

Foreign Language Teaching Methodology

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ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES – STUDENT ATTITUDE ANALYSIS

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***Summary** - The article presents the results of the research conducted at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb among first-year students enrolled in the course „English for Specific Purposes“. The aim of the research was to establish what attitudes students have towards this course, the motivation for learning English for specific purposes, as well as types of teaching which they find popular and efficient. The results show that students have a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language, and the most desirable manner of learning is through oral communication, followed by reading and finally writing. Regarding the course, they are mostly interested in reading professional texts, discussing professional issues and acquiring specific vocabulary.*

The analysis of students' attitudes shows that the combination of general and specific English with emphasis on a selection of interesting topics is the highest motivator for doing course work.

***Key words:** English language, student attitude and motivation, English for specific purposes*

INTRODUCTION

In this day and age, quality work, especially at an academic level, regardless of the profession presupposes understanding and active use of at least one foreign language. That knowledge is necessary for keeping up with professional literature,

communication with foreign business partners as well as for correspondence and various types of written communication. Accordingly, a large number of academic institutions plans for foreign language in their program as a course through which students would acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for various types of communication in a foreign language. That is also the aim of the course “English for Specific Purposes” which is realized during the first year of study as a compulsory course at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb for students of non-philology majors. Other students have the option of enrolling into the course as an elective.

A constant issue permeating the planning and realization of the course “ESP” has been the one regarding student motivation for this course. That has been a recent point of discussion and subject of constant dialogue among foreign language teachers evident in numerous professional and research articles relating to successful learning of a foreign language (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998). A burning issue for teachers, who are in immediate contact with students, as well as for researchers would be how to motivate students and entice interest for carrying out a successful teaching process, the result of which is the acquisition of knowledge and active language use. Within the framework of scientific research, Canadian social psychologists Gardner and Lambers (1972) tackled this issue. The authors refer to integrative and instrumental motivation for learning a foreign language, and they relate success in learning to reasons of cultural nature (accepting characteristics of the culture of the foreign language being learned in integrative motivation), and less with learning for career and academic goals (in instrumental motivation). However, intensity of motivation as a key factor for successful learning began to emerge and was later established by Brown (2001) who states that within the framework of both types of motivation one can refer to their high and low degree. Gardner (1985) defines motivation as the degree to which an individual puts effort into learning a language because of the desire and satisfaction obtained from the experience.

Authors who research content and purpose of language for specific purposes (LSP) relate motivation to the needs of users and stress the so called “learner-centered approach”, i.e. the approach focused on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). According to these authors, learners are motivated by various interests and needs, and they use various learning strategies, they possess different skills and accordingly learning should be focused on their specific “learners’ needs”.

Relating to learner’s needs within the framework of language for specific purposes, emphasis is placed on language in context, that is, work is based on text analysis as a whole and paragraph as its constituent part, and less on sentence analysis and analysis of its individual parts.

RESEARCH AIMS

In order to establish the current achievement of students in learning English, their needs and motivation for the course, we have conducted a survey among six

groups of students with approximately 25-30 students per group who have been attending the course "English for Specific Purposes". The aim of the survey was to uncover students' attitudes and motivation for learning language for specific purposes and establish elements and manners which students consider important for good quality teaching. The second aim of the research was analysis of factors which can contribute to the teaching quality based on students' suggestions. The premise is that by applying some of the ideas and suggestions and students needs would result in greater interest, motivation and satisfaction in teaching, and respectively more successful work and better achievement in the course.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted on a sample of 141 participants, 79.4% female students (112) and 20.6% male students (29 participants) enrolled in the 2007/2008 ac. year into the first year of study (average age 19 yrs.) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Zagreb. Research was conducted by means of an anonymous questionnaire which consisted of 20 questions (Appendix 1). The questions related to students prior knowledge of the English language, starting with the age of initial learning of the language and manner of learning the language (question 3), current methods of learning the language (question 9), frequency of English language use (question 4), learning and use of other foreign languages (question 5), motivation for learning foreign languages (question 8), desirable and effective manners of learning foreign languages in general (question 6) and within the framework of the current course "ESP" (questions 11-19). The questionnaire offered the following possibilities for answering questions: yes-no (choosing among two options), multiple choice (choosing one among several answers), and a scale from 1-4 (selecting one answer). The final question was descriptive. Students were asked to give their own suggestions for improving the quality of teaching languages for specific purposes. The results of the research were obtained through analysis using the statistical program SPSS.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data obtained by means of a questionnaire gave the following results.

Question 2, referred to the type of major (single or double major) which the students have enrolled for. From a total of 141 participants, 60 of them are single major students, while 81 students have opted for double majors.

