MULTITASKING ACTIVITIES AS A COMPONENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT A NON-LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract [Arial, 12-point, bold, centred]
As the title implies the article describes how multitasking is implied in foreign language teaching. The author draws attention to the situation in the modern society, namely, how important it is to multitask in different activities. It is specially noted that the ability to solve different problems and to do many tasks at the same time belongs to the main skills in the XXI century. The need is stressed to employ multitasking in each discipline including foreign languages. The author tries to prove the efficiency of multitasking by giving some examples. It is shown that activities based on multitasking can improve the training and prepare the students to their future occupation. That is why the most of tasks should be work-based. The students learn to solve professionally oriented tasks using not only foreign language knowledge but also their experience in other fields they have got by learning other disciplines. The main conclusion drawn is the following: multitasking can influence the educational process positively and can motivate students to act in difficult situations using all their skills and knowledge simultaneously.

Keywords: Foreign language, non-linguistic university, multitasking in education, work-based activities, professionally oriented learning, 21st century skills, work-based tasks, modern educational technologies.

1 INTRODUCTION
We all live in the changing world. The modern society is developing rapidly and demands much of its members. The job market is also changing. Graduating students must be prepared to new challenges according to the required skills.

21st century skills are divided in three categories: learning skills, literacy skills, and life skills. To the first category belong critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. The second category includes literacy in information, media, and technology. The third category implies flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, and social skills. [1]. All these skill are to build during the study at the university. Therefore, high schools must be ready to meet all these requires. It is very important to work at forming all the skills from the beginning to graduation at all the faculties in all the disciplines. That means the following. Firstly, students must be flexible and adaptable not only in society but also in their profession. A specialist in each field is considered to be a good one if he / she can solve different tasks. There can be more the one task at once but two, three or even more. Secondly, it is very important for a future specialist to work in a team using critical thinking and creativity by solving professional tasks. It can be that a person works in more than one teams at the same time and has to work at solving a number of problems. Thirdly, one must combine skills to make ones work more efficient. Fourthly, a person must use different information sources to achieve a goal and to do it in a short time with a minimum effort. The more efficiently the students work at forming such skills at the university the more chances they will have while searching for a job after graduation. In other words, a person must be multitasking. This can be a good precondition for getting a good job and personally development.

As for the modern higher education system, we can say that the most high schools try to implement educational technologies, which meet up-to-date requirements. The forming of main skills is foreseen in syllabus and curriculum. Students learn to work in teams making professional-based tasks and solving problems, which have to do with their future profession. For example, students take part in projects connected with their professional activity. It is important, that many projects are interdisciplinary. In such a way, students learn to examine a problem from different points of view and find the best solution of it. In this case, guarantee of success is their ability to work in different directions simultaneously searching for the best way achieve the goal. It means they learn to be multitasking.
However, not only project work can be multitasking. As for foreign language learning and teaching, there can be many possibilities to implement multitasking in learning process. In this case, there are two possibilities. The first one is to give to the students the tasks, which include only communicative oriented tasks. The second one is to give them professionally oriented tasks. By making the tasks the student have to solve problems using not only their knowledge in a foreign language, but also knowledge in their professional field. My purpose was to prove the effectiveness of multitasking taking in account the preparation students for their future professional activities and to train them in solving problems using foreign language (German).

2 METHODOLOGY

To organize my work more effectively, I divided it into some stages.

