

Effectiveness of using conferences and round tables in teaching foreign languages at institutions of higher education

Eficacia del uso de conferencias y mesas redondas en la enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros en instituciones de educación superior

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Received: 30/04/2019 • Approved: 27/07/2019 • Published 29/07/2019

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ABSTRACT:

The article presents an innovative pedagogical experiment on the use of mini-conferences and round tables as problem-based teaching of English in a non-linguistic university. The authors presented the results of using this technology at the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation with confirmation of positive changes in students' personal and professional development and the formation of their sustainable motivation for personal achievements in their profession and in life, using this technology.

Keywords: mini-conferences and round tables, problem-based teaching, professional development, motivation, self-realization

RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta un experimento pedagógico innovador sobre el uso de mini-conferencias y mesas redondas como enseñanza del inglés basada en problemas en una universidad no lingüística. Los autores presentaron los resultados de un estudio realizado en la Universidad Financiera del Gobierno de la Federación de Rusia, con la confirmación de cambios positivos en el desarrollo personal y profesional de los estudiantes y la formación de su motivación sostenible para los logros personales en su profesión y en la vida usando esta tecnología.

Palabras clave: mini-conferencias y mesas redondas, enseñanza basada en problemas, desarrollo profesional, motivación, realización personal

1. Introduction

The goal of education is not only enlarging knowledge and formation of skills, but also the formation of students' personality and competency young people need for future

professional activities and further life in society. The implementation of a competence-based approach includes the use of active and interactive forms of education (such as computer simulations, role-play, case studies and group discussions) that can be used at conferences and round tables. Much attention should be given to students' autonomous work and the formation and development of their general and professional competencies.

The goals of teaching can be achieved implementing of problem solving teaching in the educational process. Creating problem situations in the classroom is considered an effective method of teaching which includes students' participation in conferences and round tables. It can be used at all stages of the educational process.

Problem solving used in discussions at conferences and round tables helps students to put into practice the knowledge from various professional fields. It is useful for the formation of communicative and professional competencies. It will help graduates to be competitive in the labour market (Anyushenkova, 2018a, b; Chikieva, 2016; Chikieva, 2018; Esina, 2017; Melnichuk, & Osipova, 2016; Klimova, 2015; Preshous, & Roberts, & Preshous, & Gakonga 2012; Hutchinson, & Waters 1987; Covey, 2019; Glazov, 2015; Malysheva, 2011; Panina, & Vavilova, 2008).

Problem-based learning methods include case studies, project method, technology for developing critical thinking, role-plays and debates (discussion) (Digtyar, 2017). Professional orientation in problem-solving tasks can also serve as means of improving students' motivation in studying English for Specific Purposes (Avdeeva, 2016).

Debate or discussion is the consideration of a controversial issue by a group of people. It is verbal exchange of knowledge, judgments, ideas and opinions. Distinctive features of a discussion are solving professional problems using non-standard approaches, creative constructivism in combination with additional dialogues, collisions of different points of view, positions, decisions and experience. The possibilities of using discussion in educational process are very numerous. They can be used when we have different schools, approaches and opinions, and where science or practice has not yet developed a unified point of view. They are a mandatory attribute of the interaction of different researchers. When training specialists in higher education, discussions perform the function of forming a certain type of mentality, scientific consciousness, developing an individual attitude and responsibility for the results of the research studies, improving communication skills and interaction within the professional community. The use of discussions and debates increases the creativity of the educational process. It also has a beneficial effect on young professionals, contributing to the development of their consciousness and responsibility. Applying this method is very effective, as it gives the opportunity to focus students' attention both on the foreign language and on the problem. Thus, it enables students to shift the focus from the linguistic aspect to the informative one.

