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The Influence of Transformations in the Modern Labour Market on Foreign Language Courses at Universities

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Abstract: The topicality of the study is determined by the discord between the foreign language teaching standards in Russian universities and undergraduate and graduate students' requirements oriented towards the modern labour market. Having obtained a specialty, university graduates may work in different fields or change their job profile altogether; the borders of professions and professional standards are undergoing changes as well. The aim of the study is to show the necessity to transform foreign language teaching standards at the university level in accordance with the recent and ongoing changes in the job market. The hypothesis of the study is that foreign language teaching standards in Russia should integrate communicative competence, critical and creative thinking, and learning to learn as necessary components. It is suggested that students of non-philological specialties should be taught two or three foreign languages instead of only advancing their command of English. The hypothesis was confirmed by the polls conducted among undergraduate and graduate students of the College of Asian and African Studies (CAAS, Lomonosov MSU), over 2019-2020. The study resulted in developing a new standard of teaching foreign languages at the CAAS, which includes teaching two European languages alongside an oriental/African one, and creating a new structure of the English language course oriented towards developing soft skills rather than a purely linguistic component. Thus, the study seeks to substantiate the need for the new standard by the requirements of the modern job market and graduates' demands. Creating the new standard targeting soft skills development and teaching two European languages is a practical result of this work.

Keywords: labour market, soft skills, foreign language curriculum, communicative competency, learning to learn.

Introduction

The past 20-25 years have witnessed significant changes in the world of labour and professions. If earlier it was typical of a person to acquire a qualification, find a job and seek professional growth making a career at one enterprise, now it is often possible not just to change several working places over one's professional life, but to move to a professional sphere which is not connected directly or at all with the received education. Interdisciplinarity is frequently cited as the main transformation in the sphere of profession, science and art, as well as the fact that many professions and occupations overlap. Information openness, intrusion of new knowledge and technologies into habitual professional standards presuppose the ability to work fast with new information and flexibility in any occupation. In this respect the question arises increasingly frequently in the context of higher education not only about graduates having professional content knowledge, i.e., an aggregate of knowledge and competencies which are present in their profession the moment they graduate, but also their possessing certain qualities and skills which transcend the borders of conventional jobs. These qualities and skills are referred to as soft skills or transversal skills, i.e., skills that are necessary in many occupations or 21st century skills (although there are many other terms). Soft skills are becoming crucial in training a specialist. Knowledge has become, on the one hand, quite accessible in the information society, on the other hand – not as determinant as soft skills. The latter include both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities which promote individual success in life in the study, work and other areas of the so-called "adult responsibility" (Pellegrino, Hilton, 2012). The main thing is the ability to perceive and acquire new knowledge, rather than have the ready-made knowledge at a certain moment.

The World Economic Forum conducted an event in Dubai, in March 2015, which focused on education. It resulted in compiling a document identifying 16 key skills for the 21st century. These skills are placed into three categories – basic literacy, competencies and personal characteristics. (World Economic Forum, 2015)

As for universities, they can formulate their own set of soft skills which they regard essential for their students to acquire if they want to be in demand in the labour market. It may be managing personal finances

or time, or the ability to resolve conflict and accept positive criticisms. However, this list will inevitably include communication (both written and spoken), team work (collaboration) and critical thinking.

Artificial intelligence, automation and robotics, biotechnologies and advanced materials are already transforming and disrupting the world of work (Webster, Ivanov, 2020). A report by the World Economic Forum "The Future of Jobs 2020" (World Economic Forum, 2020) demonstrates that critical thinking and creativity are becoming increasingly important for 2020. According to employers, emotional intellect will acquire a greater role later on. In 2022 such skills as memory and verbal abilities (reading, writing, active listening, speech) will be more in demand. This is undoubtedly the sphere of foreign language teaching. They not only must be, but also can be taught while developing professional communication competencies.

In the context of foreign language teaching, competencies in the scheme of 21st century skills are of particular interest, i.e., critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, although some personality traits – curiosity, determination, adaptability, social and cultural awareness – can also be developed through certain approaches, the choice of curricula and methods of teaching.

Recently there has appeared The Cambridge Framework of Life Competencies, which is itself based on a large body of research. The CFLC pertains to human functioning in various spheres of life, but is not bound to specific content areas in which people learning or using a foreign language specialize. One of the key terms is "competency" which is defined by the Council of Europe as a mix of knowledge, skills and attitudes where:

- knowledge facts and figures, concepts, ideas and theories which are already established and support the understanding of a certain area or subject;
- skills ability and capacity to carry out processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results;
- attitudes disposition and mind-sets to act/react to ideas, persons or situations (Council Recommendations..., 2018).

