

Instructional Principles and Approaches to English Course Design in Continuing Education

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Abstract – This study aims to design the program and instruction of an English course that stimulates adult learners' engagement in language learning and English communicative competence development in the continuing education. The authors have discussed the principles and approaches of adult education to the course design (personalized approach, meaningful learning, principles of visual education, technology-based communication) and efficacy of four classroom management strategies: a visual thinking strategy, video-based discussions, guided discovery activities, web-technologies-based communication tasks. The findings in this study prove the improvement of English communicative competence in adult learners.

Keywords – *EFL communicative competence, adult language learning, visual thinking, web technologies, guided discovery activities*

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-paced world the range of competences required for a teaching position in academia is wide. To constantly innovate and adapt to new standards and requirements, university teaching staff need to develop new competences, soft skills, and attitudes. These include communicative competence in both native and foreign languages, critical thinking, ICT skills, social intelligence, cultural awareness [1, 2]. As the roles of university teaching staff are diverse, and so are expectations about them, for personal and professional fulfillment and development in the scientific international environment, teachers should possess EFL communicative competence [3, 4].

Despite the fact that Foreign Language has always been a core discipline in the curriculum in all universities and colleges in Russia, in the recent past, foreign language education for non-linguistics specialties did not develop communicative competence in university students [3]. They have been taught

reading and translation skills mainly with some focus on English vocabulary and grammar. Little attention was paid to developing their fluency in communication.

Moreover, most of the English textbooks and teaching materials designed by Russian scholars for a wide use in universities were based on the traditional reproductive approach and had little focus on communication. Due to these factors, the teachers and professors of Omsk State Agrarian University (OmSAU) did not gain sufficient proficiency in a foreign language when they were university undergraduates and postgraduates. Currently, they have to admit that the EFL communicative competence is necessary for their successful career development in the international arena. Hence, the problem of communicative competence development in relation to adult language learning has become a topic of special interest for EFL teachers at OmSAU. Different aspects of teaching communicative competence to adult learners in the EFL class have been developed in the context of creative writing and critical thinking approach [5], extracurricular activities [6]. This study sets out to design the content and instruction of the EFL course that encourages the participation of teaching staff in language learning and EFL communicative competence development at OmSAU.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the following theoretical questions: 1) What is teachers' EFL communicative competence and how can it be revealed and measured? 2) What pedagogical principles and approaches of adult learning can we apply to the English course design?

A great amount of research work has been done to analyze the concept of communicative competence [7–10]. Most of the researchers agree that communicative competence is a combination of two interrelated competencies: linguistic and

social. According to Canale and Swain, communicative competence is the ability to use the language system appropriately in cross-cultural circumstances, with regard to the functions and the varieties of language, as well as shared sociocultural suppositions [11]. Thus, the communicative competence is a more complex ability involving more than just knowing language rules. In our opinion, it is a combination of the language knowledge and social values and attitudes, as well as the practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in a variety of settings (sociocultural, academic, and professional).

The evaluation of communicative competence, therefore, involves the assessment of the language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) in the context, and practical language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) in different settings. The communicative competence is revealed by producing or receiving texts in the oral or written forms in various contexts with a certain communicative purpose. These contexts correspond to various situations of personal, social, academic and professional life [12].

Since our English course aims to provide support for adult learners, it is important to consider the question of pedagogical principles and approaches of adult education applicable to the language course design.

The most important factors that bring adult learners to success in language learning are motivation and responsibility. In order to keep adult learners focused and motivated while learning the language, it is vital to understand and use adults' experiences and refer to their personal interests [13]. It is essential to address learners' needs and goals when designing the course content and instruction. While developing teaching materials or choosing instructional strategies, EFL teachers should bring in learners' personal experiences and strengths in language learning. This relevance to the learners' needs and personalized approach in delivering the course will produce the feeling of involvement and responsibility for learning outcomes in the participants [14].

Meaningful learning in adult education is another challenging issue to improve learning efficacy. This approach to language learning requires changing the focus from the language as an educational aim to the language as a social medium [15]. Learning the language in the context gives adult learners more understanding of how to use vocabulary and grammar rules in the meaningful communication. This approach helps adult learners see that what they are learning is "real-life" language that meets their communication needs.

