

# TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: CHALLENGES, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract.** *Teaching a foreign language for specific purposes concentrates on the specific needs of the learners, focusing more on language in context and on the course participants' need to acquire a set of professional skills and particular job-related functions. The process of teaching foreign languages in a professional higher education institution is a unique and differs in many aspects, it is directed and addresses immediate and very specific needs, moreover the trend of educational paradigm nowadays is the competency building approach which in turn involves the development of learners' ability to apply existing knowledge and skills in order to solve specific practical work –related problems.*

*The paper is the result of personal professional teaching experience as well as it contains theoretical analysis of teaching foreign language for specific purposes as well as authors reveal the current challenges that teachers encounter in the process of teaching language for specific purposes in the State Border Guard College of the Republic of Latvia.*

**Key words:** *foreign language, specific purposes, teacher, methodology, challenges.*

## Introduction

Professional and qualified personnel builds up the system and the reputation of any institution at local, national and even international levels. Professional development of personnel is considered to be one of the most important and the most significant investments in the organization's long-term perspective. Work for institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior envisages a long-term professional development, where educational institutions which provide an opportunity to receive professional education as well as necessary professional qualification plays a crucial role.

Globalization of the world's economy demands specialists and professionals in various areas to communicate effectively in foreign languages. The success is conditional of their abilities to manage language and cultural barriers, i.e. on the language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas, however the education policy of contemporary higher education institution aims at accommodating the needs of state, society and personality bringing forward highly esteemed and sought-after personal qualities such as independence, individuality, erudition, as well as the ability to take the initiative.

The process of teaching a foreign languages at a professional institution of higher education can be perceived in terms of its educational opportunities. Professional experience in teaching foreign languages allows us to conclude that the content and the methods of teaching are changing.

The teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes (FLSP) has been seen as a separate activity within foreign language teaching. It is believed that developed methodology with needs analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their field of study or work situation is the key distinguishing characteristic of FLSP. The emphasis of foreign language teaching is always on practical outcomes.

Considering the importance and peculiarities of border guard profession as well as the requirements set for training and education of specialists, authors would like to draw attention to the necessity of foreign languages for border guards which is emphasized in one of the fundamental documents -the Schengen Borders Code. It stipulates that Member States, with the support of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), *shall encourage border guards to learn the languages necessary for carrying out their tasks* (Regulation (EU) 2016/399).

Professionally-oriented communication with travellers, work with asylum seekers, detainees, completion of service documentation, taking part and being a member of escort, patrol teams as well as work in joint operations are only a few duties involving the necessity of knowing the foreign languages. Foreign languages more and more become an instrument that enables considerably improving also the career prospects.

A border and coast guard will frequently cooperate with colleagues from other European Union states. These cooperative activities, presume that harmonised procedures and common understanding exist. Language skills are essential due to the specific nature of border and coast guards' duties (Frontex Agency, 2017, p.48).

Foreign language desired expertise of border and coast guards is described in the reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Language training in the Common Core Curriculum for Border and Coast Guard Basic Training in the EU (CCC) focuses on the professional English language and is described by CEFR. Based on their own needs, national border guard organisations are encouraged to teach other additional languages as well (Frontex Agency, 2017, p.48).

In this paper the authors provide an overview of FLSP theory and practice of teaching, describe the list of challenges in FLP from the foreign language teachers point of view and come up with a range of suggestions how to develop the process of foreign language acquisition in the State Border Guard College of the Republic of Latvia.

## Foreign language for specific purposes

Several decades ago, speaking a foreign language was a prerequisite for just a limited range of professions, like managers or diplomats, nowadays it has become of fundamental importance in all professional circles. This means that there can be two main objectives for teaching and learning foreign languages: personal growth and professional growth.

“Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” this quote can be applied also to teaching LSP which also integrates the concept of professionally-oriented foreign language teaching with professional disciplines in order to obtain additional professional knowledge and develop professionally significant qualities of a person (Susilowati, 2008).

Having explored and analysed several sources of information (based on theories of Dudley-Evans and St. John on English for specific purposes), the authors came to the conclusion that definition of FLSP contains three absolute and four variable characteristics the same as English for specific purposes:

**1. Absolute characteristics** (language teaching is designed to meet specified needs of the learner; related in content to particular disciplines, occupation and activities; centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, text, discourse, etc., and analysis of the discourse; designed in contrast with General foreign language).

*Absolute characteristics:*

- a) FLSP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
- b) FLSP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- c) FLSP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis...), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

**2. Variable characteristics** (FLSP may be restricted to the language skills to be learned, e.g. reading; and not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology).

*Variable characteristics:*

- a) FLSP may be related or designed for specific disciplines;
- b) FLSP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- c) FLSP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation; it could be used for learners at secondary school level;

- d) FLSP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners;
- e) most FLSP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners. (Nation I. S. P., 1990)

Considering the variable characteristics, FLSP may be related or designed for specific disciplines. In specific teaching situations, it may use a different methodology. It is generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners, as well as for adult learners. Sometimes, it could be used for learners at secondary school level, depending on the need and expedience of the situation. Most FLSP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system (Grynyuk, 2016).

