The Model of Educational Environment for Prospective Ukrainian ESL Teachers within Competency-Based Education

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Abstract
Ukrainian Universities today encourage the principles of competency-based education in higher education, but the study of literature generally seems to discourage this process in a more theoretical way. The research reported here is a part of a more extensive doctoral study that aims to examine the process of competency-based education of English as Second Language teachers in Ukraine. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: could one apply the principles of competency-based education to create an appropriate educational environment for prospective English as Second Language teachers; would it improve the way to design the programs for their professional training and advance the language teaching process in Ukrainian Universities? This article reports on an investigation associated with the implementation of a pedagogical experiment that proves the effectiveness of the specially modeled educational environment created to design the training programs for prospective English as second language teachers within competency-based education at Taras Shevchenko National University and Donbas State Pedagogical University. This paper contains the comparative analysis of two Philology Master students groups to discover whether the traditional educational environment or competency-based one produces a better educational effect on the language teaching process. This study employs a mixed-method resulting in qualitative and quantitative data. The paper concludes by presenting recommendations for Ukrainian Universities, which major in training prospective English as Second Language teachers. Moreover, future research related to applying this educational model for students in different grades is still a potential area to be studied further.
Keywords: competency-based education, designing training programs, educational environment, higher education, language teaching, prospective English as Second Language teachers, Ukrainian Universities

Introduction

The current state of the community and the focus on competency-based approach in the process of professional education in high school require reconsideration and improvement of vocational training considering the needs of the current labor market. Competency-based refers to an instructional system where students are given credit for performing to a predetermined level of proficiency under specified conditions (Bloom, 1973). They fear that teaching facts and techniques provide students with information that quickly became obsolete (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

Competency-based education (CBE) is an educational model in which there is a clear, measurable definition of mastery, procedures, and tools for tracking that mastery. Students progress at their own pace, based on what they can show that they know (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012). According to Evans and Vander (2018), the competency-based system should support learning that intends to be a more accurate measure of what a student knows and can do in the future. It implies that lecturers should work collaboratively in an environment that is both personalized and student-centered.

According to Boyer and Bucklew (2019), learning or educational environment now seems to have poor alignment to competency-based methodology. Moreover, to follow the progressive educational movement, education should focus less on a traditional-based learning environment to one that is more student-centered and prepare a student for their professional role in society.

Analysis of research and publications on this issue proves that the development of multiple competencies specific to the professional activities of prospective English as Second Language (ESL) teachers is achievable within the appropriate educational environment. Bloom (1964) described the educational or learning environment concept as the conditions, external stimuli, and forces that may be physical, social, as well as intellectual forces that challenge the individual and influence students learning outcomes. The learning environment is an interactive network of forces within the teaching and learning activities that influence students learning outcomes. Branekova (2010) and Kolarova (2011) emphasize that the environment that enables the personality to be professional will be more effective if it focuses on the students themselves, on their educational needs, and consequently should be student-centered. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of the modeled educational environment based on the principles of CBE of ESL teachers in Ukraine. The researchers hope is that novice, as well as proposed instructions, could become a reference tool to which any researcher may apply when designing an educational environment for any specialty within the higher educational institution.

Literature Review

CBE is the primary trend in curriculum reform in the field of higher education. Nowadays, the literature review presents a broad polysemy of this term. Some scholars supporting the idea of excellence in education explain it as "a system of instructions where students advance to higher levels of learning when they demonstrate mastery of concepts and skills – regardless of time, place, or pace" (CBE: State Policy Communications Toolkit). It means that CBE "should be directed at providing students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to recognize and solve problems in their domain of study or future work, i.e., authentic tasks" (Keen, 1992).

It was highlighted by O'Sullivan and Burce (2014) that within the CBE learning measures rather than time. They state that "students progress by demonstrating their competence, which means they prove that they have mastered the knowledge and skills (called competencies) required for a particular course, regardless of how long it takes" (p.2). It implies that students "progress at their own pace, rather than at a pace dictated by semesters or credit hours" (p.2).