Using visuals in the classroom is essential in today's increasingly visual world. Visualization in the form of diagrams, charts, drawings, pictures can help adult learners understand and remember information better than mere verbal or textual descriptions. In addition, a visual object has become a significant component of foreign language communication [16]. It is difficult to imagine the language classroom without using cartoons, comics, YouTube videos, films, etc. They can stimulate critical thinking, help in creating ideas, and engage in a discussion. Videos can provide even more opportunities for language learning.

Learning the foreign language is inextricably linked with the use of technology. Modern technologies include computer and Internet technologies. Web 2.0 Internet technologies such as wikis, social networks, blogs, and microblogging (twitter) can be used both as educational content and as a teaching method [17]. They provide mediation between multiple users, and between the user and the Internet service. Web 2.0 technologies are really successful in teaching written communication. In addition, this strategy improves adult learners' motivation and as a result, it leads to better outcomes.

Thus, personalized approach, meaningful learning, principles of visual education and technology-based communication should guide the course design and instruction to suit adult learners' needs, motivations, and goals, and provide communicative environment in the classroom.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Our research questions include the following:

1. What textbook shall we choose as a main source of instruction?
2. How will instructional content suit the participants' needs?
3. What are the most effective classroom management strategies for developing communicative competence?

The research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the instructional content which will suit participants' needs;
2. To identify classroom management strategies and techniques to provide the most effective instruction of the content;
3. To identify participants' progress in the communicative competence at the end of the course;
4. To compare participants' progress in Group 1 and 2.

The following research methods were used to map the participants' improvement in the communicative competence: direct observation, questionnaire method, pedagogical diagnostics, pretesting and post-testing.

The practical realization of the communicative EFL course for the teaching staff was held at Omsk State Agrarian University (OmSAU) in the academic year of 2017-2018. The participants were 25 teachers in different University positions (1 Dean, 5 Heads of Chair, 1 Professor, 13 Assistant Professors, 5 Senior Teachers). The learners were mixed in terms of age (35-52) and gender. The abilities were at the same level mostly as they were grouped according to their language level. They were all with English-speaking backgrounds. They started learning English at secondary school. At university, they read and translated academic texts as well as scientific articles in their post-graduate courses. Some of them took extra English classes from a tutor. The learners also took English courses at different language schools where the process was focused on learning grammar, reading and translation. The learners were very motivated. According to their background they needed English for work: they must be able to study international experience through reading and writing scientific articles in English as well as to collaborate with colleagues throughout the world. The enrolled participants were divided into 2 groups. Group 1 was taught in terms of the designed course with the use

of classroom management strategies and techniques. Group 2 followed the course according to the textbook.

When designing the course for Group 1, we addressed the factors that in our opinion might affect learners' participation in the program and their educational outcomes. The learner factors included work schedules, work load, family responsibilities, learners' previous EFL experience, learners' needs and interests. Among other factors were the course duration, class location, flexible class schedule, frequency of classes. The hallmark of our program was flexibility that was applied to class scheduling, location, duration in order to maximize learning opportunities.

The 72-hour course offered a flexible class schedule of 3-6 hours of classroom work during a week with little homework.

Prior to designing the course, we asked the participants to complete Needs Analysis questionnaire to learn about their preferences and expectations about the language course. The learners' answers helped us identify the topics and communicative situations of the instructional content which included two main domains: Social and Travel (40 hours) and Work and Business Skill (32 hours) with real life social or business-related topics like Meeting people, Family matters, Eating out, Shopping for clothes, Talking about past experiences, Writing emails, Making presentations, etc.

The essential element of the course is the textbook, which provides a clear structure for teachers and learners. So, one of the most important questions at the stage of the program design was about the choice of the suitable textbook. We chose Face to Face course, Elementary level, as a main source of instruction. Making a decision in favor of Face2Face textbook involved consideration of some aspects: 1) communicative approach of the course; 2) theme-based well-developed and organized content; 3) relevance of the content to the learners' needs and interests; 4) thinking-based approach to learning a new language; 5) personalized approach to learners' language skills development, 6) multimodal approach to content design. At the same time, the textbook language had to be practiced in more natural communication settings, so there was a need to supplement the textbook content and activities with those, which were developed specially by teachers.

