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Language as a Form of Social Glue to Hold us Together

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Abstract

Information Systems Management University has experience in developing interdisciplinary modules within the framework of Business English, when the educational language environment serves as the basis for trans-disciplinary cooperation in Management and Information Technologies. On the basis of this Systems approach the authors have worked out the criteria and quantitative indices of interim and final results of student achievements in the English language acquisition. Using these data the authors have calculated the Learning Curve Model for the TOEIC test, reflecting the necessary time and content modules to achieve higher levels of the English language proficiency to ensure young professionals the ability to work on teams to solve complex problems, to think critically, think systemically, work collaboratively and communicate effectively.

Up to now complex historical processes in Latvia have generated a *national identity* conditioned by sharing a common language, traditions, ethnic roots and often religion. Historical processes going on at present in the country (joining EU and NATO, opening the borders) are generating a new identity – *European identity*, conditioned by integration of cultural values, scientific advancements and formation of a common language as a means of communication and cooperation.

The global community of today is joined by the concern about working out global educational strategies aiming to foster a citizen of the world, since all countries understand that education today has to be international to guarantee everyone greater chances for self-realization, personality development and enrichment, for multicultural social inclusion, and for education and employment. Such multiple possibilities enhance motivation to learn languages and expand personal identity.

Cross-cultural differences, national identity, citizenship and intergroup relations are not just buzz words for the country with a diverse ethnic composition: Latvia is a multinational country (Latvians – 52%; Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Polish, Lithuanians and other nations – 48%), so is the body of students who enter the Information Systems Management University. Mixed-nationality groups study together with ‘ERASMUS exchange program’ students who come from different countries. They all have different cultural backgrounds and different English language competences.

Information Systems Management University (ISMU), accredited by Education USA TC as an authorized testing language centre of Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in Riga (Latvia), has a certain experience in developing interdisciplinary modules within the framework of Business English, when educational language environment serves as the basis for trans-disciplinary cooperation in Management and Information Technologies [2-5]. On the basis of the System approach the authors have worked out the criteria and quantitative indices of interim and final

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results of student achievements in the English language acquisition in the course of trans-disciplinary modular learning. Using these data the authors have calculated and worked out the *Learning Curve Model* for the TOEIC test at Information Systems Management University, reflecting the necessary time and content modules to achieve higher levels of the English language proficiency.

Compatible with Volkan's objectives (research programs in the Baltic countries – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) [1], we inaugurated the investigation to promote integration of the two principal *ethnic* components of the student body (Latvian and Russian) and an *ex-component* (Spanish) in the context of the English language acquisition in a multicultural educational environment in the atmosphere of mutual respect and equality.

The inclusive experiment was conducted in purposive student groups of Management, Tourism and Information Systems Departments at Information Systems Management Institute. The total number of students involved into the experiment was 60: 30- control group of the local students; 30- experimental mixed-nationality group). The research was conducted on the basis of inclusive criterion-referenced TOEIC test during the year of 2007. The total amount of contact educational time constituted 120 hours.

The establishing experiment started with some research into the nature of motivation of the ISMI students, their language skills priorities they view as important for their future careers, the needs of the learners and their preferences in teaching methods. The students of the experimental and control groups were offered a questionnaire, comprising of 25 multiple-choice statements and questions.

We separated the notion of motivation into two main categories: *extrinsic* motivation, which is concerned with factors outside the classroom, and *intrinsic* motivation, which is concerned with what takes place inside the classroom. The research has given the following results (Figures 1a, 1b).

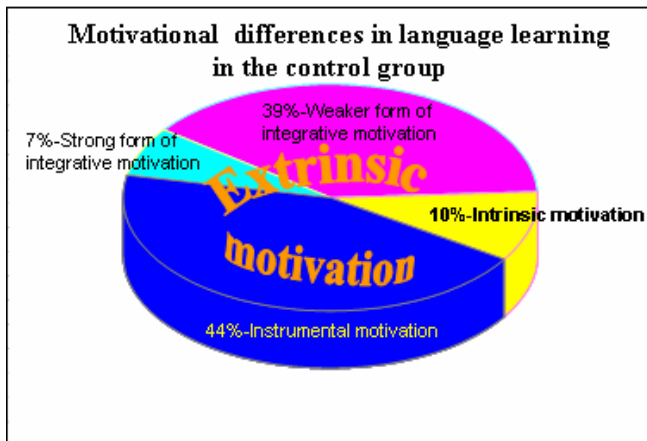


Figure 1a. Motivational differences – Control group

90% - have long-term goals concerning EFL;
 44% - chances to get a better job, position, status or will facilitate their professional advancement and help make a good career; 39% - encouraged by the possibility to travel;
 7% - wish to integrate into an English speaking society.

