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SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN TEACHING BUSINESS INTERACTION

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Abstract

The article deals with the problem of subject's soft skills development and aims at proving the potential of the process of teaching business interaction in it. The necessity of studying this question arose from the changes in the labour market which have been happening for the last two decades. Literature analysis and knowledge synthesis allowed specifying the notion of soft skills and clarifying the range of the most important ones in professional activity. The potential of teaching business interaction lies in interactive and project methods contributing to the development of communicative-interactive, analytical, reflexive and time-management skills, critical thinking via actualization of pair and group work in collaborative interactive activity. The main unit of teaching business interaction is a business communicative-interactive task. Being the basis of any interactive learning method, challenging interactive tasks provide the subject's soft skills development through taking multiple decisions on various problems in real and modeled situations. Communicative-interactive tasks can be different according to their aim, complexity, number of participants, content and conditions. The further research can be done on finding out the most effective interactive methods for developing soft skills and ways to measure them; designing a set of interactive challenges aimed at subject's soft skills development in teaching business English.

1. Introduction

Political, economic and social reality of nowadays life has been changing a lot. These changes are connected with a decline in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) occupations since 2000 and an overall growth of non-STEM jobs such as managers, nurses, physicians, and finance and business support occupations requiring strong analytical skills and significant interpersonal interaction (Deming, 2017). It doesn't mean that we are witnessing an end to the importance of cognitive skills — «rather, strong cognitive skills are increasingly a necessary but not a sufficient condition for obtaining a good, high-paying job. You also need to have social skills» (Deming, 2017, para. 5). In today's economy, workers must be able to solve complex problems in fluid, rapidly changing, team-based settings (Edmondson, 2012).

2. Problem Statement

The changes in the labour market have led to a new paradigm in the higher education. In accordance with transdisciplinary character of the modern labour market, qualification model of a specialist, closely connected to labour's subject and object, was replaced by competency model making integral demands to the result of educational process.

Today's highly qualified specialist meeting international standards has to be able to grow professionally, to be mobile, to engage in dialogue in different levels. According to competency approach a graduate should have not only professional competences but also a range of basic personal skills which are necessary for future life and activity in the up-to-date multicultural society. We can distinguish among them the abilities to perceive, analyze, summarize, set goals and find ways for their achievement; the skills to cooperate, work in a team, take decisions in non-standard situations, evaluate critically one's strengths and weaknesses, socially significant problems and processes. Creative and communicative skills should provide the personality's mobility and fast response to the changing world. Thus, one of the most important characteristics of a specialist's personality is the ability to overcome «the inertia of circumstances» which demands the soft skills development.

The term "soft skills" originally denotes personal qualities (abilities) that enable to communicate and work well with other people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020; Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2020). But in numerous psychological, pedagogical, sociological and economical researches this term has gained a much wider interpretation. Soft skills can denote personality's characteristic (Ivonina, Chulanova, & Davletshina, 2017; Martynova, 2018); a set of specific skills (Chulanova, 2018; Devyatlovski, 2017; Lorents, 2019; Ponomareva, 2018; Yakovleva & Doroshenko, 2018); universal social competencies (Lorents, 2019; Ponomareva, 2018). Including both social and analytical skills (Deming, 2017), soft skills are closely connected with staff's readiness to work effectively in any situation at a workplace in a team (Chulanova, 2018); self-actualization and self-realization (Abraham Maslow); setting and achieving aims (Yakovleva & Doroshenko, 2018); subject's adaptation and professional potential development (Ponomareva, 2018); formation of innovative climate in an organization.

3. Research Questions

Soft skills development research demands:

- specifying the notion of «soft skills»;

- pointing out the skills referred to the soft ones;

- proving and describing the ways of developing soft skills;

- finding out the ways of measuring them.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The article aims at proving the potential of the process of teaching business interaction in subject's soft skills development.

5.   Research Methods

The work on the current study was fulfilled with the help of theoretical and experimental research methods. The theoretical research methods included studying and analysing sociological, psycho-pedagogical and economical literature; knowledge synthesis on the problem. Among experimental research methods there were diagnostic (interview, conversation, questionnaire) and observational ones (monitoring of the process of business interaction, analysis of pedagogical methods and materials on the problem).

6.   Findings

As it was mentioned, the basis of soft skills is made up by well-known communicative skills which are as follows:

- to keep the conversation by means of mother or foreign language;

- to establish contacts and relations;

- to retrieve information and exchange it;

- to respond promptly to partner's verbal and non-verbal behaviour;

- to select adequate language means in accordance with the situation and use them correctly to solve the concrete tasks of interpersonal and intercultural interaction;

- to argue in favour of your position;

- to use different sign systems of the informational process: gestures, mimic, pantomime, intonation, speech tempo, diction, stress, voice's emotional colouring and strength;

- to choose and realize the most suitable ways of behaviour towards a partner (Platova, 2017).

Nevertheless, a lot of researchers agree that for successful communication employees also need to have some creative and reflexive skills that help people to effectively navigate the personal and social situations (Shaulska, Sereda, & Shkurat, 2015).

Creative skills help to act confidently in new conditions and find a way with any interlocutor. Among creative skills we can distinguish the abilities:

- to adapt to new people and conditions;

- to work in a team;

- to take new creative decisions in non-standard situations;

- to plan and replan your actions in accordance with the situation;

- to regulate relations preventing breakups;

- to resolve conflicts.

Reflexive skills deal with the objective attitude to the situation, the partner and oneself and include the skills:

to understand partner's position;

to be tolerant to the partners;

to predict the direction and character of relations' development;

to evaluate the partner and oneself adequately.

