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The Individualization of Foreign Language Teaching in the University-level Professional Education

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Abstract

The article explores the pedagogical conditions facilitating the development of students' skills of public presentation of their individual creative activity. The creation of conditions is a major strategy to individualize foreign language teaching in the university-level professional education.

Keywords

teaching differentiation, teaching individualization, self-directed learning, foreign language for specific purposes, the problem setting, presentation.

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Introduction

The growing requirements of social and professional mobility in the global world dictate the need for teaching technologies that are aimed at unfolding the students' creative potential and individual ways of teaching a foreign language. Central to these technologies are differentiation and individualization of teaching which are supposed to be geared to the students' abilities, interests, goals, and individual self-study approaches (Nikolaeva, 1987). It is however common knowledge that these technologies are embedded in the broader teaching context which can be variously conducive to differentiation and individualization of teaching (Riedl, 2008; Vollstedt, 1987). Depending on this context, teachers may utilize external or internal differentiation.

External differentiation involves the segregation of learners into groups based on e.g. entry test results. This is a way to the formation of groups homogeneous in preliminary language skills. Homogeneity imposes costs of its own, however. This holds primarily for learners classified into weak groups. These learners may develop a sense of being "marginalized" resulting in a negative self-perception and low confidence in the effectiveness of learning. Other disadvantages include pressure to perform, unhealthy competition, social disintegration. Finally, the external differentiation runs the risk of erroneous determination of entry competence levels, particularly given that individuals differ widely in their ability to fully display their knowledge during stressful tests and examinations (Riedl, 2008).

Under internal differentiation, individual features of learners are fully integrated into the organization of teaching. The notions of teaching differentiation and individualization coincide in this case. Internal differentiation attains differentiation primarily by employing various teaching techniques and technologies and is thus predicated on teacher's decision making.

New global challenges and the improved learning motivation notwithstanding, teachers often fail to pay due attention to implementing cutting-edge teaching technologies. In the agricultural higher education in Ukraine, this is caused among others by the following factors:

- discrepancy between the societal need for agricultural specialists with sufficient foreign language competence (level

- B 1/2 “Independent user”) and the short duration of foreign language courses in agricultural universities;
- discrepancy between the optimal teaching intensity and the actual teaching schedule (usually comprising one class per week);
 - increasing teacher workload resulting in the reduced ability to deliver individualized teaching;
 - discrepancy between the actual intellectual level of learners and the level required to master the teaching material;
 - discrepancy between the types of knowledge actually offered and the types of knowledge that would be optimal to master;
 - lacking students’ skills of self-directed learning.

Each of these factors contributes to significant costs to teachers implementing basic requirements of internal differentiation of foreign language teaching. More specifically, individualization of teaching requires class planning and teaching materials to be open-ended, while learners must have mastered the basic strategies and techniques of learning (Riedl, 2008:106). It is little surprising that the traditional teacher-centered approach oriented at the average student still persists.

The objective of the article is to identify the most efficient strategies for the individualization of foreign language teaching in agricultural universities.

The teaching individualization challenge

Individualized teaching is a complex pedagogical phenomenon comprising goals, contents, structures and processes of teaching. It determines the effectiveness of teaching a foreign language and requires a certain degree of learner’s maturity. This maturity is defined through the following attributes: a) relative independence from teacher and teaching materials; b) ability to articulate problems; c) problem solving skills; d) ability to adapt the available knowledge to personal interests and circumstances; e) self-awareness and self-diagnostics; f) ability to observe and control not only the own learning process but also the broader process of own intercultural behavior; g) a sense of responsibility; h) ability to project own skills onto the future professional activity (Borisko, 1999, Koryakovtseva, 2002).

In order to develop the requisite learner independence, the teacher must have a comprehensive view of the contingencies constituting the teaching process. Our experience shows that a limited amount of hours allocated to foreign language teaching makes it a profitable strategy to utilize information projects. Teachers are called upon to exercise their skills of project management and problem modeling in order to make the problem situations personally significant for learners.

We believe that these projects should take the organizational form of preparation and public presentation by the students of the results of their individual creative work. This aspect of teaching gains significance particularly in view of the requirement of public communication in scholarly research and other professional activities. A common form of public communication is a presentation, i.e., an address to the audience with a view to introducing an idea in a convincing way. To be sure, public speaking used in this way must conform to the adopted teaching materials in order to ensure teaching effectiveness and to help the students unfold their individual potentials in the course of the individualization of teaching. The recommendations developed by the Department of Foreign Languages at the Tavria State Agrotechnological University are geared toward the requirements of the Bologna process and envisage that students deliver their respective presentations twice per semester.

