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Fostering technical specialisation students' speaking skills: methodological tools of learner-centred approach

Розвиток навичок говоріння у здобувачів технічних спеціальностей: методичні засоби студентоцентрованого підходу

Summary. *The main purpose of learning English in higher education establishments is to develop communication skills. The ability to express one's thoughts and conduct professional dialogue in a foreign language is a prerequisite for the knowledge exchange, improvement of professional skills, social interaction, and cultural life. Methodologists are constantly searching for effective pedagogical approaches that will facilitate the process of developing students' communicative competence. According to many researchers, the learner-centred approach has proved to be effective, whereby students are active participants in the learning process, shaping it according to their individual characteristics, learning interests and professional needs. This investigation aims to ascertain the conditions for adopting this pedagogical approach into the process of teaching foreign language speaking at technical higher education institutions; to propose a system of teaching and methodological techniques that arranges the practical implementation of the chosen approach ideas. The study has determined that when applying this approach, foreign language teachers face a number of problems that impede effective teaching to speak, namely: the teacher's lack of information about the students' level of knowledge, their interests, cognitive abilities; too many students in the study group; a small number of hours allocated for learning and practicing a foreign language; most students' low motivation. Taking into account these factors, the investigation proposes a system of techniques that would ensure the organisation of learning activities in accordance with the requirements and ideas of the learner-centred approach: 1) defining learning goals together with students; 2) providing an appropriate active learning environment; 3) personalising the work on analysing the obtained skills. The practice shows significant contradictions between the conditions of foreign language learning at the higher educational establishments for technical specialisation students and the ideas of the learner-centred approach. Overcoming these obstacles depends on both the professionalism of the teacher and the reorganisation of the educational process in general.*

Key words: *learner-centred approach, foreign language teaching, foreign language speaking skills, active learning environment, personalised feedback.*

Анотація. Основною метою вивчення англійської мови в закладах вищої освіти є формування навичок комунікаційної компетентності. Уміння виражати свої думки, вести професійний діалог іноземною мовою – необхідний засіб для обміну знань, удосконалення професійних навичок, соціальної взаємодії та культурного життя. Учені-методисти постійно перебувають у пошуках ефективних педагогічних підходів, які полегшать студентам процес формування комунікативної компетентності. На думку багатьох дослідників, підтвердив свою ефективність студентоцентрований підхід, за умови застосування якого студент є активним діячем у навчальному процесі, формуючи його відповідно до своїх індивідуальних особливостей, навчальних інтересів та професійних запитів. Мета дослідження – з'ясувати умови для запровадження цього педагогічного підходу у процес навчання говоріння іноземною мовою у ЗВО технічного профілю; запропонувати систему організації навчання та методичних прийомів, які забезпечують на практиці реалізацію ідей обраного підходу. У дослідженні визначено, що під час застосування цього підходу викладачі іноземних мов зіштовхуються з низкою проблем, які перешкоджають ефективному навчанню говоріння, а саме: відсутністю у викладача відомостей про рівень знань, інтересів, когнітивних здібностей студентів; зavelикою кількістю здобувачів у навчальній групі; недостатньою кількістю годин, відведених на засвоєння та практику іноземної мови; низькою мотивацією більшості студентів. Зважаючи на ці чинники, у статті запропоновано систему прийомів, яка б забезпечила організацію навчальної діяльності відповідно до вимог та ідей студентоцентрованого підходу: 1) разом зі студентами визначити навчальні цілі; 2) забезпечити відповідне середовище активного навчання; 3) персоналізувати роботу з аналізу отриманих результатів. Практика фіксує значні суперечності між умовами вивчення іноземних мов у ЗВО та ідеями студентоцентрованого навчання. Подолання цих перешкод залежить одночасно від професійності викладача і реорганізації навчального процесу загалом.

Ключові слова: студентоцентрований підхід, навчання іноземної мови, формування навичок говоріння, середовище активного навчання, персоналізований аналіз результатів.

