

Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Innovations in Teaching Business Letter Writing at Nonlinguistic Universities: Individually Differentiated Approach

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Abstract

In the modern world the ability to perform professional interaction and conduct proper business correspondence is an integral part of successful commercial activities. The scope of knowledge necessary for efficient spoken and written communication is the basis of productive cooperation with foreign partners for specialists and experts in any field. This knowledge is to provide the increasing demand for such professionals as a current trend in the labour market. In this light, teaching business letter writing as a product of foreign language learning to students at nonlinguistic universities proves to be of vital importance. The present article is aimed at presenting and proving the effectiveness of the developed methodology of product-oriented teaching business letter writing in the foreign (English) language to students at nonlinguistic universities. The article reveals the examples of particular practical tasks for students. The study methods include a learner survey, the analysis of students' written works, the relevant educational and methodology literature review, the pedagogical experiment, the analysis and statistical processing of the obtained data, interpretation of the research results. In consequence of the conducted research, the authors studied and estimated the students' written works which were done as part of product-oriented teaching business letter writing on the basis of individually differentiated approach. Thus, the obtained data proved the effectiveness of the developed methodology. The practical significance of the research results lies in the opportunity of increasing productivity of foreign language professional education at a nonlinguistic university.

Keywords: business communication; individually differentiated approach; product-oriented approach.

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Introduction

At present, the importance of mastering one or more foreign languages as part of successful professional activities is to be indisputable. This factor is stated to be necessary for specialists in various fields, which is proved by a number of scientists (Butt, 2017).

In fact, at least one foreign language is taught in the majority of the Russian Federation higher educational institutions. However, according to the results of the survey, only 15 per cent of the overall number of the Russian graduates speak English fluently and make effective use of this language in their special fields (Nabirkina, 2020).

Plekhanov Russian University of Economics provides training of highly-skilled professionals in a wide range of fields including such training programs as 40.03.01 “Legal Studies”, 43.03.02 “Tourism” and 43.03.03 “Hotel Business”.

The Federal State Education Standards of Higher Education (Bachelor’s degree) focused on such training programs as 43.03.02 “Tourism” and 43.03.03 “Hotel Business” reflect the list of universal competences including the one which calls for the ability “to perform business communication in spoken and written forms in the national language of the Russian Federation and in a foreign language (UC-4)” (Federalnyi gosudarstvennyi...“Turizm”, 2020; Federalnyi gosudarstvennyi...“Gostinichnoe delo”, 2020).

The Federal State Education Standards of Higher Education (Bachelor’s degree) of the training program 40.03.01 “Legal Studies” highlights a number of common cultural competences, one of which is “the ability to communicate in the Russian and foreign languages in spoken and written forms in order to solve the issues related to interpersonal and intercultural communication (OC-5)...One of the general professional competences underlines the requirement of “mastering the skills necessary for professional communication in a foreign language (GPC-7)” (Federalnyi gosudarstvennyi...“Yurisprudentsiya”).

According to E. Tareva, “on the one hand, the whole complex of competences is socially significant and required by the society represented by employers, on the other hand, it is based on a student’s maximum personal inner fulfillment” (Tareva, 2011).

In its turn, both “Tour guide” and “Hotel manager” Occupational Standards determine the duties of these specialists and state the significance of a foreign language skills, the basics of business and interpersonal communication, business protocol and etiquette, paperwork management, etc. The following skills are also required:

- mastering the skills of performing spoken and written communication with customers, partners, and parties concerned;
- compliance with the protocol of business meetings and observing business etiquette by reference to interlocutors’ national and corporate specifics;
- mastering the English language or another foreign language at the level providing effective professional

communication, etc. (Professionalnyi standart “Ekskursovod (gid)”); Professionalnyi standart “Rukovoditel ili upravlyayushchii gostinichnogo kompleksa ili seti gostinits”)

