

Стаття у монографії Єдина Європа: розширюючи кордони - *United Europe*: моногр./ Держ.вищ.навч.закл. «Національний гірничий університет», м. Дніпропетровськ; Вища банківська школа, м. Вроцлав; наук.ред. О.І. Амоша. – Д.: Національний гірничий університет, 2012, С. 259 - 266;

## TEACHING AND LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT THE UNIVERSITY COURSES ON THE WAY TO LIFELONG LEARNING

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*Modern theories and practical issues of developing learner autonomy as a prerequisite for life long learning are in the focus of this article. Special attention is drawn to developing learning strategies and reflection, in particular. The most effective ways of developing learning to learn skills at EFL university courses are identified.*

### INTRODUCTION

Rapidly changing world and economic competitiveness require the continuous updating of knowledge and skills through life. That is why promoting lifelong learning is within the main objectives of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA).

The term lifelong learning is open to various interpretations. Thus, Macmillan dictionary defines lifelong learning as a process of gaining knowledge and skills that continues throughout a person's life and associated with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and education [9]. The Scottish Executive: 'Lifelong learning covers the whole range of learning. That includes formal and informal learning and workplace learning. It also includes the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that people acquire in their day-to-day experiences' [7].

The European Commission defined it as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective [5].

Ultimately, all learning activity undertaken throughout life, whether formal or informal can be considered lifelong learning, though the focus of this research is on formal learning of foreign languages at the university level in Ukraine.

The dramatic changes in the Ukrainian higher education and language education in particular caused by the desire of Ukraine to join the European community were proved by the participants of the International Scientific and Practical Seminar "Challenges and Experiences of the Language Education in the New Millennium: Ukraine" hosted by the State Higher Educational Institution "National Mining University" last October. Special attention at the Seminar was paid to developing learner autonomy as a prerequisite for lifelong learning.

Being among obligatory university courses, EFL courses are based on the main principles of the Bologna Declaration and encourage lifelong learning and autonomy as "it is obvious that learning a foreign language in the European context is far beyond compulsory education" [1; 33]. EFL university courses are considered to be ESP (English for Specific Purposes of learners) courses as they are dealing with the urgent learners' needs for professional community, i.e. academic and/or professional discourse communities, and generic job-related skills and study skills are dominating.

The results of the research in this area done by exploring modern theories and evaluating classroom practice of teaching EFL at the university and ESP teacher training throughout Ukraine, and by reflecting on the experience of being a student at various CPD courses while participating in the British Council Ukraine projects are given in this paper. The focus of the research is on what's, why

and how's developing learner autonomy of the university graduates while English language teaching and learning at the university level.

## 1. KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

According to the Recommendation of the European Parliament (2006), **communication in foreign languages** identified as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context is among eight key competences for lifelong learning. It is considered to be fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society as they are seen as a major factor in innovation, productivity and competitiveness [12]. Being the key competence for lifelong learning, communication in foreign languages involves in addition to the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue, mediation and intercultural understanding.

**Learning to learn**, which is related to learning, the ability to pursue and organise one's own learning, either individually or in groups, in accordance with one's own needs, and awareness of methods and opportunities [12] is the other key competence.

Though all the key competences for lifelong learning are interdependent, the emphasis in each of them is made on critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, decision taking etc. that is reflected in the EFL university course design described below.

Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF, 2001) adopts action-oriented language learning and gives '*Can do*' descriptors of language behaviour, which requires the acquisition of linguistic competences (language skills and language knowledge), and the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences needed for performing study and job-related tasks. CEF defines competences as the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform action, describes language use and learning as "the actions performed by persons who as individuals and social agents develop a range of **competences**, both **general** and in particular **communicative language competences**... The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences." [4; 9]

Therefore, the development of communicative competence relies on students' ability to learn, on subject knowledge and prior experience which occurs within a study – and specialism-related situational context. This and other innovations introduced in ESP courses resulted from the National ESP Curriculum project initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine supported by the British Council Ukraine (2003 – 2005) are evaluated on the basis of classroom research of introducing changes in teaching EFL at the National Mining University. Describing the experience of teaching/learning ESP at the university, we will focus on modern approaches to EFL/ESP teaching and learning, which from our perspective, help to organise quality teaching and learning to enable students to satisfy their specific communicative needs in future professions.

Ability to learn, i.e. 'knowing how to learn', referred to by CEF [4; 12] as the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter when necessary, belongs to general competences which are within the aims of the National ESP Curriculum [3; 33]. ESP and Business English university courses developed, using the Curriculum, encourage lifelong learning and autonomy. The active use of procedural knowledge ('learning to learn') forms the basis for efficient and autonomous learning of languages by the university graduates when being in the professional settings.

