Context-Based Integrative Educational Technique in Profession-Oriented Foreign Language Teaching (Academic Model United Nations)[1]

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the Academic Model United Nations (Model UN) as a context-based integrative educational technique in profession-oriented foreign language teaching (FLT); to point out the context-based integrative nature of profession-oriented language learning and highlight the importance of using product-based educational techniques in FLT for developing students' future personal and professional autonomy; to identify the ways of integrating Model UN as a format of social mode of teaching. The article provides an overview of an experiment of implementing the Model UN format in the educational process, conducted in 2017 in the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE), which proved that Model UN successfully serves as an "educational laboratory" that engages students in cognitive, research, creative and productive activities while using foreign language as a tool of solving problem-based tasks. The work includes the stages of integrating Model UN format in the educational process; analyzes a number of difficulties that may occur and suggests several ways of dealing with them; involves recommendations for preparing students for the roles of Model UN delegates and the criteria of participants' written and spoken speech assessment. The results of the research show that Model UN, as a highly flexible interdisciplinary educational technique, can be employed in various formats on different educational levels as a tool of modelling the context of students' future professional activities contributing to the development of their professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC), as well as their future personal and professional autonomy.

Keywords: Model United Nations; Context-Based Learning; Integrative Educational Technique; Profession-Oriented Foreign Language Teaching.

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that professional competence of modern specialists in almost any field directly depends on their ability to use foreign language as a means of professional communication, as well as a tool for solving various professional tasks. Therefore, it becomes obvious that future graduates' competitiveness on the labour market is ensured "not only by the fact that they possess deep knowledge and skills that can be applied in the specific professional field, but also by their readiness to deal successfully with concrete professional tasks in the situation of intercultural communication" (Khaleeva, 2014, p.11). In today's "scholarly works in the field of profession-oriented foreign language teaching and learning, in Russia in particular, (Koryakovtseva, 2014; Khaleeva, 2014) the purposes, content and assessment of foreign language education are described in terms of professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC)" (Koryakovtseva, 2017). PICC is referred to as the "integrative ability of solving professional tasks with the help of foreign language". It is assumed that acquisition and effective development of PICC can be provided through engaging university students in productive learning activities: enhancing students' practical skills of employing obtained knowledge in the process of resolving problem situations conditioned by the goals and tasks of a particular type of activity; activating students' personal experience in this process; and creating "personally meaningful "knowledge-products" (Khutorskoy, 2000). The concept of "productive learning" that is based on the action theory by Vygotsky (1982) is used here in opposition to "reproductive learning" – knowledge consuming mode of learning. Being involved in productive learning activities the learner does not automatically consume, but "creates something new in material or ideal dimensions, including new methods of acting" (Koryakovtseva, 2014, p.45). Product-based profession-oriented foreign language learning ensures:

- engaging learners as active participants into social and cultural contexts while solving profession-oriented tasks and activating students' individual potential,
- creating conditions for learners' self-expression and self-fulfillment; developing learning and cognitive activities,
- promoting students' understanding of the mechanisms of these activities as the basis for ongoing development; fostering students' creation of personally meaningful knowledge-products,
- creating autonomous learning environment that enables students to accumulate experience of resolving specific problems, which contributes to their independence as learners, and

- providing opportunities for the development of students' creativity and their future personal and professional autonomy (Koryakovtseva, 2010).

The concept of learner autonomy that is traditionally treated by Russian researchers in the context of developing learning as a cognitive creative process and defined as a specific ability of the individual to manage his own learning, here in this research should be considered by implying the ideas of developmental learning that give a deeper insight into the nature of autonomy of the individual. In social dimension, definition of autonomy of the individual goes beyond the ability to manage his own learning and comprises the following components: autonomy of personal values and the need to have such values; affective dimension (emotional autonomy) and the need to have personal priorities; action autonomy, the need and ability for problem-solving, decision making, self-improvement, self-development, self-identification (Koryakovtseva, 2014).

Thus, engaging students into productive learning contributes to the development of their autonomy not just as learners, but their autonomy as individuals, ensuring their future personal and professional autonomy.

