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### **Teaching ESP in the context of international integration: problems and solutions**

### **Викладання АМПС у контексті міжнародної інтеграції: проблеми та вирішення**

*Summary.* Rapid globalization in all spheres of modern life enhances the role of international communication focused on global ties formation, especially for the countries which find themselves in situations of conflict, including war, civil war and/or occupation. For such countries the role of English as lingua franca plays an imperative role and thus further intensifies the need in well-trained human resources with a good command of foreign languages. Despite the national understanding and governmental support in developing the foreign language proficiency of Ukrainian higher educational establishments' graduates, the ESP teaching and learning is presently facing numerous challenges in Ukraine. The present article deals with the analysis of the up-to-date ESP teaching and learning difficulties at tertiary level on the basis of some twenty years of the ESP teaching experience. The study shows that ESP teaching management, including program and syllabus compilation processes currently need universally agreed standards as the number of contact hours allocated, the selection of courses and their combination as well as the choice of themes under study within the scope of the same major differ significantly from university to university. An important challenge for ESP professors constitutes the students' FLP level disparity on their entry phase, which needs time to overcome and correct drawbacks of students' previous learning experience, adapt them to the university program, etc. There is a constant need to provide for teacher-training programs; requirement to supply modern and relevant textbooks; necessity to enhance students' motivation and improve their communicative competences. Some possible solutions to achieve the educational results, to successfully satisfy the learners' specific needs and to overcome the existing hardships in teaching English to non-English majors are offered.

**Key words:** English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for General Purposes (EGP); international integration; course syllabus; proficiency level; motivation.

**Анотація.** Швидка глобалізація в усіх сферах сучасного життя посилює роль міжнародної комунікації, орієнтованої на формування глобальних зв'язків, особливо для країн, які опинилися в конфліктних ситуаціях, включаючи війну, громадянську війну та/ або окупацію. Для таких країн англійська мова як *lingua franca* відіграє важливу роль, що інтенсифікує потребу у добре підготовлених кадрах з високим володінням іноземними мовами. Не зважаючи на усвідомлення важливості даного питання на національному рівні та державну підтримку підвищення рівня володіння іноземною мовою випускниками українських ЗВО, викладання та вивчення англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням на сьогоднішній день стикається з численними викликами. Ця стаття присвячена аналізу сучасних труднощів викладання та вивчення англійської мови у вищій освіті на основі майже двадцятирічного досвіду викладання у ЗВО. Дослідження показує, що процеси складання програми та робочої програми з даної дисципліни наразі потребують універсально узгодження на національному рівні, адже кількість контактних годин згідно плану, вибір курсів та їх поєднання, а також вибір тем, що вивчаються, у межах однієї спеціальності, суттєво відрізняються від університету до університету. Важливим викликом для викладачів АМПС є розбіжності у рівні володіння іноземною мовою студентів на етапі вступу, подолання яких, як от виправлення недоліків попереднього освітнього досвіду, адаптація до університетської програми, потребують значних часових затрат. Існує постійна потреба проведення програм підвищення кваліфікації викладачів; вимога забезпечення навчального процесу сучасними та актуальними підручниками; необхідність посилення мотивації студентів та пошук шляхів вдосконалення їх комунікативної компетентності. Пропонуються деякі можливі рішення для досягнення результатів навчання, успішного задоволення професійних потреб учасників навчального процесу та подолання існуючих труднощів у викладанні англійської мови для студентів неспеціальних факультетів.

**Ключові слова:** англійська мова за професійним спрямуванням (АМПС); загальна англійська мова; міжнародна інтеграція; програма курсу; рівень володіння; мотивація.

**Introduction.** English is widely acknowledged as *lingua franca* and an international communicative means; thus, the global role of English is an acknowledged fact and gives basically one or both of the following kinds of motivation for learning it: the utilitarian one, i.e., its importance for international business, and the idealistic one, i.e., the potential it affords for furthering cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding.

In Ukraine there is a national understanding and governmental support to further advance the English language proficiency of Ukrainian tertiary education alumnae, young specialists and entrepreneurs. Recently a bill for a new law (No. 9432) “On the Use of the English Language in Ukraine”, specifying English as one of Ukraine’s languages for international communication, was introduced by president Zelenskyy in June

2023 [14]. Nevertheless, despite increased attention to the problem of language training and the efforts of many scientists and researchers to improve the English proficiency level of students with non-linguistic majors, Ukraine currently lags behind many European countries. According to The EF English Proficiency Index 2023, Ukraine ranked 45th out of 113 world countries that took part in the survey and testing, thus falling into the category of medium language proficiency states. The analysis shows that the country's performance has deteriorated compared to the previous year, when Ukraine ranked 35th. The country still shows worse results than all its neighbors. Poland (13th place), Romania (15th place), Slovakia (18th place), Hungary (17th place), the Czech Republic (26th) are considered countries with a high level of language training, Belarus (33rd place) and Moldova (35th place) share our average English competence level, but still have better positions [10].

