

FACILITATING LISTENING COMPONENT IN EPP MASTER PROGRAMMES IN ECONOMIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Foreign language Master programmes in Russian economic universities crown the hierarchy of linguistic training the students get during their academic studies. The English for Professional Purposes course being elective, the EPP teachers have to offer their potential students really outstanding input to encourage them to choose it in preference to other elective programmes. Master students attending EPP lessons generally have very high expectations from them as they directly link their proficiency in professional English with their future employability. Thus the EPP course delivered has to contain varied linguistic input to train students in all language skills, and listening skills in particular. The conducted research justifies that one of the most problematic aspects of teaching EPP is finding sufficient samples of listening in specific areas. Analyzing the applicability of available sources such as textbooks and Internet-sites, the authors suggest how appropriate audio material selection and consequent processing can completely reshape the course design and significantly boost listening practices at MA level in economic universities.

Keywords: Professional English, English of accounting and finance, listening skills, course development, economic university

Introduction

An integrated approach towards teaching English for Professional Purposes (EPP), in particular English of accounting, finance and banking, must combine both linguistic and communicative competences providing sufficient knowledge for further master (MA) and post-graduate studies as well as for the reviewing foreign experience in wider areas of business and finance. The priority in foreign language studies is given to expanding the students' vocabulary by means of specialized lexis acquisition. This is preconditioned by the out-of-the-campus realities when profound learning of

terminology and research into the international fund-raising practices enable students to increase their employment competitiveness upon graduation.

Anyone pursuing a global career has to demonstrate their professional language skills and the ability to converse with the general international economic community as well as narrow specialists in accounting and finance habitually and unhesitatingly. Effective communication in a foreign language is inconceivable without the ability to listen, hear and comprehend the discourse partner, to understand and interpret the longer broadcasts including video- and podcasts, to cogitate on the lectures and presentations on research and professional issues.

One of the primarily objectives for the EPP teacher is to equip the student with a range of skills which are essential for increasing their future employability. Applying this to developing listening skills it is crucial that the undergraduates be trained enough to pass International Certificate in Financial English examination (ICFE) which corresponds to B2-C1 levels. In terms of test of listening skills the ICFE requirements stipulate that ‘Candidates are expected to be able to understand a variety of listening texts, showing understanding of gist, detail and the attitude of the speaker. They must also be able to identify and interpret the context. Texts take the form of recordings of discussions, meetings, interviews, announcements, consultations, broadcasts, etc in the context of finance and accounting.’²

Thus successfully trained students are able to understand monologues and dialogues from one to four minutes in length, delivered at natural speed in a variety of voices’ in a range of professional contexts.

In accordance with the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Language Reference (CEFR), B2 level, which is the entrance level of most master students, implies being in command of the listening skills that allow students to understand standard spoken language, live or broadcast, on both familiar and unfamiliar topics normally encountered in academic or vocational life situations including technical discussions in their field of specialisation, as well as being able to follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of presentation which use complex ideas and language.³

The targeted level of the undergraduates is C1 which in terms of listening enables students to follow most lectures, discussions and debates with relative ease, understand complex technical information, and a wide range of recorded audio material, including some nonstandard language,

² <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/financial/>

³ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp

professional jargon, job-related phrasal verbs and identify finer points of detail, including implicit attitudes and relationships between speakers.

Consequently, the future graduates' competences development should not be restricted to such inert comprehension as text translation or extensive reading on the subject. Productive skills in hearing, reflecting and vocalizing need to be sustained and advanced in. However, at the EPP level the foreign language teacher is challenged by the scarcity of listening learning materials to improve these skills.

