

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS MAJORING IN AGRICULTURE AND AGRONOMY

Khalilova Yulduz Nasriddinovna

Faculty of the English language I,
Department of the English history and Grammar,
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign languages,
Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

yulduz@samdchti.uz

ABSTRACT

Identifying the target tasks of specialized learners via needs analysis (NA) is a crucial first step in language programs design. In Uzbekistan, schools that deliver vocational education and training (VET) programs in agriculture often use English language programs which are generally not designed based on the target language needs of this specialized group of students. This paper presents a needs analysis that explored the English language requirements of agricultural technicians in Uzbekistan. It also examined how these needs are perceived by actors involved in agricultural industries and actors involved in the education of this group. Using a qualitative approach, data were elicited from document analysis and interviews with five technicians at one company and five teachers at one VET school. Findings revealed that English language was necessary for technicians to carry out specific tasks. All teachers agreed that their students should be taught not only general English, but also English that is relevant to the students' interests and needs. However, the non-existence of vocational language programs makes it difficult for English teachers to teach the contents pertinent to their students' specialization. This study contributes to an understanding of the relevance of the English language for learners in a specialized context.

Keywords: English language; Needs analysis (NA); Vocational education and training (VET); Agricultural technicians/professionals

АННОТАЦИЯ

Определение целевых задач специализированных учащихся с помощью анализа потребностей (НА) является важным первым шагом в разработке языковых программ. В Узбекистане школы, предлагающие программы профессионального образования и обучения (ПОО) в области сельского хозяйства, часто используют программы английского языка, которые, как правило, не разрабатываются с учетом потребностей целевого языка этой

специализированной группы учащихся. В данной статье представлен анализ потребностей, в ходе которого изучались требования к английскому языку для сельскохозяйственных техников в Узбекистане. Также было изучено, как эти потребности воспринимаются субъектами, вовлеченными в сельскохозяйственные отрасли, и субъектами, занимающимися образованием этой группы. Используя качественный подход, данные были получены из анализа документов и интервью с пятью техниками в одной компании и пятью учителями в одном профессиональном училище. Выводы показали, что английский язык был необходим техническим специалистам для выполнения определенных задач. Все преподаватели согласились с тем, что их ученикам следует обучать не только общему английскому языку, но и английскому языку, соответствующему интересам и потребностям учащихся. Однако отсутствие профессиональных языковых программ затрудняет для учителей английского языка преподавание содержания, относящегося к специализации их студентов. Это исследование способствует пониманию актуальности английского языка для учащихся в специализированном контексте.

Ключевые слова: *английский язык; Анализ потребностей (НА); Профессиональное образование и обучение (ПОО); Сельскохозяйственные техники/специалисты*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization in the world of work and the continued use of English has meant an increase in the demand for language courses addressing occupational and/or workplace needs [1,13]. In Uzbekistan, agriculture is an important occupational sector, which has benefitted, in the last two decades, from globalization and international trade agreements. These agreements have meant not only international integration for the country but also the need for developing English language skills on the part of agricultural professionals.

Uzbekistan is an agriculturally-oriented country. Many of the workers are agricultural technicians who play a key role in the development of this very significant sector, and they are employed in all segments of the agricultural industry. They contribute to human capital and have the potential to increase agricultural production levels to compete in a highly demanding international market.

Generally, technicians provide technical support in agricultural production, agricultural machinery and supplies, and technical supervision of agrochemicals, and provide quality control, *inter alia*. They are versatile professionals and their roles,

responsibilities, job positions, and work areas vary according to their technical knowledge and skills, experience, and studies. For example, in terms of education, Uzbekistan offers vocational education and training (VET) programs in agriculture at the secondary and tertiary level. High school VET programs provide students with specialized training in the field, prepare them for the world of work, and foster continuity of post-secondary studies and VET programs provide students with high-level technical and specialized knowledge and skills and enhance leadership skills. High school graduates can work as high-level technicians if they obtain a post-secondary VET professional or technical degree.

Within the VET agricultural program, particularly at the secondary school level, technical subjects related to the field of study are taught in the Uzbek language and, thus, the English language tends to play a secondary role. To illustrate, students only study one English subject for 2 h a week. In this context, English is taught as a foreign language and has a syllabus, language programs, and textbooks that, at the national level, are standardized but not designed to address the specialized agricultural context. Thus, a general English approach to language teaching might prevail over a more specific one that meets the students' target language needs. Furthermore, EFL teachers working in these schools are usually not provided with training on the content and topics that are more relevant to the specialized group of students they work with. This situation often leaves learners ill-prepared for the demands of their future professions, as there might be a potential dissociation between the teaching and learning of English and the language skills required by the labor sector. Therefore, it is important that “high-quality vocational programs embed core academic skills into an occupationally focused curriculum” [2,248]. With this goal in mind, the present study investigates the extent to which the English language is necessary for the work of technicians and the extent to which these needs are perceived by different actors involved in the industry and the education and training of these workers. In this regard, examining the views of school professionals is particularly pertinent as, at different levels (school and classroom), teachers' views drive curriculum decision-making. Since existing research in the agricultural field is limited, this is an exploratory study based on a qualitative methodological approach, in which the overall purpose is to discover new ideas and insights in an area where little is known [3,25].

