Methodology of a Modern Foreign Language Lesson for Postgraduate Students of Technical Disciplines

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Abstract

The integration of Russia into the international common space of research and education accompanied by modernization of the national system of education puts forward new demands to postgraduate education. The processes of integration and modernization increase the importance of learning a foreign language for a future scientist. The article deals with the methodological content of a foreign language lesson, the components of which are individualization, speech orientation, situatedness, functionality and novelty. Those components define the features, structure, principles and techniques of a modern foreign language lesson.   The aim of this paper is to describe how the above-mentioned components are implemented during foreign language classes with postgraduates. In the end, we come to the conclusion that individualization, speech focus and novelty at foreign language lessons are fully implemented through specific lesson arrangement models, based on personal involvement into the learning process in the context of scientific activity. The use of socially-oriented technologies promotes active involvement of postgraduates into speech activity, enhancing the interactive character of scientific communication.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, individualization, postgraduates, role-play, speech orientation

1. Introduction

The integration of Russia into the international common space of research and education accompanied by modernization of the national system of education puts forward new demands to postgraduate education. These demands are represented in the new Education Act (Zakon ob obrazovanii 2013, 2012) and other laws regulating relations in the system of training academic and scientific staff, which includes the minimum program of the candidate examination in the general scientific discipline "The foreign language"(Moscow State Linguistic University, 2013). This discipline is based on the provisions of foreign language learning, approved by the expert advisory body of the State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles—a commission under the Russian Ministry of Education.

The importance of learning a foreign language, being one of the aspects of a Russian scientist's education, increases due to the processes of integration and modernization, as the aims and objectives of a foreign language acquisition are similar to the aims and objectives of technical postgraduate professional training. A future engineer-scientist needs wide access to sources of information, achievements of world science, highlights of technical accomplishments and participation in various events of scientific cooperation and exchange, which requires a higher level of professional communication in a foreign language. This can be achieved through successful development of cross-cultural professional communicative competence while studying a foreign language in graduate school.

However, inadequate class hours for studying the discipline "The foreign language" while training scientific staff hinder effective acquisition of a foreign language which subsequently leads to the necessity of employing more intensive methods during the foreign language learning process. Consequently, intensification means the search for the resources of the basic methodological categories, such as aims, approaches, methods and means of training as well as methodological content of a lesson itself.

This paper is to focus on the methodological content of a foreign language lesson because its components allow the development of postgraduates' cross-cultural professional communicative competence. Following modern

teachers-methodologists, methodological content is considered to be based on individualization, speech orientation, situatedness, functionality, and novelty (Solovova, 2010). These components define the features, structure, principles and techniques of a modern foreign language lesson. The aim of this article is to describe how the above-mentioned components are implemented during foreign language classes with postgraduates.

2. Research Methodology

Different stages of the present study involved the application of the following methods: method of theoretical analysis of related psychological, pedagogical and methodological literature, comparative method, method of generalization of accumulated experience in the field of study, survey and diagnostic method (interviewing, questionnaires, testing), observation methods (direct and indirect observation) and predictive methods (simulation and forecasting).

3. Discussion

3.1 Methodological Content Components

Individualization as a teaching tendency is known to be implemented by introducing individual learning schedules, increasing the amount of elective courses and volume of self-study, and taking into account personal and professional characteristics of learners, when choosing forms and methods of teaching (Polyakova, 2011). In the context of teaching a foreign language to postgraduates, individualization, in terms of methodological content, is focused on certain models of a lesson structure, based on the personal involvement of postgraduates into the process of learning and taking into consideration communication aspects of each scientific specialty. Since postgraduate studies are highly specialized, the most significant communication aspects include personal views, professional interests and aims of postgraduates as far as their scientific activity is concerned. Active participation in class-work as well as interest in learning are more likely to be displayed when postgraduates draw on their personal experience in discussions and use target language when speaking about themselves, their scientific work, and postgraduate studies. Therefore, it is essential to choose discussion topics in each postgraduate class taking into account the necessity of mastering professional terminology. Likewise, individualization is achieved by free choice of discussion problems, usage of individualized education programs, open-ended tasks, development of Language Learning Portfolio, focus on scientific research or applied activities.

