

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INSTRUCTION CONTENT IN DESIGNING AN “ENGLISH FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES” COURSE

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Key words and phrases: course design; English for research purposes; instruction content; language of science; post-graduate foreign language education; professional communication; research discourse.

Abstract: The paper is concerned with the central framework component of “English for Research Purposes” course development, namely, conceptualization of instruction content. Language of science, research discourse and performance in scientific setting have been categorized as the most adequate, basic content elements. Their further structuring and detailed description are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

The problems of conceptualization and organization of instruction content are referred to basic issues in both native and foreign language teaching methodology. The process of conceptualizing content is the process of figuring out which aspects of language and language learning are chosen and integrated in the course. It should be noted that specialists in English language teaching have no unanimous opinion on what should be included in the instruction content. In the narrow sense the content is limited to the choice of language material (grammatical structures and vocabulary) which should be acquired by learners and the sequence of its acquisition. In a broader sense the content includes language functions and notions, topics, communicative situations, language skills, tasks, competencies, learning strategies and culture issues. Which of the above stated categories make sense for designing “English for Research Purposes” course? The way this problem is solved at the department of foreign languages teaching of Tambov State Technical University is featured in the present paper.

Recent achievements in the fields of applied linguistics, language didactics and pedagogy as well as proliferation of methods of language teaching and diversification of English language learners have provided a course designer with plenty of options to consider in deciding what will be the essence of his course [2, 4, 7 – 9]. Now the choices a course designer makes are much more context-based and so involve a number of factors such as who the learners are, their goals and expectations in learning English, the teacher’s own conception of the nature of language and language learning and teaching [3, 10].

Though some literature is available on methodology of formulating content in designing general English courses, no work has been done on categorizing content for teaching such a specific group of learners as scientific workers at the stage of their post-graduate language education. So the aim of this paper is to describe the process of con-

ceptualizing and organizing the content in designing an “English for Research Purposes” course. The results of this study can be useful to university English language teachers who are charged with responsibility of designing specialized courses for post-graduates and young scientists.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONTENT FOR AN “ENGLISH FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES” COURSE

General ways of categorizing instruction content

It seems reasonable to start with the assertion that instruction content is a constantly changing and developing category, rather than a static one. Changes in instruction content throughout history have reflected changes in approaches and methods of foreign language teaching.

To describe and outline possible categories used by teachers for conceptualizing content K. Graves suggested a graphic way in the form of a syllabus grid (Fig. 1). The fact which is noteworthy is that the boundaries between the categories are permeable; they overlap conceptually and are not exclusive of each other. For example, pronunciation is an important part of speaking skills, while vocabulary is a part of notions and topics. The teacher’s challenge is to select which ones are appropriate for her/his course and how she/he will integrate them [10].

Let’s consider the grid starting from the bottom. The traditional way of specifying content which many course designers have experienced is *grammar structures, phonological units and vocabulary*. These aspects of content correspond to the structural view of language according to which language is a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning.

The communicative movement to language teaching which subscribes to the functional view of language (i.e. language as a vehicle for expressing functional meaning) resulted in adding some more categories: 1) *language functions* such as requests, apologies, description, conveying information, etc.; 2) *notions* ranging from general concepts such as time, space, quantity to specific *topic-related notions*, e.g. inflation, industrialization, economic growth, etc.; 3) *communicative situations* (buying stamps at the post-office, visiting a doctor, opening a bank account, finding accommodation).

The proficiency movement led to a *four-skills*-based approach to content categorizing. In such a skills-based syllabus the sub-skills or micro-skills are often highlighted. For example, reading being a macro-skill may be subdivided into micro-skills, e.g. skimming, scanning, reading for gist. Proficiency in writing implies mastering such sub-skills as structuring paragraphs, using cohesive devices, editing techniques, etc.