Moreover, the chosen teaching strategies should match the domain of learning. For example, the researchers recommend that the psychomotor domain should demonstrate and perform a given knowledge or skill, propose a variety of models or simulative tasks where students can have wide practice, arrange direct supervision, create a valid and reliable assessment tool (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014). Within the affective domain, the researchers suggest to review the material in the context of its educational and personal value for students; suggest the tasks that stimulate self-reflection (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014). The cognitive domain of CBE requires a high level of critical thinking through discovery-based or problem-based learning, stimulates life-long learning, teamwork, and encourages to create and follow individualized learning plans (O'Sullivan & Burce, 2014). Supporting this scientific stream, researchers all over the world implement the principles of CBE into the educational process, adopting, improving, or modifying teaching and learning techniques. According to Curry and Docherty (2017), those principles should be preferably applied to the educational environment.

While analyzing academic literature, the researchers propose a range of polysemantic terms as: "educational environment," "environment for learning," "learning environment," "learning engaging environments," "interactive environment," "virtual environment," etc. The variety of definitions is predetermined by the perspective of a specific pedagogical system, and most authors emphasize the relationship between subjects and educational interaction (Branekova, 2010). Kolarova (2011) defines the university educational environment as "a real system of macro and micro conditions, which cumulatively present living, financial, material, organizational, social and personal options for satisfying the needs of pedagogical subjects in the educational reality" (p. 73). Genn (2001) proposes that the students experiences of the learning environment have been "related to their achievements, satisfaction, and success". (p. 339). A motivating learning environment fosters deep self-directed learning in the student and, subsequently, good medical practice in the physician (Veerapen & McAleer, 2010). For that reason, the teaching staff is the most influential participants, apart from the students themselves, in the learning environment. They guide their students to learning opportunities, and they serve as students most consistent link between the educational and workplace demands of the learning environment (Dunn & Hansford, 1996).

Method

To plan an educational environment based on the CBE for Prospective Ukrainian ESL Teachers, the researchers used modeling and pedagogical experiment as an empirical method to achieve the goal of the given research. The model of the educational environment for prospective ESL teachers within CBE was implemented into the educational process of Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University and Donbas State Pedagogical University for the undergraduate students (majoring in Philology). The university foreign language teaching staff, as well as Philological department students, participated in the experiment during 2019-2020.

The research included five primary stages: planning the whole research within the CBE principles for prospective Ukrainian ESL Teachers → modeling the educational environment for prospective Ukrainian ESL teachers within CBE → implementing this model into the educational environment of two Ukrainian universities → analyzing the effectiveness of this implementation → concluding.

Participants and Instrumentation

This research involves 98 Master students of Taras Shevchenko National University (Starobilsk, Ukraine) and Donbas State Pedagogical University (Sloviansk, Ukraine) major in Philology and qualified further as ESL teachers.

At the beginning, the researchers surveyed the Master students understanding of their personal, educational needs and their professional plans for the future in 2019. The results of the survey show that students are concerned about their future professional development because they do not understand how to use theoretical knowledge in a future professional environment, i.e., only 35% of respondents feel confident enough to work ESL teachers after their graduation (the first criterion). A significant number of prospective teachers (68%) do not understand how to use their potential to achieve professional goals (the second criterion). Finally, 56% of prospective teachers have no idea how to plan their future professional development and be motivated to further self-realization in a professional environment (the third criterion).

Thus, the results of the survey point out the need to review the conditions of the professional training of students. That is why the researchers modeled and implemented at Taras Shevchenko National University and Donbas State Pedagogical University a unique educational environment. According to above mentioned, the researchers understand the educational environment based on the principles of CBE is focused on the education of a proficient specialist, as a multi-structured, specially arranged educational space, that takes into account the stages of professional development and makes the potential of the applicant for higher education appropriate to the educational needs of ESL teachers.

Thus, the first level of the model is the macro-environment. In this level the students should gain relevant knowledge as to collaboration with various departments of state institutions that regulate the educational process and the process of professional training at the state level (in this paper it is the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine); non-governmental institutions involved in vocational training of ESL teachers (for example, the British Council, etc.); sites for distance self-education, focused on prospective ESL teachers training (EdEra online education studio, Future Learn, Cousearea); international programs and grants for prospective ESL teachers (Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program, ERASMUS +, etc.).

