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APPLICATION OF BERLITZ METHOD IN TEACHING TECHNICAL ENGLISH

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***Summary:** This paper presents the basic features of the Berlitz method and the ways it can be applied in teaching technical English. The Berlitz method presents a conversational style of teaching based on listening and speaking. It was introduced in 1878 and over time it has become the standard for language learning. The paper gives an overview of the results of the Berlitz method application conducted with groups of IT students at Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak. The results show that the successful application of the method in teaching technical English requires a trained instructor and groups of students whose knowledge of general English is at least at the intermediate level.*

***Key words:** Berlitz method, language learning, teaching, technical English*

PRIMENA BERLICOVE METODE U NASTAVI TEHNIČKOG ENGLSKOG JEZIKA

***Rezime:** U radu su predstavljene osnovne karakteristike Berlicove metode i načini na koje se ona može primeniti u učenju tehničkog engleskog jezika. Ovaj metod predstavlja učenje kroz konverzaciju bazirano na slušanju i govoru. Uveden je 1878. godine a vremenom je postao standard za učenje stranog jezika. U ovom radu dat je prikaz primene ove metod na grupama studenata na smeru informacione tehnologije na Fakultetu Tehničkih Nauka u Čačku. Rezultati pokazuju da uspešna primena ove metode učenja engleskog jezika zahteva prisustvo obučenog predavača i da grupe čine studenati koji poseduju predznanje engleskog jezika na srednjem nivou.*

***Ključne reči:** Berlicova metoda, učenje stranog jezika, nastava, tehnički engleski*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the time it appeared in 1887 the Berlitz method revolutionized the common ways of teaching foreign languages. As opposed to the traditional grammar translation method,

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inherited from teaching Latin and ancient Greek, the Berlitz Method uses a language as a tool for communication. The grammar translation method (Classical method) of learning languages is a method focused on learning grammatical rules, syntactic structures, memorisation of vocabulary and text translation. The objective of the method was to bring out the knowledge and refinement of the speaker. However, oral use of the language was utterly ignored. The Berlitz method, nevertheless, offered more beyond such rigid teaching system which could not provide greater contribution to language learning, due to the fact that "it has shifted the focus from the real language to a "dissected body" of nouns, adjectives, and prepositions, doing nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the foreign language" (Thanasoulas, 2002).

Linguistic theories offer various explanations of the ways we learn language as children. The earlier theories imply that we are born with no pre-existing language knowledge. According to this theory the knowledge in general is attained through life, i.e. we acquire it. However, in 1960 Noam Chomsky propounded the theory of universal grammar which provided a completely different insight into the ways language is acquired. According to Chomsky, a set part of human brain is dedicated to language. This part of the brain contains a set group of the rules which we apply to language. The set group of rules cannot be modified and it includes pre-existing knowledge dwelling in every language all over the world.

Even the Berlitz method had been created decades before Chomsky conceptualised his theory, it can be said that this method is based on the same postulate. Berlitz method presupposes that some rules applied to one language can be applied to other languages as well. Therefore, in the class organized according to the Berlitz method, from the very beginning, students are taught through a series of classroom instructions in the target language. Clear classroom instructions, use of concrete vocabulary through mime, pictures and objects and careful grammar approach represent some of the principles of the Berlitz method.

The Berlitz method has been proved as a very successful method in teaching General English. However, some problems may still arise if the method is applied in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP students are usually adults. They have some knowledge of English and they are determined to learn the language for the particular purpose in order to develop professional skills. Thus, an ESP program is designed to assess the needs and purposes of English in many specific fields.

The paper will provide the most important features which should be observed when trying to implement Berlitz method in teaching technical English, as a branch of ESP. Furthermore, a short overview of the possible obstacles and the ways they can be overcome will be given, based on the observation of two groups of IT students attending the course Technical English at Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak.

2. PRINCIPLES OF BERLITZ METHOD IN TECHNICAL ENGLISH

The main aim of technical English is to improve students' communication skills in the fields of engineering. It covers the language which is useful in any branch of engineering: mechanical, electric, civil. The role of teacher in teaching technical English is highly significant. The teacher has to be very experienced and well versed into wide range of different branches of engineering. If it is not the case, the change of roles of teacher and

students may occur easily. In teaching technical English, if the Berlitz method is applied, this issue can become more complex since the lecture is conducted only in target language, which is the main principle of the method. Generally, there are two major problems that might occur when applying such teaching method. The first possible obstacle might be that the student is never quite sure what the exact meaning of the word is and the second plausible problem might be teaching grammar. Overcoming these obstacles is possible only if the teacher as well is ready to learn. Caleb Gattegno implies that “if the students did not learn the teachers did not teach”. The teachers themselves have to become learners and need to decipher the ways the students learn. The most significant issue in teaching technical English according to the Berlitz method is organization of the class regarding all aspects of language, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, speaking.

