CONFERENCES AND COMPETENCIES: STUDENTS CONFERENCE AS ENVIRONMENT FOR COMPETENCIES FORMATION

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Abstract. Students' conferences make up the environment where specific competences are combined with generic competences. Our goal is to estimate the potential of the professionally-oriented academic communication in a foreign language in the students' conference environment and find out the ways students' conferences could contribute to the professional competencies formation. Investigated is the polytechnical tertiary school. Integrative in its essence, the project is aimed at fostering the efficiency of the university education, creativity development, ideas generation by specialists-to-be and innovations dissemination, – all of which is supposed to upgrade the standards of tertiary education and raise the quality of vocational training. This goes in accord with the Bologna process and European, and world-wide effort to enhance flexibility and professionalism on the labour market.

Keywords: conference, professional competencies, academic environment, communication, professional discourse, creativity, innovation.

Introduction

Students' conferences are treated as a specific form of academic extracurricular activities based on the seamless tolerant dialogue of knowledge, languages and cultures, resulting in generation, tailoring and activation of professionally related and socially significant competencies. From Latin *conferre*: to gather together, compare, to bring together; confer; to grant or bestow (an honour, gift, etc.); to hold or take part in a conference or consult together.

Specific competences and generic competences are combined in the environment of students' conferences. By specific competencies we mean the professional knowledge and skills in one special field of activities (engineering, economics, agriculture, etc.). Generic competencies are those common to all specialists in their socialising process in all spheres of life.

It is not only a set of knowledge and skills that makes up the image of a successful professional, but also the way of dealing with other members of the production process, which is usually revealed through communication (verbal and non-verbal). Entering the global market goes along with developing the global manner of communication. This means that it is not the knowledge of the language alone that paves the way to success but also the strategic vision of the whole communication process.

Materials and methods

The published materials of annual students' conferences at St. Petersburg Polytechnic University are investigated [1-10].

The methods applied: **the data collection questionnaire assessment of required and acquired skills, evaluation of the educational program, work orientations, discourse analysis, content analysis.**

Results and discussion

It has been universally recognized that speech literacy and communication proficiency are key components making up the image of a professional – sort of a personal business card introducing its owner into the sphere of interaction with other professionals.

The linguistic component in the vocational education and training system is acquiring more and more importance in the course of globalization development and the general intellectual growth characterizing professionals today.

Professional competences are related to the introduction of the different forms of innovation. Competency is the set of behaviour patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence. This definition makes a link between 'competence' – carrying out a specific job, and 'competency' – the transferable behaviour patterns which enable the individual to demonstrate competence in a range of different situations. A competency is more than

just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context [11]. As noted in the Report on The REFLEX project, graduates who took part in introducing innovations in the area of products or services were relatively competent in terms of their ability to present products, ideas or reports to an audience, ability to come up with new ideas and solutions, alertness to new opportunities, willingness to question one's own and others' ideas, ability to mobilize the capacities of others and ability to coordinate activities. Besides, the projects presented at conferences are the product of research based upon, and resulting from, both the special vocational knowledge accumulated in the course of studies, and the newly acquired data from the investigation process (instructed and independent) [12].

Interdisciplinary in its nature, conference activities in the university environment are seen as a means to support the teaching-and-learning process by opening the possibility for undergraduate and graduate students to make their contribution to the spheres of innovation, as well as to socialize on the basis of their research in different sciences and humanities (as in the case of the polytechnic multi-profile). As such, they are seen as a popular means of supporting interdisciplinary ties in the university programs, different fields of knowledge and various methods of research being involved.

The use of a foreign language chosen as a working language of such a conference adds to its popularity among students due to the opportunity supplied to contact the audience, the international inclusive, as well as to check their foreign language expertise in professional communication. The latter is exposed in the ability to take part in the peculiar type of discourse which both bears the features of special professional discourse, and displays the general features of academic rhetoric.

Notwithstanding the position a prospective specialist (as we see our today's students) is going to occupy, he/she should be versed in the issues of professional communication. Such a skill is sure to be helpful in performing his/her duties, relevant to professional contacts, including communication and socialising with representatives of different cultures. In the course of a conference, participants are involved into different kinds of rhetoric, thus enjoying a possibility to develop and update their communication competence.

Among the most important communication skills in such spheres as finance, engineering and law are building relationships, listening, giving feedback, exchanging information, soliciting feedback, advising, persuading, negotiating, instructing, giving orders, motivating, delegating authority, participating in meetings, all of which require linguistic competence of the participants of the communication process. The linguistic component in the vocational education and training system is acquiring more and more importance in the course of globalization development and the general intellectual growth characterizing professionals today.