## 2. MODERN THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN PRACTICE

Modern theories and concepts of teaching ESP are based on understanding learning process as an acquisition of foreign language in terms of both knowledge and integrated skills required for interaction in real life situation that proceeds unconsciously simultaneously with a conscious process of learning.

In other words, as Hutchinson and Waters point out “learning is an internal process, which is crucially dependent on the knowledge the learners already have and their ability and motivation to use it” [8; 72].

Harmer points out that “learning is a partnership between teachers and students and stresses the fact that students need to be ready to take some of the strain while learning” [6]. Hutchinson and Waters, Scrivener and many other linguists consider that “people learn more by doing things themselves rather than by being told about them” [15; 4].

These latest tendencies in language learning and changes in educational philosophy are reflected in the shift from teacher-centred learning environment to student-centred one, if focus on the roles of the main agents of teaching/learning process. The main differences in the approaches to teaching languages, each of which reflects various assumptions and beliefs of teachers about philosophy and psychology of teaching and learning are summarised below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher-centred Approach vs Learner-centred Approach (LCA)

<b>Teacher-centred approach</b>	<b>Learner-centred approach</b>
Focus is on the teacher.	Focus is both on the teacher and learners. Teaching is seen as a two-way process: teaching and learning.
Teaching is input-oriented based on teaching objectives.	Teaching is oriented on outcomes based on learning objectives.
Teacher is a major inputter, source of all knowledge.	Teacher is the most available source of knowledge and a presenter or facilitator of learning. Students may get inputs from peers, materials, chosen and selected by the teacher and/or found by themselves etc. and when necessary from teacher.
Teacher is the main decision-maker in the classroom, i.e. makes all classroom decisions, including decisions on content and choice of all the materials and topics etc.	Teacher is a negotiator, needs analyst and assessor etc. Students are negotiated while making decision on content through needs analysis made by the teacher (results of students’ self-assessment and self-evaluation are included).
Focus on language forms and structures (what the teacher knows about the language).	Focus is on the language as a means of communication in typical situations (how students will use it in target situation and real-life settings), i.e. focus is on skills and working knowledge of the language and its forms.
Students work individually, mostly alone.	Students work in pairs, groups, teams or alone depending on the task and/or purpose.
Teacher monitors and corrects every student utterances.	Students talk without constant instructor monitoring; teacher provides feedback.
Teacher assesses and corrects all the mistakes made by students.	Teacher assesses and gives constructive feedback mentioning the areas to be focused on by students and giving an advice what to focus on.
Teacher evaluates student learning.	Students are involved in the process of evaluation, including self-assessment, and encouraged to reflect on their process of learning and to give feedback to the teacher.
Teacher is responsible for the outcomes of students’ learning process.	Responsibility for the outcomes of learning is shared between the teacher and students.
Classroom is mostly quiet.	Classroom is often noisy and busy.

Student-centered teaching is based on the constructivist model in which students construct rather than receive or assimilate knowledge. The role of a teacher is a facilitator who provides a framework of actions, i.e. communicative activities students to complete or scaffolding tasks for performing actions that facilitates their learning English (see column 2 in Table 1).

The results of questioning students and analysis of their feedback on the modules gathered during ESP and BE courses demonstrate that the majority of students prefer to work in pairs and groups that allow them to share their experience and ideas with their group-mates (see Fig.1). Students like

communication in the situations close to their real life (nearly 95% of respondents), though sometimes the professional situations proposed by EFL teachers for simulation and role plays are still vague for them. This can be explained by the fact that students undergo ESP training during their first year of study, when they are not aware much about their future specialism. The situation is much better at the Business English courses delivered for the second- and third-year students that can be explained by the students' experience of initial training in their specialism area provided in the native language(s).

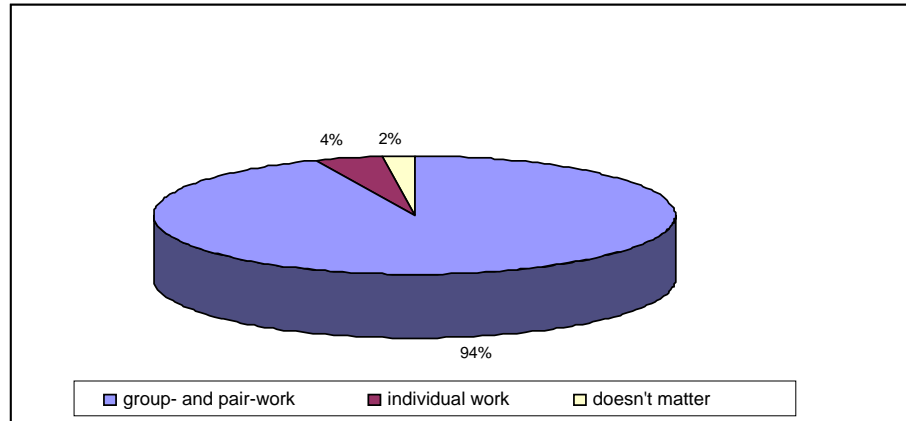


Fig. 1. Students' Attitudes to the Classroom Interaction Patterns.

