DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS USING E-LEARNING PLATFORM

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Abstract

The requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0) have caused significant pressure on doctoral programmes. In this context, doctoral students are expected to be not only technologically literate but fluent in foreign languages, especially English as it has become a lingua franca of science and technology. The author attempts to identify the most effective ways of improving English language skills of doctoral students. Following from the competence-based approach as a methodological basis for the implementation of the modern educational standard for doctoral studies, the author presents the concept of the university textbook that was specially designed to develop linguistic and communicative competencies of doctoral students at the Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies within the compulsory discipline "English for Doctoral Students". Special attention is being paid to the learning modules and their content designed to develop target competencies. Learning modules were created in virtual learning environment and implemented into the Moodle platform of the Technical University of Košice as the online English language course for doctoral students. The course in available at http://web.tuke.sk/fvt-engeru/ to serve the needs of the Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies as well as other technically oriented faculties and universities.

Keywords*: doctoral students, doctoral studies, competence-based approach, media text, learning modules, communicative competence, linguistic competence*

1. INTRODUCTION

After introduction of the three-cycle system in the European higher education area, doctoral studies are not further considered as postgraduate education but as a third level complementing bachelor's and master's degrees. Consequently, the requirements put on doctoral studies have changed. Nowadays, doctoral studies are understood as an educational programme that is implemented to obtain the necessary level of knowledge and skills needed for further research activities as well as a tool that forms the competence of a researcher in a chosen area of investigation. The updated status of doctoral studies within the university education system places a double responsibility on foreign languages teachers. Deep analysis of current documents on language learning in all educational levels in Czech Republic and Slovakia emphasizes the implementation of approaches leading for more effective communication (Varečková, Pavelková, 2018). In the context of the new requirements put on doctoral study, there is a demand to apply appropriate forms and methods of teaching a foreign language to provide the most effective implementation of the training programme for doctoral students.

2. OBJECTIVES

Our main objective was to develop a special English language course for doctoral students, who, on the one hand, have to be involved in advanced machining processes research at our faculty, and, on the other hand, must complete the compulsory English language course. The challenge for language teachers laid in the fact how to reach the unity of requirements of research and language education within a single course. In accordance with the stated goals, the following tasks were supposed to be accomplished:

1. To select and adapt materials for the university textbook for compulsory English language course.
2. To choose an effective teaching method to improve doctoral students language skills needed for highly professional environment.

3. To combine all these factors in a special syllabus design, which should be based on developing specific competencies.
4. To make teaching materials available for both full-time and part-time doctoral students via e-learning.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Nowadays, educators view a foreign language competence as a necessary functional component of a professional competence of potential scientists and researchers. They see the purpose of a competency-based approach (CBA) in focusing on outcomes of learning and address what the future specialists are expected to do, rather than what they are expected to learn (Bratanych, Vishnevska, 2018). The CBA revolutionized the European higher education having shifted the educational process from a teacher-centred to learner-centred education. Within the CBA, a teacher becomes less as a traditional authority and more as coordinator and a language consultant. Target objectives of a study programme are defined in terms of competences that are to be acquired by students. The basic element of CBA is the concept of "competence" that is viewed as a norm serving the development of individual performance (Spector, Bawane, 2009) or as a complex system of knowledge and skills enabling to perform required activities (Curran, 2009). Within a foreign language teaching context, the term "competence" was defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) as the action-oriented approach where a learner is viewed as an actor performing specific roles in a specific area.

Pedagogical communities actively discuss various issues dealing with the CBA implementation in the higher education. Nurmukhanova considers the concepts "competence" and "competency". The term "competency" is viewed as an ability of an individual to perform practical activities, and "competence" is considered as an element of this ability, i.e. knowledge and skills. The author also points out that mastering communicative competence does not mean to immediately obtain a better command of foreign language, but it also enables to overcome communicative obstacles (Nurmukhanova, Sagyndykova, Pāvulēns, 2014). Specific kinds of competencies, such as linguistic, pragmatic, mediation, personal development-supporting, which a technology student is expected to acquire, have been specified (Pop, Mazilescu, 2012). Some authors, who deal with Competency-Based Education (CBE), assume that by improving syllabuses, learning materials and activities as well as by changing the role of teachers and learners, we can achieve more effective language learning (Richards, Rodgers, 2001). Based on CBA, the theoretical model of the modular technology of foreign language teaching aimed at technical universities students have been developed. As a result, the authors have determined the following competencies: strategic, linguistic, socio-cultural and self-educational (Elci, Beith, 2019). Consequently, from the pedagogical point of view, the CBA enables to change the paradigm of the educational process. The main emphasis is not on the transfer of knowledge from a teacher to a student, but on the activation of motivation of learners to improve their language skills (Gluchmanova, 2019). Within the methodological level, specific objectives of study programmes based on CBA can be determined according to the acquired competencies of language learners. We believe that such a statement of the issue in the context of foreign language learning corresponds to the new system of doctoral studies.

