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New approaches to teacher development in an EAP context

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Professional development is an important part of teachers' professional lives. It involves improvement of individual skills, personal performance, chances of obtaining a good job, and career advancement. The article reports on teacher professional development of English language teachers. It, first, explains the need for teacher training seminars and an increased demand for new IELTS exam teaching skills based on a study conducted by the author; then it outlines standards for English teachers and, finally, it looks at various areas of teacher development at the tertiary level, such as teaching portfolio, collaboration, teacher study groups, workshops, and research seminars. Findings reveal that teachers lack experience of teaching for IELTS and its assessment; they have also difficulties in teaching academic style to students and explaining the text structure for two IELTS essays; the format of the speaking part is also a problem with several teachers. These results indicate that there is a need for teacher training seminars as the first step in teacher development and a demand for continuous professional development in a particular university context.

Keywords: teacher standards, teacher training, teacher development, IELTS exam preparation, tertiary level, EAP

Introduction

English language teachers in Russia obtain their teaching qualifications at Pedagogical universities and Philological faculties of universities. To get a qualification of foreign language teaching, students take a 4-year Bachelor course. Many graduates choose to follow a 2-year Master's course to be able to conduct research into Philology or Pedagogy and do Post-graduate studies. University graduates become professional language teachers who understand that 'a "professional" is a trained and qualified specialist who displays a high standard of competent conduct in their practice' (Leung, 2009, p. 49).

Nevertheless, teaching English at a secondary school is different from teaching at a university. And even working at Humanitarian and Technical universities English language teachers need different skills. Under these circumstances, the question of teacher training and teacher development arises: how can this process be organised in order to meet the requirements of teachers and give them ground for further development?

This paper aims to analyse teachers' needs for new skills and their difficulties in obtaining them, the role of teacher training seminars in this process and possible ways of further English language teacher development in a Russian context.

Background

Teaching English at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) was initially based on the concept of teaching General English, Business English, and Professional English – an approach widely used in technical and economic universities in Russia. In *General English* classes, students perfected their knowledge of grammatical structures and functions; they extended their vocabulary to fulfil these functions in roles, topics, and discussions. They were taught to converse on different themes and take part in discussions, to analyse authentic materials from news-

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papers and magazines, to write formal and informal letters. In *Business English* classes, students developed their reading and listening comprehension of business and economic texts; they were provided with an opportunity to express business concepts in their own words while analysing and discussing such issues as company structures, work motivation, recruitment, advertising and marketing, franchising, retailing, banking, stocks, etc. The purpose of ESP (*English for specific purposes*) course was to develop students' restricted knowledge of economic terms and topics which included micro- and macroeconomic issues, tools of economic analysis, supply and demand, price, income, money and banking, central banking and international trade. Students had a weekly input of 4 hours during the 1st and 2nd academic years, 2 hours in the 3rd year, and 4 hours in the 1st semester in the 4th year. Testing was organised in the way that they took a 2-stage exam in English. In the first stage, they had to do multiple choice tasks based on listening to a lecture or an interview in their subject area, prepare a summary and an analysis of the factual information. In the 2nd stage, they prepared a summary of their diploma work and presented it at the end of the 4th year.

These ideas formed a basis for the concept of teaching English at the Higher School of Economics (HSE). Its aim was to form and develop English language competence necessary for solving practical tasks in various communicative and professional situations, sociocultural competence, and behavioural stereotypes essential for successful adaptation of graduates in the labour market; to develop students' self-study skills which can help them obtain knowledge and skills necessary for social and professional communication in English (The Concept of teaching foreign languages at the HSE, 2005, p. 1). Taking into account the fact that the number of hours per group and per week was limited to four, faculties could form their own combination of aspects depending on course objectives, either General English and ESP or Business English and ESP. According to the concept, students' competence was measured by their ability to retrieve necessary information from reading and listening tasks, to produce their own texts, both written and oral, using professional vocabulary, make summaries, and write formal and informal letters. The final exam included a listening task, writing a summary to a text and written analysis of factual information, in the 1st stage and making a presentation in the 2nd. The concept and the English language syllabus based on it worked for 5 years.

