Foreign-Language Professional Project-based Method as a Means of Forming Socio-Cultural Competence in Non-Language-Majoring Students

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Abstract

The paper deals with the analysis of the process of the formation of socio-cultural competence through the course “German for Professional Communication” for the students of economic specialties. A foreign-language professional project-based learning method is considered as a means to achieve the educational goals. Two professionally oriented projects are described in terms of didactic implementation of the authors’ approach to teaching.

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1. Introduction

Due to globalization in all spheres of human activity, participation of Russia in the Bologna process, a growing number of international contacts, the possibility for Russian specialists to compete in the European labor market and an increase of linguistic contacts there is a real demand for new psycho-pedagogical and methodological decisions aimed at “expanding” the borders of educational process by placing the student into the real intercultural communication context. These decisions involve establishing conditions for their practical use as a means of social and cultural interaction (Galskova & Gez, 2004).
In modern society, a well-qualified specialist should be equipped with both a good interdisciplinary training, and communication and social competence to successfully establish social and professional contacts. Galskova (2000) considers it necessary to include in the professionally focused foreign language learning process such topics, situations and speech material, which would take into account the students’ professional field. In addition to linguistic material the course content should reflect the system of national and cultural peculiarities and realities of the country where the language is spoken. According to the "Foreign language for non-linguistic higher educational institutions and departments” discipline program, students must have sufficient command of communicative competence to solve social-communicative tasks in various aspects of everyday, cultural, professional and research life while dealing with foreign partners, as well as for further self-education. In this article we consider the way the process of acquiring social and cultural competence to meet the challenges in the professional field goes in the classroom for the German language students of economic specialties.

The aim of this work is to develop socio-cultural competence of students of economic specialties during the lessons of “German as a language of professional communication.” The question is how to create specific conditions in learning a foreign language that would make it possible to achieve this goal, what methods to choose. In our opinion one of the methods that can be applied is the method of foreign language professional project-based learning (PBL).

2. Theoretical foundations of PBL for socio-cultural competence formation

2.1. Socio-cultural competence

Langaker (1991) notes that continuous interacting with the culture and mentality forms a native speaker as a person belonging to a given socio-cultural community, imposing and developing the system of values, morals, behavior, attitude to the people. According to Edward Sapir (1993), each cultural system and every single act of public conduct explicitly or implicitly implies communication. The system of values as an element of culture, in turn, is made up of socially significant sets of subcultures determined by group and target goals and interests. For example, it is possible to be quite fluent in general German, but to be functionally illiterate, if after completing a Higher Educational Institution course “Professional communication” the person is unable to fulfill the functional role of a candidate for a vacancy at a university, to participate in a training course or to take a job abroad, does not possess the communicative culture skills and does not follow the standards in the field of job, does not know how to search job and apply for recruitment. These problems may appear because the program of the course might lack focus on socio-cultural aspects of professional communication in German, which brings to a rising barrier to successful social adaptation of the graduates in the labor market in the context of globalization of the economy and education. Skalkin (1991) emphasizes that for a long time the Russian national methodology was dominated by the approach when students were to acquire the ability to perform in a peculiar to us (native culture) socio-communicative position, but in a foreign language code.

We can achieve a radical increase in the level of communication and interaction between people of different nationalities only with a clear understanding and real consideration of the socio-cultural factor. The European Council identified socio-cultural competence as a component of communicative competence and defined it as knowledge of cultural peculiarities of native speakers, their habits, rules of conduct and etiquette, the ability to understand and use them appropriately in the communication process, remaining a bearer of another culture at the same time (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2000).

Analysis of research papers suggests that the social competence as individual awareness about socio-cultural context of the language use is socially significant, and includes socio-cultural processing by the native speakers of fragments of reality, concepts and means of their linguistic consolidation and expression, the mechanisms of which are imprinted in their minds in the form of language and speech preferences. If we consider socio-cultural competence development as a goal of studying a foreign language at a Higher Educational Institution course (Safonova, 1996), it should be noted that it may comprise the development of socio-cultural knowledge in students on the one hand, and socio-cultural skills – on the other. Lupach (2000) believes that the principles of socio-cultural direction include the principle of learning a foreign language in the context of dialogue between cultures; methodical authenticity on the basis of socio-cultural content of teaching material; problem solving and the priority of creative
activity of students in the learning process; functionally adequate socio-cultural visual materials. Scheitza (1999) allocates the following set of components within socio-cultural competence: country through language component; sociolinguistic component; socio-psychological component; culture studies component. Socio-cultural awareness forms knowledge, awareness and understanding of cultural characteristics of native speakers, namely awareness about the social communication, habits, norms of behavior; national mentality; knowledge and experience not only of their own, but also of foreign country; command of their own and foreign language (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2000).

