

# UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' GENERAL CULTURAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## Abstract

The system of higher professional education in Russia is undergoing major changes that require updating of the educational process contents and application of new learning technologies for training future competitive professionals. Nowadays, we need to move to a new specialist model based on the contents of key competences. The transition to competence-oriented education is the adequate reaction of the Russian education system to the social demand.

The trend of the labor market restructuring, taking into account the Europeanization processes that are relevant to all of us, requires that students of higher education institutions receive a stronger foreign language training based on the formation of professional communicative competences. Up to what level of development the basic core competences are, is one of the main criteria of higher education quality and foreign language training as an integral part of it. Urgency of the problem to gain professional and cultural components of the foreign language training content, involves the need to develop a special system of pedagogical tools and activities aimed at the consistent inclusion of students in foreign language environment using both common cultural and professional vocabulary.

The article is devoted to development of common cultural and professional competences of students on the example of foreign language training of Russian University students by means of such foreign instructional technologies as "cooperative learning" and "project method", in particular.

Keywords: cooperative learning, project method, foreign language acquisition, cultural competences, professional development.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The achievement of the educational goals of foreign language training of students in Russia is carried out in the aspect of humanization of education [1], and means to expand the horizons of students, improve their general culture and education, as well as the culture of thinking, communication, and speech. Modern standards of higher professional education include the formation of general cultural and professional competences of future specialists. The role of foreign language training in the formation of general cultural competences is the most essential, since one of the fundamental functions of a language is to be an instrument of creation, development, and storage of culture.

Real progress in the future highest qualification specialists' foreign language acquisition is possible through significant changes in the process of foreign language training in Russian universities while introducing foreign innovative instructional technologies [2], oriented to the professional world and providing clear criteria for assessing language skills. Educational institutions can have the flexibility for optimization process and quality improvement of professional training, as they are able to respond quickly to the demands of the society and the economy.

According to the State educational standard of higher professional education, a foreign language is included as a compulsory subject in the cycle of general humanitarian and socio-economic disciplines. For each major there are the requirements described for language training with a detailed description of the types of speech activity, lexical units, which need to be mastered, and skills which must be developed to apply the received knowledge in practice. Along with the practical goal of learning to communicate, the course of foreign language in non-linguistic colleges sets educational goals [3].

The changed status of foreign language acquisition in the context of the processes of Europeanization in the common educational area leads to increasing demands for foreign language training of students, the content of which should now reflect the following: the concept of "the polylogue of cultures", implying a focus on sociocultural principles of education, when the cultural environment of foreign language training is formed in a situation of intercultural learning [4]; authentic nature of

learning; formation of specialist who will be able to socialize in response to the processes of Europeanization; the promotion of subjective position of students; integration of methods of teaching foreign language with theoretical and practical trainings, research-focused and student-oriented components; a pronounced communicative and professional orientation; the orientation of students to self-realization in the conditions of Russia's entry into the common European educational area; the internationalization of knowledge and the formation of transcultural skills; promotion of the need for continuous self-education and self-assessment [5].

## **1.1 Language and culture**

Modern standards of higher professional education are provided for the formation of common cultural and professional competences of future specialists. The role of foreign language training in the formation of general cultural competences is most essential, because one of the fundamental functions of language is to be an instrument of creation, development, storage and transmission of culture [6]. When confronted with a different culture, the main and most essential factor is the need to master the skills of communicating in the language of that culture. People, who speak the same language, e.g. English, such as British, Americans, with certain differences in their cultures, also have some differences in the way of information transmission. People use different words to denote the same things. For example, in the British variant they say "petrol", but not the American "gasoline", or "tram", not a "street car", and etcetera. On the idiomatic level there are many more variant differences and they are harder to understand. The idea of such American phrase as "to put one's foot into it", meaning "to commit public misconduct", in the British variant is delivered by phrase "to drop a brick", which, in its turn, is unlikely to be understandable for most people in the United States. Culture includes regular items: ideals, moral norms, traditions, and customs. Together they make up the social rules of conduct, the observance of which makes it indispensable to maintain society as an integrated whole. A special role is played by language, as it is a means of conveying social experience of the individual. The thesis of the sociality of language should be understood as a dialectical unity of language and culture, language and society.