The described skills are all important for fulfilling effective interpersonal and intercultural interaction. Thus, following Osiyanova and Vdovichenko (2016) we refer them to communicative-interactive skills.

One of the central notions of psycho-pedagogical concept «soft skills», first suggested by P. Salovey, D. Caruso and G. Meyer, is emotional intelligence - a group of personal abilities allowing understanding one's own and the partner's emotions, such as self-control, self-consciousness, sensitivity and others (Meyer, 2007). Speaking about emotional competency Chulanova (2018) also singles out empathy, self-confidence, ability to manage stress and conflicts, to treat critics tolerantly and react to it adequately, to create emotionally comfortable atmosphere. Furthermore, most researchers agree that to be successful a person needs some personal qualities such as flexibility, friendliness, punctuality, time-management, self-development (Butenko et al., 2017; Chulanova, 2018; Robles, 2012).

Finally, one shouldn't forget about the importance of cognitive skills for soft skills development because cognitive skills include not only basic knowledge of a subject but also skills of more complex thinking (critical thinking and problem solving) (Shaulska et al., 2015).

Thus, summing up all the described skills and qualities singled out by researchers as components of soft skills, we can define the last ones as a set of communicative-interactive skills, personal qualities and emotional intelligence which in combination with cognitive skills enable a person to perform professional activity effectively, even in multidisciplinary conditions.

Despite the necessity of developing soft skills for a specialist, proved by social demand and major private, state and non-commercial organizations in different industries and regions of the world (Butenko et al., 2017), the system of higher education doesn't include their purposeful development in the course of educational process. Nevertheless, soft skills development is possible on the subject content of language and humanitarian disciplines (Beresnev & Beresneva, 2018; Martynova, 2018). In this context foreign language should play a role (Salnaya, 2016; Shaulska et al., 2015), as the basis of teaching it is interpersonal communication and interaction in cross-cultural context. The content of this discipline allow developing student's communicative-interactive skills purposefully via actualization of pair and group work in collaborative interactive activity; current interactive technologies; experiencing problem situations. Discussing questions, significant for students, enables teaching them to «express their attitude to what is happening, form value orientations, attitude to life, labour, oneself and the others» (Osiyanova, 2005).

In regard to soft skills development, teaching English interaction is of the greatest interest. The content of interactive methods of teaching business interaction (case-study, «jigsaw» method, incident's synthesis and analysis, basket method, brainstorm, role play) contribute to the development of such skills as goal-setting, taking immediate constructive decisions in new, non-standard conditions; working in

cooperation; allocation and awareness of responsibility; resolving conflict situations. Furthermore, interactive methods involve the following analytical and evaluating activity, aimed at development of reflexive skills and critical thinking. The usage of project method is directed at time-management skills and skills of planning and performing public speeches.

Any interactive method of teaching business communication is based on business communicative-interactive task. A set of communicative-interactive tasks makes up, in fact, any interactive method of teaching (Platova, 2018). We suppose that soft skills development is possible through the subject's multiple participation in modelled and real situations of business interaction in the course of solving communicative-interactive tasks.

Communicative-interactive task involves a problem, some circumstances of surrounding reality, a verbal stimulus motivating a subject to solve it. The person is in a situation of intellectual predicament and tries to find the way out. The characteristic feature of communicative-interactive task is that it requires pair and group work. Group activity on solving a task has, consequently, a common, group result. It should be noted, that the aim of any communicative-interactive task is directed at changing a doer of the action but not the situation itself.

Communicative-interactive tasks can be different according to their aim, complexity, number of participants, content and conditions (Platova, 2018).

The possible aim of a task is to inform, to establish and maintain communication, to regulate relations, to take up a decision, to express one's attitude, to motivate, to convince, to make a choice.

Communicative-interactive task can be simple, i.e. include one problem (e.g. to ask a secretary about the time of meeting; to inform a partner about new circumstances; to persuade the customer to buy a product) or complex, i.e. consist of several simple simultaneous tasks (to establish a contact with a new partner, to provide information about his company's production, to arrange the next meeting).

As it was mentioned, communicative –interactive task can be solved in pairs (a pair task) or in groups (group task). The circumstances of the situation in a task can be introduced completely or partly, aiming at subject's stimulation to figure out the necessary information (incident's analysis and synthesis).

The content of communicative-interactive tasks can be various and it hasn't been systemized yet.

Summing up, being the basis of teaching business interaction, communicative-interactive tasks contribute to gaining personal experience in communicative activity and expressing subjective position, therefore developing subject's soft skills.

The question of measuring soft skills is still being open for Psychology and Pedagogic throughout the world. Unlike cognitive skills, which are now being measured by a system of numerous tests, «the study of soft skills is hamstrung by poor measurement and lack of definitional clarity» (Deming, 2017, passa. 17). Deming (2017) proves that soft skills measurement is still at an embryonic stage in terms of both validity and reliability as such methods as self-assessment, behavioral measures and Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test have a number of problems. Among them there is contextual dependence, racial discrimination, correlation between emotional intelligence and social status. Thus, there is a necessity to work out fundamentally new ways and criteria for measurement of soft skills.

7.   Conclusion

According to social and economic demands of nowadays it is necessary to develop person's soft skills in the course of studying. As soft skills are a combination of communicative-interactive skills, emotional intelligence and some personal qualities, it is possible to develop them while teaching business interaction by numerous interactive methods based on communicative-interactive tasks. The further research required in this context aims at finding out the most effective interactive methods for developing soft skills and ways to measure them, designing a set of interactive challenges.

Acknowledgments

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