A change in strategy

In five years' time, there occurred a need to systematise approaches to English language teaching and to standardise the English language proficiency levels. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp) abbreviated as CEFR, and the programme 'Foreign language', recommended by the Methodological committee of the Ministry of Education (ESP Programmes and Projects – ELT in Russia) form the foundation for *a new concept* of teaching English at the HSE. The *aim* of the new concept was 'to ensure transparency of the requirements for English language competence formation at the Bachelor's level' (HSE, 2010, p. 2). Its *objectives* were: to develop the all-University English language syllabus meeting the requirements of all faculties; to relate it to international certification; to develop communicative competence necessary for academic and professional activities in English. The concept also aimed at achieving maximum correspondence with international standards in teaching foreign languages in reference to a mutual aim, transparency of the content of the programme, teaching techniques, and assessment criteria. An accord with international standards was to be realised through an introduction of international examinations: IELTS and BEC. The *purpose* of this concept was to contribute to the creation of the common European environment of higher professional education corresponding to the requirements of the European Union for the internationalisation of higher education and the development of academic and professional mobility of graduates (HSE, 2010, p. 2). The *syllabus* prepared on the basis of this concept aimed to form students' communicative competence (social, linguistic, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, discursive, pragmatic, and strategic competences) necessary to use the English language in their academic, scientific, and professional activities. Language communicative competence is understood in this concept as 'a sum total of individual student's qualities (knowledge, skills, and abilities) which can be used to solve problems and find answers to questions occurring during students' academic, sociocultural, professional, and everyday communication in a foreign language' (Solovova, Kuzmina, & Sternina, 2009, p. 2) (translation – mine). By the end of a four-year course in the Bachelor's programme students are to obtain the level of B2 – intermediate level or C1 – advanced level in CEFR. The main difference from the previous concept was in a shift from traditional General and Business English to academic skills development and correlation with European standards. Academic skills to be obtained by students, according to this concept, can be summarised in the following table.

This concept was a breakthrough in teaching English for many teachers because it meant a change in their teaching practices. In the world of teaching

Table 1
Skills description

Skill	Description
Speaking	to be able to maintain conversation with native speakers; to participate in discussions on familiar issues; to develop an argumentative discussion in an academic and professional environment.
Writing	to be able to write essays and reports, develop arguments for and against, to write business letters.
Reading and Listening	to be able to comprehend lectures, articles, and reports on familiar themes; to take notes from a lecture in a professional environment.

(HSE, 2010, p. 3)

practices this change is called by some authors 'a concept change' which they interpret as 'a move from general English into EAP teaching' (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2008, p. 18).
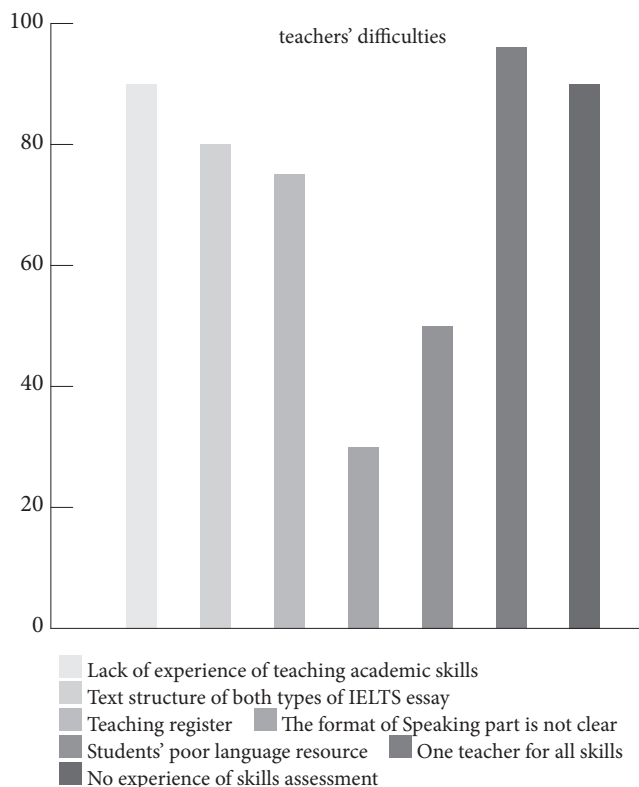

Figure 1. Results of the questionnaire.

