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DEVELOPING A CONSTRUCTIVIST TEXTBOOK OF ENGLISH FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS MAJORING IN TOURISM

Abstract:

Objective: The goal of the article is to discuss the characteristic features of a textbook of English designed for Ukrainian university students majoring in tourism.

Methods: The methods include the analysis of theoretical approaches and teaching experience, theoretical cognition, the method of analogy and comparison.

Results: The most important results of the study were the specific features of the textbook developed. It is designed following the constructivist approach to language teaching that permits students to acquire involuntarily target language communicative skills through participation in professional activities/communication conducted in English and modeled in the classroom. The peculiar structure of the textbook and its thematic units has been developed to suit the requirements of the constructivist approach. Seven constructivist principles following which the textbook is designed have been elaborated. Experiential learning activities are introduced to practically implement the constructivist approach in classroom practice. They comprise: continuous simulation, project work, case studies, discussions; searching for, listening to and reading authentic professional printed and electronic information required for doing creative tasks; writing different professional documents.

Scientific novelty: The features of the textbook discussed in the article make it scientifically innovative in what concerns teaching English for professional purposes. The research results make an innovative contribution to the theoretical development of the constructivist approach in language teaching.

Practical significance: The results of the study open new ways of improving teaching English for professional purposes and they constitute the first practical development of the constructivist approach in teaching English to future managers of tourism.

Keywords: teaching English for professional purposes; textbook of English; constructivist approach; principles of constructivist teaching and learning; experiential learning activities.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for Specific, or Professional, Purposes (ESP) is rapidly becoming one of the most important directions in English teaching in Ukraine because of its internationally oriented economic development requiring numerous specialists with good command of English for professional communication. Of special significance is training such specialists in the field of international tourism since this area of economic/business activities is one of the most beneficial for the country's economic growth. However, ESP teaching to Ukrainian university students majoring in tourism is far from being up to international standards — first of all, due to the absence of a textbook of English meeting the most cutting edge requirements to such textbooks, as well as meeting the requirements of the specific conditions of teaching ESP to future tourism managers at Ukrainian universities.

Owing to this, the project of designing a cutting edge textbook of English for such managers has been elaborated for longer than a year at Alfred Nobel University in Dnipro (former Dnipropetrovsk), Ukraine. The development of the textbook is now drawing to its close and the aim of this article is to discuss its specific innovative features. The textbook is designed following the precepts of the constructivist approach to organizing the teaching/learning process and the essence of that approach in what concerns language training should be discussed before considering the textbook in question.

CONSTRUCTIVISM IN ESP TEACHING

The constructivist approach in teaching/learning is based on the psychological and pedagogical theories of

Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotskii [1; 2; 3]. The approach aims at making learners "*construct*" themselves their own knowledge and skills through specific learning activities modeling genuine practical activities where such knowledge and skills are required and where they usually emerge and get reinforced in natural (e. g., professional) situations and conditions. A good example is using case studies in classes on professional disciplines at universities. When solving professional or quasi-professional cases, university students autonomously "construct" their ability to solve similar tasks in their future professional activities through realizing the specific method of solving them (knowledge) and involuntarily acquiring the skills necessary for using that method efficiently in practice.

After publication of the works by Ioannou-Georgiou and Jonassen [4; 5] devoted to using constructivism in language training, it has become possible to formulate a definition of the essence of the constructivist approach to ESP teaching and learning. Such a definition has been given by Tarnopolsky [6] who states that constructivism presupposes a specific design of a university ESP course giving students opportunities of subconsciously acquiring skills of professional communication in English through learning activities modeling professional activities while those modeled activities are performed through communication in English being learned.

It should be said that it is in the works of the latter author and his co-authors [6; 7; 8; 9], as well as in the series of ESP textbooks developed by him and his team [10; 11; 12; 13], that the constructivist approach/method in ESP teaching has found its fullest embodiment. This embodiment has been modified and improved in accordance with the author's latest theoretical and practical ideas that were brought to life in the textbook "*Tourist Matters*" whose development has been almost completed by now and which is discussed further in this article.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS AND STRUCTURE OF THE TEXTBOOK

The textbook is designed for students who have already achieved the intermediate level in their command of General English (levels B1+ or B2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference* [14]). If students have attained this level of General English command before entering the university, they can start using the textbook "*Tourist Matters*" from the first year of their university studies. But in most cases it is supposed to be used in the ESP course during the second year of study-ing English at university when professional language training specialization mostly begins.

