Professional Abilities of Foreign Language Teachers: a Pilot Survey

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a pilot survey designed to evaluate the level of professional competence of foreign language teachers, employed in the institutions of higher education at Tomsk. The study is based on the self-assessment of the respondents. The authors suggest to distinguish between six different groups of professional abilities that present various aspects of the professional competence of a foreign language teacher. The results of the pilot survey can be deemed useful for further studies of the issues related to professional training of foreign language teachers.

Keywords: foreign language teaching; professional competence; professional abilities of teachers

1. Introduction

The globalisation of major economic, social and cultural activities in the 21st century have deeply affected educational issues, making foreign language learning and teaching an educational domain of prior importance. It goes without saying that one of the crucial factors assuring the efficiency of language learning and teaching is the professional competence of teachers. Professional competence of a foreign language teacher manifests itself in language proficiency, attention to the interests and individual traits of a student, use of various language teaching methods and techniques, creativity, ability to solve numerous problems in the educational process, theoretical interpretation of his/her teaching experience, consistency and aspiration towards self-education (Prokop'ev, Mikhalkovich). The complex nature of the professional competence of a foreign language teacher demands specific

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methods of evaluation, which should obligatorily involve self-assessment, that is the teacher’s own evaluation of his/her level of professional competence.


Our objective in this study is to design a pilot survey aimed at evaluating the professional competence of teachers and to test it on a random group of language teachers. The study is aimed at measuring the level of professional competence of a group of foreign language teachers, working in today’s Russian university. The survey is based on the theoretical assumptions, presented in a number the studies by N. Nikitina, O. Zheleznyakova, M. Petukhov (2007), N. Kuzmina (1985), A. Shchukin (2007), V. Safonova (2004). The pilot survey was conducted in National Research Tomsk State University (Russia) between February and March 2014.

We assume that the level of the professional competence is determined by the professional abilities of teachers. We understand the professional abilities of a teacher as his/her characteristics that condition the formation of his/her professional competence and are represented in the qualitative mastery of teaching techniques and practices. It must be mentioned that professional abilities are not inherent to any teacher, but are developed on the basis of their personal dispositions in the course of teaching activity (Nikitina, 2007).

According to Kuzmina (1985), professional abilities of teachers are stable personal traits, represented by the specific sensibility to objects, methods and conditions in and of teaching and design of the efficient educational models.

As there are numerous classifications of the professional abilities of teachers, we have summarised the classifications suggested by several researches (Kuzmina, 1985; Podlasyy, 2007; Nikitina, 2007; Stankin, 1998; Kodzhaspirova, 2004; Grigorovitch, 2001) and selected the following groups of abilities:

1) perceptive abilities are represented in the process of interaction with the student as an object and subject of classroom activities;
2) design-related abilities manifest themselves in the process of design and selection of the classroom activities and tasks in compliance with the immediate and global objectives of the educational process;
3) constructional abilities are realised in the implementation of certain methods of composition and presentation of information in a way that it encourages intellectual, emotional and pragmatic response of the students;
4) communicative abilities manifest themselves in establishing and maintaining of pedagogically relevant relationships with the students, based on authority and confidence;
5) organisational abilities are represented in the process of students’ participation in various learning activities, in the student group interaction that is aimed at educational influence on every student. Organisational abilities enable the teacher to encourage students’ need for self-education, self-discipline and personal development.
6) research abilities are realised in a teacher’s study of the object, processes and results of his/her own teaching activities in order to find ways of professional enhancement. Research abilities stimulate self-education and professional development of the teacher as well as his/her ability to apprehend new ideas to be implemented for educational purposes.

We have selected these groups of abilities as they are related to various aspects of professional activity of a language teacher. We have omitted some groups of abilities, suggested by other researchers, including gnostic abilities (Kuzmina, 1985; Stankin, 1998; Kodzhaspirova, 2004), abilities related to leadership (Grigorovitch, 2001), abilities related to emotional expression (Kodzhaspirova, 2004), pedagogical sense of tact (Stankin, 1998), suggestive abilities (Podlasyy, 2007).

