

УДК 378.4

Overcoming Barriers in Teaching EFL to Non-Linguistic Students

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DOI: 10.26907/esd15.2.02

Abstract

The transition to the knowledge-based economy requires a new generation of professionals with a complex set of skills and competencies. These include English language skills, which will help them to merge into the international professional community. One dimension of this challenge is finding effective unconventional approaches to mass EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching for non-linguistic university students, to increase their motivation, interest in learning English, and their willingness to use this foreign language actively by lowering communication barriers.

In this study, we investigate the effectiveness of an experimental EFL teaching and learning framework, aimed at helping non-linguistic majors students to develop an English communication competence through an artificial bilingual environment. Statistical analysis and comparison of the results of the students' surveys suggest that using more unconventional activities and a strong focus on students' social interactions, interdisciplinary language activities and heterogeneity of study groups, builds students' intrinsic motivation, removes communication barriers and increases the need to use English in real life.

Keywords: intrinsic motivation, English for non-linguistic students, communication barriers.

Преодоление коммуникативных барьеров в процессе обучения английскому языку студентов лингвистических специальностей

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DOI: 10.26907/esd15.2.02

Аннотация

Задача эффективно и массово обучать английскому языку студентов-лингвистов остро стоит перед профессиональным сообществом, нацеленным на воспитание нового поколения специалистов для нового типа экономики – экономики знаний. Способ решения этой проблемы – внедрение современных оригинальных и продуктивных подходов, способных повысить у учащихся интерес к иностранному языку, укрепить их желание активно им пользоваться и снизить коммуникативные барьеры.

В данной статье описан эксперимент по внедрению устойчивой системы мер, направленной на развитие англоязычной коммуникативной компетенции у студентов гуманитарных лингвистических направлений подготовки. Методики, включающие экспериментальное обучение, опрос и статистическую обработку данных, позволили видеть, что комплекс таких мер, как расширение арсенала нестандартных учебных ситуаций и заданий, упор на социализацию обучающихся, применение междисциплинарного подхода и формирование гетерогенных учебных групп, способствует формированию внутренней мотивации к общению на неродном языке, устойчивому снижению коммуникативных барьеров при говорении на языке, выученном в условиях искусственного билингвизма, а также к повышению потребности углубленно изучать иностранный язык и применять его на практике.

Ключевые слова: внутренняя мотивация, обучение студентов-лингвистов английскому языку, коммуникационные барьеры

Introduction

With a constantly changing global environment and the emergence of a multipolar world, some experts have already claimed that the fall of English as the language of global choice will coincide with the rise of Chinese (Ostler, 2018). Nonetheless, the use of English as a tool of international communication is unlikely to decline in the foreseeable future, and the interest in learning this language is still growing in many countries, including Russia. In 2016, the Unified State Exam in English was taken by 74,000 Russian secondary students; in 2019 this number increased to 99,000 (Unified State Exams in 2019, 2019), and when this exam becomes mandatory in 2020, the number of English learners is expected to rise by at least 20%. English as Foreign Language (EFL) has been included

in all the curricula of Russian secondary and tertiary educational institutions. All these developments can be seen as part of Russia's commitment to the internationalization of its academic programs and research activities. However, as of 2018 only three Russian universities were included into the QS World University Rankings (Project 5-100: 2018 results, 2018). Russian positions in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) have been improving over the past years, but the FWCI score of Russian research publications is still very low, with only 20% of papers being published in the first-quartile journals (Erohina, 2019). So, if real improvement is to take place, new approaches to the English language teaching need to be found, or the existing approaches and methods need to be modernized and adjusted to current realities.