4. DEVELOPING THE NEW CONTENT

The content of the discipline "English for Doctoral Students" is aimed at developing the ability of students to participate in the work of international research teams to solve various scientific problems, to use modern methods of scientific communication in a foreign language as well as to plan and solve problems of their own professional development. During the period of study, doctoral students will have to obtain, comprehend and process a vast amount of information. Therefore, competent university authorities have recommended to design a university textbook the content of which adhered to the following criteria:

a) compliance with the content of the specified training objectives of the faculty;

b) targeted exercise system repeated in all modules;

c) availability of authentic materials (media texts);

d) use of modern multimedia;

e) development of the tasks aimed at the formation of skills of autonomous professional development;

f) availability of feedback.

The discipline was structured so that a doctoral student, in addition to improving his communication skills in a foreign language, can also develop and improve his skills to search as well critically evaluate various sources of information, conduct an analysis within different media texts, create his own new media texts aimed at achieving research goals.

Traditionally, media education is understood as a process of personal development using media material aimed at creating a culture of interacting with media, developing creative, communicative skills, critical thinking, perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts (Vepreva, Pechinkina, 2018). If we apply this definition to a foreign language course for doctoral students, its goals and objectives will be largely identical, since a doctoral student is in the process of continuous development, interaction with various media texts that are not only scientific publications but also announcements of scientific events, mobility programmes and grants, research works competitions etc. Development of communication skills, critical thinking, perception, interpretation and evaluation of media texts as well as development of creative skills and forms of self-expression could result in creation of a new scientific product and media text presenting this product.

The first step in creating the university textbook was to define its scope as well as thematic content. Based on the main objective, which is focused on forming the necessary language competence of potential scientists, we have organized the process of English language teaching on a modular basis assuming that the content of the course should contain all the factors that are characteristic for their professional and scientific activities.

We understand a “module” as an autonomous organizational and methodological unit of a discipline that includes didactic goals, a logically completed content component of educational material which is compiled taking into account interdisciplinary connections and methodological recommendations. Consequently, the three main modules have been selected:

Module 1: Developing a Conference Presentation

Module 2: Scientific Writing

Module 3: Reading and Understanding Scientific Texts

Each module ends with the section Language Activities to reinforce the skill taught in the corresponding module. The texts were selected from the authentic Internet sources including the websites of educational institutions, scientific journals, databases, materials of scientific conferences, etc. All the selected texts meet the following criteria:

a) authenticity;

b) professional orientation;

c) novelty and informativeness;

d) language accessibility.

5. CREATING LEARNING MODULES CONTENT USING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Virtual learning environment (VLE), which is composed of various communication tools, is a web-based platform created to support educators in the process of online courses management.

Some educators view the benefit of VLE in enabling students to access the course material at any time what especially suits doctoral students, both full-time and part-time, who are motivated by the instant feedback provided by online assessment (Dashtestani, 2019). Another authors state that organization of the educational process by means of VLE contributes to effective foreign language training and interdisciplinary communication that allows educators to create logically complete and independent study modules in accordance with the educational goals resulting in a rational combination of traditional methods of teaching a foreign language and modern information technologies thus ensuring the formation of a high level of professional knowledge and information competence of doctoral students (Vepreva, Pecinkina, 2018). We agree with the author that the use of technology outside the foreign language classroom can make students more autonomous (Gluchmanova, 2014).

Teaching doctoral students a foreign language is very often organized on a modular basis. Modules are components created via Moodle system to provide interaction among students and educators. A learning module, which consists of blocks, is a building stone of an online course. It is a sequenced collection of subject-related materials designed to teach a topic or skill. Online learning module usually consists of learning objectives, instructions for use, learning materials, learning activities as well the ways to ascertain whether students have understood or learned the material (i.e. assessment).

