COMMUNICATIVE TECHNIQUES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE FIELD OF SPORT

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Abstract: This article presents ideas and models for English language learning, using elements of two communicative learning methods for the specific purposes of sport practice. It is part of a pedagogical experiment, carried out with students from the National Sport Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia, organized into an experimental group (34) and a control group (34). The aim of the experiment was to study the influence of interactive techniques applied in the specialized English language course for sport terminology. The experimental course work involved using elements of different interactive learning methods to teach sport terminology to the experimental group of students for about 30-40 minutes of every academic class of 90 minutes. Initial and final tests of the basic language skills and knowledge of sports terminology were carried out with the experimental and control group of students, in order to establish their language competences before and after the experimental course. The results from the tests were processed with statistical methods – variation analysis and Student’s t-test (dependent and independent samples). The results from the initial and final tests of the two groups have shown that students from the experimental group have improved their language skills, their confidence in using the language and their knowledge of sports terms to a greater extent than the control group. Applying interactive techniques in language learning for the needs of sport specialists leads to better results in their language acquisition.

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Introduction

Communication is a key word in contemporary society. Internet and modern technologies offer wide opportunities for international contacts. Using foreign languages is very important in every social sphere for the exchange of information and ideas. Social interaction also provides a natural environment for foreign language learning. On this ground interactive learning has developed as part of the communicative approach in language learning. One of the basic characteristics of interactive language learning is the transformation, on the one hand, of the learners’ role - from passive receivers into active seekers of information and knowledge, and on the other, of the teacher’s role – as an adviser and assistant in the process of learning. Another characteristic are the techniques used – group work, problem solving, game activities, presentations, brainstorming, etc. (Brown, 1994).

Some researchers (Gjurova, 2007) distinguish between *human-centered* and *technology-based* interactive learning methods. In technology-based learning, interaction between learners is achieved by technical means – internet, computers, audio and video appliances, etc. Online study materials are currently applied in language learning. Using video games and activities in language lessons is met with enthusiasm by both students and teachers (Bonchev, 2019; Paunova-Hubenova, 2019). On the other hand, human-centered learning presupposes an exchange of information in direct communication between learners in the class.

Our study is mainly focused on human-centered interactive language learning for the needs of students specializing in the field of physical education and sport. Communicative language skills are quite important for sport specialists, since sport activities very often require direct communication - between peer athletes, between coaches and athletes, between participants and referees, etc. The aim of our research was to enhance English language learning with reference to sport by introducing elements of different interactive methods and techniques, together with more traditional language teaching methods in the Bachelor’s language course of education at the National Sports Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia. To achieve our aim, an experimental specialized English course was organized in the 2016/17 academic year with students from the National Sports Academy “V. Levski”, Sofia. A specialized English language course was designed for the purpose, applying elements of different communicative learning methods. We will present experimental lessons on two sports below as an illustration to our work (Hristakieva, 2018).

The communicative approach in language learning offers a wide range of popular methods and techniques, which could be adapted and used appropriately, according to the specific needs of the learners. Total Physical Response (TPR) is a well know communicative language learning method, created by James Asher, a psychologist at the State University of San Jose, California. The method is

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based on the strategy of learning through action, first applied by Francois Gouin in the end of the 19 century, and later, by the followers of the Direct method at the beginning of the 20 century. The theoretical approach of the method is grounded on three hypotheses - that young children accumulate language knowledge by listening and understanding first, before they start speaking; that children acquire language through motor activities, i.e. the more often a mental connection is repeated, the stronger associations are created in the human mind; and that stress inhibits the learning process and should be avoided (Richards, 1992). The learning content includes imperatives at first, the lecturer addresses the students giving orders they are supposed to follow (Stand up! Go to the door! etc.), or touch and point at objects (Show me the book! etc.) Later these orders are given by students themselves, then role games are included in the learning process (e.g. Simon says...). Asher states the necessity of providing variety by using different activities and language forms, apart from the imperative, and thus creating a positive learning atmosphere in the class. Listening and speaking skills are developed first, and later reading and writing skills. Oral communication is the major aim of the method (Shopov, 2013). Total Physical Response is suitable mainly for beginner language levels, but separate elements and techniques could be used appropriately in other levels of communicative language learning, providing variety and positive emotions in the lesson as well.

