THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES IN PROMOTING HEALTHY LIFE BEHAVIOURS IN MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The paper demonstrates the benefits that foreign language-based educational activities have for the development of healthy life behaviours of students of medical universities. Based on the review of research, theory, and current foreign language teaching practice in medical universities of Krasnoyarsk, Moscow and Yekaterinburg, the authors suppose foreign language teaching practices as the most effective in promoting healthy lifestyle among students of medical universities. In this paper, foreign language-based health education refers to the broad range of foreign language-based activities that promote healthy behavior among medical students. These activities focus not only on the English language classroom instruction; they are relevant to all components of the academic programme and include such extracurricular activities as round-table discussions, teleconferences, Internet-based forums, quizzes and olympiads. New ICT-based foreign language teaching practices are reported to be a useful means to stimulate medical students’ healthy life behaviours. At the same time, it is demonstrated that implementation of these new practices requires autonomy oriented approach to teaching a foreign language, which encourages students to work with health-related foreign-language resources independently.
Keywords: health education, healthy behaviours, medical students, foreign language-based educational activities, health-related language training, information and communication technology (ICT), student’s autonomy, teacher’s autonomy

Relevance

The national health promotion and disease prevention objectives encourage the medical university faculty to look for new ways to provide medical students with the information, pedagogical and psychological support they need to adopt long-term, healthy life behaviours.

Teachers are known to play a key social role in promoting the health of future populations and students’ well-being (Maguire et al., 2011: 108). Foreign language teaching is reported to be a useful means for developing students’ professional and generic competences (Markovina et al., 2013), strengthening “independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility” (Council of Europe, 2001: 4). Proceeding from these ideas, foreign language teaching can play an important role in promoting lifelong healthy behaviours among medical students.

At the same time, perceived autonomy is regarded as “an important condition, which determines psychological well-being, optimal functioning and healthy development of a personality” (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Motivation and engagement are known to be critical for the development of learners’ skills and behaviors (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999). Accordingly, to ensure students’ autonomy and engagement teachers should make the process of learning desirable and enjoyable for learners, providing more learner-centered activities and taking into account individual differences and interests (Gavrilyuk & Lebedeva, 2009).

Among the most effective strategies to achieve these goals, there are profession-focused tasks and use of technology. It is suggested that through the use of information and communication technology (ICT) we can modernize learning environment as well as equip students with new skills and competencies. Providing visual information (Siemens, 2005) and game-based activities (Sailer et al., 2013; Smith-Robbins, 2011), ICT allows students to be involved into discovery-based learning through exploring new learning contexts, testing their own ideas and creating knowledge (Brown, 2000).
At the same time, effective implementation of the above mentioned approaches in teaching as well as the use of ICT are largely determined by the degree of teacher autonomy (Gavrilyuk, 2013). This means that teachers should be ready to act autonomously, consciously choosing forms, tools and strategies for effective language teaching and investigating new educational environments, stimulating students’ autonomy (Ravikumar et al., 2015: 33), and ensuring the health promotion (Duncan, 2011 : 320). Based on the results of these studies, the purpose of the present work is to further investigate the role that new autonomy-supported foreign language teaching practices play in maintaining medical students’ health and developing their healthy life skills and behaviors.

Nowadays, foreign language is increasingly in demand in medicine as a means of accessing relevant professional information, exchanging this information, and disseminating experience (Dement’ev, Yarchikovskaya, Pristav, & Koval, 2015; Bennett, Cunningham, & Johnston Molloy, 2016). Medical specialists successfully grow in their profession not because they have some theoretical knowledge of a foreign language but because they are ready and willing to apply this knowledge for resolving problematic professional issues. This determines the relevance of content-based language training (Stoller, 2004) in higher medical education institutions. At the same time, Foreign language is considered as a discipline with a great educational value and a high potential for personality development (Passov, 2000: 26). It stimulates a lot of competences and attitudes that are crucial for a modern medical practitioner. Among these characteristics there are readiness to lifelong learning, humanistic approach to patients and healthy life behaviors (Toassi, & Lewgoy, 2016; Chen & Lee, 2016; Pang, & Soong, 2016; Sendall, Lidstone, Fleming, & Domocol, 2013).

**State of the problem**

Given the extent of the problems of the development of healthy life behaviours in medical students, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the educational factors that enable medical students to develop healthy life skills and behaviours.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the potential of foreign language-based educational activities as a factor of the development of healthy life behaviours in medical students. The study emphasizes the problem of a relevant choice of foreign language-based
educational activities, which could motivate students to improve and maintain their health, prevent disease, and reduce risky behaviors.

**Materials and methods**

The study used a descriptive research design. Most of the data were obtained through literature review and analysis of the results of selected studies. Some educational projects with participation of Russian and foreign medical students which were implemented in Krasnoyarsk State Medical University, I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University and Ural State Medical University in 2014-2016 have also become an important source of information.

**Results and their discussion**

The study outcomes allowed to consider foreign language-based health education as a broad range of activities with the use of foreign language that promote healthy behaviors among students. In the context of the higher medical education these activities focus not only on the English language classroom instruction, they are relevant to all components of the academic training and include such extracurricular activities as round-table discussions, teleconferences, Internet-based forums, quizzes and Olympiads based on the ICT.