ESP as a term specifies teaching and training English for its future use in students' professional work to serve vocational purposes in different spheres of life from business to medicine. There have been miscellaneous studies on English for Specific Purposes essence and methodology over the past decades. Some latest investigations stress the multiple opportunities that ESP studying offers, however they also examine the difficulties or limitations that the ESP teachers and students face. The most frequent problems that teachers and/ or researchers from many universities worldwide (Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, Turkey, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan, Rwanda) share are: obstacles in program allocation, appropriate curriculum selection difficulties, necessity for ESP teachers' training courses; varying entry-level of students' foreign language competence, learners' low absorption and motivation levels. The study on "The Scope and Use of ESP in Foreign and Turkish Context" by Nazli Gündüz reveals that an ESP teacher possesses specialist knowledge of the target language which the learner is interested in acquiring, and he/she usually does not possess some familiarity with the subject matter relevant to the learner's area of study or occupation [12]. D. Saidvalieva emphasizes that Uzbekistan ESP teachers become slaves to the published textbooks available, even when the textbooks do not tailor their students' needs, as they are usually unable to rely on personal experiences when evaluating material and considering course goals as well as unable to rely on the learners' views who tend not to know what English abilities are required by the profession they hope to enter [16, p. 482]. G. Chmelikova states that the main problem concerning ESP students' proficiency enhancement in Slovakia is that Slovak universities are decreasing the load of English lessons despite the quality elaborated syllabus and even closing their language centres or departments [7]. A. Q. Dou, S. W. Chan

and M. T. Win from Malaysia dwell on the problem of young ESP teachers with little or no experience in teaching specialized courses, lack of good ESP textbooks as well as the absence of a universal ESP syllabus program [9, p. 8]. T. J. Bosco and others specify that students' fear of practice, few speaking activities and lack of enough teaching and learning tools outweigh challenges impeding effective ESP teaching and learning in Rwanda higher educational establishments [6, p. 507–510].

From the above-mentioned one can conclude that many universities worldwide have coinciding problems. The ESP teaching and learning management, including program and syllabus compilation difficulties, the need to provide for teacher-training programs, necessity to enhance students' motivation and improve their communicative proficiency are currently issues of great importance and very topical items for further investigation in search of possible solutions. In the present article we will try to analyze some challenges and problems that the ESP teaching and learning is presently facing in Ukraine as well as offer possible solutions to overcome them in order to comply with the specified learners' needs and aims set up by the training institutions.

**Methodology/Methods.** The study uses a number of general research methods: comparative analysis – to evaluate the most common problems in ESP teaching and learning that the universities worldwide currently face, systems analysis – for disclosure of pedagogical and educational path on the improvement and modernization of the national ESP methodological conception; analysis and synthesis – to discuss the challenges that English for Specific Purposes teachers and professors of Ukrainian higher educational establishments currently face and offer possible solutions that could lead to the targeted improvement of students' foreign language proficiency level. Generalization and prognostic methods have been applied for conclusions formulation.

**Results and Discussion.** English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is often the only or one of the most important foreign language training subjects for university students of non-philological higher educational establishments in Ukraine. It is included in the study curriculum as a compulsory subject and is often the only means to train the English language proficiency of future specialists.

However, this subject teaching and learning faces multiple problems, the first one to be named is the fact that there are no universally agreed standards for teaching English to non-English majors at tertiary level in Ukraine. As a result, the content of the ESP course program as well as the number of credits (contact hours) allocated to this subject for students of the same major vary considerably from university to university. As stated in the “Country Report. Ukraine” supplied by the Ministry of Education

and Science of Ukraine, language teaching schedules are highly variable: from 240 to 432 hours of Foreign Language and 108 hours of Ukrainian depending on the department. Choices (of language and schedule) have not been made according to the special needs of the students or those of the study orientation, and the number of hours, which could be specified for foreign languages [13, p. 45–46]. Thus, it is difficult to have a common voice in training as well as to facilitate student mobility and transfer from one establishment to another.