Obviously, there is a contradiction arising between the abovementioned requirements of the Federal State Education Standards of Higher Education (Bachelor’s degree), Occupational Standards combined with employers’ requirements and an insufficiently high level of training future specialists. Therefore, the issue of practice- and profession-oriented approach in teaching foreign languages to students at nonlinguistic universities becomes acute and of practical importance.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to reveal the developed methodology of product-oriented teaching business letter writing in the foreign (English) language to students at nonlinguistic universities. The set purpose is relevant to the following objectives of the study:

- to estimate the level of the students’ developed business letter writing skills;
- to elicit the most common difficulties arising in the course of teaching business letter writing to the students;
- to represent theoretically justified basics of product-oriented teaching business letter writing to students at nonlinguistic universities;
- to present the consistent methodology of product-oriented teaching business letter writing on the basis of an individually differentiated approach.

Literature review

The analysis of the working programs of the discipline “Foreign language” related to such training programs as 43.03.02 “Tourism” and 43.03.03 “Hotel business” (Rabochaya programma uchebnoi distsipliny “Inostrannyi yazyk (bazovyi kurs)” po napravleniyu podgotovki 43.03.03 “Gostinichnoe delo”, 2019) at a nonlinguistic university showed the importance of the development of foreign language oral and written communication skills of a professional nature (including knowledge of the main types of business writing), as well as the students’ ability to do an independent creative linguistic research using relevant dictionaries and reference literature as well as the proper Internet resources in a foreign language. The planned result of mastering the discipline is the formation of a foreign language communicative competence in the framework of several indicators of achievement, including the use of information and communication technologies when searching for the necessary information in the process of solving typical communication tasks and conducting business correspondence, taking into account the peculiarities of the stylistics of official and unofficial letters, socio-cultural differences in the format of correspondence in the state and foreign languages. As for teaching English to students doing the training program 40.03.01 “Legal Studies”, the nomenclature of situations and spheres of foreign language professional intercultural communication in the process of international legal activity includes written works (business legal

correspondence, annotation and referencing of business documents and texts, drafting reviews, reviews, appeal documents and complaints).

It is possible to draw a conclusion that teaching a foreign language at the present stage is characterized by “high practical significance and has become productive” (Loveless, 2021). N.F. Koryakovtseva defines productive education as “the development of a student's cognitive and creative abilities, the disclosure and realization of his creative potential, the formation of a creative personality”. At the same time, one of the key components of such education, according to the researcher, is the creation of a personally significant educational product based on the independent acquisition of knowledge to solve a specific problem (Koryakovtseva, 2010).

The term “product-oriented learning”, coined by the German philologist and philosopher Gunther Waldmann, became widespread in Germany at the end of the last century. Such German scientists as G. Waldmann, G. Kugler, K. Fingerhut, G. Haas, K. Spinner and others contributed to the development of this concept.

The product-oriented approach, as the term implies, has as its ultimate goal which is the creation of a specific product as a result of teaching and learning activities. The resulted products can be essays, reports, advertising, research, dictionaries, review and analysis of thematic resources, portfolios, presentations, abstracts and other works, this is the result of active knowledge extraction, independent creative activity of the student, and not an already available sample. In this regard, it is advisable to emphasize such a specific feature of product-oriented learning as a creative component or creativity, since product-oriented foreign language activity takes place in a creative educational environment, which provides an opportunity for each student to not only develop the initial creative potentials, but also to stimulate the need for further self-knowledge, creative self-development (Connor, 2017). This greatly helps the formation of students' objective self-esteem, the development of the ability for self-reflection (Sorokovykh, 2013).

In the course of creating a personal educational product, the acquired knowledge is effectively assimilated precisely due to the creative component of this process, the processing of individually significant new information.

Considering the abovementioned data, we agree with the definition of product-oriented learning proposed by N.A. Altukhova, who emphasizes that this is “the concept of language learning based on the creative assimilation of knowledge in the process of independent productive activity aimed at developing the language and creative abilities of students” (Altukhova, 2015).

