TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES IN KAZAKHSTAN: CONTENT OR SKILLS?

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Abstract

The paper discusses the highly debated issue of what approach Kazakhstan University teachers of English as a foreign language(TEFL) should prioritize in teaching English for Special Purposes (ESP) at present: content-based or skills-orientated. It is the fact of the day that the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education aims to encourage about 70% of the local students to take up technical specializations (Gosudarstvennaya programma obrazovaniya RK, 2011). However, many researchers claim (Ford, 2017; Winthrop & McGivney, 2016; Global Economic Forum, 2016) that because of the intensive robotization and automation of the working processes worldwide and real threat of unemployment for a vast number of specialists, the most critical skills for future employees are the so-called "soft skills", such as communication, negotiation, problem solving, critical/creative thinking, and cross-cultural skills. The survey among the local ESP teachers has revealed that the greater focus in their lessons is placed not on the soft skills, but on the content, often overloaded with complicated technical terms and processes which most teachers find irrelevant for their professional competencies. On the other hand, more than half of the surveyed students admitted that the ESP lessons supported their understanding of their specialist subjects in terms of the terminology and language skills. The author will attempt to provide her vision of the optimal solution to the stated problem based on the survey findings and her teaching experience.

Key words: ESP, Communicative Competence, Content-driven Approach, Soft Skills.

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of Kazakhstan strategic development plan of for 2011-2030 (Nazarbayev, 2011), the country has been striving at creating adequate conditions to raise a generation of highly competent qualified engineering cadre able to communicate effectively in multilingual settings, who have been in scarce supply in the republic since the Soviet times. The responsible body, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (MES RK), have been putting this initiative into effect by adopting and implementing the education development plan for 2011-2020 which aimed to encourage about70% of school graduates to take up technical science studies (Gosudarstvennaya programma obrazovaniya RK, 2011).This means that the biggest numbers of state grants are allocated to technical university students or those who aspire to pursue engineering careers.

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The implementation of the educational reform in Kazakhstan (Gosudarstvennaya programma obrazovaniya RK, 2011) has resulted in a turnaround shift in the local curricula of both the secondary schools and higher education establishments: e.g. transition to content and language integrated learning (CLIL) systems. As many as 110 schools (Abdildina et al, 2017) including the

state-funded intellectual schools, and the leading national and private universities (Vitchenko, 2017) have been committing to the introduction and promotion of CLIL, in fact, the European system of content and language integrated learning, which implies both instruction of a number of subjects in a language which is foreign to the students and learning a foreign language based on the content of the subject of study (Marsh, 2002,p.10). In the context of Kazakhstan, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the main medium of instruction in the local CLIL-based schools and Universities.

According to a number of Kazakh researchers (Bekenova,2016; Abdildina, 2017;Vitchenko, 2017), the local schools and universities have been instructing primarily mathematics, physics and related science and technical subjects in the English language to local students. Other examples include recent ventures in the republic, such as Kazakhstan Maritime Academy and Faculty of Information technologies which are parts of Kazakh-British Technical University. In these higher education schools, roughly 90% of subjects are delivered in English.

2. Problem

A CLIL experiment conducted among senior classes in Kazakhstani secondary (intellectual) schools, in 2016 (Abdildina et al,2017) revealed that over half of the surveyed teachers involved in the pilot project admitted that they did not achieve the expected academic and content-oriented objectives. The main reason for that were the loss of content and a relatively low English language proficiency level among senior schoolchildren.

As for the state of things in universities with CLIL programs, the outcomes seem to be more productive and result-effective in terms of the content, but there is a substantial decrease both in foreign language skills and cognitive abilities, such as critical and creative thinking, verbal and written communication skills. This might result from the fact that the students are often challenged with information retention, combined with rota memorization, not information analysis, as it is common for the Maritime English course in Kazakhstan and Russia. Regarding this, debate has arisen among the local English language instructors whether they should prioritise skills-centred or rather a content-driven approach in delivering English for Special (Professional) Purposes to science and/or technical students.

