

Modern Methods in Training Professional Foreign Language for Students Majoring in Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to discuss how problem-based and professionally-oriented situations and the case study method have been adapted for use in the classroom to motivate students majoring in agriculture. The content pertaining the agricultural area was taken into the consideration. The study was conducted on 33 (93) students who were divided into subgroups in doing the tasks. Discussions, class activities, group and individual presentations were carried out in classrooms, using the board and computer. The results of the survey showed that these methods are significant not only for language but also relevant for specific subject learning.

KEYWORDS

Professional foreign language, problem-based situations, professionally-oriented situations and case study method

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 October 2016
Revised 28 November 2016
Accepted 05 December 2016

Introduction

A wide cooperation between countries in terms of economics, culture, education, science, politics and agriculture is developing. All the necessary branches of a country are closely connected with the basis and demands of training professional personnel. The qualitative training of specialists should coincide to the international and national standards. The training of agrarian specialists plays an important role as well. Healthy food, clean water, food security and the others are daily basic needs of a mankind. Therefore, agriculture is considered to be one of the most important economic sectors not only in Kazakhstan, but all over the world. For further exchange of information, joint production, joint projects, discussing challenges and cultivation of crops, exchange of students, faculty, academic mobility - all require specialists not only competent in the field of agriculture but also competent in mastering the language, especially English. In the area of the development of international

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cooperation the main task of state educational policy is to implement a complex of measures to create an integrated system of international linkages in the educational field which would embrace both international and national markets for educational services (Kunanbayeva, 2016). Transformation of Kazakh National Agrarian University into the research university and integration of science-education-industry and the ever-changing demands of modern society demand changes in the content of studies and English language teaching methodology. Therefore, by considering the significance of language proficiency we should refer to the European standards in the field of higher education, as reflected in the "Bologna Declaration". One of the basic requirements for quality training is mastering so-called "language portfolio» (Sprachportefeuille) - certain lexical and grammatical units enabling you to communicate in the field of professional activity. Creation of requirements for the European Union "language portfolio" refers to the development of free professional communication with foreign partners. Implementation of such requirements leads to the development and consideration of educational programs for training foreign languages in a professional context as well. Modern foreign language teaching should combine theoretical and practical learning, which will be oriented to the development of professional cognitive potential and creative abilities of an individual. This paper describes some non-traditional methods as problem-based and professionally-oriented situations and how case method aligns with research on foreign language acquisition, gives guidelines for teachers in implementing them in classes or programs for agrarian university students in learning English and outlines the benefits and challenges of case study method with English language learners.

One of the most well-known, though still receiving little use is the case study method (Benoit, 2009), which appeared as a distinctive approach as far as in the beginning of the 20th century. Case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as an event, a person or type of behaviour, institutional group or culture) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment. This is a method of research by which accumulated case histories are analysed as primary authorities instead of textbooks (Horwich, 1999). Normally in FLT the text of a case study is up to 2 pages long and includes such sections as: background or introductory information, description of an event or problem definition, and a presentation of issues for group discussion. Materials and methods Case studies for FL study should be based on realistic professional or everyday problems and situations, and designed to motivate and actively engage students. Typically students are involved in discussions on particular problems and work out solutions or recommendations through their active group work. Case studies are also excellent topics for dialogues. It is common that each case study ends with a realistic writing task reflecting the real world of professional correspondence. To be successful in using case studies a teacher should take into consideration the level of students' language knowledge. The best choice would be using it with the student groups of intermediate or advanced level, who may have certain problems in grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary use, but for the most part are at ease with speaking the FL. Classroom applications of the case study method include: – free discussions; – directed discussions; – group research work; – written tasks (Benoit, 2009), and other types of activities. Language Portfolio is a set of documents that contains information about student's language learning experiences, the level of different language skills – writing,



reading, speaking, listening, and translation, and samples of those skills. It promotes language learning and the development of cultural competence. Most often it consists of three parts: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier (Horwich 1999). Its language passport allows language learners to summarize their language learning experiences and to describe them in a meaningful way using the terminology of an international rating scale. The language biography focuses on the five C's of language learning: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. It provides learners with an opportunity to assess for themselves their language learning progress in five skill areas. It also encourages them to set personal goals in language learning and intercultural competence development, and to plan strategies to meet their individual goals. The dossier both stores samples of a learner's speaking and writing, and documents results of the learner's language tests and other professional certifications.