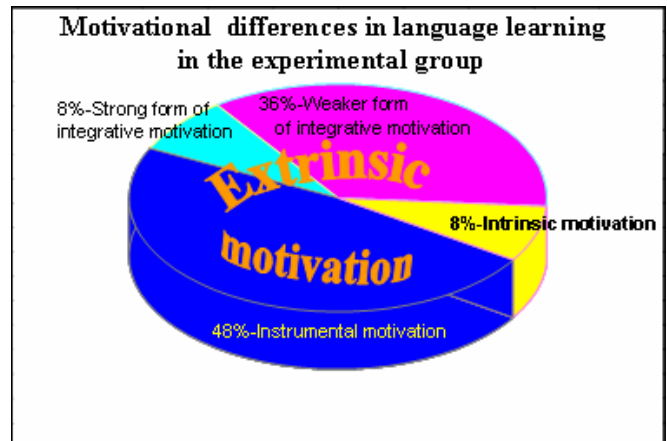


Figure 1b. Motivational differences – Experimental group

92% - have long-term goals concerning EFL;
 48% - chances to get a better job, position, status or will facilitate their professional advancement and help make a good career; 36% - encouraged by the possibility to travel;
 8% - wish to integrate into an English speaking society

As we can see from the pie charts, there are many different reasons for learning the English language, but we are mainly concerned with a classroom situation in which English is being studied.

We have included both those students who have themselves made the decision to study the English language and also those for whom the study of the language is a compulsory part of their education. Still, having different types of motivation, it was important to find out about the skills priorities the students have in connection with learning the language - what they hope to be able to do with the language they are learning (Fig.2).

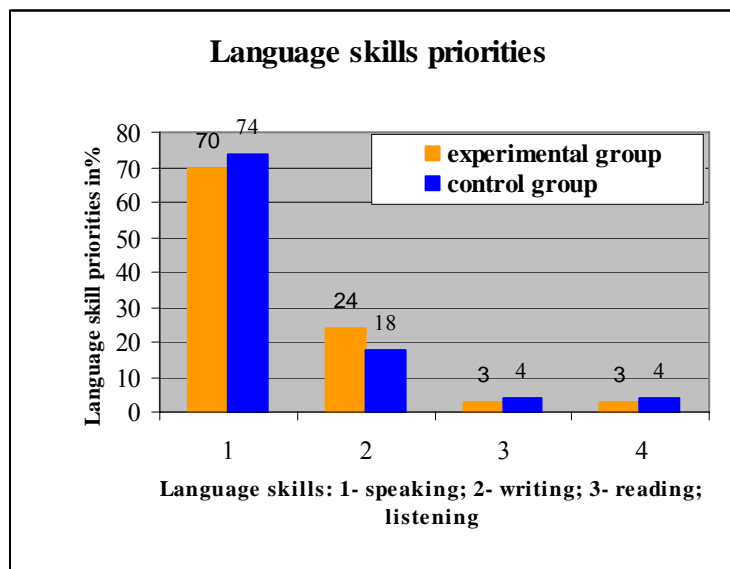


Figure 2. Student options in skills priorities

According to the bar graphs, 70% of students of the experimental group (74% - in the control group) hope to become competent speakers and want to develop good conversational skills. 24% of learners (18% in the experimental group) consider writing skills important for themselves in the future. Reading and listening are left to take care of themselves in both groups, since the students either do not consider developing these skills of a paramount importance for themselves, or they are just reluctant to reading, or think they are able to comprehend written and oral messages. These findings seem somehow strange, since without reading and listening skills it is impossible to build up communicative skills and, ultimately, advance in learning the English language!

