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PHENOMENON-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

In the changing world not only does the education content undergo significant changes but also the skills that are required from future citizens evolve dramatically: the 21st century skills development entails incorporating new approaches to teaching various subjects, including foreign languages, into the education process. The phenomenon-based approach is thought to be a means of developing students' creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills while studying a certain real-world phenomenon. The aim of this research was to reveal the principles of applying this approach to teaching a foreign language, to identify the stages of its effective implementation in the education process. Moreover, one of the purposes of the study conducted lay in revealing the instructor's competences necessary for arranging the learning activities efficiently in order to encourage students' communicative skills improvement and language skills progress. The practical realization of these recommendations found its reflection in the cross-cultural project conducted by Russian and American students and professors. The PhBA to teaching Russian as a foreign language within a series of workshops proved to be an effective way of addressing the learners' needs, promoting their motivation since the topics were selected according to their interests and encouraging their language skills development and cultural awareness.

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and rapid technological development new challenges arise not only in international and intercultural communication but also in education on various levels. Therefore, the requirement for new skills of future citizens and professionals facilitates the renewal of the content of both teaching and learning (Halinen, 2014). As Tareva (2011) points out, the traditional paradigms of learning and teaching have been changing towards the so-called competence models, the personality-oriented and practical approaches becoming the main didactic principles.

The didactic principles are known to be defined as main statements that determine the contents, organizational forms and approaches to the education process in accordance with basic aims and mechanisms of teaching and learning (Zharkova & Sorokovykh, 2017). Learning is supposed to be an active and self-regulatory process making students reflect on their own experiences and emotions, thus creating a positive atmosphere and motivating students to develop their competences (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016). Constructing the so-called creative learning environment, as Sorokovykh (2013) emphasizes, helps not only develop students' creative potential but also induce their need of self-reflection and self-identification.

Silander (2015), Yew and Goh (2016) assert that the innovative approaches meeting the requirements in question are enquiry learning, problem- and phenomenon-based learning, project and portfolio learning in concrete curricula.

Project learning, being close to the phenomenon-based type, requires a certain interdisciplinary approach (Gerasikova, 2015; Larmer et al., 2015; Syahril, 2019). For instance, Poonpon (2017) describes an interdisciplinary project aimed at combining knowledge of Information science and language skills, which helped improve students' communicative skills. Although in Asian countries like Taiwan using project-based or phenomenon-based learning techniques can cause problems at first stages of implementation, as parents and children, according to Chiang and Lee (2016), tend to pay a lot of attention to exam grades, learning by means of interdisciplinary projects is sure to bring positive results in terms of students' language skills and motivation to learning in general.

Phenomenon-based learning is known to be the method of learning and teaching whose aim, according to Symeonidis and Schwarz (2016), is to "expand students' world of experience, strengthening their motivation and making learning meaningful to them" (p. 35). Eftestøl (2018), for instance, describes the way this approach can benefit students in teaching history and music, arguing that "through aesthetic experience the students are engaged both emotionally and intellectually" (p. 91). Thus, through the work of music art the students' personal present is connected with a cultural past.

The phenomenon-based approach basically consists in engaging students in exploring authentic phenomena, or real-world themes, which cannot be studied within a separate subject (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016, p. 35). According to Wakil et al. (2019) phenomenon-based learning improves students' skills making them think critically and creatively, collaborate and communicate within a peer group.

Therefore, although phenomenon-based learning has been described in numerous articles by various scholars worldwide in terms of students' benefits and the role of this approach in the learning process, little has been said about the guiding principles of the way the teaching of Russian as a foreign

language can be organized and the teacher's key skills necessary for implementing this approach in a foreign language classroom.

2. Problem Statement

The phenomenon-based approach (PhBA) to learning is regarded as a learner-centered approach, where students initiate studying a specific topic or concept aligning with their own interests and goals. It is known to share similarities with project-based, problem-based and inquiry-based approaches as it also encourages the development of the 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Dolgaya, 2019).

