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LANGUAGE LEARNING PLATEAU IN THE CONTEXT OF BUSINESS ENGLISH: EMERGING CAUSES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS BY MEANS OF ONLINE TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES

The paper investigates the problem of the language learning plateau, its impact on the learners of foreign languages, especially Business English (English for Special Purposes) as well as suggested methods to overcome this problem through mutual efforts of learners and educators.

Research and works carried out by prominent scientists and educators have been studied and presented in the paper. The paper targets to meet the needs of students studying Business English, who feel that they face the language learning plateau through applying modern and online technologies to envision the efficiency of technology-embedded learning in eliminating the language learning plateau. Evident is the fact that some students face stagnation in their studies, whereas others continue their way toward language proficiency. Our research resulted in the development of the Motivation Matrix and PINE model to address the problem and solve it according to the needs.

Keywords: *language learning plateau, technology, online tools, motivation, skills, teaching modality*

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Introduction. The main emphasis in the phenomenon of the 'language learning plateau' is on the idea that students and learners stop making progress while mastering a foreign language when they reach the CEFR intermediate level (B1). When learners start mastering a new language, they are quick to make progress and it is evident for the learners, but later it slows down after the intermediate level is reached. This phenomenon can occur at any time during the learning or teaching process that should be tackled by the instructor or teacher for the learners not to consider their language learning as a useless endeavor. The lecturers should use the best methodology, continue their teaching while employing new and engaging activities to boost motivation among the learners. The shift to online mode of teaching, then to offline settings and later to some blended modality posed new challenges for both the learners and educators. It also led to natural slowdown and the language learning plateau was evident in this process. Our research allowed us to suggest the ways to solve or overcome the language learning plateau that is further developed in the paper.

Literature Review. According to Richards,¹ once the learner has arrived at an intermediate level of language learning, however, progress does not always appear to be so marked, and making the transition from the intermediate level to the upper-intermediate and advanced sometimes proves frustrating for many learners. Dr. K. Anders Ericsson, a Swedish psychologist, and Professor at Florida State University says that hitting plateaus is a common occurrence in skill development (not only limited to language learning). According to him, there are many causes of plateaus but a major one seems to be routine as well.² Richards (2008) and Yi³ state that the language learning plateau in foreign language learning development is not permanent and can be overcome under certain pedagogical procedures. Second language acquisition is the study of 'how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language. It is the study of what is learned in the second language and, importantly, what is not learned.'⁴ Foer cites the work of Fitts and Posner who argue that there are three stages of learning a new skill: cognitive skill where the learner strategized on how to perform it better, associative stage where the learner no longer is gaining skill, and the autonomous stage where the learner no longer thinks about how to improve. He claims the autonomous stage is the *OK plateau* because the learner is satisfied with his or her performance and does not feel the need to continue making the effort to improve. Foer found that individuals who sought to gain mastery, however, purposefully framed their mindset at the cognitive stage. He asserts there are three strategies employed by

¹ Richards J. C., (2008). Moving beyond the plateau: from intermediate to advanced levels in language learning, Retrieved in 2022 from <https://www.professorjackrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/moving-beyond-the-plateau.pdf>, p. 1.

² Anders Ericsson - Reaching a plateau in language learning - How to get out of It? (www.lingholic.com), p. 2.

³ Yi, F. (2007). Plateau of EFL learning: A psycholinguistic and pedagogical study. Retrieved in 2022 from <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.565.6275&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, p. 35.

⁴ Gass, S. (2013). Second language acquisition: an introductory course (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge, p. 1.

experts: 'focusing on their technique, staying goal-oriented, and getting constant and immediate feedback on their performance'.⁵ Thornbury (2014) claims the need to move beyond it because they have the ability to communicate.⁶

Tarone (2006) states that some researchers disagree with the inevitability of fossilization, that is the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot easily be corrected, and points to sociolinguistic factors such as the learner's desire to be identified with his or her first language group rather than the target language group. According to Tarone, this 'relates to matters of human potential rather than human's actual behavior'.⁷

Research Methodology. The research has used qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and interpret the data to find and offer the best possible solutions. The primary technique of collecting data was the poll (designed by us) sent to two different groups of students studying at the Armenian State University of Economics. The students study Business English which differs from General English by many new terms and notions. They gave some reasons when they reached the plateau, namely lack of motivation (15 students), boring materials (8 students), and nobody voted for difficult or hard materials.