The situation is complicated by the fact that in Russian schools, colleges and universities English is taught in artificial bilingual environment, which has its drawbacks for both teachers and students. Speaking English is not a necessity for most of the Russian students, and it is a serious challenge for Russian EFL teaching community. There are many reasons behind this situation, including inadequate or outdated teaching methods, the lack of real possibilities to use English in everyday life, and even the rejection of the globalization concept. Communication in the artificial bilingual settings is hindered by various barriers created due to the isolation of EFL classrooms from the natural language environment, prevalence of teacher-and-textbook-centred instruction, teachers' and learners' inclination to use their mother tongue, and the lack of genuine need for international communication. In this regard, special attention should be given to teaching English to non-linguistic majors. In contrast, university students of linguistics see English as their future professional tool, and therefore, have higher learning motivation. This empirical research was an effort to take one more step towards the transformation of EFL teaching approaches to achieve a sustainable teaching environment, a steady increase in motivation among non-linguistic students, and eliminate or lower students' communication barriers. The aims of this article are twofold: (1) to describe the experimental English teaching and learning framework developed for the students of humanities at Petrozavodsk State University; and (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing this framework for combating students' communication barriers and increasing their communicative competence.

Research Background

The theoretical framework for this study is based on various research works investigating and discussing various aspects of intrinsic motivation, which can be defined as doing something for "inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (Ryan & Deci, 2000:56). Many studies have clearly demonstrated that motivation affects students' academic performance in various fields of professional education (Kusurkar et al., 2012; Kretschmann, 2014; Birgen, 2017). From the variety of the aspects associated with intrinsic motivation we chose to focus on social/environmental factors, because communication is socially determined, and language plays a crucial role in becoming an "active and competent member of ... community" (Ruhela & Tiwari, 2013).

Two important theories widely used in the educational research are the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2015) and expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983). The first theory postulates that students' intrinsic motivation is driven by enhancing competence, autonomy and relatedness, while the second proposes that student's achievements are determined by expectation of success and perceived task importance or value. The research papers based on these two theories (e.g., Orsini et al., 2015; Cooper et. al, 2017) recommend the following teaching practices: identifying students' needs and preferences, applying different teaching and learning approaches, promoting

active learning, giving positive and constructive feedback, providing emotional support, encouraging students to take more responsibility for their learning, creating conditions for naturally occurring interaction and giving them more opportunities for independent work (Orsini et al., 2015).

While these principles are no doubt valuable and have been deemed effective in EFL teaching and learning, the researchers seem to underestimate the significance of an avoidance motive or fear of failure as opposed to an approach motive (e.g., Thrash & Elliot, 2002). Moreover, their teaching guidelines are not always applicable in certain national or cultural context. So, more research into the fear of failure identified the concept of foreign language communication anxiety, which is claimed to be crucial in determining willingness to communicate and success of communication (Guntzville et al., 2016). This phenomenon seems to be closely connected with social and evaluation anxiety, which leads to “withdrawal from social situations in which scrutiny and negative evaluation are anticipated” (Leitenberg, 2013:1).

Besides, studying the experience of the countries which face the challenge of mass English education (e.g., Russia, India, China) raises some important questions. For example, how students with avoidance temperament can be driven by expectation of success, if their fear of failure makes them avoid potential failures, and they do not feel dissatisfied or shamed when the set goal is not achieved? How do you attach value to uninteresting tasks, when your students perceive English language education as an “outlandish irrelevance” (Appleby, 2010 :9)? How do you acknowledge individual students’ needs and provide meaningful feedback under the pressures of mass English teaching? Finally, how do you support and enhance relevance and natural interaction in closed study groups where students learn English in an artificially bilingual environment?

Based on the literature review and practical experience, we assumed that the lack of need to use a foreign language, low perceived value of EFL learning, limited social interaction during the study period and foreign language communication anxiety combined with evaluation anxiety and/or fear create strong communication barriers. These barriers can be overcome with the help of sustainable principles derived from the abovementioned motivational theories and consistently implemented for all students.

Study design, methods and participants

Our empirical investigation addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Russian non-linguistic university students need to use English in real life?

RQ2: Which barriers prevent Russian students of non-linguistic majors from effective English-language communication in academic environment?