Thus if developed, socio-cultural skills allow the speakers to understand socio-cultural context, make appropriate use of knowledge of cultural peculiarities typical of native speakers in the communication process; to identify and analyze the situation, understand the rules of social interaction in the studied culture, traditions, values, customs, and make use of the selected minimum stereotyped communicative gestures. Ranking intercultural competence as social competence when talking about professionally-related training, Crist (2000) singles out the following specific skills: tolerance to errors when communicating with foreign business partners; willingness to listen carefully and ask questions using “language for special purposes” when dealing with business partners; understanding of the specific cultural terms and expressions; attention to gestures in dealing with business partners; taking into account of specific cultural forms of communication; effort to apply standard language in communication (2000).

2.2. **PBL methods in the course of foreign language teaching**

In our study a foreign language professional PBL is understood as a joint activity of the teacher and students to create a product in a foreign language, in which students are free to discuss professionally significant problems in socio-cultural conditions. In such a project, students are involved in the dialogue of cultures, carrying out research and discussion, which contribute to the formation of socio-cultural competence (Minakova, 2012). The important thing is that there is an opportunity to focus on the content of the utterance and, at the same time, to develop socio-cultural competence, as while comparing cultures of different countries and producing speech, students have to take into account the norms of etiquette, communication styles, the system of relationships between members of a certain socio-cultural community, etc. A foreign language PBL has a number of features:

- it is based on a certain situation, which is designed with information gap and involves learners in seeking the lacking knowledge in order to solve the problem;
- it should focus on practical and professional subject-matter, corresponding to the students’ interests;
- it exploits a great deal of independent activity of students.

However, at the beginning the teacher may suggest some ideas for the project development; specify some problems that can be further expanded by the students. The teacher’s task is to awaken the students’ interest to the issues, focus their attention on achievement of the result, challenge them to create a product by taking part in various activities (relevant website search, a PowerPoint-presentation, pair and group discussions, a talk show, a poster talk, a telephone conversation, listening to audio media, etc.). To achieve the goal, solve the problems and demonstrate the results of the activities, the students have to work together, which involves the development of such socially important qualities as mutual respect, tact, ability to express and accept criticism, to resolve conflict. While implementing PBL teaching methods within a FL course at the university level we motivate students to work on tasks associated with their future professional field and develop interdisciplinary ties. Techniques of “brainstorming”, “round table”, and “project presentation” can be used to help students learn how to identify the problem, set the goals, suggest hypotheses to solve problems, discuss research methods, analyse information in the foreign language, make conclusions, draw results of the research.
3. Implementation of professional PBL in the course “German for Professional Communication”

3.1. Participants of the experimental learning

According to the suggested topic we organized the project activity of students of National Research Tomsk State University – Bachelors at the Faculty of Economics and the International Faculty of Management. The project activity was based on the topics within the course “German as the language of professional communication”: “The economy of Germany and Russia”, “Enterprises in Russia and Germany”, “Trade fairs and exhibitions in Germany”, “Business discourse” and others. Groups of students were divided into two teams: Group A and Group B.

3.2. Procedure

We divided the implementation of the tasks within the project “Business discourse” into several stages. In the first stage of implementation students discussed the goals and objectives of the project, selected several types of business conversations: the meeting, discussion of sales, business negotiations, interviews / applying for a job, and developed tasks for each of them. In the second stage, project participants were divided into two groups: Group A were the representatives of Russian culture, and Group B were the representatives of the German culture. In these groups, they discussed the key points of the project. Responsibilities of the project participants were distributed. Each group gathered information by working with authentic texts from various sources (periodical materials, online publications), gave their definition of the selected types of business discourse, prepared and developed the procedures for business interactions. Interim results of research were regularly discussed in groups. The teacher advised on the language during the implementation of the project. In the third stage students summarized the information gathered and fulfilled tasks that were developed.

