Principles of gearing content of foreign language teaching to professional needs of non-linguistic university learners

The article is devoted to the problem of gearing foreign language teaching content to professional needs of specialists-to-be. New version of the content based approach to foreign language teaching at non-linguistic universities is being proclaimed. The quintessence consists in structuring language content with consideration to students’ professional orientation, occupational environment and social needs which presupposes modeling content as the direct analogue of specialist’s prospective activity. The article also deals with the problems of content area selection, curriculum design, the use of proper techniques, the role of a subject expert. The model of thematic content based on a discipline specific language and subject matter (legal profession) is presented. Thematic content is considered as the main organizing principle in all professional settings.

Key words: non-linguistic university, content of foreign language teaching, professionally oriented approach, gearing content to professional needs, curriculum design, subject experts, integrating subject matter and its linguistic representation, techniques of teaching, the role of the teacher.

New orientations

Non-linguistic universities present a peculiar challenge to that of other educational institutions with respect to English language teaching, its methodology, course content, activities, etc. These are the universities where the bulk of the students study for getting professional education in various spheres of national economy such as engineering, agriculture, medicine, law, pedagogy (apart from linguistics), etc. Foreign language (FL) is taught there as a compulsory discipline which is aimed at developing professional communicative competence in the spheres relevant to the learners’ future jobs. So the generally accepted approach to foreign language teaching (FLT) at the universities described can be defined as a professionally oriented one.

Actually this trend is not a new one, it has a long history. Early versions go back to the movement called English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It was the time when English began to be accepted as international language of technology and commerce. English speaking countries expanded their political and economic influence world over and their language acquired a high status. A new generation of learners knew what they needed the English for. To become successful businessmen they had to read instruction manuals to keep up with the developments in their fields. Most of such books were available in English. They also needed English to communicate with their potential employers.

Over time ESP research was extended to other settings, especially those connected with the use of language for different academic purposes. This movement has been initiated in the 1960s in Eastern and Central Europe where English began to be intensively used to promote professionally based instruction. Western Europe also did much to advance second language studies that involve some forms of professional content learning. As a result a number of bilingual programmes and curricular formats in a wide range of educational contexts have been introduced in university level instruction. More recently, its role has dramatically increased and a professionally oriented content-based approach has become the most wide-spread in classrooms.

Nowadays ESP is gaining prominence in a wide range of vocational and workplace instructional contexts. Students are enrolled in a member of subject-area courses which are elaborated to satisfy students’ personal needs and interests. Experience shows that the greater part of language users are interested in a specific language of their occupation and pragmatic skills needed on the job. Indeed, most students will probably go on using language in business or industrial context rather than in their every-day life. One can say that the actual relevance of the approach stands out for the ever-increasing applicability of English to the demands of the profession, i.e. to the necessity of linguistic provision of students’ professional activity. An extensive body of research in this field speaks for the effectiveness of this approach. It creates positive attribution, motivation and sustained interest in FL learning, manifesting a widening of traditional set of goals.
The theory of FL education for professional purposes is successfully developing within the framework of professional linguadidactics. It is a separate branch of linguadidactics which deals with the theoretical problems of the content area of FLT related to the nature of language and the nature of communication as a social phenomenon. It also concerns methodology and organizing principles of ESP. Much has been done in this field by T. Hutchinson, A. Waters, J. Swales, W. Littlewood, P. Robinson and their more recent followers. Still more remains to be done.

