THE ROLE OF PROJECTS IN THE STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS OF BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The implementation of a system of quality management in higher education is aimed at assuring a stimulating and interactive study environment meant to facilitate the students' involvement in the process of their own formation. The projects devised by business students, individually, within foreign language practical courses enhance their social skills (civic-mindedness, communication, empathy) emotional intelligence (self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation) as well as their propensity to interaction and support. In addition to the students' freedom of expression approach, transversal competencies are also utilized in this teaching strategy employed in foreign language courses with a view to developing language skills. Projects offer students autonomy and the opportunity to express themselves by speaking about topics that arouse their interest thus opening a path to address the chosen topics from an intercultural perspective and to explore them from trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary angles.*

Key words: *project, teaching strategy, language skills, motivation*

1. Introduction

In order to have a successful professional career in the field of economics, students are stimulated and supported in the acquisition of linguistic competence and performance. This is the cornerstone of future collaborations and essential for their professional updating capacity by reading the specialized literature written in the most prominent international languages. Nowadays, irrespective of the field of activity, in addition to solid professional training and expertise there is the need to master a foreign language, specifically to be able to currently use accurate specialized language.

With a view to attaining one of the main objectives of the didactics of foreign language teaching to business students, namely that of correctly using the foreign language in personal and professional contexts, updated teaching methods are a priority as in this field there are no absolute truths.

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Furthermore, in a general key it can be stated that, with regard to the foreign language teaching/learning objectives, concurrently with the development of research on curriculum theory, there has been a delimitation between language and cultural objectives, hence also differentiating between the cognitive, affective, social and pragmatic dimensions of these categories of objectives (Bontaş, 1996).

The focus of the didactic process on the student in foreign language teaching is linked to the quality standard of the foreign language teaching/learning system and presupposes a learning process with a high degree of autonomy which entails dealing with individual linguistic and cultural experiences resulting from the interaction with members of other linguistic/cultural spaces as well as from the personal, extracurricular interest in the target foreign language (social networks, art and cinema, part-time jobs, conferences, trips and tours, etc.)

Thus, students develop the ability to reflect and, implicitly, to become linguistically and culturally aware by their involvement in the learning of a foreign language. Students have to be trained to use the foreign language in any real-life communication circumstance. The achievement of this major objective requires teachers to relinquish the preconfigured teaching formulas that only result in an artificial work environment in favour of laying emphasis, in their teaching endeavour, on instances of real daily and professional life, on various communication patterns that the future graduates may come across. Hence, in a pedagogy of autonomy, the teacher becomes an advisor as well as a facilitator. It is of utmost importance for lecturers to know their students' level of competence and their propensity for learning, to stimulate and encourage them by means of didactic strategies. The role of students also changes as they now have the ability to discern with regard to information, hence being granted a greater learning authority. This direct communication demystifies the social role of the teacher in former times, almighty on account of their omniscience but also because of the student who was belittled by an assumed lack of knowledge. Autonomy in institutional contexts involves the acquisition of declarative and procedural knowledge that would allow students to define their own learning objectives, to negotiate and set such objectives, to choose their learning materials, the strategies and learning techniques and to establish their own learning circumstances (pace, progression, duration, etc.). It is precisely at this point that the purpose of the project devised by the student to be defended during the foreign language practical course becomes manifest. Out of the multitude of topics previously presented by the teacher during the course, students can elaborate on a subject of their choice by motivating their option, formulating work hypotheses and emphasizing conclusions and postulates.

2. The project as Didactic Strategy

Generally, in the teaching-learning process, the encouragement of active involvement marks the passage from "learning" to "learning to be and to become", i.e. the readiness to face situations by becoming willing to commit and to act.

