Second Language for Professional Purposes in the Training of International Social Work Students

Budayová Z.
Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology, Theological institute
Catholic University in Ružomberok
Spišská Kapitula 12, 053 04 Spišské Podhradie
e-mail: zuzana.budayova@ku.sk

Morhunova N.
PhDr., PhD in Psychology, Head of the Department of Language Training
Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University
Yaroslav Mudry st, 25, 61002 Kharkiv, Ukraine
e-mail: morgan.ns777@gmail.com

Opryshko N.
PhD in Philology, Assistant Professor
Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University
Yaroslava Mudroho st, 25 Kharkiv, Ukraine
e-mail: nataopryshko21.11@gmail.com

Semenenko I.
PhDr., PhD in Pedagogy
Department of Language Training
Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University
Yaroslav Mudry st, 25, 61002 Kharkiv, Ukraine
e-mail: inga.semenenko@ukr.net

Introduction. The language readiness of a foreign student of social work is not only manifested by the ability to understand a lecture or create a grammatically correct text. The future social worker needs to conduct a sensitive conversation, identify needs, explain rights and procedures, formulate a professional record, cooperate with other professions and respond appropriately in a crisis situation. Each of these activities has its own communicative purpose, vocabulary, genre rules and ethical implications. General knowledge of a second language is therefore a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for successful studies and safe professional practice.

The aim of the contribution is to define the peculiarities of the second language for professional purposes in the preparation of foreign students of social work and to

propose the content, methodical and evaluation principles of its teaching. The contribution has the character of a theoretical overview study based on the synthesis of knowledge from the didactics of languages for specific purposes, research on the communication needs of social work students, studies on the experiences of foreign students and professional standards. The starting point is the belief that professional language training should connect academic learning, professional communication, ethics and reflected practical experience.

Second language for professional purposes

Language for professional purposes does not represent a separate language system, but a special way of using language in a specific academic or professional environment. Its content is derived from the needs of a certain group of learners and from the situations in which they will communicate. The classic concept of Hutchinson and Waters emphasizes the learner, his goals, basic skills and learning conditions [4]. Basturkmenová complements this approach by systematically linking needs analysis, description of the target discourse, course creation, materials and evaluation [1]. Therefore, a professional language course cannot be created just by choosing terminology from a social work textbook. It must be based on real communication events of the profession.

In the preparation of foreign students, the language for academic purposes is mixed with the language for professional purposes. In the academic field, the student reads professional texts, listens to explanations, discusses theories, writes seminar papers and interprets research findings [11]. In the professional field, he conducts an interview with the client, communicates with the family, prepares a social anamnesis, a record of the intervention, a report for the institution or a recommendation for further service. The border between the two areas is permeable. Academic language conveys professional knowledge, and professional language enables this knowledge to be applied in relational and institutional practice.

The Common European Reference Framework for Languages understands the language user as a social actor and emphasizes mediation in addition to reception,

production and interaction [2]. Mediation is essential for social work. The social worker often mediates the meaning between the client and the institution, explains professional or legal information in understandable language, summarizes the positions of several parties and helps to achieve understanding in a conflict situation. Vocational language teaching should therefore develop the ability to change register, paraphrase, check understanding and preserve essential meaning without distortion.

Communication requirements of social work

Communication in social work is simultaneously a tool for learning, building a working relationship and carrying out an intervention. It includes active listening, empathetic responding, asking open and closed questions, summarizing, clarifying, sensitively naming the risk and agreeing on the next course of action. Professional competence is not manifested by the number of terms used, but by the ability to choose the language appropriate to the person, the purpose and the situation. Simple and non-stigmatizing language may be necessary when talking to a client, precise professional argumentation during a team meeting, and concise, substantive and verifiable wording in the documentation [9].

Pragmatic and sociopragmatic competence requires special attention. The student must understand not only the literal meaning of the statement, but also what is considered appropriate, polite, supportive or professional in a specific work environment. The research of fifteen practice mentors showed that the main problem for foreign students was not the general language level or the control of individual language means. A greater challenge was understanding the sociocultural norms of work communication [3]. Therefore, increasing the entry language limit does not in itself replace targeted preparation for professional situations.

