

Learning Skills and Difficulties Encountered by Students During Acquisition of a Foreign Language for Specific Purpose

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Abstract

Through this research, we analyze the learning skills, and thus competencies, needed by students during the learning process and the acquisition of a foreign language for specific purposes. The purpose of such research is not only to identify the difficulties they encounter during the learning process, but also to introduce special techniques and strategies for a specific teaching process aiming at the enhancement of communicative competence as the primary goal of the teaching/learning process. The applied method is that of a survey (40 hours of study time). We have highlighted and commented on the most common difficulties for students, based on an assessment table. In the second part of the research, based on the survey results, teaching suggestions and techniques are presented which help students to overcome obstacles and guide them to acquire learning skills toward the ultimate acquisition of specialized communicative competence. Besides the theoretical part, practical aspects of didactic activities related to the analyzed skills are presented.

Keywords: Skills, competence, teaching, learning, language for specific purposes, micro skills, macro skills.

Introduction

Foreign language for specific purposes is part of the University curricula in Albania. Although such teaching experience has been developed since many years, there are still complex issues as it is difficult to establish a separation line between study and acquisition of foreign general language and specific sector language.

Besides the four basic language skills known as macro skills (*reading, listening, speaking and writing*), students who study a foreign language for specific purposes

must acquire other skills which can be defined by the term micro skills, such as: reading and understanding a text in a language for specific purposes, the use of vocabulary, the acquisition of new specific lexis, library work, preparation for examinations, the management of a study method, systematic note-taking, text briefing, improvement of memorizing capability, formulating hypotheses to understand a definition, the acquisition of new research techniques, the preparation and presentation of a report, etc. These skills can be used for learning a foreign language in general, but in the framework of a foreign language for specific purposes, they are even more specific.

What are the difficulties actually encountered by students during the acquisition of a foreign language for specific purposes?

To answer the above question, we present the results obtained through a survey, as explained below:

1. Survey of difficulties related to learning skills.

In order to gain insight into and analyze the difficulties students face in acquiring skills to learn a foreign language for specific purposes, we have implemented a survey method.

The focus group consists of first-year students of the Faculty of Medicine, University “Zoja e Këshillit të Mirë”, in Tirana.

Their **language proficiency** is B1¹.

Used text ‘Italian for doctors²’.

Duration of the survey: 40 study hours.

Number of students: 40 (20 in each group of the same level).

The goals of utilizing this method: To obtain information on and identify the difficulties of students in the acquisition of a foreign language for specific purposes in the medical field. More precisely, the aim of this survey is to define the difficulties encountered during the learning process.

Survey Methodology:

We prepared a table of study skills that are required for the acquisition of the Italian medical language.

Table 1.

Survey Table to Put in Evidence Difficulties During the Learning Process

Reading and understanding the textt		
Fluent reading	present	is not present

Understanding of text	Understands and expresses concepts in Italian.	Understands but has difficulties in expression of concepts	Does not understand concepts
Capability to perform text briefing			
Distinguish primary information from secondary one	Capability to perform text briefing		Difficulty to perform text briefing
Capability to prepare a written report			
Use of medical terms	Not used at all	Used with difficulty	Used easily
Providing arguments to support/contradict a given thesis	Do not provide arguments at all	Difficulties in providing arguments	Provide easily arguments
Orthography of the word	Correct	Wrong	
Structure	Correct	Wrong	
Form of active/passive verbs	Correct	Wrong	
Capability to present a report			
Types of presentation	Qualitative & independent thinking	Simple/Mechanic/no independent thinking	
Presentation methods	With Power Point	Without Power Point	

