

On Fostering Oral Skills in ESP

Violeta Janulevičienė, Galina Kavaliauskienė

Abstract. Oral skills for ESP students are vital for their professional communication at seminars, workshops, student conferences and professional associations. However, the students' oral presentations lack fluency and accuracy, which is caused by inability to process the ESP lexis spontaneously. When put under professional precision pressure, learners keep mentally translating from their native tongue before speaking and often inappropriately replace professional lexis by rudimentary vocabulary. Therefore, what is meant under oral skills in ESP is, primarily, a learner ability to produce accurate target language lexical term and word combination equivalents in impromptu situations.

In this paper we concentrate on a practical aspect of learners' language ability strategic competence. Experimental data supporting inconsistency between different types of oral versus written performance in subject-based language production is presented and analyzed. Several techniques that aid vocabulary retention and recycling, alongside with practical hints on activating appropriate for ESP oral skills, are offered.

"Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (D. Wilkins).

Introduction

Recently "the important (and becoming even more important) but undervalued area" (Spoetll, 2000) of teaching/assessing/evaluating/testing *oral proficiency* has become the focus for many ELT (English Language Teaching) practitioners and researchers.

For the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) field all the enumerated aspects of oral proficiency present new challenges. Since it is content-based, learners' ability *to select appropriate vocabulary spontaneously in speech* is the most urgent **objective**. The specialized vocabulary acquisition is a complicated process and **the problem** is to locate the threshold at which "the word passes from receptive to productive status" (Read, 2000).

With that **aim** in mind, we conducted an experiment on the impact of related teaching/learning/testing ESP oral proficiency, the findings of which have been presented herein.

Oral proficiency could be viewed as a proof of a productive foreign language competence. For the last few years we have been researching the acquisition issues of the ESP competence with the aim of helping our students to develop accuracy and fluency in a foreign language (L2). We tried to establish the major causes why often in the learning/teaching process this accuracy and, probably more important, fluent presentation of the ideas and information left to wish for the better. The teachers, striving to enhance the proficiency of their learners, should be aware of several reasons that hinder ESP learners' fluency, both oral and written:

- One of the major obstacles preventing learners' progress is the *intervention* or negative transfer from the native

language (L1), which causes errors in the L2 (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskienė, 2000).

- It is also assumed that our students might encounter *difficulty of mental translation* from the L1 into the L2 and vice versa because of the communicative approach of teaching ESP through English, i.e. it is difficult for them to produce the equivalent terms and subject-relevant words instantly (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskienė, 2000).

Other important issue which is complicated *to master* in language acquisition concerns the *word-partnerships*, which are often referred to as lexical phrases, chunks, or word combinations. There is an expressed necessity for students' consciousness raising to lexical items and a vast number of word combinations essential to competent, mostly oral, production of L2 (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskienė, 2001).

In spite of all the efforts and strategies to sort out incurring errors, they keep appearing on a regular basis. The ESP learners often persistently avoid using proper word combinations in impromptu presentations and keep replacing them by *rudimentary* vocabulary.

Lately the scope of *specialized vocabulary* has become a priority in ESP learning. If teachers ever want to avoid fossilization of vocabulary errors and reach a passable ESP level of their students, they need to take care of language accuracy achieved through sufficient input and practice of lexis.

This consideration urged us to reflect on what should or could be done to resolve the issue of improving learners' **oral skills** in ESP field while combining the effects of teaching and testing.

Oral skills are referred to and assessed here according to the relevant for ESP distinctive features – learner ability to

produce accurate lexical terms and word combinations in impromptu situations.

Influence of Receptive Versus Productive Knowledge on Learners' Oral Skills

Learners' language ability consists of two components. One is **language knowledge** and another is **strategic competence** (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Vocabulary knowledge certainly is only a part of numerous areas of language knowledge. Competence involves activating all areas of language knowledge in communication oral and written alike. Thus, we cannot expect our students to demonstrate communicative competence before they acquire language knowledge generally and vocabulary knowledge in particular.

In ESP field speakers' fluency is predetermined by their active lexis, since they have mastered general language knowledge at a secondary level. Nevertheless, what concerns this active lexis, students do not learn what teachers want them to, i.e. intake does not equal input.

