Different Proficiency, Same Class: Tackling Language Instruction in Heterogeneous ESP Courses in Vocational Schools[1]

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Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context requires certain particular skills from teachers. The usual group comprises students with different *p*roficiency levels, learning experiences, and diverse course expectations. Thus, ESP teachers need to achieve broad goals because they need to both develop students' general language proficiency and teach highly specialized technical vocabulary. This article provides accounts of students' concerns and expectations from ESP courses as captured in a small-scale survey. This explanation is followed by practical guidelines for teachers in this particularly demanding educational area. Lastly, this article discusses didactic implications based on classroom observations in Poland.

Resumen

La enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en un contexto de inglés para fines específicos (ESP) requiere ciertas habilidades particulares de los maestros. El grupo habitual comprende estudiantes con diferentes niveles de competencia, experiencias de aprendizaje y diversas expectativas sobre curso. Por lo tanto, los maestros ESP necesitan alcanzar objetivos amplios porque necesitan desarrollar el dominio general del idioma de los estudiantes y enseñar vocabulario técnico altamente especializado. Este artículo ofrece relatos sobre las inquietudes y expectativas de los estudiantes de los cursos de ESP capturados en una encuesta a pequeña escala. A esta explicación le siguen pautas prácticas para los docentes en esta área educativa particularmente exigente. Por último, este artículo analiza las implicaciones didácticas basadas en las observaciones en el aula en Polonia.

Introduction. EFL Classes in Vocational Schools: the Polish Context

Occupational foreign language is one of the compulsory courses in secondary and post-secondary vocational schools and technical colleges in Poland. The purpose of these courses is to develop overall linguistic skills and teach a foreign language for specific purposes. The syllabi for language education courses and the amount of instruction are stipulated in subject-specific curricula. They also depend on the type of occupation that a student pursues, the type of school and the type of tuition (full-time or extramural).

In Poland, vocational education, especially at post-secondary level, differs significantly from general compulsory education in regard to student demographics. Contrary to primary or high schools, vocational education attracts people of different ages, occupations, and overall linguistic experience. Currently, each student receives English instruction from childhood, but this has not always been the case. Students before 1989, for instance, were taught Russian as a rule, and they were not provided with any English courses in general education. Therefore, today's adult groups in post-secondary vocational schools might encompass linguistically independent and highly proficient learners with B2 or C1 levels according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), as well as people who never received any instruction in English or who only attained the most basic levels of proficiency (e.g., A1 or A2, in CEFR terms). According to the CEFR document, a C1 user is able to understand a wide range of longer and more demanding texts or conversations and express ideas without assistance. An A1 user, however, is a beginner, who understands and uses very basic expressions to satisfy concrete needs, thus interacting in a limited way. Vocational schools comprise a small number of students taking a current course, which results in students at different language levels within one course.

The national program guidelines for ESP courses provide the main objectives of the language education in vocational contexts. According to this document, teachers are to ensure that the graduate can:

- establish personal and professional contacts in a foreign language,
- address potential customers' inquiries concerning trade-related services,
- use specialist foreign language vocabulary, necessary for their field,
- read foreign vocational literature,
- translate simple trade-related texts,
- produce a CV in a foreign language that will be needed to seek a job abroad,
- search for available trade-related resources and use them successfully.

Developing specialist skills with students presenting relatively advanced linguistic skills is mostly unproblematic. This process, however, may be more challenging when total beginners are expected to achieve these same goals. It is frequently necessary to first build general linguistic competence, and then build on this competence by teaching specialist skills effectively. The entire program is frequently too short to handle each of these tasks. For instance, a part-time English course for a florist job in a post-secondary vocational school lasts 15 hours only. This time is supposed to be sufficient to achieve all the aims outlined above. This amount of instruction might be sufficient when teachers work with learners who already know English at, say B1 or B2 level, but is clearly insufficient with students with no such prior instruction. Linguistically, students are supposed to achieve a vague "understanding [of] the main ideas of a complex text such as a technical piece related to their field". This might indicate that what is expected of them is the B1 level of proficiency.