R.W. Langacker (1991) notes that continuous interacting with the culture and mentality forms a native speaker as a person belonging to a given socio-cultural community, imposing and developing the system of values, morals, behavior, attitude to the people. According to E. Sapir (1993), each cultural system and every single act of public conduct explicitly or implicitly implies communication. The system of values as an element of culture, in turn, is made up of socially significant sets of subcultures determined by group and target goals and interests. For example, it is possible to be quite fluent in general German, but to be functionally illiterate, if after completing a Higher Educational Institution course "Professional communication" the person is unable to fulfill the functional role of a candidate for a vacancy at a university, to participate in a training course or to take a job abroad, does not possess the communicative culture skills and does not follow the standards in the field of job, does not know how to search job and apply for recruitment. These problems may appear because the program of the course might lack focus on socio-cultural aspects of professional communication in German, which brings to a rising barrier to successful social adaptation of the graduates in the labor market in the context of globalization of the economy and education. V.L. Skalkin (1991) emphasizes that for a long time the Russian national methodology was dominated by the approach when students were to acquire the ability to perform in a peculiar to us (native culture) sociocommunicative position, but in a foreign language code.

Methodology

Subjects of the study. The subjects of the study are the students enrolled in Kazakh National Agrarian University located in Almaty, Kazakhstan. 6 classes were scheduled twice a week, that is 150 minutes per week for one group. Each class size is about 18 and 15 students - among them there are international students from Afghanistan. English is taught in two academic years, the first year is aimed at General English and the second year - at Professional Foreign Language courses.

Objectives of the study. The objectives of the study are to investigate the effects of modern teaching approaches in developing students' professional foreign language competence.

English Language courses for students majoring in agriculture. The specific objective of the course is to develop students' intercultural communicative competence as a mainly attempt to communicate with individuals from various countries (Kunanbayeva, 2013). As the effective teaching is based on communication, the goal of English teaching is exactly the same, namely to develop the ability of students to communicate with people in a new language in real world situations (Brown, 1987; Ommagio, 1986; Oxford, 1990; Widdowson, 1978). The significance of mastering students' professionally-communicative abilities in a foreign language is indicated in the "Concept of development the foreign language education in the Republic of Kazakhstan". According to the Concept, in order to achieve international standard parameters in learning foreign languages two stages were taken into account: the first stage is expected for students to master the fourth (B2) European level for non-English majoring universities. That means student with B2 level can understand difficult information on the themes of personal, social, academic or professional areas of life, use the language fluently, grammatically correct and effectively in the conversation on various topics and express their position clearly by providing relevant explanations. The second stage assumes professionally-oriented training within a specific specialty using English for Specific Purposes (LSP) (Concept of development the foreign language education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2006).

Rationale for using problem-based and professionally-oriented situations

Most schools and universities adopt a traditional teacher-centered approach in teaching English. It goes without saying that in this approach most students are often passive receptors of knowledge. In order to realize developing students' communicative and professional competence in a foreign language acquisition process we could point out several non-traditional technologies and methods as problem-based and professionally-oriented situations, case study method. These methods would enable students to be encouraged in developing their team-building, communicative and creative skills. According to the free dictionary, "situation" is defined as the combination of circumstances at a given moment; a state of affairs and as a critical, problematic, or striking set of circumstances. Using problem based and professionally-oriented situations in a curriculum model emphasizes the use of task-based problems to engage students in active and multidisciplinary learning. Through problem-based tasks students learn how to solve problems that are ill-structured, open-ended or ambiguous and this type of tasks would engage students to learn from real life situations. In order to understand a particular problem students can work alone, in pairs or in groups and then find possible solutions to it. As scholar D.N. Kulibaeva (2002) points out method of modeling the professionally-oriented situations is connected with students' communication on a specific topic, as business correspondence, contract negotiations under the terms of cooperation and the others. Professionally-oriented situations require solutions to problems from learners as real partners or experts of these organizations requiring solving problems.

For instance, the following professionally-oriented situation for students majoring in agricultural sphere could be used: *Private businessman deals with dairy production and he is looking for the company-dealers to export his products. Allocate your roles and discuss with your partner how this task could be implemented.*



Similar situations can be used in the form of role-play, which motivates students to communicate with their groupmates and as a consequence it will develop their communicative, creative skills and critical thinking ability.

Rationale for using case study method. Another option for teaching English as a foreign language in agrarian university is using case study method. Case study method is a unique method not only in business and law studies, it is also an innovative method in language teaching.

The case study method as a learning method designed to identify, select and solve problems, work with information, evaluate alternatives, analyze the arguments, listen and understand the other students' decisions and develop the skills of team work. Currently the problem of introduction the case study method into the practice of higher professional education is very topical, which is determined in two tendencies:

- the first one follows from the general direction of education development, which is focused more on forming professional competence rather than on obtaining specific knowledge and an ability to process huge amounts of information;
- the second follows from the quality requirements of a professional who should also have the ability of optimal behavior in different situations, systemic and effective actions (Kunanbayeva, 2014).

Many works have described the process of case method. There exist a number of definitions for the term «case study». Case studies are, by their nature, multidisciplinary, and “allow the application of theoretical concepts...bridging the gap between theory and practice” (Davis & Wilcock, 2010). Having students work through complex, ambiguous, real world problems engages students with the course material, encouraging them to “see it from an action perspective, rather than analyze it from a distance” (Angelo & Boehrer, 2002). It has proven to be an excellent means for the integration of subject-specific aspects into language teaching. The use of the case method in language teaching encourages task-oriented teaching methods and problem-based learning, as the students are confronted with an authentic problem they have to solve by analyzing material in the target language (Fischer et al., 2008; Deardorff, 2006).