It is true that teaching ESP in higher educational establishments in our country has undergone serious changes in the previous decades. Joining the Bologna process has specified a system of recognizable and understandable degrees of education; has established two cycles of higher education; implemented a system of course credits that correspond to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This has facilitated students', scientists' and teachers' academic mobility; stimulated cooperation to ensure the quality of education while preserving the autonomy and independence of higher educational institutions as well as national systems of higher education [15, p. 239].

Another important step was taken as far back as 2005 when the National ESP Curriculum was developed by a team of Ukrainian and British universities in collaboration with the British Council and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The project aimed at delivering an English Language Curriculum of a new generation which is level specific, competence based and job related to ensure the development of learners' professional language competences and their effective functioning in diverse academic and professional environments.

The content of the Curriculum is aimed at the formation of professional communicative competence, which is viewed as the foreign language behavior of students and represents general skills, that is, the teaching of ESP is focused on the development of communicative skills which are common to any major. Much attention is also paid to students' sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences formation, their self-education as well as self-organization, self-evaluation and self-awareness development.

This National ESP Curriculum was adopted by many universities across Ukraine. However, instead of clear instructions, it offers a framework within which curricula can be developed for each specific higher educational establishment. The absence of clear instructions is explained by the idea that the development of any educational program begins with the needs analysis of: the students, the specific educational institutions and their faculties, which are diverse for different areas of training and fields of knowledge. Thus, it is up to the ESP course designers to

determine the specific (professional) communicative skills required, the generic situations and job-related areas in which their students need to use them. So, the Curriculum does not provide for a list of the exponents of various functions as the range of exponents available for a particular function is unpredictable in real life situations [11, p. 33–36].

According to the Curriculum, course designers are recommended to design their course syllabi not on the thematic approach (compiling a system of profession-related topics and themes and making it the main focus of the syllabi content), but focusing rather on the language skills (communicative predominantly) necessary to be trained and acquired by students in the teaching process. Consequently, the teachers who are mostly experts in linguistics and don't have any special knowledge in the subject matter of the students' majors (like law, economics, medicine, etc.) should focus not on the understanding and explaining the essence of many professional concepts, but on the morphological and grammatical structures of some text sentences and should facilitate the development of students' professional communication skills by teaching language rules rather than explaining professional notions. However, it should be kept in mind that we cannot differentiate the content and form and it is impossible to teach only grammatical or lexical structures if the students (to make matters worse – the teachers) do not understand what they are learning or teaching.

Many scientists investigating the problem of a successful ESP course design (Saidvalieva, Kostrytska, Zuyenok and others) propose corroboration of ESP practitioners with field specialists in the selection of themes and topics which should be included in the syllabi. They recommend to make up a list of topics in cooperation with specialists in each individual field of training and simultaneously agree on them with the students, since the topics can change over time and may vary in different student groups. They stress the understanding that any ESP training course is aimed at the development of professionally oriented communicative competence, and not at teaching special disciplines in foreign languages, which is essential for distinguishing the role of a language teacher and a teacher of specialized discipline [3, p. 157]. In this sense cooperation with field specialists is a good practice as any ESP course design process should essentially concern three aspects: the ESP teacher, the subject-matter instructor, and the ESP learner who is sometimes expected to be more knowledgeable than the ESP teacher with regard to some chunks of specialist data. Therefore, it is necessary to attain harmonization between these three elements in order to achieve success in teaching and learning processes in ESP classes.

Nevertheless, from our point of view, there is still an urgent need for a more standardized approach and/ or unified requirements in the sphere of syllabi design, both concerning contact hours (credits) allocated to

ESP/EGP/Business English or any other language training course at universities as well as in the selection of necessary topics as topics selection determines the lexis to be used. In other words, specification of themes presupposes whether the students get or do not get acquainted with professional vocabulary and terms connected with the selected thematic field and which would turn necessary for their successful specialized oral and written communication at their future workplaces. However, universities' autonomy is a necessary and required thing, the ESP teaching and learning at tertiary level in Ukraine should have more integrated criteria and detailed rules. In our view, it would be better and more time-saving to have a unified approach or some thematic frameworks to syllabi design specified by the Ministry of Education after cooperation with field specialists in each major, as there are not so many of them.