Together with Learners' Needs Analysis questionnaire, the participants did the Entry test. The results of the test revealed that at the start of the program most of the participants possessed basic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and elementary reading and writing skills with some difficulty in listening and speaking. These findings helped us define our approaches to the language instruction.

In order to engage the participants of the program into communicative language learning we chose 4 instructional strategies: 1) visual thinking strategy; 2) video-based discussions; 3) guided discovery activities; 4) web-technologies-based communication tasks.

Now, we describe how we employed the above strategies to promote language learning and communication in the classroom.

When assessing the educational worth of the Face2Face textbook, apart from vocabulary and grammar presentation and skill-related activities we evaluated the visual aspect as well. The textbook contains a lot of pictures, photos, images which we used as a meaningful medium of thinking and communication in the classroom. The role of the teacher was to prepare a set of inspirational questions about the pictures for learners to motivate their thinking and talking on a certain topic. Using Bloom's taxonomy of learning, we made two groups of questions: lower-order and higher-order types [18]. Lower-order questions helped learners: 1) to revise grammar and vocabulary); 2) to practice new language forms giving descriptions of the picture, stating ideas about the topic; 3) to use language knowledge and skills in a new situation or just practice the language in the context. Higher-order questions stimulated deeper critical thinking about the topic or situation shown in the picture that also contributed to free communication. Answering higher-order questions, adult learners could: 1) make analysis of the situation depicted in the picture; 2) state new ideas about the situation; 3) give and justify their opinions about the situation. Therefore, both types of questions were very valuable in the teaching-learning process as they served different educational purposes.

The next strategy, which we integrated into our class, was video-based discussions. We used this strategy as a teacher-directed learning technique where the teacher arranged discussions around certain topics and asked students to complete certain exercises supplementing their classroom objectives. The technique drew learners' attention to a specific topic thus building their expectations about the video. It is worth mentioning that adult learners needed to be involved not only in receptive skills building activities but also in productive and critical-thinking activities. For realizing the above strategy, we picked out short videos directly connected with the domains from different resources such as youtube.com, film-english.com, vimeo.com, esl-lab.com, bbc.uk.com.

As an example, we chose a short video called "Wife-Carrying Race" which we connected with the "Family matters" topic. Doing the pre-watching activities, we included a picture (a snapshot, without giving the headline of the video) (Fig.1) for stimulating discussion about the topic and a set of questions developing critical-thinking (rather than just simple answers, e.g., "What color is the man's T-shirt?") and appealing to learners' life experience and values.



Fig. 1 Snapshot From The Video "Wife-Carrying Race"

Thus, possible questions (using modals of speculation- *might, must, couldn't, has to, may*, etc.) with this picture included: "Where is the man in this picture?" ("He might be in the country/on a specially prepared site". "He might be participating in the race"), "Where is the man running to?" ("He might be running to the finish line". / "He's got the number

on his T-shirt". / "There are many people around". / "They must be fans".), "What is the man carrying?" ("He's carrying a man/a woman/a child". / He couldn't be carrying an adult because it would be very difficult for him to run"), "Is it a challenge for him?" ("Yes, very serious challenge, judging by the emotions on his face" / "He must have been tired but the desire to win is very strong." / "He must be testing himself to the limits"), "What will be the prize?" ("Perhaps, a sum of money?"). For after-watching discussion we offered our adult learners the following questions: "What things do you do to strengthen the relationship with the members of your family?" "What are the keys to a successful family, both emotionally and intellectually?" "Are there any outdoor activities like hiking or camping that you enjoy doing together?" "Do you ever face a challenge?"

Guided discovery activities as an effective instructional strategy in ELT proved to be useful in encouraging and stimulating meaningful learning. First, students were engaged in the process of working out the rules of how language forms were constructed and used. Then they went on to do exercises using the language they had uncovered. For adult learners, 'discovering' facts about the language rather than having the teacher or the book tell them was more effective. The role of the teacher was to select appropriate techniques and methods in conveying and checking the meaning of the target language and prepare worksheets. In our course, guided discovery activities enabled our learners: 1) to study examples of the target language; 2) to clarify the meaning and the form of the target language; 3) to practice and use the language in the context. We also used concept checking questions, visual prompts and cues (timelines and pictures) and realia (e.g. diary) as supporting techniques.

