PERSONAL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY OF A STUDENT IN THE INTERACTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The article examines the possibilities of full implementation of personal approach to foreign languages teaching in universities, based on a strategy that is centered on the creation and subsequent implementation into the training process professionally oriented integrated virtual learning environments for foreign language learning, which allow students to master foreign language skills consciously and provide unlimited opportunities for their use in speech practice.

Key words: foreign languages, training process, English for special purposes, language skills, language proficiency, learning outcomes, personally-oriented, implementation, virtual learning environment, multimedia educational programs

1. INTRODUCTION

At the current, technological stage of human civilization development when digitized information is stored in the global space and is available to every user who needs it and knows how to use a personal computer or even a mobile phone, the ability to use the opportunities they provide for the purpose of acquiring professional knowledge and skills individually is a challenge and necessity of time.

There is no problem in the process of searching information, but in fact what is the aim of this search and how to process it for future use. Particularly relevant is this problem in the field of foreign languages for professional purposes training, because information given in the non-native language requires also additional language (lexical and grammar) knowledge for its assimilation / synthesis / processing. Due to these circumstances, it is necessary to make corrections and improve the objectives and methods used nowadays for training foreign languages in universities, learning style, learning outcomes, course content components as well as control means taking into consideration innovative computer-oriented means of study.

2. OBJECTIVES, APPROACHES AND METHODS: HISTORY AND PERSPECTIVES

Learning is a means of becoming a more proficient learner (Gattegno, 1972). That’s why today the foreign languages learning objective is determined not as perfect pronunciation, accurate grammar rules proficiency or wide vocabulary acquisition, but as the cognitive abilities and practical opportunities the learner is expected to acquire as a result of training (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). The Common European Framework (CEF) divides learners into three divisions (basic user, independent user, and proficient user) which are divided into six levels. For the bachelor’s degree the target level B2-Vantage (for Ukrainian Universities graduates) is determined with the following description: “can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.; can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken; can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest; can describe experiences and events…” (CEF).

During the last hundred years of foreign language learning the objectives of foreign languages teaching have changed significantly and were determined depending on the approaches and methods. First of all it is necessary to distinguish between approach and method. According to Anthony (1963), approach is a set of theories dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. It describes the nature of a subject matter which should be taught. Method is an overall plan for the language material presentation order, which is based upon the selected approach. Simply speaking, it is a way of
teaching a language which is based on systematic principles and procedures, application of views on how a language is best taught.

Scientists have proposed different ways to determine approaches to foreign languages teaching and learning. For example, Piccinin (1997) distinguishes three approaches to learning: content-centred, teacher-centred and learner-centred. But Grammar Translation, Direct, Reading (oral-situational), Audio-lingual, Cognitive Code, Humanistic (Silent Way, Suggestopedia), Comprehension-based, Communicative Approaches are widely known among scientists and practical teachers of English.

Methods are based on different ways of what language is and how this language is learned (Richard and Rodgers, 1986). The specification of particular learning objectives is a problem of instructional system design and technique (strategy used to accomplish an immediate objective), not of approach. The major goal of any method is a practical mastering of basic students skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking), only sequencing of steps differs for various methods. For example, Grammar-translation method as a way of studying a language by means of reading and writing which include the detailed analysis and deep learning of its grammar rules, proposed learning foreign language with the purpose of reading literature sources and for student’s intellectual development. Structural Situational Approach and Situational Language Teaching (SLT) which are necessarily linguistically focused, propose oral acquisition of vocabulary, speech structures, and sentence patterns by means of their listening, repetition and some reproductive exercises before reading and writing (Davies et.al., 1975).

The communicative approach proposes to achieve the main goal through mandatory study of grammatical structures and basic objectives of audio-lingual and group training methods include oral communication (listening, correct pronunciation, recognition of graphic symbols) with gradual transition to "long-term goals" - reaching the level of a native speaker. (Brooks, 1964). Ch.A. Curren applied the techniques of psychological counseling, known as the Counselling Learning for the development of Community language learning (CLL) - language teaching method which is based on the Counselling Learning theory. This method begins from speaking and translation with further movement to writing and reading (Curran,1976).

