TEACHING ENGLISH TO TOURISM STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at giving an overview of the particular features of teaching English to students in tourism, a field which has seen a considerable development over the recent period. The paper is divided into four parts: the first part offers an introduction to the importance of English in this field and an overall presentation of the target population; the second part focuses on the four categories of competences that teachers should develop during the foreign language class; the third part makes reference to the teaching materials to be used with a view to enhancing students' language proficiency; the last part presents some possible challenges language teachers and their students have to cope with to successfully accomplish the learning objectives.*

Key words: *teaching, learning, foreign language, competences, students.*

1. Introduction

Business English is recognized at present as the leading language in business communication, representing the key for conducting and consolidating international business relations worldwide. In Europe, specialists consider its status has significantly changed due to the enlargement of the EU, especially after the '90s [3]. It has also been underlined that, even if language diversity is considered paramount at European level, English does have a dominant position in most of the fields of activity, including business, generally speaking.

This is also valid in the field of tourism, where good command of this language, sometimes at a choice with another international language, represents a requirement in an important number of occupational standards in Romania and abroad (e.g. travel agent, receptionist, manager in tourism activities, mountain guide, hotel or restaurant manager, concierge etc.) [14].

However, whether English is part of occupational standards in tourism or not, it is certain that it represents a real asset both for employment and for career advancement in the field. Furthermore, it is a fact beyond doubt that good competences of this language represent the basis for achieving customer satisfaction, given that outbound tourist flows within the travel and tourism industry have constantly increased at global level lately [16], [17].

These are all realities which should always be considered by language teachers at academic level, as, among others, the university has to enhance students' language proficiency, so as for future graduates to be well prepared for an extremely challenging labour market.

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The curriculum and syllabus for English classes for students in tourism may differ from one university to another, as there is no strictly set policy regarding foreign language learning for the programmes of study focusing on this field. Thus, for Bachelor's degree students, English courses may last from one to six semesters, varying from 14 to 28 hours of English per semester. For Master's degree students, there are faculties which do not include English classes in the curriculum at all, but, with most of them, the number of semesters dedicated to English ranges between two and four.

As regards students' experience with English, most of them have had this subject in the curriculum for more than eight years, which theoretically entails that they are at least B2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. However, as demonstrated by research conducted among candidates within the admission process, quite a significant percentage of future students self-report a definitely lower level, which finally brings about very different language levels and, consequently, mixed-ability classes.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the students' language level and of their grouping, the ultimate aim of the language teacher is to set objectives which foster their practical use of the language and to find appropriate ways to thoroughly prepare them for the world of work, through the development of competences.

2. Development of competences

As regards the aim of the teaching process in the field of foreign languages, recent years have seen a shift from the focus given to the attainment of objectives, to that of the development of competences, which comprise knowledge, skills and attitudes [15]. The references in recent books, research materials and conferences go towards four categories of competences: generic, inter-cultural, linguistic and discourse, some of them traditionally connected to foreign language teaching and learning, some others seemingly occupying only a marginal position [2], [6], [7], [12]. In what follows, emphasis is put on all the four categories.

2.1. Generic competences

Generic competences, having a lot in common with "soft skills" or "people skills", are those competences which bring added value to students' performance or to the employees' performance at the workplace, being transferable from one field to another [2].

Allison points out that, although the attention given to this kind of competences in the past was quite scarce, they are now regarded as paramount for students' future careers, being very much sought for on the labour market [2].

According to Luca et al. and Allison, these competences comprise teamwork, problem solving and decision-making skills, willingness to succeed, assertiveness, but also concern for quality, active listening skills, diplomacy persuasion skills [2], [12].

In the foreign language class, generic competences are generally taught inductively, but there are some which can be tightly connected to the use of appropriate language or right attitude, intonation and tone in particular contexts, and which may be specifically addressed during the English class for students in tourism. From our perspective, these may include diplomacy, positive attitude and commitment, professional communication skills, adaptability, all of them assisting students in their future professional life.

2.2. The intercultural competence

According to E. Frendo, the intercultural competence refers to the attitude, behaviour, believes and values which exist within national or organisational cultures and which help people communicate successfully with people from other cultures [6]. The same author emphasises that there are specialists who opine that this competence should not be necessarily included in foreign language classes for business students, generally speaking, as, for certain programmes of study, there are dedicated subjects to focus on this.

