Competences development within L2 PR undergraduates education in the Digital Age

Формирование компетенций в обучении английскому языку специальности студентов отделения по «связям с общественностью» в цифровую эпоху

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Abstract

The paper deals with the competences development within L2 learning and teaching undergraduates majoring in public relations (PR) in the Digital Age. The purpose of the current investigation is to demonstrate the transition from hard skills to soft skills education, applied within the frames of learner-oriented approach. Individual educational trajectories (IET) are being promoted to be implemented at universities worldwide. Teachers' role has been changed significantly, since the education of the Industrial Epoch with its teaching aims and methods as well as practices does not correspond to the needs of the Digital Age education. The lecturer's recital of the information contained in textbooks is no longer relevant. Instead of the master of the class, educators have become undergraduates' assistants. PR undergraduates' L2 learning-teaching process is concentrated on the usage of digital technologies for autonomous work, as well as for creating self-standing projects in the form of mind mapping, audio, video podcasts and others. The aim of the investigation is to demonstrate the necessity and relevant practice to develop within PR undergraduates not only six competences (6Cs) acknowledged by CEFR, but eight competences (8Cs) to secure successful L2 language acquisition in the globalizing world of the Digital Age. In conclusion, it has been shown that competency-based education is the most relevant at present.

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается процесс формирования новых компетенций и лингводидактические методы обучения иностранному языку студентов направления "Связи с общественностью" (PR) в цифровую эпоху. Цель данного исследования состоит в рассмотрении перехода от жестких навыков (hard skills), фундаментальных знаний к обучению мягким навыкам (soft skills), которые доминируют в рамках современного подхода, ориентированного на удовлетворение потребностей общества. Индивидуальные образовательные траектории (ИОТ) в настоящее время внедряются в учебный процесс университетов мира. Роль преподавателей значительно изменилась в виду того, что образование индустриальной эпохи с его целями, методами и практиками более не отвечает потребностям образования цифровой эпохи. Информация, содержащаяся в учебниках и изложенная в лекции в аудитории, больше не является единственным источником знаний, а преподаватель вуза стал помощником, или ассистентом студентов на пути формирования профессиональных компетенций. Учебный процесс студентов отделения PR при обучении иностранному языку направлен на использование цифровых технологий для самостоятельной работы, а также на создание индивидуальных и командных проектов в цифровой среде при использовании технологий ментальных карт, аудио и видео приложений. В задачи статьи входит демонстрация необходимости внедрения в соответствующий учебный процесс студентов PR не только шести компетенций (6Cs), признанных Еврокомиссией (CEFR), но и восьми компетенций (8Cs) для

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обеспечения успешного овладения английским языком специальности в глобализирующемся мире цифровой эпохи. В заключение авторы приходят к выводу, что образование, основанное на формировании компетенций, является наиболее актуальным в настоящее время.

Introducción

In the VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity undergraduates should acquire the competencies preparing them for the professional life in the new emerging circumstances. 'New normal' (Schwab, & Malleret, 2020: 8) in which humanity is destined to live after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, has established a new mode of life, work and studies, including all the spheres of professional activities and education in particular. The imposed lockdown and physical isolation have challenged the leaners and educators to look for new ways of spreading and getting information and knowledge necessary to continue the education process.

Having faced the challenges of lockdown, the people realized that all the education process can be carried out by means of digital technologies that have their advantages and disadvantages. Competence-based approach gained momentum in education, when it became clear that every profession needs lifelong learning to support the sustainable development and sustainable education (Sergienko et al., 2021) of humanity. Linguodidactics combining professional knowledge alongside linguistic command, is aimed at implementation of this idea into life.

The present day competency-based approach transformed the vision of competence-based approach, theoretically suggested in the 1960s (Chomsky, 1969), and placed special emphasis on private initiative and self-education, as contemporary society needs well-educated, highly moral, industrious, critically thinking and socially responsible professionals ready to make important decisions and prognosticate their possible consequences. They are noted for social and technical mobility, dynamism, critical vision, constructability and the feeling of the elevated responsibility. Within this approach, competence is understood as the ability of a person to cope with a variety of tasks at the professional workplace.