We analyzed some modern methodologies and modes of teaching to boost and encourage the learners not to be distracted by temporary stagnation in their knowledge and utilized both online and offline opportunities to make the students see the new potential and opportunities and not be hit back because of frustration. To achieve it, finding new and challenging resources to make the lessons more engaging and interesting was of utmost importance. We should not forget that this generation of students was obliged to study online for one year because of the pandemic, and the new offline setting was a little bit challenging and frustrating for them.

We also discussed the quality of materials used, their topicality, followed by some adaptations to be done according to the needs and abilities of the students.

Research. After the pandemic (COVID-19), many educators returned to their normal mode of teaching and found themselves in their comfort zone, whereas students got frustrated as they got accustomed to online studying and learning mode, and some of them even complained that offline settings are not beneficial for them which further leads to other issues to be faced by educators. After one month of teaching offline, we noticed some problems that learners faced but they did not share these problems with lecturers. They reached the phenomenon known as the 'language learning plateau' which was unknown by many learners who felt the need to change something.

⁵ Foer, J. (2011). *Moonwalking with Einstein: The art and science of remembering everything*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, p. 171.

⁶ Thornbury, S. (2014, July 31). Fossilization: is it terminal, doctor? Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_XTRu0igNA, video resource.

⁷ Tarone, E. (2006). Fossilization, social context, and language play. In Z. Han & T. Odlin (Eds.), *Studies of fossilization in second language acquisition*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, p. 751.

One of the reasons is the situation known as 'to be stuck in the loop' when students and educators do the same thing all the time, be it the same textbooks, the same activities, or the same materials, and nobody realizes the underlying causes or fundamental essence of the problem. It could also lead to boredom which would spoil the efforts of all parties involved in the teaching and learning process.

Learners also lacked the motivation to improve their skills, which could emerge because of personal problems or tiredness as they had to study many new subjects and notions, and their deep desire to do everything simultaneously could also lead to these problems.

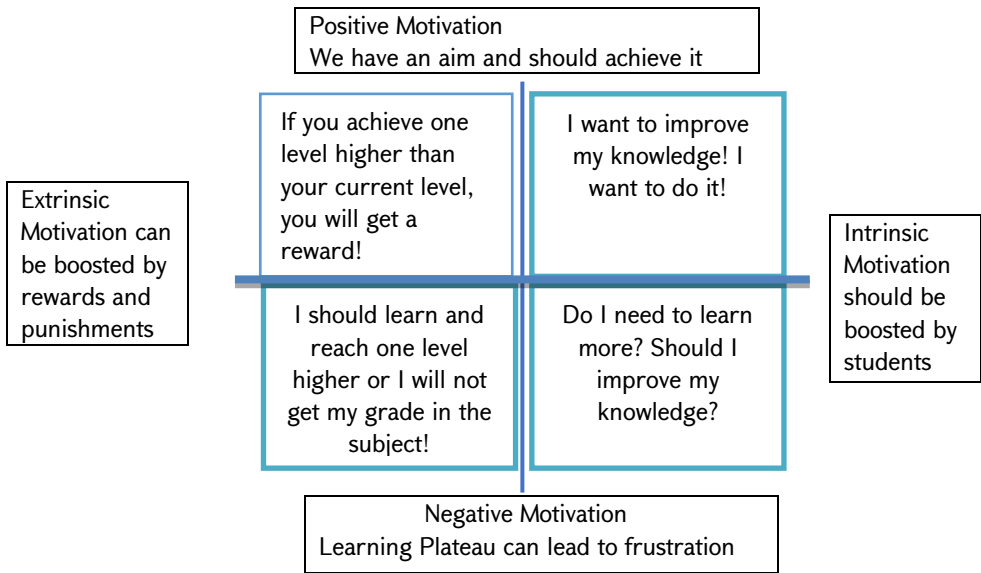
Another reason the learner generally faces is the natural slowdown that happens even if one works hard and does everything right, but a language learning plateau can happen quite naturally.

