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The problem of the syllabus design within the competence approach based on the course “English for Master Degree Students in Economics (advanced level)”

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Abstract

The transition of Russian System of Higher Education to new Educational Standards of the Third Generation challenged the authors of the article to develop the syllabus for Master Degree Students in Economics that would satisfy both the requirements of the Standard and would fit the framework of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach used by teachers all over the world. The main objective of the article is to define methods to be applied to syllabus design for ESP course in Economics. The authors analysed different approaches to ESP and its problems expressed by such authors as Hutchinson & Waters, Crocker and McDonough and came to the conclusion that although teaching of ESP is in many ways similar to that of General English, it still has some specific features especially in the sphere of Economics. The comparative analysis of the attitudes to syllabus design (product-oriented, process-oriented) and the Standard demand for competence approach encouraged authors to develop their own course “English for Master Degree Students in Economics (advanced level)” which has been successfully implemented in the Kazan State University, Institute of Economics and Finance. The role of the needs analysis derived from the idea of communicative competence has proved to be the powerful means of materials evaluation for each professional field. The course design is given as a practical outcome of the study. The way to explore the syllabus design as a link between the present post-graduates’ needs and future employment needs is presented in the article as the result of the research.

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1. Introduction

The system of Higher Education in Russian Federation nowadays is under transformation. This process is a complex issue and includes not only the transition to Bachelor-Master Degree structure but also the introduction of new Educational Standards of the Third Generation which are based on general-cultural competence and professional competence paradigm. Due to the competence approach the Standard requires students for Master Degree in Economics to have English language ability at the level to guarantee successful professional communication. All these challenged teachers of the “English language” discipline to reflect on the ways to develop the syllabus applicable under the required Standard.

The rapid growth of international cooperation and globalization made English language a necessary skill for future specialists to obtain a well-paid job. It is also considered to be the means for further professional development and the required condition for professional socialising world-wide.

Taking all these factors into account we set the following range of questions to be answered while developing the syllabus for our course:

- What are the needs of my students?
- What type of syllabus should we apply?
- How to select authentic materials needed for this course?
- How to assess the course?
- How to evaluate the course?

This article is the result of our reflections over these issues. It also suggests the possible framework to develop the syllabus for ESP.

2. The problem of ESP as a subject in Russia

Before we start talking about the ways to develop the ESP syllabus for Master Degree in Economics let us describe the background of the issue. Prior to Bachelor-Master Degree structure of Higher education there was a Specialist Degree one that lasted for five years. English language was a compulsory subject during the first two years of education and was based on skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) approach. The course was rather an integrated one than English for General Purposes - ESP course. Due to these factors it was quite a challenge for teachers to change the mentality and to develop separate syllabus.

Although the teaching of ESP is in many ways similar to the way we teach English for General Purposes there are still some peculiarities to be taken onto account. According to Hutchinson and Waters, the approach to ESP should be based on learner's needs in their professional areas. A.Crocker in his work "Scenes of Endless Science: ESP and Education" outlines the similarities between language instruction in general and ESP but points out that the ESP course is “something outside of the language through the medium of the language”. This idea gives us a suggestion that ESP should be considered as a necessary tool for specialists to function properly in their professional field.

Talking about ESP in Russia we should emphasise that it used to be taught throughout the course of English language but not as a separate discipline. The introduction of “English for Master Degree Students in Economics (advanced level)” course challenged teachers to negotiate the objectives to be achieved by the learners with subject specialist, to take into account the academic level learners have already attained in the specific subjects and to develop the course both interesting for learners and efficient for the future career.

3. Students' needs analyses to develop ESP for Master Degree in Economics

The first step to develop the syllabus was to identify the goals that learners would like to achieve while taking this course. To do that the needs analyses approach was implemented. We studied different approaches to needs analyses described by world-known scientists (J.Munby, T.Hutchinson and A.Waters) and developed the model that meets our objectives and is relevant to our curriculum. It was agreed to develop a pre-course questionnaire and to organize a pre-course interview to identify the areas for syllabus development.

