

**Idea Sharing: Professionalizing ESP Teaching to  
University Students through Modeling  
Professional Interaction in ESP Classrooms**

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**Abstract**

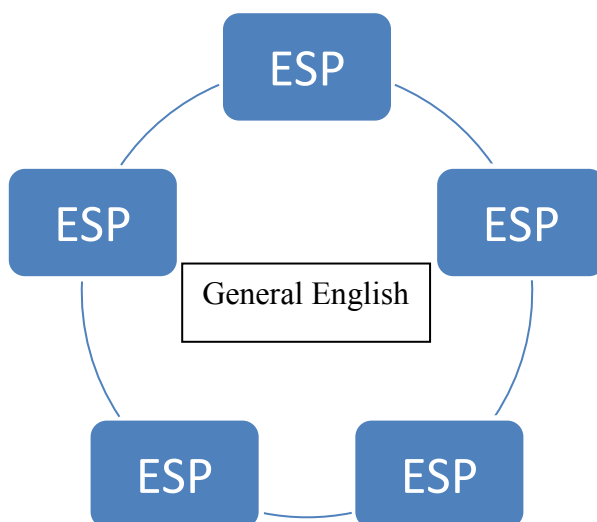
The article discusses the implementation of the *constructivist approach* in ESP teaching to university students. This approach creates opportunities for students to *construct* their own target language communication skills meant for use in their professional intercourse. The way of achieving such an effect can be seen in professionalizing ESP teaching and learning through modeling professional interaction in ESP classrooms. The learning activities that are suggested for implementing such modeled professional interaction are interactive ones in which students: 1) orally interact in English with each other on professional issues; 2) use outside sources of professional information in English and prepare different professionally-oriented written papers in English on the basis of the data obtained during their interaction with these professional information sources; and 3) do project work in English summarizing everything that they have learned both professionally and from the point of view of ESP

acquisition. The article is illustrated with examples from ESP teaching to university students of psychology, as well as business and economics. The analyzed learning activities are interpreted as representing *experiential learning*, which is considered to be the principal practical implementation of the constructivist approach in the ESP teaching/learning process.

**Keywords:** ESP, constructivism, experiential learning

### Introduction

ESP may be considered a kind of umbrella term for an enormous variety of professional sub-languages. For instance, the professional sub-language of psychologists is totally different from the professional sub-language of atomic physicists though both belong to the system of the English language, which ensures a kind of common foundation for different ESP's varieties, forms, and usages. In principle, the relationship between General English and different varieties of ESP can be represented as shown in the scheme in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Relationship between General English and varieties of ESP**

It can be seen from the scheme that every kind of ESP is embedded in General English, but in each kind there is a specific notional and lexical part that characterizes only this given variety and goes beyond the General English boundaries. Actually, teaching and learning ESP is teaching and learning that specific aspect common to all varieties of ESP and embedded in General English.

This means that ESP learning can be efficient only after students have already acquired quite a high level in General English – not lower than the intermediate level, or level B2 according to the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001). Otherwise, they will have to continue learning General English while taking their ESP course to make up for their prior deficiencies in General English. This is obviously counterproductive whereas when students enroll in an ESP course with a sound and solid basis in General English, their efforts can be concentrated on the specificities of ESP-based professional communication. This is what the course of ESP is actually designed for. Just such an approach, when ESP starts to be taught only after learners have acquired a no lower than intermediate level command of General English, was developed by us at Alfred Nobel University, Dnipropetrovsk (Ukraine). This article discusses some of the characteristics of the learning activities in that particular ESP course.

### **The constructivist approach to ESP teaching and experiential learning as its practical foundation**

As stated, the approach followed at Alfred Nobel University is based on the implementation of an ESP course to university students only after they have already achieved at least the intermediate level of General English. The achievement of that level was tested at the beginning of the ESP course following the benchmarks set in the above-mentioned *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001). The students' level of English at the beginning of the ESP course has quite a specific consequence. The consequence is the fact that when teaching ESP

to university students we can consider of secondary importance the language teaching as such. At the intermediate level, students are most certainly not supposed to be taught pronunciation. In the same way, their grammar skills are also developed in the General English courses that they have taken so that grammar materials need not be taught or learned but mostly just recycled in learners' speech reception and speech production. In terms of vocabulary, it is professional lexis on which learners' attention is supposed to be concentrated – and this is not so much vocabulary acquisition as learning professional basics through professional English terminology. This means that the only purpose of teaching ESP is helping students acquire professional communication skills together with professional knowledge, which is an integral part of such skills. Those communication skills are developed while being used for learners' professional communication General English already known to them together with newly acquired specific ESP language particularities – mostly lexical.