The system of education has been drastically changing in the world since the middle of the 20st century, when a new paradigm forced a transition from knowledge-oriented to competence-based approach, which marked the transition from information society to the Digital Age. These ideas remained latent until the dawn of the new millennium. Otherwise stated, a new epoch was started in education, when J. Delors commences an initiative to introduce competence-based approach to education (Delors, 1996) when UNESCO in 2004 suggested and acknowledged the development of four competences (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006), necessary for higher education: creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration, later to be extended to six competences (6Cs), complemented by citizenship and character in 2016 (Fullen et al., 2017).

This brings about the expansion of competencies dominating education to meet the requirements of the new educational paradigm. The constant increase of knowledge and the improvement of skills and abilities are fixed and turned into competencies. The educational environment should form an integral system of competencies necessary for the acquisition of universal knowledge, experience of independent activity and personal responsibility, which are necessary for solving problematic issues and justifying their decisions.

The modern education system should be able to offer creative tasks that contribute to the development of 6Cs (6 competencies) necessary for the future work of the undergraduates in the new conditions of the 21st century. The professionally oriented English classes for PR specialists should encourage the students to pay more attention to learning English matching their professional needs, because the sphere of PR is a newcomer to the family of academic disciplines with university education. It is due time to implement multidiciplinary achievements to the

development of L2 curriculum for professional PR education.

Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

Linguodidactics started to develop alongside the new technologies, giving rise to digital textbooks and multimodal approach to education. As an academic discipline, linguodidactics combines two entities: linguistics and didactics. It means that all the theoretical achievements concerning the study of language proper is implemented into the process of teaching professionally-oriented language. Teaching L2 within professional undergraduate PR education can be considered a multidisciplinary process (Minyar-Beloroucheva, & Sergienko, 2021a), which includes linguistic knowledge and methods of L2 teaching. In other words, linguodidactics combines those essential achievements in the field of the professionally oriented language of the chosen discourse (Law et al., 2016; Weare, 2019; Vishnyakova et al., 2020), PR discourse in the view of this work, and development of certain competences.

Turning to the historical retrospective of the development of competence/competency based approach to education, we can state that it took almost 40 years for the idea to be implemented into life. It should be noted, that it was N. Chomsky in the 1960s, who was the pioneer to put forward the thought concerning competency based education. Scholars single out several development phases in the history of competencies.

The first phase lasted in the 1960s and 1970s when the main methodological and terminological apparatus was worked out. It was the time with the terms competence and competency were singled out. Competence-based education was shaping in the USA in the 1970s, founded on the theoretical works suggested by R.W. White an N. Chomsky. American psychologist W.R. White in his work "Motivation reconsidered: the concept of competence" (1959) introduced the concept of competence filled with psychological vision of personality including motivation (White, 1959).
In 1965 Noam Chomsky, professor of Massachusetts university, by reinterpreting Saussure's language and speech theory distinguished the concepts of competence and competency. According to N. Chomsky, competence is understood as a mental system underlying actual behavior, ability to analyze a language, ignoring mistakes, understanding new sentences, while competency is defined as the actual use of the language in real-life situations – that is the production of new sentences. Competence is a set of principles which a speaker masters, competency is what a speaker does. As competence is a kind of code, competency is an act of encoding or decoding (Chomsky, 1969). Competence concerns the structures which the undergraduates have succeeded in mastering, whether or not they utilize them in practice, without interference from the many of the factors that play a role in actual behavior. N. Chomsky describes 'competence' as an idealized capacity that is located as a psychological or mental property or function that involves "knowing" the language (Chomsky, 2010).

In the course of transformational grammar and theory of language education Dell Hymes studying different types of language competences introduces the concept of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). The scholar takes competence as the 'most general term for the capabilities of a person' <...> 'Competence is dependent upon both (tacit) *knowledge* and (ability for) *use*. Knowledge is distinct, then, both from competence (as its part) and from systematic possibility (to which its relation is an empirical matter). Thus, it already in the 1960 that scholars started to distinguish competence as a systematic possibility from what persons can do, which is explained by personal and professional experience of a person.

