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DEFINITION AND ESSENCE OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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The paper discusses the constructivist approach to teaching/learning foreign languages (in particular, English) for professional communication – especially at tertiary schools. The origin and the essential features of the constructivist approach to teaching/learning foreign languages are analyzed and the definition of the approach for teaching ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at tertiary schools is formulated.

Keywords: constructivist approach to teaching/learning foreign languages, blended learning, experiential learning, interactive learning, content-based instruction.

The literature on the topic of constructivist teaching/learning of foreign languages for professional communication (in particular, at tertiary schools) is quite limited, if existing at all. However, constructivism is probably one of the most efficient approaches to such teaching – for instance, to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially when it concerns teaching ESP to tertiary school students. It is so because under the conditions of constructivist teaching/learning the process of acquiring a foreign language for professional communication becomes quite similar to the process of learning majoring disciplines, thus turning it into an organic constituent of professional training.

Unlike the literature on constructivist language teaching/learning, the literature on the constructivist approach *in general* is quite voluminous, and the origin of the approach is far from being recent. In fact, four names can be cited as the creators of the approach: Jean Piaget, who is its founder, Lev Vygotskii, Jerome Bruner, and John Dewey.

The theory of child development by Jean Piaget [10] is based on the assumption that through processes of *accommodation* and *assimilation* children construct new knowledge from their experience mostly acquired when playing. Every separate piece of new experience is incorporated into the existing framework which is in constant process of construction and reconstruction in accordance with the experience being gained.

Following the same line of thinking, Lev Vygotskii [12] defined successful human learning and development as the outcome of a social process of constructing knowledge and skills from experiential activities. A child cannot do such activities totally independently but they

become accessible when done more or less autonomously in collaboration with an adult who provides general guidance and prompts (the zone of proximal development – c.f. also [13, p. 40]).

Finally Jerome Bruner [2] proposed three modes of representation in human learning and development: enactive representation (action-based), iconic representation (image-based), and symbolic representation (language-based). According to Bruner, even for adult learners it is best, when faced with new material, to proceed from enactive to iconic to symbolic representation. That again means the domination of practical experience through which knowledge and skills are constructed and which lies at the foundation of all human developmental and cognitive processes.

Thus, it may be said that, according to the constructivist theory, humans gain their knowledge and skills from an interaction between their experiences (mostly social, i.e., generated in contacts and collaboration with other people) and their ideas. The ideas themselves are generated from experience (first of all, social experience) and are used to create frames into which new pieces of experience are introduced, generating new ideas that, in their turn, often modify or even totally change the existing frames, and so *ad infinitum*. Therefore, the basis of constructivist learning theory is the belief that human learning occurs only through experience – mostly practical experience. It is following this assumption that John Dewey [3] developed the first pedagogical constructivist approach to teaching and learning that he called *learning by doing*. It is based on learning not through theory but through the experience of real-life or modeled practical activities in the course of which knowledge is used as

the means or tools for those activities. As a result of using knowledge in practical activities, it is not simply learned but *internalized*, or *appropriated*, by learners, i.e., acquired much better and more efficiently (and with less efforts) than in the traditional learning process. Actually, it is learning by doing, or learning through practical experience (*experiential learning* – c.f. [8]) developed by Dewey that underlies all kinds of constructivist learning, including the type of learning a foreign language for professional communication discussed in this paper.

In fact, all approaches to teaching/learning based on constructivism, even the most recent ones, such as constructionism developed by Papert and Harel [9], derive from the set of ideas discussed above, primarily from the ideas of Jean Piaget and John Dewey.

In general, according to everything said above, *the constructivist approach to teaching/learning any subject (including foreign languages and ESP among them) may be defined as the approach providing students with opportunities of constructing their own knowledge and skills through practical experience in real-life or modeled activities. In this case, students acquire their knowledge and skills as a by-product of their real-life or modeled activities, thus internalizing (appropriating) the knowledge and skills and not just learning them.* Such an approach is also sometimes called *social constructivist approach* in psychological literature [13].

The definition of constructivist foreign language teaching/learning has to be just one particular case of the general definition above, i.e., be within the boundaries of that definition. However, in the case discussed in this paper the constructivist approach developed by us

for teaching ESP to Ukrainian tertiary school students was not only constructivist but a constructivist *blended* ESP teaching/learning. That is why before proceeding to formulating the definition being sought, the definition of blended learning should be given.

According to *Encyclopedia of Educational Technology* [4], the concept of blended learning grew out of the practical experience in e-learning. The experience demonstrated that only some but not all instruction is appropriate for online delivery. There are many contexts in which learning occurs best if the combination of traditional classroom and web-based training is provided. That is exactly what blended learning does, combining "... e-learning with a variety of other delivery methods for a superior learning experience" [5, p.1].

