Students’ Professional Contests as a Tool for Motivation outside the Classroom

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Abstract

The paper looks through motivation of the law students at Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia in language learning and especially learning (language for specific purposes (LSP)). The objective for the paper was to establish a link (direct or indirect) between the success in English and obtaining professionalism via participation in different competitions, and particularly taking part at Willem C. Vis Annual International Commercial Arbitration Moot Court in Vienna. The authors have been involved in students’ training since 2011 and have seen the change of attitude and the success of the team as well as the insight. A teacher needs to find the student’s motives to be able to accommodate them. According to the Webster’s, to motivate means the act or process of giving someone a reason for doing something: the act or process of motivating someone, the condition of being eager to act or work; the condition of being motivated; a force or influence that causes someone to do something. The paper tries to explore how the above statements work regarding the students’ professional contest potential for their future careers.

1. Introduction

After the fall of the “Iron Curtain” there has been a great increase in language learning and teaching. Thousands of people, young and old threw themselves into foreign languages, mostly English. However, some decades later we have witnessed a little indifference in LSP by some students. This was partly due to difficulty in LSP teaching,

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because the country did not have far too many specialists in LSP itself, or the learners found it not easy. In a way it needed some hard-working and devotion by both the educators and the learners.

The foreign languages department at the Law Faculty of Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (PFUR) decided to start a new era in language teaching, trying to motivate students with some incentives. We established a few student conferences, devoted to legal aspects, as well as translating methodology and practice. The department started this deal having only thirty students taking part. Soon the number doubled and even went three fold. Now we had participants from about ten institutions of Russia and even some on line participants from abroad. Our students started taking part in other conferences with a number of two or three. Today we can choose from among best of the best and reject some week issues. The department has had to go beyond the traditional standards of legal education, to engage students in language mediation as part of lawyer’s professional performance in the multicultural environment (Atabekova, 2011).

In 2011, realizing that the department has a lot to go and reveal all its potential, the department decided to engage students in international events, such as Philipp C. Jessup International Law moot or Willem C. Vis Annual International Commercial Arbitration Moot Court in Vienna. A few enthusiast students searched the net and decided to try the latter. The motivation of the students was average but not high as they were not very certain that professors or teachers might be able to assist them. After having questioned some teachers they discovered some enthusiasts to assist them. Two of the volunteers were the authors of this issue.

The main motivation of the students was the mere desire to get good marks at the exam as they wanted to make a good impression on the examiners. A lot has changed during the preparation to this world event.

The present research focuses on the students’ motivation regarding their foreign language and professional context training within outside the classroom activities. The issue of students’ participation in professional contests in foreign languages is in the focus. To start with it is necessary to map the concept of motivation for further research.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. What is motivation?

Motivation is a desire to achieve a goal, combined with the energy to work towards that goal. The word motivation makes us think of a goal, effort, desire, energy, active involvement, persistence. A teacher must know the sources of motivation to be able to support the learner’s desire to success.

The learner’s intrinsic satisfaction is number one. It is based on the learner’s natural interests (Rowell & Eunsook, 2013). Then there comes the extrinsic reward: the teacher/institution/employment. Satisfaction and reward together make the success in the task (Fisher, 1990).

"The best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which learning has occurred." (Bruner, 1960, p. 31).

As a matter of fact, people like doing what they do well, and are therefore more likely to do it again, and put in more effort. Thus, those students who develop an image of themselves as 'no good at English’ will simply avoid situations which tell them what they already know — that they are not any good at English. It can lead to a downward spiral of a self-perception of low ability – low motivation – low effort – low achievement – low motivation – low achievement, and so on (Littlejohn, 2001, p. 7).
To be able to speak about motivation one should remember its aspects (Gardner, 1985):

1. A Goal (reason for learning),
2. An Effort (effortful behavior),
3. A Desire to attain the goal,
4. Favorable Attitude toward the activity in question.

Motivation is also defined as the impetus to create and sustain intentions and goal-seeking acts (Ames & Ames, 1989).

Gardner also describes core second language learning motivation as a construct composed of three characteristics:

- the attitudes towards learning a language (which he called affect),
- the desire to learn the language (want), and
- motivational intensity (effort).

We need to remember that in the classroom students who do well in the language are more confident than those who are not. Feelings of failure can lead to a downward spiral of a self-perception of low ability – low motivation – low effort – low achievement – low motivation – low achievement.