One of the ways of achieving this general goal of ESP teaching and learning, which is advocated in this article, is using the constructivist approach. The constructivist approach to teaching/learning any subject (including foreign languages and ESP among them) may be defined as an approach that provides students with opportunities of “constructing” their own knowledge and skills through practical experience in real-life or modeled activities. In this case, students acquire their knowledge and skills as a by-product of their real-life or modeled activities, thus internalizing or appropriating that knowledge and those skills and not just learning them (Jonassen, 1991, 1995; Tarnopolsky, 2012).

The constructivist approach can be considered as quite an efficient one in the teaching and learning of ESP due to the following:

1. Not having to drill or deliberately memorize new language forms, learners can acquire or reinforce them implicitly,

subconsciously in the process of creative communication on professional matters in modeled professional situations.

2. Such communication gives learners opportunities of not only implicitly, subconsciously developing their English professional communication skills but also of acquiring professional knowledge and skills in the process of that communication.

3. This allows for the integration of learning English for professional purposes, i.e. integrating the ESP course with university courses in professional disciplines.

4. Such integration raises students' ESP learning motivation because they see the immediate usefulness of their English studies for their future professional development and career.

5. The constructivist teaching and learning is based on learning autonomy (Holec, 1981) and, in cases when students communicate in English on professional matters in modeled professional situations, that autonomy becomes creative because professional intercourse in professional situations (even modeled) is always connected with problem-solving.

6. This makes the ESP teaching/learning process task-based (Pica, 2007; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 2002), thus enhancing the learning outcomes due to students' active involvement in solving creative learning tasks.

7. The task-based and autonomy-based learning keeps students permanently engaged in professional information searches, which is required for doing their creative profession-oriented learning tasks. Since such search is done using professional sources in English, it becomes invaluable for furthering, accelerating, and improving ESP acquisition.

The practical way of implementing the constructivist approach in ESP teaching and learning lies within the framework of experiential learning with its specific experiential learning activities (Jerald, & Clark, 1994; Kolb, 1984). The experiential learning activities in ESP model extra-linguistic professional

reality. They ensure that students experience their personal functioning in that modeled reality using the target language for such functioning. In this way, professional communication skills are subconsciously constructed by the students themselves in the process of quasi-professional experience and communication. This subconscious construction intensifies and facilitates acquisition thanks to the fact of its being subconscious and, therefore, practically effortless. Acquisition comes as the outcome of learners' experiencing direct participation in professional communication. Such features make experiential learning fundamental for the constructivist approach.

The specific learning activities used at Alfred Nobel University for implementing experiential learning in the ESP course include:

1. Role playing and simulating professional situations in the target language;
2. Brainstorming professional issues in the target language;
3. Case studies concerning some professional issues and done in the target language;
4. Discussions of some professional issues conducted in the target language;
5. Students' presentations on professional issues delivered in the target language;
6. Students' search for professional extra-linguistic information through target language sources (Internet, audio, audio-visual, and printed sources). That search is undertaken for finding particular information required for doing some profession-oriented creative learning assignments;
7. Writing professionally-oriented papers in the target language (such as essays, reports, memos, articles, business letters, etc.) on the basis of the information that students have discussed orally and found during their information search;

8. Project work (when students do profession-oriented learning projects using the target language for doing such projects).

Such learning activities, on which all ESP teaching and learning are based at Alfred Nobel University need to be analyzed from the point of view of their modeling professional interaction in ESP classrooms. This further analysis will be conducted by considering teaching ESP to future businesspeople and future psychologists, i.e. to Alfred Nobel University students majoring in those two fields. The experience of teaching them following the developed approach culminated in developing two relevant ESP textbooks for future business people and for future psychologists, and it is from these textbooks that the examples given below are taken (Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al., 2002; Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al, 2011).

