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## **Peculiarities of teaching professional English to medical students in mixed ability groups**

### **Особливості викладання професійної англійської мови студентам медичних факультетів у різнорівневих групах**

**Abstract.** *The main goal of the Professional English course for medical students is to teach intending doctors to use the language skillfully and fluently in communication with patients, colleagues, while participating in international conferences, seminars and webinars. This goal involves the formation of foreign language communicative competence of the student. To form students' appropriate speech competencies in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and phonetic, lexical and grammatical competencies in professional English, the teacher must carefully select the material and types of tasks taking into account the level of preparation of students, their age and intellectual abilities. When preparing assignments, the teacher must take into account the capabilities of each group of students (advanced, intermediate, elementary), and prepare appropriate multi-level tasks to involve everyone into the work. To organize the work of students in the classroom, such forms of student learning activities are used as individual work, pair work, and group work, which differ from each other by the number of students employed and ways of organizing activities. It is the group work that compensates for all the shortcomings of other types of work and is mainly used to summarize the studied material. The difficulty for a teacher in a mixed ability group is to organize the work of the group in such a way as to meet the needs and interests of all students. The preparation of the teacher for classes in a mix ability group involves several stages: to choose the right interactive method for a particular lesson, which is determined by the purpose of the lesson and the characteristics of the material being studied; to organize correctly students into groups; to consider carefully the structure of the lesson using group forms of educational activities; to choose a problem and outline ways to solve it; to think about the interior of the classroom. When grouping students and planning classes in a mix ability group, the teacher takes into account not only the level of students' language proficiency, but also their psychological characteristics and needs, creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the group.*

**Key words:** *professional English, medical students, mix ability groups.*

**Анотація.** *Провідна мета викладання професійної англійської мови для студентів медичних вузів – навчити майбутніх лікарів вміло використовувати мову у спілкуванні з пацієнтами, колегами, під час участі у міжнародних конференціях, семінарах та вебінарах. Саме ця мета передбачає формування іншомовної комунікативної компетентності студента. Для формування у студентів відповідних мовленнєвих компетентностей в аудіюванні, говорінні, читанні, письмі, перекладі та фонетичної, лексичної і граматичної компетентностей з професійної англійської мови викладач повинен ретельно відбирати навчальний матеріал і види завдань з урахуванням рівня підготовки студентів, їхніх вікових та інтелектуальних можливостей. У підготовці завдань викладач повинен враховувати можливість окремих груп студентів (сильних, середніх, слабких) і готувати відповідні різнорівневі завдання, щоб залучити до роботи кожного. Для організації роботи студентів на занятті використовуються такі форми навчальної діяльності студентів, як індивідуальна робота, робота у парах та у групах, які відрізняються одна від одної кількістю зайнятих студентів і способами організації роботи. Саме групова форма роботи компенсує всі недоліки інших видів робіт та виступає заключною формою організації роботи групи під час підбиття підсумків вивченої теми. Складністю для викладача у різнорівневій групі є організація роботи групи таким чином, щоб задовольнити потреби та інтереси всіх студентів. Підготовка викладача до занять у груповій формі навчання передбачає декілька етапів: правильно вибрати інтерактивний метод для конкретного заняття, що визначається метою заняття, особливостями матеріалу, який вивчається; правильно сформулювати студентів у групи; ретельно продумати структуру заняття з використанням групових форм навчальної діяльності; вибрати проблему для розв'язання та намітити шляхи її вирішення; продумати інтер'єр аудиторії. Об'єднуючи студентів у групи та плануючи заняття у різнорівневій групі, викладач враховує не тільки рівень знання мови студентів, а і їхні психологічні особливості та потреби, створюючи невимушену, привітну та дружню атмосферу.*

**Ключові слова:** *професійна англійська мова, студенти медичних факультетів, різнорівневі групи.*

**Introduction.** The main goal of teaching professional English to medical students is practical. Intending physicians must be able to use language in communication with patients, colleagues, and in international conferences, seminars, and webinars. This goal involves the formation of foreign language communicative competence of the student.

Knowledge of the language helps people from different countries and different parts of the world to understand each other and promotes their friendly or working relationship. Therefore, today there is an acute problem in finding ways, methods and means of language learning, which in turn contributes to the easy, interesting and most importantly effective learning of professional English.

It should be noted that the content of learning an English language is structured in several components: 1) linguistic competencies (lexical,

grammatical, phonetic), 2) psychological component (speech skills), 3) methodological component (how to learn) [2, p. 19-20].

To form students' appropriate speech competencies in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and phonetic, lexical and grammatical competencies in professional English, the teacher carefully selects the material and types of tasks taking into account the level of preparation of students, their age and intellectual abilities. The level of readiness of the student to perform the task corresponds to the degree of complexity of the task itself. Therefore, the tasks set for students should be clear and feasible for them to perform, as overloaded or very complicated educational material reduces the quality of learning. In the opposite, if the material is too simple, the classes become uninteresting for students.

