A New English Course for the Program “International Transport Policy”

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Abstract. Due to radical changes in technologies, there appear new professions and functions of engineers. Engineering universities respond designing and introducing new educational programs. Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) run by the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Moscow Automobile and Road Construction State Technical University (MADI) with the support of the United Nations Association of Russia launched a new additional educational program “International Transport Policy”. The aim of the Program is the development of professional competences of students necessary for the professional activities in the sphere of international transportation processes, including cooperation of organizations in the system of the United Nations Organizations. MADI Foreign Languages Department was responsible for implementation of the English course. The paper describes the course design, the content of compiled teaching materials, learning outcomes and highlights the importance of learner-centered approach. Special attention is given to the results of the survey revealing students’ motivation, their language background, self-assessment of their English communicative competence level, the difficulties they have studying the foreign language, evaluation of the course, the skills they have acquired, their attitude towards teaching materials and recommendations for the course improvement.

Keywords: International relations · Transport · Additional educational program · English course design · Survey

1 Context

Fast radical changes in technologies cause the appearance of new professions and new functions of engineers. In order to respond to these changes, engineering universities design and introduce new educational programs.

At present in international relations, there is a demand for synchronization and harmonization of transportation processes in the sphere of multimodal and automobile transport, cooperation of international transport organizations, providing traffic safety and rights of all stakeholders. As a result, the specialists require professional competences both in the field of international relations and multimodal transportation.

For that purpose, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) run by the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Moscow Automobile and
Road Construction State Technical University (MADI) launched a new additional educational program “International Transport Policy”. The United Nations Association of Russia has supported the initiative.

The Program is aimed at the development of professional competences necessary for the professional activities in the sphere of international transportation processes, including cooperation of organizations in the system of the United Nations Organizations (UNO). The curriculum and syllabus were designed on the base of the Federal State Educational Standard “International Relations” [1]. The total load is equal to 396 h, or 11 credit points. At the end of the Program, the students who pass final examinations and defend their final project successfully receive Bachelor’s Degree. The Program is intended for those who already hold either Bachelor’s or Master’s Degrees in Transport and for those who are still students of MADI.

2 Goal

The Program “International Transport Policy” includes three modules: General, General Theoretical and Specialized modules. The first two modules are common and at the level of the third module, the students have the opportunity to elect one of the three specializations:

- “Global international transport policy”;
- “Traffic safety and respect for the rights of all traffic participants”;
- “The role of road and transport sector for the sustainable development of regions”.

Each module of the Program provides one English course. The first module contains a course of General English, the second module includes a course of English for Specific Purposes and in the third module there are three elective courses of English for Specified Purposes. The election of the course depends on one of the three specializations mentioned above. All the foreign language courses are 36 contact hours each, or 1 credit point.

According to the Program, the course of General English is aimed at the development of students’ communicative competence the level of which allows them to discuss general problems of international policy and participate in Moscow International UN Model. The course of English for Specific Purposes is mainly supposed to train students to be able to use terminology of international policy, transport and law both in oral and written forms. The English for Specified Purposes is aimed at developing students’ communicative competence necessary for oral and written communication in the professional activities according to one of the three specializations they have chosen.

MADI Foreign Languages Department is responsible for linguistic training of students. The goal of the Department was to design and implement the General English course of the first module. According to the Program, the content of teaching materials should cover the issues connected with the UN, the principal organs of the UN, the system and structure of the main UN organizations, the economic and social policy of the UN including international conventions on traffic safety.
With the knowledge and the skills acquired, at the end of the course students should be ready to participate in Model United Nations. It is also known as “Model UN” or “MUN”. Model UN is a conference organized as an extra-curricular activity of students. This conference is a role play in which students have the roles of UN delegates to the United Nations and simulate UN committees. After the debate, the participants adopt a resolution aimed at solving some problem.

With the necessity to achieve such results, it was evident that there was no chance to find an English textbook already published corresponding to such content and aims. Therefore, the second goal of the Department was to compile teaching materials for the curriculum developed.

The Program aroused interest and 45 students applied for the Program. They were MADI first-year students of the Departments of Economics, Logistics and Management. They enrolled at the Program without any entrance examinations in a foreign language, which made the task of the Foreign Languages Department even more difficult.

3 Approach

The General English course of the first module for the Program “International Transport Policy” was designed on the base of the concept of long-life foreign language training diversification in engineering education [1] that provides the corresponding technology [2]. The area of the language application and the language activity in this sphere were already determined in the Program as synchronization of international multimodal and automotive transportation and participation in international conferences and negotiations. The organization where the language will be applied was defined as a multinational team.

