

LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION – EXPERIENCES AND TRENDS

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Abstract. In today’s “global village”, any kind of information spreads faster than ever before and reaches every corner of the world. Scientific information is no exception in this regard. Therefore, the need to learn a foreign language for specific purposes to serve as a means of scientific communication and production is more than obvious. The development of research in the field of science and technology illustrates the progress in the 21st century and the fundamental change in the language of this field. It is a major factor for drawing the attention of learners to specific terminology and for acquiring communication skills that are required by young professionals internationally.

Keywords: language learning for specific purposes; teaching languages in higher education; professional development; vocational education

As an integral part of foreign language teaching, the teaching of a foreign language for specific purposes deserves special attention. From a methodological point of view, and given its objectives, the field of foreign language for specific purposes is positioned on the border between academic disciplines and the intersection of specialized scientific knowledge and linguistic competence.

From the traditionally informative objectives of training, which from day to day become morally more obsolete given information technology and the availability of information on the Internet, the crucial role of training in general is oriented towards an approach with a focus on skills and perceptions in a way that can meet the requirements of modern reality (Yordanova 2021). Nowadays, the context of learning a foreign language for specific purposes is changing dramatically thanks to a set of factors:

1. Foreign language learning for specific purposes should develop communication skills and abilities in a working environment for the preparation of linguistic and functional staff for the labour market, and profound changes should be made for this purpose: in the way language learning is perceived by

learners and their teachers; in the purpose of language teaching and in the role of communication strategies.

2. To achieve these changes, educators need to discover and implement creative and innovative ideas in their teaching, benefiting on the one hand is stimulating motivation, which in turn will enhance the learning effect.

3. On the other hand, innovative teaching strategies have been the subject of wide discussion in recent decades and have become an extremely important factor for foreign language learning in the 21st century. It can be said that innovation and creativity are the driving forces for economic prosperity, social and individual well-being and are an essential factor for a more competitive and dynamic environment. Tomorrow's professionals need to be flexible, critical, and creative. All these qualities begin in educational institutions.

Since its inception as a term in the 1980s (Riemer 2002), foreign language for specific purposes has been associated with the study and analysis of the communicative needs of learners from a particular professional or scientific field. This specialized knowledge is even more sought after and offered nowadays in view of the processes of globalization that characterize the 21st century and the related transfer of specialists around the globe. Foreign language for specific purposes and its subdivision for professional/vocational purposes owe their popularity to the fact that more and more foreign language programmes are drawn up for the benefit of those who want to learn the target language in relation to their profession. The aim of foreign language training for specific purposes is to support professionals in a given field to successfully function in their workplace, regardless of its location, or in their vocational education in higher education institutions, where the foreign language is a means for instruction and communication, and learners are expected to acquire competencies and skills that will contribute to their fruitful work in an environment, in which the language studied is a mediator for communication and work. Needs analysis serves as a basis for informed learning practices such as curricula, development of learning designs and materials.

Since its inception, teaching a foreign language for specific purposes has faced a number of challenges that surpass the usual difficulties in the daily lives of teachers of general foreign language. These difficulties are of a diverse nature: the lack of resources adapted to the specifics of the training, which is explained by the enormous complexity and high degree of specialization of academic disciplines in recent decades, which in turn makes it practically impossible to have a standardized/universal foreign language textbook for specific purposes that satisfies the linguistic needs of a specific group of learners as much as possible. Also, the complexity with which appropriate activities are created for the exercise of all linguistic skills in this type of training.

