

Case study method as a tool for developing soft skills within the framework of the discipline “Foreign language in the professional sphere”

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Abstract

Importance. Soft skills development through the use of the case study method in teaching “Foreign Language in the Professional Sphere” contributes to creativity and flexibility in thinking, communication skills, empathy, and the ability to work in a team – all of which are essential for their future activities. The aim of the study is to identify an algorithm for using professionally-oriented cases in English to develop soft skills for successful business communication among students majoring in economics. The objectives of this study are: to clarify the essential characteristics of the case method; to determine the range of problem situations for the development of soft skills in the course of solving problems posed in cases; to identify the didactic potential of professionally-oriented methods and their experimental verification. It is emphasized that familiarity with the cultural codes of the target language and searching for missing information to solve the case contribute to the problem and stimulate the development of students’ soft skills.

Materials and Methods. Experimental verification was conducted at the Derzhavin Tambov State University. It was based on the relevance of the topic, review of scientific literature (definitions and research results published in this field of knowledge), selection of bibliography and analysis of the results of its study. The formative experiment was conducted on the basis of using case study methodology in the framework of the discipline “Foreign language in the professional sphere”. The participants in the experiment were students majoring in economics. Criteria for selecting problem cases included situations related to international business cooperation. A survey was used to determine students’ attitudes toward the case-study method. The respondents were 50 master’s students.

Results and Discussion. We tested cases related to communicative situations in which the socio-cultural aspect was affected. This choice implied students’ work on studying the cultural characteristics of participants in communication, in order to apply the acquired knowledge to solve problems and apply intercultural communication competence in practice. As a result, students honed their flexibility in communication (soft skills). The experimental verification showed that students became more flexible and adaptive in communication, the skills of formulating and implementing communication goals (in aspects such as informational, professional and normative), skills of choosing and using established constructs in relevant situations, analyzing and summarizing dialogue results were developed. A survey of students showed that this method: a) stimulates thinking and is interesting (82 %); b) introduces different ways to achieve a communicative goal (70 %); c) takes too much time to prepare (16 %); d) is time and energy-consuming (68 %), e) is useful for continuing learning the discipline (91 %). 2 % found it difficult to evaluate this method.

Conclusion. On the basis of the results of the forming experiment, a conclusion was made about the significant didactic resource of the case-study method as a way of forming soft skills. It was realized in the process of moving from reproductive (expanding and practicing thematic vocabulary and grammar) tasks to receptive (listening, watching videos) and further to productive (speaking, creating presentations, writing) types of activities in a foreign language. Working with the case study method to develop soft skills demonstrated that this method stimulates communication skills and serves to develop flexibility and adaptability in professional communication in a foreign language (soft skills).

Keywords: soft skills, case study method, professional communication, development, communicative competence, foreign language in professional sphere

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Метод кейс-стади как инструмент развития мягких навыков в рамках дисциплины «Иностранный язык в профессиональной сфере»

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Аннотация

Актуальность. Формирование мягких навыков путем использования метода case-study в процессе обучения дисциплине «Иностранный язык в профессиональной сфере» способствует развитию креативности и гибкости мышления, коммуникабельности, эмпатии, а также умения работать в команде, необходимых в их будущей деятельности, и может быть достигнуто различными методами. Цель исследования: выявление алгоритма использования профессионально-ориентированных кейсов на английском языке для формирования мягких навыков ведения успешной деловой коммуникации студентов экономических специальностей. Задачами данного исследования выступают: уточнение сущностной характеристики кейс-метода, определение спектра проблемных ситуаций для формирования мягких навыков в ходе решения поставленной в кейсе проблемы; определение дидактического потенциала профессионально-ориентированных и их экспериментальная проверка. Подчеркнуто, что знакомство с культурными кодами изучаемого языка и поиск недостающей информации

для решения кейса способствуют решению поставленной проблемы и стимулируют развитие мягких навыков студентов.

Материалы и методы. Экспериментальная проверка проводилась в Тамбовском государственном университете им. Г.Р. Державина, базировавшаяся на актуальности темы, обзоре научной литературы (дефиниций и результатов исследований, опубликованных в данной сфере знания), подборе библиографии и анализе результатов ее изучения. Формирующий эксперимент проводился на основе использования методики case-study в рамках дисциплины «Иностранный язык в профессиональной сфере». Участники эксперимента: студенты экономических образовательных направлений. Критериями отбора проблемных кейсов послужили ситуации, связанные с международным деловым сотрудничеством. Для определения отношения студентов к методу case-study было использовано анкетирование. Респондентами выступили 50 студентов магистратуры.