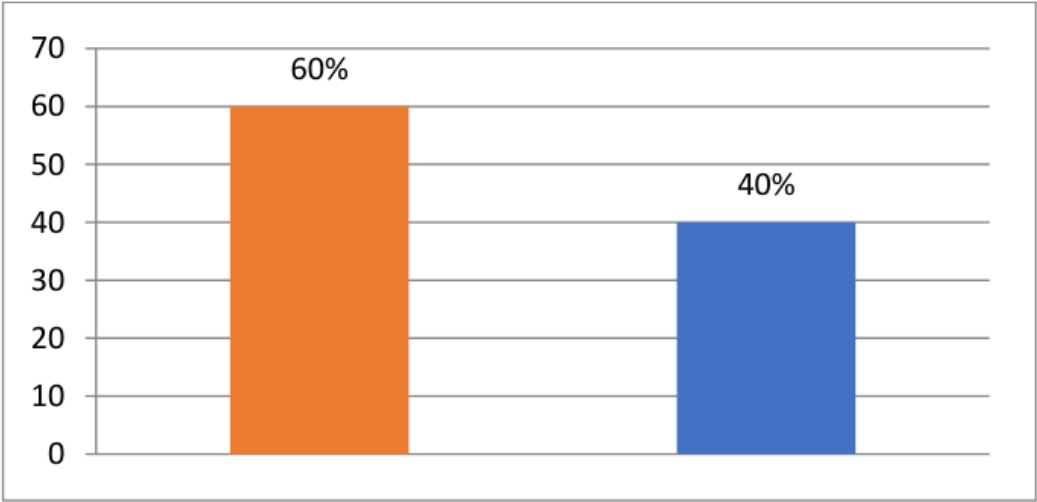
1.1. Reading and Understanding the Text

The survey showed that more than 50% of the students had difficulties in reading and understanding a new text. 30% of them understood the concepts of the text but had difficulties in expressing them in the Italian language; 20% of the students were not able to give correct answers to questions related to understanding the text.

Leximi i tekstit te ri 50% 50% me lehtesi me veshtiresi	Kuptimi I tekstit kupton & shpreh konceptet 20% kupton, por ka veshtiresi ne 50% shprehjen e koncepteve 30% Nuk kupton konceptet
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1.2. Capability to Synthesize

The survey showed that only 40% of the students possessed good skills to synthesize a relatively long text. 60% of them had difficulties in determining the level of priority of information.

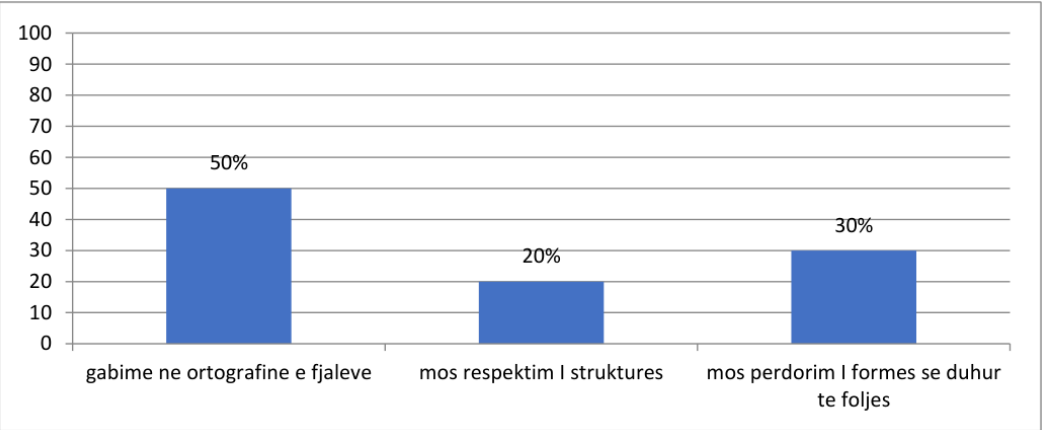


60%

40%

1.3. Capability to Prepare a Written Report

The survey showed that 50% of the students made mistakes in the orthography of words and terms. 30% of the students used active verbs instead of passive ones. 20% of them did not follow the structure according to the form:



50%

30%

20%

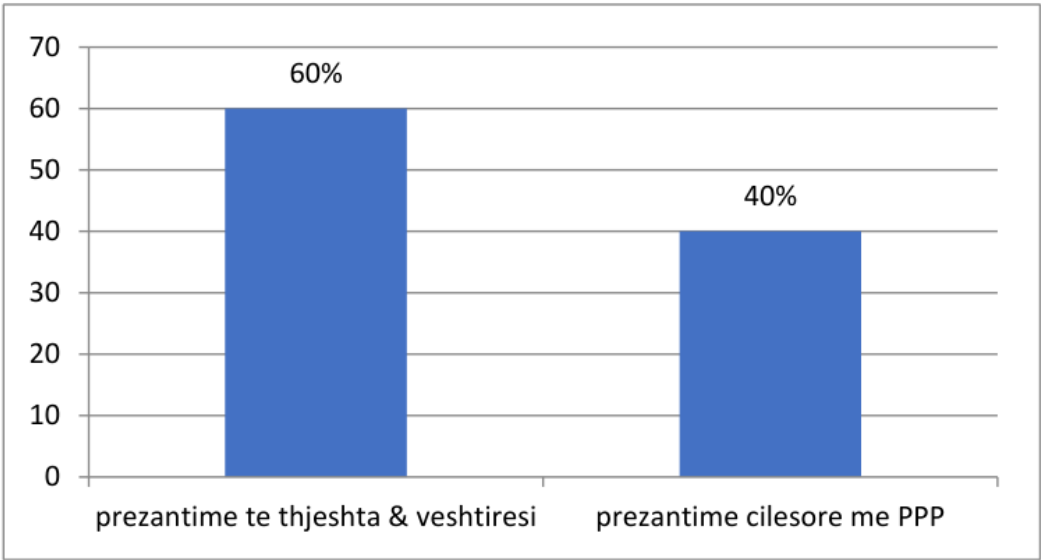
introduction-development of arguments-conclusions.