The focus on communicative competence brought about such content categories as *tasks and activities*. These are activities in which learners need to use language to produce something. Tasks may be either real-world or pedagogic ones. The notion of competence thought broadly as a unity of subject, performer and development competencies brought about the category of *competencies* [5], which can be added to the grid. The fact that *social culture* is not just a fifth skill or even an aspect of communicative competence but the underlying dimension of all one knows and does resulted in adding cultural component into instruction content.

Participatory processes		Learning strategies		Content	
Culture		Tasks and activities		Competencies	
Listening skills	Speaking skills	Reading skills	Writing skills		
Functions		Notions and topics		Communicative situations	
Grammar		Pronunciation		Vocabulary	

Fig. 1 The completed syllabus grid [10: 24]

The learning of language through or in conjunction with the subject matter can be the focus of a language course. Such courses have been called *content*-based. They may teach the subject matter (e.g. computer technology, economics, history) directly or use subject matter as the basis for language-learning lessons. Thus the target language can be both a means for and a by-product of learning the subject matter [1].

The advent of learner-centered approach to teaching emphasized the importance of improving learning skills. Thus the category of *learning strategies*, such as self-monitoring, problem identification, note taking was added to content specifications. Sometimes enabling students to participate in determining the content of their course so that what they do in class gives them the tools to cope with and change what they will encounter outside of the classroom becomes the focus of the course.

To sum it up, the process of specifying instruction content is the process of making choices. Course designers have to decide which categories make sense to them for a given course. This is equally true for English for Specific Purposes courses. According to the recent theory of specialism-oriented English language teaching at tertiary school, content should encompass two basic components – subject matter and language. The former is defined through topics (themes) and communicative situations, the latter – through text types, discourse types, skills and strategies of reception and production, language functions, grammar and vocabulary [9]. With this in mind let's proceed to formulate the content for the course under consideration.

Categorizing content for an “English for Research Purposes” course

It is an accepted practice to start specification of the content for the course with needs analysis. In our case information about needs was provided by engineering post-graduates as well as various people connected to the course, such as English language teachers, ESP researchers and practitioners, University administration, scientific advisors, University professors, ex-postgraduates, colleagues.

The results of needs analysis presented in [6] showed that instruction content for an “English for Research Purposes” course is likely to be the combination of the following three categories – language of science, research discourse and performance in scientific setting (Fig. 2). Let's consider what is meant by each of the components in more detail.

Language of science implies knowledge of specific grammatical and lexical conventions and the ability to use them to produce grammatically and lexically correct

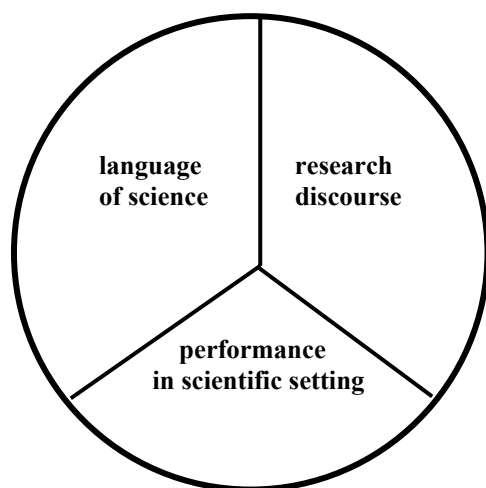


Fig. 2 The basis for conceptualizing instruction content

utterances. *Research discourse* involves knowledge of a set of specific norms and stereotypes of discourse (strategic, genre and rhetoric) behavior in the sphere of scientific communication and the ability to use these rules to produce coherent texts of different research genres and different rhetorical types. *Performance in scientific setting* means applying language knowledge and communicative discourse skills in the real world situations. Further structuring of these components is presented in Fig. 3.

