SPECIFIC COMPETENCIES REQUIRED IN PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROCESS

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Abstract

The involvement of the academics in the complex activities specific to higher military educational process places the act of teaching English among the defining priorities of meeting quality, national and international standards of academic military education. As a defining activity aimed at the enhancement of the teachers' competencies, teaching English is a priority and decisive value across all the other disciplines which contribute to achieving the quality of higher military education, being, in fact, the central intercultural core that provides substance, consistency and strength to the intercultural dimension of the academic military education. After the accession to NATO, the participation of the Romanian officers in missions abroad has created the need to develop, during academic training, their ability to meet specific standards of the English language. In this regard, identifying and addressing issues aimed at the improvement of teaching of English is considered to be of paramount importance. On the background of this thematic area of theoretical and scientific concerns, our study tackles and develops specific aspects of the influence of the teaching skills on the quality of the content and objectives of English language teaching in a military institution of higher education.

Keywords

English language teaching, higher military education, teachers’ skills, military students, teaching activity

1. Introduction

Considered as a process, learning and improving English knowledge represents a constant and harmonious alternation of teaching, learning and assessment, activities that are interacting in an organic, dialectic manner, so we can talk about the triangular paradigm of teaching-learning-assessment. Basically, teaching, learning and assessment are, in their turn, processes that are in a relationship of interdependence and interconditioning. Learning derives from teaching, and, depending on the quality of teaching and on the manner in which it is addressed, learning is induced, supported, and can be productive or not. Once learning occurs or once it is considered that it has occurred, but also during the learning process, evaluation comes in place. According to the same coordinates, the education and training of military students in terms of English language skills becomes...
a process of adjustment and tuning, which completes the activities, objectives and content of teaching and learning and puts the bases of new requirements for the future teaching process. Naturally, the evaluation results depend directly on the quality of learning, which is, in turn, dependent to a large extent on the quality of teaching. In the context of the three processes present in the military education act, all these considerations make teaching English a separate component of great importance.

The evolution of English teaching over several centuries of existence of the academic teaching profession has given it the dimension of art rather than science, and this because teaching English became particularly intuitive, being directly influenced by the qualities and beliefs of the teacher. In turn, the practical aspects of teaching English reveal a multitude of possible options, each teaching act taking place in unique circumstances, so combinations can rarely be the same in time and space. Moreover, none of the theories of teaching English attempts to specify exhaustive rules for a successful activity, as there is always an approximate and probabilistic evolution in any teaching act. On the other hand, teaching English leaves room for naturalness of thought and action, for constructive imagination, intuition and teaching skills, so that the art of teaching can largely be exercised.

The special complexity and difficulty in learning and using English correctly is even greater in the case of learning English for a general domain and also for a specialized military and civilian one. This reality has been given by the diversity of the abilities that should be formed and improved in order to master the English language, so as to provide specific skills, i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking, and to effectively manage any professional situation characteristic to the international military environment.

Therefore, the evolution of scientific research has increasingly pulled out mechanisms and laws underlying the teaching of English. On this background, a solid scientific validation of the teaching decisions and the art of teaching have thus become increasingly closer to the science of teaching.

In order to understand more clearly the theoretical and practical aspects of English teaching in higher military education, the scientific nature of certain approaches specific to fundamental and applied scientific research, we need to identify and explain its cognitive, axiological and praxeological content and meaning. We will present below the opinions of some authors, as well as our own understanding in what regards these aspects.

2. English Language Teaching – Necessity and Specific Content

Like any teaching activity, teaching English is driven by goals and objectives, aiming at meeting specific goals. Teaching is an activity with multiple functions: to transmit knowledge, to form skills or abilities and behaviour patterns, and to teach the cadets.

Thus, the transitive function, which is the transfer of scientific information or messages, is supplemented by an expressive function, which translates into specific verbal and action behaviour [1].

As far as it goes beyond a rigorous structure of learning content and operations, of the use of strictly scientific specialized terminology and of purely cognitive reasoning, teaching English opens to expressiveness, emotions, individual subjectivity. To the extent that it exhibits an inclination towards tolerance, towards deviation from the norm or if it fails to respect a certain scientific content, the teaching of English might also encompass novelty, originality, invention or creation of developing better ways of personal thinking and of achieving the act of teaching.

These things are meant to make the reactivated content more accessible, clearer, more motivating and accurate, and, at the
same time, trigger the maximum intellectual mobilization of the military students, all these being aimed at promoting a more effective and efficient learning. Given at least these arguments to support the needs of the educational objectives of teaching the English language, one can understand why the concept of teaching, including that of teaching the English language, has, in time, undergone substantial changes, gaining an increasingly comprehensive and complex content.