Postgraduate studies should be organized and managed keeping in mind postgraduates' employment and, therefore, blended learning should be widely made use of. In-class learning with a teacher and other learners is supplemented by independent computer-assisted learning. The following proportion 1/3:2/3 (printed learning materials: high-tech learning tools), employed in distance learning (Lewis, 2009), may vary and depends on a certain learning situation, enabling postgraduate students to learn at their own pace, in their own time.

In the modern world academic and business communities are highly interested in recruiting not only well-qualified professionals, but also specialists having a good command of at least one foreign language (Telnova, 2011). Advanced fluency in a given foreign language, or, as it is more relevant now, in several foreign languages, has nowadays become a necessary prerequisite for a successful career, an essential condition for fruitful scientific activity and an opportunity for valuable interaction with colleagues abroad. This makes speech orientation, which is closely connected with situatedness and functionality, unquestionably valuable within the framework of a modern foreign language lesson. Therefore, in consideration of this fact, the Foreign Language Department of Volgograd State Technical University has developed and published two textbooks for the English and German languages designed for postgraduates and external doctorate students (Mitina, Novozhenina, & Toporkova, 2010; Mitina, Tchechet, Dzhandalieva, Vysotskaya, & Konovalenko, 2013). These textbooks have been recommended for publication by the Education and Methodologies Association in linguistics of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. They fully comply with the new educational standards and requirements in terms of learning objectives which are as follows: to teach future scientists how to socialize in a foreign language on scientific, social and professional topics, to develop skills of reading scientific literature in the respective field of knowledge, to build data mining skills in order to summarize information from foreign language sources in the form of reviews, translations, abstracts, and proceedings and to enhance skills of writing scientific articles and reports in a foreign language.

The development of linguistic competency goes along with the development of discourse competency, therefore, it is impossible to mention speech orientation of a lesson without speaking of situatedness and functionality. They are connected, bound together and don't exist separately.

Hypothetical situations in learning are of high priority, as they simulate real communicative situations best of all, which facilitates the development of social experience. For instance, the situations on the topic «International

Business Trip» in the English text book are chosen from the point of view of the current and future needs of postgraduates. The practice dialogues reflect the spheres which scientists will have to deal with during their international business trips, as well as develop their personal and professional communication skills. This section of the work book also includes a wide range of speech functions: asking for information, asking someone's opinion, complimenting the question, agreeing/disagreeing other people's opinion, requesting clarification, giving an equivocal reply, etc.

The last methodology component—novelty—is an equally important element. The novelty effect, interesting forms of the learning process and new pedagogical technologies lead to the socialization of positive emotions essential for personality development. They motivate students to learn, develop the wish to investigate, to expand their experience and knowledge, facilitate interaction, give assurance and personal pertinence, and enable students to cope with hardships. Positive emotions are a prerequisite for effective dialogue and cross-cultural communication. During postgraduate classes we tend to use new forms of communication, new speech tasks, and new pedagogical technologies, which are directly determined by contemporary changes in education such as globalization, modularization, mobility of learners, distance education/e-learning/flexible learning, lifelong learning, and work-based learning (Ashworth, Brennan, Egan, Hamilton, & Sáenz, 2004). Primarily, they are socially-oriented technologies, widely used in professional education, such as business games, projects, case-study technology, conference simulations, dramatization, round tables, communication via email/the Internet (Sesnan, 2004).

3.2 Simulation Games and Role-Plays

It seems appropriate to use simulation games and role-plays as their constituents in teaching foreign languages to postgraduates, because these teaching methods are especially effective with people who have enough knowledge to take a simulation game seriously and who want to learn by their personal experience. Traditionally, a role game is a small episode displaying somebody's life, or a role which a student is preparing himself for. Greek researchers K. Magos and F. Politi (2008) noticed that using a role-play while teaching a foreign language "contributes to the improvement of significant skills, particularly participation in conversations and the ability to handle everyday situations requiring communication". Hungarian scientists Halápi and Saunders (2002) conducted research that has shown the following advantages which teachers see in using role-play activities for English language learning: closeness to real-life communication where students are trying to achieve a goal which is beyond the language; students learn to cooperate and negotiate while working on the task and gain self-confidence; role-plays develop fluency and spontaneity; they can reveal students' creativity; students have to consider structures, vocabulary, functions, and social relationships in order to use language successfully; role-plays are a big help with mixed-leveled groups. This method also has an apparent advantage of giving an opportunity to every postgraduate to participate in the game and promoting their motivation for further mastering of a foreign language.

