INVOLVING STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract

Educational process in the period of pandemic has demonstrated not only professionalism of the teaching staff at MGIMO-University but also its flexibility, mobilization and assistance of colleagues in any emergency situation. Switching teaching/ learning process into the online or distance format required a lot of efforts on the part of both professors and students to make it successful, and a lot of changes were brought about to this end. Still, students' creativity caused by their involvement into the learning process is what the study at the university is about.

That is why creativity should be at the core of educational process whether in-person, remote or any other format, and the following steps can be seen helpful:
1) Adaptation of the programs to the online learning process with respect to the specifics of the Internet communication on the whole: as learning online these days is fraught with danger of poor or even the loss of connection caused by the network congestion, it's better to transfer all audio and video assignments to homework, which could resolve listening problems and free time for creative assignments.
2) Creativity: when students are challenged by the assignments addressing their life at the university or at home, their interests or problems, they get willingly involved into different activities: from the story making/ telling or participation in round-table talks to discussions and decision-making. Students enjoy this creative 'flight' and are ready to share it with their group mates. The online platform is the efficient and appropriate platform for spontaneous self-reflection with all the students participating in it.
3) Delegation of class management to the students can challenge the latter and give them an opportunity to switch the roles with the professor. Students enthusiastically perform the role of a tutor, which, however, enables a professor as well to learn more about his/her students and find an individual approach and methods working for them better.
4) Spontaneous interaction with a professor at the beginning or in any other part of a class enhances motivation and makes interaction real and purposeful, allows seeing students' progress. It always enlivens the atmosphere, establishes contact between a professor and his/her students and brings interaction to the point, when students can freely speak their mind. Solve-problem questions and discussions elicit the greatest response.
5) Adaptation of assignments is another good stimulus for students to study thoughtfully, when working on text assignments at home. Modification and deviation from the student-book assignments prepared at home and checked in class helps to see students' progress in mastering the program at home and in class and their flexibility when knocked off the beaten track, which in the long run improve students' academic performance.

Although singled out as separate, these steps are often intertwined in classwork; they are aimed at a student's personality and direct interaction, which yield only positive results.

Keywords: Adaptation of programs, creative assignments, delegation of class management to students, spontaneous interaction, online learning, flexibility.

1 INTRODUCTION

The academic year of 2020/2021, which has already come down to history as the pandemic year of Covid-19, is the year of reconsidering and bringing up to date methods of teaching and approaches to university education. It was an impetus for the university educationalists worldwide to look at the teaching/ learning process anew and make a step forward to improve it in accordance with the circumstances.

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Noteworthy, the educational process at MGIMO-University has demonstrated not only professionalism of the teaching staff but also its flexibility, mobilization and readiness of colleagues to come to help any time in any emergency situation. The switch of teaching/ learning process to the online or distance format required a lot of efforts on the part of both professors and students, and a lot of changes were brought about to this end. Still, students' creativity caused by their involvement into the learning process is what the study at the university is about.

The question of creativity in class has been in the focus of scholarly pedagogical discussions for quite a long period of time, which finds its reflection in the articles and research papers of educationalists from different countries [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6]. In the dictionaries, 'creativity' is defined as "the use of imagination or original ideas to create something; inventiveness' (LEXICO). In other words, creativity is the ability of a person to switch quickly from one activity to another, to think fast and generate new ideas; it is the ability to invent something new applying imagination, and the use of language. It is a very wide specter of inherent or acquired skills and qualities, which make a student and a person in general active, mobile, fast in making decisions, witty, and ready to solve any problem in any situation, however hard it may seem. Creativity is also flexibility and readiness for any task.

