

Development of students' professional communicative competence in an economic higher school

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Abstract

The article investigates the importance of development of professional communicative competence in an economic higher school through case studies. The components and levels of professional communicative competence are examined and analysed. The author comes to the conclusion that professional communicative competence is an important trait of character needed for a person in the XXI century.

Key words: professional communicative competence, competence-based approach, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, acmeological competence, case study, innovation

Introduction

Recent changes in social economic development, political conditions in the Russian Federation and integration into the international community have led to fostering international relations and the establishment of contacts between representatives of different nationalities in the economic, social and political spheres at different levels.

In a globalized world modern learning environment should be aimed at developing personal intellectual abilities, critical thinking skills, communication skills essential for understanding cultural diversity, cooperation with representatives of various multinational organizations.

Professional communicative competence has become a focus in higher education over the past couple of decades as educational policy makers and advocates have stressed a "back to basics" mentality. The ability to communicate effectively is often included as a primary undergraduate learning goal along with other key skills like writing, critical thinking, and problem solving (<http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/a-primer-on-communication-studies/s01-04-communication-competence.html>). Development of professional communicative competence makes graduates of Russian economic higher schools highly competitive for jobs in the field of international finance.

Teaching students in Russian economic higher schools up to the standards and requirements of the global market is one of the most important aims of Federal targeted program for Research and Development in Priority Areas of Advancement of the Russian Scientific and Technological Complex for 2014-2020.

Reaching the goal involves the usage of modern methods in learning environment. The implementation of competence-based approach is also very valuable in modern educational environment.

A competence-based approach in development of professional communicative competence

Russian traditional system of education with a number of hours spent in class and the list of disciplines in the curriculum has been replaced by a new one based on a uniform system of credits which is widely applied in the European education system

(Frolova, Kalugina, Artamonova, Boykov, 2016).

Decision making capacity and ability to work in a flexible way are top priorities of today's Russian education. There has been a shift from knowledge to competence. Irina A. Zimnyaya highlights a number of reasons to focus on competence-based approach and the need to adopt competence-based approach to the educational process:

- European and global integration trends, globalization of the world economy;
- changing education paradigms;
- requirements set by local education authorities (Zimnyaya, 2004).

One of the main differences between the competence-approach and dominating knowledge-based approach is that it integrates the reflective assessment and awareness of the boundaries of professional competence.

Competence-based approach involves the connection between the education process and its comprehension. It evolves students' professional identity and positive attitude towards studying. The basic idea of this approach lies in the fact that *fragmented* pieces of factual *knowledge and skills are not* the main goals of higher education, but the ability and willingness of the person to work effectively in different situations.

Moreover, nowadays, most universities implement competence-based approach by using active and interactive learning instructional strategies which include business meetings, role-plays, case studies, psychological and other training (Vasbieva & Kalugina, 2016).

Moving towards competence-based education brings benefits to both students and teachers:

- Sets clear performance expectations for teachers and students, enabling them to make better decisions and work more effectively;
- Prepares students for active social adaptation, lifelong learning, self-reliance, self-education and reflection;
- Creates a shared understanding of what proficiency looks like when students demonstrate it, and more relevant feedback on what the student needs to do to progress towards it;
- Establishes reliable two-way communication between the teacher and the student.

Components of professional communicative competence

Recently many Russian scientists have given their valuable contribution to the further development of the concept of professional communicative competence. Just a few of them will be mentioned in the following, namely those whose theoretical reflections and empirical work seem to have had the most important impact on the theory of professional communicative competence.

I.V. Novgorodtseva defined professional-communicative competence as a personality trait. It is composed of the skill, capability and knowledge to communicate effectively, personal traits of character which are necessary for resolving professional practice issues. (Novgorodtseva, 2008). According to the scientist professional-communicative competence contains the following components: motivational, cognitive, technological, personality, reflective.

M.A. Erofeeva, O.A. Zhelnova understood professional communicative competence as an integrative pattern of personality traits, the unity of the professional culture and the necessity of professional knowledge, skills and competence (Erofeeva, Zhelnova, 2011). In their opinion the structure of professional communication competence consists of professional and socio-cultural knowledge, professional communication skills, personality values and motivation.

According to E.B. Solovyova professional communication competence contains particular personality traits (empathy, kindness, tolerance, sociability, responsivity); professional communication skills (*knowledge of community speech norms, business etiquette, ability to use appropriate communication patterns*); communication skills (ability to start a conversation, develop your ideas and finish your speech effectively, dominate the *conversation and outcome, consider the fluency*) (Solovyova, 2001).

