Teaching English for specific purposes at Russian universities: problems teachers have to cope with

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Abstract. Any university performance is assessed according to the job placement of its graduates who according to the Russian Federal Educational Standard of higher vocational education must acquire professional skills as well as skills of using Russian and foreign sources of information and being active representatives of domestic companies in business dealings with their overseas partners. Thus, in comparison with English for general purposes taught at Russian schools, students at non-linguistic universities learn English for specific purposes. Since an ESP course is a very demanding one, the paper deals with the main challenges ESP teachers cope with.

1 Introduction

The development and expansion in scientific, technical and economic activities on a large international scale as well as the focus on communicative approach has led to the demand of learning English for specific purposes (ESP) and especially training specialists who are able to conduct ESP courses. The field of ESP has rapidly developed to become a major part in English language teaching and research. The necessities to understand the requirements of chosen professions and willingness to adapt to these requirements make a specific group of learners prepare differently from those learning general English, because they need English in cross-cultural communication, in mastering national and international cutting-edge technology and in dealing with foreign specialists as business partners, rather than using it in daily life. Thus, the ESP approach provides opportunities for the learners to acquire English naturally by using it in a context that they comprehend and find interesting.

In this regard, ESP courses play a special role in modern universities as they develop competences relevant not only for the 21st century, but also for their professional development in the field. ESP courses are often conducted by EGP teachers for whom teaching ESP becomes a challenge because they need to develop and adapt course materials to particular academic and disciplinary contexts and specific students’ needs.

The main hypothesis of the study is that ESP teachers at Russian universities face a number of challenges caused by the peculiarity of the educational system itself as well as the current changes in the educational process.

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2 From the history of ESP studies

English for specific purposes (ESP) or English for special purposes arose as a term in the 1960’s as it became increasingly clear that general English courses could not very often satisfy learners’ or employers' needs. As T.Hutchinson and A.Waters point out “Operating on the basic principle that the English of, say, Electrical Engineering constituted a specific register different from that of, say, Biology or of General English, the aim of the analysis was to identify the grammatical and lexical features of these registers” [1]. The second important issue ESP focuses on is learners’ needs, i.e., relating language analysis and study to situations in which they will use the language they are learning [1].

With time the application of this specific approach has been developing and acquiring new features, and the notion of ESP teaching and learning has become much broader. Thus, it becomes obvious that ESP teachers working at non-linguistic universities stick to a purpose-oriented approach and undertake multidimensional tasks as they have to equip their learners with linguistic skills, strategic competences and prepare their students for performing professional activity in multicultural environment [2].

ESP has been regarded from both teachers’ and learners’ perspectives. T.Dudley-Evans and M. St. John prefer the term ESP practitioner to ESP teacher as this definition seems to be more detailed and complete. They distinguish the following key roles of ESP practitioner as those of a teacher; course designer and materials provider; collaborator; researcher; evaluator [3].

Other studies regard this issue from students’ perspectives. J. Harmer singled out special characteristics of adult learners that can be applied to university students. They bring to the classroom certain expectations about the learning process, they have their own patterns of learning, they tend to be more disciplined than younger learners and they are more critical-thinking. Being adults, students bring a great deal of life experience and cognitive maturity to the classroom, they are aware of learning options open to them and they choose those which are best for them. They can also work and learn on their own, and this self-study becomes an integral part of language learning [5].

3 Challenges ESP teachers deal with

The Federal Law “On education in the Russian Federation” (№ 273-FZ dated December, 29, 2012) stipulates that university graduates must acquire skills of using Russian and foreign sources of information and being active representatives of domestic companies in business dealings with their overseas partners [6]. Such requirements were stemmed from the entry of Russian specialists to a new level in cross-cultural communication, from the necessity to master national and international cutting-edge technology and to deal with foreign specialists as business partners. Thus, teaching English as a second language is conducted not though imposing and drilling rules, but with the regard of students’ needs and motives formed under the influence of the situation on the economic and labour market.
It is quite obvious that ESP learning conducted at Russian universities is totally different from EGP learning, which is the subject of study at secondary and higher school. English for specific purposes is a term that refers to teaching or studying English for a particular career (like economics, law, building construction, medicine) or for business in general. There is a specific reason for which English is learned. If we focus on the origin of ESP and its development it is closely linked with learners’ interest in various specific disciplines, for instance, Insurance English, English for Tourist Management, English for Medicine, etc. Students learn English for specific purposes, ESP courses are designed for studying specific subject for the students to gain and develop appropriate knowledge and skills through English. Students study ESP not only because they are interested in the English language but because they have to complete a task in English. In other words, for students who have studied English for specific purposes during their university years, it will be easy to adapt to their work conditions and they will be easily employed in their fields.