According to traditional theories, the act of teaching was unidirectional, meaning that it was directed from the educator towards the educated and was aimed at transferring structural knowledge which the students were to passively assimilate. Only then came the need to elaborate teaching models in which teaching was no longer “attributed” exclusively to the teacher, but it was supposed to actively engage the educated, as well. Consequently, we believe that, in modern didactics, English teaching can no longer be conceived as an activity of conveying knowledge, but as a matter of organizing and managing learning approaches, of controlling the learning experiences of the educated. Teaching is not reduced to transmitting a volume of information particular to the study of this subject, but it requires action and systematic operations undertaken in order to optimally organize, conduct and guide the learning process of the cadets.

Therefore, teaching is a triggering factor that stimulates and directs all educational activities of the military students, including individual study, fixation and consolidation of the new information, this also encompassing the control and assessment of the assimilated content. Hence, we can consider teaching English a matter of determining, organizing, directing and guiding the activity of learning; by the learning it induces, the teaching process facilitates the progressive formation and development of the personality of the cadets. Of course, it is about the training of English skills, taking into account the extent to which the concept of training the modern Romanian officer, capable of acting outside the country, has changed.

In recent decades the interest in learning and knowing English in the military institutions of higher education has obviously increased, as a natural consequence of the new statute and role of the Romanian Army, and, directly, the Romanian officer in international peace and security missions. Only on the basis of knowing the language that can ensure communication between soldiers belonging to different armies, i.e. the English language, can different nations collaborate effectively.

Of course, it is not enough for the officers just to know English very well, but they must also be trained and educated to accept the existence of other cultures and, on this basis, to manifest tolerance and respect for military personnel or civilians, no matter which culture they belong to. Only by understanding that there is an intercultural reality and necessity and, equally, that there is a unity of respect and collaboration between officers and civilians from different cultures can we create the conditions for the successful completion of any international missions. Basically, in our view, teaching English makes sense only to the extent that it determines a corresponding effort from the military students, meaning that it triggers and maintains the learning of the educated.

Teaching should not mean telling and requiring the students to replay the information taught according to the information provided, but organizing learning experiences in order to provoke desirable changes in their behaviour.

According to Professor Ioan Cerghit, the main meanings of teaching are: teaching as transmission of knowledge, teaching that offers experience, teaching as a form of controlling learning, teaching as managing learning and teaching as a set of specific behaviours [2].
Consequently, teaching English is not limited to what happens in the group or series of cadets, but extends to what happens before and after the process. It is this particular feature that gives English teaching the dimension of managing learning and teaching, i.e. the management of the “changes” known as learning.

Based on the concepts presented, we concede that there is a constant concern for defining and redefining English language teaching. The decisive moment in the redefinition of English teaching is the transition from the transmission of the so-called active and constructive pedagogy, which marks a reversal of perspective in the practices of higher military education. According to this new acceptance, teaching is seen from the perspective of learning. “Henceforth, teaching acquires new connotations depending on the different ways in which teachers represent learning and their learning success, but also according to the needs and the culture of the communities they serve” [3].

Of course, for the military students, learning English envisages achieving a much expanded and diversified international horizon, but still subordinated to the idea of cooperation for the benefit of peace and of the international security, of democracy and national and universal values. In this sense, teaching English means choosing the most appropriate teaching strategy by the teachers, based on the objectives of this course, on the depth and scope of the content of the subject to be taught, on the typical environment of the teaching and, of course, on the ability and motivation of the students to learn. We appreciate that the act of teaching English is ordered on three fundamental axes: “to know”, “to know how to do” and “to be” the man behind the teaching desk. This triple opening that is offered to each university teacher to better fulfill his or her basic activity requires the enhancement of specific skills and the increase of the accountability in teaching English.

3. Teachers’ Fundamental Competencies Necessary for Quality English Teaching

There is no doubt that the performances obtained in the teaching of English depend on the quality of the work of the educator, activity that reveals his or her personality as a whole (as a unity system), but especially by specific teaching, scientific and management skills.

Palmer believes that “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” [4], or we can say, in other words, that “we teach who we are”.

The issue of teacher personality from the perspective of its academic education dimension, a concern of many disciplines, lies further out in the field of controversy. Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and especially pedagogues are trying to substantiate interrogative approaches that aim at deciphering the instructional-educational meanings and significance of the personality of the teachers.

