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Communicative Competence Development for Future Teachers

Abstract

The main scientific focus of the paper is the new pedagogical knowledge about the educational activities content and organization for the development of future teachers' communicative competence, together with the new aspects of educational communication, implemented in the modern information environment. The paper describes the approach to students' communicative competence development based on the use of educational blogs. During the research students solved professional pedagogical problems, described and discussed their experience in blogs. For each of the problem solved, students had a specially developed activity algorithm. The algorithm structure described teachers' and students' actions, additional electronic resources, stages of monitoring activities, terms of effectiveness, as well as extracurricular activities assessment scale.

Keywords: *communicative competence, blog, students, future teachers, information environment, e-learning, ICT*

Introduction

In accordance with the changing requirements concerning teacher communicative competence, the teacher should be able to organize the learning process so that the in-class objectives complement the network educational goals. The new phenomena, e.g., web audience, blogosphere, online communities, social networks (Cadima, Ojeda, Monguet, 2012), have become an important part of contemporary teacher training.

Several contradictions in the development of communicative competence within the active use of ICT and e-learning have been identified (Marshall, Kinuthia, Richards, 2012). Firstly, the system of teacher training in higher education institutions is not always sufficiently focused on the urgent needs of society related to communication in the modern information environment. Secondly, the ability of students to implement the network communication in everyday life is higher that their willingness to communicate in the virtual learning environment. This paper describes the research on the educational activities content and organization for the development of future teachers' communication competence, carried out in Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia.

Research Problem

Nowadays the world society challenges education (Shams, George, 2006; Cadima, Ojeda, Monguet, 2013); students live and work in the network society (Castells, 2000). Therefore, in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe of 18 December 2006 eight key competences were named: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; cultural awareness and expression.

This situation is common not only in Europe, but in other countries. For example, in the Russian Federal State Educational Standards of higher education it is emphasised that a graduate in "Teacher education" should be ready to use the basic methods, ways and means of obtaining, storing, processing information; to be able to work with the information in the global computer networks; to understand the nature and significance of information in the development of modern information society; to be aware of the dangers and threats that arise in this process; to be ready to apply advanced techniques and technologies, including information, and to provide the quality of the educational process and the quality of the educational environment.

Communicative competence is of special importance for teachers who carry out their professional activities within the permanent interactions with all the participants in the learning process – scholars, students, parents, colleagues, and international partners (Baydenko, 2004). In the digital society communicative competence integrates into the ICT competence. Consequently, web-based courses are implemented in the educational practices (Li, Zheng, 2013; Bernath, Sangra, 2007). Social media technologies provide an opportunity for a user to modify and configure different electronic recourses, to increase their own network environ-

ment, to personalize, to collaborate, to manage knowledge resources, to perform the new role of an expert in network societies. Particularly, blogs are widely used to reach various educational objectives (Ray, 2006; Mei Liu, 2013; Pursel, Barton, Hui Xie, 2014).

Research Focus

The main focus of the research is connected with the education of future teachers, the development of new professional competences associated with the remote network communication and e-learning.

The scientific novelty of the research results is the following: communicative competence is studied in the context of network communication and educational communication; the communicative competence development includes the evolution of its components – motivational, cognitive, operational, reflexive and evaluative; the activity approach to the communicative competence development is implemented. *The practical importance* of the study is the following: the particular approach to the use of blogs can be implemented in universities, colleges and other institutions of pedagogical education.

Research Methodology

Background

Communicative competence of the 21st century teacher

Teachers' communicative activities are altering nowadays. For instance, the following trends contributing to the new quality of teacher communication are identified as follows (Kolesnikova, 2001): the intensity and density of the information flow is increasing; the number of participants in the educational space is growing together with the development of social partnership; new communication needs and interests are being formed among people of all ages; new forms and channels of educational information broadcast are developing.

