Organizing Independent Activity in EFL Teaching in Ethnically Diverse Classrooms at the University of the Coal Mining Region

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Abstract. Training of highly qualified specialists is a significant factor for the consistent progress in any branch of economics. Kemerovo State University provides training of specialists for the coal mining region in Russia. Nowadays, the University tends to increase the proportion of foreign students as well. Most of these are students from neighboring countries, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, where raw materials industries, including mining, are developed. Taking into account the multi-ethnic diversity of students at Kemerovo State University, we analyzed the experience and determined the worthwhile forms of organizing independent activity in EFL teaching. Among the forms of independent activity, we introduced independent reading, preparing thematic presentations, written tasks based on video content, and writing thematic essays. Organizing independent work in the educational process, which involves a large number of multinational groups of students, we took into account the following conditions. We considered such particular qualities of contemporary students as their general need in flexible learning environment as well as in self-expression; we took into account their interest in new knowledge and motivation for self-improvement, and at the same time, lack of desire for completing reproductive types of tasks, along with fragmented thinking.

1 Introduction

The purpose of the article is to analyze the experience and determine promising forms of organizing students' independent activity in teaching a foreign language at Kemerovo State University – the flagship university of the coal mining region. An important feature of the teaching process at Kuzbass University is the need to take into consideration the multiethnic diversity of its students, in creating the proper educational environment with a large number of multinational student groups.

Learning a foreign language has always been a compulsory part of the curricula, both of the secondary school and the University. At schools pupils can usually choose one of three foreign languages: English, German or French. In universities they traditionally continue to

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learn the same foreign language they had at school. It should be noted that nowadays the vast majority of students at Kemerovo State University study English as a foreign language.

The University course of foreign language at non-linguistic departments presents a complex educational program based on professional character of the content. The Department of Foreign Languages is responsible for the EFL teaching at Kemerovo State University. The University course of a foreign language is designed to develop linguistic competences along with intellectual, educational and professional culture of students [9]. This ensures the proficiency of future engineers, economists, exploration geologists, environmental managers etc. for coal-mining enterprises in Kuzbass region [3].

2 Materials and methods

The research presents the experience of organizing students' independent activity in EFL teaching at Kemerovo State University (Kemerovo), the leading institution of higher education in training specialists for mining industry in Kuzbass. The scientific study of the problem has begun in 2019.

In preparing the article the following methods and materials were used: reviews of publications on the problems of EFL teaching at higher educational institutions; interviews with teachers of foreign languages (36 interviewees) and students (647 interviewees) of Kemerovo State University (Kemerovo); analyzing the practice of EFL teaching at Kemerovo universities; evaluation of the content of language education at universities.

3 Results and discussion

University curricula of the modern Bachelor's Programs allocate considerable amount of credit hours for students' independent activity in learning a foreign language, which is more than half of the whole course.

One common example of independent activity among the traditional forms is the independent reading that teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages at Kemerovo State University offer their students. Independent reading involves reading and translating an original professional text with a dictionary. The purpose of independent reading is to enrich students' professional vocabulary, writing new unfamiliar foreign words in the workbook and accompanying them with a translation into Russian. It should be noted that students do not show their interest in the independent reading. Also, they often find this type of activity quite complicated. Nowadays, the availability of a variety of software and applications for the foreign language translation greatly facilitates a lot of manipulations with text material. Online applications with voice, text and camera translation can perform instant translation. However, the difficulty is that students often have no wish to independently carry out the written part of the assignment because of its reproductive character. For many of them, writing out a vocabulary from a text seems useless, and their solution to the problem is simply to memorize the translation of the text with a feeble attempt to compare it with the original, which, unfortunately, is seldom diligent.

Nevertheless, about 25% of students fulfill the teacher's task to write out foreign vocabulary from a text as a part of their independent reading assignment, thus enriching their professional vocabulary, as well as their knowledge of constructions typical of a scientific foreign language. Students' consistent work on a foreign language text including reproductive along with productive vocabulary tasks ensures stable and effective learning.

As for international students, they are, as a rule, more motivated to work independently with material in a foreign language: they diligently write out unknown vocabulary with translation into Russian. As the course of "Foreign language" is a part of curriculum at the

1st and 2nd year of the University studies, students have not yet lost their teenage perseverance in learning, which is typical in most cases for this age group, and uncomplicated by social goals that arise in senior courses.

