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Language for Specific Purposes: Methodological Problems, Trends and Perspectives

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Abstract

Teaching foreign languages for specific purposes in Russia is a rather new developing direction in methodology, but mostly it means teaching at nonlingual high schools. Though it doesn’t reflect the overall variety of purposes to learn a foreign language. The article considers possible kinds of goals depending on educational establishments, age of learners, learning styles and other factors. The author assumes that the main factor is a set of target tasks, which could and must be solved in studied language, so some ways of subcategorization LSP are discussed according to various factors. For providing of effective LSP teaching the author suggests direction of LSP teacher training forms and their content.

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1. Introduction

The modern situation in Russia can be characterized by innovative processes in all spheres including education. Foreign languages play an important role in the country’s educational politics and according to new Federal State Standards this discipline is obligatory to study at every secondary and high school not depending on professional direction. The students are expected to become mobile specialists, which are able to raise their qualification using materials in foreign language and communicating with their colleagues from abroad.

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All aims of high education are presented in Federal standards as cultural and professional competences and must be reached by the end of study. Among them there are capabilities to communicate in foreign language, knowledge about intercultural specificities of countries, where this language is spoken. Compared to old standards involving only activities in translation of professional texts modern students have to study even more, but on the other hand new curricula have got fewer hours for this subject than the old ones. So Russian foreign language teachers have to do lessons more effective but in less time.

The other side of LSP-problem is preparing of pedagogical staff for high schools and other specific educational establishments. There is no qualification “high school teacher” and graduates of pedagogical universities begin to teach based on their intuitions, on experiences how they were taught. Traditionally the programs in methodology discuss questions of foreign language teaching in secondary schools and such significant sectors as preschool teaching and high school teaching have not received attention during preparing of future teachers.

So there are two main tasks for solving the problem: to define particularities of LSP and LSP-teaching and to change methodic programs at pedagogical universities to prepare our graduates ready for teaching in every sector.

2. Purpose approach to foreign language teaching

LSP-teaching is a rather new problem for our country. Though foreign languages were always taught at secondary and high schools, the main goal of teaching was to drill some grammar constructions and to learn to translate texts into Russian often with dictionaries. The subject “foreign language” was considered as one “for the overall development” and not important for future profession. The results of such approach are highly qualified specialists, who cannot participate at international meetings, conferences, share their experience with their colleagues and use colleagues’ achievements in their practice.

LSP-methodology is at the stage of development, of search how to integrate graduates into modern international sciences, to let them become members of international professional communities. Even the term “LSP” is a new one in language teaching methodology, because in Russia it is traditionally studied in linguistic, not pedagogical meaning.

There are many investigations devoted to characteristics of language for specific purposes, most of them to English for specific purpose. This phenomenon is studied as a kind of teaching and “it aims at acquainting learners with the kind of language needed in a particular domain, vocation or occupation” (Majid, 2009).

The terms ESP and LSP as a word-word translation (often as English abbreviation) is used in Russian too, but in the meaning professional language, scientific language, business language and so on. All definitions are regarded as a kind of language with some distinguishing features, as a functional style. So the linguistic approach studies linguistic characteristics and does not allow to make foundations for foreign language teaching, because it does not consider all spheres of language. To know what and how to teach we have to know what tasks our learners have to solve using this language, for what purpose they begin or continue to learn foreign language.

In this connection we suggest to introduce another approach to differ directions of language using and of its teaching. It could be a task oriented approach or to reflect the term “language for specific purpose” a purpose approach to foreign language teaching. Key points would be answers to following questions:

- Who is the learner?
- What does he/she learn foreign language for?

Thus in order to create a methodological theory of LSP-teaching there are following aspects to be revealed: what are possible learners’ types, what personalities can be foreign language learners, and their variable purposes to study foreign language.

3. Ways of methodological subcategorizing LSP

To settle our issues it is necessary to review some literature devoted to ESP/LSP problems. Researchers note, that “the ESP literature has expanded enormously” (Swales, 1988) and “teaching materials in languages for specific purposes have evolved in the last years dramatically” (Laborda, 2009), most of them base their investigations on difference between general language and language for specific purposes.
But purposes differ and J. Swales (1988) generalizes three ways of subcategorizing English for Science and Technology (EST) and other ESP activities. The first way considers educational levels: A. Schools; B. Technical Colleges; C. Polytechnics and Universities (undergraduate level); D. Polytechnics and Universities (postgraduate level); E. Polytechnics and Universities (research and academic staff); F. Specialized Institutions.

A second way bases on science directions and differs two main kinds: Science (Earth Sciences, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences (Chemistry, Physics, Math)) and Engineering and Technology (Mechanical, Electrical, Civil, Chemical, Production Engineering).

