

Cross-Cultural Challenges of a Foreign Language Quest

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Abstract. Nowadays a quest is not only a fascinating way to pass one's leisure time, but also a powerful resourceful TEFL methodology increasingly gaining popularity among teachers to gauge their students' skills and abilities (competences). Its array of applications is impressive, and thanks to this fact it turns an otherwise strictly formal and routine assessment procedure into a pedagogical game, the authors deemed it worthwhile and rewarding to utilize it in the educational process. The experiment featured in this paper exposed the immense potential of the quest and proved the success of the activities of a varied nature (from grammar to lexis to cultural background) arranged within the framework of the quest. The obtained findings clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of testing different language levels of potential entrants planning to apply for majors in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Cybernetics, Radioengineering and Physics (in this paper – elementary-pre-intermediate) by means of this gamified and adjustable technique.

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, there exist three major changes taking place throughout the whole Teaching English as Foreign (Second) Language paradigm (TEFL). This gradual adaptation to the challenges of the post-industrial era – as far as we are concerned - has three interconnected features: 1) shift from mass-oriented education to individualized training; 2) ever-growing role of ICT; 3) exploring simulation as a powerful tool for vocational training.

2. Major changes in the TEFL paradigm

2.1. Shifting to individualized training

The changes that took place in the 20th century affected predominantly industries and governments consequently entailing significant changes in the educational paradigm [1-3].

Industrial revolution forced schools and educational institutions to adapt a novel view upon vocational training: 'technology' made its way to the training process too. Governments and growing businesses turned their eyes towards educational facilities, financing research and adoption of more efficient ways to train individuals to meet their minimal requirements, so that they would fill in numerous vacancies while keeping chances of human error low [3]. This has built the basis for contemporary

standards of education incorporating meta-competences in the description of an ideal result of education.

Meta-competences can be interpreted as the ability to learn quickly, make decisions with insufficient information, proactiveness and communicative skills – all these competences support and allow subtly developing other (sub)skills and competences of a professional.

In order to achieve higher quality of education we ought to take a more individualized approach to vocational training, which, in turn, combines (not compromises upon) employers' requirements for a specialist with an individual's psychological needs in order to achieve life contentment and happiness [4, 5, 6].

In this regard, in order to stay effective TEFL should be based upon the following principles: tasks and communicative exercises should be practical, providing hands-on experience; combining English training with students' majors; TEFL should prioritize the development of the so-called 'soft skills' and meta-competences as well as communicative competences; simultaneously, TEFL should implicitly instill empathy, giving insight into intercultural communication in order to help navigate in multi-cultural environment.

2.2. Challenges of ICT

In the post-industrial era IT advancements enable us to save time and increase performance, which brings more value to the entertainment industry and leisure, providing even more opportunities for self-development, personal- and professional-wise [7].

Thanks to ICT researchers and experts belonging to different cultures can share their ideas and work together, creating a much "denser" noosphere than academician Vernadsky ever imagined. In addition, social networking sites and internet media allow one to communicate his/her ideas to a vast audience beyond one's own culture. In this regard English is considered as the best "communication protocol" for the majority of the world.

Thus, language acquisition goes hand in hand with increasing intercultural awareness and a foreign language classroom becomes a crucial ground for developing tolerance, empathy and practical skills for communicating effectively with people coming from other cultural backgrounds [8].

2.3. Simulation as a powerful tool for TEFL

Simulation-based language education for specific purposes can be a platform which presents valuable opportunities to resolve practical issues most graduates encounter, especially meeting essential (language) requirements (in particular, the necessity to possess practical skills) for an efficient performance at work [9,10]. Some EFL teachers eagerly introduce gamified simulation (or gamification) as a solution to this problem but not exclusively: lessons turned into game sessions create a competitive environment and provide almost-immediate feedback for students [11-14]. The intrinsic 'win-lose' nature of a game can push students to mobilize their resources and learn faster with direct feedback while unconsciously developing both their communication and other professional skills and meta-competences – the ability to cooperate to achieve their goals, prioritize and empathize.

In addition, gamification helps to implement all the major principles of modern TEFL paradigm described above within the course.

