

# TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COMMUNICATIVELY – A CHALLENGE?

## PREDAREA COMUNICATIVĂ A VOCABULARULUI ENGLEZ DE SPECIALITATE – O PROVOCARE?

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**Abstract.** *The present paper aims at analyzing how the communicative method could be successfully applied in the process of teaching English for Specific Purposes. In doing so, we have started from the assumption that the aim of learning a foreign language is none other than communicating in the respective language and that there is no fundamental difference between the ways in which general terminology and specialized vocabulary are acquired. After a brief presentation of the main principles the communicative theory is based on, we tried to exemplify some of the ways in which its methods could be successfully used in our particular case, laying special emphasis on the advantages of choosing such an approach, among which that of meeting the students' learning needs and that of offering them the chance to become truly competent and efficient language users.*

**Key words:** communication; English for specific purposes; learning needs; linguistic competence

**Rezumat.** *Scopul prezentei lucrări este acela de a analiza modul în care metoda comunicativă poate fi aplicată cu succes în procesul predării vocabularului de specialitate în limba engleză. Punctul de pornire al acestui demers a fost aserțiunea că scopul învățării unei limbi străine este acela de a comunica în respectiva limbă și că nu există diferențe fundamentale între modalitatea de achiziționare a terminologiei generale și cea a vocabularului de specialitate. După o scurtă prezentare a principiilor de bază pe care se sprijină teoria comunicativă, am încercat să exemplificăm felul în care metodele acesteia ar putea fi folosite cu succes în acest caz particular, accentuând avantajele utilizării unei astfel de abordări, printre care se numără acela de a răspunde nevoilor de învățare ale studenților și acela de a le oferi acestora șansa de a deveni cu adevărat utilizatori competenți și eficienți ai limbii.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** comunicare; vocabular de specialitate; nevoi de învățare; competență lingvistică

## INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, communication is based on the existence of a speaker and of a listener, between which there is an information gap which will be filled in the communication process, so that, in the end, both the speaker and the listener will have the same information. In other words, the aim of all communication is

to adequately convey an intelligible message to a speaker, within a larger social and situational context.

The aim of learning a foreign language in general, but also in particular, that is of its sublanguages, is as concrete and pragmatic one as possible – more specifically, that of being able to communicate using the language or specialized vocabulary in question.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

Teachers have always been on a continuous search for the most adequate and efficient teaching method, even though, in reality there is no such a thing as a “perfect” teaching/learning recipe, maybe except for the one indicated by the American journalist Dave Barry (1992:20): [in learning Japanese] “the method recommended by experts is to be born as a Japanese baby and raised by a Japanese family, in Japan”. For all others, less fortunate, there is nevertheless the possibility of being included in a learning context that resembles real life situations as much as possible. This is the very general principle the communicative teaching/learning method is based upon, a method focused on making the student acquire communicative competence. Its declared purpose is that of enabling the students to use the appropriate language in a given real-life like context (appropriate from the point of view of the communication situation), and to make themselves understood by communicating efficiently, while establishing at the same time the process of negotiating meaning with the listener.

To attain this, the communicative method is based upon a few clear, well-defined principles that guide the entire teaching/learning process, that is:

1. the aim of all verbal interactions is to communicate;
2. linguistic competence must be doubled by the competence/ability to adequately convey meaning in various contexts;;
3. communication of all kinds occurs in social and situational contexts, which is why language must also be learned in authentic, real-life like situations;
4. for an efficient communication in a language it is necessary to acquire communication abilities and skills, as well as all four communication competences, that is: reading, speaking, listening, writing;
5. all verbal interactions have an aim;
6. one remembers better familiar, interesting and relevant (to the learner) situations;
7. one remembers better things that one performs.