According to the stated objectives, the following training modules have been designed and integrated into the university Moodle platform:

Module 1: Developing a Conference Presentation consists of the following topics: Presentation Structure; Language of Presentations; Delivering a Presentation; Handling Questions During a Presentation; Referring to Visuals; Describing Graphs; Commenting Slides.

Facing the audience at a scientific conference can be very stressful experience for a doctoral student. Doctoral advisers tend to focus mainly on science, not on improving presentation skills of doctoral students. What we want to emphasize in this paper is that scientific career of our doctoral students highly depends on how well they talk in public using English as lingua franca. In the course of mastering the module, students analyse the structure of their doctoral thesis, substantiate the choice of the research topic, formulate goals and research methods. Doctoral students also consider various ways of presenting the results of their scientific research, learn to express their own point of view on the issues under discussion, find various ways to maintain verbal and non-verbal contact with the audience.

A modern researcher cannot work in an isolated society. To obtain a high-quality result, a researcher needs to present the results of his work as well as to communicate with colleagues from other countries, share his achievements attending conferences and symposia (Gluchmanova, 2017). For a number of reasons, this very important activity causes certain difficulties to young scientists. Therefore, one of the objectives of the module is to remove psychological and language barriers and to develop skills for preparing and conducting effective presentations. At firsts, students discuss various reasons they fear public speaking and determine the ways to overcome them. Then, they develop the distinctive features of a successful performance and study its structure. Much attention is paid to the use of psychological techniques and the influence of body language on the audience. The study of the module material is supported by video presentations, which make it possible to visually demonstrate what is being studied. At the end of the module, students gradually prepare a presentation: introduction, body, conclusion and discussion. At each stage after the presentation, usually accompanied by a suitable presentation software, students ask questions about the content and give their comments on the presentation layout, fonts, graphic design, visual aids, contact with the audience, verbal and non-verbal skills of the speaker, manner of handling to the screen, etc.

The most effective training focused on the use of a lexical layer within the topic “Developing a Conference Presentation” could be a role-playing activity in which all doctoral students should be

involved. Several students could take on the role of team leaders to solve organizational issues and to be responsible for a discussion development. Students could act as conference participants, presenting their contributions and discussing the reports of other speakers. The situation should be as close as possible to the real one. Therefore, the role-play should be preceded by well thought out preparatory phase. The topics of the contributions should be strictly defined to distribute all the reports into sections. Each "team leader" should draw up a programme for each session. Students are required not only to present their own contributions but also to discuss other students' reports. The emphasis should be gradually shifted specifically towards communication about the discussed scientific problems. Consequently, in the process of role-play activity, doctoral students can prove their competence in organizing international conferences as well as constructing a foreign language scientific text, both monological and dialogical. Conference simulation brings doctoral students to the real conditions of their professional activities. It allows the students to develop communication skills, apply the basic rules of public speech leading to development of skills needed for preparation of scientific reports and presentations as well as helps them to develop the ability to ask and answer questions on issues related to their field of investigation. The importance of such a role-playing activity for preparation of doctoral students for their scientific communication in English is crucial because the main purpose of teaching scientific discourse we see in preparation potential scientists to convincingly present the results of their investigation and objectively evaluate the achievements of the other colleagues in the course of scientific discussion. Training within the module "Developing a Conference Presentation" should lead to the participation of doctoral students in scientific conferences held both in universities in Slovakia and all over the Europe.

Module 2: Scientific Writing: consists of the following topics: Abstract and Its Structure; Abstract Language; Writing Papers; Basic Word Order; Tense Consideration; Active and Passive Voice; Various Stylistic Conventions; Formulaic Expressions; Textual References to Figures and Tables. An important aspect in the process of developing the determined competencies of doctoral students is to improve their written communication abilities. Written scientific communication within the international scientific community is an important part of communication that requires compliance with certain standards and principles. One of the objectives of the module is to point to the features of universality and linguistic peculiarities that exist in the scientific discourse as well to acquire modern scientific communication rules that must be taken into consideration when writing abstracts, journal articles, resumes, etc. In the process of English language learning, doctoral students master academic writing skills, particularly the features of scientific discourse functioning and scientific texts generation as well as learn the genre features and types of academic writing. Stating their own point of view, generalization and evaluation of received information as well as consistently presented written information in their own texts written in English language is the next important skill to be mastered.