Researchers consider communicative competence as the ability to choose a communication strategy that contributes to the goals of a particular social situation (Dornyei, Thurell, 1995; Rychen, Tiana, 2004; Shams, George, 2006). In general, communicative competence includes language knowledge, ways of interacting with others (face-to-face and in a remote mode), group work skills, knowledge of different social roles. Communicative competence includes cognitive and behavioral components, as well as the basic skills of communication operations. The use of network communication in the learning process should be

focused on students' self-activity, which is implemented in a comfortable mode, including their own strategic activities and personally significant problem solving (Pawlowski, 2013; Rickheit, Strohner, 2008).

According to the recent research (Kommers et.al., 2014; Noskova, Pavlova, Yakovleva, 2007, 2012, 2013) the effectiveness of educational communication in the modern information environment is directly related to the need for building a communication process adequate to networking opportunities, rather than transferring the traditional classroom interaction into the network environment. Using various kinds of network interactions, teachers can learn to observe students' behavior and evaluate students' educational achievements. Communicative competence of future teachers in a network learning environment is a new and important aspect of training. The teacher has to be prepared to facilitate extracurricular activities in the network educational environment, to communicate with students, and to provide pedagogical conditions for an individual student's development. In an educational environment, it is possible to solve new problems using the networking tools, to accumulate electronic educational resources, to perform remote management of students' activities, to consider individual motivation and behavior strategies of students. Consequently, the development of future teachers' communicative competence in the course of training should include problem solving in the network environment.

Hypotheses

Communicative competence always plays the leading role in the structure of the teacher's professional competence and includes three components: perceptual, interactive and communicative ones. These components are expanding in today's information space.

The study is based on the following assumptions:

- Communicative competence can be developed in the course of training with the use of a specially developed technique based on solving of information and communication professional pedagogical problems on blogs.
- For each problem solved, the student should have an activity algorithm. The structure of this algorithm includes the teacher's and the student's actions, additional electronic resources, activities monitoring stages, terms of effectiveness, the student's extracurricular activities to students of different educational levels – Bachelor's and Master's degree students.

Research Sample

103 students from Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia participated in the research, including first and second year Bachelor's degree students (53 students), third and fourth year Bachelor's degree students (25 students), Master's degree students (25 students).

Instrument and Procedures

A teacher's (or a future teacher's, i.e., a student teacher's) communicative competence assessment can be carried out with the use of a number of indicators that are corresponding to the selected components of communicative competence – motivational, cognitive, operational, reflexive and evaluative (Zimnjaja, 2003).

To assess students' communicative competence development level in accordance with the parameters outlined above, a questionnaire for students' self-assessment and a questionnaire for teachers was developed. The 30-point scale allowed for introducing three levels of students' communicative competence development: *low level* (0–10 points); *medium level* (11–20 points); and *high level* (21–30 points). The main criteria for evaluating the communicative competence of higher pedagogical school students are: the willingness to use communication, based on information and communication technologies in teaching activity; the attitude to communication as part of teaching activities; the experience of solving educational and professional problems in the information educational environment.

Methods of working with blogs

In accordance with the communicative competence components (communicative, interactive and perceptual) and types of professional pedagogical problems (information and communication) three types of blogs were identified: news blogs, project blogs and discussion blogs. Generally, a blog is a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, chronologically ordered and viewed in a web browser.

In the process of studying disciplines "Information Technology" (for Bachelor's degree) and "Information Technology in Professional Activities" (for Master's), students were encouraged to post their individual assignments on blogs.

Junior students (1-st and 2-nd year) were offered to work with news blogs. Interactions on a news blog were performed in the following way: every student could produce messages by publishing information about new achievements in the field of information technology and to participate in ongoing discussions. Almost 90% of the junior students' audience became regular blog readers; however, only a few participants were active authors of the content. The students were mostly

involved in commenting. During the experimental work qualitative changes were revealed: the variety of questions to the audience increased, methods of attracting attention were used.

