

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES FOR CUSTOMS SERVICE – SPECIFICS, PRACTICE AND THE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *English language today is admittedly the lingua franca of international relations, business, trade and academia. In the sphere of Customs Service, English language plays an axial part, in the process of education and training of future Customs personnel, in their work, in the hugely and unavoidably relevant exchange of intelligence among Federal Services, and in the further research in sciences that contribute to the enhancing of Customs efficacy. The authors here present an overview of the English for Custom Service tertiary education courses, both in terms of the present day state of the art content and methodology of this aspect of English Language Teaching. Following that, there is a presentation of the English language learning facilities provided by the Russian Customs Academy in Moscow, the World Customs Organization Regional Training Center. Finally, there are given directions for further research with the emphasis on the multidisciplinary nature of the instruction of English for Customs Service in relation to other sciences and disciplines comprising Customs education and training. The overall aim of the authors is to advocate the need for making a unified online platform, a repository of teaching/learning material, Customs service phrase bank and vocabulary, with an open access to the International Network of Customs Universities (INCU) members that would greatly aid both the everyday work and research in this area.*

Key words: *key word 1, key word 2, key word 3, key word 4*

1. INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND ITS DIVERSIFICATION

English language has for quite some time now been considered a lingua franca in virtually all aspects of human life, be it science, trade, academia, international affairs, every day private communication. This status of it has much been elaborated on and disputed, but due to its wide spread use, it has gained the status of a 'second language' at the expense of being a 'foreign language'. This implies that professionals today are considered to be bilingual if they are to participate fully in the competitive and fast forward moving global world, and at the same time is telling enough of its unavoidable presence and relevance today. English language teaching (ELT) is a highly developed linguistic and methodological discipline that has been flourishing in response to these conditions. It is a multidisciplinary field that wisely includes not only linguists and methodologists, but psychologists, sociologists, pedagogy experts, and many more. The reason is to take into close considerations the profile needs of the learner – in terms of age, mentality, geographical and cultural characteristics and specifics, etc. All these conditions are taken into account when designing learning

course material, designing methodology of teaching, which necessarily have to be attention grabbing, to include latest topics of interest regarding the learners' profile, practice work is to be various and minutely in tune with the estimated attention and concentration span, etc. Just to give a short illustration of how much all this is taken care of is the fact that textbooks are being issued new, revised editions every other year. For example, at a teenage level it is partly due to the fact that in that period the taste for favorite actors or singers change so texts featuring them need to be revised to include new faces and stories.

This huge investment of both financial means, but more importantly of expertise and creativity has contributed to the English being in truth a vehicular language. The insistence on first minutely estimating and then appropriately responding to the social, professional, age, psychological profile of the learner with carefully designed learning material that suits them precisely has led to immense diversification of ELT formats. So, English language teaching (usually called General English) spread into various categories and sub categories. The one that is of our interest here is *English for Specific Purposes*.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) grew as a distinct field of ELT in response to meeting the professional needs for English language of the learners. In other words, one of the issues that have to be taken care of when designing an English language course and the corresponding material is the professional situation that course is for. So, ESP is a branch of ELT that deals with the varieties of English language needed for professional environments. However, since there exist yet an incommensurable variety of professional environments, ESP has branched into English for Science and Technology, English for Medicine, English for Mechanical Engineering, and it further diversifies daily.

1.1. English for Customs Service - general characteristics of this approach to English Language Teaching

Out of this minute segmentation of ELT there appeared *English for Customs Service*, a branch that is quite new and is yet to be fully formed and formulated. English for Customs Service is the form of English Language that is taught at institutions worldwide dealing with Customs. It is the language used at WCO and INCU, for example, or the language used by Customs officials at simply any border crossing. It is also the language used in scientific and science communication and research in this area of expertise.

What are its characteristics and what makes it different from the English language taught and used elsewhere? First of all, English language for Customs subsumes that the learners/users possess the pre-intermediate level of EL proficiency. The very English for Customs course is designed at the intermediate and upper intermediate level. This means that a person studying it is already in command with the so called General English. The course is to be the upgrading of their knowledge in terms of professional oriented corpus of language.

English for Customs therefore includes *domain specific vocabulary*. That is a corpus of words and phrases, roughly speaking, lexis and structure of English for Law, Economics, IT, PR, etc, that are encountered in all aspects of the Customs sphere. This segment, vocabulary and phrases, is certainly the axial point of the corpus of English for Customs.

Then, roughly speaking, there are grammar points most frequently used in this area(s) of expertise. So, if students are preparing to be border officers, then certainly they would need instruction in making questions techniques and indirect speech, much more than in say, passive. Whereas students majoring in Customs technology would need exactly the opposite grammar instruction.

Further on, learners need to be trained in the specifics of writing various kinds of documents. Here, the main focus is on style and format required. Those may be field reports, case studies, laboratory testings or experimental reports, etc. The exact formats do depend on the exact profile of a Customs employee.