The first stage was theoretical research, which, in its turn was divided in sub-stages. At first, I had to clear what multitasking is. My first step was to study conception “multitasking” in modern educational theory and praxis. It turned out that today multitasking means first and foremost computer based tasks [2, 3, 4] because of the modern generation is called “technological, multitasking generation” [2]. My second step was to define multitasking concretely relating foreign language training. Only computer based learning is not enough for foreign languages because we have to do with communication, which is not only computer based. Moreover, communication at a non-linguistic university must be connected with professionalization [5, 6]. That means that students, use foreign language not only for communication in their professional field, but they also do problem-oriented and work-based tasks, make interdisciplinary research where they work with information in the languages they are studying. To examine the problem more precisely, I made a public opinion pull among my students and asked them to define what multitasking in professionally oriented foreign language learning means for them. The most popular answers were the following: “multitasking is to be able to use foreign language in communication with my German-speaking colleagues solving problems”; “multitasking is information processing while working with professionally based information using different information sources”; “multitasking is using foreign language knowledge by team-working connected with participation at projects in multinational team”; “multitasking is combining all my knowledge and skills to solve problems in my professional field”; “multitasking is to use modern information technologies and ability to combine these skills with foreign language knowledge to solve problems in professional field”; “multitasking is combination and connection all the skills and knowledge to do my work more efficient and more productive”.

The second sub-stage in my theoretical research was to summarize all above-mentioned opinions and to elaborate tasks pointed at training multitasking in professional oriented foreign language learning. After summarizing opinions, I would suggest the following definition for multitasking. Multitasking in foreign language learning at a non-linguistic university is ability to solve professionally oriented tasks using: 1) foreign language knowledge, 2) communicative skills in native and foreign language praxis, 3) former experience in professional field, 4) knowledge in professionally based disciplines, 5) modern information and communication technologies, 6) skills in solving work-based problems, 7) team-working skills, 8) creative approach to a problem, 9) critical thinking, 10) flexibility, and 11) social skills.

The second stage was preparing to experiment with multitasking. The main purpose was to organize the work at such a way, which would motivate students to use their experience in professionally based disciplines combining it with their foreign language knowledge and communicative skills to solve some problem tasks. For this purpose, I needed to study syllabus in professionally oriented disciplines to work out proper tasks. The schools and departments in question at the MGIMO-University are the following: School of International Relations, International Law School, School of International Economic Relations, School of International Journalism, School of International Business and Business Administration, School of Applied Economics and Commerce, School of Governance and Politics and some others. As for me, I work at the School of International Economic Relations and International Journalism. I had to elaborate tasks for these Schools for the students in 1st and 2nd Academic years. After studying the syllabus, I determined the main points in professional based disciplines. After that, I tried to extract the most interesting problems to solve, which demand multitasking skills. My next step was to work out tasks, which had to be interdisciplinary. That means, they must be work based, and at the same time motivate students use their foreign language knowledge and skills. Besides, using modern technologies and 21st century skills is necessary to include in doing such tasks. The main thing is not to forget: the students must solve a problem or do a task by doing some operations simultaneously.
The third stage was the experimental one. The participants were students in 1st and 2nd academic years who were only beginning to study the basis of their profession. Moreover, they did not have much German language experience. I can say, it was a challenge for them and for me as a teacher, but the results were quite well, as it will be shown below.

The main methods I used were modern approaches to foreign language teaching, such as problem-oriented approach, communicative approach, competency-based approach, personalized approach, gamification and some others.

Below I give some examples of multitasking work to illustrate my experimental work.

Multitasking in teamwork. The group of International Economic Relations students got the following task: to promote a Russian product at the German market. The work was organized in a project form, where each student had her/his own field of work. But they didn’t work separately. They had to examine German market, and then they found out a product in short supply (felt boot – traditional winter footwear in rural areas (valenki)). After that, they elaborated a strategy of promotion, and as a result presented possibilities how to promote these goods. Why is such a work multitasking? The students had to solve not only professional based tasks, but also they applied creative approach to the problem, examined different ways to find the most effective promotion strategy, they used their former experience, and they applied their language knowledge and skills to get and process information in German. Moreover, all that was going on simultaneously.

Another group of students at the School of International Journalism got the task to prepare themselves to an interview with a famous German politician. To do this, they examined some information about personalities, after that they choose a person to interview, and then got more information about this person. On this base, they made up a questioning according to up-to date political situation. Well, multitasking consisted in searching and analyzing information using German language knowledge, putting it together, and making up questioning taking into account political situation in the changing world. Such skills as creativity, using professionally based disciplines, flexibility were combined with using information and communication technologies. Besides, in both cases the students demonstrated high level of social skills.

Multitasking in pair work. I decided to try multitasking in the work with a text. The main goal for students was comprehension the text in German language as a result of text reading and analysis. The main skills to implement were creative approach to a problem, critical thinking, flexibility, social skills, and competence in working with ICTs. The students got a text, which contained some unknown words and grammar. To comprehend the whole information, they were recommended to organize their work as follows. The student got a sheet of paper with a printed professionally-based text. One person is reading the text aloud while the other person is marking new words and grammar. After that, they simultaneously searched for word meanings in electronic dictionaries using different sources. Like this, they worked with the new grammar. At last, they changed the information with each other and compared the findings. As a result, they comprehended the text, mastered new grammar, and learned new words more efficiently than if thee had worked in an ordinary way.

Multitasking in individual work. In this case, a student got a professionally oriented task consisting in extracting, comparing, and putting together information from different sources in German language. These sources were podcasts, video casts, news on television and in internet, paper articles, printed books, reference books, and manuals. Internet was considered the main source. The person had to work with all of these sources, choosing between the most important and not so important information. It was necessary to do the following simultaneously: follow the information in internet; use critical thinking by analysis; reject unimportant information; decide if she/he needed some additional sources and use them if was necessary. The result of this work was a short presentation in a form of verbal answer.

The last stage of my work was the post-experimental one, which included estimation, evaluation and feedback. The results are the following (see section below).

3 RESULTS

After experimental work had been finished, the first result were estimated. My goal was to get some feedback from the students to realise if I was right to start this experiment or it was useless. A questionnaire was made up, which contented the following questions. 1) What difficulties presented your multitasking work? 2) What was the most interesting for you, and what was not quite interesting
or not at all interesting? 3) Were your multitasking activities successful? If not, what was the reason for no / little success? 4) What were you lacking while working multitasking? 5) What other activities can you suggest within the framework of multitasking? 6) Are you a multitasking person in ordinary life? Is it good or not so good for you? Why? 7) Would you like to go on with multitasking in your German classes?

As the answer on question number one the following difficulties were mentioned, which can be divided in two groups. The first group is connected with common competences and includes: search for information among too many sources in internet; process information, and information analysis. The second one belongs to language knowledge and includes difficulties connected with unknown words and grammar. As for the second question, the most interesting were a new possibility in using language knowledge and combining them with professional skills. Not so interesting was routine work such as searching in internet for a long time. By answering the third question all the students considered they multitasking activities to be successful. The answer to the fourth question helped to discover some gaps to fill which interfered with multitasking activities. Some students mentioned the lack of time, others came across difficulties in social activities (team working, interaction in pair work). It is worth mention, that for some responders the main difficulty was the multitasking work itself because of it was quite new for them. Very interesting for me was the answer to the fifth question. Students suggested activities which they regard as multitasking, such as “brain storming”, case study, role-plays and others. As for the sixth question, the responders answered that they are multitasking in ordinary live. For example, some of them can do home tasks and listen to the radio or watch TV; speaking over the phone and searching in internet at the same time is multitasking too. Common opinion was that one cannot do without multitasking in modern life. Multitasking is good because it helps save time and do more things. By answering to the seventh question, all the students agreed to do more multitasking.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As the result of my research, I can conclude that multitasking is efficient because of: 1) It contributes to develop main skills, which are considered as 21st century skills. 2) It motivates students to use all their knowledge and experience to do a task. 3) It helps to implement their communicative skills in work-based tasks. 4) It gives a possibility to further development. 4) It indicates perspectives in the future profession.

Because of the experiment, I can conclude that multitasking is useful in foreign language teaching and learning because of it can influence the educational process positively and motivate students to act in difficult situations using all their skills and knowledge simultaneously.

As for further perspectives, it seems to be important to popularize this experience and implement multitasking at other faculties and schools. Besides, it can be possible to include multitasking in other disciplines connecting and combining many of them. The work in this direction can assist in personal development and in future professional development.

REFERENCES