A third way is to establish a set of activity-types, such as reading and making notes on textbooks, reading scientific articles, Following and taking notes on lectures, Carrying out and writing up experiments, Writing technical reports, Answers examination questions, Taking part in seminars and tutorials, Using technical manuals and other instructional literature (Swales, 1988).

Of course all the ways are interrelated and it is not possible to say, which of them is most important. ESP is often divided into English for Academic Purposes, English for Occupational or Vocational Purposes, English for Professional Purposes. This division is relevant for some methodological classifications in Russian methodology, so E.N. Solovova (2009) speaks about language kinds according to the functions they have: language for general purposes, business language, academic language and language for specific purposes. These are modules of foreign language teaching, each module does not depend on other, and it is autonomous and can be taught separately.

A problem in classification of E.N. Solovova (2009) is content and subject of business language. This part is widely discussed, because traditionally it means language of trade and all student books in business language aim to teach future business people to solve their professional tasks in foreign language, therefore, it is only a language for professional trade purposes. On the other hand according to new Federal State Standards for master-level discipline named “business language” is obligatory in almost all the curricula and university chairs of foreign languages have to work out “business” for every educational direction to choose content of teaching foreign language.

Besides schools stay as a separate part of educational system and results received at schools are not so high as it is stated in teaching plans and do not play any role for next institutions. School teachers have no responsibility for language competence of their pupils; school curriculum is not combined with others.

To avoid problems all the stages of foreign language learning should be considered as a system, in which every component depends on the other. The main criterion for such classification is purpose of language learning and firstly it determines connections with professions, so the purposes can be individual and professional. Further division specifies the first: individual purposes through communicative situations and professional purposes through professional directions.

Among professional purposes Science language takes a special place because on the one hand it is a professional language of scientists’ communication and on the other hand a means of communication in career for all professional groups. Of course every science language has its particularities, but mainly in lexical context concerning terms of specific profession. However there are universal stereotype features, which determine scientific functional style and form therefore teaching content by preparing of all future specialists.

At high schools Science language becomes both the means and the end goal of foreign language teaching. Academic language has the same function of scientific communication between students and university teachers, it makes possible to plan and organize learning process, do research work, discuss studying problems and so on, and therefore Language for academic purposes can be considered as a basic level of scientific language. Specific content of various professions is expressed through special terminology, and the most grammar structures of Science language build skeleton for languages for professional purposes.

And one point more, that should be mentioned concerning traditions of foreign language learning in Russian high schools. It is division into lingual and nonlingual specialties and according to this division foreign language teaching differs in term of study and in target activities. But modern professions cannot be divided into this groups so easily, for many of them foreign language becomes obligatory, though they belong to nonlingual group. Because of this contradiction foreign language methodology should be developed as profession oriented teaching aimed at language learning on the level sufficient for profession problems solving (Kazakova, 2011).

Thus, for foreign language teaching there are following purposes-types, which can help to work out relevant teaching methods:
Language for nonprofessional purposes (individual purposes);
Language for academic and scientific purposes;
Language for professional purposes.

These types reflect the spheres, in what the language will be used, and allow to show the levels of language learning from very beginning to educational stages till language as a tool in professional life. According to H. Basturkmen (2009) “all language is specific purpose”, every person has an aim to learn a foreign language, even if she or he has to learn it as an obligatory subject at an educational institution. This thesis is very important for the whole system of foreign language teaching, it makes possible to accept every methodological step as a part, as a preparing stage for the next one.

4. LSP learners’ types

Methodological system of LSP teaching includes besides content (language phenomena and their use) personalities of learners. The goals of foreign language learning can be conditioned by internal or by external motivation, so one wants to receive good marks and the other to make a career. Teaching methods depend on object, that’s why it is necessary to classify target groups for foreign language learning.

The question, who is LSP learner, can be answered from two angles: age of learners and their personal features. These are main points, which ensure efficiency of individual teaching and differentiation in group education.

As for age groups there are two methodological directions: early foreign language education and education of adults. Both groups are not new for pedagogics but they need generalization concerning foreign language teaching and corresponding preparing of future teachers for these special groups.

Early education becomes actual because of bringing foreign language in all primary schools in Russia. Besides some kindergartens introduce this innovation too. Private lessons and bilingual education are in fashion among parents, many want their children communicate in English, but it is difficult to say, that methodology of early education is fully developed. The main investigations are devoted to practical outcomes, plays, visual methods, and few of them present analyzed results of teaching in young groups.

