

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES – A WAY TO RAISE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INTEREST IN STUDYING ENGLISH. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to observe the changes in attitude and interest of three generations of students attending the Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea, when switching from the study of general English (in the first year) to the study of technical English (in the second year). According to the data collected, starting with year 2007 and ending with 2010, an increased interest in studying English within the context of environmental protection is noticed.

Key words: student, ESP, environmental protection, needs, average, motivation

INTRODUCTION

At present, due to the fast rhythm with which events and scientific discoveries take place in different fields of activities, the need of increasing understanding, when studying English as a foreign or second language, starts to be overcome in comparison with the need of communicating with the people around. Exchanging ideas at a global level is essential in some certain areas, such as: environment, nutrition, medicine, technology, politics, economics and so on (Gubbins, P. & Holt M.: 2002).

More and more individuals have specific academic and professional reasons for seeking to improve their language skills. For these individuals, usually high school students and university students, courses included in English for Specific Purpose (ESP) hold a particular appeal. When we speak about ESP, we think about English language which is integrated into a subject matter area (Dudley-Evans, T. & St. John, M.J., 1998), in our case environmental protection, and language instruction. ESP emerged in the late 1960s and developed differently according to the country (Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A.: 2006). In Romania, ESP was limited to teaching special vocabulary and translating numerous texts at the beginning. Now, some teachers started to focus on communicative competences, intercultural competence and vocabulary awareness. The new approach is a student-centred one, and its goal is to identify the particular needs of the students

(Sysoyev, P.: 1999; Johns, A.: 1991; Laurence, A.: 1997; Kitkauskiene, L.: 2006).

Furthermore, the increase of motivation, when making the switch from studying English as a foreign language (in the first year of study) to English for Specific Purpose (in the second year of study), is assessed for the students attending the Faculty of Environmental Protection, with a major interest in environmental protection.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study of three generations of students (2007-2008; 2008-2009 and 2009-2010) has been had in view, each generation studying English language for four semesters within the Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea. Four grades corresponding to each semester were taken into account for each selected student. As the study to be as accurate as possible, only those students that have four grades at English language were selected.

In the case of generation 2007-2008, the selected students represent 53.52% of the total number of individuals enrolled in the first year of study. The percent is quite low, due to the fact that the abandonment of the faculty is frequent in the first year of study. Other factor for not having all the four grades can be the possibility as the student to pass his/her exams anytime he/she has the possibility, till the end of the four study years.

For generation 2008-2009, the same percent mentioned above is of 39.49% and for generation 2009-2010 is of 61.25%.

It is a well-known practice as the first-year students to study general English, because the teacher tries to reduce the disparities among the students. However, students always have different levels of English knowledge, some of them are beginners, others are false beginners, and others are intermediate or advanced. For the beginner and intermediate students, the first year of studying general English is very useful, because it fills in some gaps that generate a lot of problems when starting to study environment-related English.

In the second year, the teacher begins to teach English specific to environmental protection subject matter by approaching major topics, such as: pollution, ozone depletion, greenhouse effect, acid rain, waste management, renewable and non-renewable energy and endangered species.

The combination between specific vocabulary and language instruction are very motivating, because students have the possibility to apply what they learn in their English classes to their major field of study. By using the vocabulary and grammatical structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases students'

interest. The knowledge and abilities possessed by the student in his/her subject matter field, in turn, enhance their ability to acquire English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the grades achieved by the students that study within the University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, specialization: Environmental Engineering, starting with the year 2007 and ending with 2010, led us to the following results:

- generation 2007-2008 had the average of 8.73 in the first semester and of 7.95 in the second semester (first year of study). The average of the two semesters in the first year of study was of 8.35. It must be mentioned that in the first year of study, the students learn English as a Foreign Language. In the second year of study, when the study of environment-related vocabulary started to be taught, an increase in the grades of the students was noticed. This fact makes us believe that their motivation to study English increased due to the introduction of a vocabulary and some grammatical structures specific for their specialization. Thus, in the second year, first semester, the average was of 9.07 and in the second semester of 8.78. The average of the second year was of 8.92, with 0.57 more than in the first year. (See Figure 1)

