

GOOD PRACTICES IN LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF GABROVO

Diana Izvorska, Georgi Velev, Mariana Avdeeva

Technical University of Gabrovo, 5300 Gabrovo; g.velev@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. With the development of new technologies, the role of information and knowledge at all levels and in all spheres of social development is increasing. Foreign language proficiency is a prerequisite for young people's success and professionalism and allows them to employ and explore the information available in the global community, to communicate with colleagues from different countries. The objective of this paper is to share some best practices applied in language training at the Technical University of Gabrovo related to: student mobility under the Erasmus + Programme, language support and training of students according to the requirements of modern society, preparatory courses for foreign students and language training for ethnic Bulgarians living abroad.

Keywords: foreign language training, foreign language proficiency, good practices

ДОБРИ ПРАКТИКИ ЗА ЧУЖДЕЗИКОВО ОБУЧЕНИЕ В ТЕХНИЧЕСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ГАБРОВО

Диана Изворска, Георги Велев, Мариана Авдеева

Технически университет Габрово, 5300 Габрово

РЕЗЮМЕ. С развитието на новите технологии нараства ролята на информацията и знанията на всички нива и във всички сфери на социалното развитие. Владението на чужди езици е предпоставка за успеха и професионализма на младите хора и им позволява да използват и проучват информацията, с която разполагат в глобалната общност, да общуват с колеги по професия от различни страни. Целта на доклада е да сподели някои най-добри практики, прилагани в езиковото обучение в Технически университет в Габрово, свързани с: студентската мобилност по програма Еразъм +, езикова квалификация и обучение на студентите според изискванията на съвременното общество, подготвителни курсове за чуждестранни студенти в български университети и езиково обучение за етнически българи, живеещи в чужбина.

Ключови думи: чуждоезиково обучение, владение на чужди езици, добри практики

Introduction

In modern pedagogical literature, one of the most discussed issues is the implementation of the *competence-based approach* promoted by the *Bologna Process*. Concepts such as *competency* and *competence* are increasingly debated. Different groups of key competencies, which also include *communicative competence*, have been suggested. Yet, the successful practical application of this approach implies an adequate support based on the psychological and pedagogical theory fundamentals. The formation of the specialist's *professional competency* has been studied from the position of the activity-based learning approach – a unity of personality, consciousness and activity, interconnection of processes related to activities and communication.

A particular role here has the *foreign language proficiency*, which is a must attribute of the successful professional in today's world. The integration processes in various fields of politics, economy and culture raise the problem of intercultural communication and mutual understanding of participants belonging to different cultures. This requires a proper selection of the content and teaching methods of foreign language professional training of students, including a situational range of thematic areas and respective language and speech material reflecting the specifics of their future professional

activity. Along with the *development of new technologies*, the role of information and knowledge at all levels and in all spheres of social development is increasing. Foreign language proficiency is a prerequisite for success of prospective professionals and allows them to work with the information available to the global community and to communicate with colleagues in profession from different countries. This is a reason why UNESCO characterised XXIst century as the *century of polyglots*.

Recent problems with foreign language proficiency of students

Foreign language is a compulsory but not a leading subject in non-language universities. On the one hand, language training has to be an *instrument for acquiring professional knowledge*, and on the other – to contribute to the realisation of the modern purpose of education – formation of specialist professionals capable to operatively solve professional tasks by using the potential of the global information space. The course in foreign language is not just a university subject - it is a sphere of personal and professional development of future specialists, which forms their communicative competence (D. Hymes, N. Chomsky), (Izvorska, 2016).

At present, significant experience has been gathered in the area of foreign language training, but in some cases, students lack skills for fluent language communication; a poor command of professional vocabulary and a fragmentary knowledge of the socio-cultural context of language use are also observed. All this does not meet the requirements of modern education and precludes the active participation in the Bologna process. There is a necessity to *intensify the language training* with regard to *establishing new training standards* and *updating the methodology of teaching*. These two lines have been actively developed in didactics. The transition to new standards of training has been initiated by the process of European integration in education and is based on the *competence approach* - from knowledge to competencies (J. Delors, J. Raven, N. Chomsky, W. Hutmacher, I. Zimnyaya, C. Baydenko, etc.), (Izvorska, 2015). The regulations of the *Council of the European Union* direct the focus of education to *developing communicative competence*. In the scope of foreign language teaching, this concept is consistent with categories such as: *foreign language competence* (D. Hymes, etc.) and *intercultural communicative competence* (C. Safonov, E. Tarasov, etc.), (Izvorska, 2017). From a didactic point of view, more adequate is the concept of *foreign language communicative competence* (O. Iskandarova, S. Savington, etc.) (Izvorska, 2017), which has become a standard for language training. The second methodological line for intensification of language training supports the competency line and represents the logics of transition from lingua-centric learning model to lingua-sociocultural and further to communicative learning model (Chantov, 2014). In addition, university carrier centres can also be beneficial in language support of students (Hristova, 2008).

