Individual characteristics of language learners in lesson planning for specific purposes

N V Ivleva
Business Foreign Languages Department
Reshetnev Siberian State Aerospace University,
31, Krasnoyarsky Rabochy Av., Krasnoyarsk, 660037, Russian Federation
E-mail: natalie_ivleva@mail.ru

Abstract. This paper provides a summary of internationally recognized methods and approaches in teaching foreign languages with the focus on teaching foreign languages for specific purposes. It also covers the idea of mastering a foreign language through knowing speech units which are necessary for individual language learners in the professional area with due regard to criteria provided by the author. The criteria were developed on the basis of the theory on adaptation of complex systems and also observation in the teaching process.

Key words. Individual characteristics, language learners, adaptation, speech units.

1. Introduction
Learning a foreign language is a priority in the professional advancement and development of a specialist in any area. It is stipulated by the processes of globalization, which oblige the society to provide information about technologies, designs and other activities implemented through foreign languages. Any professional area, having access to the international community, fulfills all the processes, or partially, in the English language. Consequently, to share the experience with foreign colleagues, undertake an internship program abroad, get opportunities to carry out activities with the focus on foreign technologies, implement those technologies and other innovations on the territory of a home country it is crucial to master a foreign language, especially English, as it is considered to be the international one. Due to abovementioned facts there are reasons for English popularization in the professional community and increasing the number of people, learning the language.

In response to demand there is supply of educational services specializing in giving English language courses. Such services are provided both by private and state educational institutions within fee-based educational services. Competition on this market is rather big in any major population center. However, not many of such institutions are able to define the effective educational path for a specialist applied to them. Currently, a great number of methodologists emphasize teaching methods and approaches. They reckon that in case the right method is chosen, it will be faster for a learner to master a foreign language. The other group of methodologists states that except for methods and approaches it is vital to pay attention to individual characteristics of a specialist who applied for getting skills in a foreign language.

2. Methods and approaches in teaching foreign languages
According to Jim Scrivener, ELT author and teacher trainer, there are 12 methods and approaches in teaching foreign languages recognized worldwide:

Grammar-Translation Approach (GTA). Much traditional language teaching in schools worldwide used to be done in this way, and it is still the predominant classroom method in some cultures. The teacher rarely uses the target language. Students spend a lot of time reading texts, translating them, doing exercises and tests, writing essays. There is relatively little focus on speaking and listening skills.
Audio-Lingual Method (ALM). Although based on largely discredited theory, the techniques and activities continue to have a strong influence over many classrooms. It aims to form good habits through students listening to model dialogues with repetition and drilling but with little or no teacher explanation.

Communicative Approach (CA). This is perhaps the method or approach that most contemporary teachers would subscribe to, despite that fact that it is widely misunderstood and misapplied. CA is based on beliefs that learners will learn best if they participate in meaningful communication. It may help if we distinguish between a stronger and a weaker vision CA. As a strong aspect students learn by communicating, but they also learn through a wide variety of teaching, exercises, activities and study, with a bias towards speaking and listening work.

Total Physical Response (TPR). A method devised by Dr. J. Asher, mainly useful with beginner and lower-level students. Learners listen to instructions from the teacher, understand and do things in response, without being required to speak until they are ready.

Community Language Learning (CLL). A method based around use of the learners’ first language and with teacher help in mediating. It aims to lower anxiety and allow students to communicate in a more genuine way than is typically possible in classrooms.

Natural Approach (NA). Devised by Stephen Krashen, this is a collection of methods and techniques from many sources, all intended to provide the learner with natural comprehensible language so that the learner can pick up language in way similar to a child learning their first language.

Task-Based Learning (TBL). A variant of TBL which bases work cycles around the preparation for, doing of, and reflective analysis of tasks that reflect oral life needs and skills.

Silent Way (SW). Devised by Caleb Gattegno, this method requires the learner to take active ownership of their language learning and to pay great attention to what they say. Distinctive features include the relevant restraint of the teacher and the use of specially designed wall charts. The use of Cuisenaire rods in mainstream ELT arose from this method.

Person-Centered Approach (PCA). Any approach that places learners and their needs at the heart of what is done. Syllabus and working methods will not be decided by the teacher in advance of the course, but agreed between learner and teacher.

Lexical Approach (LO). Proposed by Michael Lewis and Jimmie Hill. On the back of new discoveries about how language is really used, especially the importance of lexical chunks in communication, proponents suggest that traditional present-then-practise methods are of little use and propose a methodology based around exposure and experiment.

