

New Foreign Language Education for Sustainable Development in the Culturally Specific Context

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Abstract: This paper aims to describe into the latest sustainable development issues in the field of foreign language teaching that have been adopted at Southern Federal University. In order to provide insights into language teaching practices regarded as essential to contribute to a sustainable future we raise the issue of culturally specific educational environment. It also attempts to discuss the new trends and challenges that result from the need to adapt to the new social, economic and educational contexts in such areas as methods and approaches, with an emphasis on Blended Teaching, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP); teacher training; innovation in the classroom, assessment practices. These issues correspond to the key areas in the new language teaching. Methods and approaches described in the paper enable language experts to keep up with the far-reaching changes directly affecting the learners' lives and the quality of new of future generations. In addition, the indicators of the new educational paradigm are revealed, with a focus on the opportunities for achieving sustainability in the light of this paradigm. Finally, we want to highlight that conceptualizing new realities of assessment is also seen as one of the major objectives of .


1 INTRODUCTION

Education is permanently transforming with regard to shifts in economy, demography, technological breakthroughs and political issues. The triggers rearrange the ways in which our decision and test makers should conceptualize and establish the practice of the new curriculum and system of assessment. These penetrating shifts are indicative of the new era in education: i.e. the new paradigm for sustainable development in foreign language teaching. No one is in doubt that the process of inventing the ways in which education is changing is worth studying as it contributes to conceptualizing the comprehensive picture of future development in education and assessment . This paper attempts to reveal the basic challenges taking into account the indicators of the new educational paradigm, with a focus on the opportunities this paradigm implies. We

also see conceptualizing new realities of assessment procedures as an objective of the paper.

There has been an ever-growing awareness for the last decades that both language teaching and language learning in Russia are facing radical and dramatic changes and developing exponentially. As a matter of the fact, this new paradigm might be characterized as culturally-specific. The English language teaching and learning experiences both tested and approved in the English course at Southern Federal University, rely mostly on the cutting-edge research and innovative practices evident in the work experience of many other professors from Russian and overseas universities. In our paper we also focus on the best of traditional culturally-specific approaches and the most recent developments in language education of our country.

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2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of the the most remarkable challenges for classical university education is the Internet and various communication technologies. It has been a common feature in language teaching for many years and we are already used to enlivening our classes with different materials from the Internet and with different mobile applications. This teaching trend falls under the category of the so-called blended learning. In fact, the everyday use of these cutting-age technologies has become especially relevant during the pandemic of Covid 19. As a consequence, they have evolved so rapidly and so far that our country has managed to wipe up its traditional public education system to some extent during one night.

This notable trend encourages us to develop a rich diet of various techniques for class work and self-study online. It goes without saying that this transformation is almost tangible in a great deal of national educational systems, but this paper does not aim to look at this issue from the global perspective. Instead, we intend to consider some national specific features of learning and teaching cultures through the prism of the new paradigm. Taking into account the undeniable fact that these innovations have become an integral part of our life we regard them as an essential component of educational system as well. However, from our teaching experience we can draw a conclusion that not all these advances necessarily have staying power. The aura of novelty of a number of innovations might wear out, and there have always been issues concerning privacy and copyright.

Yet it is rather difficult at this time to make a straightforward prediction which of them will stay for a long time in the future. What we really want to highlight is that an effective English teacher must be flexible and be able to adopt innovations in all spheres of life and adapt to constantly transforming environment. And what is more is that it is not a free choice as we perennially deal with changes and challenges in our profession. If we accept this fact and take it for granted, we have to be aware of new areas of research and innovation, apart from the growth in computer technologies in English teaching and learning experience.

The view that education in the Russian Federation, in general and higher education, in particular is in a permanent state of flux is shared by almost every academic and layman, with standards and requirements generated on a regular basis, new approaches and practices erupting on practically daily basis. As higher school language teachers we are challenged by new regulations corresponding to the new paradigm and which question our long-held

beliefs. Although a number of approaches, theories, methods and techniques in our teaching experience persist through time, the main thing to emphasize is that our profession implies some kind of creativity as well as flexibility. We have had to work as syllabuses and materials designers, organizers, assessors, observers and performers. However this situation is as it must be, because when it comes to our profession, the richer diet of learning activities we can offer to the students, the better.

