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STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE FORMATION
BY USING NEW APPROACHES AND INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

High requirements to the level of a young specialist's foreign language competences are dictated by the growth of globalization and international relations. The purpose of this article is to draw attention of the colleagues working in non-linguistic universities to the question "How to organize the educational process in such a way that it would provide the formation of foreign language competences guaranteeing a young specialist competitiveness at the labour market?"

The Department of Foreign Language Communication of the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus has gained a rich experience in forming students' competences in professional and cross-cultural communication. Our approach is based on major resources of the Department: teaching materials; innovative technologies; class, extra-class activities and research work. The Department has created its own information-educational system of training public administrators, IT-managers, economists and lawyers by designing its own manuals and textbooks, using innovative teaching and computer technologies and by organizing class, extra-class and scientific activities of the students of the Academy of Public Administration.

Taking this fact into consideration we have one more aim – to share the experience of the Department in forming future public administrators' professional and cross-cultural competences with our colleagues from other higher educational establishments of Belarus.

As for the formation of professional competences, we are privileged to be teaching the discipline “Business English” for two years (3-6 semesters) to the students of the three specialities: “Public Administration and Law”, “Public Administration and Economics”, “Information Resources Management.” The discipline “Business English” involves English for Public Administration students provided for the second year students and profession-oriented English provided for the third year students. It is done on the basis of the textbooks designed by the Department, such as “English for Law Students”, “English for Economics Students”, “English for ICT Students” [1-4]. Besides that, the manual “Connecting People. The Art of Presentation” was designed for future specialists who will have to deliver presentations in a professional environment [5]. The aim of it is to form foreign language communication competences and to provide numerous opportunities to practice the skills acquired. It contains extensive authentic articles, video and audio resources, a collection of practical exercises to develop essential presentation skills.

The Department of Foreign Language Communication actively uses a cross-cultural approach taking into account the current trends in ESP teaching. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of cross-cultural competences for future economists or public administrators in our globalized world which enable them to establish and develop successful business contacts, build proper business relationships with their foreign partners, understand and accept different models of behavior, avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural interaction.

Integrating cross-cultural component into the ESP teaching process we provide the students with specially designed for this purpose materials such as the manual “Professional Communication in Cross-Cultural Environment” [6]. It aims at helping students to increase their consciousness of cultural differences in values and attitudes, to learn the models of behaviour of people from other cultures, to get the necessary skills of cross-cultural communication, to consider the characteristics of their own culture, other cultures and the world culture in general. The manual is designed for the first, second and third year students of specialities ‘Public

Administration and Economics”, “Public Administration and Law”, “Information Resources Management.” Nine units of the manual encompass the following topics: “Cross-Cultural Differences, Values and Norms”, “Good Nonverbal Communication, Good Business”, “Do’s and Taboos around the World”, “Cross-Cultural Differences in Management”, “Leadership across Cultures”, “Cross-Cultural Business Etiquette”, “Strategies for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication”, “National Cultures and Corporate Core Values”, “Religion and Business Culture: Where do they Meet?”, “Cross-Cultural Competence and How One Can Improve it”, “Managing Cross-Cultural Communication.”

Each unit consists of the following sections: “Anticipating the Issue” which aims at defining student’s background knowledge and skills in the sphere of cross-cultural communication by performing a set of tasks and video clips; “Read, Watch and Discuss” which includes 4–6 informative authentic texts and 4-6 video clips supplemented by a number of tasks and activities for discussion and practicing different situations of cross-cultural communication; “Cross-Cultural Case Studies and Role play” the main activities of which (cross-cultural role-plays, case studies, simulations, discourses, etc.) are oriented towards practical usage by examining culturally sensitive situations and choosing the most appropriate behaviour for the situation; “Miscellaneous” the tasks of which suggest unexpected situations and circumstances, which stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity, encourage creativity, initiative and develop skills of cross-cultural communication.

A very encouraging initiative to organize a special course for public administration students with an invitation of visiting professors from abroad is a good example of including both professional and cross-cultural components into the process of foreign language competence formation. In the past years two groups of students attended the course run by professor Gregg Bucken-Knapp from the School of Public Administration of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The course admission of the candidates was preceded by a thorough selection based on a good command of English, an ability to express creativity, intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. The program of education included two stages: “Qualitative Approaches and Methods in European Politics and Society”, which aimed at providing the students with a concise overview of some of the key issues currently being studied by scholars of European politics, public administration and society and suggesting the fundamental elements of social science research projects: theory review, case selection, data collection and analysis, drawing conclusions; “Bachelor Degree Project in Public Administration”, which aims at producing a bachelor degree project in public administration similar to those submitted by undergraduate students in the University of Gothenburg’s School of Public Administration. The format of meetings varied from lectures in English and seminars to short Skype conversations between the professor’s arrivals.

