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Overcoming non-linguistic barriers to effective speaking in Russian adult ESP classroom

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Abstract: The problem of teaching speaking in the adult ESP classroom has not been sufficiently studied in Russia, although the challenges it poses differ significantly from those that traditional research on pedagogy can address. One of these challenges is that some Russian adult ESP students do not feel comfortable speaking English in front of their teacher and classmates, which leads to communication barriers. The review of the literature on andragogy, our observations, and the anonymous survey conducted among Russian adult ESP learners have revealed that this discomfort may be caused or compounded by such socio-cultural and psychological factors as the fear of appearing incompetent and difficulty assuming the subordinate role of a student. The given study explores these factors and suggests creating a number of conditions maximizing the benefits of speaking activities for adult ESP audiences. The first condition is a flexible class organization, in which students are mostly encouraged to interact with equals in respect of their social characteristics and language proficiency. It creates a favorable anxiety-reduced classroom atmosphere in which all learners are given an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths. Another condition is the students' exposure to relevant learning content with interactive speaking activities representing real-life communicative situations. It raises adult learners' motivation and reduces the impact of psychological constraints. The third condition is the teaching style of a facilitator rather than a superior, which involves recognizing that both the teacher and the adult learners are competent in their respective fields of expertise and therefore equal in status. This setting proves to foster the development of speaking skills in Russian adult ESP classrooms and thus may be recommended for this audience. Further research into the topic may reveal more factors underlying verbal interactions in adult ESP classroom.

Key words: adult learners; speaking skills; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); andragogy; socio-cultural communication barriers; psychological communication barriers; differentiated instruction.

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**Обучение взрослых слушателей программ по английскому языку
для специальных целей навыкам эффективного говорения:
преодоление нелингвистических барьеров**

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Аннотация: Проблема обучения взрослых слушателей программ по английскому языку для специальных целей иноязычному устному общению недостаточно изучена в России, хотя сложности, возникающие в процессе преподавания взрослым АСЦ, существенно отличаются от тех, на преодоление которых направлены традиционные педагогические исследования. Одной такой сложностью является дискомфорт, испытываемый некоторыми русскими взрослыми слушателями программ по АСЦ при говорении на английском языке в присутствии преподавателя и других обучающихся, что приводит к коммуникативному барьеру. Обобщив данные ряда исследований по андрагогике, основываясь на собственных наблюдениях и на результатах анонимного анкетирования, проведенного среди соответствующей категории обучающихся, авторы статьи установили следующее. Испытываемый слушателями дискомфорт может быть вызван либо усугублен такими социокультурными и психологическими факторами, как страх оказаться некомпетентным и сложность принятия подчиненной роли студента. В статье исследуются эти факторы, предлагается ряд условий, повышающих эффективность устной речевой деятельности для данной аудитории слушателей. Во-первых, необходима гибкая организация учебного процесса, при которой взаимодействие происходит в основном между слушателями, равными с точки зрения социальных характеристик и уровня владения английским языком. Это создает благоприятную и непринужденную атмосферу, при которой каждый участник учебной группы имеет возможность продемонстрировать свои сильные стороны. Во-вторых, важно использовать актуальные дидактические материалы с интерактивными заданиями по говорению, моделирующими реальные ситуации общения. Это повышает мотивацию и снижает негативное влияние психологических барьеров. В-третьих, целесообразно придерживаться фасилитаторского, а не доминирующего стиля преподавания, что предполагает признание компетентности слушателей как специалистов в своей области и их статусного равенства с преподавателем. В статье обосновывается, что соблюдение данных условий способствует развитию навыков говорения у взрослых слушателей программ АСЦ и может быть рекомендовано для данной аудитории обучающихся. Дальнейшие исследования темы могут выявить и иные факторы, лежащие в основе вербального взаимодействия между взрослыми слушателями программ АСЦ.

Ключевые слова: взрослые обучающиеся; навыки говорения; английский язык для специальных целей; андрагогика; социокультурные коммуникативные барьеры; психологические коммуникативные барьеры; дифференцированное обучение.