2. Literature Review

Skills-orientated teaching approach

In a Kazakhstani context, skills-orientated approach in teaching a foreign language traditionally implies raising the students' proficiency level in four main areas of English as a Foreign Language (EFL): understanding and responding to the stated questions based on audio or recorded information, reading to foster skimming and scanning the input information from a variety of discourse texts, speaking skills framed mostly by the topic-based reproductions and structured dialogues, and paragraph writing skills. Most of the classroom activities have a receptive, not a productive output. However, the rationale of CLIL approach is much wider and more comprehensive: as Brewster (1999, p.3) claims, its primary purpose is 'to achieve breadth, comprehensiveness, and synthesis of blurring disciplines to create complex thinking system'. This goes along with the goal of higher education in RK is to raise specialists with life-long competencies, of which critical thinking capabilities play a pivotal role. In terms of the ESP classroom setting, this means transforming the young language learners to the efficient communicators in authentic professional contexts.

As Paul and Elder, (1998) define, an efficient communicator is an effective critical thinker who:

1)responds in a thoughtful way to a broad range of issues and problems;
2)is open to differences in opinions, accepts them by evaluating reasoning and evidence;
3) is able to communicate effectively with others in working out solutions for complex problems,

4) raises vital issues and problems, defining them concisely and succinctly;
5)collects, sort outs and evaluates relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively and to come up with well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards.

These are the main learning outcomes an EFL teacher should strive to foster in their learners in the course of their professional activities.

Content-driven approach in ESP/EFL

The ESP teachers in Kazakhstan have been applying the content-driven approach in learning a foreign language since the era of the Soviet Union. In local terms, this approach implies teaching and learning EFL through the content of specialist themes with a focus on deriving meanings from the professional terms and concepts, as well as developing the learner's understanding of subject-related processes on the basis of discourse information. This often results inrota memorisation of word meanings, information retention and bears a reproductive nature of learning.

However, modern interpretation of this approach is much broader. According to Savignon, as cited by Met, (1998), 'Content-based courses ...of language instruction are a natural concomitant of communicative approaches to foreign language instruction that emphasize the use of language to interpret, express and negotiate meaning'. Thus, it becomes apparent that a communicative and interactive approach to teaching ESP is predominant though it is difficult to implement in Technical English courses in the republic because the content of technical discourse is dull, sometimes overloaded with terms and process descriptions, which leave little room for discussions or critical reviews.

Another critical aspect of learning EFL through content is the metacognitive value as this approach is supposed to "integrate new knowledge, better interpret and understand language phenomena, innovate and bring novelty in language studies" (Popesku et al, 2011, p.18). These imply a higher order of thinking skills and require a high English language proficiency level which is the goal of the EFL, and seems to apply to the instructor's competence level.

Soft skills

Since Kazakhstan has set an ambitious goal of integrating into the global market and joining the list of 50 most competitive countries (Nazarbayev, 2011), it is necessary to consider the global trends in the labour market to be able to adjust the educational system in general, and the EFL program to the needs of the 21st century.

The fact that the current aim of the Ministry of Education (Gosudarstvennaya programma obrazovaniya RK, 2011)) is to engage roughly 70% of secondary school graduates in acquisition of engineering and/or technical specialisations, this might cause some problems in the future with the allocation of human resources in different sectors of the economy. Another concern is that this strategic plan takes into account the current situation in the country, but the global market trends seem to be underestimated. According to some official sources (Global EconomicForum2016; Ford 2017; Winthrop & McGivney, 2016), current intensive robotization and automation of the working processes will lead to the disappearance of a vast number of jobs by 2020, resulting in a high rate of unemployment for many jobs, including technical specialists. Therefore, the universities should prepare specialists with soft skills(PWC Global, 2017; Luu, 2018; Ford, 2018), such as critical and creative thinking, problem solving, negotiation and reasoning, cross-cultural communication and fast learning skills.

In terms of the EFL, the primary skill which future specialists need to be equipped with is widely known as the communicative competence, the linguistic term which was first introduced by

Chomsky, explicitly defined by Hymes at al and, (cited in Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007, pp. 95-96),as a person's underlying ability to use the knowledge of a foreign language, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and context for a communicative purpose in multiple settings. This concept is further explained by Savignon (1972 p.8 as cited in Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007, p. 96) as 'the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors". In addition to the linguistic aspect, communicative competence assumes sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007, p. 95-96). The first competence implies the student's ability to use the appropriate language in different social settings to comply with the social conventions and roles. By discourse, competence Swayne and Hymes (cited in Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007, pp. 95-96)understand a student's ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances. By the strategic competence, problem solving, mistake identification and self-correction are generally accepted. This theory of the communicative competence is actively promoted in Kazakhstan and the university. EFL teachers are supposed to develop these four underlying competencies. (Kunanbayeva,2006, pp.12-13).

