Development of the dialogue skills in a foreign language in comparing of oil benchmarks

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Abstract. The aim of research is to develop skills of dialogue on professional topics in a foreign language. The objectives of the research are the following: analyze professional goals in programs; identify language skills used in the dialogue; investigate the role of self-study in developing the skills of professional communication; suggest ways of improving the dialogue skills (stimulate asking of questions, giving extended answers). Methods of research include literature analysis on the topics of oil benchmarks, methods of teaching professional communication as well as the interview with an expert in teaching foreign languages. The outcomes of research are planned to be a set of recommended exercises for developing the dialogue skills.

1. Introduction

The research related to teaching students of oil and gas specialisation ranges from teaching them environmental responsibility [1] to writing skills connected with their specialisation [2] as well as general rhetorical skills [3-4]. The scope of research in St. Petersburg Mining University regarding oil and gas activity is various encompassing international environmental agreements, greenhouse gas emissions, taxation [5, 6, 7], as well as study of metals used in manufacturing of hardwearing oil and gas equipment [8, 9, 10].

Since we plan to teach would-be oil and gas engineers, it is essential to refer to the list of competencies which they are supposed to acquire. The bachelor’s student should be able to ‘assess risks and suggest measures to provide security of technological processes in oil and gas production; apply principles of rational use of natural resources and environmental protection; take measures of ecological protection when building, repairing, restoring oil and gas wells, collecting and preparing well product, transporting and providing storage of oil and gas’ [11].

Having studied the requirements, we see that future engineers have to gain an insight into all stages of oil and gas exploration of resources, development and management. A relevant basis for this could be a study of oil standards as well as their specificities related to a country where it is produced. Other constituents of the requirements’ list are also relevant to our purpose. The bachelor’s student should be able ‘to communicate in written and oral forms both in native and foreign languages…’; to study and analyze scientific and technical information related to professional activity in both native and foreign languages [11]. Thus, future oil and gas engineers should be able to communicate in a foreign language with their partners on the topics of their specialisation. This necessity is taken into account in our research which is supposed to find ways to teach them dialogue skills in a foreign language as a part of professional communication.
2. Language skills in the dialogue

dialogue skills are a part of speaking skills as well as monologue ones; monologue and dialogue comprise different forms of oral communication. The dialogue is characterized by a constant change of a speaker in the process of exchanging views; the second property is equal participation of both sides in the dialogue. The dialogue skills include the skills to ask questions as well as to answer them. Hence, it is important to train students in performing both functions of dialogue participants: the one who asks the questions as well as the one who answers the questions. The dialogue unit consists of the question and the reply and comprises the unit for developing of the dialogue skills. The question as a component of the dialogue is a multifunctional means. It can be used as a way to monitor the understanding of the material studied; as a way to motivate expression of views by the students; as a way to keep the conversation going. In its first function it is crucial to make up interesting questions so that students feel motivated to respond to them. In its second function they should be thought-provoking in order to cause students’ wish to take part in discussion [12]. In their third function they should be informative so that the partner of communication could use it for asking another question. The reply is another constituent that can consist of a word, a phrase and even an extended utterance. It can be brief, full or extended. Hence, all the types should be trained and used to fulfil a necessary aim.

The skill to ask the questions consists of the following types: the skill to ask various types of questions; the skill to ask the question related to the response of the interlocutor. The skill to answer the questions consists of the skill to give a relevant answer; the skill to give an extended answer that helps to keep the conversation going.

When planning to introduce a dialogue at classes, the preparation before the class is also needed. Hence, it is necessary to turn to the organization of self study in developing of this skill. Self-study is a kind of study activity that is organized and controlled by a teacher by means of study materials, tasks’ formulation without assistance from a teacher. It is inevitable part of study, especially at university as it allows students to choose the method of learning. The exercises provided to students for self-study should be creative in order to stimulate independent decision-making in learning activity. Some study aims are fulfilled in a better way when achieved by means of self-learning; moreover, the combination of self learning and in-class activities can be effective [13].

3. Methods

This paper is based on the theoretical analysis of literature related to oil benchmarks, methods of teaching the dialogue; the interview of an expert teaching technical English to students of oil and gas major. Interviewing as a method of social science research has been regarded by scientists as the one which helps to assess people’s experiences and attitudes in a comprehensive way. The semi-structured type of interview lets the interviewee speak about related experience and touch upon the issues which were not considered by the researcher of the topic. We made a semi-structured interview which was conducted in English. The expert has been teaching foreign languages to the students of oil and gas specialisation at the technical university for four years. The interview lasted about an hour. The questions were divided into three topics: ‘The role of the dialogue skills in teaching professional communication’, ‘The effectiveness of exercises for teaching the skill of asking questions’, ‘The effectiveness of exercises for teaching the skill of answering questions’.

The second method of research was literature analysis of textbooks in academic and professional communication related to the development of the skill of formulation of various types of questions.

4. Results

The aim of the first group of questions was to find out the level of the dialogue skills that students possess; if they realize the importance of this skill in professional communication.

In the first topic, ‘The role of the dialogue skills in teaching professional communication’, we asked two questions. To the question ‘What professional context can we suggest for students to practice the dialogue skills?’ the following response was given: ‘I suggest practicing presentations of research as a way to make a professional context at classes.’ To the question ‘What is the least
developed skill in dialogue?’ the following response was given: ‘The skill to ask the question that relates to the previous answer and is based on the information given in it.’

