ESP Adult Course Implications for Professional Competence Development

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Abstract

In this paper we focus our attention on the design of an ESP course, aimed at instructing adult learners, who are university lecturers, teachers and specialists. We developed a course based on the student-centered approach to meet the needs and individual professional interests of the target category of learners. We discuss the ways in which the course can boost professional competence development in the context of the multiprofessional environment of a modern polytechnic university undergoing changes.

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1. Introduction

The dynamism of modern society causes dramatic changes in the approach to language teaching/learning processes. Moreover, there is a growing interest in ESP due to globalization, resulting in wider and closer international relations. This brings forward the importance of lifelong learning for competitiveness and employability. Adult learning is a vital component of lifelong learning. Currently, adult learners’ education and training are considered crucial for every country with globalized, advanced and knowledge-based economy. So, a lifelong learning perspective is a key issue to allow countries to face current challenges, and a lifelong learning perspective for the education and training of university staff is even more significant, because universities have to integrate the educational world and research environment. In Russia, particularly, university education is being...
reformed. In the context of lifelong education, language training is also undergoing changes. To meet the requirements of the changing world, educators have to introduce and develop such training courses and teaching technologies, which would boost the professional competencies. Thereby, language education can effectively contribute to the development of some professional competencies of specialists in various fields of technology. Competencies such as communicative skills for making contacts worldwide, working in groups or international teams, ability to argue effectively, ethical liability of decision-making, flexibility and social experience, create a lasting ground for professional and cultural development of specialists; these are among the most topical ones. The aim of this paper is to present an ESP course, designed for the professional competence development of adult trainees.

2. Method and procedures

2.1. Learning Environment

An essential peculiarity of modern societal development is the formation of a multicultural and multiprofessional educational environment involving a diverse range of discourses, both general and professional, as well as the subjects of discourse practices from various sociocultural communities. The University educational environment is undergoing crucial changes under these conditions (Aylazyan, Obdalova, 2012). Besides, specific features of a polytechnic university with its multiprofessional community require particular pedagogical and methodological approaches.

Tomsk Polytechnic University, given the status of a national research university in 2009, incorporates specialists in 26 fields of technology, science and humanities engaged in research and education. As the university joined the Lisbon European Council of March 2000 doctrine of continuous education, it aims not only at training high quality specialists but also at lifelong learning. To implement this latter task, the university provides its staff with the opportunity to improve and update their professional competence in the university refresher courses. One of the essential components of these courses is foreign language skill development, which involves constant training and updating.

In the multiprofessional environment of the polytechnic university it was necessary to model the learning setting for EFL acquisition by non-linguistic professionals for whom the language is regarded as a tool that helps them to extract, process and use new special knowledge and skills. This implies the use of authentic texts, video and audio sources as well as creating a favourable and relaxing atmosphere, using the communicative approach.

2.2. Participants

The trainees in the refresher course are the university staff, including professors, teachers, assistants and other adult learners of a very wide range of professions, age and language competence characteristics. In Table 1 it is possible to see the composition of one group in the first module of the programme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of learners</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Particular field of activity</th>
<th>Needs in language learning</th>
<th>English language competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>geology</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>geology</td>
<td>Deliver lectures</td>
<td>false beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>geology</td>
<td>Make business contacts</td>
<td>beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>economy</td>
<td>Write and deliver lectures</td>
<td>beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>economy</td>
<td>Write and deliver lectures</td>
<td>elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>machine design</td>
<td>Deliver talks at conferences</td>
<td>false beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>nuclear power engineering</td>
<td>Make business contacts</td>
<td>false beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>administration</td>
<td>Deal with foreign students</td>
<td>beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>history</td>
<td>Research and deliver lectures</td>
<td>elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>philology</td>
<td>Research and deliver lectures</td>
<td>elementary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows that the group included 10 participants: 3 geologists, 2 economists, 2 engineers, a historian, an administrator and a philologist. All the participants are adult learners aged 30 to 50. As for the current level of their EFL-ESP, it varies considerably with every individual in the group. As mature learners they are competency-based learners, aiming at acquiring skills and knowledge that they can apply pragmatically to their immediate circumstances. Adult learners are primarily in charge of their own learning and aware of specific learning needs generated by real-life events.

2.3. Course design

The complete Business Professional English course was developed for the university staff. The general aim of the course is to develop communicative competence for business-related context. It is comprised of four semesters and includes four modules. Each semester corresponds to one level of proficiency and covers one module (36 academic hours). The aim of each Module is specified to the level of language proficiency and the participants’ needs. Module 1 is composed of 4 parts devoted to professional topics: 1. Business etiquette at work; 2. My workplace and duties; 3.Professional activities; and 4. Language of professional activity, incorporating 16 topic-related Units. Apart from classroom practice, participants of the programme are expected to work on their own (18 hours), using recommended materials, including e-net resources and the teaching media Moodle, specially developed to support Module 1 of the given course. At this level, learners are expected to be able to give personal information in the most typical business professional communicative situations.

Much emphasis in EFL and ESP methodology has been paid to the learner-oriented instruction due to the spread of communicative language teaching (CLT). We followed the pattern traditionally used in CLT: “pre-activity, activity and follow up”. Each unit began with a Lead-in, containing several questions which introduced the content of the unit, some short information for developing the learners’ cultural awareness and discussion, training exercises and a kind of presentation or role-play. A strong focus was on practical skills, functional language, situational dialogues and role-plays.

