

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING EFL TO PART-TIME STUDENTS IN MOLDOVA

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Rezumat: În ultimii ani, instituțiile de învățământ superior din Moldova au experimentat o creștere semnificativă a numărului de studenți în diverse programe de studiu în regim redus determinată de motive socio-economice variate și anumite caracteristici proprii acestor programe. În general, cursurile cu frecvență redusă, definite ca o formă flexibilă, eficientă, deschisă și democratică de educație profesională continuă, își propun nu doar furnizarea de cunoștințe profesionale și competențe corespunzătoare, ci și sporirea activității cognitive, creșterea personală, realizările în învățare și independența în diverse activități academice. Deoarece cunoașterea unei limbi străine este recunoscută ca o competență fundamentală pentru a rezista concurenței în piața contemporană a muncii și pentru a accesa cele mai inovatoare informații disponibile, cursurile de limba engleză I și II au devenit componente integrale ale tuturor planurilor de studii universitare destinate studenților cu normă parțială în programele de licență. Cu toate acestea, trebuie menționat că, în prezent, bazele teoretice și metodologice pentru predarea limbii engleze studenților cu normă parțială nu sunt suficient de dezvoltate și se bazează în mod tradițional pe strategii și tehnici pedagogice comune, fără a recunoaște numeroasele provocări impuse de programele universitare cu normă parțială. Astfel, profesorul de limbă engleză se confruntă permanent cu diverse provocări ale acestor programe, luând în considerare în mod constant diferențele de percepție a materialului și competențelor de către studenții adulți, non-uniformitatea vârstei studenților, precum și particularitățile motivației intrinseci și angajamentului extrinsec.

Keywords: challenges, teaching EFL, part-time students, educational process, contingent diversity, motivation, workable solutions

In recent years, higher education institutions in Moldova have witnessed a considerable increase in the number of students of various part-time study programs, accounted for diverse socio-economic reasons as well as certain features inherent in the programs themselves. Generally defined as a highly flexible, effective, open and democratic form of continuous vocational education, part-time (extramural) courses aim not only at providing students with professional knowledge and corresponding competences, but also at enhancing their cognitive activity, personal growth, learning achievements and independence in diverse academic

undertakings. Since certain proficiency in a foreign language has long been recognized as a fundamental prerequisite skill for a specialist to be able to withstand escalating competition in the contemporary labor market, to access the most innovative information available and to communicate with colleagues worldwide, the courses “*The English Language I*” and “*The English Language II*” have become an integral component of Moldovan university curricula meant for part-time students of bachelor’s degree programmes. However, it should be noted that currently the theoretical and methodological grounds for teaching English to part-time students are not sufficiently developed and are traditionally based on common pedagogical strategies and techniques without recognizing numerous challenges posed by part-time university programmes. That is, a teacher of the English language permanently has to encounter diverse challenges of such programmes, constantly and simultaneously taking into consideration the differences of perception of the material and competences by adult students, non-uniformity of the students’ age as well as the peculiarities of their intrinsic motivation and extrinsic engagement. Additionally, the incessant dilemma of the effective curricular content selection augmented by the challenge of the productive individual work organization (which constitutes 80% of the overall number of hours) demands persistent analysis of psychological, pedagogical and methodological literature, targeted observation and analysis of the educational process, combined with the study and generalization of advanced pedagogical experience. Hence, what the objective and subjective difficulties of teaching the English language to part-time students are, “how this presentation occurs, how its goals can be attained and what methods and media are used, should be preceded by a consideration of its basic character”. (Holmberg 2005: 264)

