OPTIMIZATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS ACTIVITIES AT A NON-LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract
The objective of the present work is to consider the main problems that arise in the foreign language class in connection with the new changes (the reduction of foreign language classroom hours up to 2-4 a week at non-linguistic universities, according to the federal state educational standards of the third generation of Russia), on the one hand, and the high requirements imposed on graduates' foreign languages skills, on the other; to analyze the practical experience of teaching German as a second foreign language from elementary level at the Institute of World Economy and Business (2 hours a week); to offer a number of recommendations for optimizing classroom activities.

Keywords: role of the teacher, optimization of classes, teacher as a facilitator, co-education, social competence, responsibility for the learning process.

1 INTRODUCTION
Due to the latest Russian government initiatives to reduce foreign language classroom hours up to 2-4 a week at non-linguistic universities (according to the federal state educational standards of the third generation of Russia), on the one hand, and the high requirements imposed on graduates' foreign languages skills by their potential employers, on the other, teachers face the hard task of improving efficiency of the foreign language learning process [1].

The objective of the present work is to consider the main problems that arise in the foreign language class in connection with these recent changes; to analyze the practical experience of teaching German as a second foreign language from elementary level at the Institute of World Economy and Business (2 hours a week), and to offer a number of recommendations for making classroom activities more efficient.

It should be pointed out that according to the Federal State Educational Standard of the Higher Professional Education, Russian graduate should possess the following abilities:

- to cooperation with colleagues, team work,
- to find out organizational and management solutions in nonstandard situations and being ready to bear responsibility for them;
- to study and improve qualifications independently within the whole period of professional activity [1].

Nevertheless, in accordance with practical experience, junior students do not know how to:

- work efficiently in a team;
- ask groupmates for help;
- find compromise;
- give reasons for their point of view;
- listen to and take into account opinion of their groupmates;
- bear responsibility for results of work.

Partly this peculiarity can be attributed to social and cultural peculiarities of the environment, i.e. traditional Russian relations teacher-student are focused only on the knowledge transfer from a lecturer to a student. “...the teacher is a Lecturer with a capital L, a kind of a mentor. And students have honorary right to "befall to resuscitating source of wisdom", i.e. listen to or, if you like, catch every word of a Teacher» [2].

In turn, high-achievers have learned:
• to hint and allow cheating - this is help;
• it is easier to do all the work independently;
• if you do not know/understand something, it is better to ask a teacher;
• advanced students complete not only their work but they also help their groupmates, sometimes even the whole group;

In some cases, low-achievers are sure that:
• if you attend all classes, do not interfere or do nothing, this is enough to get a satisfactory mark;
• if you do not understand what to do, there is no need to do complete the task;
• you can ask to go out and come back in 15-30 minutes, in this case the lesson will finish sooner;
• I have behaved in school in such a manner, why cannot I continue to do the same at university?

All the above-mentioned examples show that the majority of lecturers are afraid to let students communicate during the lesson or leave them without any task as they can lose control over a group and the lesson will turn into uncontrolled chaos. A great number of students share this opinion, especially high achievers as from the first grade they were learnt how to sit straight, do not get distracted on classmates, listen to a teacher carefully, do not ask questions/comment unless a teacher asks you directly. Good or strict discipline was a sign of successful work of a teacher who is respected and whose instructions are strictly obeyed.

Thus, the modern lecturer of foreign languages in a higher educational institution should take into account a number of factors [3], [4]:
- applicants’ unpreparedness to efficient team work;
- reduction of duration of in-class learning;
- high requirements to reference level as well as development of students’ personal abilities.

2 METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

University work experience shows that despite the high requirements and tough conditions, it is possible to achieve high results in foreign languages learning while studying for two hours per week, if students are divided into groups or pairs, and they have clear instructions and more freedom. During the analysis of psychology and pedagogy literature [5],[6],[7],[8] that has helped us to justify our assumptions made empirically, we have made a conclusion that current tasks lead to the reversal of a traditional lecturer role in a lecture hall. The lecturer stops to:
- be in the centre of attention during the lesson;
- control/correct each said/written phrase,
- translate unknown words;
- question students,
- introduce new grammar rules and so on.

In other words, a lecturer stops to be a mentor whose main task is to transfer knowledge about language, his/her task is to teach students how to learn German without lecturer’s active and close control even in a lecture hall [9]. Thus, a lecturer becomes an organizer of an education process who stimulates language learning in small groups and pairs, gives informative and useful feedback and creates friendly environment for teamwork.

