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**DIDACTIC POTENTIAL OF DISCUSSION TECHNIQUE IN
TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR PEDAGOGICS
STUDENTS**

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Abstract

The relevance of studying this problem is due to the demand for professionals with foreign language fluency in both national and foreign labour markets. Second-language skills for professional interaction are essential for building up competitive specialist's profессиogram. Thus, the role of Foreign Language as a course at the teacher training departments of universities has been increasing constantly. Language proficiency enables students of Pedagogics to understand and work effectively with the authentic sources of professional information, to express their own thoughts and ideas, demonstrate terminology proficiency in interpersonal and professional communication. In this context, this article aims to identify the didactic potential of discussion technique in teaching English to students of Pedagogics. The leading research method was the survey, conducted among 17 English language teachers of the university, and it highlighted a certain relationship between the frequency of discussion technique used and improving cognitive abilities of the student body, increasing their motivation, stimulating their speed of thought and open-mindedness. The paper sets out the strategies for organizing and conducting effective discussions such as active listening (listening comprehension), analytical thinking, priority of public speaking skills, constant collaboration and mutual criticism, and the complexity of the problems and topics discussed during the course. The authors identified the conditions under which discussion techniques are most effective and also established the aspects of discussion technique in teaching English to students of Pedagogics such as content-related, procedural and monitoring.

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Keywords: Discussion technique, language proficiency, communicative competence, cross-cultural communication, students of Pedagogics.



1. Introduction

1.1 Foreign language training priorities (academic context)

The improvement of language training of students in recent years has become a priority in education. The knowledge of foreign languages for professional communication is an integral component of competitive specialist profession. In this connection the role of discipline “Foreign Language” in the pedagogical departments of universities is constantly increasing. According to the Russian educational standards of the third generation the objectives of foreign language teaching in the sphere of pedagogics is the foreign language practice in interpersonal communication and professional activities, possession of the skills of arguments, participation in discussion. So it is worth mentioning that all these aspects lead to shaping the communicative competence. In this regard, there is an urgent need to identify the most effective learning forms and methods to achieve the goal – to form a solid communicative competence.

Among the most important competences that graduates need is the communicative competence - the one that is the focus of the teachers (Valeev et al., 2015; Sungatullina et al., 2016), and it involves the ability of free cross-cultural communication and participation in discussions in all spheres of human activity, in compliance with the social norms of verbal behavior. Foreign language competence will enable the future teachers *to understand and work with authentic sources of professional information* which will develop their potential to design and select an original set of exercises aimed at training speaking, reading, writing, listening and translating skills (competence in teaching methods), as well as unique skills to conduct research particularly in international comparative studies, *to express their own thoughts and ideas, exploit professional terminology in interpersonal and professional communication, participate in dialogues and debates, express and defend their point of view, give presentations and do reports – to have public speech skills.*

When learning vocationally oriented foreign language, based on interdisciplinary connections, one of the effective forms of teaching foreign language to students is their inclusion in active communication, which involves the co-curricular activities. To organize the said activities, special modes of study are necessary to simulate learning environments close to real practice, encourage students in active thinking and practice based on the material studied, develop communication skills, improve personal (emotional) contacts among the students, nourish such intellectual skills as analysis, synthesis, goal setting, and problem solving. In connection with the above, we focused on one of the important aspects of professional communication – dialogue speech, in particular, discussions. It involves free communication on professional issues, proper use of terminology, expression of personal opinion and the reinforcement of one’s arguments, the use of the relevant conversational clichés, the ability to compile and summarize the discussion.

1.2 Literature review

In general, the problem of organizing educational discussions is the subject of several papers. So Brookfield and Preskill consider that “discussion is a valuable and inspiring means for revealing the diversity of opinion that lies just below the surface of almost any complex issue” (Preskill, 2012).

Moreover they point out that discussion is “a particularly wonderful way to develop a fuller appreciation for the multiplicity of human experience and knowledge” (Preskill, 2012). We can’t but agree with Barbara Gross Davis who writes: “Class discussion provides students with opportunities to acquire knowledge and insight through the face-to-face exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. Initiating and sustaining a lively, productive discussion are among the most challenging of activities for an instructor” (Gross Davis, 1993).

Cazden (2001) believes that discussion is a basic principle of learning. She identified and analyzed four intellectual roles students try on while working in small groups: spontaneous helping, assigned teaching or tutoring, reciprocal critique, and collaborative problem-solving (Cazden, 2001).

