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A Competence-based Perspective on Foreign Language Teaching at the Master Level: Insights from John Dewey's Educational Philosophy

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Abstract

The article determines the specific bundle of competences and strategies underpinning the modern process of foreign language teaching by building upon the selected elements of educational philosophy of John Dewey. The article proceeds by reconstructing some of these elements and subsequently by drawing implications for the competence development strategies in the foreign language teaching. The main implications include adopting cutting-edge teaching technologies and fine-tuning and individualizing teaching materials. A key aspect of teaching technologies to be adopted is assisting students in developing their own self-study strategies.

Keywords:

Sociocultural competence, Dewey, learner-centred approach, self-study, learning strategies, teaching activities

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Introduction

The importance of sociocultural competence for modern university graduates is universally acknowledged. Yet, in practical terms, developing this competence still poses a number of challenges related to the background competence of master students and availability of academic hours. While information sources on relevant topics abound, there remains a deficit of comprehensive training packages that are finely attuned to the unique needs of master students in agricultural universities. This article explores the development of sociocultural competence at the master-level foreign language teaching.

The competence-based approach was founded in 1965 by N. Chomsky. According to this approach, students are supposed to assimilate the learning matter in the form of integrated wholes rather than separate and loosely connected pieces of information. The advocates of this approach point out the dramatic rate of societal change and the futility of making timely adjustments in the learning matter. Instead, they lay stress on the formation of key competences that would enable students to deal with this change as it proceeds. In the course of learning, generic competence development is thus supposed to take priority over the particular contents of professional education.

The competence-based approach is fully endorsed in the Ukrainian strategy of modernization of foreign language teaching. Indeed, the contemporary foreign language teaching is centred around the formation of key competences [1, 2, 3]. Yet, important gaps in the understanding of these competences still persist. It is unclear what competences are to be regarded as the key ones and how they are to be accommodated into the learning matter.

The present article will seek to address these gaps from the perspective of the multifaceted theoretical legacy of John Dewey, an outstanding proponent of philosophical pragmatism and a major reformer of the American educational system of the early XXth century. John Dewey laid the pragmatist foundations for educational reform, and his concerns about the potential inadequacies of the educational process gain particular relevance in the modern Ukrainian context. The basic point of departure of Dewey's educational philosophy is the need to integrate the learning matter into the "life continuum", or the social experience, of the students. The key contention of the present article is that a closer look at the relevant social experience may be helpful in

discovering the competences to be accentuated in the foreign language teaching.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to build on selected elements of Dewey's educational philosophy in order to determine the specific bundle of competences and strategies underpinning the modern process of foreign language teaching. More specifically, the article elaborates on the importance of teaching approaches and strategies, including self-study and autonomous learning. The article proceeds by reconstructing some of these elements and subsequently by drawing implications for the competence development strategies in the foreign language teaching.

John Dewey's educational philosophy: a background

Dewey saw the philosophical meaning of education generally in what he called "renewal by transmission", i.e. the preservation and further development of societal civilizational attainments [4]. This societal problem is laid upon the office of education. It is through the education that people become effectively socialized and enabled to fully participate in the societal problem-solving process. Dewey warned, however, of the corrupting effects of rigid traditions and ceremonies that potentially convert the educational process from "renewal by transmission" into static and rigid systems of ceremonial domination. Dewey contrasted the natural plasticity of students' cognitive capacities with the potential rigidity of the educational process. He argued that the educational process must make students into effective problem-solvers rather than recreate the coercive ceremonial relationships existing in the broader society [5].

As a leading proponent of pragmatism, Dewey rejected the so-called dualisms of the idealist philosophy, such as those between body and spirit, matter and consciousness, facts and values. He explained them as reflections of excessive social stratification resulting in the disintegration of the social experience. In pedagogical terms, a relevant idealistic dualism is that between body and reason. According to Dewey, idealistically oriented teachers wish that their students bring their reason to a class but not their body, as the latter distracts them from learning. Dewey designated this kind of education as scholastic and remote from practical life, i.e., from the actual social experience. He argued that the really useful education appeals not merely to the reason, but to the

personality of the student as a whole. According to him, the students must be able to see the value of the learning matter from the standpoint of the whole social experience of which they continuously partake.

