TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH ART

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Abstract

In the context of today’s global informational society, a special importance is given to the knowledge of foreign languages. A wide range of interesting, new methods of teaching foreign languages at higher education institutions is offered. Our experience of working at a technical (non-language oriented) higher education institution teaching foreign languages has shown that new foreign language teaching methods should be developed, the kind of methods that target specifically the students studying for an engineering or technical degree.

This article presents a brief guide regarding the goals, tasks and strategies of the innovative methodology of teaching a foreign language. The method’s motto is to teach the language through art.

This new approach is in learning the foreign language by means of acting training, art of theatre, by participating in plays and culturally-thematic performances executed in a foreign language.

Keywords: foreign languages, innovative technologies, «foreign language through art», student language art studio, acting training, acting craft, theatre craft, education, culture, intercultural communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

The educational process should serve two fundamental purposes: to impart knowledge and a moral foundation. The moral foundation is the main aspect that determines the economical, state and creative resilience of the society [1]. “We are entering an era where education, knowledge, and professional competency play the defining role in the life of an individual. An all-encompassing education can produce the person of the future, a creative person, a creator of everything new and moral, a person responsible for everything being created” [1]. It is important to not just preserve the thoroughness of education, which had been forming over the course of the global cultural-historical development, but also to integrate the global educational process’ modern developments into it. It is important to focus the attention on relevant technologies that are used to teach new specialists in all professional fields and that had been formed in the context of globalization and the needs of the 21st century.

Within the triad of the unified educational process (1. The impartment of professional knowledge and skills; 2. Informational technologies; 3. Foreign languages), knowledge of foreign languages carries an especially important role. In the context of the globalization of education, of internationalization of higher education institutions, of decreasing distance between cultures, in the context of modern informational society demands, the knowledge of foreign languages serves as a universal communicational bridge.

Presently, there is a wide range of interesting, new methodologies of teaching a foreign language at institutions of both primary and higher education. Certain differences exist in the approach used to teach foreign languages to the students studying for a Liberal Arts/Humanities degree and those wishing to attain a Technical/Engineering degree. Our experience of working at a technical (non-language oriented) higher education institution, teaching foreign languages in particular, has shown that new foreign language teaching methods should be developed, the kind of methods that target specifically those students who study for an engineering or technical degree (future engineers, mechanics, bridge and machine builders, road constructors, etc.) The thinking is that, taking into account the level of the market’s globalization, the knowledge of foreign languages is one of the fundamental conditions for a successful career in the modern field of technology and engineering.

This article presents the elements of our methodology. Its main principle is teaching a foreign language through art. This new method consists of learning a foreign language through participating in plays and culturally-thematic performances executed in that language, where students act as creators and actors. It is important to note that the offered methodology can be tested on the basis of any
foreign language. We brought this approach to life on the basis of English language as one of the most-in-demand languages in contemporary cultural space.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of the new teaching method is to teach a foreign language on an innovatively new level: to form the skills and professional competency that would allow to implement the attained knowledge in various contexts that require foreign language skills, to create conditions for multifaceted professional and personal development of the generation of the 21st century, which lives in the reality of the polycultural world. Our teaching approach, which presumes the use of the acting training strategies, makes it possible to fulfill this goal.

In regard to its content, the method presents a complex, systemic, communication-oriented foreign language learning concept (using English language as an example), which is realized on the basis of the student theatre art. Until now, this innovative approach had not been identified in either Russian or international foreign language teaching practice. Within the framework of “Foreign Language & Theatre”, the act of speaking in the continuum of theatrical plays and performances serves as the main tool of learning and practicing the English language.

The new approach is aimed at developing creative skills, intellectual interests, and creative potential of the individual of the 21st century - something that fully serves the goals of the global language environment that targets the new generation.

The student body of our program is comprised of students studying for various degrees offered at our university, including foreign students who came to our institution to study for technical professions.

When choosing the art of theatre as the methodological basis for the process of developing our foreign language teaching approach, we considered several factors.

First of all, theatre presents a synthesis of various types of art. It includes music, architecture, fine art, photography, etc. Therefore, when participating in activities related to theatrical performance preparations, the students have the opportunity to realize their talents in various creative fields (singing, music, poetry, fine art, design, architecture, etc.) – while successfully learning the foreign language in an unconventional way. “Theatre is considered to be the most powerful medium to affect an individual, because, when observing the events taking place on stage, the viewer associates him or herself with this or that character, and, by way of catharsis (cleansing through the climactic suffering) inside of him or her, undergoes internal changes” [2].

Second of all, the lofty purpose of theatre is to learn the world. Utilizing the words of the ancient Greek creators of The Theatre of Dionysus, Michael Chekhov wrote: “Our inspiration led us beyond the borders of the world of senses. It took us outside the narrow frames of the personal…When following our characters, we penetrated the spheres that were new to us, previously unknown to us. Creating, we were learning!” [3].

