

Reading Programs in St. Petersburg State University

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the role of reading in teaching English for special purposes. Four various types of reading are described. Reading is one of the basic skills in language teaching because it is a key to acquiring other language skills. Teaching ESP before the perestroika focused mainly on translation, the purpose of instruction being to develop reading and translation skills. Little attention was paid to oral skills, the Soviet Union being a closed country. Reading materials were predominantly special—the student was taught to read and translate special texts. At present, the situation has dramatically changed. The instruction is focused mostly on communicative skills, reading afforded limited attention and translation disregarded completely. This does not seem sensible, because a university graduate must be able to read and translate professional texts. A balanced approach is needed, combining communicative and translation skills. University graduates must be able to read professional literature.

Keywords

Types of Reading, Translation, Grammar Translation Method English for Special Purposes, Homework

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the four basic skills in language learning: reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Reading contributes to the development of the other skills mentioned above. Numerous scholars in language teaching methods offered techniques of developing reading skills for various audiences (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019; Yuldashev, 2020).

Different types of reading can be used in the classroom and out of it, supplementing each other and contributing to the development of other skills. They may be tentatively divided into four types:

Intensive classroom reading. A text is read, translated, analyzed and discussed in the classroom. The text must be necessarily short (500-600 words) and accompanied by exercises (word analysis, syntactic analysis, stylistic analysis, etc.) Back translation (translation into English) helps to memorize the lexis and grammar and develop writing skills. If the text covers a controversial topic, these exercises give the student the wherewithal to discuss it.

Home reading requires the student to read a substantial fragment at home and to discuss it in the classroom. The best kind of material for this is fiction, preferably a novel, which is read continuously during the term. The work in the classroom focuses on discussing and reproducing the material. The choice of material is crucial because the book chosen must be interesting both to the student and the teacher; it also must contain the necessary lexis and must be challenging, but not too difficult for the student. It should take the students' preferences into account. This type of reading contributes to the students' general education and increases their autonomy; describing various events and situations and discussing the material in the classroom improves conversational and debating skills.

At the departments of English for special purposes (English for students not majoring in it), teaching concentrated on grammar and translation and home reading programs required the student to read and translate a certain amount of special text.

Additional home reading. Every student reads a book in English during the term. The student's autonomy is at its highest, because the material is chosen by the student. At the end of the term, students make presentations about their books.

Recreational or extensive reading. Students read English books for their own pleasure and talk about them in the classroom. The autonomy is at its maximum and the control at the minimum.

2. Reading programs in St. Petersburg University

In St. Petersburg University, language teaching relies heavily on home tasks. A foreign language is taught both at a special department (to foreign language majors) and at non-special departments, to all students of the university. The latter group (referred to as English for special purposes) is catered for by the faculty of foreign languages, including a separate department for every university specialty.

At the English department, the language is taught by "aspects", grammar, home reading and oral practice taught by different lecturers. As to reading, intensive classroom reading is taught as "analytical reading, including lexical, syntactic and stylistic analysis; home reading is a special aspect, with the students reading a book of fiction (usually a novel to provide continuity) and the task for every week discussed in class. Additional home reading is reported by the students at the end of the term. Recreational reading is usually not corrected in the classroom and we teachers only recommend certain authors and works for reading.

At the non-special department (English for special purposes), where the author has worked for 48 years, the format of reading classes has greatly changed since before the perestroika.

In pre-perestroika times, there was little chance for a student to travel abroad, and the authorities disapproved of any contacts with foreigners. Therefore, oral practice did not get much attention, and the grammar-translation method was predominant. Teaching focused on reading special texts, to enable students to find their way in the copious research literature. Therefore, the main instruction method was decoding grammar (August, 2002).

Within the grammar-translation method, there were two basic approaches, one focusing on morphology, the other on syntax.

The first approach was focused on the parts of speech, and grammar was taught approximately in the following order: the verbal tenses and the passive voice; non-finite forms of the verb; modal verbs; subjunctive mood. These are parts of grammar most difficult for translation (Malchevskaya, 1970).

The second approach was based on syntax. The student was expected to analyze a sentence, find the predicate and the subject, as well as the secondary parts of the sentence, and translate the sentence according to its syntactic structure. The textbooks were composed accordingly: grammar presentation was based on syntax, with such chapters as "Predicate", "Subject", "Attribute", etc. (Zvereva & Eber, 1968).

Whereas, the first approach allowed some form of active usage—back translation from Russian into a foreign language—the second approach was reduced to decoding a sentence.

Of course, teachers did their best to help their students develop some oral skills. The texts studied were discussed, the students were encouraged to speak about themselves, their family, their homes and professional interests. But the main purpose of instruction was to teach students to read their professional texts.

Besides classroom reading, there was home reading—students were obliged to read and translate a certain amount of professional text (the students called them "thousands"—because the tasks were assigned basing on the number of digits).

On the whole, language teaching at non-special departments depended heavily on homework: a lot of reading and translation was assigned as home tasks.

The weak points of this teaching method are obvious, but there are some strong points as well.

As noted earlier, the purpose of this kind of instruction was to teach the students to read special texts—and this purpose was achieved, provided the students wanted to learn. Reading a special text, students were exposed to the branch of science they studied, especially if the text was recommended by the student's research adviser. Grammar-translation method, with all its deficiencies, taught the art of linguistic transformations that is processing linguistic information, which, like the algebraic transformations we were taught at school, develops and disciplines the brain.

During and after the perestroika times, the language teaching methods have changed dramatically. People were able to travel abroad and the country was opened for foreigners, so oral skills became extremely important, and rightly so. There appeared numerous schools with enlarged English curricula, so the level of university freshmen was higher, and

the students understood the necessity of speaking English. The country was flooded by foreign materials—books, newspapers, magazines, newly developed video materials and, of course, textbooks of foreign languages. These changes were, of course, welcomed by the intelligentsia and especially by the foreign language teachers' community.

The advent of original English textbooks was greeted by teachers and educational communities and they were enthusiastically adopted by the departments teaching English for special purposes. The new teaching focused on oral skills, which is very good in itself, but translation and home reading programs were largely reduced in the university programs of English for special purposes. Modern English textbooks are addressed to people of all nationalities and do not take into account the properties of the student's native language. They do not contain a systematic study of decoding grammar (and do not prepare a student to read a complicated scientific text).

At the same time, the home reading programs at the departments of English for special purposes were either reduced or totally discarded.

The use of translation as a teaching technique has been described above and the disappearance of translation from instruction programs looks as if the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

3. Conclusions

The review of reading programs implemented at St. Petersburg State University shows that no reading program can be implemented without homework. Doing a home task, a student can process language material at his/her own speed, without being pressured by the teacher. The student's autonomy is enhanced

As to the dramatic changes which occurred in the language teaching practices in St. Petersburg State University, they have both strong and weak points. The opportunity to travel abroad, to communicate freely with native speakers and to take part in student exchange programs have contributed greatly to the students' motivation and the development of oral skills. But the reduction of reading programs and the exclusion of translation from university programs has decreased the role of academic reading.

Reading of different types must be an internal part of every language instruction program, classroom reading supported by home reading, with gradual transition from the former to the latter.

A balanced approach is needed, combining teaching reading, translation and conversational skills.

A colleague of the author's said that a Russian scientist must be able to ask the way to the Harvard library and understand the answer. In the author's view, it is much more important that a Russian scientist should be able to read the books the Harvard library is so rich in.

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