### **Experiential learning activities in ESP**

#### ***Profession-oriented role plays and simulations***

These activities, such as brainstorming, case studies, discussions, and presentations, are based on learners' interacting orally among themselves on professional matters. There is a specific difference between profession-oriented role plays and simulations. Profession-oriented role plays focus on the interaction between a specialist and a non-specialist in a given professional area (such as a lawyer and a client) or between non-specialists whose interaction and behavior during it provide information for professional analysis (e.g., psychological analysis). Simulations model only the interaction between professionals on professional issues (e.g., two lawyers discussing a particular case). In the context of this article, however, such a distinction is not very important, so it will not be mentioned further. Both of these activities involve the classroom modeling of target language professional communication situations. In such modeled

situations every learner-communicator acts out the roles typical for those professional situations (for instance, a practical psychologist and a client in the situation of holding a psychological consultation session). While acting out roles, the learner-communicator is supposed to solve some extra-linguistic professional problems with the purpose of achieving an extra-linguistic professional goal. That goal can be either explicitly set in the instruction or formulated by learners-communicators themselves in the process of doing a role play or a simulation. Below two examples of role play and simulation assignments are given: a role play from the ESP course for future psychologists and a simulation from the ESP course for future economists and businesspeople.

***A profession-oriented role play:***

Act out a dialogue between an employer and a working person (mother or father) who is asking for a release time from work to attend to her/his children's needs at school. 'The mother/father' should follow the recommendations (both those that are in the text above and those that you have developed in your discussion). Please, keep in mind that 'the employer' is certainly unwilling to give 'the employee' some extra release time. S/he will listen to reason only if 'the employee' proves that such extra release time is absolutely necessary and that her/his work will not suffer because of it (textbook "Psychological Matters" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 4. Balancing Work and Family).

***A profession-oriented simulation:***

***Student A***

*You are a representative of a manufacturer. Discuss with the middleman (a wholesaler or retailer) the conditions of distributing your product. He/she will store it. But who will*

***Student B***

*You are a middleman (a wholesaler or retailer). Discuss with the representative of a manufacturer the conditions of distributing his/her product. You will store it. But who will*



*transport it? You would prefer it to be the middleman because you lack the means of transportation. If he/she agrees to undertake transportation, you are willing to lower the price he/she will pay you for the products.*

*transport it? You prefer it to be the responsibility of the manufacturer because you lack the means of transport. But you can solve the problem and find the means of transport if the manufacturer agrees to lower the price at which you will buy the product. You would like a 15% reduction if you transport the product. Discuss this with the manufacturer's representative (Textbook "Business Projects" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al., (2002) – Unit 7. Marketing).*

In fact, role plays and simulations are one of the simpler forms of modeling professional oral intercourse in professional communicative situations. Especially efficient and valuable among them are the so called continuous simulations developed by us (Tarnopolsky, & Kozhushko, 2003). They represent a specific organization of a Business English course (as a specific type of ESP). In this case, learning develops as continuous modeling and enacting of business activities and communication in the class. The enactment is done in the framework of almost life-size functioning of an imaginary company. Students themselves invent it, "set it up", organize its "functioning", and "work" in that company. A fragment (one in a series of continuous simulation tasks) of continuous simulation from our ESP textbook for future businesspeople is given below as an example:

*In small groups of three or four students, discuss the kinds of promotion you think would be good for your business and give your reasons. Which methods do you need (if any), and why? You will surely include advertising. Which method of advertising do you recommend that your company uses, and why? After a 5 to 7 minute discussion, each*

*small group will make a two-minute presentation to the class, giving their recommendations and answering questions (textbook “Business Projects” by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2002) – Unit 7. Marketing).*

### **Brainstorming, case studies, and discussions**

Brainstorming, case studies, and discussions are a more sophisticated form of modeling professional interaction in ESP classrooms. The examples below of a brainstorming task for future psychologists, of a case study task for future businesspeople, and of a discussion task, again for future practical psychologists, are given:

#### **A brainstorming task:**

*What are the reasons for work-family conflicts? What groups of employees can experience such conflicts? What are the typical outcomes of work-family conflicts? What measures can reduce negative effects of such conflicts? Brainstorm these questions in groups of four or five students (textbook “Psychological Matters” by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 4. Balancing Work and Family).*

#### **A case study task:**

*Jeff Peters worked in the R & D Department of a big corporation. His duties were doing some independent work on developing parts of new products. He was very thorough and accurate in his job, but liked working alone, especially when he received some concrete assignments and instructions from the Department Manager. The results of his work were so good that when the Department Manager retired, Jeff’s superiors promoted him to that post. But very soon things went wrong. Jeff did not have good ideas about developing new products, and did not like to listen to other people’s ideas. When a new idea was presented, he did not know how to organize teams to work on it or which assignments to give to different people. His subordinates disliked him because he was distant and unfriendly. Within his whole first year he developed only one new product and that was not a success on the market when manufactured. Talented people began to leave the Department and look for jobs in other companies. So after a year, Jeff’s superiors asked him to resign.*

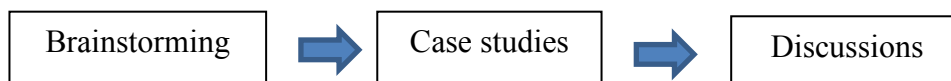
**Discussion**

a) Why did Jeff fail? b) What qualities did he lack for being a good R & D Department Manager? c) Were Jeff's superiors right in promoting Jeff? d) What position would be best for Jeff and what job you would recommend that he looks for after leaving his present job? (Textbook "Business Projects" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2002) – Unit 2. Company Structure).