Foreign language for specific purposes is an approach to language teaching as a second or foreign language, whose aim is to empower a group of people with specific needs, no matter whether it is in academic, professional or personal issues. The whole course is tailor-made, so that the focus of the teaching content and method varies according to each field of interest. Two major types of foreign language for specific purposes have been recognized: foreign language for academic purposes and foreign language for occupational purposes. I. Kubrak in his survey on teaching English for specific purposes compiled the theories and underlined the differences between Language for Academic Purposes and Language for Occupational Purposes. He points out that Language for Academic Purposes entails training students, usually in a higher education setting, to use language appropriately for study. Such programs focus instruction on skills required to perform in foreign language-speaking academic context across core subject areas generally encountered in a university setting. The emphasis is largely on a general course content to cover common problems rather than specific courses according to the student's field (e.g. English for Engineers).

Language for Occupational Purposes covers situations in which Learners are studying languages for work-related reasons. Such courses are based on an analysis of their specific communicative needs in their work. Fields: industry sectors, government etc. (Kubrak, 2012).

Helen Basturkmen (2005) distinguishes five broad objectives in FLSP teaching:

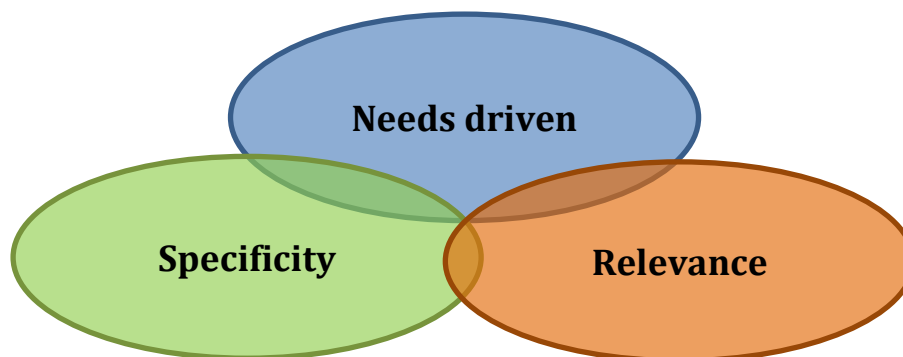
- revealing subject-specific language use;
- developing target performance competencies;
- teaching underlying knowledge;
- developing strategic competence and
- fostering critical awareness. (Basturkmen, 2010)

Taking into account theories regarding the FLSP, Carver states that there are three characteristics common to all FLSP courses:

- 1) **authentic materials** – the use of authentic learning materials is possible if we accept the claim that FLSP courses should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level. The use of such materials, modified by teachers or unmodified, is common in FLSP, especially in self-directed studies or research tasks. The students are usually encouraged to conduct research using a variety of different resources including the Internet;
- 2) **purpose-related orientation** – refers to the simulation of communicative tasks required by the target situation;
- 3) **self-direction** – means that FLSP is concerned with turning learners into users. For self-direction, it is necessary that teacher encourage students to have a certain degree of autonomy – freedom to decide when, what, and how they will study.

Based on the research of the theoretical basis, the authors made the conclusions that foreign language for specific purposes is:

- Learner-centred, second/foreign language training;
- Needs-based, involving all stakeholders;
- Characterized by collaboration with workplace/content experts;
- Characterized by the use of appropriate, authentic tasks & materials (specificity and relevance).



**Figure 1. Core principles of foreign language for specific purposes**  
(Source: compiled by the authors)

### **Teaching of foreign languages in the State Border Guard College of the Republic of Latvia**

The quality of the State Border Guard (SBG) work reflects in its implemented functions that also results from the proficiency and professionalism of its teacher. Professional training of border guards in the SBG comprises the following stages:

- 1) the course of professional training (complementary course) – gives insight into the structure of the SBG, service management and fundamental principles of professional activities;
- 2) professional education – provides border guards with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to perform their duties in certain positions as well as to plan and manage own work and the work of subordinated personnel;
- 3) specialization – ensures the training of border guards in the SBG required profiles e.g. dog handling, immigration, document examination, aviation etc.;
- 4) qualification improvement/ professional development courses – provide an opportunity to improve appropriate and systematic professional knowledge and practical skills required in service.

Three out of four Professional training stages include or may include the acquisition of foreign languages. The State Border Guard College (SBGC) implements the Professional further education study programme „Border Guarding” (Subjects: Professional English language terminology – 86 hours, and Professional Russian language terminology – 26 hours. After receiving the professional secondary education, where the length of studies is one year, border guards obtain the qualification – SBG inspectors (the 3<sup>rd</sup> level professional qualification) and can join the service in the SBG structural units or the SBGC.

According to the Basic concepts, the SBG officials after the definite period (service experience) may apply for studies in the SBGC in the programme -1st level professional higher education study programme “Border Guarding” (2 years full time studies or 2,5 years part-time studies) (Courses: Foreign language(English)-74hrs and Second Foreign language(Russian) - 26hrs. Students who successfully have acquired the abovementioned programme obtain the qualification -"State Border Guard junior officer".

