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ESL Challenges in Technical Universities

The article examines the ESL teaching challenges in technical universities and possible ways of addressing them. For the graduates to be competitive in the labour market the ESL instructors must rely on modern literary sources and Internet resources, use innovative social sciences, modern systems and means of evaluating students' work

The modern society sets high requirements to any specialist taking into account both productive and reproductive (receptive) skills. In other words, they are less interested in encyclopedic knowledge, but in its practical use for effective and efficient decision-making and problem-solving. Studying a foreign language in a technical university is an integral part of the professional training of future specialists. The foreign language is known for its enormous educational and mentoring potential that helps bring up competent, flexible and competitive professionals in line with established international standards.

However, this is not an easy task to cope with, especially, in a technical university as ESL teachers face numerous challenges against teaching process optimization. In this article we'll identify the following:

1) lack of continuity between school and university;

2) lack of students' self-directed skills in working with specialized literature and online resources;

3) low motivation;

4) insufficient technical base, i.e. information and communication technology tools for ESL instructors;

5) insufficient amount of modern literary sources in technical universities.

What are the ways to address these problems?

Since school leavers are not good enough at a foreign language, their poor secondary school background causes low language learning at the university. Frankly speaking, some remain unable to catch up with it before their graduation.

A big gap in students' language competence makes the ESL instructors plan their lessons centered on average students, while for lower performing students the task is hard to do and language skills of advanced students are fading. Therefore, to maintain the adequate language level for all learners in the group the teacher should use differentiated instructions for the learners to get on with different tasks for the same activity. In this context, we offer two options: quantity and level of difficulty. At the quantity level, the same task is assigned to the whole class, but not all learners fulfill the same amount. They are given a choice: the lower performing students do half of the task, while the advanced learners are asked to complete the whole. The level of difficulty adapts the existing tasks to learners' skills. For

instance, lower performing students are tasked with reading, translating a text, completing the sentences, filling in the sentences with appropriate words from the text, and doing other substitution drills. The middle reading group gives a general idea of the text, while the advanced group gives detailed answers with further discussions.

In addition to the differentiated instructions, we think integrated skills approach to be also creative. The integrated approach allows building up new knowledge and skills on what the learners already know and can do and involve students in various class activities (listening, reading, writing, speaking), thus, increasing their motivation. Here we distinguish two types of integrated skills: *simple integration* like a model for productive language skills, and *complex integration* like combination of various skills. As we see, this technique is quite demanding for teachers as it is time-consuming and requires lot of preparations and, of course, suitable materials.

In order to address the second challenge we mentioned - lack of students' self-directed skills in working with specialized literature and online resources – we should enhance students' self-study through preparing reports, presentations, topics, and conference thesis in a foreign language, in our case - English. Students' self-study is a special learning option enabling the learners to master their professionally-oriented foreign language, develop the skills of autonomous acquisition of knowledge and create information culture.

The students with undeveloped individual skills in working with specialized literature and Internet resources cannot sort out the required information from Internet webs. Moreover, the technical university students often do not know how to work with a dictionary, not to mention working with specialized textbooks. A way out of this situation, we think, is to give a list of references for a lesson, to explain how to use dictionaries, especially, language thesauruses, Internet resources, as well as to avoid inactive tasks (substitutions, change the sentences using the pattern (s), etc.). Such monotonous work dulls attention, develops a formal attitude to the task, scales down the interest in subject. Foreign language assignments should be aimed at overcoming feasible difficulties and achieving tangible results (back translation, question answers to the text, annotation, summary, reports, etc.).

Low motivation of students in ESL learning in technical universities is tied to technically-oriented priorities. The lack of motivation results from objective assessment of student work. Therefore, we advice the ESL instructors to make formative assessment of individual student work and identify, on the one hand, the gaps in foreign language knowledge, and, on the other hand, to rise in students' self-esteem. The formative assessment is recognized as an inalienable element of the competency approach focused on the establishment of target education results, their criteria, control methods, and systematic monitoring and adjustment of training.

The gainers in this process are undoubtedly, the students taking their university degrees in the English project groups. This year our university has marked the 20th anniversary of the project which offers the students unique opportunity to master their English as the language of instruction and become high-class specialists in their field of study with English as a working language.

Speaking about the educational process, we can't but draw attention to insufficient technical equipment of the foreign language classrooms in most technical universities. Unfortunately, the university, focusing on technical subjects, does not pay due attention to the material and technical support of ESL classes. The instructors trained in ICT tools have to follow old-fashioned teaching methods. On the contrary, the ICT tools are designed to facilitate the learning process, systemize information and improve students' motivation.

ICT-based interactive learning allows the teachers not only to diversify the learning process, but also to implement a range of methodological, pedagogical and didactic objectives, such as to engage each student in collaborative activity in the group. It is obvious that using a computer and multimedia tools helps implement a student-centered approach to learning, as well as adopt individual and differentiated approach based on the level of students' knowledge. Much depends on the ESL instructor, on his/her desire to use information technologies in the teaching process.

One of the ICT tools is presentation. The main purpose of the presentation is visualization of the educational material. A multimedia presentation is a qualitatively new approach to language learning. When preparing the presentation a student conducts a research, explores many information sources in order to make his/her work individual, creative and to avoid piracy.

We distinguish illustrative and interactive presentations. At the illustrative presentation the student demonstrates a new learning material. The interactive presentation attracts students to discussions, encourages them to express their opinions on the topic, harnesses their knowledge and skills of the previous material. The tasks can be performed either in groups or individually. Thus, the presentation fosters students' communicative competence as a frame for foreign language mastery.

The forth challenge we are discussing in this article is insufficient amount of modern literary sources in technical universities. The developing scientific and technological progress changes not only technologies, but also the language of their description (specialized terminology). The problem with insufficient literature can be handled by Internet resources where the students are offered update and relative information.

Fortunately, our Department of Professional Foreign Languages have never suffered from the lack of textbooks, manuals and method guides for the students we taught because the ESL instructors of our department write and publish our own textbooks and method guides with authentic adapted texts for the students of specific fields of study. The books also include various drills, exercises and activities for consolidation of learnt terminology and skills.

In view of the above-said, we can say that the current objective of technical universities is to train competitive specialists for the labor market. Consequently, the graduates acquire their language competence by passing through professional and social adaptation, and ESL teaching in the technical university should move "from simple to complex". Professional development of a student is impossible without self-assessment and self-analysis.

Conclusion

A foreign language is an expanding information-educational environment, which uses different methods and techniques along with teaching and evaluating instruments. An important element of ESP training is the ability of the teacher to create an atmosphere for live communication and constructive debate in the classroom. Students acquire sustainable communication skills only when they have the opportunity to use them in communication with others. Very often, the teacher may be the only person who speaks English, with whom students can talk, but the time for communication in the class is limited. Therefore, the teacher should develop and use effective methodologies for developing communication skills in student groups, e.g., blended learning, brainstorming, case studies, round-tables, meetings, etc., in order to stimulate communication outside the classroom.

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