted with particular words, seems to be too difficult to comprehend as the words belonging to a scientific field often have the same meaning as in common language. Therefore, it is vital to teach students to use professional dictionaries while working with scientific texts written in a foreign language.

The following criteria help differentiate both kinds of languages – general and professional: – the users of the language; – in what area it is used; – its level of comprehension; – whether is used in speaking and writing; – the goals and effects of its use (in the case of professional language, there are two major aims: communicative and cognitive, we may communicate our thoughts and opinions, and , on the other hand, we are able to widen our knowledge thanks to the language skills); – the level of codification of the language (Kubiak 2002).

It is significant for a teacher to prepare a syllabus in accordance with job requirements to help students develop suitable and desired language skills. There are three skills connected with the knowledge of foreign languages determining the achievement of success in professional life. The first is the ability to use language in informal situations, to communicate and be understood without any professional aspects; the second is efficient and appropriate use of lexis typical for a particular profession, and the third is the ability to use necessary academic language, e.g., in conducting research.

6. ENGLISH FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES

Many researchers, such as Waters, Fluck, Hutchinson, Strevens. deal with the problem of teaching/learning foreign languages for professional purposes. Fluck divides professional language into two categories: scientific language including varied fields of science, and scientific language of one particular science, e.g., the language of physics.

The common feature of teaching both types of professional language is work with a specialist text, teaching lexis connected with a particular field of science as well as professional content. The main differentiating features are the level of transmission, methods used during the process, and the level of use of the native language.

In the case of ESP at universities, we concentrate on students for whom learning a foreign language is an auxiliary activity for other professional or academic goals. Most students treat it as a means of achieving their own independently defined goals. ESP constitutes a challenge for teachers, because they are linguists, not professionals in a field such as electrical engineering or chemistry, but it enables them to develop their methods and rethink past experience and practice. D. Bell suggests that the following elements while teaching ESP should be taken into consideration: curiosity (a teacher should have at least a basic knowledge of a particular subject); cooperation with other specialists; and confidence (a teacher will feel more confident if he or she is aware that changes and cooperation with specialists are an indispensable element of the teacher's work). It is worth pointing out that in the case of ESP the traditional division of roles for teachers and learners is changed, as a teacher is not treated as an indisputable expert.

7. THE CONCEPTS OF TEACHING OF A PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE

Teaching a professional language is quite a new concept in foreign languages didactics, so teachers do not complain about the excess of methodological publications devoted to ESP. V. Hahn even rejects the existence of any kind of methodology of ESP. Unfortunately, it seems that the challenge of teaching ESP is either too difficult or not worth deeper research for scientists; therefore teachers are forced to seek their own, unique, individual ways of teaching professional language. The only branch in which teachers may choose the most suitable student books for them is business, whereas other fields, specially technical subjects, still need a more thorough examination by researchers. Teachers usually search for their own materials relevant to the level of their students.

While describing the concepts of teaching/learning ESP, teachers generally use *content-based instruction* approach originating from bilingual teaching. This idea is connected with language immersion. This approach has advantages as it allows students to master efficiently both general and professional contents, utilize professional knowledge, and refer to authentic situations, however it has a negative influence on mastering grammar and orthography.

8. THE PECULIARITY OF TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS WITH SPECIAL CONSIDERATION FOR PROFESSIONAL LITERATURE READING

In the further part of my work I focus on the aspect of reading professional texts. Generally language skills may be divided into productive skills (writing and speaking) and receptive skills (reading and listening) (Harmer

1991). Researchers distinguish intensive reading and extensive reading, the latter referring to reading just for pleasure, while the former focuses mainly on achieving a required goal. During a language course it is impossible to teach only one particular skill in isolation from other skills. The tasks students face should give them language input and encourage them to create their own linguistic production.

Reading plays quite an important role in teaching/learning a foreign language and is an indispensable element of a language for people who use it at work, when travelling or for pleasure. It should be stressed that the reading and comprehension of written text contributes significantly to general educational development. Thus the texts used in a course should take into account the emotional, intellectual, cultural, social and personal development of learners. The main focus is the use of authentic materials and exercises which prepare students for practical use of a foreign language in a real life.

9. TEACHING LEXIS

Teaching ESP at a university cannot be conducted in isolation from teaching lexis. New words are the basic elements when learning a specific domain. The knowledge of vocabulary connected with a field allows for communication in a foreign language, even at a very low level. In the 1980s Hutchinson, Widdowson and Waters conducted research devoted to teaching ESP. They clarify that students of science need not only technical vocabulary, but general language as well to master a foreign language and solve technical problems. At any rate, lexis became a very important part of scientific research. Gatehouse claims that the ability to use appropriate professional language (jargon) is a major factor in vocational success.

It should be stated that one has to distinguish comprehension from the ability to use vocabulary properly (production).

10. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AND REMEMBERING VOCABULARY

Comprehension and the level of difficulty of words are the most vital factors influencing text readability. The observation might be offered that understanding lexis is more important in text comprehension than grammar structures used in the reading text. There is an additional problem that rarely used words might be a great hindrance in comprehension of the text. One may ask what ratio of unknown and familiar words is optimal to appropri-

ate understanding and reading with comprehension. It is almost impossible to answer this question in an unambiguous way, especially in the case of a foreign language. Some research conducted by West, Nation and Coady implies the ratio of one unknown word to fifty words familiar to a reader.

This provides a hint for teachers – while preparing for classes one should take into consideration the difficulty level of a text, the right choice of exercises, and remember that the initial introduction of key words is indispensable for understanding.

11. CHECKING VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND EVALUATION OF READING WITH COMPREHENSION

In the next part of my work I discuss ways of checking vocabulary and evaluating reading skill. First of all, a teacher should answer the question what does it mean that a student knows a word. Generally, it is stated that a learner knows a word if the learner distinguishes its sound and graphic form, knows its basic meaning, is able to use a word in an appropriate context, pronounces a word in a proper way and is familiar with other meanings and collocations of a word (Komorowska 2005).

There is a wide variety of techniques to check the knowledge of vocabulary. Because language teachers in most cases are not experts in technical issues, test questions and tasks must be formulated clearly and unambiguously. Personally, I am against tests consisting of words to be translated into either a foreign or a native language; when preparing a test, I try to combine language and technical knowledge. In the case of reading, it seems important to clarify the skill we are evaluating – it is silent reading, since reading aloud requires intonation, pronunciation, accents, i.e., other elements than comprehension. The communicative approach has expanded the range of skills reading with comprehension includes. Among these abilities one should mention the ability to comprehend the main ideas stated in the text as well as the ideas and intentions of the author(s), the ability to search for particular facts and information in the text and the ability to distinguish the structure and kind of a text (Komorowska 2005).

12. TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT POZNAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

In the final part of my work I consider the syllabus prepared at Poznan University of Technology, the Department of Foreign Languages, and some other technical universities in Poland, and discuss the problems appearing

in language classes. I try to clarify how to overcome obstacles and problems and elaborate on the future of teaching/learning foreign languages at higher technical schools.

Students participating in foreign language classes at Poznan University of Technology have been taught professional language for several years. The syllabi for particular faculties have been/are prepared by teachers responsible for each faculty in consultation with a specialist from our University. Thus all subjects are connected to students' field of study. Thanks to some publications teachers may choose from a variety of books, though not for all faculties; teachers also use the latest editions of magazines available in the university library, especially in the case of advanced groups. In groups of lower level students, sometimes it is necessary to simplify texts to adjust them to a suitable level and students' requirements. Thanks to the materials in a foreign language, students widen their general knowledge or even are able to understand the problem depicted from another point of view. The main aim of PUT teachers is to introduce words, phrases and structures necessary to communicate in a particular field of science.

I have carried out some research at three technical universities and at two state vocational technical schools in Poland. My work includes a thorough description of the Departments of Foreign Languages and the schools to further illustrate their experience, ideas and potential. I have tried to explain the differences and abilities between them on the basis of both teachers' and students' answers to the questionnaires I prepared. The central aim of the questionnaires and interviews (only with teachers) was to examine the targets, motivation of students and methods of teachers in the process of teaching/learning foreign languages. I proceed to offer some recommendations leading to further effectiveness of the whole process. I have chosen various schools taking into consideration the number of students, number of faculties, and programs of teaching foreign languages.

It should be noted that there are numerous ways of enhancing the process of teaching/learning a foreign language, but one of the most vital ways is the work of students not only during classes but at home as well. The number of hours, the syllabus, the organization of the classes and, of course, the teachers are significant elements influencing the educational process, but success and effectiveness depend very much on students' own input. Their contribution and individual work leads to achievement of the required level. In most cases it means overcoming obstacles of different kinds such as the lack of hours, considerable level differences between students in one group, lack of cooperation with teachers from other faculties, and many others.

In my work I tried to answer questions concerning the best method enabling students to develop their language skills effectively with an emphasis

on professional language competence. I examined how students from groups of beginners (in cases in which the English language was imposed by the faculty board) or groups from low-intermediate level dealt with English for Specific Purposes. In many cases, students know other languages quite well, e.g., German or Russian, but they need to know English. Furthermore, I asked students about the importance of professional language learning during their studies, if the decision to teach students ESP was the right choice, and how to motivate them in difficult situations (lack of hours, imposed language) to increase the effectiveness of the educational process. I also tried to check whether the focus on teaching students to read professional literature was the right target in such short language courses. The principal dispute is over proposing a model of foreign language classes that fulfil the requirements of students and satisfy teachers.

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