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# Student-Centered Learning: The Experience of Teaching International Students in Russian Universities

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**Abstract**

The paper focuses on the use of student-centered technologies when teaching international students of the Preparatory Department in the Russian language. The authors review such technologies as problem-based learning, search, research, and design technologies. The main emphasis is on gaming technologies. The feasibility of their use arises from the specific character of education of international students at the Preparatory Department. The paper presents potential applications of these methods and validates their use. The main supporting argument is that student-centered communicative technologies in general, and gaming techniques in particular, improve the quality of training for international students when used in the organization of the learning process. The authors emphasize the need for the teacher's personal activity in the educational process, including the use of student-centered communication technologies.

## 1. Introduction

In today's globalizing world, one of the characteristic trends in the development of education has become its internationalization, which makes higher education more easily accessible, improves its quality, and promotes the introduction of innovative teaching methods. Currently, Russian institutions of higher education are actively

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expanding their international presence, making it a top priority to increase their international student population and create favorable learning conditions for these students.

Tomsk Polytechnic University has been educating international students since 2003. Currently, there are 553 foreign residents from 30 countries of Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Africa studying at TPU, and another 243 international students undergoing training at the Preparatory Department (Facts and figures, 2014). The vast majority of students are learning in the Russian language. The number of international students is increasing every year.

To help international students transition smoothly into a new learning environment, Tomsk Polytechnic University established a Preparatory Department. It provides training in engineering, economics, the humanities, and medical biology. In addition to learning Russian as a second language, students of the Preparatory Department study general theoretical disciplines. Thus, they do not only acquire knowledge on the subject but also develop the language base necessary for further study at the University in their chosen major. The task of the teaching staff who work at the Preparatory Department is to train international students within one year of studies so that they will be able to further "carry out educational and cognitive activity by means of a non-native language in a non-native material and socio-cultural environment" (Surygin, 2000).

The choice of means and methods of teaching depends on the purpose of learning as well as its specific character. At the Preparatory Department, the fundamentals of learning are formed in a non-native language in a limited timeframe in close connection with students' adaptation to the new socio-cultural environment (Semiletova, 2014). Some of the important practical tasks of preparatory training are to optimize the learning process and to reduce the excessive workload of students. Such a situation encourages teachers to find effective teaching technologies that improve the educational process and increase the efficiency of training. In the actual learning process, a teacher combines all the best practices in order to provide the best possible learning outcomes within a limited time. The ability to do so indicates a teacher's high level of qualification, professional competence, skill, and creativity.

Years of experience with international students at the TPU Preparatory Department have shown that the greatest effect is achieved when, along with traditional methods of learning, modern student-oriented communication technologies are used as complementary methods and techniques. These are, for instance, the communicative method, the project method, the gaming method, and the use of interdisciplinary connections. They are all enacted on a personal level and based on active, emotionally charged teacher-student and student-student interaction and communication, which necessitates an increase in the level of personal teaching activity (Hulea, 2015). Not every teacher, however, is willing to engage in intense interpersonal interaction, which leads to a low level of teacher activity in creating and introducing non-standard forms of learning. In this paper, the authors describe intensive forms of learning based on the principles of student-centered learning and thus try to show their instrumental capabilities, as well as the prospect of their practical development for the accomplishment of learning objectives. On the one hand, using these methods causes some difficulties in the educational process because they require targeted optimization of the studying methodology. On the other hand, such methods offer great opportunities for improving the system of teaching the humanities in the preparatory departments of universities.

## 2. Utilization of student-centered learning

Students of the TPU Preparatory Department begin their transition into a new educational environment with learning the Russian language. Then we, their teachers, gradually add other subjects. Russian is included as a subject-communicative activity. International students face various difficulties because learning a subject (or, in this case, several of them) requires the absorption of large amounts of information, and the Russian language acts "not just as a means of communication, but in a different, more complicated way, as a means of learning and cognitive activity" (Surygin, 2001).

