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**Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future**

**“CASE STUDY” AS A WAY TO DEVELOP SOFT SKILLS AT  
UNIVERSITY**

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*Abstract*

The article deals with the problem of soft skills formation and social capital development which is considered to be of major importance for building a successful career. It focuses on the need to involve the potential of humanities, namely ESP, into the process of specialist training. The notion of hard skills and soft skills is defined. The constituents of soft skills are presented. The role of English in professional activity is considered. The most effective means and methods of teaching ESP in this context, as the authors see them, are described. The authors distinguish approaches and methods optimal for achievement of the stated research objectives. The study's findings indicate that case study alongside with contextual approach, the problem method and the active learning methods provide more powerful tools to develop students' skills of professional collaboration in the English-speaking environment. The history of case study approach, its specific features and application are outlined. The authors highlight the opportunities to use the mentioned-above method on the second educational level which allows students to put into practice the theoretical knowledge they gained. The advantages of using the method are analyzed. Some practical recommendations of implementation the considered approach are given. The results of the research demonstrate the effectiveness of case study over traditional teaching methods.

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**Keywords:** Soft skills, social capital, case study.



## **1. Introduction**

Higher engineering education in Russia has faced the problem of training a professional able to work effectively in the contemporary world. The professional activities are influenced by the globalization trends. The creation of economic and political unions that mitigate the importance of state borders and the development of transnational corporations imply carrying out professional activities in multicultural environment. English has come the language of international communication. Thus, the Foreign Language courses should play a key role in training students for multicultural professional interaction.

Modern society changes are reflected in the changes of the requirements for the process and the results of the training of a professional. Along with the hard skills, the universal competencies (aka the soft skills) are also significant for the process of socialization of young professionals, their employment and professional growth.

### **1.1. Hard skills and soft skills in the system of specialist training**

The terms hard skills and soft skills were introduced in 1959-1972 by Dr. Paul G. Whitmore, who studied the training system for US Army personnel.

Unlike hard skills, which can be defined as professional skills in their traditional sense, soft skills are unspecialized skills related to personal qualities and social skills that determine the success of a person's participation in professional activities. The importance of developing high skills in vocational training has been pointed out by a number of Russian and foreign researchers (Botke, Jansen, Khapova, & Tims, 2018; Hartanto, Lubis, & Rizal, 2017; Itani & Srour, 2016; Ivonina, Chulanova, & Davletshina, 2017; Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, Kristin, & Moore, 2015; Lyz, Lyz, & Opryshko, 2018; Ramkumar & Rajini, 2018).

### **1.2. The role of the foreign language in the specialist training system**

Since the Foreign Language course belongs to the humanities, it primarily contributes to the creation of a humanitarian educational environment. According to Bordovskaya (2016), this environment makes possible the creation of conditions “for intellectual development and usage of students' creative potential as preparation for future professional activities” (p. 11). This becomes possible due to new humanitarian technologies and growing importance of integrating technological and humanitarian approaches. The Foreign Language course contributes to the formation and development of both hard skills (a significant amount of professionally significant literature, studied by students, is presented in a foreign language; participating in conferences also implies the ability to present reports and projects in a foreign language and discuss them) and soft skills (communicative competence, personality traits and emotional intelligence are all being developed in the Foreign Language classes). The notion and significance of social capital is considered and the role of a foreign language in its formation is also emphasized (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Sidelnik, Melnik, & Lutsenko, 2018; Soldatova & Chigarkova, 2018).

English is the main language of professional communication, especially for information security specialties. As the most part of information and documents necessary for students such as standards for information security, a considerable part of scientific publications, websites of professional communities are presented in English. The importance of English for professional socialization of a future specialist is

indicated by the requirements of certain English Proficiency Level tested during the job application process. The value of a modern specialist is determined by their ability to integrate into the global.

## **2. Problem Statement**

We believe that Foreign Language course at university should contribute to the development of soft skills and hard skills, as well as social capital of a future specialist. This approach to the organization of the learning process allows university graduates to successfully socialize and increase their labour market competitiveness. In the future, the soft skills and the social capital of a specialist will be useful for their career development.

