Constructivism in ESP Teaching at Ukrainian Universities

OLEG TARNOPOLSKY

Introduction

It is well known that every type of English for specific purposes (ESP) course is based on general English, but in each type, there is a specific notional and lexical part that characterizes only this given ESP variety, and goes beyond the general English boundaries (Robinson, 1991). In actuality, teaching and learning ESP is a specific part of the basis of the commonality to all varieties of ESP and embedded within general English.

Hence, ESP learning can be deemed efficient only after students have already acquired a high level of general English—not lower than intermediate, or level B2 according to the Council of Europe's (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Language*. Otherwise, students will have to continue learning general English in their ESP course to compensate for their prior deficiencies in general English knowledge. This is counterproductive because, when students start their ESP course on a sound and solid basis of general English, their efforts can be concentrated on specifics of ESP-based professional communication (i.e., what the course in ESP is actually designed for). Moreover, in such a case, the ESP course can be designed in a constructivist manner, so that students themselves *construct* their own target language professional communication skills for use in their professional interaction. "Self-constructing" one's own knowledge and communication skills is achieved through learning activities that model the extra-linguistic reality which is the reason the target language is being learned. Thanks to such modeling, target communication skills are, from the very beginning, developed to serve professional communication and expand on the information base of such communication.

This entry discusses the theoretical and practical ways of implementing the constructivist approach in ESP teaching at Ukrainian universities on the basis of experiential learning, interactive learning, content-based instruction, and blended learning. The dimensions of the ESP teaching and learning process are presented next.

ELT Dimensions

The constructivist approach to ESP teaching is a relatively recent development in Ukraine, and this approach was first introduced in 2002, when the first Ukrainian business English textbook "*Business Projects*" (Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, Bezugla, Degtiariova, & Gibson, 2002) was first adopted for classroom use at the Alfred Nobel University, Dnipro. Over the years, this textbook became the basic text of business English courses at many Ukrainian universities.

The constructivist approach embodied in the textbook is based on Jonassen's (1995) characteristics of constructivist language learning, requiring it to be *active, constructive, cooperative, intentional, conversational, contextual*, and *reflexive*. To achieve the implementation of these characteristics within the approach developed and the textbook used, three essential ways of learning were laid out as the approach's primary foundation: *experiential learning*, *content-based instruction*, and *interactive learning* (Tarnopolsky, 2012).

Experiential learning, along with specific experiential learning activities (Jerald & Clark, 1994; Kolb, 1984), was considered the most important practical way of implementing the constructivist approach envisaged here. The ESP experiential learning activities exemplify extra-linguistic reality within which students can experience, first hand, their personal functioning in that "modeled reality" during real-life target language use. In the process of undergoing such quasi-real experiences, learners subconsciously construct the skills necessary for successful communication.

This subconscious construction intensifies and facilitates language acquisition due to its intuitive nature and, therefore, occurs effortlessly. Acquisition is the direct result of learners experiencing target language communication within carefully planned learning constructs. Such features make experiential learning fundamental to the constructivist approach.

The specific learning activities for implementing experiential learning while affording students opportunities to explore quasi-real-life situations, issues, or both include, but are not limited to, role playing and simulation, brainstorming and conducting targeted case studies, engaging in selected discussions, presenting particular scenarios, searching for extra-linguistic information through authentic language sources, completing various creative learning assignments, writing essays, reports, memos, articles, or business letters on the basis of information discussed orally and observed during information searches, and, finally, engaging in primary project work requiring purposeful target language use. These activities, it is worth noting, epitomize experiential learning by accentuating the key characteristics of the constructivist approach, thereby making learning active, conversational, reflexive, and, above all, constructive.

Against such a backdrop, the ESP course content was selected following the requirements of *content-based instruction* (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). Content-based instruction is a kind of ESP teaching and learning process organization in which the focus of instruction has shifted from language instruction to the integration of both languages for professional communication and the content matter of

professional disciplines. The shift in focus creates a situation in which the teacher's and students' attention is explicitly concentrated on the professional content matter, while the language (ESP) and communicative skills are, to a great extent, acquired implicitly during mastery of content through the medium of English. In the conditions under discussion, content-based instruction implies that all the experiential-interactive learning activities performed by students are inextricably linked to their profession through the systematized professional contents of everything that they speak, write about, read, or listen to in English. Content-based instruction thus ensures the implementation of seminal characteristics embodying the constructivist approach.

Combining experiential learning with content-based instruction results in a viable constructivist approach that makes ESP teaching and learning practice more efficient and credible. The rationale for this is simple: Not having to drill or deliberately memorize new language forms, learners can acquire or reinforce such forms implicitly in the process of creative communication on professional matters in modeled professional situations. In turn, such communication gives learners ample opportunities to not only implicitly and subconsciously develop their English professional communication skills, but to also acquire the professional knowledge and skills needed in the process of quasi-real-life professional communication as noted earlier. In addition, such communication permits the purposeful integration of learning English for professional pursuits with learning the necessary knowledge underlying the profession targeted. Even more importantly, the above integration raises students' ESP learning motivation because they see the immediate usefulness of their English studies for their professional development and career. In the end, target language interaction situated within professional settings (even when only modeled) is far better connected to problem-solving tasks and language acquisition practices than an approach that is devoid of such real-life language purposes. This, in turn, makes the entirety of the ESP teaching/learning process all the more focused and task-based (Skehan, 2002; Pica, 2007). Students' active involvement in solving creative learning tasks both enhances and supports the learning outcomes envisaged within a constructivist approach in ESP.

