

## FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TRAINING AT TERTIARY LEVEL: IN SEARCH FOR THE 'PRINCIPLED ECLECTICISM'

*Raising the quality of teaching English for Specific Purposes is a vital necessity at tertiary level in a country like Belarus. Teaching ESP at a higher technical school faces a number of challenges. Firstly, foreign languages are typically taught in the first year of studies, long before any specialized subjects are taught. That's why the language of profession is hardly familiar to the learner, even in the native language. Secondly, foreign language courses are normally rather short, up to 200 academic hours, which seriously limits any significant advances in building verbal communication skills of the learner. These are two major contradictions in the existing educational practices that create roadblocks on the way to successful mastery of a foreign language at tertiary level.*

*Under such conditions, it is necessary to seek innovative ways to meet the existing challenges. The following material deals with one such approach developed at a military university. Discussed are the aims, principles and strategies for developing the system of teaching English to university students (cadets) based on an integrated methodological rationale. The rationale includes the ideas borrowed from both Western and Soviet / post-Soviet methodology and put together on the basis of certain principles. The entire approach may be viewed as an attempt to integrate the ideas creatively. The system under development includes three main educational objectives, nine basic principles, and specific ways to develop educational content. Put together, all of these function as an integrated methodology-based teaching system. The novelty of the approach is provided by the fact that development of learner faculties is put above anything else. An on-going experimental teaching aimed at further betterment of the system is currently conducted.*

**Key words:** *ESP, military education, foreign language training (FLT), aims, methodology-oriented principles, approach.*

At the beginning of the new millennium, European university level educational landscape is undergoing crucial transformations. For instance, in Bulgaria [17] the shift toward a more student-oriented approach is viewed as a paradigm shift that encompasses more than just teaching and learning. In Slovakia [9] the 2020 state program for educational development describes the required approach as creative and humanist, in which *foreign-language training (FLT)* plays an important role. Research efforts are being made in Kazakhstan [5] that are aimed at finding more effective ways of applying the communicative approach practices.

Belarus is undergoing, though at a much slower pace, the changes that affect the systems of higher education in the rest of Europe. In this context, *FLT* at university level is of paramount importance. This puts in focus the problem of improvement in the practices of *teaching English for Specific Purposes*.

The aim of the present article is to describe the approach to *FLT* that can be considered an effective means to raise the quality of teaching / training. The discussion also includes an attempt to clarify some terminology.

Speaking of *FLT*, the necessity of modernizing these practices at tertiary level in a country like Belarus is caused by a number of reasons. The last two decades have seen two distinctive periods in the development of foreign language methodology for adult learners.

The 1990s were a period of advent of information technologies and close encounters with what is called western 'methodological culture'. It was in the area of *FLT* that western ideas of what constitutes 'good' learning and teaching clashed with the outdated local practices and stereotypes. Unfortunately, many teachers were ready to take for granted, if not unwisely, western 'methodological superiority'. In the period between 1991 and 2000, this led to indiscriminate use of foreign-made teaching materials and, which was worse, to almost complete absence of critical analysis of the 'ideological origins' [11] of western methodology.

The 2000s were a period when the faculty responsible for *FLT* engaged in searching for some ways and means to improve the quality of training. However, the attempts to do that were hindered by the general loss of momentum in the previous decade, in which methodological eclecticism reigned supreme. The very fact that some western methodologists had announced the end of the communicative era resulted in the absence of any consistent approach. In 2001–2010, there seemed to be no educational philosophy in Belarus that could serve as foundation for an approach to *FLT* based on any kind of 'principled eclecticism' [10].

Thus, the current decade (2011–2020) is destined to become a period that should yield both a balanced theoretical view on and a practical realization of a modern system of FLT at tertiary level. The approach to come should be based on principled eclecticism, with a strong emphasis on the use of universally acknowledged terminology.