Students' Concerns and Expectations: A Survey

To learn about students' expectations and concerns at different stages in the course, the study's author developed and conducted a small-scale survey. This survey (see Table 1) asked students about their motivations, needs and concerns about the upcoming course. The participants were 10 native speakers of Polish in a floristry vocational school. Four participants were at A2 or lower level, and six participants were at B1 or B2 levels. The small number of participants is due to the fact that the number of students in such courses in Poland is currently very limited, and this number was obtained from two classes during the consecutive years in which the author had access to the participants. The survey was distributed to the participants after the course's conclusion because it required that the participants comment on all the stages of the course. Participants signed an informed consent form before participating. The questions were open-ended with the exception of one question about the participant's perceived progress. This item was presented on a 1 to 7 Likert scale. Table 1 shows participants' responses, which exhibit different course expectations and concerns.

	Low proficiency students (A0, A1, A2)	Higher proficiency students (B1, B2)
What was your main personal aim to participate in the course?	• Learning *some* language	• Development of language skills • Learning specialist language
What was your main concern about the course?	• Lack of any knowledge of English • Fear of getting a negative grade and failing the course • Fear of not understanding too complex issues	• Difficulty of specialist vocabulary
What was your biggest difficulty in the course?	• Too fast pace of instruction • The complexity of English language • Lack of partner on my proficiency level	• No responses given
What were your expectations concerning the teacher's instruction?	• Stopping at the problematic cases • Ensuring positive atmosphere in class	• Developing linguistic skills • Getting to know a vast array of specialist vocabulary
What is your self-perceived progress after the course (on 1 to 7 scale)?	*M*=4.2 (*SD*=0.91)	*M*=5.8 (*SD*=0.79)

Table 1: Students' Concerns and Expectations: Responses from the Survey

Beginning speakers at a A0, A1, or A2 English proficiency level can feel a sense of inferiority which can negatively affect their learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). It seems that these students face more difficulties both before and during the course. This suggests that language specificity and overall course experience might be more conducive to more advanced speakers (e.g., B1 or B2 proficiency level). Additionally, beginners may exhibit higher and more general learning aspirations for the course. If they are taught in a gradual, unthreatening manner, beginners can be encouraged to develop skills after the

course, and it might motivate them to boost their overall linguistic competence. At the same time, teachers should not forget the more proficient English learners because these learners need to develop in areas not encountered before (mostly ESP, but also gaps in overall proficiency).

Guidelines for Teaching ESP to Heterogeneous Language Groups

Teaching ESP to a heterogeneous language group in vocational education is highly demanding and might be difficult for teachers. The teacher, in this context, even more so than ever, has to remember about the students' needs as well as the heterogeneous group dynamics. Teaching in such contexts needs to be marked with an increased dose of differentiated instruction, which takes the intellectual and psychological capacities of students into consideration and tries to cater to students' needs individually as well as at the group level (see Thomas, 1992). It also requires the accommodation of existing materials to fit students' different language needs. Below, I provide a discussion of issues in teaching in such contexts.

Teaching General Language Content

Some scholars think that in an ESP context, previous general language education is unnecessary, and the teacher starts teaching ESP without reference to general linguistic skills (e.g. Sowa, 2017). The majority of ESP scholars, however, stress that only students equipped with some general L2 language proficiency and linguistic skills can learn ESP subject matter efficiently (see, for example, Medrea & Rus, 2012). Teaching general language to a heterogeneous language group is therefore seen as necessary and should be a cornerstone of any ESP teaching. Teachers have to remember that with zero- or low-proficiency students, the introduced grammar will be basic. The general vocabulary will be the most frequent, and teachers may use frequency-based lists such as Oxford 3000™, but might limit them with the duration of the course in mind. It is necessary to be as inclusive as possible and to serve not only as an instructor but also as a partner in the language development. This may involve frequent teacher's involvement in collaborative groups as a peer and an instructor.