The use of discussions during round tables and conferences gives students a possibility to:

- use professional vocabulary in a given situation;
- develop critical thinking;
- improve listening and speaking skills;
- find out and discuss opinions and attitudes to the issue under discussion;
- enable ability to set goals;
- analyze and defend their points of view;
- develop tolerance to other people's views
- be able to work in a team (Klimova, & Lizunova, & Obukhova, 2015).

The purpose of the implementation of this method is to:

- enlarge theoretical knowledge of the English language;
- revise grammar and vocabulary;
- improve skills in listening, writing, reading speaking;
- manage the teaching and learning process;
- overcome psychological problems.

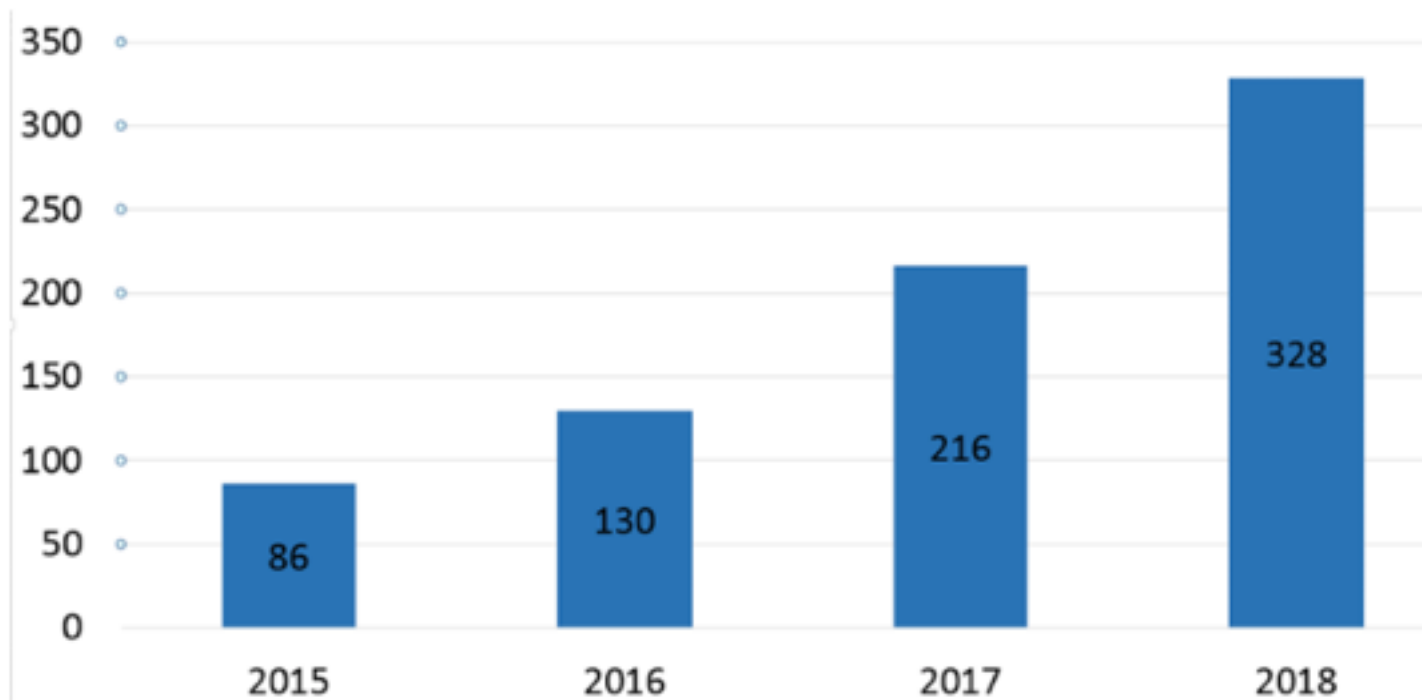
Therefore, mini-conferences and round tables can be one of the most effective forms of

2. Methodology

The following research methods were used: the study of pedagogical and methodical literature, descriptive methods, analysis, synthesis and classification. In order to prepare a discussion in a foreign language, students need communicative skills and competencies. This way of communication is universal for foreign language learning, as it integrates linguistic and socio-cultural approaches and gives an opportunity to be creators of their own cognitive activity (Klimova, 2015).