At the second level, within the middle-environment, the researchers have organized cooperation with related institutes and institutions within the region that carry out educational activities and promote professional training and self-realization in the educational environment. They include local authorities of educational institutions; the bases for practical training of prospective ESL teachers which cooperate with universities mentioned above (schools, colleges); libraries of different levels (Window on America, Access, Regional Training Center (RTC) in partnership with IREX, etc.), which provide the professional training of prospective ESL teachers.

The last level is the micro-environment, which offers complete interaction of Master students and teaching staff within the institution of higher education that provides professional training (institutes, faculties, departments). The micro-environment level involves three stages that coincide with the logic of the professional development of the individual (adaptation, professional transformation, and integration).

The researchers understand adaptation as an environment for the dynamic adjustment of ESL teachers in the local higher education institution. Since the adjustment is a process, it involves the total interaction of all participants in the educational process. To implement such a stage is possible at the expense of content; focus on the development of specialized competence in students; cooperation and collaboration of all participants of the educational process. The first criterion for the adaptation environment is the informational improvement of Master students ideas about the future professional activity of ESL teachers. It is possible to achieve by improving one's resources and personal knowledge, skills, and abilities to function within quasi-professional events. The second criterion is self-awareness includes thinking oneself within the framework of future professional action and motivation to develop necessary competencies in the process of vocational training. The third is a change in self-attitude where students should regard themselves as prospective specialists with a focus on self-developing their skills within the individual working plans.

The second stage is a professional transformation, where the new mechanisms of professional behavior help to develop skills to find internal resources for the improvement and development of underdeveloped skills, which may need some correction. The functioning of such an environment should comply with the following principles. Firstly, the teaching staff should draw up personalized working plans to develop specialized competence. Those plans should be clear to all participants in the educational process. Secondly, the process of professional transformation itself should involve constant facilitation and mentor with detailed, comprehensive, and constructive feedback. Thirdly, the tasks for students should be creative and inclusive, with quasi-professional assignments encouraging to apply the acquired professional experience.

The next component of the environment is the integration stage. This stage is a set of content-related and organizational factors that allow prospective ESL teachers to integrate into a quasi-professional climate of an institution of higher education to effectively perform future professional activities at the last stage of their vocational training. Therefore, there is a need to organize the stage of complete integration of prospective ESL teachers into their future professional environment.

This stage includes the following conditions. First, there are plenty of activities initiating professional interaction of all participants of the educational process within the department or institute. In this context, students should be encouraged and involved as much as possible into work with junior students, as well as into an internal work of the department of the institution. Second, the involvement of prospective ESL teachers should provide an opportunity for their self-expression and creativity.

To plan the educational environment, the researchers used the model called MUSIC suggested by Jones (2009). This model allows influencing the level of learning motivation of

prospective ESL teachers during their training at the university. The name of the model is the acronym, including (1) eMpowerment, (2) Usefulness, (3) Success, (4) Interest, (5) Caring (Jones, 2009). The model helps in teaching academic disciplines according to the components of MUSIC. Consequently, the researchers adapted the model to the specifics of their educational model.

Thus, under eMpowerment, the scholar understands that the students have extended powers so that they have the opportunity to self-control the process of their professional development (Jones, 2009). Therefore, the focus of ESL teachers training is on the series of activities that allow every student to adapt the educational material to their own pace of life and modify it to their educational goals. It implies that the content of each training course should be somewhat fluctuating and adaptable to change. It can also be supplemented by the information that future professionals perceive as essential for their future professional activities considering their educational goals. Thus, they will not be passive participants of training courses but will become co-participants and co-responsible developers together with their teachers.