B. Ospanova, T. Timokhina and N. Kassenova emphasize the following structural components of communicative competence: a linguistic competence, a sociolinguistic competence, a discourse competence, a strategic competence, a sociocultural competence, a social competence (Ospanova, Timokhina, Kassenova, 2013).

All these terms are defined as knowledge and abilities/skills for use. This shows that theoreticians, especially those in the field of applied linguistics, after years of theoretical and empirical research on professional communicative competence have reached an agreement that a competent language user should possess not only knowledge about language but also the ability and skill to activate that knowledge in a communicative event. However, while it is relatively simple to define, observe and evaluate the basic knowledge that makes the concept of communicative competence, it is not that simple to understand, describe and evaluate the ability for use (Bagarić, Djigunović, 2007).

Thus, professional communication competence can be defined as a complex dynamic integrated system of personal and professional skills, which allows financial workers to establish professional communication activity in solving communication problems in the financial sphere (Vasbieva, Kalugina, 2014).

The analysis of the academic literature testifies that professional communicative competence should be of an integrated, multilevel character and should possess a complicated structure:

- A sociolinguistic competence (SLC) implies the ability to select and to use adequate linguistic forms and means depending on the aim and situation of communication, social roles of communication participants;
- A discourse competence (DC) implies the ability to understand various types of communicative statements, to build integrated, coherent, logical statements of various functional styles (Ospanova, Timokhina, Kassenova, 2013);
- An acmeological competence (AC) reflects priorities of personal achievements of high level of professionalism through communication (includes determination, emotional stability, reflective thinking and empathy);
- A foreign language competence (FLC) deals with knowledge of the foreign language and the ability to use that knowledge to interpret and produce meaningful texts appropriate to the situation in which they are used. It is best developed in the context of activities or tasks where foreign language is used for real purposes, in other words, in practical applications.

Professional communication competence structure of non-linguistic higher schools' students can be presented in the following diagram (Diagram1):

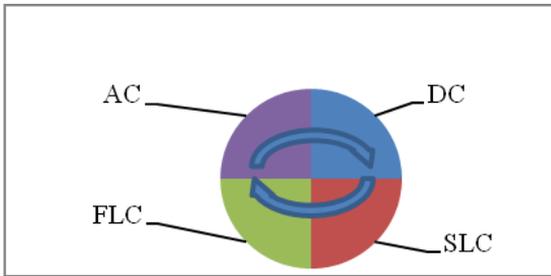


Diagram 1 Professional communication competence structure of economic higher schools' students

Professional communication competence levels

The levels of professional communication competence based on the present research methodology and theoretical findings can be categorized in terms of low, medium and high levels of performance as proposed by the INCA project (http://www.incaproject.org/en_downloads/20_27.04.2008), Interagency Language roundtable skill level description for competence in intercultural communication (<http://www.govtilr.org/skills/competence.htm>).

At the low level of proficiency the learners can use appropriate posture and behavior when acknowledging and delivering short polite exchanges, such as greetings, farewells, and expressions of thanks and apology, but can rarely cope with deviations from the routine. They can often miss cues indicating miscommunication and are almost always unable to repair misunderstandings when they occur. Typically experiences difficulties with less predictable and spontaneous interactions, such as open-ended conversations or bargaining.

At the medium level of proficiency the learners can express opinions on abstract matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements, they are able to write letters make notes on predictable requirements.

At the high level of performance, the so-called level of analysis, learners can contribute effectively to the meetings within own area of work, keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions and dealing confidently with hostile questions; can understand documents, correspondence and reports, including the finer points of complex text; can write letters on any subjects and full notes of meetings with good expression and accuracy.

Thus a learner should acquire medium or high levels of sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, acmeological competence, and foreign language competence.

Accordingly, under the circumstances, there is an urgent need to use the technology with a high degree of innovation in the pedagogical process, with a clear dominant interaction of theoretical and practice-oriented forms of learning, relevant to contemporary needs in education

Professional communicative competence development through case study

The traditional methods do not provide sufficient opportunities to develop professional communicative competence. Learners train their communicative skills, but not to a sufficient degree. Components of professional communicative competence could be best developed through the case study method at higher schools.

The case method is based on a philosophy of professional education which associates knowledge directly with action (Boehrer, 1995). This philosophy rejects the doctrine that students should first learn passively, and then, having learned, should apply knowledge. Instead, the case method is based on the principle that real education consists of the cumulative and unending acquisition, combination and reordering of learning experiences.

Case studies are extremely rich in content and can provide the learner with the potential to consolidate already acquired knowledge and train specific language and managerial skills. Case-study is defined as an analysis of practical situations which includes the way of consideration, case analysis; search for solutions, criteria based assessment. The case is a type of industry or economic situation, made by the teacher for analysis and students' assessment (Vetoshkina, Shnajder, 2011).