The elaboration of such an approach is the main aim of our research. The ultimate goal of this ongoing project is to develop a multi-level FLT system based on innovative methodological rationale.

Let us pay closer attention to the basic terminology. In Belarus today, discussions on methodological terminology are quite common. That's why it is worth stressing that the choice of the term FLT is not just one of the author's idiosyncrasies. We are not talking about FL teaching or FL learning, nor are we describing the system of FL 'education' (*obrazovanie*).

As is known, many authors maintain that FL education (as in 'physical education') should be the preferred term today. We suggest the use of the term 'training' (*podgotovka*) because it seems to be more in compliance with the aims of professional training at tertiary level and is more skill-oriented in its essence.

The basic assumption is that any FLT system at university level should contain a number of clearly-defined component parts. These most fundamental component parts can be described by the 'military-looking' abbreviation, *APCS*. It's not about armored personnel carriers – it's about *Aims, Principles, Content, and Strategies*. All of these components of the FLT system are its indispensable elements and cannot function unless coordinated with one another.

#### *Aims*

It is important to stress that FLT aims are of paramount importance. The traditional approach to aim-setting in post-Soviet methodology presupposes that there are three aims – practical (*prakticheskaya*), developmental (*razvivayushchaya*), and educational (*vospitatel'naya*). They are always interconnected and are supposed to be realized in each and every teaching / learning situation.

The practical aim is generally viewed at as the leading one. The innovative approach to aim-setting within the system in question is that it is *the developmental aim that is viewed at as the leading one*.

Placing the developmental aim as a top priority at all times can be explained in terms of the specific educational environment. In our case, it's a higher military school. The target learner audience is young people aged 17-18 years of age whose level of communicative competence is typically A1-A2. They are not fast or studious learners, and a great deal of extrinsic motivational effort is needed. In fact, what the young cadets need most is the three I's – Interest, Intellect and Interpersonal skills. It can be better achieved if the developmental aim is recognized as the leading one.

#### *Principles*

The problem of defining FLT principles is not new, but it seems to arise time and again when a relatively new approach to teaching and/or learning appears. A number of post-Soviet researchers suggest various taxonomies of FLT principles [1; 2; 3; 4]. The analysis of these papers shows that the suggested principles are often not entirely related to methodology but rather present borrowings from related areas like pedagogy or didactics. On the other hand, western FLT researchers sometimes shy away from the discussion of principles assuming that they are self-evident.

In the system that we are developing, selected principles play a crucial role. We postulate nine fundamental principles, three in each of the three categories determined by the given aim. It can be noted that everything in the system in question seems to be organized in *archetypal triads* – 3-element structures, which is in accordance with some basic concepts about the world in general. Note that the same triads can be traced in 'world objects' (Nature, Man, Society), spheres of conceptualization (Science, Art, Morality), and even categories of description (Structure, Function, Development).

#### *Content*

It may be true that the solution of the problem of content design and development is most essential to the success of the entire project. As we mentioned earlier, the process of FLT has recently been hindered by a number of factors. One fact remains obvious, though, the lack of ready-made FL teaching materials for the military available on the market. The existing materials designed for the military in western countries [for instance, 16] seem irrelevant to offer a systematic approach to FLT practices in terms of clear-cut methodology.

Under the circumstances, it is necessary to engage in large-scale instructional design. Our approach is based on the general instructional design model [8] which presupposes a complete cycle – from initial definition of aims, needs and priorities to development and then evaluation. In post-Soviet methodology, content has always been viewed as 'thematic vehicle' of FLT. In the western tradition [7], this understanding seems to have resulted chiefly in the theory and practice of content-based learning.

Indeed, content is not just something with which to practice language, and this idea has been reiterated by many authors, especially those who write about the so-called CLIL or Content and Language Integrated Learning [14]. These ideas are of importance for university-level education though originally CLIL was applied to secondary school education. On the other hand, one should note that the majority of researchers in this country

agree that FLT content can be described as target culture in its entirety. Hence, we postulate the leading principle of creating a culturally-enriched educational environment.