Students are involved in evaluation process step by step. If at the end of the first module the majority of respondents (more than 90%) demonstrate lack of reflection and critical thinking as to their studies and personal responsibilities for the outcomes of their learning, there is some evidence that by the end of the course at least 50% of students are able to assess themselves and find the reasons of their failures and gaps that help them to plan their further actions in learning.

Portfolio tasks having been introduced in EFL/ESP courses contribute much to shift the focus from teaching to learning and to develop students' responsibility for their learning that will lead to their further autonomy. Students' feedback on EFL teaching mostly positive, though students often are not good in reasoning their learning outcomes, but their recommendations how to improve teaching are of great value for teachers. Sometimes the reflective assignments demonstrate discrepancy in student's vision of learning foreign language and his/her own practice. For example, being used to learn grammar, they insist on learning grammar rules and doing a lot of grammar exercises, though sometimes there are only few grammar mistakes in their written paper and the range of their vocabulary is within the target level.

The majority of students are quite realistic as to their responsibility for language acquisition that is proved by the data obtained with the help of structured interview. The students were proposed to identify the responsibilities of the main agents of teaching/learning agents by choosing the degree of responsibility among 'full', 'partial' and 'no' and support their opinions by giving arguments. The results of questioning demonstrate that students, especially those who have experience of study at the university more than a year, are aware of the shared responsibility for their learning outcomes, but the ratios of responsibilities lie between two extremes from 'fully dependent on teachers' to 'fully dependent on students' that can be interpreted as the demonstration of the level of students' autonomy. In general, the ratio is varied from 2:3 to 1:1. Moreover, the majority of students see the role of teachers as it is mentioned in Table 1 (see column 2 above).

Ultimately, there is an evidence of the shift from teacher-centred approach to learner-centred approach (LCA) in the university, though the results of teacher trainings demonstrate that there are still some teachers who are afraid of losing full control in the classroom. Though, more and more teachers have become aware of learner-centred approach (LCA) and use it in their daily practice, there is low

evidence of their awareness of learning-centred approach to teaching EFL/ESP which is considered to be one of the most effective for learning English.

### **3. ACTION LEARNING AND REFLECTION**

Action learning, which is close to ‘learning by doing’ proposed by Hutchinson and Waters [8] for ESP teaching in 1998, is defined by McGill and Beaty as “a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done” [10; 11]. The key points in action learning is that learning is problem-based, self-directed and encouraging reflection on actions in a supporting ‘set’ of peers that provide a dialogue with each other, thus, managing of the learning process is shifted from teachers to individual learners.

The role of reflection while learning is stressed by Scrivener [15] too, who points out that “the process of learning often involves five steps: (1) doing something; (2) recalling what happened; (3) reflecting on that; (4) drawing conclusions; (5) using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience”. His experiential learning cycle is based on Kolb’s Reflective Cycle: *experience* (Immersing a learner in the task), *observation and reflection* (What did you notice?), *abstract conceptualisation or creating meaning* (What does it mean?), *planning and testing* (What will happen next? What do you want to change?).

While describing the reflective practitioner, Schon has identified reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, where “reflection-*in*-action is a process of thinking about doing something while doing it, i.e. ‘learning by doing’ [14; 54] that allows a practitioner no matter who is s/he to construct ‘a new theory of the unique case’ ” [14; 68]. This is so called mode of ordinary practical knowledge - knowing-*in*-action. On the constructivist view of learning, as Moon points out, “the learner constructs their own knowledge and the knowledge is conceived more as a cognitive structure”, where teachers may influence the learning by constructing the materials of teaching, interacting with students or by choosing this or that form of assessment. From her perspective, cognitive structure is an accumulation of learning that provides a link for new learning [11; 108].

Richards refers to reflection or “critical reflection” as “an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action”. It is mostly concerned with asking “what” and “why” questions that raise the degree of autonomy and responsibility [13].

To sum up, reflective practice is associated with learning from experience, i.e. experiential learning, where reflection is viewed as one of the learning strategies used for constructing new knowledge. The act of reflection is seen as a way of promoting the development of autonomous, qualified and self-directed professionals. Engaging in reflective practice is associated with the improvement of the outcomes of learning and leads to professional and personal development, and closing the gap between theory and practice. That is why reflection as a learning strategy is built in the foreign language courses by using task-based approach to teaching EFL which presupposes pre-task activities, task itself and post-task activities; self-assessment and portfolio of the results of self-study as an instrument for self-evaluation and self-assessment.