The second component is Usefulness, which the author understands as the confidence of the course developer. Students understand the importance of educational material for their future professional development (Jones, 2009). In our context, students must be aware of why they study this particular theoretical or practical material and use it for their professional purposes. Therefore, teachers involved in creating an educational environment should focus on this issue and incorporate theoretical content into a quasi-professional context, visualize this knowledge in the process of practical tasks completing, and encourage students to active teaching activity during practical classes.

The researchers applied the marketing strategies "The Golden Circle" suggested by Sinek (2011). In this context, the researchers suggest that any topic from the curriculum starts with the question of WHY?. It can help the university teachers recognize what competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities students need to be competitive in the labor market. Why do they need to study the material? How necessary is this theoretical knowledge for a future professional career? The second question - HOW - should explain how students can achieve their professional goals. What are the most effective methods and technologies for them to become a proficient specialist? The last question - WHAT – answers what skills and abilities they must have to be successful and efficient teachers in the market of educational services. To implement the idea is possible during orientation classes before each discipline. In our opinion, this can be done most effectively with the help of training and game technologies.

The third element of the MUSIC model is Success. The author of the research interprets the component as students confidence that if they focus all their effort on their studies, they will succeed (Jones, 2009). The scholar believes that the training course must be supported by detailed instructions so that every student has the opportunity to succeed following them. Therefore, to create an educational environment, prospective teachers must clearly understand the requirements and expectations for the theoretical material. Additionally, the practical tasks should vary so that everyone can show their creativity at a personal level. In our opinion, creative assignments provide the best chance to realize the potential. Thorough and sound comments should follow practical tasks. It is vital to understand that the remarks as "you have done everything wrong…; rewrite it;

many mistakes…" cannot be judged as comprehensive. The comments should illustrate the level of students professional growth, explain in detail what they exactly need to correct or study, or research, and why. To do this, teachers who plan to create such an educational environment must comprehensively help students. They should not be just authoritarian examiners, but rather mentors willing to explain and teach.

The fourth component of the model is Interest. This component implies an understanding that the material chosen for professional training is exciting and will promote interest in future professionals (Jones, 2009). Interest in this context has two variations. On the one hand, it is a situational interest that equates to curiosity and has a temporary prolongation. On the other, personal or individual interest is specific and long-lasting (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). The task of professional training is to transform situational interest into an individual for further self-development (Jones, 2009). Hidi and Renningeer (2006) suggested a four-phase model of individual interest development, which the researchers adapted to the objectives of their model.

In the first phase, which includes triggered situational interest, it is essential to arouse physiological interest in students, demonstrating them quasi-professional settings and materials in different formats (audio or video). In this phase, future teachers will be able to compare the requirements to the profession and their level of professional development and lay the foundation for further self-development from the standpoint of greater interest. The second phase - maintained situational interest - proves the stability and better involvement of students in professional training. Within this phase, prospective teachers clearly understand the significance of each practical task, and actively participate in various quasi-professional tasks, testing their skills in different possible situations.

In the first two phases, it is necessary to plan situations arousing emotional interest and to plan assignments for the training courses considering professional and life experience. This trigger provides an opportunity for self-expression using personal behavioral stereotypes and tendencies.

The third phase - emerging individual interest - involves physiological state and is the initial stage of steady personal interest. In the context of professional training in this phase, future specialists have their ideas about quasi-professional tasks. Master students ask many questions about educational processes and look for options to develop their pedagogical style. The fourth phase - well-developed individual interest - includes physiological, long-term, and steady interest. Within the professional training, this interest is expressed in self-improvement and self-development, focus on lifelong learning, characterized by deep internal involvement in the task completing process.

In these two phases, prospective ESL teachers need to be given much self-control over their professional development. In the process of completing quasi-professional actions, it is vital to emphasize the dynamics of their professional development and encourage further self-development and self-improvement, demonstrating comprehensive support specific to the fifth component of the MUSUC model - Caring (Jones, 2009).

The author understands this component not only as simple attention during professional training but also as personal care (respect students private life, know their living or health conditions) (Jones, 2009). Thus, in the focus of professional training of prospective ESL teachers, it is essential to create an educational environment that would promote friendly relations between future professionals and university teaching staff. Students should feel parental mentoring and guardianship.