Of the total of 60 single major students who have participated in this research, the results of the analysis show that work in homogenous groups can be organized for students of pedagogy (20 participants) and students of Croatian (35 participants). For other single major or double major groups (various combinations)

Table 1 Data on the number of students according to their majors

	Number of students	Number of students %
1 Single major	60	42.6
2 Double major	81	57.4
Total	141	100.0

language for specific purposes can be organized according to the criteria of related program majors (English for history majors, literary, linguistic, philological majors, etc.) In cases with language groups of several professions, teaching is adapted to the basic principle of the acquisition of academic English in the context of reading and understanding academic texts, writing papers and discussions of professional topics. Text topics are selected from humanities and social sciences and also include literature, education, language, history, culture, intercultural communication, etc. Part of teaching relating to improving writing skills covers the basic framework for essay writing and summary writing. In order to improve speaking skills and public speaking, students conduct ten-minute presentations on a chosen topic followed by a discussion using specific concepts in from the presentation. In this way students in mixed groups have the possibility to individually work on professional content by reading and researching materials for presentations, presenting key ideas and concepts to their colleagues and answering questions in discussions.

Question 3 related to the age of participants when starting to learn a foreign language and manner of learning.

When did you start learning the English language?

1. In kindergarten
2. In primary school (first three grades)
3. In primary school (in grade 4)
4. In a foreign language school as an extracurricular program
5. Other (state) _____

Table 2 Data on starting age and manner of learning the English language

	Number of students	Number of students %
1	24	17.0
2	26	18.4
3	66	46.8
4	12	8.5
5	10	7.1
Data missing	3	2.1
Total	141	100.0

The analysis showed that the majority of the students began learning the English language in fourth grade of primary school, 66 students in total (46.8%), 26 students started learning the language at the beginning of primary school (18.4%), and 24 (17%) students while in kindergarten which shows that approximately 35% of the students belongs to the so called early foreign language learning phase. For 12 students (7.1%) English had initially been an extracurricular activity in foreign language schools. The remainder of the students (10 participants, i.e. 7.1%) started learning + English in a different manner, later in their education or through listening to songs or watching the TV program (as an illustration, watching *Cartoon Network* at a very early age was mentioned).

We believe that the initial level of knowledge of a foreign language is a very important factor in organizing a language for specific purpose course. Considering the fact that students who are enrolled into the course “English for Specific Purposes” have learned the language in primary and secondary school, the manner in which the course program was set presupposes a very high level of knowledge of the English language. Referring to the Common European Framework for Languages the target level would be B2 or C1. According to the definition of languages for specific purposes by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, pp. 4-5) the minimal level of general knowledge of language for learning language for specific purposes would be intermediate or advanced («ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students»). In the long practice of work with students in language for specific purposes we have observed that the actual situation is somewhat different, since these groups also include students of a lower level of knowledge (regardless of the fact that they have been learning English for 8-9 years) who have difficulties in following the program and consider it demanding and laborious. On the other hand, there are students with a very high level of knowledge who demand more, and work in a group where the level of knowledge is different is considered demanding since it does not represent a challenge. Such students would want groups organized for them. In that case however, foreign language teaching would have to be organized according to the criteria of level of general language competence, and not profession.

Question 4 referred to using the English language in everyday situations.

Table 3 Data on using the English language in everyday situations

	Number of students	Number of students %
1 never	4	2.8
2 occasionally	82	58.2
3 often	34	24.1
4 daily	21	14.9
Total	141	100.0

According to the results, most of the students (58.2%) use the language occasionally, 24.1% use the language often, and 14.9% of the participants use the language on a daily basis. A small number of participants (only 4 students) reported never using the language.

Considering the wider language competence referred to in question 5, we were interested in finding out which other foreign languages students use, since teachers at the Center for Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Philosophy who teach courses “Languages for Specific Purposes” believe that students should know at least two foreign languages. Accordingly, in addition to the compulsory language, students have a choice of enrolling into another foreign language course. Students’ responses to the question on which foreign language they use actively were the following: 74 (52.5%), answered that they used English only, 44 participants (31.2%) used another foreign language besides English, and 18 students (12.8%) reported speaking more than 2 foreign languages. The languages mentioned were mostly German, French, Italian and Spanish.

Question 6 referred to manners of learning a foreign language which students find efficient and desirable. The majority of the students, over 70%, want to learn English by means of communicating. The types of communication mentioned the most are discussions, teacher-student communication, communication among students in pair and group work, stating opinions, and even communication with native speakers from the English speaking community. This leads to the conclusion that students find speaking and communication essential in English language courses and often point to the importance of conducting teaching in smaller groups so that each student is given a chance to speak. This view of teaching English for specific purposes poses the question to which degree is teaching language for specific purposes communicative. Hutchinson and Waters (1984) ask the same question and conclude that this aspect of teaching language for specific purposes, although extremely important, is often neglected.