The key difference lies in the global context of the topic studied: it must be a real-world issue or "phenomenon" requiring knowledge and skills from different subjects. Technically the PhBA is a multidisciplinary, instructional form of learning forging to obtain core knowledge and skills across a range of subjects (Silander, 2015). Learners themselves have to choose a "phenomenon" from the real world, i.e. the topic related to real life issues or events. This means that a topic must be a real-world issue or "phenomenon" and that learners need to apply different perspectives in order to study the topic.

Thus, the problem arises as to how the learning process can be arranged effectively by the teacher so as to encourage the development of 21st century skills and to foster the improvement of the language skills in question.

3. Research Questions

The analysis of the researches conducted by Russian and foreign authors demonstrates that the following topics need further description and the questions posed want solving. This article attempts to give answers to the following questions:

- How can the teacher arrange the learning within the phenomenon-based approach effectively?
- Which stages must the studying process undergo in order to develop learners' collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking skills?
- What competencies are required from the instructor implementing the phenomenon-based approach in a Russian as a foreign language classroom?

4. Purpose of the Study

Despite the fact that phenomenon-based approach is a teaching technique that has been widely researched from various perspectives by language instructors the teacher's role and the key competences required from him/her have not been revealed. The aim of this research lies, above all, in identifying the steps a teacher is to take in order to organise the learning process in a foreign language classroom effectively and in pointing out the key requirements the teacher embedding the PhBA in the education process is to meet. Moreover, this article's purpose is to give a detailed description of PhBA

implementation in a Russian as a foreign language classroom thus proving its efficiency in terms of language skills acquisition.

5. Research Methods

This research is based, first of all, on the results of implementing the cross-cultural project within the phenomenon-based approach; the project involving Russian and American students and professors deals with learning and teaching Russian culture and traditions. Before conducting the project the method of theoretical basis analysis was applied in order to identify the main features of phenomenon-based approach to teaching a foreign language and to formulate the key principles of its realization in a foreign language classroom. The results of analyzing the researches on PhBA to teaching a foreign language lie in defining the key principles of the education process in the context of PhBA and identifying the cardinal skills required of the instructor. Another method implemented in the research is the quantitative method by means of which the number of participants of the project mentioned above was calculated (Table 1). Besides, the logical method found its use in the research as it serves a means of analyzing the theoretical and empirical data, comparing the results and making generalizations and conclusions.

6. Findings

In the context of learning a foreign language the PhBA is known to be a cross-disciplinary approach as it can be applied to assist foreign language learners to use the topic as a means to learn a foreign language. There are several benefits of PhBA to learning a foreign language. When students focus on learning a topic, the specific subject, such as customs and traditions of a foreign country, it becomes an important tool or medium to understand the topic, thus providing a meaningful way for learners to use and learn the subject (or a language itself) beyond the learning environments in real-world situations where the learned subject matter or skills are used.

The model of the PhBA to learning a foreign language as “a real-life phenomenon” is based on the following:

a) Students ask a question that relates to real life communication that is of personal interest (e.g. celebrating holidays in a foreign country). It is usually done by developing an “inquiry” question around this topic that begins with either a “how”, “why”, etc. Students themselves come up with the question or the problem they want to investigate that pertains to the activities they are engaged in. At its best, the PhBA to learning a foreign language fosters students’ greater engagement in learning new knowledge and skills because they are working towards what interests them personally;

b) Students engage in research to find a solution by studying the topic from different angles and perspectives (e.g. customs, culture, language means). Resources and support need to be available for students to tackle self-studied issues as a phenomenon. This can include web-based research, in-house research, online learning resources, or interviews. There is commonly an open structure of time for learners to engage in the research needed. The PhBA to learning a foreign language enables deeper learning because students are making connections across subjects and seeing practical relevance to real life;

c) Instructors facilitate the process by guiding students to learn the concepts and skills needed to solve the problem (e.g. reading strategies, communicative skills). They also identify and teach the basic concepts that pertain to the question chosen by the learner, exactly what skills or knowledge they will need to solve the problem. Without a facilitator, students may struggle to identify and learn the skills and knowledge required to complete the project;

d) Learners present and deliver their project/solution in a chosen format. The PhBA to learning is characterized by its lack of formal structure. In this context students need to show the completion of skills or knowledge required to find a solution.