Therefore, the general approach to teaching English at Russian universities is that EGP is basic language learning to be studied before, but not during college or university time. Students must have such a command of the English language that they can reach a satisfactory level in their specialist subject studies. University English should be more advanced, more specialized, and match students’ majors of study, particularly in non-linguistic universities where students are trained to perform on-the-job. Compared with EGP, ESP is more effective in increasing students’ learning motivation because it relates to their fields of study and meets with their needs.

Russian and foreign educationalists specify that ESP teachers are responsible for formulating certain goals and objectives, selecting and developing effective materials, planning appropriate courses, and evaluating their learners’ patterns of development. Therefore, they have to act as teachers, course designers, collaborators, researchers, and evaluators simultaneously. Moreover, ESP teachers have the most essential role to enhance the learners’ motivation. Thus, the role of ESP teachers is multifaceted and is based on learner setting and needs [7, 8].

The fact that learners know specifically why they are learning a language is a great advantage on both sides of the process. The group of ESP learners is going to achieve a certain goal in the field of studying branch, so learners’ motivation, in a form of the same aim, enables teachers to meet learners’ needs and expectations easier. Knowledge of the subject area enables the students to identify a real context for the vocabulary and structures of the ESP classroom. In such way, the learners can take advantage of what they already know about the subject matter to learn English.

Moreover, while studying EGP students have acquired learning skills which permit them to learn ESP faster and more efficiently. The language learning abilities of the adult learners in the ESP classroom are potentially immense. They are constantly expanding vocabulary, becoming more fluent in their fields, and adjusting their linguistic behaviour to new situations or new roles.

There is a problem in Russia of scarcity of ESP teachers as there is no concept of establishing ESP teacher training institutes to train professional ESP teachers. As a result, EGP teachers who carry no professional training for teaching specialized English face a number of challenges. Here is a list of some of them and the ways ESP teachers try to solve them:

1. Students of nonlinguistic universities, as a rule, have a worse command of the English language than those who enter linguistic universities, or foreign language groups comprise students of different learning levels. As a rule, there are students in a class who are shy or unwilling to speak which requires a good lesson planning, bringing about a variety in classroom activities, rearranging seating positions of the students for different activities, negotiating and describing the importance of English language learning to them, giving
individual consultation to the students and conducting pair work activities instead of group work activities;

- After studying general English at schools students can get demotivated by the number of terms, choice of topics and tasks when they begin ESP learning. This means that ESP teachers must conduct activities that both educate and motivate their students;

- As a consequence of the previous challenge there is an issue of the course content selection, which arises the question of how much the topics, vocabulary and issues under study cater to the demands of the chosen profession. Thus, English teachers design required syllabuses not only based on their professional knowledge of teaching English for communicative purposes but also based on learner’s academic and linguistic needs;

- There can be a large number of students in one class when administrators combine several groups in a big one explaining it by lack of funds or time, number of academic hours or English not being their major subject. ESP teachers have worked out their ways of dealing with such issues from dividing large classes into smaller groups to taking help from more advanced students;

- Understanding specific vocabulary and specific professional issues can also become a problem because in order to practice effective and wholesome teaching, it is necessary for the ESP teachers to have a complete grasp on the contents they are teaching. As a rule, the teacher makes a tool of himself/herself while explaining the text or new topic. Therefore, in order to see to these issues, choices can be made in selecting the text that is not too specialized and/or context bound, students themselves who major in this subject can be taken help of in order to explain complex terms and there is a wide range of books, dictionaries, print media, etc. that can be of great use. It is also helpful to collaborate with content tutors, professionals and students to apply cognitive practices specific for the particular discipline and students’ backgrounds;

- Absence of Russian national educational materials and appropriate manuals brought to the necessity to prepare resource materials for particular universities. ESP teachers attend conferences and seminars (e.g. “Theory and methods of ESP teaching” held in the city of Ekaterinburg) where they share their experience in choosing and compiling resource materials, efficient academic programmes and planning aimed at achieving certain goals, maintaining motivation, efforts and attempts undertaken by students;

- All researchers interested in assessing the progress of ESP as a component of English language teaching agree that one of the most constraining factors to this progress is the lack of “specialized teacher training”. The teachers have general know
assessing their level of distance technology proficiency. The COVID pandemic revealed deficiencies of technical nature (some students and even teachers were not appropriately equipped with microphones, web cameras, computers, laptops and other gadgets; technical support was far from being perfect, the access was often denied and communication between students and teachers interrupted). The other set of problems was connected with the educational process (there was a lack of electronic textbooks and display materials; as the contact between students and teachers was broken and it was difficult to apply an individual approach, the teachers couldn’t properly control and correct the work of their students; there was an issue of plagiarism and cheating while preparing reports, giving answers and writing tests by the students.