### *1.1.1 Polylogue of cultures*

As we reflected in our previous publications, the mechanism of mutual influence of personalities and cultures is the dialogue (as a basis of polylogue) [7], which is interpreted as a form of communication of individuals and as a way of their interaction with the subjects of culture and art in a historical perspective. In situations of interethnic communication and in sociocultural behavior of the participants there are the similarities and differences of cultures, their national identity that fosters respect and affection for the socio-cultural values of each other. Any communication, interpersonal or intercultural, is the interaction of two or more private worlds. In the polylogue of various cultural senses of being there is the essence of the modern concepts, of the modern logic of thinking. The proponents of hermeneutics consider the polylogue of cultures primarily as the communication of consciousnesses. As for "consciousness" in this case, a set of images and their structures emerging in the activity are referred to [8].

### *1.1.2 General cultural competences*

Today, graduates of higher vocational schools must be able to cope with different business situations. Professional competence is the willingness and ability to appropriately act in accordance with the business requirements, to solve professional tasks and problems independently and in a methodically organized way, and to independently evaluate the results of their activities.

General cultural competences are human abilities to navigate in the area of culture, they include knowledge components: insight into the scientific worldview, knowledge of the basic scientific achievements, and the idea of artistic values. Special features of the general cultural competencies are in that they enable graduates to be more marketable in the labor market, to successfully realize themselves in different spheres of activity, including those not associated with the University qualification. The contents of general cultural competences include the generalized ways of activity, enabling the person to adopt the cultural patterns and create new ones [9].

### *1.1.3 General professional competences*

General professional competences of students are important personal and professional characteristics. Practice suggests that the incompleteness of general cultural competences hinders

personal growth of students and decreases the efficiency of the entire educational process on the level of acquiring professional knowledge.

The educational potential of a foreign language is manifested in the willingness of professionals (especially those with an academic degree "Bachelor" or "Master") to promote the establishment of inter-cultural and scientific relations, to represent their country at international conferences and symposia, and to respect cultural values of other countries and peoples.

According to W. Gewehr [10], the true purpose of education is to teach students to navigate in a world of constant changes, to be able to continuously extract and process new information on their own. As one of the effective ways of learning a foreign language he suggests creating communicative situations in the classroom where students interact with each other in simulated conditions of communication, given from everyday real life. Thus, they assimilate the new acquired knowledge, integrating it with the already learned knowledge on the topic. The emphasis here is on how students study, which is the center of attention at any comprehensive approach to language teaching in the European context. One of the main results of the research on education in recent decades is the increased role of the learner in the process of learning a foreign language, as well as a deep awareness of student needs in the development of their ability to learn independently.

## **2 MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In the course of the experimental work in teaching foreign language in Kazan Universities, the following interactive instructional technologies were tested: cooperative learning (project method) [11]; language portfolio for the evaluation of the results of foreign language training [5]; the organization of individual educational trajectories of students, all within the credit-modular rating instructional technology [12]. The main goal of the interactive instructional technologies is the liberation of consciousness and the potentials hidden in every student. The relevance and novelty of interactive instructional technologies, which are increasingly used within higher education, lie in the degree of use of their capacity to meet learning needs in innovative ways. During the experimental research work several variants of the communicative technology of cooperative learning were applied: "team learning", "jigsaw", and wider the "project method", which is regarded nowadays as one of the options for the cooperative learning approach, and can integrate all the other variations of cooperative learning instructional technologies as constituent elements.

The project approach is such a theoretical and experimental area in methodology of teaching foreign languages, where the task is to study foreign language communicative and cognitive activity during the process of foreign language training and to develop student teaching principles for oral language, to organize the teaching content and select the adequate teaching techniques. Teaching a foreign language using project-based instructional technologies, we relied on the integration of knowledge gained in learning other humanities within the scope of the students' future profession [13]. We tried to consider interdisciplinary connections together with the special, specific subject areas.

