

The Terminological Vocabulary in Teaching English for Specific Purposes from the Perspective of Students and Lecturers

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Abstract: *The purpose of this academic article is to find similarities and differences between the teaching and learning of general English vocabulary and the teaching and learning of terminological vocabulary in the context of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) from the perspective of first-year students of economics (and management) taught in English at the University of National and World Economy – Sofia, Bulgaria, and Business English lecturers at the same higher education institution. The paper concentrates on vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary teaching and learning approaches, vocabulary acquisition, the most effective ways of teaching terminological vocabulary, and the acquisition of terminological vocabulary translation equivalents. Taking the survey results into consideration, some conclusions can be reached, which, if implemented in practice, could contribute to the improvement of terminological vocabulary teaching and learning in an ESP environment.*

Keywords: *terminological vocabulary, teaching, learning, acquisition, English for Specific Purposes, Business English, students, lecturers*

Introduction

The role of foreign language teaching becomes more and more essential for students at every level of education because the knowledge of at least two foreign languages is an important life skill for a successful professional development. The subject of this paper are the similarities and differences between the teaching and learning of general English vocabulary and the teaching and learning of terminological vocabulary in the context of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) from the perspective of first-year students of economics (and management) taught in English at the University of National and World Economy – Sofia, Bulgaria, and Business English lecturers at the same higher education institution. The object of the paper is their views on some issues associated with the two types of vocabulary teaching and learning.

The research tasks are the following: outlining the key features of teaching English for Specific Purposes mainly in contrast with those of teaching English for General Purposes; shedding light on the terminological vocabulary in teaching English for Specific Purposes; presenting the teaching of Business English at the University of National and World Economy – Sofia, Bulgaria; providing the essence of the empirical research; conducting a

comparative examination of the selected survey results obtained from students at the beginning and end of their first academic year, as well as from Business English lecturers. For the fulfillment of the set tasks, the following research methods are used: theoretical analysis of the scientific literature on the topic of the paper; surveying the students and the lecturers participating in the empirical research; statistical methods for processing the results from the three surveys.

1. Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Teaching ESP differs from teaching English for General Purposes in that the former is primarily aimed at practical situations and learners' immediate professional or academic needs. Therefore, the language used and taught tends to be more literal and specific rather than metaphorical and abstract. Main emphasis is laid on communicative language skills rather than on language structures. Teaching ESP covers teaching English for Professional Purposes, whose aim is to facilitate the specialist's (expert's) communication in an international context (Garcia Laborda, Litzler).

Munby defines ESP courses as ones in which the syllabus design and the materials design are determined entirely on the basis of a preliminary analysis of learners' communicative needs. According to Dudley-Evans and St John, teaching ESP is created in order to meet learners' needs by using the methodology and activities typical of the respective specialized disciplines and focuses on the language, skills, discourse and genre typical of those activities.

According to Harding, learners' needs and the specifics of the respective specialized disciplines determine the material content in teaching the different variations of ESP (Business English, Legal English, Technical English, Medical English and so on). Schleppegrell and Bowman point out that ESP learners are usually adults who already have some knowledge of (general) English, but continue to learn it in order to communicate effectively in a working environment and perform certain professional functions. Therefore, the ESP syllabus is based on the analysis of learners' aims and needs as well as the functions they require English for.

While in teaching English for General Purposes equal emphasis is laid on the four communicative language skills (i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing), in teaching English for Specific Purposes the needs analysis determines which language skills are of greater necessity for learners, which is taken into consideration during the syllabus design. For instance, when teaching engineers, it is possible for the ESP syllabus to focus more on the development of reading skills, and when teaching tour guides, the focus would rather be on the development of speaking skills (Schleppegrell, Bowman 1).

Teaching ESP integrates specialized content knowledge and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because learners can apply the knowledge from the English classes to the main field of their teaching – economics, business management, accounting, tourism, computer science and so on. Their ability to use the acquired vocabulary and language structures in a real context consolidates their knowledge and boosts their motivation (Schleppegrell, Bowman 1).

The main inference reached by the researchers in the field of ESP teaching (e.g. Robinson; Dudley-Evans, St John) is that the lecturer's sense and knowledge of the language as a system are insufficient – knowledge about the use of language within specific contexts is also needed.