### **2.1. The role of Soft Skills and social capital in the process of socialization of students**

Foreign Language communicative competence, social capital as well as soft skills facilitate entry into the international professional community and further socialization. This course allows students develop a level of foreign language communicative competence, sufficient enough to take advantage of the opportunities provided by student mobility programs. Acquaintance with the cultural features of different countries and the process of comparing them with the culture of the student's native country are also parts of the Foreign Language course. It is aimed at developing the realization of each student's cultural identity, mitigating the cultural shock and preparing students for interaction with people from different cultures (the cross-cultural dialogue). The Foreign Language course, together with the other humanities, contributes to the cultivation of tolerance, respect for nature and the human rights. Communicative technologies, studied by students during the Foreign Language classes, allow future professionals to increase their level of competitiveness in the global labour market and build successful careers.

We believe that in the process of training a competent specialist a fundamental role is assigned to the formation and the development of their universal competences (soft skills). By this term we mean a combination of certain personal qualities, emotional intelligence and communicative competence, which allow a specialist to achieve professional success (Ovcharenko & Salnaya, 2015).

We highlight the following personal qualities as universal competencies: self-organization, creative thinking, ability to educate yourself, adaptability, flexibility, stress resistance, optimism, leadership skills, the ability to achieve goals, the ability to recover from failures.

As basic components of emotional intelligence we consider the following: empathy, the ability to properly evaluate and correctly express emotions, self-examination, self-esteem, the ability to manage emotions, the ability to correctly interpret emotions of the interlocutor, the ability to understand and use the ideas and current trends in the development of science and society, self-motivation.

The most important elements of communicative competence are: the teamwork skills, the ability to represent your ideas and results of your work, verbal and non-verbal communication, communication skills when using a foreign language, persuasiveness, the ability to defend your point of view, awareness and acceptance of social and ethical norms of communication.

## **2.2. Approaches and methods to develop Soft Skills and social capital in the learning process**

It seems obvious that in order to successfully train a specialist for professional activities within the international professional community, it is necessary to create optimal learning conditions. By optimal learning conditions we mean such a method that, while being communicatively-oriented, would take into account students' professional interests and help prepare students for future professional interaction. The main prerequisite for the development of soft skills and the formation of social capital during the learning process is the inclusion of learning activities within the ESP into the analogue of future professional activities and modeling the processes of solving professional tasks.

The contextual approach, the problem method and the active learning methods are implemented in form of performing problem tasks, projects, working on articles, participating in conferences and business games, which recreate situations of professional communication. Some researchers (Faltis, 1997; Medvedeva, 2015; Safina, & Salieva, 2018; Zemlinskaia & Fersman, 2018) believe that these methods increase students' motivation, develop the ability to work independently and determine the objectives of the work, the stages and methods of its execution, exercise self-control and self-esteem and present the results of work.

## **3. Research Questions**

It should be noted that, despite the recognition of the importance of the Foreign Language course for the training of specialists, there are several contradictions in the system of higher education:

- the requirements of the rapidly developing society to the results of professional training at university and the inability of the educational system to prepare competitive specialists who would fully meet such requirements;
- the students' need to acquire behavioral experience, the formation of social capital in situations of professional communication and a lack of a training system that would provide such an opportunity;
- the need of enterprises and organizations for specialists who have already developed soft skills and a lack of programs and courses aimed at their development at university;
- the need for constant self-education of students, development of their ability to accumulate knowledge, process and transform it into professional experience and a lack of necessary competences to do so;
- potential of the ESP and its insufficient implementation in the system of modern higher vocational education.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the research is to study the teaching aids used by ESP instructors at Southern Federal University, which give the students the opportunity to effectively develop soft skills and form social capital in foreign language classes. Studying a foreign language with an emphasis on professional socialization and career building helps students prepare to join the professional community, successfully interact with colleagues and build their own career paths.

We believe that case-study is one of the most effective methods for the professional and communicative socialization of students.

The use of the “case study” method in the process of teaching contributes not only to the active formation of such professional qualities as interpersonal skills, leadership, the ability to analyze a large amount of information in a short time and make decisions under stress and with insufficient information, but also to the development of the system of values, professional positions, ideas and viewpoints of students.