During the experiment, the general principles of project-based teaching techniques were identified: the principle of interest in the project implementation on the part of all its participants; the principle of consultative and coordinating functions of the teacher; the principle of relation of the project idea to real life; the principles of team work activities, self-reliance, co-creation, cooperation; the principle of authenticity of teaching materials. The main purpose of project-based work is to develop independence and creativity of the student, his/her abilities for future business/professional activities, to use the language as a tool of future professional multicultural communication while during the process of mastering a foreign language. The leading criterion of the project-based work is the student's ability to interact and cooperate in the process of solving project-research and project-creative tasks. The project method aims at eliminating dependence of the student on the teacher through self-organization and self-learning in the process of creating a specific product or solving a specific, taken from a real life problem.

### **2.1 Method of situational analysis**

Interactive learning includes the method of situational analysis (case study method), which we used effectively in the cooperative learning process when implementing the project approach. In the experiment, the method of "case study" contributed to: 1) teaching students practical skills of working with information: patterning, structuring and ranking on the importance of the problems; 2) formation of communicative competency of students; 3) developing students' ability to select the best options for

effective interaction with other people; 4) developing students' analytical thinking, application of the analysis in dynamics.

## **2.2 Criteria in selecting teaching material**

Russia's striving to enter into a multilingual Europe, the international labor market and education, brought forth a problem of studying professional foreign language communication for linguists, didacticists and methodologists in the field of foreign language training of students. An appeal of the domestic pedagogical science to the experience of professional education development in the European Union can contribute to both the deepening of the domestic theory of education, the enrichment of the European developments by Russian research, and will also assist in the processes of all European integration and the creation of a European area of vocational education. The fragmentarity of the use of instructional technologies and the under-development of the principles of selecting and structuring the content, aimed at the development of creative abilities of students in the national higher vocational school, are stipulating a fundamental need in studying, analyzing, and using the rich experience in this field in foreign countries. So as one of the primary criteria in selecting teaching material for the realization of cooperative learning instructional technology the criterion of professional and practical value was considered.

Other criteria were the following: professional orientation of the educational material; the adequacy of the prospective areas, types and typical situations of real speech foreign language communication; thematic and situational relevance; communicative values of the selected material.

## **3 RESULTS**

From the practice of the formative stage of the experiment, we concluded that cooperative learning technology in the presented variants of its implementation ("team learning", "Jigsaw" and "Project Method") develops the following skills and personal qualities:

- 1 Qualities, which are essentially the basic rules of behavior (to be with the group until the work is finished; to always wait for your turn).
- 2 The skills needed for informed, motivated attitude to the acquisition of knowledge (the ability to associate new information with the already studied material; ability to test the group on understanding the studied material).
- 3 Skills supporting active work of all the team members on the assignment and supporting a fruitful working relationship between them (the ability to involve their mates in the work; ability to ask for help and clarification; to paraphrase the responses of teammates; the ability to set the team up for work).
- 4 The skills defining a creative approach to knowledge (ability to think logically, to resolve intellectual conflicts, find additional information and analyze different points of view).

### **3.1 Formation of professional competences**

When considering and implementing the linguistic-cultural aspect in language training of University students there was as well inevitably realized the process of some professional competences' formation. For example, not only the topics relating to the customs, traditions and cultural and social features in Russia and in English speaking countries were proposed, but also topics related to the future professional activity of students. For example, along with such topics as "My Tatarstan", "Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan", "Moscow is the capital of Russia", "Traditions of Russia and Tatarstan", "Holidays and customs in England and the USA", "Art and Music in Canada and U.S.", and et cetera, we introduced topics to the students of the College of Law, such as "The Government in Britain", "the American political system", "The Legal system in Canada", and etcetera. And the most interesting examples of student project works were those that included knowledge from other disciplines, in particular, from the disciplines of the future profession, when the students proposed a resolution of a certain legal situation in a foreign language, but in a fictional foreign environment.

