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DEVELOPING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN AN ESP COURSE THROUGH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Reading comprehension of professionally-oriented texts is one of the most important skills for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners in the modern world of knowledge and information. The research is aimed at investigating how the Critical Pedagogy approach combined with computer technologies could enhance ESP reading comprehension skills of university learners. For this purpose, the following research problem was formulated: Does the Internet-integrated application of Critical Pedagogy techniques exert influence on ESP academic reading comprehension skills of learners? The research methodology included a pilot study focusing on observation and analysis of students' academic performance. Two groups of ESP students took part in the experiment. The experimental group attended Internet-integrated Critical Pedagogy language classes and the control group attended traditional language classes. Both groups studied the same ESP programme. Both groups were interviewed about their learning experiences, reading comprehension abilities and motivation to read. At the end of the programme the participants took a post-test to evaluate their progress in ESP reading comprehension. Students of the experimental group performed better than the control group.The results show that the Internet-integrated instruction of Critical Pedagogy strategies might positively influence learners' reading comprehension and could contribute to ESP academic reading skills development in Social Sciences. The results confirm the hypothesis that the efficient methodology for the elaboration of ESP academic reading skills in Social Sciences could be based on the application of the principles of Critical Pedagogy in a computer-networked environment.ion of the principles of Critical Pedagogy in a computer-networked environment.

Keywords: Teaching methodology, critical pedagogy, reading skills, english language, English for Special Purposes (ESP).

1. Introduction

The new prospects for academic and educational community development, which are opening up with the transition to a knowledge society (Maximova, 2016, pp. 1003-1010) impose new requirements on linguistic competence of modern specialists. It should be noted that the intensification of cultural globalization processes makes it necessary to provide high school graduates with skills of intercultural activity and international communication. It is quite obvious that in the context of globalization, a high level of proficiency in a foreign language becomes a factor in increasing competitiveness in any profession at the labor market. In addition, the "internationalization" of education and increasing academic mobility requires the skills to continue learning after graduation in accordance with «Life Long Learning» concept, as well as skills to carry out professional activities in a foreign language environment.

A key element in the training of a specialist in Social Sciences and Humanities is the achievement of a balanced combination of professional skills with linguistic competence. It is worth mentioning that the development of linguistic competence in the sphere of professional communication contributing to deeper assimilation of knowledge, expansion of general and professional erudition of the future specialist is a priority for teaching foreign languages in higher education (especially in the field of the Humanities and Social Sciences).

The development of reading comprehension skills of professionally-oriented texts is one of the most important educational task in teaching English for speific purposes (ESP). First of all, reading comprehension is a must in contemporary post-industrial societies. In the era of digitalization students need to upgrade their skills and strategies (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010, pp. 179-225). Secondly, there is a significant diversification of texts that students have to deal with: along with conventional, "paper" texts, "electronic" texs are becoming widespread. As reading strategies vary depending on the type of text, the teaching methods for reading comprehension development should be adjusted.There are many additional difficulties in teaching academic reading in Social Sciences and Humanties for learners and teachers as they are challenged with different styles, formats and genres.

On the one hand, there are many studies analyzing application of various techniques for ESP reading skills development, such as teaching in computer-networked environment (Abanomey, 2013; Levine et al., 2013), feminist methodology (Brantmeier, 2003; Pavlenko et al., 2011), the Theme and Task Based Learning Model (Romero, 2017), problem-posing approach (Naiditch, 2010), etc. On the other hand, it is difficult to find out which technique would be more effective for ESP reading skills enhancement if we take into account the challenges of the knowledge-based society, the influence of modern globalized communication environment (in particular, the increasing role and importance of electronic communication) on all participants of educational process.

Learning in a computerized environment can be very stimulating for the development of reading skills in ESP as it fosters learners' motivation and creativity. The benefits of the use of computer-mediated and information technologies approach to ESP are obvious because reading patterns of the modern student youth are influenced by computer mediated communication. Indeed, new cultural practices and possibilities of electronic communication affect students' cognitive and communicative skills. The emergence of a new digital mentality of the 21st century ("clicking people") among students contributes to new cognitive and communicative skills development (Maximova, 2011, pp. 24-33).

Critical Pedagogy is a communicaive approach to teaching practice, fostering students' independent thinking skills, contributing to the formation of active, critical, conscious and responsible members of society (Freire, 2013). Critical Pedagogy methods include the rejection of rational and dogmatic methods of traditional teaching in favor of an approach that takes into account the diversity of positions and points of view of participants in the educational process, their individual characteristics. Such an approach contributes to the development of professional competence of students.

