

# FLSP

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FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE  
FOR SPECIAL  
PURPOSES

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## Promoting Language Awareness for Business Communication

Teaching Business English to pre-experience students having little or practically no access to live English poses its own problems. Teaching business communication skills occupies a special niche in this respect, as apart from bearing methodological features common to teaching general communication techniques, it has its distinctive peculiarities, since oral business communication requires accuracy of information, clear intercultural awareness and unmistakable grasp of interpersonal business relations.

How well do learners cope with these issues?

With us, students know the grammar of the English language rather well, master a decent amount of vocabulary, read a lot and write essays, use the Internet and e-mail easily. However, when it comes to conducting a business talk or a telephone conversation much goes wrong. The strain of communicating in a foreign language, very frail cultural and business background and lack of practice make emotions run high. The long accumulated knowledge of the language slips away and what the students actually start doing is a word for word translation from Armenian into English.

The reasons lie both in cultural and educational experience.

Firstly, as another remnant of the Soviet legacy, people didn't have and still do have very little access to "live" English. This deprives the students of first-hand experience in the language practice. If in many parts of the world this problem is solved easily by a great influx of tourists and business people and through years of tradition of contacting with native speakers, in the ex-Soviet countries in transition, it is still a problem.

Secondly, now that Armenia is getting into various business contacts with the outer world, new types of institutions, new types of concepts, notions and relations are being established, and a lot

are to be learnt. This, in its turn, means that the students do not have the pre-set awareness of many realities that sound so natural to the western man. Brumfit writes of this general phenomena: "We have the strange paradox that in mother tongue teaching we emphasize the clarity of the child's ability to express himself, while in the foreign language we demand that he express a culture of which he has scarcely any experience" (Brumfit, 1980).

Consequently, while organizing their thoughts in English, students, quite naturally, try to modify and adapt the new concepts to the familiar ones, and promptly resort to a word for word translation at that. The result is often faulty, funny and, in most cases, wrong. Therefore, it is in this framework that textbooks acquire additional meaning. Through textbooks students not only learn the language but also develop cross-cultural awareness and pick up some knowledge of the elements of international business etiquette.

Thirdly, starting from school, students are mainly used to the translational method of learning a foreign language, which they naturally expect to be applied in their tertiary education. Furthermore, communication skills are practically not taught at school (though they should have been taught to the standard, according to the state educational programme). As a result, pre-experience students generally have very low competence of communication skills. This arouses particular concern about teaching business communication skills that stand out as one of the central language teaching issues' at present.

The above mentioned and some other considerations, as well as years of experience of struggling with the problem, have led to devising a certain sequence of exercises, incorporated in the book "Talking Business?" published in the year 2000, which allows to attain the goal in a relatively easy way. The prime objective of its implication is to beat down the natural upsurge of literal 'translation-making', which occurs every time the tension of oral contact is faced, and to develop a correlative approach of language perception. In the given circumstances, this is practically possible only when deep in the learner's mind appropriate L1 - L2 matches, set in certain contextual frames, have already been formulated and fostered both on cognitive and emotional levels. Owing to this, in further instances,

whenever the need to use this or that L1 language pattern arises, which can be defined as a sort of an urge for 'translation-help-loan', the corresponding L2 pattern, in a similar context, emerges from the memory, thus facilitating the genuine communication in a foreign language.

As the psychological pattern of the so-called "language traffic" in the communicative process at the intermediate level proceeds from L1 to L2, the logic of teaching a foreign language should be brought as close to it as possible, so that in the course of time the necessity to refer to L1 greatly weakens and gradually fades away, as "the more English students learn, the less reliant they are on the L1" (Prodromou, 2002).

The debate on the use or the extent of use of L1 in teaching foreign languages has been long and, in many cases, heated. While Atkinson argues that "Every second spent using the L1 is a second not spent using English!" (Atkinson, 1993), Krumsch (see: Krumsch C. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, 1993), as well as Prodromou hold a distinctively opposite view: "The mother tongue is an important part of a learner's psychological and cultural make-up and to that extent must be taken into account in any educational practice, of which ELT is just one small part" (Prodromou, 2002). The pros and cons are so evident and still debatable that another drop in this storming sea seems almost useless and out of line. Nevertheless, references can be made to many English language magazines published in different countries, e.g., Germany and Poland ("Business Spotlight " in Germany ['Business Issues' 2.2001, p. 15, 'Interview with Ian McMaster'], the monthly "Mozaika" in Poland), where the publishers ease the hard work of reading materials in a foreign language by giving the translations of different language units in the footnotes and so on. The Russians demonstrate a similar attitude. Most of their textbooks, especially Business English ones, are heavily based on translations, using different techniques at that. The above said again comes to prove that "*the mother tongue – 'the skeleton in the cupboard' has been there all the time*" (Prodromou, 2002), and instead of avoiding it a better choice would be to *use it wisely*, to allow the pragmatic approach gain the upper hand over the scientific methodological prescriptions.

