

# ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN THE IN-SERVICE TRAINING COURSE “BORDER CHECKS AT A ROAD BORDER CROSSING POINT”

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**Abstract** *English language proficiency is one of the competences Latvian border guards should have in order to communicate successfully with persons who wish to travel and reside in the Schengen area. The present article is a survey of the in-service training course on basic English professional terminology “Border checks at road border crossing points” which has been developed and implemented in the State Border Guard College of the Republic of Latvia. The survey was carried out in the period from September 2015 until April 2018 and focused on the analysis of the course development process and results of its implementation. Based on the results of the questioning, the participants of the course and their own observations the authors put forward suggestions for possible improvements of the quality of the course and border guards English language training.*

**Key words:** *English for occupational purposes, professional terminology, course development, border guards training, quality.*

## Introduction

Border guards’ ability to communicate effectively with foreigners, to ask questions, provide thorough answers and necessary instructions is one of the crucial preconditions for successful border checks both at the external and internal border of the European Union (EU). It is the knowledge of foreign languages that makes border guards – travellers’ interaction and the border check procedure more productive and less stressful for both of the parties.

The importance of foreign language knowledge for the EU border guards is emphasised in several normative acts. Article 16 of the EU Regulation 2016/399 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on a Union Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code) includes the prerequisite that “Member States, with the support of the Agency, shall encourage border guards to learn the languages necessary for the carrying-out of their tasks”. Article 8 of the Schengen Borders Code specifies that “...third-country nationals subject to a thorough second line check shall be given written information in a language which they understand or may reasonably be presumed to understand, or in another effective way, on the purpose of, and the procedure for, such a check. This information shall be

available in all the official languages of the Union and in the language(s) of the country or countries bordering the Member State concerned and ...”.

According to Article 36 of the EU Regulation 2016/1624 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2016 on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) “shall establish and further develop common core curricula for the training of border guards and provide training at European level for instructors of the national border guards of Member States, including with regard to fundamental rights, access to international protection and relevant maritime law.” The “Common Core Curriculum for Border and Coast Guard Basic Training in the EU” (CCC) offers minimum standards for basic level border guards and coast guards training which should be implemented by national border guards and coasts guards training institutions and defines that “apart from performing their tasks and duties in their national language, border and coast guards must also prove their proficiency in English, the EU official language, in order to be able to serve all the persons involved in regular or irregular border crossing and also to cooperate with their foreign counterparts in joint operations” (Frontex Agency, 2017, p.48).

The present article is a survey of the Basic English professional terminology course “Border checks at road border crossing points” which was developed and implemented in the State Border Guard College of the Republic of Latvia (SBGC). The survey which was carried out in the period from September 2015 until April 2018 included the following stages: course programme development (September-October 2015), development of training materials (October 2015-September 2016), implementation of the course (September-October 2016, February-March 2017, September-October 2017, January-March 2018), analysis of the results of implementation (March-April 2018). The authors analyse the course development process, evaluate the quality of the implemented training and its relevance to the target group needs and put forward suggestions for enhancing the quality of both the course under research and English language training for border guards provided by the SBGC.

### **Overview of the course development**

Being aware of the importance of improvement of English language knowledge for border guards serving on the EU external border (the results of the testing carried out in the State Border Guard 2013 showed that border guards’ level of English was not very high – 55% of border guards had a very limited knowledge of professional terminology), the English language teachers of the SBGC have developed an in-service training course

in basic English professional terminology “Border checks at road border crossing points”.

The course was designed based on the principles of English for Occupational Purposes which is considered to be a category of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) defined by Hutchinson and Waters as “an approach to language teaching in which all decision as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 2001, p.19). According to Dudley-Evans and St John, ESP has three characteristics: (a) ESP meets the specific needs of learners; (b) ESP uses the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; and (c) ESP focuses on the appropriate language for these activities for grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre (Dudley-Evans, 1998. p.4). Dudley-Evans and St John hold a view that English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is one of the categories of ESP and it is aimed at students whose primary purpose for learning English is to improve job-related language skills. They believe that EOP particularly concerns with adult language acquisition as well with aspects of general training for adult learners. The purpose of EOP training is to enhance workplace performance, with special attention to how adults learn a language to communicate better in job-related contexts (Kim, 2008).