Capability to Present a Report

Communication in a language for specific purposes is the expression of opinion in a discipline related to the referring subject through the communication scheme of that discipline. Students must gain knowledge and be able to manage the way of thinking of experts in the discipline that is the subject of language study.

The survey showed that 60% of the students presented their work simply by reading it and had difficulties in giving an independent opinion, especially in the concluding part. Although they had acquired the medical terminology, they had difficulty, namely, in giving arguments to oppose or support a certain thesis.

Power Point Presentation resulted more qualitative and interesting (40%) against the simple presentations.



60%

40%

2. Teaching techniques and didactic activities related to learning skills.

Based on the results obtained through the survey method, which brought to light difficulties encountered by students during the learning and acquisition process of a foreign language for specific purposes, we are going to analyze the learning skills in more detail by introducing theoretical suggestions and teaching techniques aimed at acquiring not only linguistic skills, but communicative ones as well.

2.1. Capability to Read and Understand a Text in a Foreign Language for Specific Purposes

The didactics of foreign languages for specific purposes primarily emphasizes the skill of reading or understanding the text, as reading means understanding as well. The task of a foreign language teacher is to introduce a text that is meant *to speak, be read and reread*, guiding the student to fully comprehend it. By acquiring reading strategies, it becomes easier for students to access very difficult texts in various areas. This is no longer a matter of deciphering texts in a linear way, but of perceiving their meaning based also on linguistic indicators (*title, content*) or extralinguistic indicators (*images, signs, diagrams*), typical of languages for specific purposes.

Reading does not consist in the simple perception and understanding of all words in a text, as it is a reason-guided activity through which the reader seeks answers. Unlike in the past, when the reading process was considered a skill to distinguish letters and words, where words were used to construct a sentence, and sentences were used to make paragraphs to make long speeches, nowadays it is seen as a vivid, organic intellectual and thinking process, always in action, where the reader achieves an understanding of the text rather than merely reproducing its words. It is not merely a thinking function, but the result of many factors defined more appropriately as skills.³

In order to study a text in a foreign language for specific purposes, it is necessary to use special techniques that make possible the determination of principal ideas organized in a critical and organic manner. Any newly received information is not simply added to that which we already possess, but it offers new tools for understanding, thus creating a new asset in individual knowledge.

The Chart below presents the consecutive line of actions to be followed during the reading-learning process:

Highlight the text Review the text Ask the text Read the text

2.2. Capability to Summarize in a Synthetic Way a Text of Language for Specific Purposes

Making a synthesis of a text in a given language for specific purposes involves not only skills of a linguistic nature, but also of a logical nature. Such an activity requires the shortening of the text in quantitative terms and keeping the communicative function unchanged. It also requires that the semantic content of the text is not lost.

The teacher of a foreign language for specific purposes must guide students by suggesting the required techniques to summarize a text. Students need practice to acquire the following skills:

❖ Read the text by starting with the general elements and continuing with the more specific ones, or, figuratively, from macroscope to microscope; ❖ Understand different parts of the text; ❖ Understand the logical-pragmatic relationship between various parts; ❖ Understand its main target; ❖ Define priority levels among the information provided by the text by distinguishing the essential from secondary elements as a function of the priority goal of thoroughly understanding the text; ❖ Reformulate the text by defining relationships between different parts and by amending it time after time;

Below are provided some didactic activities that can be utilized to support reading and text-summarizing skills in a language for specific purposes.

Activity 1:

Read the title and make remarks on the general understanding of the text.

Activity 2

After reading the text, put in two columns the sentences that outline the logical reasoning part and those related to the explanatory part.

Activity 3

Read the text and underline the specific information found in it.

Activity 4

Define a level of priority for the information given in the text by distinguishing the essential from the secondary to support the priority goal previously identified;

Activity 5

Read the passage and underline the key words in each paragraph.

Activity 6

Underline the logical/pragmatic relationships between various parts of the text.

Activity 7

Read the passage in 2 minutes and summarize it in the form of a synthesis.

2.3. Capability to Write a Language for Specific Purposes

Among the various didactic teaching/learning activities for learning a foreign language for specific purposes, reading activities are important. It is suggested that these activities take place at the end of a didactic session, as it is believed that

linguistic competences (morphosyntactic, lexical, and textual rules) and those related to content have been acquired.

Teachers must guide students by giving them pertinent suggestions and standard, typical models for a given language for specific purposes, and only after that can students be independent in performing a certain type of activity.