As we have pointed out above, English teaching methodology is culturally-specific.

The ideas that Russian language teachers encounter in our learning culture might appear to be too simplified and irrelevant to life, making us wonder whether we are properly teaching our learners for real life in the 21st century. Our job, in the first place, should involve structuring our course in a way that makes it relevant to students' life. A. Pulverness writing about culturally-specific characteristic of some national learning cultures sees the main issue as "the teacher's failure to build bridge between what they want and have to teach and their students' worlds of thought and experience" (Pulverness, 1995).

In the shadow of these conclusions, it can be noted that a good teacher must stimulate their students to respond to texts and situations with their own thoughts and experiences rather than just answering questions and doing abstract learning activities. Describing this trend corresponding to the new learning culture introduced within the new educational paradigm Susan Halliwell notes that "We are obviously not talking about classroom where students spend all their time sitting in rows or talking only to the teacher" (Halliwell, 1992). It is common knowledge that students respond well to being asked to use their imagination. From our own teaching experience we dare claim that there is almost nothing more exciting than a class of involved young people pursuing a learning goal with a great enthusiasm. As teachers within the new paradigm we all should recognize the need to minimize the negative impact of past learning experience.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Old School Teaching Paradigm VS New School Teaching Paradigm, with a Focus on Sustainable Development

One more feature which we see as a common one to the old learning environment in Russia is that the old

school teachers have always seen accuracy as a more important aspect in their teaching practice. Students, who studied English in the Soviet time, were obliged to do it, some of them saw learning English as an unpleasant but sadly necessary occupation. A great deal of students who come to universities from secondary schools are still used to being corrected. They might get even frustrated when they find themselves in the new learning environment. The scenario is similar to one described by Lavezzo and Dunford in 2013. "When they find that there is practically no correcting at all," they wrote, "and this comes to them as a big disappointment (Lavezzo and Dunford 2013). But we should not feel guilty of neglect., however, as according to the new paradigm we see this practice as a principle at stake. And we fully agree with the above mentioned Lavezzo and Dunford who noted that "the immediate and constant correction of all errors is not necessarily an effective way of helping students improve their English".

Our shared view at Southern Federal University is that when our students are involved in accuracy work it is part of our function to point out and correct the mistakes. But during communication practices it is generally felt that teachers must not interrupt their students in mid-flow to pay attention to the mistakes and correct them, since doing this can be considered as something that interrupts the fluency in communication and drags an activity back to the study of language forms and precise meanings. Indeed, in accordance with the new educational language paradigm, we view such speaking activities, especially those at the extreme communicative end of our continuum, as "acting as switches to help learners transfer "learnt" language to the "acquired" store (Ellis. 2012) or as triggers, "forcing students to think carefully about how best to express the meaning they wish to convey (Swain, 2020). In our opinion, the value of such speaking practices lies mostly in the different kinds of attempts students have to make to get their meaning across, processing language for communication, which is generally felt as the most effective way of processing language for acquisition. So there is sufficient evidence that the old paradigm view on language learning has been modified so far, with a focus on fluency as a basic trend for sustainable development.

As we have mentioned above, the old teaching language showed a strong preference to accuracy at the expense of fluency. Since then a rich diet of effective teaching techniques in accordance with the new paradigm has been introduced and effectively applied for teaching both accuracy and fluency. Armed with these techniques we can be sure that

students not only understand the meaning of a language form and how it works in texts and exchanges, but are also clear about its structure and feel confident when using the structures in speaking and writing.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to list all the techniques used and approved in the language course. But the main thing to note is that they are united by one principle, i.e. making the introduced structure or vocabulary relevant to the students' experience. The trick is to put a new chunk into the students' life as the recent research reveals that memory works better if a new item is hooked into what we are already aware of. The more hooks, the more likely students will remember the item. The more emotions and memories they evoke, the more effective and more efficient the learning process is.