For the above stated reasons, the teaching/learning process is seen from this perspective as being focused on an efficient language use – with special emphasis on content, not structure – on the students, with their needs, interests and preoccupations, and not on the text itself. Thus, the emphasis is laid on verbal interactions among students (using the target-language) working in pairs or groups, on the initiation of real-like like communicative situations and on the frequent use of the discovery techniques in the learning process (the student will understand on their own from the examples given), as well as of authentic materials. By authentic materials one understands all written or oral materials containing “real”, not processed language, produced by a real speaker for a real audience and in a real situation. These can be grouped as: published material (paper-based) (magazines, journals, etc), audio-visual material (radio, T.V.) or materials available on the Internet (an almost limitless resource varying from news to the latest articles available on-line).

The advantages of using authentic materials are significant not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from a psychological one: the students become more confident, since they realize that they can “survive” in a real life communication situation, they will also see a point in learning (it really is of use to them in real, concrete, veridical situations as compared to the sterile, abstract ones presented in textbooks) and will feel motivated (can find the things they need for themselves). Furthermore, as the students will be exposed to situations they are likely to come across in real life, they will be forced to use the respective foreign language in the same way as a native speaker would.

Moreover, the language – in all its aspects, from structure to vocabulary – will be presented in interesting, adequate, relevant contexts that are close to the students’ every-day experience, and the teaching/learning process will be structured on 5 stages, that is: introduction, presentation, practice, application and ending. Although all 5 stages are compulsory, the most important stage from the perspective of the communicative method is “application”, in which students have to use the knowledge and skills acquired in a creative way in a new situational context.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Naturally, in spite of its numerous and indisputable advantages, this method also has a series of disadvantages, such as: the fact that it requires very rigorous and clear previous planning and setting of the aimed objectives, of the desired results and of the priorities (even though they may be and have to be adjusted in the course of the teaching process), as well as the fact that this type of activities are time-consuming. All these must be nevertheless considered from the point of view of their benefits, among which: those of facilitating thorough learning and those of turning the students into competent users of the language in question.

The method has also been criticized for setting the teacher on a second position in the teaching/learning process and for not allowing the teacher to control the whole of the activities - as they are not omnipresent and the students discuss in pairs/groups. These criticisms disregard the fact that what really matters in the end, is not so much a perfect use of the structures, but an efficient conveyance of the message, as well as the fact that the aim is to make the students (and not the teacher) communicate.

Finally, when discussing the teaching English for specific purposes this is treated as if it had a special status and therefore as if it required special teaching methods. In fact, a word is a word regardless of the way and frequency with which it is used, and the practical means of teaching/learning it should not differ. Knowing a word – no matter which – means being able to recognize, understand, and use it in a given context. Therefore, English for specific purposes is not something abstract and unnatural, but a part of the larger communication process (even if better delineated). In other words, English for specific purposes too is more than an aim in itself, a means of attaining a communicative aim, which is why it too can be taught communicatively.

As a matter of fact, by restricting the linguistic area, the specificity of the vocabulary helps concentrating and focusing the communicative activities (which take up quite a lot of time, anyway). Certainly, an issue which always comes up

when discussing teaching vocabulary is, regardless of the method employed in teaching it, that of not being able to cover but a small part of it – both when tackling the general and the specialized language. An aspect that is worth bringing up is the fact that, in reality, we do not use but a small part of the vocabulary of our mother tongue – as words we actually use (the so called active vocabulary) – and we do not even understand but a part (larger than the first one but still a part) of the words existing in our own native language. We may not therefore expect our students to know all the words (even if we refer to just one type of vocabulary, such as specialized vocabulary) of a language that is not even their own. The solution is helping the students reach a language level at which they should begin to acquire knowledge autonomously, which is possible especially if they have grown confident in their own abilities as foreign language users. As a matter of fact, how many of the words we use (regardless of the language or sublanguage) have been actually taught? The communicative method tries to fill in this perfectly justifiable and natural gap.

Moreover, in the case of a language such as English, in the present context of computer and media communication boom that present a large part of the information in English (from entertainment – music, films, games – to specialized language), foreign language teachers are faced with the situation in which their students recognize (but cannot use) a large number of words (even specialized language). The general directions to be followed in the teaching/learning process are both the introduction of new vocabulary and the transformation of a large part of the passive vocabulary into active vocabulary. This is also the aim of the application stage largely used by the communicative method.