With regard to the teaching of a foreign language in a non-linguistic University described in this article, this definition undergoes minor changes. Following G.V. Sorokovykh, we will consider product-oriented learning in a nonlinguistic university the concept of a foreign language professional education based on the creative assimilation of knowledge, the formation of various competencies and skills in the process of

independent productive activities of students aimed at developing professional communication skills, linguistic and creative abilities of a modern specialist (Sorokovykh, 2018). Consequently, the purpose of such training is not only the creation of an individual product, but also the practice of independently solving educational (professional) tasks, and most importantly, providing students with the necessary tools for the creative assimilation of new valuable information (Kencana, N., Melati, M, 2020).

Speaking about the advantages of product-oriented teaching of a foreign language in higher educational institutions, one should emphasize not only the development of cognitive and creative abilities of students, but also an increase in their educational autonomy and the practical value of the created product directly in the context of their future professional activities (Sorokovykh, 2011).

In practical classes aimed at developing the skills of both oral and written speech, for a number of reasons, it is advisable to apply a product-oriented approach based on the interactive interaction of participants in the educational process (*Interaktivnye tekhnologii v inoyazychnom obrazovanii: issledovanie strategii i opyta primeneniya*, 2013).

Methodology

Despite the fact that the concept of product-oriented education at a non-linguistic university has lots of merits, the methodology of its implementation seems to be developed insufficiently, since a relatively small number of students and graduates are fluent in a foreign language and consequently fail to apply this knowledge successfully in their work (Taylor, 2020). This fact has been initially assumed in the beginning of this article.

We have conducted the study aimed at developing the methodology for teaching business letter writing to students of a nonlinguistic university. The experiment was conducted at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics among 1-3-year undergraduates doing “Hotel Business”, “Tourism” and “Law Studies”. The stages of the experiment are the following:

- the assessment of students' knowledge and skills to conduct business correspondence;
- the analysis of available text editions;
- the development and testing of a consistent methodology for teaching business writing based on a product-oriented approach;
- the investigation of the results obtained and further development of appropriate methodological recommendations.

The main research methods were the survey, the analysis of students' written works, the study of educational and methodological literature, the pedagogical experiment, the investigation and statistical processing of the obtained data and the interpretation of the results.

At the first step, we selected several groups of 1-3-year undergraduate students, studying “Law Studies”, “Hotel Business” and “Tourism” training programs with a total number of 190 people. The first-year

students were asked to write a CV (Curriculum Vitae) and a cover letter, while the second- and the third-year students were supposed to deal with a placement report and a Letter of Complaint.

The results obtained indicate that about 30% of students in each field of study failed to fulfill communicative tasks. They were able to write only a few simple sentences, lacking clear structure and coherence. As for the rest, almost all of them used the samples of written works found on the Internet. According to the students, they were the first to come across, and therefore weren't thoroughly analyzed. There were also those who submitted resumes and cover letters composed while studying at school, without making any special changes in the content of the work.

These results allow us to conclude, that in the process of learning a foreign language at a nonlinguistic university, students show low proficiency in applying specialized vocabulary and speech clichés, when preparing (writing) such practical assignments, related to their profession. Moreover, they try to minimize efforts, rewriting from a sample and making minor changes in the original version. At the same time, in the survey, students (mostly 1-2-year undergraduates) explain this by saying that they were used to template work from school, and the slightest deviation from the sample was often regarded by teachers as a major violation, and led to lower results (points, marks) (Tareva, 2011).

During the survey, some third-year students admitted that they copied templates due to poor knowledge of the discipline in general and fear of making lexical and grammatical mistakes, in particular. In any case, it is obvious that the insufficient development of consistent methods of product-oriented teaching at a non-linguistic higher educational institution hinders a deeper and more effective, and most importantly, meaningful understanding of the material, its individual interpretation when creating a personal educational product.

