LEARNING MEDICAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE: BACKGROUND FOR SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to consider the most common difficulties faced by teachers of English for specific purposes from Chuvash University (Russia) in developing an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for medical students and in the learning process. The objectives of the research are the challenges to ESP teachers that might impact the quality of the teaching process and hence the learners’ academic achievements unless these challenges are removed. The authors not only reveal the difficulties in the learning process but offer possible solutions to overcome them. The study showed that the most common problems interfering with the efficacy and the quality of learning are the lack of updated teaching materials, the lack of cooperation of ESP teachers with fellow teachers conducting classes in medical disciplines and a low level of general English of students majoring in medicine. The possible solutions to these problems based on the data collected during the survey are proposed. The results represented in five-step ranking mode are summarized in the form of two tables, the first representing the hierarchy of difficulties and the second showing the willingness of ESP teachers to take a special training course. The authors believe resolution of the problems may facilitate the transition of ESP for medical students to digital ecosystem.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Linguistic Competence; Communicative Competence; Course Development; Curriculum; Needs Analysis; Special Knowledge in The Field of Science

INTRODUCTION

It is a common knowledge that any language irrespective of the fact whether it is valued prestigious, e.g. English [1] or not, e.g. a tribal language is used as a means of communication by all community members unless the language is extinct. At any rate even an extinct language may still enjoy popularity among certain professional groups although its usage may be restricted to some extent, e.g. Latin in medicine and pharmacy. It should be noted that it was Latin that brought physicians and pharmacists of different nations from different continents together long before the globalisation process started. The physicians and pharmacists actually belonging
to different cultural and linguistic communities could understand and share professional knowledge owing to one universal language, i.e. Latin.

Nowadays more and more people come to understand and take it for granted that English has become a globally universal language used in international communication in all spheres of human activity nearly by all nations of the modern world. The recognition of English as a global language [2] used in politics, business, science, culture and education encouraged the educational authorities of many countries to review the existing foreign language teaching curricula to the benefit of English. By the way, in Soviet Russia during WWII and immediately after the victory over the fascist Germany in 1945 for many succeeding years German was the main foreign language taught at schools, Institutes and Universities.

Today, majority of schools aim at providing the learners of a foreign language, as a rule, with the linguistic competence including basic knowledge about the language structure and a basic vocabulary. Developing communicative competence consisting of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills enable the learners to communicate on the topics confined mainly to learners’ everyday lives, their hobbies, etc.

The course of English at Institutes and Universities is a bit different. The difference is accounted for by the fact that the objective of learning English is different. It is determined on the whole by the profession the learners are going to major in. In this sense English language is used by professionals, e.g. scientists, lawyers, politicians, etc., which is known among the teachers community as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) [3, 4]. It has also been stated [4] that there are different variants of English for Specific Purposes, such as EST (English for Science and Technology), EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). Widdowson [5] preferred to name it Professional and Academic English (PAE). Having summarized his forerunners’ points of view on the problem, Jordán [6] proposed English for Academic Purposes should be subdivided into two separate “Englishes”, i.e. English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). Anyhow a deep insight into the problem of ESP proves the alleged controversy of the scholars and the practitioners caused by terminology clashes only [7].

We believe that besides being distinguished by specific linguistic features ESP as a specialized language discipline requires special training, which can be provided only by specially designed curricula and special text-books. A concept emphasizing the term “specialized language” is often associated with language learning for professional purposes, when students learn to use the language in their future professional work. In this case, the features of the language that manifest themselves in different professions are emphasized. It is known that learning a professional foreign language should focus on linguistic and communicative competence [4], be formed on the content and context of the curriculum [4, 8] to enable the learners to use the professional foreign language, which they mastered, after completing the course of studies. To achieve this, it is important to learn the
foreign language on the basis of real situations, i.e. the foreign language learning should be situational. This can motivate students’ interest in adapting practical skills to the conditions of their future profession [4]. Teaching a medical foreign language is always a challenge to teachers because they need to adapt and find new approaches and methods, make decisions and adapt to permanent changes. Therefore, being equal partners, both the student and the teacher must realize that this training is a mutual process.

A key role in the study of a specialized foreign language is to determine the individual conditions of study and teaching and to apply them in the development of the curriculum and the assessment system. Creating a curriculum in which the student is in the centre of the focus has become the basis for teaching foreign languages all over the world and is getting a domineering approach. So the curriculum is based on the needs of the learners, and the manifestation of their motivation and success is a result of a properly designed and balanced curriculum and techniques used by the teacher.