**A discussion task:**

*In the photos you see pictures of four different families. In the first picture there is a young working couple with no children. In the second picture the husband and wife both work and have one child. In the third picture the family with both parents working has a number of children. The last picture shows a single-parent family with a working mother. In the same small groups discuss and decide which of the four families are at the greatest risk of work-family conflicts. Why? What kinds of conflicts can there be? How can they be solved? You have ten minutes for discussion. After the group discussion, one student from each of the groups will be requested to make a short presentation of the conclusions made (Textbook "Psychological Matters" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 4. Balancing Work and Family).*

In brainstorming tasks students are required to formulate as many ideas and solutions concerning a professional problem as possible, not caring too much about the feasibility of the suggested solutions. In case studies learners test their ideas for solving some particular professional problems eliminating those of the previously-formulated ideas that are impractical. Finally, in discussions they come to general conclusions concerning what practical and feasible solutions can be found for successfully solving a particular type of professional problems. This is why in many cases brainstorming, case studies, and discussions may follow each other as shown in the scheme in Figure 2.:



**Figure 2: The possible sequencing of brainstorming, case studies, and discussions in the ESP teaching/learning process**

It should be noted that the sequencing of brainstorming, case studies, and discussions suggested above is the only more or less regulated sequencing inside the system of experiential learning activities used by us. All of the others can follow each other in different orders. For instance, individual students can begin by making presentations for the benefit of the whole group on the basis of the data that they have collected individually on the Internet. Then the information from those presentations is brainstormed and discussed in class by the other students, who later role play relevant professional situations, and finally include everything they have learned in their projects and academic essays. Or, otherwise, the learning cycle can begin with role plays and simulations enacted at the teacher's task, continue with brainstorming, case studies, and discussions of what has been simulated, proceed further with presenting the results of such discussions in separate small groups of students, and finish with searching the Internet for additional information to be included in project work and written articles and abstracts. Other ways of sequencing learning activities are also possible depending on the professional content of the learning materials being used.

### ***Presentations***

A presentation is a form of students' oral interaction modeling in the ESP classroom aimed at helping students to be aware of their typical professional intercourse in the future. A typical task for preparing and delivering a presentation can be seen below:

*What are the main symptoms of job burnout? What causes job burnout? Who is at risk of burnout? What measures can be taken to*

*prevent or overcome job burnout? What helps to overcome job burnout? Discuss these questions in groups of four or five students (you have five minutes for discussion). After the group discussion, one student from each of the groups will be requested to make a short presentation of the conclusions made (textbook “Psychological Matters” by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 3. Job Burnout).*

Such professional presentations in an ESP course can be defined as prepared or spontaneous monologue-type speaking activities of different duration with a definite (modeled) professional aim and in a definite (modeled) professional situation. Speaking in presentations is based on analytic research of a definite professional issue; presentations have clear and logical composition and structure, internal unity, coherence, and cohesion, and are aimed at informing, motivating, or persuading listeners in what concerns their further professional activities (also modeled).

***Students’ search for professional extra-linguistic information through target language sources and their writing professionally-oriented papers in the target language***

Professional information for their presentations, as well as for brainstorming, case studies, discussions, and even role plays and simulations, is obtained by students from their information search which is mostly done on professional websites in English. A typical task for doing this search is given in the example:

***Working in the Internet class, do some Internet search.***

*The class is divided into pairs. Every pair searches for additional information on causes of job burnout and, what is most important, ways of treating it (ways of helping people who suffer from job burnout). It may be generalized theoretical information and descriptions of practical cases. Every pair is supposed to choose a particular site (or sites) and particular information.*

*After you have chosen, start collecting information from the Internet. Your goal is to prepare a 10-minute presentation on all possible causes of job burnout and ways of treating it for the next class. In your presentation you should speak both about the theory and practice of treating job burnouts. Find illustrative material (practical cases) on the Internet to be discussed during your presentation (textbook “Psychological Matters” by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 3. Job Burnout).*