"Motivation to learn is a competence acquired through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by significant others (especially parents and teachers)." (Brophy, 1987).

2.2. What influences motivation?

Six factors that impact motivation in language learning are: attitudes; beliefs about self; goals; involvement; environmental support; personal attributes. Language acquisition is the result of interplay between cognitive mechanism and environmental conditions. Thus understanding and creating optimal language learning environments becomes a primary concern of the language teacher. Teachers can observe circumstances under which learners acquire language and are able to make adjustments toward creating optimal learning conditions. While designing learning activities, the language teacher should remember that learners must be given opportunities to participate as language users in multiple contexts because language learning or mastering focuses on both the accuracy and appropriateness of application in various contexts of use (Bransford, et al. 1990). These opportunities will result in learners’ increased motivation and awareness of the intricacies of language use. Huitt (2011) suggests that via intrinsic and extrinsic motivation teachers can increase their students motivation.

Learners should recognize a real need to accomplish learning goals that are relevant. This prepares them for the complexities of real-world tasks that require them to use language skills and knowledge that have to be continually transferred.

Motivation is a desire to achieve a goal, combined with the energy to work towards that goal (UniSA). Students who are motivated have a desire to undertake their study and complete the requirements of their course.

The above conceptual framework has laid grounds for specifying research objectives, methodology and stages.

3. Objectives, Methodology, Stages

The research objectives were to observe the process of students’ engagement into the professional contest in a foreign language to understand the reasons, essence and aspects of their motivation, to identify stages and activities that required motivation, to specify possible motivation techniques for them. Our preliminary hypothesis was that such an event required students’ motivation in terms of their professional awareness, social aspects, foreign language (English) skills mastery.

The methodology included literature review to map the conceptual framework of the research (see the previous section), training sessions for students, their participation in the contest for the period of 5 years, observation of the process, discussion of the empirical information.

The experiment has been conducted at the Law Institute of Peoples’ friendship University of Russia.
At start there were 5 students wishing to participate in Willem C Vis Moot Court in 2011. Several times we faced a hurdle: no or very little information about the procedure, action itself and many others. Soon, after having written a hundred page memoranda of the Claimant and Respondent, the team started its preparation to the games. To be able to control all the pleadings, the department purchased a Sony camera and started making video of every event the team participated. Later there were discussions and arguments, corrections and brushing of English, as well as legal English. The department started working with Civil law department, cooperating with a teacher of it.

The first participation of the team was a great success, bringing it the 194th place among about 300 teams worldwide.

Next year (2012) brought even more students to the team and a bigger problem for the coaches: the necessity to choose the best of them. Now we saw a competition among the participants, devotion to hard work. The previous desire to get a good mark now was not essential. There were 8 students and only 5 of them must have been chosen for Vienna. This is due to the funding by the university. It was a hard work to do, but the result of team was better – the 174th place.

2013 saw 13 students and 154th place (only 5 students participated in Vienna). The return of team was also victorious. One of them was noticed by Baker and McKenzie and offered a job. It is where now we witnessed a boom in LSP learning. Students from different courses and different language level were ready to do their utmost to become the team member. This brought the coaches a bulk of difficulties as almost each participant could have become a team member. But the requirements to the candidate were also very high. Not every student was able to carry out the pace. Hard work made some candidates to stand away.

2014 and 2015 were also years full of excitement and competitiveness, as in 2014 another former participant became Baker and McKenzie employee. The number of candidates was 15 and 20 people accordingly. Some of them were even ready to go to Vienna at their own expenses for the mere reason to participate in just one round of pleading.

The coaches have not seen this kind of motivation for a long time and each year brings us a dilemma: who to choose, though almost every year we renew the team because some of the team members graduate and leave the university. But now when the machine is well designed, it is only the coach who should assess the readiness of each potential participant. (It is necessary to mention that the PFUR team is the 126th in this competition and this fact has a great impact on the growing motivation of the learners).

4. Discussion: Our expectations

Taking into consideration that foreign language teachers are linguists and not lawyers but linguists, we assume the role of running the class, improving students’ speaking, listening and writing comprehensions, adjusting them to the on-going changes in legal language, at the same time giving them some freedom of choice while making presentations. The environment itself is fully devoted to the main goal – motivating students to speak English, think English, and act English. Speaking the truth, the last two aspects are quite difficult. L1 differs from L2, Common law and Continental law also contributes to arising of difficulties.