It was necessary to determine communicative needs’ of learners and specify educational aims and objectives, to select the content of teaching and to describe learning outcomes. That will give the opportunity to develop teaching materials for the English course. For that purpose, a survey of all the students of the Program “International Transport Policy” was undertaken which is of vital importance with the learner-centered approach. For the survey, two questionnaires were prepared: a preliminary one and a final one.

At the first stage, it was necessary to work out a preliminary questionnaire and to analyze its results. The questionnaire was supposed to find out motivation of learners, their language background, the level of their English communicative competence and the difficulties they have when studying English. Later the results of the students’ self-assessment were compared with the outcomes of the placement test.

At the second stage, according to the description of the learning outcomes in the Federal State Educational Standard “International Relations” [3], the data collected in the survey and the outcomes of the placement test, we worked out teaching materials.

The third stage provided the teaching process. There were four groups of students and two English teachers. Both of them were involved in compiling teaching materials.

At the fourth stage, the students were tested and participated in Model UN conference to assess the outcomes of learning.
At the fifth stage, after the course the final questionnaire was prepared and analyzed. It was supposed to reveal the learners’ evaluation of the course, the opinion on the skills they acquired, their attitude towards teaching materials and recommendations for the course improvement. The results were compared with the outcomes of learning.

4 Actual Outcomes

At the first stage, the preliminary questionnaire gave the data concerning learners’ language background, the course expectations, self-assessment of their English communicative competence, and the main difficulties they have while studying the foreign language. The placement test gave objective assessment of the learners’ level of communicative competence.

The preliminary questionnaire showed that before entering the University the majority of students studied in ordinary secondary schools (93.4%) and only 6.6% of students left specialized language schools. However, they turned out to be highly motivated to master English. Before the beginning of the Course 95% of them had studied English additionally, 48.8% of students had had one-to-one lessons with a private teacher, 31.1% of them had had the experience of self-study, 11.1% of them had attended different English courses, 8.8% of them had used other means of improving their English. The students’ interest to studying English is also confirmed by the fact that almost half of the students (46.6%) elected All-Russian State Examination in a Foreign Language as one of their final secondary school examinations and passed it with good marks.

These results of the survey correspond to the self-assessment of the students’ level of English communicative competence. According to the students’ opinion, their average level is Intermediate but they feel more confidence in written speech. In reading, 35.5% of them assess their level as Upper Intermediate and 35.5% of them as Intermediate. In writing, the level of 33.3% is Upper Intermediate and of 44.4% is Intermediate. The self-assessment of oral speech is lower. In speaking, 53.3% of the students assess their level as Intermediate and 20% as Pre-Intermediate. In listening, the results are even still lower: the level of 37.7% is Intermediate and of 26.6% is Pre-Intermediate. As we see the students feel more self-confidence in reading and writing than in listening and speaking.

Consequently, the students give the priority to acquiring skills in oral speech. 84.4% of the students want to acquire skills to understand oral speech, 82.2% – to participate in formal oral communication, 77.7% – to participate in oral informal communication, 60% – to read professional literature, 64.4% – to write texts, letters, 53.3% – to compile documents, 51.1% – to interpret from English into Russian, 44.4% – to translate written texts, and only 13.3% – to make presentations. (The sum is more than 100% in cases when it was possible to choose more than one answer; 6.6% of the students chose some other activities).

According to the students’ opinion, the main difficulties they have when studying English are also connected mainly with oral speech. They have problems with the usage of grammar structures for expression of their own ideas both orally and in writing (53.3%); understanding oral texts (46.6%); maintaining a conversation with a partner
The results of the survey were confirmed by the outcomes of the placement test of the four groups of the students that showed that the average level of the students in reading was Upper Intermediate, in writing it was Upper Intermediate, in listening it was Intermediate, and in speaking it was Intermediate.

At the second stage, the teaching materials were compiled according to the requirements of the Program, the data of the preliminary questionnaire and the workload of 36 contact hours. The materials are grouped in four units; each of them takes eight contact hours of classwork. The program defined the UN as the content of English texts and Model UN as a final event for the assessment of learning outcomes. Thus, the main topics of the units are the following: Unit 1 “The history of the UN”, Unit 2 “The structure of the UN”, Unit 3 “The transportation policy of the UN”, Unit 4 “Model UN”.