We would like to illustrate how we used this strategy in the classroom. The target language was the Present Continuous Tense for diary future. The teacher showed a picture of Anna and her diary with the plans for the next week and introduced the following text: "Anna's next week is very busy. Every evening after work she has some plans. On Monday she's visiting her hairdresser – she needs to have her hair cut. On Tuesday she's having a dance class – she started doing this not long ago and she really likes it, she has classes once a week. On Wednesday she's meeting her best friend for dinner – she phoned Anna and they agreed to meet. On Friday she's going shopping – she needs to buy some clothes". Then the teacher asked the learners to look at the sentences from the text and answer the questions, which had the advantage of getting the adult learners to think about the meaning and highlight the concept of the target language [19].

1. Anna is having a dance class on Tuesday.

– "Is Anna having a dance class now or next week?" ("Next week.")

– "Is it a definite arrangement?" ("Yes.")

– "Is it in her diary?" ("Yes.")

2. On Wednesday she's meeting her best friend for dinner.

– "Is she talking about the present or the future?" ("Future.")

– "Is it a definite arrangement?" ("Yes.")

– "Is it in her diary?" ("Yes.")

For constructing the form and clarifying the use of the target language, the learners were asked to fill in the gaps in the rule.

Form: (+) Subject be _____ .

(-) Subject _____ not Ving

(?) Be subject Ving

(?) What/When/Where _____ subject Ving

Use: We use Present Continuous to talk about _____ definite arrangements.

To make sure that the learners understood the meaning and form of the target language, the teacher asked them to do a task (e.g. "Read the situations and complete the dialogues. Use the Present Continuous Tense"). At this stage, the teacher could see if there were any problems in the usage of the tense and gave extra help if it is necessary. Then the teacher provided the learners with practice in using the target language in a freer way, so they could develop oral fluency as well. The teacher asked to think of three things the learners were planning to do at the weekend and compare their ideas with other learners. First, they worked individually, and then they mingled to learn about each other plans. The task was personalized and enabled the learners to generate interesting ideas on the topic. Besides, the task had a communicative purpose: learners had to find someone with the same plans.

Because of the prevailing role of written communication in social networks at the present time, we paid particular attention to the improvement of learners' writing skills through the use of web technologies. During the course, the students were offered to write comments on different events in English-speaking social networks such as "Instagram" or "Facebook". We chose these resources, as they are the most visited and the most popular ones. The learners' written works were later read and analyzed by the teacher. This teaching strategy provided adult learners with an opportunity for direct communication in the classroom and successful communication with other Internet users.

According to this strategy, we followed 3 steps: 1) preparation, 2) writing a comment, 3) follow-up. As an example, we chose "The best holiday photo" activity for developing learners' communicative skills.

Step 1. Preparation. The teacher introduced a symbol of Instagram and asked the learners if they knew what this logo was for. The learners were asked to tell their partners in pairs how often they used social networks, Instagram in particular, and find out who was more active user in their pair. Then the teacher boarded a picture of a man and told the learners: "This is Henry. He is an architect from Liverpool and a very active Instagram user. He likes taking part in all Instagram contests. Two days ago he took part in the contest "The best holiday photo". The learners read Henry's post about the photo and did the tasks (matching paragraphs to questions, filling gaps with prepositions). This stage allowed preparing the adult learners

for writing activity as it provided them with a model (sample post).

Step 2. Writing a comment. In order to engage the learners and make the purpose communicative the teacher said, “You’re going to take part in the contest “The best holiday photo”. You will write a post for Instagram. You need to get the most ‘likes’”. The learners were offered to choose a photo that they had not seen it before. The contest conditions were the following: 1) to describe the picture that they got, 2) to describe it as it were their favourite holiday photo, 3) to write 5 paragraphs on the questions in their handout (from Step 1), 4) they had 12 minutes for that task. While the learners were writing, the teacher was monitoring the learners’ work, doing microteaching if needed, and collecting examples of good and not so good language use for final feedback.

