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Integration of Communicationand Reflection in EAP: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper argues that communicative and reflective skills as expected learning outcomes of learning at the university though believed seemingly opposite can complement each other being developed concurrently and ultimately benefit students' EAP proficiency.

The methodology is based on the theory of step-by-step development of mental actions, the Multiple Intelligence Theory, learning-oriented approach, cooperative learning.

Communication is considered the bases for the relations of participants in education and a fundamental ability to take necessary knowledge and skills from all resources available [5].

Reflection plays the role of means (reflective models, reflective techniques), aim of teaching and learning (developed reflective competence).

The author presents a framework for concurrent reflective and communication skills development based on balancing benefits and challenges of integration communication and reflection in EAP classes in a psychologically positive environment.

Key words: English for academic purposes, EAP, communication skills, reflective competence, expected learning outcomes.

Introduction. In the era of globalisation foreign languages in addition to their traditional role of means of communication, have acquired a new role of a tool to develop general competences of a university graduate.

Both international educational standards like *The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* [1] and draft Russian standards for professional higher education include well developed communication and reflective skills of critical thinking as general competences and desired university graduate attributes.

How can these seemingly opposite competences be developed within the framework of master studies?

Aim. The purpose of the article is to prove that communication and reflective skills though believed very different can complement each other being developed concurrently and benefit the EAP competence.

The author presents a module in EAP course as a specially organized environment for activities aimed at concurrent communication and reflective competences development.

Theoretical Background. Communicative competence is the core aim of any course in training foreign language. But, in teaching EAP to master students communication skills development has specific foci.

The first specific feature refers to the context. According to state standards and level descriptors in the Bologna documents master students are to be able to communicate in both professional and scientific contexts. These demands developing the ability to report on action clearly, autonomously and competently and to work effectively with a group as leader or member, clarifying tasks and making use of the capacities of group members, pass the results of the research to colleagues, etc.

Also, communication serves the means of learning both inside and outside the classroom. Learning environment has become larger thanks to new technologies and master students in EAP classes are able to communicate in group and pair distantly with peers abroad using internet and other people as resources.

At the same time communication can be treated as the bases for the relations of participants in education. In EAP classes students are treated as individuals with their personal life and work experience and have equal

rights to speak pit their ideas. So, the efficiency of communication in teaching and learning depend on successful subject-subject relation between a teacher and students.

As for reflection, we treat *reflective competence* as the ability of teachers and learners to realize their reflective skills, attitude to getting knowledge and components of learning through their activity in educational process, which can lead to the successful result [8].

Analyses of Russian publications on reflection in education and our own research have led us to identifying three types of reflective skills to be developed in EAP course for master students [2].

1. Reflective skills presenting master student's ability of self-management in education, including life-long learning (LLL) goal-setting, planning, self-control and self-correction in learning
2. Reflection as a means of knowledge construction is based on step-by-step development of critical thinking from the awareness of a certain issue to the ability to transform information into a different form or evaluation of a certain problem's solution.
3. An ability to play different roles and to look upon the situation (life or professional) through your partner's eyes, find the solution evaluating options together with peers are among them make reflective communicative skills [2]. These skills bridge communication and reflection.

The methodology grounds for concurrent development of communication and reflection in foreign language teaching is in the theory of step-by-step development of mental actions by Vygotsky, Galperin and Talyzina.

The main idea behind the hypothesis for the benefit of concurrent development of communication and reflection is the idea of the critical relation between an individual's internal and external human behavior. According to this theory, mental development as well as knowledge and skills' acquisition takes place when being gradually transferred from external (material) activity into internal mental perspective.

As a result, of this transfer external actions are transformed into mental by being processed, verbalized, consolidated, ready to be transferred into another context. Any idea becomes meaningful for a person if and when it helps to construct new knowledge or skills, a student being able to demonstrate ability to apply new skills in communication with partners.

From the point of view of didactics, a teacher's role is in gradual transfer of responsibility for a specific reflective or communication skill development as well the whole learning process management from oneself to a student. For the teacher this process starts with interpretation of his activity and students' activity with the consequent methodic support. Gradually this support takes a latent form, then a teacher stops it [7].The teacher's role is that of facilitator, advisor, learning process organizer. At the same time students taking responsibility for their learning become more autonomous and active agents of learning, responsible for its results.

Other methodological concepts underlying concurrent development of communication and reflection is the Multiple Intelligence Theory and learning and learner oriented approaches which promote individualisation with a variety of task formats. Students are encouraged to express their own opinions based on their life and work experience and knowledge from related courses.

Reflective skills positively influence communication skills development as they provide favourable conditions for sharing ideas and solving problems in interaction, enhance students' responsibility of a group member for the whole group results when performing a task.

Communication facilitates developing reflective skills by providing a positive productive environment. Teaching and learning practice have shown that it is not only easier and more interesting to study together, but also more productive [7].

Method. The first challenge in the idea implementation is in lack of appropriate teaching materials providing a good balance of tasks aimed at reflection and communication development.

The second challenge is in creation of specially organized learning environment [2], where each class aim is to develop a specific communicative and reflective skill.

In our opinion, there are two ways of developing master students' reflective competence concurrently with communication skills through EAP: by integrating a reflective component into interactive tasks and step-by-step developing students' reflective skills in communication.

Materials. The source for inspiration to develop a module *Business across Cultures* within the framework EAP course for master students in Management [3] was the book written by Laura M. English and Sarah Lynn [5]. It was believed that the course could be of multiple benefits for master students. It addresses the issues of ethics and corporate culture in global business environment, and creates a supportive environment where students communicate on business issues at the same time developing and practicing their reflective skills of critical thinking and self-management in simulated real-life contexts via English language.

Cross-cultural differences in business and communication are in the focus of the module and provide a food for comparison and analysis.

The framework involves four steps: firstly, providing students with a clear instruction for the activity; secondly, facilitating students' reflective practice by including problem tasks, thirdly, organizing communication to practice group communication on professional issues addressed in the course, and creating structures and algorithms to help students to think and do tasks individually; and fourthly, using criterion referenced assessment to encourage student feedback and reflective peer assessment, by providing students with favorable environment and time for their reflection.

The final product is a presentation where master students are to cover all issues included in the course structure in reference to a particular business

culture and a country. Students are to substantiate their choice of the country under consideration. Presentations are assessed both by a teacher and peer students against preselected criteria.

Results. Experimental teaching took place in the Institute of Business Process Management and Economics in 2 groups of master students in Management (an experimental and a control) and proved the hypothesis that concurrent communication and reflection development positively influences both competencies development. After the experiment students of experimental group assessed themselves as being more confident in communication in a foreign language (4.10 against 3.53 points out of 5) on research and professional topics. The control group results were negative.

The data of expert assessment by teachers, who observed classes have shown positive dependence of reflective competence and communicative skills levels on each other after learning the course in question. The share of students with a well developed level of communication skills increased by на 11% and advanced level of reflective competence increased by на 18%.

Interviews with students, questionnaires and peer observations proved the hypothesis of the positive interdependence of reflective competence and communicative skills development in a specially organized learning environment.

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