Productive foreign language learning requires implementation of product-based educational techniques in the process of profession-oriented education. This study discusses and describes the ways of implementing Academic Model United Nations (Model UN) into educational process as product-based educational technique in profession-oriented English language teaching.

Academic Model United Nations is an extremely popular and widely practised in the academic environment type of school, college and university conference that has been in focus in recent decades from the perspective of scaffolding learners' knowledge and bridging learning gaps in a wide range of fields such as International Relations, Politics, Economics, History, Diplomacy and other spheres of international cooperation (Dittmer, 2013; Fortin, 2012; Hazleton, Mahurin, 1986; Johnson, 1988; McIntosh, 2001; Muldoon, 1995; Obendorf, Randerson, 2012; Pettit, Craig, Walker, & Rychly, 2017; Reitano, 2003; Zenuk-Nishide, 2014). Academic Model UN is generally defined as an operational simulation of a role-playing type, in which students assume the roles of diplomatic representatives of various countries, UN member states, as well as the roles of conference organizers, journalists and interpreters at simulated United Nations committees' hearings. The format of Model UN originated in the USA in the 1950-s after the United Nations organization had been created to replace its' predecessor – the League of Nations (Muldoon, 1995). Since then the Model UN has grown globally and today, "according to the United Nations Association of the United States of America (2012), over 400,000 students worldwide participate in a Model United Nations simulation each

year" (Obendorf, & Randerson, 2012, p.3). The biggest international Model UN in Russia, that is annually organized by MGIMO University, unites around 700 participants from all over the world in Moscow. "Churkin Moscow International Model UN" offers an opportunity to all students to become a Model's delegate or a member of organizers' team and provides a choice of any committee (out of 12 simulated committees) and a choice of the working language (out of 6 official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian or Spanish) that the delegates prefer to use during the sessions (2017a). Such encompassing popularity of the conference can be explained by numerous advantages it brings to its participants.

Although the benefits of using a Model UN format for the purpose of advancing learners' knowledge and practical skills required for the future IR-related specialists have been revealed and successfully introduced into various educational practices, importance of the format as a laboratory for mastering students' professional intercultural communicative competence is relatively underrated and not so thoroughly studied yet. However, scholars in the field identified a number of positive Model UN aspects and important functions that are crucial for understanding the way it may, as a product-based educational technique, contribute to the process of effective foreign language teaching and learning. According to Hazleton and Mahurin (1986), Model UN can be regarded as an "educational laboratory" that: activates students' cognitive activities; expands their knowledge; deepens their understanding of key concepts and complex nature of modeled situations; strengthens, changes and/or develops their attitudes to the debated problems. Model UN, as McIntosh argues, "shares many of the advantages of case-based instruction and Problem-Based Learning (PBL)" (2001, p.270). Fortin (2012), Obendorf and Randerson (2012), Reitano (2003) and other scholars highlight a great challenge of an individual and group work that students face while participating in the Model UN: "competitive challenge of the simulation engages participants emotionally and intellectually in ways that are far different and more extensive than more routine intellectual competition" (Reitano, 2003, p.4). Obendorf and Randerson (2012) stress that Model UN is a highly flexible simulation framework, suitable for various contexts and a wide range of learning levels, that advances development of basic academic and professional skills including research, analytical and cooperating skills, as well as ability to produce knowledge and to apply acquired theoretical knowledge to solving particular practical issues. It is critical to point out that great flexibility and interdisciplinary nature of the Model UN format allows adopting it to a large number of educational contexts. It can be practiced in class or integrated as a part of extracurricular activities, or even become an elective course of the Debates in the Model UN format at both Bachelor's and Master's levels of studies.