The best solution to overcome all these difficulties and frustration is the mutual work of the lecturers and students, which is impossible to solve without the participation of any side of the learning process or cycle. Some lecturers offered to do the "needs analysis" and find out the reasons of this problem: how we can jointly overcome this stagnation in the learning process and we suggest another solution: it was used by us when we faced this situation and will share how we have risen to this challenge. We offered to shift from the methods and techniques long used in offline settings and use the new teaching modality: to integrate modern technology into our teaching process. When we looked at the stages cited by Foer, namely cognitive, associative, and autonomous, we concentrated on the cognitive stage that could increase the efforts students exert when learning to understand the material and use it later. We again revitalized the cognitive one: the best way was the usage of online technologies embedded in offline settings.

The best online technology we used was the websites to prepare quizzes and offered the students to compete with each other. Before starting the task, we explained to the students the benefits they would get from such activities, and in this case, it would be the materials learnt and the progress they will see after their accomplished activities: how well they played, their strong and weak sides in their knowledge base and the visibility of their progress after every quiz. The spirit of competition diminished the students' frustration, made them understand that they did not know everything necessary to advance further in their knowledge: the realization of gaps in knowledge eventually motivated them to study. We sometimes used a specific strategy: we included a person (sometimes the lecturer) in the game who was faster and more knowledgeable, and it motivated the group to improve their knowledge and win during the consecutive games as the feeling that somebody knows it better acts as a trigger. Some useful websites for organizing such competitions are www.kahoot.com and www.quizziz.com, and educators have to spend much time developing the tests, but for the devoted lecturers this is a real jewel, and time spent on designing the tests will finally contribute to achieving better results.

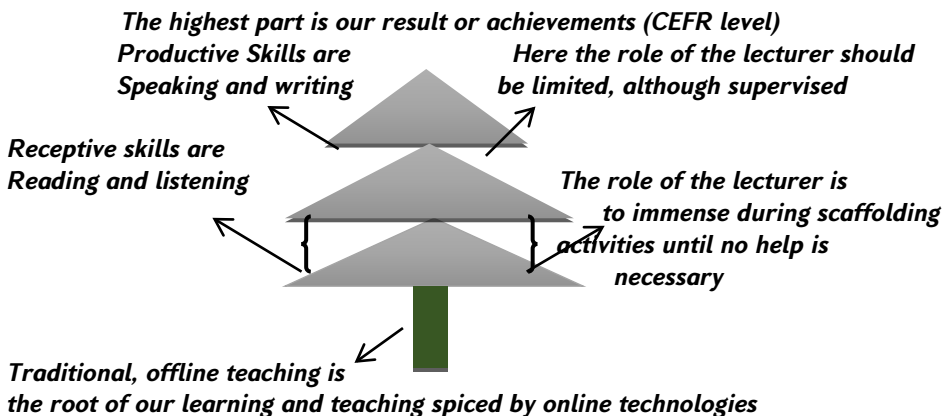
We have developed a modern motivation matrix especially for the period that can lead to a language learning plateau and how the students can overcome this process by boosting their motivation. (Picture 1)

When we further analyzed this motivation quadrant or matrix, we saw that the main idea lay in Positive, Intrinsic, Negative, and Extrinsic motivation, and when we abbreviated it further, we got the acronym PINE. According to the PINE principle, we can see that learning a foreign language can be divided into sections and here we used our skills and methods of teaching to show the development.



Picture 1. Types of Motivation to overcome the language learning plateau

Here is the PINE model (developed by us) to reflect the students' motivation and which causes can increase it as we suggest (Picture 2).



Picture 2. Motivation to study to achieve the highest possible results (PINE model)

According to the PINE model offered by us, we should take into account that we need different methods and techniques for the development of all language skills and for the students to achieve the highest possible results, we should encourage them to improve these skills based on the PINE model, and the final result can be either tested via international or university-wide exams (that can be an external motivation) certifying the knowledge obtained or the possibility to participate in different training courses both in home universities and in foreign countries.

Another method chosen was that we offered the students completely new styles of exercises and reading activities that captured their attention because this is the psychology of learners that other materials (non-compulsory) are always better than their textbooks. Our strategy reaped results, and the learners felt motivated and full of new emotions. These new materials also included the skills to be developed (namely, writing business letters, finding mistakes in others' works, CV development, and how to make presentations and successfully introduce them). We offered the students presentation-making websites, such as www.canva.com, www.visme.co, www.crello.com, Microsoft sway, www.prezi.com and other tools and how they can make their presentations in new formats and the way to use these websites was a challenge and motivation for students. We would also introduce one more activity that encouraged our students and made them analyze and speak about the procedure and how to prepare an excellent CV to apply for a job or further studies.