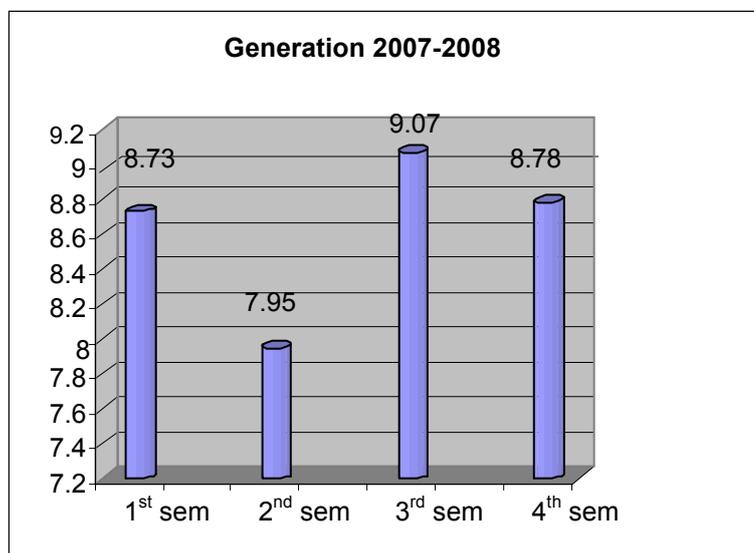


Fig. 1. Averages for generation 2007-2008

- the same increasing results are noticed in the case of generation 2008-2009. If in the first year, the average was of 8.16 (first

semester – 8.61, second semester – 8.87), in the second year, the average knows a similar increase with that of generation 2007-2008, of almost 0.50. Thus, the average of the second year is of 8.87 (average in the first semester is of 9.63 and in the second semester is of 8.12). (See Figure 2)

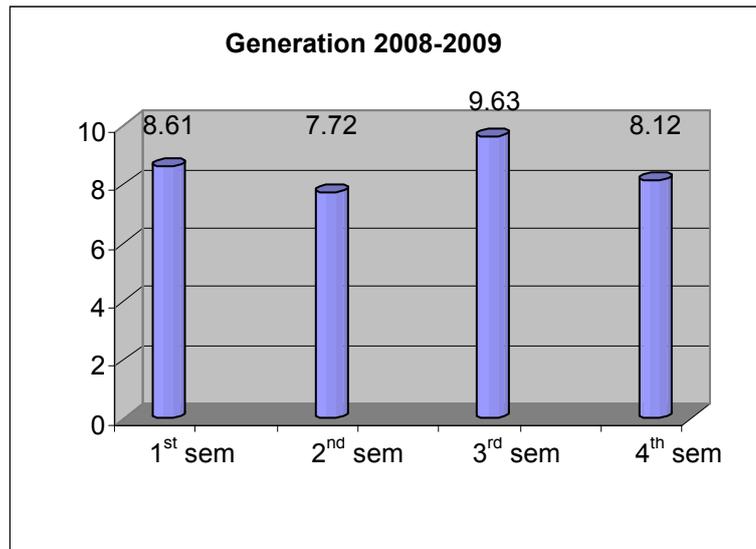


Fig. 2. Averages for generation 2008-2009

- because generation 2009-2010 didn't finish the second year of study, only the first one, it has an average of 8.52 (the average on the first semester is of 8.36 and on the second semester is of 8.69). This average represents the best one in the last three years; therefore, we can suppose that once the technical English being introduced for study, the average of the second year will increase with at least 0.50, with respect to the first year (See Figure 3).