Furthermore, the teacher must establish the segment of the target-vocabulary to be taught, depending on the level of the students, but also taking into consideration the communicative needs of the students. In other words, what and how much of the specialized vocabulary must be taught, so as to meet the students' interests and communication needs at an elementary, intermediary or advanced level. It is crucial that both the teacher and the student realize that knowledge is acquired gradually and selectively.

Secondly (though not less important) one must also clearly establish the concrete results to be achieved: what exactly do we understand by “knowing a word”? If by this we normally understand knowing its spelling, its pronunciation, its grammatical functions, its meaning or meanings, its correct use in various contexts, as well as its connotation and collocations, the expectations from a, say elementary student, cannot cover, at least not from the beginning and most certainly not theoretically, all of the above. We cannot expect - nor is there any point in forcing a student still making the first steps in as far as the target-language is concerned - to remember all the meanings and ways of using all the new words. This would only have a negative effect on the respective student and would in no way help them become competent in the language in question. Though we may repeat ourselves, but so as to underline the importance of it, from the point of view of the ways in which words are learned, specialized language is

no different from the general terminology, which basically means that the learning principles valid for the latter are also valid in this case.

Once agreed upon this, one can start the selection of the materials to be used, as well as of the types of communicative teaching/learning activities. As already mentioned before, finding authentic material in the teaching of specialized vocabulary not only does it not represent a problem, especially now, when we can use the Internet, but also it increases the chances of finding material that meets the students' interests and preoccupations, and thus of being relevant.

Therefore, English for specific purposes can be taught resorting to a series of such materials, ranging from realia, to pictures, documentaries available on-line or on CDs or on videotapes, materials which the students will undoubtedly come across in everyday life, as well as in the course of practicing their present/future job. The ways in which this material can be used is up to the teacher who can adopt the solution they consider to be most appropriate to the given teaching/learning situation (students, level, etc) and who will be able to select from a large series of practical activities – from matching (names/definitions), to labeling parts of a picture using the words newly learned, to fill in the gaps exercises (with the missing information) or even role-play (in pairs or in groups) transposing the respective situation into practice. As already underlined before, in the process of teaching/learning from a communicative perspective, special emphasis is laid on the ways in which the students, once familiarized with the newly presented vocabulary, will be able to use it themselves in new contexts created by them. Among the most frequently used means of achieving this (and extremely adequate to the teaching/learning of specialized vocabulary) there is project or presentation draw-up, in pairs or in groups. In order to finalize them, the students will work together using the target-language, the newly acquired vocabulary, personalizing and internalizing the way in which this is used, in a natural way, without worrying about the formal part, similarly to the way in which they learn words in the native language.

A final aspect that is worth considering refers to the importance of using varied authentic materials, ranging from publications to the Internet and especially to the audio-video materials. As already mentioned, the communicative method emphasizes the importance of developing all four competences, which is why the student must also be exposed to listening and writing activities, and not just to reading and speaking ones. While exercises of the project-draw-up kind (in groups or pairs) answers both the question of the reading and that of the speaking part, the teacher must find a way to introduce listening to authentic text –exercises (which can also be found on the Internet or on CDs/videotapes). The audio-visual material represents a key ingredient in the process of foreign language teaching/learning as, on the one hand it helps the students get the correct, natural pronunciation and improve their listening skill and, on the other hand the impact of the visual element (especially when combined with the sound) is an extremely powerful one that will undoubtedly help the students remember the information

presented. Moreover, the use of varied materials will help the students focus better and maintain their interest alive.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, one must say that, as demonstrated, the use of the communicative method in teaching English for specific purposes is not just possible, but also recommended, since:

1. it manages to meet the students' learning needs;
2. to offer them the chance of becoming truly competent in a foreign language;
3. to stimulate personal motivation;
4. to ensure the much needed mental comfort and confidence;
5. to ensure the acquisition of the segment of vocabulary in question in the form of active vocabulary.

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