Even from our own empirical experience as users of L1 and L2 languages, we know that the number of words we can recognize and understand is larger than the number of words we use in writing or speech. "This distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary is accepted by scholars and is often referred to by the alternative terms *passive* and *active*" (Read, 2000). Since the difference between reception and production is significant for assessment purposes, it made J. Read introduce the terms of **recognition** and **recall**: "**Recognition** means that the test-takers give the L1 translation of an L2 word, and **recall** refers to the reverse process: they give the L2 word in response to the L1 translation. Recognition and recall represent aspects of vocabulary knowledge". Conventional lexis tests assess learners' knowledge and progress in vocabulary learning and aim at checking learners' recognition and recall. They are "predominantly *discrete, selective and context independent*" (Read, 2000).

J. Read also suggests a different way of distinguishing reception and production, i.e. by introducing terms of **comprehension** and **use**. "**Comprehension** means that students can understand a word while listening or reading, whereas **use** means that the word occurs in their own speech or writing. These aspects of vocabulary assessment require *comprehensive and context dependent tasks*".

What usually happens in an ESP classroom when assessing learners' vocabulary? Once in a while, teachers are bound to check learners' progress in vocabulary acquisition. The common way of doing this is by administering a written test. Formats of vocabulary tests are usually either multiple choice, or matching words and their definitions, gap-filling, etc. The advantage of such tests is that they are designed in advance to cater for particular needs, easy to administer and check. A disadvantage is that an element of guessing is pre-programmed in tests of this kind, and an element of cheating is probable when the same test is administered to the whole group. It is noteworthy that students' performance in written lexis tests is more advanced than in oral tests. This inconsistency may be

either because in the former cases a 'thinking time' is allocated or students' passive vocabulary prevails over their active vocabulary.

Reasons and Methods of Setting an Oral Testing Experiment

We negotiated this issue of inconsistency between the oral and written performance with students.

On the whole, students' performance in a written lexis test was better in the second semester. However, their oral performance seemed to be on a standstill. Trying to gain insights into its causes we realized that it was inextricably related to their inability to produce word combinations spontaneously, i.e. the fluency of impromptu speech was hindered. Students agreed that checking vocabulary orally might produce different results than that in writing.

Having negotiated this issue with our learners, we came up with an ORAL experiment, i.e. oral lexis test – L2 to L1 and L1 to L2. Our misgivings about possible resistance to novelty testing was not been vouched for.

Each student was tested individually outside the classroom hours. The students were invited to come during our counseling time at the end of the semester, and be tested in an one-to-one environment (teacher and student). This put students at ease and removed their *debilitating* anxiety (Nascente, 2001). Learners are often afraid of losing face in front of their classmates. Most were relaxed and content with facing a teacher alone. Tested items included legal nouns, verbs, collocations, expressions, lexical phrases, etc. With a few exceptions, students either produced the required word-partnership almost at once or when asked to continue. The vocabulary test lasted about 5 minutes, sometimes a bit longer, depending on the thinking time needed by a student. Many students wanted to talk about their worries or discuss language difficulties after the test; feedback to each of them was also been given immediately after testing.

There was an element of novelty in testing learners' ability to generate a required **equivalent impromptu**, i.e. 'on the spot'. Any speaker needs ability to say accurately what she/he means in everyday situations, but it is much easier in one's native language, and native speakers do not complain that they are short of words. Such complaints are common among non-native learners. To retrieve the required phrase in a foreign language within a limited time may and usually causes some problems at the initial stage of word/term introduction.

The test consisted of two tasks; which asked students to produce

- adequate Lithuanian equivalents to 10 English word combinations, and
- adequate English equivalents to 10 Lithuanian word combinations.

In other words, students were expected to provide *an adequate translation, not word for word*. For each correct translation, a student was given one point, for each wrong

one a student lost one point. Tested ESP vocabulary was limited to five topics that were covered in spring semester:

- Enforcing the Law
- Criminal Law
- Judicial Institutions
- Civil and Public Law
- Human Rights

In a pre-test discussion on the grading criteria, students agreed on a passable level to each part of the test – half out of 10 lexical items. There were 37 second-year students who took part in an oral lexis test. The findings of this innovative for our students' oral test are presented below.