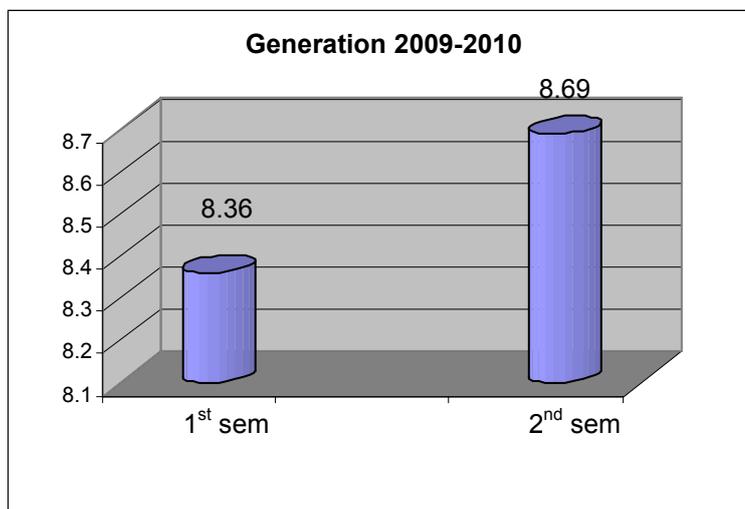


Fig. 3. Averages for generation 2009-2010

- A slight increase in the average of the first year of study is noticed for all the three generations, from one year to another (excepting generation 2008-2009). The differences among the three average (8.35, 8.16 and 8.52) are not very significant, maybe because the usage of the modern and continuously updated methods and materials in teaching English was made a long time ago (starting with 2000), (See Figure 4). If in high school the teacher is forced to use a textbook for performing his/her activity, in the university, the lecturer has the freedom to choose his/her own materials, to design his/her own practical course, so that it could meet the students' needs.

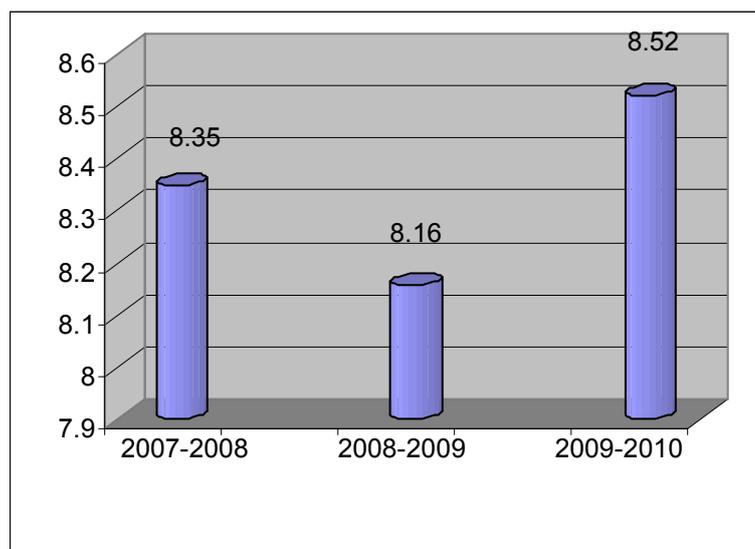


Fig. 4. Averages for the three generations in the first study year

CONCLUSIONS

The present study organized in the Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea proved through the collected data for the period 2007-2010:

- the positive evolution of students' motivation from one year to another, through the introduction of technical English specific for environmental subject matter in the second year of study. This fact was clearly reflected by an increase in the average with about 0.50;
- an increased motivation for studying English, due to the implementation of a new approach of teaching ESP (not only by translating specialized texts), which consisted in the usage of some updated materials tailored to the students' needs, and in the introduction of specific exercises with grammar explanation and language in use activity worksheets, with focus on language, inherent in specific discourse, group discussions, debates, individual tasks, quizzes, interactive exercises and audio-video word-building activities;
- the need for a collaborative work between the ESP teacher with the subject matter teacher.

The interpretation of the collected data in this study makes us consider necessary the design of a textbook that will meet the needs of the students studying environmental engineering. The knowledge of this "jargon" can represent an opportunity to having access to new information, found either in virtual libraries that host journals with valuable papers and research studies (presenting the last discoveries in the field), or in magazines, books and volumes written by different scientists in the field. Taking part in students exchange programmes, or in different activities within international projects (Sifokis, N & Sougari, A.: 2003), or their participation in different international manifestations (conferences, symposiums, workshops, seminars, and round tables) can represent an extra motivation to learn English language in environmental context.

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