The goal of the textbook is to teach students professional communication in English (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) on those topics and in those situations requiring the use of English that are encountered with the greatest probability in the professional career of a tourist manager. The textbook is designed for 144 hours of in-class work and approximately the same number of hours of out-of-class students' work on home assignments received. It consists of 12 thematic *Units*, three units making one module with one review-and-skill-check class after every module. The topics of separate units reflect the major aspects of tourism managers' professional activities, such as selection of tourist destinations, participation in tourism fairs and exhibitions, providing tourists with accommodation, etc.

Every unit is divided into five *Steps* (and then working on it takes five classes with one class per step) or six *Steps* (then working on it takes six classes).

In a unit of five steps those steps include: 1) the *Step of Introductory definitions* with a communicative introduction into the topic aimed at eliciting students' background knowledge and giving them all the fundamental notions and definitions concerning that topic; 2) the *Step of Information processing* where student are expected to acquire in English all the important information on the topic; 3) the *Step of Presentations and their discussion* for which students prepare presentations on different aspects of the topic that are listened to and discussed in class; 4) the *Step of Continuous simulation and project work* (see explanations further in the article); 5) the *Step of Discussing projects, concluding and checking* where the results of project work are discussed, the material on the topic is finally processed, and students' knowledge and skills acquired during the work on the *Unit* are checked. Those units that contain a larger share of professional information in them or where this information is especially difficult or important have one more step (*Development*) introduced between the above-discussed third and fourth steps. In that step additional information on the professional topic is processed and discussed.

As can be seen from the above description of units and steps in them, they are totally based on professional communication in the target language and this concerns even home assignments and materials for them placed after every *Step* in every *Unit* of the textbook. Language form-focused exercises are not used not only because the

textbook is mostly designed on the basis of Krashen's language acquisition theory [15] but also because formal language exercises disrupt the involuntary communicative skill acquisition processes proper to the constructivist approach.

CONSTRUCTIVIST PRINCIPLES IN THE TEXTBOOK DESIGN

Seven such principles underlie the textbook and it is they that ensure its constructivist nature, i. e., learners' subconscious acquisition of target language professional communication skills through professional communication in English into which students are always "immersed" in their language classes where those skills are subconsciously "constructed" and, thereby, acquired.

The first principle is *the principle of content-based instruction* [16]. English and English communication skills are acquired only through professional content when students are speaking, reading, listening, and writing in English about that content. It means that English communication skills are mostly acquired subconsciously while processing the professional content matter.

The second principle can be called *the principle of providing systematized professional information in the textbook (and course) of English for professional communication.* This principle means that the textbook is designed not as a random selection of professional topics, materials, and varieties of learning activities but is based on systemic and systematic rendering of the entire course of training for the career of a tourist manager embracing all the basic issues that can be important for the work of such a manager.

The third principle is *the principle of authenticity*. First, it means that only authentic materials (texts for reading and listening) are used in the textbook, i. e. those professionally oriented materials which are created by native speakers and for native speakers. Most of those materials are *synthesized* [17] and *modified* in such ways that either one single text is made out of fragments of several authentic texts, or authentic texts are abridged and modified to better suit the learning purposes. But no adapted texts or texts artificially created just for this textbook have been used. Such an approach is very important for ensuring genuine content learning.

Second, the principle of authenticity means the introduction of authentic students' professional activities into the learning process, i. e. those that faithfully model genuine professional activities and professional communication in it. This is achieved with the help of

the following principle inextricably connected with and supporting the principle of authenticity. It *is the principle of ensuring professional communication in English in students' experiential learning activities*. Both the authenticity of students' activities and their orientation towards professional communication in English mean that the learning process is totally focused on learners' communication and that communication authentically models professional intercourse of practical tourist managers.