Step 3. Follow-up. After writing a comment, the learners boarded their posts. Every student should choose the post he or she liked most and put his ‘like’ (a magnet). The winner was the learner whose post got more ‘likes’. The teacher boarded three sentences that had been collected during Step 2 and asked to improve them if needed. This stage attracted the learners’ attention to the mistakes they had made and good examples of their language use. The teacher also gave feedback on the learners’ ideas while describing the photos.

IV. RESULTS

For language assessment and evaluation of learners’ progress, we used the online test: “Evaluation of Readiness for the Certificate Exam in English” developed by the Tomsk Polytechnic University. The test consisted of two parts: Listening and Use of English & Reading. The test was of A-level and it aimed at checking the language (grammar and vocabulary) ability in the context and communication skills in reading and listening. Testing materials corresponded to the A1-B1 level of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

TABLE I. CORRESPONDENCE OF TEST SCORES (TEST A) WITH THE LEVELS OF CEFR

Scores	% (max. 100 %)	Correspondent level of CEFR
0-9	0-16	-
10-27	17-47	A1
28-38	48-66	A2.1
39-48	67-83	A2.2
49-58	84-100	Higher than A2

During the course, the learners went through assessment twice: at the beginning and at the end of the course in order to fix their learning progress.

The entry test aimed at evaluating the participants’ EFL communicative competence at the start. The results were as follows.

The results showed that the majority of the participants in both groups (Group 1 and Group 2) had an A1-level of English at the start. The analysis of the performance of the language skills indicated that most of the participants had difficulty with listening: only 34 % of all listening activities were successfully done by the participants. The least difficult tasks were those which tested reading skills: 52 % of all reading activities were

done. As for the language ability (grammar and vocabulary), the participants were able to cope with Use of English tasks: 36 % of all the tasks were done successfully. So, on average most of the participants had very basic language skills and abilities at the start of the program.

TABLE II. ENTRY TEST RESULTS

Level	Group 1 (13 participants)		Group 2 (12 participants)	
	Number of participants	Percentage of participants (%)	Number of participants	Percentage of participants (%)
Higher than A2	0	0%	0	0%
A2.2	1	7%	2	10%
A2.1	3	23%	2	10%
A1	9	70%	8	80%
-	0	0%	0	0%

These findings defined our approaches to the course design and instruction. The entry test scores allowed the teachers to identify the learners’ level of language proficiency. With the assessment data the teachers could make decisions about instructional content and program needs.

The learners’ progress in EFL competence was measured by the end-course tests. The results were as follows:

TABLE III. END-COURSE TEST RESULTS

Level	Group 1 (13 participants)		Group 2 (12 participants)	
	Number of participants	Percentage of participants (%)	Number of participants	Percentage of participants (%)
Higher than A2	0	0%	0	0%
A2.2	3	16%	2	10%
A2.1	5	56%	3	25%
A1	5	28%	7	65%
-	0	0%	0	0%

The comparative analysis of the results reveals the considerable growth of the EFL communicative competence in the participants of the program within Group 1.

TABLE IV. ASSESSMENT RESULTS OF ENTRY TEST AND END-COURSE TEST IN COMPARISON

Level	Percentage of participants (%)			
	Entry Test		End-Course Test	
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 1	Group 2
Higher than A2	0%	0%	0%	0%
A2.2	7%	10%	16%	10%
A2.1	23%	10%	56%	25%
A1	70%	80%	28%	65%
-	0%	0%	0%	0%

The participants’ performance of the tasks checking language ability and skills shows steady growth during the course. We can see slight increase in listening skills of A1 level during the whole course, and dramatic increase of A2 level towards the end of the course. The number of the learners who managed to reach B1 level in listening skills underwent insignificant change from 7 to 10 percent. Mastering listening skills remained challenging for Russian adult learners probably due to the fact that adult learners usually have dominant visual

and kinesthetic learning styles mostly. Besides, in Russia we lack natural English communication environment.

The language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary in use) of the participants went up steadily during the course with some growth in A2 level, which was revealed in the end-course test in comparison with the results of the entry test. There is significant increase in reading skills in all levels, which was expected.

