International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)

The Role of tasks in teaching/learning of foreign languages for specifics purposes

Silvana Vishkurti
vishkurtisilvana@yahoo.fr

Fatmir Vrapi
fatmirvrapi@yahoo.com

Jola Bojaxhi
jolabojaxhi@hotmail.com

Center of Foreign Language, Faculty of Mathematic Engineering & Physic Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana (PUT), Tirana, Albania

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze the problems that arise when different methods are used in teaching/learning of a foreign language for specific purposes. These methods include active learning, which aims, at putting students in a situation when they will use it to communicate in writing as well as orally in order to be more competitive for a job.

The testing is made possible thanks to a group of first year students who continue their studies in the Polytechnic University of Tirana. The methodology is based on the analysis of the situation before realizing the task, which allows us to determine the language level of the students, their expectations towards the subject as well as strategies they will use to learn that foreign language. In addition, observation of the classes as well as an interview done at the end of the study, aims at highlighting the linguistic and methodological difficulties encountered during the realization of the study.

The results achieved, emphasize the supportive and guiding role of the teacher in encouraging student self confidence in foreign languages while accomplishing such complicated tasks. Such studies also encourage students to better learn the language and to use it as an information and communication tool in the professional field.

Keywords: Communicative Tasks, Learning Independence, Operational Perspective, Reflective Approach

INTRODUCTION

The changes that have taken place in the teaching/learning process of foreign languages in Albania (the implementation of the Bologna process since 2003, the designing of new curriculums as well as educational reforms in general)[1] have had significant impact in increasing the quality of teaching. And so redefining the objectives and the content of subjects, has always been accompanied by contemporary handbooks and new methodology in the field of teaching foreign languages. The stages, through which the implementation of the education in this field has passed, have aimed at adjusting the content of the subjects with the need of the students.

This swift and complex development makes more difficult the job of the teacher. He/she needs to find ways how to work with new textbooks, how to approach grammar problems explained in the textbooks, how to encourage language interaction between students as well as how much he/she needs to work on different skills described in the methods. For those reasons, the role of the teacher remains key in the progress the students make in the language. On the other hand, the attention of the teacher on this teaching activity has increased. And so, he/she needs to observe, analyse, compare, experiment and test the practices in order to choose the ones that are most suitable for the classroom.

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[1]"Final report on the reform of the higher education and scientific research", July 2014. Source: http://www.arsimi.gov.al/files/userfiles/reformaalksh/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf. Consulted on 05.11.2014.

The question we ask is, how do we support students in the process of learning so that they can communicate (in writing or orally) in a foreign language. Our presumption is that, the approach through tasks of learning the foreign language will enable the students to highlight their language and communication needs as well as the way to solve problems that arise with them. Moreover, the involvement of teachers in multicultural work groups within international projects, promotes contemporary vocational training as well as a change in their mentality about the way they teach foreign language.

The analysis of 25 tasks collected from a group of second year students in a bachelor degree that attend a foreign language class in the Polytechnic University of Tirana, and a conversation realized with 11 of them, will allow us to test the results of this approach, realized in a foreign language class of vocational education. The collected data will help us improve and compare our work through the years.

The data will also allow us to accumulate valued educational experience in order to solve different problems that arise during the teaching process. This experience will affect the exchange of the achieved results between teachers of foreign languages for specific purposes in regional and international level.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The reduction in volume of the teaching hours in a foreign language and its duration in only one semester, raised the problem for the Center of Foreign Languages of reviewing the curriculum. But, as a result of different credit distribution in different faculties, this curriculum, should take into consideration the volume of teaching hours assigned to each faculty as well as the language and professional needs of the students.

This situation put in front of us the question of how can we achieve teaching objectives within the defined deadline? Our hypothesis is that the approach through tasks allows the students to practice and learn the new teaching-learning situations. Assessment of the tasks si performed not only by the teacher but also by the student himself/herself, who learns how to correctly measure progress in this subject.

But how much does the task help in a reflective approach towards the language? What is the role of technology in a communication task? What are the results that can be achieved through this methodology?

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

### General Background of Research

Traditionally, teachers of the foreign languages faculty have also taught foreign languages for specific purposes in vocational faculties. Most university textbooks were designed by those teachers in accordance with their field of teaching starting in 80s. It is neccessary to emphasize that the content of those methods was partly ideological and was based on the lexical study of the professional textbooks.