It is over this period that the role of a subject teacher and their interaction with the students in solving problems encountered in the learning process become especially important. When choosing methods and means of education, teachers "should be able to act according to their own choice rather than follow strictly prescribed rules" (Galskova, 2000). Any teacher with their personal and professional experience has the right to choose the techniques and training methods that correspond to their desire and temperament. An important aspect is the fact that the set of

methods used will vary depending on the particular group of international students. The reasons for this may be the following:

- the number of students in the group;
- national composition (mononational or multinational), representatives of which nations are present in the group;
- national and psychological peculiarities of international students;
- the ability of students to master the Russian language;
- the level of general education of students;
- psychological atmosphere in the group.

Based on the above, in order to increase the efficiency of practical orientation in training, we should focus on the pedagogical technologies that help to reduce students' workload and save their time. One of the most effective ways to optimize the educational process at the Preparatory Department is to use interdisciplinary connections in the education of foreign students.

Using interdisciplinary technologies is a method of synthesizing interlingual and interdisciplinary fields in order to:

- form general academic skills for succeeding in related disciplines;
- form an interdisciplinary structure of knowledge to be developed in subsequent courses at the University.

With the help of interdisciplinary connections, a teacher improves the content of their educational material as well as the methods and forms of the organization of the teaching process. The integrated teaching staff of the Multidisciplinary Department of Tomsk Polytechnic University is able to create a unified educational space and use interdisciplinary technologies to find a unified approach to educational problems. The teachers perform a lot of work including the following:

- creating coordinated training manuals on related subjects in order to eliminate the differences in conceptual and terminological apparatus and meet the requirements of the language training mode for international students;
- ensuring interdisciplinary coordination between the teachers of Russian as a foreign language and teachers of general subjects;
- developing a methodology for coordinated teaching of related academic disciplines;
- developing methods of working with texts and grammar exercises to identify and generalize the collocations used in related subjects;
- developing visual schematic manuals for working in an interdisciplinary field.

Below we give examples of the practical implementation of interdisciplinary connections between Geography, Economics, and Country Studies. The disciplines are studied in parallel throughout the year. Geography studies the climatic conditions of the area where social production (economy) develops and historical events take place. There are common themes related to Economics and Country Studies in any area of geography: the economy and geographical location of the country, classification of countries by form of government, models of their economic growth, GDP index, natural and human resources, agricultural and industrial structure, etc.

In general topics, it is especially important to identify and work out the general concepts for these subjects such as population, ethnicity, government, specialization and cooperation, employment and unemployment, productive and non-productive industries, and many others. At the same time, unity should be emphasized in these disciplines by means of maximally generalized lexical and grammatical structures. Repeated use of lexical items, especially in several disciplines, ensures a positive outcome in the memorization of terms and definitions and activates the object-language skills of international students.

Such a methodical technique as posing a challenging question related to the topic studied generalizes and triggers recall of knowledge from different academic subjects and encourages students to form an independent understanding. Awareness leads to the development of verbal communication skills, as well as of the ability to discuss scientific subjects in a coherent and educated manner.

A good way to diagnose the outcomes of interdisciplinary training of students is the method of educational projects. It is an integral part of modern communicative educational technologies and it is the most popular one of them at present. The main thesis of the project method as we currently understand it is, "whatever I learn, I know what I need it for and where and how I can use this content" (Polat, 2000). In other words, this educational technology does not only allow the integration of the theoretical knowledge acquired, but also gives students an

opportunity to apply it practically and to acquire new knowledge independently, while also solving the given problem.

The authors have been using the project method in their work for many years and consider it one of the most effective and promising types of learning. Over this time, we have formed a system for working with projects. Here it is especially important to consider a phased approach to the use of project method technologies. At the initial stages of learning a subject, when the skills of substantive communication are not yet formed, the elements of the project method should only be used in summarizing lessons after completing a section. Using the entire volume of the covered material, students summarize their interdisciplinary knowledge in connection with a certain issue or idea. It helps them to see the inextricable link between academic subjects; and academic subjects in their turn begin to reinforce each other. Knowledge becomes both specific and generalized, which makes it possible to transfer this knowledge to new situations and apply it in practice (Sinyakov, 2009).

The implementation of such projects teaches students to navigate in the information stream and develops their ability to work with information and apply computer skills. Students can produce a creative presentation of their results in various software formats. Using their language skills, students publicly defend their projects. In this case, the atmosphere of the class is no longer official and the sense of constraint is removed; teaching communication arises "because with their help, a natural language environment is created and the need for language communication is formed. In addition, the actual conditions are created for intercultural dialogue" (Polat, 1997). At the later stages of learning, when students of the Preparatory Department gain experience in research and creative activity, as well as in interdisciplinary integration of knowledge, skills and abilities, they successfully participate in student conferences.