As many researchers, we can define “case study method” as a learner-centered activity focused on gathering, analyzing information in order to find decision of a problem which is in consequence develops students' critical thinking and communication skills.

As it was mentioned above in the “Conception of development the foreign language education in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, such method as modeling problem-based and professionally-oriented situations of general intercultural content would be implemented for the 1st course students of non – English majoring university, as well as the case study method in professional content would be appropriate for the 2nd or 3rd year students in studying professionally-oriented English. Therefore, case study method in English language is recommended at higher level, as students are needed a certain amount of knowledge, sufficiently high level of English language proficiency and formed communication skills. Furthermore, being complicated and effective teaching method, case study is not universal and is applied particularly well in

combination with other methods of teaching foreign languages as brain storming, role play and etc.

English classes based on the case study method should be organized in consequence of the previous method of situations and it is also vital to pre-teach vocabulary and speaking skills. Therefore, the whole teaching plan should be systematically and logically constructed. For instance, students of Agrarian University would be given Starting up exercises on content vocabulary through listening and reading texts. It is important to pre-teach the specific language required to discuss the case study.

Results and Discussion

Example of a case study:

Imagine that your producers' association has identified an opportunity for placing a non-traditional export product on the United States market. As a leader of your agribusiness you wish to assess the viability of this opportunity, for which you basically need to:

- a) survey the size and commercial conditions of the market;*
- b) find out which quality standards this market demands;*
- c) improve the product's presentation.*

— *In your environment, do you know of a policy or programme that could help you to develop this initiative?*

— *Which entities in your environment would you approach for support to enable you to achieve your aim?*

— *Which factors in your environment stand in the way of exploiting this opportunity?*

In order to help students use case study effectively the following stages were used. Students from two groups were divided into small subgroups. They:

1. grasped the situation described in a case study;
2. defined the presenting problem allocating factors and personalities that could really affect
3. proposed themes for brainstorming
4. analyzed the consequences for adopting a decision
5. decided the solution of the case – offered their own decisions.

Monitoring the progress of students in implementing problem

In order to keep track of students' progress, each group had to answer the following questions orally:

a) What problems did your group experience in the case study method and how they were solved?

b) Did you have any challenges in searching materials? What kind of sources did you use?

c) Was it interesting and fruitful to work in groups?

d) What have you learnt from this method?

Response of students towards the case study method

Student 1



I have learnt a lot while I was looking for information to solve the task. We have used to read professional terms in our native language, therefore it was a little bit difficult and at the same time exciting to use them in English communication

Student 2

I liked this task. There is no doubt that it has more benefits. To my mind it is a good opportunity for me to expose myself to the realistic professional agricultural world. It is not as a traditional way of studying and it is more truthful to solve the problems in English. I think it will help me in the future.

Student 3

I think I have gained more abilities and skills in communicating with my groupmates. We tried to search materials, discussed it in English. It has more advantages in developing not only our English as well as professional awareness in solving the task. I had a barrier to speak before an audience, especially in English, but now I think I am doing my best. I read a lot and try to do my best in preparing the presentations.

Challenges

After the survey we could face some challenges with the case study method in the classroom. For example, it is difficult for students whose English is a little bit lower in comparison with their groupmates to be involved into the discussion. Another challenge is connected with the students' hesitation in expressing their opinions before the audience. They are afraid to make mistakes and say wrong things in saying their views.

Benefits

The use of case studies in the classroom of professional English language training has two objectives: to improve the communicative and intercultural competence ¹ and to form students' professional skills. The case study method improves learners' skills through discussing and presenting their opinions and findings and will become more confident in reading texts in a foreign language for specific purposes, namely, in finding specific information on a given topic. Also students are normally asked to present the results of a case study in written form, for example, by writing a report, preparing a brochure, etc.

Case studies also stimulate team work, problem-solving, presentation and discussion skills. But most of all, case studies are extremely motivating: learners spend more time on reading texts in a foreign language, they feel a real need to express themselves using the target language and put more effort into preparing their presentations.

Conclusions

The overall results of using non-traditional methods in training professional foreign language specialists showed that the learners were motivated enough to communicate with each other in the classroom. It can be observed that students were generally interested in studying and the case study method assignment. They were involved in analyzing, discussing, negotiating, searching materials and insisting on their point of view. Working in a team helped learners to understand domestic and international students; as a result, it strengthened

their friendly relationship. Taking into account their positive point of view concerning the problem-based, professionally-oriented situations and the case study method, students were encouraged to learn English despite its difficult sides. It also helped them to make more informed decisions about their career choices. Accordingly, the learning process was intensified and became more successful, students showed better linguistic results in situations of authentic communication.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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