Data Analysis and Results

After implementing the suggested educational environment into the educational process, the researchers obtained results that prove its effectiveness in the process of professional training of prospective ESL teachers. Thus, 112 Master students have participated in the survey in 2020. According to the first criterion (readiness for professional activity), 78% of respondents showed their willingness; according to the second criterion (ability to use potential), 83% of respondents demonstrated it. According to the third criterion (ability to plan future professional growth), 79% of respondents showed positive results. Figure 1 represents the results of the analysis.
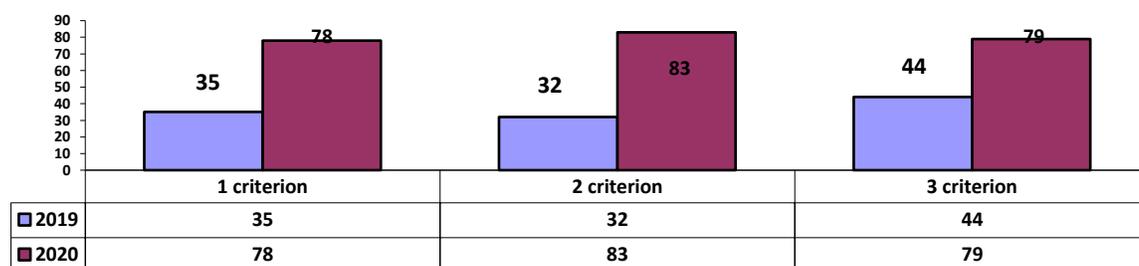
	1 criterion	2 criterion	3 criterion
☐ 2019	35	32	44
■ 2020	78	83	79

Figure 1. The comparative analysis of data before and after implementing the educational environment (in %).

Discussion

The present paper provided the researchers with a clear picture of implementing the model of Educational Environment for Prospective Ukrainian ESL Teachers within CBE. The survey of Master students before implementing the model showed their negative attitudes towards many aspects of their professional training when getting the degree of ESL Teachers. Their responses clearly showed that they were unaware of and ignored some courses they thought did not match their learning outcomes. After having implemented the model, ESL teachers had found a variety of opportunities for pedagogical creativity and self-development in the professional educational environment, since everyone had their personal experience, personal qualities and cognitive abilities, character, cognitive style, etc. Consequently, the environment the researchers have developed and implemented, on the one hand, promoted self-development and self-actualization, and on the other - stimulated self-improvement and professional advancement of each participant of the pedagogical system.

The model provides the educational multi-structured environment, which is focused on the education of a proficient specialist. The specially arranged educational space, which is implemented within the educational model, considers the stages of professional development and

triggers the potential of prospective ESL teachers. The obtained results prove the effectiveness of the suggested educational environment, which can be adapted for different purposes of professional training and preparation of specialists in various fields. As for recommendations, the researchers suggest, firstly, to consider every possibility to influence the personality of the students to develop their skills and reveal their potential for further self-development and self-improvement. Secondly, the institution of higher education should provide a perfect educational environment in the context of professional training of prospective ESL teachers. Finally, the teaching staff must be creative, self-critical, and willing to apply the model of educational environment that proved to be successful and efficient in the process of prospective ESL teachers training in Ukraine.

Conclusion

The given research proved that Ukrainian universities still face problems preparing the ESL teachers, though the CBE is very trendy. The literature review oriented researchers to model an educational environment based on the competency-based principles for Prospective Ukrainian ESL Teachers. The model was further implemented in two Ukrainian universities and encouraged positive changes in the education of Master students within a year and a half of the experiment.

However, the present study has some limitations that should be researched further. Firstly, only Master students getting the ESL teacher's degree participated in the experiment. The same model can be applied to other levels of professional training. Secondly, it is reasonable and still vital to involve other Ukrainian universities in the experiment to provide more clear mapping and validity of the results. However, this research has raised the concern for educators to rethink the way the ESL teachers should be trained within the competency-based educational principles and has emphasized on searching for serious changes in the whole educational system of Ukraine.

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