Before we decide what kind of practice our class needs, we have to know what they want it for – whether it is for passing an exam, writing business reports, working as telephone operators, understanding computer journals, talking to tourists or for some other reasons. When planning a syllabus, we therefore not only have to consider language structure, vocabulary and idiom, but also how our students will be using these and why.

First, it is clear that they must master as much of the language system as they reasonably can: that is, its grammar, its vocabulary and phonology. However, we must remember at the same time that the process should not be boring. What we need are ways of giving

the learners only the most essential items of language meaningfully, economically and enjoyably to help them become adequate users of the language.

Secondly, it is equally clear that the learners need opportunities to try out language for themselves: in other words, to experience within the classroom ways of communication through the language.

Taking all the aforementioned into account, we attempted the research into the priorities of teaching methods and technologies as viewed by our students in order to find out what kind of activities attract them most and which teaching techniques they sympathize with and find effective in language acquisition. Here are the results (Figure 3).

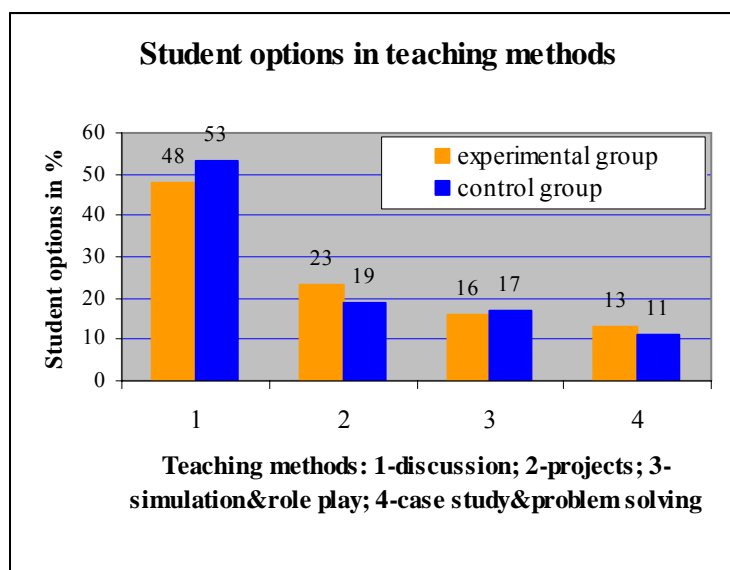


Figure 3. Student options in teaching methods

As the bar graph shows, the students have given their preferences to activities which bear characteristics of communicative interactions, both spoken and written, which contribute to their ability to communicate in English. Still, the situation might seem a bit frustrating since project work, problem solving and case study are considered to be the leading contemporary methodologies among the traditional arsenal of higher education teachers not only in Europe but worldwide.

Communicative activities that the students have chosen mean getting them to actually do things with the language, and it is the *'doing'* that should form the main focus of the learning process in developing communicative language competence.

Dialogue thus has become a central element of our model of classroom practice, which is indeed not only different from many of the techniques that have been used before, but also that it has considerable promise as a problem-formulation and problem-solving philosophy and technology. We will also argue that dialogue is necessary as a vehicle for understanding cultures and subcultures, and that kind of learning will ultimately depend upon such cultural understanding.

The necessary supplement to this model was to ensure a methodological provision for communicative competence development on the principles of the national and international compatibility of teaching methods and evaluation in the field of modern language learning which will strengthen students' independence of thought, judgment and action, combined with social skill and responsibility, by:

- Basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners;
- Defining worthwhile and realistic objectives as explicitly as possible;
- Developing appropriate methods and materials;
- Developing suitable forms and instruments for evaluating student achievements.

Giving our adherence to these principles, we voiced our vision of good practice of competence-based educational programme. The aim was to develop curriculum guides in the core subjects that listed optimal skills and competences in accordance with Professional standards, instructional activities and materials, and minimum instructional time. The programme also required assessment to be linked with competences. The emphasis was on critical thinking, case study, problem solving and effective communication.

A collaborative spirit of the programme began with the development of the Systemic Approach Programme (SAP). SAP took a lead role in fostering cooperation between the various Departments of the Institute and Education USA Information and Testing Center in Latvia, Riga [3-5].