2. PROCESS OF DESIGNING THE SYLLABUS OF A COURSE ON ENGLISH FOR CUSTOMS SERVICE

It is of utmost relevance to point out that English for Customs is a *knowledge-building* process in which content and context are inseparable. This means that English language is taught on the example of texts that are authentic which at the same time present students with relevant information, knowledge from the sphere of Customs. In this way, students get twofold, comprised instruction – at once in English language and in the Customs related content. The Customs related content that needs to be linguistically covered relates to the following competencies: identifying and questioning people, searching baggage and individuals for smuggled items, seizing smuggled goods, checking documentation relating to imported and exported goods, undertaking physical examinations of individuals and freight, detecting drug smugglers, collecting and supplying trade statistics, writing reports, combating the illegal trade in endangered species, dealing with revenue due on imported and exported goods, calculating and collecting customs duties and taxes, using e-customs instruments and IT technologies.

2.1. Investigating the specifics of the field

Before commencing the course design, lecturers of English Language for Customs need to do extensive research into the overall curriculum of the Customs educational institution they are affiliated with. This means first of all, extensive communication, consultations with fellow colleagues teaching majors. Through these talks, a lecturer is usually given instructions pertaining to the relevant literature and subject content. *The task of the lecturer in designing the course is extremely difficult and demanding.* A non expert in the field of Customs needs to gain properly wide and precise insight into the specifics of such huge and important area, and then from that vast bulk of information is to abstract the most relevant and representative ones and furthermore on those design (or take over) suitable texts and language practice.

The course of English for Customs presented here is the one taught at the Russian Customs Academy (RCA), Moscow, Russian Federation. The institution was established by the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation. The Federal Customs Service (FCS) of Russia is a Federal executive authority, performing the functions of control and supervision in the field of customs and the functions of a currency control agent and special functions of contraband control, abatement of other crimes and administrative violations. Russian Customs academy is a unique institution

with three branches in St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don and Vladivostok. The English Language Course here comprises content knowledge from the following fields: Customs Legislation, Economics and Customs Management.

English language teaching in the field of Customs business embraces such general topics as:

- Customs Law (International and Customs Union legislation);
- Finance (types of financial documents, types of payments, taxes and duties);
- Business (INCOTERMS, types of contracts, business correspondence, International Trade, Retailing, Manufacturing, Business Law, and Economics);
- Logistics (information flow, material handling, production, packaging, inventory, transportation, warehousing, and often security);
- International relations (International agreements, conventions, organizations);
- Technology (technical means of customs control);
- E-matters (e-declaration, e-customs, IT- technologies), etc.

2.2. Material Design – finding, creating, modifying texts to be worked upon lexically, grammatically, stylistically

Graves (1996: 17) defines goals in language learning as "general statements of the overall, longterm purpose of the course". Thus, they are related to communicating specific knowledge, acquisition of a job, communication with members of the target language community. They should therefore also aim at the development of a positive attitude towards language and culture.

Objectives are defined as "the specific ways in which the goals will be achieved" (Graves, 1996: 17). They may refer "to activities, skill, language type or a combination of them all" (Harmer, 1991: 269).

Based on the needs analysis, the overall curriculum for the Customs courses, the goals and objectives of the English for Customs were identified. Goals of the course are to further familiarize students with terminology used in Customs, to teach them grammatical structures specific for their field of study, structure and organization of different kinds of spoken and written communication.

2.2.1. Most relevant topics

The Course of English for Customs is focused around the following topics as agreed upon after thorough consultations with the entire staff of the Russian Customs Academy:

- Customs Conventions and Recommendations (The Revised Kyoto Convention),
- The HS Convention (The Istanbul Convention, Convention relating to temporary admission),
- The TIR Convention (CITES),
- Customs technologies,
- Customs enforcement and compliance,
- Application of Customs Control International Standards,
- Moving goods across borders,
- Obligations, Power and Liability of the EU,
- Customs Authorities,
- Customs Union between the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan,

- Customs Legislation of the Customs Union between the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan,
- World Customs Organization,
- General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade,
- World Trade Organization,
- Russian accession to WTO,
- Risk management in Customs procedures,
- Intellectual Property Rights,
- HM Revenue and Customs,
- US Customs and Border Protection (CBP),
- Australian Customs and Border Protection Service,
- Green Customs Initiative,
- International Customs Co-operation,
- Federal Customs Service (FCS) International Customs Co-operation,
- The Russian Customs Academy Review,
- International Network of Customs Universities (INCU),
- Types and samples of documents used in international Customs cooperation,
- International Activities of the Russian Customs Academy, (Kuznetsova, Tkachenko, Filippenko, Gayko, 2012)
- Structure and style of written and spoken communications. (Stojković, 2005)

From this list it can clearly be seen that the course covers knowledge on main branches constituting the Customs business, it includes substantial information on representative Customs organizations and presents the exemplary differentiation among various types of Customs systems worldwide.

