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CONSTRAINTS OF COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING IN RUSSIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

An overview of practicing communicative approach to foreign language teaching in institutions of higher education in Russia is presented with a focus on three methodologies used in the process of foreign language teaching and learning: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English for Special Purposes (ESP) and Content and Language Integrated learning (CLIL). Reasons for deviation from genuine CLT practices at a technical university are studied and summarized. Advantages of CLT in general English are evaluated, with *fluency activities*, *teaching functions*, *pair and group work*, *didactic games* and *inductive grammar presentation* being most evident. It is shown that in the mainstream ESP practice CLT fluency-based activities are, to some extent, suppressed by accuracy-based activities as students have to be prepared to conform to the requirements of the Federal State Educational Standards reflected in the foreign language syllabi including the established forms of final competence assessment. In CLIL methodology, students acquire a new way of dealing with written texts as the learning strategy is built on the top-down approach to the text comprehension, active communication of learners and shifting the focus from basic reading comprehension to a cognitive activity. The experimental results of the ESP versus CLIL group practices in reading professionally oriented texts indicate some supremacy of the CLIL methodology, which turns out to be more effective in overcoming CLT constraints at a non-linguistic university.

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1. Introduction

Communicative approach conquered the world of teaching foreign languages as a timely alternative to the grammar method back in the 1980s. It proved efficient for the purposes of communication in English in everyday life in the time of an increasing mobility of millions of people mainly in their spare time. It appeared that people can successfully communicate even at a relatively low level of language proficiency with a limited grammar and vocabulary, yet eager to understand and be understood. This meant a great advantage of the approach with the English language as a global means of face-to-face communication, especially if immediately practiced beyond the classroom.

However, after the Bologna Declaration in the early 2000s, the English language has taken another crucial role becoming the lingua franca of internationalizing education, science and research, the areas where much higher language proficiency was required (Jenkins, 2015). What is more, for the escalating international academic mobility everyday English did not suffice to serve as the language of instruction. The question arises whether the communicative approach is still relevant in the teaching/learning English at universities.

1.1. Communicative language teaching (CLT) in general English

The communicative language teaching develops all major language skills, from speaking and writing to reading and listening. Grammar is mastered in the process of communication in class: students are introduced words and functional formulas and only then their attention is drawn to the grammatical patterns. Rules and the meanings of new words are explained by the teacher using both verbal means and expressions familiar to the students and non-verbal means such as gestures, facial expressions, pictures, images and other visual aids. As translation is highly undesirable, teachers do their best to avoid it. Instructors encourage fluency giving students a chance to talk more freely and using delayed error correction.

According to the CLT methodology, the learning process is a model of the real-life communication, albeit somewhat simplified. Under the influence of CLT theory, grammar-based methodologies aimed at achieving *accuracy* through *grammar presentation – practice – production*, were replaced by *fluency activities* based on interactive small-group work. This led to the emergence of a “fluency-first” pedagogy (Richards, 2006, p. 8), in which learners’ ability to communicate requires more than mastering linguistic structures, so instead of grammar needs “language functions might be emphasised over forms, typically, although not always, a functional syllabus is used” (Larsen-Freeman, 2008, p. 131).

Teaching these functions has become a more relevant approach to enhance fluency than regular topic-oriented grammar approach. When teaching functions we refer to what items of language actually do in a real context, as opposed to what they might mean literally. Functions include suggesting, criticizing, refusing, agreeing and disagreeing, inquiring, giving advice, etc. It is important for learners to understand that one form may have many different functions, and they need to see how functions work in context.

At foreign language classes interactive learners’ communication is organized through the use of *pair* and *group work*. The teacher creates or suggests role-plays and the situations in which students communicate with their peers, which makes the lesson more dynamic and increases the learners’ speaking time. Working in a group, students are encouraged to demonstrate their verbal independence. They can help each other and correct their interlocutors’ statements. The teacher takes over the roles of communication

organizer; he asks suggestive questions, draws attention to the original opinions of the participants, acts as a judge in discussions of disputable problems.