For the senior students (3-rd and 4-th year) blogs were used as part of their project implementation. The students themselves developed the structure and design of blogs, and chose a target audience (students, parents, teachers, administration, etc.). In addition, the students were asked to take part in the proposed discussions and thereby to test each other's blogs. The greatest number of blogs aimed at assembling useful ideas on the project and discussing necessary changes for a successful outcome of the project. These blogs had a colorful design and a large number of multimedia materials. For example, the blog "Art Studio" was created for primary school pupils and their parents. The blog presented creative activities that parents could perform with their children at home. All messages were accompanied by a brief photo or video summary. Furthermore, everyone could comment on the master classes, report whether they were useful and easy to implement, and advisable to other users.

The other type of blogs was a weblog, which aimed at reflecting events of the project. Such a diary was also run on behalf of the project coordinator, and everyone could comment on the records. Entries were often accompanied by photographs illustrating past events. Some students suggested a blog in which students, teachers and parents could discuss progress on the project. This type of blogs was the most difficult one to implement, as it involved different categories of authors. Posts of such blogs were the most reflective.

Research Results

Analysis of the experiment results led to a number of conclusions that are presented in the diagrams. Diagrams 1–3 reflect the percentage levels of communicative competence of the initial and final stages of the experiment with the distribution of the groups of students.

Junior students (1-st and 2-nd year) are sufficiently proficient in the use of information technology for everyday life objectives. They have developed cognitive and operational components of communicative competence to an extent sufficient to solve current educational problems. At the same time, the experience of solving such problems is insufficient. They are not fully aware of the role and place of information technologies in contemporary teaching. The motivational component (values of communication) in this group (60% of the respondents) is at a low level of development. The level of reflective-assessment component is also low. For 73% of the respondents feedback is of no interest; 80% of the respondents have no

Diagram 1. Distribution of students with a low level of communicative competence at the initial and final stages of the experiment

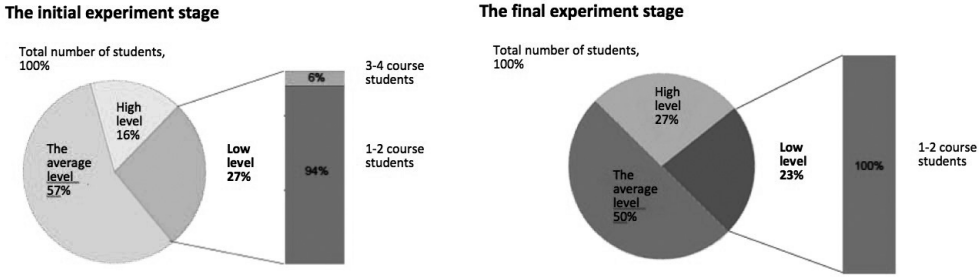


Diagram 2. Distribution of students with a middle level of communicative competence at the initial and final stages of the experiment

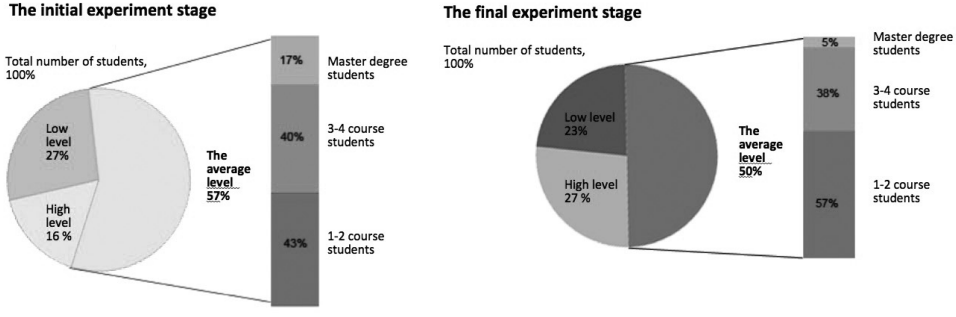
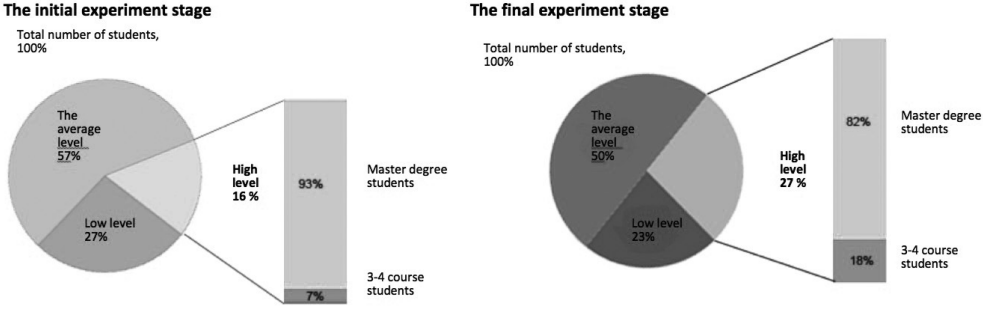