On the face of it, creativity has nothing to do with educational process but in fact education and successful learning is dependent on it, it is part and parcel of educational process. When students complain that education has nothing to do with real life, with professional practical life, I always tell them that education is not about the professional skills they will need at work (students more often than not do not know where they are going to work and what is 'their cup of tea'), it is about their ability to analyze, make inferences, react in different situation, their ability to perceive the whole situation from minute details, it is also their ability to adjust themself to new formats of work and adjust everything around to themselves. In other words, it is much more than simply knowledge of disciplines.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper reflects my extensive experience of teaching English for students of different levels and the observations and conclusions made from it. Although there are a lot of teaching courses instructing on different methods of engaging students in the learning process [7; 8; 9; 10], much depends on the professor, his/ her sensitivity to a student group and ability to foresee what will work better for one group and will not be productive at all for another.

In this paper I tried to single out the most popular (in my classes) ways of engaging students into the learning process, which, nevertheless, cannot be confined to the following:

1) Adaptation of the programs to the online learning process;

2) Creativity: personalization of assignments in class;

3) Delegation of class management to the students;

4) Spontaneous interaction with a professor at the beginning or in any other part of a class;

5) Adaptation of home assignments – a knock off the beaten path.

3 RESULTS

The move of face-to-face classes to hybrid, online, or distant classes necessitated the adaptation of learning programs to new forms and formats of the teaching / learning process, which was to a certain extent painful as the physical presence of professors in class, their voices, facial and body language enhancing the process was lost or almost lost via the screen and therefore required some compensation.

The abovementioned activities may be considered as part of a possible compensation for online education.

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3.1 Keeping Students Engaged

3.1.1 Adaptation of the Programs

In the given context of Covid-19, a computer screen is called to become an advantage and not the reverse. From this perspective, learning programs should be adapted in such a way as they could give students a different approach to the study – predominantly interactive. Since the congested Internet could any time disconnect students in class or even fail, the way out was seen in giving up a frequent switch of sites and platforms in class and confining watching videos to 5 minutes when absolutely necessary. This way listening problems were resolved and free time appeared for creative assignments. The focus, therefore, was made predominantly on discussions, answering questions on home assignments, which allowed checking students' progress with the active grammar and vocabulary. Taking students from the well prepared home assignments to spontaneous speaking and discussions immediately reveal the most vulnerable and insufficiently learnt material for further training.

Video files were transferred to home watching and in-class discussions, which was reasonable as it did not create any technical problems or lapses of time and allowed having a smooth flow of class work, sometimes even saving time for extra assignments. Class work was organized mostly in an interactive way: students share their opinions on the topics under discussion, have dialogues in groups, give their own interpretations or understanding of one issue or another, the process that involves every student, even if it was grammar (the subtleties in using modal verbs, for example, or collocations of verbs). When interaction causes live interest – their concerns, hobbies, fears or uncertainties − students are open to creativity.

A few words should be said about the adaptation of exam materials, according to which 2-3 pages long texts were shortened to one page text fitting the screen of the computer, and, similarly, the preparation time for students was shortened to 5 minutes in front of the computer. In the professional part of the exam long professional texts were replaced by quotations of the world famous specialists and scholars. Such adaptation revealed students' abilities to think creatively and flexibly highlighting their knowledge in the field of their future profession (journalism, sociology or PR - sphere). The experience of the year 2020 showed the efficacy of the changes introduced into examination materials.

3.1.2 Creativity: Personalization of assignments in class

Personalization of assignments in class presupposes the relevance of the topics raised and discussed in class and it's bearing on the students, as well as professors' participation. Students are eager to speak their mind when it concerns them, now at this moment; they always have anxieties and questions on their minds. When they see and feel that their professor is compassionate, they always find a way to have heart to heart in order to consult with him/ her and get a piece of advice.

Students really feel challenged by the assignments addressing their life at the university or at home, their interests or problems, and they get willingly involved into different activities: from the story making/ telling or participation in round-table talks, holding conferences and debates in class, to role-playing and participation in projects and competitions. When students have the topic 'Ecology', we simulate an international conference on ecology where they have only 3 minutes to get their message of crucial significance across to every participant. When they study adjectives characterizing different voice qualities, they role-play personages with different voices in such a funny and entertaining way that such episodes stay with us for good, let alone the easiness with which they memorize adjectives. The emotional and subjective factors in the educational process make learning easier, more enjoyable and engaging. Students in the second or third year of study participate in Grammar Guru, a university competition, and they get so involved in competing with each other that they are willing to advance the level. For students-researchers there are always opportunities to become part of a project research group supervised by a scholar to work on a proposed topic.

