

Contemporary Approaches to Teaching Languages in ESP Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in ESP contexts, highlighting how it enhances learners' ability to convey ideas effectively in the target language while also building their confidence in both oral and written communication. The focus of the study is the student-centered approach, which represents a fundamental principle that contemporary language instructors should consistently apply in their teaching practice.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), target language, student-centered approach, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), communicative competence, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The approach to teaching foreign languages has changed significantly alongside new requirements for students to engage in deeper learning and for teachers to conduct lessons more effectively. In the past, learning a language was regarded as having knowledge of a grammatical structure of that language. Indeed, learners were often unable to communicate freely in the language due to excessive attention being paid to theoretical issues and a lack of practical application. However, communicative language teaching (CLT) created opportunities for students to eliminate barriers to using a language successfully. Nowadays, CLT enables learners to utilize the language in real-life situations; more precisely, to put theoretical knowledge into practice. As CLT encompasses a number of vital aspects, including linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation), pragmatic competence (discourse), and sociolinguistic competence (register), it helps to enhance students' communicative competence. Communicative language teaching is mostly concerned with engaging learners in real communication within the sphere of the target language. Thus, a number of demands regarding the appropriate teaching of ESP students exist.

Firstly, it is claimed that most attention should be paid to using a language in real situations (in practice) rather than to language theory. Secondly, an ESP teacher should bring a wide range of appropriate resources, including innovative technologies, into the classroom. Moreover, developing students' critical thinking through the illustration of real-life examples should be a primary aim of a language instructor. Finally, it is not the ESP practitioner but the students who should be at the central point of the lesson, which is known as a student-centered approach (teachers should act as facilitators during a lesson).

The importance of student-centeredness is emphasized by a number of ESP specialists who have worked in teaching English for a long time. These language instructors firmly believe that the student-centered approach should replace the teacher-centered approach in modern methodology. To illustrate experts' opinions on this issue worldwide, David Ross from Houston Community College highlights the importance of student-centeredness through the changing role of the teacher as a facilitator of students' learning rather than as an authoritative source of knowledge. Lola Katz (2003), a cross-cultural

communication consultant from Israel, emphasizes “the appropriateness of the tasks and activities to the level and learning style of the learners and their constant awareness of the reasons for what they are doing.” Casey Peltier from George Mason University Language Institute, however, claims that “younger students rarely know what is good for their language development,” thus limiting student-centeredness to older learners. Jim Williams (2001), an academic coordinator from Pacific Rim Language Institute, describes student-centeredness primarily as “a process of customizing and constantly updating traditional policies and tried-and-true applications.” John Harbord from Central European University in Hungary summarizes “the gist of student-centeredness as teachers’ professional judgment in deciding what is best they can do, while sometimes making concessions to students’ demands so as not to give them the impression that they have been totally ignored.” According to Anthea Tillyer (2003) from City University of New York, there is considerable disagreement about the meaning and implementation of the student-centered classroom. To her, “what really matters is the fact that learning and the needs of the learners should determine our teaching objectives.” Finally, Bill Snyder declares that “a student-centered educational program is not one in which students run the show or one in which their every whim is catered to. Rather, it is one run for their benefit, where the focus of all participants is on helping students acquire what is needed based on a consideration of all viewpoints.” Therefore, from this perspective, students’ views are taken into account but balanced against those of others. Snyder further states that “ignoring students’ wants, even when they do not contribute to their primary objectives, may lead to resentment and lack of motivation.” It is only when students are not considered

or included in the process, and are not informed about why they are doing what they are doing, that curricular decision-making becomes an administrative fiat.

In turn, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) clearly defines the requirements and skills that should be acquired at each level of English proficiency. According to this document, learners at the B1 level can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, and leisure; they can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken; they can produce simple connected texts on topics that are familiar or of personal interest; and they can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions, as well as briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

As can be seen, this extract merely provides a basic explanation of the requirements for learners at the B1 level. In fact, it generally outlines the language proficiency learners should acquire at this stage; more precisely, they should be able to comprehend conversations on familiar issues and express their opinions on personal matters in order to participate in communication in the target language.

The implementation of the European Framework in the educational sphere of Uzbekistan has provided an opportunity to establish certain standards for learners at every educational institution in terms of English proficiency. Based on the requirements of the CEFR, a set of standards has also been developed for teaching English at vocational colleges. Educational standards based on the CEFR specifically indicate the language proficiency of B1-level students by identifying each language skill separately. For instance, when listening to English texts, learners can understand speech related to daily-life conversations and work-

related issues, grasping general and some detailed information. They can comprehend speech on familiar topics that is clear in terms of pronunciation. Moreover, they can understand the main points of radio or television programs about current affairs if the speaker speaks relatively slowly and clearly. In the communicative process, they can engage in conversations related to familiar topics in their professional fields. They can exchange opinions, agree or disagree with others on familiar topics, and provide short reasons. They can connect expressions in a simple way to talk about abstract topics, including culture, hopes, dreams, and ambitions. In addition, they possess sufficient vocabulary to communicate on familiar topics such as traveling.

Along with the requirements for listening and speaking skills, the CEFR document also outlines requirements for reading and writing. Regarding reading skills, B1-level students can understand texts that interest them and mainly consist of familiar language; they can understand work-related language and read texts connected to their professional fields, perceiving general and some detailed information; and they can understand simple tables and charts related to their field. In terms of writing skills, they can produce simple texts on familiar or personally relevant topics.

The State Educational Standards of Continuous Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan also clearly define requirements for learners at the B1 level. In accordance with these standards, while listening, college students are expected to comprehend: (1) authentic and semi-authentic discourse within their professional fields; (2) the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters; (3) the main points of clear standard input on work-related matters; (4) simple radio podcasts featuring relatively slow and clear speech related to students' interests or professional fields;

and (5) the main points of instructions and explanations on familiar topics.

As can be inferred from the requirements of the State Educational Standards, ESP students should be exposed to authentic materials and become familiar with specific language terminology in order to express opinions within their professional spheres. Teaching ESP at colleges requires directing learners toward their professional fields. Bearing in mind that college graduates in Uzbekistan tend to enter the workforce soon after graduation, they should experience language use in real-life situations. Students should be more actively involved in authentic English communication within their professional domains and encouraged to become familiar with the vocabulary related to their majors. Obviously, to achieve this goal during lessons, ESP teachers are required to create an appropriate classroom atmosphere by encouraging students to make progress in developing their language proficiency.

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