HOME-READING STORIES WRITTEN BY STUDENTS AS A COMPREHENSIVE METHOD OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

The article is devoted to an experience in German language teaching. The authors describe the process and results of a project named "Language learning based on literature creation". The project was held in the frame of home reading as one of the aspects in a foreign language teaching and learning. Working at home reading supposes reading, analysis and discussing a literary work written by a German author. Besides, this work includes word and grammar training. Taking in account the future profession of students (the faculty in question is International Journalism) the authors suggested the fourth-year-students not only read the work of literature but also to create their own work for first-year-students. The project work included some stages: choice of the subject, task distribution, work out of the plot, project implementation, preliminary evaluation, presentation of work results, final evaluation.

The main conclusions of the work could be the following.

1. Such project work is connected with the special subject. The students are upcoming journalists and writing skills are very important to them. Therefore, they can developed their skills not only in native language.
2. Creating a literature work is useful for developing team-working and communicative skills.
3. The student get a possibility to help the junior students and to motivate them for successful German language learning.

Such a work seems to become an innovative method based on a new creative approach to teaching a foreign language.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, home-reading, project work, innovation, creativity

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of modern higher education is to prepare upcoming specialists to their future profession. In this connection, special subjects are on the first place. However, it does not mean that other subjects (such as a foreign language at a non-linguistic university) can ignore that aim. Modern concepts of higher education are based on the idea of professionalization. To our mind this idea must run thorough all the subjects including foreign languages.

At MGIMO-University, foreign language teaching is divided in some aspects, such as translation, mass media-based communicative skills development, home reading and others. Home reading is a good possibility to get acquainted with German-speaking authors, but only on condition that the students have a good proficiency in a language. As for the first-year-students, they don't have enough language skills to read originally literature works, so the main goal of home reading is another one, namely to enrich their vocabulary based on a simple story, to train the basic grammar and to develop communicative skills.

Proceeding from the conception of collaborative learning, we decided to combine the professional approach with practical needs of the first-year-students. Therefore, we got an idea to suggest the students of International Journalism faculty to try their hands in writing a simple story in German language for their younger colleagues. After the story was ready, we tried to transform it into a complete manual for German language learning. The experiment will be described below.
2 METHODOLCOOGY

The method we are offering in this paper can be referred as experimental one. Its experimental character consists in the fact that the method is based on students’ creative work confined by the parameters, that assigned by the teacher.

At the first stage of our experiment, we distributed the tasks among the four-term students. As concerns out particular case, so we set the students a task to write a detective story with enthralling plotline, it became a creative component of the experiment. We intentionally choose the detective genre as one that presumes fascinating stories, arousing interest of both readers and writers. The latter circumstance was especially important in the initial stage of the experiment, since we had to keep the participating students high motivated.

The second stage of the experiment was devoted to working out of the story plot. We organized some brainstorming discussions to invent a story that could fascinate the readers. The students suggested their ideas one by one. The best ideas were selected and used as the base of the whole story. The student were free to choose the main characters, their age and occupation and so on. The only limitation in the creative component was one that concerns the volume of the story: in order to avoid the situation, when there are not enough lessons in the term to read a home-reading story completely and discuss the impression left by it, the amount of chapters had to be equal to the amount of home reading lessons provided by the curriculum.

The third stage of the experiment was project implementation. The most important aim of the experiment and of the whole method is to acquaint the students with German culture and history. This aim is reflected in the area studies element. This element consisted in that according to the task the story action should take place against the background of various famous places in Germany, which are closely allied with its history and culture and well known in the world. This condition produced an effect that the students had to study background materials strongly in order to be able to create a probable story and avoid in the same time error of fact. The posterior discussion with the participated students demonstrated how greatly increased their area studies knowledge after the project had been finished.

