The Development of Students’ Mental Lexicon in Legal Discourse by Means of Authentic Materials

Anush M. Shoikova*, Evgeniya V. Tikhonovab

a) National Research Tomsk State University, 36, Lenin Ave., Tomsk, 634050, Russia

Abstract

This article is devoted to the formation of a mental lexicon of legal discourse by means of authentic materials within the competence-based approach in forming and developing appropriate skills as well as to the possibilities of students to develop their skills not only in the process of learning English but also for future professional activity.

Keywords: Legal discourse; mental lexicon; authentic audio materials; EFL methodology

1. Introduction

Legal education is currently one of the most prestigious and authoritative in the labor market. However, the requirements for graduates at the moment are undergoing a great change. Thus, in connection with Federal state educational standards for higher professional education, future lawyers must not only possess appropriate skills and abilities in the legal field, but they must also possess a communicative competence in the native and foreign language using appropriate legal terminology, which will ensure their competent work, that is, they must use correctly legal discourse in different situations of interaction.

The paper aims to study how foreign language authentic materials affect the development of students’ mental lexicon as a component of their professional competence in the context of legal discourse. Thus, the development of the mental lexicon of legal discourse in teaching law students will be more successful and will lead to the formation

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-3822-529-695; fax: +7-3822-529-742.
E-mail address: anushka@sibmail.com
of necessary competencies if the learning process will take into account: 1) the characteristics of the legal discourse, 2) the characteristics of the mental lexicon, 3) skills and abilities that are to be formed by the completion of University training, 4) the need for authentic materials in the classroom.

2. Methodology

2.1. The learning environment

Legal discourse is understood as a form of institutional discourse, i.e. discourse associated with a particular social sphere of communication, in particular, with the sphere of rights (Borisova, 2010). At the core of any discourse is a text. The legal text has features of a scientific text, and of instruction text as it performs informative, and prescriptive functions. The language of the legal text is characterized by the following grammatical and lexical features: 1) richness of legal terminology which demands precision usage and sound; 2) use of Latinisms and abbreviations; 3) the presence of a large number of eponyms and toponyms in the terminology of the case body of Anglo-American law; 4) the specific semiotic space, which is characterized by a certain set of verbal and nonverbal signs; 5) the inclusion of phraseological units which have a lexical-grammatical and stylistic features in the text.

We build a mental lexicon of legal discourse by forming a foreign language communicative competence in a law-student by and taking into account the above mentioned features. The concept of “mental lexicon” has been considered by many scientists and scientific teams (Jackendoff, 2002; Gural, 2012). However, in this paper we refer to the works of Gural S. K., who considers the concept as a category of discourse and points out that it is associated with a person's ability to store in his or her memory a huge amount of necessary words and instantly extract them in the process of constant communication (Gural, 2012). Thus, the mental lexicon includes the following characteristics:

- non-alphabetic arrangement of words and reservations, based on similar sound segments;
- interrelation of words with other units of language, as well as with words and phrases;
- the dependence of words on the situation of communication (its usage in various contexts);
- presence of non-sound form of words in the mental lexicon;
- regular establishment of new connections, i.e. an active movement in the language and its change.

On the basis of the suggested characteristics of the mental lexicon we can distinguish the following skills which a student should have at the end of studying legal discourse in English:

- ability to use actively and pronounce correctly the lexical units in accordance with the norm and Language Usage and in a particular context;
- the ability to recognize associations between units of language and objects of reality;
- the ability to improve knowledge not just in learning, but also during the professional activity.

2.2. Material

The mental lexicon of every person who belongs to a particular society is different and has its own characteristics. However, in the pronunciation of particular words or phrases, each individual accesses denotatum to recognize the meaning of the thing uttered and relates it to the context in the situation of communication, although the language also has a number of words and phrases in the utterance of which it does not happen. This applies to stamps, situational clichés and precision words when referring to a particular object in reality to realize the meaning of statements is not required.

When learning a foreign language in higher education institutions and forming a mental lexicon of a student a number of factors that have a significant impact on this should be taken into account, namely, age and personal characteristics of each individual student, the teacher's role in the educational activity, the formation of an active learning environment that promotes the development of background knowledge of student in all areas. Law students have a fairly extensive knowledge of the law, which greatly simplifies the task of basic studying – the formation of
the mental lexicon of legal discourse. However, due to the fact that this knowledge is limited only by their own language, teachers need to find the right means of teaching, based on the specifics of language consciousness of lawyers and characteristics of the language in a legal text. Future lawyers in the implementation of their professional activities must possess all the skills of speech activity (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Understanding of the text of a foreign language perceived aurally (listening) is one of the main and most difficult tasks of teaching foreign languages in higher education. Formation of mental lexicon of legal discourse by authentic materials for foreign language lessons is the most effective. This is due to the fact that they have the following important characteristics: authenticity, literacy, pronunciation and intonation, a full immersion into language environment of legal sphere, the presence of the socio-cultural component, the correct use of terminology and precise words, proper names, etc.

