

APPLYING OF DESIGN THINKING APPROACH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE

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Abstract. *A lot of people comprehend the necessity to acquire foreign languages and particularly foreign languages for their professional needs, but in most cases, their enthusiasm and motivation decrease and sometimes even disappear when hard work on a regular basis starts. The greatest advantages of the Design Thinking approach in teaching foreign languages are the development of foreign languages' competencies and the making of the learners more motivated. The aim of the paper is to analyze the development outcomes of communicative competencies by applying the Design Thinking approach to teaching foreign languages to Bachelor level law students who acquire legal English and Bachelor level Information Technology students who study German as a second foreign language. The following methods were used while doing the research: survey data analysis of the foreign languages courses' target audience and the qualitative analysis of the data content. A questionnaire of the students was developed and carried out, the answers were processed. The research experience was analyzed, the conclusions were drawn and the proposals for future work were worked out. The framework of learning was based on the Stanford method: empathizing, defining the problem, ideating, prototyping, and testing. The results of the study proved that the design thinking approach is effective as the learners solve many real-life problems. This encouraged collaboration and activity as they discussed simulated professional and real-life issues. The results also proved that the design thinking approach is recommended for learners with a higher level of foreign language proficiency. The pros and cons of the approach, based on the learners' results and questionnaires have been summarized.*

Keywords: *acquisition of a second foreign language, communicative competencies, design Thinking approach, legal English.*

Introduction

Nowadays more and more new digital tools, which support and promote the acquisition of foreign languages are being developed, as they are particularly convenient to be used in independent studies or as additional means in learning of foreign languages. These tools can assist in productive acquisition of grammar and phonetics topics, but it is more complicated to develop communicative competence. Even more, communicative competence in foreign

languages becomes more and more topical as the partners of communication get into the situations when they have to maintain the conversation without using any additional tools.

A lot of people comprehend the necessity to acquire foreign languages and particularly foreign languages for their professional needs, but in most cases, their enthusiasm and motivation decrease and sometimes even disappear when hard work on a regular basis starts. Learning and teaching of foreign languages is a creative and changing process where the teachers apply different methods in a masterly way and look for new ways to make the study process not only more interesting and captivating but also in order to provide the outcomes desired. One of the approaches, which gradually enters into the teaching of foreign languages is Design Thinking. The greatest advantages of the Design Thinking approach in teaching foreign languages are the development of foreign languages competencies and the making of the learners more motivated.

The object of the research: to analyze the development outcomes of communicative competencies by applying the Design Thinking approach to teaching foreign languages to Bachelor level law students who acquire legal English and Bachelor level Information Technology students who study German as a second foreign language.

The purpose of the research: to reveal the principle of Design Thinking approach in the acquisition of foreign languages, additionally showing how this approach can be applied in the mastering of both the first and the second foreign language

Research tasks: to carry out the questionnaire on the self - evaluation of the communicative competence among the target audience and develop the model based on Design Thinking, which reflects the integrating of the approach into the process of foreign languages' acquisition.

Methodological approach: methodological approach of the research consists of the sources' review on the Design Thinking approach; working out and carrying out the questionnaire among the target audience, the analysis of the data acquired.

In the 1990s, the design thinking approach developed as an innovative approach to creative processes. Initially, it was applied only in the design of different goods and services. The basic idea is that the goods have been worked out well only if they are well-accommodated to the human needs (Dam & Siang, 2022). Any conceptions are viable only if they solve human problems. The framework of learning is based on the Stanford method (Thienen et al, 2018): empathizing, defining the problem, ideating, prototyping, and testing. As the Design Thinking approach develops creativity, innovation and collaboration, it can be efficiently applied in the education process, including the acquisition of foreign languages. Design Thinking develops students' language skills as well as makes students more motivated. Design Thinking in foreign languages'

acquisition is perceived as the process of five stages. Empathizing teaches students to comprehend the true needs of the imagined customers or of the target audience. At the stage of defining they have to identify the problem to be solved, but at the stage of ideating they have to find solutions to the problems. This is the brainstorming phase. Understanding and improving brainstorming skills enables teams to develop more innovative options for prototyping. Prototyping is linked with the implementation of the best idea. Prototyping is linked with learning by combining and connecting different ideas. The last stage is based on getting feedback from the students.