Literature Review

The significance of mastering listening skills and strategies has long been recognized by researchers as vital for active language acquisition. Rost and Ross (1991) highlighted the direct correlation between listening and general language proficiency. Koroleva C. (2011) sees listening skills as ones of the most important in future economists' education as the ability to understand a foreign language is now seen as a must for their further career progression. Therefore master students need strong oral comprehension skills for confident access to oral content in their academic classes delivered in English. Many Russian-speaking master students in economic universities find it difficult to understand the lectures in English as part of their course because "listening is a highly complex process during which they have to construct meaning out of information provided by the speaker" (Saliha Chelli, 2013). Their difficulties are many, ranging from decoding words and sentences, insufficient knowledge of the language structure, lack of prior subject knowledge to inferring abilities. Saliha Chelli (2013) believes that successful listening requires the integration of a range of strategies: cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. In other words, "to yield better performance for listening comprehension, listeners must at least possess the ability to recognize and master major foreign language patterns, as well as to activate all the schemata to make sense of the incoming information" (Hui-Fang Shang, 2008). It is frequently assumed that students having many opportunities to hear spoken English during their academic studies, this exposure will automatically improve their ability to comprehend oral English. However, for many students, this is not always the case. Even when listening is the focus of lessons in the English language classroom, it often consists of testing students' ability to listen to oral information and answer comprehension questions, without providing any specific instruction in the skills and strategies necessary to accomplish this task (Field, 1998). Li, Hasegawa and Yamamoto (2014) consider the listening comprehension ability as the most difficult to improve and suggest building up personal learning environments based on their characteristics and conditions. Mehrak Rahimi and Sajad Abedi (2015) study the relationship

between metacognitive awareness of listening strategies and listening proficiency among language learners with low, mid, and high levels of academic self-regulation. Close to our research are the findings by Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh, Ambigapathy Pandian, Sarjit Kaur Gurdial Singh (2015) focusing on the challenges faced by the students in Master programmes of Malaysian universities in their academic listening practices, and the measures employed to overcome the challenges. Modern authors propose various strategies to improve listening comprehension skills. For example, Wallwork (2014) has pointed out that advances in listening can be achieved apart from the classroom by employing a vast range of materials on the web specifically designed for non-native speakers as well as a mix of TV programs. Yong Lin (2013) proposes a method of listening strategies via a one-year practical teaching. Alyssa Friend Wise, Simone Nicole Hausknecht and Yuting Zhao (2014) in their study develop a robust theory of online listening by examining the relationship between how learners “listen” (access existing posts) and “speak” (contribute posts) in online discussions. The study by Flowerdew, J. and Miller, L. (1992) has revealed a broad, rich picture of the perceptions, problems and strategies of students struggling to get to grips with a new situation, that is of listening to lectures in a second language. The key finding is that listening to a lecture monologue is an extremely difficult task, for which second language students may well be inadequately prepared. Results of Zeng Yajun, Zeng Yi (2014) study show that (Chinese) undergraduates have a fairly high degree of metacognitive awareness of listening learning in aspects like person knowledge, planning, and problem solving but not in strategies like directed attention, online-appraisal and mental translation. The findings of Hong Dang (2012) thesis focusing mainly on listening strategy training in web-based self-access environment affirm its value and conclude that it will not only help students become more successful to learn a foreign language but can also provide teachers with a meaningful way to focus their efforts. Nikitenko (2011) uses the integrative listening tasks based on the use of podcasts in the English language textbook for technical post-graduate students as an example of the integrative basis formation in masters’ education.

Nevertheless, the literature review let us conclude that despite the abundancy of research on listening strategies there are few studies which are directly related to the present paper.

Research Results

Data Collection Methods and Procedures:

The method that we employed in our study was a descriptive survey research method. In our research we have analyzed the data collected from 9 English Language Teaching sites, 7 newspaper and journal sites, 2 on-line

encyclopedias and 8 textbooks by 4 publishing houses. The practical experience described has been accumulated at 3 faculties at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE) for 5 academic years. Field and research results were summarized in an in-house publication ‘Supplementary listening tasks for the students of finance and accounting’.

Textbooks selection

Textbooks on financial English by international publishing houses for the EPP courses are not many. We have analysed 8 available textbooks in point of their suitability for the task of teaching MA students listening skills and presented our research results in Table 1. Survey of available textbooks by international publishing houses shows that most of these publications are logically structured along theoretic encyclopedic contents or newspaper/journal articles with a plethora of exercises based on them. Such educational material is ideal for teaching English of finance and accounting hence providing the students with a sufficient amount of texts for the vocabulary acquisition, translation, analysis and discussion.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of textbooks respective listening skill training

Author, Title	Level	General impression	Availability	Listening Description
Ian MacKenzie, English for Business Studies	C1- C2	topic-based units covering major business topics and functions	yes	+ required level - around 1/4 of the topics concern financial sector
Ian MacKenzie, English for the Financial Sector	B1- B2	topic-based units covering major business topics and functions	yes	+ a very big selection - not required level
Ian MacKenzie, Professional English in Use Finance	B1- C2	excellent for vocabulary acquisition, an ideal business language reference book		no
Ian MacKenzie, Financial English	B1- C2	excellent for vocabulary acquisition, an ideal practice book		no
Sara Helm, Market Leader Accounting and Finance	B1- C1	excellent for vocabulary acquisition, reading, discussing and Internet search skills development		no