However, cultural facts need to be carefully selected on the basis of strict criteria. Most researchers are typically concerned with the forms of cultural content, be it films / videos or graphic novels [13; 15; 6]. In terms of developing the FLT system in question, it's more important to decide on the criteria of selection. The criteria should allow for the selection of the most 'canonical' facts that should be everyone's knowledge.

It has been emphasized [12] that the cultural content should not be confined to the culture of the target language community only. It brings about the problem of ideas and concepts that border on the area of politics and ideology. It has been a very sensitive issue for teachers in the post-Soviet countries. For teachers working in higher education in Belarus, it is a no less challenging task. That is why more efforts should be put in creating necessary *didactic instruments* for the realization of methodological concepts.

In the contemporary Military Academy classroom such instruments are primarily computer-based technologies. Specifically, these are PPPs – PowerPoint Presentations that offer more than simple *Presentation-Practice-Production* cycle.

Such presentations are being developed by the faculty at the moment. Each 10/12-slide sequence provides for the methodology-based activities during a class of 80 minutes. The activities during one class typically include tasks in speaking, reading comprehension, listening comprehension and writing. A sequence of interconnected classes presents thematic content of a given 'topic'. All the tasks follow the same cycle – from habit-formation at the start (lexis and grammar) to building skills and, finally, fulfilling integration tasks at the end of the sequence. The visual information component includes meta-language (instructions as such), as well as all sorts of visual stimuli and multi-level prompts all of which are usually 'cultural facts' in themselves.

The instructional design that we are now involved in should probably include ways and means to introduce a pan-European cultural perspective. This may well start with the inclusion of 'canonical' cultural facts belonging to various European communities living primarily in Central and Eastern Europe. The need for such an inclusion is determined primarily by the geographical location of Belarus and its rich history. This calls for more cooperation between FL teaching working in Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus.

#### *Conclusion*

The ongoing project described above tends to be in accordance with the general trend in education which consists in searching for ways to produce would-be citizens of the world able to think critically and communicate effectively with one another. Obviously, FLT at a military establishment is rather a challenging task, which can only be solved on the basis of a methodology integrating a variety of approaches and/or methods – that is, on the basis of 'principled eclecticism'.

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#### ІНШОМОВНА ПІДГОТОВКА НА ПРОФЕСІЙНОМУ РІВНІ: В ПОШУКАХ 'СИСТЕМНОЇ ЕКЛЕКТИКИ'

*Удосконалення якості викладання англійської мови для спеціальних цілей є неzapеречною потребою. Це пояснюється наявністю низки протиріч у вишівській практиці іноземної підготовки, подолати які можна тільки шляхом удосконалення методики викладання. На розгляд пропонуються цілі, принципи та стратегії розробки системи вишівського навчання англійської мови на основі інноваційної методичної бази. Цей підхід апробується наразі в системі вищої військової освіти Республіки Білорусь.*

**Ключові слова:** англійська мова для спеціальних цілей, військова освіта, іноземна підготовка, методичні принципи.

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#### ИНОЯЗЫЧНАЯ ПОДГОТОВКА НА ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОМ УРОВНЕ: В ПОИСКАХ "СИСТЕМНОЙ ЭКЛЕКТИКИ"

*Улучшение качества преподавания английского языка для специальных целей является постоянной необходимостью. Это объясняется наличием ряда противоречий в вузовской практике иноязычной подготовки, преодолеть которые можно только путем совершенствования методики преподавания. В материале обсуждаются цели, принципы и стратегии разработки системы вузовского обучения английскому языку на основе инновационной методической базы. Данный подход апробируется сейчас в системе высшего военного образования Республики Беларусь.*

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык для специальных целей, военное образование, иноязычная подготовка, методические принципы.

Стаття надійшла до редакції 09.09.2016