

DEVELOPING THE COMPETENCE OF “LEARNING TO LEARN” IN THE INITIAL TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract: *Using methods and techniques of effective lifelong learning, for training and continuous professional development is one of the transversal competences that the "Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE)" study program should develop in students, future teachers. The cross-curricular status of these competences does not exclude the need and possibility for its development in a training context, precisely delineated, at the level of an academic discipline. This article focuses on the experience generated by the introduction in the curriculum of such a discipline- "Effective learning techniques", for the PPPE students, since the academic year 2015-2016 at "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu. Capitalizing on the analysis of the students' products and of their answers in a structured interview, the study provides a blueprint for this training experience, from the perspective of those involved in such an endeavor.*

Keywords: *transversal competences, learning to learn, future teachers*

1. Introduction

In recent years there have been concerns and systematic efforts in Romania to restructure the curriculum, both in pre-university and university education, in terms of competences training for students. These competences are underlying the curriculum, the university specializations, qualifications or professional standards (Bîrzea, 2010).

These concerns and approaches are directly connected to trends in education policy in Europe. Thus, learning to learn is one of the eight key competences listed in Recommendation Parliament and the European Council (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006), along with others such as: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic

competences in science and technology, digital competence, social and civic skills, spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. This document states that these skills are needed by all individuals for personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. In Romania these competences determine the student's training profile for primary and secondary education (according to the 2011 National Education Law, article 68).

In this EU Recommendation, learning to learn is defined as “the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organize one’s own learning, through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups. This competence includes awareness of one’s learning process and needs, identifying available opportunities, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully. This competence means gaining, processing and assimilating new knowledge and skills, as well as seeking and making use of guidance. Learning to learn engages learners to build on prior learning and life experiences in order to use and apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts: at home, at work, in education and in training. Motivation and confidence are crucial to an individual’s competence” (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006, annex, paragraph 5).

Focusing on competences is an assumed orientation in higher education too. Thus, according to the Methodology of implementation and use of the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education (2009), completing the process of learning a particular school cycle (Bachelor, Master or Doctorate) leads to obtaining a qualification, linked to the level of learning outcomes with professional and transversal competences.

While professional competences refer to the ability to select, combine and use the appropriate knowledge, skills and other acquisitions (values and attitudes) in order to successfully solve a special category of work or learning situations, circumscribed to that particular profession, in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, transversal competences transcend a particular field or study program and have a trans-disciplinary nature. The Methodology of implementation and use of the National Qualifications Framework in Higher Education (2009) identified among transversal skills: teamwork skills, oral and written communication in the mother tongue / foreign language skills, using information and communication technology, problem solving and decision making, recognition and respect for diversity and multiculturalism, learning autonomy, initiative and entrepreneurship, openness to lifelong learning, respecting and developing of professional values and ethics. Therefore, the power of learning to learn is integrated in these transversal competences.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Addressing the question of the competence of learning to learn in the context of the program of Bachelor Studies - Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE), we mention that using the methods and techniques of effective learning throughout life, for training and continuing professional development is one of transversal competence on this program that must be developed in students - future teachers for primary and preschool, according to RNCIS (National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education), along with other transversal and, of course, professional competences.

The competence of learning to learn is a transversal competence that graduates of the PPPE study program need not only for personal fulfillment, but also to meet the multiple and increasingly complex demands of the teaching profession and for active participation in the professional environment. The roles of teachers and schools are changing, and so are expectations about them: teachers are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs, use ICT for teaching effectively, engage in evaluation and accountability processes, and involve parents in schools (OECD, 2009).

Teaching staff nowadays need the competences to constantly learn and innovate in order to adapt the educational practices. Čepić et al. (2015) points out that the new tasks and roles require new competences from teachers such as the “learning to learn” competence (including adaptation to change, self-regulated learning and coping with failure). The competence of learning to learn is an essential tool that enables permanent education.

Then, learning to learn is an important teacher competence from the perspective that students should develop this competence too. Teachers can be a real support in developing the competence to learn of the students, only if they have developed this competence themselves. Teacher training programs can not neglect or lightly address the competence of learning to learn. Bercu (2010) believes that this competence should be seen in relation to the training programs of teachers and trainers, and its development “should benefit from a consistent and coherent approach at the training curriculum level, not only for students, but also for teachers, trainers and adults in general” (p.71).

