

FOCUSING ON DECISION MAKING IN NEW ESP CURRICULUM FOR UKRAINIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The article deals with the problem of training students to become professionals with job-oriented competences which include general competences, capacity for autonomous learning, and ability to make decisions in the field areas. The main focus of the article is Ukrainian new ESP curriculum that takes decision making as one of the most necessary pragmatic competences and study skills.*

Keywords: *English for specific purposes (ESP) curriculum, a decision-making model, problem-based learning.*

One of the defining features of the modern field of second language teaching for specialists is its cross-disciplinary nature. Growing out of linguistics and psychology, it has been stimulated by theoretical concepts developed in fields such as mother tongue education (process approaches to teaching), discourse analysis (genre theory), artificial intelligence (schema theory) and subject learning (job-related language learning). A rich area of research, one that is particularly relevant to issues of language learning and teaching specialists is that of cognitive science. This area has been linked to the study of language learner strategies [Rubin, 1981]. Another aspect of this field with potentially great relevance is the modeling of "expert systems" and processes of decision-making.

Newly developed Ukrainian ESP (English for specific purposes) curriculum [ESP National Curriculum, 2005] is designed to explore this relevance by combining these areas: looking at the topic of learner strategies through the lens of a decision-making model.

In this article we are making an attempt to show how updated ESP curriculum is going to meet the requirements to specialists training.

First, we are summarizing a complex of psychological activities that are necessary for decision making. Then we are describing learner strategies as they have evolved over the past two decades. And finally we are framing the learner strategy concept in terms of a decision-making model, relating it to work on teacher decision-making, pointing out some similarities between teacher and learner decision-making, and highlighting the negotiated nature of decision-making in classroom language learning.

The new curriculum has been developed with the approval of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine:

- as a response to international developments;

- in order to meet the language needs of university students across a range of discipline areas;

- to provide benchmarks for teachers and students in line with the identified levels;

- to provide a standardized basis for course and syllabus design by teachers of English at the faculty level in universities throughout Ukraine.

An enlarged Europe has led to radical changes in education. The creation of the European Higher Education Area by 2010 [Bologna, 1999] sets challenging tasks in terms of greater mobility for students, more effective international communication, better access to information and deeper mutual understanding.

The ESP curriculum was designed to give students an opportunity to develop the competences and strategies needed to function effectively in the study process and in the professional situations they encounter. As a result of new courses higher levels of student language proficiency and their decision making skills will facilitate individual mobility and competitiveness in the job market. So, it is viewed as important to discuss why decision making is important in training career-oriented students.

After exploring the pitfalls of decision making in learning processes students may feel that good decisions are impossible before they become experienced specialists. Yet major decisions must be made – about jobs selection, family/career choice, where to live, what to do with money or how to make money in the first place.

However, the trainers' task is to help students discover whether a decision is good or bad only after they make it and begin to see its consequences. In many cases a person never knows whether his choice is the right one until he takes over the responsibility and uses hand-on experience. If you decide that it is too early to take a risk, you can only guess what career opportunities would have been like if you had accepted the challenge.

A teacher can never guarantee good decisions, but he can guarantee a useful procedure that can increase students' chances of doing better. This procedure is described in the newly developed curriculum that gives recommendations on how to teach English for specific purposes (ESP). Not only does the curriculum give levels and language skills descriptions, but also it characterizes study skills as students' pragmatic competence. Decision making turns out to be one of the most important study skills for future specialists.

Decision making process a complex of psychological activities:

- Selecting the most important changes to make
- Evaluating the relative importance of different options
- Selecting between good options
- Choosing between options by projecting likely outcomes

- Weighing the pros and cons of a decision
- Analyzing the pressures for and against change
- Looking at a decision from all points of view
- Seeing whether a change is worth making

In the updated Ukrainian ESP curriculum it is expected that mentioned above psychological activities should be performed within problem-based learning (PBL).

For the first time the focus on decision making skills has been made in the frame of communicative approach towards language learning to train field specialists.