Dewey was particularly critical of all forms of learning by heart. He put forward the original idea that learning by heart is the kind of learning that destroys the ability for critical social inquiry and that is ideally suited for the preservation of the current patterns of ceremonial domination. Ceremonial societies are indeed generally known to favour learning by heart, but this kind of learning is clearly inappropriate for the purpose of making students into critical inquirers.

To Dewey, one of results of learning must be the creation of common interests and understandings among people, i.e., a better integration of the social experience. This is the reason why Dewey was wary of raising “egoistic specialists” and pleaded for general education that makes people more aware of the things they have in common with each other. Among these things, the language ranks foremost, and Dewey was explicit about it. Indeed, to take an extreme example, even if the language is used for conflict escalation, conflict participants still maintain a common interest in making their conflict strategies mutually understandable. Particularly the foreign language helps students to recognize their common interests with the diverse professional stakeholders from all over the world.

Implications for the study of foreign languages

Based on the above ideas, there are a number of general implications that can be drawn for the study of foreign languages.

- First, this study must occur within, rather than outside, the life continuum of the students. The students must be encouraged to bring to the class the diverse practical problems that they are facing, and be encouraged to explore how they can solve these problems by utilizing their foreign language competences. They must not be required to “forget” their problems for the time of the class.
- Second, it is crucial to make sure that the teaching strategy is free of any vestiges of ceremonial domination, primarily that of teachers over the students. The teacher must act not as the master, but as the facilitator of intrinsically driven inquiry.

The students must be given wide-ranging autonomy in the selection of the learning matter and learning strategies. As mentioned above, ceremonial domination often reveals itself in various forms of learning by heart. Speaking in pragmatist terms, it must be examined whether this learning has ceremonial or instrumental value in particular instances.

- Third, the interaction between teachers and students must be guided by their mutually recognizable common interests. Within these common interests, the students must be able to set their own learning goals that ultimately converge upon becoming effective citizens in the global and increasingly dynamic society. The common interests between teachers and students thus develop into a still broader interest of meaningful citizenship that is shared by a much broader community. This is how education contributes to the integration of the social experience in the sense of Dewey.

All of these implications have an important bearing on the basic pedagogical distinction between the learner-centred and teacher-centred teaching approaches. The former approach is traditionally associated with the learners' autonomy in setting learning goals and methods as well as with the extensive collaboration with the teacher in the development of learning schedules. This approach envisages the fullest use of the available learners' knowledge before the teacher starts explaining the new material. It requires taking seriously the learners' sociocultural and lifestyle habits in order to reflect on them from the international perspective. The emotional states and moral values of the learners likewise become important informational inputs into planning the teaching process. Overall, the learner-centred approach boils down to constraining the teacher domination of the learning process and to empowering the learner.

It is common knowledge that particularly the Western experts tend to overemphasize learner independence in the teaching process. They advocate learner autonomy and learner independence and argue for transferring the control over the teaching process from the teacher to the learner. The reasons for this standpoint basically include improving learning motivation and effectively appealing to learners' sense of responsibility. To us, it is obvious that this understanding of the learner-centred approach works best if the teaching occurs within the foreign

language environment and/or with adult learners who already have experience of responsible decision making.

In contrast, the teacher-centred approach supposedly contradicts the humanization of the educational process and constrains the learners' creativity. As a traditional teaching method, the teacher-centred approach involves frontal teacher-learner interaction with teachers usually nominating students for the assignment of specific tasks. Yet, many Ukrainian experts embrace the teacher-centred approach because of its ability to ensure continuity and conformity of the teaching process with the unified national standards.

Taking the Deweyian perspective, we believe that the dispute between the advocates of learner-centred and teacher-centred approaches is largely misplaced and that the best combination of these approaches is contingent on specific learning conditions. The basic condition that is shaping the foreign language teaching process today is the fact that, unlike a few decades ago, the professional environment of modern university graduates is rapidly changing in response to the ongoing processes of globalization and internationalization. This environment presents many opportunities of professional development, but it is a major source of risk as well. Apart from professional competence and language skills, competitive job seekers in the globalized labor markets must have cross-cultural competence, cultural awareness, and a meaningful sense of global cultural community. Developing this competence requires the full-scale cooperation between learners and teachers, with neither side dominating the other.