At the heart of the Model UN debating process lies a necessity of finding a compromised solution to the discussed problem that activates the delegates' responsibility to not only plausibly express their ideas, but also bring their diverse opinions and arguments together. Engaging students into such social mode of learning, i.e. the one that involves future graduates' reflection of content and context of their upcoming social and professional activities, can be seen as a part of implementing the ideas of "contextual or context-based approach in education" (Verbitsky, & Kalashnikov, 2013, p.2) that had been introduced in Russian educational theory by Verbitsky and "then has been further developed by many scholars (Agapova, O. I., Bakshaeva, M.D., Chomyakova, N.P., Dubovitskaya, T. D., Iljasova, N.A., Kalashnikov, V.G., Larionova, O. G., Russkasova. I.N., Scherbakova, O.I., Tenischeva, V.F., Trunova, E.G., Zhukova, N. V.)" (Galustyan, 2017; Verbitsky, & Kalashnikov, 2013). The Model UN format seems to be a plausible way of modeling subject and social content of students' future professional activities that today consist mainly of various problem-based tasks. When at the Model UN participants are to act as social agents that means to cooperate in order to find a mutual solution to the issue on the agenda. So, they are expected to exercise such academically and professionally valuable skills as fast and argumentative articulation of their ideas, critical thinking, reflection on their opponents' opinions, cooperation and decision-making.

Thus, we can conclude that Academic Model UN can be regarded as an "educational laboratory" that possesses the following most prominent features of a context-based integrative educational technique:

1. As a highly flexible technique it can be practiced in various educational contexts (on different educational levels – e.g. both Bachelor's and Master's; in various formats – as an elective course, extracurricular activity, two hours' seminar or several days' conference etc.).
2. It serves as an interdisciplinary format that bridges learning gaps of various disciplines while employing foreign language as a tool of solving problem-based tasks.
3. It integrates mastering professional intercultural communicative competence that expects students to create personally meaningful products while being engaged in a subject and social content of their future professional activities.

2. Materials and Methods

All above mentioned challenges that Model UN creates for its' participants moved us to conduct an experimental study of implementing Model UN format in

educational process. An experimental study was conducted in 2017 with participation of NRU HSE School of Foreign Languages staff and 1st and 2d-year Bachelor students majoring in Linguistics (educational programme "Foreign Languages and Cross-cultural Communication"). The study involved 3 major stages that reflect the actual process of the Model UN format implementation in the educational process: preparation and training stage; simulation stage; assessment and evaluation stage.

As the Model UN is a highly flexible in scale format, for the purposes of conducting the second (simulation) stage of the study, the format of running experimental simulation of one working UN committee hearing was chosen. Participants were to model the work of the United Nations Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee (UN SOCHUM), issue on the agenda – "The Syrian Crisis. Protection of the Syrian Artistic and Cultural Heritage", working language – English. This up-to-date problem of international significance was chosen for the hearing's debates in accordance with students' English Language course syllabus – the topics that students had already learned before included "World Cultural Heritage", "UNESCO Heritage" and etc. The number of participants of the first (preparation and training) stage of the study was: 1 tutor and 45 students, the number of the second (simulation) stage and the third (assessment and evaluation) stage – 4 tutors and 16 students. Students' general knowledge about the work of international organizations, the UN in particular, the simulation agenda and procedure were evaluated during the first stage of the study with the help of observation and discussion methods, students' written and spoken speech in English was assessed before, during and after the simulation proper according to the designed criteria with the help of the simulation video recording. The final stage also included answering the questionnaire and the interviews with the participants of the study targeted at collecting their personal opinions about the effectiveness of the Model UN format for their current academic and future professional activities.

2.1. Preparation and Training Stage

Before running the Model UN sessions, it is critical to find out if students are ready or, it is better to say, "to what extent" they are ready for it. It is obvious that hardly all students are well aware of all the necessary procedures and the missions of the UN and of the UN Models, and that was explored during the discussions held on the first stage of the study with the students before organizing the simulation. We faced the following difficulties when implementing the Model UN format: students possessed scarce and very general knowledge about the functioning of international organizations and conferences, the work of the UN and the Models UN in particular (some students had never heard of the Models UN before); students showed just surface knowledge of the problem on the agenda (The Syrian Crisis. Protection of the Syrian Artistic and Cultural Heritage); they lacked experience of taking part in the

international conferences, forums and debates that require participants to work in English and comply with specific rules and regulations; students were also found to be poorly motivated to become a delegate.

