

## PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN UNIVERSITIES WITH AGRONOMIC PROFILE. A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

In a changing world, the needs of those who learn English also evolve. In the last decades, the English courses for specific groups of learners have become highly important. English for special purposes found its way after the II World War. As for Romania, even if there was a certain interest in this field, it was taken to the next level only after 1990, when there appeared the economic and technological background for the development of this type of English. The scientific paper presents methods used for teaching the technical vocabulary to the first year students of the faculty of agriculture, the specialization of Technology of Processing Agricultural Products. The technical texts that are studied during the first year are those related to different types of cereals, such as wheat, maize, oats, barley, rice and millet. There is also a unit that deals with the history of food processing and types of preserving foodstuffs. The vocabulary awareness has in view various types of exercises, such as: true or false exercises and answering questions synonyms and antonyms, matching words, word-building types of exercises, find the mistakes in a given text, translation of technical texts both from Romanian into English and from English into Romanian. Typical mistakes have been found and we propose ways of correcting them. We noticed that during the students' performance the most frequent mistakes were those related to pronunciation. When learning the new vocabulary, the students confused words, trying to use the more common one; moreover, they misspelled and misused words.

**Key words:** English for Specific Purposes, communicative competences, vocabulary awareness

The knowledge of English has become a necessity for modern man, representing an informal means of communication and hence our integration into society. For higher education students, who study at a university with agronomic profile, learning English has some peculiarities due to the variety of specialized knowledge they need to possess. This involves some specific methods of teaching and learning. This paper aims to present the specificity of teaching /learning English by the students studying at an agronomic faculty. We conducted a survey of first year students, their level of language and their method of learning.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

The survey is based on curricula and analytical programs on the status and content of the English language for the specializations within the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iasi. We also used questionnaires that revealed the level of English learning in pre-university period, the teaching methods and techniques agreed by the 1<sup>st</sup> year students when acquiring English.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 1. Features of agronomic universities

The agronomic universities differ from other universities by several features:

*a wide variety of fields and specializations.*

At UASVM Iasi there are four domains (agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and veterinary medicine), each with several specializations. An exception is the veterinary field, where there is only one specialization.

*b. The content of the curriculum has wide-ranging subjects.* The students are offered information and skills in multiple areas: biology, biochemistry, anatomy, mechanization, technology, economics, etc.

*c. The existence of large differences regarding the level of specialized knowledge and awareness of English vocabulary.* 1<sup>st</sup> year students come from different high schools, where the concern for learning English vary greatly, making it difficult to harmonize the acquisition and improvement of English.

#### 2. Proficiency in English of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students

Analyzing the initial tests handed in to the 1<sup>st</sup> year students we can state that, even if they

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studied English both during secondary school and during high school, the majority (60-70%) do not master the basic grammatical structures and vocabulary. The differentiation criteria are varied: the knowledge they possess, the power of assimilation, motivation, interest in research in general and English in particular, temperament, imagination, effort, socio-cultural environment etc. We thus conclude that all these factors create distinct individuals who are equal in number to the students in a group. All mentioned above lead us to the idea that for teachers of English the most important factor should be the students: their needs, reasons for wanting to learn, the special skills or their lack, their method of learning.

### 3. Teacher's role in teaching

In the situation in which the students from one class have different levels of English, we can say that the teacher's role is more important than any method or material. The teacher must turn the written symbols (material) into speech, to make all these words, idioms, phrases from texts play a useful role in a real or imagined situation. To do so, he must use all his talent, all his energies and abilities. One of the tasks of the teacher in preparing lessons is to establish clear learning objectives, appropriate to the content of teaching, students' knowledge level, their interests, behavior and what they need to know until the end of the course. In the so-called task -based learning, the teacher should:

- change the way of planning the seminar
- become familiar with the ideas and principles of task-based learning and to apply them when using techniques of planning and learning
- increase the efficiency of learning by taking into account the theories about learning how to learn
- focus on student when teaching
- encourage the development of student responsibility and independent learning techniques
- stimulate student motivation
- use active participatory methods
- improve learning in groups of students
- use materials in a creative way.

The person who teaches English for specific purposes (ESP) must be aware of how the teaching skills of English as a second language (ESL) can be adapted to teaching English for specific purposes. Moreover, they will have to work with specialists to design appropriate courses to clarify some issues regarding the scientific vocabulary or content.