Communication decisions have an ethical dimension. Language can promote dignity and client participation, but it can also reinforce inequality, stereotyping, or a sense of powerlessness. The student needs to learn to explain informed consent, protect confidentiality, talk about sensitive topics without moralizing, and distinguish between observation, interpretation, and evaluative judgment. Global standards of

education in social work require linking professional knowledge, values and skills with context, human rights, diversity and practical training [5]. Language teaching is supposed to support these requirements, not be apart of them

Analysis of International Students' Needs

A specialized language course should be grounded in a needs analysis that distinguishes between target communication situations, students' current proficiency levels, and their learning needs. It is insufficient merely to identify which grammatical structures students have not yet mastered [12]. It is necessary to determine the tasks involved in their communication, their interlocutors, the media used, the objectives of the interaction, and the potential consequences of imprecise or inappropriate phrasing. Data can be gathered through student questionnaires and interviews, consultations with educators and internship mentors, the analysis of anonymized documents, the observation of simulations, and the analysis of errors in both written and oral performance.

The results of the analysis should not lead to international students being characterized solely by their deficits. A gap between general language proficiency and specialized, situation-specific competence can manifest in any beginning student. For instance, a study of fifty social work students revealed an uneven profile of macro-skills: stronger reading abilities contrasted with weaknesses in writing organization, speaking fluency, the handling of accents, and specialized vocabulary [6]. Furthermore, a review of twenty-four studies on international social work students highlighted the significance of linguistic and cultural differences, as well as knowledge of local systems and the structural conditions of the study program [7]. Support measures must therefore address these diverse profiles and contexts. Content of specialized language training

The lexical component must cover terminology related to social policy, social services, social work methods, human rights, child protection, health, housing, poverty, and crisis intervention. However, this terminology must be linked to actual usage. Students must learn to distinguish between professional terminology intended

for colleagues and explanations that are understandable to the client. They need to know how to replace stigmatizing or generalizing labels with descriptions of specific situations. Work on vocabulary should include collocations, set phrases, word-formation patterns, and semantic distinctions between terms that might appear synonymous in everyday language.

Training in text genres should focus on the types of texts students actually need: social histories, interview records, needs assessments, work plans, referrals, emails, case reports, practice reflections, and professional presentations. For each genre, it is necessary to clarify its purpose, intended audience, structure, level of formality, and the distinction between fact and interpretation. Documentation writing is particularly important, as ambiguous wording can influence institutional decisions or subsequent assistance. Exercises should foster precision, conciseness, chronological clarity, and a respectful description of the individual. Verbal communication should encompass initial contact, introducing the worker's role, explaining confidentiality, assessing needs, discussing risk, setting goals, concluding the meeting, telephone communication, and case conferences. The student also needs to practice communication repair strategies: asking for repetition, admitting a lack of understanding, rephrasing a question, verifying meaning, and correcting inappropriate expressions. These strategies safeguard the quality of communication better than feigning understanding. The language course should also develop the ability to understand various accents, speech rates, and emotionally charged speech, without requiring the suppression of one's own linguistic identity.

Methods and Learning Tasks

Case-based tasks serve as a suitable starting point, linking professional decision-making with language use. Students might begin by analyzing a brief case description, then prepare interview questions, conduct a simulated meeting, create a record, and orally convey key information to the team. A single scenario thus integrates reading, speaking, listening, writing, mediation, and professional reflection. The task should entail a clear communicative goal, an appropriate level of

uncertainty, and scope for multiple solutions. Subsequent reflection should address not only linguistic accuracy but also the relational aspects, ethics, power dynamics, and impact of the chosen phrasing.