The study of the current state of things in the students' EFL proficiency might give us a clear picture of the existing and potential problems.

3. Methodology

The study relies on the data obtained from online and paper-based open-end questionnaires and opinion survey carried out among Technical University students, and ESP and specialist subject instructors. It also includes the university entry and exit test results recorded by the author over the last 7 years of student admissions to the technical university.

The research aims at identifying existing problems that inhibit the local students' acquisition of the EFL in the context of CLIL programs in Kazakhstan. The research questions were as follows:

1) Should English language (ESP) instructors prioritise teaching student's communicative and academic skills or should they rather scaffold students with the acquisition of the subject-related and/or professional terms and concepts using specialist types of discourse?
2) What sort of English language difficulties or gaps do students in CLIL programs experience?
3) What can be done to improve the learners' EFL proficiency level?

Setting

The study of students' learning experiences and problems was carried out in one of the leading Kazakhstani CLIL-based technical universities. However, the teacher survey included lecturers from 6 state and private universities, including the ESP and subject instructors. These universities comply with the state educational standards and their curricula incorporate ESP program. The Professional English course is usually preceded by the Academic English one. Students must achieve an Upper-Intermediate level of English to be admitted to the ESP course (IELTS band score 5,5- 6.0) in CLIL-based university programs.

Participants

Three groups have been defined as the research targets: students, English language instructors and specialist subject lecturers.

As many as 165 students were surveyed and 48 (26 ESP, 22 specialist subject) teachers responded voluntarily to the survey questions. The first group involved the 1st, 2nd, and 3d year Bachelor program students of technical and economic majors (Maritime technologies, IT,

Petroleum Engineering, Economics and Finance). The students completed the ESP courses during the first and second year of their study.

The mean average of ESP teachers' teaching experience was 12,4, and the latter group gained an average of 5,7 years of CLIL experiences.

Data collection

To process qualitative data, open-ended questions with the respondents' answers, all in the English language, were coded in two ways. First, open coding was used to define all the topics the respondents discussed while responding to the questions. Thereinafter, the frequency of each code was counted and accumulated by code in order to group the responses by similarities of ideas and beliefs from the most frequent to the least one. The next procedure involved detailed examination, comparison and categorisation of the topic and sub-topics, along with estimating the frequency rates.

Another source of data applied in the research is the university ESP exam scores at the entry and final stage of learning the foreign language. The data also incorporated the students' IELTS official exam scores, all paper-based. These were coded by four exam aspects: listening, reading, writing and speaking, and mean average scores. The next step involved measuring the frequency rates of grades in each aspect and the mean average scores.

4. Findings

The responses have been summarized in the tables below.

The students' responses have been summarised as follows:

1)Should English language (ESP) instructors prioritise teaching students communicative and academic skills or should they rather scaffold students with the acquisition of the subject-related and/or professional terms and concepts using specialist types of text?	Professional content of English is very important for me as a future specialist because it helped me acquire new terms and concepts and a lot of new and useful information about my future job (career).	Communicative and academic skills (speaking, reading, writing, presentation and negotiation skills, grammar and vocabulary, etc.) are more necessary for me as a university student.	Both content knowledge and academic/commun icative skills are essential for me because in my future career I will/might need both: I will use the professional language with colleagues and will do research.	Don't know
	62 respondents 37,5%	35 respondents 21,21 %	65 respondents 39,4%	3 respondents 1,8%

The largest group of students, which makeup 39.4%, believe that they need to master both aspects of the language: skills and content. Over a third of them have positive responses to the outcomes and role of the Professional English in their education. However, almost every fifth student find that they still need to raise their competence in general and academic aspects though they had completed this course prior to the Professional English course. Overall, the importance of the Professional English has been emphasized by more than 50% of the science students.