We view scientific communication as a two-way process. A scientific text is created not for the sake of the scientific text itself, but for presenting objective scientific information, thereby realizing the dominant informative function of the scientific style. Recipients of scientific texts are usually specialists who are prepared for the perception of pure scientific information. A doctoral student needs to look at his text from the position of a reader and evaluate how adequately his abstract or scientific paper will be understood.

Writing abstracts is one of the skills necessary for both students and educators. Nowadays, not a single article in a journal of international level is published without abstracts and keywords in English. Even though abstracts cannot replace the original, their purpose is to enable the specialist to form an opinion on the advisability of a more detailed acquaintance with the presented material. The author (a doctoral student) is expected to ensure that the abstract properly represents the paper to be submitted to the reviewer. Very often, the abstract is the only part of the paper that readers see when they search through electronic databases. The purpose of working with the module "Scientific Writing" is to train students to understand the structure of abstracts, to connect parts of the abstract using transitions as well as to focus on features of abstracts within various fields of science. In order to improve the skills of academic writing of doctoral students, it is necessary not only to deal with the issues related to the specifics of writing abstracts, but also to consider various educational and methodological approaches including the

implementation of different types of tasks aimed at analysing examples and correcting errors. Writing abstracts is an indicator how a young scientist can systematize and summarize information.

Module 3: Reading and Understanding Scientific Texts consists of the following topics: Reading and Understanding Scientific Texts (Skimming and Scanning Scientific Material; Understanding Reference; Identifying the Main Idea; Understanding Technical Terms.

In our opinion, when working with original technical literature, a researcher is required to master all the types of reading presented in the module because, on the one hand, they are interconnected and, on the other hand, each type of reading is aimed at solving certain communicative problems depending on the type of the text and the objective of a reader. Doctoral students, as a rule, already possess certain skills of reading scientific literature. However, not everyone has the ability to work with many sources of information and select relevant literature for their field of investigation, which is an integral part of the work of any scientist or researcher. Therefore, the formation of these skills comes to the fore in this module. During face-to face meetings as well as in the process of independent work, students improve the ability to distinguish the main and secondary information, support semantic blocks, structural and semantic cores, basic ideas and facts in scientific texts to find logical connections and eliminate redundant information. When analyzing scientific texts, students master grammatical and lexical features of the language of scientific literature as well as develop a language guess based on the context.

At the beginning of the module, students get acquainted with various scientific publications (journals, monographs, conference proceedings, etc.), to identify their objectives and target audience. After that, they study the structure of the article and the functions of each of its parts and learn to establish the relationship between the title and the content as well as to identify keywords. Further tasks are aimed at developing skills to quickly determine the relevance of a source for their field of investigation. Having completed the module, students are invited to demonstrate their skills according to the following tasks: a) to find media texts (usually articles on the Internet) that corresponds to the topic of their own scientific research; b) to find a conference and justify the choice of participation in it; c) to prepare an abstract of the article to be sent to the journal/conference.

When working within the module, various media texts are used. Using available browsers, students search for media texts (reports, articles, monographs, dissertation theses) related to the field of their investigation. The objective is to assess the reliability of the source and information provided, use other sources to confirm or deny the information, formulate their own opinions on a specific media text. A great help in the process of mastering reading skills is provided by a hypertext that has already transformed the way we read and which consists in the fact that in the process of reading it is possible to switch from one text to another and, thus, a student seems to be immersed in a diverse context. At the same time, students may have significant problems with orientation in the structure of a hypertext space. Consequently, this is our objective to develop the ability of students to read hypertexts. It is necessary to take into account the fact that young scientists usually use translation programmes to get a general idea of what is reported in a particular media text. Of course, for doctoral students it is very important to acquaint with the published results already achieved in their research field. However, such an innovation should not lead to the underestimation of thoughtful work with an English scientific text. On the contrary, we should guide the students in their work with computer translation programmes, explaining what are the advantages and obvious disadvantages of the Internet translators.