CLT draws on 'open-ended' exercises: students themselves may not know what will result from their activities; everything depends on the responses of their interlocutors. Students' interest in classes is maintained due to real-life situations. Instead of *deductive teaching grammar* in traditional approaches, which used to focus on the rule followed by practical exercises, *inductive grammar presentation* in CLT is always realized through examples of sentences built on a particular grammar rule, which students have to work out themselves. Using contextual way of introducing grammar, the teacher may describe a situation in detail and then use the new grammar structure to give a general overview of this situation. In this way students understand the concept and the function of the grammar structure (Larsen-Freeman, 2008).

The use of role-plays and games contributes to the informal nature of interaction in the classroom and enhances learners' communication. The use of games makes learners psychologically prepared for real life communication, creates the conditions of multiple reiteration of linguistic content and trains learners to achieve situational spontaneity of their utterances (Golub, 2017). CLT also enables us to realize the principle of individualization as building communicative competence depends on individual learners' abilities and preferences (Galskova, 2000).

Generally speaking, in spite of the CLT popularity in secondary education, in higher education it can be used only with certain reservations along with the prevailing cognitive approach, involving students' search activities using information and communication technologies in their independent work on professional vocabulary development (Shamov, 2004), which is an essential part of teaching English for specific purposes (ESP).

1.2. Communicative language teaching (CLT) as part of ESP practices

Since the 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching nowadays. Its development is reflected in university ESP courses offered in many countries, Russia among them. Some researchers described ESP as teaching English for any purpose, as specified by learners. Others describe it as the teaching of academic English or English for vocational or professional purposes (Anthony, 1997). It is important to realize that ESP is centered on the language appropriate to activities related to the disciplines it serves, conducting these activities in terms of grammar, vocabulary, register, study skills, discourse and genre (Dudley-Evans, 1998).

The latter consideration is definitely true and applicable to teaching English at a polytechnic university. The peculiarity of the technical register is that it contains only cognitive information in the absence of emotionally-evaluative and aesthetic information. Most characteristic feature of the language design of scientific and technical discourses is the standardization of the structures used, which is explained by the predominance of purely cognitive information. Among the main features of the technical register are also the syntactic completeness of the utterances, the presence of numerous attributive chains of nouns as part of nominative sentences, as well as the impersonality that arises from the frequent use of the passive voice and impersonal grammatical structures. More than that, technical terminology is characterized by a large number of terms that are unambiguous, neutral and independent of the context. There is also a large amount of general scientific non-technical vocabulary, which is widely used to emphasize the objective nature of the information presented in the text.

Taking into account these features of the technical functional style to be covered in the syllabus of the *foreign language* discipline and reflected in the appropriate textbooks, we can realize that the intended CLT use in class is actually limited to technically informative statements, whereas real communication involving a number of general topics is only wishful thinking. When reading professionally-oriented texts translation is unavoidable and the main strategy for translating a technical text is the search for single-valued, if possible, dictionary equivalents in a bilingual dictionary and observance of a neutral written literary norm. Communication is limited by the obligatory use of technical vocabulary and practiced only as a secondary activity.

Besides register limitations, we can also mention curricular constraints for the CLT use, keeping in mind large groups of students to be taught and the limited number of classes in the syllabus. In view of these facts, inductive grammar presentation in context, taking more time, has to be replaced with traditional deductive grammar presentation, with the instructor explaining a grammar rule at the blackboard and students keeping notes. Instead of teaching subtleties of contextual functions, lexical topics are to be covered as required in the institutional syllabus with the use of texts in the appropriate professionally-oriented textbooks recommended by the methodological council of a certain university department. Regrettably, “many ESP teachers have become slaves of the published textbooks available, unable to evaluate their suitability based on personal experience” (Anthony, 1997).

One of the main reasons for this unsatisfying situation in terms of CLT use as part of ESP methodology is the necessity to follow the Federal State Educational Standards (FSES), which are product-oriented and focused on building the required competences. Being obliged to fulfill the FSES requirements, instructors have to aim at product orientation in teaching a foreign language, which implies more checking and testing grammar and professionally-oriented vocabulary accompanied by translation practice.