Third of all, the theatre’s special mission is in teaching kindness. The great Russian writer, Nikolay Gogol, said that theatre is «the kind of a speaking podium from which a lot of kindness can be spoken to the world» [4].

Fourth of all, theatre serves a special esthetic function, which was singled out as a very important one by the famous director and playwright Konstantin Stanislavski: «Not that is beautiful that theatrically blinds and intoxicates the viewer – but what elevates the life of the human spirit on the stage and from the stage, namely feelings and thoughts of actors and viewers» [5].

Fifth of all, the theatre is assigned the lofty enlightening, educational and cultural mission. Konstantin Stanislavski, in particular, paid a special attention to the aspect of education and cultured-ness of young actors: “An actor, first of all, should be cultured and should understand, to be able to reach for the level of literary geniuses” [5].

The global philosophical concept regarding the essence (sui generis) of the theatre was formulated by Voltaire. The leitmotif for this thought was the playwright’s ruminations about the unity of the human world, its general problems, feelings, emotions, about the “identity” of its perception by all of human kind. In Voltaire’s opinion, “The Earth is a giant theatre where the same tragedy plays under different names” [6].
Thus, the theatre as a performance art promotes the learning of the world, cultivates kindness, moral values, it develops in one the aesthetic of the feeling, enlightens and educates an individual.

The theatre unites all people of the world while serving as a universal language (idioma universal). This is certainly relevant to our students studying for engineering and technical degrees as they apply themselves to the creative, theatrical pursuits while learning a new language on the basis of these pursuits. As stated by the famous thinker M.L. Nalbandyan, the theatrical stage “is positioned not any lower than a lecture podium. Theatrical stage is the very seat where philosophy is seated, and, putting the words in the body of live situations and examples, it spares the society of the effort of perceiving the words solely through imagination. The theatre is the new school of its own kind, where people of all ages are the students…”[7]

3 RESULTS

3.1 The innovative strategies of teaching a foreign language through art

Teaching on the basis of the new Foreign Language learning method aims at the following: that students improvise, study the plays written by famous foreign authors, display creative initiative and independence, create their own short foreign language performances, study the art of telling, participate in various linguistic games, that they are introduced to the history of theatre, music, fine and stage decoration art, etc.

The practical recommendations regarding the implementation of the methodology of teaching a foreign language through art were developed by the Associate Professor L. Lookina, Professor Z. Fomina, Senior Lecturer O. Nesterova, et al. These recommendations are reflected in our teaching guide [8]. The guide contains new methodological technologies to be implemented in the process of teaching a foreign Language through art, which are briefly listed below.

3.2 The new methodological technologies of teaching a foreign language through art

The teaching of a foreign language through art presumes a harmonious combination of the language and art, the possibility of an active, engaging process of learning the language by way of implementing it in various types of creative activities: singing, poetry reading, acting, applied arts, etc. The results of this creative learning should be presented on stage.

The innovative quality of the offered methodology of teaching a foreign language is in the practical combining of methodic-didactical principles, which make up the basis of learning a new language, per se—and of individual psychological specificities of the students, the emotional and esthetic components, and main principles of the acting and stage art.

In the context of this approach, the body of these new methodological technologies of teaching a foreign language through art is comprised of the following methods:

1  Method of acting craft where the speech is given in a foreign language;
2  Method of dramatic craft, which includes a foreign language speech accompanied by expressive gesticulation, facial expressions, movements, acting skills, etc.;
3  Method of musical art, which presumes singing in a foreign language, and should be characterized by clear articulation, correct pronunciation, dramatic expressiveness, and should produce a powerful effect on the viewer;
4  Method of poetry declamation that presumes reciting poetic literary works in a foreign language, which should be characterized by clear articulation, emotional melodicism and intonation, an expressive declamation quality, and the power to affect the listener;
5  Method of designer art that presumes the use of written foreign language to be presented in a creative-educational form, etc.;

For the purpose of bringing these methods to life, the following methodological elements are used:

1  Cognitive reliance on the main elements of the acting craft;
2  Active development of not just creative-cognitive abilities but also of various psycho-physical abilities of the students (their motor, vocal, gesticulation abilities, etc.);
3 Active inclusion of the students' emotional potential, of the specificities of their psycho-physical makeup, etc;

4 The teaching of the new language is done in the form of an educational play, which is based on the following two interconnected elements: the language training per se and stage training, where the former is the goal and the latter is the experimental platform, the language learning tool;

5 An engaging process of learning a foreign language also promotes a lasting interest displayed by a student to the new language in the future;

6 One the one hand, the new foreign language teaching approach is aimed at introducing the student to the linguistic components per se (speech, intonation, phonetics, articulation, vocabulary, grammar, communication, rhetorics, etc.), on the other hand, to the culturological elements, which present the basis for absorbing the vocabulary, grammatical structure (morphology and syntax), emotional and esthetic components of the language being studied, etc. The culturological information includes the data on the great English, American, and Russian playwrights, writers, actors, composers, on the most popular contemporary music genres, on some modern foreign musicals, as well as the texts of English and American folk songs.

