

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF ESP LEARNERS

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to describe various learning strategies applied by students of higher technical education in the English language courses. It focuses on specific students' approaches to their foreign language learning in connection with their future professional career. This article describes the results of the survey on different ways of learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) on the basis of Chamot's (2009) CALLA Learning Strategies Questionnaire.

Key Words: language learning strategies, foreign language learning, ESP, CALLA

Abstrakt

Cieľom príspevku je opísať stratégie učenia sa anglického jazyka študentov odborov technického zamerania. Primárna pozornosť je venovaná špecifickým prístupom študentov pri štúdiu cudzieho jazyka pre potreby ich budúceho profesionálneho smerovania. V príspevku sú opísané výsledky prieskumu týkajúceho sa spôsobov a postupov osvojovania anglického jazyka študentov na základe CALLA dotazníka stratégií učenia sa cudzieho jazyka.

Kľúčové slová: stratégie učenia sa cudzieho jazyka, anglický jazyk pre špecifické účely

Introduction

In the contemporary global world, the use of English language has undoubtedly become an international means of communication. This phenomenon is reflected in different areas and in various spheres where English is considered as a professional communication tool.

In order to meet specific objectives of students of technical fields, Slovak universities have introduced various English language courses in their curricula on the basis of English for specific purposes (ESP). During English lessons, many learners tend to discuss the importance of individual language skills and possible means for their enhancement in their future life and career. They usually ask about steps or strategies which can enable them to achieve better studying results or to improve, for example, their speaking skills which are particularly important in their part-time job. The answers to their questions are not as easy as they may seem to be.

As Straková (2012) states, we have to regard foreign language learning as “a complex process which has many specific features for each age group as well as for each individual stepping

inside this process” (Straková, 2012, p. 158). On the basis of this claim, this paper aims to describe similarities and possible differences between ESP and General English (GE). Moreover, it includes a general overview of language learning strategies applied by ESP students because “teachers should build on strategies students already use by finding out their current strategies” (Chamot, A. U., 1998) and bring their attention to a wide range of strategies which can enable them to enhance their learning process. Therefore, the survey of language learning strategies was performed among students of the Technical University of Košice in November 2016 and March 2017.

1 Comparison of ESP and GE courses

In general, ESP courses are a recent trend in higher technical education. These courses are specially designed to meet students’ needs according to the field of study and their goal is to help the learners to cope with everyday situations in their future professional career. The English language courses provided by the Department of Languages at The Technical University of Košice (TUKE) are not an exception. The English language is taught at all faculties of the TUKE in the form of ESP courses specialized in the fields of economy, IT and electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, mining, metallurgy, geo-tourism, civil engineering, and aeronautics. Students with a technical specialization learn the English language mostly for study purposes or for their future professional career and not because they are interested in the English language from a historical, cultural or even linguistic point of view. In order to point out to the obvious relevance of ESP courses in higher education, it is fairly important to make a general outline of rapidly growing literature discussing the subject matter.

The 1960s mark the origins of ESP which has been developed to help the learners who intend to use the English language for academic, professional or vocational purposes. There are several definitions of ESP from different points of view. Robinson (1980) defines it as the teaching of English to the learners with specific goals and purposes which might be academic, professional, scientific, etc. According to Mohan (1986), English language courses based on ESP focus on preparing learners “for chosen communicative environments” (Mohan, 1986, p. 15), in which foreign language speakers will feel more comfortable if they use appropriate vocabulary in their professional area. For example, if a learner who graduates in IT works as an IT specialist or a programmer, he/she might have a better chance to communicate with many different people working for multinational companies in the field of IT rather than with people from a financial sphere.

