# Project Activities as a Form of English Language Teaching Based on the Interdisciplinary Approach to Form Intercultural Communicative Competence

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**ABSTRACT**
The authors of this article suggest a thesis about the purpose of teaching a foreign language – it is student's communicative activities, i.e. learning a foreign language in practice. The teacher's task is to encourage activities of every student and to create situations to develop their creative activities in a learning process. New information technologies streamline and diversify the learning process and, at the same time, open up good prospects to expand the educational framework and undoubtedly bring an incredible motivational drive and promote the principles of individualization of learning. At the current stage of development, the educational system tends to gradually shift towards learner-centered cooperation where a learner plays an active role. Non-standard technologies, encouragement of teacher's creative pursuit and professional advancement, and implementation of innovations proved to be useful in the learning and educational process.

## Introduction

A project method, which has recently become ever more widespread at modern educational institutions, takes a leading role among the latest technologies. The project method helps to strengthen individualization of the learning process, to search for optimal combination of theory and practice, to keep students' knowledge and skills up-to-date, and to encourage students to resolve their everyday issues themselves. For such activities, cooperative or group learning based on the principle 'train the trainer' is typical as achievements of one student in the process of such activity become those of the entire group.

A project activity allows students to act as authors and initiators, strengthen their creative endeavors, broaden their outlook and develop their language skills.

Involvement in web-based projects raises the level of their practical knowledge of English as well as their computer skills and, most importantly, develops

independence and leadership skills. In the course of project activities, it is a student who takes the responsibility for deliverables. The most important thing is that a student, not a teacher, decides what the scope of the project is, in what form and how the project should be presented. The project is an opportunity for students to come up with their ideas presented in a form they design and find convenient (Carbaugh, 2016).

The application of the project method at foreign language classes demonstrates that students:

1. Achieve good progress in learning a foreign language;
2. Have a good opportunity to apply their computer skills in practice and can use other multimedia teaching aids;
3. Understand the need for interdisciplinary links;
4. Unlike traditional learning method, the project method provides a number of benefits including the key advantages:
5. Students are better motivated to study a foreign language.
6. Knowledge of various subjects is visually integrated.
7. There is an environment for creative activities and workmanship.

The project method has recently become popular and 'trendy' in our country. This might be a matter of concern since at attempt to keep up with the fashion could be misleading: we can take common group activities as students' projects. To prevent such a mistake, whenever the project method is used in the educational process, one should keep in mind that the main feature of the project technique, which distinguishes it from traditional teaching methods, is the subject – subject relationship of those involved in the teaching process. In such approach, a teacher is an adviser and a partner, and any project is learner-oriented.

## Methodological Framework

To summarize the existing theories, a project in teaching foreign languages can be defined as a set of exercises or assignments that involve well-structured, long-term, meaningful independent research activities of students in a foreign language. Such activities should be carried out as a part of their classwork and extracurricular activities. The purpose of the project method is to encourage students' interest to specific issues requiring them to apply certain knowledge in project activities to address one or more issues. This defines the main objectives of the project method (Antonenko et al., 2015):

1. To transfer certain amount of knowledge to students, to teach them how to apply their knowledge on their own to address new educational and practical tasks.
2. To help a student to gain communicative skills, so he/she could work in different groups and play various social roles (such as a leader, an executive, an intermediate etc.)
3. To expand students' social network so they could make acquaintance with other professionals and learn an issue from different perspectives.
4. To teach students to use research techniques: how to gather and analyze required information, analyze the information considering different points of view, hypothesize and present conclusions.

The new pedagogical thinking starts with mastering the project designing method: clear didactic goals, education in the context of future professional activities, structured learning materials, quality of methodological language, and reasonable management of students' learning activities (Kuznetsova, 2015).

The review of modern methodological literature allows us to present a general typology of projects. E.S. Polat (2000) identified the following types of projects by prevailing type of activity: research, creative, role play, informational, or practice-oriented projects. A project may also be interdisciplinary (when referred to the scope of knowledge), flexible (in terms of project coordination), long-term (in terms of duration), or verbal/written (in terms of communication type) (Handford, 2016).

For the purposes of this article, it is also advisable to point out the following features of the project method:

1. Long-term research activities are designed, implemented, and assessed by students themselves.
2. The learning process covers all types of foreign language activities.
3. Knowledge, skills and competences representing various areas of science and students' personal experience are well-integrated.
4. Active classwork and out-of-class activities are encouraged.
5. A certain end product, such as a written document, a published brochure or newspaper, video etc. will be obtained

Notably, besides achievement of a certain result, one of the main tasks of organization of students' project activities is the use of a foreign language at all project implementation stages. The development of the system of knowledge for students' independent work focused on their personal interests and hobbies with consideration of their life experience and knowledge as well as skills and competences from various life spheres would help to achieve this goal.

Any project goes through four stages: preparation, execution, presentation, and final stage (Díaz, 2016).