1 Warm-up

What mistakes on a CV do you think might stop someone from getting a job?

2 Keywords

Match the following words with their correct definitions.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. a recruiter | a. a business that provides services for companies and people |
| 2. an employer | b. a company or a person that looks for people to employ |
| 3. a candidate | c. a company or a person that pays somebody to work for them |
| 4. an agency | d. a fixed amount of money that a person earns every month or year |
| 5. a buzzword | e. a person that is competing for a job |
| 6. a salary | f. a set of questions that are asked to get information |
| 7. a survey | g. a word that has become very popular in a particular subject area |

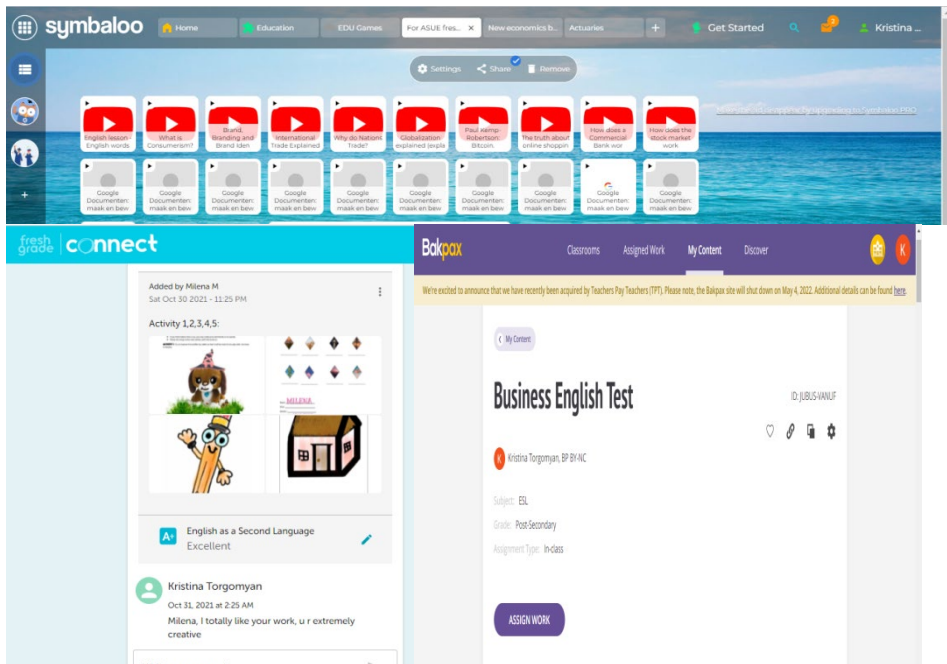
3 Reading

You are going to read an article about the unusual mistakes that people make on their CVs. Match the headings to the paragraphs in the article on the next page.

- | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Non-editable formats | Salary details | Ridiculous email address | Too many keywords |
| Bad file names | Not doing your research | Statements that you can't prove | |

This type of activity proved to be effective for speaking, vocabulary acquisition and reading to insert information. This activity was engaging and useful for learners as it showed them how to build their own CVs, and the lecturer assigned the students to design personal CVs as homework without making all the mistakes that would spoil their chances of finding employment.

Learning a foreign language is always challenging, whereas learning Business English can pose new problems and challenges, especially if the General English level is not high, so we should try to juggle between these two forms of language learning. To achieve it, we turned to online technologies and offered our students to do some activities in General English, and as the online resources can check their work automatically, we will concentrate more on Business English during offline settings. Such online tools are www.bakpax.com, www.freshgrade.com, and www.symbaloo.com. (Picture 3)



Picture 3. How to engage students and make your assignments varied and modern by utilizing new and modern technologies

In the website www.symbaloo.com we created some files and named them according to the type of activity they served and included all the materials we wanted our students to do or learn.