### 4. The student - active subject in learning

This principle consists in considering the student the subject of his own personality development and process of assimilation of the

training provided. Starting from the ones already mentioned, it is important that, during the act of teaching, the teacher should encourage the student participation in his own training. From this perspective, learning is an unceasing process of structuring and restructuring of what has previously been learnt, the internal dynamics of the personality being both a result and a condition for the active participation of the student.

The intellectual component of personality of the students include informative-formative and instrumental-acting aspects. It is therefore very important to know and see how students learn, how they process information and how they integrate it into a larger system. The intellectual work requires specific instrumental-acting techniques that are absolutely necessary for high efficiency. Familiarizing the students with such technical means to teach them how to learn. This goal requires a new vision through which the students develop their own intellectual work techniques that enable his gradual detachment from the external guidance and the increasing engagement in the self-education process. Teach students how to learn means to form skills, abilities and intellectual work techniques that ensure higher efficiency in education. Acquiring the techniques of intellectual work requires the need to process information by the learner, the total commitment of his personality and thus the student forms his own learning techniques. The teaching / learning these techniques also means practicing. Any technical content is associated with a learning technique and any learning technique is related to its content. The conclusion that emerges from this is that education is also done by the student as the subject that actively takes part in the learning process.

### 5. Teaching - learning techniques of the English language

The meaning of the word "method" comes from Greek and means *way to* (*odos* = path; *meta* = to). The teaching method refers to a techniques of acquiring knowledge that is proposed by the teacher that turns into a way of student learning which leads to long-lasting education. The literature presents traditional methods of teaching and learning foreign languages: translation method, audio-lingual method and modern methods and different techniques and methods of their application. The experience of working with students has shown that they generally prefer the modern methods due to their effectiveness in developing communication, and of course we take this matter into consideration when designing courses. We believe, however, that the eclectic approach as Chaslain (1988) calls it is best because it combines the elements of traditional and modern

methods. Such an approach has many advantages. It is more flexible and can be easily adapted to a wide variety of teaching-learning situations.

At the same time, the teacher will be less inclined to fix on one method and be more open to the use of new techniques and approaches. The learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have already focused their education to a specific area and consider foreign language acquisition as an important element for being successful in their career. They will constantly have to enrich their vocabulary and develop the skills needed for oral and written communication. We will present by examples the difficulties encountered at the second year students of Technology of processing agricultural products in the assimilation of the specialized vocabulary and the methods and techniques used to help them learn how to learn. The teaching of the vocabulary is made in context and learnt through exercises that include synonyms, antonyms, suffixes, prefixes, idioms, word families, verbal expressions, homonyms, dictionary use, development projects, etc. The so-called "international words" can be easily understood and learned by students. But the vocabulary specific to the processing of agricultural products includes many words of German origin, which makes assimilation more difficult: *vernalization, starch, bran, tassel, kiln* etc. To facilitate their learning, the chosen text is followed by different types of exercises: true-false, questions that include these words and their meaning in the text, matching words with their definitions, exercises of translation from Romanian to English and vice versa. The students also have difficulties when coming across similar words either in pronunciation or in writing. For example, when treating the subject cereals, the most common mistake is confusing the words *wheat* [wi: t] and *wet* [wet] both in pronunciation and in writing. Another typical mistake is the pronunciation of words *to droop* [dru: p] and *to drop* [drop]. The word *legume*, the plural of *legumen*, which means plante leguminoase that is often, translated *legume* by the students. The student awareness is important as the easiest way to correct this mistake is to start from Romanian word *legumă* and to find the English version, *vegetable*. Thus, if we put those words next to each other in exercises we can eliminate this confusion. Other specific terms such as *rancid, to seal, slaughter, to cure* (meaning *to preserve*), *dormant, to ripen, livestock, kernel* etc. can be easily assimilated if practiced in exercises using their antonyms and synonyms. Putting words in places where they occur (technique of places) is also an effective method. Thus, the various types of cheese

are presented in images of dairy processing facilities, pastry products in images of bakeries, vegetables in the vegetable garden or market etc. Developing projects on subjects of their own specialization will require students to consult dictionaries, use specific vocabulary both in writing and in speech when they presented their projects in front of their colleagues. With the help of the teachers and by learning how to learn, the students will acquire the English language as they work with materials they find interesting and relevant as they can use them in their work or further studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Learning English in universities with agronomic profile has a number of features determined by the variety of the vocabulary, different number of hours for the specializations and different degree of assimilation of English during high school studies.

2. The investigations conducted on the first year students show that over 65% of them present little information on the acquisition of English vocabulary and structures.

3. Of the methods we tested in order to motivate them to thoroughly learn the English language, we found out that the students agree the eclectic method.

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