To determine the foreign language proficiency level, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is used nationwide, which describes foreign language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2 (Elementary and Pre-intermediate), B1 and B2 (Intermediate and Upper Intermediate), C1 and C2 (Advanced/ Proficiency) and also defines three 'plus' levels (A2+, B1+, B2+):

In order to master the university foreign language course for professional purposes successfully, the students' foreign language proficiency entry level must be no lower than B1, as specified in the State Standard of Basic Secondary Education [1]. The target level of the language proficiency to qualify for a Bachelor's degree is B2 (Independent User), according to the National ESP Curriculum requirements. The program recognizes that the English language proficiency level B2+ may be sufficient for verbally non-demanding specialisms, while the C1 level may be required for highly verbal specialisms. As the entry level of Master's students will be B2 (Independent User), it will ensure their independent English language communicative competence for them to function effectively in their academic and professional fields [11, p. 30–31].

However, according to the latest research and analysis of the national condition of foreign languages development, in particular English [4; 5], one of the reasons that hinders the successful learning of a foreign language course at a higher educational institution is that some students have not fully mastered (or have partially mastered) the foreign language program of a secondary school. Besides, the level of foreign language proficiency of the applicants is rather difficult to assess for two basic reasons:

– School-Leaving Examination in a foreign language is not standardized and the grades are not aligned with CEFR terms. Exam results are usually assessed by the school teachers, thus the language competence estimated by those grades may vary significantly from one school to another;

– Universities do not routinely have entrance examinations in English, thus there is no robust assessment in universities which monitors students' language levels.

University teachers repeatedly report that many students, perhaps the majority, do not currently reach the Ministry's B1 benchmark [4, p. 84] at the beginning of the university language course, even if their school leaving grades were high enough, which influences their further learning process. They stress that the entry-level of students' language proficiency significantly affects the content of the educational programs being developed as well as predetermines the level of students' language proficiency at their graduation. Although it should be B2 to ensure the academic mobility of students, these requirements are often impossible to be met.

Thus, according to the data of entrance diagnostic testing, for example, from 20% to 40% of entrants in various specialties at Chernivtsi National University regularly demonstrate insufficient level of language proficiency [2, p. 4]. Research data from the National Mining University of Dnipro show that the entry level of most students today is A2, which is viewed as common for most non-linguistic higher educational institutions of Ukraine [3, p. 155].

The same situation is true for the Chernivtsi Trade and Economics Institute. The students' FLP entry-level is far from B1 and predominantly varies from A1 to A2. Such a picture stems mostly from the fact that students of economic majors do not have to pass compulsory testing in foreign languages to enter the higher educational institution. Their entrance requirements include high scores in the independent National Multi-subject Test, including compulsory subjects for all economic majors like Ukrainian Language and Literature plus a choice of Ukrainian History/ Mathematics/ Geography/ Biology/ Physics/ Chemistry or Foreign Language. In practice, very few school graduates choose to pass one of the foreign languages (English, German or French) as it is viewed more difficult and problematic, pupils fear to score poor marks in it, thus discarding it from the very beginning. And as the last years of their secondary education are usually spent in preparation for the above-mentioned subjects (in which they need high scores to have better prospects), their foreign language preparation, however understood as significant and vital for their future, is very often neglected.

One more reason for the entry-level discrepancy stems from the fact that students come from different areas of residence, where the organization of English education could show considerable inconsistencies. It is well-known that graduates from high schools in some localities suffered from a lack of teachers or from the absence of qualified teachers, especially during war-time difficulties due to considerable migration of



population from the affected areas. It should be noted here that however the problem of students' low entry-level of language proficiency causes certain challenges for ESP teachers, it can be solved at the administrative level of the higher educational institution.

Many universities conduct entry-level tests and organize their students into graded groups according to their language competence levels (e.g., beginners/ intermediate/ proficient), if the number of entrants is sufficient enough and presupposes the formation of several learners' groups of the same major. However, recent years show stagnation in entrants' numbers leading to the practice of uniting students of different majors into one ESP learning group. That is why, the study time of the 1st as well as 2nd years in some universities is spent on adapting students to the university program, correcting and making up for what was lost at school. To overcome the teaching difficulties in mixed competence academic groups it is recommended to assign easier tasks (e.g., translation, vocabulary drills) to lower-level students and more complex ones (group discussions, problem-solving, etc.) to students showing better language competence in order to keep everyone involved and studying.