Introduction. Speaking skills play a pivotal role in foreign language learning and communication, serving as a primary means of expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Proficiency in speaking enables individuals to engage in meaningful interactions, establish social connections, and navigate diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Besides mere verbal communication, speaking skills encompass pronunciation, intonation, and fluency, which contribute to effective comprehension and expression. Cultivating speaking skills enhances overall language proficiency and empowers learners to actively participate in academic, professional, and social settings. Through spoken language, individuals convey their identity, share obtained knowledge, and collaborate with others, facilitating

mutual understanding and cooperation. Effective speaking skills are essential for language learners to succeed in real-world communication tasks, such as presentations, negotiations, and social interactions. Ultimately, mastery of speaking skills enriches language learners' communicative competence and fosters their integration into multicultural and multilingual communities.

The history of learner-centred approach in education can be traced back to the early 20th century, with roots in progressive educational philosophies and theories of learning. The progressive education movement, led by educators such as John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Jean Piaget emphasized the importance of human potential, self-actualization, personal growth, and the integration of real-life experiences into the curriculum. John Dewey advocated for active student involvement in the learning process and believed that education should be tailored to individual students' interests, needs, and abilities [11].

In recent decades, learner-centred approach (LCA) has gained increasing prominence in educational practice, influenced by advances in technology, globalization, and scientific research. Contemporary educational practices emphasize personalised learning, flexible learning environments, and the integration of technology to support individualised instruction and student autonomy. Nowadays, the LCA is a crucial research issue for scientists such as K. L. Brown, J. H. Cornelius-White, T. Doyle, J. Elen, G. Geraldine, A. P. Harbaugh, T. Hutchinson, J. L. Meece, J. W. Neumann, I. Tudor, M. Weimer, and many others. According to the LCA concepts, students are no longer passive recipients of information; rather, they are viewed as "active contributors to learning and collaborators in knowledge construction" [7, p. 111]. In W. K. Law's opinion, teachers serve as mentors and guides to stimulate students' engagement in active learning. Through interactions between teachers and students, the learning process is enriched by exploration, inquiry, and problem-solving [6]. M. Weimer states that the learner-centred teaching prioritises students' inherent drive to learn, and fosters the development of their problem-solving skills. The scientist condensed her findings into what she termed the "five key changes," asserting that for instruction to be learner-centred, it must undergo transformations in five areas: the redistribution of authority, the redefinition of content's purpose, the reimagining of the teacher's role, the shifting of responsibility for learning, and the reevaluation of assessment's objectives and methods [10, p. 8].

In the realm of English language teaching, fostering speaking skills is often considered one of the primary objectives, in particular, for technical specialization students at higher education establishments aiming to communicate effectively in various personal, academic, and professional

contexts. There are some investigations considering the efficiency of LCA as a prominent pedagogical framework in developing speaking skills (N. O. Al-Tamimi [1], T. Hutchinson [4], F. Larasati [5]). F. Larasati's research focuses on an attempt to find methodological techniques of learner-centred teaching for the development of speaking skills. The researcher notes: "The students can develop their speaking skill through the realization of tasks, which are devised along with the students and taking into consideration their needs and characteristics" [5, p. 156].

The presented study endeavours to ascertain the subsequent aspects: 1) tasks that teachers have to fulfil when implementing the LCA to develop students' speaking skills in higher education establishments of non-philological branches; 2) problems that teachers face while trying to incorporate the LCA into foreign language acquisition process to teach students of technical specialisations; 3) modelling system of teaching techniques that would provide a learner-centred teaching framework considering the revealed problems.

Methodology/Methods. The objectives of this article are to examine the possibility of the LCA implementation into complex didactic process of teaching English as foreign language at technical higher establishments considering the difficulties that teachers face while developing the speaking skills in a learner group with different level of students' knowledge. The investigation focuses on finding an equilibrium between the LCA ideas and existing teaching routine that is challenging for modern educators, particularly in the case of developing speaking skills. These purposes determined the scientific and practical methods: 1) overview of key research achievements and theories related to LCA in modern scientific literature; 2) study and generalization of practical experience; 3) scientific observation; 4) analysis and synthesis of the observation results; 5) modelling a practical teaching system to solve the problems of the LCA adoption to enhance students' speaking skills considering the results of the observation.