The simulation game "International Scientific Conference on Modern Technologies", conducted during the final stage of learning English by postgraduates of Volgograd State Technical University is presented in the text book as an example. Postgraduates are assigned the following roles: Chairman, Programme Coordinator, Director of the American Scientific Society, young scientists from different cities of Russia. The chairperson gives an opening speech to the participants of the conference, outlines the programme, and gives the floor to the Programme Coordinator and its sponsor—the Director of the American Scientific Society. The conference participants who have the roles of young Russian scientists make reports on the topics of their scientific research, answer the questions of other participants, and take part in the discussion. A coffee-break is scheduled in the programme of the conference when the participants have an opportunity to small-talk, to get to know each other better, using everyday vocabulary. The use of this simulation game enables postgraduates to display the essential skills and abilities of a future scientist: skills of presenting the results of investigation at an important international event with further discussion of these results, the ability to ask questions in a foreign language regarding scientific topics, and the ability to work in an international team. Thus, the mentioned skills and abilities are certain to aid a scientist's successful professional communication.

One more example of a simulation game is the work on the module "Seminar on the History and Philosophy of Science" in teaching the German language. On the one hand, studying the problems of the philosophy of science at the lessons of German is a vivid novelty indicator for postgraduates. On the other hand, apart from developing essential skills and abilities there appears a possibility to prepare postgraduates for the candidate examination in the history and philosophy of science, i.e. for the course included into the list of obligatory candidate examination courses by the Russian Ministry of Education, dated 17 February, 2004 (2004). The work on this module is best represented in the form of a polylogue—a conversation of a philosophy professor with his postgraduates on the fundamental problems of the philosophy of science: what scientific cognition and knowledge are, which kinds of

cognition and knowledge can be distinguished, how to separate scientific knowledge from non-scientific knowledge, which methods can be used for such separation, what verification and falsification of knowledge mean. A wide variety of tasks in the course of work on this module (question-answer, find a synonym, give a definition, complete the gap with a missing term, mini-dialogues, etc.), using the aspect of novelty and intersubject communications, encourages postgraduates to study the foreign language in a more thoughtful and deep way and develops postgraduates' scientific approach to their scientific work.

3.3 Telecommunication and Multimedia

Telecommunication and multimedia learning tools have great advantages over traditional educational means. They enhance the efficiency of postgraduates' self-study while mastering the language, provide postgraduates with new opportunities for creative work, and develop the multimedia and professional competency of future scientists. The use of authentic video materials in foreign language lessons also deserves attention. They create conditions for involuntary memorizing of materials, caused by empathy with the events on the screen. The process of watching a video clip has a strong emotional impact and is a stimulus of motivation in the learning process. The profound study of authentic movies on business themes or video courses created by native speakers allows for not only enhancement of one's vocabulary and improvement of one's listening skills, but also the imagining of a communicative situation in the professional, scientific or business context (Mitina & Novozhenina, 2012). For example, the video course in the German language "Kontakt Deutsch" (2001), aimed at those studying economics, is successfully used for postgraduates of technical specialties. Introduction of postgraduates to specific episodes of the video course provides a means not only to acquaint them with business vocabulary and typical expressions, used by Germans, but also to perceive visually non-verbal signs of communication in various business situations (greeting, introduction, discussion of business trip conditions, hotel accommodation, innovation marketing, time management, etc.).

New forms of communication also include involvement of foreign experts for teaching a foreign language under a short-term or long-term contract. Considering development of cooperation between countries on different levels, modern and future postgraduates are likely to have more possibilities of such forms of education.

4. Conclusions

While teaching postgraduates of technical specialties we consider methodological content to be one of the main components of the cross-cultural professional communicative competence development. Individualization, speech focus and novelty at foreign language lessons as the essential components of its methodological content are fully implemented through specific lesson arrangement models, based on personal involvement into the learning process in the context of scientific activity. The use of socially-oriented technologies facilitates active involvement of postgraduates into speech activity, enhancing the interactive character of scientific communication.

Having such methodological content foreign language classes promote effective development of postgraduates' professional communicative competency in all its diverse aspects.

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