Findings and the Result Analysis of the Conducted Research

Figures representing the experiment findings are placed in tables below.

What does the analysis of the testing data reveal? First of all, it should be mentioned, that each fifth student (21%) failed the first part of the test, and two thirds (65%) failed the second part of the test at the first attempt. The significance of this outcome lies in *learners' difficulty of retrieving required vocabulary*. It is easier for students to translate from the L2 into the L1 than from the L1 into the L2. To some extent, such an outcome could have been predicted, but language of figures speaks for itself.

The student's **comparative performance** X is shown in the Table 1. If learners are better at translating from English into Lithuanian, X exceeds 1. If they are better at translating from Lithuanian into English, X is below 1.

The interpretation of these findings is the following. Only 8% of students have no problems in translating both ways – from/to L1 to/from L2 – i.e. $X=1$. Only 16% are slightly better at translating from L1 into L2 ($X=0.5$). The majority (78%) are better at translating from L2 into L1.

The Tables 2 and 3 serve as the **quality indicators** of learners' performance. NCA1 and NCA2 mean the Number of Correct Answers in the part 1 and part 2 of the test, respectively. The number of questions is 10, so the highest NCA cannot exceed 10, and the minimal is 1. Abbreviation S means the number of Students who answered correctly.

Figure interpretation is as follows: under each Number of Correct Answers (NCA) there is an indication how many students produced right answers. For example, 9 students generated 10 correct answers, 1 student – 9, 9 students – 8, and so on. 3 students failed the test because their level was not passable as they produced only 4 correct answers out of ten.

Table 3 highlights students' performance in the second task.

In the second part of the test much more – 17 students – failed: their scores were between 1 and 4; 6 students got 6 or 5 right answers, respectively; 12 students got 8 or 7 correct answers, and only 1 student answered correctly all questions and 1 gave 9 right answers.

The conclusion drawn from all the figures presented is very straightforward: translation from L1 into L2 proved more difficult than that from L2 into L1 – 46% failed in Part 2 against 8% in Part 1. Less than one fifth of the students (16%) are slightly better at translating from the L1 into L2 than back. The majority (78%) are better at producing Lithuanian equivalents from the L2.

Learners' backwash has highlighted their awareness of a great variety of L1 and L2 equivalents and expressed requests on placing more emphasis on practicing translation from the mother tongue into ESP in the next semester.

We also asked students to reflect on the time they learn of English outside the classroom. Almost half of our students (49%) out of 37 spend about 1 or 2 hours per week, and they admit it is not sufficient at their level. Only 6 students (16%) express a genuine interest in English, enjoy surfing the Internet websites, particularly intended for practicing English language skills, in their spare time, and read professional articles with the aim of improving their reading comprehension skills. They claim to have spent at least 6 hours per week on English outside the class. It is noteworthy that their progress in English is remarkable. According to Jeremy Harmer (2001), "However good a teacher may be, students will never learn a language – or anything else – unless they aim to learn outside as well as during class time. This is because language is too complex and varied ... Students need to develop their own learning strategies, so that as far as possible they become autonomous learners".

Data on oral testing of ESP lexis reported in this article support this view. Our task in the future is to help learners develop their own learning strategies with the aim of becoming more autonomous, i.e. taking charge of their own progress.

Proposed language activities to foster oral skills in ESP

Though the language activities designed to foster better ESP oral skills could be the object of a separate research, we feel the urge to outline the major categories of these, prompted by our experience.

The traditional method of vocabulary learning at secondary schools in Lithuania is memorizing words kept in a wordbook – with English words in the left-hand column and their Lithuanian equivalents in the right-hand column. Memorizing is understood as a process of drilling. To the best of our knowledge, 12-formers are given lists of words they are expected to learn by heart, and then they are tested on a weekly basis. In this way, vocabulary for all exam topics is covered, and learners are supposed to have learned the lexis needed to conduct dialogues, role-plays and speak fluently on a suggested topic in their final examination.