In such a search, learners interact not with each other but with outside professional information sources developing, when processing those sources, their English professional reading and English professional listening skills. The information search is also the source for students’ professional writing in English when on the basis of the information they have found and the results of their oral professional interaction learners prepare different written documents, such as articles or reports. They are then presented to other students and the teacher for discussing and evaluating as illustrated in the two following examples:

**Example 1:**

*1. Students’ presentations. Students from every pair deliver their presentations on personal experiences in the area of emotions and feelings and personal successes in managing them. Presenters should be asked additional questions by the students and the teacher when the presentations are over. The time for every presentation is up to 5 minutes, including questions and answers; the total time for work is up to 35 minutes.*

*2. Listen to the first part of Professor Smart’s lecture “What to Do with Your Feelings” and take notes of it while listening. After listening, in a whole-class discussion try and list everything that Professor Smart recommends for:*

- 1) identifying how you feel;*
- 2) acknowledging your feelings;*
- 3) identifying the source of your feelings.*

*Discuss whether you agree with the recommendations or whether you can recommend some other procedures. You have 25 minutes for doing the task.*

*3. Now listen to the second part of Professor Smart's lecture "What to Do with Your Feelings" and take notes of it while listening. After listening, in a whole-class discussion try and list everything that Professor Smart recommends for managing and controlling our feelings. Discuss whether you agree with the recommendations or whether you can recommend some other procedures. You have 20 minutes for doing the task.*

*4. Home assignment. Write a 150-word summarizing essay on emotions, feelings, and ways of managing and controlling them. (Textbook "Psychological Matters" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Unit 6. Managing Emotions and Feelings).*

### **Example 2:**

*Every student has to individually write a review of the TV programme and quiz show that he or she has just watched (the students from the first group in the assignment 1 above write a review of the programme "Psychology in the Workplace" and the quiz show "What do you know about psychological problems at workplace?"; the students from the second group in the assignment 1 above write a review of the programme "Meet Psychology" and the quiz show "What do you know about psychology?").*

*Make each of your reviews of four paragraphs and of approximately 100 words.*

*You have 30 minutes for writing (until the end of the class). After finishing writing, hand in your written reviews to your teacher for his/her checking, commenting, and grading (textbook "Psychological Matters" by Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, et al. (2011) – Recapitulation Class).*

### **Project work**

One of the most important learning activities for the entire suggested approach is project work. It includes all of the activities that have been discussed above uniting them in a single project task with a single goal, and with a definite final result. Project

work is based on project tasks, which model real-life productive activities and require relatively long-term fulfillment (from one or two weeks to a whole semester, academic year, or even longer). Project tasks are assigned to individual students or groups of them, and for fulfilling such project tasks, students need to share their responsibilities and functions, divide the task among themselves, work autonomously in and out of class (with only the consultative assistance of the teacher) to complete the part of the entire project assigned to them. At the end, they report the completion of their part of the project to other students and the teacher demonstrating the results of that completion in a material form. When the entire project has been completed by all the students in the group, the final results also need to be reported and demonstrated in a material form. An example of such a project task may be the project done by our students majoring in psychology. All through their ESP course they compile “*A Short Psychological Encyclopedia*” on the basis of everything they have done and learned. In a similar way, students majoring in Business and Economics all through their ESP course compile a detailed “*Prospectus*” of their imaginary company. Such an “encyclopedia” or such a “prospectus” prepared by students leads to the completion of the final material product of each of the respective projects.

### **Conclusion**

The discussed approach’s most prominent feature is that practically all learning activities used in the ESP course are interactive and modeling genuine professional intercourse in English. The approach has been tested in teaching practice at Alfred Nobel University in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine and has proved to be of high efficiency (cf., for instance, Tarnopolsky, & Kozhushko, 2003). This means that important advantages are inherent in the experiential and interactive learning activities involved in implementing the approach so that, when doing such activities, learners orally interact in English with each other on professional issues. They also interact with outside sources of



professional information in English and prepare different professionally-oriented written papers in English on the basis of the data obtained. Additionally, they do project work in English, summarizing everything that they have learned both in what concerns their future profession and ESP. The essence of those advantages is in allowing students to construct their professional English communication skills autonomously, implicitly, and subconsciously, thus facilitating and accelerating their ESP skill acquisition. Therefore, such an approach and learning activities in which it is practically embodied can be safely taken as the basis for designing ESP courses for university students.

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