In the fourth stage – qualification improvement– the SBG officials focus on the development of their knowledge, skills and competences in a specific area. The border guards may sign up for various qualification improvement courses such as Professional English language terminology (14 weeks) e-learning course, Basic English professional terminology course “Border checks at road border crossing point” (blended learning course), English language is a part of Air Border Module, Russian and English languages are included in the qualification improvement course for Escort.

Authors of the paper would like to describe the major challenges they as the foreign language teachers come up with during the years of work in the SBGC.

**1. Not a teacher of subject.** One of the characteristics or even a critical feature of FLSP teaching is that a course should involve specialist language (terminology) and content. In the majority of cases, language teachers are not specialists in the students' professional fields. That is why the primary issue in FLSP teaching is the struggle to master language and subject matter, in addition, the FLSP teacher is the syllabus designer and is responsible for the teaching material and evaluation. Foreign languages in the SBGC are not taught as a subject separated from the students' job related needs instead these are integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners which means that foreign language teachers have to be competent and need to have knowledge in many aspects directly not related to language issues- issue of visas, asylum procedures, refusal of entry, document check, vehicle examination etc. The professional in teaching FLSP has to go beyond the regular skills of a classroom teacher, but act as a collaborative, researcher, evaluator, course designer, consultant and material's provider.

**2. Issues related to training materials.** It is a considerable challenge foreign language teachers face in order to provide essential content-based materials for students with specific needs. These usually are teacher-developed materials which help to foster the acquisition of the syllabus content. In this respect, Gairns R. maintains that "for some teachers the lack of materials is a challenge, but for others – the opportunity". It is necessary to be cautious in using a word 'best' and 'perfect' related to teaching sources because according to Gairns R. "the perfect English textbook does not exist, but the best book available for you and your students certainly does". The authors of the paper believe that it is not possible to buy one Language book that completely satisfies the needs of FLSP teachers, especially if we talk about teaching professional terminology in Russian and English languages. In order to enhance and develop learners' professional vocabulary, their speaking, writing and listening skills, foreign language teachers must make the major part of methodical materials by themselves.

**3. Different level of knowledge.** In the FLSP course, the students are expected to have at least an intermediate level of general English. In practice, we have to deal with mixed-ability groups in terms of level of language competence, in Russian language some of them do not have even basic knowledge, they are not writing, nor speaking in Russian.

## Conclusions and Suggestions

1. Teachers/trainers of specific subjects the same as language teachers working in the field of professional education are affected by a constant changes in existing legislation which in turn affect not only the core vocabulary, but arise the necessity to adapt or implement new specific terms and even whole topics in the syllabus of the subject. There is a need to update subject/ course programmes as well as methodological tools, the authors of the paper bring forward the suggestion to organize the regular meetings (once in three months) with professional subject teachers in order to get familiar with the latest tendencies, changes in national or international normative acts.
2. Taking into consideration the beneficial infrastructure and training tools offered by the SBGC as well as the fact that the professionalism of border guard is build up from the combination of theory and practical skills. Authors suggest within the certain topics of border checks, immigration control or document technical examination organize the range of lessons based on CLIL method (integration of foreign languages in field subject). In order to avoid misunderstandings, the goals of the lesson as well as the practical interference of English/Russian languages into specific subject must be well planned. Such lessons could be potentially successful and bring the added value to the training programmes, strengthening the cooperation and coordination between subject teachers as well.
3. Authors suggest to make the changes in the training plans in order to harmonize the professional subjects with topics in subjects of foreign languages. (At first, learners get the fundamental knowledge in specific topic and only then topic related to professional terminology in English or Russian languages).
4. Various student exchange programmes have become a cultural phenomenon and are very popular among European students. A modern training institution in order to foster the cooperation and exchange of best practices among the educational bodies activate, promote and facilitate students' exchange programmes/mobility. To raise students' motivation, broaden professional experience, gain necessary social skills as well as to put into effect the gained knowledge, authors of the paper suggest to consider the possibility of students mobility, other students' exchange visits in frames of cooperation agreements with foreign border guarding educational institutions.
5. Teaching and learning foreign language is a complicated task, both for teachers and students. The number of contact hours allocated to mastering Professional Russian language terminology (Professional



further education study programme „Border Guarding”) seems to be extremely insufficient to develop and reach all the learning outcomes set for this subject, thus the authors of the paper suggest to increase the number of contact hours in the abovementioned subject as well as divide students into groups according to the level of knowledge in Russian language.

6. Border guards need precise command of a range of language specific to border guarding. They need to use language accurately to avoid ambiguity, thus in order to improve the current situation in foreign language proficiency among border guards and taking into consideration the results of several questionnaires (given to students at the end of the course), authors of the paper suggest to make the needs analyses regarding the development of general English/Russian language course. Such course can be offered as a separate course or it can be integrated in the 1<sup>st</sup> level professional higher education study programme “Border Guarding”.

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