The discussion-based approaches required changes on many levels: in the structure of moment-to-moment interactions among students and their teachers; in the ways that activities were orchestrated to support students’ developing understandings; and (to the extent that we could measure it) in the overall shape of the curriculum. All of these changes reflect an underlying emphasis on providing students with needed knowledge and strategies in the course of an active exploration of new ideas and experiences through challenging reading, writing, and discussion (Applebee et al., 2003; Mayher, 1990; Beck, 1997).

Nevertheless, Zhu and Baylen employed the case study method to effective learning. While working with the cases students formed a learning community by engaging in activities such as getting to know each other, setting up individual and group learning objectives, discussing, comparing and contrasting, analysing the information presented in the cases, sharing online resources and synthesizing the principles of instructional design. The cases offered a common ground for discussion and allowed for self-regulated learning and sharing of individual’s perspectives. Zhu and Baylen stressed that the discussion provided students with opportunities to defend their own positions and negotiate a common understanding of the basic concepts and principles (Zhu & Baylen, 2005).

An interesting point of view is expressed by Warren Lee, who warns about the origin of various unusual situations - hot moments - during the organization of debates. Hot moments can occur during the discussion of issues people feel deeply about, or as a result of classroom dynamics in any field. The challenges of dealing with hot moments are 1) to manage ourselves so as to make them useful and 2) to find the teaching opportunities to help students learn in and from the moment (Warren & Center, 2006).

Thus summarizing the above points of view on the discussion as a teaching method, we want to focus on the following:

Discussion is a means for revealing the diversity of opinions, for developing a fuller appreciation of the human experience and knowledge multiplicity. It helps students to acquire knowledge and insight through the face-to-face exchange of information, ideas, and opinions and develop skills in evaluating the evidence for their own and others' positions, promotes collaborative problem-solving, it improves students’ active listening, analytical thinking, and public speaking skills; encourages intellectual collaboration and reciprocal critique.

1.3 Literature review critique

As for the use of discussion technique is concerned, our long educational experience in teaching foreign language enabled us to identify the following potentials of discussion:

- social potential (shaping the skills and abilities of work in the learning community, problem solving in the collaboration, etc.)
- intellectual potential (shaping the skills and abilities of active generating new ideas and experiences)
- communication potential (shaping the skills of dialogical communication, teamwork, learning community, etc.)
- managerial potential (managing the process of the discussion, initiating it, organizing the process of preparation for it)
- teaching potential (shaping the skills and abilities of organizing and conducting discussions in the learning community).

The projection of the above potentials into the process of vocational training of future teachers actualizes the importance of discussion forms of work, as modern society today desperately needs an educator-intellectual, a methodologist who is capable of managing the educational process skillfully, effectively communicating with all its participants, being a behavior model for the students both in the educational and in any other community.

Despite the sufficient elaboration of using discussion techniques in higher vocational schools in the national and foreign academia, the problem of methods of organizing and evaluating the effectiveness, the didactic potential of the discussion in foreign language when teaching future teachers has not been fully resolved. Particular complexity is presented in the content as well as the procedural components of learning through discussion. This fact served the basis for conducting research on the content and technologies of organizing, conducting and evaluating a foreign-language discussion in a pedagogical university.

2. Problem Statement

Educational interaction in a modern university is characterized by a change in the nature of communication. Today, this is a multi-positional communication with the dominance of polylogue without a clear polarity and concentration on the only true “expert” point of view. Specific forms, methods, means of instruction for optimal and effective influence on cognitive activity of students are of particular value for practical teachers. Moreover, teachers are looking for the source of activity in shaping the communicative competences, both in native and foreign languages, in the students themselves, in the natural environment, in the personality of the teacher and the ways of his/her work, in the forms of interaction and relations between the teacher and the student.

The positive cumulative effect of the discussion that enables to stimulate students’ speaking activity in the process of learning a foreign language, gives it a special educational value and importance:

- compliance with the specifics of teaching a foreign language in the process of communication and the principles of a communicative approach to teaching foreign language in university;
- priority of the participants’ exchange of opinions, which implies their personal interest in the subject matter of the conversation and in achieving the communicative goal, thus prompting a motivated statement;
- relevance to the students’ age, to their emotional-sensory development;

- the implementation of interdisciplinary links while studying at the university and applied importance for students of non-linguistic universities;
- a positive post-effect in the form of search or cognitive activity due to the emotional push received during the discussion.

To achieve significant results in organizing the discussion in the process of teaching a foreign language at university, a teacher has to possess a high level of professional competence, thorough methodological and linguistic training, and repeated application of the discussion in the educational process. Students, in their turn, should master the linguistic means of expression in a foreign language.