Mainly there are three ways in which the development of this transversal competence can be supported in the PPPE study program. A first way is

constituted by a cross-curricular approach, where all subjects in the PPPE program's curriculum and consequently all teachers involved in the program contribute to the development of the competence of learning to learn. Thus, the specific academic activities, the nature of the organization forms of teaching (lectures, seminars, practical activities, laboratories etc.), by applying different teaching methods (lecture, conversation, discussion, cooperative learning, etc.), by exploiting the different assessment methods (written, oral examination, practical tests, portfolios, projects, etc.) require the exercise of academic skills, healthy study habits (taking notes, effective reading, writing essays, work organization etc) that need mastering in order to achieve success.

A second way relates to the integration of this learning to learn competence in the subjects in the curriculum for this specialization by explicitly treating some of the themes and learning outcomes. Disciplines such as: Developmental Psychology, Educational Psychology, Theory and Methodology of Training etc. include in their aims the development of the competence of learning to learn, addressing theoretical and practical learning activities, such as: dynamic of learning, peculiarities of the learning process at certain ages, learning theories and methods etc.

Another approach to learning to learn can be achieved at the level of a stand-alone curricular discipline. This article focuses on an approach inspired by this third variant of integration, by introducing in the curriculum of the PPPE specialization a discipline - Effective Learning Techniques, in the first year, first semester (2015-2016), consisting of 2 hours of seminar, weekly.

3. Methodology

The subjects of this study were 49 students enrolled in PPPE specialization, freshmen, who attended the discipline of Effective Learning Techniques (ELT). Three types of activities were used: classroom activities (seminar - presentations, discussions, exercises, applications), library activities (information and documentation) and participation in scientific events (conferences) as public attenders.

Throughout the semester we intended to facilitate the assimilation/ practice by students of knowledge/ skills related to learning to learn competence, such as knowing and understanding his/ her preferred learning strategies, using techniques of efficient learning, efficient use of learning resources; practicing skills on planning and learning management; monitoring their own learning process; using reflection on the learning experiences they used. The elements of motivation and attitude were not neglected either: stimulating motivation and approaching the learning process

with confidence, the cultivation of perseverance, a curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and apply learning in a variety of life contexts.

Students work was objectified in developing portfolios. The analysis of the students' activity products, contained in individual portfolios, and the interview method were used to collect data.

The study's questions were:

1. What are the positive aspects identified in the conception and production processes for their portfolio's products and what were the difficulties the students faced?
2. How do the students perceive - from the perspective of strengths, needs, opportunities and threats - the learning experience offered by this discipline (Effective Learning Techniques) during their first semester at university?

It is worth noting that the first question gives an overview of the teacher responsible for the discipline about the learning experiences offered within the EFL discipline, a perspective outlined over the semester; the second question brings into focus the students' perspective. In what follows, we will share some of the learning experiences offered to students in order to support the "learning to learn" competence.

4. Results and discussion

Student activity was reflected in several products developed during the semester. Some of these products were presented in front of their peers and teacher. All products were included in their individual portfolio, products such as: themed poster - "About me", the analysis of personal learning styles, specialty books presentations, double journal, the Cornell note-taking system, graphic organizer on a course theme/ concept, learning journals, argumentative essay, other representative products of the learning activity (notebook, reading cards etc.). Next, we present some of the activities and products developed within this discipline, noting that the difficulties encountered in achieving these products were considered a natural part of the learning process and the students received support and constructive feedback from the teacher and peers.

The development and presentation of the poster with the theme: "About me" (personal data, interests, values, learning issues, ideals, what I like / I do not like, future projects etc.) was a challenging activity for the students and had a double purpose: as a way to synthesize and present in an attractive form data related to their personality, but also as a way to support knowing each other at group level, because students did not know each other- these posters were developed in the beginning of their first year at university. This

way, the students have learned a lot of information about their peers' concerns, interests, their experiences, practicing oral presentation.

Positive aspects: personal presentation varied from student to student, sometimes with a touch of creativity and originality, using the poster as a support in giving a presentation, encouraging discussion about the interests of students, future plans related to careers, knowing each other, concerns for the aesthetic appearance of the poster (rendered by mixing text and images, colors, varied layouts). As difficulties, these are worth a mention: managing emotions during the presentation, finding a balance regarding information for their poster (some posters were overloaded, while others were very thin, content-wise).