So, the approaches and methods are interrelated in every field of science. The development of new learning approaches will lead to the immediate appearance of new methods of teaching and vice versa. At the end of the last century, thanks to the active search for new ways of learning a foreign language, the activity-based approach, which has replaced the communicative one, was determined as the leading approach for learning process. New concept of study has suggested the updated interpretation of learning goals - to train communication skills in the integration of all their functions - cognitive, regulatory, value-labeled. Exactly in this concept it was determined that focusing on real results and taking into account the necessity of mastering by all students the same amount of instructional material the teacher should also take into account the individual characteristics of students. This meant the emergence of variability in the levels of training.

The appearance of the idea of methodological pluralism and separation of various levels to study foreign languages meant the appearance of prospects for further development and movement to the emergence of updated goal in foreign languages learning, including learning for professional purposes. This renewed objective should become development of each student integrated skills considering his/her abilities and interests and the practical application of acquired knowledge in the disciplines being studied in the future which lead to a successful adaptation of the citizen in society, his professional self-realization, self-formation skills for life. But the concept did not provide teachers of secondary and higher school interaction mechanism developmental, educational and educational purposes only declaring it. That was the beginning of individual approach to foreign language learning.

Johnson and Paulston (1976) emphasized the student role in an individual approach as self-dependent planning of the learning program by each person individually and thus being responsible for their own classroom activity; monitoring and evaluation of the own progress; learning by interacting with other students; obtaining information from the teacher, from other students and from other teaching sources.
3. MODERN APPROACHES TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The objective of teaching strategy today is to help students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners. That’s why nowadays approaches to foreign languages learning are based on the principles of individual, competence and activity-based approaches, implemented into education. This integrated approach to education ensures the development of academic, cultural, social, psychological and other capabilities of the students and promotes forming of key competencies, development of student skills and abilities to learn and apply acquired knowledge in practical situations.

Implementation of any approach or teaching method into the learning process depends on the quality of instructional materials. The role of instructional materials within any educational system to satisfy learner’s communicative needs should include the following specifications (Johnson and Paulston, 1976: 26):

1. allow learners to progress at their own rates of learning;
2. allow different styles of learning;
3. provide opportunities for independent study and use;
4. provide opportunities for self-evaluation and progress in learning.

For the optimization and further individualization of learning process the implementation of personal oriented educational technologies was proposed, and the necessity to obtain, replenish and evaluate information from various sources applying cognitive and creative activity was separately allocated. An interesting step forward in the study of foreign languages is the appearance of activity-line learning strategy where the main component is the "ability to accept new experiences, analyze, summarize, remember and to act adequately in professional and life situations."

3.1. Virtual interactive educational environment as a method of foreign languages study

The main factor of the teaching method effectiveness on the didactic level is the content of training and organized accordingly tool for instruction material acquisition. For the successful realization of any novel strategy it is very important to choose right learning technique and content structuring of the educational process that may be implemented in traditional, including textbooks (as traditional tools) and innovative training tools or instruction materials – virtual interactive educational foreign language environment of the course (as innovative tools). The strategy which is based on the creation and further implementation into the learning process such interactive environments, firstly in the form of interactive multimedia learning computer programs, allows everybody who study foreign language to acquire language skills consciously and provides unlimited opportunities for their use in speech practice.

Under the term "virtual learning environment" we will mean a coherent educational system of programmable individually-oriented training adapted to the needs of students. Thus every student depending on his/her knowledge and skills at this particular stage of training is provided with psycho-pedagogical tools for clarifying learning objectives (independent forecasting and planning expected result), forming an individual program of training activities (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation (classification developed by B. Bloom [8])), selecting the desired option or level (independent choice of lexical / grammatical material complexity, the text of interest, grammatical material for learning / study, etc.), during the whole period of course study that generally meets the requirements of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, (ECTS).

3.2 The principles for the development of the virtual interactive educational environment

The quality of the language environment, which is created artificially for practical foreign language classes in the form of electronic media programs, depends on the principles that are laid into the foundation in the process of such programs development.
Beginning from the end of the nineteenth century the scientists argued on what methodological principles should be fundamental for the teaching method. Four main principles developed by H. Sweet (1899) which included careful selection of what is to be taught, imposing limits on what is to be taught, arranging what is to be taught in terms of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and grading materials from simple to complex in fact are the fundamental for all later proposed principles and today are enlarged according to the requirements of our time.

