Quest-oriented assessment at the ESP class

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Abstract. The problem of finding the most appropriate, sophisticated or innovative approach, technology and method of teaching English for specific purposes has always drawn the specialists' attention. Nowadays a promising graduate of any educational institution is to be able to establish professional communication not only in the native language, but also in a foreign one. A graduate of a military academy is not an exception. Peacekeeping operations, joint military exercises, international exhibitions, war games require military specialists, who are able to react to standard and non-standard professional communicative situations. The author focuses on the necessity of professionally oriented approach to language teaching and the definition of the language for specific purposes. Special attention is paid to the notion of assessment and its peculiarities at the ESP class. Apart from being communicative, systematic, diagnostic, developing and educational, assessment is also to be professionally-oriented, so existing methods of it should be modified to meet the requirements of the future profession. This research paper is aimed at identifying the advantages of quest-oriented form of assessment over the traditional one and proving with the help of the experiment that quest is one of the most appropriate forms of evaluating the students' progress at the ESP class. The methods of the research include observations on language competency development (80 students were observed throughout two years); comparative analysis of examination results. The experiment has shown that quest-oriented assessment creates the situations of professional communication in the most realistic way. Such designed situations of profession-oriented communication enable a teacher to assess the level of skill development and enhance students' motivation. The author presents the models of tasks involving all language skills that can be adapted to other professional spheres. The outcomes of this research may be of high value to teachers who are dedicated to creating appropriate and effective assessment for ESP classes.

Key words: assessment, performance-based assessment, professionally-oriented assessment, quest-oriented form of assessment, professionally-oriented quest, ESP, professionally oriented approach, professional communication.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays a specialist in any sphere tends to be uncompetitive without an appropriate level of a foreign language. Consequently, the main aim of language teaching has become real-life communication between professionals from different countries, and language skills development turns to be professionally oriented.

Language for specific purposes has been defined by different researchers at different stages of pedagogical science development in a number of ways. The following approaches to the notion of LSP can be pointed out: 1) LSP is regarded as professional communication, 2) LSP is a form of national language, 3) LSP is a system of codified and uncodified professional terms, 4) LSP is the terminology of a certain scientific domain (Felde, 2015).

Taking all these approaches into account most methodologists currently agree that the main feature of LSP teaching is the range of methods which reflect the peculiarities of a future profession. Thus, ESP classes are to be aimed at teaching students to communicate at various professional situations, paying attention to professional culture and way of thinking.

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There is no doubt that effective language teaching is provided by the ideal alignment among three main components: objectives that presuppose mastering certain skills, instructional strategies that will help students meet the objectives and assessment of the student's progress. It should be noted that each of the abovementioned components must correspond constantly developing requirements to graduates. Owing to the fact that the list of graduates' competences is thoroughly worked out and described, the learning objectives, as a rule, are distinct and practice-oriented. However, according to a number of researchers the modern assessment system does not respond to the constantly changing requirements of the future profession.

According to the new dictionary of pedagogic terms and notions the assessment is described as «the process of defining the level of knowledge and skills of a student after completing oral and written tasks and producing the mark for the unit, program or course that has been covered» (The new dictionary of methodology terms and notions (the theory and practice of language teaching), 2009).

The obvious advantages (objectiveness, validity, reliability etc.) have made a test the main traditional form of assessment. On the other hand, performing the diagnostic function a test does not always allow to assess the students' progress, as well as their ability to act in the real-life situations of professional communication.

It has been pointed out that the main aim of an ESP class is to create real-life situations of professional communication, hence to gain multiple perspectives on students' academic development, it is important and necessary to assess the students' progress in such situations. Assessment is also to be professionally-oriented, so existing methods of it should be modified to meet the requirements of the future profession. Moreover, most researchers and teachers assume that assessment must be communicative, systematic, it must perform not only diagnostic, but also developing and educational functions. In our opinion, quest-oriented assessment forms fully meet all these requirements.

The term «quest» has been studied by many researchers. M.N. Kicherova and G.Z. Ephimova regard quest as a form of game activity that requires intensive problem solving (Kicherova, Ephimova, 2016: 4). V.V. Istomina defines quest as an adventure team game, where you have to perform tasks to advance (Istomina, 2015). According to N.A. Elmuratova quest is a kind of research activity (Elmuratova, 2018). In general quest is characterized by game features, problematic character, a specific plot, problem solving. Quest can be applied as a means of studying a topic, as well as assessing the level of certain skills.

METHODS

Participants

The study focused on the performances of 80 Russian cadets (students of the military academy). The geopolitical situation generates interest in the Russian Armed Forces professional activity. Currently the army represents one of the most important social institutions, it makes studying of the language of military professional communication vital. International military cooperation, the exchange of military data, organization of international military training and competitions emphasize the necessity of the appropriate level of the English language. The requirements to the graduates of a military academy are the following: cadets must be able to read and understand the professional texts in the English language, be aware of the peculiarities of the English military terminology, be able to establish written and oral professional communication.