Результаты исследования. Нами апробировались кейсы, связанные с коммуникативными ситуациями, в ходе которых затрагивается социокультурный аспект. Такой выбор подразумевает работу студентов по изучению культурных особенностей участников коммуникации для использования полученных знаний в ходе решения проблемы и применения межкультурной коммуникативной компетенции на практике, тем самым оттачивая гибкость своей коммуникации (soft skills). Опытная проверка показала, что студенты стали более гибкими и адаптивными в процессе коммуникации, были развиты умения формулировки и реализации целей коммуникации (по таким аспектам, как информационная, профессиональная, нормативная), навыки выбора и использования устоявшихся конструкторов в рамках соответствующей ситуации, анализа и обобщения результатов ведения диалога. Анкетирование студентов показало, что данный метод а) стимулирует мышление и является интересным (82 %); б) знакомит с разными способами достижения коммуникативной цели (70 %); в) требует слишком много времени для подготовки (16 %); г) является трудоемким и энергозатратным (68 %); д) полезным для продолжения освоения дисциплины (91 %). 2 % затруднились с оценкой данного метода.

Выводы. На основе результатов формирующего эксперимента сделан вывод о значимом дидактическом ресурсе метода case-study как способе формирования мягких навыков, который реализовывался в процессе продвижения от репродуктивных (расширение и отработка тематической лексики и грамматики) заданий к рецептивным (аудирование, просмотр видео) и далее к продуктивным (говорение, создание презентаций, письмо) видам деятельности на иностранном языке. Работа с методом case-study по формированию мягких навыков показала, что этот метод стимулирует их коммуникативные навыки и служит развитию гибкости и адаптивности (soft skills) в ведении профессиональной коммуникации на иностранном языке.

Ключевые слова: мягкие навыки, метод case-study, профессиональная коммуникация, формирование, коммуникативная компетенция, иностранный язык в профессиональной сфере

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IMPORTANCE

The university education system is in an era of rapid growth of interconnections in all spheres of life. Education as a social institution and an important sphere of functioning of society is also changing, adapting to new conditions. The goals of this institute have been preserved, but we see serious transformations in the methods, techniques, and technologies of education, in particular in teaching a foreign language. Proficiency in a foreign language is an excellent opportunity to establish professional relations with foreign partners and the ability to familiarize oneself with various sources on one's profession in a foreign language, and, as a result, to get a chance to build a successful career. Based on this, it can be argued that the importance of the discipline "Foreign language in the professional sphere" requires the improvement of methods, techniques, and new educational technologies to successfully provide students with all the opportunities to master a professional foreign language.

For example, communicative, project-based, environmental, and remote techniques provide the means for the development of all types of speech activity since they are focused on real communication, thus meeting the demands of modernity.

The relevance of the problem stated in our article is related to the shift of traditional reproductive teaching methods (the ability to reproduce acquired knowledge and skills) to practice-oriented methods and technologies that involve students in professional problematic situations, albeit artificial, but professionally significant.

The case-study method, based on a simulated situation, is designed to immerse students in a professional problem as close to reality as possible and provides an opportunity to interest students and increase their motivation. This method itself is certainly not new. But having appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, it is still being analyzed by researchers. For example, B. Flyvberg [1], D. Douglas [2] and C. Quintão et al. [3] consider the pros and cons of its use in the field of research and public practice. This method is becoming increasingly popular in the

higher school system, which follows from a review of this problem in the work of M. Sharan [4], and is considered from different perspectives: from approaches to its application by B. Yazan [5], and to the view of T. Harland [6] on cases as a methodology for the study of higher education itself. The approach of G. Steiner and A. Posch views case study as an interdisciplinary learning tool [7]. According to D.L. Aleksandrova and A.V. Repina, students' preparation for professional activity can be realized through the use of case study method as a form of control over the students' mastery of the learned material [8]. O.G. Porechnaya [9], E.R. Guzueva et al. [10], and K. Kelch and M. Maluppa-Kim [11] focus on its high potential for the formation of professional skills among students.