The topics of both presentations are discussed with students at the beginning of the respective semester. Students are recommended to undertake a comprehensive overview of the relevant information; to draw upon own relevant experience if applicable; to conduct an independent search for additional materials; to develop a presentation outline; to keep to the outline when organizing the material; to make the presentation visually appealing; to prepare a basic text and train it; to prepare a vocabulary of possibly new words for the listeners, and to deliver the final presentation according to the approved schedule. Teachers are willing to assist students should they ask for additional advice.

The value of public presentations as a tool for foreign language teaching is in their unique combination of students' professional

competence enhancement, development of independent learning skills, furthering of intellectual mobility as well as critical and creative thinking.

As teachers are employing the project-based teaching technologies they have to make sure that a number of crucial conditions are met. For example, the project must be oriented toward an independent search activity by the students faced with a specific problem setting; project topics must be professionally interesting; students must have sufficient maturity; recommendations and guidelines must be made available; the whole course of project-related activity must be carefully monitored by the teacher (Solovova, 2008:80).

The selection of specific tasks for the creative work by the students must be guided by learner-related and task-related factors. The former factors include the extent to which a specific task enhances the learner motivation; the amount of teaching materials a student can master per unit of time; the extent to which a student feels competent to master the material; the extent to which a student needs any further professional competence to do so; the extent of student's self-confidence and social competence which are required e.g. in order to interview a high-ranking official or a foreign visitor.

The task-related factors include the personal significance of the task to a student; the conceptual structure of the task and the cognitive challenge it means to a student; the amount of information to be processed by a student; the clarity of task instructions; the range of socio-cultural and practical competences required by a student in order to address the task; the extent of assistance the student needs from a teacher; as well as the requisite investments of student's time (Ariyan, 2007:6,7).

As the nature of tasks and recommendations guiding the individualized teaching are based on the awareness of students' abilities and interests, they enable the differentiation and individualization of teaching process. More specifically, the project-based individualized teaching allows realizing the four types of individualization distinguished by S.Yu.Nikolaeva: motivating, regulating, empowering, and cognitive (Nikolaeva, 2002:250, 251).

The motivating individualization occurs through the articulation of the task having personal significance for the student and induces the student to find answers to questions that are of special interest to

him/her. The main criterion of topic selection for the individual creative work must be students' interests and needs, while the supplementary criterion is the substantive link between the task and students' professional interests. The professional interest in the task provides an incentive to the student to integrate the findings of various fields of study into the final presentation.

The regulating individualization is concerned with taking a full account of the actual level of students' language competence. The task must be accessible to all students, including those with poor training. The final presentation is a creative product of students, is very personalized, and is thereby automatically adjusted to their training levels. The congruence between task complexity and students' abilities gives each of them a chance to attain success which can be repeated in the future.

The empowering individualization occurs through the selection by the students of the rational task implementation regime which would be in line with their psychic processes. The open-ended tasks enable students to regulate their intellectual horizons and use of memory and emotions, e.g. through the creative visualization. The diversity of teaching trajectories allows filling the gap between the levels of strong and weak students.

The cognitive individualization refers to the students' selection of most effective and acceptable (to them) strategies of presenting in the public and thus develops a metacognitive tactics of the teaching activity.

Of central importance for all types of individualization are methodical guidelines and recommendations on the conduct of individual creative activity. They encompass information about the contents and schedule of task assignments, provide advice on optimal data search strategies, highlight the alternative ways to develop skills of independent work, include links to the supplementary reference literature, provide guidance on the efficient organization and effective visualization of presentations, introduce the appropriate clichés, and contain samples and models of individual creative activities. These recommendations are downloadable from the website of the Department of Foreign Languages.

The quality control of individual student presentations is intended to reveal both the linguistic competence and other competence

components, such as social and methodological. Thus, apart from checking the lexical, grammatical, and communicative aspects, the teacher evaluates the depth of students' problem analysis, recourse to knowledge from adjacent areas, the convincing power of proposed arguments, aesthetics and correctness of visualization, and interaction with the audience. The many-sided diagnostics along the suggested lines provides orientation to the teacher on the best strategy toward every student. It goes without saying that the teacher must ensure full transparency of the criteria to be used for final evaluation.

The individual student presentations are optimally followed by students' own reflections and recollections of own relevant experience, about the specific learning activities. It is crucial to involve students in the discussion of issues of which talk they liked most, and of specific strengths and weaknesses of particular presentations. Students benefit from these discussions by engaging in self-observation and self-evaluation as well as by speeding up the evolution of their individualized learning strategies.

Concluding remarks

The upshot of the proposed argument is that an effective way to individualizing the teaching of foreign language for specific professional purposes is through student presentations of their individual creative activity. It is crucial however that these presentations are well supported by didactic and conceptual materials. Only in this case can these presentations help to raise students' independence and self-awareness.

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