The “case study” method has been used in Russia to train students of economic, legal and medical specialties since the 1990s. The use of this method makes it possible to heighten cognitive interest in the disciplines under study and improve the understanding of economic laws; it also contributes to the development of research, communication and creative decision-making skills, since one of the prerequisites of this method is the authentic content to create cases that brings the real world into the language teaching classroom. And while the case-study method is already widely used in such disciplines as medicine, law, management, and economics, it is still rarely used in the teaching of foreign languages. That is despite the fact that Christina Uber Grosse (1988) in her work “The Case Study Approach to Teaching Business English” described all the advantages of using this method in teaching foreign languages:

As a method for teaching English, case studies combine many of the latest techniques currently advocated by researchers and practitioners in the profession. They teach language through content, rather than through grammatical or lexical exercises. Content material is business-related, and thus of greater relevance and interest to the student in a business language course than non business subject matter. Case studies are typically authentic materials which present the students with actual business problems to analyze and solve, in contrast with more traditional materials that consist of dialogues or reading selections about business topics. They constitute an integrated skill approach that develops reading, oral and aural skills. Of necessity the class is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered, as students assume some of the responsibility for the direction of class discussion and for their own learning. Instructional techniques used to present case study materials include student-directed, small group discussions, role plays, and simulations rather than lectures or structured drills. Learning activities center on problem-solving and situational analysis instead of question-answer or close-ended exercises, and tend to develop critical reasoning skills. The combination of these characteristics distinguishes the case study approach from any single method of teaching English as a second language (p. 131-132).

As noted above, the “case study” method has found wide application in business schools, but we believe that this method can be the integral element of teaching foreign languages, which will both increase the motivation and interest of students, and contribute to the development of independent analytical thinking, the ability to listen and take into account the alternative point of view, the ability to work in a team and find the most rational solution to the problem.

It is most expedient to apply this method in foreign language classes at the second educational level, when students study Foreign Language for Special Purposes. At this educational level, students already have a sufficient amount of professional knowledge and can study a problem situation more competently,

reasonably present the solutions developed for each particular problem. The use of this method at Foreign Language lessons allows students to put into practice the theoretical knowledge they gained. At the same time, in the process of joint work, the development of the common intellectual and communicative potential of both the student and the teacher takes place.

The use of the “case study” method at university for teaching foreign languages enables students to get acquainted with authentic material on a specific problem. In addition, this method brings the learning situation much closer to real life, in comparison to the traditional methods of teaching foreign languages, when the teacher asks students to play situations from everyday life. Students will have to analyze and solve various problem situations in their future professional activities, make reports and present their solution to a problem to an audience that will make comments and analyze the proposed solution in detail. The case study method gives students the opportunity to develop the competencies that they will need in their future professional activities.

## **5. Research Methods**

An experimental academic group was organized at the Southern Federal University. In the course of the research, in order to test the effectiveness of the developed method various tests for students, developed by the authors of the research were used: diagnostic and final tests, computer test and oral tests. Also, students were offered a survey aimed at determining the level of satisfaction with the course.

47 students from 2 groups of specialties in the field of information security took part in the experimental group. The improvement of soft skills and professional foreign language communication skills in the most typical situations of professional activity we considered as the criteria for the effectiveness of the educational process.

## **6. Findings**

We believe that foreign language courses should effectively prepare students for fruitful and successful professional activities.

Thus, the choice of approaches, methods and means of training is determined by their usefulness for the formation and development of hard skills, soft skills, socialization, and the formation of social capital.

We consider the most important methods are ones of student-centered and problem-based learning in the context of professional activity. A particularly interesting and effective method for learning to communicate in the process of solving professional problems is, in our opinion, the case study (Sidelnik, Burenko, & Melnik, 2016; Salnaia, 2017).

The case study has several advantages over traditional teaching methods.

1. Regardless of whether the work on a case is conducted individually or in a group, it implements the principles of student-centered learning. It allows each student to choose their own role and degree of involvement, depending on student's willingness and capability. This choice optimizes the learning process of professionally oriented communication and develops positive motivation.