The second phase of competencies development embraces two decades that lasted from 1970 up to 1990. It is noted for the implementation of competence-based education in the USA. It was founded on Noam Chomsky's works. In his book "Competence in modern society: Its Identification, Development and Release", published in 1984, John Raven gave his own early definition of the term 'competence' (Ravens, 1984). Years later the scholar referred to competence "as a value-based and internally heterogenous quality – a fact which was implicitly, but not explicitly acknowledged <...>" (Raven, 2001, p. 253). John Raven in his works outlined how the competence-oriented education movement reformed education by replacing the qualities previously known as knowledge, skills, aptitudes, abilities, attitudes and personality (Raven, 2001, p. 259). It should be underlined that competency-based education arose an interest in competence/competency per se.

The third phase of competency-based education that started in 1990 and lasts till present is marked by its official recognition. The

competencies necessary for meeting the education needs of the populace were verbalized by Jacques Lucien Jean Delors, who chaired the UNESCO Bureau of Education (IBE) in 1996. In his Fundamentals of the Report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century entitled "Education: A Hidden Treasure", Jacques Delors communicated the basis of "four pillars" of education: learning how to know, learning how to do, and learning how to live together, learn how to live (Delors, 1996). Essentially, J. L. J. Delors singled out the key competencies to be acquired by the undergraduates.

In his Report of the Symposium in Berne Walo Hutmacher defined key competencies so that 'they can actually be taught in an education process (Hutmacher, 1997, p. 16). The formulation of competencies always expresses the expectations and aims of the education, which in turn depend on the interests, risks and opportunities of the protagonists (Hutmacher, 1997, p. 16). The author sees only a marginal difference between the following: skill, competence, competency, ability, mastery and craftsmanship.

The Council of Europe defined five sets of key competencies, that could have been applied for PR undergraduates' professional education, as viewed seen by the authors of the present work:

- Political and social competencies such as the capacity to accept responsibilities, to participate in group decisions, to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner, and to play a part in running and improving democratic institutions.
- Competencies relating to life in a multicultural society. In order to check the resurgence of racism and xenophobia and the development of a climate of intolerance, education must "equip" young people with intercultural competencies such as accepting differences, respecting others and the capacity to live with people of other cultures, languages and religions.
- Competencies relating to the mastery of oral and written communication, which are essential for work and social life to the point that those who lack them are henceforward threatened with social exclusion. In this same register of communication, the mastery of more than one language is taking on growing importance.
- Competencies associated with the emergence of the information society. The mastery of these technologies, the

understanding of their applications, strengths and weaknesses, and the capacity for critical judgment with regard to information disseminated by the mass media and advertisers.
- The capacity to learn throughout life as the basis of lifelong learning in both occupational contexts and individual and social life. (Hutmacher, 1997, p. 16-17).

This was the way to the four competencies (4 Cs) reigning in education for more than two decades pressurizing with a very varied agenda schools, which were traditionally expected to promote the moral, intellectual, aesthetic, vocational and physical development (Hutmacher, 1997, p. 32) of the undergraduates.

Methodology

The concepts of competence and competency reveal the methodological essence of competency-based learning at present. New competencies are not only aimed at obtaining theoretical knowledge, but also practical skills that use knowledge to solve specific tasks and apply the acquired knowledgein the professional activities of PR undergraduates. The development of new competencies is one of the trends of education reformation, which is typified by a competency-based approach. To be aware of the current methodology, it is important to note, that in education we understand professional competency as a number of different competences, necessary for high level professional performance. At present PR undergraduates face constantly arising challenges in the VUCA world of present society. The methods applied in the article embrace analysis, synthesis and classification to facilitate the research of the existing theoretical investigations and practical recommendations. The suggested set of recommendations given in the article helps the development of highly profiled future PR specialists in terms in professionally oriented language acquisition as well as the ability to fulfill the professional goal.

Results and Discussion

It is generally established that the interest in competence/ competency theory usually arises during the periods of crisis in the economy, education and culture. This period marks the transition of all aspects of human life into the digital environment. It has become most relevant to trace the etymology of the generally accepted of the terminological units 'competence' and 'competency'.