At PFUR the department of foreign languages considers using advanced way of education as one of the means of motivating students. We welcome the so-called “on-spot” tasks when students are invited to analyze a concrete case from legal practice related to the textbook unit from ILEC (International Legal English Course book by Cambridge) and/or from other sources (see British and Irish Legal Information Institute, http://www.bailii.org/).

The same way we train our PFUR team for the International Willem C. Vis Moot Courts on Commercial Arbitration. Any position, either Claimant or Respondent is first prepared, checked, discussed. After that the team gathers together, and a Claimant/Respondent presents his/her positions in front of his/her colleagues and the camera. Mistakes are fixed both by the teacher and the team members, not to say anything about the camera. Questions are asked, remarks are done. Do we conclude that the job is over? Not yet. There is the camera, the judge that fixes everything: gestures and postures, voice, eye contact and a lot of other things that eventually well describe the Counsel, gain scores for the team, or at least prepare the future lawyer for public speech. It is the modern technologies that can help us at this point. In our multimedia classroom we watch the film on a large screen, making all the necessary stops and returning to the arbitrary point.
Information perception, identification of key items, reprocessing, argumentation, self-evaluation, team-based discussion are the key stages that students pass through while combining their psychological abilities to evaluate the audience and counter partners, understanding legal features of the case and the adversarial party’s position, trying to make their best in terms of using foreign language for professional purposes. Thus, both cognitive and social abilities should be motivated.

Each period requires particular techniques to motivate students at each stage of the relevant activities, including visual effects, special attention to gestures, other participants’ physical position and movements, questions, structured debates within focus groups, etc. Although it should be mentioned that a lot depends on students’ individual character traits and their interpersonal relations. That is why the teacher trainer is expected to draft the cognitive actions plans for the training sessions, assigning each student with a number of behaviour repertoires that vary from session to session. What is more, the above planning should foresee each student professional, social, emotional values. (Motivation of various values is understood after: Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Kugler & Lanham, 2012). The above techniques contribute to the holistic approach to the students’ motivation reinforcement on both personal and team levels (the levels of motivation are understood after: Hume & Don Mills, 2011).

Such an approach contributes to the systemic multidimensional motivational paradigm of the students’ training that would take into account each team member and the overall team weak and strong points, and would be tailored to various stages of students’ quasi professional activities during both training sessions and the context itself.

During the contest itself, students are eager to fulfill their task with maximum quality as they are going to win a prize. At the same time, after the contest, each of the participants can know what points have been reduced. This allows students to perform introspection work and to avoid similar mistakes in the future activities. Participation in the contests under study allows students to not only to improve their professional skills, but also to assess themselves in comparison with their classmates. Those who did not participate in the event see the success of their fellow students and also seek to reach their level, knowing that this is possible.

5. Conclusion

One of the priorities of higher education is to develop creative thinking, professional and general cultural competence of graduates. The requirements of the labor market are now linked not only with the ability to use the knowledge and apply it in the professional sphere, but also with the readiness to search for new knowledge, to use it wisely, to adapt actively to the new systems, to do lifelong learning throughout life. Professional motivation is the main internal driving factor. Thus it should be taken into account when planning students’ activities in and outside the classroom. The students’ participation in professional contests should be viewed as part of non-formal learning integrated into the academic curriculum (Keller, 1987).

The modern society views the goal to train highly qualified specialists as one of the higher education key priorities. The process of improving the university-based training of future experts is quite complicated and depends on many factors. One of them refers to the adequacy of students’ awareness and attitude regarding the importance and specifics of the future profession. The respective perceptions turn out to be obligatory conditions for the formation of socially matured personalities. The students’ participation in the contests above portrayed is seen as an important instrument to achieve the respective goal.

The students’ participation in professional contests enhances both their learning and professional motivation. Students are encouraged to explore specifics of their future profession in concrete settings; students obtain comprehension of their urgent social needs (such as self-development, self-knowledge, professional development, improvement of social status, etc.).

The motivation of students’ cognitive abilities and social skills motivation is considered one of the components of the training, a substantial element of a holistic education process.

The development of motivation techniques should be based on the integrated approach that combines a thorough analysis of students’ needs, abilities, knowledge, skills, and interpersonal relations inside the team.
References