In the process of learning a foreign language, new knowledge is always applied to the phenomenon or solving a problem, which means that new words or grammar rules learned have immediate utility value. For deeper learning, it is very important that learners apply and use new language material during the learning situation. A foreign language learned only at the level of reading or theory often remains superficial for learners, without their gaining a comprehensive understanding of the real-world phenomenon behind it. It is the practical application of foreign language knowledge that is the key requirement (mentioned above) in the PhBA to learning a foreign language. The PhBA to learning a foreign language allows to create real communication situations where grammar and other language knowledge must be applied to transmit messages comprehensively and understandably to another person. The aim of the PhBA to learning a foreign language is to bring real-life practices and processes into learning situations in a pedagogically structured way. The PhBA to learning a foreign language builds tangible connections between theoretical knowledge and the real world. It also serves to link the various, separate subjects that students learn in schools. For example, Foreign languages, World Literature and Culture, Intercultural Communication can be studied as complete entities, in their real context, and the knowledge and skills related to them are gained by integrating these subjects.

The PhBA to learning a foreign language is contextual. Since new knowledge or reading / listening skills are absorbed in a specific context (studying political affairs, geographical situation, etc.) its immediate utility value is very important for retention.

The PhBA to teaching a foreign language may result in changing a teacher's role as a teacher is no longer just explaining grammar rules and correcting mistakes. The key point is in guiding students in search of knowledge (language means included) by incorporating authentic learning experiences into their instruction. Students build their own knowledge, which is transferable, and hence acquire a deeper understanding of the language they are studying. Yet, basic language concepts should be taught before applying the PhBA to learning a foreign language.

The PhBA to teaching a foreign language embodies the idea of introducing students at teacher-training universities to methods suitable for phenomenon-based teaching. Teachers are required to have more and more skills related to teaching and assessing individually within the framework provided by the curriculum. The scope of a teacher's professional role and responsibilities for applying the PhBA to teaching a foreign language may be described in terms of the following activities:

- *teachers' activities prior to applying the PhBA:*

a) understanding students' motivations and interests;

b) creating a favourable environment for students to practice a foreign language;

- c) clarifying the product expected of students;
- d) instructing individually each student.

- *teachers' activities when applying the PhBA:*

- a) monitoring students' progress toward being taught a foreign language;
- b) identifying difficulties students are experiencing in learning a foreign language;
- c) facilitating instructions;
- d) giving credible praise and regular feedback.

- *teachers' activities after applying the PhBA:*

- a) recording the extent to which each student has attained both short- and long-term educational goals;
- b) discussing the results with students;
- c) analyzing students' education records;
- d) evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching methods;
- e) evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum and materials in use.

In the framework of PhBA to teaching a foreign language instructors should be able to incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge and tasks, collaboration and team work as well as problem solving tasks. Therefore, the instructor's skills involve creating the proper psychological climate at the lesson, monitoring students' interests and education needs and evaluating each student's progress in achieving the learning goals.

In the context of the realization of the approach in question the department of English-studies and cross-cultural communication of state autonomous educational institution of higher education of the city of Moscow "Moscow City University" (MCU) has for a number of years been part of an international project in collaboration with the College of arts and humanities of the University of Florida (UF, Orlando, Florida, the USA). The project under the name of "The dialogue of languages: Russian and English" (referred to as the Project) is expected to further develop academic and research cooperation between the stated higher educational institutions by refining the ways of teaching Russian as a foreign language in the cultural context and promoting the most effective teaching practices worldwide. The project has been carried out for three academic years; the official agreement between the two universities was signed in the year 2018.

The number of Project participants has not varied much and comprised up to 58 professors and students from the corresponding universities (see Table 1). What varied was the lineup of student-participants that changed every term. In the Table below, we specify the data about Project participants.