Needs analysis

Being university teachers, established teachers of English in a classroom stick to a university approach: they widely use pair-work or work in threes and fours, role-playing, making presentations on professional issues. The majority of them would use authentic lectures and reading texts in students' subject areas and develop additional tasks to check students' understanding of listening and reading materials in their lessons according to specifically developed criteria. Both teachers and students understand that the skills to be obtained are an investment in students' future, and this is the reason why the teaching process ought to be effective. During a study conducted at the Faculty of Economics at the HSE, 15 teachers of English were interrogated about difficulties that they have in teaching for IELTS exam. The results of this survey can be seen in Figure 1. In their responses, the majority of teachers (in percentage) named the lack of experience of teaching academic skills to the students as one of the major difficulties. Being professional teachers with years of experience of teaching General English, Business English or Professional English, they mentioned that teaching register was a big problem because many students did not differentiate between literary style and academic style and even conversational style. This can be easily explained because at school pupils are taught to write compositions, not essays. Another main problem which teachers faced was text structure of both types of IELTS essay. At the beginning of the writing course, all students found writing an impersonal essay according to a specific format almost very difficult. Several teachers complained that the format of the speaking part of IELTS exam was not clear to them even though they could differentiate between general purpose and academic speaking skills. Nearly half of the interrogated teachers named students' poor language bank as a difficulty which was unequally shared among students' language levels. Among other challenges mentioned by teachers were the following: one teacher for all skills which results in the lack of time for each skill to be developed and no experience of skills assessment. These problems were mentioned by nearly all teachers.

The needs of university teachers were analysed by the administration of the HSE, and after short negotiations with native English speakers who work at the HSE a series of teacher training seminars was organised. Both parties treated this training as 'activities directly focused on a teacher's present responsibilities and ... typically aimed at short-term and immediate goals', as 'preparation to take on a new teaching assignment' (Richards & Farrell, 2005, n.p.). The seminars included explanation of IELTS reading, listening, writing, and speaking formats. Multimedia presenta-

tions showing candidates taking speaking tests and an analysis of example tasks, information on assessment criteria, on common problems and common students' errors was provided. All teachers who participated in the seminars found them useful and helpful but not sufficient. In terms of the specification of teaching academic writing and assessment criteria there was a demand for additional seminars. In order to meet this increased demand, three seminars were organised for representatives of three faculties: Economics, Management, and Law. Those seminars aimed to provide teachers with a detailed analysis of essay titles, essays' text structure, and language resource. In their feedback, many teachers admitted that they finally acquired an understanding of what teaching for IELTS exam is.

Professional standards

In the teacher training seminars, all teachers realised that they wanted to have a better understanding of the *conceptualisation of teacher professionalism* and their future *effectiveness* as teachers. In general usage, a professional is 'a trained and qualified specialist who displays a high standard of competent conduct in their practice. The term *professionalism* is regularly used in a constitutive sense to refer to practitioners' knowledge, skills, and conduct' (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 49). The research conducted by Barduhn and Johnson showed that there is uncertainty about complexity, practicality, and reliability of assessment systems and existing standards based mainly on observed behaviour (Barduhn & Johnson, 2009, p. 63–64). Among areas that need changes and which were identified by the researchers, the following are the most topical in an ELT environment:
- 'higher language proficiency before nonnative speakers are allowed into teaching programmes;
- fairer and more rigorous assessment;
- retraining of lecturers;
- better access to courses, exams, and opportunities for further development'.

Out of 11 factors listed by Barduhn and Johnson, these four were chosen to be quoted since they cover areas for improvement which are very challenging for ELT in Russia. For instance, the university diploma and assigned qualification of an ELT teacher is valid for both a secondary school and a university (either Pedagogical, Humanitarian or Technical), and teaching practice obtained in the university course covers only school. Besides, EL teacher assessment in a number of institutions is a formality which involves only paper work. In addition, both retraining of lecturers and better access to opportunities for teacher development must be well planned and properly organised by the administration and taken into account in teacher assessment alongside with other factors.

