

ENHANCING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS OF THE FUTURE SPECIALISTS IN THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR

TOPOŠO VIESMĪLĪBAS SPECIĀLISTU SVEŠVALODU PRASMJU PILNVEIDOŠANA

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Abstract

Foreign language skills are one of the basic skills which the professional who works in the hospitality business must possess. Students' needs are analysed in order to improve the teaching – learning process. Enquiries reveal insufficient level of knowledge of foreign languages. One of the ways how to solve the issue could be the communicative approach to language teaching with the express purpose of developing communicative competence. The main principles and aspects of communicative approach to foreign language teaching are considered and the essence and components of communicative competence are outlined. The development of socio - cultural competence, which is an important component, is regarded due to the fact that in hospitality business professionals deal with people coming from different nations and cultures. The most appropriate methods in the acquisition of foreign languages are suggested. We have come to conclusion that the application of the communicative approach to language teaching promotes enhancement of foreign language skills.

Key – words: communicative competence, communicative approach, teaching – learning process

Introduction

World economies and cultures are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, politically, socially and technologically. The increasing economic globalisation exerts a substantial impact on culture and education, and makes foreign language and cross-cultural skills mandatory. In Europe there is growing evidence that English has become the major business lingua franca (Graddol, 1997).

Establishing joint ventures creates incoming demands from international visitors who require supporting services, such as hotels and tourist facilities. Today, as a result of new working practices, there is an increase in the number of the personnel who need English language skills. Not surprisingly, demands on an employee's competence in English are rising. Consequently, higher educational institutions have to pay more attention to the language teaching of their future specialists and tailor education and training programmes to employment trends.

Language skills are one of the most important skills which the professional who works in hospitality business must possess. Several higher educational establishments in Latvia train

specialists for the above mentioned industry, the Latvia University of Agriculture (LUA) being one of them. Our students are highly motivated to master several foreign languages not only because of their future professional career but also due to various challenges they meet during the study process. They have possibilities to attend lectures delivered by guest lecturers, participate in student exchange programmes as well as be sent out on work placement abroad. Contracts have been signed with several enterprises in Italy, Greece, Germany and many students have already accomplished their internship successfully in these countries.

As hospitality business involves working with people, the ability to communicate effectively both verbally and non-verbally is paramount. The aim of the paper is to research foreign language acquisition at the Faculty of Food Technology (FFT), clarify “Catering and Hotel Management” speciality students’ opinion and find out ways how to enhance students’ foreign language skills.

Methods

The methods applied in the research are the study of scientific literature, enquiry and description of the personal experience of the authors of the article. The research uses the methods of comparison, synthesis and analysis, diagnostic (questionnaires) methods.

The task of the research is to investigate the possibilities how to improve the process of foreign language studies at the FFT in the study programme “Catering and Hotel Management”.

Theoretical background

During the course of time foreign language teaching has undergone various cycles and approaches. In the late 1960s communicative proficiency rather than mere mastery of structures came into the focus of attention in language teaching and the communicative approach developed and took up one of the leading positions.

Communicative language teaching is seen as “an approach that aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

Language is acquired through communication, which can be viewed as „the social interaction through messages” (Finnegan, 2002). We have to take into consideration also the following ingredients of communication: non-verbal communication; the medium and channel of communication; role relationships between the participants; the topic and purpose of communication (Hutchinson and Waters, 2002).

One of the main goals of language teaching is communicative competence (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Sociolinguist D. Hymes views competence „as the overall underlying knowledge and ability

for language use which the speaker – listener possesses” (Hymes, 1998). The scientist lists four sectors of communicative competence. In his view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to: whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible, feasible, appropriate, and in fact done (Hymes, 1987). M. Canale identifies four basic components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is concerned with mastery of the language code itself. Here are included such features of the language as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to use and interpret language forms with situational appropriacy in different socio-linguistic contexts. The choice of language forms is determined by such factors as status of participants, setting, purposes of the interaction, channel of the communication and the topic (Harmer, 2001). Strategic competence is composed of mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies either to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance the effectiveness of communication (Canale, 1995).

In hospitality business professionals deal with people coming from different nations and cultures. Participants in multicultural communication are sensitive not only to the cultural meanings attached to the language itself, but also to social conventions concerning language use, such as turn-taking, appropriacy of content, nonverbal language, and tone of voice. These conventions influence how messages are interpreted. In order to be communicatively competent, learners should be aware of both their own culture and culture of the target language society. What must be learned is a general empathy and openness towards other cultures (Savignon, 2001). Consequently, we have to teach our students to be aware of cultural differences and stereotyping, and treat these differences with sensitivity in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding or even conflict.