Table 01. The results of percentage

Academic Year	Number of participants (UF)	Status of participants (UF)	Number of participants (MCU)	Status of participants (MCU)	Total Number
2017-2018	26	10 students 16 teachers	26	20 students 6 teachers	52
2018-2019	28	12 students 16 teachers	30	22 students 8 teachers	58
2019-2020	26	10 students 16 teachers	26	20 students 6 teachers	52

It was agreed between the participants of the Project that its product must be a yearly resident educational and cultural event from which the professors and students of both universities should benefit.

Below is the scheduling of events carried out as the Project has progressed in time:

- An online workshop “Cross-cultural studies in American universities” conducted by UF participants (December, 2017).
- A set of 3 lectures “Russian: history, diversity and change” and 3 workshops “Introducing oneself in Russian”, “Russian cuisine: then and now”, “Russian folk tales” conducted by MCU participants in the University of Florida (February, 2018).
- A set of 6 lectures and 6 workshops “Russian culture: history and present day” conducted by MCU participants in Moscow City University (June, 2018).
- An online presentation of 3 research works “Russian studies: undergraduate research”, “Understanding culture through learning Russian abroad”, “Enhancing foreign language curricula through technology” accomplished by UF participants (December, 2018).
- A set of 2 workshops “The dialogue of languages: Russian and English” conducted by MCU participants in the University of Florida (January, 2019).
- An online presentation of project research work ‘The 75th anniversary of the Second World War’ accomplished by UF participants (April, 2019 – forthcoming).
- A set of 6 workshops ‘Russian culture: history and present day’ conducted by MCU participants in Moscow City University (June, 2019 – forthcoming).

A letter of gratitude that the department of English-studies and cross-cultural communication of Moscow City University received from the authorities of the University of Florida in the fall of 2019 proves the satisfactory character of Project development.

As stated above, the Project was at the start planned to be product-oriented and the resulting product was supposed to be of an educational and cultural character. When choosing the ways of implementing the Project and involving its participants, we came to the idea of partially relying on phenomenon-based learning techniques at least while working on the scenario and planning activities for a set of workshops on the topic of Russian culture and literature for American students and professors.

It should also be stated that each workshop in the set was developed by a team that comprised a professor/professors who facilitated the work and 4-6 students who created the contents of the workshops and actually conducted them under the academic guidance of the professor in charge.

The workshops that are used to exemplify the way phenomenon-based learning techniques can be implemented to teach Russian studies (in the case described in the article the focus is on culture and language) were carried out in June, 2018, 2019. They comprised altogether 12 meetings that lasted 180 minutes and were organized on the premises of Moscow City University.

Each workshop underwent the following procedure:

- Step 1: finding out educational interests of the target audience.
- Step 2: planning the structure of the workshop and assigning participant roles, spheres of responsibility, and defining deadlines.
- Step 3: collecting the data that make the content of the workshop.

- Step 4: elaborating on phenomenon-based learning techniques that can be used to engage the target audience of the workshop.
- Step 5: adapting the data in accordance with the phenomenon-based learning techniques planned to be employed in the course of the workshop.
- Step 6: visualizing the workshop by means of PowerPoint presentation including audio- and video materials.
- Step 7: preparing learning aids necessary for implementing phenomenon-based activities during the workshop.
- Step 8: rehearsing, appropriating the timing of the workshop.
- Step 9: conducting the workshop.
- Step 10: getting feedback and reflecting on the results.

The needs analysis allowed the workshop teams to specify the needs of foreign participants who indicated the following topics of their interest, which turned out to be a very good choice in terms of promoting cross-cultural communication:

- The works of the Russian writers and poets of the 19th century from the cultural prospective.
- The woman character in the works of the Russian writers and poets of the 19th century.
- Russian folk tales from the cultural prospective.
- Russian visual art and literature.

The list of writers and poets to be discussed during the workshops included Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov and Alexander Pushkin.