An empirical study was used to analyze the results of the TOEIC Practice Test 1 at Information Systems Management Institute, where thirty learners of the control group and thirty learners of the experimental group were offered the materials of the TOEIC test - a two-hour multiple-choice test that consisted of 200 questions divided into two separately timed sections – Listening and Reading.

We got the results on seven types of task reflecting the levels of the following communicative language competences: 1- Phonological Competence, 2- Functional Competence, 3- Pragmatic-Discourse Competence, 4- Social Competence, 5- Lexical-Semantic Competence, 6- Grammatical Competence, 7- Strategic-Design Competence. The results on seven parameters allowed us to make measurement scales showing each student's level of competence and to compare students with each other, as well as, to compare the levels of competences with each other. (See Fig.4). We calculated the average score of the group's task performance – AS. It gave us the possibility to define the mean index of communicative language competence – MIC (the ratio of the average score to the number of tasks). This is a very important parameter since it reflects not only how successfully students managed to cope with the task, but also the level of their competence in a particular language area. The AS on its own can not be considered as totally objective since it does not reflect the scope of results dispersion in the group, which might result in neglecting weaker students in the educational process. This would turn up a major pedagogical and methodical mistake. To get the objective evaluation, it is vital to take into consideration the standard deviation – SD. If the index of the standard deviation is reasonably low, the homogeneity of results in the group is sufficiently high.

Therefore, to control the quality of student achievement and verify the dynamics of their progress, another component – risk index – RI – has been introduced (a ratio of the standard deviation to the average score – SD/AS), which demonstrates the degree of confidence in the average score – to what extent this figure is objective and reliable. If RI is relatively low, approaching $\rightarrow 0$, it means that the level of mistakes dispersion is rather low and the average score might be quite high and reliable.

The results exposed the most problematic areas in 3- Pragmatic-Discourse Competence, 5- Lexical-Semantic Competence, 6- Grammatical Competence, and 7- Strategic-Design Competence.

This was an alarming signal which demanded a critical analysis of the adequacy of the materials, the methods of teaching, and other components of the educational process. At the same time, the main problem areas mentioned concern the link between the English classes at secondary school level and at the institute. Most Latvian higher education teachers feel that the knowledge students gain at secondary school is not sufficient for a higher education institution. Students come from different regions of the country from schools which are sometimes very poorly equipped, where there are almost no special teachers of English and lots of teachers have had no special training in teaching English.

The analysis of the obtained data helped us to work out educational modules with a special emphasis on the most problematic grammatical areas (e.g., sentence structure, modal verbs, conditional sentences, phrasal verbs, prepositions) as well as reading and writing strategies acquisition, which is closely bound up with vocabulary expansion.

To provide the practice students need for test success, an inclusive in-depth study guide for improving English skills and preparing students to take the TOEIC test, Competence-Oriented Modular Programme for Autonomous Students (COMPAS) has been worked out and implemented in the experimental group. After the course, another TOEIC test was used to see the results and analyze the effects (Fig.4, 5).