Results and discussion. It is obvious that an educational framework is essential to facilitate the development of fluent English language speaking skills in learners. Learner-centred teaching, a methodology that prioritises the learner regardless of their age or developmental stage, is one of the most appropriate. According to Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, teaching is viewed as facilitation, and instruction is perceived as engagement. They characterise the classroom as a setting where classroom management emphasizes student empowerment rather than strict control [2]. That is why the teacher's role as a responsible facilitator is enormous taking into account that the basis of the LCA is the statement that a student is a subject of learning activity endowed with their unique characteristics:

psycho-physiological, intellectual, behavioural. Therefore, learning should be based on these individual characteristics (peculiarity of feelings, perception, thinking, abilities, memory, imagination), educational interests, life experience, personal goals in their study. The teacher's task is to study these students' peculiarities and needs, and create a language learning system that meets them.

The investigation of the theoretical and practical research results has made it possible to outline a number of challenging **tasks** that a teacher has to perform when implementing the LCA to develop speaking skills, including the follows:

- obtaining appropriate teacher's professional and methodological training;
- studying individual psycho-physiological, intellectual, behavioural characteristics of every student in a group, finding out their learning abilities;
- defining students' educational interests;
- determining students' individual goals in mastering speaking skills;
- organising appropriate teaching and methodological basis: learning environment (where, in what environment, with what didactic and technical means the training will take place), teaching materials, technological learning tools (computers, mobile phones, learning platforms, websites, etc.);
- creating a learning system (a system of learning techniques and tools) that will implement the LCA in teaching to speak.

The foreign language teaching at higher education institutions has its own specifics which often does not contribute to the high efficiency of language acquisition. Drawing from our personal teaching experience, we underscore the following principal **problems** encountered by teachers when endeavoring to implement the LCA in teaching foreign languages to students specialising in technical fields.

- the teacher does not possess the information about the level of the student's knowledge in the learner groups;
- the range of individuals' interests is unknown for the teacher;
- the educator is not informed about students' learning abilities;
- groups with a large number of students;
- academic hour shortage for a foreign language learning and practising;
- lack of motivation among most students;
- negative attitudes towards learning a foreign language in the students' minds that are based on previous learning experiences.

As it is obvious from the above-mentioned list, there are problems the solution of which does not only depend on the university teacher, but

requires an urgent solution at the state level, for instance, the tasks such as increasing the number of academic hours; reducing the number of students in foreign language groups; defining the students level of foreign language knowledge (it can be done while applying for a higher education institution); providing certain opportunities for teachers' professional and methodological training, etc. Our research focuses on finding practical solutions to incorporate the LCA into the foreign language learning process at technical higher educational establishments to develop students' speaking skills, overcoming some negative factors of the learning environment, and improving the effectiveness of speaking training.

Taking into account the tasks that the LCA puts forward to the teacher as a facilitator, we tried to model a system of techniques that would arrange such learning activities in which the student would determine the learning content according to his/her own educational needs and cognitive interests that, in our opinion, would increase the student's motivation, develop personal qualities and encourage him/her to realise his/her own responsibility and significance.

According to the proposed system, when preparing a foreign language class with a focus on speaking in accordance with the LCA, the teacher should firstly *determine the learning goals* together with the students. For this purpose, it is necessary to study the students' learning needs and educational interests (at the same time, it is desirable to find out their learning abilities). The purpose is to nurture the student's growth, establishing conditions in which each lesson fosters learning activities that empower the student to become an enthusiastic participant in their own learning and personal growth. A continual dialogue between teacher and student is maintained throughout these activities.

Secondly, the teacher should create an *engaging learning environment* including selecting teaching materials, organising the students' work in compliance with the chosen approach, finding appropriate technical support. The instructor coordinates learning activities wherein the students, through collaborative efforts, engage in communication. The student takes precedence as the focal point. The teacher deliberately crafts an environment conducive to success, demonstrating empathy and providing encouragement.

Thirdly, the instructor should provide *personalised feedback* of the students' learning results. The objectives of providing personalised feedback are to enhance students' understanding of their learning progress, guide their improvement efforts, motivate their continued engagement, foster self-reflection and self-assessment, offer individualised support, and strengthen teacher-student relationships. By fulfilling these objectives, personalised feedback plays a crucial role in promoting effective learning and academic success in developing speaking skills.