According to the experience of work in university, transition to new roles is hardly accepted by both, lecturers and students. The present phenomenon is partly connected with the fact that students do not have enough desire and habits to take responsibility for educational activity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with the lecturer concerns that students will not handle this responsibility. The lecturer’s behavior on today’s lessons on the German language in the Institute of World Economy and Business (IWEB) is characterized as “active inactivity”. It is expressed in the external passive behavior and granting of freedom for tasks completion. At the same time, a lecturer should be able to anticipate possible difficulties and monitor processes happening within a group.
2.1 Cooperative learning

While analyzing American literature, we got acquainted with a great number of Spencer Kagan works on psychology who, for over 30 years, has been studying and promoting cooperative learning in American schools. Cooperative learning is considered as organization of students learning in small heterogeneous groups in order to achieve general learning targets. In addition, they are responsible not only for the results of their learning, but also for their partner/partners [8].

According to the experience of cooperative learning implementation, this method considerably increases students' activity, education achievements and responsibility for the process itself [10]. In case of social interaction student learn to listen to and respect groupmates' opinion, find compromise, work efficiently in a team as well as independently, be responsible before team/group for completed work. We have met groups where students barely knew their groupmates and even their names after three years of cooperative learning (one lesson per week). They failed to communicate and refused to work with a new partner. We can conclude that students do not know that teamwork can be allowed but they also do not know how to fulfill it efficiently.

Let us consider the following example: practicing of new topics assumes a number of exercises from reproduction to production. Traditionally, during foreign languages lessons, they were completed in turns or one student completed a task on the blackboard, while others, according to their motivation, listened to and made notes. If students failed to complete a task, there always were volunteers to correct his/her mistakes or to answer instead of this person to show their knowledge and get high marks. This became the reason for tension in a class where it was better to keep silent rather than to answer. Mistakes, corrected by a lecturer, are understood as a mark and exercises - as test on the topic.

According to the experience, in order to avoid above mentioned problems, it is necessary to divide students into groups or pairs (avoiding groups of enemies and best friends as there is a chance of topic change; pairs of two high achievers as they, probably, will become rivals rather than co-learners; pairs of two low achievers as they fail the task; preferring pairs of a high achiever with a low achiever). The task is formulated in accordance with the purpose of the lesson, however, it is necessary to make it challenging and interesting for all participants, for example: “Students A (high achievers), your task is to make sure that students B have completed task No. 4 correctly but you are not allowed to pronounce the answers, you can only explain the rule, check and point out the mistakes, at the same time, you are not allowed to correct it.” Students are explained that an irresponsible and indifferent partner gives the correct answer, while a responsible partner who is ready to help explains how to get the correct answer.

Some high-achieving students ask whether we are afraid or not that they will understand and explain the rule incorrectly. However, the experience shows that the more independence and responsibility students have, the more often they check and refresh information. In addition, it is more important to pronounce the rule that they understood incorrectly than to keep silent. Only in this case misconception can be corrected.

The following tasks lead to:
- simultaneous activity of the whole group;
- students’ motivation in achieving results;
- role change strategy: “spods” turn into assistants, “flunkers” - active and capable students;
- improvement of social competences: active listening, consideration of other people opinion and abilities, respect of a partner, abilities to a teamwork and so on;
- development of skills of individual studies (without active lecturer participation);
- a lecturer releases his/her time to work with troubled students without involving the whole group.

Let us consider one more example from practice: after introducing a new topic, we ask students to discuss the rule once again in groups or pairs. We provide them with the clarification questions. The given approach works more efficiently than the question whether everyone understood the topic or examination of one of the students who raised a hand. The pair work often evokes doubt in the correctness of understanding, however, exactly this point is a key to knowledge. In this case, students start to revise the rule, ask partners, and search for the rule on the Internet in the Russian language. Students are not afraid to express their opinion (even if it is not correct) in front of their groupmates,
they are more open and ready for corrections. Besides, students often give more relevant and bright examples that enhances the possibility of understanding and memorizing. If the practice of a topic is fulfilled in groups or pairs than instead of spirit of competition, there is a place for cooperation and support. Mistakes, corrected by a partner, are felt as mutual help and joint exercises - as a way to improve your knowledge.

Of course, it is necessary to explain students the value of learning in pairs or groups if they demonstrate protest or lack of understanding. The researches [5], [8] show that during cooperative learning students master not only the greater amount of the material, but they do it on a high quality level. It should be pointed out that modern employers appreciate advanced soft skills (ability to work in a team, find compromise, take into account other people opinion, use mutual help and support, be tolerant) rather than professional knowledge [9], [10]. In addition, such kind of work brings pleasure.

According to the practice of group and pair learning, students accept the similar type of activity rather quickly. In several lessons they ask what partner should they join before the lecturer mentions it. There are few comments such as “Again stand up?” or “Can I do it by myself?” Now you can hear such phrases as “I have understood it, do I need to explain anything to anyone?”, “Can I add my own questions to an interview?”, “We haven’t finished yet, can you give us a minute, please?” that are a sign of high interest and motivation.

2.2 Conditions of successful cooperative learning

It is quite often that our colleagues tell us that somebody had a successful lesson, in other groups, students were passive, and in one more group, students could not understand the rule and made many mistakes. It is impossible to guarantee a 100% success, however, the consideration of certain rules has helped us to advance efficiency of German language lessons.