Content Area

Professionally oriented course of FLT is organized around content. The challenge lies in the principles of its structuring relevant to the goals of FLT. The problem is not as simple as that. The declared principle of professional orientation doesn’t give a definite idea of the volume and thematic preferences of the content formation. The lack of strict criteria leads to the solution of these questions often dependent on the content of textbooks and manuals. According to the broadly accepted approach the whole content continuum is subdivided into General Language, Language for Specific Purposes and its variety – Language for Scientific Purposes, which correspond to the modules of social, professional and scientific communication. All of these blocks encompass different aspects of professional activity and therefore are included into the content area. The module of professional communication deals with some theoretical and practical communicative skills including minor business and correspondence. The module of the so-called social communication reflects the structure of public relations of specialists and is linked to the prospective professional needs. Scientific/research block (primarily master’s level) includes practical ability of making reports, presentations, discussions as well as participation in international conferences, using language in scientific research, etc. In short, content area should be relevant to the learners’ academic, social and personal needs. Taken together all blocks balance the curriculum in a certain proportion, emphasizing its business and professional content. We can say that the key principle of structuring content is consideration of students’ language specialization and occupational environment. The essence lies in including FL activity into the analogue of student’s prospective activity.

The model described represents a kind of microsystem which integrates the qualities of the whole system. Even in case of some educational gaps in this or that content area, the loss is compensated at the expense of preserving the integrity of the whole system. In didactic purposes minimization of thematic and linguistic content may take place in all three blocks. One of the main principles for selecting content is its accessibility and sufficiency for achieving the educational goals.

Content-area learning strategies are practiced in all branches of knowledge such as history, biology, economics, maths, etc. Special curriculum is designed for each of them being based on the discipline-specific language and subject matter. In practice much of the material is concerned with reading and discussing subject texts. Scholars are convinced that a thorough and systematic analysis of written discourse is essential for creating professional communicative competence. For example, for law students at the level of intermediate fluency of English we suggest the following thematic content.

Law as a science, its place among other humanitarian sciences and in the life of modern society. Essence of law. Ancient legal systems. Sources of law. Legislative history. Case studies.


Court systems in the co-studied countries (the USA, the UK, Belarus). Jurors.


Law enforcement agencies. Police. Peculiarities of the police systems in the co-studied countries. Role of the police in crime investigations. Case studies.
Content area is a methodological concept which integrates both, the subject matter of speech and its linguistic representation. Acquiring new language knowledge always entails relating new information to new language units. In this respect ESP theorists admit dual nature of language: linguistic and extralinguistic. Systemic integration of both is quite natural and arises from the nature of language, its ability to reflect the real world and to give names to its concepts and objects. Language content is inseparable from its linguistic expression. If language were not related to the objects and notions it would remain “a pigeon language”, senseless and useless for communication. This is one of the linguadidactic regularities which explains the synthesis of both aspects of content theory.

Deriving from this theoretical assumption methodologists consider FLT content as a mixture of both: knowledge of linguistic units (words, phrases, grammar rules, etc.) and linguistic instruction of the real conceptual world they represent (Strevens 183-89). In our case the cognitive structure of “real world” is associated with the professional sphere of knowledge, exemplified above. Thus language acquisition involves acquisition of the learners’ genuine professional subject of interest.

Systemic integration of both aspects and their close interconnection is interpreted in educational purposes, especially for the purpose of content area selection and curricula design. Content becomes the key organizing principle for both of them. Thematic content is usually communicated and linguistic expression is something that derives from it. So, linguistic presentation of syllabus is not a random list of words or grammar rules but the derivative of a network of topical issues and concepts. The zone of overlap between content and language development activities is constantly shifting. Some students focus on mastering content and neglect their language skills while the instructor’s task is to balance the roles of language and content specialist.

The development of all language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and all aspects of language (lexis, grammar, phonetics) takes place within certain content areas. Lexis includes subject-specific lexical items: vocabulary of students’ future occupations, technical terminology and scientific terms, business concepts, etc. It was originally labeled “register” for a want of a better term, and it led to a useful analysis of several sub-branches of science and technology in terms not only of lexis but also of grammatical structure.