Being viewed as both a means of communication and a stimulus to the cognition process, a foreign language cannot be acquired without a student’s preliminary possession of a definite level of cognitive activity and independence, which is one of the essential characteristics of an adult, who, according to Y.N. Kulyutkin is “a socially formed personality, capable of independent and responsible decision-making in accordance with the norms and requirements of society. This is a subject of social and labour activity, leading an independent life, industrial, social, personal. He makes decisions independently and actively regulates his behaviour” (Kulyutkin 1985: 36). The definition acquires greater significance in case of part-time students, who are endowed with relative liberty to independently determine the goals of their educational activities, choose forms, means and methods of learning, regulate educational processes, evaluate and correct the results of their studying activities. N.M. Tolstova singles out three structural components of the students’ cognitive activity while acquiring a foreign language, i.e., that of motivational necessity, operational-cognitive and the moral-volitional one, which is of primary importance regarding part-time students (Tolstova 2012: 119) as for them specifically individual work, which possesses great development potential simultaneously demanding the permanent exertion of will-power, stipulates the acquisition of advanced linguistic competences. Likewise, the intended study load of a part-time program, which is to be less than 75% of the normal full-time annual study load <https://www.unb.ca/registrar/> (accessed on 04.12.23) combined with the specifically traditional organization of the educational process (i.e., comprised of three-week or four-week sessions, occurring three times a year) significantly complicates the teacher’s activity and hinders the students’ awareness of the consistent implementation of the hierarchy of goals necessary for their professional development.

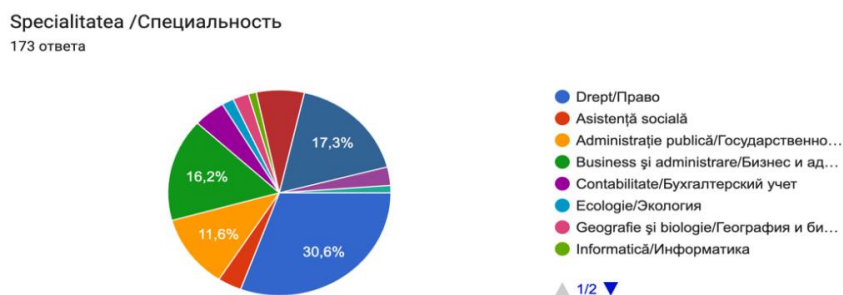
Logically, while regarding the most effective methods and techniques to boost the EFL acquisition by part-time students in Moldova, there arises the primary necessity to pinpoint and analyze the entirety of interconnected challenges, presented by the specificities of this

form of education. While the specific challenges may vary based on the context and individual students, there appear certain contentious issues impairing the educational process:

- Limited Contact Hours: 24 hours per term (in total 48 hours for both “*The English Language I*” and “*The English Language II*”) could make it challenging to cover the necessary material and ensure consistent language practice.
- Assessment and Evaluation: Designing fair and effective assessments for part-time students can be exigent as traditional evaluation methods may need to be adapted to suit the part-time learning format.
- Limited Time for Feedback: Due to the reduced contact hours, teachers may have less time to provide individualized feedback to part-time students. This can hinder the development of specific language skills and competences and address individual learning needs.
- Diverse Backgrounds and Skills: Part-time courses are taken by the students of various ages, diverse educational backgrounds and different language proficiency levels and learning styles. Consequently, adapting teaching methods to accommodate this diversity can be demanding.
- Balancing Work and Studies: A lot of part-time students work and have other numerous responsibilities, making it challenging for them to balance work, personal life, and language learning. This definitely affects attendance, individual assignments completion, and overall engagement.
- Varying Levels of Commitment: Some part-time students are highly motivated, while others treat the English language class as a secondary priority, thus decelerating their progress and participation.
- Motivational Challenges: Part-time students may easily become discouraged if progress is slow, or if they are not able to see immediate practical applications for their language skills in their daily lives.

To a great extent, the persistently emerging educational predicaments are conditioned by the multilaterally diverse contingent of part-time students, which is confirmed by the in-depth survey, conducted among 173 students of 12 part-time study programs offered by Alecu Russo State University of Bălți, Moldova.

