

Teaching and Assessing Students' Language Skills in Developing Professionally Oriented Communicative Competence in Foreign Languages

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Abstract

The work investigates and offers some specific approaches in ESP teaching and assessment at different proficiency levels. The research and experience show that professionally focused lexical codifiers have to become an integral part of teaching-learning process, while complex syntactic structures can be introduced at levels A2-B1 (by CEFR) implementing lexograms, which are also provided in codifiers. Teachers-methodologists with implementation of corpus methodology compile lexical and grammatical codifiers for ESP. Students within their professional competence collect and verify necessary vocabulary for updating and upgrading lexical codifiers. They select authentic texts as per courses they major in. English texts they select should be relevant and requested not only in an English language class, but also (if not primarily) in their major study and research activity (seminars, term papers, final graduation papers, etc.).

Along with instruction methodology, ways of assessment are analyzed and specified. Two assessment schemes are offered, i.e. one for a teacher (vocabulary and grammar range, fluency, etc), the other for a student (report relevance, topic significance, understanding facility, etc.). This approach, on the one hand, enables teachers to assess student's language competence, on the other motivates students to actively participate in class activities, analyze material and make conclusions. Language instruction and assessment processes make the student act as the expert of professional knowledge. Assessment methodology, where a student plays actually a leading part, is integrated into the learning process. This approach efficiently develops competence and skills that meet profession requirements. Students are challenged to be fully involved in the learning process and be responsible for their professional knowledge, as it is they, who provide professional evaluation.

Key words: ESP, lexical codifier, corpus-based approach, knowledge assessment, receptive language skills, productive language skills

Introduction

The research investigates and offers some specific approaches in ESP teaching as compared to General English at the same proficiency levels. Along with instruction methodology, ways of assessment are analyzed and specified. It is stressed that the student becomes an equal partner in the process, as it is the student rather than the teacher, who possesses highly specialized professional knowledge.

ESP Specific Features and Language Teaching

It is well known that while teaching ESP we face certain distinctive difficulties, which mainly have their roots in defining and complying highly specialized professional vocabulary necessary and sufficient for successful professional communication. This vocabulary is rarely used in everyday life, usually represent phonetically compound words; moreover, there can be difficulties in finding equivalents (if available at all) in the native language. Currently, very few English textbooks for special purposes are available for teaching purposes (e.g. Business English, textbooks for legal English, for nurses, for air traffic control officers). Moreover, textbooks, which can be recommended to be used in classes, present vocabulary selection of more or less general character within any given specialty. However, ESP classes in many cases are aimed at professionally oriented vocabulary acquisition, the latter to be actively and passively applied in quite complicated grammar structures.

It seems that one of the possible approaches to tackle the problem mentioned above is to concentrate on compiling "local" lexical and lexical-grammatical codifiers. Lexical codifier is assumed to be a selected list of lexical units knowing which makes communication in a professional community

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successful. Basic professional lexical codifiers can be compiled by qualified teachers, who can apply corpus methodologies and work exclusively with authentic latest materials in specific areas [1]. Then, these codifiers should be verified by specialists in the named area. Codifiers should be updated and verified on a regular basis following the development of a professional sphere. Lexical codifiers can become an integral part of any ESP teaching process and be recommended as a compulsory source of an “ESP” Syllabus.

Lexical codifier application in a teaching/studying process provides other opportunities along with availability of professionally oriented vocabulary. It is students, who can be involved in compiling, updating and verifying word lists suitable to become part of a codifier. Considering students’ proficiency in a chosen area, they can be assigned to search and work with authentic texts as per courses they currently take; chosen texts should be requested and relevant not only for English classes, but primarily for their research within the specialty courses.

Research work with authentic texts and lexical codifier updating benefits students in various aspects. Students cope with quite a large amount of lexical material that can be considered as professionally oriented immersion experience. While developing lexical codifiers, students become involved in content and language integrated learning. Communicating with an English language teacher, they are motivated to act as “experts-consultants” in a specialized area, which eminently should motivate them for more responsible work.