However, it should be noted that international students demonstrate an excellent personal discipline in combination with tenacity, strength of spirit, which are characteristic for the majority of school graduates from countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. An additional factor in their appropriate attitude to independent activity is the sincere desire to quickly adapt to the new conditions – in the Russian University, primarily in relation to the language of teaching. Although teachers give foreign students an opportunity to submit the translation into Russian in writing, nevertheless, this independent work is carried out quite thoughtfully. When translating a text given for independent reading, foreign students show their interest or, at least, attention to the specific features of both foreign languages (Russian and English), and typical constructions, often draw a comparison of the languages, as they have to operate two foreign languages along with their mother tongue. It is important to point out that this approach to learning a foreign language can be called professional because students take it on a regular basis for a long time.

Thus, independent reading as a form of independent activity in the course of “Foreign Language” still remains useful for approximately 50% of students, and even effective for approximately 20% of students at the University.

An alternative format for students’ individual independent work is a presentation. If the majority of students in a group demonstrate reluctance or neglect to translate the text, then the teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages offer them to prepare a presentation on a topic. Creating a PowerPoint presentation in a foreign language involves working with the original language content in a more convenient and acceptable way for each student, thus satisfying the need of modern youth in flexible learning environment. In the process of independent work, the student inevitably faces the search, selection and processing of a large amount of information in a foreign language. Thus, preparing a presentation includes both reproductive and productive methods of working with a foreign language text.

Preparing a thematic PowerPoint presentation is considered as one of the productive forms of students’ independent work at the university. It is important that this type of activity on a topic corresponds to the key features of the modern generation of students, such as the desire for new knowledge and the need for self-expression.

Thus, the language training for modern university students largely depends not only on the ability of the teacher to keep their attention, but also on understanding their current interests [3].

However, one of the difficulties in teaching EFL is to make students interested in such aspect of learning a foreign language as grammar. Organizing independent grammar practice (in addition to classroom one) assigned by the “Foreign Language” course program has its own characteristics. Despite the fundamental importance of grammar skills in learning a foreign language [10], students often underestimate the need to work out grammar topics. The popular conception in language education with the focus on studying functional grammar, which is based on the relation between the structure of a language and the various functions that the language performs, is also losing its relevance. The modern generation of students, with their typical desire for quick and instantaneous results, hardly set a high value on arguments about the importance to have a general idea of the grammar aspects of a foreign language. They explain their grammar negligence by stating the opportunity to learn a foreign language directly through oral communication. (However, in fact a lot of students are still unable to make up elementary statements or use simple constructions spontaneously.) In other words, modern students with great difficulty sustain

the routine activities, including the study of grammar of a foreign language. The teachers solve this problem by inserting grammar instructions in different other language activities.

One more typical feature of foreign language learning at the university is, unfortunately, scarce written activities. This is due not only to a higher motivation for speaking in the modern world. Writing activities are degrading mostly because of the gadgets with their vast variety of applications and functions. A modern student rarely faces the need to write a foreign word into a notebook or translate a sentence. Thus multifunctional gadgets deprive students of the opportunity to learn writing skills in a foreign language. Students now do not even have to type a word or text to find the meaning – due to the availability of camera-translators – as a result, they practically do not train motor memory.

In order to engage students in activities of little interest to them, teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages compose assignments based on video content. Certainly, a new generation of young people is enthusiastic in work involving the use of new advanced media. This concerns organizing their independent work as well. It should be noted that the new generation of students has a huge interest in videos. Surveys show that many students spend about 1 hour a day watching videos, but some of them spend even 2 and 3 hours [2]. Observations also confirm that a new generation is watching a great amount of videos online. We consider this need of youth should be taken into account when organize their independent work. It is important that the video arouses the interest of students if it is of some real value – entertaining, educational or any other.

Consequently, one of the promising types of organizing students' independent activity at the university is a written assignment based on video recording. A teacher selects for students a thematic (according to the course program) video lasting 10-20 minutes, then offers a number of questions and tasks, suggesting creative studies based on it. Tasks include questions for general comprehension – about the principal character of the video, the key idea of his speech, the arguments that he provides in support of the main idea, about the methods and techniques he uses with the public, etc. A number of tasks also involve students' expressing opinion on the video content as well as giving a brief description of the given information, listing the new facts learnt from this video, thinking what question would he ask the principal character of the video, analyzing what is worth criticism in his speech, giving the vision of the problem discussed in the video.