At the second step of our experiment, we studied several textbooks on business English used in the process of teaching at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics:

- Peter Strutt "English for International Tourism" (New Edition, Intermediate);
- Peter Strutt "English for International Tourism" (New Edition, Upper Intermediate);
- John Allison, Paul Emmerson "The Business 2.0" (Intermediate);
- John Allison, Jeremy Townend, Paul Emmerson "The Business 2.0" (Upper Intermediate),
- Mr. A Robin Widdowson "Business Law: Market Leader.

The study of these manuals showed that business letter writing materials take no more than 10% in the first two manuals, although conducting business correspondence in a foreign language plays an important role in the future professions of the graduates. Despite the availability of a special Writing Bank section, containing examples of business letters and a list of the main points of these documents, we assume that the samples of business letters presented in these manuals are not sufficient. They do not provide with required clichés and consequently students fail to create a successful written product.

As for the rest of the manuals in this list, the tasks aimed at developing business writing skills make up 8-12.5% of the total number of tasks in the manuals.

However, in most lessons, students are offered only one sample of a business letter. They are not provided with specific list of speech clichés and other typical phrases, lexical units necessary to write a letter in an effective and coherent manner.

In our opinion, the presentation of a single sample when teaching business letter writing is insufficient, since it deprives students of the opportunity to analyze different versions of the same business letter, even if they have slight differences.

However, in this case, students do not see the individual approach of the author to writing a letter and the personally significant content of the document, which is considered to be an indispensable condition for creating an individual written product (*Interaktivnye tekhnologii v inoyazychnom obrazovanii: issledovanie strategii i opyta primeneniya*, 2013).

The third step was to develop and test a methodology for teaching business writing based on a product-oriented approach (Sitisri Wulandari, 2016). The results of this stage of the experiment are shown below. The methodology of teaching business letter writing at a non-linguistic university in the framework of product-oriented approach is presented in the following consequent stages:

I. Introduction to a particular type of a business letter (CV, complaint letter, placement report, etc.):

- discussion of the reasons for writing such a letter;
- presentation to students several options of the writing;
- answers to questions about the content of specific samples.

II. Analysis (comprehension) of the proposed samples and methods of creating an individual product:

- identification of the distinctive features of the content of each proposed version of the business letter;
- analysis of the overall structure of the submitted business letters;
- study of lexical and grammatical means used by the author;
- compilation, search and addition of a list of possible lexical and grammatical means necessary for writing a letter;
- discussion of possible changes (adjustments) to certain fragments of the business letter, aimed at improving it as a whole.

III. Creating an individual product:

- thinking about the content of a business letter to solve a communication task;
- drawing up a business letter writing plan (structure);
- selection of necessary lexical units, speech clichés, grammatical constructions;
- writing a draft version of a business letter;
- correction of individual structural components of the letter;

- preparation of the final version of the business letter.

We offer you some examples of individual tasks aimed at teaching business writing to undergraduate students in the field of Law Studies.

Task 1.

Study the sample of the contract and answer the following questions:

What is the structure of the contract?

What legal relations is this agreement aimed at?

What parts does the contract consist of?

What is the purpose of each part of the contract?

What language means does the compiler use to indicate conditions?

How the section of the agreement "Subject of the Agreement" ("Price of the Agreement and the Procedure for Settlements", "Procedure for Transferring Property and Transfer of Ownership to the Buyer", "Rights and Obligations of the Parties", "Responsibilities of the Parties", "Final Provisions", "Addresses and signatures of the parties")?

Task 2.

Read the request letter and the complaint letter and answer the following questions:

What speech formula should be used if it is required to inform that ...

a) you are ready to confirm the receipt of the letter;

b) you are writing a letter on somebody's behalf.

1. We act on behalf of Sun Microsystems Inc of the USA...
2. We duly received your letter of ...
3. With reference to our telephone conversation, I am writing to provide the requested information...
4. The law firm Represents Mr. ... and I am writing to you on his behalf...
5. We hereby acknowledge receipt of ...
6. I wish to acknowledge receipt of your letter of 26 September 1995.
7. I am writing on behalf of Mr. Black ... whom I represent as an attorney...
8. We hasten to acknowledge receipt of your letter ...

