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LSP TEACHING TO ADULT LEARNERS: EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPING LSP COURSE FOR AIRPORT FRONT LINE PERSONNEL

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Abstract

The development of the modern world is increasingly characterized by globalization, which affects many social aspects including professional ones and sets new challenges not only to university students but to adult professionals as well. Increasing scientific and business international contacts render foreign language skills (at least English as the language of international communication) a must for highly qualified specialists; thus one of the challenges that adult professionals face is to acquire foreign language skills for effective communication in professional settings. At the same time, LSP teachers face similar challenges of helping adult learners to develop targeted competencies in the shortest term possible. The article focuses on comparing strategies of preparing and structuring teaching materials for students and adult professionals. The article also discusses challenges in developing LSP course for airport front line personnel. The conclusion outlines the main solutions in teaching material selection, it's structuring and arranging in the course designed for 40 academic hours of total workload, as well as presents practically obtained results of the course approbation in class.

Keywords

LSP Teaching, Adult Learners, Targeted Foreign Language Skills and Competences

1. Introduction

The Modern world is becoming increasingly globalized, with the phenomenon of globalization penetrating every sphere of social life including professional communication in specialized settings. Currently, being a professional means dealing with increased internationalization and communication (Ainsworth, 2012). Effective professional communication in the context of globalization sets the task of training qualified specialists with good command of at least one foreign language. When people speak of language for Specific Purposes, they generally think about English for Specific Purposes, which is broken down into a number of finer categories (Gollin-Kies, Hall, Moor, 2015); in this article, we will mostly concentrate on English for Professional Purposes.

A lot of research literature is devoted to methodology of LSP teaching to students, considering a variety of approaches, methods, and strategies. Scholars point out the necessity of applying a various teaching methodologies to address peculiar needs of LSP adult learners (Javid, 2015). However, teaching foreign language to adult, highly qualified specialists, who graduated from universities some twenty years ago, and may be, achieved some success in their profession, seems to be less discussed and developed topic. Teaching adult learners constitutes a separate problematic field of pedagogy and didactics, as it has its own methodological and psychological specificity, and, when it comes to practice, all these characteristics come into play. Furthermore, quite frequently the set goal is to make adult specialists acquire targeted foreign language competencies in a maximum short term, which is challenging in itself.

In this article, we will consider the specificity of LSP teaching to adult specialists. We will also share our personal experience in developing professionally oriented course of English. The course was developed for personnel of the front line of Domodedovo Airport. The course total workload is 40 academic hours, including 20 hours of self-study. Learners were expected to have a B1 level of English language proficiency.

2. Background Information

Discussing LSP teaching issues, it would be appropriate to ask a question, if teaching foreign language for professional purposes to adult specialists principally differs from teaching students. The answer is obvious.

Teaching students to acquire targeted foreign language competencies, teachers most commonly use the professionally oriented material, which necessarily involves teaching them some new facts, both linguistic and facts related to their profession-to-be. This appears to be especially true about students of minor courses. Thus teachers have to deal with double fold challenge: linguistic and extra-linguistic. This circumstance entails specifically chosen from professional perspective teaching material: not professional, but professionally oriented texts of descriptive nature. Such texts do not present much difficulty for comprehension, require no specific knowledge and could be easily understood even by laypersons, who in most cases LSP teachers are, as we do not teach the professional subject, we teach foreign language using professionally oriented materials.

However, the simplicity of teaching material from content perspective presents certain difficulties from a linguistic perspective. These include a variety of grammatical structures, a lot of synonyms and other features not typical to scientific prose or rigid genres of professional texts.

Searching for course materials, we have analyzed about 30 text fragments from course books developed for professional courses of English in aviation universities. In this respect it is proper to mention the following. First of all, such course books are not many and texts themselves present linguistic and extra-linguistic difficulties discussed above. Text fragments are of descriptive nature, only generally covering professionally specific issues. Considered text fragments contain a lot of synonyms, not all of them, however, used terminologically. Due to the specificity of the content, it is impossible to work with the material on the basis of learners' anticipating comprehension. At the same time, the language structure itself drops out from learners' focus.