Modelling the system of didactic techniques and tools we have admitted that some of them are more effective in teaching-learning situation which we have at technical universities so we have proposed the most appropriate of them. To define learning objectives, the following techniques can be used:

Preliminary Discussion or Survey (conducting a preliminary discussion or survey with students to find out their goals, interests, and preferences for topics and activities. Determining the students' objectives, their areas of interest, and their preferences regarding subjects and kinds of tasks is an important step in the process of planning effective speaking training sessions);

Individual Conversations (having individual conversations with each student where you can discuss their goals, interests, and preferences in more detail. This will also provide insight into their level of language competence and individual needs);

Writing Assignments (assigning students to write a short essay or story about their goals in learning English and the topics they find most interesting or important to them);

Using of Online Tools (using online platforms or applications to conduct surveys or collect feedback from students. This can be a convenient way to gather information about students' goals, interests, individual abilities to study);

Questioning (preparing a questionnaire or survey that includes questions about learning goals, interests in topics and preferences for types of activities. Teacher can post the survey electronically or conduct it in class before class begins);

Group Discussions (organising group discussions where students can express their opinions and suggestions regarding lesson topics and activities that they find most interesting and useful from their personal or professional perspectives).

By combining different methods of identifying students' goals, interests, and preferences, teachers can gain a better understanding of their students' needs and modify the learning experience accordingly.

The crucial step to the LCA is the creation of an engaging learning environment that encourages active participation and fosters beneficial interaction among learners. Incorporating various interactive activities can stimulate engagement and promote language use in necessary contexts. By providing opportunities for learners to express their opinions, share experiences, and collaborate with peers, educators can cultivate a sense of language proficiency and motivation, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of speaking skill development. To create an engaging learning environment, the following techniques can be used:

Role-plays (assigning roles or scenarios to students and having them engage in role-plays where they must communicate and interact in English. This could involve everyday situations, such as ordering food in a restaurant or negotiating a business deal);

Debates (organizing debates on various topics where students must present arguments, express opinions, and engage in rebuttals. Debates encourage critical thinking, persuasion, and effective communication skills);

Discussion Groups (dividing students into small groups and provide them with discussion prompts or questions related to a specific topic or theme. Encourage students to express their ideas, share experiences, and engage in meaningful conversations with their peers);

Information Gap Activities (presenting students information that is incomplete or missing certain details. The instructor pairs students up and have them ask questions to gather missing information from their partner. This promotes interactive communication and information exchange);

Storytelling (encouraging students to share personal anecdotes, experiences, or narratives in English. This can be done individually or in small groups, allowing students to practice storytelling techniques, vocabulary usage, and fluency);

Role-switching Activities (having students take on different roles or perspectives within a conversation or dialogue. For example, they could switch between being an engineer presenting a new tool and a consumer interested in this tool in a simulated presentation. This helps students develop their proficiency and adaptability in communication);

Information Sharing Presentations (assigning students to research a topic of interest and prepare a short presentation to share with the class. This gives students the opportunity to practice public speaking, organization of ideas, and delivering information effectively);

Problem-solving Tasks (presenting students with real-life problems or scenarios that require them to collaborate and communicate in English to find solutions. This could involve group projects, case studies, or simulations of workplace challenges).

Described the LCA learning activities encourage active participation, collaboration, and communicative interaction among students, fostering the development of speaking skills in English.

Personalised feedback plays an essential role in supporting the development of speaking skills by providing learners with specific information about their language use and areas for improvement. Educators should adopt a constructive and individualised approach to feedback, focusing on both linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness. Providing timely and targeted feedback on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and

discourse features helps learners identify their strengths and weaknesses, set learning goals, and track their progress over time. Additionally, incorporating self-assessment and peer feedback mechanisms empowers learners to take ownership of their learning process and engage in reflective practice, further enhancing their speaking proficiency. To personalise feedback, the following techniques can be used:

Individualised Error Correction (providing specific feedback to each learner based on their language production during speaking activities. Teacher focuses on correcting common errors in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax);

Peer Feedback Sessions (facilitating peer feedback sessions where learners exchange constructive feedback on each other's speaking performance. Instructor encourages learners to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and suggestions for further practice);

