

## REFLECTING ON RESERVES: UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**I**n today's world nobody denies the necessity to master languages of international communication and English, in particular, as, perhaps, the most worldly of them. It is an instrument of information exchange and a tool for cooperation. Education area is not an exception where a foreign language command is a prerequisite of academics' and students' mobility postulated by the Bologna process in Europe and required by the globalized world of today:

An enlarged Europe has led to radical changes in education. The creation of the European Higher Education Area by 2010 (Bologna 1999) sets challenging tasks in terms of greater mobility for students, more effective international communication, better access to information and deeper mutual understanding" (Bakayeva et al. 2005:32).

In this context it seems to be a paradox that the number of contact hours allotted to foreign languages in Ukrainian university curricula has been reduced with every passing year, and is fixed at 5 credits by the Education Ministry Directive (No 873 of 18.09.2009). This reduced number of classes is considered to be the main reason for low language proficiency level of Ukrainian university graduates according to the

opinion of the majority of Ukrainian university teachers. On the other hand, it is not a paradox since foreign languages are studied at school for a considerable period of time, actually, during the whole period of schooling. This time is long enough to build a solid base of general English, develop the four speech skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking, and equip school-leavers with working knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, with the proficiency level of school-leavers being B1+ in terms of the Common European Framework (CEF) as it is required by the secondary school curriculum. Then, 5 credits of the university course for bachelors seems to be quite a reasonable period to get to B2 proficiency level, the level of independent users. It is described in the CEF as follows: users of the language “can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of different opinions” (CEF 3:24). This proficiency level makes mobility a reality and allows foreign language users to function properly in academic and professional context and to be engaged in research. It also provides them with the platform for life-long learning (Bakayeva et al. 2005:32).

With the aim of reforming English instruction at Ukrainian universities to make it meet the societal demands and expectations and helping teachers design appropriate syllabuses, a team of Ukrainian university teachers developed the National ESP Curriculum (Bakayeva 2005), the project of the British Council and the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. The Curriculum is aimed at developing students’ professional and functional language competences, which enable them to

function effectively in culturally diverse academic and professional, job-related environments (op. cit. 2005:37).

The Curriculum was an innovative project opposed to the traditional approach to teaching foreign languages in Ukraine. It was the first curriculum based on students' language needs reflected in generic job-related skills which require particular types of language behavior described in CEF and adapted to university environment by the Curriculum designers. The Curriculum does not concentrate on the number of words or verb tenses that should be mastered by students as it was traditionally fixed in Ukrainian university curricula. It is obvious that students should know grammar and vocabulary, but it should be the working knowledge of the language, the ability to apply vocabulary and grammar for communication:

The ESP Curriculum shifts the emphasis from language knowledge as a set of isolated constructs to the notion of language as an integrated system of skills and knowledge, competences. This viewpoint reflects a change in educational philosophy where language teaching is viewed as a diversified education in language. Language learning is thus seen as the acquisition of both knowledge and integrated language skills as they are required for and interact in real-life situations (op. cit.:32).

The Curriculum is generic by nature and can be easily transferred to a variety of specialisms as it had been proved by the Baseline Study (Astanina et al. 2004), the first stage of the Curriculum development project. The research demonstrated that students of all specialisms need foreign languages for being engaged in the same activities: for socializing, for extracting information from written sources and working with this information, for making presentations, participating in discussions, and communicating in writing. Developing syllabuses which are consistent with the Curriculum has definitely contributed to changing the attitude to foreign language

teaching and learning in Ukraine and improving English language proficiency of Ukrainian students and university graduates (op.cit.:X). What is more, the Curriculum is a useful resource with valuable practical recommendations for professionals, in particular, for language achievement and proficiency assessors, for material designers and text book writers.