The participants of the experiment are all second-year cadets. Their levels of proficiency can be described as heterogeneous, due to their different school language levels.

Procedure

The participants of the experiment were the cadets of four different groups. At the end of the module two of these groups were offered a test and oral answers to the list of questions, covering the topics they had studied. The rest of cadets were offered to pass a quest. It should be noted that owing to the institutional peculiarities any military academy has a number of technical reasonable restrictions, one of which is absence of the Internet. Undoubtedly, this situation presents a challenge for a teacher. But the experiment has shown that even offline format of the quest (the presentation of the material in

the form of the quest) excites cadets' interest. The main idea is to create the atmosphere of the quest. One can use Power Point presentations, that might contain pictures, video, audio files. It is also possible to present a paper version of the quest with a map.

While developing a quest the main task is to make up a plot that will include all the necessary aspects. The most typical plots presuppose the rescue operation of a character, search for something important or occupying a territory by gradual problem solving.

The quest offered to the cadets was named «Save the Professor». This quest represents the final lesson of the theme «Types of armament», that comprises such topics as: Pistol, Rifle, Mines, Armored Fighting Vehicles, Machine Gun. The aim of this quest is to rescue the Professor, weaponry developer, who was captured by a group of criminals. Students receive the map with four locations, where the Professor can be found. To move from one place to another a set of tasks must be performed. Each group was subdivided into several teams that were competing with each other. A team got a point for successful performance of the task. The team that found the Professor first won the battle.

RESULTS

The analysis of the level of motivation, involvement and the results of the assessment allows to make the following conclusions:

1. The game format of a quest reminds of a computer game, which greatly increases the modern generation's interest, especially male cadets. Technically proficient teachers can create a quest in the form of a computer game, which will definitely contribute to the students' motivation.

2. The game format can ease the psychological tension during communication, as a result, the assessment process will be implicit.

3. In the course of problem solving the ability to react to non-standard communicative situations and produce non-standard professional actions are assessed and developed at the same time.

4. In order to perform educational functions country studying and cultural components should be added to the plot of a quest.

5. The layout of a quest presupposes group work that contributes to the development of teamwork skills and responsibility for decision-making.

6. The quest content can include the material of several subjects, which makes the learning process cross-disciplinary and more complex.

7. A quest allows to involve each student into the process of assessment in the active form.

8. Quest performing presupposes different forms of information processing, it allows to assess the level of cognitive skills development.

9. Each quest requires a set of accurate criteria that will help students to assess their own progress, contribution to cooperation.

It should be noted that the groups that were offered a test and oral answers to the list of questions also performed well, but the cadets demonstrated the lack of motivation and interest.

DISCUSSION

The most typical forms of assessment for non-linguistic specialties today are answers to questions, tests and presentations. Due to the fact that a group usually consists of 20-30 cadets it is not always possible to turn to individual oral presentations, consequently, answers to questions and tests seem to be preferable in most cases. However, such methods of assessment do not allow to create the conditions for professional communication in the most realistic way. Moreover, traditional methods do not allow to assess the level of skill development in the designed situations of professional communication.

To gain multiple perspectives on students' academic development, it is important to apply such performance-based assessment as quest which includes a wide range of activities. For the gradual assessment of all language skills the quest should be structured according to the following aspects:

1) Phonetics and vocabulary: a) students are given a list of vocabulary, covering the topics that have been studied (IFV, APC, LMG etc.) and the task to explain the meaning of the professional terms. The letters of the abbreviation may be scrambled, and students will have to unscramble the abbreviations and read them correctly; b) to do a crossword, in which the name of the location is encrypted; c) to fill in the table with the specifications and guess what weapon is characterized by them; d) to group the names of weapons according to the given categories etc.

2) Grammar: a) to form nouns from verbs that will help identify the name of the next location; b) to write down the verbs, denoting actions with a weapon.

3) Reading and listening comprehension: a) to restore the manual of the weapon that was damaged by fire; b) to look through the table with 3 columns (types of mines, detonation methods, parts of mines), find the mistakes and correct them; c) to voice the mute video about a type of a weapon (its characteristics, action, application).

4) Written and oral speech: a) at the beginning of the quest students are to choose the weapon (a pistol, rifle etc.) that they will use during the chase and give arguments for their choice; b) considering the specifications of the weapons and the mission they have to complete, students are to choose one of the given weapons and give arguments for their choice; c) to work out a new type of weaponry with unique specifications and introduce their invention.

Summarizing the research outcomes, it is reasonable to conclude that quest-oriented assessment allows to check the degree, to which the students are meeting the learning objective, is communicative, has a game format, which is attractive to young learners, and helps create the real-life situations of professional communication.

The ideas and models presented in this article are intended to be adaptable, practical, and realistic for teachers who are striving to create meaningful and effective assessment experiences for ESP classes.

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