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Информация о конфликте интересов: авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Despite the high demand for English for specific purposes (ESP) courses among adults in Russia, several educators have pointed out the lack of research into andragogy, particularly in regard to language teaching [Altareva 2004, p. 168–169; Belkina, Dmitrusenko, Kravtsova 2014, p. 79]. One of the underexplored problems associated with teaching ESP to adults is their difficulty developing speaking skills. Russian adult ESP students learn the language in order to perform particular job-related duties, many of which involve oral communication with foreign partners and clients. Speaking skills are recognized as critical for functioning in different English language contexts including a workplace and a professional environment. In addition, they prove to be the hardest to develop [Hinkel 2006], especially when it comes to adult groups.

Recent studies show that Russian adult ESP students do not always feel comfortable speaking Eng-

lish in their classroom in front of the teacher and their classmates. Discussing the factors causing these difficulties, researchers specify, among others, methodological and linguistic reasons [Prokhorova, Vasilieva 2014; Belkina, Dmitrusenko, Kravtsova 2014; Samofalova, Borisenko 2017; Abramova, Ananyina 2019]. They are related to the traditional and presumably obsolete approach to the English language instruction that the learners were previously exposed to. This ineffective teaching approach results in their low level of English proficiency, in general, and underdeveloped speaking skills, in particular. However, besides the lack of linguistic competence, adult learners' poor speaking performance may be caused or aggravated by a number of non-linguistic factors.

Our hypothesis is that there are two major socio-cultural and psychological barriers to effective speaking in the adult ESP classroom. These barriers are the fear of appearing incompetent, observed

mostly in peer-to-peer interactions, and difficulty assuming the subordinate role of a student, observed in student-teacher interactions. Our research will therefore aim to examine these hindering factors, to consider a number of conditions maximizing the benefits of classroom speaking activities for Russian adult audiences, and to share some teaching ideas illustrating how to create these conditions.

Literature review

The problem of non-linguistic barriers to speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) has been addressed by Kang Shumin in her article "Factors to consider: Developing adult EFL students speaking abilities" (1997). The author claims that among the factors influencing oral communication skills are age or maturational constraints, aural medium, socio-cultural factors, and affective factors [Shumin 1997, p. 9]. Indeed, all of these factors have an impact on foreign language acquisition to a greater or lesser degree. It can be assumed, however, that poor speaking skills of adult ESP learners are not directly related to their age. Rather, maturational constraints may keep adult people from studying foreign languages in general. As for the lack of listening comprehension skills, which are also mentioned in the article by Shumin, they prove to affect speaking skills of old and young learners alike. Adults' proficiency in spoken English is more likely to be influenced by affective and socio-cultural barriers. Among the affective factors related to foreign language learning, Shumin names emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation [Shumin 1997, p. 9]. As regards the socio-cultural factors, the author describes them as differences in cultural and social norms and, as a consequence, inability to communicate in various contexts. Agreeing that these factors affect speaking in foreign languages, we consider that the paper by Shumin does not examine some of the important perspectives of this problem.

Specifically, it should be noted that psychological, or affective, barriers are closely connected to socio-cultural ones. Adult ESP learners, especially if they are professionals in their respective fields, are sometimes afraid to make a mistake and thereby lose face. It happens because they have trouble changing their social roles of experts to those of inexperienced students. It may also be associated with culturally conditioned emotional distance that exists, in particular, among people in Russia, especially if they are not familiar with one another or are socially unequal. The socio-cultural barriers observed in adult ESP learners' interactions may also be related to a high degree of power distance and a high degree of collectivism, which are some of the cultural norms traditionally ascribed to Russia [Isurin 2011; Domysheva, Kopylova 2019].

To better understand how to deal with the socio-cultural and psychological barriers in adult ESP

learners, it is useful to refer to some important findings about the general principles and approaches to teaching adults.

