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DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS FOR MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES 2 DURING THE ONLINE TEACHING PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present the results of our analysis regarding the development of critical thinking skills for the subject Macedonian language for specific purposes 2, research conducted in the online teaching period in the academic 2019-2020. The appearance of COVID-19 virus in March 2020 and the pandemic that it caused seriously affected the educational process. But the well-established Google Meet and Google Classroom platforms have proven to be a solid foundation for teaching in extraordinary circumstances at SEEU. Our goal in the past period was mainly aimed at developing and improving the critical thinking skills which are clearly defined in the syllabus. Definitions of the term critical thinking are given, as well as the results of our research regarding the development of critical thinking skills during online teaching. In terms of methodology, for each skill an exercise was given, which was assessed by the professor and the students received feedback. Our research covers 7 critical thinking skills. An analysis is emphasized as one of the key skills for developing critical thinking. The ability to apply established personal, professional and social rules and criteria

reflects students' ability to present information in their own way. In the modern world, access to information is readily available. The development of critical thinking by mastering the skill of logical reasoning was aimed at establishing correlations and conclusions that are supported or determined by the above data in the form of a debate on the criteria for successful professional communication. The ability to distinguish is emphasized as one of the skills for developing critical thinking. The novelties in the future should be mainly focused on the main challenge, which is the motivation of the students for active participation because according to our expected results there was more pressure for their activity on Google Meet, but they showed significant interest in the exercises that affected the final grade (according to our previous experience, that was characteristic for the period of teaching with physical presence).

The active involvement of the students, but also the additional engagement of the professors in these extraordinary circumstances will contribute to a quality and smooth mastering of the skills for critical analysis.

Key words: critical thinking, skills, online teaching, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The appearance of COVID-19 virus in March 2020 and the pandemic it caused seriously affected all aspects of modern life, and especially the educational process in the country and in the world in general. Negative effects were observed at all levels, and the weaknesses of the education systems to cope with this process came to the surface. From all this we have learned a very important lesson, i.e. that in the 21st century it is impossible to function without online activities. At the local and global level, education must be adapted to the world trends for this type of teaching and we should all work in overcoming the problems that have arisen during this period.

The South East European University (SEEU) was previously known as a leader in the country, but also in the region in terms of commitment to digitalization in every segment of its functioning, and especially in teaching activities. Therefore, it was not a problem to make a transfer in a single day - from teaching in the classroom, to continue with online teaching on March 11, 2020. Confirmation of the quality of the realization of the teaching process in the period of the pandemic is the high grades of the students assigned through the anonymous evaluation.

The well-established Google Meet and Google Classroom platforms have proven to be a solid foundation for teaching in extraordinary circumstances. However, the knowledge gained in the period of online teaching clearly indicates the possible shortcomings that need to be addressed in the future. What stands out as a problem is the awareness of some students for active participation in the whole process, but also for its benefits. Some students during the teaching process faced technical problems (poor internet, lack of computer, etc.).

Our goal in the past period was mainly aimed at developing and improving the critical thinking skills that we believe are the key to the success of students' professional careers.

METHODOLOGY

43 students from Skopje and 31 students from Tetovo were included in this research, registered for the subject Macedonian language for professional purposes 2 (free elective course for students from all SEEU faculties). This means that students who have a solid command of the Macedonian language were taking part. Our goal was to determine whether students will actively participate in the realization of the exercises that contribute to the development of critical thinking skills and result that they will achieve.

We worked according to the following methodology: An appropriate activity is listed for each skill in the curriculum. Students were given clear guidance through the information provided on the Google Classroom and through Google Meet lectures. For each exercise, they had a period of 1 week to complete it. Exercises that were sent later were not considered.

Within 1 week, each student received feedback from the professors with their notes and achieved points through Google. They had the opportunity to correct the exercises and resubmit them. Our goal was to make them realize their mistakes through evaluation and to improve in the future.

Students have shown interest in this type of exercise, primarily because of the awareness of the importance of critical thinking in future professional careers. In this paper, we will not present a comparative analysis with previous years when teaching was conducted at SEEU because our goal is only to describe in a descriptive way the development of critical thinking skills during online teaching in the period from March to June 2020 during pandemics.

DEFINING THE TERM CRITICAL THINKING IN RELATION TO THE TEACHING PROCESS

Defining the term critical thinking is complicated because it covers complex activities. In the literature we find different definitions which according to Yinger (1980:14) can be broader (equated with problem solving or reflexive thinking) and narrower (it is a special kind of thinking).