Practical implications

In line with Dewey's idea of the students' life continuum, we believe that the viable approach to creating the sociocultural competence is to maximize the use of authentic information in the teaching process. More specifically, this means that master students must be supplied with up-to-date training packages, including print and electronic media, and must have access to the web. Particularly the latter condition will enable the utilization of tremendous learning resources dispersed among a wide variety of global organizations and institutions. The high quality of teaching technology becomes even more imperative upon considering the trivial number of academic hours allocated to language study in non-language universities.

Several conditions must be met if the sociocultural aspect of language study is to be successful. Master students must be in possession of sufficient background competence and communicative skills obtainable during the bachelor study. The key aspect of master-level training is to build on the existing foundation of students' factual and lexical knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial that the master-level language study accommodates materials that have not been stripped of interesting factual and professional content. No less essential is the practice of considering grammatical schemes in the context of situational and contingent problem-solving. Class activities must be aimed at transferring information gained through self-study into the shared contextual space of the class.

Given the wide variation in the background competence among students, an individualized approach to teaching requires helping the students to develop independent abilities to search and process information on sociocultural topics. Due to their advanced training stage, master-level students are largely able to devise individual learning strategies. This ability is an important asset that potentially activates intrinsic motivation in studying a foreign language.

We follow Koryakovtseva in taking out-of-class activity to involve organization and implementation of students' cognitive activity without direct guidance on the part of the teacher [6]. This activity is advantageous in many respects. First, it enables time-saving optimization of the learning process. Second, it motivates students to engage in search behavior. Third, it makes for the creative and innovative character of the learning process. Given the significant amount of learning strategies outlined in the extant literature (cf. 62 strategies in Oxford (1990)), we lay emphasis on the formation of strategies of the following types: inductive/deductive inference strategies, comparative analysis strategies, summarization strategies, memory strategies (grouping, structuring, logical linking), compensation strategies (meaning guessing, constrained-language coping), social strategies (cooperation in learning, account of sociocultural traits of learning partners) [7]. All these strategies create a shared mental context for effective self-study.

Skills of independent learning allow master students to significantly enhance their professional competence. The competence thereby added is further reinforced through topical oral communication in the class. The receptive lexical and grammatical skills contribute to this process by effecting learning flexibility that engenders free student

discussions in various organizational settings, such as panel discussions and debates. Panel discussions are based on primary involvement of few students with advanced communicative skills. By contrast, debates involve the delivery of several oral reports featuring conflicting viewpoints that are subsequently discussed by the rest of students [8]. According to our experience, discussions have been particularly lively while considering the theme of 'Leadership styles'. Accordingly, we take discussion to be an advanced training method suitable for highly independent students advocating conflicting perspectives on an issue of common professional interest. Our understanding thus differs from those studies that consider discussion as a mere conversation with no reference to language competence. In our understanding, discussion helps students with various language competences to be meaningful parts of the shared learning space [9].

Concluding remarks

The competence-based approach in the foreign language teaching involves reorienting the teaching process toward the social experience continuum shared by both teachers and students and toward the development of student competences rather than the accumulation of passive knowledge. The basic practical strategy for implementing this approach is the integration of competence development into the teaching process. The work of John Dewey, an outstanding American philosopher and educator, helped to disentangle the challenges of the competence-based approach in a number of respects. The competence-based approach has been shown to most fully correspond to the Deweyian vision of the general societal meaning of education as "renewal by transmission". It is only within this approach that it becomes possible to effectively counteract the institutionalized patterns of ceremonial domination that exist in the broader society and are projected onto the classroom situation. Finally, the competence-based approach enables the most effective integration of what Dewey called the social experience across a number of divides, such as those between teachers and students and those between different cultures. The spanning of these divides is the major prerequisite for effective self-study that expands the students' learning horizons and creates a stimulating intellectual atmosphere in the classroom.

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