At the preparatory stage, a teacher designs students' activities in project implementation (identification of main activities, distribution of students by small groups to focus on a particular area, identification of a format of an end product, and designing ways and sources for information search and the ways to present the deliverables of the study). At this stage, students are usually involved in receptive and receptive-reproductive conventionally communicative exercises.

At the second stage (execution), students perform receptive, reproductive, and productive communicative exercises to improve their skills by four types of speech activities.

At the presentation stage, students present their results and get ready for a verbal report through receptive and productive communicative exercises

The final stage involves discussion, analysis, and assessment of the quality and results of students' project activities and projects in small groups followed by a large group discussion (Zavyalova, 2015).

The teacher's role is to analyze and use the information obtained to make an overall assessment of students' performance.

According to E.S. Polat (2000), the overall project assessment includes:
– analysis of significance and relevance of the issue chosen;

–    correctness of study methods chosen and techniques to process the results;

–    each project member's active behavior based on his/her individual performance;

–    collective decision-making;

–    communication and mutual cooperation;

–    required and sufficient insight into the issue;

–    evidence-based solutions;

–    ability to reason conclusions;

–    esthetic presentation of project deliverables;

–    ability to answer opponents' questions;

–    brief and reasonable answers by every group member;

We would like to add one more feature to those listed above: quality of language and verbal presentation of the project.

## Results and Discussion

Today, the project method is considered to be important since this approach, being an instrument of development of learner-oriented situations, differs from widely used traditional methods of learning and considered to be the most productive since the entire specifics of teacher's work associated with purposes, tasks, object, ways of implementation and the result is learned in the course of project development and implementation. When combined with other learning techniques, this method can address the issue of gradual formation and further development of students' independent thinking and certain intellectual, creative and communicative skills.

As is well known, the content of education is a scientifically substantiated system of didactic and methodical educational material to serve various educational and educational-qualification levels.

The content of the communicative training based on the project method is not defined by a separate paper but comes out from professional educational programs and academic disciplines focused on developing certain aspects of communicative competence (known as communication-oriented subjects) (Ignatov and Shulepov, 2015).

The content of students' communicative training requires thorough designing with a separate strategy that forms communicative competence of future specialists. We believe that such content should be designed on the basis of systemic approach and integrative approach.

The systemic approach in educational research is an area of the educational research methodology, i.e. study of an object as a set of elements in the web of relations and connections between them, that is examination of the object as a pedagogical system. The system, in general, represents a plurality of interconnected elements. The system is usually separated from the external environment and can interact with the latter as a single whole (Sidorov et al., 2015).

The integrative approach allows us to form a coherent picture of the world, involves pooling the processes of formation of individual elements of communicative competence fragmented in time and in the context of formation (a part of various

academic disciplines). In addition to "integration" as "pooling" of elements, "integration" as "restoration" of a common vision and understanding of students' communicative competence should be achieved despite complex branched structure of the elements (Zhang, 2016; Kohler, 2016).

These approaches should be integrated considering the need to pool fragmented and uncoordinated elements of students' communicative training in a system and to study the elements of this system and the links between them as well as the need to expand and improve the system of students' communicative training in a high-quality manner.

The starting points for designing the contents of students' communicative training based on the systematic and integrative approaches include (Napier and Leeson, 2016):

1. Integration of communication-oriented academic disciplines by using and strengthening interdisciplinary links.
2. Introduction of communicative modules into occupation-oriented disciplines.
3. Systematization and integration of content of students' communicative training with due consideration of communication-oriented academic disciplines and communicative modules as part of occupation-oriented disciplines.

Let us recall that communication-oriented disciplines are defined as those that provide knowledge about communication, develop one's skills and competences in communicative activities and provide an opportunity to get a communicative experience. Disciplines which develop communication knowledge and skills on how to achieve efficient communication based on communicative experience are communication-oriented. They focus on communication and direct students through communication. Among the most communication-oriented disciplines, in our opinion, are Foreign Language (Occupation-oriented), Russian Language (Occupation-oriented), and Psychology, since these subjects demonstrate the largest knowledge of communicative processes, opportunities to acquire skills and competences of communication and take the most academic time for communication (Dossanova, 2015).

Occupation-oriented disciplines are intended to develop general professional competence and may often be associated with a process of developing communicative competence. We believe that association of some occupation-oriented disciplines with communication issues and communicative competence is an important reserve which is currently underused for development of communicative competence (Widodo, 2016).

Thus, we propose to identify and use the communicative potential of occupation-oriented disciplines and to design the content of students' communicative training with due consideration of systematization of the content of the communication-oriented disciplines based on basic subjects (such as Russian, foreign languages, and psychology) and communicative modules as a part of special disciplines. Designing the content of students' communicative training will contribute in the future to the development of a method of integrated development of structural elements of communicative competence (Napier and Leeson, 2016).

The review of academic curricula and professional training programs shows that communication-oriented disciplines include:

- Year 1 – Russian Language (Occupation-oriented), Foreign Language (Occupation-oriented), Information Systems and Technologies, Business and Management Ethics;
- Year 2 - Foreign Language (Occupation-oriented), Psychology, and Office Management;
- Year 3 – Managerial Decisions, and E-Commerce in Management;
- Year 4 – Manager's Work Organization;
- Year 5 – Public Administration.