4 The perspectives of ESP courses

As English continues to dominate as the lingua franca of business, insurance, media, technology, medicine, education, and research, the demand for ESP is growing rapidly, particularly in the countries where English is mainly used for instrumental purposes [9, 10]. People in these countries including Russia, learn English in order to fulfill the school curriculum requirement, to pass standardized English proficiency tests, or to obtain promotion or professional development at work.

However, ESP employs a totally different language that even native speakers have some difficulties to comprehend, because teaching English for any vocational field requires special knowledge. ESP teachers even make a joke saying that it is not clear whether they work with future professionals in such fields as economics, medicine or insurance and teach them English or they teach those subjects but in English. Hence the necessity of having special courses with specific curriculum offered by Russian universities. Another important point is teacher training which means that teachers should obtain special training; they should be more specialized in order to teach such courses because they are not only teaching English but also special technical terms according to different subjects. More and more universities are offering ESP courses to meet the global need as well as to meet students’ future career needs. The demand for ESP has led some higher education authorities and administrators in many universities to claim that ESP should replace English for general purposes (EGP) and thus, become the mainstream of higher education. The problem under discussion arouses great interest among both scientists and teachers of foreign languages who have to act as practitioners, they do not only deliver some knowledge in grammar and vocabulary of any language and develop practical skills of speaking, listening, reading or writing but also provide skills related to a specific vocational field. The study of ESP teaching and learning peculiarities is based on the educationalists’ and practitioners’ researches which exemplify that ESP teachers stick to a purpose-oriented approach and undertake multidimensional tasks as they must equip their learners with linguistic skills, strategic competences and prepare their students for performing professional activity in multicultural environment [11].

Since an ESP course is a very demanding one, teachers of ESP may face a lot of challenges generated by the lack of specific field knowledge, insufficient needs analysis in developing a course or finding suitable materials for the course. In order to minimize the effects of those challenges in ESP, the practitioner should start from in-depth needs analysis and design the course materials according to the needs and expectations of the learners. Even though an ESP teacher may not be an expert, he/she can overcome most of the challenges by reading some literature about the professional field of the learners that will develop their competence and also by collaborating with the subject teacher which will in turn make the course.
to take learners’ suggestions about the lessons into consideration. Moreover, they need to encourage students to create their own materials as well. An ESP teacher should closely follow the latest research in the field, read related publications, attend conferences and visit relevant institutions in search of expert observations.

Educational process conducted in the period of pandemic demonstrated the possibilities of online learning and the ways disadvantages can be eliminated [12]. Educational innovations have occurred to make the universal adoption of remote learning a possibility: university professors implement multimedia teaching resources to master professional lexicon and terminology; students watch and discuss teaching films and use internet resources. A number of new technologies have been introduced for ESP teaching, e.g., Wiki creation, workout of web-quests. New innovative methods of teaching are introduced at seminars (for example, Internet linguodidactics, conducted by RUDN ESP teachers) and workshops. In this respect an important role is played by young teachers who are more advanced in implementing new technologies at their lessons. They provide help to their older colleagues in the way of finding and using multimedia technologies in teaching. A new digital technology generation of their students. A combination of traditional and virtual means of studying has been acknowledged as the most efficient in ESP studying. A critical students’ approach to the educational material contributes to the acquisition of new skills and developing linguistic, sociocultural, communicative and professional competences.

5 Conclusion

As ESP derives from the need to use language as a tool in facilitating success in professional life, the process of learning gets centered around the approach based on the learners' needs, purposes and expectations. The success of the process depends on learning strategies and teachers' attitude and interest in ESP course, that's why motivation may be emphasized as an obligatory part of a learning process.

The peculiar nature of ESP courses put in claims for both students and teachers. To achieve the aims and goals, students must first obtain academic skills through EGP courses, and then apply these skills to their own disciplinary discourse. In general, it is possible to say that ESP teachers have to take heavier responsibilities than EGP teachers; and though ESP teacher training is not developed in our educational system, ESP teachers succeed in providing teaching at a high level because they are eager to progress in this field by mastering their skills, using innovative technologies and taking part in ESP teacher-training programs, conferences and workshops. In this case, ESP teachers can share their experience and knowledge with each other to improve their teaching quality.

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References


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