Simulations and role-playing allow students to rehearse challenging situations safely before entering professional practice. A systematic review of communication skills training in social work identified a limited yet promising evidence base, as well as a positive trend in communication performance following educational interventions [8]. The effectiveness of simulations is enhanced by high-quality task design, realistic roles, observable criteria, and structured feedback. Students should have the opportunity to repeat the task after reflecting on it. When dealing with sensitive topics, it is essential to apply principles of psychological safety, offer appropriate choices, and clearly distinguish between a learning error and a personal evaluation of the student. Authentic materials can be sourced from publicly available forms, methodological guidelines, codes of ethics, information leaflets, and document templates. Materials drawn from professional practice must be thoroughly anonymized so that the client cannot be identified. Collaboration between a language instructor, a social work educator, and a practitioner is beneficial. The language instructor analyzes discourse and supports learning; the practitioner ensures factual and ethical appropriateness; and students contribute insights regarding what they find unclear. Such collaboration prevents the course from becoming either professionally superficial or linguistically inaccessible.

Linking language instruction with professional practice

Before beginning their practical placement, students should be familiar with the workplace's typical communication situations, documentation, professional terminology, and supervision protocols. Preparation may include role-playing a phone call or initial interview, drafting a brief record, handing over a case, and formulating questions for the mentor. During the placement, students require opportunities for regular reflection on communication events while maintaining confidentiality. Mentors should distinguish between professional errors, linguistic

inaccuracies, and differences in sociocultural norms. Feedback should address specific behaviors, their impact, and possible alternatives, rather than making general judgments about a student's linguistic competence.

Language demands should be increased gradually. Initially, the student can observe, analyze, and practice specific sub-tasks; later, they may lead part of an interaction and, finally, manage a complex situation under supervision. A crucial link exists between the language course and practical experience: recurring difficulties can be transformed into anonymized learning scenarios, allowing acquired strategies to be re-evaluated. Research on the language competence of international students also demonstrates a connection to social integration and psychological well-being [10]. Therefore, a supportive environment should foster performance without ridiculing accents or instilling a fear of communication.

Assessment of professional communication competence

Assessment should be based on performance in tasks that mirror real-world professional situations. A written terminology test cannot replace the observation of an interaction, team communication, or the processing of records. Assessment criteria should encompass clarity, factual accuracy, appropriateness of register, structure, active listening, responsiveness to the client, the ability to verify understanding, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to self-correct communication. Grammatical accuracy is important insofar as it affects meaning, credibility, or safety. An accent should not be penalized unless it impedes intelligibility.

A combination of formative and summative assessment is advisable. A portfolio might include revised versions of texts, reflections on simulations, audio or video recordings of model scenarios, and a plan for further professional development. Self-assessment and peer feedback foster the ability to monitor one's own learning, yet they require clear criteria and examples [12]. Final assessment may take the form of an objectively structured simulation followed by a written record. Conditions should allow for appropriate support measures without compromising professional standards, particularly where communication relates to client rights or safety.

Recommendations for Course Design

The course should be integrated into the study program rather than offered merely as a voluntary remedial measure for students identified as having weak language skills. Its objectives should be derived from the graduate profile and aligned with specialized subjects and practical training. Diagnostic assessment is required at the start, ongoing feedback during the course, and an evaluation of authentic performance at the end. The content should progress from academic and basic interpersonal tasks to documentation, interdisciplinary communication, and complex situations. It is important to create a reusable set of anonymized case studies, sample texts, recordings, and assessment rubrics.

Course quality should be regularly evaluated by a team comprising a language instructor, social work faculty, field placement mentors, and student representatives. Evaluation should track not only satisfaction but also the transfer of learning to specialized subjects and practice, the types of persistent communication difficulties, and the experiences of clients or simulated participants—provided their involvement is ethically and organizationally feasible. Terminology, legislative and institutional texts, and digital forms of communication require regular updating. A course designed in this way becomes a shared space for linguistic, subject-specific, and professional learning.

Conclusion. A second language for professional purposes plays an indispensable role in the training of international social work students. It enables the transformation of general language proficiency into the ability to act in academic and professional settings with precision, clarity, ethics, and cultural sensitivity. An effective course is grounded in a needs analysis, utilizes authentic genres, integrates all language skills, employs simulations, and is coordinated with professional practice. Its aim is not to eliminate linguistic diversity, but to develop the communicative competence necessary for safeguarding client rights, ensuring safe collaboration, and practicing social work responsibly.

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