The Teachers' responses have been summarized as follows:

1)Should English language (ESP) instructors prioritise teaching students communicative and academic skills or should they rather scaffold students with the acquisition of the subject-related and/or professional terms and concepts using specialist types of text?	Professional content of English is very important for students as future specialists and current students because they should know specialist terms, vocabulary, processes etc. to comprehend the major courses.	Communicative and academic skills (analytical reading, essay writing, presentation and problem-solving skills, application of grammar and vocabulary, etc.) are more necessary for students.	Both content knowledge and academic/communicative skills are essential for students because: 1) their level of English is still low; 2) They will work in diverse settings and they need to be versatile and adaptive.	Don't know
English teachers	11 respondents 42,3%	4 respondents 15,4%	11 respondents 42,3%	
Subject (Specialist) teachers	8 respondents 36,4%	1 respondent 4,5%	13 respondents 59,1	
All teachers	19 respondents 39,65	5 respondents 10,4%	24 respondents 50%	

Exactly 50% of all surveyed teachers claim that both aspects of English should be taught in a balanced way. At the same time, almost 40% of the instructors surveyed argue that content-based learning of English is critical in acquisition of the science subjects and for future careers.

The responses to the second research question have been sorted out by frequency of responses with similar answers.
Student survey results:

What difficulties or problems do you experience when communicating in English?	Don't know how to use the professional terms and it is difficult to talk on professional topics	Lack of general and academic vocabulary	Cannot speak spontaneously	Writing is difficult and I don't like it.	Don't know
Students	15 respondents 9,1%	64 respondents 38,8%	39 respondents 23,6%	44 respondents 26,7%	3 respondents 1,8%

It is apparent that quite a big number of the surveyed students (38,8%) feel that they have an insufficient range of general and academic vocabulary, which results in their difficulties in speaking (23,6%) and writing (26,7%) skills.

The Teachers' responses to the second research question have been summarized as follows:

What sort of English language difficulties or gaps do students in CLIL programs experience?	Students have limited general and academic vocabulary range, and grammatical problems.	Students don't know subject-related terms and vocabulary.	Students have insufficient level of reading and summarising skills	Students have poor writing skills	Students are slow to respond to questions, they cannot communicate interactively	Students lack in critical thinking skills, lack in background knowledge.
English teachers	8 respondents 36,4%	1 respondent 3,8%	5 respondents 19,2%	9 respondents 34,6%	4 respondents	6 respondents
Subject (Specialist) teachers	15 respondents 36,4%	1 respondent 4,5%	4 18,2%	13 respondents 59,1	9 Respondents 40,1%	3 respondents 13,6%
All teachers	23 respondents 39,65	2 respondents 10,4%	9 respondents 18,8%	22 respondents 45,8%	13 respondents 27,1%	9 respondents 18,8%

The same pattern is observed in both teacher group responses: their trainees face difficulties in formulating their atttitudes and opinions both in speaking and writing which is caused by the konowledge gaps in their lexical and syntactic aspects of the English language, combined with lower levels in reading and critical thinking skills.

Another source of evidence that shed light on the students' EFL competence level are the entry and exit tests administered at the university and the British Council(IELTS). Experience of 7 years shows that based on the IELTS band scores (applicants do this internationa test before they enter CLIL programs at university), over a half them have 5.0 - 6.0 in the reading and listening sections as compared to 4.5 - 5.0 in the writing and speaking sections of the exam. After one year of study, the students do the IELTS exam again at the British Council and the results are that despite an obvious progress, most exam takers' scores in speaking and writing are still lower than in listening and reading, on average 5.5and 6.5 respectively.

Discussion

The student survey has revealed that around 65% of students have positive attitudes to learning English through content. However, the teacher and student surveys and regular assessment of students' EFL proficiency level testify to the fact that over 60% of the learners still underperform in their communicative competencies, which are manifested in insufficient knowledge and application of grammatical patterns, lack of lexical variety, combined with poor writing and speaking skills. By and large, ESP teachers would be recommended to take up a more skills-driven approach, despite the fact that roughly 38% of the CLIL-based university entrants possess a prerequisite level of English and most of them are graduates of the leading state and private schools, located primarily in big cities and capital of the republic.