The techniques of phenomenon-based learning prevented the workshop teams from concentrating only on actual data though it was also presented during the workshop.

The objective of each workshop was threefold:

- To inform of the facts crucial for understanding the issue discussed.
- To teach the language relevant for the issue and appropriate for the diversity of language levels of the target audience.
- To engage the target audience into problem-based learning activities that will enable them to make conclusions about the phenomenon through discovering things.

The language level of the target audience ranged from A2 to B1. During each workshop, American participants were grouped with students and professors of MCU who spoke English and Russian, which allowed implementing cross-cultural approach to the topics explored and served to generally enhance the speaking skills of both American and Russian participants.

The timing of the workshop was planned so as to introduce an interdisciplinary activity every 15-20 minutes of listening to the presentation. Activities prioritized hands-on assignments and emphasized assignments relevant to the real world. They were shaped to let the target audience see how the information presented could be applied to the phenomenon discussed thus demonstrating the utilitarian value of the information being studied.

We will further present the scenario of one workshop giving details of the activities woven into its structure and describe the activities implemented while conducting another workshop of the set presented at MCU in June 2018, 2019.

The first one is devoted to Feodor Dostoevsky. The workshop structure included

- Introduction to the topic.
- Question to be discussed: What would happen if Dostoevsky lived in the era of the Internet and social networks? Dostoevsky's Instagram page (see Figure 01).

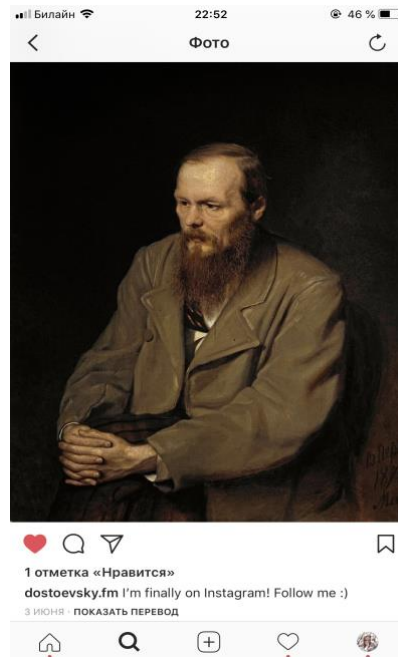


Figure 01. Dostoevsky's Instagram page as presented during the workshop (MCU workshop presentation, June 2018, 2019)

- Dostoevsky's biography presented in the form of the interactive chart (Figure 02 below).

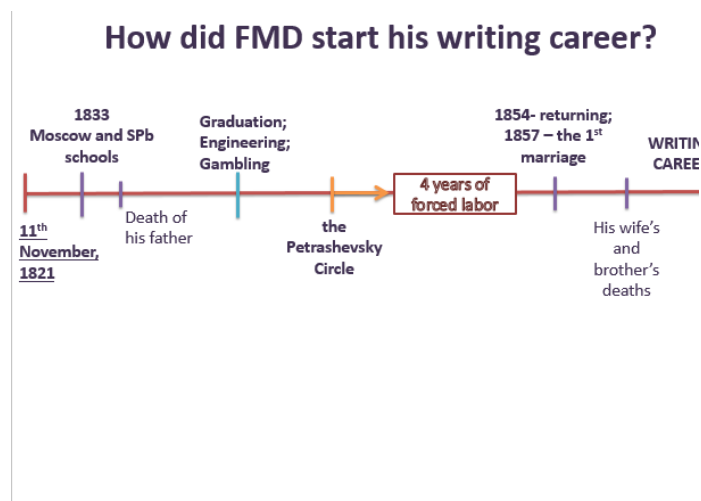


Figure 02. Dostoevsky's biography (MCU workshop presentation, June 2018, 2019)

- Dostoevsky's bibliography.
- Activity: learning how to pronounce the titles of the most famous works by the writer.
- Brief outline of the contents of Dostoevsky's novels.