ESP is recommended to be introduced into the study process, when students’ performance level is at least B1. However, reality shows that students’ grammar and vocabulary competence is in dissonance with the ESP communicative situation requirements, e.g. business ethics says: «...to make it more understandable I would like to show you a short video....», while a student can say: «... watch it». The conducted research shows, that it is possible and even efficient to introduce and train complex grammar structures at levels A1-B1, but in the form of lexograms provided in codifiers [2]. For example, even at level B1 such structures as Infinitive Complex Object\Complex Subject are not discussed, however students dealing with authentic texts have to understand them, and to actively use them both in a written or oral speech. It seems efficient to develop grammar structure formulas - lexograms – and explain the meaning of each lexogram. E.g.” ***N is thought/believed to V***” - “***N is thought/believed to be Adj***” –“***This method is thought to be reliable...***” or “***N is thought/believed to have V₃***” - “***We are believed to have made meaningful anatomical correlations of behavioral recovery***”.

Receptive Language Skills Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of any educational process. Specific nature of ESP course assessment results in the necessity to implement authentic specialized oral and written texts as early as at A2-B1 levels. Listening tasks should cover both study and professional objectives, e.g. lectures, conference reports, etc. [3]. The study results show that testing and assessment materials should include professional texts with all types of complex and /or integrating tasks. Codifiers cover assessment objectives. Thus, both learning efficiency and reliability of testing increases. For example, the codifier presents a lexogram:

Lexogram	Lexogram Realization
V-ing a/the + N	Changing the situation Looking up the number Solving a problem Telephoning a friend Processing information Keeping time
Adj +N	affective response effective stimulus
<u>Adj</u> + behavior	<u>strong</u> <i>behavior</i> <u>weak</u> <i>behavior</i> <u>human</u> <i>behavior</i>
<u>Adj</u> + process	<u>cognitive</u> <i>process</i> <u>behavioral</u> <i>process</i> <u>mental</u> <i>process</i>

<p>Cognitive +N</p>	<p><i>cognitive process</i> <i>cognitive thinking</i> <i>cognitive revolution</i> <i>cognitive psychologist</i> <i>cognitive term</i></p>
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(Table 1)

To assess performance at level A2 a student has to complete assignments by filling gaps; the task is always made based on an authentic text, e.g. text in **(Readings in psychology by Michael B. Casey, Joseph A. Sgro Paperback, 534 Pages, Published 1992 by Ginn Press- p 256-257)**. The example of the task is below.

Task №

Fill in the gaps with the words from the list.

Changing the situation Looking up the number Solving a problem Telephoning a friend

:"(1)_____ is an example. A problem is a situation that does not evoke an effective response; we solve it by (2)_____ until the response occurs. (3)_____ is a problem if we do not know and we solve it by (4)_____."

Keys: 1 Solving a problem, 2 changing the situation, 3 Telephoning a friend, 4 looking up the number

Productive Language Skills Assessment

Productive language skills - speaking and writing – can be evaluated during learning process. It was established, that such activities as making presentations, participating in various discussions, peer reviewing, etc. could adequately show performance level necessary for a professional communicative situation. Two assessment schemes are offered, i.e. one for a teacher (vocabulary and grammar range, fluency, etc), the other for a student (report relevance, topic significance, understanding facility, etc.). This approach, on the one hand, enables teachers to assess student's language competence, on the other motivates students to actively participate in class activities, analyze material and make conclusions.

Similar approaches can be implemented in assessing writing skills; e.g., student A writes an article and student B reviews it in compliance with the given assessment scheme (compliance with the format, professional vocabulary range, spelling, etc.). Students are randomized in pairs; however, every student has to perform both roles. The teacher will evaluate each and every student's performance to see if they completed the offered tasks.

It is immediately apparent from the foregoing, that the assessment methodology, where a student plays actually a leading part, is integrated into the learning process. This approach efficiently develops competence and skills that meet professional requirements. Students are challenged to be fully involved in the learning process and be responsible for their professional knowledge, as it is they who provide professional evaluation.

The methodology offered above will enhance effective teaching on the one hand, and will motivate students to implement foreign languages in their research work and professional communication.

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