This paper presents the results of the application of the implemented methodology of teaching in the context of the chosen specialty and the use of non-traditional forms of practical training, namely, using mini-conferences and round tables. Teachers of foreign languages at the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation annually organize and conduct students' activities in the format of mini-conferences and round tables. The number of students participating in this project and research activities is annually increasing (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Students participated in the round tables and conferences



However, it should be taken into consideration that the majority of students have neither experience in public speaking nor research practices. Moreover, students do not have much experience in their professional field. Therefore, scientific mini-conferences and round tables within the framework of the university Week of Foreign Languages should be considered as innovations in the educational process.

It is known that a round table is a form of public discussion or consideration of some issues. The round table is a communicative technology that allows, using rational arguments to influence on the opinions and change attitude of participants in the process of communication (Malysheva, 2011). As a matter of fact, a round table is a type of discussion. Discussion is a public and free verbal exchange of knowledge, judgments, ideas and opinions about a controversial issue. Its characteristic feature is a clash of different points of view (Panina, & Vavilov, 2008).

It should be noted that the purpose of organizing round tables in the process of teaching English at the Financial University is to present the ideas and opinions on the problem under discussion. All the participants in the round table discussion act as proponents, they are equal in rights; no one has the right to dictate their will and impose their own decisions. The problems for discussion may be professionally oriented, for example: Globalization: pros and cons; Approaches and methods for developing a municipal strategy; Problems of interaction between cultures; Smart city and heritage preservation with the help of modern technologies; Time management of the future leaders; Trends and prospects of economic

cooperation between Russia and Latin America. These topics are professionally and socially oriented and they are interesting for students.

It presents certain interest to consider experience of organizing a round table devoted to the topic "Problems that young people face and possible solutions" in the group of the first-year students with different levels of English language proficiency of the Department of Public Administration and Financial Control.

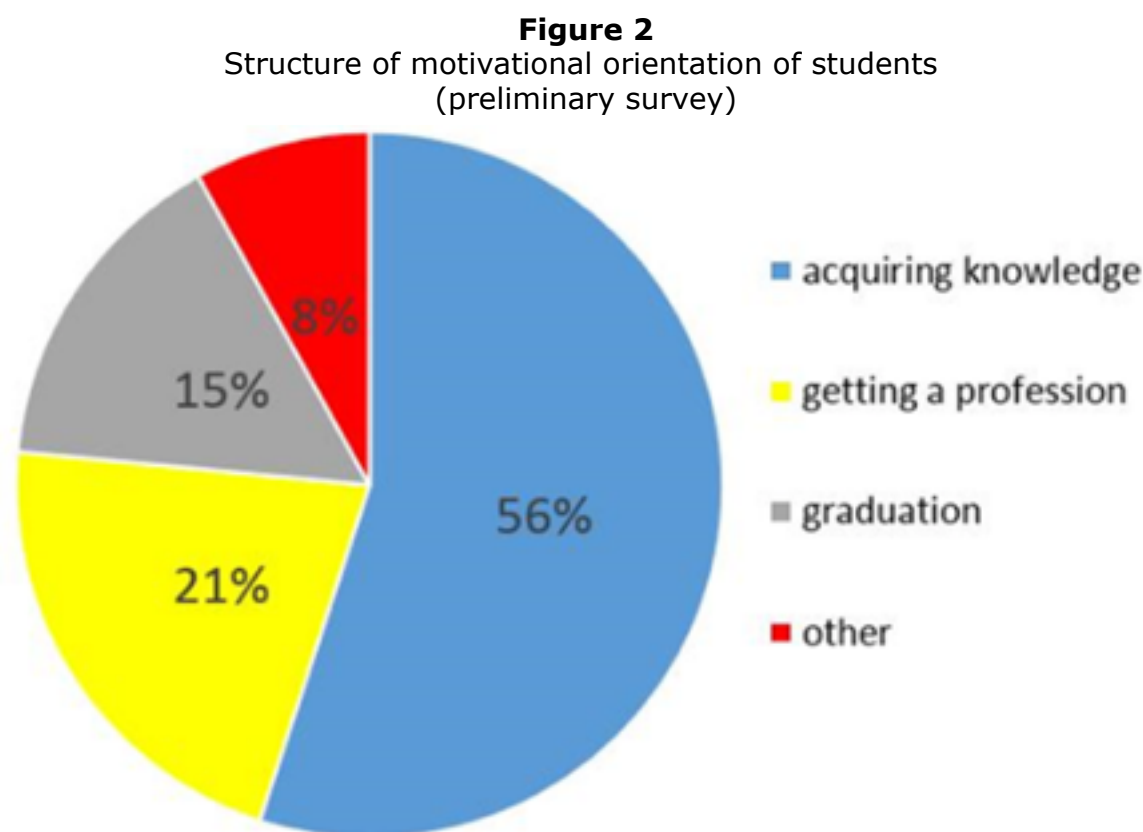
The objectives of the mini-conference and the round table were the following:

- the development of the intellectual potential of students;
- study and discussion of innovative methods for problem solving and the results of their practical implementation;
- exchange of information and ideas, the search for unsolved problems and their solution;
- increasing students' motivation to learn a foreign language;
- improvement of public speaking skills in a foreign language;
- the formation of interdisciplinary professional mobility.

To study the motivation of students for improving their foreign language proficiency, a questionnaire was used, allowing identifying the four parameters of students' educational motivational orientation:

- focus on the process of learning (knowledge acquisition);
- focus on obtaining a profession (the social significance of the profession, the desire to master the specialty);
- focus on getting a degree of higher education;
- others.

According to the results of the research, the focus on the process of knowledge acquisition and obtaining a profession is on the top in the structure of students' incentives (Figure 2).



There is no doubt, that cognitive interest is one of the main factors for a successful educational process and the evidence of its proper organization. In the process of teaching foreign languages, it is important to develop an incentive for students to constantly increase the quality of their professional activity. In this case, the assessment and self-assessment of success and failure in mastering a profession make sense. Students can develop an adequate attitude to the acquired knowledge, skills and competences. Thus, the majority of students are assessed as having a high level of willingness for professional development.

The first stage

One month prior to the date of the round table, students are given the task, where the problem and the purpose of the discussion are formulated. Students receive a project task - to collect information from various sources about the problems / dangers / threats and benefits that accompany the young generation.

Students brainstorm the problem in class and have a background discussion. Students are invited to answer the question: "What are the most common problems that young people face nowadays?" Students' answers include the following ideas: parental pressure, gadgets addiction, good education, unhealthy lifestyle and obesity, drug addiction, time management, obsession with the 'Perfect figure', clashes with religion, the 'Future', divorced parents, lack of parents'/ teachers' support and others.

The next step is to prepare a presentation on this issue and reflect on the content, formulate novelty, find out the necessary facts, provide illustrations, and make sure that the presentation has a logical layout.

For communicative preparation for the round table, students can listen to the audio recordings or watch videos of professional discourses. They are advised to learn English-language speech clichés of business communication: greetings, introducing yourself, expressing your point of view, supporting a conversation, filling in pauses, putting forward arguments and counter arguments, ending and saying goodbye. With the help of specially selected lexical and grammatical exercises, students practice language material on the topic of the upcoming round table. It is important to achieve an unambiguous understanding of lexical units, terms, concepts, collocations, professional phraseological units, jargon expressions and speech clichés.