The language aspect of the project was the most regulated. As story writer participated in the project second-year-students. But the story was meant for first-year-students. So the range of lexical and grammatical means, that could be used for text creation, was restricted. On the one hand, the language complexity of the text should not exceed the language competence of first-year-students after one term of German studying. On the other hand, the text creation should not be too simple for the second-year-students, that is why the moderate usage of more complicated language phenomena was welcome. As a result, we had a text of average complexity that is complex enough to motivate both creators and readers to active out-of-class studying activities, but in the same time simple enough to let the students to rely on their obtained knowledge.

The creative component of the experiment serves the purpose to set the creator-students under conditions, when the need to invent an interactive content of the plotline. An interactive content consists of interaction acts between characters. The nature of a detective story presumes an investigation idea, embodied in the form of quest, when investigator get the information through the dialog. Certainly, these dialogs are fictitious, but the more valuable they are for the experiment, while in such situations the students had to rely on their previous communicative experience.

Therefore, in our experiment we managed to put the students in such framework, where they had to show their communicative competence in different communicative situations, even in those they will not probably find themselves in the real life. Since almost the half of text volume falls on the dialogs between the characters, we can describe out method - in this case a story-writing method - as an intensive communication self-training. All speech means, used by the students during the fictitious interaction, can be subdivided in different groups, according to the communication aim: the interest demonstration (Wirklich?), anger (wenn du noch ein Wort sagst), recognition (du bist so klug), amazement (Mein Gott! Warum…?), a polite request (Könnten Sie uns bitte…?), consent (Okay/ Na gut/ Sehr gern!), introduction (Eva Hansen, Kripo München/ ich bin aus der Polizei) and many others. Since it is set in Germany, the story has an extensive cultural background. The cultural background serves the aim to put both writers an readers in the German sociocultural values. The sociocultural value presented in the story can be subdivided in two sections: national-historical values and everyday values. Since the story is written by Russian students, for whom the German culture is a foreign one, the presentation of cultural values in the story is based on the students’ ideas of relevance of a certain value for the Germans. The idea of relevance was formed during three terms of German studying by
the information, the students gathered from area studies articles, and descriptions, made by their teachers.

What we under the national-historical values mean is, first of all, the cultural heritage, of what the Germans should be proud, or at least are supposed by foreigners to be proud of. As our story concerns, the action takes place in the Harz - a geographical region, which became a scene of action some stories of German folk epic literature. Actually the legend about Frederick Barbarossa - a conspicuous figure in the German history -, that is with this region concerned, underlies the story plotline. The creative task, according to that the students had to put the detective story into German cultural background, induced them to find out more facts about the region and the legend about Barbarossa during their intensive independent work.

The everyday values reflect the ideas of everyday life of Germans. But it is of course life in Germany, imagined by the students of German. So when someone is in the city of Leipzig, he sees certainly The Monument to the Battle of the Nations, and then occurs a dialog, which expose the history of the monument and the historical invent itself. If a character in a flat leaves, then this flat has all morden conveniences. Then follows a dialog, which expose a lot of details relating to the theme accommodation, which is well-known to the students from their first year of studying German. The same thing with the themes of transport (the Germans goes by trains) and food (the Germans find it good to be a vegetarian and goes shopping in a supermarket). Such typical everyday life elements are successfully interlaced with the plotline and let students to remember the studied material of previous terms.

The language aspect of the project consisted first of all in the language means selection. As above mentioned it is determined by the studied lexical themes. But the necessity of text creation assigned its framework. So, although the first-year-students studies the material the present tense, the text as narration was written in the past tense and in the perfect tense. It is of course a challenge for first-year-students, but one that will be encourage. The language aspect of the text creation demonstrated also some gaps in knowledge of the creator-students, first of all in homonyms and prepositions usage. After the story was completed in generally outline, it was time for the fourth stage of the project, namely preliminary evaluation. On this stage, we discussed all questionable point and exchanged views to come to common consent. Of course, the text written by the students was not faultless. So after each chapter was ready, we discussed in the class to achieve improvements of communication aim expression. That is why our method is not only self-training, but also interactive student-teacher-cooperation. As already mentioned above, the story was offered the first-year-students as home-reading literature, so the adjusted speech means are the part of communicative experience of readers. It gives us the right to describe our method also as passive communicative training.