Mutual relationship and potential differences between ESP and GE teaching are other important issues to examine properly. A number of authors have examined this matter (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988; Dudley Evens and St. John, 1998; etc.). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claim that “in theory there is no difference between ESP and General English teaching; in practice, however, there is a great deal of difference” (Hutchinson T., Waters A., 1987, p. 19). They highlight the necessity to regard the ESP teaching “as an approach” rather than “a product” (ibid.). Furthermore, ESP should not be associated with a specific kind of methodology or language. They claim that language learning should be based on learner’s needs to learn a foreign language and

they call for a systematic analysis of the language learners' needs. On the other hand, Strevens (1988) reports that there is a distinction between absolute and variable characteristics of ESP courses in contrast to GE courses. He claims that absolute characteristics of ESP courses mean that they are designed to meet the specific needs of the learner and they are related in content to particular disciplines or occupations; moreover, the courses are centered on the language which is specific to those disciplines or occupations. On the other hand, the variable characteristics indicate that the courses may be restricted in the skills to be learned and not be taught according to a particular methodology. Strevens (1988) tries to identify the difference between ESP and GE by putting the emphasis on "Specific English" which lies within some particular discipline, profession or activity. Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 4-5) base their extended and modified version of ESP definition on absolute and variable characteristics of ESP; however, they acknowledge that ESP can involve specific needs of learners who do not belong to any specific professions. Concerning the variable characteristics of ESP, they propose that ESP courses should be designed for adult learners in a professional work situation or at higher education; however, they could be provided to learners at secondary education level. ESP courses are generally designed for intermediate or advanced learners because they mostly assume some basic knowledge of the language system. Nevertheless, they also suppose that the ESP course may be used with beginners.

The literature presented in this section suggests that ESP courses as well as GE courses should focus on foreign language learners, their needs and attitudes to foreign language learning. This is in accordance with Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who claim that "our concern in ESP is not in language use" but in "language learning" (Hutchinson T., Waters A., 1987, p. 14). Moreover, they draw attention to the importance of learning-centred approach because they argue that "a truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning" (ibid.). The shift from the teacher to the learner, as a focus in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, is inducted in the work of Straková (2013) who also points out the necessity of "analysing thoroughly processes which directly or indirectly guide foreign language learning" (Straková Z., 2013, p. 37). In the language course or classroom Straková (2013) suggests turning the attention to the thinking processes because they are important for teachers who bring about learning and also for learners, who try to accomplish the learning process efficiently. These intentions may be achieved by appropriate learning strategies which can enable learners to achieve not only better study results but also to enhance the process of foreign language learning. Based on the research of many scholars (for example O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, R. L., 1990; Cohen, A. D., Macaro, E., 2007; Chamot A. U., 2009) language learning strategies positively influence the process of foreign language learning. Therefore, it is important to recognize procedures, attitudes and approaches of ESP learners to the learning process.

2 Survey on language learning strategies of ESP learners

The learning strategies are defined by Chamot (2004) as "the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (Chamot A., U., 2004, p. 14). We

decided to accomplish the survey on language learning strategies in order to inquire what steps and actions the learners with technical specialisation take to learn the English language. The survey was performed among students of the Technical University of Košice in November 2016 and March 2017. The main aim of our investigation was to identify the learning strategies which students use most frequently to learn English in the field of higher technical education. The survey was carried out among the students of intermediate ESP courses. We had expected that the level of their English language should have been higher and they should have used larger repertoire of strategies in the language learning process.

Method

The survey was designed to address two questions:

1. Are ESP learners able to become aware of the processes when learning foreign language to formulate them properly in a written form?
2. Do ESP learners use only one learning strategy or a combination of two or more learning strategies?

Participants

The survey included 74 students attending the first semester (winter semester - in November 2016) and 41 students attending fourth semester (summer semester – in March 2017) of their university study at The Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics (FEI). The students study English only one semester (summer or winter) in the field of IT. The students of FEI were assigned into two groups in relation to the language level based upon Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The students who passed their school leaving exam on English at level B2 according to CEFR standard were assigned to the intermediate ESP courses and participated in our survey.