Even though university teachers try to adhere to the CLT framework, they cannot implement it to the full extent. The reasons for their deviation from CLT are summarized in the table below:

Table 01. Reasons for deviation from CLT in a technical university in Russia

#	CLT feature	ESP feature	Reason for deviation
1	Process-oriented language learning in learner-centered instruction	Product-oriented language learning in teacher-centered professionally-oriented instruction	Need to follow competence approach as recommended in the Federal State Education Standards
2	Teaching functions to improve learners' fluency	Teaching topics to build learners' lexical competence in their professional field of knowledge	Need to follow institutional syllabus
3	Inductive method of contextual teaching grammar without translation	Deductive method of teaching grammar involving accuracy-based activities and translation	Limited number of hours for classroom work, big groups of students

From the above description of CLT versus ESP practices, it follows that fluency-based activities in ESP are, in fact, suppressed by accuracy-based activities as in most cases students have to be prepared to conform to the FES requirements reflected in the foreign language syllabi including the established forms of final assessment. All the benefits of process-oriented CLT with communicative language games and motivating role-plays which give students ample opportunities to practice communication in various social

contexts remain beyond the scope of everyday teaching practice. This partly explains the fact that, despite 2-3 years of ESP, many university students with initial B2 level tend to remain at this level often acknowledging only ESP vocabulary increase and those with initial A2-B1 do not seem to be satisfied with their achievement. As a rule, they do not succeed in catching up with the 'stronger' peers unless they study English on their own or are taught within the CLIL framework.

1.3 Communicative competence as a prerequisite for a university CLIL

More recently, a 'pure' language learning methodology has been challenged by the proponents of such an innovative educational approach as content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Initially designed for primary and secondary education, CLIL started to appeal to researchers and practitioners in higher education (Khalyapina, Popova, & Kogan, 2017).

The idea that language learners progress faster and more smoothly if the focus of their attention moves from the linguistic forms to the content has been known for decades (Klychnikova, 1983). In CLIL, this idea has finally taken the central place. Students study a non-language discipline simultaneously using the newly introduced domain-specific language. A genuine integration of content and language implies an active and interactive knowledge construction by the learners themselves provided they are supported by the instructor through a system of scaffolding which ensures a shift from 'non-knowing' to 'knowing' a new subject matter because "CLIL is not about the transfer of knowledge from an expert to a novice. CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understandings and be challenged – whatever their age or ability" (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010, p. 54).

In the communicative methodology learning to read is focused on the development of reading comprehension. Written texts are chosen to demonstrate how vocabulary and grammar structures are used in conveying meaning. As regards this point, reading is considered both a major communicative skill, alongside with speaking, listening and writing, and a way of developing language proficiency in general. Being the mainstream method in the secondary education, CLT therefore ensures a certain level of communicative competence often varying from a limited A2, which is considered insufficient for being used as the language of instruction, to a strong B2 (CEFR).

A longitudinal action research provides convincing evidence that even low-proficiency learners have high chances to succeed in achieving the planned objectives within the university CLIL framework (Vdovina, 2018). Thus, the basic general English communicative competence, the fruit of secondary education CLT, deserves to be considered a prerequisite for a university CLIL. Following a different teaching/learning path which the integrated approach requires, new academic skills development is built on what learners already know and can do using the target language. In a content-driven CLIL university course, the transition to academic English appears less stressful as learners' attention is firstly drawn to the content, with the target language being a vehicle through which content is learned.

Unlike in CLT, in CLIL written texts for reading are aimed at knowledge acquisition, not just search for information. It implies an active processing of the content by organizing, evaluating and managing the new content. In the CLIL context the construction of knowledge is a social process; constant collaboration of all participants of the learning process and mutual support is of importance while creating new knowledge (Ellis, 2015).

Therefore, in CLIL classes, which are more rarely introduced in tertiary education than ESP courses, reading is organized as a collaborative inquiry-based process. In the CLIL class, students acquire a new way of dealing with written texts. The learning strategy is built on the top-down approach to the text comprehension, active communication of all the participants, questioning as a tool to enhance thinking, both planned and incidental scaffolding on behalf of the instructor, and the use of various types of graphic organizers transforming written texts into graphic form which visualizes the concepts and their hierarchical links. During the graphic reconstruction of the textual input the focus naturally shifts from basic reading comprehension to a cognitive activity which can be characterized as ‘constructive modality of knowledge acquisition’. This procedural arrangement results not only in learning the new field-specific language and the disciplinary input. It contributes to the development of metacognitive skills necessary for the students as fluent readers of any texts in the target language (Papaja, 2014).