The reality is that with this big assortment of approaches, methods and techniques available and applied, a great deal of those who teach foreign languages are not quite certain of which to opt for and how to deal with this option. In this part of our paper we intend to look into the cultural implications of the methods chosen and attempt to draw some basic conclusions about the rationale we bear in mind when deciding on our teaching techniques.

We would agree with A. Pennycook who says, "we need to see English language teaching as located in the domain of popular culture as much as in the domain of applied linguistics"(Pennycook, 2018).

What is more important is that our attitude what to teach and how to teach mostly depends on our cultural beliefs and biases. The main fact is that many approaches and teaching methods we use these days within the new paradigm come from the West and hinge upon a very western idea of what constitutes "the right learning". For example, the basic principle of the Western teaching paradigm that students take responsibility for their learning is unlikely to work well in our secondary schools and even in higher ones. Most of our students, who used to study in traditional schools, see us as a source of authority and knowledge rather than a helper. This is the educational culture they got used to, and it could take a long time to get used to another. And what is also worth saying is that the situation with clash of the two paradigms is no way easier for the students as they are subjected to methods for which they are just unprepared. Yet this tenet of Western teaching culture with a focus on an independent learner is likely to fly in the face of our educational tradition, which can be seen as the matter of the past but still persists through time. Although the new paradigm implies a more autonomous learner, we are still struggling with

introducing this new type of educational culture. Things are changing, however. But in the Russian case it means introducing gradual rather than immediate change.

Metaphorically speaking, learning and teaching is like "making the kind of bargain" as D.Torp sees it (Torp,1991). No one is in doubt that even when teachers and students come from the same place, they still might have different cultures and beliefs concerning what to teach (learn) and how to teach (learn). Struggling for some kind of accommodation between these cultures is a basic part of what teachers have to do on a regular basis to a greater or lesser degree. It is obviously one of the realities which makes teaching constantly challenging.

Bearing these differences in mind, it is extremely difficult to come to straightforward conclusions what methods work better and why. What really matters is that teaching practices must be constantly scrutinized to make sure that they work properly and why or why not. The safest conclusion to draw is that pragmatic eclecticism is the best option for teachers as decisions what to teach and how are mostly based on what appears to work better. But pragmatic eclecticism does not necessarily imply that anything goes. Students now expect to have a right to be asked to do things for a reason. It means that if you have some aim in mind, make an attempt to articulate it clearly.

3.2 New Trends in Assessment Practices.

The idea of combining assessment and learning practices can be seen as a necessary paradigm for the present educational environment. Assessment enables teachers to take the curriculum critically and reveals what students do not know from what they are supposed to be aware of (Weir, 2010; Pellegrino. 2012). The acquisition of some particular knowledge and skills, the analysis of various materials based on which a student can master the knowledge and skills might be seen as the main objectives of assessment.

Students who demonstrate the ability to adapt to different formats of assessment and think critically undoubtedly are indicative of the new educational paradigm. If students are not used to being flexible and not likely to take critical choices, it implies a lot of endeavors from teachers to make them get engaged in a way that interests them and motivates to remember what they are taught. Again N. Burbridge (Burbridge, Gray, Levy and Rinvoluceri, 2006) adds: "If students' initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp new concepts and information presented in the classroom, or they may learn the

material for purposes of test taking but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom". This insight into the learning process requires those who teach should probe first what students already know doing classroom activities that draw out students' thinking. They will be able to apply it as the basis for students to further practise the language acquired. They are also strongly recommended to use formative assessments as often as possible to make students' language acquisition tangible to themselves, their groupmates, and their teachers. We regard these assessments as a necessary prerequisite for effective combination of learning and assessment compared to tests measuring students' knowledge of facts or acquisition of isolated skills.

In order to judge the effectiveness and efficiency of any form of assessment it is sensible to lay down criteria to measure students' performance indicators. Whatever purpose assessment has, a major factor in its effectiveness as a good measuring instrument lies in the following criteria. Assessment these days is expected to meet the following requirements:

- checking the students' existing knowledge and skills, as well as their enthusiasm for new knowledge;
- probing the understanding of new grammar structures, vocabulary and other chunks and procedures;
- confirming if they have acquired the new language facts and skills;
- understanding of how well the students can use their knowledge and skills with automaticity;
- probing their ability to transfer the newly acquired language to other contexts.

