

Blogging in English as a Tool for Enhancing Students' Motivation, Professional Development and Succeeding in the Labour Market

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Abstract

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As there's an increasing demand for specialists that are both professionally competent and are able to communicate their ideas in English language, more and more attention is drawn to innovative methods and technologies for enhancing professional language competence. This article reviews the main advantages of blogs as instruments for this competence acquisition due to its universal nature. The hypothesis of the ongoing study is that students' blogs will become a product of their achievement and can be used as a demonstration of their professional language competence.

This paper also includes the results of the survey conducted at M.T. Kalashnikov Izhevsk State Technical University that explores the students' need for a longer language training.

The development of new model that combines independent students' blogging with competence-based, personal and thesaurus approaches is proposed. This model supposedly will become a successful motivational factor that provides a continuous professional language learning process for the students who finished the curricular course of English language.

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Keywords: Blogging, blog, independent work, self-development, motivation, professional language competence, technology, language learning, thesaurus.

1. Introduction

As the world gets more interconnected there's an increasing need for international communication



between different experts. Today those who succeed in foreign language training have a clear competitive advantage over those who do not. The most widespread language that became a “lingua franca” for scientific and business discussion is English which will be further referred to when speaking about “language” in general.

A specialist who acquired a certain level of professional language competence, which is an ability to communicate professional problems in a foreign language, can be sure to get a prestigious and well-paid job provided by the labour market. Moreover, he or she has an opportunity to work in an international company or study and work abroad, e.g., after passing international exams. The possession of the professional competence also implies a specialist being able to take part in negotiations, rationalize and present one’s business ideas as well as demonstrate a high level of logical and critical thinking (Gareyev, 2015). Nevertheless, despite various efforts to improve the methods for acquiring professional language competence, they seem to be not enough to unlock the full students’ potential.

The modern education is also characterized by the lack of motivation among students. One of the tools that already proved its effectiveness in solving this type of issues is ICT and distant education technologies (Krasavina, Isayeva, Shikhova, Shikhov, Zhuykova, 2015). The usage of online tools for the modern type of student is a norm and their adaptation especially to new technologies is what distinguishes them from adults. They got used to express their thoughts and opinions on the Web, so that online platforms sometimes are more appropriate for conveying youth’s ideas than face-to-face communication.

2. Research questions

An underrated type of ICT technology used for professional and linguistic competence acquisition is blogging. Blogging is simply an activity of writing something on a blog. Blog is usually a website which is used to express ideas through posting messages called “posts” that contain text or multimedia content. This paper suggests that blog is a universal tool and can be used for different purposes and enhance different qualities and skills simultaneously. Not only can it increase motivation and provide an opportunity for a much easier professional language competence acquiring, but also may become a driver for the improvement of students’ self-development and independent work skills which are priceless at workplace. This research explores a special type of blog called “student blog”, i.e. a blog where a particular student writes his or her own posts. Further in this paper we’re going to talk only about student blogs.

Blogging is most widely used in language training. It works as an educational tool for applying students’ extensive knowledge, performing creative tasks and serving as an electronic portfolio that demonstrates their accomplishments and helps a teacher to follow learners’ progress.

The motivational aspect of blogging was discussed by Montero-Fleta & Perez-Sabater (2010) in their research devoted to enhancing language skills using student blogs. The reason why blogs may boost students’ motivation boils down to the fact that their blogs can be observed by a large set of their peers and experts who may not only add expertise on pressing issues, but in some cases represent a

potential employer for a student-blogger. That obliges the learners to check carefully their writings choose a more appropriate vocabulary and grammar and use creative expressions that are rewarded by teachers. The authors came to conclusion that writing in blogs for a certain purpose, i.e. self-expression and self-reflection has a strong potential to make students lifelong and more efficient learners (Montero-Fleta & Perez-Sabater, 2010).

A blog also becomes a product of student's achievements that can be used in a variety of ways. Blog as electronic portfolio provides a clear picture of what a student has done since launching one's blog and what is his or her linguistic and, if it's a professionally oriented blog, professional competence. Teacher can easily follow both short-term and long-term progress of a student and analyze frequent mistakes in grammar or vocabulary usage regardless of this blog's topic and purpose. The same blog can also be viewed as a promoting tool for student's future career. Considered as a set of learner's accomplishments a blog might serve as an entrance ticket to a new workplace demonstrating professional and linguistic competences to the potential employer. This, again, hypothetically will give extra motivation to a student as he or she will have a clear goal, one that is attainable.

However, blogging despite being such a universal tool cannot make a difference in itself. This process should be thoroughly orchestrated and managed. That's where the role of a teacher becomes less of a lecturer and more of a tutor who help students to clarify complex ideas, corrects repeating mistakes and supports them in all their efforts (Richardson, 2006). Thus, the development of the model of autonomous work for improving students' professional language competence based on blogging technologies – which is the aim of the research reviewed in this paper – may have an enormous effect on the way students learn.