The next stage of the project was the development of digital version of the story. The necessity of such a version was obviously. Firstly, all the students use digital tools and gadgets not only in their everyday life but also as additional aid for their studies. Secondly, the efficiency of using ICTs in the frame of eLearning has been already proved. Electronic books has already become a part of our life. Electronic textbooks and manuals are used by students instead of printed ones. Thirdly, the first-year-students who are at the beginning of studying foreign languages need additional learning aid, the more the better. Taking in account all above mentioned we decided to create an electronic manual based on a home-reading story. The main feature of this manual should be its interactive interface. In other words, there are the hyperlinks and pop-ups. Besides, the integral part of the manual must be interactive exercises for training active vocabulary and grammar. Proceeding from the main principles of organization electronic manuals we begin to develop an interactive home-reading manual using simple tools available in Internet such as Hot Potatoes. The last one is convenient for creation interactive self-training exercises. Hyperlinks and pop-ups are simply to do using tools such as site builder and so on.

The first step was to create an interface according to components of the manual. The components were the following: text divided into chapters, vocabulary, grammar and vocabulary exercises, and cultural background information.

The work with the home-reading manual begins with the main menu containing the titles of the chapters. By selecting any chapter, the user (student) can also select a sub-menu, which contains above mentioned components (vocabulary etc.). It means: the student can begin with reading the story or can at first get acquainted with vocabulary and only after that start reading. Working with electronic manual, the students have more possibilities in contrast to work with printed version of the story. For example, they can use pop-up hints in case of not knowing a word. In this case, it is no need to go to vocabulary because one can find the translation on the pop-up. If a student would read a printed version, he/she would waste time for searching word for word in the dictionary. The pop-ups help save time while reading. In the same way, the student can use pop-ups with cultural background
information. After reading a chapter, the student can choose from some possible next steps: they can read the next chapter or select grammar or vocabulary training. In this case, they do not need to do these exercises at the lesson. That helps save time and begin communication according to contents of the story, which contributes to develop communicative competence more efficiently. One more advantage of such electronic manual is a possibility to extend the volume of the manual if necessary. For example, if there are not enough exercises for achieving the best result, one can add some more ones.

The fifth stage of the experiment was presentation of work results. The manual was presented to the colleagues and students. Finally, the home-reading manual was integrated into German language training. The first-year-students were offered this manual in both variations: as a printed book and as an e-manual. The students worked with the manual during the whole term. The results of the work were important for the sixth stage of the experiment, final evaluation, described below.

3 RESULTS

It was important for us to get a feedback to realize if our experiment had been worth carrying out and would be worth carrying out in the future. For this purpose, we interviewed our students to get to know if they consider such a work useful for developing communicative competence or professional skills (or both). The interview elicited the following facts.

The main result of the whole experiment was that both second-year-students and first-year-students got additional motivation to study German language. The first-year-students got a learning aid in form of the printed and electronic manual based on a crime story. It was interesting for them to read the story because of the intrigue, they become more motivated to learn vocabulary because they realised the necessity of it: the more words they would know the better they would understand the story. The students – upcoming journalists – got a real chance to create a task that had a practical implementation. Besides, they got added evidence that they had made the right choice concerning their future profession.

4 CONCLUSIONS

1. The students – story-writers – are upcoming journalists and writing skills are very important to them. During the experiment, they got a possibility to develop their skills not only in native language.
2. Creating a literature work is useful for developing team-working and communicative skills. It makes each team-worker be responsible for the common result.
3. The student get a possibility to help the junior students and to motivate them for successful German language learning.

Integration the manual into the process of foreign language learning and teaching can contribute to increasing motivation not only to learn a foreign language but also to develop professional skills. Such a work seems to become an innovative method based on a new creative approach to teaching a foreign language. We hope that our experiment will break new ground for similar further projects. We are ready to share our experience with other colleagues.

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