Albena Stefanova pays attention to the fact that difficulties in teaching a foreign language for specific purposes might arise in case of lower level of command of the foreign language for general purposes, as well as in case of lack of professional experience on part of the learner who has not become fully acquainted with the subject matter of the respective field yet. The learners' homogeneity in the study group is also essential for the efficiency of the teaching process – in terms of both their general language preparation and their professional experience (Стефанова 36). Albena Stefanova argues that, according to the vast majority of methodologists, a solid base of knowledge and skills in general language is necessary for acquiring proficiency in specialized language (Стефанова 103).

Chirobocea-Tudor claims that the communicative approach cannot be used universally and cannot be applied entirely to specialized foreign language teaching since it cannot fully meet ESP learners' needs, because in the communicative approach the acquisition of communicative skills prevails over the precise acquisition of (general and terminological) vocabulary, and the latter is of greater importance for ESP learners, who are (would-be) specialists (experts) in different fields (finance, law, technologies, medicine and so on) and who need mainly accuracy of expression. Therefore, although using translation for text understanding and finding translation equivalents in vocabulary learning are considered as outdated teaching methods, they are especially needed in specialized foreign language instruction. This is because they significantly contribute to the precise acquisition of terminology (Chirobocea-Tudor 76–77).

2. The terminological vocabulary in teaching English for Specific Purposes

Terms are (single or compound) words or collocations, including acronyms, abbreviations, symbols, etc., that are unique to a particular field or discipline and denote certain concepts. Therefore, according to Helge Niska, terminology can be defined as “a structured set of concepts and their

designations (graphical symbols, terms, phraseological units, etc.) in a specific subject field”, as well as the study of them (Niska 39).

Maria Popova summarizes that the concept of “specialized vocabulary” is most often defined as opposed to the concept of “general vocabulary”, “i.e. as vocabulary which is used in the specific fields of communication (scientific and professional) and whose semantics does not coincide with general vocabulary” (Попова 23). The formation of an opposition between general and specialized language use corresponds to the idea of dichotomy, which is described by Hristo Stanchev as “structural” for the research on the language phenomenon (Станчев 37). According to Maria Popova, the most general concept is “specialized vocabulary” (represented in a “specialized dictionary”). It totally covers the concepts “terminological vocabulary” (represented in a “terminological dictionary”) and “professional vocabulary” (represented in a “professional dictionary”) (Попова 41).

Nation also defines specialized vocabulary as words “distinctly specific for a certain topic, field or discipline” (Nation, *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* 198). As specialized words, Chung and Nation define those which are encountered at least fifty times more frequently in the specialized text than in the general English corpus, and later on Nation (*Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques*) calculates that the specialized vocabulary of a certain field consists of a thousand to five thousand words. Silvia Vasileva pays attention to the interconnectedness of the definitions in the system of specialized vocabulary, which are often based on one another in a hierarchical order (Василева 138).

Albena Stefanova points out that in the scientific community there is an opinion according to which teaching a foreign language for specific purposes (including introducing specialized vocabulary) is possible to begin at the lowest level – beginners, despite the fact that according to generally accepted standards the learners of a foreign language for specific purposes should be advanced in the foreign language for general purposes (Стефанова 35). The principle of upgrading is usually applied to teaching specialized vocabulary, i.e. the words and collocations with more general meaning are introduced first, and then there is a gradual transition towards the ones with more specialized meaning. It is necessary to strike a balance between introducing general and specialized vocabulary throughout this process (Стефанова 35).

In order to facilitate students’ more successful learning of specialized disciplines taught in English, increasing the efficiency in the respective specialized vocabulary acquisition should be a main aim in teaching ESP (Hou 26). Although ESP instruction is usually closely related to the application of the communicative approach, translation can also be effectively used, especially in teaching and acquiring specialized vocabulary

(Koletnik 5). Teaching specialized vocabulary in both the foreign language and learners' mother tongue is of great importance since they need to know how it is used in both languages. This is particularly important when there are differences between them – for instance, a lot of concepts from the field of accounting are typical of the particular national accounting systems and are not comparable to each other. The same also applies to a number of legal concepts (Gajšt 23).

