

Professional Development of a Foreign-Language Tertiary Teacher: Competence-Based Approach

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Abstract

The article describes research aimed at outlining the pathways to structure EFL tertiary teachers' professional development at an institution of continuous education – Academy of professional development and re-training of educators in Moscow, Russia – based on defining the scope of professional competences the in-service EFL teachers should possess. The theoretical basis of the research was provided by the theory of Professional Linguo-Didactics and the empirical stage was carried out through surveys conducted among participants in professional development courses at the Academy – in-service EFL teachers in several tertiary institutions of non-linguistic specialisms, as well as graduates from linguistic universities – future EFL teachers. Based on the findings of the surveys, the scope and content of professional competences that the EFL teachers should possess were determined and syllabi for their professional development were designed and piloted at the aforementioned Academy. The results of the research fill the gap in both theoretical and practical knowledge in the methodologies of further professional education for EFL tertiary teachers, which allows bridging the gap between the teachers of pre-service training in the knowledge-based educational paradigm and the existing requirements to act as educators in the emerging competence-based educational context.

Keywords: *English language teaching, teachers' professional development, professional linguo-didactics; teachers' competencies, competence-based education.*

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education in Russia, implemented within the framework of Bologna process, aims at Russia becoming an integral partner in the European Higher Education area, which will make academic qualifications comparable and compatible throughout Europe, ensuring student and faculty mobility. Practical steps on the way to internationalization now include various professional courses taught in English or substantial "read-up" in English for professional courses taught in Russian at universities throughout the country. To make these goals attainable, new Federal State Educational Standards have been established in Russia, which declare a competence-based approach in education (2010). The Standards imply that the teacher should change their approaches to instruction and assessment so that the curricula emphasize the developed competences expressed through learning outcomes rather than the amount of course content learned by the students. However, the teachers of English in Russia educated in the knowledge-based environment and are often adepts of the grammar-translation method, more often than not tend to employ instructive methods and concentrate on the content not the learner. This, presumably, occurs due to the virtual absence in teacher training institutions of programs that focus specifically on peculiarities of competence-based education, on the one hand, and specifics of teaching a foreign language (FL) to students of non-linguistic specialisms, for whom the foreign language is not a future profession, but a means of professional communication.

The new National Educational Standards of Higher Professional Education make demands for profession-oriented

FL communicative competence to have been developed by students by the end of their university studies. According to the above Standards, graduates of tertiary institutions of higher learning are to "possess sound oral and written communicative skills in the field of their specialism". Importantly, students of non-linguistic specialisms are taught a foreign language (mainly English) on 2-hours-per-week basis for 3 years on average. University FL teachers who teach at non-linguistic specialisms tend to confess that they often experience negative feelings, being dissatisfied with students' results and progress; students, on their part, often express dissatisfaction about their results or admit they are confused about what they have to demonstrate at the end of the course. Both students and teachers confirm that students tend to forget soon what has been learnt. All foreign language for professional purposes (LPP) curricula is language-centered with emphasis on specialist terminology, relevant grammar and discourse analysis. Grammar-translation method still dominates over communicative approach, and only language skills as such are assessed in a tertiary LPP classroom, which hardly makes university LPP training internationally competitive.

The present situation can be accounted for partially by the peculiarities of initial FL teachers' training in Russia, which focuses on either training for teaching in primary and secondary (BA in Education) or tertiary (MA in Education) educational institutions. Yet it does not include any specialization in terms of whether the newly qualified university FL teacher is trained to be teaching students in linguistic or non-linguistic specialisms. Newly graduated FL university teachers are equipped with FL competence, rich theoretical background in the field of pedagogy, psychology, theory of translation, using ICT and FL teaching methodology, but with no emphasis on content-oriented approaches. They cannot predict what specialisms they will be teaching, consequently, they have a vague idea of what subject discipline is core to their future area of work. Moreover, despite the fact that language for professional purposes (LPP) as a profession-oriented approach is recognized by tertiary FL policy makers in Russia, LPP teacher training courses are currently conducted only in institutions of continuous education as teacher-development programs, which teachers select voluntarily and often have to self-finance. To conclude, there is no systematic pre-service or in-service teacher-training paradigm for tertiary FL teachers of non-linguistic specialisms that: 1) will be tailor-made to meet the needs of a particular specialism; 2) will fill the gap between LPP teachers' language competence and specialism unawareness.

