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Teaching English to Non-linguistic Students: Foreign Language Community Model

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Abstract

This study examines the current situation in Russia with teaching foreign languages in an artificial bilingual environment and resulting difficulties, such as language and psychological barriers, inhibiting the effectiveness of used teaching methods. The authors analyze the high level of foreign language anxiety of non-linguistic students, mainly caused by the conventional summative assessment approaches typical for the traditional teacher-centered teaching model and the lack of a uniform system to control the English language proficiency development. The authors suggest that creating a common university Foreign Language Environment and a uniform System of Control and Assessment (SCA) can improve the outcomes of foreign language teaching and learning in an artificial bilingual context, compensate for the lack of natural language environment and build a more student-friendly education process. The results of the long-term study (2010-2016) show that implementation of the proposed measures effectively decreases foreign language anxiety, stimulates students' motivation and increases their responsibility and self-determination, in compliance with the modern learner-centered education paradigm. The imple-

mentation of a complex System of Control and Assessment gave us a clearly positive answer to the first question, laid a strong foundation for building a foreign language community in PetrSU and set the direction for the further development of EFL teaching in Russia. Giving students of different majors new opportunities to communicate in English within common foreign language community compensates for the lack of natural language environment, increases the motivation of students and helps to embrace the modern learner-centered education paradigm.

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Keywords

Non-native language classroom, Foreign Language Community Model, system of control and assessment, pedagogy, foreign languages.

Introduction

Being a valid member of international scientific, industrial, and educational communities, Russia puts much effort into equipping its high school students with foreign language competence to maximize their future competitiveness. However, high demand for bilingual professionals in Russian economy, politics and social life comes into contradiction with relatively low results in teaching foreign languages, especially for specific purposes. The 2015 opinion poll conducted by Russian Yuri Levada Analytical Center showed that only a small part of the Russian population has basic foreign language skills. About 14% of the respondents said that they speak at least one foreign language rather fluently, while 86% denied speaking any foreign languages at all, and as much as 66% of the respondents are not willing to work or study abroad.

These data fit quite well with the results of a survey conducted among the students of non-linguistic humanities departments at Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU). The majority (about 90%) of the 200 respondents said that they were not ready to use English as the language of their future profession. This number seems rather disturbing and can serve as an alarm signal to the Russian teaching community. The situation with EFL university teaching is aggravated by the fact that in most of the Russian higher education institutions English is taught by non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) who also learnt this language in an artificial bilingual environment. So, teaching English to young adults in an artificial bilingual environment is obviously complicated by challenges which require solutions.

The aim of the present study is to investigate a set of factors hindering the effective EFL teaching in a Russian university classroom and evaluate the effectiveness of a multi-level Foreign Language

Community Model (FLCM), recently developed by the PetrSU Chair of Foreign Languages for Students of Humanities and directed at minimizing the major teaching and learning challenges. Hopefully, overcoming these challenges will bring students to the point where they feel confident enough to use their English skills for academic and professional purposes.

Research Context

A long-term observational research conducted by the teachers of the PetrSU Chair of Foreign Languages showed that the process of EFL teaching and learning (EFLTL) within an artificial bilingual context is strongly influenced by a number of interconnected linguistic and extralinguistic factors, including native language interference, correlation between the accent level of NNESTs and their students, lack of students' spontaneous communication, being confined to small self-enclosed social groups and lack of awareness about the language social differentiation [Abramova, Ananyina, Shishmolina, 2015].

Teaching EFL to non-linguistic students is further complicated by a number of didactic or methodological challenges. English language courses in different departments vary in length (from 1.5 to 4 years) and total number of credits (from 3 to 26). These courses are usually inconsistent and are not aimed at obtaining similar outcomes within one university. One more problem is that every group of students is usually given one teacher, students' communication in English generally does not go beyond their own group, and EFL courses do not include distinct aspects, such as public speaking, academic writing, etc. Moreover, the curricula are often highly influenced by different individual teaching approaches, which are not always justified. As a result, students from different groups within one department or even one language course are given different requirements and assessment criteria for the final exam.

Methods and participants

Empirical data which helped to identify the most common challenges with EFLTL in a Russian university classroom were obtained during 2010-2016 using a mixed methods approach, which included 3 key student surveys, as well as additional observations, interviews, and self-assessment questionnaires. In total these research activities involved about 1048 non-linguistic students.