2. Methodology

The study is focused on teachers’ self-assessment of the level of their professional competence on the basis of given criteria. We have gathered our primary data by adhering to the sociological method of conducting a group
survey in the form of a questionnaire, displaying exclusively closed questions. The questionnaire was aimed to
gauge teachers’ evaluations of their professional abilities, including the above-mentioned ability groups, i.e.
perceptive, design-related, constructional, communicative, organisational and research abilities.

Within the framework of the pilot survey the target groups were all teachers of foreign languages (English,
French, Spanish, Italian, German, Chinese), permanently employed in higher educational institutions in Russia, such
as universities, academies, centres for education and research.

In order to define the random sample for this survey we have determined the size of the parent population that is
the number of teachers of foreign languages, permanently employed in the higher educational institutions at Tomsk
at the point pf conducting our survey. According to the official websites of the higher educational institutions and
their respective faculties and departments, at Tomsk currently there are six departments and three faculties of
foreign languages in six universities (Tomsk State University, Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk State
Pedagogical University, Tomsk State University of Control Systems and Radioelectronics, Siberian State Medical
University, Tomsk State University of Architecture and Building) and one research centre (Tomsk Scientific Centre
of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The parent population does not include the teachers
employed in non-state higher educational institutions and affiliated branches of higher educational institutions. The
total number of employees in the aforementioned departments and faculties of foreign languages equals 369. Thus,
the size of the parent population equals 369 . The size of the random sample equals 58 respondents.

According to their age, we can distinguish between several groups of respondents. The largest group of
respondents (49%) is that of 36-55 year-olds; another 29% are teachers aged between 22-35 years; 17% are
representatives of the age group 55-65; and the remaining 5% are over 65 year-olds. 93% of all respondents are
women, thus 7% are men.

3. Discussion of results

The respondents marked at an average of 77% of the given criteria of professional abilities. While the results of
the survey show certain irregularities between the levels of mastery of groups of the professional abilities, the
constructional abilities are mastered on the highest level by the majority of the respondents (36); at an average the
respondents marked 84% of criteria of this group of abilities. The second group of the professional abilities is that of
the organisational abilities. The respondents marked on average 79.3% of the criteria. Then follow three groups of
abilities with the less significant discrepancy in the level of mastery: the research abilities (76.7%), the perceptive
abilities (75.4%) and the design-related abilities (74.1%). Surprisingly, the least mastered group of abilities is that of
communicative abilities – only 72.4% of criteria related to this group were marked by the respondents. This fact
may be interpreted in a variety of ways, but we assume that, first of all, it manifests the lack of confidence of the
majority of language teachers regarding their communicative abilities. The observed lack of communicative
confidence may be relieved in the process of professional training of language teachers by the intensive use of
techniques and practices, encouraging the formation of communicative abilities.

The general results of the survey are summarised in Figure 1.
It should be mentioned that the results of the survey do not show any strict correlation between the age and the teaching experience of the respondents and the level of mastery of the professional abilities. For instance, 6 respondents, belonging to different age groups, marked 100% of the total number of the criteria, presented in the questionnaire as related to them. The minimal number of the marked criteria — 25% — is provided by three respondents, also belonging to different age groups.

The fact that about 90% of the respondents have not marked all the criteria presented in the questionnaire as related to them suggests that the teachers of foreign language are capable of critical evaluation of their professional level. Whether they see any definite areas and prospects of raising their professional competence is an object of a separate study.

4. Conclusion

The results of the survey allow us to conclude that the teachers of foreign languages, permanently employed at the higher educational institutions of Tomsk, show a high level of professional abilities, reaching an average of 77% of the given criteria of professional abilities. The results of the survey show that the least mastered group of professional abilities is that of communicative abilities. This fact provides important insights for the practice of professional training of foreign language teachers such as the necessity to encourage the communicative competence of teachers and their confidence as language users.

Our results cannot be considered as decisive and conclusive due to a number of minor factors involved. The questionnaire used to collect data will require improvements and additional sociological revision, as some respondents mentioned the ambiguity of certain questions. Thus, the results of the pilot survey may have been affected by the respondents’ potential misinterpretation of the questions. Nevertheless, the group survey by questionnaire proved to be a productive tool of evaluation of the level of professional competence. Even a small-scale pilot survey allows to observe some of the general tendencies and problems, common within the community of teachers of foreign languages.
References