The identification and analysis of the learning style was conducted using the Questionnaire to identify the learning style and the Brain hemispheric preference questionnaire (Linksman, 1999). Each student completed the two questionnaires, which became the supports for the characterization of their learning style.

Positive aspects: students have identified their favorite style/ preferred learning styles and have characterized it/ them; they have realized that learning occurs in different ways, that there are no "superior" or "inferior" styles, that they learn something new easier if the material is presented in a way that corresponds to the way in which they store information, that there are important pedagogical implications for the differentiation and individualization of learning- from the fact that people learn in different ways- implications that a teacher must take into account in the design and implementation of educational activities. No particular difficulties were noted in relation to this activity.

Presenting a specialty books offered the students the opportunity to choose, read and practice the presentation of works from the fields of psychology and pedagogy, following a recommended structure: naming the author, title, publisher, city, year, identifying the central theme of the book or its area of interest, presenting some of the contents (organization, ideas, quotes), delineation of audiences to whom the work is addressed to, expressing a personal opinion. It was also a way to encourage students to approach specialized literature and capitalize on their visits to the university's library.

Positive aspects: practicing documentation to present the work, developing the skills to orally present a specialized paper, broadening the professional horizon by discovering such papers, having contact with the specialized language, with authors, ideas, concepts specific to the field of education. There have been difficulties in capturing the central ideas of the specialty books and with expressing personal opinion.

Note-taking was a topic that enjoyed special attention, because student participation in courses and seminars exploit this ability. After discussing some rules to streamline information registration: abbreviations, schematics, numbering, marking keywords, layout, use of colors (Bernat, 2015), two ways of taking notes were proposed for practice to the students: the double diary (notes in the form of ideas, concepts, content elements/comments, reactions, connections, questions) and the Cornell system (notes/ questions, connections, personal reflections, keywords/ abstract). Students practiced using these tools on scientific texts but also videos, in the Learning documentary category (Human Mind, BBC, Get Smart).

Positive aspects: the systematization and organizing information, listening / viewing / active reading, asking questions, highlighting content by layout, practicing the efficient recording and processing of information, practicing the synthesis capacity. Difficulties were recorded regarding the establishment of connections between notes and previous information and identifying keywords.

Elaborating the cognitive organizers (conceptual maps, tables, diagrams, etc.) after getting in contact with information was another activity for the students; they had the possibility to choose the informational content from the psychological/ pedagogical area and to practice creating such charts. Positive aspects: supporting the understanding by using classification, illustration, summarizing and systematizing information and practicing the analysis and synthesis operations. Difficulties: conceptual maps were overloaded or too thin, difficulties in prioritizing information, in identifying the criteria for classification.

For argumentative writing on a topic (of their choice) from the education area, students were given a framework for structuring their ideas: introduction (presenting the theme, definitions, arguments for choosing the theme, position regarding the theme); contents (detailing aspects of introduction, relevant information about the theme, arguments, evidence etc.); conclusion (summary of the main ideas, implications of the theme, steps that follow etc.). Here are some of the themes students have chosen and developed: *The relationship between formal, non-formal, informal education; School uniforms; Education and success in life; Lifelong learning; School-family relationship; The Kindergarten - an environment for child development; The role of the family in child development; School violence; The child and the TV; Homework etc.*

Positive aspects: practicing the ability to organize and prioritize information, issuing judgments and value judgments, assuming attitudes, expressing originality, compiling a bibliography and citing it. The biggest difficulties were giving arguments and correctly citing the bibliographic resources.

Regarding the reflective practice, students were asked to complete a minimum of three learning journals (using this structure: *What have we learned? / How did we learn? / How did I feel? / How / Where can I use what I learned?*). These journals were completed following their participation in courses, seminars or other activities. The use of this instrument was encouraged in the context of students participating in other academic/ scientific activities too.

Positive aspects: students practiced their capacity for reflection on their learning experiences, identifying added value in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the methodology used and the ability to use what they have learned. Some students did demonstrate a reflection process that was analytic and deep, while others approached completing the learning journals with superficiality.

To find answers to the second question of interest - the question referring to the perception of the strengths / needs, opportunities and threats for their learning experiences participating in this discipline - we used the individual interview method. In structuring the end of the semester interview we used the SWOT analysis of their own learning process we developed during the seminars.