The national ESP Curriculum is comprehensive as it intends to cover all aspects of language learning and teaching which are realized through a set of complex aims presented below: practical: to develop students' communicative language competences in English; educational: to develop students' general competences, the ability to learn, to self-evaluate, and to develop a capacity for autonomous learning; cognitive: to expose students to academic activities and further develop the full range of their cognitive abilities; developmental: to help students form general competences so that they can develop their personal motivation (values, ideals, etc.), to foster students' confidence as users of the language, and to encourage the development of positive attitudes and feelings towards learning the target language; social and socio-cultural: to develop a broad understanding of important and different international socio-cultural issues in order to operate appropriately in culturally diverse professional and academic environments (Bakayeva 2005:37-38). It is evident that teacher's job is not merely language teaching, with teaching to learn being one of the main tasks. Thus, it has become the first curriculum in Ukraine that pays close attention to students' self-study organization – self-assessment, development of learners' autonomy and, consequently, life-long learning. These should be considered as a powerful reserve of ESP.

Classroom time is usually not enough to learn any language which is too complex and varied. To compensate for the limits of classroom time and boost the chances for successful language learning and acquisition, students should

be encouraged to use the language outside the classroom, as much as possible during the so called “teacher-free’ time” (Harmer 2007:407). Without regular practice language skills disappear. Students should know how to carry on when the language course is over, i.e. should be ready for life-long learning.

Autonomous students know what their initial language proficiency is. Their entry level may be identified using a commercial quick placement test. Then they are able to benchmark their progress against and assess personal achievements with the help of the Curriculum descriptors – can-do statements. Self-assessment complements formal assessment and is based on the learners’ developed capacity to reflect on their own knowledge, skills and achievements:

Teachers should develop recommendations for students on learning strategies and criteria for self- assessment in order to make it possible for them to work in a self-study mode when the compulsory ESP course is over” (op.cit. :51).

CEF defines learner’s autonomy as “the ability to observe and participate in new experience and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary” (CEF 2001:106). Students’ autonomy and life-long learning are catch- all terms which are present in EFL-ESP discussions and publications today.

Ultimately they determine whether foreign language instruction is successful or not. Autonomous learners take the responsibility for their own learning They acknowledge that their success in education depends mainly on them, rather than on other people. They show initiative regarding learning, and share in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning is achieved (Little 1991 Schunk 2005):

This acceptance of responsibility entails that we set out to learn, in a systematic, deliberate way” (Holec 1981:3), the skills of reflection and analysis enable us to plan, monitor and

evaluate our learning. But accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing metacognitive mastery of the learning process. [...] autonomous learners are motivated learners. What is more, [...] autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning (Holec 1981:3).

Autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective (conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous). And the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom (Little : Web).

Autonomous learners are prepared for life-long learning which is therefore about “acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement” (op.cit.).

The National ESP Curriculum encourages life-long learning and autonomy. It is obvious that learning a foreign language, especially in the European context, reaches far beyond compulsory education. The active use of procedural knowledge, learning to learn (learning- centeredness) is the basis for efficient and autonomous life-long learning, developing foreign language communicative competences after school. Thus, the development of study skills is an essential objective within the framework of the language teaching/learning. They are locating information, using presentation conventions, recording and presenting research findings, developing and implementing study plans, understanding assessment requirements and criteria, etc. (Bakaieva 2005:42). The ESP Curriculum is also a tool for promoting learner’s critical awareness of learning styles. It focuses on the generic skills of critical thinking, problem solving, presenting ideas, etc. In this way it helps develop students’ language, pragmatic

and intercultural language competence, and thereby their capacity for independent language learning.