Foreign language skills and international student exchange. Statistical data

The Technical University of Gabrovo provides high-quality professional training, including language training, in conformity with the needs of the labour market for modern broad-profile Bachelor's degree courses, as well as modern Master's and Doctoral degree programmes in the field of engineering and technologies, business and social sciences. The language training is conducted by the Department for Language and Specialised Training, which comprises 14 members of academic staff. Using some of the latest interactive forms and methods of teaching, rich material resources and facilities, the lecturers provide excellent conditions for learning and personal development of 4,000 students.

The University actively participates in European educational and research programmes and has effective cooperation with more than 150 universities and research organisations in Bulgaria and the European Community. In terms of the ERASMUS+ Programme for exchange of scholars and students, the Technical University of Gabrovo has bilateral agreements and strong cooperation relations with 74 partner universities. The success of TU-Gabrovo in the international academic and student exchange under the Erasmus + Programme is variable in the years. The statistical data provided below cover the last 5 years and reflect mobilities realised only within the Erasmus+ Programme. For better visualisation, the data are presented in graphical form.

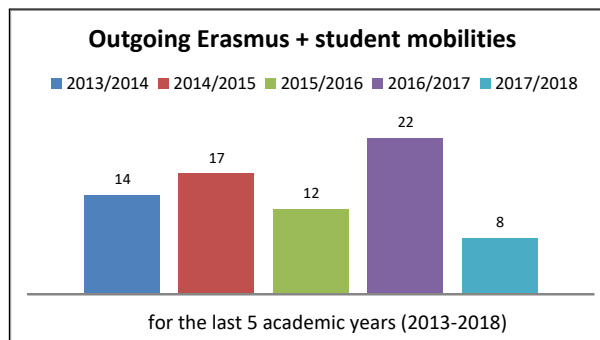


Fig. 1. Realised Erasmus+ student mobilities for the period 2013-2018

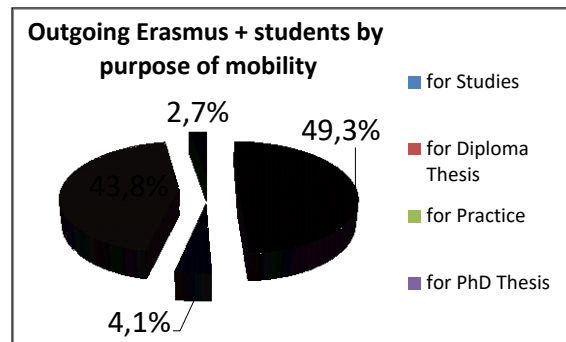


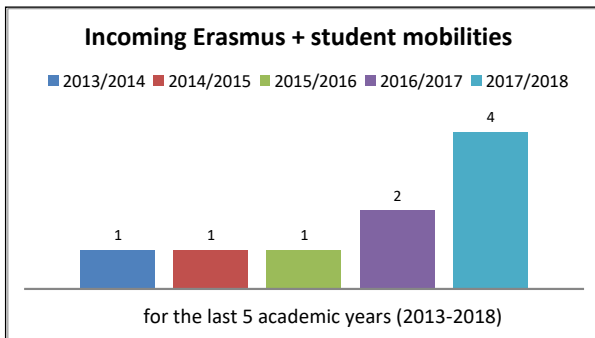
Fig. 2. Statistical data on the purpose of mobility of outgoing students within the Erasmus+ Programme for the period 2013-2018

The most preferred Erasmus+ mobility host countries for the period 2012-2018 are as follows: Germany – 24 students, Great Britain - 16 students, the Czech Republic – 12 students, Latvia – 11 students, Lithuania – 4 students, Austria – 3 students, Poland – 2 students, Romania – 2 students, Spain – 2 students, Greece – 2 students, Turkey – 2 students and Switzerland – 1 student.