The second stage

At the second stage, the round table is held. According to the results of student research, their performance, followed by discussion in groups, is organized. It is important to maintain a high level of activity of all students, to comply with the regulations, to create a friendly and motivating atmosphere. Students get acquainted with all the collected material, analyze it, and record their thoughts, ideas and conclusions. Usually participants do not interrupt each other, and questions, answers, comments are left for the final stage.

The effectiveness of the discussion depends on the following factors:

- good preliminary preparation of students (awareness and competence in the proposed problem);
- semantic similarity (all terms should be equally understood by all participants);
- compliance with the regulations;
- initial preparations of the moderator.

The final stage

Participants express their opinions on the issues presented. It turned out that many of them were unaware of so many problems facing young people in the modern world. The students especially acutely respond to the uncertainty about the future and the lack of support from adults. This problem includes different social and technological aspects that encourage speaking even students with very low language skills and a low motivation.

After analyzing the speeches and group discussion, the moderator makes the following conclusion: Our analysis proves that life of a youngster may seem to be spotless, but dig into the surface and you will find out almost every person has something or the other to worry about. Students are most concerned about such problems as bad habits and deviant behavior, factors related to health (Internet addiction, unhealthy lifestyle), gaining work experience and youth unemployment. As a possible solution to the above problems, students unanimously expect help from the older generation and the importance of the national youth policy.