2. Literature Review

Within the scope of the research presented, analysis of literature on teachers' competences has been carried out, which has revealed a substantial lack of investigation in the area of professional competences of a tertiary teacher of a foreign language for specific purposes. Both Russian and international sources have been studied, which allowed making the following conclusions: the Russian scholars (Zimnyaya, 2013; Subetto, 2006) tend to take a more theoretical perspective on general pedagogical competences and the relation between its structural components, rather than on what should be done to increase the professional competence among in-service teachers.

European researchers take a more pragmatic teacher-centered approach and concentrate mostly on the content of teachers' competence (BALEAP, 2013; EAQUALS, 2013) in terms of what skills a teacher should be able to demonstrate to prove their pedagogical expertise (Wallace, 1991; Harmer, 2012; Mehisto et. al., 2008; Dale and Tanner, 2012). Mehisto (2008), Dale and Tanner (2012) demonstrate a commitment to a particular approach (CLIL) emphasizing strengths and timeliness of it for solving certain pedagogical tasks. Harmer provides a valuable source of practical teaching advice and classroom ideas adapted from various approaches and built on essential theory. Wallace (1991) introduced the notion of a "reflective practitioner" and explores ways in which a reflective approach can be applied to many areas of the teacher development education program. All the above-mentioned researchers have contributed a lot to the development of FL teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) theory.

Bolitho (2009) presents a broad overview of current tendencies in FLT practice and CPD of FL teachers. According to Bolitho (2009, p.1), despite very theoretical approach to teachers' education accepted in Europe and beyond, "teaching is and will remain a 'doing' profession based on principled thinking". Bolitho also suggests redefining the place of foreign languages in the curriculum, integrating FL with a core discipline. Referring to influential research of Graddol (2006) and CLIL expansion in the world, Bolitho (2009) predicts scary consequences for English teachers unable to implement cross-disciplinary foreign language teaching in a swiftly changing educational environment.

Taking into account practice-oriented approach to training specialists lately accepted in Russia, LPP teachers are also supposed to implement "teaching by doing", integrating rather than isolating subjects in the curricula. This perspective throws down a challenge to LPP teachers, as most of them have FL teaching background with no expertise in the field of core subject specialisms. However, in contrast with European CLIL context, bilingual subject teachers do not pose a threat to the existing demand for FL teachers, as the number of them is still insufficient.

In order to be able to integrate foreign language and a core subject specialism in a curriculum, LPP teachers are to

develop a special professional competence, enabling them to solve the tasks of cross-disciplinary teaching and implement practice-oriented teaching aimed at forming FL professional competence of a specialist.

The above-mentioned competence is to be split into several micro-competences that should be expressed through "can-do" statements – an approach first introduced by the authors of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2009). As has been seen, little attention is given to how practicing tertiary FL teachers' professional competence should be developed, which can be accounted for by the fact that a foreign language for professional purposes is taught as a subject in universities on a much smaller scale.

All this preconditioned conducting research on what should be done in order to improve professional competencies of LPP teachers in tertiary institutions in Russia.