It was stated that “it is very difficult and it might be wrong to absolutize the specific psychological personality of the teacher. It would be more appropriate to speak of an optimum, of having the intellectual, practical and moral qualities the man is capable of” [5], and respectively, the teacher must display when teaching English.

We note that, in the field of literature, a specific set of “qualities” or “defining characteristics” is required, in order to ensure the achievement of quality and effective teaching (e.g.: solid specialized training, high qualification and professional competence, durable psycho-volitional structures, sound moral beliefs, self-control and insight, emotional stability, decision and action capacity, fast adaptability under stress, specific balance between ideation and action, superior intelligence coupled with strong will and moral strength, very sharp sense of observation, “systematic analysis” as a particular skill, high capacity of representation and spatial thinking, realism doubled by imagination).
We will focus in what follows on those aspects of teacher knowledge and abilities that are at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching. Competence is understood as “the technical skills and professional capabilities that a teacher needs to bring to a position in order to fulfill its functions completely” [6]. Consequently, practitioners of English language teaching must demonstrate at least four dimensions of teacher competency: language proficiency, content knowledge, teaching skills and professionalism [7].

Language proficiency is translated as the language-specific competencies that an English teacher needs in order to teach in an effective manner. He or she basically has to be able to: comprehend the material to be taught, provide a good language model, maintain the use of the target language during the teaching process, select target language resources in an appropriate manner, give correct feedback, tune the input according to the correct level of difficulty, and provide language enrichment experiences for the learners.

Content knowledge is described as what teachers need to know about what they teach, i.e. what they know about the language teaching itself. This type of knowledge is not shared by teachers of other disciplines. Typically, it consists of language analysis, learning theory, methodology and sometimes a teaching practicum. For example, it could encompass language teaching methods, second language acquisition, phonology and syntax, discourse analysis, critical applied linguistics and language theories etc.

From a pedagogical perspective, on the other hand, content knowledge could include practice in curriculum planning, assessment, classroom management, teaching methods tailored according to the age of the students (cadets, in our case) etc. More concretely, teachers should actually demonstrate that they are able to: understand the learners’ needs, diagnose strengths and weaknesses of the students’ language performance, evaluate students’ learning, select and design suitable learning tasks, make use of authentic materials and modern technology, evaluate their own teaching methods and techniques etc.

Teaching skills come as a direct application of the disciplinary or pedagogical content knowledge. If we see teaching as an act of performance, then we must conclude that a teacher should be able to carry himself or herself through the lesson, using a wide array of methods and techniques. Such routines and procedures include: opening the lesson, introducing and explaining tasks, setting up learning arrangements, checking students’ understanding, guiding the students’ practice, monitoring their performance, making transitions between tasks, ending the lesson.

From the perspective of teacher knowledge, teaching is not merely the application of cognition and of learnt skills. It is perceived as a much more complex process affected by the classroom context, the general and specific instructional objectives, the teachers’ beliefs and values, the motivation of the learners, and the teachers’ management skills.

Last but not least, we insist that the dimension of professionalism should not be ignored or taken for granted. We start from the premises that English language teaching is not something that anyone who can speak English can do. Teaching is a profession, a career in the field of specialized education, requiring specialized training, obtained through both academic study and practical experience. Teachers of English should be in a continuous attempt to improve themselves, to achieve increasingly higher standards of English language teaching. They can do so by doing continuous research and by publishing papers in teacher magazines and journals, by participating in conferences and professional meetings. They must ceaselessly improve and demonstrate language proficiency as a component of professional certification. Last but not least, expert language teachers are part of a worldwide community of professionals who share the same goals, values, discourse and practices.
All in all, we appreciate the fact that, unlike the mental dimensions, competencies are restricted to a domain, to an activity, to a function to fulfill. They generate the response behaviour of the individual to the requirements formulated for that task or to the functional responsibilities involved in achieving them. In this respect, competence is a “practical value” of the teachers in relation to a particular role in quality and efficient teaching. No doubt it is based on potential, but it is formed and strengthened through training which provides the needed skills.

The structure of the “crystallized personality” of the educator (as a configuration based on plasticity and flexibility) requires scientific, psychosocial and psychological competence [8]. The co-articulation of these three dimensions defines what might be called educational competence required and specific to the teaching activity. They also require abilities and skills in order to optimize human relations in the educational activity, the ability to positively influence the group or series of military students as a whole, as well as isolated students, adapting to different roles. They must also demonstrate abilities to use authority in a balanced manner and effective communication skills.