In the suggested set of exercises to be discussed, the standpoint

of L1 use is not that of providing translations to the learner. Its aim is to make the learner *recognize the peculiarities of other, foreign language thinking, the features of the new language, their corresponding and appropriate use in speech*. In fact, it is a so-called "parallelism" of autonomous language units of L1 and L2, if we may call it so, which helps to overcome the instances when the L1 translation distorts or spoils the L2 discourse with the emergence of 'false friends', creative and descriptive translations instead of corresponding words and collocations.

The provided information, which is understood and acquired logically, from the very start, often arouses pleasant surprise, estimation, joy of recognition and, why not, sometimes humour when a comparison of L1 and L2 goes on. Through the process of comparative parallelism students *experience positive emotions*. Whereas positive emotions, according to different gradings of psychologists, make up only a quarter, or at most, one third of fundamental emotions of man. Daniel Goleman suggests the following grouping of the "main candidates" of the basic emotional families, which further branch into "hundreds of emotions, along with their blends, variations, mutations and nuances: Anger; Sadness; Fear; Enjoyment; Love; Surprise; Disgust; Shame "(Goleman, 1995). While Plutchik specifies only interest-excitement, joy, surprise and love and optimism among the group of sixteen fundamental emotions (see: Plutchik & Kellerman, *Theory of Emotion*, 1980). Hence, much greater value do the positive emotions gain, when they accompany the language acquisition process. It is largely due to the switching in of the positive emotions that in the foreign language acquisition a smooth transition of the language material from short- term memory to the long-term memory, and later – its successful facilitated retrieval is ensured.

The extent of *emotional involvement* may vary, but it is certainly a lot greater in communication process than in other instances of language use. This is determined on the one hand by the potential ability of the speaker to communicate relatively freely (including not only the language competence but other psychological characteristics as well). On the other hand it is due to the quality of the perception of the message by the interlocutor and his facial

feedback and general reaction. Thus, the greater the emotional involvement is, the deeper cognitive layers of information are stirred up, which, in its turn, implies that nearer is the L1 domain. So the impact and importance of L1 increases in the process of retrieving the acquired foreign language during the communication act, as deeper emotional layers are activated and the relatively new information, which once had undergone a strong emotional fixation and had been placed into a corresponding learning context, can emerge into the conversational flow. This allows us to assume that with stronger bonds of associative acquisition of L2 with L1 the chances of productive communication are greater.

Another imperative need for provoking positive emotions in business communication teaching is caused by the necessity to *fight down the factor of stress*.

Scientists have estimated that the communicative processes, which bear greater burden of responsibility, present some of the most stressful experiences for the person. They occur "in educational situations, complex social procedures, in the events when the person is in the focus of attention or there is a need for self-assertion or fear of negative assessment" (Argyle, Furnham, Graham, 1981). Facing the necessity to cope with similar situations while speaking a foreign language (for persons with low language competence) "generally creates stress by the feeling that he or she [the learner] would be unable to deal with it" (Roediger et al, 1984). This blocks the retrieval processes from memory causing frustration. Hence, it is not difficult to infer (though language teachers encounter it in class on daily basis) that unless a clear, perceptible and easy track is paved for the learner, he is subject to being in marginal stressful psychological condition, which only complicates the learning process. Whereas having subconsciously the backing of the native language and the clear, distinct awareness of the material (what is to be said and how) not only excites the students, but serves as a **sound** base for *confidence building*. With the provision of positive emotional background and L1 fixation, there is no wobbliness or uncertainty about being right or wrong in the language choice. There is an assurance in the correctness of the say, due to which the communication proceeds easily and without strain.

The development of communication skills proceeds from teaching

a series of original business dialogues centered on a particular contextual interest area and graded from relatively easy ones to more difficult dialogues. It is desirable, that the dialogues, apart from being informative, appeal to the positive emotional field of the learner. Slight modifications, like novelistic endings or sprinkles of humour would smooth the way to more efficient learning. Each dialogue is elaborated through a) four types of consecutive exercises, the succession of which, in fact, serves the basis for this paper, b) the L1 translation of the dialogue and c) the English dialogue itself.

Having completed the first four exercises one after another the student, practically, highlights the main points and parts of the dialogue and learns them. Very little effort is then required to do the next step — which is — to work out the translation of the dialogue from L1 into L2.

We should note that all the language material tackled in the exercises is exclusively taken from the target English dialogue and not a word more.

Exercise 1 is a match of two columns of the main word collocations of the dialogue. The matching proceeds in the direction from L1 to L2. This is essential, as it makes the learners focus on and realize certain connotational differences existing in the two languages, something that the learners would not have given a thought to if they were to imply the word-for-word translational approach. To many a good student this exercise brings about unexpected findings and surprises. Therefore it is advisable to go through the exercise for the second time with the aim of fixing the differences in L1 and L2 in memory.

Exercise 1, which is, in fact, an introduction of the phrases and word combinations, allocates the information in the short-term memory, which is noted for its limited capacity and short duration. Psychologists have experimentally proved that "...short-term memory capacity tends to range from 5 to 9 items" (M. G. McGee & D. W. Wilson, 1984). This fact already determines the size of Exercise 1. It cannot be long or overburdened. Otherwise the exercise would not work, as a constant displacement of information would proceed. "Once capacity is reached, adding a new item will result in losing the old one" (M. G. McGee & D. W. Wilson, 1984). So, to avoid

information overlapping it is essential to be selective in choosing the material for Exercise 1.