There are several possible reasons for a greater number of those school leavers who underperform in EFL. In the first place, English has become the third (L3) official language

quite recently (Nazarbayev, 2012) and has had little practical application in the social life of the country so far. As a result, a large number of school learners haven't had an incentive or strong necessity to study English. Of course, integration of Kazakhstan into the world market has made knowledge of English as top priority for university undergraduates to be selected for employment in big transnational corporations that are operating in the republic. However, the results of the university entrance tests have indicated that in local secondary schools, most EFL classroom activities are centred around reproductive reading tasks, a little less on passive listening, and almost no focus on writing or speaking as the IELTS scores reveal. The teaching process might lack in communicative and interactive approaches and could be devoid of the analytical, critical and reflective thinking aspects of teaching. This could be also complicated by lack of consistency in teaching EFL when pupils move from one grade to another. Teachers often switch jobs because of low level of payment, and in some cases pupils are taught by different teachers and the content is not systematic. This is especially observed in the poor command of grammar that is practiced at the elementary level of English: personal pronouns (confusion of he and she pronouns), demonstrative pronouns ('this' often means 'these'; the latter is unknown to roughly 30% of technical students), tenses (a gerund form is used to mean both Present Simple and Present Continuous).

The next factor that impacts the Kazakhstani student's EFL competence level is the lack of systematic monitoring the outcomes of the English language program in state secondary schools. The technical university admission tests have shown that about 40%of the applicants are hardly able to yield adequate responses to the exam questions in writing and speaking. Writing is even more neglected: freshmen (about 40%) cannot write a well-structured and coherent paragraph, apart from essay, nor can they develop ideas as reasons for their opinions. Another possible shortcoming is the low competence level of the English teachers, especially in rural areas and small cities. Several years ago we attempted to provide a professional development course for rural school teachers in one of the regions of Kazakhstan and found out that 30 out of 40 could not generate a sentence to respond to a question or express an opinion. Most of them did not understand our seminar content in English. As a result, we had to conduct the session in Russian or Kazakh.

Finally, it is a well-known fact that most state schools in the republic suffer from lack of adequate funding and school administrators make parents pay for the books or school repair work (Alyokova, 2016; Zhakupova, 2017). This speaks to the effect that there might be problems with school library resources and internet access that are not available widely. These affect the quality of teaching adversely as well as the teacher's professional development. However, the new government plan (Alyokova, 2016;Zhakupova, 2017) to provide per capita funding to schools might be a viable solution to raise the quality of teaching in the future as it is likely to provide teachers access to the library and electronic resources and an opportunity to use CALL facility in the classrooms.

To bridge the gap in Kazakhstani students' communicative competence, a number of measures could be recommended. First of all, ESP instructors should prioritise skills-driven approach to L3 students. This does not imply neglecting the content learning style, but the type of tasks and activities ESP teachers design are supposed to aim at fostering the students' critical approaches in processing the input information, eliciting and practicing key grammatical and lexical items within meaningful communicative contexts, and settings contexts and simulating real-life situations for the learners to develop their speaking and writing skills while applying a wide range of vocabulary and constructing accurate and appropriate statements in different social settings. Information-retention and memorising list of terms for quizzes has to be the fact of the past pro-Soviet system of education in technical schools.

Since universities are supplied with the human capital by the secondary state and private schools in the country, it is necessary to raise the quality of the EFL teacher's competence both in the teaching approaches and command of English. Definitely, EFL teachers need training and re-training to ensure quality in raising independent, pro-active and critically-minded specialists. Another remedial solution relates to the perception and practice of EFL learning system. We presume that teaching EFL in schools should be viewed and monitored as one multi-level, systematic process in which students would be placed in level-based groups after the diagnostic and/or achievement tests to define their EFL proficiency. The learners move to a higher level English course if they demonstrate achievements in all four skills and different types of proficiency tests can be used, for example, CAT or PET. In their final year of study the high school students would be expected to be in command of English at an Upper-Intermediate level which is a prerequisite to a study at University. Currently, the students simply move from one grade to another by getting a sufficient score in a foreign language but they are not tested for their proficiency level. Another strong recommendation is to accentuate a traditional grammatical approach to teaching English especially at a basic level of its acquisition. Students often lack competence in word-ordering and sentence construction level which affect their further learning outcomes. Furthermore, a communicative and critical approach to teaching and learning is still to be implemented at a large scale, both in schools and universities of the republic.

Conclusion

The scope of the study is limited to one technical university data but since it is one of the leading local higher education institutions, it serves as a benchmark to other universities and technical schools. It is clear that there is a need to rethink and reassess the state of things with EFL teaching and learning system in schools and universities. The goal of education is prepare the trainees to the challenges of the 21st century and transform them from passive, inactive information retainers to high quality specialists with life-long learning capabilities, creative and critical approaches to problems and challenges and a high level of communicative competence.

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