In Macedonian literature, Achkova-Leshkovska gives her perception of this term, according to which it is an "engaged opinion, which does not take anything for granted and whose main purpose is to check the accuracy and adequacy of a statement. We think critically only when we start to check, evaluate, expand and apply new ideas. (2010:202)

What was our primary goal, especially emphasized in the curriculum for the subject, is the acquired skills for students to apply in their further professional career, ie: „developing critical thinking together with language skills activates study potential, refines key competencies for both study and job performance, and reflects the needs for modernization and optimizing teaching methods at the tertiary level.“ (Sieglová, 2017:1)

A comprehensive overview of the term critical thinking is provided on The Foundation for Critical Thinking, and their definition of this term is: „Critical thinking is that mode of thinking — about any subject, content, or problem — in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism.“

The precise definition of this term is also stated by Facione (2011: 26), i.e: “We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry.“

In our opinion, critical thinking is a complex concept and the development of critical thinking skills is extremely important and special attention should be paid to it during the lectures, and especially to the development of ability: (1) to analyze the information objectively and (2) to

make reasoned judgment. According to Missimer (1994:119): “reasoned judgment means proposing a conclusion (i.e., argument, hypothesis, solution), and supporting it by means of noncontradictory reason(s).”

DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

The syllabus for the Macedonian language for professional purposes 2 course clearly defines the critical thinking skills that will be paid attention to within the course, the exercises through which it will be realized, as well as the manner of evaluation.

ANALYSIS

An analysis is emphasized as one of the key skills for developing critical thinking. Given the specific circumstances in which the teaching process took place (online), it was particularly important to give students clear and precise directions for activities related to the benefits of analysis, to improve this type of skills, but also detailed recommendations with clear instructions for all other individual and group exercises.

The students from each faculty were pointed out the appropriate law since this subject is related to the enrichment of the vocabulary from the professional sphere. That is, the students from the Faculty of Business and Economics separated professional terminology from the Law on Payment Operations, the students from the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies made their own vocabulary according to the vocabulary from the Law on Electronic Communications, and the students from the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, Law Faculty and from the Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences made a choice for professional terminology from the Law on Public Administration.

Enriching the personal professional vocabulary (Macedonian - Albanian) is one of the goals for the course listed in the curriculum. We were aware of the challenges we will face in relation to this activity, knowing that what needs to be emphasized to students first is that a rich professional vocabulary will greatly facilitate communication throughout their future careers. With that, we wanted to instruct the students not to use the words that are already familiar to them, but to focus their attention on the possibility of finding and applying new terms.

It was not particularly difficult for the students to find a translation of the vocabulary, using, above all, the online dictionaries. However, a serious obstacle was the ambiguity of the words,

the ability to find a suitable translation depending on the text, and especially the skill to use that term in a self-created example and at the same time to take into account the linguistic context. The evaluation referred to the analysis of the appropriate application of words in a given context through the use of a measurable instrument.

Students were constantly monitored and encouraged to apply new words, and in terms of grammatical categories to be in accordance with the standard language norm. That is, at the beginning of the semester, each student filled in a list of 40 professional terms separated by the above laws, for which he/she had to write a translation and be able to use the same example appropriately. At the end of the semester, they were given the same list. Through the feedback, students had the opportunity to track their progress in terms of the number of newly learned words during the semester.

This activity has shown good results in terms of the development of critical thinking and in the future we plan to implement it every teaching class.

APPLYING THE ESTABLISHED STANDARDS

The ability to apply established personal, professional and social rules and criteria reflects students' ability to present information in their own way in the best possible way. The development of this skill was followed by two extremely important activities: filling out a job application form and answering interview questions.

The job application form was preceded by an analysis of the different types of job advertisements and the essential elements that it should contain. Then, based on the given advertisements, but also on those that are available online, each student was asked to structure an advertisement for a given job position. In the next class, after the analysis of the pre-prepared application at the workplace and the relevant documents in which the given issue is processed, each student filled in his application for an advertisement prepared by another student. The importance of this document was stressed, which is the first contact with the employer, but also that the sharing of key information increases the possibility of being called for an interview.

Prior to the online interview class, links were shared on the Google Classroom platform to help students understand the importance of a job interview and prepare appropriate answers to common questions. We have analyzed the important steps for successful communication, in terms of language expression, gestures, physical appearance, which can be useful.

Given that none of the students had previously met with the job application, nor had been interviewed, they showed great interest in these activities and singled them out as extremely important. Their evaluation was made based on the accuracy and precision of the data, through feedback on the completed application and the answers to the given interview questions.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

In the modern world, access to information is easily available. What is especially important is to assess the reliability of the source. That is, the search for facts and knowledge should be realized by identifying relevant bases.