The main reasons for the inadequate level of foreign language skills by students of non-linguistic (pedagogical) specialties are: - a low motivation for learning a foreign language (“Foreign language” as a discipline is secondary regarding to majors of the special cycle in the conditions of a non-linguistic university, the psycholinguistic specificity of mastering a foreign language); - significant time commitment, strong-willed effort in learning the language, insufficient knowledge of effective methods of memorizing and self-control skills; - “weakness” and insufficient professional competence of the teachers themselves regarding interactive technologies for teaching a foreign language, lack of an internal motivation, personal potential for the practical organization of active learning a foreign language, ill-preparedness to create an effective interactive parity educational environment at their lessons.

The study was attended by undergraduate and graduate students whose major is Pedagogics.

3. Research Questions

The process of language learning must reflect an underlying emphasis on providing students with needed knowledge and strategies in the course of an active exploration of new ideas and experiences, that’s why instructors must assign students interesting and meaningful tasks to facilitate their understanding and application of learning materials. Discussion helps students to form a learning community by being engaged in activities such as getting to know each other, setting up individual and group learning objectives, comparing and contrasting, analyzing the information presented in the cases, sharing online resources and synthesizing the principles of instructional design. The didactic potential of the discussion forms of work, the strategic approaches to their organization and implementation in the pedagogical university, the conditions for ensuring the effectiveness of the discussion in the lessons of a foreign language: these are the problems that we are trying to consider in our study.

4. Purpose of the Study

This article aims to identify the didactic potential of discussion technique in teaching English to students of Pedagogics. In this regard, the priority was to set out the strategies for organizing and conducting effective discussions, as well as to identify the conditions under which the discussion techniques are most effective.

5. Research Methods

For this study we used theoretical and methodological researches of national and foreign educators and psychologists on the problem of stimulating students' activity, the results of psychological and pedagogical studies in the motivational sphere of students, and the experience of teaching a foreign language at university. As research methods, we employed the analysis of literary sources, the method of comparing scholars' different points of view in classifying interactive teaching methods, theoretical analysis, as well as observation and analysis of classes using interactive methods, summarizing the experience of teaching foreign languages in university and our own extensive experience.

The study began on September 1, 2016 (Institute of Psychology and Education, Institute of Management, Economics and Finance of Kazan Federal University). The study involves 17 educators from 2 institutes, from 01.09.16 – undergraduate students (153 people) whose major is “Pedagogical Education” (10 profiles) within the discipline “Academic writing” (according to the curriculum of IPE KFU); additional discipline “Communicative technologies of professional interaction”; from 09.02.17 – graduates (54 people) whose major is “Pedagogical education with two profiles of training (Primary education and English)” in the discipline “Practice of English”. At the moment, the collaborative study continues.

6. Findings

The results of the summative stage of the experiment are shown in Table 01.

It provides the data on two types of oral activity: speaking and listening (the dominant types of oral activity in the discussion forms of work).

Table 01. Proficiency level in speaking and listening (monologue / polylogue) at the beginning of the study

Level	Type of oral activity	Type of oral activity
Graduates	Speaking: 1- low – 17% 2 - below average - 28% 3 – average - 46% 4 – above average - 5% 5 – high - 4%	Listening: 1- low – 18 % 2 - below average - 38% 3 – average - 32% 4 – above average - 9% 5 – high - 3%
Undergraduates	Speaking: 1- low - 7% 2 - below average - 40% 3 – average - 39% 4 – above average - 12% 5 – high - 2%	Listening: 1- low – 10 % 2 - below average - 56% 3 – average - 29% 4 – above average - 3% 5 – high - 2%

In assessing speaking skills, the following was taken into account: phonetic competence, grammatical competence, the scope and adequate use of vocabulary (including functional lexis), the semantic depth, speech rate, its tempo.

In assessing listening skills, the following was taken into account: adequacy of response to partners' utterances in the polylogue, speed of reaction to the utterances of the participants in the discussion

The discussion forms of work that were used in teaching the above disciplines were spontaneous - 10%, free - 25% and organized - 65%: spontaneous discussion on these parameters is not regulated, free discussion implies the definition of the theme and speaking time, the organized discussion is conducted according to the regulations and in the order established in advance. They include such forms as round table, panel meeting (panel discussion), forum, symposium, aquarium technique, brainstorming.

We kept to the fact that the debate is a method of teaching which is characterized by multidimensionality: it may be universal in nature that manifests itself in the possibility of its use both in teaching of special disciplines and in practice of foreign language learning; it may be of long-range nature which is reflected in the development stages of students learning continuity, thus fitting into the context of developing problem-based learning and promoting internal language potential of each group member and the formation of process thinking; then it may have constructive nature that declares itself in independent providing (under the supervision of a competent teacher) the evidence by the student, justifying the principles and approaches, using his/her personal experience.