#### **3.1.1 General cultural and professional competences development**

The "project method" as the most striking example of the "cooperative learning" instructional technology, allowed developing the following general cultural and professional competences of students at the College of Law: has culture of thinking, is capable of generalization, analysis,

information perception, goal setting and choosing ways of its achievement; is able to logically correctly, reasonably and clearly compose oral and written speech; has a culture of behavior, is willing to cooperate with colleagues, work in a team; committed to self-development, improve his/her skills and qualifications; able to use basic provisions and methods of social, humanitarian and economic sciences in solving social and professional problems; able to analyze socially significant problems and processes; has a command of the basic methods, ways and means of obtaining, storing, processing information, has computer skills as those of an information management tool; able to work with information in global computer networks; has the necessary skills for professional communication in a foreign language; able to manage independent work of students; able to interpret various legal acts; able to respect the honor and dignity of the individual, to respect and protect the rights and freedoms of a man and citizen.

## **4 DISCUSSION**

In the higher educational institution the main goal in language training is the development of abilities of the future professional to communicate in a foreign language, formation of skills of foreign language communication at a high level. The realization of this objective is connected with the formation of the following communicative skills of a student: use of rational methods of mastering a foreign language, continuously improving in it; the understanding and the generation of foreign-language statements in accordance with the specific communicative situation, communicative intention; the implementation of one's own verbal and nonverbal behavior given the rules of communication and national-cultural peculiarities of the studied language.

Using such a foreign instructional technology with students as the method of projects, we managed to organize the students' simultaneous learning of domestic and foreign realities in order to create their general cultural competences. Projects in foreign languages are based on the principle of dialogue of cultures and civilizations [14], when the analysis of cultural and fully or partly authentic material is expected. In the formation or the study of the cultural area in terms of foreign language learning communication the appropriate material about the native or a foreign country is used, which enables the representation of a particular culture in a foreign language.

### **4.1 Equal partnership in teaching and learning**

It is known that the most successful instructional technologies are those that take into account the emotional and cognitive aspects of foreign language training [15], involving students in the learning process both mentally and intellectually. Programs of student-centered learning change the basic scheme of interaction of the teacher and the students, transforming it from subject-object to subject-subject. Under the above instructional technologies, the process of foreign language training was organized as equal partnership of the teacher and the student, requiring the teacher to create a comfortable learning environment, psychological atmosphere. When testing the cooperative learning instructional technologies ("project method", "jigsaw", "team learning"), organizing the individual educational trajectories and implementing the technology of a Language Portfolio in the system of credit-rating modular training, the knowledge was created by the students in the learning process, concentrating around them, not the teacher.

### **4.2 The pedagogical conditions**

According to our survey, the implementation of foreign instructional technologies of foreign language training of students in the context of Europeanization of education is most productive when it is within specially selected forms of lessons involving the use of innovative and interactive methods that increase the activity of students, as well as if the following pedagogical conditions are observed: a) training on the principles of personal-activity, competence-based, and communicative approaches; b) integration of educational and research activities of students; c) use of the interdisciplinary approach; d) use of problem situations; e) consideration of the individual characteristics of each student; f) improvement of students' motivation to study; g) shift from a teacher training activity to the cognitive activity of the student; h) consideration of the requirements for the political, socio-economic, regional realities, and the peculiarities of Russia; the traditions and circumstances of a particular higher educational institution.

The following pedagogical conditions contribute to efficient formation of general cultural competences of students in the university-based educational process: positive motivation of students to highly intellectual work; student participation in selecting the educational contents, methods and forms of the

organized process; phased implementation of the ideas of "cultural dialogue" and "polylogue of cultures" by including students in cross-cultural communication.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The priorities in the higher school are the educational and developmental aspects of teaching a subject. The selection of the content of foreign language training in an educational institution is carried out in accordance with the interests of the students with regard to their communicative needs and social demand. The content of education in higher education institution, in addition to the information content, authenticity, and availability should meet such requirements as general communicative, general cultural and professional areas.

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