After learning through spoken communication, students find learning through listening the second most important way of learning. Over 40% of students opted for this aspect of learning, mentioning work with audio materials, listening comprehension tasks, the importance of video material in teaching (listening and watching), and learning through music and film.

The next language skill which, according to the results, should be developed is reading. A third of the students (approximately 36%) believe that this manner of work is very important. As examples, students mention reading in the English language in general, followed by reading literary works in the English language and reading professional literature in the English language.

Within the scope of this question the most effective manner of learning English, the lowest efficiency in language learning was given to learning via the Internet (10%).

Question 7 referred to personal evaluation of knowledge of the English language.

Table 4 Data on subjective evaluation of knowledge of the English language

	Number of students	Number of students %
1 poor	4	2.8
2 good	34	24.1
3 very good	89	63.1
4 excellent	13	9.2
Data missing	1	0.7
Total	141	100.0

The majority of the students (89 participants) believe that their knowledge of English is very good. Thirty-four participants evaluated their knowledge of English as good. Thirteen students claim to have excellent knowledge of English and only 4 students opted for having poor knowledge of English. Based on actual experience it seems that the students have been rather objective in their evaluations of their knowledge since the average final grade in the last two generations studying according to the Bologna programs has been very good.

Question 8 referred to attitudes and motivation of students in relation to learning foreign languages.

Table 5 Question 8. Learning foreign languages in general for you is:

1	2	3	4
Extreme effort	Learning only because it is compulsory in high school and university	I like learning foreign languages	I enjoy discovering and learning new languages

Table 6 Data on attitudes towards learning foreign languages

	Number of students	Number of students %
1	2	1.4
2	27	19.1
3	82	58.2
4	29	20.6
Missing data	1	0.7
Total	141	100.0

Of the four possibilities given, more than half of the students (58.2%) stated that they like learning foreign languages, and more than 20% decided for the option «I enjoy discovering and learning new languages». About 19% of participants are learning a foreign language because it is compulsory in their study program,

and only two students stated that learning languages presents extreme effort for them.

With question 9 we wanted to establish the current state of learning the English language at foreign language schools, primarily for the purpose of learning at an advanced level and for improvement of the language, or for the purpose of “patching up the gaps” in knowledge in case of lower language levels. The analysis of the answers showed that over 95% of the participants did not attend such courses, and only three students of the 141 participants stated that they attended such English language courses.

As far as required reading for the program major is concerned (question 10), the majority of the students believe that reading for their program of study is mostly in Croatian language (over 60% of participants), while 17% mentioned that it was the English language. Around 4% of the students mention another foreign language. This question, however did not yield reliable results, since 17% of the answers is missing, and the reason could be the manner in which the question was asked and data analysis. In other words, instead of choosing one answer, students opted for two or even all three possibilities. As mentioned above, this was characteristic of double major students and therefore the criteria on required reading in a foreign language are different for the two study programs.

The following set of questions (11 to 18) referred to concrete aspects of work in teaching languages for specific purposes. Students were given statements with the option of choosing between two answers, yes or no.

Table 7 Questions 11 to 18

In the course “English for Specific Purposes” you are mostly interested in:	yes	no
11. Reading academic texts and acquisition of professional terminology.		
12. Writing summaries, compositions, seminars and essays.		
13. Discussion on topics relating to profession.		
14. Discussion on current issues for young people.		
15. Listening to audio materials.		
16. Watching video materials.		
17. Completing tasks via the Internet.		
18. Other		

The results show that students are mostly interested in the already mentioned types of teaching such as spoken communication on current issues relevant to young people (76.6% of participants), listening (72.3%) and watching video materials (88.7%). Less than half of the students questioned (48.2%) showed interest in using the Internet in learning foreign languages. The results also lead to the

conclusion that a smaller number of students opted for ways of learning English for specific purposes. Nevertheless, two thirds of the students (63.1% of participants) find that reading professional texts and acquisition of professional terminology is important and necessary. Students, however, do not show an expressed interest for academic writing, since only 39.7% of the participants gave a positive answer for that type of activity, and a somewhat larger number of students (41.8%) gave a positive answer on discussions relating to professional topics. The rubric “other” with a few exceptions was mostly left blank.

With question 19 we have established the importance of grammar for the course “English for Specific Purposes”.

Table 8 Data on the importance of learning grammar in the course „English for Specific Purposes“

	Number of students	Broj studenata u %
1	6	4.3
2	55	39.0
3	71	50.4
4	8	5.7
Data missing	1	0.7
Total	141	100.0

The analysis of answers showed that 50.4% of the students find grammar to be necessary (answer 3). 39% of the participants believe that it is necessary only to revise some grammatical points (answer 2). The smallest number of students opted for the two extremes - 8 participants believe that grammar is absolutely necessary (answer 4), and only 6 students believed that it is totally unnecessary (answer 1). Current written work by students shows that they have good command of grammar structures; however there are frequent, common mistakes which should be pointed out and worked on improving them.