The traditional approach to learning focuses on Teacher's activity as a provider of knowledge and Student's passive role as a recipient of information. On the contrary, in Critical Pedagogy traditional roles are deconstructed and the delegation of part of teacher's authority to students is practiced.

The principle of a learner-centered curriculum (Swanson & Kayler, 2008, pp. 1-26) where delegation of part of teacher's authority to students is practiced provides the latter with an independence and an opportunity to express themselves and actively participate in the process of collective construction of knowledge, increase their social activity. The idea of a learner-centered curriculum as well as Freire's concept of dialogical action underlie the problem-posing approach to developing critical reading skills and strategies (as cited in Naiditch, 2010, p. 94-107). Critical reading skills are developed when learners use their own personal experience and share collective experience to attach additional meaning to the problem in the process of collective construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings.

2. Problem Statement

The author puts forward a hypothesis that the problem-posing approach alongside with the concept of dialogical action of Critical Pedagogy in a computer-networked environment can be applied to teaching ESP academic reading skills. According to previous studies such methodology may be used for learning ESP and fostering learners' reading comprehension skills (Maximova, 2016).

3. Research Questions

The research question is as follows: Can the problem-posing approach and the concepts of of Critical Pedagogy be used effectively for the develoment of learners' ESP academic reading skills in computerized environment?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the resrach is to find out how the application of problem-posing approach alongside with the concept of dialogical action of Critical Pedagogy in a computer-networked environment influences students' reading comprehension skills of academic texts in Humanities.

5. Research Methods

A pilot study was conducted in which ESP students of Social Sciences and Humanities at Peoples' Friendship University of Russia took part.

Two groups of students: experimental and control took part in the experiment. The selection of these groups was based on the requirements of statistical homogenuity on the basis of equal language level, and on academic performance analysis.

At the beginning of ESP classes, students of both groups had preliminary testing in reading comprehension, which demonstrated statistical homogeneity of the groups on the basis of "reading and comprehension of professionally-oriented texts".

At the next stage the experimental group had their ESP classes with the implementation of Critical Pedagogy techniques, while the control group learned ESP in traditional environment according to traditional methods. Both groups studied in classrooms equipped with computers and the Internet. The teaching methodology in the experimental group was based on the principles, algorithms and techniques of the Critical Pedagogy, such as problem-posing approach, learner-centered curriculum and the concept of dialogical action. The technique based on E. Auerbach's stages for obtaining reading comprehension: 1) description of the content; 2) definition and discussion of the problem; 3) choosing alternative approaches to the problem (Auerbach, 1992) was used.

Students had weekly two-hour classses during a term. In the course of ESP classes surveys were conducted, which revealed students' attitude to what was happening in the classroom.

6. Findings

At the end of the programme, students of both groups had their final tests for reading and comprehension of professionally-oriented texts, both in paper and electronic formats. The control tests revealed a statistically significant superiority of the students of the experimental group over the students of the control group, both in "paper" and "electronic" test formats.

The results of the control and the experimental group can be seen in Table 1. As it can be seen see from the data, there is significant correlation between the application of Critical Pedagogy techniques in computerized classes with Inernet and the develoment of learners' ESP academic reading skills. Tests results of the experimental group are better than the scores of the control group.

Table 01. Reading comprehension test scores of the control and experimental group

Post-test reading comprehension	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T observed
Control group	18	22,22	7,47	1,76	2,3749
Experimental group	18	28,0	7,12	1,67	2,3749

The results of our pilot study confirm the hypothesis that the appliucation of the problem-posing approach with strategies of Critical Pedagogy in a computer-networked environment can be useful in ESP academic reading skills development.

7. Conclusion

Our results show that the application of Critical Pedagogy methodology in in a computer-networked environment makes a positive contribution into ESP reading comprehension skills development of

university learners of Social Sciences and Humanities. Such methodology may be useful for learning ESP to improve learners' reading comprehension skills.

It should be pointed out that the advantage of the method of delegating the authority of a teacher to a student is evident in ESP. Indeed, a foreign language teacher, not being competent enough in the field of students' specialization, can act as a learner. The ability for a student to «teach» a discipline of their specialization to their language teacher (in the studied language) gives classes additional interest and motivation.

To sum it up, we can assume that the application of Critical Pedagogy methods in ESP teaching meets both individual needs of modern students and the needs of the global labor market.

Acknowledgments

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