O.M. Osiyanova and E.V. Rogozina offers algorithms for creating cases in a foreign language developed by her [12], case modeling is focused on in the work of L.G. Vikulova, I.V. Makarova, and E.G. Tareva [13], which is associated with the importance of correctly posing the problem in various subject areas, including the field of foreign language education. A. Seid and S. Rao [14] rate this method as productive and positively influencing the success of interaction. The authors pay special attention to solving the tasks of developing communicative competence in a professional foreign language. P.V. Sysoyev and V.V. Zavyalov, although they recognize the prospects of this method, assess it as quite complex and energy-intensive [15]. Thus, I.A. Erina [16], L.I. Pirogova [17], T.Yu. Molchanova [18] and M. Meyer [19] define it as leading in the formation of intercultural communicative competence. The case study method is of particular importance in the study of reactions in the interaction of representatives of different cultures. According to P.A. Duff, the case-study method creates "...new perspectives or offering a refutation or refinement of earlier theories in applied linguistics by analyzing linguistic, cultural, and social phenomena..." [20, p. 233].

A case, at its core, is a kind of problematic situation that needs to be resolved. The problem itself can be identified (for elementary levels),

or it may require students to analyze the situation (for advanced levels). It is important to note that an error in identifying a problem may lead to an incorrect algorithm for solving it. The proximity of such professionally oriented situations to real ones is important for understanding and building various success-oriented speech and behavioral models in the context of professional interaction, which also increases the degree of interest in the motivational level of students.

However, in our opinion, it is necessary to research case study as one of the productive, practice-oriented tools for developing soft skills in order to conduct successful professional communication in a foreign language in future activities with representatives of other cultures.

Despite the fact that a unified definition of the term “soft” skills has not yet been fully established, life requires its understanding, which is closely related, according to M. Cinque’s research [21], to the employment of young people and their future professional activities. We agree with N.N. Loktaeva’s opinion that these are, first of all, communication skills for solving non-standard tasks, assuming certain qualities such as adaptability and openness to new things, creativity and flexibility of thinking, self-control, the ability to work in a team, and predict the reaction of communicants, which, as is well known, largely depends on belonging to a certain culture [22, p. 30].

Soft skills, according to the conclusion of Alambekova O.A., can be “personal skills, social skills, and methodological skills” [22], as well as “basic, communicative skills, effective thinking skills, and self-management skills” according to L.K. Raitskaya and E.V. Tikhonova [24]. L.N. Stepanova and E.F. Zeer [25] substantiate the need for the development of soft skills as predictors of students’ life fulfillment. In our opinion, the case study method, with its solution to a certain problem and its implementation in the process of communicative activity, requires the development of such skills.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this article is to identify an algorithm for using professionally oriented cases in English to develop soft business communication skills for students of economics. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: clarifying the essential characteristics of the case method, determining the range of problematic situations for the development of soft skills for building a correct communication strategy within the framework of the problem posed in the case, determining the didactic potential of professionally oriented cases in a foreign language, and their experimental verification. In the course of solving set goals and objectives of the experiment, we used such research methods as the analysis of scientific literature, observation, and the application of the case method in the discipline “Foreign language in the professional sphere”. The experiment was conducted on the basis of Derzhavin Tambov State University.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discipline “Foreign language in the professional sphere” includes topics directly related to specialized disciplines, which allows using models for the development of hard and soft skills of students. Therefore, in each section, we master the language material of the professional sphere and form the skills of communicative competence, represented in all types of speech activity: listening, reading, speaking, and writing in a foreign language. In addition, a prerequisite is the formation of skills and abilities for obtaining and updating knowledge in a foreign language in the professional field. Each section includes a main topic with grammatical and terminological material that allows you to use the sub-topics of the section to master and implement the communicative component of the discipline: from effective perception (listening, searching for material, reading) to the effective

application of knowledge and skills to build a successful strategy and its implementation in the process of one's own speech and behavioral communication in a foreign language. Based on the fact that the pragmatic aspect of learning a professional foreign language is manifested in the "indirect influence of foreign language competence on the professional competence of a specialist" [23, p. 548], we turned to the case study method, as it meets such objectives, including a professional problem, some elements of project activities, modeling, discussion of professional situations, communication and business play, which allows you to study, comprehend, solve, and present its solution. In this case, the use of hard skills should be complemented by the use of soft skills, since a complex situational task cannot always be solved using only professional and general communication skills (hard skills), and the inclusion of soft skills is necessary to solve the proposed problem.

The description of the situation of a case containing a specific problem includes the following parameters: updating the linguistic and grammatical material of this section, using a foreign language to find the information necessary to solve it, applying professional knowledge and skills acquired in the process of studying other disciplines to solve the case, and developing your own professional solution concept and its competent speech presentation.