The method of using projects during any class on any educational level is not a revolutionary method of the past few years, but was put forward by J. Dewey (1859 –

1952) and substantiated by the principle of learning by doing. The project method is an active-participatory one with multiple teaching benefits that entails the transfer of knowledge, skills, abilities, facilitating interdisciplinary approaches and consolidating the students' social aptitudes. By the actual preparation of the project, the student anticipates the results, foresees the ways to reach them and they organize/seek/select the materials to be used. (Ionescu & Radu, 2001)

With regard to business students' foreign language project activities, it is essential to successively go through such mandatory stages as: choose a topic from the foreign language course materials or from other; specialized subject courses, related to the themes that were debated during the foreign language course; set objectives and structure activities; search for/ study bibliographical sources and process authentic materials; elaborate the project; defend the project and ensure feed-back (comments, questions, discussions).

The main advantage of the active-participatory methods used in higher education is student involvement in the teaching act and enhancing their capacity to issue opinions and comments on the studied phenomena, to develop their critical thinking, i.e. a type of reasoning that is centred on testing and evaluating possible solutions to a given situation, followed by the choice of its appropriate, substantiated resolution (Bocoş, 2013). To think critically means to own valuable and useful knowledge, to hold rational convictions, to propose personal opinions, to accept that one's ideas may be debated and assessed, to frame adequate arguments for one's opinions, to actively participate and cooperate in order to find solutions (Iacob, 2018).

Apart from the elements that are mostly related to psychology, the evaluations that the foreign language teacher conducts when assessing the defended projects of (in our case) business students throughout the semester are of utmost importance in identifying the progress and the drawbacks in the students' acquisitions and language skills. The projects that are written and defended by the students during foreign language seminars assist the lecturer in determining the latter's linguistic needs. Hence teachers reassess the students' degree of language proficiency and reroute the training outlook, the content of themes/materials by making targeted observations and thus improving the students' individual performances from one project to another. Teachers offer students certain guidelines for project development, guide the student in processing materials (from its selection and organization to the concordance between content and theme, the author's capacity to analyze and synthesize, the relevance of conclusions and the originality of the outcomes, etc.).

For large groups, this evaluation strategy is inconveniently time-consuming in detriment of the teaching process, it requires rooms equipped with video projectors and internet access, but its major benefit is that the discussions, the comments of the group on the defended project bring about further value to the class (students also display other competencies, they built group cohesion through interaction, a lively working climate is created alongside a boost of learning motivation).

Group projects are not suitable for foreign language courses (although they would greatly improve team work and team spirit) as it would be challenging for the lecturer to separately evaluate the contribution of each group member; in addition, the level of

linguistic competence differs hence the language acquisition requisites call for individual and primarily voluntary projects. Projects grant students autonomy and the opportunity to express themselves on topics that attracts their interest and equally create the opportunity of an intercultural perspective on the chosen topic as well as of trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to its exploration.

The acknowledged advantages of the project method as a didactic learning strategy are (Păcurari, 2003) it is an efficient method of evaluation and interactive learning that:
- places the student in an authentic research situation;
- cultivates responsibility for one's own learning and for its outcomes;
- creates the opportunity for interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches to the topic;
- enables the analysis of the extent to which students adequately use their general knowledge and linguistic competencies;
- consolidates and exploits intellectual activity techniques (gathering, processing and presenting information);
- stimulates student initiative and independence in activities;
- ensures the development of relational and communication competence;
- stimulates creativity and facilitates an increase in self-confidence, etc.

Among the disadvantages of using projects as coursework, mention could be made of the need to take time, out of the one allotted for the course itself, for project presentation which would require the organization of course materials for shorter time intervals; the need to register the students for their project presentations for course time management purposes; the need for the room to be equipped with video-projector, laptop, internet access, etc. (Ionescu, 2001) With regard to students, the disadvantages of project assignments can be: difficulties in completing the assignment by a given deadline, the need for a certain amount of time to plan, a particular state of mind to choose the topic, locating sources, gathering and processing authentic materials, using technical support in devising the project. Also, some students can be hindered by obstacles from the real world.

3. The Role of Didactic Projects in Student Formation

Generally, projects, as a form of summative evaluation, target more complex, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. By writing projects within the foreign language courses of business schools specializations, students display their intellectual prowess, the amount of in-depth knowledge of their specialization and surmount hindrances that can arise either from writing and speaking language skills or even from the anxiety of presenting their personal opinions in front of their peers. Additionally, students can exercise their dexterity in operating a computer and using the internet to locate sources, gather materials and create the oral presentation support (especially PowerPoint presentations).