The pre-course questionnaire took place in June, three months before the course started and contained the following questions:

- What for do you need English language knowledge?
- Whom do you plan to use English with?
- Where do you plan to use English?
- What level of English language proficiency do you plan to obtain?
- What occupational area do you need English for?
- What communicative activities (speaking, reading, writing) do you plan to participate in?

Answers to these questions helped us to develop the learners' profile and were used further as a criterion to select authentic materials.

As for pre-course interview it was held in September, a month before the course should start and it was used as a means to identify learners' current English language level, their motivation level and some problem areas.

As a result of this needs analyses we got the following learners profile: young graduates with intermediate English language proficiency that plan to work for international companies in the sphere of audit and consulting and to have both oral and written communication with colleagues world-wide. To guarantee successful career growth they need to have advanced level of English language proficiency and deep understanding of the trends within the sphere of their professional interests.

4. Setting objectives of the course

Having the results of the needs analyses and considering Communicative language competence within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages we set the following objectives to be achieved while taking this course:

- To master the ability to understand various texts in the field of the professional interest.
- To develop the ability to use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
- To develop the ability to use language as a means of oral and written communication for professional and academic purposes.
- To form the ability to maintain life-long learning as a means of professional and personal development.

These objectives are used as a guideline on what, when and how to teach learners in order to meet their expectations and to achieve feasible result.

5. Course development

To develop the course that would meet our objectives and would fit the required Standard we first studied the approaches used by developers of ESP towards syllabus design. The major concepts are based on the idea of either product or process syllabuses. The main distinction between these syllabuses is given by D.Nunan in his work "Syllabus design" – "We saw that product syllabuses are those in which the focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction, while process syllabuses are those which focus on the learning experiences themselves". While in product syllabuses the focus tend to be on the results of the learning process, procedural or task-oriented syllabuses which constitute process-oriented syllabuses tend to be organized around the tasks, rather than on terms of grammar and vocabulary an focus on classroom activities which stimulate learning. From this point of view the process-oriented syllabus approach was chosen as the leading one in designing our course.

The other classification used to define approaches to course design was described in the book "English for Specific Purposes: a learner-centered approach" by T.Hutchinson and A.Waters. They identify three main approaches to course design: language-centered, skills-centered and learning-centered. A language-centered approach makes a direct connection between the analyses of the target situation and the content of the course. A skills-centered approach goes behind the target performance data to discover what processes enable someone to perform. Those processes determine the ESP course. A learning-centered approach looks beyond the competence that enables someone to perform, because what is important is not the competence itself, but how it was acquired.

The main problem that we faced with designing the course was to achieve the balance between learners' desire to focus on communicative aspect of the language and the necessity for students of the graduate level to have fluent academic language ability. Based on general-cultural competence and professional competence paradigm introduced by Educational Standards of the Third Generation and keeping in mind objectives that were set after conducting needs analyses we consider the combination of learning-centered approach and process-oriented syllabus approach to be the basis for our syllabus design. Such integrated approach to course design could be identified as English for Academic purposes based on ESP framework.

The next step in designing the course within the competence approach was to select authentic materials that would meet our objectives and stimulate critical thinking. Authentic materials do not only provide the idea the language is used in real life but also stimulate motivation towards language learning, develop communicative competence and encourage personal responses. To provide academic education and vocational training we have selected the range of journals that publish articles based both on scientific research and practical implementation of its outcome. The resources that we used for our course were the ACCA reports open to public and PWC and KPMG articles on the current trends in the sphere of audit and consulting. This approach to select materials for the course helped us to get necessary vocabulary based on reality that exists in the sphere of accounting, audit and consulting and to give the in-depth idea of the way this vocabulary used in academic world.

We divided our course into six modules: text organization and the structure of the article; summaries and effective reading; critical reading and writing; writing an academic essay; written presentations; presentations and debates. Each module encourages learners to understand various texts in the field of the professional interest, to develop the ability to use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes and to develop the ability to use language as a means of oral and written communication for professional and academic purposes.

6. Course assessment and evaluation

Assessment is integral part of course design. It helps teacher to link student performance to the objectives that were set for the course, to measure learning outcomes and to provide useful feedback about how successfully students are doing the course. The formative and summative assessment methods help the developer of the course to organize the assessment as an on-going process that will monitor student learning during the learning process and will measure the extent to which students have achieved the desired learning outcomes.