Preparing and structuring study materials for students, teachers most frequently proceed from the logic of the professional subject. That is the reason why study materials are commonly

arranged according to the “snowball principle”, that is in linear order from simple general issues to more complicated professional aspects. It is appropriate to mention here, that rather often the complexity level of the chosen teaching materials is determined by the scope of professionally related knowledge of the foreign language teacher him/herself. It should also be pointed out that simple texts are often characterized by information superflux, while professionally complicated texts are not, which creates additional difficulties in students’ text comprehension.

The methodological approach to LSP teaching of adult highly qualified professionals is basically different. Obviously, genres of professionally specific texts used as teaching materials vary greatly in terms of language, degree of technicality, stylistic and other characteristics. Thus technical specification of an aviation engine would be very different from scientific prose on, let’s say, physics. However, if we view these texts from didactic perspective, there is one thing in common. Specialists have a profound knowledge of their subject, they do not have to know or translate all the words in the sentence to guess its meaning, three- four words would be enough. A sequence of several sentences provides the specialist with more or less complete understanding of larger text fragment.

Unlike students or laypersons, who comprehend the sentence content through its form, specialists perceive the linguistic form as means of conveying ideas known or understandable to them. Strangely enough, but the majority of highly qualified specialists are able to familiarize with professionally specific literature without profound knowledge of a foreign language. However, it should be pointed out that the above statement is true for specialists of natural science domain.

3. Challenges and Solutions

The first challenge we had to deal with in developing the course is study material selection for both class work and self-study. The study materials for adult specialists had to be professionally authentic. All attempts to simplify it, make it easier to understand (from foreign language teacher’s point of view) encountered negative reaction and general criticism on adult learners part, which in our opinion, reduces learners’ motivation, as well as harms teacher – student rapport as learners tend to lose their confidence in the teacher. On the contrary, professionally authentic materials tend to be perceived by adult specialists as truly related to their

profession, increased learners' motivation thus contributing to enhanced learning outcomes. It would be appropriate to mention here that specificity of the study material tends to affect teacher – student relationship: in LSP the relationship between student and teacher is usually more adult-adult like, in comparison to parent-child model common to general English teaching (Howard, Brown, 1997)

The second point to mention concerning the material is that it does not have to be chosen and organized according to the subject development logic. In fact, this way of material presentation invited learners to discuss or make presentations on other related aspects.

Text fragments do not have to be too big, but ideally, they should focus on one grammar structure. For example:

Carriage of baggage is generally performed by airlines free of charge but within baggage allowance limitations. In case the weight or dimensions of checked-in baggage exceed the free baggage allowance, its carriage must be paid for additionally.

Baggage larger than 500x500x1,000 mm is accepted for transportation only upon the carrier's authorization in case of availability of carriage capacity on the flight.

Transportation of oversized / overweight baggage should be paid for separately, depending on its actual weight.

Airline Company may refuse to accept for transportation as baggage any items which do not comply with the requirements of transportation standards.

The text fragment was borrowed from “Rules for Air Carriage of Passengers, Baggage, Cargo and Mail”, it was not adapted or simplified, it is small (only 99 words), and it is focused on one grammar topic: passive/active voice.

The class work with text fragments procedure is fairly standard at early learning stages. First, learners are asked to read the text either aloud or silently. Then the teacher asks them to outline the text content, elicits unknown words and only after that provides students with active vocabulary list. We believe, and practical experience supports it, that this order makes adult learners more involved in the process, as well as encourages them to explore the new material more actively.

Active vocabulary learning is supported by various types of exercises like:

a) Filling in the gaps, doing which learners have to be aware of the grammar context:

Passenger's luggage is checked and _____ (accepted) for carriage on board the aircraft in the luggage-cargo compartments. Items carried along by the passenger _____ (in the cabin) are classified as hand luggage.

b) Correcting the spelling, which helps learners not only to remember the spelling, but also to feel the context of lexical items use:

Perfumes are usually not dabelercla items. (Declarable);

c) Matching sentences halves, and other similar types of exercises.