Teachers of English working at the HSE would probably question themselves about what skills and knowledge they need in order to demonstrate professionalism and competence in teaching English. In fact, National Standards of Education in Russia exist but they refer basically to the professional standard of a teacher in general without specification of any particular area or subject. According to this standard, which is a set of competencies, a teacher must be competent in personal qualities, in setting aims and objectives, in the development of students' motivation, in programme writing and making decisions, in forming information base for the teaching process and in teaching organisation (Shadrikov & Kuznetsova, 2010, p. 17). Personal qualities are described in this document as professionalism and an ability to be an effective teacher, which includes such qualities as high general intelligence, self-organisation, good knowledge of the subject, and an ability to understand and respect other people (ibid, p. 118–120). Competence in students' motivation is revealed in the teacher's ability to motivate students to develop and be successful in adult life. The competence in forming information base is characterised by the teacher's theoretical and methodological competence, professionalism in teaching and an ability to obtain and provide necessary professional information (ibid, p. 126–132). A competent teacher must maintain good relationships with students, manage the teaching process and assess its results.

TESOL standards involve five domains: Language, Culture, Professionalism, Instruction, and Assessment (Katz & Snow, 2009, p. 69). Some researchers (Smith, 2007) put features characterising standards for teachers into four levels (individual, group, school, and profession) and three domains (behavioural, affective, and cognitive). According to these standards, teachers must demonstrate competence in various domains not only in their own classroom, but in working with peers, taking on a role at the school level, and acting as a professional in the wider community (Katz & Snow, 2009, p. 69). Similar standards for teachers have been developed in other countries (e.g., Egypt, China, Australia, etc.) but what they have in common is a link to standards required of their students.

Standards serve as a common frame of reference for talking about teaching and learning (ibid, p. 72). They outline a set of competences for an effective teacher and ways to assess these competences. A competent and effective teacher must be aware not only whether his or her qualification matches the standard but also of the standards and needs of English language learners and how to assess their progress. Under the circumstances of changing standards, many teachers

of English realise that they can be given new roles and responsibilities; some of them will be involved in programme design and obtaining new skills in teaching academic English. As an innovative National Research University, the Higher School of Economics expects its teachers to become materials and course developers and researchers in various areas: philology, linguistics, pedagogy, and methods of teaching. On the other hand, standards have a potential to guide professional development innovations such as teaching portfolios, teacher collaboration, workshops and research seminars, and self-monitoring.

Innovations in teacher development

The concept of *teaching portfolio* is new to the majority of the colleagues at the HSE. Even though some of the teachers could have heard something about it they never looked upon it as part of their competence and professionalism. A teaching portfolio is 'a collection of documents and other items that provides information about different aspects of a teacher's work. It serves to describe and document the teacher's performance, to facilitate professional development, and to provide a basis for reflection and review. ... It is another form of teacher development that is built around self-appraisal and teacher-directed learning' (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 98). It represents who you are, what you do, why you do it, where you have been, where you are, where you want to go, and how you plan on getting there' (Evans, 1995, p. 11). In Japan, for example, such a portfolio is required to be submitted every 2 years for evaluation by an elected committee of faculty peers and administration. It must be prepared according to a standard and usually includes: an updated CV, a concise letter of self-evaluation of teaching, samples of course materials demonstrating a pedagogical approach, creativity, willingness to adjust to the educational need of students, and standards of judgments on student performance, and examples of scholarship (Richards & Farrell, 2005, pp. 99–100).

Teaching portfolios are not required but are now talked about at some Russian universities and, specifically, at the HSE. Candidates for lecturers, senior lecturers, assistant professors and professors are assessed according to the following criteria:
1. Education and degrees
2. Achievements and promotion
3. Participation in research projects
4. Research activity (publications)
5. Presentations at conferences

All this information is kept on a teacher's personal page on the Web-site of the university. Apart from the required information, a teacher can include additional information, for instance, membership in various Committees and Teachers' associations (for example, TESOL, IATEFL). Many teachers outline their professional interests and skills taught. All this information must be put on the teacher's personal page and must be updated regularly. Why do teachers still need to compile a portfolio? The answer is obvious: it gives a teacher a chance to assess his or her own progress and establish goals for personal development. It can also facilitate the teacher's assessment by the administration. Apart from the required information stated above, the contents of a portfolio can include:
1. Copies of education and degrees documents
2. Certificates of courses taken in areas one teaches
3. An evaluation of supervisor and colleagues who visited the teacher's class
4. Self-evaluation of lessons taught
5. Lesson plans
6. Examples of teaching materials
7. A professional development plan
8. A report on conference or workshop attended
9. A report on ways the teacher has contributed to the colleagues' professional development
10. Photographs of classes taught