Case Studies spark lively classroom discussion and provide real-world management lessons that students can put into practice in their professional lives. In other words, students discuss real-world business situations in an artificially created professional environment. Many students are more inductive than deductive reasoners, which means that they learn better from examples than from logical development starting with basic principles. The use of case studies can therefore be a very effective classroom technique (Vasbieva, 2014).

Using a case-study enables learners to look at a particular economic problem from various perspectives. The problem may have nothing to do with their own line of business, and they may or may not be asked to produce a solution. Case-studies are suitable for professional communicative competence development for all types of business English learners (except perhaps for those still at a low level of English language competence), because the information needed to address the problem is normally included in the data provided, although with some pre-experience groups additional background information may be necessary. Teachers writing their own case studies can tailor situations to their learners' specific needs, but may not wish to invest a lot of time and effort in case study preparation if each case is only to be used once (Frendo, E. 2005).

The benefits of case-study based development of professional communicative competence are as follows:

- Allow practically apply the theory;
 - Develop the skills of data processing; setting priorities;
- problem analysis;
- Develop interpersonal and communication skills;
 - Provide a realistic approach to the situation;
 - Get the learner involved, and encourage immediate use of newly acquired skills;

Learning takes place through activities and through teaching others.

Case study based technology allows teachers to simultaneously solve several problems. The most important is that it allows to learn the course material and to include the motivational sphere of the student into the educational process; it also develops creative abilities, the capacity for further self-development and self-education, communicative skills; helps to establish the emotional contacts between students; implement educational objectives, as it accustoms students to work in a team, to listen to their group mates. The use of case study based technology in developing professional communicative competence relieves students' nervous tension; it gives the possibility to change the form of their activities, to focus the attention on the key issues.

Case-study is a method which combines many ways and means and is used when a particular method does not help quickly and effectively achieve the goal in the existing conditions (Borisova, Vasbieva, Malykh, Vasnev, Bírová, 2016).

When examining the concept of case-based learning, it is important to first capture the essential components of the method. According to C.F. Herreid, (1997) effective cases for learning share a number of characteristics:

- The case content is closely aligned with the overall instructional goals and objectives.
- The case tells a story and focuses on an issue that arouses interest.
- The case itself is well-written and its readability is appropriate for the age or level of the student.
 - The case should be written in the present tense and deal with an authentic situation not more than five years old.
 - The case includes direct quotes, using the characters' dialog to tell the story.
 - The story is compelling and creates empathy with the main characters.
- The case clearly states and illuminates the dilemma without resolving it.
- The case is relevant to the reader.
- The case provokes conflict and forces decision making.
- The case is general enough to be used in several applications.
- The case is short.

Classification of cases

There are different approaches to the classification of cases. National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science presents the following case types: analysis case, dilemma/decision case, directed case, interrupted case, clicker case, flipped case, laboratory case (<http://sciencecases.lib.buffalo.edu/cs/collection/method.asp>). Analysis Case is a type of case (also sometimes called an issues case) is used to teach students skills of analysis. The material is focused around answering questions like, "What is going on here?" An analysis case frequently lacks a central character and generally stops short of demanding that students make a decision.