Grammar also has some specific features compared with its traditional teaching. As it has been repeatedly stressed in literature the grammatical differences of ESP from General English are fewer than one can imagine, but they exist. Grammar instruction at non-linguistic universities is limited and focused on the use of indefinite and definite articles, on restrictive relative clause constructions, passive voice, etc. Grammar class usually involves demonstrating to students the rhetorical frames of reference acceptable to the area of specialization with which the class is concerned. There also exist some grammar structural patterns most typical for business correspondence. Nevertheless the focus of instruction should be on communication, not grammar itself. It doesn’t mean that grammar is ignored: communication implies grammatical accuracy of the language learners produce. Phonetically correct tones of social register and politeness are also in the focus of attention.

One of the recent requirements is a cross-culturally oriented approach to the English-language content for undergraduates. It means that one must design the course according not only to linguistic and occupational needs of the learners but to the cultural experience as well. It is important that they should have a better understanding of native speakers’ cultural values, norms of corporate culture and technical jargon. Some verbal and nonverbal norms of behavior should be examined and the success of communication or miscommunication should be discussed. Cross-cultural studies, i.e. the integration of nonnative speakers with native speakers in the content course ensures the authenticity of the academic demands placed upon the students.


This programme is rather suggestive, it can be changed in many ways according to the external conditions of teaching (timing of the course, classroom quality, students’ motivation, etc.). Research on the advantages of extensive reading has shown that it leads to improved language abilities and greater content area learning (West, Stanovich, Mitchel 34-50). It improves not only reading abilities but vocabulary and general knowledge. Students become more “text-wise”. They develop greater content knowledge and higher motivation.

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**Curriculum design**

Content based ESP curricula for University level have been designed to teach specific content and language skills. A real concern for subject matter or content is what most distinguishes the content-based syllabus from other syllabus types. Content is viewed not merely as something to practice language with, rather language is something to explore content with. Due to its great importance content is considered as the main curriculum organizing principle. First we choose content then strategies and skills.

Discovering precisely which language skills students are lacking in relation to expected rather complicated job performance is not a simple task. That’s why a large part of ESP has always been concerned with the preliminary needs analysis and material development. Grammar and terminology course as well as some intercultural issues will not provide an answer to the challenge. Setting up University course of English one should aim at examining different types of prospective employers, their activities, requirements and work with subject experts. The final adjunct model guarantees that the ESP teacher goes in the right direction.

According to M.C. Gianelli the procedure of creating thematic-based curriculum should include the following steps (Gianelli 13-15).

1. Selection of themes appropriate for developing professional competence.
2. Identification of the most important content area concepts. A designer chooses the most critical concepts and develops subtopics for each of the main concepts.
3. Identification of the skills to be emphasized. Basic skills are incorporated into each content area. In doing so we give a definite scope and sequence to the curriculum. At this point of the curriculum development, we have a hierarchy of concepts related to a theme and a list of objectives to be taught and reinforced throughout the year.
4. Identification of strategies. The curriculum may be skill-based or text-dependent. The strategies should be appropriate. In comparison with the Whole Language Approach all teachers need an additional in-service training.
5. Gathering of materials. It’s necessary to determine what materials best teach each concept. It can be done by reviewing available textbooks and supplementary materials including audiovisual ones. Certain materials have to be developed and assembled in a resource box for each thematic unit.

Judging by its complex character the procedure demands not only language but subject knowledge. How can it be achieved? Some practitioners hold the belief that English teacher must be a content instructor. Some think that it may be the potential employer, the industrial companies and their English requirements. They can better define what professional skills should be included into the syllabus. It’s more reasonable to join the efforts of the teacher with that of the subject expert in ESP classes. If the ESP instructor has the opportunity to work with subject experts and employers, it may guarantee greater success. In this case the ESP teacher remains firmly on the side of language in the language-content course. His role would be not to teach content but to provide the linguistic means to be able to cope with it.