Speaking about the linguistic competence formation in the polytechnic university environment we give priority to the languages most widely used in the relevant spheres of knowledge. The factors reflecting the economic and technological strength of a particular language as a means of international communication, as considered by Jan M.Ulijn and Judith U. Strother, are 1) the geographical distribution of the language throughout the world, 2) the GNP of the countries which use it, 3) the number of patents and amount of research conducted in the linguistic area, and 4) the scientific and technical literature published in the language. The analysis conducted by the authors lets them conclude that «all these factors influence the export and import relationships among the world trade powers», with the overall rank order of languages needed in international business and technology following: English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Dutch.

Keeping to the general (or at least, mutual) acceptability lines makes the core of the verbal communication process. In this respect the emphasis is put on what a personality, society and culture add to the language functioning. It becomes especially obvious in the case of international conferences. The latter are an indispensable part of students' mobility activation characteristic of the general globalization process underway in the field of higher education. To reach the positive result of the cross-cultural communication process, the interlocutors should overcome certain obstacles and reach the level of cultural tolerance and flexibility at which the communication companion is treated as a partner instead of an alien. Another resource to better communication is cross-cultural literacy in

the context-dependent discourse dynamics. So, cross-cultural competence should be set off as the one formed and developed within the framework of the students' conference. Academic rhetoric is a multilateral sphere of interaction especially vulnerable to social, cultural and psychological effects.

Discourse investigation is based upon different factors of social, cultural and psychological nature.

From different approaches to the academic discourse analyses (rhetoric peculiarities in different cultures; discourse among foreign language speakers with native speakers; foreign language communication between non-native speakers from different cultures; etc) we have chosen the comparison of academic discourse structuring in different cultures when a foreign language is spoken by all the communicating parties. Hopefully the results of the research will contribute to recommendations how to follow the mutually (or generally) acceptable rules in the academic debate sphere, so that to stimulate students' international contacts in research.

There are three dimensions of discourse: 1) linguistic (the language proper); 2) epistemological (thinking and information transmission); 3) interactive (situation-dependent verbal communication). From the lingvocultural angle of vision it is relevant to define what culture the subjects of the discourse belong to and correspondingly how the cultural standards and values influence the instantation of all the discourse components.

There are two vectors of the analysis: from cultural phenomena to their linguistic manifestation, and from actual wording and structuring to the corresponding cultural basis.

Following Grice's maxima of Cooperation, we emphasize the most important feature of academic speech bound to create the cooperative effect – accuracy, or rather exactness, of terms and precision of structural models. Being informatively condensed, academic discourse follows different patterns in low-context and high-context cultures.

The peculiarities of the Russian linguistic culture include lots of inferences, implicated information (implicatures), multiple deviations from the subject of discussion, abundance of allusions and backoffs – all of which combined to result in comprehensive description, or in-depth argument presentation. English, on the contrary, is perceived as linear, consecutive, enjoying optimal verbal expression of all propositions [13]. As soon as cultures interact the effect on the language of communication becomes obvious.

Content and form juxtaposition is of prior concern. Form is priority by low-context Anglo-lingual culture, with all relevant discourse elements verbalized and unequivocal, connections between them being unambiguous. In anglolingual cultures formal aspects dominate the discourse structuring and evaluation.

On the other hand, Russian linguaculture is high-context, with all the consequences. Context orientation results in asserting that information is priority, little attention paid to the reliability of the information source.

This is closely connected with the distribution of responsibility between the addresser and the addressee for the text comprehension and avoidance of disruptions in discourse. Anglolingual cultures are inclined to hold the addresser responsible for any possible failure, committing the addresser to produce addressee-friendly texts, while in Russian culture the addressee is recognized responsible for misunderstanding, and it is the addressee's fault or lack of intelligence/competence if the information is missed.

Individualism vs collectivism parameters find numerous manifestations in academic discourse, one of such being I vs we attribution to investigation descriptions. From the analysis of students' research works it is evident that "I" dominates the academic discourse in anglolingual cultures, while Russian culture prefers "we" – reference, which is based upon the relations of the research-work author with the epistemological aspect, as well as upon the values of responsibility and independence in different cultures. In this respect it is also possible to refer to the indication of commitment, complicacy, indifference, modesty, self-evaluation, arrogance, etc.

All this is demonstrated both in written texts (abstracts and reports), and in oral discourse (presentations, discussion, etc.) often becoming a barrier to adequate communication.

