The Problem of Identifying Socio-cultural Difficulties in the Course of Teaching ESP Reading

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Abstract

Socio-cultural aspects are often underestimated in the course of teaching ESP reading at universities. Moreover, they frequently constitute latent challenges as opposed to lexical, grammar and structural ones. That is the reason they are commonly unspotted by students and invariably cause mistakes. The purpose of the study is to identify socio-cultural difficulties inherent in Legal English texts as well as to classify them according to the previously determined criteria. The methods employed are as follows: surveying students and teachers, classification, comparative analysis, method of continuous sampling. The data were subject to the unified system of interpretation.

The students surveyed were selected according to the age, year of studying (2-year / 3-year students), academic achievements, level of proficiency in the foreign language at issue, and the time of training. While singling out the texts were ranked in accordance with the level of difficulty taking into account that of the vocabulary; the sentence structure; quantitative characteristics of conceptual intensity; the degree of interest shown while perceiving the texts; conceptual complexity, informativeness, subjects (in accordance with the professional themes based on the analysis of the ESP syllabi); the degree of idiomaticity and expressiveness; problematic character; the perspective to transform the text.

The author analyzes and validates the data obtained through questioning teachers and students. Based on the evidence collected four groups of difficulties are identified and described. They fall within those that refer to using sources of reference, analyzing and increasing professional knowledge, systemizing and grouping socio-cultural vocabulary, and, finally, those related to contrasting professional realia in the target and original languages.

Keywords: ESP teaching, socio-cultural difficulties, ESP reading, Legal English

1. Introduction

In the course of learning a foreign language for specific purposes students encounter inter alia socio-cultural difficulties. The latter are difficult to reveal, as opposed to lexical, grammar and structural ones, frequently being unidentified by students. As compared to other speech activities (writing, listening, and speaking) reading poses more challenges as for the socio-cultural material the corresponding texts contain. Reading material contains a number of layers denoting different socio-cultural information: on the level of words, word combinations, sentences, complex syntactic units, paragraphs, text, as well as numerous non-textual layers. Moreover, once a student overcomes socio-cultural challenges of ESP texts he/she can easily deal with those related to writing, speaking, or listening both by directly applying the knowledge and transferring the skills obtained. Thus, in this article we focus on socio-cultural peculiarities of ESP reading as illustrated by Legal English texts for learning purposes.

2. Theoretical Background

Socio-cultural aspects of ESP reading have been in the focus of scientific research for decades now with globalization provoking further in-depth analysis of the related issues. We can identify studies dedicated to general issues in ESP teaching (Dudley-Evans, T and John, M (1998), Richards, J.C. & Rodgers, T.S. (2001)), socio-cultural matters of ESP teaching and language acquisition in general (LoCastro, V. (2011), Byram, M. (1998), Kasper, G. (2001), Lantolf, J. (2000)), those related to certain layers of language, as well as numerous studies of teaching ESP reading, and its various aspects (Macalister, J. (2010), McNamara, D. S. (2007), Nation I. S. P. (2009), Harris, A. & Sipay, E. (1990), Willis, J. (2008)).

However, there have been no attempts to consider socio-cultural difficulties of ESP texts as perceived by both teachers and learners, no relevant typology of such difficulties has been introduced, and in particular those related to Legal English texts for learning purposes.

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3. Methods of research

The research focused on texts selection, identification of socio-cultural material the selected texts contain, its categorization as well as surveying students` needs, expectations and difficulties alongside with monitoring the learning process and collecting teachers` observation experience. Thus, a number of methods were employed: surveying students and teachers, teaching reading observation, classification, comparative analysis, method of continuous sampling. The data were subject to the unified system of interpretation.

Ten teachers in the field of teaching Legal English reading were surveyed and their students (140 people). The teachers were selected according to their qualification (translators (university degree) and law degrees), teaching experience (10-15 years) and the overall methods, forms of teaching and approaches (mainly cognitive, activity-based and communicative) employed. When selecting students the following criteria were adhered to:

- Students of the same age, year of studying (2-year / 3-year students, bachelor degree, the Law department of the same University (MGIMO).
- Groups with similar academic achievements, level of proficiency in English (intermediate-upper-intermediate)
- The unified system of data interpretation (applied to both students` and teachers` survey data).
- The total time of training (one year).

4. Findings Amd Results

The first step in our research concerned texts selection on the basis of students learning experience and in compliance with the stage of learning, taken into account the corresponding Federal Education regulations as well as those of MGIMO-University. Below we provide characteristics of texts that were used in the course of teaching ESP reading. While teaching we used authentic (primary) texts (newspaper, journal, scientific articles) as well as instructional ones, those constituting secondary texts, adapted subject to content and functional parameters (explanatory, descriptive and argumentative primary texts).

Upon selection the texts were ranked in accordance with the level of difficulty taking into account that of the vocabulary (according to the level of abstraction, with the relevance to the life experience); the sentence structure; quantitative characteristics of conceptual intensity (the correlation between the phrases given and the number of ideas); the degree of interest shown while perceiving the texts; conceptual complexity, informativeness, subjects (the relevance to the course training requirements); the degree of idiomaticity and expressiveness; problematic character; the perspective to transform the text, its adaptation.