2.1. ACQUIRING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR

The first thing an ESP teacher should consider is thoroughly planned and selected technical vocabulary. As stated before, the vocabulary of the course Technical English should cover the language which is useful in any branch of engineering. Every word should be carefully estimated in teaching technical English. For example, if the teacher intends to introduce word alloy it goes without saying that the words **mixture** and **metal** have been previously acquired by the students. Another example is when describing technical problems, when students are expected to learn **engineering enemies** problematic for each part of a car. Firstly, the teacher can bring images of the car parts and thus the students at the lower level of English will be given a chance to interact. Secondly, the teacher should explain each of the engineering enemies, for example **heat** or high temperatures; **pressure** or loads from expanding gases or liquids; **vibration** or continuous low-frequency movement or shaking; **shocks** or sudden impacts; **abrasion** or damage to surfaces caused by friction. Of course, it is expected that the already acquired students' vocabulary contains the words: **load, expand, impact, damage, friction**.

As far as grammar is concerned, it must be noticed that ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. When it comes to Berlitz method, since the emphasis is on speaking from the very beginning, the student is encouraged to discover grammatical rules himself, without the explanation of the used rules provided by the teacher. Therefore, the focus is placed to reading and listening to various professional and academic texts.

2.2. READING SECTION

Reading, nevertheless, is included only within the limits of student's active vocabulary, due to the fact that the opposite is not effective: “even a perfect reading ability does not necessarily result in a speaking ability of even the most modest degree” (Stieglitz 1955: 301). Classroom instructions regarding reading are worth mentioning because they determine the entire course of the class. For example, by skimming the text regarding the GPS (Global Positioning System) students should get only the general idea of the GPS. If they are instructed to read the text silently (the entire activity should not last longer than 3 minutes), the students should be able to answer the questions regarding the primary and associated applications of the GPS, the origins of the GPS, and the functioning of the GPS. Of course, the teacher is the one who should provide the explanation of the possible unknown words such as navigation, monitoring, drift alarms, man overboard buttons, etc.

By creating an appropriate selection of the technical texts, the primary objective of the Berlitz method to think in new language can be successfully attained.

3. POSSIBLE OBSTACLES IN TEACHING TECHNICAL ENGLISH ACCORDING TO BERLITZ METHOD

When considering language level of the students attending the course we can encounter quite a knotty issue. Generally, there are several levels of language learning according to the Berlitz method. The lowest language knowledge level is covered by functional level. At this level communication is limited to its simplest form both orally and by listening. The level covering conversing in English and understanding familiar topics of discussion is intermediate level. Advanced-intermediate level covers competent communication and at this level students are comfort with speaking the English Language in a professional and personal setting. Advanced level students speak English proficiently. Finally, the level at which students are able to speak English naturally or at a professional level is Native Speaker level⁴.

In order to obtain better results in language learning, students' knowledge of general English should be tested. Thus, at the very beginning, the group of IT students, at the Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak, was provided with a diagnostic test. According to the test results, two groups of students were formed. The first group was made of students whose language knowledge was no less than intermediate level. The second group consisted of the students whose language level was from basic to upper intermediate level.

The first group was coherent regarding the English knowledge level, whereas it was not the case with the second group. Therefore, the experience of ESP teacher trying to accomplish the objective of the course Technical English (i.e. to improve professional communication skills of students, propose the vocabulary useful in engineering and focus on describing technical problems) significantly differs in these two groups of students. In the coherent group of students the introduction of new vocabulary was quite easy and motivating. From the very beginning, the students possessed the initial necessary language knowledge which presented a stimulus for learning technical English. These students were utterly overwhelmed by the feeling and the awareness that they are capable of speaking only in target language within technical field. For example, in speaking exercise regarding the unit Water rockets, the students were expected to discuss the solutions to the problem experienced with the rocket based on basic materials and simple assembly techniques. In this student group the topic was so inspiring that the students conveyed even their own experience regarding simple assemblies with basic materials at the end of the exercise.

On the other hand, in the non-coherent group the obstacles arose at the very beginning of the class. Some of the students were able to follow the lecture, whereas some students could not even grasp the meaning of the topic. Thus, the explanation of the new vocabulary required significantly longer period of time. Furthermore, better students were losing interest because the teacher had to repeat the mater they knew, while worse students had to put a lot of effort in order to understand the general meaning of the class topic.

Teaching grammar in the first student group did not encounter any major obstacles due to

⁴ <http://blog.innovativelanguage.com/2009/06/16/second-language-learning-methods-direct-method-berlitz/>

the fact that the students had already had considerable knowledge of grammar patterns of English language. These students easily acquired new grammar patterns, while the teacher only induced the students to detect these grammar patterns. However, teaching grammar in the second group was very difficult. Some students in this group did not even understand the classroom instructions, not to mention grammar acquisition. Due to the lack of understanding, the students in this group could not learn grammar as it had been expected. At this point we reach the problem of grammar teaching method. According to Berlitz method, grammar is taught simply by “creating the conditions by which learners learn naturally” and “it should be integrated into communicative abilities”. Thus, it is almost impossible for a teacher to create such teaching conditions for a group of students at different language levels who are expected to learn explicit grammatical knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION

The application of the Berlitz method was successful inasmuch as the groups of students attending the course Technical English were coherent regarding general English language level. The method proved to be very successful in the group of students at the same intermediate language level, whereas it was not the case in the group of students with different language levels. Nevertheless, this problem can be solved by introducing diagnostic tests and testing students’ knowledge of English language at the beginning of the course. The observation shows that the successful application of the Berlitz method in teaching technical English requires a trained instructor, groups of students at at least intermediate level of general English language, carefully selected vocabulary for every teaching unit, and grammar teaching through the conditions created by teacher in which students are enabled to learn naturally.

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