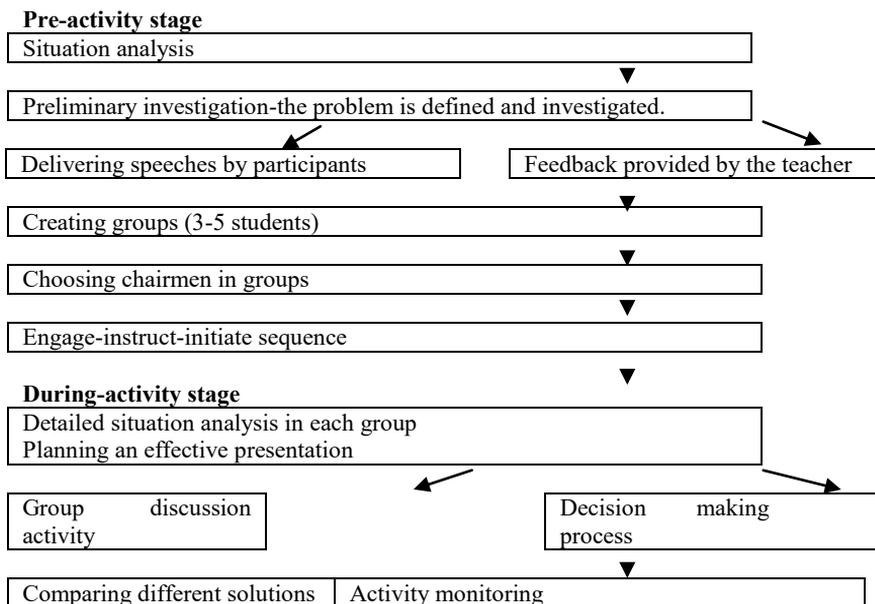
Dilemma/Decision Case presents an individual, institution, or community faced with a problem that must be solved. It often consists of a short paragraph or section that introduces the problem (and the decision-maker) at the moment of crisis. A background section fills in information necessary to understand the situation. A narrative section then describes recent developments leading up to the crisis. Charts, tables, graphs, letters, or other documentation that helps lay the foundation for a solution may be integrated into the case or appended. The teacher's goal is to help students sift through the facts, analyze the problem, and consider possible solutions and their likely consequences. Directed Case is designed primarily to enhance students' understanding of fundamental concepts, principles, and facts. The case usually consists of a short, dramatic scenario accompanied by a set of "directed" questions that can be answered from the textbook or lecture. The questions are "closed-ended" (i.e., typically they have only one correct answer). Students prepare answers to the questions, which they provide in class when called upon during the case discussion. Questions usually are assigned as homework, with students working individually or in groups to prepare their answers in advance, although instructors may have students prepare answers in class, again either individually or in groups.

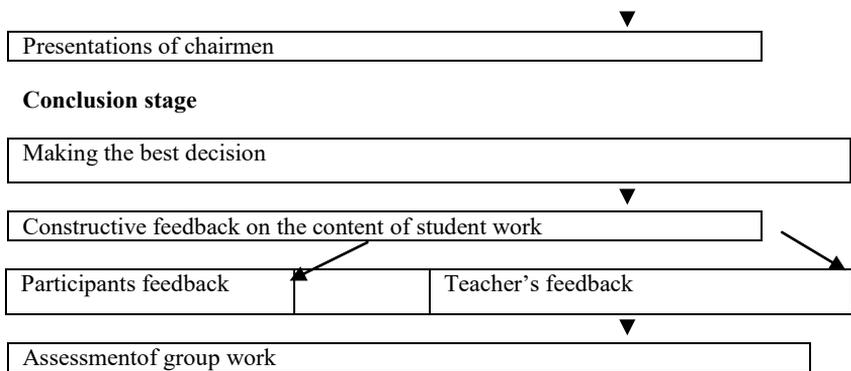
Interrupted Case presents a problem for students to solve in a progressive disclosure format, with the case given to students in parts to work on in small groups and complete within a single class period. A common method for developing an interrupted case is to take a scientific paper and choose a research question from it (or have students read the paper’s introduction and work in groups to pose a research question based on the issues it raises). Students develop hypotheses and design experiments to test them, which they then present for the class to critique, after which the instructor gives students information on how the actual authors of the paper tackled the problem. After a description of the authors’ methods, students are asked to predict the results, which they report on when called on in class. The instructor then reveals the actual data, which students interpret. The instructor brings closure to the case by revealing the authors’ interpretations and conclusions. This format allows students to practice the scientific method – from question formulation to hypothesis testing, experimental design, and data analysis and interpretation. Clicker Cases combine the use of student personal response systems (“clickers”) with case teaching methods and formats. The case is presented in class using a series of PowerPoint slides in parts, or stages. After each stage, students are asked to respond to questions (called “clicker questions”) posed by the instructor. In this way, students work their way through the material to understand (and also usually solve) the problem presented in the case. Specifically designed for use in large introductory science classes, the method integrates lecture material, case storylines, student discussion, (clicker) questions, clarification of the answers to those questions, more lecture, and data.

Flipped Case is a case study that has been designed to be used in a flipped classroom context in which students learn the basics at home by watching short interactive videos and then apply these principles in class to the case in order to learn the material in depth.

Case study activity should be carefully staged. We can summarize this procedure in Figure 1:

Figure 1 Case study organizational structure





Analysis of case studies can be organized in several ways to reach different goals. The teacher organizes the discussion at seminars, asking students to read a short case and answer the questions raised in it. The teacher can run a discussion being involved in decision making process or act as an expert who summarizes, draws conclusion and assesses the progress of each participant. Long cases can be given to think over at home followed by a discussion at a seminar in a group (Dumnaya, 2013).

Conclusion

Further research on development of professional communicative competence is considered to include further defining professional communicative competence, analyzing levels of development, revealing a relevant set of methods to develop high level of professional communicative competence. Professional communicative competence is of vital importance and crucial to the development of student's mentality and personality in the XXI century.

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