Christine Johnson, Market Leader Banking and Finance	B1- C1	excellent for vocabulary acquisition, reading, discussing		no
Paul Emmerson, Business Vocabulary Builder	B1- B2	excellent for vocabulary acquisition and revision purposes	yes	+ interesting and useful content - very few in relation to the volume of the book - not required level
Paul Emmerson, Business English Handbook Advanced	B2- C1	excellent for vocabulary acquisition and revision purposes	yes	+ interesting , useful content + required level - very few in comparison with the volume of the book

As far as listening input is concerned, none of these publications material fits perfectly into the MA EPP course design due to the disparity either with the students' group language level or subject matter of the course.

For example, a universally recognized as one of the best textbooks for the finance students "English for the Financial Sector" by Ian MacKenzie though covers a lot of relevant issues is stated by the author to be B1/B2 level which is the approximate language level of a second-year student, rather than the level of an undergraduate or MA student that is C1 predominantly.

Another textbook by the same author "English for Business Studies" contains learning materials at a required C1 level whereas only 8 out of 28 units fully correspond to EPP study curriculum.

Paul Emmerson's "Business Vocabulary Builder" and "Business English Handbook Advanced" are also more biased towards Business English rather than Financial English. However, they both do have some topical audio recordings which are of great informative and educational value. Nonetheless, these pieces of listening are fragmented and not all of them can be included into EPP studies.

And last, but not least, every time a teacher wants to use selected listening comprehension exercises from any printed publication, he/she steps onto the shaky ground of possible copyright infringement when including these copyright materials in his/her teaching practice which, of course, is a serious constraint and acts as a deterrent.

Internet sources

Desire to provide students with the appropriate level listening material on financial issues urges teachers to search and consider different sources of audio-information not only in the course books but also in the Internet. Nowadays the sites of such popular publishing houses as the

Financial Times, the Economist and others contain not only the on-line open-access versions of their regular issues but also multimedia libraries which present videoblogs and audio- or videocasts. Nevertheless, the teacher and students cannot benefit from these authentic sources fully for the lack of scripts which complicates the teacher's preparation for the class. Also, paradoxically, immediacy, on the one hand, being the highest value of current news at the same time disrupts the sustainability of the developed tasks due to the inevitable obsolescence of the news video- and podcasts. Additionally, the speech rate, e.g. in podcasts, is the regular speed of speech of the native speakers encompassing innumerable varieties of the world's accents which in turn compounds its perception without any visualization. Such recordings would ideally supplement training listening skills of the most advanced student group aspiring to achieve C2 level when non-native speaker practically has no difficulty in apprehending any type of speech: 'I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent' (CEFR). However, the university teacher has to take into account the fact that a university group usually consists of students with miscellaneous linguistic abilities, where the number of learners could total up to 40, and some of them may be below C1. Therefore, the authentic material from the news-reporting sources is not always an appropriate e-resource for the development of listening skills.

Another valuable listening material resource has always been ELT sites. Yet, most of them are aimed to meet the needs of General English learners. As a matter of exception, one can find there a few General Business topics covered, e.g. 'How to become a manager' or 'How to get ready for the job interview'. Finally, browsing the sites one can discover the LearnEnglish site by the British Council where a searcher will be lucky to find 'Business and Work' and 'Professionals' tabs. There are 12 podcasts on financial themes, with a duration from 2 to 13 minutes, reporting on the issues of banking, insurance, investment, financial forecasting and financial management in quite a generalised way.

The British Council LearnEnglish and Professionals podcasts can be approached on-line or downloaded free to the user's PC. The downloadables mostly consist of MP3 podcast sound, support pack and PDF transcript. In particular 'support pack' presents the text of some interactive exercises to enable a student to print out, read and analyse the tasks from the site, as well as the keys to these exercises. Undoubtedly, the availability of the podcast scripts is convenient for the detailed examination of the recorded text and creating, if necessary, some supplementary exercises to tailor them to the particular course objectives.

As a sample we have analyzed one of the above mentioned podcast sets.