The Cambridge Framework includes the following competencies: creative thinking, critical thinking, learning to learn, communication, emotional development, collaboration and social development, with each competency having its component competencies. The first five competencies are the most relevant for this study.

Creative thinking is a complex concept which has proved difficult to define. There are some elements which are always present in a creative act: novelty, recognition and acceptance within the domain where they occur, relevance and practicality (Maley, Peachey, 2010). Some characteristics of creativity are thinking out of the box, imagination, cognitive flexibility, tolerating ambiguity or unpredictability, intrinsic motivation and joy from things previously unfamiliar. Three components of creative thinking are: participating in creative activities; creating new content from own ideas or other resources; using newly created content to solve problems (Cambridge Framework..., 2018).

Critical thinking refers to higher levels of thinking and consists of identifying links between ideas, analysing points of view and evaluating arguments, supporting evidence, reasoning and conclusions (Cambridge Framework..., 2018). The major components of critical thinking are: understanding and analysing the links between ideas; evaluating ideas, arguments and options; synthesizing ideas and information.

Learning to learn also comprises three components: practical skills for participating in learning, the so-called learning technologies; taking control and managing your own learning; self-reflection and self-assessment. (Cambridge Framework..., 2018)

The 21st century skills framework defines communication, or communication competency, as the ability to listen, comprehend, transfer and contextualize information via verbal, non-verbal, visual and written means. P. Cenere and co-authors regard communication as a critical skill for business professionals; it is definitely "more than reading and writing." "Good communication skills make us employable, regardless of the specialization we are choosing within the business world." (Cenere et al., 2015, xiii). It is also an "active process influenced by the complexities of human behaviour in which elements such as non-verbal behaviour and individual styles of interpreting and ascribing meaning to events have a significant influence. Mastering effective communication is a skill which can be developed and honed and is distinct from mastering the core linguistic features of language". (Cambridge Framework..., 2018, 5)

In the Cambridge Framework, communication comprises the following competencies: using appropriate language/registers for context; managing conversations; participating with appropriate confidence and clarity. (Cambridge Framework..., 2018)

Collaboration is the ability to work in a team striving to achieve a common aim, including the ability to prevent and manage conflict.

The Cambridge Framework for Life Competencies bases on three foundation layers: emotional development, digital literacy and content knowledge. The concept of emotional intelligence dates to 1990, when P. Salovey and J. Mayer defined it "a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's life" (Salovey, Mayer, 1990, 185). Since then the hypothesis has grown into a large body of research, which repeatedly proved that emotional intelligence can be more determinant for the worker's success in the labour market than IQ. It is noteworthy that interpersonal skills, that are part of EQ can contribute to companies' success as well as they lead to establishing productive working relationships, better collaboration and team work (Goleman, 1998; Mayer, Salovey, Caruzo, 2008). A number of works have shown emotional development to have a greater impact on academic and social success than cognitive abilities (Pope, Roper, Qualter, 2011). The three main components of emotional development are: defining and comprehending emotions; managing one's emotions, empathy and relationship building skills.

Emotional development should undoubtedly become one of the tasks of foreign language teaching, as studying diverse languages and cultures implies developing such qualities as empathy and tolerance towards other people's sentiments. The experience of overcoming cultural shock often increases general stress resistance.

The development of the above-mentioned competencies must concern practically all subjects taught at universities. That is why lately the term "educational technology" appears to be replacing the term "methods of teaching", the former including certain general principles of memory functions and attention – basic human abilities for mastering a certain information basis and applying it in practice.

Because of the pandemic of corona virus over the past year universities have been facing the dire necessity to implement the teaching of all subjects distantly. What has actually happened is adapting the existing traditional forms of teaching to various on-line platforms. However, it turned out that despite abundant electronic resources and apps, as well as the active use of video, it is hardly possible or even impossible to attain the same level of efficiency as in the face-to-face classroom, as far as foreign language teaching is concerned. It was noticed both by the teachers and the students who asked to be transferred back into the physical language classroom at the first opportunity. From the authors' point of view, it happens due to the absence of technologies of teaching suiting the on-line format, where attention and memory seem to work differently. Hence, it requires a different structure of the lesson, different types of assignments, and different forms of control. When learning on-line, the direct emotional contact between the teacher and students and students with each other suffers.