The aim of the second group of questions was to get an expert’s opinion on the most effective exercises for teaching the skill to ask questions. In the second topic, ‘The effectiveness of exercises for teaching the skill of asking questions’, we asked two questions. The first question, ‘Are students good at practicing the skill of asking questions?’ was answered in such a way: ‘Students do not perform this skill on a high level; they underestimate this skill.’ The question ‘What are effective ways of developing questions’ formulation?’ was responded in the following way: ‘I consider practicing questions’ formulation to be effective. The ones based on the text, e.g. presentation. Both listeners and the speaker should practice making questions: the skill to ask questions to the speaker based on the presentation; the skill to ask the questions to the audience to control understanding of the presentation.’

The aim of the third group of questions was to get an expert’s opinion on the most effective exercises for teaching the skill to answer questions. In the third topic, ‘The effectiveness of exercises for teaching the skill of answering questions’, we asked two questions. For the first question ‘Are students good at practicing the skill of asking questions?’ such response was given: ‘No, answers are not full, sometimes not relevant. There is enough space to improve this skill.’ The question ‘What are effective ways of developing questions’ formulation?’ was responded in such a way: ‘Both speaker and listeners should participate in practicing this skill. The development of the skill can include varying the amount of sentences in answers.’

The second method used was literature analysis. The authors of textbooks in academic and professional communication suggest making of the following types of questions: multiple, ‘good’, ‘sharp’ [14]. The multiple question includes several questions asked at once; related to the topic of presentation. The ‘good’ question is very much relevant to the content of presentation, continuing its discussion. The aim of the ‘sharp’ question is to challenge the speaker requiring more arguments for persuasion.

The researchers in the theory of teaching foreign languages suggest using the following exercises to develop the dialogue skills: answer questions using brief, full, extended responses; make the dialogue from the text [12].

5. Discussion
The findings of the expert interview suggest that the interviewee has a very good grasp of issues discussed. The role of the dialogue skills and difficulties that students experienced were clearly stated. The importance of such skills is undoubtedly obvious. Yet, students have not developed those skills on a high level. Hence, there is a room for improvement.

The valuable suggestions of the interviewee related to the exercises for developing dialogue skills were the following: practicing questions and answers by both the speaker and the audience, e.g. the speaker answers the questions of the audience and asks them her questions. The audience asks the questions to the speaker and answers her questions. The second valuable suggestion was to practice answers of different length. It is possible to vary them from one to three sentences depending on the assignment.

Based on the literature analysis and interview we compiled the following list of exercises for developing of the dialogue skills given below with the examples. The dialogue skills presuppose the skills to ask various questions from the speaker to the audience (questions of understanding, multiple questions, ‘good’ questions, ‘sharp’ questions); ask questions after presentation: from the audience to the speaker, from the speaker to the audience; ask a relevant question to continue the dialogue; give different answers to questions: brief, full, extended ones.

1. Read the text. Look at the questions of understanding: what density does Brent have? What is sulphur content of Brent? What API gravity does Brent have? Answer them. Practice formulating your own question of understanding.
Brent Crude is a major trading classification of sweet light crude oil that serves as a benchmark price for purchases of oil worldwide. This grade is described as light because of its relatively low density, and sweet because of its low sulphur content. Brent Crude is extracted from the North Sea. Brent is the leading global price benchmark for Atlantic basin crude oils. It is used to price two thirds of the world’s internationally traded crude oil supplies. Basket, Dubai Crude, Oman Crude, Shanghai Crude, Urals oil and West Texas Intermediate. Brent blend is a light crude oil. It contains approximately 0.37% of sulphur, classifying it as sweet crude. Brent is suitable for the production of petrol and middle distillates. It is typically refined in Northwest Europe. Brent Crude has an API gravity of approximately 38.06 which is equivalent to a specific gravity of 0.835.

2. Look at the multiple question, the ‘good’ question, the ‘sharp’ question based on reading the text. The multiple questions consist of three questions related to each other. The ‘good’ question helps the speaker to show his research in a detailed way, whereas the ‘sharp’ question challenges the speaker. Answer them. Practice formulating your own ‘good’, ‘sharp’ and multiple questions.

Multiple questions: What other oil benchmarks do you know? Can you give their characteristics? Which one is the most wide-spread? Sharp question: What classifications of oil do you know? Good question: Could you formulate the main idea of presentation in one sentence?

3. Read the dialogue unit. Look at the next question added. Add the question to the dialogue logically related to the theme of discussion.

Dialogue unit: -What was the aim of your presentation? -The aim was to introduce the audience to oil benchmarks, making an example of Brent. The next question: - Why did you decide to start with Brent? (Option: Why is it necessary for students to know about the classifications of oil?)

4. Study a dialogue unit containing an extended answer to the question based on the text. Practice formulating the answer consisting of three sentences when explaining the choice of the topic for your presentation.

-Why did you decide to start with Brent? – I chose this benchmark since it is the leading one in Atlantic basin. Secondly, it is used to price two thirds of oil worldwide. Thirdly, it is relevant to my research interests.

5. Prepare a presentation on one of the oil benchmarks. Formulate questions of understanding based on your presentation.

6. Look at the words written: Brent, Kirkuk, Urals. Explain what they mean. How do oil benchmarks differ?

7. Compare standards of oil using the following expressions: to be (un)like, to be (dis)similar to, likewise, similarity. Make up three sentences.

6. Conclusion
The aim of the research was to suggest ways of the development of the dialogue skills in a foreign language. To reach it, the goals for teaching students in the study programs were analyzed; different resources, both self-study and in-class, were applied. Due to the expert interview the new ways of the development of the dialogue skills were found. As the outcomes of research, exercises for the development of the skills of practicing the dialogue have been suggested.

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