One of the game formats that we have implemented on the main campus of Russian Technological University (RTU MIREA) is a quest perfectly scalable for individuals as well as small groups. Its content (i.e. the cognitive effort of a participant) is well-adjustable as well and can include cross-cultural aspects of communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Preparation

Three major factors determined the conditions for arranging the quest. One of them was to do with timing – the university was hosting a scheduled open day that should attract a large number of poten-

tial entrants. The other one was the fact that the authors felt cautious about intervening in the normal course of curriculum activities in the middle of the semester. It would have implied adjusting the lessons of the selected classes without a clear enough outcome of the experiment. Furthermore, organizing a quest gives students a sensation of playing game thus removing the formalized limitations associated with a traditional test as well as reducing the language barrier. Lastly, a promise of an award is a natural incentive while carrying out any competitive event boosting its appeal to a target audience.

3.2. Quest layout

According to one of the definitions of the word 'quest', it is 'a search or pursuit made in order to find or obtain something' [15] (in particular, competences).

So as to render it more reminiscent of a real quest and to re-create the essential conditions, the quest designed and developed by the authors bore the following format: there were set up five so-called checkpoints each of which was concerned with tasks of their own nature. Since the Latin etymology of the word 'quest' implies seeking or searching, a different location was assigned to each checkpoint. These were situated on the same floor within the boundaries of one building but still in different classrooms. Having said that, it was considered necessary that ushers stood in the corridors along the main locations for the convenience of the participants. In order to completely ensure that absolutely no participant would be led astray each of them received an individual walkthrough sheet at the beginning of the quest.

The quest itself comprised two rounds: basic and more advanced. This reflected the estimated acquired language skills (elementary to pre-intermediate) of the average school graduate applying to a technical university. Those (almost) accomplishing the basic round were awarded with souvenirs bearing the university logo and the more fortunate ones enduring through the advanced round obtained USB flash drives.

The basic round always began at a '**German** checkpoint', which, however, required of the participants absolutely no previous experience of studying German. The main reasoning behind setting up this checkpoint was to have the contestants reflect on German cultural trace and legacy in Russian. During the basic round it was suggested that everyone thought of German loan words in Russian and gave two to three such examples. During the more advanced round the participants were given a card with a German proverb and its corresponding Russian adaptation and had to think of a Russian substitute, e.g. '*Aller Anfang ist schwer*' ('*Всё начинать сложно*') [16].

Every time a quest participant solved the offered task successfully, they were directed to the next checkpoint, which was referred to as a '**Riddles** checkpoint', where the participants were confronted with a riddle or puzzle. The basic round at this checkpoint involved dealing with less complicated riddles, e.g. '*It lives in the sea and sounds like 'park''* [17]. If the contestants made it through the basic round and ended up at the Riddles checkpoint for the second time, they faced more sophisticated tasks, e.g. '*What belongs to you but other people use it more than you do?*' [18]. All of them had been rendered in Russian in advance.

Following their success at the Riddles checkpoint the contestants progressed to a '**Tongue Twisters** checkpoint'. The challenge at this stage was how to avoid tying oneself into knots. Those who regained their composure were able to pronounce the expressions such as '*Four fine fresh fish for you*' [19]. In order to complete the more advanced round at this checkpoint it was mandatory that the participants mastered the fluent pronunciation of tongue twisters like '*How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? A woodchuck would chuck all the wood he could if a woodchuck could chuck wood*' [20].

The fourth checkpoint on the contestants' way was a '**French** checkpoint'. In spite of its explicit name no French background knowledge was expected of a participant. Instead, the tasks rather focused on, as it were, the cross-cultural potential of the French language, its influence on English and Russian in quite a few (trans)linguistic aspects. Therefore, within the framework of the basic round the authorized examiners at this checkpoint could check whether the contestants managed to apply French reading rules ('the music of the language') to seemingly well-known English words (e.g. *QUESTION*,

MESSAGE, IMPORTANT, SCIENCE, IMAGINATION, etc.) in order to make them sound French. The more advanced task at the French checkpoint was arranged as a table where the contestants were asked to find a match connecting a thing, event or personality in the right column with their corresponding meaning/association in the left one.