It is becoming obvious that the system of foreign language teaching in Russia should be transformed if we set an aim to produce students who are sufficiently prepared for the modern labour market. It is not a narrow specialization, studying terms, or reading specialty texts that are required but rather developing vital soft skills, which contribute to professional growth, mastering related areas of knowledge and using knowledge and skills from different fields. The authors suppose that studying several foreign languages will help solve many of the above-mentioned tasks, as it developing such vital skills as learnability by maximizing the work of memory and attention (Marian, Shook, 2012); creativity (Furlong, 2009); emotional intellect (through studying foreign languages in their cultural contexts), emotional competencies and foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele, Macintyre, 2014), critical thinking and other cognitive abilities through comparing different language systems (Keysar, Hayakawa, An, 2012; Bartolotti, Marian, 2012; Wallin, 2019) and clearly communicative competency, which presupposes studying language etiquette, rhetoric, correct interaction with various partners.

Recent research demonstrates that such transversal skills as critical thinking, collaboration competence and creativity can be fostered in the context of tertiary education when incorporated into the English language course (Sinkus, 2020; Tevdovska, 2015).

The aim of the study is to substantiate the need for the new standard of foreign language courses in the university in Russia by the requirements of the modern job market and graduates' demands.

Methodology

The job market requirements are the main reference point while rethinking the standards. The study identified the most in-demand soft skills based on the analysis of reputable research of the labour market and aims to determine whether these soft skills can be developed in a foreign language class. An important part of the study is the polls demonstrating that the students are interested in adjustments to the standards, namely, introducing two European languages and modifying the typology of tasks defined by the development of soft skills.

In accordance with the aim of the study the following tasks were set:

- to identify the attitudes of the undergraduate students of the 3d and 4th years of study to the prospect of taking up a second European language after completing an English language course of 5 semesters;
- to consider whether the 4th year undergraduate students and master students realize the significance of soft skills and to study which soft skills they consider most important;
- to study whether the respondents regard foreign language classes as a conducive environment for developing their soft skills.

The authors' hypotheses were that the students of the College of Asian and African Studies tend to be oriented towards language study and consequently should be interested and committed to studying more languages not only for enhancing their employability and career prospects in the future, but also for broadening their horizons and improving their cross-cultural communication, i.e., for self-development. Studying an oriental or African language is often perceived as exotic, it requires substantial investment in terms of time and effort but not necessarily is in demand in the labour market. English is learnt at school, quite often in a large volume, and many students will have already mastered it at the C1 or even C2 level by the time they are accepted at university. That is why the authors hypothesized that if the students were offered an opportunity to take up one more European language in addition to English as part of their curriculum, they would mostly feel positive about such a prospect. Besides, the authors supposed that the students should be quite aware of the importance of soft skills and would embrace an opportunity to see their development as one of the aims of their education in general and foreign language classes in particular. Thus, students should favour the prospect of seeing their foreign language course modified towards incorporating two European languages and developing soft skills rather than a purely linguistic component.

The results of the first survey were presented and warmly received at the conference "Languages in the Open World" held in Graz, Austria, November, 20-22, 2019.

The results of the second poll are being presented in this article.

Participants: Undergraduate students of the 5th and 7th semesters aged 20-22 (Mdn. = 21, 65 % female, 35 % – male) participated in the first poll (91 in total), while the second poll targeted the undergraduate students of the 5th and 7th semesters (25 respondents, aged 20-22, 67 % – female, 33 % – male) as well as master students in the 3d semester (20 respondents, aged 24-25, 60 % – female, 40 % – male) (45 in total), i.e., those who are already aiming at their career and realize the practical value of the received education. Sampling was random. Gender groups were not regarded separately.

Measures: The authors conducted two polls among the students of the College of Asian and African Studies of Lomonosov MSU. Both questionnaires were designed by the authors and drawn up in Russian, the mother tongue of the respondents. Both questionnaires consisted of questions of a close-ended, multi-choice type, presupposing the selection of one option out of several – 6 questions in the poll concerning the participants' attitude to the prospect of taking up a second European language, and 5 questions in the poll referring to the students' opinions of the importance of soft skills and their development in foreign language lessons. The first poll was conducted in September 2019, the second – September 2020.

<u>Procedure:</u> The questionnaires were typed out and distributed in class among the potential respondents who completed the questionnaires at leisure and submitted them in the teachers' absence. The answers were subsequently compared and analysed.

Results and Discussion

The first survey aimed to establish whether future orientalists wanted to take two European languages alongside their oriental/African one.

One hundred percent of the respondents considered the knowledge of two European languages necessary or very desirable (Figure 1). Sixty one percent perceive the command of English insufficient for communication in any sphere, while 69.2 % acknowledge that being able to speak two European languages may enhance their academic prospects, and 72.5 % - career prospects in general.

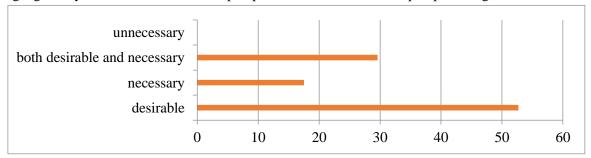


Figure 1. The respondents' opinion on whether knowing 2 European languages is necessary or desirable (in percentage of respondents).