RQ3: How do the proposed principles of EFL teaching and learning impact students’ motivation, foreign language communication anxiety and communication barriers?

For this empirical investigation we designed and carried out a three-year experimental EFL course for the students of Petrozavodsk State University majoring in social sciences and humanities (non-linguistic majors only). This course was based on the following principles:

- A strong focus on developing profession-specific English communication skills;
- A strong focus on developing universal competencies – critical thinking, collaboration and team work, problem solving, creativity and innovative thinking, managing information;
- A strong focus on task-based teaching and learning to create meaningful experience;
- Maximum expansion of interaction – building and maintaining new contacts and social ties;

- Creating learning situations which encourage students to step out of their comfort zone and seek unconventional approaches to new people and challenges;
- Interdisciplinarity of language activities – mixing students of different majors and fields of study for a more meaningful exchange of information and experience;
- Heterogeneity of study groups - mixing students with different background, motivation and performance levels;
- Consistency and continuity of learning tasks and projects - in particular, the ability to continue the research and/or discussion of the same topic and issues for more than one year of study;
- Using flipped classroom instructional strategy in order to promote students' autonomy, responsibility, self-organization and mutual support;
- Creating a supportive and friendly environment in order to compensate for the stress caused by new challenges.

The course included such communication-enhancing activities as role plays, group discussions, round tables, debates, research projects and conferences, which are becoming increasingly popular in Russian EFL classrooms, and unconventional activities such as digital storytelling, filmmaking, dramatization, student contests and foreign language portfolio building.

The research design included general scientific methods and methods of empirical research, including observation, questionnaire surveys, unstructured interviews, content analysis for processing the obtained data and statistical analysis. Surveys relevant to the study aims and research questions were conducted in both the study group (SG) and the control group (CG) before and after the experimental EFL course. Students assigned to the control group went through conventional textbook-based teaching and learning process, with the teachers using some additional audio and video materials. Final assessment in the control group was performed by the same person who did the teaching. The teaching and learning process in the study group was organized and conducted according to the set of principles listed above, using a wide range of learning activities. Final assessment in the study group was carried out through an interdisciplinary student conference by a panel of teachers practically unfamiliar with and to the students, with some elements of peer assessment.

Both the study and the control group included 200 students each, with a total number of 417 participants (400 students and 17 teachers). For validity and reliability, students were chosen to meet the following eligibility criteria: (1) age range from 18 to 22 years (one age group), (2) scoring only “excellent” and “good” grades (A and B equivalents) in English at school and during the pre-study university semesters. Before the students started their studies, we conducted surveys in both groups in order to evaluate their need to use English in real life, to identify possible circumstances where the students of non-linguistic majors could communicate in English, to evaluate the study participants' motivation for learning a foreign language, and to reveal problems or barriers hindering the learning process. Subsequently, a longitudinal study was conducted from 2008 to 2018, which included three three-year teaching and learning periods (the number of students enrolled in the study totalled 400 after the end of these three periods). At the end of each period, the same survey was handed to the students from the study group and the control group. The results of the pre-study and post-study surveys were analysed and compared.

Research findings

The first research question was addressed in a pre-study survey, aimed at discovering whether the study participants felt the genuine need to use English outside the classroom.

It contained the question “What will you need your English communication skills for?” and the following answer options: for further studies (including studying abroad), for professional purposes, for tourism and travelling.