6. DISCUSSION

Various approaches have been proposed to solve the discussed issue. On the one hand, educators state that online education has become a chance at pandemic times offering a way to provide sustainability to learning and teaching. On the other hand, they question whether higher educational institutions are prepared for online education (Altinay, Dagli, 2020). Within this new context, researches have started to search for appropriate learning methods that can work in online education. It has been suggested to implement a student-centred approach that is digitally assessed. This seems to be a reliable approach as teachers have to determine in advance what skills they want to develop when developing a course (Naamati Schneider, Meirovich 2020). Some authors put forward to solve the issue by applying a

structural approach in the context of planning, developing and implementing doctoral study programmes (González, Isaacs, Wagenaar, 2010). We would like to add that within doctoral studies we should also focus on the formation of the necessary competencies: on the one hand - research, on the other - pedagogical. Of course, this status should also influence the formation of academic literacy of a potential scientist, both as a scientist and as a teacher. When organizing the educational process for doctoral students, we have identified a number of problems related to teaching English. First of all, a lack of close interdisciplinary connections between the system of special disciplines and English language as the language of professional communication. Secondly, the level of English in regard to high requirements of professional competencies, which a doctoral student should possess, is not satisfactory, especially that of external doctoral students. In any case, the structural approach to doctoral studies opens up attractive prospects for building interdisciplinary ties along the lines "foreign language – pedagogy – specialization" which could bridge the gap between the English language and other subjects. As practice shows, isolated academic disciplines lose their completeness and complexity. Perhaps teaching some topics or conducting seminars in English will help to build that educational trajectory for doctoral students, thus filling their educational activity with a new, contextual meaning having a beneficial effect on the motivation to learn new competencies. Consequently, young scientists will be able to independently find this important context both in their research and pedagogical activities.

7. CONCLUSION

Developing a foreign language competence is a complex process that requires active cognitive motivation on the part of a doctoral student and mastery of effective technologies on the part of a language teacher. One of the tendencies of modern higher education manifests itself in the reduction of onsite meeting by increasing the hours for independent work. The issue of stimulating interest in learning and selection of effective methods that allow to teach a student to work independently come to the fore. Most of the knowledge and skills doctoral students have to master on their own but the success of this process depends on the competent organization of their independent work and the effective use of the time planned for learning a foreign language. Within the context of teaching a foreign language to doctoral students, new ways of independent work have appeared: the use of blended and distance educational technologies, for example, learning with the help of online language courses based on different educational online platforms available at universities.

We see the main objective of teaching English language to doctoral students in developing their ability to be involved in international research by means of a foreign language. Nowadays, international conferences, symposia, educational programmes, international conferences are being organized all over the world. Educators generally accept that no other language has occupied the position English holds today (Gluchmanova, 2016). Undoubtedly it has become a global language, a new lingua franca (Morgan, 2019). The objective of the English language course for doctoral students at the Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies is to form and improve language skills of potential researchers. Having completed the course "English for Doctoral Students", students are expected to master communicative skills in the framework of a particular field of their scientific investigation (Bielousova, 2019). In the process of mastering the discipline, doctoral students are assumed to develop the following competencies:

1. Linguistic competence, which involves the knowledge of a system of the language being studied according to its levels: phonetics, vocabulary, word composition and word formation, morphology, syntax of simple and complex sentences, the basics of text style. A student possesses linguistic competence if he understands the system of the language being studied and can use this system in practice. The quality of linguistic competence in the language being studied is affected not only by a student´s degree of proficiency in it, but also by the level of competence in his native language.
2. Communicative competence, which involves communicative situations skills within the field of four main types of speech activity (speaking, listening, reading and writing). One of the main skills formed within the framework of this competency is the ability to produce and perceive, understand

foreign texts, both oral and written. Communicative abilities are skills of speech communication, the formation of which is possible only on the basis of linguistic competency.

Thus, at the end of the course, doctoral students are required to be able to:

a) participate in discussions on both scientific and global issues of our time;

b) deliver a presentation at scientific conferences at home and abroad;

c) conduct scientific work with foreign partners;

d) extract information from different media texts;

e) apply reading techniques to understand authentic literature in English language in the relevant field of study;

f) abstract and annotate authentic scientific literature;

g) fill in correctly various application forms for grants and patents.

Finally, we would like to add that computer technology in many respects have contributed to increasing interest in reading original scientific and specialized literature in English language by doctoral students. It is no longer a tribute to fashion, but a need aimed not only at training a professional researcher and the formation of his information competence but also at the development of universal and general professional competencies. The use of modern information technologies for independent work of doctoral students provides not only the issuance of tasks via the Internet but also targeted assistance that allows students to gain confidence when dealing with special technical texts in English. Intensity of the educational process increases as it becomes possible to access learning material and corresponding consultations at any time. Online dialogue with a language teacher outside the schedule stimulates educational interest. Information technologies are effective when working with doctoral students with different levels of language acquisition. With such an organization of the educational process, the pace of the group's work does not affect individual students and it is possible to develop an individual trajectory.

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