

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES FOR ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN MONGOLIAN CLASSROOMS?

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В статье рассматриваются проблемные вопросы методики преподавания английского языка как иностранного.

Ключевые слова: программа, преподавание английского языка, коммуникативные методики, уровни владения английским языком.

This presentation will include some challenging issues in the English teaching. These challenges include: changing the traditional language teaching method, developing effective curriculums focusing on the specific engineering fields and preparing appropriate teaching materials for English for Specific Purposes courses at tertiary level education and balancing students' different English levels. Also, this presentation will explore some of the reasons.

Key words: curriculum development, English teaching, challenges, ESP courses, communicative tools, different English levels.

In today's globalized society, English is recognized as one of the most significant languages in the global market. Having the ability to communicate effectively in English both orally and in writing is regarded as one of the most important skills for job applicants regardless of their qualified fields. In order

to keep pace with these global changes, the Mongolian government decided to introduce English as a second language instead of the Russian language into all levels of the school curriculum after the Democratic Revolution of 1990s. Therefore, it is imperative that Mongolian universities adapt these trends to best prepare students successfully to enter the professional world. The Mongolian University of Science and Technology (MUST) has taken steps to embrace these trends since English was introduced into tertiary level education. Nowadays the most important objective for MUST is to improve English courses for general and specific purposes particularly in the areas of Engineering and Technology. On the other hand, there are also some challenging issues in the English teaching.

One of the challenging issues is that students are not able to communicate effectively in a variety of activities outside the classroom however they have basic language knowledge. At a glance, it can be seen that MUST students have more opportunities to improve their general and specific English skills at the different levels in comparison with other university students in Mongolia. This can be seen in the communicative English course, Introductory and Professional English for Specific Purposes. The communicative English course which is offered for new comers at MUST has a large focus on using language skills as a communicative tool in real situation. On the other hand, MUST have not achieved the goal as they intended because students cannot communicate satisfactorily in real life. There are still many disadvantages in the curriculum because of the influence of the traditional teaching method-grammar translation. According to Kong [4], the traditional method can be advantageous in many ways such as understanding the abstract meaning of foreign words and different kinds of sentence structures, as well as providing systematic grammatical knowledge and strong translation capacity to students. Unfortunately, there are still some difficulties for students in communicating effectively in a variety of activities. In fact, they have basic language knowledge because they spend at least 5-6 years learning English in the secondary school, but most of them cannot use their language skills appropriately in real situation. The reason may be that the chances are limited for students make use of their language skills in the real world beyond the classroom. In grammar-translation classrooms “grammar was taught as a set of rules to be memorized and repeated. In systems where grammar translation gave way to audiolingualism, students were able parrot responses in predictable situations of use” [7, p.70]. In fact, the grammatical teaching form leads to separate the communicative meaning eventually. Nowadays

English communication ability has become an important qualification to raise a highly qualified specialist. The language as communication involves the “active use” of grammar and vocabulary, so it is important to give students the opportunity to listen and read effectively and to speak with and write to other people. “Language needs to be learned functionally” [7, p.65].

Another challenging issue currently being facing at MUST is the effective curriculum development of English for specific purposes programs in the specific engineering field. According to Yu (Liao,H.C., Chen,Y.H, as cited in English Language Teaching, 2012, pp.89-94), the ESP course is a difficult for teachers and learners because it is not only about science and technological issues but also effective language instruction is needed. Therefore, curriculum developers should consider a variety of factors particularly the teacher, the learner, teaching method, teaching materials and the context. Also Yu states [6, pp.89-94] that there is a highly need to develop learner centered ESP course materials that suit learners’ different career focuses. At MUST, ESP courses which are offered for second- and third-year students are divided into two parts: Introductory and Professional English for Specific Purposes. “The introductory ESP course “English for Science and Technology” is designed and implemented to provide students with foundational language for the field of engineering” (English Curriculum for Engineering Students, 2014). MUST has developed the curriculum based on two books: “Engineering” (from Career Path series by Express Publishing) and Cambridge’s “English for Engineering” (Cambridge University Press). This introductory English course covers broad engineering and technological fields such as aeronautics and watercraft. Unfortunately, the foundation of some engineering fields has not been laid in Mongolia at all. Many students do not like to learn these fields because they believe they are not related to their majoring field. In our country, the following engineering fields such as IT, civil engineering, construction, geology, mining, car mechanics, electricity and power engineering are very popular career choices in the job market. Thus, our students are interested in obtaining the knowledge about these fields through the language. Therefore, MUST academics have to focus on these fields mentioned above to improve the curriculum for ESP courses. This also suits to students’ needs.

In order to achieve this goal, MUST need to prepare appropriate teaching materials for professional ESP courses. This professional ESP course focuses on teaching a specific engineering field of English for students with specific goals. However, “engineering majoring students are facing a lack

of appropriate materials for ESP books. Suitable instrumental materials are increasingly critical at present” [6, p.89]. Also, English teachers need to teach professional ESP courses in the specific engineering field, but almost all English teachers do not have the background of the specific engineering field. This makes them feel unconfident as the position of career guidance counselors (IET, 2008). As Arya and Salk (2006) claim, cross-sector partnership could be the best way of managing this uncertainty. Further to this, Ljunggren also (2009) claims that quality enhances when all institutions of higher education collaborate with the surrounding society. Lemon & Willer [5] also point out that strong relationships of partnership in research and development can be found within the university. Therefore, it seems that we need to collaborate with the relevant engineering departments at MUST to develop and implement the professional ESP curriculum effectively. Sharing knowledge and experiences with each other may bring creative and practical outcomes. This can increase our competitiveness and expand the enrollment of the university as well. This also may suit students’ need.

Moreover, another issue that cannot be ignored is balancing students’ different English levels. There is a wide gap in the English skills between urban and rural students. New comers to university have different English skills, in particular, their listening and speaking skills are clearly distinguished from each other. From my experience and observation, students who studied in urban high schools better more developed listening and speaking skills because they have more environments to develop these language skills in and outside the class using the modern technology. In addition, they have more opportunities to access to the internet and other media as well as interact with native speakers. Unfortunately, there is a completely different attitude from the students who came from the countryside. The years they spent learning English is the same as urban children, and they also use the same textbooks. However, their communicative ability in English is lower because their English classes are conducted based on only grammar translation method in secondary school and they have limited opportunities to practice their language knowledge in the real world outside the class. The only practice they have is in English class. Therefore, they experience a lack of oral expressive ability because their foundation of listening and speaking skills are weak. Unfortunately, this gap between language skills influences the development of English communication skills within the limited time in class.

It has been more than 20 years since English was introduced into all levels of the education systems of Mongolia. Nowadays, the requirement for

English skills and knowledge is increasing. English communication skills are regarded as one of the most important abilities for job applicants. Therefore, it is vital for the university's future development to be achieved high standards of English communication skills. To achieve these goals, MUST need to teach, learn and use English as a communicative tool instead of teaching English as grammatical patterns and fragmentary words to be memorized in the class period. There is no doubt that MUST have achieved some success based on the traditional method, but now the significant improvements are necessity.

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