### **4. LEARNING STRATEGIES VS TEACHING STRATEGIES**

It is quite evident that developing students’ language proficiency teachers should use various learning strategies which will lead to better achievements of students in learning English. The fact of the association between learning strategy use and positive learning outcomes has been proved by the numerous researches, though sometimes there can be clashes between the student in terms of their style

and strategy preferences and the combination of instructional methodology and materials used in the English classroom.

Experience demonstrates that the majority of teachers prefer to use teaching strategies based on their own learning strategies resulted from their own experience of learning, sometimes not bothering much about their students' learning preferences. The other extreme is when teachers, being aware of their students learning styles, adapt their teaching to their students wants only. In these cases, students remain unaware of different learning strategies, though some of them could be applied to learning language. Thus, EFL teachers have to strive to find a balance between their instructional methodologies, i.e. their teaching preferences and style, with students' learning styles and their ability to learn.

The way out is to provide students the whole set of learning strategies, keeping in mind that is up to a student to choose what strategy to use. Good practice is to raise awareness of students' learning strategies in the English classroom *implicitly* or *explicitly* by proposing students to reflect on and to share their experience how they were doing this or that activity, task, and in such a way to raise their awareness of various learning strategies. This awareness and reflection on their learning may contribute to the development of student's responsibility for their learning.

Understanding of the processes of language learning and teacher's aim as to facilitate students to learn by developing various learning strategies through the course enables teachers to choose appropriate approach(es).

## 5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research demonstrate that action learning which is learning-centred, i.e. learning by doing, and task-based is considered to be the most effective one. Reflection, cooperation and collaboration widely used in the English classroom contribute to the development students' ability to learn that will lead to their further autonomy and develop their communicative competences and soft skills necessary for any future professional. Moreover, level B2 set by the Curriculum [1] and the University standard [2] as a target for university students presupposes that learners become Independent Users of language, according to CEF [4], though students of language demanding professions need C1 level.

The key concepts described are reflected in an ESP coursebook '*English for Study and Work*' [3] which is trialed in the Ukrainian universities now. Being the first attempt to design the materials that would meet both national and local standards and provide the Ukrainian teachers with an indispensable tool for teaching/learning English for specific purposes of students specialized in Engineering and Mining Engineering in particular, the coursebook may be used by other teachers to design their own options and materials within their university syllabuses, keeping in mind their students needs.

Putting the overall aim of the coursebook as development of general and professionally-oriented communication language competences in English (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) within the students to allow them to communicate effectively in their academic and professional environments, all the materials have been derived from real life and piloted in the university classroom. The voices of our colleagues and students, their feedback have contributed much to the course book design.

Being task-based promoting cooperation and collaboration among the students by numerous pair- and group-work, the coursebook units encourage reflection, raise students' self-awareness and value of self-study, therefore, promote lifelong learning. To promote e-learning the links to the useful sites and a series of tasks for doing the Internet search are provided by the authors that, from our perspective, contribute to students' autonomy development and demonstrate in practice e-learning as one of the learning strategies.

Although the primary feedback got from students is positive, the coursebook will be redesigned after evaluation of the course outcomes and feedback got both from students and teachers. To encourage e-learning and ICT use for language learning interactive tasks will be updated.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern theories of learning language are focused on acquisition language rather than transfer of language knowledge from teachers to students. Learners acquire knowledge and develop communicative language competences through actual actions, repetitions while doing tasks and thinking critically, rather than through traditional instruction.

The university students prefer learner-centred environment, tasks and activities which apply to their own experience shared with their peers, while being in secure and friendly environment.

While teaching foreign languages and scaffolding tasks teachers should keep in mind different learning styles, though developing learning strategies won't be limited to students' learning preferences only. Teaching should be focused on raising awareness of and practicing different learning strategies in order to equip students with a variety of them to be used in future while learning autonomously.

Experiential learning and reflection contribute to professional and personal development. From this perspective, action learning is considered to be one of the effective ways of teaching. The described innovations were used in the ESP coursebook design, which is trialed in the university now.

Sharing and exchanging experience of teaching EFL in different countries will be of great value to enhance language teaching and foster learning English at the university level. E-learning and networking both by students and teachers may be used to share their practices of teaching/learning English that will raise language proficiency level and socio-cultural awareness both of teachers and learners due to the communication in real life, and contribute to constructing new knowledges and introducing innovations in foreign language teaching.

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