Developing speaking skills is also a major aim of Cooperative Language Learning - COOP, another communicative learning method created in 1994 by a team of methodologists led by Spencer Kagan, an expert in learning methodology in California. The method is based on group work for the acquiring and exchange of information. All members work together for the success of the group, i.e. the model of dialogical learning is applied where all participants succeed, unlike the educational model of competition where only one person is the winner (Shopov, 2008). Group members can vary from 2 to 4 and each member has a specific task to complete for the achievement of the goal of the group. The role of the teacher in COOP is presented by Diane Larsen-Freeman as an effort to develop students' cooperation and social skills, so that they could work more efficiently together (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

The method provides opportunities for a very positive social environment, where tension and anxiety are replaced by the feelings of belonging and sharing. This is especially valuable for the development of learners' speaking skills. Specific "structures" for the method of COOP are used for the achievement of the presented comprehension and social goals. Learning activities on concrete topics are realized through these structures. We will present briefly below five of the most popular structures:

Round Robin: Each student shares some information with his/her partners in the group. The functions of the exercise are: to create a sense of belonging to a group, of equal participation, sharing opinions, narrating.

Paraphrase Passport: Students paraphrase the statement of their last partner and add some idea of their own. The functions of the exercise are: to improve communication, to check understanding, to give feedback.

Numbered Heads Together: Students are divided into groups of 3-4 and given numbers in their groups. The teacher/lecturer asks questions and the students speculate on the correct answers in their group. The teacher calls out a number – the students with that number answer the questions on the part of their groups. The functions of the exercise are: revision of covered material, checking students' knowledge.

Three-Step Interview: Students interview each other in pairs and then share with the group what they have learned. The functions of the exercise are: to develop active participation, to improve understanding when listening, to stimulate dialogue, etc.

Brainstorming: Students in the group look together for the solution of a problem, or speculate on a topic giving new ideas, or developing their partners' ideas. The functions of the exercise are: to develop active participation, giving ideas, etc. (Shopov, 2013).

These five "structures" have been chosen as most appropriate for use in the foreign language course for students of the National Sports Academy. The interaction between the participants in them is useful and interesting, because it combines different skills and activities in a natural way, for example: Round Robin – includes understanding when listening, develops speaking skills, exchanges in dialogues, etc.; Brainstorming – deduction, synthesis of different opinions, reaching agreements, etc. The communicative method of Cooperative Language Learning is valuable for its numerous aspects of

positive influence as a learning method directed to students and aimed at the development of speaking skills, mutual respect, feelings of belonging to the group, etc.

In modern language learning methodology, it is accepted that there is no “best method” of teaching a foreign language in the general sense of the word. Rather language teachers have to choose their “best method”, according to the specific conditions and language needs of the students (Allwright, 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Harmer, 2013). Consequently, elements of different methods can be combined and adapted for specific purposes of language learning. Thus elements of the above mentioned two methods and of other communicative methods have been chosen for our research, because they can be useful to apply in the specialized foreign language courses of the National Sports Academy.

The acquisition of specialized terminology in different fields of knowledge is an important part of language learning. Foreign language learning for special purposes requires basic language skills and knowledge at A2-B1 level, according to the Common European Framework for References (CEFR, 2001.). It is presumed that students have the necessary specialized knowledge and skills in the respective field. The language teacher may not be a specialist, but he/she ought to have good knowledge in the field to be able to work with the students successfully. Because of the specific aspects of the course, the teacher has to prepare his/her own learning materials, in compliance with the concrete language needs of the students, using authentic materials and close to natural communicative situations. The selection of suitable study materials and techniques are among the major challenges for lecturers teaching foreign languages for special purposes. (Wilson, 2012).