In 1991 engineering sciences were separated from the University of Tirana and the department of foreign languages was created, which in 2008 was transformed into the Center of Foreign Languages. Currently, it is the only center of foreign languages that offers oriented training towards the language for professional communication. The volume of teaching hours that foreign languages should cover, is decided within each faculty.
With the implementation of the Bologna reform, the foreign language in the bachelor level is

reduced from 4 semesters to only one. As seen in the following chart, the distribution of credits for foreign languages in the faculties of Polytechnic University of Tirana is very diverse.

Fig. 1: Heterogeneous distribution of credits to the Polytechnic University of Tirana
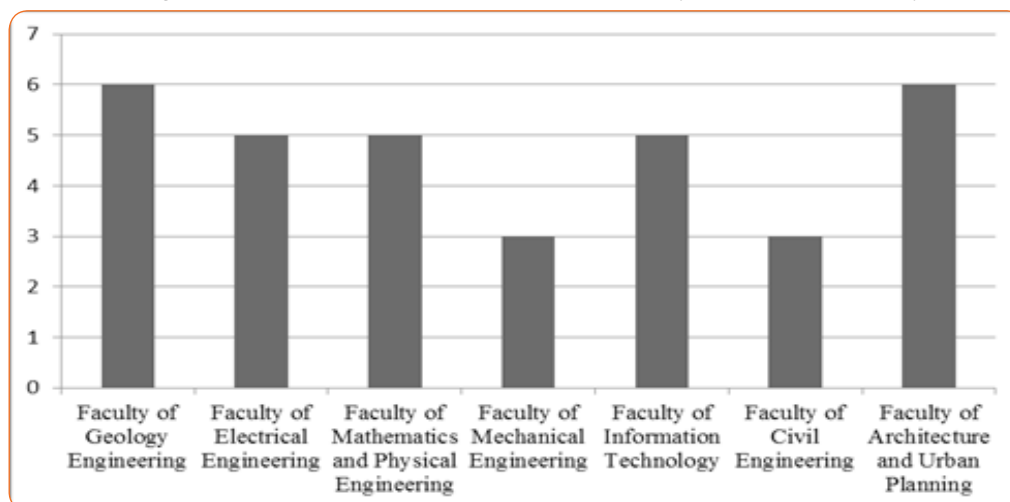
Moreover, the schedule is such, that does not allow the creation of groups according to the level the students have in a certain language. The fact, that students come from different cities of the country and with a different language level, transforms classrooms into very heterogeneous groups.

In terms of used tools, language teaching methods are contemporary and printed abroad. They are completed by the line sources as well as materials adapted and designed by teachers. The professional textbooks in those methods, do not always answer the needs of students, and conceptual grammar is not very rich. The use of communication methods as well as studies on different aspects of teaching have improved the learning skills of the students.

The relation between teaching and research increased the role of the teacher. In the framework of an international francophone project[2], there were designed line materials in the field of professional communication. A lot of studies conducted by members of the center in the framework of accomplishing their doctoral thesis, focus on teaching activities such as the role of reading, writing or intercultural topics, study of vocabulary or designing of the curriculum for foreign language for specific purposes. The approach through tasks is part of research work of the center. Its implementation in a small group of French learning students, was aimed at testing this phenomenon, in order to expand it in more classrooms in the future.

Theoretical Background of Research

Our study is based on the operational perspective of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR)[3]. In this framework, communication is first of all an action and an interaction and that is why the approach is named "co-actionel" (Puren, 2002) and "communic'actional" (Bourguigonon, 2006). The task takes central place in this document and is considered a process that includes different steps, in order to reach the final result. Language is considered part of this communication activity (Cartroux : 2006, Springer : 2009, Bagnoli et al. : 2010). The creativity and initiative of the students is encouraged through enabling the skills, the choices they make.

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[2]The project « Mutualisation des formations en FOS sur des réseaux interuniversitaires (droit, économie)» 2011-2014 was realised with the financial support of the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) and was headed by the State University of Moldova. In it participated the Tirana University, the Polytechnic University of Tirana (Albania) as well as Universities Paul Valery, Montpellier III and Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand II (France).