The experiential nature of students' learning activities (*experiential learning* [18; 19]) means that they are designed in such a way as to make learners acquire target language communication skills through *experiencing* real or quasi-real (modeled) practical professional activities in which professional communication is conducted in the target language. Further below in the article the learning activities that can be considered as experiential and are used in the textbook "*Tourist Matters*" and the course based on it will be discussed.

The three remaining principles help to implement the two basic constructivist principles discussed above (the principles of authenticity and of ensuring professional communication in experiential learning activities). First of all, it concerns *the principle of integrating different communicative activities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in the learning process.* The course of English taught with the aid of the textbook "*Tourist Matters*" presupposes parallel development of learners' speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Each of those skills in its development is based on all the others and supported by all the others and, in its turn, makes a base and support for all the others [20].

But it should be noted that the most vivid manifestation of the principle of integrating different communicative activities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in the learning process could be observed in students' *project work* (see "*Basic characteristics and structure of the textbook*" above), which is an integral part of all textbook learning activities. Project work is an inalienable part of every *Unit* in the textbook. From the beginning of their work with it, students have to do a project task meant to be done through the course. This project task fulfilled through the entire course is compiling "*The Prospectus of a Travel Agency*" where students write separate parts after working on every unit of the textbook.

The chapters of *The Prospectus* are not written as simple summaries of the information obtained in the process of work on this or that unit. Such summaries make a mi-

nor part of every part in *The Prospectus.* Most of those parts are made up of information that every student has to find (in discussions, when working on the Internet, etc.). On the basis of the information found (through speaking, listening and reading), pairs or small groups of students who worked together prepare their version of the relevant part (in writing). Every version of the part prepared by pairs or small groups is discussed by all the students in the group (speaking and listening). Strong and weak points of all versions are talked over and, in the general discussion, the outline of the final version of the part is determined.

In this way, the learning activity under discussion can be considered as the best embodiment of communicative activities integration because there is the "focus" communicative activity around which all the other communicative activities concentrate. In this case, that "focal" communicative activity is writing because reading, speaking, and listening serve for improving *writing* of *The Prospectus* parts, i. e., for obtaining the best results of the project work.

Neither the project tasks nor a number of other creative experiential tasks in the textbook (see below) would be possible without implementing the sixth principle underlying it. This is *the principle of organizing students' out-of-class Internet search for professional information on English web sites,* which is one of integral and inalienable kinds of learning activities in the textbook under consideration. Such Internet search for professional information is absolutely necessary because creative learning tasks require such a great amount of that information which could not have been provided only by the professional texts for reading and listening included in the textbook. The mandatory nature of the Internet search postulated by the textbook makes the ESP course based on it a *blended* one (*blended learning* [21; 22]) where students' in-class work and out-of-class online work are equally important for learning outcomes.

The last, seventh, principle following which the textbook is designed is *the principle of students' cooperative learning.* A great number of learning activities are based on students' work in pairs and/or in small groups. It not only creates better and more natural conditions for learners' communication in English (the language is used in its natural function of organizing joint efforts for solving different professional tasks and problems). The principal advantage of cooperative learning is in creating conditions for learners' mutual assistance when doing learning assignments, the assistance that gives students opportunities of learning from each other because every student invests his/her own potential of skills and knowledge into common work. As a result, the learning activities in the textbook based on cooperative learning give opportunities of increasing the general efficiency of the teaching/learning process by summing up the efforts of individual students who work together with other students to achieve a common goal and learn from each other while doing that [23].

The clearest practical embodiment of the principles discussed above, which makes the textbook most vividly constructivist in its nature, is the experiential learning activities which are the only kind of learning activities in every textbook unit.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN THE TEXTBOOK AND THE ESP COURSE BASED ON IT

From the above description of the textbook "*Tourist Matters*" basic characteristics and structure it becomes clear that probably the most prominent experiential learning activities used in it are *project work* and *continuous simulation.* The former has thoroughly enough been discussed above when analysing the principle of integrating different communicative activities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in the learning process. In what concerns the latter [6; 7; 24], it can be considered as a very specific learning activity that integrates all the learning process within one single plot — in our case, the plot in which students establish their own (imaginary) travel agency where their work during their entire ESP course. In the framework of this continuous simulation various separate simulations [25] and role plays [26] are used to model different episodes of the imaginary agency's functioning, and it is the course and results of such functioning that are reflected in the project of preparing "*The Prospectus of a Travel Agency*" discussed above.