2. Problem Statement

The roots of the problem of identifying constraints of the communicative approach to language teaching in universities lie in the undergraduates’ specific linguistic needs and the importance of interdisciplinary links as professionally oriented teaching materials dominate in foreign language classes.

2.1. Point 1

Communicative Language Teaching, attractive as it is in secondary education, reveals certain constraints in higher education. In the university context, especially when teaching English as a foreign language to non-linguistics majors, CLT is, to some extent, contradictory to another widely practiced teaching method known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As the latter is actually a mainstream in higher education of Russia, it is worthwhile looking at CLT versus ESP methodologies, taking into account undergraduates’ specific linguistic and cognitive needs analysis.

2.2. Point 2

Communicative approach in tertiary education is generally practiced within the ESP framework, in which communication as such is complicated by the necessity of giving students cognitive tasks mainly through professionally-oriented reading activities. The feasibility of establishing interdisciplinary links between the ‘foreign language’ discipline and students’ *area of study*, be it physics or economics, through written texts is evident, but it is of methodological interest to see if CLIL practice, still rare in Russian higher education, is able to cope with it more effectively than in ESP teaching. Even though linguistic needs in ESP and CLIL may coincide, the latter methodology shifts the focus from learning a language to using the language for learning a non-language subject. The results of the comparative evaluation of CLIL versus ESP groups engaged in reading authentic texts will be analyzed.

3. Research Questions

1. How to distinguish teaching in CLT and ESP in non-linguistics tertiary education?
2. What are the students’ ESP needs according to the Federal State Educational Standards?
3. How do students with relevant communicative competence succeed in reading authentic materials (a newspaper article chosen for economics students)?

4. How can one overcome some of the CLT constraints using CLIL approach when reading authentic texts?

4. Purpose of the Study

We believed that the answers to the aforementioned research questions will help us to achieve the following objectives:

1. to identify the differences between CLT, ESP and CLIL approaches in tertiary education in Russia taking into account students' linguistic and cognitive needs and learning conditions.

2. to find out the deficiencies of reading comprehension acquired within CLT by comparing the results of the CLIL group with their focus on reading for learning with those of the ESP group focused on reading comprehension.

5. Research Methods

Two groups of first-year Bachelor students of 18 respondents each participated in a 60-minute reading and a summary writing experiment. Each of the participants was given an editorial of a New York Times issue accompanied by a list of the following tasks:

- to skim an editorial of about 600 words for the gist;
- to underline the unknown words;
- to read the article trying to understand the meaning of these words from the context;
- to write a short summary of the article in about 60-80 words.

Drawing on the essence of the problems under consideration and the logic of the research, we used methods of theoretical analysis in the sphere of foreign language teaching methodologies and generalization of practical experience in a technical university. Research methods included the comparison of the results of reading and writing in the ESP-group and in the CLIL-group. In addition, the respondents of ESP-group were asked to fill in a short questionnaire concerning their opinions on the above activities.

6. Findings

For the research purposes we chose an argumentative newspaper article which discusses the conflicting views of Democrats and Republicans on how to avoid budget cuts in the weak American economy. The former vigorously pushed an idea of raising taxes on higher-income tax-payers, and the latter opposed tax increases and suggested cuts on spending.

We expected that the message of the article is adequately understood if the students correctly indicate the major problem of the dispute (budget deficit), if they understand and emphasize the point differentiating the opinions of the two parties on fiscal policy measures (either focused on spending or on taxation), and if they correctly figure out the supporting arguments. As the article does not merely inform the readers, but discusses the views of the opponents, the comprehension of the text and summarizing improve if information processing follows a hierarchically-based pattern of thinking and not a linear type of accumulating the facts and opinions without comparing and contrasting them.