The following conclusions could be made with regard to Figures 1 and 2:

- Most of the outgoing Erasmus+ students prefer to perform mobility for studies and practice, and a negligible number of students prepare in foreign universities their Diploma or PhD theses.
- The most economically developed countries in the EU are the most desirable countries by students to conduct their Erasmus+ mobility, i.e. Germany, Great Britain, the Czech Republic, etc.
- The number of outgoing students in the years varies and there is a slight decrease in the last academic year;
- The demographic problems in Europe are a partial reason for the decrease in the number of students in universities in general and it is an indirect reason for decreasing the number of outgoing mobilities;
- Students do not have enough motivation to participate in the international exchange. An additional reason for demotivation is the insufficient foreign language proficiency;

Over the last 5 academic years, the number of incoming foreign students within the Erasmus+ Programme is comparatively low. As seen from Figure 3, foreign students that have preferred TU-Gabrovo as a host university come mostly from nearby, neighbouring or culturally similar countries – Latvia, Romania, the Republic of Turkey, etc.



Erasmus + incoming students by their country of origin		
Latvia	3	students
Romania	2	students
Republic of Turkey	2	students
Germany	1	students
Austria	1	students

Fig. 3. Incoming Erasmus+ foreign students for the period 2013-2018 and their country of origin

TU-Gabrovo has made a lot of efforts in the last years in order to be attractive for the international Erasmus students. Most of these activities have been related to:

- Active collaboration between TU-Gabrovo and the partner universities;
- Active policy for establishing new collaborations and partnerships with foreign universities under the Erasmus+ Programme.

As a result, the number of incoming student mobilities during the last two years showed a slight increase.

Nowadays, the process of globalisation is characterised by the tendencies of intercultural mixing and student exchange. The number of mobile students (not only under the Erasmus+ Programme) is growing year by year. They subsequently face the problem of a language barrier in their host country and university environment. The language barrier seems to be the main problem that the outgoing and incoming Erasmus students generally have.

In Europe, the most popular languages that students use for mobility are English and German. Russian is typically used by incoming international students coming from Russian speaking countries.

The main issues related to the language proficiency of the outgoing students are as follows:

- Insufficient foreign language training of newly enrolled students. Exceptions are the students who have graduated from language high schools;
- Fear and low self-confidence on the part of students when communicating in a foreign language (written and spoken proficiency)

The incoming foreign students prefer English, German and Russian language. Their difficulties in communicating in public places are associated with the fact that the elder population in Bulgaria does not have a good proficiency in English and German. Moreover, it is very important to note that all incoming

foreign students are interested in studying Bulgarian language during their stay at the University.

Good practices of language training in the Technical University of Gabrovo.

Incoming foreign students

Bulgarian language training for incoming Erasmus+ students is available with a workload of 60 academic hours per semester. Finally, the language course ends with an examination in which students receive a numerical score of their result and the course "Bulgarian Language" is recorded in their academic transcript as an optional subject with the appropriate credits awarded according to the curriculum of their degree course.

Along with studying Bulgarian language, the foreign students acquire knowledge about the Bulgarian culture, history, traditions and customs. The University organises educational trips to historical and geographical landmarks in the country. The location of the town of Gabrovo, adjacent to the geographical centre of Bulgaria, in a region near the old capital Veliko Tarnovo, the architectural and historical reserve "Bozhentsi", Tryavna – a town with rich and unique cultural-historic heritage and last but not least the peak of "Shipka" favours their organisation and diversity.

The good practices in language training are of key importance for better results in the international student exchange.

Foreign language training of outgoing students

The University has a strategy for improving the language skills and competencies of students according to the needs of the modern society. For this purpose during the last several years an example of good practice is the implemented *facultative foreign language training* of students, which is conducted by the Department for Language and Specialised Training (DLST). As stipulated in the curricula, all students pursuing Bachelor's degree courses study a foreign language for a period of 6 semesters. In the first two of them the language training in English, German or Russian (eligible by students) is compulsory. It is strongly associated with their scientific major. In the next four semesters (second and third year of study) the training is conducted in the form of a specialised foreign language course, which improves students' language proficiency and extends their language competences in the respective professional field.