However, for tourism students, given that they are very likely to deal with a wide range of nationalities and corporate cultures in the future, they obviously need to have some knowledge of cultural differences and peculiarities. Consequently, in our opinion, this is a competence worth developing in the English language class, if not systematically, at least tangentially.

Thus, the teacher may introduce the dimensions which are commonly used when comparing cultures, as devised by Hofstede et al., such as high vs. low context, femininity vs. masculinity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, monochronic vs. polychronic conception of time, individualism vs. collectivism [9], but also elements related to non-verbal communication, such as occulistics (eye-contact), kinesics (body language), proxemics (body distance), haptics (touch), or paralanguage (the way we use tone, intonation, turn-taking or speed of talking) [6].

Another possibility, even more likely to be used by language teachers, is that of taking advantage of reading and listening activities, of case studies, in order to draw students' attention to incidents caused by cultural differences, stereotypes or prejudices, to invite them to reflect upon cultural differences.

2.3. The linguistic competence

If the two types of competences presented above might be regarded as optional for a foreign language class, the third category, the linguistic competence, is a subject-specific one, inherent to teaching and learning a foreign language.

According to E. Frendo, the linguistic competence focuses on the basic elements that together form a language, i.e. phonology, grammar and vocabulary [6]. Consequently, it involves teaching elements of stress, rhythm, intonation, general grammar related to morphology and syntax, but also those grammar structures which are appropriate and typical to the formal register and which should be used, for instance, in letters, reports, proposals. But, at its turn, grammar can also be regarded from a functional perspective, which makes it close to the next type of competence we are going to concentrate on, the discourse competence.

A. Vizental argues that, as regards vocabulary, for quite a long time, there used to be a prejudice according to which vocabulary teaching was equivalent to providing students with long lists of isolated words, generally organized in semantic fields, but not contextualized, which had to be learned by heart [13] (e.g. "jobs in tourism": *travel and information consultant, cellar man, restaurant greeter, tour guide, sommelier, concierge, outdoor recreation guide, resort manager, night audit clerk etc.*).

E. Frendo has demonstrated this was a totally restrictive view, since "lexical words" represent just one category within vocabulary, the most numerous undoubtedly, but there are also "function words" (such as determiners, pronouns,

prepositions, conjunctions, modal verbs, *wh*-words), which make the connection between lexical words and which are also part of vocabulary [6].

In addition, teaching vocabulary should always involve teaching "multi-word units"/ "lexical phrases"/ "chunks of language"/ "collocations"/ "word partnerships". E.g.: *tourist accommodation sector, travel agent, package tour, growth rate, domestic trip, outbound trip, go on + expedition/ business trip/ guided tour/ voyage, take a risk.*

Elements related to register and colligation should also be addressed when teaching vocabulary. The latter refers to the grammatical relations between words, being considered a grouping of words which occur in particular syntactic patterns. E.g.: the pattern "the+adj.-superlative+noun+to+verb" (e.g. *the best time to visit, the most amazing country to see, the most popular way to get*), "prep.+the+noun: city" (e.g. *around/ in/ from/ of the city*) [11].

Word formation issues represent another aspect connected to teaching vocabulary, and not only the common one, but also initialisms – abbreviations and acronyms (e.g. ETA: estimated time of arrival, RFP: request for proposal, LOS: length of stay, WTO: World Tourism Organisation, TOS: Tour operators, R&B: room and board) and blendings – the merging of two lexemes in a single term (e.g. *travelogue: travel + catalogue, travellator: travel + escalator, stagflation: stagnation + inflation, campsite: camping + site, ecotourism: ecological + tourism* etc.) [1].

Among the topics which tend to be present in most of the materials supporting the teaching and learning of grammar, vocabulary and language skills for tourism, we can mention: Travelling and Holidays, Countries and Nationalities, Employment in Tourism, Accommodation, Hotel Structure and Staff, Food and Restaurants, Sightseeing, Tour Guides, Tour Operators, Using the Telephone, Reservations, Complaints and Adjustments, Types of Tourism, Money and Payment etc.

As types of activities to enhance the linguistic competence, the most frequently used ones mentioned in the specialized literature are: word formation, verbs in brackets, multiple matching, translations, find words/ phrases for explanations given, open cloze, error correction, information transfer, multiple choice [8], [13].