The template for skills development is based on problem-based learning which is taken as an instructional method characterized by the use of “real world” problems as a context for students to learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills and acquire knowledge of the essential concepts of the job-related course.

By using case-studies within PBL students obtain life-long learning skills which include the ability to find and use appropriate learning resources and develop appropriate strategies. Such approach has proved to be the most effective and constructive for the fast changing social economic situation in Ukraine.

New ESP curriculum that is being currently implemented for teaching English to “field students”, is designed to develop and sustain a set of strategies that enable students to make language decisions in professionally-oriented situations.

However, the complexity of strategy use is becoming more apparent. It has become clear that there are different strategies characteristic not only of different learners, but also of the same learner at different levels, with different language learning goals, engaged in the use of different skills, and so on. As a result of this growing realization, research began on the factors affecting the choice of strategies, rather than just the strategies themselves. This research is summarized by Oxford [Oxford,1989]. Strategy choice was found to be related to the language being learned, the learning goals, the level of learning (or proficiency of the learner), the learner's self-awareness, age, and sex. Affective variables have been found to play a role: the attitudes, motivational level, motivational orientation. Personality characteristics play a role as well-learning styles, learning experiences, and methods-as does cultural background (national origin or ethnicity).

Another important factor was investigated by Wenden [Wenden,1986] with the notion of learner beliefs. The connection was made between a learner's beliefs about language learning and the types of strategies that he or she uses. In addition to these more longer term and stable characteristics, there are also a number of short-term factors which play a role in strategy choice: the requirements in the current communication or task in the specific situation of language use (and this of course includes the method by which the researcher attempts to elicit a learner's strategies).

This growing appreciation for the complexity of the issue of learning strategies and the factors that play a role in their use makes it increasingly apparent that a classification and taxonomy of strategies does not adequately represent the intricate ways in which strategies are chosen and used. One of the consequences, or costs, of developing such a classification is that the learner strategies are removed from the context in which they occur. They are categorized and given labels which make sense to the researcher, i.e. explicitly relating strategies which are seen as falling into the same paradigmatic class or category. However such a categorization is not necessarily one which makes sense to the learner, nor one that is used by the learner for accessing possibilities or weighing and making choices about what to do. Such a classification does not give us a sense of why a learner uses a particular type of strategy at a particular time, how this strategies fits with other strategies that are being used, and how the strategy is related to the learner's evolving planning process and beliefs, and how it is evaluated and feeds into further strategy choices.

To determine how and when the learner uses certain strategies, we need to look for relationships among them which are relevant to the learner: those strategies which are considered by the learner to be substrategies of others (i.e., the means to achieving others), and those which are related, from the learner's perspective, by patterns of sequencing (i.e., those which naturally stimulate or follow others).

Examining learner actions and behavior in terms of a decision-making model provides an alternative for researching and reporting on learning processes. In the work on teacher decision-making [Woods, 1996], a number of concepts are elaborated that are related to decision-making in the learning-teaching process from the perspective of the teacher. There is every reason to suspect that the other side of the coin-the learner's perspective on decision-making in the process-would provide interesting insights. In fact, there seem to be a number of parallels between learner decision-making and teacher decision-making that are worth exploring. The first consideration is that there is a great deal of similarity in the types of decisions made by teachers and those made by learners: many decisions could be made equally well by either party. For example, it may be a teacher who decides who to call on to answer a particular question, or a learner who decides to put up her or his hand to answer the question. It may be a teacher who assigns a particular exercise for homework of a learner who decides to do it for extra practice. Although there is an important difference-the teacher's decisions are ultimately geared towards actions by another person while the learner's decisions are ultimately geared towards her or his own actions (i.e., it is the learner who ultimately has to act for learning to take place)-the decisions can involve many of the same actions. In fact, there is often a negotiation that takes place with regard to whose responsibility it is to make which decisions.

Taking into account the teacher-students relations variety new ESP curriculum develops new teacher roles: a facilitator, a process monitor, a consultant, and a language assistant rather than a ready made and rigid example to follow or a totalitarian knowledge supplier.