According to Leonardi, owing to translation tasks, learners can improve their ability to find the right lexical equivalents in the other language. Translation tasks provide an opportunity for learners to acquire vocabulary at two stages – they learn, first, to make a connection between the meaning and the form of the word and then when to use it, in what collocations, with what nuances of meaning and so on.

According to Chirobocea-Tudor (79–85), the benefits of translation tasks with regard to more efficient acquisition of specialized vocabulary can be the following:

a) Consolidating the orthography of new words – in contrast to other types of activities (e.g. multiple choice or matching terms with their respective definitions), translation activities require writing – regardless of whether by hand or by typing, which enhances memorizing. Besides, an environment is created for explaining the differences in the meanings of some words with similar pronunciation in the foreign language and the mother tongue, the differences between their British and American spelling, as well as the writing of some lexical items as one word or as two words, leading to change of their part of speech (mainly *noun – verb*).

b) Acquiring the synonyms and the different meanings of new words in both the foreign language and the mother tongue, especially when there is no exact correspondence between equivalents in the two languages – the frequent use of new words in a suitable context provided in translation tasks contributes to this aim.

c) Avoiding mistakes due to negative transfer (interference) – it is desirable for lecturers to pay attention to the words with similar pronunciation, but with completely different meaning in the two languages in order for learners to acquire them correctly and avoid common translation mistakes (e.g. in word order, the use of the definite article and so on) due to mother tongue interference.

d) Acquiring the precise terminology and translation equivalents – translation tasks facilitate the introduction, revision and consolidation of new words. For this purpose, it is not necessary to always use whole texts and it is possible to use only selected sentences, phrases or words which are most likely to lead to mistakes.

e) Acquiring the simplified (concise) phraseology typical of English and allowing for expressing ideas with fewer words – in most cases, this kind of phraseology is hard to explain and acquire by learners, especially when it is not typical of their mother tongue. Translation tasks, however, can provide opportunities for simplifying expression (making it concise), so that it sounds more natural in English (for Specific Purposes).

3. Teaching Business English at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) – Sofia, Bulgaria

Before starting their studies in economic disciplines at UNWE – Sofia, Bulgaria, newly-admitted students in the subfield of “Economics (and Management) taught in English” usually possess limited or no proficiency in Business English and English for Academic Purposes, despite passing an entrance exam in (general) English at B2 level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

At UNWE the students of the mentioned subfield sit a practical final (state) exam in (Business) English at C1 level after completing their second year of studies, i.e. for the two years in which they study the compulsory discipline “English as a first foreign language” (a sum total of 240 academic hours), it is expected of them to gradually become acquainted with the highly-specialized economic subject matter and to acquire the respective terminological vocabulary.

4. Context of the empirical research

During the academic year 2020/2021 at UNWE – Sofia, Bulgaria, the following three surveys were carried out: a survey among students at the beginning of their first academic year; a survey among lecturers (of Business English); a survey among the same students at the end of their first academic year.

The aim of the **survey carried out at the beginning of the first academic year** was to determine the students’ initial ideas, attitudes and expectations regarding the forthcoming instruction in Business English. After going through it, a **survey at the end of the first academic year** was carried out, whose aim was to determine to what extent it had met their initial ideas, attitudes and expectations and what recommendations could be offered for its improvement. In order to present another viewpoint, a **survey among lecturers (of Business English)** was carried out, which was similar to the ones among the students, so that a comparison with their opinion was possible.

The three surveys were sources of subjective (qualitative) data and aimed to present the respondents’ perceptions and attitudes. The survey

questions were mainly of multiple-choice type and at the end there were also some open-ended questions.

A sum total of 94 students (44 women and 50 men) took part in the surveys, most of whom were 19–20 years old and who in the academic 2020/2021 year were first-year students of “Economics (and management) taught in English” at UNWE – Sofia, Bulgaria.

The first survey (**the survey at the beginning of the first academic year**) was carried out in writing (on paper) and 103 students took part in it. Nine of them did not participate in the second survey (**the survey at the end of the first academic year**). Since the written (paper) surveys were anonymous, their responses could not be identified and remained in the initial sample. Because of the working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the second survey was filled out online (through *Microsoft Forms*) by 96 students. The system allowed for partial identification. For that reason, it became clear that 2 respondents had not filled out the first survey and they were excluded from the second sample. **The survey among lecturers (of Business English)** from the Department of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics at UNWE was carried out online (through *Microsoft Forms*) at the end of the academic year and 9 respondents took part in it.