Applying modern technologies and formats of organizing the teaching process (debates, case studies, forums, cross-cultural role plays, simulations) allows to simulate various situations of professional and cross-cultural communication,

which motivates students, broadens their interests, encourages them to behave adequately in international environment. One of the resources to do that is the TED platform. It is an open-source online platform for organizing students' extra-class work. The platform's facilities are used to upload professionally-oriented content (authentic videos and audio segments) to create lessons tailored for the needs of their target learning audience. The lessons are placed on the platform and are available through the password protected access. Each lesson has tasks aiming at developing students' listening skills, vocabulary, grammar, phonetics. They have feedback options and are interactive. The 'Discussion' section is an open group forum for participants to further develop the ideas discussed in class.

Another important type of organizing the process of forming students' competences in foreign language communication are the numerous extra-class activities organized by the Department. One of them is the club "SCOFL" (Students' Club of Foreign Languages) which has been functioning since 2005. The club consists of the section groups such as Starters, Business group, Case study, Research, Debates and others. The programme of these groups includes such activities as role-plays, debates, scientific reports, quizzes, discussions of video films, meeting foreign guests, participation in the programmes organized by the foreign embassies and Friendship societies.

A special section of the club "SCOFL" is "The Art of Debate and Argumentation." Its main aims are to teach students how to communicate efficiently with business partners, how to behave in different communication situations, how to present their arguments and reach agreement and how to organize business and cross-cultural interaction. The classes help the students to form analytical capabilities, flexibility and mental dexterity, an ability to find convincing evidence, to understand the multicultural world and reasonably accept other people's views and opinions.

The format of The Week of Foreign Languages changes from year to year but as a rule it includes presentations, project works, round-table discussions, forums, essay writing and other creative activities.

The group project "Belarus on the Map of the World, in the Heart of Everyone" has successfully been prepared by first-year students for a number of years. The specificity of the project is defined by the fact that the learners themselves define the content of the presentations and prepare them, which develops their imagination, creativity, initiative and communication skills.

The Business game "International Conference: "Current Issues of Public Administration" encourages students to generate ideas and collect them for scientific reports, develops their ability to present speeches in public and to participate in discussions, enhances their creativity and self-expression. All these activities are highly welcomed both by the students and the teachers.

Having acquired professional foreign language skills and cross-cultural competences during the in-class and extra-class activities our students have an opportunity to realize them in practice and come up with their own products. The Department's Innovation Platform was founded in 2014 on the basis of the national

Tourism Agency of the Republic of Belarus. The educational project ‘PlacesToGo’ designed by the students of the speciality “Information Resources Management” was the result of this fruitful cooperation. It became a finalist of “The Best Innovation Project” contest held by the State Committee of Science and Technology of the Republic of Belarus and won a championship title in the IT-project contest of the World Summit of Information Society in Geneva, Switzerland. Being multiple goal-oriented, the project became an essential component of training future IT-professionals since it focuses on forming competences in professional IT sphere and foreign language competences in professional communication. The project got an appreciation from the Belarusian higher educational institutions and overseas establishments.

The students’ project ‘Academic Globus’ is one more example of practical implementation of acquired skills and competences. First-, second- and third-year students of the three specialities participating in it prepare news programs about the latest events of the Academy shooting video packages in different languages – English, Spanish, German, French, Turkmenian, etc. These are students who act as speakers, editors, computer graphics designers, etc.

In conclusion we can add that oral and written periodical achievement tests and finals used for diagnostic purposes and for evaluation of students’ competences in professional and cross-cultural communication showed that practical steps taken by the Department in designing its own manuals and textbooks, using innovative teaching and computer technologies and in organizing class, extra-class and scientific activities helped the students of the Academy to integrate the English language into the network of their own communication competences and considerably improved their professional and cross-cultural communication skills.

By expressing our readiness to share the Department’s experience with our colleagues from other higher educational establishments we intend to combine our joint efforts in solving the problems that slow down the process of formation of future specialists’ foreign language competences and to innovate the process of teaching English in non-linguistic universities.

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