Apart from that, the texts were selected in accordance with the professional themes based on the analysis of the ESP syllabi of the corresponding University (singled out and compiled for the purposes of the study). They are as follows:

-Nature, purpose and classification of law.
-Sources of law.
-Administrative law (Russian, English).
-The court system (Russian, English).
-Law of persons.
-The law of torts (Russian, English).
-The law of contract (Russian, English).
-Sale of goods law (Russian, English).
-Law of Agency (Russian, English).
-Law of insurance (Russian, English).
-Negotiable instruments (Russian, English).

Teachers survey revealed the following difficulties: methodological ones (related to the organization of work with ESP texts, lack of general learning competencies), those related to the process of teaching in general (mismatch between ESP and Law syllabi; incompliance with the principle of proactivity of Law teaching as compared to ESP teaching; undue attitude to reading scientific, journalistic professionally-oriented literature in English and in the foreign language); linguistic difficulties (on the level of words, word combinations, paragraph, text, those of semantic and content character); other difficulties of socio-cultural character.

Having analyzed and validated the results of the students` questionnaires we identified 4 groups of socio-cultural difficulties a student encounters while reading ESP texts.

The first group embraces difficulties related to analysis and enrichment of knowledge, namely, inability to: systemize and group their background, linguocultural knowledge according to different criteria: new-old, known-unknown etc; set sociocultural guidelines; identify gaps in their background knowledge; consolidate and enrich knowledge, in particular by studying topics not covered by the general syllabus or those required to be studied thoroughly; to revitalize their professional, linguistic and background knowledge.

The second group includes: difficulties related to inability to systemize and group socio-cultural lexical units. The skills of systemizing and grouping constitute: systematizing and categorizing, grouping in accordance with frames, based on etymological connections (time-oriented, cause and effect), abilities to reveal connotative semantics; broaden, narrow socially-oriented vocabulary units.

The third group consists of difficulties related to inability to use sources of reference (encyclopedia, reference books, dictionaries of area studies, encyclopedic, bilingual, explanatory dictionaries, linguistic corpora, and regularly updated internet-resources). This group of difficulties also includes the inability to correlate word meanings given in dictionaries to the contextual ones (*civil law* jurisdictions as opposed to *civil law* which is not criminal in nature), to identify meanings of lacunas using dictionaries, to select reference sources.

Using dictionaries and various reference books is an integral part of English teaching and ESP teaching in particular, due to the specificity and complexity of ESP content. But the unformed ability to use reference books does not provide for the desired results.

The fourth group includes difficulties arising due to inability to contrast socio-cultural professional realia in English and Russian. For instance, inability to spot lacunas (Equity Law, barrister), full and partial equivalents (agreement, damages, registrar of companies, tort, misrepresentation), semantic differentiation, establish associative links (similarities, contrasts).

We often spot student`s inability to identify frequent interfering lexical units where the word by word translation corresponds to a particular unit in their mother tongue (Russian) but in the context of Legal English texts acquires a different meaning. Such words as «consideration» ("total consideration to be paid", «house» (Companies House), «clause» (damages clause), "association" (Articles of Association) acquire specific meanings rather different or having nothing in common with their usage in General English.

Moreover, students are characterized by the lack of skills to identify differences in the system of values, in the connotative semantics of socio-cultural units; they tend to establish stereotypes not corresponding to the reality of the language under study.

Thus, sociocultural difficulties in the course of learning a foreign language, in particular studying ESP texts, are caused by references, connotative links etc. Comprehension of a text is possible due to comprehension of a particular socio-cultural situation, provided elements and facts of other cultures are identified including those which are not present in the students` native culture and also provided the elements and facts given are compared in order to identify similarities and differences. Thus, students are expected to select the right equivalent taking into account the uncovered denotative and connotative meanings of words of the original and in compliance with the norms of adequacy while translating and using the terms.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Socio-cultural mistakes students make in the course of ESP reading are to a great extent caused by hidden socio-cultural challenges. Thus, the first step for teachers is to raise students` awareness of socio-cultural components of Legal English texts, teach them how to identify the latter at different levels from words to non-text information and what techniques to employ to overcome them. To prevent such mistakes it is required to consider the teaching style (whether cognitive, action-based or communication–oriented), the target and translation languages, the forms and methods of teaching reading, students` learning experience, their professional and background knowledge.

When the factors are determined one should conduct a comparative analysis of the jurisdictions at issue, drill equivalency on the level of words, word combinations, sentences, paragraphs, texts and non-textual information. Legal notions are of special importance. Students shall be taught to identify full or partial equivalents (when the legal systems under study contain both identical and different conceptual meanings), as well as inclusion (when a notion from one language includes the conceptual bases of a term of a different language and additional characteristics as well). One should also consider the cases when comparable notions are missing in one of the languages which is dictated by the differences of the legal systems under study.

Therefore, in case of full and partial equivalents, as well inclusion and terminological gaps one shall be aware of the arsenal to employ - finding analogues, resorting to descriptive translation, borrowing

terms, coining a neologism etc. Students shall also realize that it is relatively rare in jurisprudence as compared to other diciplines such as business studies to encounter something unexpected and unknown to the specialists in comparative law that has never been translated before. Thus, in most cases research gives understanding of the concepts and notions Legal English texts contain.

Being able to identify challenges students learn to draw parallels between the legal systems at issue. They either look for an equivalent, or its partial equivalent, and in case of gaps in notions and terms investigate ways to denote the corresponding meaning of a lexical unit of one legal system in terms of another one, by means of either explanation, calquing, or other.

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