

NEW APPROACHERS TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN AGRARIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: the articles deals with the conventional approaches used to teaching students at the Department of Foreign Languages in the RTSA U and the development of new techniques based on "blended learning", interactive exercises, updated coursebooks and tutorials focusing on teaching foreign languages for academic as well as for specific purposes in order to meet the students' requirements in achieving the appropriate level of language proficiency according to the Common European Framework.

Key words: foreign languages, foreign language for academic purposes, foreign language for specific purposes, language skills, educational programmes.

The Department of Foreign Languages, first established at the Faculty of Economics, was founded in 1923 in the Agricultural Academy named after K.A. Timiryazev and is considered to be one of the oldest departments of foreign languages among all agrarian institutions of higher education. Since its creation the Department has been offering courses in three foreign languages (English, German and French), mainly to the first and second year undergraduates as well as to part-time students and scholars of corresponded education. The Department is known as the interfaculty one, aiming to provide all enrolled students with foreign language as a tool to enhance their knowledge and harmonize their scientific research activities. Moreover, post-graduate students are expected to take a course at the Department to satisfy the requirements of the curriculum and in order to be prepared and eligible for the compulsory examination in a foreign language.

In the course of its rather long history the Department was headed by such outstanding professors as I.N. Shevaldyshev (1930-1936), K.M. Pogodilov (1938-1957), B.F. Komdorf (1958-1962), E.E. Mihelevich (1963-1981), F.V. Korolkov (1981-1996), G.Ya. Axenova (1996-2011). They have all played an important role in the development of the core methodological principles and approaches to teaching foreign languages to non-linguistic students in the Agricultural Academy. It is worth mentioning, that there have been several editions of the coursebook in German for students-agriculturists written by G.Ya. Axenova, F.V. Korolkov and E.E. Mihelevich, which is still widely used in teaching students in many Russian agrarian universities. This serves as a vivid example of a great contribution made by former heads of the Department to the educational process. The Department has expanded in the years of associate professor G. YA. Axenova's leadership. At present there are 20 classrooms including the media lab where students have free Internet access to academic resources, as well as various coursebooks and dictionaries for self-studying in English, German and French. Furthermore, students are able to use audio and video materials in order to improve their listening and comprehension language

skills. Ten years ago on the initiative of G.YA. Axenova special course was developed and offered to students who intend to become expert interpreters. To date statistics indicate that about 150 students take this course annually, and former graduates are mainly employed by foreign agricultural companies. Under the conditions of a contemporary labour market there is a trend of a growing demand for specialists who are not only experienced in the field of their branch of science but are competent in using foreign languages in a particular area of knowledge.

One of the main consequences of the world economy globalization is closely connected with the incredible popularity of studying the English language throughout the world. English has become the language of business, politics, science, international relations and beyond. The English language is not only a native language for more than 330 million of the world population, but it is also used as the second official language by more than 1.4 billion people. Moreover, the number of people learning this language has incredibly increased in recent decades. It is observed that, most students, who are trained at the Department of Foreign Languages in the RSAU-MTAA, choose to study the English language from the entire variety of foreign languages offered. Since 2010 the University along with all other Russian universities has introduced new educational programmes, so that students are trained to acquire the Degree of Bachelor in 24 majors and the Master Degree in 11 majors. As a result it requires the development of new curriculums for teaching foreign languages to students of various courses and levels.

The main aim of the Department of Foreign Languages is to develop linguistic and professional intercultural students' competences which are necessary for their studies and future employment as well as to master a foreign language at the level which enables to communicate with foreign specialists and become familiar with their experience. Being one of the disciplines included in the section of humanitarian and social sciences, a foreign language is a compulsory subject for Bachelors and Masters as well as PhD students. In order to meet the existing demand of students in achieving higher level of proficiency of foreign language, modern educational programmes have been developed on the basis of the communicative approach. The course of the Foreign Language is divided into two main parts as follows: the Introduction Course and the Foreign Language for Academic and Specific Purposes. The former involves the system of lexical and grammar training exercises, revision and systematization of the knowledge and skills acquired by a student at a school level. In addition students are guided to develop their speaking, reading, listening and writing skills by dealing with specially designed linguistic materials corresponding to the studies at a higher institution. Students are offered to get engaged in the discussions on such themes as the problems of the young professionals in the modern world, systems of education existing in different countries, students' life, interests and issues, the importance of learning a foreign language for future profession and career promotion etc. The main emphasis in the second part of the course is made on how to become successful in applying the knowledge of a foreign language for academic studies and professional activities. This implies further development of speaking skills such as monologues, dialogues, participation in discussions and debates on professional themes. For a successful future career many students are interested in such courses as Business Communication and Business Culture. A wide range of materials for reading (different on-line scientific journals and educative sites) and listening (resources of Youtube) can be found currently in the Internet. At this level it is essential for students to develop some writing skills for academic purposes, e.g. writing abstracts, summaries, articles, reviews, reports and business letters.