In the learning process, the teacher must monitor how the material is mastered. When preparing assignments, the teacher takes into account the capabilities of each specific group of students (advanced, intermediate, elementary), and prepares appropriate multi-level tasks to involve everyone in the work. The same is applied to determining the scope and content of homework.

That is why we intend to explore the process of learning professional English and activities for effective teaching of students with different levels of language skills who study in one group.

The **relevance** of the topic is caused by the necessity to further seek possibilities to improve the effectiveness of teaching professional English, especially in the context of the spread of viral infection COVID-19, which prompted educational institutions to move to a mixed form of education.

The main **aim** of the research is to study types of work with medical students for effective teaching of professional English in mixed ability groups.

The **objectives**, which have been put forward for the better achievement of the goal, include analysis of the organization of professional English teaching for future doctors and outlining the peculiarities of training in mixed ability groups.

**Methodology of investigation.** The central research questions in the present study are: How can teachers increase students' productivity while teaching professional English? What are the peculiarities of teaching mix-ability groups of medical students?

As part of our study, we carried out observation of the educational process dealing with English classes for future medical specialists. The surveys took place between 2019 and 2021. Thus we studied the full range of professional practice in teaching professional English in mixed ability groups. Our results are based on a research method that is closely linked

to practice in teaching English for students of different ages and different specializations.

**Results and discussion.** Observation of the educational process showed that the content of foreign language teaching provided comprehensive, interconnected and balanced mastery of all types of speech activity [1, p. 19].

*Listening* is used as a means of teaching oral speech and as an independent type of speech activity aimed at understanding coherent texts. Students are offered three ways to use listening: while introducing new material, when attention is paid not only to understanding what is heard, but also to the conscious perception of new language units; as an element of dialogic speech; listening to audio texts. Texts for listening include monologues and dialogues directly related to scientific and practical medical topics. The text is listened to once or twice according to the task. Re-listening is preceded by control of understanding and formulation of a new communicative task, which focuses students' attention. The rate at which the text for listening is delivered is also important. Listening is carried out in three stages: before listening, while listening and after listening.

*Speaking*, as an active and productive type of speech activity that provides oral communication in a foreign language in dialogic and monologue forms, is carried out on the basis of solving practical tasks, for example, in the hospital, at a doctor's examination, examination, diagnosis of the disease, history taking [3, p. 88]. To ensure the rate of speech, the teacher provides a sufficient number of vocabulary and grammar.

*Reading* as a receptive type of speech activity, which refers to the written form of speech, develops the ability to read a professional medical text without a dictionary to obtain basic information, or with a dictionary – to fully understand the content of the text, including up to 6% of unfamiliar words. Students develop the skills of writing an annotation (briefly present orally or in a written form the content of what is read), abstracting (identify new information or main ideas in the text) and reviewing (express their opinion, evaluate the content of the text orally or in a written form). Teaching reading is also carried out in three stages: pre-reading stage – directs students' attention to reading and comprehension of the text (for example, key questions, the answers to which are in the text, or statements that students must confirm or refute); while-reading stage – students read the text and perform a communicative task; after-reading stage – control of reading comprehension by performing after-text tasks.

Teaching *writing* includes the ability to make notes, a plan or an annotation to the text read or listened to; to write a short message, an abstract or an essay.

For the balanced development of all types of speech activity, a student-oriented approach is implemented, which takes into account the peculiarities of their individual development. To organize the work of students in the classroom, such forms of student learning activities are used as individual, pair and group work, which differ from each other by the number of students employed and ways of organizing activities.

During *individual work* the teacher prepares and selects for each student an individual task according to their level of language proficiency. Also, when students work individually, the teacher monitors the work of each student, determining their success, efforts and improvements. An important element of this method is the use of material and resource base, because for students with elementary level of language knowledge as well as for advanced students appropriate materials for performing the task are provided in the best way, and at the same time different goals for their implementation are set [5, p. 168]. Students can independently choose tasks with a level of difficulty that they consider appropriate to their knowledge. This allows them to complete the task with minimal teacher's intervention, as the task is clear and requires no further explanation.

Such a way of organizing students' work in the classroom, as *pair work*, develops communication skills. Researchers distinguish two options for organizing students into pairs: heterogeneous pairs and homogeneous pairs [10, p. 132]. However, as Edmund Dudley notes, "even two students who, based on the writing of the test, can 'be on the same level', will certainly have different learning strengths and significant advantages in certain aspects of learning" [8, p. 59].

The work of homogeneous pairs succeeds in tasks in which the roles of partners are interchangeable or of equal complexity. Tasks to complete the sentences with missing information are most often used for such groups. To perform this task, partners need to enquire the missing information from each other, thus practicing communicative skills. Examples of such communicative exercises for homogeneous pairs are dialogues, role-plays or interviews.

The work of heterogeneous pairs in our foreign language class has the character of tutoring. Students in such pairs face different tasks. Students with an elementary level of language proficiency receive the task of giving short exact answers or asking questions according to sample, but more complex requirements are applied to advanced students. In addition to more active participation, the advanced student also plays the role of tutor, namely, they manage the process, help weaker students and correct them.