On the other hand, teachers can leave the grammar and vocabulary development to students of higher proficiency levels in class, but can provide supplementary materials (e.g., explanatory notes with practical application) for students' independent use. Such high English proficiency students have surely developed some autonomy (see, for instance, Smith, 2008) and with certain meta-competence deal with more advanced tasks (see, for example, Krashen's (1985) $i+1$) effectively and need less explicit general language instruction. It is crucial that students' complete all tasks, and that the teacher make frequent checks of the students' progress.

Teaching ESP Content

Specialist content might be equally enigmatic to all students in a course. Because of its importance and the fact that the course has a strong ESP character, specialist content needs to be developed equivalently by students at all levels of English language proficiency. The properties of the specialist content frequently invite the use of the L1 (Scheffler, Horverak, Krzebietke, & Askland, 2016), which will be particularly helpful for lower English proficiency students. The core of ESP content (trade-related lexis and basic linguistic functions) should be equal for both proficiency groups, but the teacher instructs in different ways and with different materials. Such an approach ensures the high degree of motivation in low English proficiency learners, whilst it does not appear boring to the higher English proficiency learners. In the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) paradigm of teaching, the presentation part is what can be done with the whole group, while practice and production should be achieved in smaller subgroups.

Level of Materials and Tasks

All students need to accomplish the same goals, according to the program guidelines. They should use the same recommended ESP materials. However, the materials can be adjusted with the proficiency of the group in mind. One highly complex grammatical structure can be substituted with another when it occurs to the lower English proficiency group. Authentic audiovisual materials should be used (Ciornei & Dina, 2015), and they can be quite complex due to their authenticity. However, the teacher should differentiate the tasks connected to such materials. For example, teachers may show the same film to both groups, yet require different products for each student according to their English language proficiency. This means that higher English proficiency students can answer elaborate questions concerning the presented material, and students with beginning proficiency levels can watch the same material and concentrate on listening for keywords, the main idea, and basic grammar tenses for this specific specialty. Such an approach is beneficial to all students because it optimizes learning in an individualized way.

Timing

Learning dynamics will differ due to all aspects connected with learners' English proficiency and linguistic experience. However, the use of the same content with similar supplementary materials will not guarantee that an equal amount of time needs to be spent with both groups. When timing is concerned, a teacher in a heterogeneous ESP course should allot and control time differently and should react to all students' needs as much as possible. Students' attainment of skills and language aspects is therefore the main objective. This is much more important than ensuring all topics outlined in the curriculum are covered. It is crucial that a teacher have additional supplementary exercises to provide to high proficiency students when they have finished, while the basic material is studied by beginner students. The teacher should not worry excessively about the passing time or intergroup synchronization issues but should accept that the differences are inherent in a heterogeneous language course.

 (Sub)grouping Issues

Grouping issues within heterogeneous classes are particularly delicate. For shared tasks and interactions, it is necessary that each student have a partner who is well-matched, as far as proficiency is concerned. Pairs or small groups of very similar proficiency, as confirmed in an initial placement test, are one example of such subgrouping match. Otherwise, learners might be seriously demotivated. Students in highly specialized courses might be few and highly unbalanced regarding proficiency. Therefore, the obvious partner for group tasks is also the teacher, who should be there with learners, sometimes partnering with students to complete the exercise.

Conclusion

Teaching ESP in vocational schools involves a set of highly specialized teaching skills. It is particularly difficult because the ESP vocational course comprises learners with heterogeneous English language proficiencies and diverse backgrounds. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary that ESP teachers adjust their teaching and remain as flexible as possible, taking factors, such as content, materials, class activities, timing, and student grouping into consideration. It is necessary that while all learners need to attain the same skills and knowledge outlined in the guidelines for teachers, they will present hugely different characteristics and expectations from the course, and will therefore achieve these goals through different learning products.

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