When using authentic materials in the formation of the mental lexicon of legal discourse it is necessary to consider didactic, linguistic, psychological, proper linguistic principles (Shchukin, 2014). However, in this paper, it is advisable to select only the major ones, which are interrelated and interdependent:

- the principle of use of visual methods in the formation of the mental lexicon of legal discourse to ensure correct use of relevant terminology in different communicative situations;
- the principle of consistency ensures gradual immersion into language environment of the legal discourse and the gradual complication of the material, as well as the need to distinguish three stages when working with each particular exercise: preparatory (before listening to the text), the main (actually listening to the text), analytical (after listening to the text);
- the principle of interdisciplinary coordination based on the knowledge acquired in the subjects “Administrative Law”, “Theory of State and Law”, “Politics”, “Information Technology in the legal activity” in direction “Jurisprudence”, ensures the formation of background knowledge in native and foreign languages;
- the principle of concentric features implies “such a nature of selection and introduction of lexical and grammatical material, at which is based on the repeated reference to already learned material with its gradual deepening and widening” (Shchukin, 2014, p.159), thereby helping law students to maintain and develop mental lexicon of legal discourse;
- the principle of student motivation (interests and encouragement for result) provides not only the acquisition of knowledge and experience in a foreign language in the learning process, but also for future career.

2.3. Groups of Exercises

So, using authentic materials in the formation of the mental lexicon of law students and taking into account the above principles, it is advisable to distinguish between different groups of exercises that achieve this goal:

- Exercises aimed at forming listening skills:
  a) exercises to memorize legal terms and situations of their use in the monologic, dialogic text (with consolidation of information in writing / without consolidating of information in writing);
  b) exercises to single out the key information of the text (Russian and English-language material) with an accent on terms, precision words, and without focusing on the reservations and zero information of the text;
  c) listening comprehension of authentic text fragments in a foreign language in order to identify its phonetic peculiarity: dialect groups, intonation, pronunciation manners;
  d) exercises to determine the contextual dependence in dialogic / monologic text in a foreign language with a clear definition of linguistic tools that are used to solve the speaking task in a particular situation.
- Exercises aimed at forming communication skills in legal discourse:
  a) the ability to analyze and create texts of legal discourse, using appropriate terminology, precision words, phraseological units
  b) the development of statements by Russian and foreign languages (monologic, dialogic);
  c) the ability to pronounce the texts phonetically correct by adhering to the necessary intonation, speech rate, with a focus on the key information of the text
• Combined type of exercises (Artemyeva, 2005; Karasik, 2000; Pinker, 2004; Tikhonova, 2014), which involves combining the previous two types of exercises, when the law students at the same time learn to understand authentic audio materials and to highlight pragmatic potential of the text, its purpose, key information, and to reflect according to the situation.

2.4. Experimental learning

During the experimental learning we used 2 authentic texts, containing legal terminology on the theme “Law and Law Enforcement”. Content analysis of Text № 1 allowed us to select 25 lexical units in legal terms. Text № 2 contained 30 lexical units in legal terms. These language items make up the active field-related vocabulary. The aim of the experimental learning was to study how selected authentic field-related materials together with the set of designed exercises help students enrich their vocabulary in the field of jurisprudence. In the study, the above-mentioned groups of exercises were divided according to the ways of material mastering, namely receptive and productive, which helped us to compare the level of students’ knowledge in the experimental group before and after the training through the designed methodology. Practical sessions in the learning groups took place 2 times a week.

2.4.1. Participants

The training was organized on the basis of the Institute of Law at National Research Tomsk State University. It was carried out under natural conditions in the framework of the practical course of English language training, and 22 first-year students majoring in “Jurisprudence” participated in it. The sample of subjects was allocated to one experimental group.

2.4.2. Results

We measured the results of experimental learning in terms of juridical terminology acquisition by the students. We measured their vocabulary skills in two aspects: receptive acquisition, i.e. their ability to recognize the terms when reading authentic texts, and productive, when students can use the specified words in their oral speech. We asked students to work in pairs and count the number of used terms when speaking on the problem. These results are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways of terminology acquisition</th>
<th>Text № 1</th>
<th>Text № 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before experimental learning (students)</td>
<td>After experimental learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>receptive</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>productive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
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Based on the results of mental lexicon units acquisition by students, we can see that the indicators in the training of legal terminology through the receptive method are higher.

2.5. Discussion

The comparison of control results shows that at the start of the experiment control law students of experimental group had a fairly low knowledge and not developed enough skills for the correct and proper communication in a foreign language in the field of jurisprudence. The data for the task is very difficult for the following reasons: the presence in the text of a large number of precise vocabulary, terminology, the structure of the text difficult to understand, the difficulties in pronunciation.

The results at the final control test show that in the experimental group one can see an increase of knowledge and skills after this training phase. However, qualitative and quantitative indicators of mental lexicon of legal discourse
of law-students of an experimental group suggest that the use of authentic audio materials, that are included in the above mentioned group of exercises enable us to develop relevant knowledge and skills more effectively, which indicates the usefulness of the proposed method.

3. Conclusion

The results of experiential learning research support the hypothesis which lies in the assumption that the development of the mental lexicon of legal discourse will be more successful if the students use authentic materials, which include the above-mentioned types of exercises based on the relevant implementation guidelines, which are based on the features and characteristics of the legal discourse of the mental lexicon. This is due to the fact that the students not only remember certain legal vocabulary in the classroom in a foreign language, but also are able to understand and reproduce the major and minor elements of a coherent legal discourse with reliance on background knowledge.

References