[3] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, pp. 30. Source: www.coe.int/t/Dg4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

An important role in accomplishing these tasks, has the use of information technologies. And that, because technology gives us the possiblity to consult a wide range of materials (text, video, audio). Line cooperation (Demaziere & Narcy-Combes, 2007) is a another priority that in the cases of exolingue situations allows the usage of the language and so keeping it alive. Line publication of the works realised by students (Puren, 2009) allows the exhange of those works and also increases their works value due to addressed topics.

During the analysis of the teaching/learning process, we take into account the concept of dual mediation of Lenoir (1998). The concept of mediator, emphasizes the role that the action plays in the active learning of the student. That same thing, can be said for the teacher, who with the help of his/her educational planning action, creates the necessary environment for the student to achieve his/her objectives during the teaching program.

Description of activity

The testing was realised in the framework of studing French during school year 2013-2014. The used textbook is «Tout va bien»[4] 2. The task presents a real life situation that the students may encounter in their daily life: reading a job offer and applying for it. But, before starting to look for a job, the students should be aware about what they are looking for, what kind of job are they interested in, related to the vicinity of the place they live, the time they have available, means of transportation etc. Selected language skills, are those of understanding and creating in writing in the foreign language.

The second stage, is looking for a job on internet. The problem they will face is finding the linguistics models that match the job they are looking for. What makes this task special, is the fact, that the student has to find and adjust the linguistic material and not get it ready from the teacher. Facing such a task, teaches them how to search and design materials through looking at different types of materials offered in internet and books. The teacher has an assistive role and aimes at orienting and offering some reading material in order to better accomplish this task.

Sample of Research

The test is realised with the help of 25 students of French, 19 boys and 6 girls that study in different faculties in bachelor level, in the Polytechnic University of Tirana. Their distribution is as follows: 10 students are from the faculty of information technology, 8 students are from faculty of electrical engineering and the other 7 attend classes in the faculty of mechatronics. They have a A2/B1 level in the language and have chosen willingly to attend the french class in this university.

Instrument and Procedures

The tools used to accomplish this test, are a group of tasks realised by the students as well as conversations held with them after the completion. To accomplish the task, we were based on the communication indicators of designing a letter. Writing a letter requests knowledge of linguistics sources such as respecting the structure of designing the letter, adapting to the main purpose of writing such a letter and the arguments given for writing it. Identification of linguistics expressions, used by students in writing, was another purpose of this test. From the linguistics point of view, they should write without mistakes, and be able to adapt linguistic elements such as opening and closing remarks of a letter and the use of professional vocabulary.

At the end of the task, the half structured interviews are aimed at taking the opinions of the students on this test, based on their experience in writing, the difficulties they have faced during

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[4]Méthode de français, livre de l'élève, éd. Clé International, Unité 1, L. 1, (2005), pp. 22.

the process, the strategies used and the fields where they can use the gained knowledge in the future.

The classroom was organised based on 2 main tools: the french textbook «Tout va bien», as well as the scheme of rereading the job application letter according to the proposed critereas (MOOC: Travailler en français, 2014)[5]. The task is somewhat complex, since it includes reading/designing of the job announcements as well as designing a job application.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of communication elements present in the tasks of the students. The data collected from the half structured interviews, underwent qualitative analysis based on their content. Their combination allows us to have a better view about the approach of the task based in concrete and final results as well as the students opinion on this learning experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The designing of the letter was accomplished by all students, but the results and the problems they have encountered are not the same. The greater difficulties, are the formal and linguistics ones. And so, in structuring the application letter only a few students made mistakes (5 %), linguistic problems appeared in a larger scale (80 %), while expressions used didnt always correspond to the selected situations (21 %). Student difficulties are presented in this way in the figure below:

Fig. 2: Linguistics and communicative difficulties in performing the tasks

- structuring the application letter
- linguistic problems
- The communicative adequacy
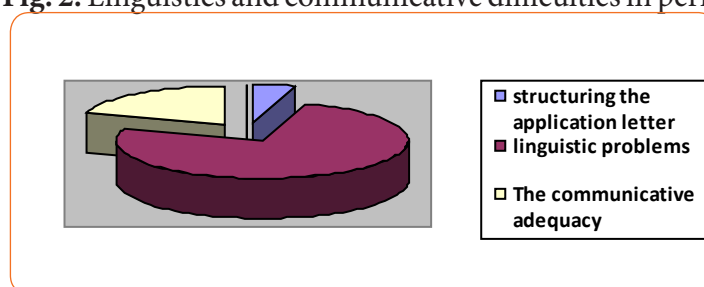
Realising the task, was not easy, since it required a lot of different skills not used previously as well as multitasking. After realising the task, 11 students expressed their wish to be part of the survey. The purpose is to give an evaluation, as seen through the eyes of the student.