Based on the model devised by Malcolm Knowles [Knowles 1984], Greg Kearsley in his article "Andragogy (M. Knowles)" (2010) describes the following principles of andragogy, which prove worthwhile for this research:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their jobs or personal lives.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. [Kearsley 2010].

These mean that the teacher needs to involve the students in the process of planning the instruction form and content and have them provide some feedback (for example, via a poll). Also, it is important to arrange practical activities based on real-life situations and the students' job-related duties. Speaking activities should be built around problems that have to be solved (for example, in a discussion, or during negotiations).

Raymond Woldkowski in his research "Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults" (2008) suggests five criteria for making a learning activity for adult students "an irresistible invitation to learn". They are as follows:

1. Safe. There is little risk of learners suffering any form of personal embarrassment.
2. Successful. There is some form of acknowledgment, consequence, or product that shows that the learners are effective or, at the very least, that their effort is a worthwhile investment that is connected to making progress.
3. Interesting. The learning activity has some parts that are novel, engaging, challenging, or stimulating.
4. Personally endorsed. Learners are encouraged to make choices that significantly affect the learning experience.
5. Personally relevant. The instructor uses learners' concerns, interests, or prior experiences to create elements of the learning activity or develops the activity in concert with the learners. At the very least, a resource-rich learning environment is available to encourage learners' selections based on personal interest [Finn 2011, p. 38].

Besides the concepts of relevance and personal involvement in instruction planning, which are also presented in the paper by Knowles, Woldkowski points out that the activities should be safe (anxiety-free), interesting, and bring the learners to success or, at least, minor achievement. These criteria are important for teaching languages in general, and speaking skills in particular.

In "Principles of adult learning: An ESL context" (2011), Donald Finn outlines the factors that might motivate adult students to participate in ESL educational programs as well as potential barriers to

learning. In particular, Finn claims that adult learners mostly join educational programs for career- or job-related reasons. He describes ESL learners as goal-oriented, i.e. they “enter the educational environment with specific desired outcomes to be achieved at the end of participation” and “often expect to experience success quickly” [Finn 2011, p. 35]. Teaching goals are best accomplished through a favorable learning environment, relevance of the instruction for the students, and their positive learning experience [Finn 2011, p. 37]. Therefore, it can be assumed that, in order to motivate adult learners, the instructor should teach them some meaningful content and practical skills that can be immediately employed in real-life context. This idea is also supported by a number of Russian researchers [Samofalova, Borisenko 2017, p. 194].

Methodology

In order to address the problems raised in this study, a number of different research methods were used. Our hypothesis was proposed and confirmed by the recent findings made by EFL/ESL and ESP professionals, our observations made during more than 12 years of teaching adult ESP students, and an anonymous survey conducted among adult learners of English for Professional Communication.

The survey was done among 61 adults who studied at the Baikal International Business School of Irkutsk State University in 2017–2019. On the whole, the respondents had different social and professional backgrounds as well as different levels of language proficiency, from A1 to B2. They were streamed into appropriate language groups based on their English proficiency levels, defined by the results of placement tests. Also, it should be noted that a number of students came from the same companies and even the same departments, thus some groups had students who were co-workers, supervisors, and subordinates in relation to each other.

The questionnaire contained 5 questions.

Questions 1–2 were intended to collect such demographic data as the age groups and the education levels of those polled. Question 1 asked a person to mark his/her age range, particularly as follows: 18–20, 21–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and 60 and older. Question 2 asked about the highest level of education obtained by a survey participant, namely, from a high school diploma to PhD. Also, respondents could specify if they had more than one degree or other qualifications.

Questions 3–5 were aimed to test our hypothesis about the negative impact of non-linguistic factors on effective speaking in adult ESP classes as well as possible practical ways to alleviate that impact. The respondents were asked to indicate if they agree, partly agree or disagree with the suggested statements.

Question 3 had the following statement: “After a break in my studies I have difficulty being a student again”.

