

STUDY SKILLS AS A WAY TO INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The ways of developing students' study skills for independent language learning are described. The results of the research carried out about students' study skills are presented. The tasks of the teacher in organising students' self-study are highlighted. It is shown that evaluation and assessment help students become active participants of the study process. The importance of Language Portfolio in stimulating motivation and encouraging lifelong learning is pointed out.

Key words: ability to learn, study skills, self-study, tasks of the ESP teacher, learning materials, cooperative approach, project work, evaluation, assessment, self-assessment, Language Portfolio, autonomous lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

Entering the European space, Ukraine is expected to follow the European standards in language proficiency. The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) National Curriculum for Universities is designed to achieve the B2 language proficiency level as the standard of achievement for the Bachelor's degree [3]. The practical aim of ESP teaching/learning is to prepare students to communicate effectively in their academic and professional environments by developing their general and professionally oriented communicative language competences, which, in particular, rely on students' ability to learn. Ability to learn mobilises existential competence, declarative knowledge and skills, and draws on various types of competence [4]. With its regard, students develop their study skills and their acceptance of responsibility for their own learning.

The purpose of the research is to find out whether the students possess the necessary study skills and whether their study skills are developed with each following academic year. With this regard, 70 students of the National Mining University (Dnipropetrovsk) have been surveyed. They are first-, second-, fourth- and fifth-year (Master) students of various specialities: Mining, Geological Prospecting, Marketing, Management, Power Engineering, Computer Systems, System Analysis, Finance and Economics. The language proficiency level of the students ranges from A2 to B2.

1. RESEARCHING STUDENTS' STUDY SKILLS

The study skills are aimed at developing students' abilities to make effective use of the learning opportunities created by teaching/learning situations. They encourage the development of independent students in academic and specialism-related areas. According to the objectives for B2 level, the study skills which will be developed throughout the ESP course are grouped into the following categories:

- information location (e.g. locate specific study or subject-related information using library catalogue);
- academic speaking (e.g. make a presentation or give a talk on study-related topic);
- academic writing (e.g. summarise, paraphrase, synthesise ideas from different types of texts);
- organisation and self-awareness (e.g. develop individual study plans);
- assessment (e.g. understand assessment requirements, including continuous assessment) [3].

The focus on developing students' study skills reflects the values of the Bologna Process with its emphasis on individual responsibility for learning [2].

The students were given the following checklist of study skills and were asked to tick the appropriate boxes.

Study Skills			Yes	No
1	I can identify my own needs and goals in language learning			
2	I can plan my own learning			
3	I can reflect on my own learning			
4	I can be aware of my own strengths and weaknesses as a learner			
5	I can organise my own strategies in order to activate skills and maximise effectiveness			
6	I can search for appropriate learning materials and use them for independent learning			
7	I can co-operate effectively in pair and group work			
8	I can monitor and evaluate my own progress that helps me to watch the changes in my progress and learn to correct myself			
9	I can take responsibility for my own progress and work independently			

Source: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (2001)*

The results of the research are summarized in the following table.

Table 1

Abilities	First-year students %	Second-year students %	Fourth-year students %	Fifth-year students (Master students) %	Average %
Identifying own needs and goals	100	100	100	100	100
Planning own learning	47	31	56	43	44
Reflection on learning	59	62	88	86	74
Awareness of own strengths and weaknesses	100	85	92	79	89
Organisation of strategies	47	38	36	21	36
Searching for appropriate materials for independent learning	65	46	72	93	69
Effective co-operation in pair and group work	59	92	68	43	66
Monitoring and evaluation of own progress	35	38	44	29	37
Taking responsibility for own progress	35	38	68	71	53