*Group work*, performed by six or less students, creates the best conditions for participation of all group members in the activity and the

achievement of effective communicative competence, which is a basic principle in learning a foreign language. The formation of groups, as well as pairs, can be of two types: homogeneous and heterogeneous [11].

The *work with the whole group* is used mainly at the beginning of the lesson as the warming up and at the end of the lesson to summarize the learned material. Sometimes this way of organizing work is also used to do such tasks as group project work, in which each student is responsible for some relevant part of the project.

In our opinion, it is the group work that compensates for all the shortcomings of other types of work. Unfortunately, in the psychological and pedagogical literature there is no single definition of group learning activity. We consider group learning activities a form of organizing learning in small groups of students, united by a common learning goal under the indirect guidance of the teacher and in collaboration with students. "A mixed ability group" is "a group where students with different levels of knowledge and learning needs study" [4].

The difficulty for a teacher in a mixed ability group is to organize the work of the group in such a way as to meet the needs and interests of all students. This means that the teacher must pay attention to both advanced students and to those with an elementary level of language proficiency in the same way. It is clear that students who mastered the language better will be more active during the English lesson, while students who have a lower level of language proficiency will feel insecure and will prefer passive participation in the learning process. The task of the teacher is "to create a favorable environment for learning, where students themselves will be willing to participate in it and will not be afraid to make a mistake" [9, p. 42].

While preparing a class in a mixed ability group, the teacher should follow some certain stages: 1) to choose correctly the interactive method for a particular lesson, which is determined by the purpose of the lesson, the characteristics of the material being studied; 2) to organize correctly students into groups; 3) to consider carefully the structure of the lesson using group forms of educational activities; 4) to choose a problem and outline ways to solve it; 5) to consider the interior of the classroom.

When organizing students into groups and planning a class in a mixed ability group, the teacher takes into account not only the level of students' language proficiency but also their psychological characteristics and needs, creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the group. As noted by A. Tereshchenko and others "mixed ability groups are especially highly valued by weaker students because of their inclusive and cooperative environment" [12]. J. Budden offers two ways to organize

foreign language learning in mixed ability groups: 1) Division of students into subgroups due to the level of their language proficiency (advanced, intermediate and elementary) and selection of level tasks and exercises individually for each subgroup, which work independently of each other; 2) Work due to the plan and materials, which are focused on the average level of knowledge of students in a foreign language and the distribution of common tasks at different levels [7].

We use the second method, as it gives the opportunity to organize joint work of the group during the class, taking into account the individual needs of each student and promotes the full participation of the teacher in the process of teaching a foreign language.

For effective teaching of professional English in a mixed ability group, the teacher selects material of the appropriate level. Students regularly receive feedback from the teacher about the performance of their tasks. The teacher uses positive and neutral comments, as well as constructive comments that encourage changes. In addition, assessment techniques are of great importance. It is important to ask different types of questions to different students. To work with the material, the teacher uses technical aids, supporting materials, available textbooks, manuals and interesting visual aids. Another important point is the location of desks and chairs in the classroom. For individual performance of tasks by students the traditional way of arrangement of furniture in rows should be applied, while during discussion it is better to arrange them in a big circle. To create a favorable environment for cooperative learning, desks should be set up in groups. Students must have the possibility to move freely enough in the classroom to form groups.

In order to unite students into groups properly, the teacher defines different criteria: for example, the creation of a group for educational purposes, that is depending on the level of students' achievements, complexity of educational tasks or for organizational purpose, namely taking into account the dynamics of interpersonal relationships inside the group, for example, how well certain students get on with each other and interact while solving a problem.

The use of various forms of organization of the educational process helps the teacher to take into account the following students' differences in the educational process: 1) level of preparation – by adjusting the rate of learning and the level of complexity of the material; 2) individual learning styles – through the organization of numerous activities so that students have the opportunity to receive and process information in different ways, at different levels; 3) interests – based on the inclinations, interests and desires of the student to master a certain topic or develop a certain skill [6, p. 21].

By monitoring students, the teacher determines their level of preparation, interests, learning style, strengths and needs. It helps in organization of students into groups. Group formation and regrouping is a dynamic process and changes depending on the content, design and results of periodic evaluation of results.

**Conclusions.** For effective teaching of students with different levels of language proficiency in professional English classes the teacher uses individual, pair and group work. The teacher uses a variety of teaching methods, technical teaching aids, and develops appropriate teaching materials. When planning a lesson in a mixed ability group, a foreign language teacher takes into account not only the level of knowledge proficiency, but also the psychological characteristics of students and their needs. The teacher creates a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the group. To organize effective work in a mixed ability group, the teacher organizes students into groups correctly, taking into account the level of students' achievements, the complexity of the learned material and tasks, or interpersonal relationships in the group. The formation of mixed ability groups contributes to a positive atmosphere in the group and the development of communicative activities of future doctors. Teaching various types of professional speech in professional English in mixed ability groups requires further investigation.

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