The most significant and versatile form of the educational process, which is most often used by the authors, is undoubtedly a game or, in a student audience, the use of gaming techniques in the educational process.

The use of game techniques in the educational process has always been, and remains, a relevant educational technology. A well-known ancient Chinese saying reads, "Tell me and I forget; teach me and I may remember; involve me and I will learn".

In this regard, a game is a method of emotional stimulating students and it has a number of positive aspects:

- It helps the teacher build positive interpersonal relationships with students;
- It trains and develops students' memories and activates individuals' hidden abilities;
- It helps overcome psychological barriers in the development of verbal communication in the language being learnt (Kuyumcu, 2013);
- It forms the ability to find analogies, single out problems, and make one's own decisions;
- It promotes the function of inter-ethnic communication;
- It encourages a positive attitude to learning.

The technology of game teaching methods is universal, suitable for any subject, and international students readily accept it, since it liberates them, relieves their stress and helps them overcome mental barriers associated with studying a subject in a non-native language (Tyabaev & Sedelnikova, 2013).

Games can be used at different stages of the lesson and with different purposes. For example, they can be used to practice communication skills or to systematize and actualize knowledge, and most often (in our case) to overcome the passivity of students and their tiredness.

When introducing academic disciplines in the learning process, we increase the amount of information (especially the number of professional terms), which is a leading cause of exhaustion. Gaming moments in the classroom trigger positive emotions in students and thus stimulate their attention and performance.

The game phenomenon is that, although it is an amusement and leisure activity, it can become instrumental in the learning process (Zan'ko, 1992). It is the synthesis of entertainment and learning. As part of a game, the educational material is absorbed with ease, as if by itself, but the game requires emotional and mental effort. In a short period, many things need to be remembered, compared, and evaluated. In addition, it is important to note that this is not done at the request of the teacher but at the request of game situations. In addition, the "weak", unsure and often passive students are included in the game. For them, the game appears to be a kind of entertainment, fun on the one hand, but on the other hand, the game makes their memory and mind work more intensively without any pressure from the teacher.

Speaking in a non-native language creates a fear of mispronouncing a word in most students. Many of them do not speak at all, or only use the words they can pronounce correctly. An important feature of the social and psychological impact of games is that they help overcome the fear of speaking (communication) in a second language and help form the culture of dialogue.

Agame is a convention with a direct didactic task hidden inside. This gives a lesson its informal nature where "the teacher should be able to become an equal partner in a conversation with their students (and to eliminate the influence of their authority) (Alkhazishvili,1988).

The game is a dialogue lesson – lively and active communication between the teacher and students, brought together by their joint fascination with the subject-specific communicative and cognitive activity. Students begin to think and to speak their second language fluently, without fear of making mistakes. The game helps to express specific knowledge through personal feelings. This encourages students to speak spontaneously, without resorting to a pattern or a cliché, which leads to the logical understanding of the utterance.

When using educational games in the classroom, it is necessary to take into account the fact that they cannot replace a systematic study of theoretical material on the subject. A teacher should apply them to a feasible and appropriate extent (Tyabaev & Sedelnikova, 2013). At the same time, didactic games can and should take an appropriate place in the classroom, because with the free flow of activity during educational games, students learn and repeat subject-specific material, develop their memory, attention, language, and creative thinking, and acquire the ability to find analogies and to make the best decisions.

## 3. Conclusion

Thus, summarizing the experience of subject teachers of Tomsk Polytechnic University's Preparatory Department and the findings of some researchers, we affirm that the use of student-centered communication technologies contributes to improving the quality of education of international students and their academic progress. Moreover, elements of learner-centered communication technologies can be easily integrated into traditional teaching methods. They vary depending on specific conditions, expand interdisciplinary communication, increase the ability to achieve educational goals, and reduce the impact of unwanted factors. All of these technologies, however, require an increase in the personal activity of the teacher, which is also one of the most important factors in the development of higher education in Russia.

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