3. Research Methodology

To settle the on-going controversy, the tertiary LPP scholarship in Russia is currently characterized by the emerging content-oriented FL methodology, which has been termed "professional linguo-didactics" (PLD). The aim of the research presented was to outline the pathways to structure FL tertiary teachers' professional development at an institution of continuous education – Academy of professional development and re-training of educators in Moscow, Russia – based on defining the scope of professional competences the in-service FL teachers should possess from the perspective of professional linguo-didactics. The research was undertaken with the intention to identify the current state of tertiary LPP teachers' readiness to integrate subject and content, and to subsequently design a teacher development course that will aim to develop LPP teachers' linguo-professional didactic competency. In order to achieve the final goal, the following objectives have been set:

- to compile a list of components of linguo-professional didactic competency that a FL teacher should possess in order to be able to integrate subject content and a FL;
- to systematize those components into a teacher linguo-professional didactic competence model;
- based on the above mentioned model, to develop a questionnaire with the aim to define the actual functional didactic literacy of practicing LPP teachers of non-linguistic tertiary institutions;
- to analyze the responses to the questionnaire in order to determine the practical areas that will require further learning and practice;
- to design and pilot a teacher development program based on the results of the survey.

The theoretical basis of the research was provided by the theory of Professional Linguo-didactics, developed by A. Krupchenko (2005) in her doctoral thesis. PLD primary goal is to develop the LPP teacher linguo-professional competence model that would help the teachers to switch from traditional language-centered LPP curriculum through content-centered CLIL curriculum to student-centered competence-based education, so that students would confidently build the desired professionally-oriented FL competence.

Professional Linguo-didactics (PLD) is a young interdisciplinary branch of (linguo) didactics which develops a methodology (research, management and modelling) of job-relevant FL learning/teaching aimed at the building of a professional foreign language communicative competence of university graduate. The components of the above competence characterize a specialist linguistic identity and focus on building graduate's multi-cultural professional competence required by internationalization in a globalized world.

Through designing a linguo-professional environment based on interdisciplinary integration and student-teacher-engineer interaction, PLD develops such new approaches as language and specialism integrated learning (LSIL), problem-solving profession-based approach (PSPB) and linguo-professional approach, which are at present on the agenda of a scientific research curricula in the Academy of in-service Teacher Training and Retraining in Moscow (Russia).

Appropriateness and relevance of using PLD as the theoretical basis for the research presented stems from the following assumptions:

Firstly, internationalization has changed perceptions of what FL competence means for a professional in a globalized world. Those graduates whose career, regardless of anything, gets international dimension, still have to find additional opportunities to improve their English skills for professional purposes. University authorities declare the need to change tertiary language policy, shifting focus from what students know **about** the language to what they can **do** in the language in the field of their specialism.

Secondly, surveys of graduates from linguistic teacher-training universities revealed that less than 5% of them are willing to teach FL in technical (non-linguistic) universities. Thirdly, analysis of profession-oriented FLT in technical

universities demonstrated that the curricula of more than 50% of educational institutions focuses on the formation of students' general linguistic communicative competence rather than on foreign language (FL) professional communicative competence (PCC). All this substantiated the need for the development of a new FLT methodology for training a teacher-instructor to teach FL for professional purposes at tertiary level – professional linguo-didactics.

The specific PLD principles were developed: selectivity of resources, foreign language professionalization, internationalization, international harmonization and advanced foreign language specialization to be applied to various aspects of LPP teaching: goals, content, forms, methods and tools for gaining learning outcomes, as well as for the teacher development purposes.

PLD is aimed at the formation of a foreign language professional communicative competence (FL PCC) of a university graduate, viewed as a logical unity and a clear coordination of linguistic, business and specialized knowledge. The application of PLD is aimed at designing a linguo-professional teaching /learning environment, the components of which take into account the interdisciplinary integration, "student – FL teacher – subject lecturer" interaction and traditional and active teaching techniques integration, which will maximize building of FL PCC. This language-and-specialism integrated learning/training means an increase of a learner's professional competence in FLT process.

The following components have been established within the broader LPP teacher professional competence:

- axiological;
- linguo-professional;
- interdisciplinary;
- linguo-didactic, with competence in assessment in competence-based educational paradigm singled out as subject of stand-alone study.