3. Problem statement

The majority of Russian non-linguistic university students learn foreign languages for two years. Since our country adopted the bachelor-master educational system, students can either continue their studies for getting master's degree or find a full-time job after four years of getting a bachelor's degree. Given the fact that in both cases a graduate will need to possess a high level of academic or professional language competence, the standard curriculum should have included a methodology or some organized process of knowledge retention, i.e. a way not to forget the knowledge acquired within a certain period. As there's no such practice provided for three- and four-year students, the strong need for a mechanism of knowledge retention emerges which potentially gives extra motivation to a student as he or she will have a clear goal that is attainable.

According to Ebbinghaus' "forgetting curve", after one month a learner remembers only about 20% of the learnt material (Ebbinghaus, 1913). Extrapolating this curve to a two-year period one can imagine a tiny fraction of what is left out of the whole curriculum if a person doesn't practice the learnt material after finishing a particular course. That's apparently true for English language learning as well, so that with passing the exam students are usually doomed to forget almost everything they've learnt unless they find a way to practice language by themselves. That takes too much effort and time and this

process is not managed properly, that's why there're very few examples of graduates who can communicate their academic or business ideas in a foreign language clearly.

Also today's students are flood with vast amounts of information and there's no other type of training within the standard curriculum that would help students to process large volumes of information than preparing abstracts, reports and presentations that are widely represented in language training courses. The key to improving skills related to dealing with information sources, especially the Internet sources, would unlock much of the learners' hidden potential.

The idea behind the ongoing research is that blogging combined with a number of approaches for acquiring competence and enhancing self-development and self-studying skills gives an opportunity for students to continue studying languages outside curricular activities. Therefore, the development of the model mentioned earlier is suggested. This model will be designed to:

- 1) Fill the two-year gap that the standard curriculum ignores with respect to learning languages;
- 2) Enhance students' information literacy and the ability to apprehend vast amounts of data;
- 3) Supply the labour market with professionally and linguistically competent specialists.

A more detailed description of this model which is in the process of its developing, some ideas and approaches behind this research are presented in the next section.

In order to find out what are students' needs, a survey has been conducted at M.T. Kalashnikov Izhevsk State Technical University (ISTU). There were 131 first-year students from different departments – mostly from technical ones such as Electrical Engineering, Applied Mathematics and Computer Science – who took part in this survey. The students were asked a number of questions related to their attitude towards language learning at the university.

The first question students were asked was “How important do you think the English language is going to be for you at workplace, in your daily routine and in your scientific research?” They graded the level of the importance on the scale from 0 to 100 (0 – it's not important at all, 100 – it's vital). Figure 1 shows the average values on that scale and essentially says that most of the students realize the necessity of the language for their future career and life.

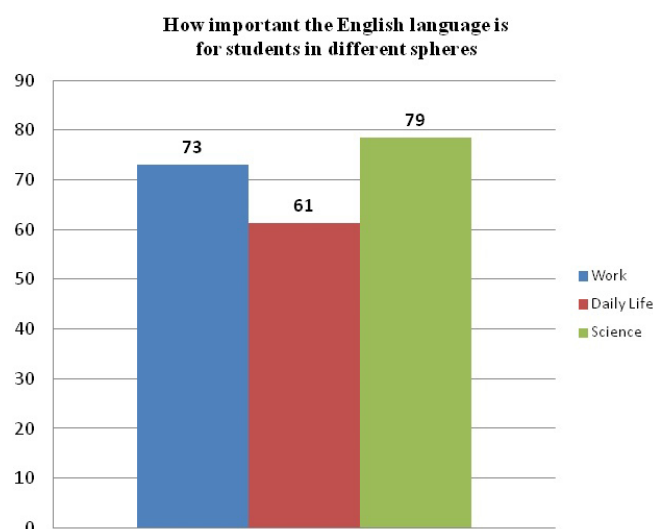


Fig. 1. The average students' assessments of the importance of English language for their career and life

Another question students were asked was “How many years would you like to study language as an obligatory discipline at the university?” Bearing in mind that these students will have only two-years for English language training, they ultimately said that they would like to study it for a longer period (Fig. 2).

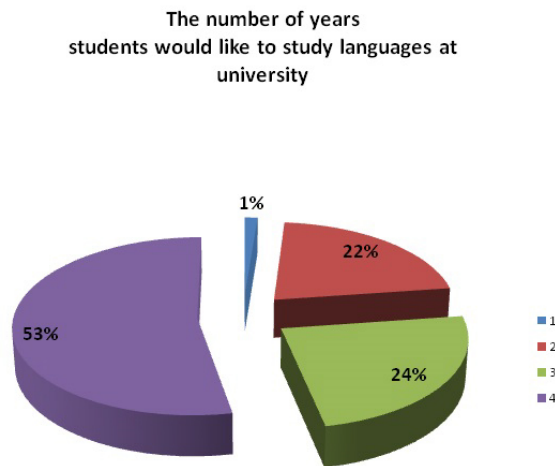


Fig. 2. The number of years students would like to study languages at university.

According to the questionnaire and students’ answers, they also would like to attend two times more English classes than they usually do. One of the interesting results of this survey was that when asked “What is the main reason some students don’t do well in English?” more than a half of the respondents pointed out the lack of the skills required and none of them said that the main reason is the inadequate level of teacher’s competence.