5. Comparative examination of some of the results of the two surveys among the students and the survey among the lecturers (of Business English)

In this part of the exposition, a comparison is made between the students’ opinion and the lecturers’ opinion on several pairs of similar questions. The students’ opinion is also examined through time by two surveys – at the beginning of the first academic year and at the end of it. A comparison is made between the ideas of **general vocabulary** and the ideas of **terminological vocabulary** and some recommendations are made for teaching and acquiring the latter. It is important to clarify once again that the two surveys among the students are carried out among one and the same respondents.

Task 1. Checking whether from the perspective of the students the strategies for acquiring general vocabulary correspond to the strategies for acquiring business vocabulary and what should the latter be from the perspective of the lecturers

For that purpose, at the beginning of their first academic year, the students are asked what strategies for acquiring **general vocabulary** they have used so far. At the end of their first academic year, they are required to point out what strategies for acquiring vocabulary they have used during their **Business English** classes. The lecturers are asked to answer the question what

strategies for acquiring vocabulary they would recommend to the students of economics during their **Business English** classes. The options are the following: *multiple writing of the unfamiliar words in order to acquire their spelling; multiple oral repetition of the unfamiliar words in order to acquire their pronunciation; filling the unfamiliar words in a dictionary notebook and multiple browsing through time in order to revise and consolidate knowledge; memorizing sample sentences containing the unfamiliar words in context; other (Explain in free text).*

Marking more than one answer is allowed. The comparison is presented in figure 1.

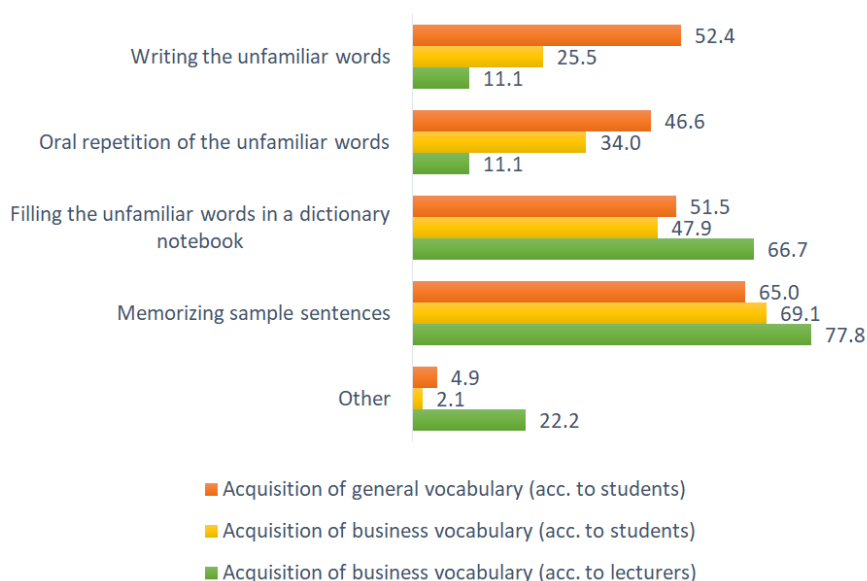


Figure 1. Comparison between the strategies for acquiring general vocabulary and business vocabulary (in %)

Source of the figure: the author of the paper

While acquiring **general vocabulary**, students use approximately 50% of all mentioned strategies – mainly memorizing sample sentences containing the unfamiliar words in context (65%), and least often multiple oral repetition of the unfamiliar words in order to acquire their pronunciation (46.6%). When it comes to acquiring **business vocabulary**, data are different. The least used strategy is multiple writing of unfamiliar words in order to acquire their spelling (25.5%), and the most used strategy, as with general vocabulary, is memorizing sample sentences containing the unfamiliar words in context (69.1%). The lecturers would also recommend mainly that strategy (77.8%), followed by filling the unfamiliar words in a dictionary notebook and multiple browsing through time in order to revise

and consolidate knowledge (66.7%). The other two strategies are considerably less recommended (11.1% each). Two additional answers are pointed out in free text – more intensive reading and finding your own way of acquisition, but immediately attempting to use the unfamiliar words in different forms of communication.

