

TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AS A MAINSPRING OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reveal the potential of university teachers' professional autonomy as a core value of a new type of education that is based on creativity and innovation. The study focuses on the relevance of autonomy as a generic competence of a foreign language teacher from philosophical, psychological and pedagogical perspectives. Based on the literature review, we demonstrate the benefits teachers' professional autonomy has concerning language teaching development. The paper describes an autonomy-oriented approach to teaching and university teachers' professional development through defining a set of principles which are suggested to guide the introduction of innovations in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Autonomy-oriented approach, Creativity, Foreign language teaching, Innovation, Professional autonomy, Teacher development

BACKGROUND AND AIM

Nowadays, due to the increasing speed of technological change, the capacity of every professional to engage in creative activity and innovation is emphasized in many Russian national education documents and initiatives, including the Law on Education in the Russian Federation (2012) and Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education (2014). Taking into consideration the transformation that technology has made in the way young people learn and understand (Redecker, 2008), creativity and innovation in education are not just a possibility, but a necessity. Teachers need to be creative, to implement creativity in their practice if they want to teach in an innovative and creative way (Craft, 2005). As a consequence, it appears that a new creativity and innovation-oriented paradigm is progressing in the modern theory and practice of foreign language teaching. It is not a secret that teaching a foreign language can benefit from creativity, which has been recognized as the infinite source of innovation (European Commission, 2008).

The search for effective ways to organize foreign language teaching in this new paradigm requires, on the one hand, a thorough theoretical understanding of the ideas of creativity and innovation in education. On the other hand, this idea needs to be specified through focusing on the main educational agents: teachers and learners. In this paper such specialization is made by the example of the university teacher who is expected to ensure creative learning through innovative teaching.

Generally speaking, creativity refers to thinking up new things, and innovation involves doing new things, thus it follows that professional communities would be interested in innovation-oriented specialists with a creative mentality, willingness for self-realization and self-actualization, with the capability to perceive innovations and to change ways of thinking and living and to participate in innovation processes. The education of a person with

a profile that meets the demands of the times we live in is becoming impossible in the “Procrustean bed” (Taleb, 2010) of obsolete methods and techniques. Therefore, it is necessary to implement innovations into the educational reality and make the striving for innovative development an expectation for this sphere of public life.

At the same time innovations in education should provide a qualitative growth of the efficiency of the educational process and its results, which are primarily represented in new personal qualities and characteristics of a student and a teacher. Among these personal characteristics there are creativity, innovative thinking, readiness for innovative creation and autonomy.

In our previous studies we demonstrated a lack of perceived autonomy (or professional autonomy) in Russian university teachers of foreign language and claimed that it should be intentionally developed to enhance the process of English grammar teaching (Gavrilyuk, Lebedeva & Karelina, 2013). The present paper continues our efforts to validate the concept of foreign language teachers’ professional autonomy, addressing the problem of enhancing creativity and innovation in foreign language teaching. Taking into account the multiple challenges facing the implementation of innovations in modern higher education, this paper is intended to reveal the principles of the autonomy-oriented approach that could act as facilitators while introducing innovations in foreign language teaching.

TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AS A PHENOMENON OF INNOVATIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

There are a number of reasons why teacher’s professional autonomy should be regarded as a mainspring of teachers’ creativity and innovation. First of all it is critical to note that creativity and innovation in a foreign language classroom are deeply interrelated with the concept of competence. The recent *International Summit on the Teaching Profession* held in Berlin, Germany, (Stewart, 2016) stated that teachers need to prepare students “for a rapidly changing world” (p. 5) and ensure the development of “21st century competences” (p. 10). Going beyond achievement of academic outcomes, these competences are suggested to include problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, learning how to learn and other social-emotional skills. To reach this goal, modern teachers need the ability to “adapt to rapidly changing and ever-increasing technology innovations for teaching” (Kopcha, Rieber & Walker, 2015) and constantly innovate (Stewart, 2016, p. 40; Waters, 2009). According to the statements made in the document *Supporting the teaching professions for better learning outcomes* (European Commission, 2012), these competencies include: having critical, evidence-based attitudes that enable teachers to respond to students’ outcomes; collecting and analyzing “new evidence from inside and outside of the classroom”, and maintaining “professional dialogue in order to adapt their own practices” (p. 23). This is particularly true for teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which is reported to pose many challenges that language teachers have to face (Campion, 2016).