2.4. The discourse competence

According to E. Frendo, the discourse competence always situates language in use, involving people's ability to generate appropriate language in different contexts corresponding to professional communication [6]. In addition, this competence is also connected to the ability of recognizing language and language patterns, consequently encompassing all the four language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking.

As regards receptive skills, reading and listening, even if they involve different media, the purposes for which people read or listen to something in real life are similar [13]. Thus, they might be interested in finding specific information, having an overview, checking explanations, getting the right message in order to be able to reply, looking for details. This entails that several different specific sub-skills need to be developed in class, so as for students to be able to successfully deal with such situations in real life: finding out tourists' names, preferences, details about stay, employees' or colleagues' points of view, understanding reports, proposals, complaints and formulating appropriate replies etc.

Consequently, the English teacher should give emphasis to all these sub-skills students need to acquire or develop. Thus,

first of all, students need to be able to predict what they are going to hear or read by considering details, hints which are offered: titles, headings, contexts, people involved. Secondly, they need to get an overview of the points made, without attention paid to details ("skimming" in case of reading). Thirdly, they may be interested in specific information conveyed by the written/ oral message, concentrating on specific things and disregarding the others ("scanning" in case of reading).

Some other times, reading for details is required, like when having to pay attention to figures, graphs, dates, reasons, names. But other more complex things can also be included here, such as the interlocutor's attitude towards the message expressed.

Equally important is the skill of deducing meaning from the context, not worrying about encountering unknown words or structures, especially in the case of students who do not have such a good command of the language. For didactic reasons, these words and structures will be subsequently resumed by the teacher and practised by students, so the development of receptive skills can be naturally accompanied by the development of language competences.

Recognizing functions and discourse patterns could be related to predictive skills, given that, when hearing or seeing a certain discourse marker, language users should know what is going to follow: an explanation, an exemplification, a conclusion. In addition, by identifying discourse functions and patterns, students get to know about structure, coherence, cohesion.

All these competences for receptive skills can be enhanced by means of a wide variety of exercises: dual/ multiple choice, yes/no questions, open ended questions, information transfer, blank completion, multiple matching, filling in a grid, taking notes, (re)creating a message based on notes taken.

Some of these types of activities are more appropriate for certain skills (yes/ no questions for the general understanding of the text, filling in a grid for extracting specific information etc.), while some others can be used for several skills equally successfully.

Apart from receptive skills, the discourse competence also includes productive skills: writing and speaking. Writing has been proven to be part of many activities in the tourism field, although, especially as regards writing in English, this may not happen necessarily on a daily basis. Generally, the writing genres which present students in tourism need to master for their future activity are: e-mails, formal letters (letter of application, letter of enquiry, invitation, order letters), CVs, faxes, advertising materials such as brochures and leaflets, but also genres related more to internal communication, such as reports, proposals or memos, or even agendas.

The last skill which the discourse competence has to cover is speaking, which seems to represent a priority both for learners and for future specialists, being given that they are very often involved in spoken exchanges. This importance attached to speaking, however, is accompanied by a significant degree of difficulty, a perception which may be due to the insufficient lack of language proficiency, to the fear of making mistakes and thus losing face.

The most important discourse competences in point of speaking are considered the following: the ability to explain and persuade, delivering good extemporaneous presentations, efficiently speaking on the phone, using appropriate language during meetings and discussions.

Some types of activities for developing speaking skills would be: oral drills,

information gap activities, comparing and contrasting pictures, individual or group presentations, presentations based on notes, group/ class discussions, debates, case studies, role plays, interpreting ideas from texts/ audio messages.

For writing, the most frequently used exercises are: error correction, matching sentence halves, describing text structure, information transfer, diplomatic rephrasing, open cloze, register change, summarizing, writing follow-up letters, writing texts according to instructions.

Both for speaking and writing, the difficulty of the exercises may vary, from simple ones, like oral drills (speaking) or error correction (writing), to delivering oral presentations, role-plays, simulations, debates, respectively effectively writing complex texts.