There are no statistically significant differences between the strategies used by the students for acquiring **business vocabulary** and the strategies recommended by the lecturers. Those conclusions could be drawn with a certainty probability of 95%.

Task 2. Checking whether different approaches are necessary for the teaching and acquisition of specialized/terminological vocabulary compared to the approaches used for the teaching and acquisition of general vocabulary

For that purpose, both at the beginning of the first academic year and at the end of it, the students are asked whether they consider that different approaches are necessary for the teaching and acquisition of specialized/terminological vocabulary compared to the approaches used for the teaching and acquisition of general vocabulary. The lecturers are also asked the same question. The options are “Yes” and “No”.

The comparison is presented in figure 2.

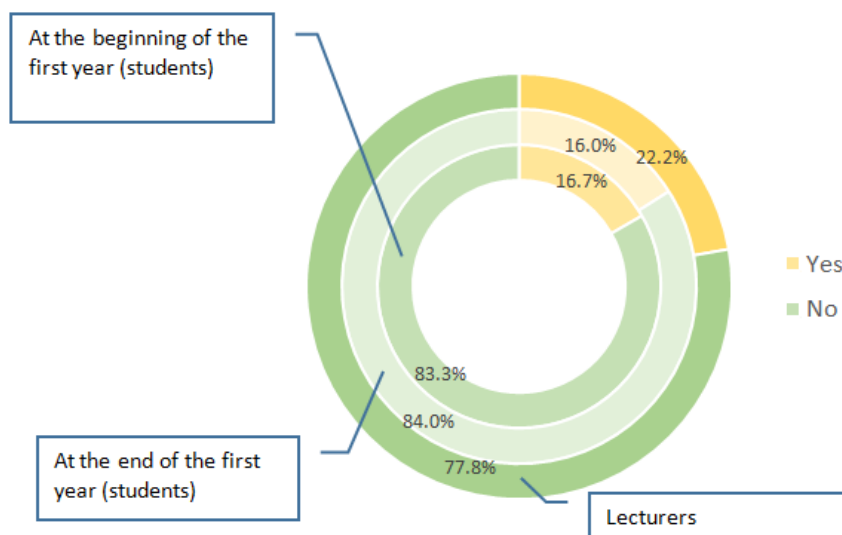


Figure 2. Are different approaches necessary for the teaching and acquisition of specialized/terminological vocabulary compared to the approaches used for the teaching and acquisition of general vocabulary?

Source of the figure: the author of the paper

At the end of the **Business English** classes in the first academic year, the students' opinion on this question has almost not changed compared to their initial one. In both cases, over 80% of them think that different approaches are not necessary for the teaching and acquisition of specialized/terminological vocabulary compared to the approaches used for the teaching and acquisition of general vocabulary. The majority (a bit below 80%) of the lecturers share the same opinion.

Task 3. Checking whether specialized/terminological vocabulary is harder to acquire than general vocabulary

For that purpose, both at the beginning of the first academic year and at the end of it, students are asked whether they consider that they will acquire / have acquired specialized/terminological vocabulary harder than general vocabulary. The lecturers are asked a similar question – whether they consider that specialized/terminological vocabulary is harder to teach and acquire than general vocabulary. The options are arranged on a semi-Likert scale and are the following: *no*; *rather no*; *I do not know*; *more like yes*; *yes*.

The results are presented in figure 3.