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Needs analysis (NA) seeks to determine the *what* and the *how* for the development of a course. It involves data gathering from the world outside the

classroom relevant to the language needs of learners in specific contexts. Needs analysis is considered to be a key component at the time of developing materials for Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) . A proper NA can “lead to courses designed to ensure that students will learn precisely what they need” [4,5]. Diverse studies in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and L2 instruction have acknowledged the significance of conducting a NA to identify the actual language demands in workplace, professional, and academic settings.

In the history of needs analysis, some of the traditional units of analysis have been lexical items or grammatical structures which are usually situated within a structural or linguistically based syllabus. Furthermore, traditional needs analyses have tended to be based on the intuitions of teachers or linguists rather than empirical, evidence-based studies using different sources of information (including specialists involved in the target academic, occupational or professional discipline). These approaches to NA, on their own, rarely prepare learners for the actual performance of real-life tasks. From this perspective, a needs analysis that focuses only on text might not be sufficient; therefore, a task-based approach to NA may be more appropriate for identifying the communicative tasks requiring English in the learners’ field of specialization.

A task-based needs analysis seeks to identify the tasks that learners will be performing in the target situation. The findings of a task-based NA are to be used as input to inform the design of an analytical syllabus; i.e., a syllabus built around a non-linguistic unit. In this regard, the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, according to Long (2005a, 2015), starts with a task-based needs analysis to identify the learners’ needs. Needs, in this regard, are conceptualized in terms of tasks which become the cornerstone of language instruction in a TBLT program.

The findings of these studies provide implications for language teachers, course designers, and syllabus developers. Yet, most studies have centered either on the language needs of personnel in the workplace and/or the English education of specialized learners at the tertiary level. Little research has investigated the target language needs of VET learners at the secondary school level. Furthermore, little research has focused on the field of agriculture. Thus, this study attempts to broaden the literature by exploring the language needs in the agricultural sector from the perspectives of different stakeholders (from the industry and school). The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. What are the English language needs of agricultural technicians?

2. What are the technicians' and school professionals' perceptions of the English language needs of agricultural technicians?

3. General English is still the primary focus at VET schools

All teachers, including the principal, concurred that it was crucial for agriculture students to know both general and technical English. Interestingly, despite the fact that the EFL teachers acknowledged a lack of familiarity with the students' field of study, they indicated that students should be taught not only general English but also English based on the students' discipline. In addition, all five educators stated that general English should be taught to 9th and 10th grade students, then for 11th and 12th graders, the focus should be more on technical content in relation to the students' specialization.

Regarding the language content being taught to the students of the agricultural program, both EFL teachers indicated that their lessons tended to be more centered on general English and general topics. However, both teachers endeavored to include or redirect some general topics to the agricultural area, based on their intuitions, as neither the program (syllabus) nor the teaching materials provided by the Ministry of Education covered technical areas or technical language related to the students' field of study. In addition, they mentioned that in order to teach the language based on agricultural topics, they had to search the Internet and look for other materials to complement their lessons. For example, Ricardo, in an attempt to teach agricultural English, created lesson plans focusing on the photosynthesis process, "I created a couple of lesson plans in connection with the agricultural field, which was meant to teach vocabulary and to understand processes like photosynthesis ... they [students] should learn more vocabulary related to agriculture, they should know processes in English that are related to this field, for example, plants, photosynthesis etc." Lastly, of the two English teachers, he was the only one who occasionally worked in collaboration with a technical teacher to develop teaching activities relevant to the students' area of study. However, the topics addressed in those activities were topics more related to environmental sustainability than agriculture *per se*.

4. English is considered a tool to improve career opportunities

Eight of the ten participants (from school and company) commented on the idea that knowing English on the part of technicians gave them advantages in terms of job opportunities and possibilities to work/travel abroad. One technician said: "There are a lot of technicians and agronomists who receive fruit abroad; it is a job in which companies send technicians to do quality control" (Daniela). Another technician expressed: "when you are younger, when you finish high school, you can be offered a

job to work abroad as quality control in the USA” (Joaquin). Another technician explained: “As a machine operator, it [knowledge of English] would give me the opportunity to work on a ship to operate in a cryogenic room” (Danilo).

CONCLUSION

Other interviewees mentioned that English was an essential tool in helping technicians obtain better job positions and, as such, the chances of increasing their income. For instance, as one technician said, “you can find a better job that is better paid, one has opportunities to work overseas” (Carmen). Similarly, the school principal stated that “English can be an incentive for hiring, English proficiency can be much more decisive than technical aspects, so English proficiency in agriculture is that important, especially with exporting companies” (Federico).

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