One of the most important problems, as we see it, is the lack of knowledge about the reasons why learners will need English after completing the course of study. We call it insufficient needs analysis. The source for the needs analysis can be both the learners and the teachers. It is important to learn not only what information the learners expect to get from an English language course, but also to study the environment in which the learners will be speaking English.

The university students will need to develop listening skills in order to understand lectures and seminars, develop writing skills, write projects or dissertations, develop oral speech, make oral presentations, etc. If a student needs a foreign language for present or future work, then the teacher should find out what kind of professional work it is and what linguistic and communicative competence is required to be a successful professional.

The aim of this study was to investigate the most common challenges that the teachers of ESP face while developing ESP course curricula and during the teaching process, and to provide them with possible solutions to these challenges, the solutions being obtained from the data collected from the survey, the literature review and theory.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study involved 15 ESP teachers of the Medical Faculty of I.N. Ulyanov Chuvash State University. The participants have been teaching English for no less than three years. The questionnaire had 15 different questions of various types, such as multiple-choice, rating questions, yes/no and open ended questions. For validating of the needs analysis, interviews, questionnaires and observations were used. The idea was to get as much data as possible about the problems that teachers faced during the learning process. The respondents were also asked to fill out a
questionnaire about their attitude towards learning ESP. The results of the survey, i.e. the answers to the questions were ranked on a five-step scale from 1 to 5, wherein 1 denotes ”least likely”, 2 – ”less likely”, 3 – ”likely”, 4 – ”more likely” and 5 denotes ”most likely”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It is well-known that an ESP course should be based on a needs analysis to specify, as closely as possible, what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of Tenyakova [8]. There is a general agreement that the needs analysis should be completed before any course starts. However, at the beginning of the course the learners were interviewed so that the teachers could find out the students' interests and motivation. Motivation is a determining factor of learning. It involves the learner's reasons for attempting to acquire the second language [9]. Our research revealed that most of the teachers considered the lack of needs analysis as the most important problem as shown in Table I. 74% of the respondents considered this criterion as the most significant one. The lack of suitable materials hinders the teaching of English for special purposes. 84% of the respondents noted the importance of suitable material for conducting classes and highlighted this criterion as the main one. Finding good quality material for working with students is a difficult task. What material to use in class and how to use it is a key issue for many teachers. Teaching materials for the work should be chosen carefully, to be the real functioning language. In some cases, when a teacher does not find ready-made materials that fully meet the needs of students, he/she must create his/her own materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of learners' needs analysis (Are your students going to use English in their professional work?)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lack of suitable materials (Do you have enough updated material for ESP course?)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Lack of specialist knowledge (Do you have a special medical education?)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lack of cooperation with other teachers of medical subjects (Do you feel lack of cooperation with teachers of medical disciplines?)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Learners' low general English level (What are the results of your general English assessment test?)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Another problem faced by an English teacher for specific purposes is inappropriate knowledge of the topic. One of the most important things was that not all the students have the same level of knowledge. This fact results in various learning profiles within the same class. Thus, some students in the group can have a
low General English level (GE), but others may have a higher level, therefore for the latter an ESP course would be more interesting.

The students participating in the research had a variety of learning styles and abilities. According to the survey some students required substantial assistance; others had a better knowledge of English and consequently they might be more interested in an ESP courses. In addition to above mentioned facts, the teachers have to consider motivational aspects as well as the number of students in a class. The survey proved that the learners’ academic achievement correlates with the number of learners in the group, i.e. the fewer the number of learners in the academic group, the higher the level of their knowledge. Nearly 30% of the respondents considered this criterion to be of utmost significance.

It is also worth mentioning that medical discourse is abundant in special terminology bound to the medicinal context. Since the teachers of foreign languages are not specialists in the professional field of future specialists, i.e. medicine, it is obvious that sometimes they encounter problems of misunderstanding the content of the texts. Consequently, they can come across the texts the contents of which are not familiar to them. In such cases, the teacher will need more time for better preparation for the lesson as he/she needs to read up to have sufficient knowledge about the material under discussion. For the teacher this can be quite time consuming sometimes. The teacher can get special medicinal knowledge by reading literature in a foreign language, consulting with teachers delivering lectures in medical disciplines.

It should be noted that the cooperation of an English teacher with the medical specialists is one of the most important parts of a foreign language course for special purposes. The study showed that 40% of respondents recognized the lack of collaboration with the medical professionals and mark this criterion as the most significant one. A review of this study also demonstrated that the problems may also arise due to time constraints, differences in schedules, curricula, personality problems, etc. These issues are usually resolved on the educational establishment authorities’ level.