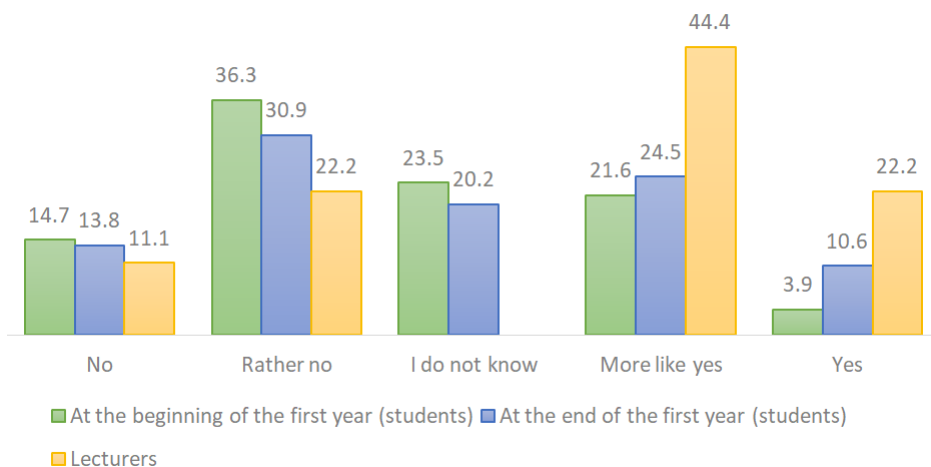


Figure 3. Do you think that specialized/terminological vocabulary is harder to (teach and) acquire than general vocabulary? (in %)

Source of the figure: the author of the paper

At the beginning of **Business English** classes in the first academic year, a sum total of 51% of the students think that specialized/terminological vocabulary is not harder to acquire than general vocabulary. At the end of the academic year, this percentage falls to 45%, and among lecturers it is 33%. At the beginning of the first academic year, as well as at the end of it, the most common response from students is “Rather no” (36.3% and 30.9%

respectively). The majority of the lecturers however have a different opinion – the prevailing answer among them being “More like yes” (44.4%).

Task 4. Checking which are the most effective ways of teaching specialized/terminological vocabulary

For that purpose, the students at the beginning of the first academic year and the lecturers are asked how / in what way they consider it would be best to teach **specialized/terminological vocabulary** in order to achieve maximum efficiency in its acquisition. The options are the following: *writing the unfamiliar words on the board as lists; explaining the meaning of the unfamiliar words in English; paying attention to the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the unfamiliar words; giving examples (sentences) containing unfamiliar words in context; planning enough exercises for the active use of the newly-introduced words in context (written or oral); other (Explain in free text.).*

Marking more than one answer is allowed. The comparison is presented in figure 4.

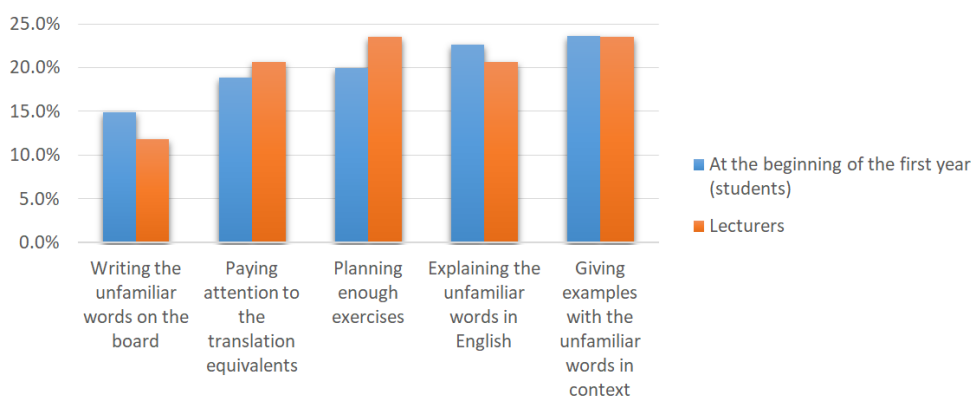


Figure 4. Comparison between the students’ opinion and the lecturers’ opinion on the most effective ways of teaching **specialized/terminological vocabulary**

Source of the figure: the author of the paper

At the beginning of their first academic year, the students think that the most effective way of teaching **specialized/terminological vocabulary** is giving examples (sentences) containing unfamiliar words in context (23.7%), followed by explaining the meaning of the unfamiliar words in English (22.6%). The least effective way is writing the unfamiliar words on the board as lists (14.9%). There is no additional free-text answer.

The lecturers’ opinion is similar. From their perspective, two of the ways of teaching **specialized/terminological vocabulary** are most effective

– giving examples (sentences) containing unfamiliar words in context (23.5%) and planning enough exercises for the active use of the newly-introduced words in context (written or oral) (23.5%). The least effective way is writing the unfamiliar words on the board as lists (11.8%). There is also one additional free-text answer, which states that it is necessary for the unfamiliar words to be introduced not only through writing the respective equivalents in Bulgarian, but also through giving synonyms and antonyms, and that explanations in English are relevant in a limited number of cases.