Uncovering these difficulties enabled us to elaborate and test the following ways to overcome them before modeling the UN committee hearing:

- to conduct a series of classes that introduce students to the world of international organizations and Models UN (suggested topics: "History of United Nations organization; international importance of the UN in the 21st century"; "Creation and expansion of Model movement: scale, popularity and contribution"; "Global problems on the agenda"; "Becoming Model UN delegate: how to write "position paper" and "opening speech", rules of procedure"),
- to guide students in working with the educational sources that offer the information on preparation and participation in the Model UN as delegates,
- to provide detailed instructions and study guides to prepare for the simulation,
- to explain students how they can individually grow within the Model UN – from a delegate to an organizer,
- to show students what opportunities and perspectives there are to become a delegate of national and international Models UN (Moscow Models at MGIMO and MSU; Harvard MUN, WordMUN, Global MUN abroad, and
- to award the simulation participants: to record participation as a volunteer work; to award with Certificates of participation and Diplomas in different nominations - "Best Delegate", "Best Position paper", "Best Presentation", "Best Diplomat" etc.

The preparation and training stage involved elaboration of the instructions and study guides for potential simulation participants. The following recommendations can be used by teachers as the guidelines in creating the materials to prepare their students for participation in the Model UN format sessions.

1. To guide students in their pre-session research on the assigned countries' positions – for writing "position paper" and "opening speech":
   - to formulate concrete requirements for writing "position paper" and "opening speech". This file should clearly articulate the requirements for the format, volume, content, organization and the language of the "position paper" – the written work that potential delegates prepare beforehand and submit to the simulation organizers as a proof of their participation and understanding of the

assigned role. The same requirements should be set for creation and delivery of the "opening speech" – short monologue that every delegate presents at the opening of the committee hearing. General requirements for these research works are the following:

    a) "Position paper" and "opening speech" are the documents written on behalf of the assigned country's delegation, in which the position about the issue on the agenda is stated,

    b) "Position paper" is a one-page paper written in a formal style that usually includes three paragraphs presenting assigned country's position, while "opening speech" is a prepared in advance 1-1,5-minute monologue that briefly summarizes the key points of the "position paper",

    c) The papers must involve general statements about the issue, recalling national and international Conventions and Declarations that deal with the problem; assigned country's contribution to solving the discussed issue, including any national policies or actions that had already been done by the country; realistic and practical solutions that assigned country could propose to tackle the issue; the papers must have at least two references to the official sources and documents that indicate the reliability of the information.

Criteria of assessing students' written and spoken speech performance must be based on the outlined and other requirements that we provide the simulation participants with. To ensure students are able to conduct a decent research and properly present it, it is essential to show them examples of "position paper" and "opening speech"; to provide them with a study guide that covers the issue on the agenda in a detail, lists the sources of the issue-related information that can be used for the research.

    2. To guide students in their preparation for acting as delegates during the simulated UN Model Committee hearing it is helpful:

        • to compile a booklet with general information on preparing for the Model UN that contains a programme of the future simulation: the issue (-s) on the agenda, committees presented, sessions' schedule, organizers' contacts and sources for additional information,

        • to provide a document that explains the rules of the chosen committee sessions' procedure. All the working sessions of the General Assembly committees are similar in procedure. However, it is better to consult on the particular committee's regulations on the United Nations official website, and

- to send the delegates an illustrative example of the "Working Paper" and "Final Resolution" – the documents that are supposed to be the final products of delegates' cooperative work during the hearing's debates. It is critical that students clearly understand the ultimate goal of their mission at the simulation – elaborating productive compromised solutions to the issue on the agenda in the process of cooperation with other states' delegates.

Thus, the "Model UN Delegate Toolkit" must include:

- instructions on writing Position paper and Opening speech,

- example of Position paper,

- committee Study Guide on the issue (e.g. "SOCHUM Study Guide "The Syrian Crisis. Protection of the Syrian Cultural and Artistic Heritage"),

- rules of Procedure,

- example of the Working Paper and Final Resolution, and

- general information on preparing for the Model UN.

2.2. Simulation Stage

On the second stage of the study the simulation of the UN SOCHUM Committee hearing was modeled. As the Model UN was the first experience for participating students, the roles were distributed the following way: 3 NRU HSE tutors acted as Chairs (The Dias) and Co-chairs of the hearing and 1 tutor provided technical support of the simulation; 16 NRU HSE students acted as delegates of the assigned countries.