Task 3.

Study the example of a typical contract of sale and analyze the proposed text of the document in a foreign language from the point of view of the rules of the structural organization of such a contract. Arrange the disparate parts of a typical sales agreement in the correct order.

Task 4.

Writing a memorandum.

You have a client who is a foreign citizen and works in Russia. He bought an electrical appliance imported

from China and was badly injured while using it. He intends to file a lawsuit and needs your professional advice. You will recommend the client to claim product liability in his native jurisdiction. Write a memorandum where you set the overview of products liability case highlighting the main doctrines.

Task 5.

Writing a letter.

Your client is going to form a joint-stock company with an American business partner. The issue your client is discussing with you concerns Intellectual Property matter, namely the trademark of the enterprise that is about to enter the international market. You advise to register the trademark in the USA and you are to write a letter to the US partner and set forth the plan of action.

Results

In the conclusion of our experimental study, we analyzed the results of the ascertaining and control stages of the experiment, and also developed appropriate methodological recommendations.

Both at the ascertaining and control stages of the experiment, students were asked to write several business letters according to their field of study. All the students' papers were analyzed and evaluated according to the following criteria: the content of the business letter, its structure, style and language (Table 1). The table shows the data of the ascertaining and control experiments, or rather, the % of students who relatively successfully coped with writing business letters and made a small number of mistakes for each evaluation criterion.

The obtained data allow us to conclude that the developed teaching program for writing a business letter is quite effective.

Table 1. The results of students' work at the ascertaining and control stages of the experiment.

Professional field	Hotel business		Tourism		Law	
	Ascertaining experiment	Control experiment	Ascertaining experiment	Control experiment	Ascertaining experiment	Control experiment
Content of a business letter	75%	98%	68%	95%	71%	92%
Style and language of a	40%	88%	39%	79%	48%	86%

business letter						
Structure of a business letter	71%	90%	65%	96%	59%	91%

While developing a methodology for product-oriented teaching of foreign written speech to undergraduate students at non-linguistic universities, we have developed the following recommendations:

- working with a text, whether it is an essay, an advertisement, or a business letter, should be preceded by a panel discussion of the topic, brainstorming possible ideas about its purpose and content;
- when proceeding to the text, it is necessary to ensure students not to be in a hurry, to read thoroughly and comprehend its specific practical value for their future profession;
- perception (understanding) of the text should be not only from the point of view of its content for further processing of the information received, but from the perspective of structural and semantic relations, genre, characteristic features (for example, a great number of terms, selection of specialized vocabulary, certain clichés, compound and complex sentences, etc.);
- the analysis of finished products (source texts) should involve the study of at least slightly different, and at best, quite diverse versions of the same work, whether it is a resume, a letter of claim or an essay. In this case, at least at first, the teacher needs to provide students with a wide range of reference materials/Internet resources for their further independent work. Thus, students, having studied even minor differences in the texts of a single genre, will have the opportunity to generate their ideas on the basis of this analysis. It will enable them to do clearly structured work, to bring updated content, in other words, to create an individual (personally significant) educational product (written work).

Discussions

Teaching business communication to students whose professional activities will be related to the implementation of communication skills and abilities is an important part of formal preparation. Developing the competence of business written communication in a foreign language is an integral part of the process of teaching a foreign language at a non-linguistic university. The skills obtained will improve the professional training of specialists and their demand among employers.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the detailed development and testing of the methodology of product-oriented teaching of written speech to undergraduate students of non-linguistic universities is of particular importance at present, since this concept provides favorable conditions for the professional and personal development of the future specialist. In a business environment literacy and a good style of business documentation are extremely important for conducting a successful and productive business communication. The high quality of business correspondence, which will be carried out by a graduate of a non-linguistic university, will ensure his success in the modern professional area. Product-oriented teaching of business writing should be

based on a consistent methodology presented in the article. It will enable students to create a coherent product, meaningful for personal development in the context of students' creative abilities.

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