Part-time programs



Law / Social Assistance/Public Administration / Business and Management / Accountancy / Ecology / Geography and Biology / Information Technology / Music / Pedagogy in Primary and Preschool Education / The Romanian Language and Literature / Mathematics

Fig. 1. *The diversity of part-time study programs including EFL courses.*

Since one of the fundamental teaching principles is taking into consideration students' age characteristics, the substantial disparity in ages between the students of the same academic group requires perpetual differential approaches to the educational process.

Age Brackets

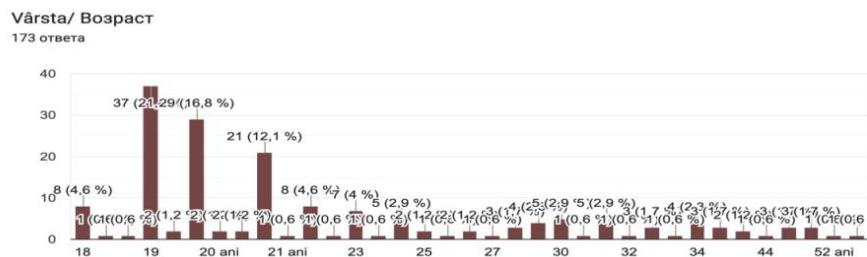
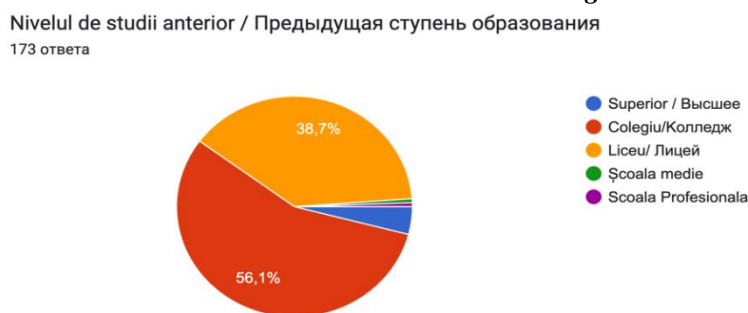


Fig. 2. *Non-uniformity of part-time students' age.*

As the above bar graph indicates, the majority (about 55%) of the respondents fall into the 18-21 year category, the period with the prevalence of verbal-logical thinking; nearly 10% are between 22-25 years, when imaginary thinking is in the foreground; the students between 26 and 35 years, characterized by the practical mode of thinking, comprise approximately 19% of survey participants; while 16% are above 36 years old. Consequently, the practical way of thinking of those part-time students, who are under 36, entails the integration of the theoretical knowledge into the concrete field of practical application whereas being above this age boundary, students, experiencing the peak of their intellectual activity and productivity in the familiar professional background, encounter limited possibilities of exploring innovative educational horizons (Sibilikova 2010: 770).

Regarding memorization capacity of the part-time students of different age categories, J.L. Vitlin (Vitlin 1976: 110) states that the greatest changes occur in short-term verbal memory in the visual and auditory modalities. The highest indicators in the development of verbal short-term memory for hearing are at the age of 18-30 years and low with a constant decrease – at age 31-40 years. At the age of 18-35 years, the verbal imprinting of long-term memory is characterized by greater constancy and a decrease in the level of development from 36 to 40 years. After 40 years, the level of memory development diminishes. With age, reaction speed slows down, so do the speed and flexibility of thinking. However, there are a number of advantages that older students have in comparison with yesterday's lyceum/college graduates: life and professional experience, a sense of responsibility for the family and colleagues (quite often subordinates), and the desire to make up for lost time during their lyceum/college years. While maturing, a great number of people develop a quality that is fundamentally important for self-learning – a greater ability to generalize. Evidently, all the above-mentioned factors place special demands on techniques, methods, means and educational technologies for teaching part-time students of various age categories.