To improve the materials developed for foreign language courses for specific purposes, teachers and researchers unite around the idea of analyzing the genre

of texts, the target situation and the needs of the learners and their attitude to the materials offered. Modern educational theories also focus on the learners and their communication skills and competences. There are several principles to be followed when designing a language course for specific purposes. The first, of course, is the analysis of the needs of the learners. The second is the role of teachers – they must teach, develop and present materials suitable for students, do research work in the field of language teaching and learning for specific purposes, be up to date with the latest trends and cooperate with specialists in the given professional field. In this respect, there has always been a discussion on how much scientific knowledge teachers of foreign language for specific purposes should possess. The answers to this question are not unambiguous, but the more optimal solution is to seek cooperation between foreign language teachers and specialists/professionals/lecturers in each scientific field. Another option is even to offer the learners themselves as counterparts, which is highly motivating for them. In addition, this approach makes them more active participants in the learning process. However, this is not very popular, as it remains questionable to what extent the learners themselves have the necessary professional knowledge to be able to rely on their credibility.

In the context of vocational education, both in secondary (vocational upper secondary schools) and in higher education (technical higher schools) learners are divided into classes (groups) according to their vocational choice. For this reason, they work with texts (respectively textbooks) that correspond to the professional field in which they are trained, and which are related to building the skills and knowledge necessary for their profession. The textbooks and teaching materials used are selected based on professional topics, tasks, and vocabulary to serve as a medium for the development of professional expertise and linguistic skills in the relevant field. The materials for teaching foreign language for specific purposes contain key elements such as authenticity of situations and thematic texts, development of knowledge and language, certain tasks and activities, positioning of learners in conditions of social practice, methodological guidelines. With the development of information and communication technologies, the opportunities for access to authentic sources of the target language are expanding, and in practice they become an unlimited resource for learners, which in turn affects the development of their autonomy for learning.

The dynamics of economic, political, and social processes require young professionals to continuously broaden their professional knowledge, but also their language culture. The number of employers looking for specialists proficient in one or more foreign languages (at least at a working level) for their offices and divisions in the country and abroad is growing. For international companies, this requirement is mandatory and more than obvious. Therefore, improving in their professional field, specialists need continuous mastering of their knowledge of a foreign language (Terzieva et al. 2015).

Foreign language teaching is a timeless process that continues after graduation of students, practically throughout their lives. The level of foreign language proficiency reached in secondary education should be further developed in higher education towards specialized training in a foreign language, after which a person feels prepared for self-improvement and self-study for his own needs and specific goals (Veselinov 2020). In the context of modern globalization, learning a foreign language is no longer an advantage for those looking for a promising professional realization, but a prerequisite. The training in language schools and centers, which offer a variety of language courses, focuses precisely on the personality of the learners, their goal is to satisfy their needs and to get the most out of their personal abilities and skills to master the English language in order to achieve communicative competence at a certain level. Universities and colleges, on the other hand, still offer language instruction based on language perception and mastery through its cultural and literary traditions, cognitive structures and historical events. It is an indisputable fact that in-depth cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are essential for a proper understanding of native speakers and their society. (Veselinov 2023), but this alone is not enough to make successful communication in a foreign language.

Language learning must be structured in a way that produces certain outcomes: language-educated professionals who possess in-depth translinguistic and transcultural competence. Learning a foreign language at a higher level is often oriented towards replicating the competence of the representatives of the language, which goal is very rarely achieved by older learners. The idea of translinguistic and transcultural competence, on the other hand, is based on the ability of functional interaction between languages. Students are trained to communicate in the target language with the representatives of that language, as well as to perceive themselves and the world around them from the point of view of the foreign language and culture. They learn to perceive the representatives of the target language as part of a different linguistic and cultural society and to perceive themselves as part of a society that is linguistically and culturally different for their interlocutors.

Teaching a foreign language for specific purposes in the new reality is a challenge for teachers, even more so because it reflects the requirements of the new millennium, which emphasize flexibility, cooperation, authenticity, efficiency, etc. A foreign language for specific purposes concentrates on the language, skills, discourse, and genres characteristic of a given discipline, becoming a function and tool within a course.

The creation of a multilingual European community, in which the focus is on linguistic diversity and the developed linguistic repertoire, is determined by essential factors such as economic competition, the opportunity for lifelong learning, developed communication between the citizens of the individual member states of the European Union through tourism, relocation and training. The intensity of mobility and

cooperation between specialists on the European and global labor markets in recent decades determine the dynamics and directions in language learning.

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