The main advantages of this problem-based approach are that it teaches and encourages students to listen to each other's opinion and it means that it improves their communication skills. The design-based language learning approach assists to promote communicative grammar comprehension through oral and written communication practice, systematic problem solving and thinking, presentation and structured content.

Lightbown and Spada have emphasized that thinking skills operate effectively when students voice their analysis and take part in the learning process occurring in the classroom (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, 135). R. Jones states that language facilitates creativity because it is both rule governed and ambiguous, and socially situated and dialogic (Jones, 2016, 16 - 21). Chappell considers that any language is socially situated and dialogic and requires imagination and empathy to interpret others and bridge the gaps of understanding in everyday conversation R. Gotlieb, E. Jahner, M. Immordino-Yang and S. Kaufman have emphasized that reflexivity, empathy and social-emotional imagination allow students to visualize different perspectives and future selves, think creatively, and communicate appropriately (Gotlieb, Jahner, Immordino-Yang, & Kaufman, 2016, 308 - 336). Therefore, creativity should be seen not only as an artistic process but also as an essential part of communication, facilitating memory and collaboration.

Nowadays the process of globalization has closely connected different nations, and therefore it has enhanced their personal and professional relations. The necessity of learning foreign languages for professional purposes increases. It emphasizes the importance of the development of communicative competences, both oral and written during foreign languages' classes for students' future professional purposes. Communicative competences are distinguished by their especially complex nature. A lot of problems are linked with them (rate of delivery, the shyness of the students, lack of motivation to involve, redundancy, clustering, lack of knowledge, insufficient knowledge on formal and informal written language (Brown, 2007, 324). Before designing communicative activities, the list of the features that are typical for professional activities have to be made. Based on the list, the activities, which require discussion, argumentation, problem solution, summary and report of the ideas

conveyed inside the group, decision making, defending one's own position, etc. have to be developed. These features are essential for future professionals and ESP academics have to develop these competences.

In order to develop an effective foreign language course, an efficient syllabus has to be developed. D. Nunan states that syllabus design means the selection, sequencing and justification of the content of curriculum (Nunan, 2014, 55). The selection process is determined by the needs' analysis. An efficient foreign language syllabus for specific purposes is designed to meet students' needs, is relevant to the students, is successful in mastering learning, and is related to the content (terminology, topics, grammar structures) of the particular study fields. Questionnaires and surveys can be carried out to specify students' needs, but not always academics can rely only on students' opinion, particularly at bachelor's level, as they do not have any professional experience in the chosen professional field. For successful learning, the incorporation of *real world* needs – and the development of students' abilities to transfer the mastered language knowledge to novel situations, together with the usage of acquired competences in real life communication are considered to be vital parts of the efficient syllabus. On the whole, needs analysis is a complex process, which is usually followed by syllabus design, selection of course materials, teaching/learning a course, and its evaluation. Students often find it difficult to define what foreign language needs they have and are not able to distinguish between needs, wants and lacks. Here their academics are responsible for successful learning. Identifying and analyzing essential language and discourses is also very important. The trends in this sphere vary and change, for example in the 1980s the emphasis was put on business letters, but now e-communication is topical. The emphasis is put more on language function than on specific language items. The main advantages of the efficient foreign languages' syllabus for specific purposes are speed, efficiency and effectiveness in learning.

Research Results

93 respondents participated in the questionnaire - Rezekne Academy of Technologies' students who are studying in different programmes. The questionnaire was organized with the aim to clarify students' self-assessment on their ability to communicate in a foreign language (Independently of the fact if it is their first foreign language or the second one; either they are studying it now or have already acquired it). In the questionnaire the students reveal the obstacles, which influence their ability to communicate in the foreign language. Dividing the respondents according to the age groups, it can be seen that 52.7 % of respondents are young people of age from 18 to 23; correspondingly the following age groups are divided in the following way: 31.2 % are in the age group between 24 and 35 and 16.1% of respondents are in the age group starting

with 36 and older. The dominating acquired foreign languages mentioned are English, German, Russian; in more rare cases - Polish, French, Swedish, Chinese and Japanese. 45.2% of the respondents answered in affirmative the question on the usefulness of foreign language knowledge for professional purposes, in its turn, 38.7% of the respondents recognised that knowledge could be useful, and only 6 respondents (6.5%) answered in negative, considering that they would not need foreign language the foreign language in their professional field.