Woodrow distinguishes between the following types of EOP courses: general and the ones designed for a group with very specific needs and pre-experience EOP courses which are usually parts of an undergraduate or graduate professional degree and the courses for learners with work experience (Woodrow, 2018). According to Woodrow, EOP is likely to offer only those structures and vocabulary relevant to the communicative needs of the occupation. Typically an EOP course is based on a discourse analysis of the language that is used to complete the work tasks.

The language-centred course design approach was used in the process of designing the course being analysed. Hutchinson and Waters describe the language-centred course design as one of the most familiar to English teachers and consider it to be prevalent in ESP. Its aim is “to draw as direct a connection as possible between the analysis of the target situation and the content of the ESP course” (Hutchinson, Waters, 2001, p.65). According to Hutchinson and Waters, the language-centred course design includes several stages: identifying learners’ target situation, selecting theoretical views of language, identifying linguistic features of target situation, creating syllabus, designing materials to exemplify syllabus items and establishing evaluation procedures to test acquisition of syllabus items.

The following parameters suggested by Dudley-Evans and St John are investigated in making decision regarding the structure and content of the course:

- intensity of course (should the course be intensive or extensive?);
- assessment of learners (should the learners' performance be assessed or non-assessed?);
- learners' immediate or delayed needs (should the course deal with immediate or with delayed needs? Dudley-Evans and St John refer immediate needs to those needs that students have at the time of the course, while the delayed needs in their perspective are the needs which become more significant later);
- teacher's role (Should the role of the teacher be that of the provider of knowledge and activities, or should it be as a facilitator of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?)
- broad or narrow focus;
- pre-experience on in parallel with experience (by pre-experience it is meant that learners do not have experience of the target situation at the time of the ESP course, by parallel with experience it is meant that the English course runs concurrently with the study course or professional activity);
- common-core or specific material (by common-core material the material that uses carrier content which is either of a general academic nature or of a general professional nature is meant, specific material is the material that is drawn directly from the learners' academic or professional area);
- homogeneous or heterogeneous groups and motivation (whether the group is made up of representatives of one discipline or profession or representatives of different professions or specialities) (Dudley-Evans, 1998, p.145).

Dudley-Evans and St John suggested the above mentioned course parameters in late 1990-s characterised by classroom training and learning dominance in foreign language training. Rapid development of information and communication technologies and expansion of the Internet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have introduced a new form of learning and training, known as e-learning – “learning that is supported by information and communication technologies (ICT)” (Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2001). Since e-learning became essential in modern education, the authors add one more parameter to the Dudley-Evans and St John list – *type of course instruction* (traditional classroom training/learning, e-learning or blended learning. By blended learning the authors understand the learning which combines face-to-face instruction with computermediated instruction).

As a result, the course was specified as *an intensive 6 weeks blended learning course*, comprising 2 weeks of classroom instruction in the beginning and the end of the course, and 4 weeks of independent e-learning in parallel with work between the two sessions of classroom instruction.

The target group – *State Border Guard (SBG) inspectors serving at road border crossing points (BCP), who have preliminary knowledge of general English (A1-A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment) and have not acquired professional terminology in English within the training subject “Professional foreign language (English)” of the further professional training programme “Border Guarding” or the ones who have served 5 years in the structural units of the SBG after graduating the above mentioned training programme.*

The aim of the course – *to improve the SBG officials’ knowledge of professional terminology in English and develop communicative skills which are required to carry out border checks on persons, documents and vehicles successfully.*

The content of the course was defined based on the needs analysis done (the developers of the course identified the needs of potential end-users by means of interviews carried out during their visits to road BCPs) and requirements regarding the foreign language training included in the CCC.