The review of professional training program for MEPhI students based on these communication-oriented disciplines demonstrated the following specific features of communicative training:

1. Poor systematization and coordination of the content of learning materials.
2. Insufficient use of interdisciplinary links.
3. Inconsistent communicative training.
4. Lack of overall strategy for students' communicative training.
5. Superficial links with occupation-oriented disciplines and their contents.

However, students' communicative training offered as a part of communication-oriented disciplines has the following typical features:

1. Variation of communicative tasks, methods and forms of education.
2. Substantial time reserve to form communicative knowledge, skills and competences to acquire communicative experience.
3. Quite deep study of certain aspects of students' communication.

The review of communicative prospects of occupation-oriented disciplines as part of academic curricula shows that (Capone and Mey, 2016):

1. There is a link between the content of certain occupation-oriented disciplines and professional communication, and communicative modules may be introduced when certain topics of the disciplines are studied and such approach would be advisable;
2. There is an important possibility to substantially strengthen the contextual focus and improve communicative training despite relatively insufficient time reserve for communicative training when occupation-oriented disciplines are studied.

Therefore, we consider it necessary to design the content of students' communicative training with due consideration of the systematization of the content of communication-oriented subjects and the development of communicative modules to be used as a part of special disciplines.

Systematization is the process of constructing a system based on fragmented knowledge. To this end, a basic idea is required to arrange knowledge as a logical unity (Grainger and Mills, 2016).

The fundamental idea of systematization of the content of students' communicative training is the need to align the content of the training in accordance with realities and sustainable development trends in the sphere of communication of these specialists. Therefore, students' communicative training must include:

1. Competence in all types of communicative activities.
2. Understanding of ability and motivation to continuous development of one's competence as the modern information society develops.

Functions of systematization meet the needs for improvement of students' communicative training, as the systematization allows:

1. To review the entire information and develop a common view of a phenomenon or an issue.
2. To identify and address gaps, discrepancies and inconsistences.
3. To improve performance.
4. To make the information easy to use.
5. To ease data retrieval and replenishment process.
6. To thoroughly study phenomena and issues.

Systematization and integration of the content of communication-oriented disciplines and communicative modules as part of occupation-oriented disciplines provides (Bloom, 2015):

1. An overview of communication- and occupation-oriented disciplines that have a communicative potential; development of a common vision of modern students' communicative training.
2. Identification and addressing gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies in the content of students' communicative training based on fundamental disciplines of communication training (such as Foreign Language and Russian Language).
3. Improving the efficiency of students' communicative activities.
4. Development of a system of communicative competences, skills, and motivation supported by the communicative experience and subject to natural modification and expansion as the sphere of communication develops.

Therefore, the basic disciplines of students' communicative training are Russian Language (Occupation-oriented), Foreign Language (Occupation-oriented), and Psychology as these are the most communication-oriented disciplines (Earls, 2016).

The purpose of the course Foreign Language (Occupation-oriented) is a practical learning of a foreign language as a means of communication in everyday life and professional activities. The full training course consists of two stages (the main course with elements of specialization and occupation-oriented courses) and is studied for four semesters.

According to the standard program, grammar and vocabulary topics are studied at the first stage. They are required for speaking and translation of simple texts in terms of grammar and vocabulary. It is important that special attention is paid to the development of speaking skills, such as dialogic and monologue speech and use of everyday vocabulary. The second stage involves transition to communication in general scientific and highly specialized topics: the development of speaking skills based on topics of student's specialty, reading professional literature, and in-depth study of grammar.

## Conclusion

As universal and professional values, heuristic interviews and effective professional communication in a foreign language will contribute to the efficient learning of a foreign language and help a student to develop communicative competence in general.

A project component of students' communicative competence should be developed using micro-situation analysis, portfolio and roundtable discussion methods.

Micro-situation analysis refers to non-player simulation techniques and can enhance cognitive activity in MEPhI students, focus their attention on search for information and provide information directly about the situation of communicative activities requiring a high level of communicative competence. Given the complex structure of communicative activity, micro-situations can vary by content. Therefore, this method involves a range of technologies, such as communicative competence blog, Skype, YouTube, and e-mail.

It should be noted that a case-study method, which is also based on the situation analysis, will be used in formation of the other component, i.e. an activity-corrective element. The principal difference between these methods is large-scale complex real-world problems of a business entity in the case-study method and one-sided and relatively simple (affordable) problems in the micro-situation method. This is the way – from the simple to the complex, from the accumulation of knowledge and information to activities and analysis of results – communicative competence should be developed in MEPhI students.

The key to the efficient use of the micro-situation analysis method in the present case is to consider diverse and numerous communicative situations in professional activities of an agrarian manager. Future specialists analyze and learn how to make decisions in such micro-situations step by step to be well positioned in the future to deal with sophisticated issues combining several challenges.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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