Enhancing technical vocabulary knowledge in ESP courses

Nina Daskalovska, Goce Delcev University, Republic of Macedonia.
E-mail: nina.daskalovska@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

The world is getting smaller every day due to technological advances and increased communication in every sphere of human life. English has become a lingua franca of business, science and technology and all kinds of communication in almost every part of the world. This implies that mastering the English language is a prerequisite for students and professionals of every field. Thus, after learning the first 2,000–3,000 most frequent words, the primary goal of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners is the acquisition of the technical vocabulary of the field in which they are specializing. However, ESP courses are usually taught by English language training (ELT) teachers who have not been trained to teach ESP in all possible specialized fields. Thus, teaching technical vocabulary may be a difficult task for teachers, due to the lack of background knowledge of the particular field and lack of technical vocabulary. This paper argues that teachers can help their students acquire the technical vocabulary they need by devising activities that learners can do on their own or in cooperation with their peers. It describes an activity that has been trialled and proved successful.
Keywords: technical vocabulary, academic vocabulary, business English, financial English.

1 Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a long and complex process, which involves acquiring a number of competencies that will allow learners to use the language effectively in different real-life situations. One of these competences is linguistic competence, which includes lexical, grammatical, semantic and other competences, that are essential for foreign language learners. According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* developed by the Council of Europe (2001), the size, range and control of vocabulary are the main parameters for the acquisition of the foreign language, establishing the level of language competence and planning the language programmes. It means that the vocabulary component of a language programme is essential and should be given a high priority when planning a language course.

This is especially true for ESP courses. Register analysis carried out in the 1960s and early 1970s with the aim of identifying the grammatical features of several registers. Hutchinson & Waters (1987, p. 10) revealed that there was very little that was distinctive in the sentence grammar of Scientific English beyond a tendency to favour particular forms such as the present simple tense, the passive voice and nominal compounds. It did not, for example, reveal any forms that were not found in General English. Further analysis that addressed the organizational patterns of texts and the linguistic means by which these patterns are signalled showed that 'the rhetorical structure of science text was regarded as different from that of commercial text, for example' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 12).

Several studies that have investigated the vocabulary needed for academic study demonstrated that academic vocabulary 'gives an 8.5% coverage of academic texts' (Nation, 2001, p. 188). A study of an economics text revealed that a group of around 30 words related to the field of economics accounted for over 10% of the running words in the text (Nation, 2001). These facts imply that one of the main issues in ESP courses is developing students' knowledge of academic and technical vocabulary, since apart from the rhetorical structure of texts, vocabulary is the main differentiator between general and specialized English discourse.

2 Academic and technical vocabulary

In *The Tree of ELT*, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) divide the field of ESP into three main branches: English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBD) and English for Social Studies (ESS). Each of these branches is further divided into two: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which refers to the English needed for academic study, and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), which is the English needed for work. However, they note that there is no 'clear-cut distinction' (pp. 16) between EAP and EOP because people can work and study at the same time, or learners may need EAP while they are studying, but later when they start work, EOP will be essential. Nation (2001) suggests that after learners have mastered the first 2,000–3,000 words of General English, they should direct their vocabulary learning at academic vocabulary and, subsequently, the specialized vocabulary of a particular field or technical vocabulary.

What is the difference between academic and technical vocabulary? Academic vocabulary has been referred to as 'sub-technical vocabulary', 'semi-technical vocabulary', 'generally useful scientific vocabulary', 'specialized non-technical lexis' or simply 'academic vocabulary' (Ming-Tzu and Nation, 2004, pp. 291). Two well-known word lists of academic vocabulary are the University Word List (Xue & Nation, 1984), which contains over 800 word families, and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 1998), which contains over 570 word families. Nation (2001) gives four reasons why academic vocabulary is important and useful for learners of EAP:

1) Academic vocabulary is common to a wide range of academic texts, and not so common in non-academic texts.
2) Academic vocabulary accounts for a substantial number of words in academic texts.
3) Academic vocabulary is generally not as well known as technical vocabulary.
4) Academic vocabulary is the kind of specialized vocabulary that an English teacher can help learners with.

Technical vocabulary is the vocabulary 'that is recognisably specific to a particular topic, field or discipline' (Nation, 2001,