Within the framework of the last question in the questionnaire (question 20), students were asked to give two personal suggestions which they believe would be imperative for improving the quality of teaching for the course “English for Specific Purposes”. With the mentioned wishes of students for oral communication (discussions, conversations, debates), group work and pair work is also often mentioned, as well as active participation of students in teaching and constant encouragement by the teacher. Some participants emphasize the importance of homework as an additional type of practice and encouragement for individual work. For better motivation, students mention good communication at the teacher-student level as well as a relaxed work atmosphere (“without pressure” – as one student described). What is easily observable and often mentioned is emphasis on inter-

esting materials and topics and work through fun ways. It seems that that together with relevance and usefulness for future professional work is a key concept even in some professional articles tackling issues of language for specific purposes.

CONCLUSION

Considering students' attitudes on learning languages at an academic level, and motivation for particular type of learning we come to several conclusions.

Firstly, students keep stressing the importance of spoken communication, talks and discussion; however they relate this kind of learning to general, current topics rather than professional. In addition to that, they emphasize listening to audio materials (among other, music) and watching videos (e.g. films) which can lead to a general attitude about language which throughout education before the academic level is related to dispensable and enjoyable everyday situations, and therefore this course is almost perceived as "time-out from other school obligations" (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998, p.86). Accordingly, students would rather improve idiomatic phrases typical to spoken interaction than study and acquire linguistic characteristics of a professional article (internationalisms, passive constructions, noun phrases, etc.). On the other hand, this attitude can be explained by the need to learn and understand cultural and civic content which always comes in hand with foreign language learning are its indispensable part. By moving to the academic level, students are, however, conscious of the need for language for specific purposes, since they encounter foreign literature (usually English) from the beginning of their studies. That is why within the framework of language for specific purposes, emphasis is given to reading and understanding professional texts and acquiring professional terminology. Furthermore, while work on improving grammar is deemed necessary or necessary to an extent, by the majority of students, results which refer to acquiring principles of academic writing show that students do not show a marked motivation for this kind of work.

Considering the above mentioned components of language for specific purposes and the research, it seems that the role of the teacher is far from easy and that their primary quality should be flexibility (Robinson, 1991 in Michalakelli, 2007). This characteristic relates to a teacher's ability to teach various aspects of language, from general to language for specific purposes while taking into consideration the needs of various groups of students. Therefore, our wish is that teachers of language for specific purposes continue to reach their goals in a quality manner and at the same time take into consideration and accept specific needs of students in order to motivate them and respectively become successful in learning. It is possible to accomplish that by applying some actual suggestions from this research such as the communicative approach to teaching, team work and the use of modern technology in the context of language for specific purposes.

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Translation from Croatian: Ivana Cindrić

Appendix 1.

QUESTIONNAIRE

For the purpose of establishing current achievement in learning English and the interest of students for the course “English for Specific Purposes” at the Faculty of Philosophy,

1. Gender (circle) M F
2. Student (state the program of study) _____
3. When did you start learning the English language?
 1. In kindergarten
 2. In primary school (first three grades)
 3. In primary school (in grade four)
 4. In a foreign language school as an extracurricular activity
 5. Other (state) _____

4. Your subjective evaluation of the frequency of using English in everyday life:

1	2	3	4
never	occasionally	frequently	daily

5. In addition to English, I actively use:

a/ English only

b/ another language (state) _____

c/ more languages (state) _____

6. In your opinion, the most efficient manner of learning English is:

a/ through listening

b/ reading

c/ Internet

d/ communication

e/ other (please state) _____

7. In general, you can say that your knowledge of English is (circle):

1	2	3	4
poor	good	very good	excellent

8. In general, learning foreign languages for you is:

1	2	3	4
Extreme effort	Learning only because it is compulsory in high school and university	I like learning foreign languages	I enjoy discovering and learning new languages

9. Are you currently enrolled in an English course in any of the foreign language schools?

a/ no

b/ yes

c/ I refrain from answering

10. Considering your experience, the required reading for your major is mostly in:

a/ the Croatian language

b/ The English language

c/ another language (please state) _____

In the cours English for Specific Purposes you are mostly inte- yes no
rested in:

11. Reading professional texts and acquiring professional termi-
nology.

12. Writing summaries, papers, seminars and essays

13. Discussion on professional topics

14. Discussions on current issues relating to young people

15. Listening to audio materials

16. Watching video materials

17. Solving tasks through the Internet

18. Other

19. Grammar revision and learning within the course „English for Specific Pur-
posts“ is in your opinion:

a/ not necessary

b/ necessary to revise only some aspects

c/ necessary

d/ indispensable

20. Provide at least 2 suggestions which are in your opinion important for qua-
lity teaching for the course “English for Specific Purposes”:

1. _____

2. _____