Instruments

A Slovak version of CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) Learning Strategies Questionnaire was used in the survey to find out what steps the participants, ESP learners, take when learning foreign language. The questionnaire was translated into the Slovak language for better formulation of students' thoughts and attitudes to the inquiry. The CALLA Learning Strategies Questionnaire was originally proposed in English by Chamot (Chamot A. U., 2009) in her work *The CALLA Handbook* and contained eight open ended questions. The author of the questionnaire suggests adapting and recording the interview guideline. In our investigation, we decided to include seven areas of interest into the questionnaire and administer the survey in a written form to lower the level of participants' anxiety and stress as much as possible. Another reason for the written form of the questionnaire was to obtain appropriate amount of qualitative data and to provide participants with time to fill in the questionnaire.

Procedure

As the ESP courses are time-limited, the inquiry was realized during English lessons in the middle of the semester. The students obtained the questionnaire forms and were asked to become aware of their thinking processes when learning English and to answer the questions sincerely. It took 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The administration of the survey was anonymous. We tried to establish such conditions that participants would not feel forced to write desirable answers. The top of the questionnaire form was marked by acronyms FEI 1 or FEI 2 to assure the possible comparison of first- and second-graders' answers for the purpose of mutual comparison of language learning strategies applied by ESP learners in the realm of professional vocabulary learning (see Michaleková L., Hájik T., 2017).

Results

As stated earlier, the questionnaire consisted of seven open ended questions translated into the Slovak language in the following fields of interest: 1. Learning new vocabulary; 2. Listening for information; 3. Reading for comprehension; 4. Viewing the audio-visual program; 5. Writing; 6. Understanding graphic information; and 7. Oral reporting. The answers of the participants varied in a considerable way and we gathered a large amount of qualitative data. In order to answer the first research question, we examined all the questionnaires and checked carefully whether all the questions were answered and the descriptions of the learning processes were presented. The results of the investigation are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The ability of ESP learners to trace their learning processes and express them verbally

The area of interest	1 st semester participants – total number 74		4 th semester participants – total number 41		Total number of respondents-115	
	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%
1. Learning new vocabulary	72	97.30	41	100	113	98.26
2. Listening for information	71	95.94	39	95.12	110	95.65
3. Reading for comprehension	70	94.59	41	100	111	96.52
4. Viewing the audio-visual program	65	87.84	38	92.68	103	89.56
5. Writing	68	91.89	41	100	109	94.78
6. Understanding graphic information	52	70.27	35	85.36	87	75.65
7. Oral reporting.	67	90.54	40	97.56	107	93.04

Source: Elaborated by the author

As shown in Table 1, more than 90% of survey participants could verbally express their language learning processes in five areas of our interest. In the fourth part related to viewing the audio-visual program, 87.84 % of participants could explain their learning procedure. However, only 70.27 % of respondents could verbally characterize their procedure of interpreting the data in a graphic form. The answer “I do not know” was classified as an omitted one. Table 1 shows the

partial results of first- and fourth-grade participants. In the part referring to the understanding of graphic information, there is a slight difference between these two groups. 70.27% of the first-semester respondents were able to characterise the steps they make when they work with the information in a graphic form. On the contrary, 85.36% of fourth-semester participants could identify and describe their learning processes in this area.

Based on the questionnaire containing only open-ended questions, it was rather difficult to answer the second research question. As stated above, we gained a huge amount of qualitative data. The answer of each participant was carefully recorded and systematically analysed. The results of the detailed analysis are listed in Table 2, where we provide the comparison of a number of learning strategies according to individual areas of interest and according to the research group (first- or fourth-semester participants).