Self-Reflection Journals (encouraging students to keep reflective journals where they can record their thoughts, experiences, and progress in developing their speaking skills. This promotes self-awareness, self-assessment, and goal-setting in language learning);

Video Recording and Analysis (recording learners' speaking performances during class activities or presentations. Instructor reviews the recordings together with the learners to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement encouraging self-assessment and goal-setting based on the analysis);

Role-Play Debriefing (after completing role-play activities, teacher engages learners in a debriefing session where they discuss their performance, challenges, and strategies used. Educator provides personalized feedback on language use, communication skills, and role-play effectiveness);

Error Analysis Tasks (providing learners with error analysis tasks where they identify and correct errors in their own speaking or written productions; at the same time learners analyse errors and develop strategies for improvement);

One-on-One Speaking Sessions (conducting individual speaking sessions with each learner to provide personalized feedback and coaching focusing on addressing specific language needs and supporting learners in achieving their speaking goals);

Language Portfolio Reviews (encouraging learners to maintain language portfolios where they collect samples of their speaking activities, feedback received, and self-assessments. Teacher periodically reviews the portfolios together to assess progress and set new learning objectives);

Feedback Surveys (administering feedback surveys to learners to gather their perceptions of their speaking skills, learning experiences,

and preferences for feedback using the survey data to tailor feedback approaches and instructional strategies to individual learner needs);

Task-Based Feedback (integrating feedback into task-based learning activities by providing immediate, task-specific feedback during speaking tasks or projects focusing on guiding learners towards achieving task goals and improving language performance in context);

Goal-Oriented Feedback Discussions (engaging learners in goal-oriented feedback discussions where they identify specific speaking goals, assess their progress, and receive guidance on strategies for achieving their goals. Teacher encourages learners to take an active role in shaping their feedback);

Feedback Workshops (conducting feedback workshops where learners receive training on giving and receiving effective feedback. The teacher provides opportunities for learners to practice providing feedback to their peers and receiving feedback from others).

By incorporating these personalised feedback activities into the practice, English teachers can support language learners in their speaking skill development, promote learner autonomy, and enhance overall language proficiency.

The system of three principal didactic activities of the LCA with the techniques for fostering speaking skills is presented in Figure 1.

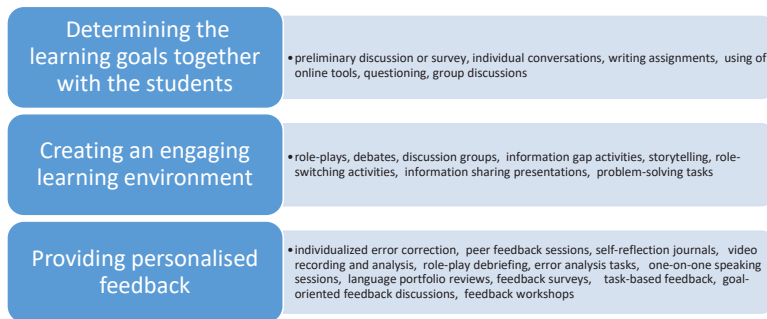


Fig. 1. The system of three principal didactic activities of the LCA with the techniques for fostering speaking skills

Conclusion. Overall, the history of the LCA reflects a shift from traditional teacher-centred models of education towards more learner-centred, interactive, and experiential approach that prioritise the individual student's needs, autonomy, and engagement in the learning process. Taking into account the responsibilities outlined by the LCA for the teacher as a facilitator, this research aimed to create a system of methodological techniques to facilitate learning activities where students could shape the content based on their educational requirements and cognitive interests. Based

on the fundamental ideas of the LCA, considering the problems in the teaching-learning situation of the foreign language acquisition at technical universities, the system of three principal didactic activities for developing speaking skills has been presented: 1) determining the learning goals with students; 2) active learning environment; 3) personalised feedback. This system is instrumental in supporting the speaking skill development while implementing the LCA ideas at non-philological higher education establishments. Moving forward, continued research and innovation in learner-centred pedagogy will further enrich teaching practices and empower learners to achieve their language learning goals effectively.

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