In the next question the respondents were asked to evaluate separate competences of the foreign language's usage in the professional field.

Table 1 Evaluation of the communicative competence's importance for professional aims (compiled by the authors based on the results of the questionnaire)

| Competence | Number of respondents' answers | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| | very important | more likely is important | more likely is not important | not important |
| Ability to communicate in the foreign language orally | 52 | 33 | 6 | 2 |
| Ability to communicate in the foreign language in written form | 45 | 39 | 8 | 1 |
| Ability to read and comprehend texts in the professional field | 56 | 32 | 5 | 0 |
| Ability to perceive and comprehend speech in the professional field | 62 | 26 | 4 | 1 |

The answers of the respondents, which have been summarized in the table, reveal that both oral and written communicative competences, as well as ability to perceive the read and the heard information are equally essential. It indicates that all these kinds of communication in foreign languages' acquisition have to be developed and perfected both during the classes and out of them. In addition, concerning the issue of self-evaluation of their professional aims of the foreign languages' communicative skills 47 (50.5%) respondents acknowledged that they are mediocre, that is why it is necessary to improve them. Besides, only 3 (3.2%) evaluated that they are excellent, the same number of respondents (3)

evaluated them as very weak. Correspondingly, 19 (20.4%) - as weak, 21 (22.6%) - as good.

The last question required the respondents to evaluate the reasons, which influence or do not influence their communication skills in the professional field. One third of respondents (31) concluded that this is a lack of regular communication opportunities in the foreign language; 45 respondents answered that the basis of vocabulary is of crucial importance (25 of them pointed at insufficient knowledge of professional terminology, 21 - insufficient knowledge of general vocabulary). It is interesting that uncertainty and unconvincingness of their own skill are not obstructive, 39 respondents answered in negative.

The authors of the paper chose the perfection of oral communicative competence at English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for lawyers-in-training, and the perfection of written communicative competence at German as the second foreign language course for professional purposes based in Design thinking approach.

As the students pointed out in the questionnaire that vocabulary and terminology are essential cornerstones, which prevent communication in the foreign language on professional topics, it is taken into consideration working out English and German courses based on the Design Thinking approach. In order to present the particular scenarios, it is first necessary to make sure that students have enough knowledge. The Design Thinking approach is user-oriented. That is why the target group is defined at the beginning and their needs are fixed. Based on the needs of the target group, particular and sequential tasks are defined. The needs of the target group are changed into ideas.

The syllabi of both foreign languages' courses are linked with the acquisition of professional terminology and discussing of the professional topics.

Legal terminology is pretty broad and complicated and it is not possible to fully acquire it during 32 contact hours and 28 hours of independent work, which is the amount of hours for the first year Bachelor level students. The level of students' English knowledge is pretty high, but they have mainly acquired general lexis at secondary schools and just a little bit of legal terminology.

Now the students have to acquire different topics on legal terminology - *Professions in law, Crimes and offenses, Criminals and wrongdoers, Court work, Verdicts and sentences, Idioms to do with crime, Verbs to do with crime, etc.* The principles of Design Thinking approach can be used from the very beginning of the course, but they can be used more efficiently when the students have acquired at least several topics.

In order to develop a teaching model, using Design Thinking, which would advance written communicative competence in the German course, a preliminary independent preparation is necessary. Students themselves have to offer a more varied lexical material. If the lexical material is prepared during the

classes in advance, it would be the same to all the students. Usually the students start studying German at University level without preliminary knowledge, as the dominating second foreign language, which has been chosen at comprehensive schools, is Russian. Taking into consideration the condition that German knowledge is at beginner's level, the principles of Design Thinking can be tried only in a definite period of time. when students can already form simple, structured sentences and have already acquired a certain amount of lexis.