This stage of work on a given case involves the integration of students' existing professional competencies with foreign language communication skills. Exploring the idea of using the case study method, we assumed that in the course of preparing and solving cases, students have the opportunity:

- to consider several approaches to solving the problem;
- to study additional professional vocabulary (sometimes even at the level of accepted professional jargon);
- to learn about traditions, cultural expectations, and the manifestation of peculiarities of speech and behavioral stereotypes in different cultures;

- to understand the relevance / inappropriateness of jokes and their topics in business communication;

- to work in a team at all stages of case-work (from the preparatory stage to the presentation stage).

However, in our opinion, the downside of using cases could manifest itself in the case of individual students' lack of confidence in the correctness of the decision made, uneven distribution of workload in teamwork, insufficient knowledge of individual students, and a small number of hours.

In connection with the above and our practical experience, we propose to clearly monitor the results of the work done by students at each of its stages.

We have tested cases related to communicative situations, during which the sociocultural aspect is touched upon. The choice of such material implies the work of students to study the cultural characteristics of communication participants in order to use the acquired knowledge in solving the problem and applying intercultural communicative competence in practice, thereby honing the flexibility of their communication (soft skills).

In connection with the above, we were forced to abandon the case study method with the designated problem (*Stated-Problem-Method*), with its inherent characteristics in the form of presentation and justification of existing solutions through critical evaluation and the search for alternative solutions. This method is not sufficient for our task of attracting additional material. In addition to solving the case problem, we needed the manifestation of communicative knowledge and skills, the manifestation of adaptability, as well as a wide range of vocabulary presented in the process of solving the stated communication problem.

The choice for conducting a formative experiment fell on:

- *Case-Problem-Method* (a method of finding a problem in the proposed situation). Cases of this type usually propose a problem situation in which the causes of communicative failure are not clearly identified. And in order to identi-

fy latent causes, it is necessary to include additional information. Students are given a description of a specific situation, and the communicative problem itself is formulated. The algorithm of operation is as follows:

- 1) problem description;
- 2) using additional material to uncover the latent causes of the problem;
- 3) diagnosis of cultural expectations and the actual manifestation of behavioral stereotypes in different cultures;
- 4) selection of possible solutions and their presentation;
- 5) discussion of solutions to the problem.

The following situation can serve as an example of such a case.

The head of one of the international public relations agencies is faced with the problem of a communication failure among two employees. The communicative behavior of both participants causes mutual tension and stress.

At the first stage, students get acquainted with the content of the case: they study a memo from one of the participants in the situation (Edmundo) and a letter from Sakiko to a friend. Much attention was paid to the vocabulary necessary to understand the situation of the case.

At the second stage, students are provided with information about how cultural characteristics manifest themselves in communicative behavior. Their task is to use different sources (textbooks on cross-cultural communication, the Internet, etc.) to find differences in the way representatives of different cultures communicate and choose vocabulary.

The third stage of the case study is devoted to the analysis of specific cultural differences between the participants in the case in such positions as: eye contact, physical distance, cooperation, giving opinions, and way of listening.

As part of the fourth stage of the work, students are invited to find ways to optimize cooperation between Edmundo and Sakiko and present their own solution to the problem. For example, the following roles are offered: Agency Director, Edmundo, Sakiko, cross-cultural communication consultant. Students present a short

presentation based on their role and on the information they have previously received.

Such an interactive case within the framework of mastering a professional foreign language allows you to analyze various situations of professional communication, attract additional materials, use the knowledge gained about the peculiarities of the manifestation of speech and behavioral stereotypes, and make informed decisions.

In advanced groups, we offered a more complex Case-Problem Method. Its features include the lack of complete information. The solution algorithm after mastering the lexical and grammatical material proposed by the teacher assumed completely independent work of the students. In addition, the algorithm for solving such cases included not only a presentation of the resolution of the situation but also a route for its implementation. In other words, the found solution to the case is combined with a real study of communication skills. An example of such a case is the "Visitors from China" case we used (Market Leader textbook).

TOY WORLD is engaged in the retail sale of toys (Seattle, USA, with branches in more than 30 countries). The company purchases its products from suppliers all over the world. Mr. Li Chang, Head of the Guangdong Manufacturing Plant, and its Export Manager, J. Wonga, are going to visit Toy World to establish a partnership. This is their first visit. The purpose of the visit is to get to know the Toy World management better and learn more about the company.

The first stage practiced the linguistic material on the given problem. Here, we paid attention not only to vocabulary on the topic of Culture, but also to the topic of Negotiations, as well as to the study of the basic requirements for drafting international business contracts. The group was divided into subgroups to work on the case and prepare it for presentation.