It should be said that despite the fact that the word *competence* came into English in the 1590s, meaning 'rivalry' (based on compete), and 'adequate supply', both senses became obsolete, as in the 1630s it acquired the meaning 'sufficiency of means for living at ease', coming from French compétence, from Latin competentia denoting 'meeting together, agreement, symmetry', from competens, present participle of competere, especially in its earlier sense of 'fall together, come together, be convenient or fitting'. From 1790 the noun *competence* started to denote 'adequate range of capacity or ability, sufficiency to deal with what is at hand' and is notionally connected with other words (OED, n/d).

Some scholar believe that competency-based education conceptually dates back to Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who correlated it with the Greek word "atere", in Latin "virtu", which meant a force that was developed and improved to such an extent that it became a characteristic feature of the personality.

The concept of 'competency' is used to describe the achievement of the final result of education. Competence is an integrative personal resource that ensures successful activity due to the learned effective strategies. Competencies are specific strategies for successful activities that ensure the solution of tasks, overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. For PR undergraduates it means the development of those skills and competencies, necessary for the successful activities connected with shaping public opinion and controlling behaviour, like for example the axiological aspect of professional PR discipline (Minyar-Beloroucheva et al., 2021a) or the environmental issue (Minyar-Beloroucheva, & Sergienko, 2021b).

The key competencies of the present day competency-based education are the six competencies (6Cs): collaboration, character, citizenship, communication, creativity, critical thinking (Fullen et al, 2017), that can be applied to L2 teaching/learning with the PR education.
It is necessary to proceed to the practical application of the theoretical knowledge, regarding the application of the existing competencies to the professional L2 PR undergraduate education. It should be stress that the process of PR education needs further theoretical methodology, ideology and intellectual heritage. The deeper understanding of competencies applied contribute to this process:

- Collaboration means working with other people as a team or partners to use small tasks to complete larger tasks of creating a positive image of the company. It also involves everyone in making the decision, adequately responding to societal needs and the goals, set by the business company. Gamification as an L2 teaching method can be used for the development of collaboration and instilling in PR undergraduates professional ethics and rules of behaviour. Joint work of students within the academic environment can also presuppose the assignment of certain roles to each member of the team. One of them can be responsible for studying the target audience, another one should write a press-release in English serving the lingua franca of the present day professional communication, both in the traditional and digital forms, another one can think of the visual and video support of the issue.
- The character competence implies the knowledge of the next steps to accomplish the tasks. An important skill is also the collection of the feedback from the audience to make improvements to the company's performance. Character also includes the knowledge of the learning intention and success evaluation to improve the work and overcome challenges in it. For the professional PR activity most relevant is the issue of compassion. Empathy and understanding lead to trust and mutual success of the company and its audience, making the emotional intelligence an essential part of the character competence.
- The citizenship competence implies helping someone with work to promote awareness in the world. This competency is generally used to solve the problem connected to the real world. PR specialists are always at the forefront to manage societal demands. In the education environment this competency can be developed by means of video conferences, quizzes and real life professional situations. L2 acquisition is achieved effortlessly during the fulfillment of the tasks. It is also useful for future PR experts, as their products will be presented on the international level to the people from different countries, whose lingua franca is English.
- The communication competence means to speak to other people at work using specific vocabulary, which is not only important for effective communication with a group of experts but also the audience. Communication is also used to show their

learning to others to know who their audience is. This competency can be developed by means of role-play games used in class or by digital instruments when applied online. It is also convenient to seek assistance at the work place form highly specialized sphere, like graphic design, economy, law and management. PR undergraduates are recommended to work in teams to ease the transition to the professional environment.

- Creativity deals with knowledge that a particular problem requires special attention. Additional knowledge of the problem and the right questions facilitate the process of problem solving. For achieving this, the exploration of multiple ways to solve the problem is needed in order to create an unusual idea to fit the task. In the academic environment PR undergraduates can practise team-work, brainstorming techniques and pools of ideas for finding unique solutions to given problems.

- The critical thinking competence is achieved through revealing the true information to give up mistaken or false opinion. Information can be classified into several groups to give original answers to the posed questions. For PR experts it is essential to classify and keep information and connect it to the real world and the areas of learning. During their academic classes PR undergraduates can be divided into several groups to work in groups of 3-4 students for creating their own projected with certain assigned roles on the basis of the digital tools.