We believe that on the basis of these afore mentioned competencies, the teachers, during their entire academic activity, can achieve the two major goals of higher military education: on the one hand informing, transmitting knowledge, and on the other hand, forming, namely ensuring the optimal conditions for the development and improvement of the personality of the military students. The teaching process cannot be limited merely to the simple chronological unfolding of moments, stages and sequences. It requires training and guiding groups of cadets, providing all conditions necessary for every student to master the English language, according to his or her possibilities and social requirements expressed by the ideal of the educational model, that of the officer.

Nevertheless, the act of teaching should not be divorced of the cultural, social and professional context in which it must be applied. As far as the performance of the educational outcomes are concerned, it has been shown that the most effective method is to address the academic educational content in a realistic manner, to correlate it with real situations, with the cognitive and affective needs imposed by the profession of officer. A modern university teacher is not only, or primarily, a professor who uses the most advanced technologies, but a teacher who is very well informed, flexible and open-minded to new things, aware that his or her work has the mission to prepare military students for their future role in the modern intercultural military organization which they will be part of.

Through their attitude and behaviour towards the military students, the teachers must confer credibility to the values, contents and principles to be taught, demonstrating that they are not abstract, but realities that are valid for the military domain, and for life, in general.

As a consequence, the teaching activity organized and carried out according to the contextual paradigm, helps the teacher associate the content taught to concrete situations, specific to the international military environment in which the students will operate. Berns and Erickson explain teaching from the contextual perspective as an instructional innovation assisting students in using the contents learned in real situations where they can be implemented [9].

In one study led by Cockrell, Caplow and Donaldson [10] in 2000, it is concluded that the resolution of the problematic situations stemming from the assimilated contents establish the link between education and application. The study was conducted on groups of students who had to solve problems starting from a set of data. The students who practiced connections between the content taught and the real environment achieved better results in terms of information.
In order to achieve the quality and effectiveness of teaching, the teacher uses the whole system of psycho-pedagogical, scientific and praxeological competences, in terms of skills and attitudes, constantly tailoring the teaching act to the peculiarities of the military students, the performance standards of teaching English and to the underlying and guiding rules. Hence appears the need for each university teacher to have these skills, to determine and to provide a differentiated conduct of the military students through a specific way of approaching and working with them. It is equally important to ensure, during each teaching sequence, a quality intercultural military education through promoting the higher values of the “discipline they teach, by using (appropriate) training methods and techniques” [11].

Ioan Cerghit suggestively underlines that today teaching is a defining activity for the university teachers, being given priority and a decisive value across all other functions characteristic to the higher education staff; through the richness and complexity of its modeling aspects, it is legitimized as the central pivot giving substance of the entire teaching process [12].

We can basically assert that the qualitative and effective teaching of English in the military academic environment ranks the characteristic skills of a performant teacher at the base of the fundamental requirements that offers students basic knowledge and improvement of the English language at the level of national and Euro-Atlantic standards.

4. Conclusions

The key concern for the training of the future officer is to make him or her able to perform tasks in different cultural environments, together with other officers who, in turn, have a different culture. Military students have to possess English knowledge, which has become normal in the military academic environment. Teaching is a priority aiming the forms of activities specific to the training of the military students in terms of knowledge, skills, and capacities.

The theoretical and practical aspects of English teaching in higher military education, some of which have been presented in this study, reveal the need for the presence of different types of competencies needed in the configuration of the personality of the university teachers.

The theoretical limits and the practical choices of the effective ways of organizing and conducting quality English teaching reveal the complexity and multidimensionality of the teaching skills. They are required not only by the scientific requirements specific to the military higher education, but also by creativity, imagination and the ability to adapt to the peculiarities of the international military environment, where the personality of the military student becomes essential.

We consider that the efficiency and quality of the military academic objectives, the training of the future officer at the level of the Euro-Atlantic standards can only be achieved through an active, integrative manifestation of the skills of those who teach English where the competence dimension is in constant agreement with the attitudinal one.

The diversity of the views present in the literature regarding the behaviour of the teacher in the English teaching process emphasizes the need to mix the scientific rigour with originality, flexibility and openness to interculturalism, as key notes of the abilities of the university English teachers.

We believe the teaching of English becomes a qualitative and efficient process only if each university teacher is able to put into action those specific educational valences defining their personality. Teaching English is and actually should be a fundamental component that is active in the higher education enabling the training of future officers, proficient in turn and able to perform tasks in an intercultural international environment.
References