Such characteristics, which are considered necessary for adapting a person’s knowledge and competencies to new tasks and developing new skills and competencies throughout the life cycle, are often referred to as generic (or key) competencies (European Commission, 2012; Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Meanwhile, as Verbitsky fairly notes, “reforming of education in terms of competence must lean on a complex of sciences about the person, consider psychological (sociological, culturological etc.) regularity of development of her personality and identity” (Verbitsky, 2012, p. 53). Following this trend, in modern

European education documents, autonomy is regarded as a generic competence every professional should possess (European Communities, 2007, p. 8).

The crucial role of autonomy in education is proven by the existing definitions of the term which is reported as “the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation” (Jiménez Raya, 2007, p. 33). Autonomous teachers are regarded as capable of setting their own goals, making choices concerning their own teaching (Benson, 2011), engaging in self-directed teaching, including detachment, and critical reflection (Mann, 2005), as well as making decisions and taking independent action (Little, 1995).

Our research allowed us to specify the notion of teachers’ autonomy, and reveal the strategies that are associated with the desire and readiness to take control of their own personal and professional self-development and involvement in planning, making responsible decisions and choices. It was revealed that teachers’ autonomous activity is associated with a set of personal characteristics, ranging from intrinsic motivation to professional achievement, personal and professional self-development, internal locus of control, empowerment, responsibility, critical mindfulness, and abilities to set goals, make decisions and choices (Gavrilyuk, 2013). This is in keeping with the existing literature on creativity and innovation for education that emphasizes the importance of the same individual skills, abilities and attitudes, including intrinsic motivation and empowerment (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

As a generic competence, autonomy plays a key role in the development and interaction of different teacher’s competences. Autonomy provides a teacher with an ability to organize a problem-centered activity in the classroom, conceptualize an innovative idea, develop it, implement it, and reflect on the implementation. As a culmination point, autonomy allows transformation in teachers’ thinking style and focuses their attention on meaningfulness of linguistic information they deal with through asking themselves questions about what to teach, how to teach and why. Accordingly, autonomous teacher is concerned about what should be changed, why and how to do it better. This means that autonomy ensures teachers’ “innovative self-change”, which is regarded as a basis for every innovation in teaching (Tareva, 2013, p. 61).

In accordance with the need to ensure the constant professional development of a teacher, the acquisition of autonomy is able to put into practice Mahatma Gandhi’s principle “[B]e the change that you want to see in the world” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 299). This “transformative” role of autonomy reflects the philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon, which has often been associated with the ability of a man to “push the limits” or “go beyond the line of the institutional culture” (Marchenko, 2013). Thus, teachers’ autonomy based on a thorough understanding of the social and cultural context may be regarded as an effective means for stimulating their creative activity and innovative development both inside and outside the university environment.

Furthermore, an autonomous teacher is a lifelong learner who is capable of mastering new skills and competencies to deal with new challenges (Gavrilyuk, 2015), which are characteristics known to be prerequisites for creativity and innovation. Thus, as teachers stimulate and support the process of autonomous learning, and promote creativity and change in learners, at the same time teachers themselves are the subject of change. In turn they become key figures capable of promoting their own creativity and innovation in higher education.

From the psychological perspective, the idea of associating teachers’ autonomy with creativity and innovation draws on the assumption that autonomy represents the core of self-actualization (Maslow, 2011) and psychological constructivism, as the capacity to create (Gabanska, 1995). Additionally, within the educational context, constructivist-based teaching

practices are reported to be statistically significantly correlated with creativity ability in a positive way (Temiz, 2013). This argues for the theory of De Charms (1968), who regarded autonomy as a prerequisite for creativity such that most recently creativity is reported as a starting point for innovation in language teaching (Yin, 2009).

In the context of professional activity, innovative work behaviour is reported to be positively related with employees' job autonomy (De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, De Witte, Niesen & Van Hootegeem, 2014). Chang, Yeh, Chen & Hsiao (2011) found significant positive relationships between technical education teachers' task autonomy and the degree of their innovation in professional development. The literature review on innovation, creativity-oriented foreign language teaching and teacher's professional development (Compton, 2015; Varatharaj, Abdullah & Ismail, 2015) suggests that foreign language teachers also need to be autonomous, which is manifested through their:

1. critical thinking and perception of many opportunities for making students' acquisition of intercultural competency creative;
2. consideration of various stressors as stimuli for development as a participant of intercultural communication;
3. being intrinsically motivated to professional achievement and personal development;
4. accepting responsibility for their own teaching and professional development;
5. mastering new skills and competencies to deal with new challenges;
6. following a proactive approach (staying ahead instead of acting reactively); and
7. better performance and increase of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Therefore, underlying foreign language teachers' ability to be innovative and self-changing to foster their lifelong development, flexibility and readiness to successfully deal with the challenges of the educational environment, autonomy is argued to be a necessity for successful implementation of a new creativity and innovation-oriented type of language and cultural education.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive research design. Most of the data were obtained through literature review and analysis of the results of selected studies. To justify the benefits of professional autonomy for modern teachers, we performed a content-analysis of both national and international educational/research documents.