We consider it viable to include such elements of discussion as problematic questions and situations that involve unexpanded oral responses of students with the use of various supports (functional-semantic tables, logical-syntactic schemes, logical-communicative problem maps) in the learning process. It is important to systematically use the training exercises aimed at the progressive mastering of various conversational clichés, question-answer utterances in a foreign language (expressing one's own opinion and asserting it, agreeing-disagreeing with the opponent's opinion, argumentation-counter-argumentation, expressing doubt, interest) for their subsequent usage during the discussion.

In the course of the study, we developed strategies for organizing and conducting effective discussions: active listening (listening comprehension), analytical thinking, priority of public speaking skills, constant collaboration and mutual criticism, and the complexity of the problems and topics discussed during the course.

Also, we managed to identify the conditions under which discussion techniques are most effective: friendly and open interaction, the participants' willingness to listen to and hear other positions and points of view, adequate information on the problem, opportunities to speak, detailed, correct reasoning of one's position, opportunities to ask questions. Here, it is necessary to emphasize the role of the teacher in organizing this kind of work.

When organizing a discussion, one should not forget about the ethics and rules of conduct in the process of communication. Our long experience of work and analysis of expert assessments allowed us to determine that successful discussion has to be conducted under the supervision of the teacher who keeps to and avoids the following moments: interrupting the participants in the discussion, allowing rudeness, avoiding repetition, encouraging the filling of speech with facts and arguments, the opportunity to speak out to all participants.

The teacher trains students for a discussion emphasizing the following aspects:

✓ content: 1) it is professionally oriented, based on interdisciplinary links; the latter we subdivide into a) actual - these are the connections between different subjects on the basis of scientific data, examples, arguments; b) conceptual - intersubject communications at the level of professional terms common to related subjects, concepts and ideas based on inter-subject links. 2) auxiliary-accompanying -

verbal clichés which are typical of discussions and debates, proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, the scope of the training material, evaluation of the student’s presentation. 3) accompanying 4) preemptive.

✓ procedural - 1) stage-by-stage training - the first stage - question-answer work; the second stage - drilling monologue utterances; the third stage - drilling dialogical statements; 2) rehearsal training – transition from mini-discussions to **professionally-oriented discussions** - to help students to formulate their own opinions using terminology, to clearly express their own point of view, to hear the opinion of opponents. 3) the transition to **professionally-oriented discussions based on informative peculiarity** - designate the purpose of the discussion; develop a plan for its implementation; correctly and logically think through questions; monitor the process; formulate and authorize the completion of the discussion. The culmination of such kind of a discussion should be coming to a mutual agreement. Discussion is accompanied by teacher’s corrective questions to comprehend, clarify, analyze, generalize and evaluate.

✓ supervising - the regular evaluation of the discussion is based on its results, the evaluation is given both by two “experts”, chosen constantly from among the students, which helps them to see and assess themselves “as others see” and by the teacher. The final evaluation is a consideration of the “pluses” and “minuses” of the discussion held by all participants of the process.

When preparing for the discussion, the students learned how to correctly formulate questions, touch upon the issues that are relevant to the problem, encourage, stimulate the statement, seek information from various sources; to systematize the material obtained; to build a system of arguments for asserting and denying the thesis, prepare a round of questions; to formulate and justify arguments; they mastered oratory and reasoning skills, learned to apply them in practice; mastered the skills of effective work in the group.

Positive results of the first stage of the experiment indicate a correctly chosen course in teaching a foreign language. After a series of control and diagnostic tasks, the following was revealed (Table 02):

Table 02. Speaking and listening proficiency (monologue / polylogue) (first results of the experiment)

Level	Type of oral activity	Type of oral activity
Graduates	Speaking: 1- low – 15% 2 - below average - 29% 3 – average - 47% 4 – above average - 5% 5 – high - 4%	Listening: 1- low – 17 % 2 - below average - 34% 3 – average - 37% 4 – above average - 9% 5 – high - 3%
Postgraduates	Speaking: 1- low - 5% 2 - below average - 41% 3 – average - 40% 4 – above average - 12% 5 – high - 2%	Listening: 1- low – 10 % 2 - below average - 53% 3 – average - 32% 4 – above average - 3% 5 – high - 2%

7. Conclusion

The analysis of literary sources on the use of interactive methods in the process of teaching a foreign language, as well as the observation and analysis of classes using interactive methods of teaching a foreign language enabled us to conclude that the method of discussion, having a considerable didactic

potential in stimulating students' oral activity, is one of the important means to intensify the educational process in the university. The shaping of students' speech activity, in turn, aims to prepare them for the profession, to improve speaking skills of students of pedagogical universities.

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