- In the Digital Age one of the most important competences is the digital one, as it is succeeding the information society, which in its turn substituted the Age of the Industrial Revolution. The spread of the Internet, the development of the computer technologies and the advent of social networks, which have spread around the world having turned into a global network, giving rise to the concept of Metaverse. With the idea gaining momentum, it becomes highly essential for PR specialists to master new technologies and apply novel strategies bearing in mind the digital competence.

- The digital competence, as proposed by the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Recommendation Council, 2018), establishes a set of principle, universal values, skills and attitude required for the professional practice of PR specialists. This competence also marks the professional behaviour and appropriate participation in the democracy oriented society. Together with the full transition of all spheres of human activity PR practice has also been shifted to the digital space, which helps them communicate with the audience and circulate information throughout the globe instantaneously. PR undergraduates should practice the use of social networks, websites and other digital tools for professional purposes.

- The development of the digital competence needs constant perfection and sustainable learning. Thus comes the learning to learn competence, which also provided in the European Reference Framework of Competences.

- For PR undergraduates it is essential to develop the learning to learn competence (Recommendation Council, 2018), which includes the ability to reflect upon one's professional performance, effectively manage the information flow, work in the multimodal environment, remain resilient and manage one's own professional development and career. The competence also includes the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity in the world of volatility and ambiguity. Future PR experts should learn to maintain their physical and emotional state, physical health and lead a future-oriented life, as well as manage conflicts in the supportive context.

As seen from the provided vision of necessary competences of the professional L2 PR education it becomes relevant to harness both, hard and soft skills. With the rapidly changing world and the working environment, PR specialists should not lag behind. Soft skills here presuppose not only social interaction of the participants of the communication process, but also a high level of cognitive abilities development and personal qualities that contribute to the efficient personal performance. The success in the professional sphere of public relations very much depends on the developed competencies during the process of education and at the workplace. The L2 is trained in all of its aspects by means of practice and joint projects of the PR undergraduates to prepare them for international communication in their professional life.

The afore described competences ensure successful education of L2 within professional PR education to help instilling all the necessary qualities and attitudes of the future experts of the field. The competences of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity,

character, citizenship competence alongside the digital one are among most required qualifications among employers. In addition, during specially conducted L2 classes PR undergraduates develop the skills of business communication and teamwork, learn proper communication through socialization and motivation. And finally, future PR experts develop the skills of independent research, taking responsibility for the result of work. It is also worth noting, that the competences development has become possible with the introduction of interdisciplinary approach to education of PR undergraduates.

Conclusions

The research that has been carried out testified that competence-based education in the development of public relations undergraduates in the 21st century is the present day framework for teaching and assessment of learning. Competence-based professional education relies highly on the developed competencies focusing on results and real-life professional activities, contrasted usually to traditional methods of assessment in education.

Competency consists of competences, provided by professional PR performance, the basis of which is acquired during higher professional education with the application of digitalization and gamification. Educational competence is a requirement for educational training, expressed by a set of interrelated semantic orientations, knowledge, skills and experience of the undergraduates' activities in relation to a certain range of objects, necessary for the implementation of personally and socially significant actions. In the globalizing VUCA-world a future PR expert needs to be specially prepared to answer the societal needs and take flexible decision. The emotions and empathy are keys to knowing the audience and the professional development. Moreover, the digital transformation of education presupposed the development of soft skills connected with the application of professional expertise within the digital environment.

The novel digital competence is comprehensive, as it involves all the previously developed competences, such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, global citizenship and character. Digital competence demands constant learning and honing of skills. Future PR experts should understand not only how digital technologies work, but should be able to support communication, support the general principles
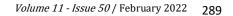
and share ethical concerns underlying the relevance of digital technologies and the professional activity they perform. The achievement of the public relations goal in establishing harmonious existence between the company and its public is facilitated by the modern technologies having no borders to embrace the whole world. The advantages for PR undergraduates of the development of the described competences include practice-orientation, aims at mastering tools for self-development in the chosen field of professional activity.

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