Survey 1 "Do I need a foreign language?" (2010-2011) was aimed at identifying whether PetrSU's students are going to use their English skills after graduation and revealed that most of the respondents studied EFL with the clear understanding that they are not going to use it in the future. About 64% out of 200 survey participants saw English only as the language of travel and were not going to use it for continuing education or building a career. The survey results clearly showed why so many students lack the motivation to put additional time and effort into advancing the ESP instead of learning General English.

Survey 2 "Barriers for effective classroom EFL learning" (2012-2013) was aimed at finding additional factors besides the lack of motivation to learn English that mitigate the students' progress. At the first stage of the survey, 200 students were asked to name the biggest barrier to successful EFL learning at school or at the university, and 84% of the respondents said that it was "fear or anxiety". This problem demands careful examination and has already been discussed by foreign experts [Toth, 2010]. At the second stage of the survey, students were given several open-ended and closed-ended questions specifically concerning the issue of language anxiety. More than 68% of non-linguistic students admitted being anxious when speaking in classroom, mainly due to the fear of being unjustly corrected, fear of performing worse than others, and fear of disappointing the teacher or peers. As for the question regarding the origins of their language anxiety, 47% of students explained that this feeling was born in high school and led to the persistent fear of speaking a foreign language. Among them 23% explained it by the fear of their teachers who made inappropriate remarks when correcting their mistakes or oriented the teaching process towards stronger students, ignoring those who lagged behind. Such attitude created psychological barriers for lower-performing students, causing them to see learning English as an impossible task. Thus, the results of the comprehensive Survey 2 helped to identify an important psychological factor discouraging adolescents and young adults from learning a foreign language in an artificial bilingual context – i.e. the high level of foreign language anxiety in a classroom, mainly connected with the way students' communication skills are evaluated by NNESTs.

All the linguistic, psychological and didactic factors mentioned above led us to start looking for new ways of teaching EFL to non-linguistic students more effectively. Modern Russian national higher education standards and syllabi for all majors are aimed at training a new generation of students, ready for self-development and independent work. This approach fully complies with current global education trends, especially the move towards andragogy and heutagogy, praising the idea of more independent and self-directed learning process [Glitterman, 2004], but contradicts with the real situation in Russian foreign language education, primarily for non-linguistic students, because common teaching practices stay within a teacher-centered paradigm and are oriented towards summative assessment. The abandonment of an outmoded "one-to-many" approach and the shift towards student-centered teaching implies an increasingly active and independent role of students in the education process [Mota, Scott, 2014]. So, a sustained artificial foreign language environment demands a lot of motivation and effort from NNESTs.

Creating a Consistent Foreign Language Community

The study's hypothesis was that creating a foreign language learning environment oriented towards students' language socialization, as well as enhancing their independence and creativity can minimize communication barriers and foreign language anxiety. Thus, we

created a Foreign Language Community Model (FLCM) and a corresponding uniform System of Control and Assessment (SCA), aimed at establishing uniform EFL learning standards – i.e. identical types of learning activities, projects, intermediate and final exams for students of different majors and departments with differentiated requirements and assessment criteria based on the students' level of EFL proficiency (Elementary, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate and Advanced) defined by the entry test. The proposed uniform mid-term and final exams complement the conventional forms of preventing control used by every teacher (grammar tests, vocabulary dictations, listening comprehension tests, classroom discussions, etc.). However, unlike these standard types of activities, the mid-term and final exams are supposed to be assessed only by "external auditors", i.e. a panel of teachers who have not worked with the students before.

During its practical implementation in 2013-2016, the proposed SCA for the students of humanities included the following components:

1. Induction stage: performing a short play for the Annual Students Drama Contest.
2. Mid-term oral exam: making a non-fiction/fiction film on a topic directly connected with the students' major for the Annual Student Film Festival OR mid-term presentation of an individual academic report.
3. Final oral exam: final presentation of an individual academic report at the Annual General Conference for the PetrSU's Students of Humanities.