All instruction materials in any program are systematized and ordered according to the basic principles of the intensification method (the principle of personal communication, personality-role principle, the principle of concentrated organization of instruction materials and training process, the principle of collective interaction, the principle multi-functionality of exercises) that facilitates a step-by-step implementation of computer-oriented model of study.

4. PEDAGOGICAL EXPEDIENCY AND ROLE OF PERSONAL COMPUTERS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING

Under computer technologies in education today we consider the methodology and technology of learning process with e-learning using. It should be noted that having equal rights with other components of didactic system, electronic learning tools begin to affect on the performance of the entire system, changing, adding and redirecting it.

As a result of the e-learning (e.g. multimedia programs) introduction into the learning process it is possible to nominate a qualitatively new learning objectives, which are: using a foreign language as a means of communication in the process of planning, implementation and improvement of professional activity within the topic, which is studied, for its implementation in schools and in the future, under production conditions. Changing the role of a teacher who appears as a knowledge moderator and activity of students, from whom depends on the acquired knowledge quality, developed abilities and existing skills in learning, used for foreign language learning virtual learning environment requires going beyond one discipline, which leads to the necessity to apply knowledge from other disciplines and to acquire new forms of activity. The learning process is reoriented. Having received the initial knowledge from the teacher, the student focuses on independent formation of skills that are essential for “further lifelong learning”.

Content components of the training process with multimedia applications using should perform linguistic matter and speaking skills that will be realized through the implementation of well-defined tasks and exercises. All programmed amount of material for the study should be presented in the form of educational and authentic texts submitted in a format that allows listening, instant translation, hyperlinks, answers to questions, interactive tasks on mastering lexical and grammatical material including the possibility of correspondence audio and video materials controlled understanding listened / seen, tests current and final control. All this will ensure high effectiveness of each student study during the course learning.

4.1. Structure of virtual educational environment

Virtual interactive educational environment in the form of multimedia program in the process of its active use in the educational process in the classroom as well as in the course of independent work, provides deep mastering of linguistic and professionally oriented knowledge given in the foreign language. It systematically trains the student’s ability to use information acquired in the course of the oral and written foreign language communications, effectively use the skills formed in the course of practice, in case of contacts with foreign specialists or exploring other language sources. Such actions and effective training in all kinds of language and speech activities – reading, writing, speaking, listening – can be guaranteed only if the rational system of exercises was developed and the system was integrated to a virtual learning environment while respecting the principles of multifunctionality of exercises content and their motivated character. As an examples we will show the system of exercises created in the multimedia programs “Your computerland”, “Your amazing ecoland” and
“Your professional portfolio” which were developed in our institution recently (Vereitina, 2011). On Figures 1,2 the interfaces of these programs are given.

Let’s consider the groups of exercises included in the training system. Each course consists of 20 information units; each unit corresponds to one cycle. Each cycle has 9 chapters, providing a step-by-step study of: a) language elements through the assimilation of lexical items and grammar material; b) subject learning elements of speech – through professionally oriented reading, writing, speaking, listening. Subsections tests are designed for intermediate and final control. To acquire vocabulary knowledge, and for perfect formation of lexical and communication skills students perform the following exercises: listening exemplary reading of lexical items (words, phrases, sentences) (Figure 3), train these units on the receptive level, write words, phrases and sentences after the speaker.
(Figure 4), make sentences and questions from given words, answer the detailed questions after reading texts or watching videos and presentations, create the dialogues, writing essays, letters or reports (Figure 5).

Figure 3 Examples of the exercises. Listening exemplary reading of lexical items (words, phrases, sentences).

Figure 4 Examples of the exercises. Training on the receptive level, writing words, phrases and sentences after the speaker.

Figure 5 Examples of the exercises. Making sentences and questions from given words.
5. SUMMARY

Summarizing the above mentioned we can conclude that only interactive virtual learning environment that combines all possible tools for any discipline learning and teaching, including "Foreign Language" or "English for Special Purposes" will optimize the goal of learning at each stage of study because of the emergence of new strategies and by developing innovative learning technologies. It will promote independent cognitive activity of student due to motivation of the learning process and the development of professional and creative personality of the future specialist.

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