At the end of their first year of study, students apply for facultative language training, which is optional. It is conducted from 3-rd to 6-th semester and is not mandatory, but by choosing this option students get the chance to improve their foreign language skills and proficiency free of charge. At the beginning of the academic year, students applying for facultative language training are divided into groups with regard to their foreign language progress after passing an entry level exam (Beginners, Intermediate, Advanced levels).

At the end of each academic year of facultative training, students pass a language examination and the University awards them a certificate for the respective Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

language level (A1 (Beginner); A2 (Elementary); B1 (Intermediate); B2 (Upper-Intermediate); C1 (Advanced); C2 (Proficiency)). The CEFR Language Certificates are internationally valid and students may use them when applying for Erasmus+ mobility or after graduation when applying for a job in the country or abroad.

Language training of foreign prospective students applying for studies in Bulgarian universities

Foreign prospective students who wish to study at Bulgarian universities, according to the state regulations of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) need to pass preparatory language training in a licensed Bulgarian university. This training lasts nine months (2 semesters) and comprises 1000 academic hours of workload. DLST at TU-Gabrovo conducts such preparatory training for foreign prospective students applying for engineering or economics degree courses in accordance with an adopted by the Academic Council (AC) curriculum. The workload of 1000 academic hours is distributed as follows: language training (including language for special purposes) – 650 hours; mathematics (covering the curriculum of Bulgarian high schools) – 200 hours; elective course (Physics, Computer Science, Economics) – 150 hours.

The training is finalised by passing of three exams in the respective language of training and for the respective courses. After passing the three exams, foreign prospective students are awarded a certificate, which they can use in every Bulgarian university (state or private) that offers engineering or economic studies. There is an option for the foreign prospective students who wish to independently prepare for these three exams to directly pass the exams and obtain a Certificate of preparatory training.

Another example of good practices is related to the established by the MES net of Sunday schools in the Bulgarian diasporas in Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia and Macedonia. There, prospective students with Bulgarian origin can study their mother tongue and prepare for application in Bulgarian universities. Each year, Bulgarian universities in conjunction with the Government, offer 400 places for full-time Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degree courses intended for ethnic Bulgarians. The list of degree courses and universities is published by the Ministry of Education and Science on annual basis. The ethnic Bulgarian students enrolled at TU-Gabrovo

attend a course in Bulgarian language with workload of 60 academic hours per year in their first and second year of study.

Conclusions

Language training is of key importance for obtaining good results in students' mobility and is a prerequisite for their successful professional realisation.

The good practices presented in this paper are applicable, if they are adapted to the cultural, historical and legislative specifics of the country.

Local language training in host universities is a good way for the international students to feel the spirit of the host country – to acquaint with its culture, history, traditions, people's mentality.

The additional language support and training of the outgoing students is a prerequisite for successful mobilities. The related benefits of an effective additional language training are as follows: students become more fluent in the foreign language usage in host universities; better communication with the host academic staff; improved success at the exams held in host universities; motivation for further mobilities in the same or other foreign university or company.

References

- Chantov, V. 2014. *Model za razvitie na chuzhdoezikova kompetentnost na studentite v informacionno-obrazovatelna sreda*. Disertatsia za prisazhdane na obrazovatelna stepen "doctor", Sofia (in Bulgarian).
- Hristova, T. 2008. *Myastoto na kariernia tsentar za povishavane kachestvoto na obuchenie na elektroinzhenerite*. – *Minno delo i geologia*, 6, 29–31 (in Bulgarian).
- Izvorska, D. 2015. *Realizatsia na kompetentnostnia podhod v savremenoto vishe tehnichecko obrazovanie*. – *Upravlenie i obrazovanie, menidzhmant i obuchenie*, 11 (1), 3, 241–250 (in Bulgarian).
- Izvorska, D. 2016. *Model za formirane i razvitie na komunikativnata kompetentnost na studentite v tehnichecki VUZ*. – *Profesionalno obrazovanie*, 1, 63–74 (in Bulgarian).
- Izvorska, D. 2017. *Model za formirane i razvitie na profesionalnata kompetentnost na studentite v tehnichecki VUZ*. UI "V. Aprilov", Gabrovo, 260 p. (in Bulgarian).