Spencer Kagan [8] introduced four necessary conditions that make cooperative learning more efficient:

• Positive Interdependence (a task should be formulated in such a way that students are not rivals, they are partners, in this case, the success of one student contributes to the success of another student; besides, a task requires active participation and cooperation of all partners);

• Individual Accountability (each student is responsible for his/her answer, participation or completed task; even if students work in groups, it is necessary to give time for individual thinking and taking notes, and only then to start the group discussion; if students are sure that you are not going to ask their opinion, they will not spend time on its formulation);

• Equal Participation (tasks and rules should be formulated in such a way that each partner has his/her own role in the discussion, a part of the project or time for an answer; we avoid a possibility of non-participation, on the one hand, and performance of work by the only student, on the other hand);

• Simultaneous Interaction (all groups or pairs work simultaneously regardless of whether it is a project, work with the text, role play or practice of the rule; if it becomes loud, you can ask students to talk in a whisper).

Consideration of all four principles lead to the following result: all students cooperate with each other, bear responsibility for their learning process, and motivate their groupmates to study, take part in the completion of tasks equally and improve their results.

2.3 Activity and time saving

In accordance with the experience, even if a student listens to a lecturer or a groupmate carefully, it is not correct to consider his/her participation in the lesson or tasks as an active one, it is better to consider this behavior as indifferent. It is more likely that indifference will lead to problems rather than successful learning: students are distracted and they distract each other. With the duration of a lesson only for two hours per week, a lecturer cannot waste students’ time. If a lecturer asks students to describe their room, daily routine or their last holidays, then the story of each student should last for about 3 minutes. After each story, a lecturer corrects mistakes and gives a feedback, correspondingly, it will take two more minutes or 5 minutes to each student. An average group has 15 people. Moreover, the problem is not only in the fact that it will take 75 minutes to ask all students but also in the fact that the majority of students will not participate in the process for 70 minutes. Probably, the most disciplines students will listen to several answers, but others will be distracted from the topic. Some lecturers say that they prepare additional tasks for students that we consider on optimal
solution. However, if you divide students in pairs, suggest them to include two false statements in their story and to ask their partner to find them out, then we will not only complete the task in 8-10 minutes, but also we will motivate students to listen carefully to his/her partner and they will be interested in the story. Thus, the number of indifferent students will be minimized.

It should be pointed out that the brain is more active during the communication process rather than during the lectures or presentations [11]. Naturally, the brain is better focused on people rather than objects (slides, books, subjects). Everything is accompanied by emotions and is memorized better. Cooperative learning and task completion is based on the relevant and personal examples accomplished by emotional comments and creates conditions for information digestion. Students cannot foresee the answer of their partners on open questions that is why they listen to their partners with great interest and attention.

2.4 Distribution of attention

Let us consider the following example: a lecturer call upon a student to the blackboard or listens to answer from his/her place, corrects mistakes and put a mark. With two hours per week, a lecturer cannot allow to listen to each student, because, firstly, it will take the whole lesson, secondly, there will not be time for new material, thirdly, groupmates can listen to one or two answers and then they get bored and distracted on an activity that is not connected with studies. In addition, usually a lecturer asks students who raise their hands and, correspondingly, who are ready, understand the material and do not have questions. Students who do not understand the home task or fail to complete it go unnoticed. During checking tasks one by one, they will rather make photos of answers than will ask for explanation. Thus, students who require more attention are paid no attention, while students who are highly motivated and capable get the all attention of a lecturer.

When all students work in groups or pairs, a lecturer has an opportunity and time to focus on students who really need it. We go around the classroom and listen, if a student does not understand the task or is not able to complete it, we specify one or several examples, correct and encourage students. Thus, we motivate to work students who would prefer to avoid active participation in work or would not have courage to clarify the task.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Our experience in teaching German as a second language at RUDN University of Russia has shown that one of the main functions of a lecturer is to help students develop the necessary skills for self-study and to realize the importance of their own actions to achieve the learning goal. In addition, to optimize classroom activities a lecturer becomes a facilitator of the learning process, which stimulates the learning of the language in small groups and pairs, anticipates possible difficulties, provides informative feedback, and creates a favorable climate for work in the group. This approach is becoming even more actual in view of early introduction of professional component in language learning, for example in teaching business communication [12], [13].

During the work in pairs or groups, students listen to and consider opinions that differ from his/her own, help partner/partners, ask clarification questions, express his/her opinion clearly. The regular change of partners in learning process turns strangers into friends, who trust and help each other, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Mutual help and approval motivates students to great results. Spirit of competition disappears and nobody expects his/her partner to fail the task in order to have chance and flaunt his or her knowledge.

Correspondingly, the way to successful learning in the institute of higher education correlates with the requirements of Federal State Educational Standard. Students during the foreign languages lessons that are held for two hours per week can master skills that will help them not only to learn the language, but also to correspond to future employer requirements.

REFERENCES