Another important measure to achieve the target mastery of a foreign language at the B2 level and to overcome the entrants' competence disparity problem may include taking recommended intensive language courses in the amount of at least 150–180 hours (6 ECTS credits) at the university linguistic center and/ or department in parallel with a compulsory ESP course until the student acquires a level not lower than A2+. Such a course is usually very helpful and may be either in General English/ Business English as well as in ESP, depending on the students' needs and requirements. The only drawback here is that the course is usually not free-of-charge and for the students who already have to pay a lot for their tuition it might be very difficult to furthermore finance their future language proficiency.

A good possibility to overcome the insufficient FLP level of students starting learning English for professional purposes is to introduce the General English course during their first year of study, and only then continue with ESP, learning specialized vocabulary used in professional settings. In this way it is possible to make up for the students' proficiency gaps, correct some drawbacks of previous learning experiences, adapt the students to the university program as well as to understand the needs of each definite group and design the future ESP course syllabus according to those needs.

The scheme EGP + ESP would be helpful for the idea that an ESP course syllabus must be designed upon the conducted analysis of each student's needs as well as of education target results as recommended by

the National ESP Curriculum. If the ESP course starts on the very first day of students' university life, the ESP teacher cannot analyze the needs of those who s/he doesn't know yet. Those needs cannot be analyzed during the first weeks of the tuition either, as it is required from the teachers to already have the prepared in advance course syllabus, approved by the university scientific council, before the course actually starts. That is why, with an already prepared and approved syllabus the ESP teacher, not knowing his or her future students' FLP level, the existing FLP gaps to overcome, students' special professional needs or preferences, is obliged to change, adapt or modify what was initially planned to the true-to-life situation, and this discrepancy between the desired and the real puts special strains on the teacher as well as on the students, for whom the initially planned course material (as for those with the FLP level of B1) proves to be too difficult and complex.

**Conclusions.** In conclusion it is necessary to stress once again that currently the entire society recognizes the importance of languages in the context of the country's geographical position, economic perspectives, current problems caused by the hardship of war and is interested in improving the ESP teaching and learning standards to solve the national need in well-trained and competent human resources with high professional qualifications and a good command of foreign languages to serve modernization and globalization processes. However, the up-to-date ESP teaching and learning faces numerable difficulties, which need grounded solutions on a nationwide scale.

The combination of ESP + EGP (+ EAP) and their balance ratio; the content of the ESP (EGP/EAP) programs, the number of contact hours allocated to these subjects for students of the same major vary considerably from university to university and it is difficult to have a common voice in training. Thus, it would be useful and beneficial to introduce unified standards for teaching English to non-English majors at tertiary level in Ukraine. In this aspect we consider that the creation of a uniform national scheme concerning specification of necessary foreign language courses (like ESP/ EGP/ EAP), their balance ratio and number of contact hours allotted as well as the content of the ESP (EGP/ EAP) course syllabi within the spectrum of the same major in all universities is highly recommended and should be applied to promote students' mobility and foster national educational connectivity. It would be really helpful if all levels of management: the Ministry of Science and Education in cooperation with universities' methodological units as well as field specialists could be involved into the creation of such a unified national scheme for each major, which would include the nationwide analysis of needs, define the necessary direction, prescribe the amount of contact hours, specify

recommended topics to be studied, provide a choice of recommended textbooks, etc. for each specific major across the country. Thus, when all universities have the same language training map and unified standards, tuition will be organized in the right direction and the teaching/ learning process will be more focused and targeted.

To further support the collaborative dialogue about ESP across higher education institutions in the country, it is recommended to organize regular national conferences which focus on ESP; provide for a social media platform through which ESP teachers across the country can continue to interact; create an online journal through which ongoing research and pedagogical developments in ESP can be shared; organize annual meetings in which their ESP experiences and results can be shared. There may be other options but the message here should be clear: it is essential to sustain the strong ESP community and to extend the impact of this community to higher education institutions [5].

To overcome the students' language proficiency level disparity on their entry phase it would be preferable to start the language education at tertiary level not with English for Specific (Professional) Purposes, teaching specialized notions, concepts and terms, but with an initial course in everyday (General) English. This will enable the teachers to make up for the students' proficiency gaps, correct some drawbacks of previous learning experiences, adapt the students to the university program as well as to understand the needs of each definite group and possibly design the future ESP course syllabus according to those needs.

At the same time, not all difficulties, not to mention solutions, were comprehensively and thoroughly covered in this article. Their further research is especially important nowadays, given the need in high-quality command of foreign languages for Ukrainian professionals, which is highly indispensable to enter the open information space, communicate without hardships, deepen international cooperation and serve the needs of the country, suffering from war and constant economic damage.

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