Making students feel comfortable and capable of speaking in foreign language on any topic is a very important communication skill. The preparation of an oral presentation

on different issues is of a great importance for mastering a foreign language and enhancing the speaking skill. The programmes in the Foreign Languages include such assignments as oral reports, short-term and long-term projects resulting in individual or group oral presentations, role-games, case-studies, web-quests.

To sum up, by subsequently following the above mentioned study approach, students get ready to apply their knowledge of a foreign language in practice in their professional activities. As to Masters and PhD students the educational programmes focus on developing students' reading, speaking, listening and writing skills in relation to their research and scientific interests. In order to communicate with colleagues on specific subject themes students have to work on expanding their vocabulary. This can be achieved by learning more specific terminology referring to a particular area of knowledge. Deeper insight in specialty will allow students to be more confident in using professional foreign language and will result in accuracy and fluency in speaking skills, which is sure to be the main aim of teaching a foreign language to Masters and PhD students.

Moreover, students pursuing these degrees are supposed to achieve level B2 of language proficiency according to the Common European Framework. It means that a student is able to:

- understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided that the topic is reasonably familiar;
- understand the main ideas of complex text (articles, reports) on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation;
- interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party;
- produce clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options;
- write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to his/her interests;
- write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view;
- write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.

The staff of the Department of Foreign Languages faces the necessity to introduce innovative technologies in the educational process in order to overcome certain challenges on the path of fulfilling these education goals.

To a certain extent the set aims can be achieved by means of modern coursebooks offered by different publishing companies in the market of educative literature in Russia. For example, in order to meet the needs of enormous number of potential English learners, foreign publishing companies sell a range of English coursebooks covering all levels of mastering the language from Elementary to Advanced. Nowadays among the main publishing businesses one can mention such well-known companies as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Pearson Longman, Macmillan Palgrave and Express Publishing. All these companies compete fiercely with each other actively promoting their products in many countries including Eastern Europe. The demand for high-quality modern English courses produced by native speakers is incredibly high in Russia at present. As a result, one can observe a unique situation in this particular sector of business: competition force dominating in the educational literature market and a high demand for English language study materials are forcing publishing companies to keep on introducing the most advanced innovations for the English courses, developing the solutions as fast as possible.

Modern English course study set is expected to consist of the following three main items: Student's Book, Workbook and Teacher's Book, each of them being usually supported by audio and video materials, which help to develop student's listening skills.

It is interesting to focus mainly on the English books issued by Pearson Longman and Macmillan companies as these publishing houses managed to cover the whole territory of the Russian Federation with their products' distribution net. As to the world recognition of these companies, Macmillan's coursebook of General English named "Global" (authors Lindsay Clandfield, Amanda Jeffries, Jackie McAvoy, Kate Pickering and Rebecca Robb Benne, Levels A1-C1) was awarded with such prestigious prizes as the Prize of the Duke of Edinburgh ESU English Language Book Award in 2010, the ESU President's Award 2010 and by the UK award for Innovations ELTons nominated in 2011. According to the Judges comments, ESU Awards 2010 the "Global" is considered to be "ground-breaking and ambitious, a landmark course in recent English language publishing".

The year later "SpeakOut" developed by Antonia Clare, Frances Eales, Steve Oakes, J.J. Wilson, Pearson Longman got the Duke of Edinburgh English Language Book Award. It is possible to get acquainted with Longman English Interactive Online (general English course), Azar Interactive и Focus on Grammar Interactive on the following sites: www.longmanenglishinteractive.com, www.focusongrammarinteractive.com, www.azarinteractive.com.