The online test was useful in assessing learners' skills of reproductive type. Unlike the assessing of achievement, assessing proficiency is not necessarily confined to measuring content knowledge that is taught in the classroom. The learners' proficiency in speaking was assessed by means of visual-based discussions, which allowed learners to manifest their communicative competence while expressing ideas in various contexts.

V. DISCUSSION

The main objective of the study was to design the content of the EFL course and identify the most effective strategies for successful development of EFL communicative competence in adult learners.

Adult learners had clear understanding of why they come to the course and what they wanted to get out of it. They joined the course with their different learning backgrounds and life experiences that allowed the teachers to use a wide range of activities in the classroom. Our intention was to involve our participants into more intellectual learning so that they could learn consciously. The findings revealed that thinking infused into the learning process, the use of visual objects, face to face and virtual communicative environment served as major factors in the successful adult language learning. They made the learning process meaningful, interesting, exciting and creative.

The findings show that 56% per of the participants of the program demonstrated their practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in some social settings provided that the other person is ready to help - speaks slowly, repeats phrases, uses simple grammar structures and simple vocabulary. 16% of the participants showed the A2.2 level of communicative competence which is enough for purposeful communication in personal, social, academic and professional settings.

The findings in the study support our idea that the course content should suit participants' needs and interests in the language and the topics to study. In our case, the content of the textbook supplemented with the teacher's extra activities produced a big motivating effect on the learners. However, the content of the course that was taught in the classroom did not correspond completely to the measuring content of the test. It explains the fact that the results of the end-course test were not as high as we expected.

While delivering the course we saw the benefits from engaging adult learners into productive and critical-thinking activities. Discussion through questions was a really good tool for developing learners' critical-thinking skills (e.g., determining causality, hypothesizing, etc.). Our learners vitally

need such skills not only for interaction with people in academic and work environments but also for everyday interaction. We should point out that video-based discussion as a strategy was based on the pedagogical framework discussed in the article, focusing on objectives and outcomes, thus maximizing the learning potential of our adult learners. After-watching part possessed a potential even more powerful because it helped learners to be engaged in different conversational activities to apply what they had learned and to make the language part of learner's natural communication skills.

Guided discovery learning seems to be an instructional design model. The learners had responsibility for 'discovering' the studied content through self-directed learning. Thus, guided discovery activities moved the centre from the teacher as an educator to the learners as discoverers. The use of this strategy made the process of learning more student-centered, encouraged learners' autonomy and communication as learners needed to discuss the language together.

From the study, it was found out that the integration of visuals with speaking and writing activities helped the participants communicate with one another. Internet communication and video-based discussions made adult learners engaged in the development of speaking and writing skills. Providing the learners with models in terms of the content (what the learners can write about), the language (the level of language expected), and the form (the post in a social network like "Instagram" or "Facebook" with included photos, smiley faces, hashtags, the teachers managed to create meaningful "real-life" communicative environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

In today's globalised world, Russian professionals need to develop English communicative competence for personal and professional fulfillment in the international scientific and academic environment. The study has discussed the principles and approaches to the program design of the EFL course and efficacy of particular classroom management strategies for developing EFL communicative competence in adult learners.

The communicative competence is a combination of the language knowledge and sociocultural norms, values and attitudes, and practical ability to use the language for a real communicative purpose in social, educational, professional settings. The evaluation of communicative competence involves the assessment of the language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) in the context, and practical language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) in different settings.

The course was designed on the basis of the following principles and approaches of adult education: personalized approach, meaningful learning, principles of visual education and technology-based communication. Internet technologies served both as educational content and as a teaching method.

The findings in this study support the fact that the use of a visual thinking strategy, video-based discussions, guided discovery activities, web-technologies-based communication tasks contributed to meaningful language learning and practice and purposeful active communication, which support the improvement of EFL communicative competence in adult

learners. In addition, video-based discussions and a visual thinking strategy promoted critical thinking and encouraged adult learners to reflect on values while learning a language.

Thus, the findings support the methodology of this course and raise questions of infusing specific thinking strategies in the EFL teaching.

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