All components of communicative competence are interconnected. Therefore, the primary goal of a communicative approach is to facilitate their integration for the learner.

Results and discussion

One of the fields that are experiencing fast growth in the world is tourism industry. Sector of hospitality is a significant part of tourism industry. The need for education in the field of tourism has grown along with the main tendencies in the industry and its further development into a modern, competitive industry, and it would be impossible without general development in the sphere of tourism education (including hospitality) and human resources.

With the opening of borders the number of people who visit our country has dramatically increased. In 2006, 4,645,000 non-residents crossed the border in comparison with 2,470,000 in 2003 (Statistical Data Collection, 2007).

According to data of the Central Statistical Bureau on the evaluation of the trip to Latvia, 72% non-resident travelers assessed the quality of services as very good. With the regard to foreign language skills of the locals, only 53.3% consider them to be very good (Statistical Yearbook of Latvia, 2007).

The opening of the study programme “Catering and Hotel Management”, implemented by the FFT, dates back to 1994 and during these years 680 new specialists have graduated. The aim of the professional bachelor’s study programme “Catering and Hotel Management” is to prepare specialists for organizing and management of catering services and hotels, thus providing clients with high quality professional employees.

Language skills are one of the most important skills which the professional who works in hospitality business must possess. At the FFT as a compulsory subject Foreign Language for Specific Purposes is included in the first 2 years of studies and students receive 6 CP. The majority of students study English, as it is their first foreign language (Fig. 1).

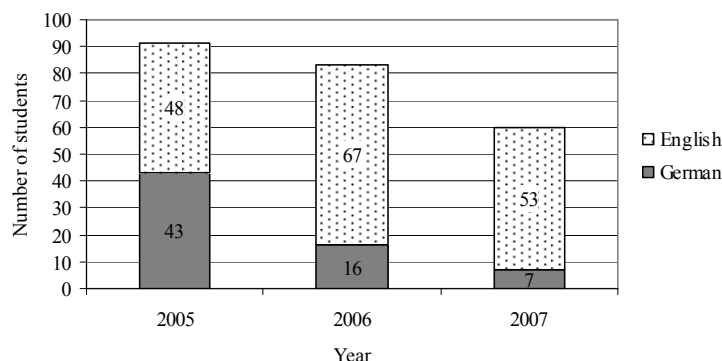


Fig. 1. Number of professional bachelor students of “Catering and Hotel Management” at the LUA FFT acquiring English and German languages by years.⁸²

In order to find out in which fields there is lack of knowledge, enterprise employees (catering enterprise and hotel employees separately) were asked to name three most important fields, which are ranged in Table 1.

⁸² Data of the study years 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2006/2007

Table 1.

Fields in which employees feel the most distinct lack of knowledge

Range	Catering enterprise employees	Hotel employees
1.	Foreign language	Foreign language
2.	Legislation	Legislation
3.	Computer skills	Computer skills
4.	Food technology	Customer service
5.	Customer service	Communication skills
6.	Hygiene	Food technology
7.	Communication skills	Hygiene

Source: Research data⁸³

Data of the Table 1. show that employees of hospitality enterprises, irrespective of the specific work, have common fields where they need to improve knowledge and first of all these are foreign languages, with the lack or improper skills of which nowadays, in the conditions of growing tourism, come across not only employees of Riga hospitality enterprises, but also in the regions.

A communicative approach is essentially learner-centred with the emphasis on learners' needs. The basic issue of teaching ESP is to effectively satisfy the future professional needs of our students. A questionnaire was designed to find out the students' needs and attitude towards language learning. The number of respondents was 109, representing 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students of the study programme "Catering and Hotel Management". The authors wanted to find out students' foreign language knowledge after having completed the study subject 'Foreign Language'. Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents evaluated their knowledge as average or good. At the same time, year by year increases the number of students being evaluated by a high grade at the final exam of the foreign language: „7” to „9”.