The main topic areas included in the course were: *Giving information about service place and duties* (border guards general tasks, service duties, BCP infrastructure, technical and special means at a road BCP); *Border check on persons and travel documents* (kinds of travels documents and information in them, first line check interview, asking questions in English with the aim to find out the purpose, length and other issues related to visit to the country); *Border checks on vehicles* (kinds of vehicles, parts of a motor car, vehicles documents and information in them, questions and instructions for carrying border checks on vehicles); *Problem situations at a road BCP* (giving explanations in case of refusing entry, imposing a sanction, detaining a person, detecting of prohibited items, annulling and cancelling a visa).

Specific training resources – printable worksheets, audio recordings, and electronic tests in the SBGC E-learning system (based on Moodle platform) were developed and used for the course.

The assessment strategy developed for the course comprises an *initial assessment* in the beginning of the course (a test on the knowledge of basic border guards terms in English) and *final assessment* in the end of the course (a test on the knowledge of basic border guards terms in English, check of speaking skills – a monologue (giving information about service

duties and place) and a dialogue (role play to solve a problem situation related to border checks at a road BCP).

Five courses were implemented based on the developed programme with 33 border guards trained from September 2016 to March 2018.

### **Analysis of the research findings**

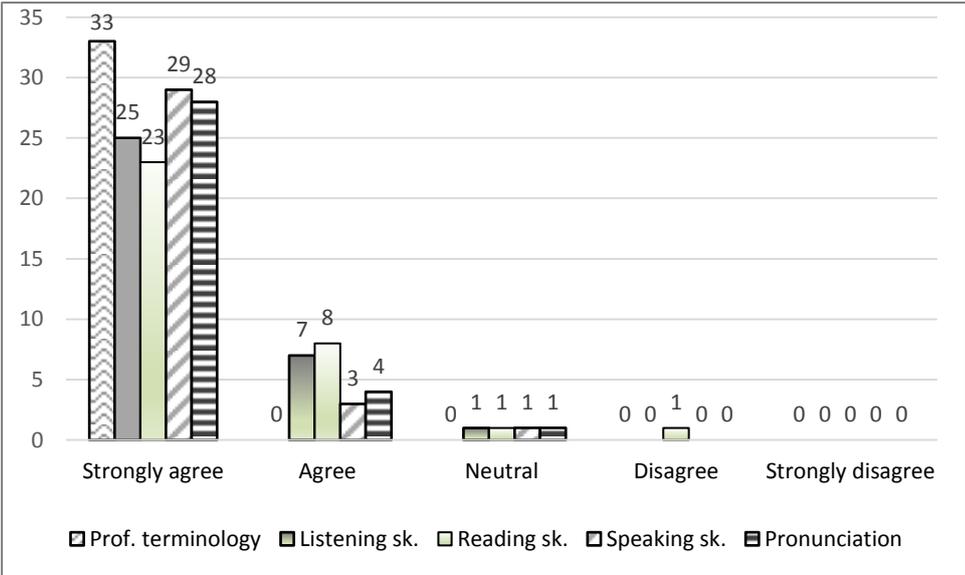
In order to find out the course participants' attitudes, doubts, and challenges faced during various stages of course implementation, as well as clearly identify the strengths and weaknesses of the course in regard to the training materials provided, the range of skills developed, as well as adequacy of the selection procedure to the course the authors carried out the survey among the course participants between the age of 20 and 50, having 2-18 years of work experience in the SBG.

The questionnaire comprised 21 statements which were used to measure respondents' indicated attitudes to a particular issue related to the implementation of the course. Possible responses were coded in accordance with a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The involved respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire with the possibility to give the comments where it was required, the questionnaire was anonymous thus encouraging respondents to answer truthfully.

The first block of questions in the questionnaire measured if the content of the programme and the course implementation mode (classroom instruction combined with independent e-learning phase) met the participants' needs and was applicable for qualification improvement. The overwhelming majority of respondents 97% strongly agreed and 3% agreed that the content of the programme meets the needs of SBG inspectors who do their duties at road BCP. 67% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement "*Such kind of course (classroom learning combined with independent e-learning phase) is suitable for improvement of foreign language knowledge*" 30% agreed and 3% partly agreed. The responses of the participants allow to make a conclusion that that majority of them felt comfortable during the training and blended learning course was suitable for them, however in comments 5 respondents admitted that classroom learning without independent e-learning would be more effective. The responses to the statement "*I would recommend my colleague to take part in this course*" (overwhelming majority of respondents 97% chose the option "strongly agree" and 3% "agree") prove that in spite of several disadvantages and flaws in the course implementation the course was meaningful and target audience oriented.