So what it proves is that students are willing to learn languages for longer periods, but only if there is a reliable and organized way to do it. That means the relevance of the developing model is already quite high among the students.

4. Research methods

While combining knowledge retention with some principles mentioned earlier is rather novel, the scientific methods which are and will be used in the research are fairly conventional. These methods can be divided into theoretical and practical.

Theoretical methods generally include analysis and synthesis of existing information. In this research scientific, pedagogical and psychological literature was analyzed along with norms, rules and different governmental documents that denote the requirements to future graduates. Also classification and generalization methods are used to process all the gathered data and communicate the results of both the analysis and future pedagogical experiment.

Apart from the experiment, practical methods contain surveying for clarifying ideas and listening to the opinion of a certain group, monitoring the students’ behaviour and actions. In order to assess the

acquisition of professional language competence and measure the level of knowledge retention, it is suggested to use testing and expert group assessment methods. The participants of the pedagogical experiment are second-year ISTU students from Electrical Engineering and Applied Mathematics departments. The students are of broad spectrum of background and of different levels of linguistic competences, so that control and experimental groups will include both elementary and intermediate-level students.

5. Findings

In order to solve the problems raised, the described model contains a number of approaches. The main ones are competence-based, learner-centered and thesaurus approaches.

Competence-based approach refers to the need of measuring professional language competence as one of the clearest indicators of students' academic success. In that respect blogging will serve as a tool for following the students' progress and assessing this competence by third parties (e.g., potential employer).

Learner-centered approach partly relates to the changing role of a teacher who becomes more of a tutor explaining and clarifying complex questions which a student came up with while performing the extracurricular tasks. As students may encounter a difficulty in studying sophisticated concepts, teacher should be able to connect to them via online tools, such as e-mail or social networks, and solve their difficulties. This approach also implies individual educational trajectories that teacher maps out together with every student, i.e. each student can learn at his or her own pace and follow one's own path towards reaching personal goals. Thus, a model that employs this approach must allow some flexibility in choosing the topic for a blog.

Thesaurus approach suggests all the knowledge possessed (e.g., student's vocabulary) or transferred (e.g., text given for performing classroom activities) to be represented by a certain amount of information (Turbovich, 1970). For example, if a text given to a student is too easy or too complex to understand, this text does not give this student any additional information. But if some, but not all, of the ideas in this text are clear, then that's where the learning process occurs. A student while dealing with such a text should comprehend the difficult concepts either through context or by putting some extra effort to find out the additional information on the Internet or with the help of ICT technologies.

One of the main features of this research is that very few studies were considering the concepts of knowledge retention and measuring the amount of residual knowledge. The hypothesis of this study is that the developing model must not only consider the approaches discussed earlier, but must also help dealing with vast amounts of data and eventually "learning how to learn" (Smith & Haverkamp, 1977).

The advantage for students' blogging as an independent form of work is that it's based on the idea of competence-based learning. If students are required to regularly write blog posts on the topics related to their major and its aspects resonating with the learner, then this technology has a potential for improving both linguistic and professional competence of the students while they memorize, interpret and find a way to clarify difficult or new concepts in their field of study. A key factor for effective blogging is regularity, so a teacher should find a way to motivate students to write blog posts at least

once a week. What this organized blogging process ultimately does is it develops a habit of posting something on your blog once a week, a habit of learning something new every day via English language that makes an average student a lifelong learner.

Coming back to the idea of students' dealing with the flood of data, this process is recommended to be organized at the very beginning of the pedagogical experiment. At the beginning of the course students with the aid of their teacher are also to find a number of information sources related to their field of studying and used as raw data for their future blog posts. These can be news websites on a particular topic (e.g., leading global newspapers like New York Times include a number of different news columns), blogs written by experts in a certain field, podcasts, radio stations, massive open online courses (e.g., Coursera, edX, etc.), books and many others. So, that means students can not only follow the news in one's field of study, but also learn plenty of new terms and concepts that are interesting for the learner.

6. Conclusion

Due to universal nature of blogging, professional language competence acquisition based on this technology brings along numerous advantages and deals with several issues. Its wide range of applications allows a teacher to use it as a driver for autonomous practice performed by students apart from their traditional classroom activities. Student blog can also be presented as an electronic portfolio containing all the accomplishments of a student that anyone can view and assess the student's level of professional and linguistic competence.

This research is focused on applying blogging technologies to dealing with forgetting knowledge and information literacy. The first one is represented by a two-year gap during which the majority of the students do not practice their linguistic skills deliberately and just few of them find their own way for applying the knowledge and skills acquired within the finished course by putting a great amount of extra time, money and effort. The second one refers to the ability to acquire knowledge and enhance skills independently with the help of different Web sources. This ability not only gives an opportunity not to forget everything learnt in a classroom, but when represented properly also serves as a powerful tool for seeking a specific position at the workplace and promoting future career.

The developed model will be just the beginning of what might become a broader, universal approach to future specialists professional language training.

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