From our teaching experience we know that for most of us who teach foreign languages the most problematic area of assessment is concerned about replication of real-life intervention. As we have noted in our first part, the basic principle of the new educational environment for sustainable development is make education as relevant to students' life as possible. In our everyday teaching practice we apply cloze passages taken from real-life conversations as reliable indicators of oral ability. From our perspective cloze procedures offer us the perfect however indirect integrating assessment format. It is certainly true that this type of language knowledge assessment is one of the most cost-effective ways to find out overall knowledge of the assessed. In its purest form, cloze is deletion of every nth word in a text (from 5 to 10). It tends to avoid assessment designer failings as the procedure is supposed to be random. On the face of it, cloze assessment turns out to be a ideal instrument, since anything (grammar,

collocation, reading comprehension) including oral ability can be tested. Modified cloze is useful for all kinds of purposes. For example, they can be used as placement tests to make judgements about students' suitability for different levels. They can also be applied in checking either students' achievement and progress and proficiency.

Our teaching practices have made us come to the conclusion that students can also be brilliant at self-assessment and peer-assessment. Having drawn to the conclusion, we made a decision to make students get involved in a peer assessment activity designed by our teaching staff. As a result, top students themselves performed as assessors and controllers. At the very beginning this idea sounded as a revolutionary one. It turned out to be a teaching and learning breakthrough for both students and teachers. As according to our national educational context there is always a clear distribution of roles : controlling and assessing teachers and learning students. Although this endeavor seemed to be risky then, everything went well. However, we did not manage to avoid a number of difficulties in developing language materials designed to provide valid assessment of students by students who performed as assessors during this pedagogical experiment. Basically, only the students who wanted and had confirmed their ability to assess their peers performed as assessors. To get engaged in this role they had passed a few preliminary trials and confirmed their advanced level of the language acquired. We assessed vocabulary unit, speaking skills and grammar structures. During the assessment procedure the teachers acted as monitors . What is also worth noting is that students-assessors were also provided clear indicators to measure the other students' progress in order to make their own judgments. At the end of the event students acting in different roles were asked for feedback.

We refer this kind of assessment to dynamic one. Teachers can engage in dynamic assessment which is representative to any changes in students' learning. Besides, it is assumed that assessment should be indicative of the actual learning experiences as well as be able to use multiple methods formats to evaluate learning. And we have said above, one of the mainstays of the effective assessment is that it is to be embedded in the curriculum in addition to teaching, and learning experiences. The latter are dialectical and are seen as crucial components of the educational process. Each component is a separate thing and part of the whole at the same time. The basic idea of this symbiotic process is that these components are given particular attention at different times for various objectives. To suit the new

assessment paradigm, we should follow the principle that once identified proper indicators of acquired knowledge and skills are identified, the practices of assessment, teaching and learning are supposed to be integrated and function tied together.

Following the new educational paradigm in the area of assessment we promote practices whereby assessment is embedded in the teaching and learning processes, and are controlled and guided by those who learn and those who teach. Although we conceptualize the new assessment paradigm as one that is aimed at getting insight into the process of teaching and learning in order to improve them, those of teachers who are in charge of applying assessment data for accountability, may still get reliable records of the assessment which can be used as measurement data for this purpose.

3.3 CLIL Methodology

One of the approaches discussed in this paper implies an extension of the use of the foreign language in order to develop the communicative competence, so content and language teaching approaches should be implemented in non-linguistic subjects. Content and Language