7 Method of learning, of introduction to the following main elements of the performance art: phonetics and intonation; theatre as phenomenon of art; history of theatre; great actors; literature and playwriting; music in theatre; fine art and stage decor art; modern English etiquette and humor, theatre miniatures (the testing of language abilities and skills). All stages of learning come with culturological information, vocabulary requirements, questions, discussion topics, theatrical games, etc;

8 Development of skills and abilities on the basis of the communicative-play training: exercises that target articulation and vocabulary that are performed during short theatre performances, exercises that promote imitation abilities, which, in the context of a play, allow to absorb the intonation, dynamics and rhyme of the foreign language;

9 Teaching the foreign language as the language of the art of theatre;

10 Teaching the vocabulary of the foreign language (English language, in particular) through the characters of English plays, fairy tales, legends, works of classic literature, through introduction to the texts of folk and modern English songs, poems, as well as dance traditions.

Within the "Foreign Language And Theatre" program, the students can choose the specific field of theatrical art that is the most preferable to them (i.e., singing, dancing, acting, directing, stage decor, etc.)

This new methodology requires participation in actual foreign language theatrical performances at every stage of the learning process. For this purpose, the Language Art Studio was created; it serves as the practical laboratory for the new foreign language method implementation.

3.3 The language theatre studio as practical laboratory for implementation of new foreign language teaching technologies

The unique feature of the Language Theatre Studio is in its emphasis on attaining the knowledge of a foreign language and perfecting the skills of using it, in its comprehensive approach to learning about culture, traditions and customs of other countries. When learning a language, we are learning the world. The existence of student theatres is one of the most important elements of the modern educational process. For the last nine years, the Voronezh State Technical University has been the home to the Student German and English Theatre Studio, which exists as a non-profit, culturally-educational student society. The Language Art Studio produces various extracurricular foreign language events (plays, celebratory forums, shows, performances, production of thematical stands, newspapers, etc.)

The creation of The Studio has spurred the development of a special student-teacher creative collaboration. The Language Art Studio is the gathering place for the creative, joyful young people who, together with teachers, discover the new talents and abilities within their own selves. As a result of this creative teacher-student union, new, original foreign language plays come to life.
Participation in the German/English theatre studio gives the university students an opportunity to perfect their foreign language skills by way of acting, acting craft, poetry declamation and design creativity, it gives them an opportunity to create, search, and discover the world and its breathtaking cultural variety.

3.4 The results of the new method of teaching a foreign language through art testing

Over the course of nine years of the Student Language Theatre Studio's existence, numerous events of various types were produced, among them are eleven plays of a wide range of genres:

1) Spring in Britain is a literary-musical performance dedicated to the holidays celebrated in the Spring in various parts of Britain (2010);
2) Halloween, a modern day celebration that goes back to the traditions of the ancient Irish and Scottish Celts (2010);
3) Christmas Meeting, a kind, fairy-tale-like festivity (December, 2010);
4) St. Valentine's Day, a romantic holiday that, in Russia, is connected to the names of Pyotr and Fevronia and is the day to celebrate family, love and loyalty (February, 2011);
5) Planet Earth, a performance dedicated to the international Earth Day (April 22nd, 2011);
6) The Story of Romeo and Juliet, the iconic work of the great William Shakespeare (December, 2011);
7) The Key of the Kingdom, a performance celebrating English poetry, literary and folk tales (May 21st, 2012);
8) Pygmalion, the musical based on Bernard Shaw's famous play (2014);
9) Dedication, the English Theatre Studio anniversary show (April, 2015);
10) The Taming of the Shrew, a musical play celebrating the great William Shakespeare (April, 2016);
11) The Gift of the Magi, a kindhearted play dedicated to Christmas, inspired by O'Henry's famous short story (December 22nd, 2016).

All performances are presented in English, however, they are also typically accompanied by a translation – to assure that those viewers who do not yet speak English well enough are still able to enjoy the show. In the near future the student theatre plans to present the English slapstick comedy “Charley's Aunt” written by Brandon Thomas. The Student English Theatre Studio is full of creative ideas and plans.

3.5 The experts that evaluate the English language skills of the “Language Through Art” program students

Who are the experts that verify the language learning, the acting and stage accomplishments of the future engineers and architects studying the language on the basis of art? Certainly, it is the auditorium filled to capacity during the performances, the actual spectators - those for whom these theatre shows are produced and performed by the student studio. It is them who define the quality of the foreign language demonstrated on stage, its beauty, its power, its emotional fullness – based on the famous «I believe!» principle of the great Konstantin Stanislavski, meaning believing what one observes on stage. Along with these aspects, the viewers evaluate the creative power and originality of the student shows. As noted by the great Goethe, the stage and the auditorium, the actors and the spectators, make up one and whole only in their union [9].