‘Risk Management’ is an excerpt from a lecture about how to manage risks by a business school professor. Statistically, it contains 627 words, which is approximately equivalent to one A4 page reading format, the sound lasting 04.34 minutes, the speech speed at around 145 words per minutes. For this recording the authors have developed one task, consisting of 8 true/false statements. Students with the financial background knowledge immediately decide on the (in)correctness of 5 out of 8 statements yet not hearing the recording, while reading the sentences only, so obvious the answers are (such statements are marked with an asterisk in Table 2). It is also worth mentioning that some of the statements do not tackle the professional contents of the lecture or check the knowledge of terminology, but only the accuracy of hearing a particular word as in statement 3 from Table 2. It is evident that such a task is not motivating the students’ interest in listening to the recording.

Table 2. Key to the original listening task on ‘Risk Management’ audio

1. Companies are not taking the issue of risk management seriously.	*FALSE	are not taking →	are taking
2. Companies need to look at the whole picture and at each separate element.	*TRUE		
3. The enterprise risk scorecard is made up of four circles .	FALSE	circles →	sections
4. Companies should make accurate predictions about the amount of tax they have to pay.	*TRUE		
5. Employees who are trained will increase a company’s productivity.	*TRUE		
6. The price of insurance does not affect a company’s business risk perspective.	FALSE	does not affect →	affects
7. Customer risk perspective includes the numbers of satisfied and dissatisfied customers.	TRUE		
8. Risk management is a simple issue.	*FALSE	simple issue →	complex

A thorough examination of the audio script revealed several layers of professional context of the lecture: 1) risks are divided into two basic types; 2) there are four types of risk perspective; 3) each of the types in 2 is illustrated by specific examples. Furthermore, it can be heard from the audio that the lecturer is switching the presentation slides and commenting on some ‘enterprise risk scorecard’, a framework to analyse the types of risk for an enterprise. Consequently, upon the script and audio analysis it is feasible

to offer the listeners three more tasks, such as to fill in the chart and to take notes for the summary of the lecture:

- 1) make notes on the **three main risk types**;
- 2) complete the enterprise risk scorecard with the **four types of risk perspective**;
- 3) make notes on examples of each type of **risk perspective** (7 words max.)

Displaying the ‘scorecard’ with the Word SmartArt tools to visualise the grouped blocks of information diversifies the listening tasks framework and stimulates students to search for more examples of the topic discussed.

In some cases the teacher may also have to master some audio editing software tools either to improve the sound quality or to filter and cut the track to excise some irrelevant to the subject matter pieces.

Our teaching practice shows that it is also necessary to prepare some tasks to facilitate listening comprehension in terms of possible vocabulary difficulties that is to match the glossary terms with their definitions or problematic lexis with the translation. This, in turn, accentuates the necessity to compose pre-listening tasks. The word-definition matching exercise appears to be necessary to bridge the gap in understanding the overseas business realia such as the differences in accounting standards. Determined by the topic of listening some additional training to review the abbreviated terms might be needed. In rare cases it is essential to give students the Russian equivalents for some terminology or specific vocabulary of the audio-piece. A set of ambiguous questions for lead-in discussion should be made up to raise the students’ genuine interest in the issue sounded out.

In order to draw the logical conclusion to the listening activity a follow-up mini-case to discuss in pairs or teams can be offered. The task to analyse a company’s performance in relation to the risk-types sounded out in the recording can consolidate the recently acquired knowledge in both linguistic and subject matter terms. Based on the soundtrack case should cause an augmented debate which will trigger the passively acquired vocabulary into the speech and will provide some associations for further reflection on the issue.

Provided there is a set of tasks, depending on the group’s background, the number of attendees and time constraints, the project with a four-and-a-half-minute audio like ‘Risk Management’ can take up from 20 to 40 minutes of classroom time.

Thus, the high-quality sound and text need further task developing and a completely new set of exercises focusing on the practical instruction in EPP is required. In line with the text the following tasks for listening skills and other competences development can be offered as in Table 3:

Table 3. Sample listening tasks

I. Before listening tasks:

1. Match the terms used in the lecture/conversation/interview with the definitions.
2. Match the terms used in the listening and their definitions with the Russian translation.
3. Search the internet and find what the following abbreviations mean in terms of accounting/banking/insurance/...?
4. Discuss the following issues (based on the background information the students received during the previous classes).