The research shows that all the students can identify their own needs and goals in language learning. It confirms the fact that the students who study English for Specific Purposes do have their own needs. Fourth-year students are preparing for a Master course entry exam in English, and fifth-year students are taking regular classes to get prepared for qualifying examinations for the Candidate's degree in English. As for first- and second-year students, they get help and guidance from the teacher. The fact that only 44% of the students surveyed can plan their own learning explains that they are not organised and responsible enough yet and need teacher's guidance and supervision. As the students are aware of their needs and goals in language learning, they assume the importance of reflection (74%), and the students are acquiring this ability each following academic year, but they still find it difficult to monitor and evaluate their own progress, 37% of the students succeed in. 89% of the students are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, unfortunately only 36% can organise their own strategies. About two-thirds of the students can search for appropriate learning materials and use them for independent learning. Most of the students (66%) find pair and group work effective in language learning. First- and second-year students demonstrated better cooperation in pair and group work. This explains the fact that the author has been teaching these students since the first days of their study at University. The groups of fourth- and fifth-year students are the new ones for the teacher, and they resumed their academic English classes this December and March respectively after having a two-year gap in language learning. A half of the students (53%) can take responsibility which is growing with each academic year.

In the latest textbooks for English learners great emphasis is placed on the development of independent learning across the course including the extensive work on study skills, good study habits and self-assessment [1]. The skills included in the book cover note-taking, evaluating resources on the Internet, describing graphs, charts and tables, improving listening and reading skills, identifying fact and opinion, summarising, expanding vocabulary, writing a bibliography, referencing, plagiarism – what it is and how to avoid it.

The British Council also helps students develop their study skills by offering English Global Products at www.britishcouncil.org/professionals, a useful resource for all language learners.

2. SELF-STUDY AS A CORE COMPONENT OF THE STUDY PROCESS

The research showed that not all the students have the necessary skills to organise their study without close teacher supervision. Thus, self-study of students should require special attention on the part of ESP teachers.

The task of the teacher is to help students organise their self-study thoughtfully and carefully, find effective ways of working, so that they can continue working efficiently and usefully even when away from their teacher and the classroom. The teacher should provide an environment and create the atmosphere in the language classroom in which students can learn. The other tasks of the teacher are to:

- raise students' awareness about how they are learning;
- make the learning process transparent for students;
- help students develop their cognitive abilities;
- get them actively involved in the learning process.

The learning materials could be a good motivating factor. The coursebook 'English for Study and Work' [6] is designed to help students to achieve target B2 language

proficiency level as required for Bachelor' Degree. Part II 'Resources for Self-study' is aimed at independent and autonomous learning of general and professionally-oriented English and developing communicative language competences. It is a pack of resources to be used by students individually during their self-study. As self-study is an integral part of the ESP course and takes 30-60 per cent of overall students' load, the main aim of this part of the coursebook is to develop students' study skills, enhance their job-related skills developed in the class, as well as cognitive skills and learning strategies, including self-organisation. Each section starts with the expected outcomes, i.e. what students should be able to do by the end of the section and finishes with Self-assessment section with the help of which students can check their progress by using the key answers to the end-of-module test. The key answers are accompanied with the explanations and can be seen as an additional input.

Students will learn and change if the tasks are meaningful, relevant, motivating, challenging, have a clear purpose and clear instructions, meet students' needs, make them think and share their opinions and own experiences, and allow to develop their confidence and fluency.

Besides using the teacher-generated materials or already existing in textbooks, students working in groups can produce those for the whole class to use. Each group can do a different task. The task of the teacher is to help groups with advice and guidance in the preparation of the exercises. Student-based materials foster group cohesion and a spirit of group solidarity. Relevant ESP teacher/learner materials should provide a systematic means for independent self-study [3].

A cooperative approach (ability to co-operate effectively in pair and group work) recommended for ESP teaching and learning changes students' attitude towards learning by making it a thinking and active process. In order to complete the task students work together, that involves making decisions, sharing ideas and resources, discussing viewpoints, and reaching some kind of decision. Maley (1981) defines the best activity that is one that involves a low input (text, visual, instructions, etc.) and a high output (the learning that takes place) [7].

Such classroom organisation is considered the most appropriate and effective in language learning as students have much more opportunities to employ their target language and develop language skills. Working in pairs/groups students do the tasks without the direct control of a teacher where each student is an individual, they work in their own manner and learn in their own way thus leading to develop autonomy skills needed in the future. Cooperation encourages students to rely on each other and on themselves and not only on the teacher, and extends a proportion of students' active involvement in completing a task. Students start thinking consciously about themselves as learners. They learn to listen and respond to each other thus providing opportunities for peer and self evaluation.