Diagram 3. Distribution of students with a high level of communicative competence at the initial and final stages of the experiment



desire to reflective activity. Such indicators can be explained by the fact that in the traditional classroom little attention is paid to the processes of students' independent activity reflection and introspection; however, such activities occupy 50% of training time for the Bachelor's degree students. About 10% of the junior students are of the medium communicative competence level. These are the students highly motivated to start the teaching profession.

Senior students (3-rd and 4-th year) are more prepared for professional work and are at the final stage of training. These students are divided into two groups of comparable size with a low and medium level of communicative competence (40% and 60%). Most students have to choose the place for future work. Some students demonstrate a high level of communicative competence. Senior students in general (in comparison with junior students) are motivated to acquire new knowledge and skills that can be useful in their future professional activity. The most developed are the motivational, evaluative, cognitive and operational-activity components of communicative competence. However, tasks of self-evaluation are not common to students in the traditional classroom, and therefore the reflective and evaluative components are developed weaker than the other components.

Graduate students (Master's degree students) showed a high level of communicative competence. This, apparently, is due to the fact that they are mainly those students who want to continue their scientific activities, as well as in-service teachers seeking to improve their skills and experience. Some Master's degree students need extra skills to use modern information technology in organizing interactions and professional activities. Other students do not have enough practice with specific ICT tools – for them the acquisition of operational and activity-related skills is the prior objective. Consequently, these categories of students are motivated to gain a new knowledge, so the cognitive component of communicative competence is developing most actively. Participation in professional discussions, interaction in professional societies, and organization of one's own study learning (75% of teaching time for Master's degree students) require self-assessment and self-awareness. These trends are reflected in the reflective and evaluative components, which develop as intensively as the cognitive component.

Discussion and conclusions

Results of the study have led to the following conclusions. Students' existing experience of problem solving in the information educational environment should be taken into account during the implementation of future teachers' communica-

tive competence development methods. Effectiveness of the methodology can be evaluated in accordance with the motivational, cognitive, operational, reflective and performance indicators.

The described method of students' communicative competence development is based on solving information and communication pedagogical problems. The specified tool for solving problems is the educational blog. For each of the problem solved, students should have an activity algorithm. The algorithm structure includes teachers' and students' actions, additional electronic resources, stages of monitoring activities, terms of effectiveness, as well as extracurricular activities assessment scale. Blogs can be the platform for a teacher-organized educational debate. In this case, the author of the blog, usually a teacher, initiates discussion. Students add comments, discuss problematic issues, expand and deepen their knowledge, develop skills to use the course terminology, learn to substantiate their points of view. Blogs give teachers the opportunity to draw conclusions about students' transformation of social and educational experience. For students blogs are materials enriching their learning experience, assisting further reflection and self-analysis.

The developed method contributes to: the formation of abilities to interact with various information resources; the creation of conditions for information exchange between the network information environment actors (teacher, students); the inclusion of students in the educational network interaction on professional issues.

The study argues that the development of students' communicative competence in the modern information environment is necessary and possible. This opportunity is provided by a number of subjective and objective factors, as well as the organization of students' extracurricular communication during the problem solving process in the modern information environment, taking into account the activity approach.

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