II. Pre-listening and while-listening tasks:

1. You are going to listen to an interview with X, a/an auditor/compliance officer/stock broker/.... How do you think he will answer the questions below? ... Now listen to the interview and compare your ideas with the real answers.
2. Read the stages in a typical ... process below. Put them in the right order. Now listen to an interview with X, a ... manager in the ... industry, and check your answers.
3. What is the role of a/an internal auditor/speculator/equity manager/...? Match 1—6 with a)–f) to make a list of his/her responsibilities. ... Now listen to an interview with X, a/an internal auditor/speculator/equity manager/.... Which one/two of the above does he/she not mention?
4. Guess the missing words (the first letters have been given to help you). Then listen to the interview and check your answers. Translate these terms and collocations into Russian.
5. Conventional banks/fund managers/venture capitalists/portfolio managers/... use different types of analysis to decide which companies and sectors to invest in. Put the key factors in the correct column. ... Now listen to an interview with X, a ... manager, and check your answers.

III. While-listening tasks:

1. Are these statements true or false?
2. Listen to the interview and find answers to the following questions (make notes).
3. Listen again and make notes on what X, a ... manager, says about the following topics (maximum ten words each). When you finish, discuss the general issues with some colleagues.
4. What players are involved in the ... process/market/underwriting process/...? What are their functions? Match the players to the functions they perform. There are some extra players in the list.
5. Below are some of X's answers to the interviewer's questions. Fill in the gaps in the sentences.
 6. Listen again to fill the gaps and establish the correct sequence of events / to exclude the event that didn't happen.
 7. Listen to the lecture/conversation/interview and match the halves of the sentences to summarise/develop/cover the points made.
 8. Complete the gaps with a word from the box to make a summary of the text.

IV. After-listening tasks:

1. Translate the following phrases from the lecture/conversation/interview into

Russian/your native language.

2. Discuss the following questions: What are the advantages of ...? What other means of ... do you know? What way would you prefer to pay/invest/be insured if you ...? What are your priorities in ...?
3. Work in groups of three. Each group should choose a type of securities/financial forecasting/risk management/... . Listen again and make notes on the chosen type of securities/financial forecasting/risk management/... . Prepare mini presentation (2 min. maximum) on the types and hold a meeting with the students who have chosen the other roles to choose the most attractive/feasible/practical type.
4. Choose a company (if necessary invent some detail) and analyse its investment/risks/financial statements/... .
5. When was the recording made? Find additional or up-to-date information, make a presentation to the other students.

The podcasts supplied with a complex of thoroughly developed supplementary exercises (see Table 3) seem to become quite challenging tasks for MA students. However, the EPP teacher has to take into account the fact that the undergraduates are less likely to be interested in listening to a theoretical lecture excerpt or philosophic dispute on the nature and ethics of banking and financing some faraway overseas projects. The practical bias towards finance and accounting matters is more appealing for EPP target audience. For instance, the university students want to know what is going to be included in their job description when they are employed as specialists. Consequently, it necessitates creation of thought-provoking tasks on the basis of authentic interviews with the leading businessmen and senior managers working in multinational corporations in different economic sectors, therefore the search for such audio tracks of C1 level is going to be continued.

Conclusion

Being elective in most economic universities, EPP courses nevertheless enjoy paramount popularity as MA students appreciate their validity for their future employment opportunities. Modern job market becoming tougher and tougher for inexperienced graduates, the prospective employers are more likely to offer a job to multilingual applicants with strong command of listening and speaking skills. Companies struggling to cut costs no longer can afford to invest money into drilling their employees' language skills and prefer to hire linguistically proficient applicants. Our communication via professional networks with EPP colleagues from other geographical locations let us conclude that they have similar problems and face similar challenges. Therefore our research accentuates the urgent need to create and develop tailor-made listening courses in accounting and finance to satisfy particular learners' demands.

In pursuit of the desire to streamline the EPP course syllabus, following the need to incorporate more appropriate listening in the course, EPP teachers are enthusiastic to search and adapt different sources of audio-information to match the MA language level and develop professional awareness as well. A framework described in the article can facilitate teachers' endeavours to foster both linguistic and employability advancement with the MA students. It is assumed that a thoroughly built up set of exercises, targeted at practical approach in teaching listening, should develop professional competences as well.

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