Use of the ICT in health-related language training is important, but it should go beyond the formal use of personal computers, projection equipment and the Internet. This type of instruction requires creation of new teaching and learning environment. Such profession-focused information - educational environment should comprise intellectual, cultural, methodological, technological resources and communication technology tools providing access to a wide range of educational resources and allowing various types of interactions.

Nowadays the thematic area of health is of particular interest and importance to all categories of people including medical students. Senior students are aware of the main problematic issues in this area, while first-year students are not always ready to discuss health-related issues that are rather distant from their personal experience. This means that when introducing health education into a foreign language classroom, teachers should make its thematic content address concrete problematic health-related situations and critical incidents which could trigger lively classroom interaction. Particularly, the topics for discussion may concern the issues of drug, smoking and alcohol abuse prevention, fast food and overweight in
youth, HIV/AIDS prevention, etc. To address these topics, a foreign language teacher should be able to find interface between a foreign language and different fundamental and clinical subjects. This practice-based cross-curricular education may benefit from the use of various intervention strategies (experiential learning activities, students’ reflective diaries, etc.) (Bukhari et al., 2011).

Implementation of these new practices requires autonomy oriented approach to teaching a foreign language. This approach is based on granting students the possibility of personal involvement in the organization of their learning in accordance with their needs and abilities. In such context, students set their own objectives, develop and implement their own initiatives. This approach encourages students to work with health-related foreign-language resources independently. Students carry out their own health-related media projects and prepare presentations on different health issues in the foreign language.

An example of applying of this health-focused approach to language training may be using different media instruments (i.e., movies and YouTube videos on the problem of health and healthy life behaviors), which are known to influence students’ emotions and attitudes. Medical students may also be engaged in larger projects, such as developing electronic guides, posters or fliers on healthy lifestyle. Positive health behavior can also be stimulated through students’ participation in international online forums, where they can express their views on different health-related issues. Another example of health-related intercultural communication is an international student teleconference in a foreign language. In this respect, involving medical students into discussion of such topics as “Students’ well-being”, “Healthy Lifestyle”, “Nutrition and Health” with students of foreign universities seems to be very relevant.

Additional Internet quizzes and knowledge competitions on the problem of health and healthy lifestyle values in a foreign language seem to be a good way to promote students’ healthy behaviours. In 2016, the All-Russian English language Internet Olympiad with international participation among medical and pharmaceutical students was organized. The students of Krasnoyarsk State Medical University, Moscow State Medical University and Ural State Medical University as well as from Latvia, Serbia, Slovenia, Poland took part in this Internet competition. All tasks of the Olympiad had a professional orientation: in the first round,
the tests were designed using health-related vocabulary. In the second round the participants had to express their views on a particular health-related topic in a 3-5 minute monologue which they had to record on video and upload on the assigned websites for the jury to evaluate. The third round was held via a teleconference in the form of an interview with each student who reached this point in the competition. All the tasks were related to the problem of health and healthy lifestyle values. A total of 420 medical and pharmaceutical students from 17 Russian and 6 foreign universities took part in the Olympiad. The evaluation of the participants’ works was performed by native English-speaking experts from Great Britain and Canada.

The results of the Olympiad showed increase in students’ awareness of health-related issues, interest in this type of educational projects and their high motivation to keep and promote a healthy lifestyle. In addition to fostering insight into linguistic and cultural aspects of healthy life - oriented medical communication, the Olympiad fostered the students’ metalinguistic reasoning, analytical skills and their ability to present a logical argument supported by data.

Holding the contest online allowed involving a lot of medical students from different Russian and foreign universities. Students-participants appreciated the opportunity to participate at no cost as well as to meet with peers who share their interests. At the same time, holding the contest online required a constant support of the students- participants. Due to this, time management was one of the most serious challengers for the main organizers of the Olympiad. In this respect, it seems that more organizers are needed to hold this kind of contests.

**Conclusion**

The results of the literature review and the analysis of educational practices demonstrate a high educational potential of foreign language training, which can be used to stimulate healthy life behaviors and competences in healthy lifestyles promotion in medical students.

The described foreign language teaching practices do not only contribute to the enhancement of target language communicative ability, but increase the students’ awareness of health-related issues that the students are unfamiliar with, develop their attitudes, values and core skills (critical thinking skills, empathy skills, decision-making skills, self-monitoring skills,
counseling skills, etc.) towards effective autonomous use of their knowledge in both intra- and intercultural settings to adopt healthy life behaviors and develop their competences in healthy lifestyles promotion.

At the same time, implementation of these new practices requires autonomy oriented approach to teaching a foreign language, which encourages students to work with health-related foreign-language resources independently. In turn, effective implementation of autonomy oriented approach to teaching a foreign language is determined by the degree of teacher autonomy. A foreign language teacher should be ready for continuous personal and professional self-development through learning of new technologies, information search, constant evaluation of the content and quality of health-related information in the foreign language to help medical students remain healthy and skillful professionals.

References


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