The structure of each Unit was traditional and contained the following sections: “Introduction”, “Active Vocabulary”, “Listening”, “Reading”, “Speaking”, “Writing”, and “Self-study Work”. The content of each section was determined according to the results of the preliminary questionnaire. In order to help students to overcome the difficulties they have the section “Introduction” uses tasks in oral speech. The section “Active vocabulary” contains about 900 words and word combinations, work with synonyms and antonyms, definitions of terms, names of the countries, nationalities and languages, etc. Special attention is given to the section “Listening” that includes two or three video films and oral texts. The section “Speaking” contains various tasks preparing students for participating in a monologue, a dialogue, and a discussion. The section “Reading” includes two or three texts on the topic of the Unit for reading and translation. In “Writing”, the students learn to compile formal documents and letters. The section “Self-study Work” provides a variety of tasks to overcome the students’ difficulties revealed, for example, writing scripts of video films or oral texts. The project work is connected with the students’ preparation for Model UN conference.

At the third stage, four groups of the students had English classes with the teaching materials developed. However, because of coronavirus pandemic each group had only two face-to-face classes. After that, the situation changed radically and the teachers had to switch to distance education. MADI immediately provided the access to Microsoft Teams. All the English classes in the form of webinars were organized with the help of this communication tool. 100% of the students concluded that Microsoft Teams were effective for the English course. Only 11% of the students think that it is necessary to increase the number of contact hours. All the groups studied three Units and participated in Model UN as a final lesson.

The fourth stage provided the organization of remote Model UN. The topic of the conference was “Coronavirus Pandemic: Different Countries and Strategies” and provided team project work. The students were divided into groups of four or five and collected the materials for the presentation of various countries. At the same time, all of them participated in compiling the final resolution. The role-play “Model UN” integrated all the language skills developed and showed the improvements of the students’
skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These results were confirmed by the learning outcomes of the final tests.

At the fifth stage, the students filled in the final questionnaire and the information received was analyzed. According to the data of the final questionnaire, the majority of the students of the Program “International Transport Policy” evaluate the English course as effective. 33% of the students consider the course to be extremely effective, 59.4% – effective, and 6.6% – more likely to be effective than not effective.

The course improved the students’ level of English communicative competence. 22% of the students are sure that they have improved their level considerably, 55% of them are sure that they have improved it but they would like to achieve even a higher level, 22% - have improved it but not considerably.

The students think, that by the end of the course they have acquired various skills in English and they are able: to translate written texts (44.4%); to interpret from English into Russian (44.4%); to understand oral speech (41.8%); to read professional literature (37.4%); to participate in formal oral communication (35.2%); to participate in oral informal communication (33%); to write texts, letters (24.2%); to make presentations (15.4%); to compile documents (8.8%).

Due to the course, the majority of the students have overcome the difficulties they had: 50.6% of them have overcome them to some extent, 35.2% - considerably, 6.6% - completely and only 6.6% have failed to do it.

Answering the open question concerning the efficiency of the English course especially for them, the majority of the students wrote that the information about the UN and other international organizations was relevant to them (two students commented that they even got interested in international political events). Most part of the students concluded that it was useful for them to learn a large number of new words and expressions, to improve their pronunciation, to begin using synonyms of the words they had already known, to use actively the names of the countries, nationalities, etc. Many students are sure that they have improved their listening skills that are most difficult for them. Some of them find that it was watching a lot of video films and especially writing their scripts that contributed to this improvement. Many students appreciate that at the lessons they had the opportunity to communicate with teachers and groupmates in English.

As far as the students’ recommendations on the improvement of the English course are concerned, the typical answer is that the course was effective and does not need any changes. At the same time, individual suggestions were quite different. Among the things that the students suggested are the following: increasing the number of tests, video films, presentations, project work and pair work, simulations for speaking, etc.

5 Conclusions

The additional educational program “International Transport Policy” is the response of the two universities, MGIMO and MADI, to a new demand for the specialists having professional competences both in the sphere of international relations and multimodal transport. The Program aroused interest of MADI students.
The concept of long-time foreign language training diversification in engineering education allowed designing and implementing a new course of General English for the Program. The survey gave the opportunity to reveal the students’ motivation, their language background, self-assessment of their English communicative competence level, the difficulties they have when studying the foreign language. The data of the survey helped to design a tailor-made course for the language needs of the particular target audience. As a result, the students have acquired the necessary skills and the students evaluate the course of General English as effective. The final leaners’ outcomes show that the structure of the course and the teaching materials compiled are adequate to the General English course objectives. The recommendations of the students will be used to improve the course.

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