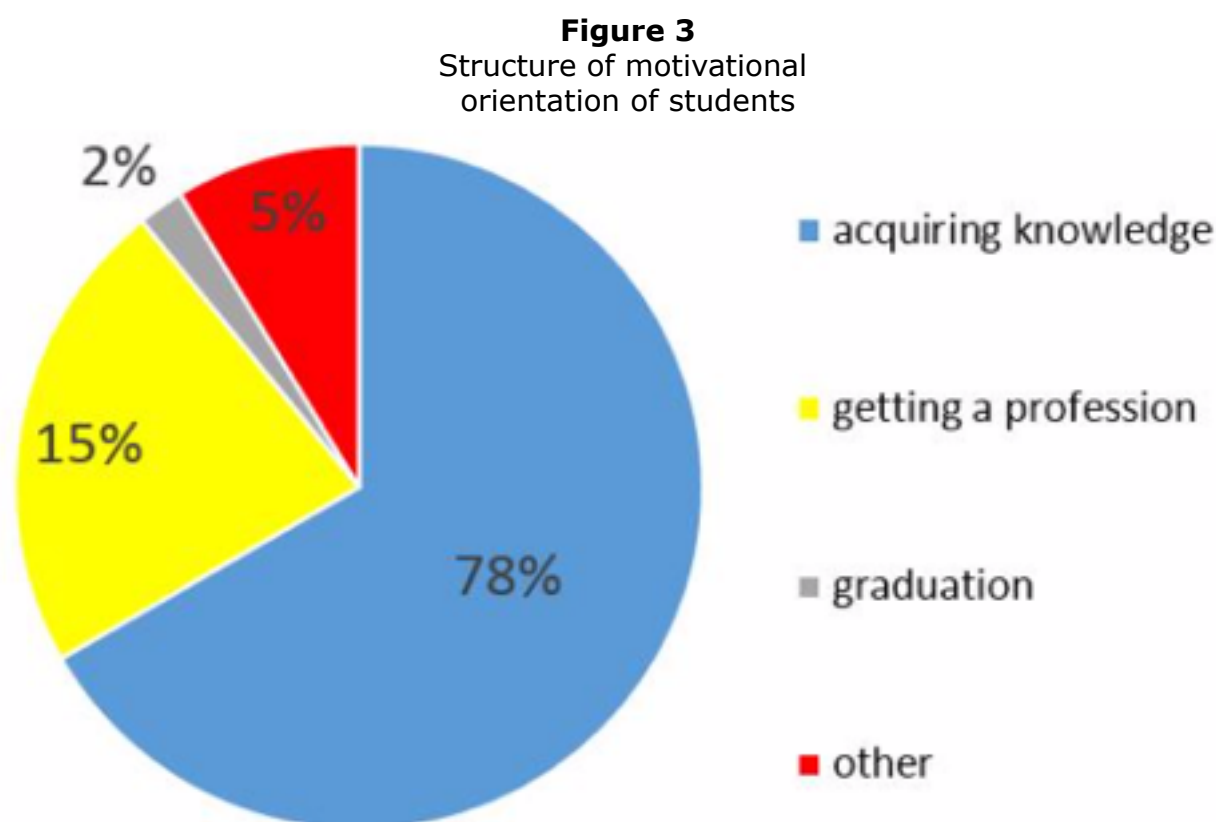
3. Results

The conferences and round tables were attended by students from other faculties of the

Financial University, teachers from the Department of foreign languages and the faculty of "Public administration and financial control." Some students acted as organizers and photo reporters, providing technical support for presentations, while others successfully conducted both plenary and breakout sessions. More than 200 reports were presented, both group and individual.

After each of the presented speeches, the jury teachers of the Department of Foreign languages and representatives of the Dean's office gave an expert assessment of the quality of the report made in electronic form, the vocabulary used and successful presentation skills of each student. Representatives of the jury gave a general assessment of the submitted reports and identified the best speakers. Then, the students participating in the round table expressed their impressions and comments. It should be noted that the students' attitude to participation in this project was responsible and enthusiastic. All speakers were awarded with certificates, and the winners - with the diplomas. The best scientific articles were published in the scientific and methodological journal included in the database of scientific publications of Russian scientists "Russian Science Citation Index". It should be pointed out, that the availability of scientific publications and reports at conferences is essential for the future scientific and professional career.

Analysis of the round tables in different groups of students showed that modern students are socially responsible people who are actively involved in social processes, seeking to master the skills of conducting debates at a high professional level, know the ethical norms and rules of intercultural communication. Students' analytical and research skills, their ability to generate ideas and analyze the situation are successfully formed during mini-conferences and round tables. The results of the re-survey showed that the structure of students' incentives has significantly changed and the increasing cognitive interest and professional development by reducing the number of students just seeking to get a bachelor's degree (Figure 3).



(results of the survey after participation in the round table)

Thus, nowadays it is important that future specialists, along with academic success, have well developed speaking and writing skills in both native and foreign languages, understand information technology, can think critically and make independent decisions. They should be good team players, creative and initiative communicators. Conducting a round table in lessons of English contributes to the achieving these objectives. Round table discussions demonstrate interdisciplinary connection. They involve students in real language activities and provide perfect experience in teamwork.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The authors have developed methodological support and an effective methodology with innovative forms of conducting lessons in the form of mini-conferences and round tables. The presented method makes it possible to effectively use the hours allocated for autonomy homework for not only learning a foreign language and the subject of a future specialty, but also for developing students' understanding of the connection between the disciplines studied and the needs of their future profession. Acquisition of public speaking skills and high-quality preparation of Power Point presentations form the professional culture of the future specialist.

After round tables and mini-conferences, there was a sharp increase of the students' interest in the English language learning and better test and exam results. It is advisable to use group discussion when teaching a foreign language, using it as an effective method of interactive learning. The methodology described in this research paper has allowed a significant improvement of the students' foreign language communication skills. It has also contributed to the improvement of professional competencies trained in the learning process. Modern specialists need to master professional vocabulary, have good negotiation skills, be able to work in a team, be able to express their thoughts and understand a foreign partner. This method will allow future specialists to understand problems, adapt in the fast changing world, make decisions and communicate in a foreign language not only in everyday life, but also in professional activities (Pokhodzey, 2015). All these skills can be effectively trained while using the teaching method of mini-conferences and round tables.

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Revista ESPACIOS. ISSN 0798 1015
Vol. 40 (Nº 26) Year 2019

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