At the beginning of the ESP course at our university, some students considered it was teacher's responsibility to dictate the vocabulary items to them so that they would be able to drill them before the semester test. As there we were a number of unknown lexis each week, and all of it

seemed of equal importance to learners, we encouraged identifying the most relevant themselves. Nevertheless, a few students were very demanding. Their basic argument was: "You must tell us what is an obligatory vocabulary, otherwise we do not know what to learn". Naturally, no lists of word combinations were provided. By the end of the first semester, a vast majority of students demonstrated ability to cope with learning the ESP vocabulary. Lexis tests are usually administered at the end of the semester and are either in a multiple choice format or matching word combinations with their definitions within the context, i.e. students produce their answers in writing. Needless to say that L1 is not used in the tests. However, as it was highlighted above, oral presentations lacked required fluency and accuracy of ESP terms.

In order to foster students' learning of ESP lexis we introduced different techniques that aid vocabulary retention and recycling:

- contextualised vocabulary practice,
- designing crossword puzzles,
- matching exercises,
- personalized writing using a pre-taught lexis, followed by peer-discussion enhancing oral skills (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskienė, 2001),
- designing BINGO game cards (Kavaliauskienė, 2000),
- using monolingual dictionary
- recording presentations on individual or group project work, followed by detailed analysis of the recordings, which proved to be extremely effective for fostering oral skills.

We placed importance on students' interactive participation – it was learners' responsibility to design (in pairs) crosswords, BINGO game cards, etc. and administer them to their peers in the class.

Conclusions

Students' difficulty in speaking accurately and fluently on ESP topics is governed by inability to process the ESP lexis spontaneously. Learners keep mentally translating

from their mother tongue before speaking and often inappropriately replace professional lexis by rudimentary vocabulary.

The possible ways towards better oral skills are as follows:

- extensive and intensive learners' practice in a communicative use of ESP lexis,
- training learners to produce appropriate translation of legal passages from their native language into the L2,
- helping learners developing language learning strategies and taking responsibility for their own progress.

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Violeta Janulevičienė, Galina Kavaliauskienė

Apie kalbinių gebėjimų ugdymą specialiojoje anglų kalboje

Santrauka

Šnekamosios kalbos įgūdžiai yra būtini profesiniam bendravimui. Sklandžiai kalbėti – pagrindinis mokymo ir mokymosi tikslas. Tačiau studentai, kalbėdami ekspromtu, daro nemaža kalbos ir stiliaus klaidų, nemoka vartoti įprastų profesinių terminų ir žodžių junginių. Dažnai studentai tikslus terminus keičia šnekamosios bendrinės kalbos atitikmenimis, nors testų raštu rezultatai lyg ir atspindi naujų, sudėtingesnių specialybės terminų išmanymą.

Atlikto eksperimento pagrindu straipsnyje analizuojamos šio neatitikimo priežastys. Lentelėse pateikiami eksperimento rezultatai patvirtina, jog kalbant specialybės mokslo kalba yra stengiamasi peržengti "slenkstį" tarp termino/žodžių junginio atpažinimo ir jo tinkamo vartojimo. Todėl straipsnyje pateikiama ir rekomenduotinių šnekamosios specialybės kalbos įgūdžių lavinimo būdų ir metodų trumpa apžvalga.

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The authors

Violeta Janulevičienė, dr., assoc. prof. at Lithuanian University of Law, Lithuania.

Academic interests: ESP

Address: Lithuanian University of Law, Ateities str. 20, LT-2057 Vilnius, Lithuania.

E-mail: ukk@ltu.lt

Galina Kavaliauskienė, dr., assoc. prof. at Lithuanian University of Law, Lithuania.

Academic interests: ESP

Address: Lithuanian University of Law, Ateities str. 20, LT-2057 Vilnius, Lithuania

E-mail: ukk@ltu.lt

APPENDIX

Table 1. Students' Comparative Performance in Lexis Test

X=A/B (ratio=correct answers in L2to L1/ L1 to L2)	1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.7	2	2.5	3	4	5	6	0.5
S (students)	3	5	2	1	3	1	2	4	3	2	1	2	1	6

Table 2. Quality Indicator of Students' Performance in Producing Equivalents from L2 to L1

NCA1	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
S (students)	9	1	9	1	8	6	3	-	-	-

Table 3. Quality Indicator of Students' Performance in Producing Equivalents from L1 to L2

NCA2	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
S (students)	1	1	3	9	3	3	5	8	2	2