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Foreign language teaching:

The ways of sociocultural competence creation at the master student level

В статье проанализированы теоретические аспекты формирования социокультурной компетенции у студентов в процессе обучения их английскому языку, обобщен практический опыт работы со студентами магистратуры, представлено собственное видение путей формирования социокультурной компетенции у этой категории субъектов обучения.

Ключевые слова: социокультурная компетенция, самообразование, учебные стратегии, технологии преподавания, формы устной коммуникации.

Problem setting. The importance of sociocultural competence for modern university graduates is universally acknowledged. Yet, in practical terms, developing this competence still poses a number of challenges related to background competence of master students and availability of academic hours. While information sources on relevant topics abound, there remains a deficit of comprehensive training packages that are finely attuned to the unique needs of master students in agricultural universities.

Objective. This article is aimed at stimulating debate about various opportunities for developing sociocultural competence of master students through “Business English” course. More specifically, we elaborate on the importance of teaching approaches and strategies, including self-study and autonomous learning.

Literature review. The problem of sociocultural competence of learners has been widely addressed in the literature. Important contributions were made, among others, by E.I. Passov, G.D. Tomakhin, V.V. Safonova, and N.F. Borisko, each of which emphasized the role of teaching process organization in compensating for the “artificiality” of language learning environment. Yet, the precise meaning of optimal teaching organization remains contested..

Main argument. Unlike a few decades ago, the professional environment of modern university graduates is that of rapid globalization and internationalization. We see the crucial contribution of “Business English” course for master students in agricultural universities. A challenge for education system is to give learners an intercultural competence that will enable them to operate effectively as citizens, to acquire knowledge and to develop open attitudes to otherness. This vision of the teaching of languages and cultures is referred to as intercultural education.

We believe that a viable approach to creating the sociocultural competence is to maximize the use of authentic information in the teaching process. More specifically, this means that master students must be supplied with up-to-date training packages, including print and electronic media, and must have access to the web. Particularly the latter condition will enable the utilization of tremendous learning resources dispersed among a wide variety of global organizations and institutions. The high quality of teaching technology becomes even more imperative upon considering the trivial number of academic hours allocated to language study in non-language universities.

Several conditions must be met if the sociocultural aspect of language study is to be successful. Master students must be in possession of sufficient background competence and communicative skills obtainable during the bachelor study. The key aspect of master-level training is to build on the existing foundation of students’

factual and lexical knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial that the master-level language study accommodates materials that have not been stripped of interesting factual and professional content. No less essential is the practice of considering grammatical schemes in the context of situational and contingent problem-solving. Class activities must be aimed at transferring information gained through self-study into the shared contextual space of the class.

Given the wide variation in the background competence among students, an individualized approach to teaching requires helping the students to develop independent abilities to search and process information on sociocultural topics. Due to their advanced training stage, master-level students are largely able to devise individual learning strategies. This ability is an important asset that potentially activates intrinsic motivation in studying a foreign language. To make the most of that asset, we developed self-study guidelines that are distributed to the students attending the “Business English” course. These guidelines incorporate our own teaching experience as well as the extant state-of-the-art in the area of language teaching.

We follow Koryakovtseva in taking out-of-class activity to involve organization and implementation of students’ cognitive activity without direct guidance on the part of the teacher [3].. Given the significant amount of learning strategies outlined in the extant literature (cf. 62 strategies in Oxford (1990)), we lay emphasis on the formation of strategies of the following types: inductive/deductive inference strategies, comparative analysis strategies, summarization strategies, memory strategies (grouping, structuring, logical linking), compensation strategies (meaning guessing, constrained-language coping), social strategies (cooperation in learning, account of sociocultural traits of learning partners) [4]. All these strategies create a shared mental context for effective self-study.

Skills of independent learning allow master students to significantly enhance their professional competence. The competence thereby added is further reinforced through topical oral communication in the class. The receptive lexical and grammatical skills contribute to this process by effecting learning flexibility that

engenders free student discussions in various organizational settings, such as panel discussions and debates. Panel discussions are based on primary involvement of few students with advanced communicative skills. By contrast, debates involve the delivery of several oral reports featuring conflicting viewpoints that are subsequently discussed by the rest of students [5]. According to our experience, discussions have been particularly lively while considering the theme of ‘Leadership styles’. Accordingly, we take discussion to be an advanced training method suitable for highly independent students advocating conflicting perspectives on an issue of common professional interest. Our understanding thus differs from those studies that consider discussion as a mere conversation with no reference to language competence. In our understanding, discussion helps students with various language competences to be meaningful parts of the shared learning space [6].

Students with intermediate level of language competence are particularly benefiting from simulation as an imagined real-life situation. Simulations are continually proving to be a good tool for maintaining students’ interest and intrinsic motivation in learning a foreign language [7].

Concluding remarks. Despite the abundance of literature on foreign language teaching, the socio-cultural aspect of language study still remains a contested issue. The experience of our “Business English” course highlights a variety of ways in which the socio-cultural aspect enhances the learning process. Most importantly, this aspect underpins an effective self-study that expands the students’ learning horizons and creates a stimulating intellectual atmosphere in the classroom.

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