(Richards & Farrell, 2005, pp. 103–105)

Some of the ideas relating to teaching portfolios have been borrowed from Richards and Farrell (2005), but since there has been no experience of compiling and using teaching portfolios so far at the university it is possible to examine and even adapt these ideas which might work in a specific teaching context. Interestingly, there is evidence that in some contexts teachers keep student's portfolio or student's personal file which comprises students' everyday home assignments and class activities. Some teachers also keep test papers, reading records, creating writing pieces, and term report cards (Shrestha, 2013, p. 155).

Next innovation in teacher development is *collaboration*. Collaboration is viewed as

'a process that facilitates teacher development, serves to generate knowledge and understanding, and helps to develop collegiality, and one which teachers should have or share control of. Such collaboration can take many different forms, such as between teacher and teacher, teacher and university researcher, teacher and students, and parents or administration.' (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 239)

Working on one's own to achieve a goal is less effective than in a group. A good means of collaboration with other teachers is *teacher support groups*. They usually include 'two or more teachers collaborating to achieve either their individual or shared goals or both' (Richards & Farrell, 2005, n.p.). A support group is not a staff meeting; participation in it is voluntary and is meant for the good of its participants.

Teachers can discuss problems, important issues, experiences, and concerns. Collaborating on materials development and syllabus writing or programme adjustment can be both beneficial for professional development and building up a good relationship with the colleagues. Trying out new strategies is a useful collaborative learning activity on the basis of a teacher support group. It can be performed in the form of class observation with subsequent implementation of the strategy by other members of the teacher group and a later discussion of experience and focus on specific problems. Some scholars such as Richards & Farrell (2005) see benefits from being in a teacher support group:

- increased motivation (which can expand to participating in other professional development projects outside the support group);
- effective teaching (can lead to innovative changes in teaching);
- benefits to students;
- overcoming isolation (can lead to a sharing attitude among teachers);
- facilitating teacher initiatives (ibid, n.p.)

A teacher support group is one of the forms of collaboration that does work at the HSE. The groups are not fixed, and the activities are informal, but they are productive in the above listed areas. They are basically formed as topic-based teacher groups to discuss some important issues in the 1st or 2nd year or other aspects of teaching.

Writing plans, teaching materials, books, and research articles together with foreign colleagues can be another form of collaboration. This can be done in the form of Partnership University project with universities in other countries in the world. It could be implemented as teacher exchange and student exchange, teacher training seminars and round-table talks and discussions on various joint projects and materials development and writing coursebooks. It can also help teachers with different levels of training and experience to learn from each other.

Workshops can be looked at as another innovative form of teacher development for teachers of the English language at the HSE. A workshop usually helps teachers 'to acquire specific knowledge and skills. Led by an expert with experience in the workshop topic this session serves a unique opportunity for teachers to learn from experts (Richards & Farrell, 2005, n.p.). Unlike workshops, *research seminars* can improve teachers' theoretical knowledge and understanding of many issues in ELT. At the HSE, they are very customary in other subjects such as Economics, Mathematics, and Sociology, but are now at the initial stage of development at the Department of Foreign languages. Invitation of foreign experts to such seminars could enhance the importance of research activities of teach-

ers at the HSE and their informative value. Each presenter could submit an abstract summarising his or her research method and results and their applicability to everyday teaching. Such a seminar can be organised once a month and held in an adopted format. Many teachers of English at the HSE consider the idea of regular research seminars as valuable experience of teacher development and personal investment.

Conclusion

Teacher development is a crucial part of teachers' professional lives after their formal education is over. The need for it is understood by all language teachers in the world as well as the fact that a much higher level of professionalism in ELT is needed every year. As it has been explained through the example of one particular teaching context in this paper, it is becoming more and more topical in Russia if language teachers want to become part of the worldwide English language community of professionals 'with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices' (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 3). It involves many issues but only a few were given attention to so far. Further research and analysis in the sphere of teacher development could focus on other innovations such as peer observation and peer coaching which are also new to many teachers involved in ELT at the HSE.

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