Working with adult learners we do not totally abandon the use of native language. Learners' concept system is formed in the native language, and it would be unreasonably optimistic to expect adult learners to form it in a foreign language in a short term. Besides translation or interpreting (both from a foreign language into native and vice versa) is a useful tool for prevention and correcting various types of mistakes: logical, semantic and grammar. Due to the time limit, we used interpreting (focused on active vocabulary and grammar structures under study) mostly as this type of class work enables learners to immediately understand their mistakes and find ways to correct them.

It should be pointed out that starting teaching LSP at early stages would not bring positive results, as the main difficulty for adult professionals lies in grammatical construction, not in learning the domain-specific terminology. The group members we had to work with had the A2 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages, which required more efforts on both learners' and teacher's part to develop targeted competencies. Our experience suggests that adult professionals are very quick to learn terminology; there are two reasons for that. Firstly, most professional terms are international; secondly, being specialists in a particular domain, adult learners already know most of the domain-specific terms in their native language, so they are ready to comprehend and learn them in a foreign language; thirdly, at early stages adult professionals tend to be highly motivated to learn more and apply their newly acquired foreign language skills to their professional activities. Thus, we believe that LSP teaching would be more effective, when the basic grammar structures are known and learners have acquired certain reading, comprehension, and communicative skills.

4. Using MOOC's

Discussing LSP teaching we can not leave out the issue of using innovative methods and approaches, one of which is undoubtedly MOOCs. This recently introduced form of distant learning is gaining in popularity worldwide, besides it significantly affects not only the teaching paradigm but also the society in general, as “education and social equity are closely connected to issues of technology access, use and mastery” (Warschauer, 2011, p.21).

Working in class with adult professionals we mostly used a traditional approach to teaching however as part of self-study learners were encouraged to choose and join one of the MOOC courses run on the major platforms such as Coursera or Udacity. Learners were provided with guidance and assistance in their choice of courses.

Deciding on MOOCs as part of learners' self-study we set the following goals. Firstly, we believed that joining the MOOC community would help our learners to improve their comprehension and written communication skills in semi-formal context through interaction with other learners. Secondly, the LSP course designed for them was very short, and MOOCs seemed to be a perfect solution to encourage our students to continue language learning independently.

We realized that adult professionals (who belonged to different age groups varied from 35 to 52) had limited time resources and many other commitments such as professional and family besides language learning, and did not expect too positive response on their part. When we first voiced the MOOC idea to our professionals, they were not very enthusiastic about it, we had to devote the whole lesson to show them how to work with MOOCs and motivate them.

Our experiment with using MOOCs as a learning tool for self-study proved to be effective with those professionals whose level of English was initially higher irrespective of the learner's age, though we expected some resistance on the part of the senior members of the group. Adult professionals with a lower level of English were more reluctant to use MOOCs and about 80% of them dropped those courses immediately or soon after the completion of their LSP course. About 35% of adult professionals with higher level of English were motivated enough to continue their independent learning after completion of their LSP course, though the percent of those who really complete the MOOC course they have registered with is doubtfully very high as according to Coursera data only about 7% to 8% of the students who sign up typically complete the course (Lewin, 2013).

5. Conclusion

Summing up our practical findings we would like to point out the following:

1. LSP teaching to adult professionals significantly differs from teaching that to university students in a number of aspects including teaching material choice. Practical experience shows, that adult professionals are more motivated and, accordingly, demonstrate greater learning outcomes if they are offered authentic material for class and individual work. Using descriptive texts for teaching adult professionals, as it is a common practice with university students, on the contrary, reduces their motivation, and thus is not effective.

2. It is more effective to start LSP courses for adult professionals at the B1 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages. This is due to the fact that adult professionals experience no or very little difficulty in learning terms or domain related material; the basic difficulty for them is associated with the linguistic aspect: language grammar and constructions.

3. MOOCs courses can be used as an effective tool for self-study and continuing independent learning of the foreign language, however, only with those adult professionals, whose initial level of English was B1-B2 regardless of learners' age. Although, the key variables for effective integrating MOOCs into LSP courses are still to be identified, MOOCs proved to be a valuable support for the basic course.

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