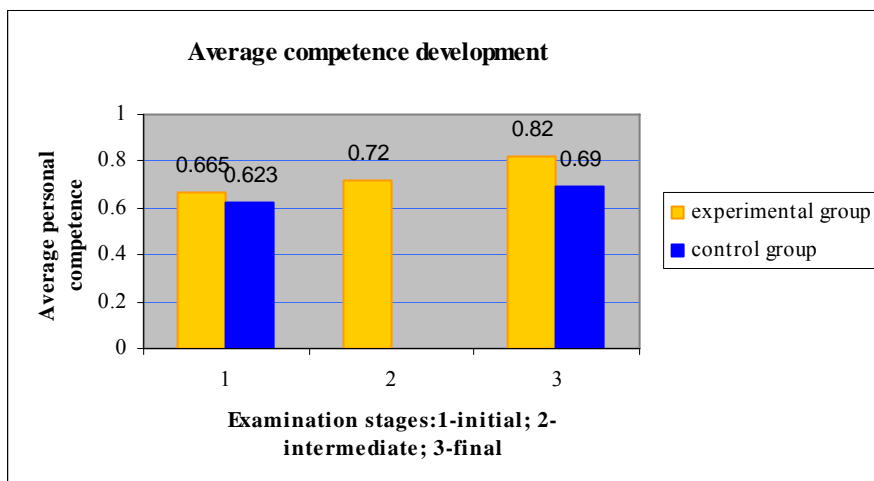


Figure 4. Overall communicative competence level

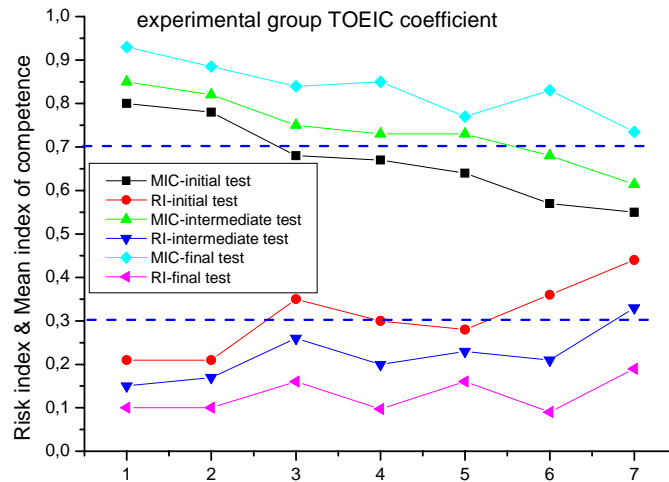


Figure 5. Dynamics of overall communicative competence development in the experimental group

What practical results the implementation of the COMPAS programme has given in the experimental group: the overall communicative language competence of students increased by 20%, which proved to be 16% higher than in the control group (see Fig.6) where students were taught according to the general study programme.

Motivation to study English has positively changed. The language is now viewed as the necessity for self-realization in multicultural environment by 77% (formerly- 48%). But the main thing for the purpose of which we launched the project was the change in ‘perceiving diversity’. The number of students who consider themselves free from national prejudices, according to the questionnaire, constituted 93% in the experimental group (76% in the control group). 86% of students consider that they have to have a chance to choose the language of education (72% in the control group). 32% of students in the experimental group consider themselves Europeans (18% in the control group).

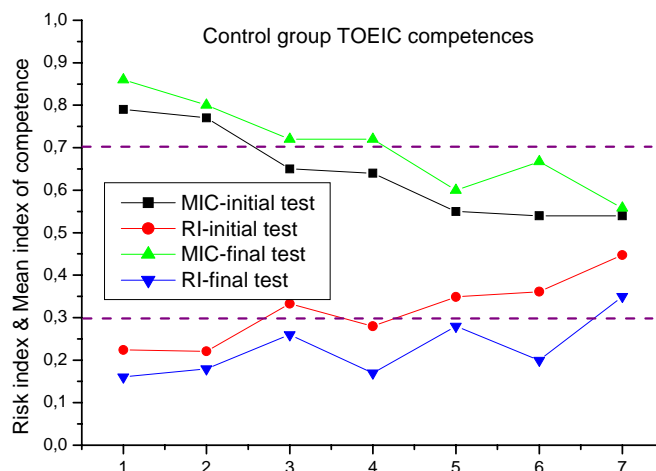


Figure 6. Dynamics of overall communicative competence development in the control group

The English language classroom is the place where all students have equal opportunities to share a common language, where integrated trans-disciplinary module cycles ensure learning and assessment on the basis of the Systemic approach so that students could understand and be given the competency, creativity and confidence to cope with the urgent professional tasks and changes, problem-solving and situation-specific reactions not only within the European society but also globally. This helps generate cognitive dissonance which may result in the modification of negative stereotypes, *evolving identities* especially if these acts are multiple and repeated.

Practice shows that students' personal constructs have shifted toward affiliation and away from indifference or repulsion (not talking about aggression – there were no signs of it). These results are broadly consistent with the expectation of an increase in mutual understanding and sympathy in a culturally pluralistic atmosphere.

Many questions, however, remain to be answered. Still, the expectation is that the result will be a personally and socially transforming experience and would open the door for modifying stereotypes and changing behavior on the basis of the feeling of a common human identity – the main and the most important identity of the whole humanity.

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