To reach a positive result of the cross-cultural communication process, the interlocutors should overcome certain obstacles and reach the level of cultural tolerance and flexibility at which the communication companion is treated as a partner instead of an alien. Another resource to better communication is cross-cultural literacy in the context-dependent discourse dynamics. International students' conferences make up an ideal testing ground for developing cross-cultural competence in research activities.

In the academic context verbal communication in a foreign language discovers the synergetic potential of linguistic training both for educators and for the recipients of education.

Intercultural competence is [the ability] "to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people." It also encompasses the ability to critically or analytically understand that one's "own and other cultures'" perspective is culturally determined rather than natural – Michael Byram, Professor, University of Durham

Globalization, having brought individuals in contact with one another at an unprecedented scale, has also brought forth a general challenge to traditionally recognized boundaries of nation, language, race, gender, and class. For those living within this rapidly changing social landscape, intercultural competence – as defined by Michael Byram above – is a necessary skill, and the cultivation of such intercultural individuals falls on the shoulders of today's educators. They should provide students with opportunities to help them define and design for themselves their "third place" or "third culture," a sphere of interculturality that enables language students to take an insider's view as well as an outsider's view on both their first and second cultures [14]. It is this ability to find/establish/adopt this third place that is at the very core of intercultural competence. The conference aims to bring researchers and practitioners across languages, levels and settings to discuss and share research, theory, and best practices and foster meaningful professional dialogue on issues related to Intercultural Competence teaching and learning [15].

Academic education based on the professional competency formation as a promising basis for success in a career joins a number of psychological and developmental processes, development of creativity among them [16].

Creativity is a special kind of thinking that involves originality and fluency that breaks away from existing patterns and introduces something new. Creativity may be applied to problem solving, in which case it facilitates the generation of a range of possible solutions, in particular the problems which have no single right answer. Alternatively, and most productively, it may be applied to the process of creating – this means, realising of a held vision, empowered by a tension-resolution system which is put in place by the existing reality being differentiated from a desired vision. So, creativity is obviously something that belongs to everyday life, rather than something confined to the so-called creative spheres, such as, say, the world of arts (poets, painters and musicians).

Creativity development is one of the priorities in the education and nurture process these days when the future of mankind depends so much on generation of non-standard ideas that may be of value to the survival and progress of our civilization. Less globally, creativity is vital for research, being an indispensable component of cognition and an important aspect of moulding of professional competency of students. Creative individuals are generally recognized to have a high capacity for challenges in their jobs, as much as willingness to take risks and high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder.

Research on creativity, done by Sternberg and Lubart (USA) suggests that it depends on divergent thinking rather than the convergent thinking that is typically assessed in measures of intelligence [17].

Creative individuals share some common core characteristics across cultures, though there are a number of factors to be considered concerning the ways in which thought processes can be engaged in different cultural milieus and the obstacles that these milieus may present.

There are different ways in which creativity can be fostered in different cultures. In terms of Hofstede's dimensions of individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, it has been found out that countries high on uncertainty avoidance prefer creative individuals to work through organizational norms, rules, and procedures. Countries higher on power distance preferred creative individuals to gain support from those in authority before action is taken, or to build a broad base of

support from those in authority before action is taken, or to build a broad base of support among members for new ideas. Collectivistic countries prefer creative people to seek cross-functional support for their efforts. So, creativity is connected with the national cultural specifics.

Another meaningful interrelationship is between creativity and intelligence. Following the recent investigations, creativity is recognized as a type of intelligence, alongside with other aspects of intelligence [18].

As a pattern of thinking, creativity cannot be deleted from or stopped in the human mental activity, still it can be retarded or intensified.

Paradoxically as it may appear, the aggressive environment may even enhance the level of creativity (probably, due to the striving for survival) and give rise to sparks of genius, while comfort and relaxation do not always predispose to look for new ideas and new solutions.

As Matsumoto and Juang put it, "creativity requires people to get outside of their own box or framework; another area of cultural difference would be the degree to which this ability is fostered" [19].

Developing of creative interests in professional fields is often characteristic of the very early stages of academic education, far before the main contributions individuals are supposed to make. We find it a target of our professional activities in supporting and fostering the relevant practices of our students and appeal to our colleagues to get involved in this process by combining our effort and expertise on the international level [20].

Conclusions

Cultural development – the progress of civilization – has its primary source, ultimately, in creative contributions made by people in all walks of life. Thus, fostering of the students' creativity combined with mastering of their communication skills and professional competencies formation within the framework of conferences is a promising means of providing the enhanced level of professionalism and productivity of would-be specialists in all areas of production and services and may be considered as an academic resource.

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