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Students enjoy this creative 'flight' and are ready to share it with their group mates. It was also noticed that a foreign language creates kind of a mask or a guise, which facilitates students' disclosure of their own selves. Love for the English language is inspiring.

3.1.3 Delegation of Class Management to students

The delegation of class management to the students is another option to be practiced but in advanced classes of English. It will hardly be effective and yield results in a beginners' group. The delegation of class management can be seen as a kind of a role-play, which is of great significance for both sides of the teaching/ learning process, because, as an observer, a professor can impartially evaluate the efficiency or inefficiency of some methods of teaching and assignments and reject the futile ones. A role-play of a tutor mirrors the professor's practices in class, and also students' creativity in a form of innovative approaches and assignments they resort to, which can be borrowed by a professor. The delegation of class management demonstrates that the teaching/ learning process is a two-way road benefiting both side of the interaction.

Students enthusiastically perform the role of a tutor, which, however, enables a professor as well to learn more about his/her students and find an individual approach and methods working for them better.

3.1.4 Spontaneous interaction with students in class

Spontaneous interaction of a professor with students at the beginning or in any other section of a class enhances motivation and makes interaction real and purposeful. In my opinion, it serves not only as a warming up exercise but as the testing of students' reaction, speech skills and abilities to maintain conversation with their interlocutors on any topic. Spontaneous interaction can be aimed at drilling the active vocabulary and grammar and their application in speech, in a form of a discussion or story making, with all students adding a sentence of their own to develop it. What engages students into discussion most is their professional future and prospects, especially in the last year of baccalaureate studies.

Spontaneous interaction in class always enlivens the atmosphere, establishes contact between a professor and his/her students and brings interaction to the point, when students can freely speak their mind. Solve-problem questions and discussions elicit the greatest response.

3.1.5 Adaptation of home assignments

Adaptation of assignments is another good stimulus for students to study thoughtfully, when working on reading assignments at home. From my experience, students often do their home tasks on the go, automatically, so to speak, without much thought given to them. It is immediately revealed in class; when taken off the beaten track, students cannot properly answer the questions or give inaccurate answers on the text. Students do not pay attention to the details or even worse - the message of the text, which can be prevented by modifying assignments and making students reread the text and reflect on the content deriving some useful information. Adaptations or improvisations in class work test the quality of students' preparation at home. Being aware of possible unexpected questions in class, students change their attitude to home assignments (not only in reading) and demonstrate a different depth of comprehension.

Modification and deviation from the student-book assignments prepared at home and checked in class helps to see students' progress in mastering the program at home and in class and their flexibility when knocked off the beaten track, which in the long run improve students' academic performance.

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4 CONCLUSIONS

There are different methods and a lot of opportunities to make classes at universities interesting and effective for learning foreign languages. The key to success is the commitment of a professor to his/ her job and desire to engage students into mutually beneficial teaching/ learning process. The engagement of students into learning may be based on and include adaptation of programs and examination materials to online formats which, on the one hand, simplifies students' preparation, on the other hand, makes their study more effective and profound. Personalization of assignments, presupposing not only creative assignments in class but also an individual approach to students, is another way to creativity, as well as the delegation of class management in advanced groups of English, which reveals students' preferences in learning to be assimilated into class practice. Spontaneous interaction with students in any section of a class, which makes learning English purposeful and rewarding, should also be taken into consideration. The list of the abovementioned activities in class is far from finite, it can be continued according to the creativity of both professors and students. The online platform is the efficient and appropriate platform for spontaneous self-reflection with all the students participating in it.

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