In that regard, the students were asked to present the obtained objective, subjective and contemporary information through an oral presentation lasting 5 to 7 minutes. It took place through the Google Meet platform during the online week 10, and each student with a Power Point presented the institution in which he would like to work in the future. In this regard, we want to emphasize that students have shown excellent skills not only in terms of access to information, but also in terms of assessing the reliability of data, their relevance, the choice of different sources, and in terms of the ability to present the acquired knowledge and technically process it. The results that we have obtained confirm the same. That is, out of 32 students who completed the presentation in Skopje, the average result is 9.4 out of 10. In Tetovo, 17 students made a presentation, with an average of 8.82.

The evaluation of the oral presentation took place through several points that were previously explained by the professors.

LOGICAL REASONING

The development of critical thinking by mastering the skill of logical reasoning was aimed at establishing correlations and conclusions that are supported or determined by the above data in the form of a debate on the criteria for successful professional communication.

Namely, the students during the online week 11 were given 8 generally accepted rules for holding an effective meeting. Their exercise was to separate and rank the three most important and give their explanation. The students showed good skills for logical reasoning because their views were supported by solid and clear opinions, and they confirmed this by creating a meeting agenda. They were asked to analyze online sources, submit links and list at least two

more rules for a successful meeting. Through the soundly realized additional exercise, they confirmed our opinion that they have good digital skills for searching the appropriate topic in Macedonian and English.

ASSUMPTION

The evaluation of the logical reasoning skill was realized on the basis of the ability to apply the obtained knowledge in creating a meeting agenda and through the opportunity to present their reasoned views and opinions at the meeting. Thereby, additional links were shared for better realization of this activity, but also in the direction of development of digital competencies.

The ability to assumption was related to planning a meeting agenda. This included determining the key aspects of the meeting and predicting the entire course of the meeting, i.e. time frame, leader of the sub-topics, goals of the individual points of the meeting, etc. It is a group activity, but the individual participation of each student was evaluated.

Students were given another exercise in which they had the opportunity to assumption based on their beliefs which criteria are most important for successful communication. Conciseness, coherence, kindness, clarity were just some of the criteria from which they had to make a choice and explain it according to their assumptions.

DISTINGUISHING

The ability to distinguish is emphasized as one of the skills for developing critical thinking. It was realized through the possibility of recognizing similarities and differences between certain professions and their categorization based on the study area.

The exercises in relation to professions were realized at different levels. Students were firstly asked to link the given professions with an appropriate description supported by examples of appropriate professional situations. As a group activity was the ability to separate multiple professions based on the faculty at which they are enrolled. Students assigned appropriate professions to five faculties.

The evaluation was made based on the recognition of the description of a given profession and the possibility to define the professions through paragraph that are in accordance with their university education.

TRANSFORMING KNOWLEDGE

Professional written communication is key to professional success. In that respect for the development of this skill, we choose exercise where students were able to structure a professional letter according to the established rules and criteria.

After the required parts of the letter of disagreement were separated and analyzed, during the online week 14, students had a homework assignment to send such a letter to Google Classroom. In Skopje Campus the exercise was completed by 32 students with the grade point average (7.6 / 10), out of 43 students, and in Tetovo Campus a letter was sent by 12 students out of 31 with the grade point average (8.9 / 10).

Before the final version of the letter, they made a mutual evaluation; another student gave his remarks on the letter from a colleague, through a pre-prepared questionnaire for critical analysis in terms of structure, language, style and technical characteristics. In the evaluation of the professional letter, the questionnaire was taken into account, through which the degree of mastery and the student's progress was determined.

CONCLUSION

The opinion of the experts is that online lectures are significantly different from traditional teaching. Despite the different advantages, when it comes to the quality of lectures, our opinion is that it is still on the side of teaching in the classroom. That is, regardless of the extensive experience of SEEU professors in the application of online platforms in the teaching process, the new circumstances have proved to be an excellent basis for serious work to improve online teaching, but also the possibility of improving critical analysis skills. This is especially true of committed students' awareness of the importance of their commitment during this type of teaching. The novelties in the future should be mainly focused on the main challenge, which is the motivation of the students for active participation.

On the other hand, professors should also keep in mind that the overall atmosphere has a negative impact on each individual, so their commitment should be aimed at:

- Well-prepared lectures (lesson planning);
- Carefully selected materials;
- Precise directions for realization of the exercises;
- Availability for online communication;
- Rationally defined deadlines;
- Respecting the planned time for the activities.

The active involvement of the students, but also the additional engagement of the professors in these extraordinary circumstances will contribute to a quality and smooth mastering of the skills for critical analysis. We believe that they are crucial for their further career, but also for the improvement and development of emotional intelligence, which according to modern knowledge with 80% affects professional success, and IQ with only 20%.

What can be stated is that the online teaching for the subject Macedonian language for professional purposes 2 was successfully realized, and the relevant confirmation of that are the high grades of the students for this subject from both campuses (Tetovo and Skopje) given in the anonymous online evaluation conducted by the Quality Office of the South East European University in June 2020.

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