No doubt teaching of adults is another methodological sphere and its development has a good basis in investigations in andragogy, rather new pedagogical science, which studies psychological and pedagogical features of adults and offers andragogical model in comparison with pedagogical model (Rakova, 2012). Teaching of adults is two-sided, in what both teachers and learners are active, it is a process based on experiences and autonomy of learners. Adult learners expect immediate use of acquired knowledge and are highly motivated if they see practical results of their learning.

Of course age groups are generalized and do not reflect individual features, this task can be solved through psychological investigations and questionnaires, which establish learning styles according to leading perception channel.

In this sense the Theory of generations is interesting as diagnostic means for selecting of teaching methods and technical tools. This theory bases on works of Giambattista Vico, Italian philosopher, of Jan Condorce, French writer and politician. In 1964 J. Deverson published her investigations in “Generation X”, in 2003-2004 it was presented in project “Rugeneration” under the guidance of E. Shamis (Kazakova, 2015). According to the Theory there are some generation groups, each of them has its distinctions formed through external conditions, historical periods. These are: traditionalists, baby-boomers, generation X, generation Y, modern generation Z. Belonging to one or another group lets determine exactly purpose of foreign language learning, correctly select preferred activities and tools.

5. LSP-teachers training

The growing popularity of ESP inspires the permanent need of qualified teachers. Changes in teaching goals must bring changes in teachers training. Curricula at pedagogical high schools in Russia are mostly aimed at preparing of teachers for secondary schools. Other teaching areas stay lacunas in professional competence and young teachers begin their professional activity by intuition making mistakes and losing time. They find difficulties in teaching situations different from them, in which they were prepared.
Beginners at technical high schools besides methodological problems have language difficulties in technical English, in such situations they have to study the major of their students, the same in all other nonlinguistic universities. Acquaintance with its basics can include visiting professional establishments, reading special literature, making projects together with students, collaborating with specialists of other professions and so on. All this activities make for young teachers the content of self-initiated self-education; university chairs of foreign languages cannot offer such additional training for colleagues.

The way out of the situation can be special methodology courses for students of senior courses, where they discuss possible problems, learn strategies of autonomous language learning, try to work out language exercises. J. Swales (1988) analyses investigations of Hutchinson and Waters and emphasizes, that they “do not believe in an identifiable ESP methodology, as they see no theoretical difference between ESP and teaching general English – only difference in practical outcomes” (Swales, 1988). To our mind exactly these outcomes and discussing of LSP-varieties must compile the main block of special teacher preparing.

Future LSP teachers should understand that their tasks are not only to drill grammatical and lexical features but to simulate real situation, where their students can practice the learned material, to help them to cope with expected problems, to teach them learn autonomously, if they meet a new situation, which was not considered in by their training. Possible situations should be investigated and presented in form of cases, which are to be solved.

The traditional role of teachers as transmitters of ready knowledge needs restructuration into teachers as partners to get knowledge. The best form for autonomous learning is project devoted to problem solving; therefore future LSP teachers must know all particularities of this method: how to choose an actual theme for project work, to organize and reflect the project, to collaborate students for team work and so on.

A new task for Russian LSP-teachers is to work out subject-specific materials. There are not enough student books for LSP as a foreign language, practitioners use a basic book and take in addition some material from other books or from internet. Mostly these are texts dealing with studied subject and they do not correspond with language phenomena of the basic book. Modern LSP teachers should be able to work out relevant exercises, which demonstrate and enable to drill language use in real or in model situations.

Besides modern students use modern tools, that’s why a qualified LSP teacher should be able to use them on high level.

Based on the analysis of most important LSP teachers’ activities possible directions of LSP teachers training could be the following:

- to discuss possible target groups for study of foreign language for specific purposes;
- to let students specialize in some professional directions concerning both language and situations of its use;
- to simulate real and model LSP situations themselves and with imaginable students;
- to learn strategies of autonomous language learning;
- to demonstrate relevant methods of LSP teaching, first of all project work, case-study and forms of cooperative learning;
- to learn possibilities of modern tools for foreign language teaching / learning;
- to work out relevant materials for LSP teaching.

This list is not full and could be continued or varied depending on conditions by foreign language teachers’ training, but such education must find a place in curricula at pedagogical universities in form of an elective course or as a special block in traditional methodological course. Main goal of such courses is not to show, how it is “correct” to teach foreign language for specific purposes, but to develop methodological thinking of students showing them varieties of LSP.

6. Conclusion

Theory of LSP-teaching is a perspective direction in foreign language methodology aimed to work out principles, methods and forms how to teach learners taking in account their own expectations and needs in professional and nonprofessional spheres. Important for such methodology is to know who is the learner, what learner’s style he/she has, how old he/she is. All these factors determine purpose approach of teaching, which should be considered by preparing of future foreign language teachers as a special elective course or as a module in traditional curriculum.
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References