Designing the course we developed the following formative techniques to monitor learners' progress throughout the education process:

- In-class activities. Students are placed in the situations that encourage them to work in pairs or small groups. They solve problems that create space for powerful peer-to-peer learning and rich class discussion. Self-assessment and peer assessment increase motivation and autonomy. For each type of in-class activity learners are given self-checklist and peer checklist. The role of the teacher on this type of assessment is to monitor the classroom as students work, helping those who get stuck and guiding those who are headed in the wrong direction. The example of peer-to-peer assessment sheet is given in the Appendix A.
- Quizzes. This technique is successfully used to gauge learners' prior knowledge, to assess progress midway through a module and to create friendly in-class competition. We organise the syllabus in such a way that all modules start from quizzes. It helps to identify what students already know, to clear up misconceptions, and to clarify how much they will learn in this module.
- Online assessment. The Standard and the University Quality Control Commission require all courses to have e-learning platform and for this course we developed the online resource "English for financial accounting". This resource has online learning modules that are supported with built-in assessments where students solve problems or answer questions along the way. It gives the instructor the analytics on student responses and class performance. Online assessment can be used to tailor further instruction to meet particular learning needs.

As for summative assessment it has been agreed that due to the integrated nature of the course we would use projects and presentations as a high-stakes techniques. These give learners the chance to go deeper with the material and to put the knowledge they have acquired to use or create something new from it. We consider this level of

application as an extremely important to show learners the progress that they have made and to see the practical usage of the material they have studied.

Course evaluation is the last but not the least important stage in syllabus design. It helps to improve and to promote effectiveness of the course. There are two ways to evaluate the course: implicit evaluation – takes place during the course, and explicit – takes place at the end of the course. Direct Observation technique is one of the ways to identify the level of learners' satisfaction with the way material is presented, the success learners make and the difficulties that arise. To help to get better glance into the success of the course we also include essays as a way to conduct implicit evaluation. We consider essay as a method to evaluate knowledge, critical appraisal skills, critical thinking skill, analysis, and synthesis skill.

The final stage of the course is to complete "The course Questionnaire" and to participate in Course Forum. We tried to develop the Questionnaire to stimulate the willingness of the responders to give full and thoughtful answers and the Forum allows for anonymity, perhaps eliciting more genuine responses. The result of this work is to get learners attitude towards the subject matter, instructional methods, activities and teacher's role in the course.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to state the practical results of the course. It enables the learners to communicate their professional interests to the outside of the University world and to update knowledge in the field of their professional concern. This fact was proved by the Round Table Discussion which was held as the end of the course activity where Students for Master Degree Programme interacted with international representatives of PWC Company in Kazan Region and had ability to show the level of both theoretical and practical knowledge the received during the course. The discussion showed that learners have achieved the desired level of ability to use language as a means of oral and written communication for professional and academic purposes (the speech of each participant was supported by carefully prepared and well-structured presentation), they can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes and the course gave them the fundamentals of how to maintain life-long learning as a means of professional and personal development.

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Appendix A. Assessment sheet

Authors including an appendix section should do so before References section. Multiple appendices should all have headings in the style used above. They will automatically be ordered A, B, C etc.

Class Presentation Evaluation

Presenter: _____

Topic: _____

1. Subject. Was the presentation informative? Did it have a clear focus? Was it well researched?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

2. Organization/Clarity. Was it easy to follow? Was there a clear introduction and conclusion?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

3. Preparation. Had the speaker rehearsed? Was she/he in control of the sequence, pacing and flow of the presentation? Did she/he make effective use of notes, without relying on them too heavily?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

4. Sensitivity to audience. Did the speaker maintain eye contact with all members of the class? Did she/he make effective use of pauses, gestures, change in pace and pitch?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

5. Visual aids. Did the speaker make effective use of handouts and overheads?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

6. Language accuracy. Did the speaker use vocabulary to the point? Were there grammatical mistakes preventing understanding? Were the sentences constructed properly?

1	2	3	4	5
very poor	poor	good	very good	outstanding

7. What were the speaker's main weaknesses?

8. What were the speaker's main strengths?