Integrated Learning (CLIL) is the methodology that teachers should be implementing and should be trained in. While a big number of those who study English in our country concentrate on "general English" as all-purpose language with no focus on one professional area, the specific feature of universities is that foreign language teaching must be in the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to promote sustainability in the further professional development. And it is not surprising that the increasing amount of students perceive an urgent need for this particular kind of language and see it as one of the major means of improving their professional career prospects. As a matter of fact, they are eager to be confident about their specific vocabulary, as armed with this confidence and speech skills they are more likely to operate sustainably and effectively in their profession. ESP requires a certain type of discourse and specific expressions which are to be taught at university level and which would be out of place in normal communication. There are also some language events such as presenting to colleague, the language of professional contacts, dealing with dissatisfied clients, which are highly unlikely to be taught in a general foreign language course. As a result we as university teachers find ourselves training classes in different professional environment they may encounter in their future career. For

instance, we arrange such procedures as the art of negotiat-ing, the correct use of phones and emails, making contracts or reports. We actively engage CLIL methodology that encourages studying both language and special subject (Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols. 2008; Coyle, Hood and March, 2010). CLIL method develops an extend-ed range of language skills and knowledge within the students' professional area and activities along with extra linguistic skills such as decision-making, team work, and critical thinking- those highly required by the potential employers. CLIL classes give us an excellent opportuni-ty to avoid monotonous routine of English language classes focused on reading and transla-tion. Moreover, studying special subjects using English as a medium of instruction creates a new sort of educational environment that enhances students' creative skills, their ability to adapt to cooperation and professional communication. Consequently, CLIL method facilitates students' autonomy in professional and communication context. Learning through profession-al subjects entails learning not only the knowledge of the discipline but also the skills associat-ed with the production of knowledge within the discipline. Through subject curriculum and instruction students should learn why the discipline is important, how experts create new knowledge, and how they communicate about it. Each of these steps maps closely to the de-velopment of 21st century skills and knowledge. Developing other 21st century skills, such as leadership, adaptability, and initiative, can also take place through the disciplines when teach-ers explicitly define those objectives and facilitate ways for students to develop them. For ex-ample, teachers can design activities in which students practice rotating leadership responsibil-ities in groups, tutor younger children, or work with their local communities.

4 CONCLUSIONS

So far we can boast that our university teachers have created a rich mixture of activities pro-moting sustainable long life learning. In the English course we teach we stimulate students to reflect how efficiently and effectively they learn, provide them with different techniques for dealing with various activities and challenges. We highlight the fact that learning techniques in university are rather different from those they applied in their secondary schools. Thus, they must come to the conclusion that they are obliged to improve their school techniques as well as

work out brand new ones which are best for their new learning environment.

Self-reflection allows students to understand better their strengths and weaknesses with a view to arranging a blueprint for a future sustainable development. For instance, we may ask students to fill in a questionnaire in which they profile their ideas about various aspects of lan-guage. Furthermore, we might probe the students' self-analysis, considering the issues such as why listening is challenging and what techniques can be used to improve listening skills. What really matters is that all these things must not go unnoticed for our students. Then it is time for university teachers to discuss with the students their learning experiences. Once the students have made some progress they might be asked to get insights into their own progress by answering questions about how productively they reckon they have learned the material. It is vitally important for the university teachers to give students help and recommendations about how to arrange independently a sustainable learning process when they have stopped attending the core course of English in university.

The best conclusion to make from what we have written so far is that all the university teach-ers who give a course of a foreign language in higher schools are supposed to be armed with a rich diet of various methods and techniques, as it is not easy to reveal which one is best and most appropriate for our present teaching environment. So our instructions should be as clear and encouraging as possible. As S. Krashen points out only "comprehensible input aids lan-guage acquisition" and provides a more sustainable learning (Krashen, 2005). Another crucial issue is the one which refers to the well-established universal techniques which might be ap-plied for teaching any course. Online teaching we face today in the time of the pandemic im-plies more active students' involvement in educational process at all stages. So our conclusion is that this reality is tantamount to the so-called pragmatic eclecticism where decisions about the content and the form are based on what seems to work. There are good reasons why we should take into account what goes well in our classrooms and outside them. However, we do not want to say that this pragmatic eclecticism does not mean that "anything goes". It is hard-ly surprising that students today are, to some extent, better than teachers armed with skills dealing modern technologies. So they have the right to be asked to do activities for a good reason, and those who are responsible for teaching are expected to have some goals in minds which they must articulate clearly to provide the desirable sustainable learning.

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