The success of cooperative work depends on a number of motivating factors, e.g. how much students already know about the subject in doing a task, in the classroom students need language to express their ideas, opinions, experience, etc.

The use of project work in ESP stimulates students' self-study. Students are engaged in extensive purposeful reading with processing the information from various sources followed by a written report and oral presentation which is shared with other students, giving the project a real purpose. In ESP, project work is of great importance. Students can access the source material in their own time, work through the material at their own pace,

choosing topics to match their own interests. They can work on their own, in pairs or small groups or as a class to complete a project sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way [5].

3. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES AND LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

The success in learning depends a lot on how motivated the students are during the study process and how many hours they are willing to spend daily on the learning materials. In order to stimulate student motivation and involvement to become better language learners and encourage them to become language learners for life, the teacher uses self-assessment grids included into the Language Portfolio.

Below is an extract of a sample of a B2 (Vantage) self-assessment checklist of language skills for professional needs.

Spoken interaction
I can take an active part in conversations and discussions on most general topics in my academic or professional context.
I can make my ideas and opinions on academic and specialism-related topics clearly understood by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments convincingly in both formal and informal discussion.
I can pass on detailed study and specialism-related information reliably, synthesizing and reporting it from a number of sources.
I can understand detailed professional instructions well and respond adequately.

Source: English for Specific Purposes. National Curriculum for Universities (2005)

Students assess their language achievement and set personal learning goals. It helps students make the language learning process more transparent, help them reflect on and assess their progress to identify problems, to emphasize achievements and motivate.

Regular goal setting and self-assessment are central to the LP. A language passport requires learners to assess their own proficiency using the scales and descriptors derived from the Common European Framework; and a dossier, in which the owner collects evidence of his or her developing proficiency in a foreign language. This emphasis on self-assessment coincides with the Council of Europe's concern to promote autonomous lifelong learning. The introduction of self-assessment can lead to an open dialogue with students and give them a better understanding of students' problems.

The language portfolio enhances 'learning to learn' and promotes the development of critical thinking skills as it is the basis for efficient and autonomous lifelong learning of languages after school [3].

During the study process students learn how to understand assessment requirements that helps them be involved into designing the criteria for assessing themselves. For example, in the module "Giving an Oral Presentation" students decide individually, in group discussion and then in panel discussion what the criteria are of a good presentation in terms of its content, organisation, delivery, and visuals. Their decisions then are used as the criteria for self-assessment of the presentations conducted in the classroom and then at different conferences. Students also evaluate their own progress in making a presentation by means of self- and peer-evaluation discussing what they liked about it and what should be improved to make the following presentations better. The same procedure takes place

when students prepare for and hold professionally-oriented meetings and participate in discussions.

Alongside the teachers, the students are equally participated in the evaluation process that requires them to reflect on their learning. At the initial stage students' input is vital. Therefore they are asked to comment on the following: I expect ..., I look forward to ..., I hope for Students can bring some changes and innovations to make the module/course more effective in the future. The task of the ESP teacher is to encourage students to be more active and involved in all the stages of the course evaluation in order to see what is important to students and what is of little consequence. In their feedback they may write what they are doing and what they would like to be doing. The information the students provide at the end of the module or the course will be used to determine the effectiveness of them and to decide what should be changed the following year. They make comments on the following:

1. Things I greatly liked.
2. Questions I would like to ask.
3. Suggestions I would make to improve.
4. What was challenging.

Besides, throughout the course students evaluate the process of learning and reflect on what is happening. Each aspect of the module and course design is evaluated: the aims, objectives and outcomes of the module/course (whether they are clearly stated, appropriate and achievable); the content of the module/course (whether it meets students' needs, complete and focused enough, at the right level); the materials (whether they are engaging and relevant); and the methods (whether the students are comfortable with their roles and the teacher's roles).

CONCLUSIONS

Study skills are incorporated into the learning objectives of the ESP Curriculum to develop professional communicative competences of students thus becoming an integral part in teaching and learning a language. Study skills are also professional transferable skills which can be used by students in learning other subjects as well as in many other different contexts including their careers and personal lives. In order to continue working efficiently and usefully after graduating from university, when there will be no teaching, students need to develop their study skills in order to be able to learn autonomously.

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