At the same time it is also wrong to say that the ESP teacher should be incompetent in the subject-matter of the course he teaches. If he wants to be engaged successfully in the teaching process he should know the main superficial aspects and what may actually happen in this or that educational setting. He must have a genuine interest and keep himself abreast of the latest findings in science or technology, business or economics. He should read authentic reading materials, watch some programmes on TV, understand the basic notions, etc. In case of difficulties he should not be ashamed to ask the students to explain this or that phenomenon which they may know better.

Teachers also need to have a repertoire of instructional strategies which may assist in making content comprehensible. They need knowledge of second language learning process. This permits them to select key concepts out of the many possibilities in the curriculum. In his turn an expert is more familia with the subject matter and study skills. He may serve as content experts rather than English teachers. What the instructor must have is a perfect command of language. This is his leading role in a performance that can excuse minor troubles with content. A definite level of language competence is also required from students because special sublanguage contains a great bulk of unknown words and phrases. So the common approach is that ESP shouldn’t be introduced until the
student has a general control of the English language. At the lower level of instruction it is also possible to use simplified material to be followed by the authentic texts. In any case students are taught limited subset of the language sufficient enough to function within the domain of that subset. But if students are motivated to perfect their English we can do a disservice if we suggest them a limited language instead of providing with real authentic materials for reading purposes.

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But who can actually take the role of a subject expert? Actually these may be the potential employers. According to Paola C. Falter there are three main types of employers, all belonging to the secondary sector (manufacturing and process industries) and different in size (Falter 11-15):

- the small, single-unit enterprise (SUE), with less than 50 employees;
- the medium-sized, single-unit or multi-unit enterprise (SUE/MUE) with 50 to 499 employees;
- the large, international or multinational corporation organized as a MUE or even consisting of several MUEs, with more than 500 employees.

The small SUE, which may still be a family business, is usually active at the regional, or possibly national level, and it will only have occasional contacts with foreign clients or suppliers. A SUE of this kind may not demand foreign-language skills of its employees on a day-to-day basis, but if a sudden business opportunity arises for which English is vital, the specialist must display his best by writing correspondence, making telephone calls, negotiating, and worse still, socializing, with prospective business partners, understanding contracts, disentangling shipping forms and collecting payments, all in English of course.

The stereotype of a medium-sized SUE or MUE presents a different picture. It will be active at the national and, most likely, international level – or at least it will be developing an international vocation. It may be found in branches of consumer goods (e.g., food, personal care, clothing, etc.), consumer durables (e.g., cars, cameras, hi-fi equipment, etc.), or capital goods (e.g., tools, machines, chemicals, etc.). Functions such as strategic planning, marketing, preemptive maintenance, data processing and automation, quality control, financial technical discussions, logistics, and human resources management are recognized as the essential support of production and carried out by specialized staff in the appropriate departments to avoid content acrobatics.

The implications for the engineering graduate are that he may be required to use English regularly, but mainly in his field of specialization. It might be a matter of writing technical reports, or labelling blueprints, or listing parts, or discussing product features. However, in all these activities except technical meetings the engineer will be able to draw on the company’s resources: colleagues fluent in English, the staff of the Language/Translation Department, or at any rate secretaries with some English qualifications. Such qualifications may not be sufficient to ensure flawless technical reports, but they are usually good enough to take care of minor correspondence and communication (such as telephone calls) to arrange meetings.

Technical discussions, meetings, and some entertainment are the only areas in which the engineer will have to use English autonomously, but here, too, the fate of a deal will not depend solely on his language skills. Nevertheless, the ability to communicate in English may determine promotion opportunities as far-reaching as relocation in a foreign country or the management of an international team. So, it appears that ability to use English as a FL in a professional context is important for an engineering graduate, but the extent and intensity of use, as well as its repercussions, differ widely between companies.

