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L2 Potential for University in the Context of Competence Approach

Zhanna Anikina*, Evgeniia Golianskaia

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, 30 Lenin Avenue, Tomsk, 634050, Russia

Abstract

Contemporary studies in the field of language acquisition show that the choice of a basic learning approach is of vital importance. To date, Russian educationalists reckon that competence-based approach is the most appropriate one. Firstly, this approach stimulates learner's self-development. It allows a learner to cognize oneself and realize individual abilities. Secondly, the approach mentioned broadens the potential of academic subjects, as it brings about the development of several competences. Finally, competence-based approach leads to the development of learner autonomy, which is regarded one of the most significant learning outcomes at a university.

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1. Introduction

The rapid pace of globalization and technological development has caused substantial transformations in the Russian system of education. These transformations are especially prominent in the field of L2 acquisition in Russia. Competence-based approach has attracted considerable interest among Russian L2 educators and policy-makers in the last few years. Yet, many theoretical and practical aspect of competence-based education remain unclear. This article examines some key issues of competence-based education and outlines its application to L2 teaching and learning at a university.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: janeanikina@yandex.ru (Zh. Anikina).

2. The essence of competence approach

Competence approach in education as opposed to knowledge-oriented one involves competencies development that allow students to act in new, unknown, problematic situations and find solutions to problems. In other words, competence approach is an improvement of education: the emphasis on students' knowledge shifts to the ability to use them, as the main value of today is not mastering some amount of information, but developing the skills that would enable students to define their goals, make decisions and act in typical and unordinary situations. The most important characteristic of competence approach is students' ability to learn in a self-directed way, which leads to the progressive development of an individual (Anikina & Golianskaia, 2014, p. 39).

It is considered that competence approach provides a student with the opportunity to cognize oneself, to show one's potential and be a competitive specialist with a high creativity and adaptability to new conditions of the labor market, as well as be a person, motivated for self-development and life-long learning. All this can be realized by means of competences development (Zimnyaya, 1991). Zimnyaya (2006) states that the changes regarding educational goals, which take place in the world and in Russia, make it necessary to obtain a more complete, personally and socially integral result, which can be referred to as competence.

The term "competence" was proposed by N. Chomsky with regard to the theory of language and transformational grammar. During the period of 1960-1970, this term used to mean "language awareness of a speaker/listener". The period of 1970-1990 can be characterized by using the term in the theory and practice of language teaching (especially non-native). This concept was considered to be a phenomenon comprising several components, cognitive and emotional. Since 1990, this concept has been used in the sphere of education.

To date, there is a wide variety of competence definitions. We follow Zimnyaya (2006), who defines competence as a combination of internal, potential, latent psychological aspects: knowledge, values and attitudes. Considering Anan'ev's opinion (2001) that a person is the subject of communication, cognition and labor, Zimnyaya (2006) identifies three groups of key competences:

1. *Competences relating to a person as an individual, performer of one's activity and communication:*

1) competences of health and safety; 2) value-oriented competences; 3) integration competences; 4) civic competences; 5) self-development competencies.

2. *Competences relating to person's interaction:*

1) social interaction competences; 2) communication competences.

3. *Competences relating to person's activity:*

1) cognitive competences; 2) competences of various activities; 3) IT competencies (for more details see Zimnyaya, 2006).

With regard to education, the following competencies are regarded to be the required learning outcomes:

- 1) socio-political (psychological readiness to solve emerging problems, ability to make independent decisions and take responsibility for them);
- 2) information (willingness and ability to work with contemporary sources of information in professional and personal spheres);
- 3) communicative (the ability to carry out oral and written communication to solve problems in different areas of professional, research, cultural and everyday activity, when dealing with foreign partners, and for further self-education);
- 4) sociocultural (the willingness and ability to live and interact in the modern multicultural world);
- 5) commitment to lifelong learning (Solovova, 2004).

3. L2 academic potential

In our opinion, academic subject "Foreign Language" can be effective in the development of several competences mentioned among the required learning outcomes. It is hard to overestimate the educational opportunities of a foreign language in the context of communicative and cultural student training. First of all, we should note that L2 acquisition is an obligatory part of professional training in Russia. Its main goal is to develop students' intercultural professionally oriented communicative competence, sufficient to solve professional and social problems as well as to perform further autonomous learning.

Having explored various educational documents (educational standards, curricula, specialized programs in Russia), we found out that L2 acquisition stimulates the development of several competences:

- 1) ability to use L2 for professional purposes (oral and written communication, reading professional literature, listening to professionally orientated texts, etc.);
- 2) ability to perform social interaction;
- 3) ability to identify personal trajectory of self-development and self-improvement (setting the desired goals in the level of language skills, defining tasks, arranging activities, etc.);
- 4) ability to achieve the identified goals (following the plan purposefully, working systematically, etc.);
- 5) ability to reflect (analyzing the activities performed, comparing intermediate results with final goals and their objective assessment);
- 6) ability to acquire new knowledge, using state-of-the-art information technologies (preparing reports, presentations, projects, etc.);
- 7) ability to collect, process and interpret information, to make conclusions, using state-of-the-art information technologies and Internet resources.

Based on our experience of L2 teaching and learning, we believe that learner autonomy should be considered one of the most important outcomes in competence-based L2 teaching. So, learner autonomy as a goal assumes the need to develop autonomous learner characteristics. There are different views about what they are. Table 1 illustrates the understanding of the basic autonomous learner characteristics in terms of Russian and overseas researchers.

Table 1. Key characteristics of an autonomous learner

Overseas researchers	Russian researchers
Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), Allwright (1988), Little (1991, 2000, 2002), Benson (2001, 2003, 2006), Park & Confessore (2002), Dam (2001), Ushioda (2011), etc.	Kapaeva, 2001; Koryakovtseva, 2001; Solovova, 2004; Ternovykh, 2007; Luksha, 2008, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • willingness to learn • initiative • persistence • creativity • ability to determine own learning goals and objectives • ability to manage and evaluate own learning activities • transferring acquired knowledge and skills into a new context • need for new knowledge, willingness to study the material beyond curriculum • ability to interact • responsibility • reflection • adaptivity • ability to perform systematic control etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflection • ability to identify own learning trajectory • responsibility • need for self-education • using learning strategies • activity • ability to manage own learning (from setting goals to evaluation) • ability to correct learning activities • initiative • ability to use the acquired knowledge and skills in various situations etc.

As shown in Table 1, in general, Russian and overseas researchers define almost the same characteristics of an autonomous learner as the key ones. The development of these characteristics will provide students with the opportunity to master any disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, skills and abilities successfully, i.e. become a tool of student development.

4. Conclusion

We believe that the application of competence approach in education has broadened the potential of academic subjects. L2 acquisition has become a valuable process leading to students' development. Learner autonomy can be regarded as one of the most meaningful learning outcomes, as it will enable learners to perform professional development at a university and beyond it.

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