Thus, the peculiarity of the course is a step-by-step approach to the formation and development of the communicative skills providing for the realization of all kinds of verbal interaction in business professional environment. The Business Professional English Course provides a flexible credit-based programme, leading towards a higher level of the language use experience in the relevant professional situations with a strong focus on classroom practice. The Module development like that of the course was begun with the target group of learners’ needs analysis, using a needs-based approach.

2.3.1. Needs analysis

There are different ways of finding information about students’ needs and their previous experience. The use of questionnaires can produce a large amount of information about many different issues such as communication difficulties, preferred learning styles, preferred classroom activities, attitudes and beliefs (Richards, 2001). A questionnaire of this type was used to elicit information about our learners, their needs, previous experience, and what they want to learn in this course before the semester commenced. As a result, needs analysis was given considerable attention in making the particular course serve the target group's interests.

Needs analysis revealed that the target group was inhomogeneous in terms of professional experience, field of activity, language competence, age and needs. The difficulty for designing and teaching the course is quite obvious. Most learners were teachers and deal with foreign students, so they have to deliver lectures in English. The administrator has to cater to foreign students in the halls of residence. Almost all of them do research, write articles, keep contacts with foreign counterparts and travel on business to other countries. However, all of them need English for their work in each individual professional environment.
2.3.2. Planning objectives

Clear understanding of goals and objectives helps teachers to choose what material to teach, when and how it should be taught (Sysoyev, 2000). In his book D. Nunan (1988) gives a clear description of how one should state objectives. Depending on what is desired, objectives may sound like the following: Students will learn that...; Students will be aware of...; Students will develop.

Having obtained information about the learners, and their goals, we formulated our objectives. We defined which aspects of EFL-ESP learning should be included, emphasized, integrated, and used as a core of the course to adhere to the learners' needs and expectations. We focused on developing basic skills: vocabulary expansion, communicative skills, and intercultural competence.

This study is focused on the description of our experience with the design and implementation of Module 1 of the course. The aim of Module 1 is to help learners acquire skills of professional communication at level A1, according to the European scale of proficiency. At this initial stage, the main purpose was to develop some core skills of the communicative competence required for the ability to interact in profession-related context.

2.3.3. Learning material

Each unit includes topic-related reading material and a series of self-check and interactive tasks in which students discuss the issues raised in each module in terms of their own professional context and educational background. In Module 1 the participants were expected to read a wide range of set and recommended texts. Our task was to provide authentic exposure for the learners. Besides, we compiled learning materials and topics that might be useful and interesting for all the learners in the group.

Topics covered are associated with daily use of the language skills due to the global spread of English. The course materials serve the development of intercultural awareness of the students in the given course. In student-centered instruction, the appropriateness of materials includes student comfort and familiarity with the material, language level, interest, and relevance. The materials included various modes of their presentation: authentic articles, audio and video stories, which were aimed developing reading and listening comprehension skills, cultural awareness, vocabulary expansion, etc. Thus, as K. Graves points out, teaching materials are "tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suit the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course (Graves, 1996:27).

3. Discussion

One of the difficulties in designing and teaching the course was due to the varying adult age (30 – 50). Unlike the common streamline of students, adults enter the learning environment with a deep need to be self-directing and bring to the learning situation a background of experience that is a rich resource for themselves and others. That is why our major challenge was to bring together the scattered interests, which differ not only because of the learners’ various professional interests, but also because of their age group. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) found that adults have a broader base of experience to which new ideas and skills can be attached; furthermore, a broader experience base allows adults to incorporate new ideas and skills with much richer and fuller meaning than do youths. The trainees were very active with pre-text activities, coped well with training exercises but felt the lack of confidence in summing-up monologues. It is clear that as adult learners and mature professionals, they want to express their ideas in a more sophisticated form, but the boundaries of vocabulary and grammar at this level disappoint them. This brings us to the idea of providing a wider range of patterns for practical use in professional context.

Secondly, the environment is multiprofessional: from an administrator to a professor in engineering, thus there was a problem of finding common topics to cater for all the participants due to the diversity of their professional interests. Thirdly, their proficiency is varying from beginner to elementary. Fourth, their needs differed considerably because of the diversity of their professional activities. Fifth, there is a week-long gap between the sessions, and it takes time to make a bridge between the previous and the present session. Experience has shown that adult learners
should be deeper involved into the teaching/learning process, using their investigation abilities and creative potential.

4. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

As a result of mastering the first module of the Business Professional English course the learners mastered the lexis and grammar means of logical cohesion in a sentence and the organizational structure of the business professional discourse. Likewise they learnt the ways of business professional communication and could construct simple statements, questions and arguments in a professional context. The trainees learnt to introduce themselves in their workplace formally. They considered professional protocol in terms of global cultures, comparing it with that of Russia. They role-played in modeled situations to make sure they were ready to use their new skills in real circumstances. Likewise they were offered the opportunity to discuss their responsibilities and duties at work place in a small group and in pairs, to ask simple questions and express requests using the telephone. They also made appointments, arranged travel, made presentations concerning eating habits in Russia, etc.

The learners’ language skills acquisition was accomplished through the integration of the sociocultural component into teaching various elements of the language. The learners have been seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, different learning models, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focusing on the learners' needs became equally paramount as well as the methods employed to spread linguistic knowledge.

The course, designed for the implementation of language training in the context of adult life-long professional development has proved relevant and topical. The pilot implementation of the course design has drawn our attention to the importance of making better use of adult learners’ experience and potential. Finally, the results obtained showed that the methodology chosen for the course design was valid.

References