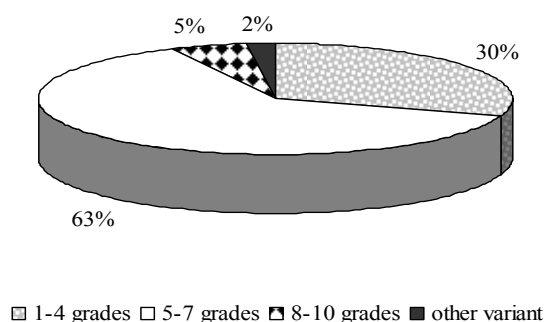


Fig. 2 English knowledge in grades of the students of the study programme "Catering and Hotel Management"

⁸³ http://www.nva.lv/esf/docs/16_470a2a8e551c19.52237103.doc

Another survey was carried out only among the first- year students of the same study programme to find out what their expectations from the study course ‘Foreign Language’ are and what their learning styles are. The number of respondents was 59, but 6 questionnaires were invalid. As regards the length of the study course ‘Foreign Language’, 31% respondents consider the current 4 terms as optimal. 38% respondents would like to have the subject either 6 or 8 terms (19% each), but 9% respondents think that 2 terms would be sufficient.

By applying the median calculation, which is calculated as the average of the line of numbers, either increasing or decreasing, students’ opinion on the most useful way of studying was found out. Students give preference to ‘Reading’ (Me=4) as the most useful method in foreign language acquisition, followed by ‘Learning grammar rules with example sentences’ (Me=4.5). ‘Writing essays’ (Me=8) and ‘Writing everything down in a notebook and learning it’ (Me=8) were considered as the least useful ways.

Students feel that they need most help and practice in grammar (Me=2), speaking and writing (Me=3), but pronunciation is the least important aspect of language (Me=7).

Learners’ communicative ability is developed through their involvement in a range of meaningful, realistic, worthwhile and attainable tasks, the successful accomplishment of which provides satisfaction and increases their self-confidence. In foreign language classes the first-year students would like to work in groups (Me=2), in pairs (Me=3), make presentations, use a course book or watch a video (Me=5), but they would not like to learn a foreign language through songs (Me=8).

Lexis is fundamentally significant for professional and meaningful language use. Students assert that they learn about concepts and issues just from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes due to the lack of experience in hospitality business field. Mostly, students learn terminology mechanically without any understanding, therefore they easily forget it and cannot apply in any situation different from the one described in the text.

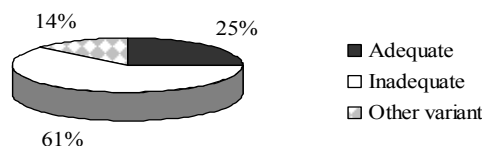


Fig.3 Amount of terms in the hospitality sector acquired in the study subject ‘Foreign Language’

With regard to acquisition of terminology in the hospitality sector, only one quarter of the respondents stated that the amount of terms was adequate (Fig.3).

In order to help acquisition of ESP, the university lecturers of the FFT Nutrition department by the support of EU structural funds have developed several dictionaries:

- English-Latvian-Russian Glossary "Assistant to Gourmand";
- Latvian-English Glossary of Tourism Terminology.

Responding to the question whether foreign language skills help them in the development of their careers in the hospitality sector, 42 students or 38% respondents gave a positive answer while 37 students or 35% respondents gave a negative answer. Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) did not feel any impact of their foreign language skills on the quality of their work.

Unfortunately, the survey revealed that in the study process students are not willing to use resources in foreign languages, although they could do it thanks to the acquired foreign language skills (See Figure 2).

As regards the sources of information, the most widely used resource is the Internet – 54%, followed by the library – 10%. As regards other sources, respondents gain information by watching films (1 student), reading newspapers and journals (1 student), communicating with foreigners (2 students), attending lectures (1 student) and reading books (1 student) (Fig.4).

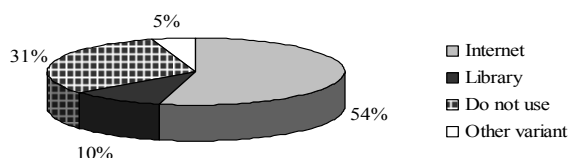


Fig.4 Sources of gaining information in the hospitality sector in foreign languages

FFT of LUA implements the 2nd level higher professional education, which gives the 5th level professional qualification in catering and hotel management. Majority of students and graduates evaluate hospitality sector as perspective with expanded opportunities and development potential. Estimating the main knowledge and skills for labour market, students give the highest evaluation exactly to practical skills. Almost so high are evaluated language skills which are necessary for integration in European labour market.

Conclusions

1. The knowledge of foreign languages and acquisition of professional competences is a precondition for successful professional activities and further career.
2. The communicative approach to foreign language teaching enhances foreign language proficiency.
3. Additional possibilities for students of LUA to acquire foreign languages should be created.
4. ESP should be taught starting with the second year after students have gained some basic knowledge and practical experience.
5. In the study process students should be asked to use independently more different resources in foreign languages.

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