How exactly learning time is shared between classroom training and online training in blended learning situations (what the optimal blend is) is an open question and it may have an infinite variety of answers depending on what is being learned, for what purposes, by what category of students, under what circumstances, in what conditions, etc. But in all cases, blended learning has the advantage of being much more flexible than traditional learning. The flexibility is due to the fact that in blended learning a substantial part of instruction is delivered through online resources saving classroom time and intensifying learning because learners can acquire more knowledge faster and easier than they would have done in traditional learning situations. That is the key to improving training, especially practical training. As Gray [5, p.1] points out, "With blended learning, the tried-and-true traditional learning methods are combined with new technology to create a synergistic, dynamic learning structure that can propel learning to new heights".

Thus, blended learning can be defined as *a synergic learning structure, dynamically and organically combining into an indivisible unity traditional classroom learning with online learning for creating a more flexible learning environment with the purpose of intensifying and facilitating the practical training process.*

Blended learning is primarily de-

signed for practical training which, by the way, makes it so popular in different kinds of corporate training programs and in teaching Business English for practical use [5; 11]. But ESP teaching at tertiary schools is also based on practical training programs that develop students' practical target language professional communication skills. If such training programs are designed following the constructivist approach as it is defined above, it will mean that students will acquire the target language and communication skills in it mostly through real-life or modeled professional activities and professional communication in that language. In such a situation, it is quite rational to combine the constructivist approach with blended learning because it is only the online resources which blended learning activates in the learning process that may provide sufficient authentic materials for modeling professional activities and professional target language communication in the classroom. *This is the principal reason for developing the advocated constructivist blended learning approach to ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools.*

Having determined that and on the basis of the two definitions (of the constructivist approach in general and of blended learning) given above, the definition of the constructivist blended learning approach to ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools may be formulated.

It should again be emphasized that the definition being sought must, on the one hand, be within the scope of the given definitions of the constructivist approach and blended learning. But, on the other hand, such a definition is supposed to clearly reflect the specificity of ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools. Both these requirements are met by the following definition:

The constructivist blended learning approach to ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools gives students opportunities of constructing themselves their own knowledge and communication skills in English through experiential and interactive learning activities modeling the extra-linguistic professional reality for functioning in which the target language is being learned. Knowledge and skills constructing is done in such a way that from the very beginning those

skills and knowledge serve professional communication in English and improve and expand the information basis of that communication. Besides, successful knowledge and skills constructing is achieved owing to students' regular Internet research on professional sites in English when that research becomes an organic and unalienable part of the learning process no less important than more traditional in-class and out-of-class activities (blended learning).

The definition above emphasizes the four basic features of the constructivist blended learning approach to ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools developed by us:

The *experiential nature* of ESP learning activities [6; 7] which, by modeling extra-linguistic professional reality, ensure that students *experience* their personal functioning in that modeled reality using the target language for such functioning (profession-oriented communication in the target language). Thereby, professional communication skills are subconsciously constructed by students in the process of quasi-professional experience and communication. This sub-conscious construction intensifies and facilitates acquisition thanks to the fact of its being subconscious and, therefore, practically effortless.

The interactive nature of experiential learning activities that students mostly do in active creative interaction not only with each other and the teacher but also with the real-life (professional) environment/real-life (professional) sources of information (found on the Internet).

From the very beginning, constructing target language communication skills is inextricably connected with the students' future profession, i.e., with their tertiary school majors. It is achieved through integrating the learning content in the ESP course with the content of students' majoring disciplines which provides for improving and expanding the informational basis of professional communication in the target language. In this way the language instruction turns into content-based one [1].

Integrating the learning content in an ESP course with the content of students' majoring disciplines and, thereby, integrating the process of studying ESP with the process of studying majoring disci-

plines is achieved to a great extent thanks to students' regular Internet research on professional sites in English. Such in- and out-of-class research becomes an integral and inalienable part of the process of learning (blended learning in language teaching – c.f. [11]). It combines traditional classroom and online teaching/learning techniques into one single synergic structure that makes the teaching/learning (and acquisition) process more flexible and less effort-demanding for students. That allows for intensifying this process.

The four basic features indicated above determine the practical implementation of the constructivist approach to ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools. First, they presuppose designing the teaching/learning process mostly on experiential and interactive learning activities, such as: role playing professional situations in the target language; simulating professional activities in the target language; project work (when students do profession-oriented learning projects using the target language for doing such projects); brainstorming, case studies, and discussions on professional issues in the target language; students' presentations on some professional issues delivered in the target language; students' search for professional extra-linguistic information through target language sources (Internet, audio, audio-visual, and printed ones), that search being undertaken for finding some particular information required for doing profession-oriented learning assignments. Second, they presuppose specific selection of learning contents based on the requirements of *professional content* to be acquired through the media of the target language and not on the requirements of the *system* of that language. Finally, they turn students' Internet research on professional target language websites into a mandatory and regular learners' activity done both in and out of class.

The above listed requirements to practical implementation of the constructivist approach in the process of ESP teaching to students of tertiary schools are the *practical conclusions* from the analysis of the approach conducted in this paper.

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