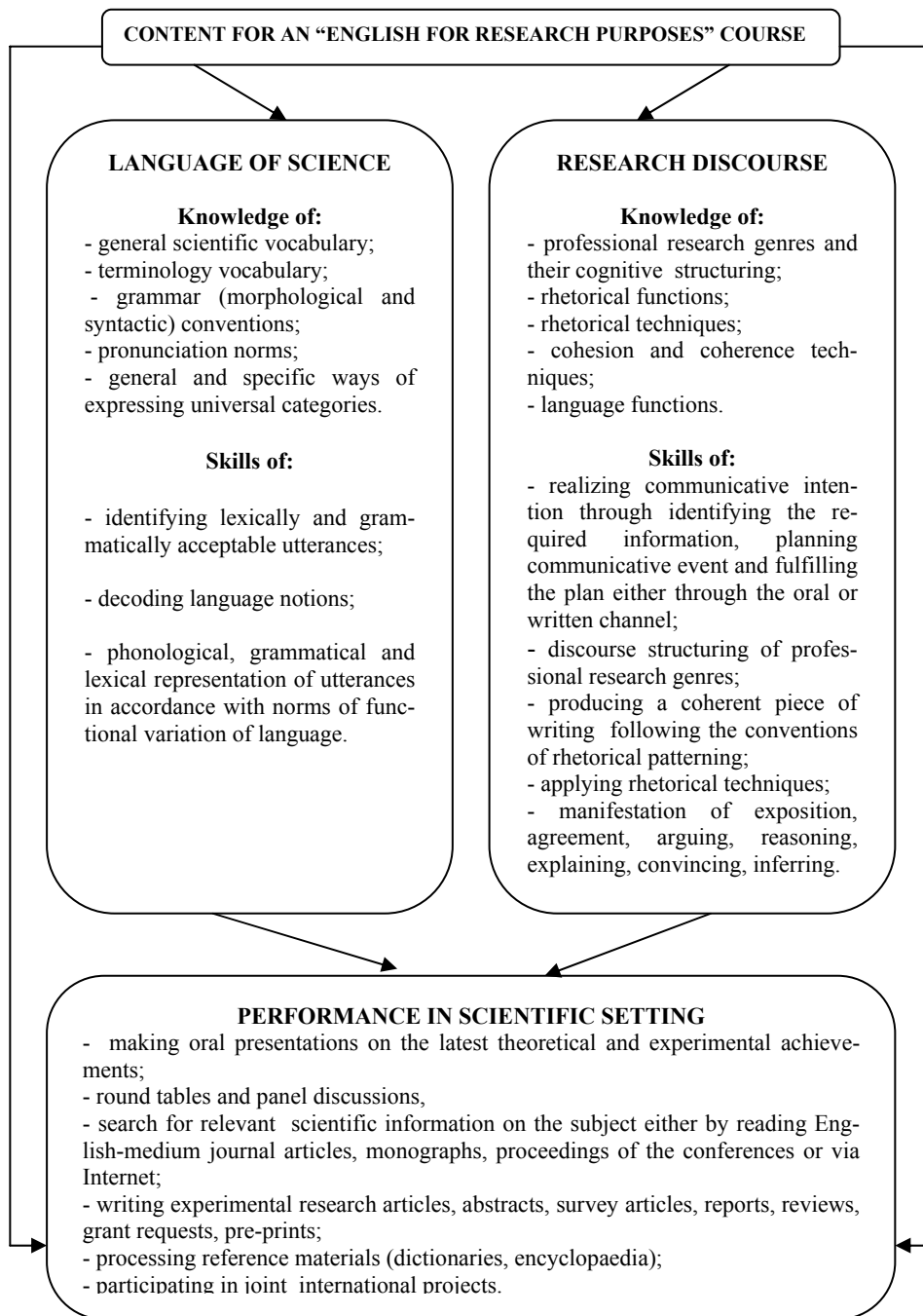


Fig. 3 Structuring the instruction content for "English for Research Purposes" course

As it can be seen from the figure, the first content element, i.e. *the language of science*, treated here as a functional variation of language, involves knowledge of general scientific and terminology vocabularies, grammar conventions, pronunciation norms, general and specific ways of expressing universal categories and the ability to use them to produce grammatically and lexically acceptable utterances.