It is clear from the above, that most of the tasks and questions virtually keep students out of incorrect answers, as they involve creative and analytical processing of video content [4]. In addition, assignments are comprehensible for students with different levels of foreign language proficiency; students can present both simple as well as detailed responses. As the Department of Foreign Languages at Kemerovo State University provides the EFL teaching for non-linguistic students, it is important to mention that oral practice on the basis of video content is very difficult for non-philologists. So, the better way to organize the speech interpreting is to give students an assignment to do this in writing. It is to be noted that in terms of independent activity, students have the opportunity to watch the video an unlimited number of times, to allocate as much time for writing their assignments as they require – depending on their educational aptitude.

Since the majority of videos in English reflect the real life in English-speaking countries, the intercultural element of assignment may include the question about typical and generally accepted ways to solve the problem under discussion in the student's native country [1].

General criteria when choosing a video or text material are their acceptable size and high relevance. We must not forget that modern students grow in conditions of a tremendous amount of information, which are responsible for the so-called fragmented thinking typical for the representatives of their generation. In other words, students are not able to concentrate on large pieces of information as part of their independent activity or

seminar. Due to fragmented thinking, their brain can reflexively ignore information perceived as irrelevant. This phenomenon is especially important to take into account when teaching a foreign language for students of non-linguistic departments, since they do not have a deep interest in words and text. Therefore, texts for studying should be adjusted to less than 1000 typographical units. If it is necessary to present some large text content at the lesson, it is recommended to structure it well, having previously divided it into semantic fragments and entitled each of them.

Another form of students' independent activity in foreign language learning at the university is the writing of a thematic essay. The essay topics are concerned with professional issues. The independent work is organized in different ways. As a rule, students are given complete freedom to present their thoughts on the topic. As an alternative, a teacher provides students with a short plan which includes different aspects of the topic that should be covered in preparing the essay. The intercultural component is accomplished through the task to present an opinion of a student on the topic as a representative of a certain culture, to describe its culture-specific concept [6].

Among the topics for video recordings and essays, teachers usually offer "Health" (or "Healthy lifestyle", "Stress in our lives"), "Ecology", "Internet in our life", "Employment", "Job satisfaction", "Business communication and etiquette" and so on.

Giving international students the task to express their attitude to the problem raised in the video or essay in terms of their national norms, is crucial for the intercultural component of the task [5]. It serves to solve several important problems facing the modern university [7]. Firstly, it helps to create a favorable educational environment in student groups characterized by multi-ethnicity. Secondly, the process of multicultural interaction of teachers and students mastering the course of "Foreign Language", which is the basic part of the undergraduate programs at the university, is improved.

4 Conclusion

Having studied the problem of organizing students' independent activity at Kemerovo State University with regard to the multiethnic diversity of its students, we arrived at some conclusions. One of the most important expectations of modern youth from higher education is an up-to-date learning environment with the opportunity of choice. First of all, a teacher should be flexible offering a variety of assignments to students. On the other hand, when offered an independent task, students should have the alternative ways to present the results of their activities. Flexible environment is especially required in terms of student groups characterized by polyethnicity, because of the different level of prior knowledge among them as well as their language proficiency.

Besides, it is impossible to ignore that the process of their studying needs to be accompanied by the use of advanced technologies: modern students perceive information through video, animation, use of applications etc.

It is still crucial that the interest in new knowledge and the desire of self-improvement are quite typical for contemporary students of different cultures and nationalities. Organizing their independent work, it is necessary to provide them with the most recent information of high relevance. The problem is that they are not inspired by dealing with the reproductive types of assignments. Teachers are responsible for engaging students in more dynamic intellectual activities. At the same time, it is important for a teacher to choose a video or text material of acceptable size – not too long to commensurate with students' capacities, and with respect to their so-called fragmented thinking. Pieces of information for independent activity shouldn't be too large considering the multiethnic variety in groups as well.

One more general conclusion for the research is that it is necessary to give students more written assignments for developing their writing skills and cognitive activity, since modern generation of students tends to use gadgets in all kinds of tasks.

The above mentioned features of organizing students' independent activity in EFL teaching are important to be taken into account with regard to the multiethnic diversity of its students. Different forms of independent activity, such as independent reading, preparing thematic presentations, written tasks based on video content, and writing thematic essays influence the proper language training of highly qualified specialists. Students' proficiency and future success in their professional life is one of the priorities for the University of the coal mining region. In this context, no doubt that the development and stability in Kuzbass depends completely on excellent specialists' training, which will sustain the knowledge-driven mining industry in XXI century.

Acknowledgement

The reported study was funded by RFBR according to the research project № 19-013-00805.

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