It is very important to make students understand that formal learning a foreign language is like an iceberg, with formal classes at the top of it and lots of other tasks and activities promoting language learning being under the water. Everything that students do with the help of a foreign language contributes to their foreign language proficiency. It is reading fiction and watching films in a foreign language. Besides presenting examples and patterns of real life communication, positive emotions that they arise are a mighty factor which makes learning more efficient. It is surfing the Internet trying to find information not available in the native language. It is participating in international programs and projects. That is why it is of utmost importance for Ukrainian universities and ESP teachers to popularize participation in programs of international academic exchange. Studying abroad is directly connected with students' and graduates' professional development. It significantly improves their language skills and cross-cultural awareness, gives them an opportunity to triangulate, to get acquainted with another life style, other peoples' progress and achievements. Academic exchange equips the participants with new ideas and experience so important for Ukraine implementing democratic reforms in all spheres of life.

There is one more advantage of international academic exchange. Coming back to Ukraine, academic exchange program participants, with their improved language command, are able to teach university courses in English. This presents competition benefits for Ukrainian universities which become attractive for foreign students. On the other hand, major subjects taught in a foreign language are beneficial for Ukrainian students too. It is a powerful tool to motivate students when a foreign language is the medium of

instruction. – “More specific and subject-related courses have been more successful in motivating students and really meeting their needs” (Dudley-Evans, St John 2003:37):

As General English becomes something done when you're young, teenagers and young adults will be seeking more specific needs and knowledge areas. In fact, one of the consequences of the universalization of English is the convergence between knowledge, skills and English. So learning about anything in future - whether computers or football - may come with an element of specialized English learning (Graddol).

When speaking about learners' autonomy and their readiness for life-long learning, it seems to be impossible to avoid the issue of motivation. The issue of motivation is always present in discussions of success or failure in education. If learners are not motivated in the ESP classroom, it is rather problematic to expect them to work hard and make good progress in their future studies to perfect their language skills. Though there are lots of students who are intrinsically motivated and ambitious, and come to university knowing well what they would like to be and to do in their future life, and what they need for that, their inner motivation may be developed and enhanced. There are different factors that could be listed in accounting for motivation, teachers being the most important among them. Teachers become motivators of students creating the right conditions for encouraging them to make as much effort as possible for maximum benefit (Harmer 2007:330). The “jug-and-mug pattern” does not work properly today. Today teachers are more of facilitators who set the stage for learning, build good student-teacher rapport, and treat students with respect (op.cit.:100) than the ones who constantly “deliver” information to students, always imposing and forcing (Brown 1994:43). “All second language learners need to be treated with affective tender loving care” which

may divert the classroom into a more positive direction (Brown 1994:22). Tasks, forms, activities, and materials should be interesting and engaging for students and give them enjoyment – “if students do not learn the way you teach, teach them the way they learn” (citation from an EFL forum). Interaction in a foreign language always requires “a certain degree of risk of failing to produce intended meaning” or interpreting it. If students do not feel themselves safe and encouraged in the classroom, their motivation disappears (Brown1994:160). Teachers who develop good relations with students and among students and make classes interesting and useful, increase learners’ linguistic self-confidence and autonomy.

The Curriculum descriptors of language communicative behavior may also be used as a basis for developing Language Portfolios (The European Language Portfolio, ELP, may serve as a model for portfolio developers) and Language Portfolios for Professional Communication (see, for example (Yagelska 2004)), which record and reflect learners’ learning and intercultural experience) are a useful tool for documenting, assessing, and self- assessing students’ individual language skills. The grids with language behavior descriptors in the form of “I can do” statements help learners to be aware of their current achievements and plan their further learning determining their immediate study needs and personal goals:

The pedagogic function of the ELP is to make the language learning process more transparent to students, to help them develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus to enable them gradually to assume more responsibility for their own learning.

The ELP enhances ‘learning to learn’ and promotes the development of critical thinking skills (Bakayeva 2005:50).

Conclusion: The world is changing so fast that English and those who learn and teach it are facing versatile tasks. Today mastering a language is not about knowing words and

understanding the language structure. It is about the ability to communicate using the language, developing and upgrading the skills for new goals and arising situations in new environments. Language teachers should struggle to keep up with new learners and their changing language needs (Graddol).

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