They would have passed easily from the adapting to the reformulation or the creating of personal expressions in foreign language. In fact, since the student's don't have a searching methodology in their native language, it makes it difficult for them to adapt to the new offered methods for the search in the internet.

Using the internet is considered a very important source of information as well as checking the task. The students emphasize, that searching on internet for linguistics sources and models, has helped them design an application letter, as well as find the right words and expressions to help them express their opinions.

And so, it was used not only to select the language material but also to evaluate it. Checking of the task was done by using the addresess grammar correction and analysis of the frequency of usage as well as the accuracy of expressions used by them. Such a tool, helps reflect on grammar and language forms, since the grammar corrector gives different forms, that the student needs to choose from and not always the right linguistic form.

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[5] « Rédiger une lettre de motivation », MOOC «Travailler en français ». Source:http://voyagesenfrancais.fr/IMG/pdf/emploi-petites_annonces_et_lettre_de_motivation_-_fiche_etudiant_-_niveau_b1.pdf, 01. 03. 2014.

In fact, the sources proposed, should have been more complete so that they could have a bigger choice. So, the job of the teacher would be to find the right means to facilitate the search and selection of language materials. As for the encountered difficulties, they mention finding the right words and expressions, expressing their opinions in foreign language and the usage of conjuctions.

On the other side, cooperation of students in exchanging information and of difficulties they encountered while performing the task, was done more in the classroom than through line communication. Despite communicating with each other through facebook, only three of them realised it. An explanation could be the fact, that they are not used to exchange opinions on tasks in social networks or use it for learning purposes.

By trying to realise this task in an independent way, the students learn how to use different information sources and select the right linguistics materials in order to use them for their communication purposes.

The discussion in classroom, on how they performed the task, helped them describe orally other activities, and understand their mistakes. Exchange of opinions enriched them with other experiences besides their own, and also processing the materials and different ways of designing the letter. And so, one of the students thought, that the way of writing letters in French would help her write a letter in German as well, when she would be working during the summer.

CONCLUSION

Building knowledge for students through tasks, was made possible through the selection of the material and the way they selected it. It is worth mentioning, the use of different models of letters or linguistics expressions found on the internet as well as adjusting them for their own task.

The use of information technologies is pointed out in using the internet, using of social networks for communication between students, using grammar correctors in line for checking the material in writing, build by them.

The approach through tasks develops such metacognitive strategies as the ability to plan and self-evaluate the level of task accomplishment. We can emphasize documentary research in known strategies, as well as the use of language in a real life situation such as the design of an application. Moreover, the accomplishing of such tasks, encourages students to cooperate and interact.

Using the approach through tasks in the classroom, is accompanied with the improvement of professional skills of the teacher. In this way, the teacher is testing and creating new means, he/she can use efficiently to improve the learning skills of the student.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Silvana Vishkurti has been a researcher and has been teaching French for the Center of Foreign Languages in the Faculty of Mathematics Engineering and Physics Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana since 1993. As a Doctor of Philosophy in linguistics, her research work is oriented towards French for Specific Purposes, sociology of education and communication through advertisements.

Prof.As. Fatmir Vrapi
Head of Center of Foreign Language, Faculty of Mathematics Engineering and Physics Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana.
We have been compiling and processing Bachelor and Masters Programs of Language for Specific Purposes in Courses for different branches and faculties of PUT. We have also prepared and workout different documents and papers in foreign languages. We have also worked out with specific, technical words vocabulary for engineering fields and with the proper recommended lectures, materials and literature, according to the field of studying.

Jola Bojaxhi has been a researcher and has been teaching English for the Center of Foreign Languages in the Faculty of Mathematics Engineering and Physics Engineering, Polytechnic University of Tirana since 2008. As a Doctor of Philosophy Candidate in linguistics, her research work is oriented towards English for Specific Purposes, anglicizms in albanian.