Four topical points have been chosen for the analysis of the summaries:

- Major point of the dispute (1)

- Differentiation of the opinions (2)
- Arguments attributed to the Democrats (3) further broken into 4 groups (D1-D4)
- Arguments attributed to the Republicans (4) further broken into 3 groups (R1-R3)

6.1. Summary analysis

The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 2. and 3. Incidentally, both groups included students with the intermediate and upper-intermediate level in almost equal proportions: 10+8 in ESP-group and 9+9 in the CLIL-group. Numbers in the brackets show this division.

Table 02. The number of respondents in the ESP-group whose summaries contain the above-mentioned topical points, n=18

Major point of the dispute	Differentiation of the opinions	Arguments attributed to the Democrats				Arguments attributed to the Republicans		
		D1	D2	D3	D4	R1	R2	R3
Budget deficit	Suggested measures	D1	D2	D3	D4	R1	R2	R3
9 (4+5)	10 (5+5)	1	13	4	-	1	-	5

Table 03. The number of respondents in the CLIL-group whose summaries contain the analyzed above-mentioned topical points, n =18

Major point of the dispute	Differentiation of the opinions	Arguments attributed to the Democrats				Arguments attributed to the Republicans		
		D1	D2	D3	D4	R1	R2	R3
Budget deficit	Suggested measures	D1	D2	D3	D4	R1	R2	R3
18 (9+9)	15 (7+8)	6	18	3	2	4	2	6

The results summarized in the tables provide us with the evidence that in almost all the points of the analysis the CLIL-group outperformed the ESP-group: 18 CLIL-group students against 9 ESP-group students focused on point 1 in their summaries; 15 against 10 directly referred to point 2; 29 CLIL-group students against 18 ESP-group students included the Democrats' arguments (point 3) and 12 CLIL-group students against 6 ESP-group students mentioned the Republicans' arguments (point 4).

We assumed that the differences could be interpreted referring to the students' previous reading experience in the target language. In the framework of the communicative methodology, reading comprehension is the main goal. It is manifested and supported by the exercises which accompany texts in ESP context, in particular, answering questions to check understanding. In the CLIL context, on the contrary, reading comprehension is just an initial step in processing new disciplinary content. Students in the CLIL-group got used to meaning-making by identifying not only the facts and concepts, but also their logical links. Unlike in the ESP format, questions are not given to them. Students are encouraged to formulate their own questions in the process of conceptualization by giving preference to Higher-Order-Thinking questions such as *Why* and *How*. This personal learning experience must have allowed all of them (18 out of 18) to figure out the central issue of the text and the argumentative character of the editorial in 15 summaries out of 18.

In the ESP-group only half of the respondents mention topical points 1 and 2 in their summaries. Moreover, the analysis of their summaries reveals a sort of arbitrary choice of the facts and opinions they pick up from the text. And more than that, one particular feature of 8 out of 18 summaries is that the summary is focused on only one of the arguments, and the whole idea of the conflict is omitted completely.

It can be inferred that the whole activity has been focused on the text as a linguistic phenomenon, and, as a result, the genuine act of increasing their knowledge about the economic realities did not take place.

6.2. Questionnaire analysis.

After submitting their summaries, the ESP-group was asked to reflect on their reading experience by answering the following three questions:

1. What prevented you from the deeper understanding of the article?
2. What do you think you should learn/know to effectively read newspaper articles on economic issues?
3. With how many unknown words (in percentage) you think you could be able to understand an authentic text like a newspaper article?

All the factors hindering understanding and listed by the students can be divided into three groups: (1)vocabulary problems, (2) the level of difficulty of the text, and (3)economic knowledge.

The first group of factors is related to vocabulary problems: unknown words (13 students); unknown economic terms (5 students); unknown word collocations (5 students). Group 2 includes factors directly related to the high level of difficulty of the text (6 students). Group 3 emphasizes insufficient knowledge of the economic theory and economic realities (3 students). Only one student mentioned the lack of previous personal practice of reading authentic texts. Yet, based on the other answers to the three above-mentioned questions, we can imply that personal practice is what many of them need.