The respondents' responses to the statement focusing on the volume of the course, showed that 64 % of them strongly agree with the statement that *"The amount of hours (76 hours of classroom learning and 4 weeks of self-studies) is enough to acquire the training material,"* 27%- agreed, 6%- showed the neutral (3 in 5 point scale) attitude and 3% disagreed. 7 respondents suggested to increase the number of classes, 2 suggested to enlarge the amount and duration of e-learning (self-studies), 4 – put forward the suggestion to reduce the number of hours and make it more intensive.

The questionnaire included also a number of statements allowing the respondents to give their opinions regarding the training material package (quality, amount and correspondence of materials difficulty level to their level of knowledge). As a result it was found out that more than a half – 55% of respondents believed that the difficulty level of the training material corresponded to their English language knowledge and put 5 in 5 point scale, 30% put 4, 9% put 3, and 6% put 1. At the same time, all respondents demonstrated a positive attitude to the statement *"The amount of the training material is optimal"* (82% chose the option "strongly agree" and 8% - "agree"). The quality of the training material was also positively evaluated (94% of the respondents pointed out that they strongly agree with the statement *"The quality of the training material is good"* and 6 % chose the option "agree"). All the participants showed the conformity of opinions regarding the statement *"Training exercises facilitated the acquisition of professional terminology"* and 100% chose the option "strongly agree".



**Figure 1. "Skills and knowledge improved during the course"**

The respondents' opinions illustrated in Figure 1 demonstrate that the course provided them the possibility to improve their knowledge of professional terminology in English, as well as three language skills – speaking, listening and reading and also enhance pronunciation correctness. In their comments respondents shared the opinion that reading skills are not so important for them because during their daily activities they have to focus more on communication rather than on reading or writing.

The respondents' opinions in relation to the improvement of grammar knowledge during the course divided. 33% of them strongly agreed, 49 % agreed, 12% had a neutral attitude, 3% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed with the statement that “It is necessary to pay attention to the improvement of grammar knowledge during the course”. Some respondents stressed that it would be beneficiary to develop a course in English grammar and a refreshing course in general English language thus allowing to revise English language basis and only then focus on professional terminology.

The next block of statements in the questionnaire was aimed at finding out the course participants' attitude towards the training materials uploaded in the SBGC E-learning system (amount and quality) and comprised four statements: “*The materials added to the SBGC E-learning system help to improve the knowledge of professional terminology*” (67% strongly agreed with it and 30%-agreed, and only 3% opted for –neutral indicator which is 3 in 5 point scale), “*The number of exercises in the SBGC E-learning system is sufficient*” (respondents' answers allow to assume that they were satisfied with the amount of uploaded materials -75% strongly agreed with the statement, 22% agreed and only 3% agreed partly), “*It is necessary to develop more tasks with audio and video materials in the SBGC E-learning system in order to have more possibilities to develop listening skills*” (respondents demonstrated various opinions on this issue- 37% strongly agreed with the statement, 24%-agreed, 27% had a neutral attitude, 6% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed which allows to conclude that trainers have to consider the possibility of supplementing the package of audio and video materials), and “*It is necessary to develop more reading tasks in the SBGC E-learning system in order to have more possibilities to develop reading skills*” (strongly agree-27%, agree-28%, neutral attitude-28%, and disagree-12%, strongly disagree with the statement-6%, in the comments respondents also suggested to recheck the uploaded exercises and tests and allow participants to use synonyms).