Thus the definition of the English syllabus at the universities and technical colleges should primarily address the needs of small industrial outfits, as they represent the “least common multiple” of the requirements of all types of companies. Exposure to English courses geared to the requirements of small SUEs will thus be beneficial also to those students who will later find employment in larger industrial enterprises.
Benefits of this approach

The problem of curriculum design also concerns the consideration of the aspect that is essential for the success of any course: student participation and enjoyment. Although this varies depending on factors that may be outside the teacher's control, such as the dynamic relationship among class members, the timing of a course, and classroom quality, students' enthusiasm for business and industry-oriented English courses is significant. It manifests itself through regular attendance, enrollment in additional optional courses, active participation in class, initiative in homework and extracurricular reading, and constructive suggestions on how to complement the course.

The students recognize the value of English-language courses geared to the needs of their future jobs. The feedback from the employers' side is clear: engineering graduates with training in business English and communication have more attractive professional opportunities which makes sense considering that they are able to use their newly acquired skills in the job-application process.

In comparison with all-purpose courses in English as a FL, the specific curriculum proposed in this article has the deliberate objective of representing a bridge between the use of the language and the professional context of such use. It is especially geared to the needs of small industrial outfits, where engineers may have to display the greatest versatility in their English-language skills.

This curriculum still covers indispensable areas such as grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, with methodological emphasis on conveying information, explaining it and using it in practice. These areas, however, are complemented by subject matter relevant to professional activities in an industrial environment, whereby the individual empirical approach to situation analysis and problem solving is especially trained. In terms of investment, this curriculum requires only a modest use of resources; no more, in fact, than would be required for other language courses.

As a result of this approach, future technical professionals will acquire comprehensive communication skills rather than isolated language knowledge. More importantly, they will acquire the ability, the desire, and the means further to develop such skills. The reward of such an approach for the teacher is the awareness of providing the students with a tool they can subsequently use in a broad range of different situations, refining and upgrading it on the basis of their own professional experience. Thus the challenge of conceiving this type of English curriculum is an opportunity for stimulating one's own creativity potential. Understanding the needs of industry in the field of English-language communication and working towards satisfying them will be an enrichment to students and teachers alike.

Techniques of teaching

Having established what the English syllabus of the non-linguistic university is supposed to be the next step is to define how it can reach its aims. This point concerns techniques of teaching. It’s obvious that all approaches of organizing content in ESP can be spoiled by the misuse of techniques and methods of teaching. From the point of view of its methodology content based instruction is a multitask approach, integrating the four skills in order to make language learning experience authentic and to reflect the learning styles and strategies of the variety of students enrolled.

Teaching different skills implies different techniques and this seems to be a separate topic for discussion. Some methodologists suggest the use of cooperative learning techniques, reading and communication (Master 244). The class would be broken up into groups and each assigned a part of the passage to read, analyze and generate a summary. After working on this for a time, the teacher as a facilitator helps individual groups if necessary. Each group in correct sequence reads its summary so that at the end, the class has heard a summary of the entire piece. Such an exercise should be something that the students will need for a later assignment, involving other skills, that’s why they are motivated to listen attentively to what the other groups have to say. For example, the main reading may be the basis of a later writing assignment or an oral report. Or perhaps comprehension questions will be assigned for homework. The students will have to read the passage again, but now they have been provided with a set of schemata to facilitate a broader understanding of the passage.

Extensive group work is certainly an important component in any communicative methodology, but more important is the quality of the group work. Thus, group work which deals with answering the teacher’s comprehension questions is considered to be less qualitatively communicative than information-gap exercises. By definition, if a task is open-ended, i.e. it has no pre-determined answer, the learners will be using English to define the parameters of the problem to be solved and to
suggest possible solutions. Since no answer is covertly pre-determined by the teacher to be “correct”, the students are able to defend their positions on their own terms. The best answers are those that emerge from the students’ own discussions, allowing them to evaluate the quality of their own work.

Authentic reading materials require students not only to understand information but to interpret and evaluate it as well. It provides a forum in which students can respond orally to reading and lecture materials. It recognizes that academic writing follows from listening, and reading, and thus requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing. In this approach, students are exposed to study skills and learn a variety of language skills which prepare them for the range of academic tasks they will encounter in the future.