The second survey concerned bachelor and master students' perceptions of soft skills required for furthering their study or career. There were four questions:

- 1. What is more important: theoretical knowledge, only soft skills or the combination of the two?
- 2. Which soft skills do you consider important: critical thinking, creativity, emotional intellect, learnability, collaboration or some other?
- 3. Is it possible to form and develop soft skills at foreign language lessons?
- 4. Is it necessary to assess the level of soft skills in the formative and summative assessment of the command of a foreign language despite the fact that these skills do not directly affect the mastery of a foreign language?

The responses to the first question demonstrated that the majority of participants (41 persons) consider the combination of theoretical knowledge and soft skills the most essential. Only 1 person pointed out the dominant significance of theoretical knowledge, and two more persons indicated that soft skills alone are more important.

Among the soft skills (critical thinking, creative thinking, emotional development, learning to learn, collaboration) the students selected critical thinking (31 answers) and learnability (27 responses) as the most important, closely followed by collaboration (26). Creative thinking and emotional intellect had practically the same number of votes (21 and 20 replies respectively) (Figure 2).

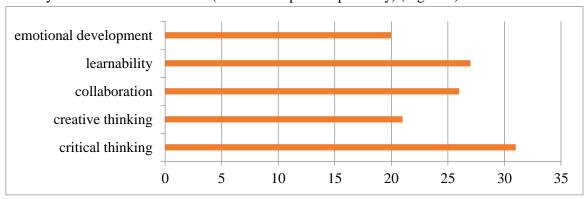


Figure 2. The respondents' opinion on the most important soft skills (in number of respondents).

While answering the third question, practically all participants indicated that soft skills can be and must be formed and developed in foreign language classes and 17 respondents regarded it as desirable.

When replying to the question concerning assessing soft skills via formative and summative assessment, most students (25 persons) gave the highest score to the necessity to assess skills and competencies directly related to the degree of practical command of a foreign language, not the soft skills. Possibly, the students feel somewhat fearful of their soft skills being assessed as there are no stringent criteria for assessing such qualities as creativity or teamwork. It is rather a psychological personality assessment where objective judgments are not possible.

The polls conducted among the students of non-philological specialties of the Lomonosov Moscow State University confirmed the authors' hypothesis based on the analysis of the existing foreign language teaching standards and the requirements of the modern labour market. The main conclusion made on the first stage of the research was the awareness of the necessity to transform the existing standards because of a discord between the aims and objectives of foreign language courses and the demands of the modern job market. It was necessary to determine the vector of change of these standards. The first poll demonstrated the desire of the students to study two European languages. The main cited reasons were: 1) the English language is insufficient for communicating in different professional spheres; 2) the wish to develop communicative competence comprising not just the language itself but also the ability to communicate in different cultures; 3) the desire to develop learnability that is connected, among other things, with developing memory, attention and ability to analyse language structures. The shift from purely linguistic teaching of languages, first of all, English, towards developing certain soft skills communication competence, critical and creative thinking, learning to learn – became the main vector of transforming the content part of the teaching standards, the typology of activities and assessment. These soft skills are cited in the modern literature as necessary and essential for success beyond the language classroom in various areas. The students' polls confirmed their wish to develop these soft skills in foreign language lessons. Further research will focus on assessing the new standard, according to which the students started studying in the first semester of 2020, and on the polls of graduates and employers about the efficiency and demand for skills acquired in a foreign language classroom.

Conclusion

The main results of the study are the following:

- The need for rethinking the foreign language teaching standards for students of non-philological specialties and their adaption to the job market requirements has been shown;
- One of the vectors of changing the standards is to introduce a second European language, which is confirmed by the students' wishes and uncertainty about the English language being sufficient for professional communication;
- Developing soft skills is becoming a priority in class over a purely linguistic aspect of teaching, primarily, communication competence, critical and creative thinking and learning to learn;
- The practical result of the study is developing a new foreign language teaching standard for the College of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Studying a second and a third foreign language establishes a basis for the ability to control one's attention, to activate memory's reserves, as well as to develop critical thinking (while comparing language systems, communication blocks and culture codes). Working with large masses of information improves the work of memory, learnability and critical thinking skills while selecting the most relevant information. Tolerance towards other cultures and their carriers contributes to emotional development. All these soft skills easily integrate into foreign language courses which can successfully prepare undergraduate and graduate students to future challenges in the labour market if there is a modification in the conceptual approach, typology of tasks and forms of assessment.

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