The statement in question 4 was the following: “During ESP classes I (would) feel uncomfortable if...” It had four possible completions:

- a) I cannot / could not adequately express myself in English;
- b) I study / studied with my supervisor/subordinate in the same group;
- c) I speak / spoke worse than the other students in the group;
- d) I need / needed to make a presentation or public speech in English in front of the other students and teachers.

The subjunctive mood was used in question 4 for students who had no problems speaking English but could imagine themselves in the described situations and predict what they might feel in that case.

Question 5 sought the learners’ opinions on the ways to overcome barriers to effective speaking: “While I am doing speaking activities on job-related topics it is important for me...” The question had three possible completions and three corresponding statements to agree, partly agree or disagree with:

- a) to have an opportunity to demonstrate competence in my professional field and share my knowledge and experience with the other students;
- b) to have a teacher who facilitates but does not dominate the class so that everyone can have an opportunity to actively participate in all activities;
- c) to be given challenging but manageable tasks, so that I can make and feel steady progress.

Data analysis and discussion

It is reasonable to start our data analysis by reviewing the observations that we made during 12 years of teaching Russian adult students such courses as Business English, English for Workplace, and English for Professional Communication (on average one or two groups per year). The groups consisted of 10–14 men and women of different ages (from 21 to 60), professions, and positions. They all had a bachelor’s, specialist, or master’s degree, and sometimes more than one degree. The students met twice or three times a week in the evenings for 120 or 180 minutes, depending on the program. Each group was supposed to be formed according to the learners’ levels of English proficiency, but in practice the classes often included students with somewhat different levels.

Having observed the students’ behavior, we inferred that it may be hard to involve the students from different age groups or having different social positions in spontaneous collaborative speaking activities. For example, adult students with a significant difference in age or positions may be embarrassed if they are assigned tasks for which they have to act as peers. In addition to interactive speaking activities, adults sometimes have trouble delivering monologues, even if they are prepared in advance. Psychological discomfort and sensitivity to criticism, observed mainly in older people or those of superior positions, lead to their difficulty developing speaking skills.

It should be noted, however, that not every adult learner faces these problems. Some groups we taught were diverse in age, status, and levels, but the students experienced no difficulty participating in oral communication activities. In other groups, even relatively homogeneous ones, the learners were reluctant to speak to each other or in front of the others. Thus, oral communication barriers considered in this paper are only faced by some adult students. These barriers may also depend on their personality, experience, study habits, personal and/or professional relationships among group members, and other factors.

Having summarized the findings by various researchers [Shumin 1997; Assylbayeva 2014; Belkina, Dmitrusenko, Kravtsova 2014] and basing on our own experience and observations, we have singled out two major factors responsible for lack of speaking skills of adult ESP learners: fear of looking incompetent in the eyes of group mates and difficulty adopting the inferior role of an incompetent student.

In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted the survey.

Of 61 adult students polled, there were 38 respondents aged 30–39 (62 %), 14 people aged 40–49 (23 %), and 9 people aged 21–29 (15 %). As for their highest academic degrees, the respondents reported holding a master's degree (33 %), a specialist degree (61 %), a bachelor's degree (3 %), an undergraduate degree (3 %). About a third of those polled mentioned having more than one academic degree (33 %). Also, 100 % of the surveyed students claimed to have completed various professional retraining and professional development courses. Considering these findings, we can assume high levels of expertise and considerable work experience in the majority of the surveyed adult learners.

The majority of the respondents admitted having difficulty being a student after a long break in their studies: 24 % completely agreed with the statement; 48 % partly agreed, and 28 % disagreed. Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between the students' age and their responses. In fact, only respondents under 30 unanimously did not agree with the statement, which is logical because they did not have a long break in their studies. Contrary to our assumptions, people aged 30 and older gave different answers regardless of their age group.

The survey also revealed the following facts.