Conclusion. There are advantages and disadvantages of teaching materials used by lecturers and educators when teaching English for Special Purposes. They prove to be effective in the beginning and engage learners in the process of studying, but the routine makes those materials uninteresting and not engaging after learners reach a specific level of language competence. There are different options to solve these problems by embedding online tools, techniques and technologies in offline settings.

1. To make the lessons more lively and engaging, we suggest using www.kahoot.com, www.quizziz.com, and www.quizalinea.com in offline settings and during the lessons it would activate the learners and add spirit of competitiveness among learners.

2. To prepare eye-catching presentations, speeches as well as pitches, students can use www.canva.com, www.prezi.com, Microsoft Sway, and many others that will open some new horizons for the learners and make them become more engaged in foreign language atmosphere.
3. New teaching materials should be developed and used as the routine (compulsory) textbooks can bore the students, whereas modern materials and online resources would help overcome the language learning plateau the students constantly face. We suggest it either when the language learning plateau is evident, or the students have reached a certain level of English language competence and the feeling of achievement hinders the students from improving their language skills as the initial goal has already been reached.
4. We have developed the Motivation Matrix and PINE model to set clear goals and boost motivation among students to combat the language learning plateau that is real impediment for students when mastering a foreign language.

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14. www.quizziz.com
15. www.symbaloo.com
16. www.visme.co
17. Microsoft sway

ՔՐԻՍՏԻՆԱ ԹՈՐԳՈՄՅԱՆ

ՀՊՏՀ լեզուների ամբիոնի ասիստենտ

Լեզվի ուսումնառության ընթացքում պլապոյի էֆեկտը գործարար անգլերենի համալրելու համար. դրա պարզառեն ու լուծումները առցանց գործիքների և տեխնոլոգիաների միջոցով.

Սույն հոդվածում հետազոտել և վերլուծել ենք պլապոյի էֆեկտը լեզվի ուսումնառության ընթացքում, դրա ազդեցությունը սովորողների, մասնավորապես՝ անգլերեն ուսումնասիրողների վրա, ինչպես նաև այն մեթոդները, որոնք կիրառվում են սովորողների և դասավանդողների համատեղ ջանքերի շնորհիվ՝ միտված այդ էֆեկտի չեզոքացմանը: Հոդվածում ներկայացված են աշխարհահռչակ գիտնականների և մանկավարժների հետազոտությունները և աշխատանքները: Փորձել ենք հաշվի առնել գործարար անգլերեն սովորողների պահանջները ժամանակակից և առցանց տեխնոլոգիաների կիրառմամբ, որը կարող է կանխատեսել ուսումնառության արդյունավետությունը տեխնոլոգիաների ներառման շնորհիվ: Ակնհայտ է, որ որոշ ուսանողներ ուսումնառության ընթացքում բախվում են լճացման խնդրին, մինչդեռ մյուսները բարձրացնում են իրենց լեզվի իմացության մակարդակը: Հետազոտության արդյունքում խնդրի լուծման նպատակով մշակել ենք մոտիվացիայի մատրից (կադապար) և PINE մոդել:

Հիմնաբառեր. ուսումնառության ընթացքում պլապոյի էֆեկտ, տեխնոլոգիաներ, առցանց գործիքներ, մոտիվացիա, հմտություններ, դասավանդման նոր մեթոդաբանություն

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КРИСТИНА ТОРГОМЯН

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Эффект плато в изучении языка в контексте делового английского: причины и решения посредством онлайн-инструментов и технологий.

В данной статье исследуется проблема эффекта плато в изучении языка, влияние последнего на учащихся, в частности в изучении английского языка, анализируются методы преодоления отрицательного воздействия данного эффекта совместными усилиями обучающихся и преподавателей.

В статье представлены исследования известных ученых и педагогов-практиков. В статье предпринята попытка учесть нужды учащихся, изучающих деловой английский, посредством применения современных и онлайн технологий и прогнозирования эффективности последних. Очевидно, что неко-

торые студенты во время обучения впадают в состояние стагнации, в то время как другие продолжают совершенствовать свои знания до достижения высшего уровня владения языком. В результате исследования нами была разработана матрица мотивации и модель PINE с целью решения указанной проблемы.

Ключевые слова: эффект плато в изучении языка, технологии, онлайн-инструменты, мотивация, навыки, новая методика преподавания

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