The Previous Educational Stage



Higher education / College / Lyceum / Secondary school / Vocational school

Fig. 3. *Non-uniformity of part-time students' educational background.*

The survey data also indicates that most of the part-time students (56.1%) are college graduates, 38.7% have finished lyceums, and the remaining percentage possess either vocational or secondary school or even the higher education background. Obviously, such an extensive range of previous educational experiences cannot but intensify the complexity of the selection of the most effective EFL teaching strategies. That is, “the wide diversity of the student body is a major challenge for institutions. This requires more focus on teaching methods that provide support for learners, more individualization of learning, and more flexible delivery” (Bates 2019: 16).

It has not but once been evinced that the students’ impromptu “immersion in the foreign context of the future professional activity generally leads, firstly, to the loss of interest in improving language competences of the students possessing elementary level of language proficiency; and, secondly, to the motivational apathy of the students not intending to connect their future profession with a foreign language”.(Simonova 2009: 26).

Subsequently, L.P. Davydova ascertains that “motivation performs the three regulatory functions, i.e. prompting, sense-forming and organizational, largely based on the profound awareness of the motive having been transformed into a goal”(Davydova 198: 212). Indubitably, the constitutional features of part-time courses necessitate and demand a rather advanced level of the learners’ self-discipline and self-control, being derived from and conditioned by the sufficiently strong motivation. The survey results clearly and somewhat alarmingly reveal that 81% of respondents have opted for the part-time form of education because of its “convenience” (“gives a possibility to combine work and studies”, “a student does not waste so much time on face-to-face classes”, “it is the most appropriate way to study while having small children”); 12% of part-time students are concerned about the career growth and merely the remaining 7% aim at acquiring innovative skills and competences.

Notwithstanding the causes of the conscious choice of the part-time form of higher education, 66% of the survey participants appear to be aware that the command of the English language can provide useful, real-world skills alongside the sense of fulfillment so that they could eventually capitalize on this supplementary acquired strength in the today’s market place and in life, generally explaining that, e.g. “it is an obligatory requirement for being hired by international companies”, “the knowledge of English is indispensable in the contemporary society” and “getting a grasp of English will make me confident and effective communicator”. Contrarily, more than one third of the respondents regard *The English Language* course as an inessential subject, i.e. as a formally imposed precondition for obtaining a higher education diploma.

Inherently, the learning outcomes and the wide range of the specific and transversal competences developed in the courses *The English Language I and II* ensure the ability to analyze, synthesize and apply the diverse language phenomena from the elementary up to the intermediate levels, which is directly enhanced through the students’ unceasing cognitive activity manifested through a lot of effort and constant individual work. “Under such a context, stimulating and cultivating students’ self-learning awareness and ability to learn English independently has become one of the important goals of English teaching” <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=129415> accessed on 02.01.2024) with the teacher’s foremost task being to offer part-time students high-quality “instruction” that would allow them to study the foreign language on their own, dynamize students’ independent learning ability and improve their comprehensive language proficiency.

Thus, embracing life experience, determination and a penchant for analysis, the majority of part-time students are characterized by specific educational motivation simultaneously being distinguished by a pragmatic attitude towards educational courses. That is,

effective teaching of English to part-time university students depends both on their motivation and perseverance, as well as on the teacher's ability to collaborate with students in order to understand their particular needs and goals, to correctly demonstrate the algorithm for working with linguistic information, methods of processing it and mastering professionally oriented language competences. An enthusiastic and competent teacher must undoubtedly possess and enhance these skills, as they are a guarantee of eventually providing a complex of workable solutions to the identified challenges, i.e.:

- embracing students' age and educational background discrepancies;
- highlighting the significance of pursuing a sense of personal accomplishment and fulfilment;
- creating and fostering a supportive and encouraging educational environment;
- explaining the potential positive impact of studying the English language on individual well-being and professional productivity;
- the meticulous selection of the course content and structure as well as relevant support resources in accordance with the specified competences and outcomes;
- the employment of befitting flexible teaching strategies, methods and techniques to enhance students' involvement in the education, thus perpetually maintaining the motivational drivers of the learners.

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