By agreeing, partly agreeing or disagreeing with the suggested statement, the students noted that they (would) feel uncomfortable during ESP class activities if they:

a) cannot / could not adequately express themselves in English (28 % agreed, 43 % partly agreed, and 29 % disagreed);

b) study / studied with their supervisors / subordinates in the same group (11 % agreed, 49 % partly agreed, and 39 % disagreed);

c) speak / spoke worse than the other students in the group (5 % agreed, 54 % partly agreed, and 23 % disagreed);

d) need / needed to make a presentation or public speech in English in front of the other students and teachers (48 % agreed, 23 % partly agreed, and 30 % disagreed).

The results show that most students chose the “partly agreed” option. The exception was the statement about making a presentation or public speech in front of the other students and teachers, with which the majority of the respondents agreed completely. On the whole, the proportion of the students' responses supports our hypothesis that adult learners may be afraid to lose face by demonstrating lack of linguistic competence or inability to learn efficiently as compared to their group mates.

Answering the question about possible solutions to the problem of non-linguistic barriers, the respondents emphasized the importance of the following learning conditions in ESP speaking classes:

a) an opportunity to demonstrate competence in a student's professional field and share his / her knowledge and experience with the other students (51 % agreed, 39 partly agreed, and 10 % disagreed);

b) a teacher who facilitates but does not dominate the class so that everyone can have an opportunity to actively participate in all activities (61 % agreed and 39 % partly agreed);

c) challenging but manageable tasks, so that the students can make and feel steady progress (80 % agreed and 20 % partly agreed).

These findings confirm that adult learners prefer a flexible and comfortable learning environment with face-saving activities in which they can demonstrate their proficiency, develop useful speaking skills, and track their own consistent progress.

The conducted survey covers only general problems that adult learners, often with relatively low levels of language proficiency, may encounter when they participate in speaking activities in the ESP class. The survey results merely highlight some of the existing non-linguistic barriers to effective speaking and indicate some favorable learning conditions for this kind of audience.

All things considered, the survey data supported our hypothesis about the two key factors affecting speaking skills in adult students of English. These factors create a teaching problem that needs to be addressed.

Classes with adult audiences require differentiated instruction with less emphasis on competitiveness and more on individual needs and personal achievement, which can lead to a favorable anxiety-reduced learning environment and foster the students' oral communication skills. Among other ways, it may be reached by:

1) *effective class organization*, which includes flexible classroom management with a balance of individual, small and large group activities assigned on the basis of students' abilities and expectations;

2) *instructional content and activities* that help students solve practical, real-life communicative tasks relevant to their professional and everyday life;

3) *appropriate teaching style*, which involves using alternative behaviors to fit various learning styles and assuming the role of a helper and a facilitator.

In relation to class organization, it is important to form effective learning groups and mini-groups so that the students can feel comfortable with the classmates who become their conversation partners. For this purpose, the teacher may use various grouping schemes, some of which are described in the article by Judith Rance-Roney (2010). She argues that “small group collaboration allows students to rehearse for the larger whole-class discussion to follow”, it provides “less formal and less-anxiety-ridden context”, and “the ability to appropriately interact in groups has become a goal in itself” [Rance-Roney 2010, p. 21]. Therefore, Rance-Roney suggests considering how many students may collaborate effectively in a group, whether groups should be fixed or flexible, and whether the teacher should assign them on the basis of the students’ oral language proficiency, their personality (dominant versus reticent students), gender, close affiliation, common interests, and other factors [Rance-Roney 2010].

From our experience, grouping adults for ESP courses should be planned in advance. For successful spoken interaction it is advisable that classes consist of “equals”. In practice, however, the classes are often very diverse in age, social positions, and levels of language proficiency. For pair work or small group work the students’ language levels and social characteristics should be approximately the same, while for groups larger than four these factors have a lesser impact on the learners’ communication since the “opposites” do not have to directly interact only with one another. As was mentioned above, people of older ages and/or of higher positions may be especially sensitive to failures in front of the others, and some adults are naturally afraid to lose face. They may feel frustrated when their partners or mini-group mates (especially those who are younger and/or have lower positions) obviously perform better. As a result, they may even drop the course. Although “safe” small groups do not have to be fixed once and remain until the end of the program, they might be preferable for challenging speaking tasks.