2. When choosing their role in solving the given problem and communicating during the case, students prepare to take part in real professionally oriented foreign language communication, to later choose their place in the professional community and to build their career.

3. The work on the case develops positive motivation as it is conducted in the context of future professional activities. Students gain experience of professionally oriented foreign language communication in simulated situations of professional communication. The essence of the work on the case most accurately reflects the essence of professional activity, which consists in the implementation of various cases.

4. The case study involves a number of actions that develop such necessary qualities for a modern specialist as flexibility of thinking, initiative, responsibility, ability to present the results of work in a suitable form, to defend their point of view. Solving problems in the process of fulfilling a case assignment activates students' verbal activity, develops their creative skills as well as the ability to apply their knowledge in practice, to attract knowledge from various fields to the case, to predict the results and possible consequences of different solutions, to find new, innovative ways to solve professional problems. All of the mentioned skills will be the key to students' successful professional activities in the future. In the course of the case, students develop cognitive skills, critical thinking, the ability to independently operate with acquired knowledge and navigate the information space.

5. The case always involves students dealing with problems, which can be either scientific, professional, or research, and in order to solve the problem, students need to think through the structure of the activity, its implementation strategy, put into practice knowledge from various fields, get the missing information, analyze the task and find an original solution to the problem. The case method involves the use of problem, search and research methods and the development of the problem as a whole; it aims students' efforts at achieving specific, meaningful result.

6. Working on cases, of course, also contributes to the experience of communicative behavior. In the course of presenting and discussing the results of the work, students form the skills of speaking coherently and convincingly, as well as the ability to present the results of their work and participate in dialogues and discussions within the framework of professionally oriented foreign language communication, and to realize their communicative goals.

The variety of cases, methods and forms of their implementation allows us to put into practice a person-entered, problem, communicative, contextual approach and teaching methods. At the second educational level, it is optimal to use research cases that are as close as possible to the scientific ones; role-playing cases that put students into the context of real professionally oriented communication situations; practice-oriented cases allowing the application of theoretical knowledge of students in practice.

The use of the case study changes the role of knowledge in the educational process: knowledge becomes a means of socialization, professional development rather than a goal of the learning process.

When approving the case topics and assessing their relevance and content, it is necessary to cooperate and consult with the teachers of special courses that are majors for students.

The last stage of the work is carried out in the form of a role-play. It is aimed at consolidating the grammatical and lexical sides of this topic, as well as including the case activity into the modified situations

of quasi-professional foreign language communication, thereby emphasizing the communicative orientation of the case activity.

Communication during the role-play allows each student to try different roles, to gain experience of professionally oriented foreign language communication. This will develop students' soft skills, and help in actual situations of professional foreign language communication.

Teaching students professionally-oriented foreign language communication within a role-play is achieved by simulating a variety of working situations, such as: finding and presenting information necessary for professional activities, solving professional problems, situations of presenting your ideas on the problem and defending them, participating in communication while working on the problem (project), presentations of the results of their work.

Along with the case implementation, students participate in scientific student conferences and role-plays etc. The topics correlate with problems that are solved in the course of the case (job interview, examination of information assets' security, international scientific conference, etc.).

It should be noted that the experimental training of ESP students at the Department of Foreign Languages at Southern Federal University was organized in such a way that the case study method was organically combined with role-plays and students' participation in various kinds of professional communication situations. During the experimental classes, the results of students' activities were reviewed objectively and subjectively.

The table 01 presents the results of diagnostic and final tests of the experimental and control groups.

**Table 01.** The results of diagnostic and final tests of the experimental and control groups

	<b>Diagnostic test average score</b>	<b>Final test average score</b>
Group 1 (control)	2,63	3,3
Group 2 (experimental)	2,65	3,8

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of learning experience and test results has led to the following conclusions:

- sociolinguistic knowledge acquired by students at university allows them to better socialize in the professional community and build their social capital;
- soft skills, purposefully developed in foreign language classes, increase the competitiveness of graduates in the labor market;
- the use of the “case study” method, based on the principles of contextual and problem-based learning, gives students the opportunity to gain skills in solving real problems, to improve teamwork, presentation and press conference skills, and, in general, skills of practical use of professionally oriented foreign language.

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