Independent e-learning phase is an integral part of the course, therefore several statements were included in the questionnaire with the aim to find out if the participants had the possibility to learn during their

working hours (in the end of 2017 SBG administration agreed to foresee a possibility to border guards to spend up to 8 working hours in a week for completing independent e-learning phase which is a part of in-service training courses). According to the results of the questioning 31% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 9% disagreed with the statement “*I had the opportunity to do the tasks for self-studies during my work hours*”, at the same time 24 % of respondents strongly agreed and 18% agreed which allows to make a conclusion that the above mentioned decision of the SBG is not fulfilled in all structural units of the SBG. Being aware of the situation the authors assume that the main reasons for that could be a lack of appropriate working places with computers which have access to the SBGC E-learning system and a lack of time during the shifts. The responses to the statement “*I used my free time for e-learning willingly*” showed that only half of participants were ready to use their free time for self-studies (15 % strongly agreed, 27% agreed to the statement and 37% partly agreed or showed neutral attitude and 17% disagreed with it).

One of the factors which influence the effectiveness of any training course is participants’ motivation to take part in it which, in the authors’ view, to a certain extent depends on that if a person applies for a course themselves or they are nominated by their chiefs. In the result of the questionnaire the authors found out that although almost half of the course participants didn’t apply for the course themselves, that was their chiefs decision to nominate them to the training (33% strongly disagreed and 3 % disagreed, 49% strongly agreed, 3% agreed while 12 % showed the neutral attitude to the statement “*I applied for the course myself*”), their motivation to learn was high (nearly 97% chose the option “strong agree”, 2% - “agree” and 1% - “neutral” to the statement “*I involved in the acquisition of the programme of the course willingly*”).

It was also important for the authors to find out if the course requirements regarding the preliminary English language knowledge level and previous experience were taken into consideration when selecting candidates for the course. The analysis of the data related to the participants’ work experience after graduating the further professional training programme “Border Guarding” in the SBGC showed that 36% of the participants did not meet the requirement defining that there should be a minimum 5 years gap between the acquisition of the above mentioned programme and the course (12 of 33 persons graduated the programme less than 5 years ago), and 18% (6 persons) did not have any English language knowledge at all. As a result a part of participants encountered difficulties in acquisition of the training material while the others considered it to be too easy which had a negative impact on their motivation to learn. The trainers in their turn had to work with

heterogeneous groups which was challenging enough and made them select or invent activities suitable for participants with different levels of knowledge.

### **Conclusions and suggestions**

1. The content of the basic English professional terminology course “Border checks at road border crossing points” meets the needs of the target group and provides a possibility to improve the knowledge of basic professional terminology in English and a blending learning course model is applicable for teaching professional terminology in in-service training courses.
2. The quality of the developed training resources is sufficient, but electronic tests in the SBGC E-learning system should be improved.
3. There is a need along with professional terminology knowledge to improve the knowledge of basic English grammar, but due to a limited duration of the course and participants’ possibilities to learn in parallel with their work it is not possible to focus on grammar during the entire course.
4. There are certain problems in selection of candidates for the course. Quite a big number of participants do not meet the requirements regarding the preliminary level of English knowledge and work experience after completing the further professional education programme “Border Guarding”.
5. Due to a limited period of study, it was not possible to gather complete data to carry out a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the course (e.g. to assess the degree of satisfaction at different times after the end of the course both of the participants and their employers, etc.).
6. The SBG officials responsible for selecting participants for the course should ensure that all candidates meet the requirements regarding previous experience and knowledge of professional terminology in English as described in the course programme.
7. It is necessary to improve the quality of the training resources added to the SBGC E-learning system (to foresee the possibility of using synonyms in tests, to make decision on common format of arranging words in jumbled sentences tests, to ensure correct spelling of words in tests).
8. The trainers of the course should improve their knowledge and skills regarding the creation of tests in Moodle platform, the SBGC administration should consider a possibility to organise training for trainers on the development of e-learning courses and training resources.

9. The overall assessment strategy of the course should be reconsidered with the aim to develop assessment criteria to evaluate participants' performance during the independent learning phase of the course.
10. It is necessary to consider the possibility to develop a special programme on basic English grammar.
11. Since there is a certain number of border guards who do not have any knowledge of English, it is necessary to consider the possibility to develop a programme for intensive training course in general English.
12. The trainers of the course should continue the evaluation of the effectiveness of the course and extend the range of measures (e.g. satisfaction at different times after the end of the course both of the participants and their employers, comparison of the results of the course under the study with those obtained in similar courses, etc.).

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