At the second stage, students conducted research on the Internet, which can be roughly divided into:

- a – studying information about the activities of this company;

b – getting acquainted with factual material on the economy and culture of Guangdong province.

The purpose of the case is to plan a draft program for the visit (work in small groups, each of which develops its own meeting program, which from this position can be considered fruitful).

1. Get acquainted with the documents.
2. Compare your ideas about possible joint activities with the ideas of the rest of the group.
3. Plan a visitor reception program and prepare a draft cooperation agreement.
4. Discussion.

At the third stage, each subgroup of students presented their own meeting project in the form of a role-playing game.

At the fourth stage, the projects were discussed. Here, the focus was on the vocabulary used, which contributes to the systematization of views on the solution of the case. Such statements include:

- expressing one's own point of view on the outcome of the case study;
- doubts about the correctness of the choice of the solution path;
- explanation of the reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the presented idea;
- reviewing the method of case solving or the details of its presentation;
- summarizing the presented solution of the case problem (can be presented by both the students and the teacher). Special attention was paid to discussing cultural expectations among representatives of different nations, as well as taking into account the peculiarities of very different speech and behavioral strategies and stereotypes in decision-making among different cultures. In addition, the discussion focused on the presence/absence of flexibility and maneuverability of participants in conducting meetings and negotiations.

We were also interested in finding out the students' attitude to work within the framework of the case-study method. We conducted a blitz survey in which 50 graduate students participated. 82 % admitted that this method stimulates thinking and is interesting. The students appre-

ciated the fact that the case study method allows one to master different ways of achieving a communicative goal – soft skills (70 %). Students also noted that this type of activity is quite laborious (68 %) and requires a lot of time for preparation (16 %). When asked if they would like to continue solving new cases, the students almost unanimously expressed their positive opinion (91 %). and only 2 % of students found it difficult to evaluate the case study method. Of course, the blitz survey does not provide a complete picture of the students' attitude to this method, but we can state their generally positive position.

From the point of view of teachers, we would like to note that the case-study method successfully fits into the structure of the discipline "Foreign language in the professional sphere", which is based on teaching the use of a foreign language to solve various problematic situations. At the same time, there are still a number of methodically unsolved tasks to be solved, which are related to the formation of flexibility of thinking and the manifestation of adaptability necessary for successful communication in the process of working on a case. Of course, a well-formulated case encourages students to look for and find ways to solve it, but the difficulty lies in teaching them how to model a flexible speech and behavioral strategy that takes into account the socio-cultural expectations of all parties involved in the case and achieve their professional goals. Despite the fact that working with cases requires a significant investment of time and effort, understanding the problem situation, ways to solve it, and thinking about a flexible strategy aimed at achieving the goal allows students to show both creativity and put their communication skills into practice.

CONCLUSION

As a result of our research (analysis of pedagogical and linguodidactic scientific literature, as well as a formative experiment), we can conclude that the case-study method allows not only for the competent solving of professional problems but also is a method of active and success-

ful teaching of professional communication in a foreign language. Situations that are as close to reality as possible require students to analyze the situation, as well as find missing information and make decisions. This method makes it possible to effectively present your ideas in the most advantageous perspective to justify and convince you of the correctness of your decision. The didactic resource of the case study method as a way of developing soft skills consists of moving from reproductive (expanding and developing thematic vocabulary and grammar) tasks to receptive (listening, watching videos) and further to productive (speaking, creating presentations, writing) activities in a foreign language that manifest themselves in the process of solving cases. Working with the case study method stimulates critical and creative thinking and allows students to prepare for successful professional communication in a foreign language based on adaptability and changes in the teamwork process. The case study method, tested by the authors, has shown that its application helps students develop qualities such as responsibility and discipline, as well as stimulate their motivation to learn. Critical thinking and com-

munication skills are also stimulated by the tasks of the cases and the need to solve them in a team. The students themselves, according to our blitz survey, (fully or partially) positively evaluate the work with cases, as it gives them an idea of the role of a foreign language in their future professional activity. In addition, students appreciate the opportunity to use a foreign language to search and process information. Secondly, teamwork contributes, in their opinion, to the development of skills of interaction with other team members. Thirdly, they note that the selection of vocabulary on the subject of the case makes it easier for them to choose language tools for argumentation on the solution of the case, and to be flexible in conducting professional dialogue.

Thus, the case study method is one of the effective tools for the formation of soft skills in the process of professional communication. The practical significance of the research lies in the fact that its results can help to develop new interactive technologies for the formation of soft skills within the framework of the discipline "Foreign language in the professional sphere".

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