

## Reflections on Language Teaching at Tertiary Level

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### ABSTRACT

“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”

*Heraclitus*

The article provides insights into the current situation in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level in a non-linguistic higher education institution in Bulgaria. It also represents some significant research findings on the topic. Moreover, it may raise the awareness of language education specialists and teacher trainers about the need for teacher training courses aiming at facilitating the implementation of the advances in the field of language teaching. It is expected that it may also appeal to university language teachers to maintain their lifelong learning habits and keep up with the advances in the field.

**Keywords:** language teaching, language learning, tertiary level

### Introduction

We live in unprecedented times of change affecting all spheres of life and language teaching is not left unaffected. If we attempt to describe English Language Teaching (ELT) with one word, it will probably be “change”. Adaptability and flexibility are the only constant characteristic features of ELT. EL teaching has always integrated versatile methods and approaches based on the types of learners – mixed-ability groups or homogeneous groups and their needs analysis, course objectives, time and syllabus. Keeping up with the developments in language acquisition and methodology along with the tidings in technology relevant to language learning are some of the ways to shape the future of ELT. Developing linguistic competence in an academic setting differs from teaching General English for several reasons – the age factor of the learners, their needs in terms of field-related language, and the specific objectives of the course. Within the research scope of language learning as far as age is

concerned, opposing theories exist. Harley & Hart (1997, p. 391) support the idea that memory plays an important role for young learners, while analytic abilities in older learners account for language acquisition. Another study by Ekstrand (1976, p. 130) illustrates that older learners outperform younger learners revealing that second language learning gets better with age. Nevertheless, young learners and older learners display extensive cognitive, intellectual and psychological differences that should be taken into account in language teaching. Older learners are superior to younger learners due to their maturity and experience, better study habits, more focused attention, and associative memory. Language aptitude depends on individual factors such as motivation as well. Motivation and positive attitude of both teachers and learners make up the amalgam resulting in better performance in the language class. Language programs can be more beneficial for students if they find ways to boost learners' motivation. Success or failure in this venture is dependent on individual as well as institutional determinants such as curricula and syllabi.

### Objectives and research questions

The article provides insights into the current situation in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level in a non-linguistic higher education institution in Bulgaria. It also represents some significant research findings on the topic. Moreover, it may raise the awareness of language education specialists and teacher trainers about the need for teacher training courses aiming at facilitating the implementation of the advances in the field of language teaching. It is expected that it may also appeal to university language teachers to maintain their lifelong learning habits and keep up with the advances in the field. It addressed the following questions: Which is the most significant objective of the language course at the tertiary level? Is language fluency more important than accuracy? What are the current trends in language acquisition?

### Methods

The literature review was employed as the primary research method. Data were collected through focus group observation, teacher reflections and a literature review of 11 articles relevant to the topics discussed. The focus group included university students at a non-linguistic higher education institution.

### Results and discussion

The specific objectives of the language course at tertiary level vary drastically depending on the professional field. Nevertheless, all of them share the same characteristic features as far as language acquisition is concerned (Fig. 1).

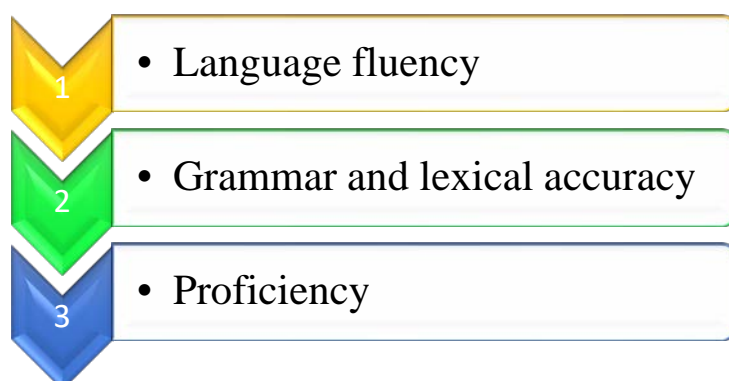


Fig. 1. Language course objectives

The first objective of the language course is to develop language fluency. It refers to oral production flowing easily, smoothly and eloquently. Research by Tavakoli & Skehan (2005) suggests that fluency consists of different sub-divisions, such as speed fluency (rate and density of delivery), breakdown fluency (number, length and distribution of pauses in speech) and repair fluency (number of false starts and repetitions). Although a fluent person uses language with ease, this is not enough to have high levels of proficiency. The second step to it is developing grammatical and lexical accuracy. The proper use of context-based vocabulary is crucial and the chosen professional domain requires in-depth knowledge of the field. Limited or even inappropriate vocabulary along with inaccurate grammar structures result in poor language use and a lack of discourse competence. Based on my experience, students are afraid of performing speaking tasks, which is one of the highest anxiety-provoking activities, due to the lack of grammar accuracy. Hammerly (1991, p.12) points out that “accuracy is performative knowledge of the language or linguistic ‘know-how’, i.e. the ability to use the language according to its systematic characteristics.” High lexical variety and grammatical complexity make up language unity. Learner coherent output is a daunting task and both fluency and accuracy are equally significant for a skilled language user. Proficiency can be measured both as a receptive and productive skill resulting in overall mastery of the language in terms of syntax, vocabulary and semantics. Lastly, achieving proficiency and enhancing students’ professional knowledge in their target realm is the ultimate goal of the language course at the tertiary level. Processing the foreign language input, and quickly and accurately responding to it is what being proficient means. Moreover, demonstrating language abilities can be beneficial for future professionals, providing them with better career options.