2.3. Teaching process and the methodology

Teaching methods employed are diverse and numerous. Broadly speaking, it can be said that they are eclectic, drawing what is best and most appropriate for the given teaching/learning environment from the vast ELT methodology corpus. Plus, the Academy possesses the latest IT teaching equipment, so the classes are as a rule interactive. What is insisted upon is that each student is active and immersed in the ongoing activities in the class and that they communicate freely. Communication is done incessantly during classroom instruction and written assignments are given as home study. Much is intentionally left for students to do as their own research projects as a way of enhancing a myriad of necessary skills, and not only linguistic ones. The exercises and practice in general is aimed to *simulate real professional situations*. In this way, students are best prepared to immediately function in their future real workplace surrounding.

All hereby mentioned above shows the main characteristics of the learner-centered approach which is widely used in the RCA. Creative thinking development is of no less importance for successful ESP teaching. The RCA language teachers have been testing Olga Almabekova's hypothesis: an ESP lesson can provide a favorable environment for teaching thinking by applying a learner-centered approach, encouraging the learner's autonomy and taking into account multiple intelligences (O.Almabekova., 2010:3,642). The idea is that an ESP teacher can find appropriate

materials and design the tasks that compel students to think rather than to memorize, thus creating an intellectual atmosphere in the classroom. This approach to learning English could help future customs officers to develop creative thinking skills and use them to make prompt decisions in their professional activities.

The learner-centered approach is reflected in General English and Professional English training courses for customs officers developed by the teaching staff of the Department of Foreign Languages. The RCA students are also free to choose some electives (e.g. International Customs Co-operation, Customs Payments, Logistics, Customs Control, Customs Administration, and E-Customs).

In the course of studies, the students use authentic textbooks issued by the leading publishing houses from abroad as well as those issued by the Department of Foreign Languages. The RCA has its own publishing house.

It is important to note that apart from regular language training, the department avails many other forms and methods of English Language training with the groups of students who need it. These are additional courses in grammar, spoken communication, interpreting and translation.

2.3.1. Most relevant topics

The Academy provides a library, an E-library in particular, to satisfy all the needs of the learner. The Language Department also has multimedia language laboratories equipped with modern computers, whiteboards, document cameras, OHPs, printers, DVD-players, etc. Modern and very effective ESP software has been installed (e.g. Helios Linguist, Netop etc.) which allows the teacher to work very effectively with the students of all levels and to control their oral and written activities. The Department has a large collection of videos released by the National Geographic, BBC, Discovery Channel, PBS Corporation, etc.

All this latest equipment allows for distant learning programs to be carried out (extra mural), as well as a number of specialization courses to be organized throughout the year for various groups of interested parties. Also, the latest technology provides for guest lecturers to successfully contribute to the variety of the language learning process.

2.3. Intercultural competence – how to prepare Customs staff for an appropriate use of the English language in diverse intercultural encounters

English is now transformed into the global lingua franca for both native- and non-native speakers. In view of the growing number of intercultural partnerships, both in organizational settings and in personal and/or romantic contexts, this seems particularly relevant. Students are prepared for intercultural encounters affected by various cultural idiosyncracies that may affect the success of communication. The connection between language and culture provides the key to the training of effective intercultural competence. Lecturers pay special attention as to which language and communication skills are needed and how the teaching of International English can be combined with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills so as to prepare learners for an appropriate use of the language in diverse intercultural encounters.

Therefore, the lecturers of English for Customs apply the intercultural communication module. The essence is to help students mediate intercultural communication skills and become competent intercultural communicators (Bakić-Mirić 2012, 45). Language

learners need to acquire not only grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is the appropriate language in the communication process both linguistically and culturally (Coperias Aguilar 2008, 59-60). To this end, the students are introduced to the arena of intercultural communication where they learn how to perceive another culture from different perspectives, understand those cultures, and challenge their own biases and stereotypes about those cultures. (Bakić-Mirić 2009, 38) This means helping students see similarities and differences between cultures, help them see the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are yet to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity, help students avoid certain stereotypes or generalizations about a group of people, a country and a nation, teach students intercultural and linguistic competence necessary for intercultural interaction, and teach students that such interaction is an enriching experience. (Cooper and Simonds 2003, 175; Cooper et al. 2007, 189; Bakić-Mirić 2009, 39.) Furthermore, language teaching with an intercultural dimension actually helps students to acquire the linguistic and cultural competence needed to communicate in both speaking and writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways.

3. CONCLUSION - DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH – HOW TO FURTHER IMPROVE THESE COURSES

Hereby we have presented an overview of a course of English for Customs as performed at the Russian Customs Academy, Moscow. *It is our aim to introduce the wider Customs audience to this segment of the overall Customs education and training process, and to emphasize the relevance of it in the functioning of Customs Service.* Instead of a usual conclusion, repeating to stress out what has already been said, we would like to outline the direction of our immediate future work. Namely, having understood well enough the tight demands of creating an English Language for Customs course, we will undertake it as our next project, to make an online repository of teaching/learning material. We conceive of it as a data base that is to be constantly enriched by participation of a network of English for Customs lecturers willing to join. It is our belief that such a domain specific repository of learning text material, grammar practice, and other relevant material, would greatly enhance the efficacy of such courses. This would be achieved by constant adding up of newly designed or acquired material that responds to all the new demands of the Customs Service.

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