Besides these activities, the other experiential speaking activities used in the textbook and the ESP course, mostly as integral parts of the continuous simulation and project work, include:

1) preparing and delivering different professional presentations on the topics being studied [6; 27];

2) case-studies and other task-based activities when students are expected to solve some professional problems and formulate in speaking their professional solutions and decisions [6];

3) professional brainstorming and discussions on certain practical issues [6; 28].

Experiential learning activities in reading and listening in English are used by students for collecting professional materials and information for doing their creative tasks the results of which are presented through speaking (see above) or writing (see below). The reading/listening tasks include:

For listening:

1) listening to information and fragments of conversations on touristic issues, doing task-based assignments on the basis of information heard, the tasks being aimed at professional analysis of the information received;

2) listening to practical cases, doing task-based assignments on the basis of information heard, the tasks being aimed at professional analysis of the information received.

For reading:

1) reading various authentic *printed* texts on different touristic issues, doing task-based assignments concerning the materials read, the tasks being aimed at professional analysis of the information received and preparing on its basis students' own presentations, cases, etc.;

2) reading various authentic *electronic* texts (found autonomously on the Internet in the blended learning framework — see above) on different touristic issues, doing task-based assignments concerning the materials read, the tasks being aimed at professional analysis of the information received and preparing on its basis students' own presentations, cases, and projects.

Experiential writing learning activities mostly summarize all the learning results which can be especially clearly seen from the above description of project work devoted to writing "*The Prospectus of a Travel Agency.*" Writing activities in the textbook and ESP course include:

1) writing essays and summaries on touristic issues;

2) writing summaries and abstracts of professional texts read;

3) writing professional articles and chapters, especially in the framework of students' project work (see above);

4) writing cases (case studies).

As it can be seen, all the learning activities are of professionally experiential nature creating conditions for students' autonomous involuntary "construction" of their English professional communication skills. It should be repeated again that the textbook contains practically no

learning activities specifically aimed at learners' gaining command of certain language items of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. It becomes possible since, as it has already been said, the textbook is designed for students who have already attained their intermediate (B1+ or B2) level of General English. It means that all their basic pronunciation and grammar skills have been developed before, and those skills need only to be subconsciously reinforced in speaking, listening, reading, and writing while working with the textbook "*Tourist Matters*". More attention is focused on vocabulary skills since students are supposed to retain a lot of new words and word combinations in their ESP course based on the textbook under discussion. But those skills are also developed in the process of communication and not in formal exercises.

CONCLUSION

The research reported in this article has resulted in developing an original ESP textbook for university students majoring in tourism. In that textbook and the course based on it the constructivist method of ESP teaching and learning has been embodied. This method makes every unit of the textbook designed in such a way that the logic of professional activities, and not the logic of presenting the target language system, is reflected in it. Such an approach gives students an opportunity of autonomously and subconsciously "constructing" their own professional target language communication skills through being constantly "immersed" into that communication when doing learning tasks modeling in the units of the textbook quasi-real professional activities.

The efficiency and effectiveness of such modeling is achieved by implementing seven constructivist learning principles analyzed in the article and the system of experiential (i.e., based on the experience in practical activities) kinds of learning activities.

The textbook discussed in the article is the last in the series [8–11] of constructivist textbooks for ESP studies compiled by us, and it is just in this textbook that the constructivist approach has found its fullest and most developed embodiment. The efficiency of this approach has already been demonstrated in the teaching practice where every unit of the textbook has been tried immediately after completing its preparation. However, the next prospect of our research is in fully experimentally testing the textbook in the teaching/learning process for finding what its advantages and disadvantages are when it is used all through an ESP course from the beginning to the end of an academic year.

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