The next logical question is which approach should be adopted to achieve all these goals. Different approaches pave the way to successful learning. The last century of language teaching focused on the dichotomy of systematic instruction – communicative interaction. Hammerly (ibid., p. 52-53) is in favor of a more balanced method encompassing both structure and communication. He goes on to state that the early emphasis on accuracy does not prevent, but rather facilitates the subsequent development of fluency (ibid., p. 54). Swain (1985) proposes a ‘comprehensible output’ that appends the idea of accuracy. Only at this stage, students’ professional competence can be upgraded through focused and explicit language instruction based on the aforementioned juxtaposition. The complexity of language teaching and learning cannot be restricted by the latest trends. When we build up knowledge based on the existing linguistic foundation, when we fully understand its building blocks, then the harmonious trinity fluency-accuracy-proficiency will be achieved. The way to attain excellent results in the language classroom, which is supposed to be our aim, derives from the idea of the 3 Rights (Fig. 2):

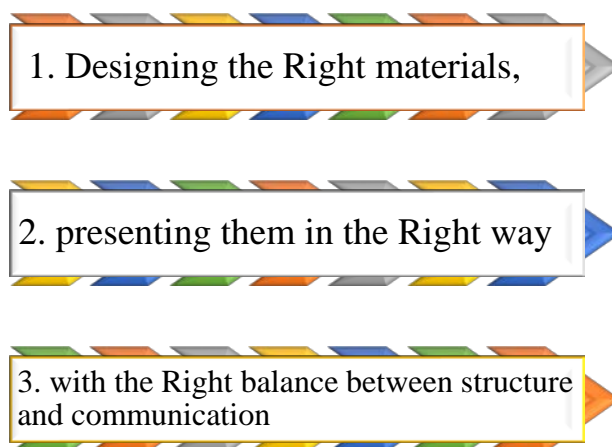


Fig. 2. The 3 Rights

In response to the academic performance of students, and in order to meet certain academic criteria, needs analysis can be the tool for achieving a thorough picture of the student's needs and preferences. Johnson K. (2008, p.200) points out that: "in order to plan a foreign language teaching we need to find a way of analyzing learners' needs. What is going to tell us just how much, and for what purposes our learners will need which foreign languages, it is the process of needs analysis." Saragih (2014, p. 59) expresses the opinion that needs analysis is crucial in designing teaching materials for English for Specific Purposes. These two statements refer to the underlying principle of syllabus design, which is based on the needs analysis process. A syllabus is a kind of representation of linguistic content. Grounded in my experience, the more difficult the activity is, the more discouraged the learners are. Identifying the students' language competence and their learning requirements can help address their knowledge gaps. Conducting a needs analysis is possible through a self-designed questionnaire based on open-ended or closed-ended questions such as:

- **How advanced are you in terms of using English for general purposes? (from 1-3)**  
*(1-elementary; 2-intermediate; 3-advanced)*
  
- **What are your future goals?**
  1. To do further study in English
  2. To be confident in using English in any professional context
  3. To be able to communicate with colleagues
  4. Other.....
  
- **Which activity is the most difficult for you?**
  1. Face-to-face communication
  2. Reading English texts
  3. Understanding English in recorded messages
  4. Writing texts in English
  
- **Which activities are most beneficial for your English learning?**
  1. Reading comprehension tasks
  2. Listening comprehension tasks
  3. Vocabulary practice
  4. Grammar practice
  5. Speaking tasks
  
- **Rank your preferences from most helpful to least helpful (1-4)**
  1. Individual work
  2. Pair work
  3. Group work

Knowing the learners' strengths and weaknesses in advance can help teachers avoid mediocrity and foster language learning. Additionally, Chandrasekaran et al., researchers at

The University of Texas at Austin, have discovered a connection between the ability to learn a foreign language during adulthood and genetic variation in the FOXP2 gene, which could explain why some learners are more successful than others are despite their endeavors.

Learning a language is a process of constant upgrading. It is the same with teaching a foreign language. At this point, we should differentiate between learning and acquisition. Kramina (2000, p. 27) claims that language acquisition is opposed to learning and is a subconscious process resembling the way children acquire their first language. Kramina (2000, p. 27) goes on to state that language learning is a conscious process which is the result of either a formal learning situation or a self-study program.

The lack of language teacher training courses results in gaps between contemporary knowledge and practice. Enrollment in such courses to keep up with the advances and the current trends in the field should not be the sole responsibility of the teacher; it should be institutional policy. According to Johnston (2009), professional development is self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning by teachers. Darling-Hammond (1998) points out the link between good teaching and student success. Good teaching can only be achieved through ongoing teacher professional development. Becoming familiar with the tidings in teacher resources and methods along with the use of digital technology in the language class are some of the advantages of teacher training courses. Such courses can be the venue for professionals who strive for excellence. Motivating teachers equals motivating students because enthusiasm is contagious in the classroom. Efforts should be put into mastering motivational techniques in order to transform from an educator into a motivator.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical findings of the research outlined the following hypotheses: the teacher-learner synergy can result in more efficient language courses only if we step on past knowledge and gradually turn conscious language learning into unconscious language acquisition. The second hypothesis is that the lack of teacher training courses reinforcing teachers' methodology can result in fruitless and ineffective language courses. University education can be viewed as a means of improving competitiveness in today's world. Language learning at the tertiary level adds value to the quality of education and facilitates professional realization later in life. Enforcing the standards of excellence is a long and elaborate process that needs a lot of effort.

## **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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