The project defence highlights the presenter's shortcomings in speech therefore, at the end of the presentation, the teacher will indicate and correct their mistakes, which would eventually lead to an improvement in oral communication. Oral communication

difficulties may stem from additional information elements which go beyond the written message: i.e. intonation, pauses, pace, stress, which are extremely important to the hearer in decoding the message. Accurate pronunciation, adequate intonation and speech pace are coordinates that the teacher examines and remedies as necessary when students present their projects. Intonation is particularly challenging for non-philological students in the process of learning any foreign language be it English, German, French or Spanish. In every single instance the teacher must raise the students' awareness of the mellifluousness of rising and falling intonation. In longer sentences, the voice ascends regularly up to a point and then descends progressively until it rediscovers its initial height. It stands to reason that this melody varies according to the speaker and to the type of text. In this communication area, the project is an excellent testing instrument. In the envisaged linguistic progression, the lecturer must create opportunities to unrestrictedly revisit some terms or communication elements encountered in the projects that students devised and defended, in order to highlight their specific features and to draw attention to the possible confusions that the teacher had most certainly come across throughout their teaching career. Within this pedagogic approach which also presupposes the grammatical, syntactic and semantic analysis of every linguistic unit, a complementary perspective on the possible difficulties in oral communication is imperative. In the written communication, we can safely claim that once students are able to use translation review programs and spelling converters, they can discern between one form and another in a translation and to add content to whatever they want to convey to an audience of their peers. By making these choices, selections and information syntheses which are essential elements of their project, the student-author becomes the subject of his/her own educational process. This activity is process-oriented, namely the process of discovery learning. (Dumitru, 2000)

When project-writing is used in foreign language courses, the information transfer is obviously circular as the teacher initially provides the framework for the development of the project by indicating the appropriate manner of addressing the topics subject to debate and afterwards, the presented project is a new pretext for debating on a theme which is tangential to the one that had originally been put forward in the course. When the same topic is presented by different students, the final benefit of oral and written communication in the studied foreign language is greater. Aside from the improvement of language skills by means of projects, emphasis should be placed on the gain of all parties (students and teacher) from the prompted information exchange. Specifically, there is a role switch that benefits both the lecturer in their teaching endeavour, and the students in their learning undertaking by their empathizing with one another.

A noteworthy dimension in the role of individual projects presented by students in foreign language courses is the social one. The latter exhibits aspects related to student interaction as well as elements of group psychology. The formation of socio-relational competencies is determined by conviction (wherewith the student speaker motivates the choice of topic and reveals himself/herself to others through their project, etc.) which relies on will, companionship, like-mindedness, common interests, etc. The permanent group dynamics is sustained by the lecturer who manages the interactive

teaching-learning strategies and who can be a promoter and supporter of a propitious climate for the development of psychosocial skills.

4. Conclusions

In addition to linguistic competencies, foreign language practical courses offer students the chance to improve their social skills (civic-mindedness, communication, empathy) emotional skills (self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation) interaction and support by using transversal competencies in achieving learning outcomes.

Designing and presenting projects in foreign language practical courses renders the teaching/learning process more flexible, it encourages individual learning and boosts the students' self-assessment abilities by relying on a formative type of evaluation. It also stimulates intrinsic motivation, it democratises the teacher-student relationship and it enlivens the activities of the foreign language course. The intercultural dimension is also prominent in the choice and presentation of any topic from the economic field, which is to be expected as we are dealing with elements that are as inter-connected as in a web. The project as a strategy of summative evaluation relies on complex multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. This type of assignment is very beneficial in the course of the learning process due to the autonomy that students acquire, to its role of psychosocial shaping factor, and to the self-awareness and self-assessment abilities that its writing and presentation entail. The choice of this evaluative strategy for foreign language courses should be a constant by virtue of the educational gains that all the actors involved in the teaching/learning process (i.e. teacher, students/student groups) can obtain.

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