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INNOVATION AND CREATIVE ACTION IN EFL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the greatest weaknesses in Ukrainian education at the moment is the failure to introduce successful innovations in teaching, especially in teaching foreign languages in all universities.

In language teaching at all levels, the result has been all too evident: young people graduating in English from many universities still unable to speak fluently or write accurately. These deficiencies are passed on from generation to generation of Ukrainian English teachers, some steeped in a Soviet-rooted version of the Grammar-Translation method, and reliant on outdated textbooks (Arakin, 1961, for instance) that were for many years the sole source of language input for university-level learners of English. In addition, the organization of universities in Ukraine has meant a separation between faculties of Philology and Education.

Future English teachers very often graduate through Philological faculties after a four/five-year programme including intensive study of language systems, literature and linguistics, with practical language classes, but with methodology taught as a theoretical discipline, usually by means of lectures in Ukrainian.

On the other hand, European experts declare that language competence is among priorities in the global education medium. As a result, teaching foreign languages faces new challenges in Ukraine. To change old models of teaching Ukrainian officials and educators try to form new approaches in studying and teaching languages, which are based on multilingual, multicultural and intercultural principles. In 2012 the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and British Council started an innovative project “A new generation school teacher” aimed at conceptual changes in the Ukrainian education. At the moment a group of 12 experts

from different universities are working on a new curriculum of teaching English. At the same time, everyone clearly understands that the program can be successfully implemented by a creative and innovative teacher. That draws attention to EFL teachers' professional development.

Some of the factors characterizing education (class size, expenditure per student) do not have demonstrable effects on student performance while teacher quality (as measured by skills, knowledge and qualifications) plays a decisive role in students' progress. Based on our previous research of teacher training policies in Portugal and Ukraine, we've come to the conclusion that teacher quality is the most important factor in an education system, and the second most important factor (only preceded by family background) among the variety of influences affecting student achievement. Moreover, certain education systems achieve substantially better outcomes than others because they have produced the system that is more effective in doing three things: getting more talented people to become teachers, developing these teachers into better instructors, and in ensuring that these instructors deliver consistently for every child in the system. This appears to be the area that resources should target; knowledge-intensive training institutions and knowledge-rich teacher development centers should be provided.

It was for this background that in January 2015 the British Council provided first professional development opportunities for university English teachers across Ukraine in the context of the project "A new generation school teacher" mentioned above. The project team produced a trainer training course in the form of face-to-face professional seminars moderated by an experienced team of local trainers.

A proposed programme of in-service teacher development incorporated substantial opportunities for participants to examine current ideas about the nature of language learning. We should then consider implications of these ideas for our own teaching, for the planning of programmes, and for testing and assessment.

The British Council provided support in the form of print resources and also the financing and coordination of our trip by the project team. For us this seminar was necessarily multi-purpose. Playing the role of our own students we clearly saw

that learner autonomy should be developed among student teachers through project work including mini-research, to reduce dependence on teacher input. The methodology component of the pre-service and in-service English curriculums need revisions as, at present, student teachers are not adequately prepared for their future roles as teachers, placing unnecessary burden on in-service teacher training; the new course should introduce up-to-date creative learner-centered teaching methodologies and should include more substantial teaching practice, with trainer and peer observation and feedback. Moreover, one belief about teaching we came to was that teachers should teach according to the syllabus not the coursebook.

In another important area – assessment - we realized that very often we were on a wrong track in assessing our students' performance. We discovered many possible alternative ways of assessment and even changed our views on error correction. Furthermore, we found out that learning outcomes need Professional development through curriculum reform to be clearly stated and they should be assessed accordingly. Before, we were not aware of the fact that we were mainly assessing declarative knowledge, and procedural knowledge, which is of paramount importance in language teaching, was to a great extent ignored in our assessment profiles. When we looked through the tests and tasks which we designed before, we realized that in most cases our assessment was either knowledge based, or focused on isolated chunks of language. What's more, it was rather subjective and criteria for assessment were not clearly stated.

From the very beginning, members of the project team have used the time available to sit together, to work with the project consultant, to explore new ideas and to evaluate them from our own perspectives. Regular meetings, discussions and consultations were built into the project activity plan and appropriate channels of communication were used to keep us informed. The processes of the project have been allowed to develop organically, with only a minimum of time pressure, and this has been enormously helpful, as the kind of deep understanding of principle that is required to implement curriculum change with conviction simply doesn't happen overnight.