The viewer (expert) body of the Student Theatre Studio productions is comprised not just of students and teachers of the university. The popularity of the student theatre of our technical university is quickly growing. Over time, the student productions, which were the result of learning a foreign language through art, started to attract full house at both the university's main event hall, and widely beyond the university, such as when the Studio is invited to perform at other educational and cultural institutions of the city and region. As an example, the young engineers and architects presented with great success their production of «The Story of Romeo and Juliet» to the young cadets at Voronezh Air-Force Academy, as well as the residents of the town of Kashira, Russia, where the actors and their play were received very warmly. In the spring of 2014, as part of the festivities related to the 450th anniversary of William Shakespeare, the student actors were invited to the Voronezh-city book club “Petrovsky” to perform. In 2014, The Student Theatre Studio was also invited to perform at The 20th Anniversary International Conference For English Language Teachers, which took place at Voronezh State University. Among the conference participants was the Moscow US Embassy English Language Teaching attaché, academics from the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, as well as professors from Moscow State University and other leading educational institutions of Russia. The conference participants were amazed by the high level of English language demonstrated by the students of the technical university, they were also touched by the students' heartfelt acting.

A major TV channel of the city of Voronezh dedicated a segment to the technical university student theatre and their English language plays.
Thus, the entire population serves as an expert/spectator: students, city residents, etc.

3.6 **What makes it possible to accomplish the task of teaching a foreign language on the basis of the new methodology?**

The result of realizing the new method of learning a foreign language through art will be the possibility of an **effortless communication in the English language**, including all types of possible communication contexts.

The use of the theatrical speech art techniques within the new methodology is the **key to learning and perfecting** the language, including one's mother tongue:

1. When engaging in theatrical speech activities, the students learn correct pronunciation, they enrich their spoken language with live, authentic **vocabulary**, master the art of correct speech **structuring** and **declamation**;
2. The students gain confidence and spontaneity in their foreign (English) language;
3. They learn the **expressive** foreign language and develop the ability to implement these new knowledge and skills in practice, in a variety of communicative situations that call for the use of a foreign language.

3.7 **Implementation of the attained foreign language knowledge and skills**

As stated by Herbert Spencer, «the great aim of education is not knowledge but action». The attained on the basis of this program foreign language skills allow for the following: 1) to work at international corporations, companies and institutions; 2) to freely participate in international conferences and forums, which require not just a high level of language skills but also that the speech is melodic and powerful; 3) to be able to read scientific, classical, popular, and specialty literature in other languages; 4) to write, translate and publish works in a foreign language; 5) to effortlessly navigate the vast modern flow of information; 6) to gain the ability to work within a creative collaboration; 7) to take the position of the leader, to be an interesting creative individual, etc.

Presently, the Program’s former students are successfully building their careers both in Russia and overseas, working towards their PhDs, many of them became leading scholars and researchers at international corporations, some participate in significant international projects, etc.

Last but not least, the young engineers who are testing and discovering their talents (during their time at the university), including their involvement in acting craft, are successfully learning the skills of declamation in a foreign language, overcoming language barriers; they gain confidence and the feeling of being «the king of the stage», all of which will certainly help them in both their personal development and their careers, including their potential entrepreneurial and business pursuits.

4 **CONCLUSIONS**

The method of learning a new language through art, which includes the language training on the basis of the modern acting and scenic craft techniques, promotes **quality, multi-faceted** (technical and liberal arts) preparation of the technical university students, it creates the fundamental conditions for **cultural, moral and language knowledge growth** of the students. Theodor Roosevelt stated: “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to the society”.

The Student Language Theatre Studio, which serves as a practical laboratory to implement the new foreign language method, makes an important contribution to the process of preparing a young specialist of the new format, the kind of specialist that possesses a high professional competency, thorough knowledge of the foreign language, erudition, great creative potential, who is capable of working successfully and prolifically in the context of the globalized world. The Student Language Theatre is a remarkable cultural phenomenon.

An important task of educating an individual by means of using the elements of theatrical art is to acquaint the student not just with the cultural spirit of the country of the language studied but also to the world culture as a whole. First of all, it is an opportunity for the student to feel like the part of this culture, and, of course, to be able to discover the new world within themselves.

It is quite unique that students of a technical university have been actively involved in student theatre productions as actors, musicians, designers, singers, directors, and poetry readers for so many years.
This innovative experiment in its practical implementation proves its strength and significance in the context of solving relevant problems in the field of teaching foreign languages and promoting peace and cultural closeness in the world.

REFERENCES