The most appropriate technique organizing principle is doing special tasks (Snow 431-367). We define a task as a situation to be solved, a piece of instruction for doing something during the acquisition of a language course. Usually students practice real practical tasks based on an analysis of learner’s needs. They are supposed to interact with content in a cognitively demanding way. The creative tasks involved may be “describe…”, “explain…”, “give reasons for…”. A needs analysis provides an inventory of the target tasks which may be both real world and pedagogic. All tasks are academic in nature and style, for example, writing essay exams, making presentation, reading reports, taking lecture notes, participating in class discussions, preparing study summaries, etc. A significant aspect of academic tasks involves comprehending material at a certain level of cognitive difficulty.

The main principles of selecting the tasks are characterized as follows:

1) they should be important and interesting for the learner. This principle is difficult to specify and operationalize but we can rely on this criterion as a big motivating factor. Practice shows that goals that reflect the communicative needs of learners have greater face validity.

2) they should be related to professional content areas and to the future academic needs of the language learners. In cases when content mastery is either unnecessary or inappropriate the language teacher creates the task proceeding from the FLT goals and specific academic setting.

From the point of view of technical assistance we can’t but mention the role of video in ESP. With the increasing availability and sophistication of video equipment, use of the video cassette recorder and video camera in the field of ESP has increased proportionally. Although video use offers no remedies for all the problems associated with an ESP program, it is recognized as a valuable aid and an effective tool for ESP curriculum specialists, material designers, classroom instructors, and teacher trainers. The use of a video camera provides a quick and accurate method of gathering the necessary data for needs analysis. The curriculum specialist may enter the biology lab, the lecture hall, or board a research vessel to record authentic samples of the English used in these specific locations and situations. By examining these samples, along with other necessary reference materials, the curriculum specialist is able to more accurately determine the structures necessary to be mastered, the registers desired, which skills are most useful, and what type of language situations the student will be exposed to. In addition, the valuable paralinguistic, nonverbal features, such as hand movements, eye contact, facial gestures, and deictic reference to charts, diagrams, and graphs can be recorded and prioritized for introduction into the course. These authentic language tapes may also help determine the terminal goals for the student, and aid the inexperienced instructor to better understand the course content.

Frequently, in the ESP classroom, video is used to do something the instructor cannot do or is forced to do in an inadequate manner. For examples an instructor can teach note-taking skills, which will be useful in the lecture hall, but he may be unable to provide a series of lecturers of different styles and topics to give the student adequate practice in real life situations. The instructor may not understand enough of the content of a course in marine biology or nuclear physics to provide the learner with sufficient factual information to keep the learner’s interest at a high level. Well-produced video tapes may not only bring factual, interesting and realistic material into the classroom, but also offer an added visual dimension to some professional settings.

Whatever technical equipment may be the best vehicle for conveying each concept and using proper techniques is a teacher. According to Nina Glaudini Rosen and Linda Sasser teachers create relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, provide experiences with content materials, use visual materials to supplement printed text whenever possible, model and demonstrate, utilize collaborative and cooperative structures, etc. (Snow 431-42).

Summing up my personal observations and experience I would gladly state that nowadays the ESP movement is gaining momentum actually at all foreign language professional settings. Teachers’ survey at
my university shows that over half of the programs develop content based specific curriculum with the focus on gearing subject-specific content to professional needs of future specialists. About 90 percent of instructors say they use a mix of conventional and innovative material and create the material themselves. In all cases content bears a heavy burden and seems to be an organizing principle of teaching English as a foreign language.

As a ESP specialist who has been teaching in a content based curriculum for many years I find this movement valuable especially in the framework of competence approach which is being introduced in our educational standards. What students really needs is practical application of their knowledge in real life professional, academic, social and occupational situations. This approach to FLT teaching and learning is well expressed by Dewey’s notion: “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself”.

List of works cited: