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TRAINING TEACHERS: INDEPENDENT LEARNING VS. TRAINING APPROACH IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract

Development of subject competence is essential and challenging in the teacher education field and is paid a considerable attention in teacher training programs. One of the key objectives of teacher education is development of foreign language communicative competence. A possible way to reach this goal could be an introduction of a specialized communicative competency-based module to the curriculum. Its content would focus on a system of activities used to develop speaking and writing skills, including sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects. As a result, it would be possible to develop a well-formed foreign language communicative competence of students. The research aims at identifying and systematizing the opportunities for active inclusion of students in the process of educational management and putting responsibilities for the results of training on students. In this context, a scrupulous attention is paid to the development of metacognitive competence, primarily, to acquisition of strategies, methods and techniques of learning by students. The research focuses on the key aspects of an original concept of a teacher training program which is designed to extend students' communicative competence in speaking.

Keywords: Student autonomy, learning autonomy, foreign language speaking skills training, communicative competence.

1. Introduction

The research problem should be regarded from two different perspectives. First, it is necessary to show why introduction of the specialized training module to the curriculum of the perspective foreign language teachers seems as a rational step in improvement the quality of teacher training, specifically, regarding the development of foreign language communicative competence. Its purpose is to carry out speech acts according to communication aims and situation by means of a nonnative language. Second, relevance of the concept of an autonomous learning should be emphasized as today it has gained a distinct significance. Development of an autonomous and flexible individual able and ready to act in varying and dynamically changing social contexts is identified as the main objective and value of education (Nasonova, 2009, p.318).

Introduction of training modules for the development of foreign language communicative competence claims its rationality in regard to the currently strengthening attention to the development of subject competence of students studying at teacher training universities. In this particular context, a good command of a foreign language, especially concerning speaking skills, becomes the main objective. Writing activities are still prevailing at foreign language classes which accounts for the fact that teachers and instructors themselves are far from being fluent in a language they teach.

This situation raises major concerns, especially when taking into account the fact that a foreign language will be a compulsory subject among the State Unified Exams (SUE) from 2022. Every pupil will have to pass this exam to get a school certificate. In 2020 the pilot project will start in some regions of Russia. This should lead to improvement of the quality of foreign language teaching at schools. Introduction of training modules for the development of foreign language communicative competence could become a small part of such improvement.

'Speaking' will be a structural part of the SUE which might also be altered as suggested by Professor Barinova from Moscow State Linguistic University (Ivoylova, 2017). With that in mind, a concept of the specialized training modules for the development of foreign language communicative competence was created at Kazan Federal University. The research examines the module designed to develop foreign language speaking skills.

In many respects, the crisis of the modern education system is not caused by insufficiency of a training process but by absolutely different factors. Alignment of the educational process with the outdated system of social cooperation instead of a new born society is one of the reasons behind this crisis (Toffler, 1970). At its very best the process of education becomes 'a means to understand the present' (Toffler, 1970), whereas 'contemporary societal evolution requires a brand new system of education, an innovative education' (Stolyarenko, 2016) that would be capable of forming students' abilities to predict and adequately influence future and take responsibility for it, to believe in themselves and their professional competencies.

Taking into account the main tendencies of educational development – namely its proactive nature (i.e. to teach students to set own subject-related routes and identify spheres of professional implementation) and being a tool for an individual to get adjusted to the environment (to be ready to change professional activities, be able to adjust to constantly changing social, technological, professional standards) – educational institutions were instructed to reformulate their agenda according to the contemporary

framework that is to teach university students how to learn. This idea is especially important in the context of training pre-service teachers. They have to learn how to learn and they should teach their students how to learn. In this regard, providing students with possibilities of autonomy and autonomous learning is highly significant.

Autonomous (independent) individual is an individual capable of making responsible decisions, engaging in dialogues with others, independently acquiring knowledge and constructing an active lifelong self-education route. Learning autonomy means that students participate in the process of educational management and take responsibility for educational outcomes. This approach enables us to bypass excessive prescriptivism, lack of individual approaches, strict system of distribution of places, streaming of students, standard knowledge evaluation, from all that makes contemporary education an effective instrument for adaptation to the conditions of the outgoing industrial society (Toffler, 1970).

2.   Problem Statement

Trainings have become an intrinsic part of the methodological repertoire in teaching various subjects. Training technology of active learning is relatively new for teaching foreign languages. There are different approaches to defining 'training in foreign languages'. Ovchinnikova and Kobzeva (2015) define training as a design of learning situations that are close to reality with subsequent role-playing during the class. The authors describe its goals and the ways to set them, attributes of training, its main discrepancies from traditional lessons, while still fitting into the framework of the psychological training concept (Zakharova, 2008). A Bulgarian scholar Naimushin (2009) is of almost the same opinion concluding that teaching translation should be performed in a manner of a psychological training based on an interactive game. He introduces training as a means of coping with stress that future translators and interpreters might be under during the educational process.

Other scholars employ the method of training during an intercultural communication that accompanies the process of foreign language teaching, including teaching Russian as a foreign language (Elizarova, 2005; Belenkova, 2010).

Authors' concept of training aimed at the development of foreign language communicative competence is presented in the second section of this paper. The theoretical and methodological frameworks of the concept are aligned with the ideas formulated by Shchepetkova (2011) who explains the rationale behind employing training when teaching students majoring in linguistics. The concept adopts the same approach which prioritizes teaching of a language although the sociocultural context is given a great significance, too. In addition, there are other common features that unite the concepts. For example, an understanding of training as a means of adopting a proactive attitude, critically analyzing own experience. Also, perceiving training as a technology which aims at obtaining specific results, but which is considered, on the one hand, as an opportunity to receive, secure and systematize acquired knowledge, and on the other hand, as an opportunity to personalize the process of education. In this respect, the concept of student autonomy and independent learning coincides with a requirement to be consciously and actively involved in the education process considering a learner's specific communicative needs.

Definition of student autonomy was first given by Littlewood (1995, p.77). The scholar describes it as 'an ability to take responsibility for one's own learning activities regarding all its aspects: goal setting,

defining content of the educational process, choice of the methods and means used for it, managing the acquisition process, evaluating gained result'. Dickinson (1987) compares 'autonomy' to self-direction, individualized instruction and self-access instruction in resource centers. He distinguishes one common characteristic, namely responsibility of a student for learning and acquiring the new and defining the spheres of distributing these responsibilities in the educational process. Nasonova (2009) underlines that a core idea in understanding these terms is in determining degree of student's involvement in the process of learning management and the degree of their responsibilities. Littlewood (1995) stresses significance of a motivational aspect. Defining student autonomy in three dimensions, as a learner, as a communicator and as a person, he emphasizes that willingness appears to be a necessary basis for each of the dimensions and for the ability of a student to act independently. Willingness to take independent steps depends on a student's motivation and confidence, whereas their abilities depend on the level of skill and knowledge. Thus, the essence of educational autonomy is embodied in the development of student motivation, confidence, skills and knowledge that are necessary for independent learning (student autonomy as a subject of learning); for independent communication by the means of a language (student autonomy as a subject of communication); for being independent as an individual (their autonomy as an individual). Many scholars view the aspect of motivation as decisive when defining the autonomy (Trim, 1992).

In Russia the issues of autonomy in learning foreign languages were studied by Anikina (2011), Nikulina (2017), Solovova (2004), Trofimova (2002).

3. Research Questions

What is the most effective way to develop student teachers' speaking skills?

4. Purpose of the Study

The research sets out to determine opportunities for active involvement of students in the process of educational management and for partially laying responsibility for educational outcomes on students themselves by means of training. In this paper we advocate for a communicative approach in learning foreign languages and underline the importance of training technologies in improving efficiency of the approach. Training designed to develop speaking skills is based mostly on the same principles, the most significant of which being a focus on speaking activities during the educational process, functionality, individual orientation of communication within a group interaction, and modelling (Passov, 1991). When set up in practice, however, several contradictions were identified. For example, the principle of originality, that implies constant change of topics, circumstances, tasks, and provides flexibility of speaking skills, does not allow consistent work on specific learning material. Furthermore, implementation of an individual approach is hindered by the necessity to split the group to a required minimal number.

Literature review showed that there is no step by step, scholarly based description of a training procedure. The majority of scholars focused on theoretical and methodological analysis, and elaboration of the general recommendations. As for the practical activity, they used training elements without considering its methodology. The situation was exacerbated as the authors faced prejudice coming from the teaching staff with regard to training. Some of the teachers associated training with boring cramming, others pointed at the absence of available training methods, whereas the third indicated the lack of time to implement

training together with ordinary schemes of instruction. All this led to understanding of a necessity to elaborate proper approaches, rules and principles of the communicative training procedure. In addition, efficiency growth should not contradict the ground theoretical rules of autonomous learning. Therefore, the authors' conception of communicative trainings designed to develop speaking skills in a foreign language can be regarded relevant. There is, however, a need to compile a list of criteria, characterizing consistency of the autonomous and training approaches.

5. Research Methods

The following research methods have been used in the study: theoretical (analysis, synthesis, specification, generalization, modeling); diagnostic (questionnaire, test, task method); empirical (pedagogical observation); methods of mathematical statistics. Questionnaires indicate a degree of involvement into the process of own educational management. Subject tests examine development level of already formed competence. It was important to investigate correlation between the parameters that show degree of learning independence and the results of learning, gained during communicative trainings. It may, first, seem inadequate to test speaking skills by means of a written task. Vivid results, however, were important to control the results of pedagogical observation and students' self-evaluation that was presented only by one single element in the sequence of evaluating tools.

At the first stage we performed theoretical analysis of existing methodological approaches to elaboration of communicative training in foreign languages. We also examined realization of the independent learning concept, together with relevant theories and methods of pedagogical research and found the issues related to existing techniques and methods of conducting trainings. At the second stage we designed and approved the authors' concept of training on the development of speaking skills. At the third stage questionnaires and a test for self-evaluation and testing were designed.

6. Findings

6.1. Authors' conception of a communicative training on development of speaking skills

The following rules and principles served as the basis for the authors' conception of communicative trainings on development of speaking skills.

Chunks are the main units of a communicative training presented as a group of words (collocations, citations) and acting as an average block of information. According to foreign language learning methodology it is more efficient to learn foreign words in relation to other words, as a part of logical structures with one semantic meaning, i.e. in chunks. Nonetheless, cards with words and vocabulary tasks are still in use. There is enough evidence that chunking can significantly increase short memory capacity. A learner reproduces chunks which are then perceived in speech as a whole unit without attaching to their grammatical structure. Chunks form a basis for further grammatical abstraction.

Learning a large number of collocations, especially if they are represented graphically, helps to acquire new words and revise already learned ones. Grammatical structures are also better retained when this approach is applied. Learning by means of chunking, thus, leads to development of lexical as well as grammatical competences which allows us to talk about development of lexical-grammatical competence. This competence is one of the consistent elements of communicative competence.

There is a distinguishable feature of our concept of training. First, a student derives the meaning of a chunk from its sound representation and only then is given a short grammatical explanation if needed. If, supposedly, the process of learning a foreign language is designed on the example of a native language acquisition, grammatical 'discoveries' should be postponed till sufficient amount of material is accumulated. Such an approach to the organization of an educational process raises no questions when it comes to educating children. In case of students, however, a lot of doubts and contradictions arise. Teachers believe that 'there is not enough time', 'there will be no comprehensive perception of a language system', 'adults learn differently than children', 'adults tend to use more of an analytical approach', and etc. Without a further analysis of these statements, we would like to emphasize that teaching experience shows that in case no explanation about the structure of a chunk is needed, a brief explanations of a grammatical phenomenon suffices. Systemization of grammatical knowledge is indeed important, although it could be a part of another module within the framework of an educational program.

Media equipment is required for a communicative training given the rule of primacy of sound and graphic representation. Video rows, photos, pictures and animation compose the basis of training. In this regard, information and image processing channels should be fully introduced and involved. Different interactive exercises should also be included as they aim at engaging students in an independent work.

Lexical units should be constantly revised in order to be stored in a long-term memory as this is the only way to create strong links between new and already acquired lexical units. The question is, though, how many times one should repeat a word or a phrase so that it is stored in a long-term memory. Educators believe this number fluctuates from 10 to 40 (Kielhöfer, 1994). Learning situations and activities, therefore, should be created in such a way that chunks are repeated several times during one class (in the case of our training – 20-25 times). It is essential for tasks and exercises to be different (sketching, schematic representation, role-playing, dialogues, and etc.). This way speaking skills will be automated. Also, the variety of speech samples and structures should be negligible. Introduction of the new grammatical structures should be based on already known structures so that students could derive a chunk's meaning much quicker without dwelling into grammar. All the exercises and tasks should be composed in such a manner that they minimize possible mistakes. Speech tempo should also be paced.

Kielhöfer (1994) singles out several stages when working with lexical units: anticipation (activation), introduction of new vocabulary and semantization, fixing the units. The first stage is highly important as efficiency of acquisition and memorizing depends mostly on the process of anticipation. At this stage a particular part of a mental lexicon is activated and gets ready to perceive new information and integrate it into already existing neural routes. This information is stored in a long-term memory and can be retrieved whenever needed. Anticipation addresses students' experience, their attitudes and beliefs. It correlates with the concept of autonomous learning. The main goal is also formulated at this stage that is to complete training on speaking skills. Communicative training is not an impersonate cramming rather personal utterances, self-projecting of the learned samples and structures with a possible expression of own relation to it and its evaluation ('like – do not like', 'love – do not love', 'I do the same', and etc.).

Exercises and tasks used during trainings are also regulated by situational stipulations. Speech behavior is to a great extent determined by different situations. Choice of a language variant depends on a particular situation and other non-linguistic factors. Therefore, chunks and related speech behavior are oftentimes acquired at the same time.

6.2. Results of a compatibility check of the principles and rules of the concept of autonomous learning and training approach

The following conclusions were drawn based on the questionnaires and test results. There is no contradiction between use of training for development of foreign language communicative competence and objectives set by an independent learner with regard to self-development.

Motivational, metacognitive, controlling, communicative, managerial components were identified as the core components of learning autonomy. 6-point Likert scale questionnaires were administered prior, during and after the training. The questionnaires pointed out conditions needed to realize the principles of independent learning during an intensive communicative training (Figure 01).
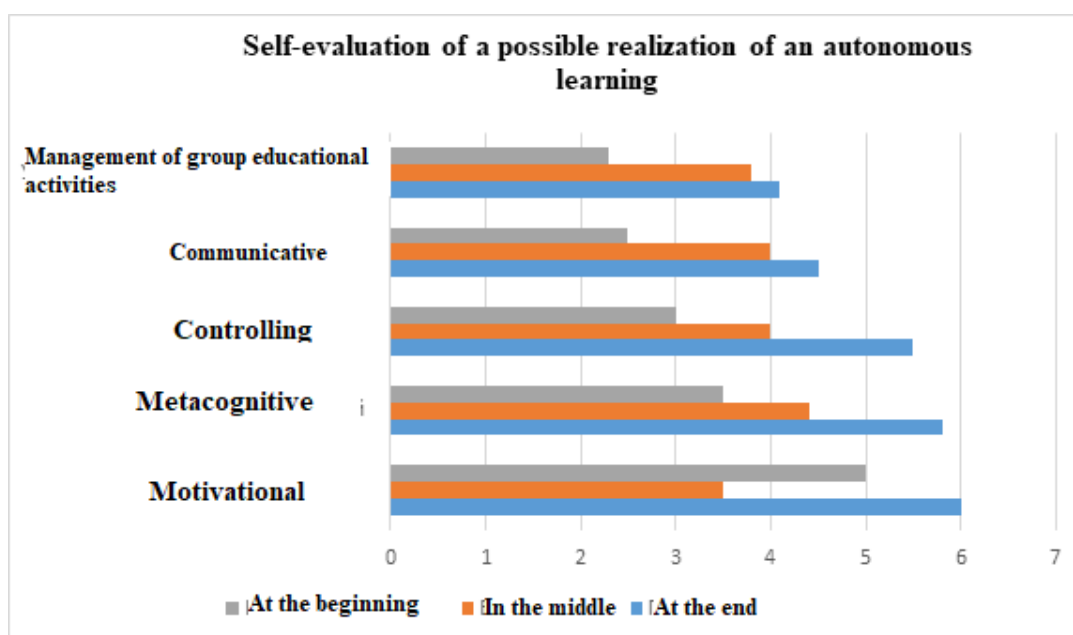
Figure 01. Self-evaluation of a possible realisation of an autonomous learning

It is interesting to note that marks improved almost in all categories and at all stages of those students who showed both good and average results during testing.

7. Conclusion

The means of student involvement into the process of educational management during communicative trainings were systematized. Some of them together with corresponding components of learning autonomy are presented further (Table 1).

Table 01. Components and the means of student involvement into the process of educational management

Components of learning autonomy	Means of student involvement into the process of educational management
Motivational	– Group and individual reflection on the willingness to acquire speaking skills and knowledge in a foreign language and interest in the result; – Self-control and self-correction;

Metacognitive	– Reflection on cognitive processes; – Getting acquainted with the stages of metacognitive activities: evaluation of a task and possible solutions; evaluation of one's own abilities with regard to the task; presentation of the result; planning task solving; controlling the stages of a task solving; evaluation of the efficiency of task and quality management of the outcome; – Acquiring methods and tools of independent learning; – Explaining chosen methods, techniques and learning tools;
Controlling	– Reflection on goal setting; – Ability to evaluate the level of one's own subject competences and results of learning;
Communicative	– Reflection on an emotional component during the process of communication; – Discussion of the questions raised during the learning process with teachers and teammates;
Management of group educational activities	– Group goal setting; – Group choice of the learning content; – Group evaluation of results; – Evaluation of possible individualization during the educational process.

Acknowledgments

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