- Activity: learning how to count in Russian on the basis of the measurement system relevant to the time when the author worked (prices of eggs, cattle, geese, candle wax are compared and analyzed by means of the construction “СКОЛЬКО СТОИТ? СКОЛЬКО СТОЯТ?”).
- Philosophical aspects of Dostoevsky’s novels.
- Activity: finding out how famous Dostoevsky is in the USA.
- Discussion: contrasting the way Americans and Russians treat Dostoevsky’s cultural impact.
- Dostoevsky’s male and female characters presented via memes.
- Activity: interactive quiz “Which character of Dostoevsky’s novels are you”?
- Activity: meme creating (see Figure 03 below).



Figure 03. Raskolnikov’s meme as created during the workshop in June, 2018
 (Source: MCU workshop presentation, June 2018)

- Dostoevsky and his impact on the Russian language.
- Activity: comparing the ways Dostoevsky’s novels are rendered into English.
- Cultural manifestations of Dostoevsky’s impact: films.
- Activity: analyzing the episodes from American and Russian films based on Dostoevsky’s novels.
- Conclusion: answering the question what target audience now knows about. Dostoevsky’s works, his language, his characters, the time when he lived and his cross-cultural impact.
- Activity: practising Russian-speaking skills and getting acquainted with Russian student culture by playing a game developed by the Project team on the basis of the novel “Crime and punishment” by Dostoevsky.

The second workshop covered the topic of Russian folk tales. It was decided to highlight the issue of background cultural knowledge as developed in Russian children by fairy tales presented with different means (books, cartoons, illustrations, songs, toys).

The activities employed while conducting this workshop included

- Learning how to say the titles of Russian fairy tales.
- Comparing the structure of English and Russian fairy tales.
- Learning native Russian words or proverbs associated with fairy tales.
- Recognizing the concept of ‘realia’ and learning to recognize and interpret them in the texts of Russian fairy tales.
- Learning a song of Kolobok (the Bun) from a contemporary Russian cartoon.
- Making kolobok from the materials prepared (salted dough).
- Staging the play “Teremok” in Russian.
- Making a short oral presentation of a fairy tale character in Russian on the model of provided sentence patterns.
- Using modeling clay to shape the figures of the characters learned about during the workshop.

7. Conclusion

Phenomenon-based learning is considered to be one of the innovative approaches to teaching a foreign language since it involves multidisciplinary knowledge and encourages students’ active participation and involvement. Starting with choosing a real-life phenomenon to study, this approach can become an effective means of not only learning the facts about the phenomenon in question but also of improving the students’ language skills in real-world contexts and situations.

Following the suggested model of organizing the learning process within the PhBA (formulating a problem based on students’ interests, engaging in researching the problem in attempt to find the solution(s) to it, etc.) can assist the instructor in arranging the language learning, be it English or Russian as a foreign language) in a proper way. Therefore, the teacher’s skills in the realization of this approach are of great significance.

Skills related to the PhBA to teaching a foreign language can be incorporated into future teacher training and certification programs. Furthermore, for practicing teachers who have not had the opportunity and support to develop such skills in-service development programs at regional levels should be widely available. Teachers are recommended to introduce real life connections, creative repetition, working in a team, problem solving tasks when applying the PhBA to teaching a foreign language.

The results of the project “The dialogue of languages: Russian and English” conducted by the professors of the department of English-studies and cross-cultural communication demonstrate the high level of efficiency of this approach implementation among American and Russian participants. The feedback provided by the target audience demonstrated that the application of PhB-learning stimulated speaking skills improvement and enhanced their awareness of cross-cultural issues. Later communication also indicated that the skills that they learned from the workshops preserved in time. The professors who were among the members of the target audience owned that they modified and implemented some of the activities that they experienced in their classrooms.

On the basis of the research conducted, both the theoretical ground of phenomenon-based learning and its practical fulfilment when conducting a cross-cultural project it can be stated that such an approach

will prove to be valid if it provides appropriate feedback, meets individual learning needs, helps to plan individualized educational programs and motivates students.

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