The focus of this article, though, is not the teacher decision making experience, but learner decision making and the event cognition.

This issue can be explored in a decision-making model of language learning, where learner strategies are seen as being part of the learner's decision-making process. This perspective implies a more naturalistic accounting of the learner's thinking during the process of learning (or attempting to learn) another language.

According to the mentioned in the ESP curriculum thinking activities we can help students develop the following decision stage model which comprises several steps:

- to notice the situation;
- to interpret it as one in which help is needed (to collect data and analyze it);
- to assume personal responsibility;
- to choose a form of assistance;
- to carry out that assistance.

Within this model different students act in a different way: onlookers who do not help may reach only stage 3 deciding on personal responsibility and decide at this point that it is not their responsibility.

The advantage of this five stage decision model is that it explains why students may fail to help even though they recognize the situation as an emergency.

It is the leaders that usually take over and go through the whole model. However, the leaders role in a model may vary from high (deciding and telling the group a decision) to low (describing the problem and then joining the group in making the decision).

The event structure framework described above allows us a mechanism for examining these relationships, in particular the means-goals relationship as well as the interconnection between beliefs and choices of actions on the part of the learner.

In a study of learners perceptions about their classes [Allwright and Woods, 1992], we noted several characteristics about learner decision-making that were both similar to and different from teacher decision-making. The first is that, within the interview format that we used to collect data, we found that learners often had goals for their learning and were making decisions about how to achieve these goals; however, they were often much less active decision-makers than the teachers. This is of course not surprising given the usual social-educational norms of the teachers being responsible for the majority of the classroom-related decisions

(it is the teacher who holds or announces the plan for the lesson). With the responsibility and the expectation about that responsibility on the shoulders of the teacher, it is natural that the teacher will put more time and effort into thinking through procedures and alternatives than will the learner. As a result, the pattern of decisions produced by the learner reveals that it is often not as complex and hierarchically organized as the teacher's. There are fewer levels of action and subactions distinguished and made explicit by the learner than by the teacher.

A second aspect is that students nonetheless have expectations about what will happen in the classroom, and how different things will be done, and who will do what. As with teachers, these expectations depend on previous experiences in language classrooms and on beliefs about language learning. These expectations can be considered a kind of 'implicit plan' that the learner holds for which no advance actions need to be explicitly decided upon until the expectations are not fulfilled, resulting in what Linde [Woods, 1996], terms a 'hotspot.' At the point when the learner becomes aware of the discrepancy between her or his expectations and that is happening, she or he is more likely to begin to carry out some explicit compensatory planning (even if it is verbalizing a complaint to a classmate).

A number of case studies recommended as classroom techniques in problem-based learning allow to examine some aspects of this process, incorporating the intricate interplay of beliefs and different types of motivation in the process as well as strategies combination. The ESP experience shows clearly that a one-shot elicitation of strategies can be very misleading, but a list of the strategies used by a learner can explain what is going on and lead to the most productive decision making.

One of the most important issues that makes the foundation for the new ESP curriculum concept is the question of who is supposed to be doing what in the language teaching/learning decision-making process. The question does not have an unambiguous answer and therefore the compilers of the ESP Program came up with the term 'management of language learning.' In this conception, the traditional view that the teacher 'teaches' (tells the learners what to do to learn) and the learners do the 'learning' is seen as a oversimplification of the process. In fact, the actual learning cannot be seen. All we can observe is the actions designed to lead to learning, which can be decided upon by the learner or by the teacher. Whose roles it is to do what is potentially up for negotiation in every class. For example, the exhortation to teach language learning strategies carries with it the possibility that learners will have to learn (i.e., be convinced) that it is their role to make decisions about which actions they should take to learn, a job traditionally done by the teacher and one that they might well resist. The notion that decision-making processes are negotiated and shared brings us to a new conception of strategy

research, one that focuses not on learner strategies but rather on learning strategies and the intricate interplay of learner and teacher in their determination.

ESP recommendations also analyze concepts “individual versus group decision making” and “effective and ineffective decision making”.

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