The strengths were identified by students starting with the following questions: *What have you learned as a result of participation in the ELT seminar? What do you know/ can do now as a result of participation in this seminar?* As strengths, students noted: knowledge and application of study techniques specific to the academic activity (graphic representation of ideas, writing essays, active reading, note-taking etc.), identification and characterization of learning styles, harnessing learning sources (books, internet etc.), the opportunity to give a personal touch to their products, knowing each other at group level, active listening of the others and sharing experiences and knowledge with their colleagues and the teacher, expression of personal opinions, active involvement in classroom activities, use reflection on activities, approaching learning with more confidence.

We quote from the students interventions: *"I discovered my learning style and I will try to make the most of it"* (student A. N.); *"I learned to take notes in ways that I did not know. It was interesting! I already use this skill in other courses."* (student G. S.); *"I learned about a lot of psychology and pedagogy books. It probably would have taken me a lot of time to discover them for myself."* (student M. C.); *"I always felt challenged by the tasks proposed by this discipline, but I feel I have evolved in terms of my way to learn and I have more confidence that I can succeed in exams."* (student T. O.);

Weaknesses / needs were identified by students, starting from the following questions: *What could you further improve? What don't you know /*

do better yet?; What learning needs were left uncovered? Students identified some issues that need to be improved, or weaknesses: difficulty to follow a learning program, problems in giving arguments, trouble with correctly citing sources according to academic standards, organizing and preserving study materials (lectures, notes, electronic materials etc.). Here are some interventions from the students: *"I still have difficulties in keeping and organizing notes and additional study materials for each subject. I'm not a very organized person and therefore lose much time and energy when I want to learn."*(student S. F.); *"I'm not sure yet whether I know how to quote correctly or not. I received information and examples of this, but I have to practice more."* (student S. A.)

As opportunities (*What learning opportunities did you have at this seminar ?; How did you capitalize?*) students have appreciated: the presence of this subject in the curriculum, in terms of usefulness and relevance for student activity, a real opportunity to practice learning techniques not only for this discipline, but all other disciplines, the visits to the university library and the documentation activities carried out there, sharing learning experiences with peers and the teacher, participation in scientific events (like conferences). The students' interventions are revealing in this regard: *"I find it great to have the opportunity to learn how to learn, not only about what and how much to learn."* (student K. F.); *"We discovered the university's library and I find it to be a place that's very well equipped and designed for the needs of students. For me it is a reference point in terms of psychology and pedagogy books. Now I know where I can find them."*(student M. M.); *"The ability to participate in the public conference Lifelong Learning in Action: The university, employers, trainers and the community working together (19 - 20 November 2015, Sibiu) and then discuss the learning experiences we got there at the seminar was a great idea. I came into contact with information, people, other modes of presentation and, especially, I learned differently. "*

The question: *What obstacles have you encountered during the learning process in this seminar?* has highlighted a few external problems faced by students, such as: the difficulty to make the study program at faculty work with their job schedule (for students that were working), the pressures of family obligations, the difficulty to adapt to the dorm life, especially in terms of finding a peaceful and personal study place. Here's what student N. A. said: *"The hardest thing is to reconcile my college classes to my work hours. I lost some activities for that reason. I tried to catch-up with help from colleagues, but I am aware that it's not the same experience as being in the classroom. "*

The difficulties the students encountered during the semester while being enrolled in the ELT discipline became reflection subjects for

optimization of the activities in this discipline, but also for the concentration of efforts of other teachers involved in the program to provide support for academic work, to find the opportunities to practice the skills that are still problematic and to give/ receive constructive feedback.

5. Conclusions

The presence of explicit steps for the development of this competence of learning to learn at an university level is justified not only by the need to support the personal development of the students and to facilitate the process of adaptation to the standards of didactic and scientific activities in the university, but also from the perspective that graduates of this the program will be responsible for laying the foundations of the competence of learning to learn for the children they will work with. If teachers have difficulties in this area, it is unlikely that they will turn into a resource and a source of support and inspiration for their students. Beyond the success of the approach described in this study, the real challenge is in front of the students enrolled in the study program PPPE, which will have to demonstrate the competence in the academic environment first and then in their professional career and take lifelong learning as a means of personal and professional development.

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