3. Teaching materials

All the afore-mentioned competences can be developed during the English language class only if the right teaching materials are used. Specialists in the field of teaching English for Specific Purposes have agreed that good quality materials have to meet certain requirements: to be authentic, to encourage students' cooperation and critical thinking, to meet students' needs, to integrate language skills [5], [6], [10].

The book market in the field of English for tourism and hospitality has lately been enriched by the publication of a lot of textbooks which comply with these principles, the best known being the *English for International Tourism* series (Pearson Education Longman), the *Oxford English for Careers: Tourism* series, the *English for Tourism and Hospitality in Higher Education* series (Garnet Education), *Test Your Professional English: Hotel and Catering* (Pearson Education), *English for the Travel and*

Tourism Industry (CUP). They are all English courses for tourism, generally speaking, without focusing on particular brunches, visually appealing, sometimes accompanied by additional materials such as workbook, teacher's book or even test booklets, which make them extremely attractive for students and convenient for teachers, had it not been for their sometimes prohibitive prices.

Apart from these books issued by publishing houses of international repute, there are also extremely valuable and useful materials published in our country: *English for Tourism and Hospitality Industry* (authored by experienced teachers in the University of Bucharest, C. Prelipceanu et al., 2005), *Lucrul în străinătate: hoteluri, baruri, restaurante, vase de croazieră* (Editura Aula, Braşov, 2007), *English for Tourism Professionals and Staff* (Adriana Iacov, Casa de Editură Irecson, 2003), *English for Tourism Managers* (G. Raţă, Editura Mirton, Timişoara, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite their quality, most of these materials can only rarely be used in class as such. This happens because, first of all, they cover many teaching hours, generally around one hundred, which means that it would take more than three semesters to cover one level. This means that, most of the times, the teacher should adapt these materials for class use, skipping certain activities or, if necessary, expanding on others.

Consequently, the solution to really meet students' needs lies in the customization of these materials. First of all, according to the students' needs, they can be combined with Internet resources, which are very generous, with dedicated web sites, which provide very useful and diverse exercises: alison.com/learn/English-for-Tourism, learnenglishfeelgood.com, esl-lab.com, englishformyjob.com, englishclub.com,

business-english.com, bbcenglish.com, onestopenglish.com, etc.

In addition, teachers should commit themselves to developing other activities starting from authentic materials, such as: tourism magazines (AFAR, The Travel Magazine, Today's Traveller, The Sunday Times Travel Magazine, Euro Travel Magazine etc.), TV documentaries from well known TV channels (Travel&Living, The Travel Channel, TV Touring etc.), official sites (culturalromtour.com, unwto.org, romaniatourism.com), tourism blogs, brochures, recordings of conversations at the workplace. In addition, they may use both job pre-experienced (from their position as customers) and experienced students (from their position as employees in the field) as a teaching and learning resource.

The use of such authentic materials, which are not specifically prepared for classroom use and which sometimes present a significant degree of difficulty is perfectly suitable for ESP students, who, according to Dudley-Evens and St. John, are supposed to be at least at intermediate level [4].

The conclusion regarding teaching resources is that preparing tailor-made materials is by no means an easy activity, being extremely time-consuming and demanding, but eventually it is undoubtedly rewarding for both teacher and students.

4. Challenges

At the end of the paper, instead of a conclusion, we consider it worth mentioning a few challenges that both English teachers and their tourism students have to cope with to accomplish the learning objective.

First of all, reference should be made to the need for improvement at institutional level, because, despite the European plea for harmonization within higher education, there is actually no coherent policy related to language teaching and learning in higher education, including here the field of economics.

Another problematic area is that of the lack of a genuine needs analysis among students, which should actually correlate students' self-perceived language level with their high school reports for English and results at diagnostic tests, on the one hand, and with subsequent investigations regarding learning styles, adaptation difficulties and other individual variables, on the other hand.

Another problem that teachers may face, especially with 2nd year students, when more specialized language is introduced, is that students do not always have the background content knowledge to get involved in communicative activities. That is why interdisciplinary cooperation could be a solution in this respect.

Then, the size of the groups very often limits teachers in their pursuit for applying modern teaching methods, a fact which reduces the efficiency of certain activities and encourages social loafing.

The last challenge to be mentioned here is connected to the teacher, who has to be willing to be a lifelong trainee, to have insight into the field of tourism, in which he/she is not a specialist, as well to permanently update and adapt teaching materials.

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