Therefore, after reflection and planning, students must take notes on the arguments they plan to treat and the ideas they plan to present. They cannot write in a clear manner if their ideas are confused or if they have insufficient knowledge of the selected arguments. After this process, the notes taken are structured and the work design is prepared. Work begins with its composition, and during the first review, students must check whether coherence and cohesion within the text are achieved. They must also monitor their lexical choices by selecting the most appropriate terms and verify the orthography with the help of a vocabulary. It is suggested that they use specific terms of the discipline under study. Students must pay equal attention to different parts of the text and may use expressions and linking elements that bring to light the pragmatic value of paragraphs by listing them in a coherent manner and avoiding repetition. Thus, it is of the essence that ideas are not only accurate and expressed in a correct linguistic manner, but that they also comply with a structure that can be considered conventional in a given discipline.

Besides suggestions, teachers can offer students, through didactic activities, standard text models of the specific sector (reports, minutes, descriptions of experiments, etc.), in which those aspects related to the organization of the text and the utilization of formal elements typical of a given language for specific purposes are underlined.

Below, we provide some examples of didactic activities which aim at the acquisition of capabilities to compose and write a text in different languages for specific purposes.

• Suggestions on performing didactic activities

In order to achieve a higher level of independence, students can be provided with sufficient information and data on the content and goal of the text they have to write. Didactic activities can be carried out that involve the following comparative tasks: concept/definition, problem/solution, comparison/distinction, cause/consequence, proposal/support with arguments, purpose/activity, and, finally, drawing conclusions.

Another technique would be the distribution of various texts of a scientific-professional nature where linking elements are missing (interfixes, expressions). Students are asked to put together sentences by placing the missing words in the proper position; or, when given different sentences that convey the same concept, students are requested to combine them into compound sentences or paragraphs.

This technique enables students to create and write text by following coherence and cohesion criteria as two crucial features of a written text.

By following the suggestions and provided models, students can gradually gain complete independence and become capable of composing and writing a text professionally.

2.4. Capability of Presenting a Report

The presentation of a report or an assigned task requires the possession of specific skills which can be acquired through targeted didactic instruction.

The initial step for the students is to structure the argument. Questions are raised such as: What do listeners need or want to hear about the selected argument? How much new information do they need to receive?

Secondly, the purpose of the presentation is defined: (*what is the most crucial and important point to be understood?*)

Thirdly, it is necessary to prepare a synthetic outline that includes the primary topic and auxiliary ones. For this purpose, it is necessary to collect valid supporting information. (*What information better supports the main topic? What information can better attract the attention of listeners?...*).

Fourthly, it is necessary to select a suitable structure for the presentation. For example, in the case of describing experiments, the following scheme can be adopted: introduction, materials, procedures, results, discussion.

Fifthly, the selection of suitable audiovisual supporting tools that have an impact on attracting listeners' attention can easily reflect the presented arguments and facilitate their understanding.

Preparation of the introductory part is crucial, as listeners have the opportunity to become acquainted from the start with essential information needed to understand the argument. Given the fact that languages for specific purposes are characterized by many definitions, it is of the utmost importance to explain them during the introductory part of the presentation. For this purpose, techniques can be used to become familiar with specific terminology through various modalities of utilizing linguistic acts.

The concluding section must reiterate the essential elements in a summarized manner to draw conclusions, leaving open the possibility of treating an argument at another time or, figuratively speaking, closing a door but opening a window.

Conclusion

The learning and acquisition of a foreign language for specific purposes are difficult and present a challenge for both actors in the educational process: the student and the pedagogue. On the other hand, such difficulties turn out to be strong points,

resulting in a mutual interrelation between the teacher, who is competent in the foreign language and has general knowledge of the specialized discipline, and the student, who is competent in a given specialized discipline but lacks linguistic knowledge. This situation has an impact on enhancing teacher-student didactic communication, giving rise to what is called collaboration didactics.

The teacher of a foreign language for specific purposes must create, through their educational and didactic activities, communicative situations and elaborate didactic strategies to facilitate the reduction of difficulties encountered by students during the process of learning a language for specific purposes. The final outcome is a type of teaching aimed at the enhancement of communicative competence in different scientific-professional situations.

The methodologies used should be in compliance with the didactic goals, which must ensure harmony between language and micro-language objectives and communication objectives in a foreign language for specific purposes.

During the teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes, the teacher must work by making use of didactic activities aimed at the integrated use of macro-capabilities and micro-capabilities. Language skills are generally of a transversal type, as they are not specific to a given language for specific purposes, but once acquired in one of them, they can be transferred to other languages for specific purposes. Thus, the acquisition of a foreign language becomes a tool of scientific and professional cohesion for linguistic communities all over the world.

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Notes

1. *Language Proficiency as per Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*

2. Forapani D., *L'italiano per i medici*, Alma Edizioni, Prill, 2004.

3. B.M. Brazon, *Il processo del leggere*. Liviana, Padova 1974. Fq 137