According to a number of authors (Adams-Smith, 1986; Bhatia, 1986), the study material and terminology in language learning for special purposes ought to be consulted with the respective specialists, to achieve effectiveness of the education. Students’ personal interests should also be taken into consideration. Special attention is given to the use of interactive techniques in the education for specific purposes – group work, role play, case study, etc., in order to use the respective terminology in conditions close to students’ future professional realization (Wiriyachitra, 1986; Hsia, 1986).

Methodology

A pedagogical experiment was organized with 68 students from the National Sport Academy “V. Levski”, divided into an experimental group of 34 students and a control group of 34 students. The aim of the experiment was to study the influence of communicative techniques applied in the specialized English language course for sport terminology in the 2016/2017 academic year. The course work involved using elements of different interactive techniques to teach sport terminology in the experimental group for about 30-40 minutes of every academic class of 90 minutes. Initial and final tests of the basic language skills and knowledge of sports terminology were carried out with the experimental and control group of students, in order to establish their language competences before and after the experimental course of education. The results from the tests were processed with statistical methods – variation analysis and Student’s t-test (dependent and independent samples).

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of the results from the initial and final test of the pedagogical experiment shows that the experimental group has better results in improving its language skills in comparison to the control group. The results from the variation analysis show that there is an increase in the mean values between the initial and final test – part Reading Comprehension for both the experimental group ($M=5.12$, $SD=1.49$ to $M=8.29$, $SD=1.78$) and the control group ($M=6.18$, $SD=1.80$ to $M=6.65$, $SD=1.89$). However, the increase is greater with the experimental group. The comparative Student’s t-test analysis shows a significant increase in the achievements of the experimental group in this index ($d=62.07\%$). The results from the variation analysis of the mean values between the initial and final test – part Use of Specialized Sport Terms also show an increase for both the experimental group ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.30$ to $M=6.71$, $SD=1.59$) and the control group ($M=4.26$, $SD=1.26$ to $M=5.47$, $SD=1.33$), however the mean values for the experimental group are higher. The comparative t-test analysis again shows a significant increase between the initial and final results for the experimental group ($d=53.02\%$) in that index. Students’ results from the initial and final tests in speaking also show greater improvement for the experimental group ($M=8.65$, $SD=2.59$ to $M=11.12$, $SD=2.87$) in comparison to the control group ($M=8.82$, $SD=2.65$ to $M=9.65$, $SD=2.88$). The comparative t-test analysis shows an increase in the achievements of the experimental group ($d=28.57\%$).