The aim of the application of Design Thinking approach is to develop students' oral communication competences via simulating role plays in court, deciding on verdicts, discussing on duties of different law specialists, etc. The table below reflects the steps of the simulation of court trial reflecting steps of problem solving based on the Design Thinking approach.

Table 2 The elements of the Design Thinking approach for improvement of communicative competence in a foreign language (compiled by the authors)

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Simulation of the situation | <i>The students have to simulate the procedure of the court trial. They have to simulate the roles of a suspect, a barrister, a prosecutor, a judge and witnesses. They also have to decide on the verdict</i> | |
| Step of Design Thinking | Practical activity | Result |
| Comprehension | The academic and the students together analyze the situation . | Everybody has comprehension on the problem and their task. |
| Visualization of the problem | The students individually prepare for the simulation of their roles, thinking about legal terminology. | Every student has visualized his/her problem- the reason why the crime has been committed, what is his/ her role during the trial, appropriate terminology. |
| Developing of ideas | The simulated role of every participant has been discussed in the groups. | The students consolidate the acquired legal terminology, and add some new terminology items, also ask for the help and advice from the academic. |
| | It has been decided in the group, which issues every of them will work on in the future. The students put down the main 2 problem issues on separate sheets of paper for solution. The students help each other in the groups. | The students develop their main arguments. |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Grouping of ideas | Voting for the best arguments takes place in the group (every participant votes for 2 ideas, which s/he considers to be the best). The best ideas have been selected and are directed for the presentation. | The students select the terminology for the simulation of their roles. |
| Prototyping and testing | Students prepare the presentation, summarizing lexical material and grammar structures for the formulating of answers. | Students have prepared the text of the reply in the presentation. |

As the aim in the Design Thinking approach is to come from the problem to solution by the assistance of a particular sequence of steps, work can considerably differ at separate stages. Developing communicative competence in German for beginners, attention is paid to applied written communication. On the one hand, the rules of correct applied communications are taught, but it is not less important to form short, particular texts, using both the acquired language knowledge and thinking creatively, as they have to formulate the answer themselves. The particular steps of Design Thinking, which have been integrated in the studies' module, have been reflected in the table below.

Table 3 The elements of Design Thinking approach for the perfection of written competence in the foreign language (compiled by the authors)

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Simulation of the situation | <i>The students have received an e-letter from the employer, which contains the invitation to arrive at the work meeting. The task is to prepare a written reply and refuse to arrive because of objective reasons.</i> | |
| Step of Design Thinking | Practical activity | Result |
| Comprehension | The academic and the students together analyze the situation, described in the text. | Everybody has comprehension on the problem and the task. |
| Visualization of the problem | The students individually make a sketch of the defined problem; they add the words, which explain the situation. | Every student has visualized his/her problem - the reason why participation has been declined, which has been supplemented by the particular lexis. |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Developing of ideas | Individual results have been revealed and discussed in the students' group. | The students consolidate their vocabulary, add the new vocabulary items, which have been acquired from the others in the group. |
| | It has been decided in the group, which problem they will work on in the future. The students put down 3 ideas on separate sheets of paper for a solution. The task is done until a sufficient amount of ideas has been collected. | The students form phrases and sentences for generation of ideas. |
| Grouping of ideas | Voting for the best ideas takes place in the group (every participant votes for 3 ideas, which s/he considers to be the best). The best ideas have been selected and are directed for the presentation. | The students select the lexical material for the preparation of the text. |
| Prototyping and testing | Students prepare the presentation of the simulated court trial, summarizing legal terminology and grammar structures for their speeches, arguments, questions, testimonies, etc. | Students have prepared their simulated speeches. |

Conclusions

The Design Thinking approach provides a working process that helps to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, empathy, creativity, and cognitive flexibility. Design Thinking assists to develop a classroom atmosphere that is motivating for students and that stimulates deep thinking and collaboration to find solutions to real life and professional problems. Using a Design Thinking approach in a foreign language class facilitates communicative creativity and creative engagement in foreign languages' learning.

Carefully planned communicative activities and tasks in foreign languages' acquisition, based on the Design Thinking approach, efficiently improve students' communication skills and help to achieve their professional aims.

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