Unsurprisingly, the prevailing factor of limited understanding of the text is vocabulary. This result reinforces the findings documented in earlier questionnaires filled by economics students on entering the university that they overwhelmingly link the progress in learning English to the vocabulary growth as the first and foremost goal of language studies.

In their answers to the second question, the students mostly adhere to three areas which they believe can improve the quality of their reading of economic articles: (1) vocabulary, (2) reading authentic texts, and (3) economic knowledge. Understandably, learning new words is of importance for 10 students; 10 students are sure they need more practice reading authentic texts; 9 students highlighted the need of deeper theoretical and practical economic knowledge.

Other students' ideas concerned mainly the ways and methods of improving their reading skills which included learning how to analyze texts; engaging in discussions while reading authentic texts; guessing the meaning of the unknown words from the context; translating such texts into Russian, and even preparing better for the lessons.

Answering the third question, two students, both fluent users with strong B2+ language level, produced extreme numbers: one believes that the unknown vocabulary should be less than 3% and the other opted for 50%. Beside these two extremes, other numbers vary a lot with 6 students choosing between 10% and 25% and 10 students between 30 and 35%.

The answers to these questions allow us to conclude that 17-18 year-old students have quite deep insights into the issues related to the foreign language skills and their development. Surely, by the time they enter university, they have gained an extensive experience reading sophisticated texts in their native

language. Reflecting on reading in a foreign language they intuitively suggest the ideas which coincide with the findings of the practitioners and researchers.

Indeed, observations of the reading process show that even after the careful reading of the text, non-linguistics students experience significant difficulties in the transition from understanding at the level of word meaning to the semantic level of understanding. This serves as an indirect confirmation of the fact that the very fact of 'knowing words', which is perceived by the majority of students as the primary task of their language growth, does not guarantee an accurate understanding of the text.

Comparing the answers to questions 1 and 3, we observe some discrepancy. Obviously, anyone feels much more confident if the text contains familiar words, hence the importance of increasing vocabulary for the students. Nevertheless, they intuitively know that a person is able to understand texts, containing a certain percentage of unfamiliar words. In this regard, their answers coincide with researchers who have found out that 30% of unfamiliar vocabulary in the text provides an understanding of its general idea, 10% do not hinder understanding the content, and 5% allow understanding the details as well (Klychnikova, 1983, p. 164).

7. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the reading and writing results of in the experimental group practicing CLIL and in the control group practicing ESP provides clear evidence of the benefits of content and language integrated learning as regards such important academic skills as reading and summarizing. Out of the two groups, CLIL students display more confidence while dealing with an authentic text in the foreign language. In the previous semester they studied a content-based CLIL introductory economics discipline using authentic materials. It means they have gained some experience of using the target language for knowledge construction through collaboration with peers. The instructor supported their learning attempts using various scaffolding means and techniques and gave them ample opportunities to independently figure out new concepts in the context.

Like in CLT, one of the major CLIL principles is communication. Yet, the concept is very much different because the language is used for learning: "Language is a conduit for communication and for learning which can be described as learning to use language and using language to learn" (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 54). In this process the instructor and the learners communicate in the academic context and many of the functions learned in CLT are of use in a university class. In addition, the academic setting contributes to the learning of new specific functions related to the learning activity. Both general and academic communicative competences develop supporting each other in interpersonal contacts and in the essential cognitive procedures. In this way, CLIL appears not only to overcome CLT constraints but to enrich the methodology aimed at the development of communicative competences. The functions are adapted to both students' professionally-oriented needs and to building a genuine academic context where the target language is a natural instrument of communication and learning.

The authors believe that if CLIL disciplines are available for undergraduates, especially in Russia with its foreign language deficiency, they can be utilized as an intermediate stage between mainly monolingual school education in Russia and a bilingual or multilingual university setting where English, being an academic lingua franca, is increasingly used as an additional language of instruction. Furthermore,

CLIL practices are promoting the intensification of the process of foreign language acquisition (Khalyapina, Almazova, & Popova, 2017), open new horizons for the university students and allow them to enjoy various bilingual education benefits including those related to globalization and internationalization of education, research and professional mobility.

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