Dogme. Scott Thornbury’s proposed back-to-basics approach. Teachers aim to strip their craft of unnecessary technology, materials and aids and get back to the fundamental relationship and interaction of teacher and student in class.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This approach refers to teaching subjects such as science, history and geography to students through a foreign language. This can be by the English teacher using cross-curricular content or the subject teacher using English as the language of instruction. Both methods result in the simultaneous learning of content and English [1].

However, there is one more approach - the Eclectic Approach - which allows teachers to use techniques and activities from a range of language teaching methods and approaches. The teacher decides which method or approach to use depending on the aims of the lesson and the learners in the group. For example, the class starts with an inductive activity with learners identifying the different uses of synonyms of movement using a reading text. They then practise this using Total Physical Response. In another class the input is recycled through Task-Based Learning, with learners producing the instructions for an exercise manual.

The eclectic approach does not mean random, unmethodical usage of various teaching methods and approaches. It is better to name this approach the integrated one as this term has positive connotation. Using the integrated approach can be justified if elements from different methods and approaches are formed into one logical complex system and encourage more effective language learning. For example, it is a good way to combine the Communicative and Task-Based Learning methods, Lexical Approach and Content and Language Integrated Learning method, etc.

The Eclectic Approach is widely used in educational programs which are integrated in fact as they contain structures and lexical units typical for the grammar-translation and lexical approaches, speech functions, used in the communicative approach, a list of skills, abilities and other components which are usually included into programs. Such programs are more effective as they cover the whole study process in different countries.
Taking all descriptions of abovementioned approaches and methods into account while lesson planning it is important to choose those which are going to work with a certain target audience and meet their needs finally. Furthermore, such an approach will be productive only if all the individual characteristics of a specialist are noted [2].

3. Speech units and their introduction into study process
According to Leonard A. Rastrigin, doctor of technical sciences, professor, contributed a lot into development of such scientific areas as cybernetics and informatics, the study process must be considered as a complex system. A standard task for a teacher is to arrange a study process as well as it could be to memorize a certain portion of information. In our case by a certain portion of information we mean speech units. Speech units are a combination of language units in the speech chain. The algorithm of teaching a foreign language presents the right choice of speech units to be realized and learnt as a portion of information. The efficiency of such teaching can be assessed with the help of a level test both in written and oral forms. It can also be visible in the process of using the language in practice [3].

Relying on the theory offered by Leonard A. Rastrigin and observations in the frame of teaching activity it is possible to state that teaching efficiency directly depends on individual characteristics of a language learner, which means – speech units he/she is in need of for communication in the professional area – and competently chosen teaching methods or approaches. As soon as a teacher finds out necessary speech units and applies the best teaching methods and approaches efficiency will level up and be noticeable in practice.

In connection with abovementioned criteria it is offered to use a list of criteria for defining speech units to be introduced into a study process which are: the professional area of a learner, the form of communication in a foreign language (business writing, oral communication, translation or interpretation), the study period, goals a learner sets and also a memorization technique (associations, repetition, writing, etc.).

Depending on a professional area of a learner a teacher is able to choose appropriate topics within which certain speech units are introduced and learnt. It is possible to arrange a study process efficiently in case of motivation in a topic discussed at the lesson and for future stimulation in mastering a foreign language. A form of communication also plays a crucial role upon designing and planning lessons. A lot of language learners need to communicate with their partners and clients in a written form (by email) more than orally. Due to this fact it is important to draw learners’ attention to functional speech units and also accuracy and cohesion in using them. If a learner communicates orally in most cases then it is better to focus on vocabulary. In such situations it is also recommended to brush up grammar structures and introduce the new ones only in case of needs which must be met in practice. To introduce advanced structures as new speech units is not logical as it can lead to wasting time and extending terms of study that can be critical for the majority of learners. It is also vital to realize the final goals a language learner sets in terms of the study process. It is common for many learners that they would like to master a language just to know it. Such a “goal” rarely leads to proper results as there is no proper goal and, consequently, no proper results. In similar situations a teacher should assist in setting goals knowing abovementioned parameters. There is a wide variety of goals such as orientation to international language exams, travelling abroad or motivation for communication in a foreign community. The last but not the least criterion is to understand how a learner is able to memorize information in his life and which techniques he uses in his studies. There are a reasonable number of people who use associations to memorize information. The idea of this technique is to connect or correlate a new speech unit to a well-known object, activity or definition to create a logical chain of speech units which helps effective memorizing. Another category of people memorizes information only through making notes. This technique also works in language learning.

4. Conclusion
In general, to understand what a teacher should pay attention to it is important to analyze a future language learner from the point of described criteria running an interview with them or asking them to participate in a survey, having chosen the best teaching methods or approaches. During the study process a teacher should continue observing and adapting the educational path regarding language mastering.

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