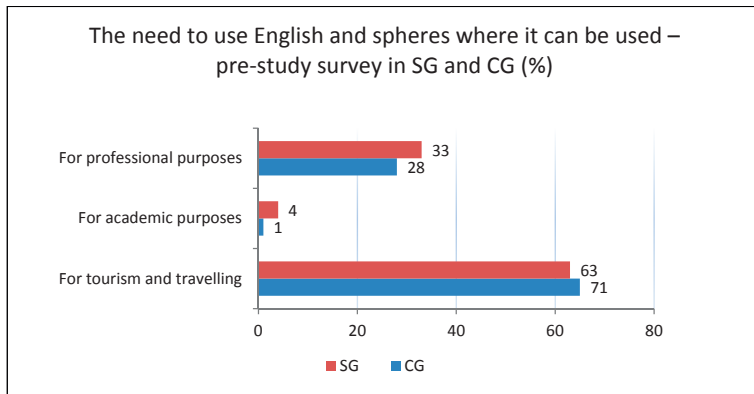


Figure 1. The need to use English and spheres where it can be used – pre-study survey in the study group and the control group (%)

The results of the pre-study survey (Figure 1) showed that the majority of the respondents (64% in the study group and 65% in the control group) saw English only as the language of travel and were not going to use it either for continuing their education or building a career. Thus, it can be assumed that without strong need to speak English and determination to use it in the future, EFL learning is supported merely by extrinsic motivation. The pre-study survey revealed that the initial level of the need to speak English and the priority of the English skills application were approximately the same in both groups.

Following the experimental EFL course we conducted a post-study survey in order to evaluate the impact of the suggested EFL teaching and learning system on the student’s motivation and English communication need. The post-study survey contained the same question and the same answer options.

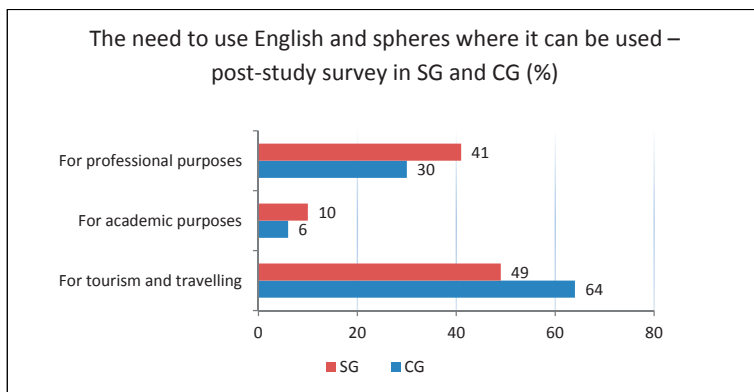


Figure 2. The need to use English and spheres where it can be used – post-study survey in the study group and the control group (%)

The results of the post-study survey (Figure 2) in the control group were practically identical to the results of the pre-study survey (63%), while in the study group more students said that they would need English for academic or professional purposes and fewer students picked tourism and travelling as the sphere of their English skills application. Thus, we see quantitative and qualitative changes in the students' need to use a foreign language before and after the experimental EFL course. The number of students who said that they would use English for further studies increased by 8%, the number of students who would need English for a successful career increased by 21%, and the number of students who saw English only as the language of tourism decreased by 23%. Among others, the respondents provided the following typical answers: "I will need English both for my future profession and for everyday life", "I will need English in the future, because it gives me more opportunities for personal fulfillment and career development," "I will definitely need English, when I will apply for a job." Some respondents gave more detailed answers: "I mainly need English for educational and professional purposes; it extends the boundaries and gives people more opportunities. English is also very useful for travelling. I would like to visit many countries, but it never really works without being able to communicate in English. During my previous trips abroad, I had a lot of confusing situations and misunderstandings – and I wouldn't want to get into such troubles again;" "Final exam in the form of an interdisciplinary conference is a great impetus for mastering my English skills. I believed in myself and realized that I can acquire a necessary level of English proficiency. The learning process was not easy – it caused some stress and insecurity, but eventually I got over it;" "I used to think that the level of my English is too low for more complex tasks, but then I started making some progress – I learnt not to be afraid of speaking a foreign language in public, and now I want to continue mastering my English skills."

Another important aspect addressed by this empirical research was to identify the students' level of foreign language communication anxiety. For this purpose, another survey was conducted before and after the experimental EFL course. The participants were asked the following question: Do you feel anxious when you need to speak English a) in class, b) with bilingual people you know, c) with bilingual strangers.