This format of mid-term and final exams pushed students beyond their small classrooms – both Film Festival and Students Conference take place in a large hall, where participants get a chance to know each other, understand the specifics of other majors and establish a sense of belonging to a community. Having many students in one place at one time also makes it easier to conduct opinion polls and receive feedback for assessing progress and identifying gaps in the teaching process.

Study results

During 2013-2016, the proposed SCA was applied to 1048 students of PetrSU History, Law, Tourism, Economics and International Relations Departments. Survey 3 "New examination format vs. conventional exams" showed that 100% of the students prefer new types of examination to conventional "student vs. teacher" face-to-face exams, while 95% of students believe that combining film-making project with individual academic presentations is an effective strategy to learn EFL. Among the reasons were given the advantage of team work, the excitement over a dynamic film-shooting process and the feeling of engagement. The number of students feeling anxious about public speaking decreased by striking 78% (from 87% to 9%), even though the students' films or reports were presented to a much larger group of peers and teachers than before. The number of students who started putting more effort into understanding their bilingual peers and became more tolerant to their speech imperfections increased by 34%; and the number of students who started

making their speech more comprehensible to the heterogeneous audience with different levels of listening comprehension skills increased by 46%. Therefore, using new formats of assessing students' communication skills leads to the replacement of anxiety with what can be called "quasi-professional satisfaction".

Discussion

A six-year period of developing and testing the proposed SCA clearly demonstrated its advantages: it enabled to unify EFLTL quality control processes and assessment requirements for the students of non-linguistic majors and create a common foreign language community of such students within one university. Annual Students Conference and Film Festival help students to get acquainted with each other's academic and professional interests, trace the academic progress of their peers, listen to the reports presented by speakers with different levels of foreign language proficiency (and improve their own listening comprehension skills), ask questions, share their views and get a fulfilling sense of involvement which enhances motivation.

However, observing the SCA in action and analyzing the results of its implementation produced one very interesting and, to some degree, surprising spin-off effect. The proposed SCA was developed in order to move away from conventional teacher-centered education model, still widely used in Russia. But instead of eliminating the teacher's role new SCA transformed and enhanced it, mainly due to the fact that preparation for such complex exams demands effective monitoring, strong coordination and extraordinary enthusiasm. Within the proposed SCA a teacher's role is not only and not so much to teach students a foreign language but to develop their research, analytical, critical skills, as well as time management, cooperative learning, problem solving skills and many others. Such demanding task requires more cooperation between teachers and increases their collective responsibility.

Conclusion

Today, many researchers ask whether foreign language can be effectively taught and learnt in an artificial bilingual environment by non-native speakers and if yes – what should be done to design a foreign language community within a university with streamlined education processes and uniform assessment standards. The implementation of a complex System of Control and Assessment gave us a clearly positive answer to the first question, laid a strong foundation for building a foreign language community in PetrSU and set the direction for the further development of EFL teaching in Russia. Giving students of different majors new opportunities to communicate in English within common foreign language community compensates for the lack of natural language environment, increases the motivation of students and helps to embrace the modern learner-centered education paradigm.

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Обучение английскому языку студентов неязыковых вузов: модель единого языкового пространства

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Аннотация

В статье описываются особенности обучения взрослых иностранному языку в условиях аудиторного билингвизма, широко распространенного в российских вузах, а также возникающих при этом трудностей, таких как языковой и психологические барьеры, неэффективность применяемых методик обучения. Анализируется проблема повышенной тревожности у студентов неязыковых специальностей при говорении на неродном языке, вызванная, в частности, особенностями оценивания результатов обучения в традиционной модели, в центре которой находится преподаватель, при отсутствии единой системы контроля уровней владения иностранным языком. В качестве возможных способов повышения результативности обучения иностранным языкам в условиях искусственного билингвизма предлагается моделирование единой иноязычной среды в рамках вуза и организация единой системы контроля и оценивания языковой подготовки с целью компенсировать отсутствие естественной языковой среды, создать более дружественную систему обучения и повысить интерес студентов неязыковых направлений подготовки к изучению иностранных языков. Приводятся результаты исследования (2010-2016), подтверждающие эффективность предлагаемой модели.

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Ключевые слова

Обучение в искусственном билингвизме, модель единого иноязычного пространства, единая система контроля и оценивания, иностранные языки, педагогика.

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