As to the short duration of the short-term memory, psychologists state that "If we do not consciously attend to the information in short-term memory, that information will be forgotten within 15-20 seconds" (M. G. McGee & D. W. Wilson, 1984). Therefore the information, namely the new language organised in single units and chunks, is fostered by the next step, by Exercise 2.

In Ex. 2 the information is organized into larger chunks. The task is to fill in the revised material from Exercise 1. But the pieces taken from the original dialogue are still moderate in size and number, and involve less material, which is easier to organize and relate to what is already known. Scholars call it "distributed practice" in the learning process. The principle is to have short sessions of information, "injection" rather than long ones.

Exercise 3 proceeds from the experience of bilingual thinking and communication, which we frequently come across with people speaking two or more languages. In order not to interrupt the flow of their thoughts or speech "bilingual" people make up sentences out of a mix of two languages. The sequence of the parts of sentences, inflexions and links by some magic of unconscious tools perfectly fit each other in most cases. Such utterances are easily grasped or understood, and replied accordingly. Being based on this principle, the exercise, in fact, comprises a series of sentences, which are part English, part — L1. It is essential that the sentences are identical with those, which we aim to teach in the business dialogue.

The students are offered to "rebuild" the English sentences by translating the L1 parts. In many cases the L1 pieces present the trickiest parts of the dialogue, which the learner would otherwise try to translate word for word, with a ridiculous outcome or they repeat the language material of Exercises 1 and 2.

Such an unexpected, uncommon and sometimes funny wording and sounding of the language flow, or, we can even call it the interplay of L1 and L2, arises positive emotions of fun, easy achievement and free play. This calls forth the desire to advance, to try the next sentence, to win, thus forming a good base for further

work. A sort of lift appears with the students which drives them forward to the following exercises where they want "to fulfil the task and win the game".

This technique is supposed to work applying to almost all Indo-European languages. And it is believed that owing to the "uniform cognitive and social development among people" (Nelson, 1965), the universality of human thinking, the language correlation and compatibility with many languages should be possible.

One might argue that compiling such a type of L1-L2 mix exercise is practically impossible or - that such an exercise is 'lame' and faulty. But facts speak the contrary. The existence and wide use of bilingual speech proves the possibility to comfortably lace in the new words and phrases into the 'fabric' of another language. And if these instances represent the L2 gaps, which often accompany the learner's speech, then they help to reconstruct them, save the learner the irritation and discomfort, channel the speech into a fluent flow and serve as a strong fixation for the acquired new language pieces.

Exercise 4 is the logical continuation of Exercise 3. Every item in it contains two sentences, two sides of the discourse (sometimes a question and answer). They represent full, complete sentences picked out from the dialogue. One sentence is in L2, the other - in L1. The condition that the sentences are those taken from the original business dialogue unchanged still stands.

At this stage already, the exercise is mostly tackled with ease and confidence on the part of the students. The learner is almost certain that he/she knows the language material that is being offered to translate.

This cycle of four exercises ensures the gradual built-up of the targeted material as newly acquired knowledge and prepares the learner for its "trial-performance". He/She is offered the complete L1 variant of the dialogue. The task is to make a close translation. No identity with the original dialogue is required. It is a creative task, language provoking, giving freedom to different interpretations, which can be filled in, corrected and enriched. It is left to the choice of the learner whether to use what he/she has already learnt from the exercises or to propose his/her own variants. There is freedom

of learning when no *musts* confine the use of the language. Yet, subconsciously, through the elaboration of the first three exercises, a model has already been formulated which the student strives to stick to. In the experimental group of students the newly acquired language is more often worded. The students perform the task enthusiastically, as it does not pose any difficulties. On the contrary, it builds up the feelings of confidence and satisfaction, as the factual incorporation of the L2 material not only enriches the learner's active vocabulary but also promotes effectively the business communication skills.

A rewarding part of the learning process is the feedback of the original L2 (English) dialogue that brings to the completion the work on the dialogue-unit. The comparison of the authentic text with the preceding free translation is a stage of final correction and with it – final fixation.

The learner is now ready to perform the dialogue, to present it, at the same time making modifications at his/her choice; he/she is now ready for the "free flight". The "innate human motive of self-actualization, the need to strive for success and excellence" (Byrne, Kelley, 1998) work their magic. The L1 backing subsides giving way to the contextually and emotionally fostered new knowledge.

Teaching and learning one dialogue per lesson might leave the impression of spontaneous business language strokes of the painter on the canvas. But within a period of time the language taught acquires a mighty shape and flows into an independent stream, free from the restrictions of the dialogues it had been learned with, forming new utterances for new conversational frames. Isaac Asimov keenly describes this phenomenon: "So it seems clear that learning is not necessarily an obvious process that you can watch at every stage. A lot of it goes under the surface, where it simply isn't visible, and you may be making progress even when you think you aren't, and when finally the underbrush is cleared away – there you are! The important thing is to stick to it".