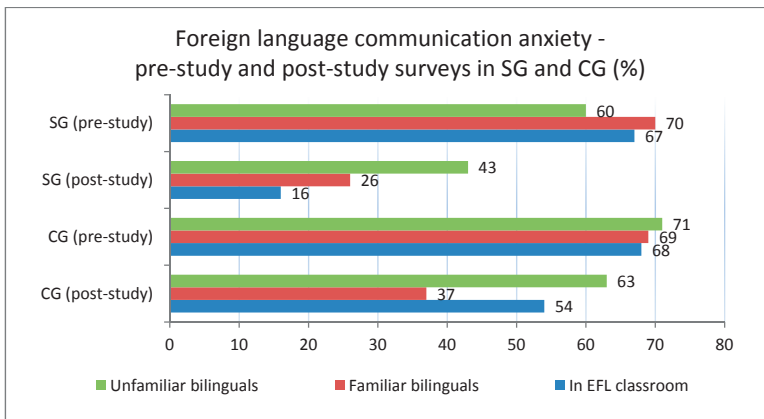


Figure 3. Foreign language communication anxiety - pre-study and post-study surveys in the study group and the control group (%)

The pre-study survey results (see Figure 3) show that initially students from both the study group and the control group admitted they had foreign language communication

anxiety in classroom (67% and 68%, respectively). The post-study survey showed significant improvement in the study group in comparison with the control group – the number of students feeling anxious about speaking English in classroom decreased by 51% in the study group and only by 14% in the control group.

As for the communication with bilinguals, the analysis of the responses gave the following results: 70% of the students from the study group and 69% of the students from the control group said that they would feel anxious if they needed to speak with a familiar bilingual person. After the experimental EFL course, the number of respondents admitting such anxiety decreased by 44% in the study group and by 32% in the control group. Such significant improvement in the control group can be explained by the fact that conventional EFL teaching and learning gave students new skills and competencies, thus increasing their confidence. However, the better result from the study group suggests that mass uncontrolled improvement of the level of students' foreign language communication anxiety is unlikely. Similar results were observed with regard to the anxiety caused by speaking with bilingual strangers. In the study group 60% of students admitted such anxiety before the experimental EFL course, and 43% after the course, while in the control group these percentages were 71% and 63%, respectively.

Finally, we asked the students from the study group and the control group to name the biggest barriers to their successful learning of English, both at school and at the university. After the majority of the respondents (84%) identified "fear or anxiety" as the main hindering factor, they were given several additional open-ended and closed-ended questions specifically concerning the issue of language anxiety and its reasons. The results are presented on the Figure 4 below. When asked whether they felt anxious talking to a native English speaker (NES) or another bilingual person who does not know Russian, 71% of respondents answered affirmatively. Among the reasons for such anxiety were the lack of vocabulary and common topics, as well as agitation and nervousness (35%). More than 68% of students also admitted being anxious when speaking in classroom, mainly due to the fear of being unjustly or unreasonably corrected and the fear of disappointing the teacher. Within this group, 23% of students explained their language anxiety by the fear of their teachers who made inappropriate remarks when correcting their mistakes or oriented the teaching process towards stronger students, ignoring those who lagged behind. Such attitude created psychological barriers for lower-performing students.