The specific character of an LPP teacher professional competence is determined by their ability to conduct the needs analysis, on the basis of which a special (modular) program and appropriate curricula are developed. Besides, an LPP teacher must possess a sustained interest and expertise in the profile field. An active FL teacher interaction with outside experts of a particular professional field develops teacher's capacity based on interpenetration, interdependence and complementarity of interdisciplinary information.

4. Results and Discussion

The empirical stage of the presented study was carried out through surveys conducted among participants in LPP teachers' professional development programs at the Academy of professional development and re-training of educators in Moscow, Russia – in-service EFL teachers from several tertiary institutions of non-linguistic specialisms. Based on the findings of the surveys, the scope and content of professional competences that the EFL teachers should possess were determined and syllabi for their professional development were designed and piloted at the aforementioned Academy.

The action research involved LPP teachers from ten Russian non-linguistic universities was undertaken in 2013-2014 to identify the components of linguo-professional didactic competence. Two questionnaires of 34 and 32 questions were designed, one on subject-language integration and the other on employed assessment practices. A third of questions pertained to the values and attitudes the teachers have relating to the area of research – subject-language integration in general and to CLIL in particular and attitudes to the employed assessment practices, respectively; one third to their knowledge and understanding of competence-based education, and one third to their actual classroom LPP practices. 29 out of 34 and 30 out of 32 questions were to be answered using Likert scale, and six and two were ranking questions. The sample was 164 LPP teachers from ten Russian universities with average teaching experience of more than 10 years.

The analysis of the completed questionnaire was done and revealed a number of tendencies. The findings indicate that the teachers demonstrate reluctance to leave their comfort zones, as well as commitment to the traditional approaches in delivering LPP knowledge to students rather than helping them build professionally relevant FL skills. The aim of LPP learning, according to the respondents, is to teach terminology and relevant grammar, which proves that conservative instructionist teaching style and language-centered curricula tend to dominate.

When asked to rank components of FL teachers' linguoprofessional didactic competence (out of the following options: linguistic, subject, facilitative, collaborative, assessment, cognitive and cross-cultural), most teachers rated linguistic above others. In the part relating to their classroom LPP practices, the respondents admit they put more value on linguistic accuracy than on the realization of the communicative task. To sum up, the findings of the research have shown a substantial discrepancy between what teachers perceive as necessary for their LPP practices and what they actually fulfill. Hence, it may be hypothesized that providing teachers with an opportunity to acquire deeper knowledge of

contemporary approaches to subject-language integration against the background of competence-based education and to take the knowledge on board through practice will increase their own competency in this field.

The findings of the research helped reveal the areas of uncertainty in the teachers' values, attitudes, knowledge and practices pertaining to their professional competence, which served the basis for the development of an innovative modular teacher-developing program. The modules in the program covered the theoretical provisions of professional linguo-didactics, the approaches to subject-language integration, and workshops aimed at incorporating formative assessment of learning outcomes into FL teaching. More than 150 teachers have already undergone the training and produced most favourable feedback.

The results of the research fill the gap in both theoretical and practical knowledge in the methodologies of further professional education for EFL tertiary teachers, which allows to bridge the gap between the teachers pre-service training in the knowledge-based educational paradigm and the existing requirements to act as educators in the emerging competence-based educational context of subject-language integration.

Alongside Russia's attempts to introduce reforms into the national educational system at all levels in conjunction with the Bologna process creating new educational opportunities for students in foreign language acquisition through developing teachers' professionalism is becoming a top priority. A systemic implementation of this strategy in various institutions of teacher professional development will ensure the success of educational reforms undertaken in Russia.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the research conducted has shown an existing need for teacher development in the area of subject-language integration in competence-based tertiary educational context and has a practical outcome in the form of a teacher development program aiming at improving LPP tertiary practice in Russian universities. It is crucial for better FL teachers' performance in profession-oriented FL teaching and subsequent growth of Russian university prestige and international recognition.

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