Running the simulation required the usage of a computer, 2 laptops, speakers, projecting device, video camera and Model United Nations Software (MUNS) designed by Duisburg-Essen Model United Nations organizers (2017b).

Simulated hearing consisted of the following stages that can be used as an example for running the Model UN format sessions of the UN General Assembly committees: Introduction to the Debates; Opening of Debates; Speakers' list; Discussion; Elaborating Working paper; Voting Procedure (Draft Resolution); Closing Debates.

2.3. Assessment and Evaluation Stage

The final stage involved assessment of the students' written and spoken speech performance in English according to the designed criteria. Three types of activities were assessed:

1. Written task – a research work in the format of "position paper" was assessed according to the following criteria: content, format (text structure and organization), vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

2. Speaking task 1 – presentation of the short monologue "opening speech" (prepared speech) was assessed according to the following criteria: content, format (text structure and organization), speech culture, grammar and pronunciation.

3. Speaking task 2 – participation in the problem discussion (spontaneous speech) was assessed according to the following criteria: content, interaction, speech culture, grammar and grammar.

Results of the written and speaking tasks assessment enabled us to indicate the following general features that characterize students' performance during the preparation and participation in the Model UN format session:

1. Participants demonstrated understanding of the discussed issue, expressed nonstandard original opinions, referred to relevant examples and true facts during the problem discussion.

2. Speech of the participants mostly sounded clear and confident, complied with the time limits, as well as ethic and formal style norms.

3. Students used suitable vocabulary, the terms and abbreviations; their speech conformed to the B1-B2 levels.

4. Delegates sometimes failed to match the set requirements to the content and structure of the tasks.

5. Participants not always demonstrated the understanding of the regulations and hearing's procedure that resulted in numerous pauses and misunderstandings during the session.

6. Students not always managed to use their skills of argumentation and maintenance of the problem discussion.

Results of the criteria assessment of the participants' written and spoken works in English are of a great value for revealing strong and weak points of the students' overall performance in using English as a tool for solving specific problems. Analysis of the results also indicates the main obstacles students face when they use the foreign language; these are the areas of concern for teachers to deal with during routine EFL classes.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Model UN format as a context-based integrative educational technique, the simulation participants' answers to the designed questionnaire and interview were analyzed. Students' feedback illustrates that according to the delegates' opinions participation in the Model UN session helped them to practice and develop the following skills of:

- searching various sources and analyzing the validity and reliability of the information in foreign language, including the search of the media and internet resources;

- usage of information within a particular situation and given tasks;
- defining and articulating the problem;
- generating original and nonstandard solutions to the problem that does not have one definite resolution;
- formulating the aims and tasks of the working process;
- conducting and presenting research;
- tracing the tendencies, differences and similarities of cultural, social, economic and political development of various countries;
- employing bright examples and relevant facts as tools of argumentation and persuasion;
- maintaining formal style of the discussion;
- presenting ideas to the audience;
- participating in a problem-based discussion.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

As the study findings show, the Model United Nations format has proved to be an effective FLT technique, as it contributes to the productivity of the learning activities and the development of the students' professional intercultural communicative competence. As a context-based integrative educational technique, Model UN format:

- allows developing and assessing learners' foreign language skills in writing and speaking,

- ensures introducing learners to particular social and cultural contexts and situation of intercultural communication, expanding their knowledge about world history, culture, international economics and politics and foreign affairs, as well as introducing to the current global issues on the agenda and the current mission of the international organizations,

- creates autonomous learning environment that enables learners to accumulate experience of resolving specific problems,

- engages learners into problem-based discussion that requires skills of individual and group work,

- advances learners' skills of delivering a public speech and presenting their ideas and arguments about an internationally important issue,

- enhances analytical and research skills and stimulates cognitive activities,

- develops learners' creativity and sense of responsibility, contributing to the development of their future personal and professional autonomy, and

- creates conditions for learners' self-expression and self-fulfillment.

Although, as the majority of alternative educational techniques, the Model UN format has its shortcomings – it requires a great deal of time and preparatory work from its organizers, as well as from the participants, – the technique is still of a great value in achieving its ultimate goal – engaging students in the process of creating personally meaningful knowledge-products with the help of the foreign language while mastering professional intercultural communicative competence.

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