The second component, *research discourse*, implies 1) knowledge of:

- different research genres and their structures including such discourse elements as ‘Situation’, ‘Problem’, ‘Solution’ and ‘Evaluation’ classified in terms of the communicative functions which they perform in relation to the discourse as a whole, and components of discourse elements, such as ‘Background information’, ‘Previous research’, ‘Question raising’, ‘Indicating a gap’, ‘Purpose of study’, ‘Justification for study’ which correspond to those aspects of text structure which taken together make up the generic structure of a scientific text;

- rhetorical functions (definition, description, generalization, classification, argumentation, visual-verbal relationship);

- rhetorical techniques (time and space order, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, analogy, illustration);

- cohesion and coherence techniques;

- language functions (exposition, agreement/ disagreement, arguing, reasoning, explaining, convincing, inferring, request);

2) and the ability to use this knowledge to produce cohesive utterances of different research genres, appropriate in terms of sub-culture of international scientific community, that is stereotypes, conventions and ideology shared and used by the members of this community.

The third content element, *performance in scientific setting*, can be best described in terms of skills needed to a scientist to communicate in situations typical of research activity:

- inform about the object, subject, objectives of the research, the procedures of the experiment and its results.

- express their opinion, compare and contrast views of different authors;

- prove their point of view, substantiate the case, convince of the correctness;

- refute the opinion of an opponent, criticize his/ her ideas;

- discuss a problem, find out the truth;

- inquire about necessary information;

- evaluate previous scientific achievements;

- make a survey of the existing research works;

- specify information, ask to repeat a question;

- initiate discussion;

- listen to scientific information and understand it correctly;

- find required data in reference sources;

- write abstracts, annotations, articles, reports on the subject of their research, etc.

CONCLUSION

The article has discussed the problems of conceptualizing instruction content in the English language course designed for science researchers at the level of their post-graduate language education. There are different ways of content categorizing in professionally-oriented language teaching. The article provides suggestions for one further way in which language of science, research discourse and performance in scientific setting are figured out as basic components of instruction content. They are thought as a basis for developing linguistic, discourse, strategic and sociocultural competences in research context.

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Концептуализация содержания обучения в проектировании курса «Английский язык для научно-исследовательских целей»

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Ключевые слова и фразы: научно-исследовательский дискурс; последипломное иноязычное образование; проектирование курса; ситуации научного общения; содержание обучения; язык науки.

Аннотация: Рассматривается один из базовых компонентов проектирования курса «Английский язык для научно-исследовательских целей», а именно, концептуализация содержания обучения. Язык науки, научный дискурс и владение языком в реальных условиях научного общения определяются как наиболее приемлемые, базовые компоненты содержания обучения. Они далее структурируются и детально описываются.

Konzeptualisation des Inhalts der Ausbildung in der Projektierung des Kurses «Englische Sprache für die Forschungsziele»

Zusammenfassung: Im Artikel wird eine der Stützpunktkomponenten der Projektierung des Kurses «Englische Sprache für die Forschungsziele», und zwar, die Konzeptualisation des Inhalts der Ausbildung betrachtet. Die Sprache der Wissenschaft, wissenschaftliches Discourse und den Besitz von der Sprache in den realen Bedingungen des wissenschaftlichen Umgangs werden als am meisten akzeptabelen

Stützpunktkomponenten des Inhalts der Ausbildung bestimmt. Sie werden weiter strukturiert und ausführlich beschrieben.

Conceptualisation du contenu de l'enseignement lors de la conception du cours «Langue anglaise dans les buts de recherches scientifiques»

Résumé: Dans l'article est examinée une des composantes de base de la conception du cours «Langue anglaise dans les buts de recherches scientifiques», c'est à dire la conceptualisation du contenu de l'enseignement. La langue de la science, le discours scientifique et la maîtrise de la langue dans les conditions réelles de la communication scientifique sont définis comme les composants de base du contenu de l'enseignement. Ces derniers sont ensuite structurés et décrits en détails.