The study also showed that the majority of teachers expressed their willingness to receive training in terminology, theory and methods and techniques of teaching English for specific purposes as indicated in Table II. Throughout the course the students mastered the speaking skill being involved in different learning activities such as giving opinions and drawing conclusions from a text. The students made up sentences of their own using medical terminology. The learners tried to use them in situations as well. The listening skill was developed by listening to different recordings. The students were asked to take notes of what they heard in order to infer the meaning of the unknown words from the context, and to find out the key words and the main ideas stated in the text. Finally, reading was practiced through the work on various types of texts in order to recognize connectors, to distinguish relevant information and to identify general concepts.
TABLE II. DESIRED TRAINING (ADVANCED TRAINING) COURSES FOR TEACHERS (%)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course preparation (Do you feel a necessity to take regular training courses for ESP teachers?)</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized terminology (Does the comprehension of the medical discourse depend on your knowledge of the medicinal terminology?)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology (What methods and techniques do you usually use?)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESP theory (Do you think that ESP teacher should know the ESP theory?)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</table>

The advantages of working in small groups include increased identification of student needs, development of responsibility and interpersonal skills. According to this approach teacher should demonstrate a positive attitude, trust and respect their students, as well as express an understanding of the way students are taught [10, 11]. The teacher cannot teach students the process of understanding, but he can increase the awareness of their inner potential through the so-called practice of sub-skills [4]. These sub-skills include analytical thinking, problem solving, deduction and imagination. In order for these skills to be improved, teachers must adopt the opinions and attitudes of students in various activities.

The task of an English teacher for specific purposes is to ensure a balanced practice of all these skills in the learning process. This is a very difficult task because a huge amount of research work is still necessary as educational process, in general, and a foreign language teaching, particularly, needs to be reviewed in compliance with its transition to the digital ecosystem. It should be noted that the use of computers and computer technologies in education at the Chuvash University started at the end of the 20th century [12]. Internet “blew up the world”, indeed, in the true sense of the verb. As a matter of fact, Internet provides real time information in textual, video and sound-track formats at any point of location on our planet. A very great amount of information has been digitized for medical professionals already.

It’s worth mentioning some of the well-known platforms and sites, as MOOC/https://mooec.com/courses/, Coursera/ https://www.coursera.org, Edx /https://www.edx.org/course?search_query=english+for+medical+students, edlinePlus / https://medlineplus.gov/. The task of paramount importance today is not to get lost in Internet, to find one’s Eco (from Greek “oikos” meaning house, dwelling place, habitation) in this system, to get connected with others [5] to exchange information and knowledge to make the world better. It should be emphasized that the design of an academic course is a very dynamic process, primarily due to the development of both medical science and methods and techniques of teaching English which are also on the way to globalisation.
CONCLUSIONS

It is generally recognized that teaching English for specific purposes should meet the needs and requirements of language learners. With regard to teaching English for medical purposes, the basic needs of medical students include comprehension of the cited texts on recent advances in medical science, practice, and improving speaking skills, with an emphasis on mastering medical terminology through role plays, team work and project works. In addition, the development of writing skills in the form of the presentation of thematic reports, research, preparing medical documentation is of great importance. In addition, medical students should be able to keep abreast of relevant literature, write research papers, as well as participate in student exchanges programs and international student congresses. This form of activity provides a solid base that allows them to share knowledge and experience with foreign peers, as well as publish scientific articles in reputable international journals.

Some strategies to ensure a balanced practice of these skills include improving the constructive dialogue between teachers and students, collaborating with teachers of core courses, and continuous assessment to create an appropriate curriculum designed specifically for health professionals. Special relationships between teachers and students have a good influence on teaching methods and stimulate students. This may become a foundation of a life-long learning process for both students and teachers.

Thus, the study showed that the objectives of teaching English for medical purposes and the minimum level of special skills are not clearly defined. The results of the study showed that students do not have enough speaking skills. The authors of this paper believe that most teachers are well aware of the difficulties that they have in teaching ESP to medical students. At the same time the teachers are eager to facilitate every learner’s communication skills, which will allow everyone to successfully communicate in the professional sphere.

It should be noted that a closer cooperation between teachers will contribute to improving the quality of teaching and students’ performance. Teaching medical English should not only focus on vocabulary and text analysis, but also on developing communication skills, problem solving, and decision making. Teachers of English for special purposes should recognize the need to introduce and develop their so-called critical thinking skills in their students so that they can meet both professional and social requirements. We believe the resolution of the problems raised in this paper may facilitate the transition of ESP for medical students to digital ecosystem.
REFERENCES