It was this inseparable unity of experiential learning and content-based instruction that provided for the emergence of the third fundamental feature of the developed version of the constructivist approach—the *interactive nature of student learning*. Interactivity in this case means more than just learning in the framework of constant dialogic interactions between participants. It also entails learners interacting in real-life professional environments while employing real-life sources of specialized information from which the materials for learning are obtained (the requirement of content-based instruction). On the one hand, interactivity presupposes *cooperative learning* (Kessler, 1992), in which students, working in pairs and small groups, integrate the knowledge and skills each of them has, so that each of them may experience the opportunity to teach the others in the group and also learn from them in the process. On the other hand, interactivity presupposes going beyond the learning environment to find information for completing learning

assignments in professional sources in English and, if possible, through direct contact with English-speaking professionals. Emulating such interactive behaviors ensures the safe implementation of critical characteristics of the constructivist approach while also making learning purposeful, constructive, cooperative, and conversational.

Interactive learning, as one fundamental feature of the developed constructivist approach, was the impetus for introducing *continuous simulations* into the business English courses, a specific and innovative experiential learning activity (Tarnopolsky & Kozhushko, 2003). Targeting future economists and businesspeople, continuous simulations are one of the most interactive, experiential, and content-based learning activities available within the framework of the constructivist approach to ESP teaching. In such simulations, learning develops as continuous modeling and enacting of business activities. All experiential simulations of professional business environments and enactments of real-life business activities within such environments requiring professional target language usage are implemented within imaginary frameworks of a fully functioning company. It is worth underscoring here that it is the students themselves who invent the company in question, "set it up," organize its "functioning," and "work" as hired employees in that company. In these continuous simulations, students were expected to "construct" their language professional communication skills in a manner befitting both natural and pragmatic exchanges. Combined with the experiential learning activities discussed above, the *continuous simulations* activities and projects addressed here formed the impetus behind all learning activity.

The above-discussed design of ESP constructivist courses for future economists and businesspeople proved to be most successful and effective, not only in teaching practice alone, but also in the empirical results obtained from the Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko (2003) study conducted 2002–3. The positive results uncovered in the study referenced here made the proposed approach and the textbook, *Business Projects* (Tarnopolsky et al., 2002), where the approach was first expressed, quite popular for teaching business English at a number of Ukrainian universities. The positive results aside, the teaching practice uncovered a drawback which requires further attention in the years ahead.

Future Directions

As noted previously, implementing the *constructivist approach* in ESP to university students in Ukraine creates opportunities for students to *self-construct* their target language communication skills expected of them in professional communications. However, because of *informational insufficiency*, the professional subject-matter information present in the textbook was clearly not enough to supplement and inform the continuous simulations, project tasks, writing professional articles, and many of the experiential activities designed to accentuate selected quasi-real-life professional situations and issues. Additional information could have

been easily obtained from the students' L1, but doing so would not have benefited the development of the learners' targeted ESP skills. Indeed, finding relevant professional information in the target language in authentic print and audio sources proved most difficult. Not having access to English-speaking professionals limited the applicability of and exposure to interactive learning. This, in turn, prevented learners from experiencing the full spectrum of business interactions as transacted in real-life professional environments while employing real-life sources of professional information from which the information for learning was initially secured.

The rapidly spreading use of the Internet in 2002 in Ukraine ameliorated this drawback considerably. In 2006, the constructivist ESP course included students' *optional* Internet searches in English. Such searches involved the selection of professional sites exemplifying readily available material learners could employ profitably to complete their assigned experiential tasks and project work. Important to note here is the observation that since not all students had free Internet access, assignments were not always completed either fully or on time given the optional nature of the tasks and the difficulties in accessing the Internet.

The situation changed radically in early 2010 when the Internet became accessible to all Ukrainian university students. At that time, Internet searches for information on professional sites in English became *mandatory* in our ESP courses. This new requirement was clearly evidenced in the follow-up constructivist course designed for students majoring in psychology. In this course, students were asked to work with the *Psychological Matters* textbook (Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, Degtiariova, & Bespalova, 2011). For students majoring in pedagogy, a similar course packet was designed in 2015. In both these courses, assignments involving professional American or British Internet searches were a regular and mandatory course feature, and all activities derived from such searches were systematized and expected to be practiced with frequency both inside and outside the class. Specifically, this curriculum change sought to offer students ample opportunities to engage in experiential and interactive learning that is anchored in authentic content-based instruction. Integration of this sort helps transform student online work into *blended learning* (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Here, the more traditional student in-class work with the teacher is dynamically combined with their out-of-class autonomous online learning, thereby further supporting the interactive experiential nature of a wide range of content-based language tasks.

In this manner, the initial direction set in the 2010s for modifying, transforming, and improving the constructivist approach developed in the early 2000s for ESP teaching at Ukrainian universities was focused on combining that approach with blended learning. What emerged from all this curricular activity could easily be termed the constructivist blended learning approach to ESP teaching and learning. Despite these early successes, there remain some specific curricular innovations that require further attention.

First, it is logical to postulate that involving Ukrainian ESP students in online professional learning projects with students from other universities worldwide, both native and non-native English-speaking students majoring in the same

professional discipline, will provide learning benefits that would be hard to ignore in the years ahead. Next, the potential online publication of students' profession-oriented writings (i.e., articles, reports, and essays), following a structured peer-to-peer review-comment-discussion phase among other ESP English-learning and native English-speaking students across many universities, is too great to dismiss casually as yet another attempt to collaborate within and across academic or professional majors. Finally, the gradual transition from ESP courses espousing a constructivist approach toward courses exemplifying true English *immersion* holds much promise not only for Ukrainian universities, but for any university that seeks to strengthen the collaborative ties among its ESP students and courses worldwide. The feasibility of these three directions alone, it is hoped, will ensure the continuous modeling and development of the constructivist approach for years to come. Its promise has yet to be fully materialized within and outside Ukrainian context.

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