Upon the task completion at the French checkpoint the participants proceeded to their final destination during the basic round – an ‘**Emoji**’ checkpoint. The main design of this final milestone was to verify participants’ skills of socializing by means of emoji (pictographs charged with cultural subtext). The contestants were offered cards with short sentences written only in emoji [21, 22]. They were supposed to ‘decode’ them by deducing what particular notion (not a literal meaning more often than not) they concealed and subsequently ‘string them together’ to formulate a complete message. While the cards offered during the basic round contained concise messages of everyday occurrence, the ones reserved for the advanced round hid a few idioms and more complicated scenarios.

4. Results, discussion and conclusion

The total number of the quest participants on the open day amounted to 46 people. The somewhat relatively low number may be attributed to a few factors: a variety of other scientifically oriented workshops, masterclasses and lectures; the limited duration of the quest; the status of the disciplines taught by the department of foreign languages defined as ‘minors’. Notwithstanding the listed factors, the number of participants was deemed sufficient for the success of the experiment as well as for garnering the adequate statistics.

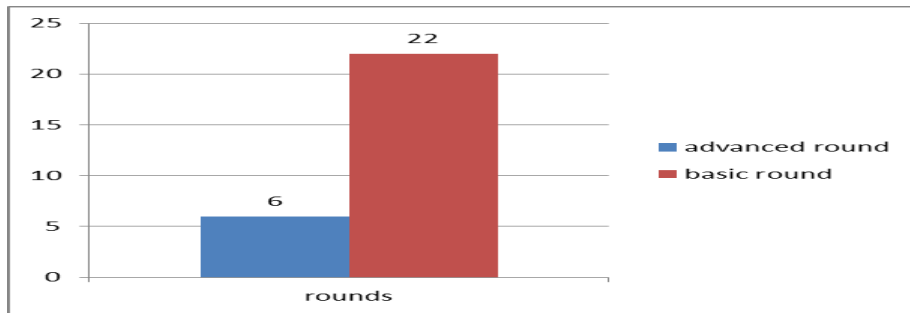


Figure 1. Number of participants who successfully completed the advanced and basic rounds respectively.

As shown above the majority of participants (28 people or 61%) succeeded in accomplishing at least one of the rounds. As many as 22 people made it to the end of the basic round and for various reasons made no more advances (mostly lack of time and the urge to benefit from other open day activities were cited as reasons to abort the quest).The fact that 6 participants (13 %) were able to resolve the tasks of both rounds pleased the authors since it proved that the quest was applicable and tailored to the needs of even non-linguistic students.

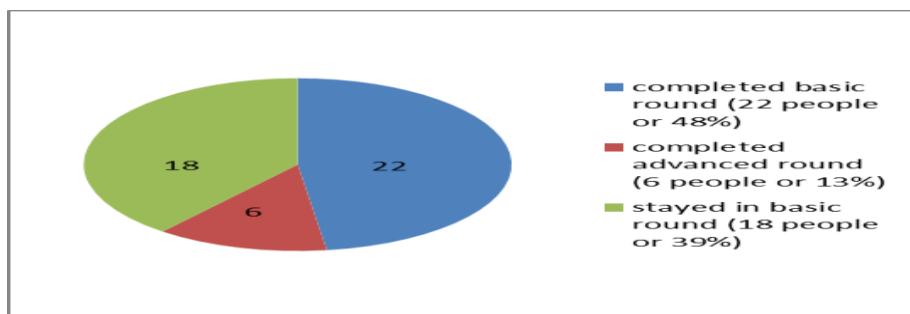


Figure 2. Overall performance.

Fig. 2 shows a pie chart of participants' the overall performance stressing the number of those who found the task(s) at (a) certain checkpoint(s) overwhelming and thus found themselves going in circles. It is also worth noting that some lost enthusiasm for the quest upon hearing the question at the starting point. To conclude, the number of less successful participants is not significant, which provides highly encouraging evidence for the authors to believe the tested methodology can be applied on a wider scale with matriculants.

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