Table 2. Number of learning strategies used by ESP learners

The area of interest	1 st semester participants – total number 74			4 th semester participants – total number 41			Total number - 115		
	Number of respondents	1 LS	2> LS	Number of respondents	1 LS	2> LS	Number of respondents	1 LS	2> LS
1. Learning new vocabulary	72	30	42	41	11	30	113	41	72
2. Listening for information	71	37	34	39	23	16	110	60	50
3. Reading for comprehension	70	38	32	41	23	18	111	61	50
4. Viewing the audio-visual program	65	31	34	38	22	16	103	53	50
5. Writing	68	25	43	41	10	31	109	35	74
6. Understanding graphic information	52	39	13	35	21	14	87	60	27
7. Oral reporting	67	24	43	40	15	25	107	39	68

Source: Elaborated by the author

From the data in Table 2, it is apparent that only three areas in the questionnaire were completely explained by all fourth-semester participants. These categories include Learning new vocabulary, Reading for comprehension, and Writing. In both groups of survey participants, one language learning strategy was applied more frequently in categories Listening for information, Reading for comprehension, and Understanding graphic information; however, the fourth-semester group used more often one learning strategy in category Viewing the audio-visual program. Two and more language learning strategies were applied in the field of Learning new vocabulary (for more details see Michaleková L., Hájik T., 2017), Writing, and Oral reporting. Moreover, the first-semester participants employed two and more learning strategies in the field of viewing the audio-visual program.

Generally, two and more language learning strategies are applied by ESP learners in the areas of Learning new vocabulary – 63.71% (for more details see Michaleková L., Hájik T., 2017), Writing – 67.89%, and Oral reporting – 63.55%. The application of one language learning strategy by ESP learners is prevailing in case of Listening for information – 54.54%, Reading for comprehension – 54.95%, viewing the audio-visual program – 51.45%, and Understanding graphic information – 68.97%. Seeing that all participants were at B2 level of English according to the CEFR standard, it was surprising that there are only three areas (Learning new vocabulary, Writing, and Oral reporting) in which the ESP learners of both research groups (1st and 4th semester participants) apply 2 and more language learning strategies more frequently. Another unanticipated result was that 24.34% of respondents were not able to characterise verbally the procedure of processing the information in graphical form.

According to the individual responses in the questionnaires, a possible explanation for these results may be the lack of face-to-face peer interaction among students. The ESP students studying in the field of IT seem to be more introverted and they tend to use various electronic devices for language learning. If the EFL learners had the opportunity to discuss more on the various ways of language learning, they would considerably expand the range of different possibilities to learn the foreign language. Moreover, they could consult the possibilities of using appropriate combinations of language learning strategies not only with their peers but also with their teachers. With regard to the future investigation on language learning strategies of ESP learners, it would be better to carry out the future investigation by means of a questionnaire including closed-ended questions. As a huge amount of qualitative data was acquired from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, it would be more time-efficient to code and interpret the responses of the survey participants.

3 Conclusions

The field of ELT (English Language Teaching) incorporates a wide range of approaches which are mutually interconnected. ESP as a learner-centered approach has become a significant part of this area. As stated earlier, ESP courses are designed for the learners who intend to use the English language for academic purposes or their future occupation in a post-academic setting. Nevertheless, it is closely related with GE and the investigation of language learning strategies of foreign language learners seems to have high importance for both.

In this paper, the aim was to comprehend the parallels between ESP and General English (GE) in connection with language learning strategies applied by ESP learners. The data gathered from the survey indicate that ESP learners tend to have a limited repertoire of learning strategies which they implement properly. Based on the data shown in Table 2, the weighted average of application of 2 and more learning strategies reached 56.79%. The results were rather surprising as all respondents passed their school leaving exam on English at level B2 according to CEFR standard and it was expected that higher number of them would apply 2 and more language learning strategy in their language learning process. However, it would be effective to support mutual communication among learners to expand their awareness on various possibilities to learn a foreign

language or enhance their learning process since not all learners are the same type. Accordingly, ESP learners should be both, trained in language learning strategies used by their teachers and given the opportunities to practice them properly within the ESP course on a regular basis.

To sum up, the process of learning how to learn a foreign language should be regarded as a key competence provided to the ESP learners since “language learning is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge” (Hutchinson T., Waters A., 1987, p.129). In chapter 6, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages determines the premises for language teachers to equip the learners with such competences and strategies which enable them to satisfy the needs of the learners and to gain the goals of society. It means that even higher education should make every endeavour to develop learners’ language learning strategies appropriately.

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