Task 5. Checking whether it is necessary to acquire the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the respective terms in English

For that purpose, at the beginning and at the end of the **Business English** classes in the first academic year, the students are asked whether they consider it is necessary for them to also acquire the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the respective terms in English. The options are arranged on a semi-Likert scale and are the following: *no*; *rather no*; *I do not know*; *more like yes*; *yes*.

The results are presented in figure 5.

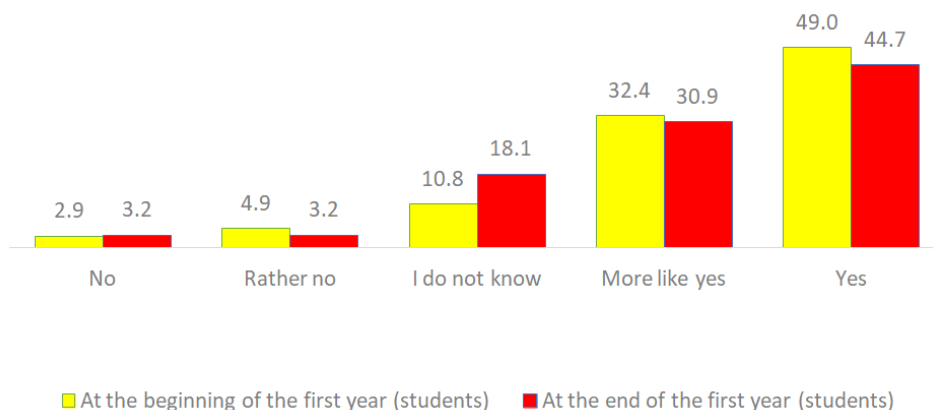


Figure 5. Do you think that it is necessary for you to acquire the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the respective terms in English? (in %)

Source of the figure: the author of the paper

Both at the beginning of their first academic year and at the end of it, the students’ prevailing opinion is that it is necessary for them to acquire the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the respective terms in English. 44% – 49% of the surveyed are fully convinced of that, and 30% – 33% are more like convinced. Those who completely disagree are about 3%, and those who rather disagree are 3% – 5%.

Conclusion

Based on the survey results, the following conclusions can be drawn about the comparison of the teaching and learning of general English vocabulary to the teaching and learning of terminological vocabulary in English for Specific Purposes (ESP):

1. Both for the acquisition of general vocabulary and for the acquisition of business vocabulary, the students use mainly the strategy of memorizing sample sentences containing the unfamiliar words in context. The lecturers would also recommend mainly that strategy.

2. Both at the beginning and at the end of **Business English** classes in the first academic year, the majority of the students think that different approaches are not necessary for the teaching and acquisition of specialized/terminological vocabulary compared to the approaches used for the teaching and acquisition of general vocabulary. The majority of the lecturers share the same opinion. The most commonly recommended approach is presenting the unfamiliar words in context.

3. Both at the beginning and at the end of their first academic year, about half of the surveyed students think that specialized/terminological vocabulary is not harder to acquire than general vocabulary. The opinion of the majority of the lecturers however is the opposite. This could be explained by the fact that the students do not have sufficient experience in acquiring specialized vocabulary and base their understanding about that mainly on their experience in acquiring general vocabulary, whereas the lecturers have rich experience in both acquiring and teaching terminological vocabulary. Therefore, their opinion on this issue differs from the students'.

4. At the beginning of their first academic year, the students think that the most effective ways of teaching **specialized/terminological vocabulary** are giving examples (sentences) containing unfamiliar words in context, and explaining their meaning in English. The lecturers' opinion is similar. From their perspective, the most effective ways of teaching **specialized/terminological vocabulary** are giving examples (sentences) containing unfamiliar words in context, and planning enough exercises for their active use in context (written or oral). There is also one additional free-text answer, which states that it is necessary for the unfamiliar words to be introduced not only through writing the respective equivalents in Bulgarian, but also through

giving synonyms and antonyms, and that explanations in English are relevant in a limited number of cases.

5. Both at the beginning of their first academic year and at the end of it, the students' prevailing opinion is that it is necessary for them to acquire the translation equivalents in Bulgarian of the respective terms in English.

Taking the drawn conclusions into consideration could contribute to increasing the quality of terminological vocabulary teaching and learning in an ESP context.

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