By the time of the second project “German-Russian joint venture”, the participants already had the appropriate level of language, and communicative, intercultural and professional competence.

It is therefore proposed to organize it with undergraduates or graduate students who have gone the necessary preliminary training. According to our approach we suggest PBL implementation to be divided into several stages. In the first stage of the project activity the students discuss the following questions: In what country the Joint Venture is created (Russia or Germany)? Which economy sectors will it be in? What should be the annual turnover? How many departments will the company include and how many people will be employed there? On which foreign markets will its products be presented? What foreign companies will it cooperate with? The students choose the company name. In the second stage, all project participants are divided into two groups: group A - the staff of the German side, the group B - the staff of the Russian side. Representatives of each party should prepare detailed information about their own country, the companies operating in this sector, the staff employed in the given industrial sector, etc. Particular attention is paid to communication in the professional world considering the mentality, customs and habits of cultures, and particular attention is paid to: the hierarchy, the attitude to authority, leadership style, whether the staff communicates using “you” or “You”, attitude to the trainees, punctuality in official visits and informal, non-verbal communication (body language, gestures, etc.), characteristic traits in clothing, food habits, leisure. In the third stage the group presented employees of their country and provided detailed information about all the points to their counterparts in another country. Groups discussed important points that partners needed to know about each other. In the fourth stage of this project, students conducted detailed analysis in the framework of cross-cultural communication and discussed socio-cultural aspects, which were identified in cross-cultural communication.

During the lessons with profession-related PBL implementation teachers can develop the learners’ communication skills and socio-cultural awareness through the knowledge of the following culture and business communication components: schedule and rules of everyday life; communication formula; norms of behavior (courtesy, etiquette, accuracy); taboo subjects; themes for «small talk»; non-verbal communication; customs and traditions; values and norms relevant to business communication and economic issues: knowledge of traditions and the place their future specialty holds in this socio-cultural society; knowledge of typical situations of delegating roles within the oral and written communication.
3.3. Discussion

Our experimental learning has shown that the process of PBL should include several stages.

- In the process of working on the projects students of each group give their definition of each type of business discourse with the characteristics of each culture.
- Then students apply business communication skills in accordance with the designed plan (paying special attention to attitudes in business conversations, the use of different lexical items in similar situations, different views about the ethics of business conduct).
- Along with participation in the whole group project, each student participates in one of the proposed business situations first in Group A, and then in Group B, demonstrating knowledge of cultural peculiarities, applying standards of conduct and etiquette norm of business culture as well as the ability to understand and rely on socio-cultural awareness.

Among the implemented projects the most interesting ones in terms of development of socio-cultural competence turned out to be professionally-oriented projects “Business discourse” and “German-Russian joint venture”. Along with participation in the whole group project, each student prepared a presentation within the framework of the suggested topic, analysed his personal and professional growth in learning the foreign language in the context of the chosen theme.

To develop socio-cultural competence in students outside classroom, we encourage them to use authentic sources from the Internet, which can be regarded, in the context of our educational objectives as a virtual socio-cultural language environment, which provides information on aspects related to their future professional activities, not only within their own culture, but also the culture of Germany, which is highly effective in stimulating students' independent work.

All in all, a professional foreign language PBL has great educational potential according to our estimation. Foreign-language projects allow teachers to work with a foreign language basing on the principles of socio-cultural focus. While working on the projects, students solve problems that contribute to the formation of socio-cultural competence and implement their creativity. As a foreign language is being used in situations that are as close to the reality as possible, including career-oriented situations, students see the feasibility of using a foreign language in practice.

4. Conclusion

PBL method in the German language lessons for non-language-majoring students activates socio-cultural competence formation due to deeper understanding of another culture, partners’ manner of behaviour in the context of professional business communication, and develops the ability to communicate with German partners and cooperate with them. Thus, profession-related PBL method is an effective means for socio-cultural competence formation in the students of various specialties.

References

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