Another point is that effective class organization involves combining various forms of work, including individual, pair/small group work, and whole class work. Like in the case of mini groups, for individual work it is rational to assign tasks basing on the student’s speaking abilities and potential. For instance, it is ineffective to assign difficult topics for individual oral presentations to the students who have trouble speaking in public. It is also important not to expose “sensitive” students to the situations that may threaten their self-esteem during whole class activities. Certainly, these students have to be involved in all activities, but the teacher may give them better opportunities to perform well. For instance, for impromptu speaking tasks we usually do not ask such students first; instead, we ask them after some fluent speakers have answered,

thereby giving the others more time to prepare their response.

As for the instructional activities, a great emphasis should be put on practical skills. For instance, when students at the basic level of English proficiency study numerals, one of possible tasks is to exchange their mobile phone numbers with the group mates. Then they are to dial the numbers they heard from the partner to check whether they got them right. If they fail to catch any number or get through to the partner, they have to politely ask him/her to repeat it. Other activities are asking/saying the time and the prices for snacks in different currencies (teachers can use images of snacks with price tags). Not only speaking, but also listening skills are developed. Due to their simplicity, these tasks are suitable for the beginners; they are problem-centered and help the students show and see immediate results.

Using the appropriate teaching style is a very important issue in the adult ESP classroom. Taking into account that such students are often acknowledged professionals in their fields, the teacher should maintain the right class management style. It means that the teacher should behave to some extent as an equal to the adult learners, and, at the same time, as an expert in ESP, which means having some situational power. The role of a competent helper and a facilitator should be preferred to that of a superior. If the instructor is much younger than some of his/her students, it is especially important to find the right balance between the roles of a strict teacher and a flexible leader.

Another role that the teacher of adults may want to assume is that of a person who needs professional advice. It is useful to give the adult learners opportunities to demonstrate that they are experts in their specific fields. For instance, accountants and economists can be asked to explain various money-related issues to the teacher and the rest of the group. Similarly, lawyers can be assigned a presentation on an interesting and relevant legal issue, engineers can discuss advantages and disadvantages of certain models of office equipment, and IT specialists can be asked to describe, for example, recent educational software. Such tasks have proved to raise adult students’ motivation. In many cases they are eager to show their expertise, and even though some students might have limited vocabulary or poor grammar skills, they do not usually manifest any psychological speaking barriers.

Conclusions

Speaking activities, like no other tasks, put adult learners in a socially and psychologically vulnerable position, especially if they are professionals outside the classroom, but not very successful students and/or not very fluent speakers inside the classroom. In addition to the low level of English proficiency that Russian adult ESP learners sometimes have, they may face such barriers as the fear of seeming incompetent and trouble accepting the subordinate role of a student.

This research has shown that, in order to overcome these barriers, students should be exposed to a favorable anxiety-reduced learning environment created by means of three conditions. The first one is a flexible class organization, in which students work individually or in effective groups and interact with their equals in respect of their social characteristics and English proficiency. It gives the learners an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths. The second condition is exposing adults to the relevant learning content and assigning interesting interactive speaking activities representing real-life communicative situations. It raises adult learners' motivation and reduces the impact of psychological constraints. The third condition is the teaching style of a facilitator rather than a superior, which involves recognizing that both the teacher and the adult learners are competent in their respective fields of expertise and therefore equal in status.

Some Russian adult ESP students experience socio-cultural and psychological barriers to speaking, so the suggested conditions help prevent communication problems or minimize their impact, particularly when it comes to verbal face-to-face interactions. Consequently, the findings may be applied to this category of learners.

The given study has been founded on the literature review, which synthesizes effective teaching practices, the authors' observations and professional experience, and the results of the survey. This article only starts to explore the problem, which certainly needs further development. Analyzing observations made by other educators and surveying more Russian adult ESP students as well as their teachers may provide more food for thought, highlight the issue from various perspectives, and help avoid subjectivity. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to examine other factors underlying successful communication in the adult classroom, which also opens prospects for further research into the topic.

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