The detailed description of the offered method is provided on the site www.mylanguageleaderlab.com, which is actually an electronic version of the published Student's Workbook. The approach to monitoring student's results is the same both in electronic grammar variant and in electronic workbooks (so-called labs). The system of MyEnglishLab provides new opportunities for learning English relying on blended learning. The latter means a combination of full-time instruction and correspondence courses (known also as extramural courses) and it is based on using modern Internet technologies.

Macmillan Publishing Company is increasing its role in the market of educational services by offering a wide range of the Internet resources. These Internet tools support teachers of foreign language in preparing motivated lessons as well as involving students in different on-line interactive activities (e.g. www.onestopclil.com, www.onestopenglish.com, www.macmillanpracticeonline.com).

It should be mentioned that all the variety of courses mentioned above is mainly aimed at teaching General English. Russian teachers of foreign languages are sure to use these valuable resources while teaching the Introduction course. Moreover, such an innovative teaching system as MyEnglishLab motivates students to become more independent learners as well as facilitates the whole education process. However, the situation in the education market is changing and now all publishing companies are trying to produce courses aimed at specific areas of knowledge and improving students' academic skills. Currently one can find a series Professional English published by Cambridge University Press (Engineering, Marketing, Nursing, Scientists), books for elective courses (Guide to Science, Economics, Country Studies) published by Macmillan company. It has been announced about the publication of a series "English for Specific Purposes" by Express Publishing Company, coursebooks on "Agriculture" and "Environmental Science" being included in the list of the coming publications in 2012.

Nevertheless, relying on the available resources offered by leading publishing companies Russian teachers should develop their own educational materials and tutorials aimed at meeting the demands of target student groups, especially in non-linguistic universities. To sum up, the Department of Foreign Languages in the RSAU-MAA has set up the following purposes for improving ways of teaching foreign languages to agrarian students:

1- before starting any course in a foreign language it is necessary to carry out a survey on the demands of both supervisors of BSc, MSc or PhD course and students' demands

(whether to focus on reading or writing skills, on describing experiments, equipment, scientific methods, graphs or diagrams, or making oral presentations, or business skills);

2 - to write or update coursebooks according to the three main areas of agriculture: Agronomy, Animal Science and Farm Economics. The coursebooks are to be considered as the introduction to the professional area of knowledge in a foreign language in advance;

3 - to organize tutorials or develop teaching aids for a particular course (ESP courses for Bachelors, Masters and PhD students) in a foreign language which corresponds the aim of the studied course in Russian within the limit of academic hours offered for the course;

4 - to prepare and publish dictionaries Foreign Language-Russian or vice versa with the specialists from the leading departments in order to acquaint students with the correct translation of specific terminology;

5 - to design a set of interactive tests covering all studied lexical and grammar issues, which will allow tutors to prepare tests varying in the number of questions, sections of grammar to be tested, time limit, etc;

6 - to establish virtual laboratories for blended learning which will provide the basis for developing student's individual curriculum, ensures student's leaning autonomy, promotes easier student-teacher communication;

7 - to launch multimedia courses relying on interactive exercises designed especially for students trained in a particular specialty in collaboration with the staff of the Department training students in this specialty and experienced programmers (Moodle platform, video resources of Youtube);

8 - in collaboration with students' scientific advisors, to motivate and support students in making reports in a foreign language at different students' scientific conferences in order to apply their knowledge of a foreign language in practice and become more confident in its use.

НОВЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ К ПРЕПОДАВАНИЮ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ В АГРАРНЫХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТАХ

Аннотация: статья посвящена основным подходам, используемым в обучении иностранным языкам студентов в РГАУ-МСХА, и разработке новых учебных программ, основанных на современных методиках, которые нацелены на обучение студентов академическому и профессиональному иностранному языку и способствуют достижению практического уровня владения иностранным языком в соответствии с международными требованиями.

Ключевые слова: иностранные языки, иностранный язык для академических целей, специальный иностранный язык, языковые навыки и умения, образовательные программы.

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