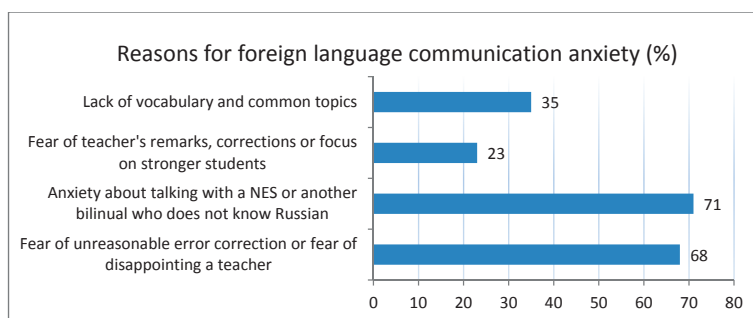


Figure 4. The reasons for foreign language communication anxiety (%)

We believe that such results can be partly explained by the specific assessment approach towards communication skills developed by bilingual non-linguistic students in an artificial EFL learning environment. Natural language environment is relatively

tolerant to errors, especially if they do not hinder communication, while EFL classrooms are mainly focused on teaching standard language and eliminating errors. In Russia, for example, foreign language progress of non-linguistic university students is usually guided and evaluated by the same teacher outside the natural language environment without considering the variability of the current language norms. This leads to an over-focus on eliminating speech errors or hypercorrection (Karlinsky, 1990; Kabakchi, 2009).

In summary, the analysis and comparison of the pre-study and post-study results showed that experimental EFL teaching and learning significantly increased the need to speak English in the students from the study group. These students also expressed more interest in using English for academic or professional purposes and had lower foreign language communication anxiety in comparison with the control group.

Conclusion and discussion

The results of the pre-study surveys suggest that Russian university students of non-linguistic majors, who learn English in an artificial bilingual environment, lack integrative intrinsic motivation to speak a foreign language. Another factor hindering students' EFL learning is foreign language communication anxiety, mainly caused by the anticipation of being evaluated or judged by a non-native English teacher. Artificial bilingual learning context can increase psychological dependence on the teacher's opinion and assessment, and therefore create strong barriers to effective communication. Conventional university EFL teaching in Russia is still largely textbook-based and teacher-centred; it often reduces learners' communication to the interaction with a limited number of peers within one learning group mentored by one teacher. However, the results of this empirical study give reason to believe that systematic EFL teaching and learning process with strong focus on developing profession-specific English communication skills, expanding the scope of challenging activities, building new contacts and social ties among students, designing interdisciplinary language activities, forming heterogeneous study groups, and ensuring continuity of learning tasks and projects will lead to more natural foreign language acquisition, boost students confidence, increase the perceived usefulness of EFL learning and reduce communication barriers.

The demand for mass EFL teaching of non-linguistic university students who lack intrinsic motivation in artificial bilingual classrooms is one of the pressures on Russian educators, especially practicing teachers. While positive reward and positive feedback are claimed to be effective motivation enhancers, there seems to be a certain contradiction in the idea that external rewards, which create an external locus of control, are the key to intrinsic motivation driven by inner motivational resources. Therefore, we need to be careful not to overemphasize rewarding importance, because there is always a risk of developing reward-dependence. Refocusing our efforts on challenging students and increasing perceived usefulness of EFL learning seems a promising strategy for making students feel more autonomous for their actions, and therefore more interested and motivated.

During this empirical study, the authors made an important additional observation that challenging students does not preclude the necessity of creating a friendly teaching and learning atmosphere. When students expand the scope of tasks performed and competencies used in their EFL classrooms, or when they are challenged with getting their messages through to wider audiences using a non-native language, they step outside their comfort zone. This needs to be compensated by a strong sense of support from teachers and peers. Olga Kuposova claimed that willingness to communicate, as well as autonomous communication planning and decision-making are the key drivers of what she called "communication initiative" (Kuposova, 2001), which can be perceived

as the manifestation of intrinsic motivation for the English language communication. So, creating a healthy and supportive environment is crucial for intrinsically motivated communication behaviour.

In the future, the authors are planning to continue their research of the social and psychological factors associated with intrinsic motivation, and apply the tested principles to larger and more heterogeneous populations of students, moving from interdepartmental to interuniversity model of collaboration and bilingual communication.

Statements

1. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.
2. All data were collected according to the applicable laws and regulations on the research ethics and the privacy of the participants involved. All the collected and processed data are available upon request to the authors.

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