Table 1: Examples of lessons using elements of TPR and COOP

Lesson topics (Lesson duration 90 minutes)	Interactive techniques and activities used (about 30-40 minutes of the lesson)
Gymnastics: Lesson 1	<p>Students are divided into groups of 3-4. They work as teams winning points for their work together.</p> <p>1. Group work (15 minutes) – Brainstorming, Total Physical Response:</p> <p><i>A. Revision of body parts:</i> Body parts: head, neck, chest, back, stomach, shoulders, arms, hands, elbows, wrists, palms, fingers, hips, legs, thighs, knees, ankles, feet, heels, toes. The words are written on the board. A human body is presented/drawn. The teacher points at respective body parts – the groups in turn name the respective parts.</p> <p><i>B. Revision of words and phrases for movement:</i> Verbs: raise (arms above head), lean (forward), clap (hands), slap (thighs), bend/ flex (knees), squat (down), stand up, bend (to the left/right), touch (ankles), put down (arms), lift (right foot), stand straight. The words and phrases are presented on the board. A student from each group performs before the class. Students from the other group(s) give him /her 3-4 instructions in succession (e.g. Lean forward and touch your ankles.). The number of correct movements is taken down as points for the demonstrator's group.</p> <p>2. Group work (15-20 minutes) – Total Physical Response, Numbered Heads Together: Instructions and demonstrations for the performance of gymnastics exercises. Each group receives a short set of basic gymnastics exercises on paper, which they prepare together. Then one member of each group (a numbered head) instructs the class and all students have to perform each group's exercise set. The sets of exercises could be performed to music.</p>
Gymnastics: Lesson 2	<p>Students are divided into groups of 3-4. They work as teams winning points for their work together.</p> <p>1. Group work (20-25 minutes) – Total Physical Response, Numbered Heads Together: Instructions and demonstrations for the performance of gymnastics exercises. <i>Option 1.</i> Each group receives a short set of basic gymnastics exercises on paper, which they prepare together. Then one member of each group (a numbered head) instructs the class and all students have to perform each group's exercise set. The sets of exercise could be performed to music. <i>Option 2.</i> Students from each group can create their own sets of exercises and present them to the whole class. N.B. The sets have to include 2 warm-up exercises, 2 basic exercises and a cool-down exercise.</p> <p>2. Group work (5-7 minutes) - Three-Step Interview: Sports crossword puzzles: Groups of 2-3 students work together solving a crossword puzzle. The group which completes their puzzle first are the winners and receive points.</p>
Team Games: Football Lesson 1	<p>Students are divided into groups of 3-4. They work as teams winning points for their work together.</p> <p>1. Group work (5-7 minutes): Round Robin News of the week: 3-4 short newspaper materials with sports news of the week are offered to the groups. They could be about football matches only, or including other sports. Students discuss them in their groups and decide which is the most important sports news of the week and why.</p> <p>2. Group work (10-15 minutes): Numbered Heads Together Football rules – Students study different rules in their groups. Then each group or one of its members explains the rules to the rest of the class.</p> <p>Group work (7-10 minutes): Watching a film on YouTube - 5 BASIC, EASY SKILLS TO USE IN A MATCH (InfinityFootballSkills (2016)). There are 6 questions on the film material presented on the board /screen. Students answer in groups. They can win up to 6 points.</p>
Team Games: Football Lesson 2	<p>Students are divided into groups of 3-4. They work as teams winning points for their work together.</p> <p>1. Group work: Oral presentations. Sport biographies (15-20 minutes): Students are divided into three groups. Each group receives or finds materials about a famous footballer. They prepare and give an oral presentation of their footballer's biography to the class.</p> <p>2. Group work: Paraphrase Passport <i>Game – Guess the Word</i> (10 minutes): Cards with sports terms (football or other sports) written on them are prepared in advance. Students are divided into two groups. A student from one of the groups draws one of the cards and tries to explain the term in 1 minute, without using the word(s) on the card, so that his/her group members can guess the term. If they do – the group wins a point. If they cannot guess – the other group can try. Groups take turns to explain sport terms. The final winners are greeted with a song. Students can follow the lyrics on the screen/or paper and sing. Song (5 minutes) – We are the champions by Queen (Queen official (2008)).</p>

Source : Author

The acquired results of the experimental group confirm that using the communicative techniques of TBL and COOP helps to improve students' language knowledge and skills. Including TBL and COOP techniques in the specialized language course creates a close to natural environment for language use and provokes students to find and exchange sport information in order to solve various tasks, which positively influences their reading skills, the acquisition of specialized terminology and their confidence in using the language for the purposes of sport. Examples of lessons in an individual and in a team sport, using elements of the interactive methods Total Physical Response (TPR) and COOP are presented in Table 1.

Conclusion

Applying TPR and COOP techniques in the specialized course of foreign language learning offers a lot of natural opportunities for sport students to communicate with colleagues from their group – sharing opinions, solving problems, exchanging ideas. Group work with peer learners provides a positive social environment, avoiding stress and helping students to build confidence in using the language to complete their given tasks. Using interactive techniques for specialized language learning in the field of sport and physical education can be both useful and enjoyable.

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