The relevance and importance of teachers' professional autonomy was demonstrated from the perspective of autonomy-oriented, competency-based and context-based approaches. The core ideas of the study were determined considering philosophical and psychological theories of internal freedom, personal autonomy and self-determination as well as pedagogical ideas of lifelong learning and personalisation of the educational process within the framework of the personality-centred educational paradigm. Applying the ideas outlined above to the foreign language teaching practice at a medical university and based on the literature review, we tried to reveal the benefits of teachers' professional autonomy concerning particular aspects of language teaching. Based on the literature review, we determined the core principles of the autonomy-oriented approach that should guide the introduction of innovations in the university educational environment.

It is known that both innovative teaching and increasing teachers' autonomy require teachers' "systematic engagement in professional learning throughout their careers" (European Commission, 2012, p. 36). Accordingly, the practical aspects of teachers' autonomy as a phenomenon of innovative educational systems have been investigated through applying the idea of teachers' autonomy to a specially developed system of personal

and professional development for Russian university teachers of Medical English. The system was implemented at Professor V. F. Voino-Yasenetsky Krasnoyarsk State Medical University (KrasSMU), 2013-2017.

The core principles of the autonomy-oriented approach were followed within the above-mentioned system of personal and professional development in order to make it foster university teachers' innovative and creative activity through the use of self-determination, personal development and "personal challenge" technologies. In particular, one of the core principles of the system implementation was using teachers' personal and professional experience that is reported to be an important resource allowing teachers to innovate (Artyukhina, 2015).

A total of ten foreign language teachers with varying degrees of experience from the Department of Latin and Foreign Languages at KrasSMU were included in the study group. The study participants were chosen at random and invited to become the members of the Linguistic Centre of KrasSMU and participate in this study on a voluntary basis. They were assured that the data collected would be confidential and would only be used for the sole purpose of the study.

To allow the Centre members to achieve more recognition in the university community and beyond we involved them in a series of innovative projects. Depending on their interests and expertise, the members of the Centre were asked to choose one or more activities from a range of creative and innovative activities that involved:

- various forms of curriculum development;
- implementation of distance-learning foreign language courses;
- organization of different types of cultural events for both domestic and international medical students;
- organization of different types of 'beyond the classroom education' for medical students;
- organization of student language contests;
- designing linguistic aspects of educational networking with foreign universities;
- consulting medical students/faculty in terms of academic writing/giving presentations; and
- providing linguistic support for university international events.

To address the study objectives, we developed a complex of materials for foreign language teachers' personal and professional development. These materials included: a problem book that contained a range of problematic professional situations supplemented with preliminary motivational questions and questions for self-reflection, a compendium of reference materials, guidelines for development of professional autonomy and materials for self-assessment that enabled teachers to track their development dynamics and allowed for their autonomous learning activity. These materials were used both as a component of specially organized training sessions (Markovina, Gavrilyuk & McFarland, 2017) and in the context of teachers' self-development activity.

To enhance the Centre members' personal and professional development, a collaborative platform was created on the KrasSMU website that facilitated exchange of ideas and resources between foreign language teachers. To foster the foreign language teachers' connections with other educators a series of interuniversity round-table discussions and conferences was organised on the most problematic aspects of foreign language teacher professional activity, including teacher's professional development within the context of recent educational reforms, teachers' and learners' autonomy, teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), internationalization of education, and teaching intercultural communication skills. Some of these events involved

participation of foreign specialists in linguistics, education and medicine. The teachers were asked to fill in a portfolio to monitor their activity, which involved adding every professional achievement to their personal achievements list on the university website.

Analysis of the system implementation outcomes, based both on the university rating system data and the results of a survey of the foreign language teachers who were members of the Centre, together with open discussions with university teachers of Medical English, provided an important source of information.

The described aspects of the study design are presented below in Figure 1.

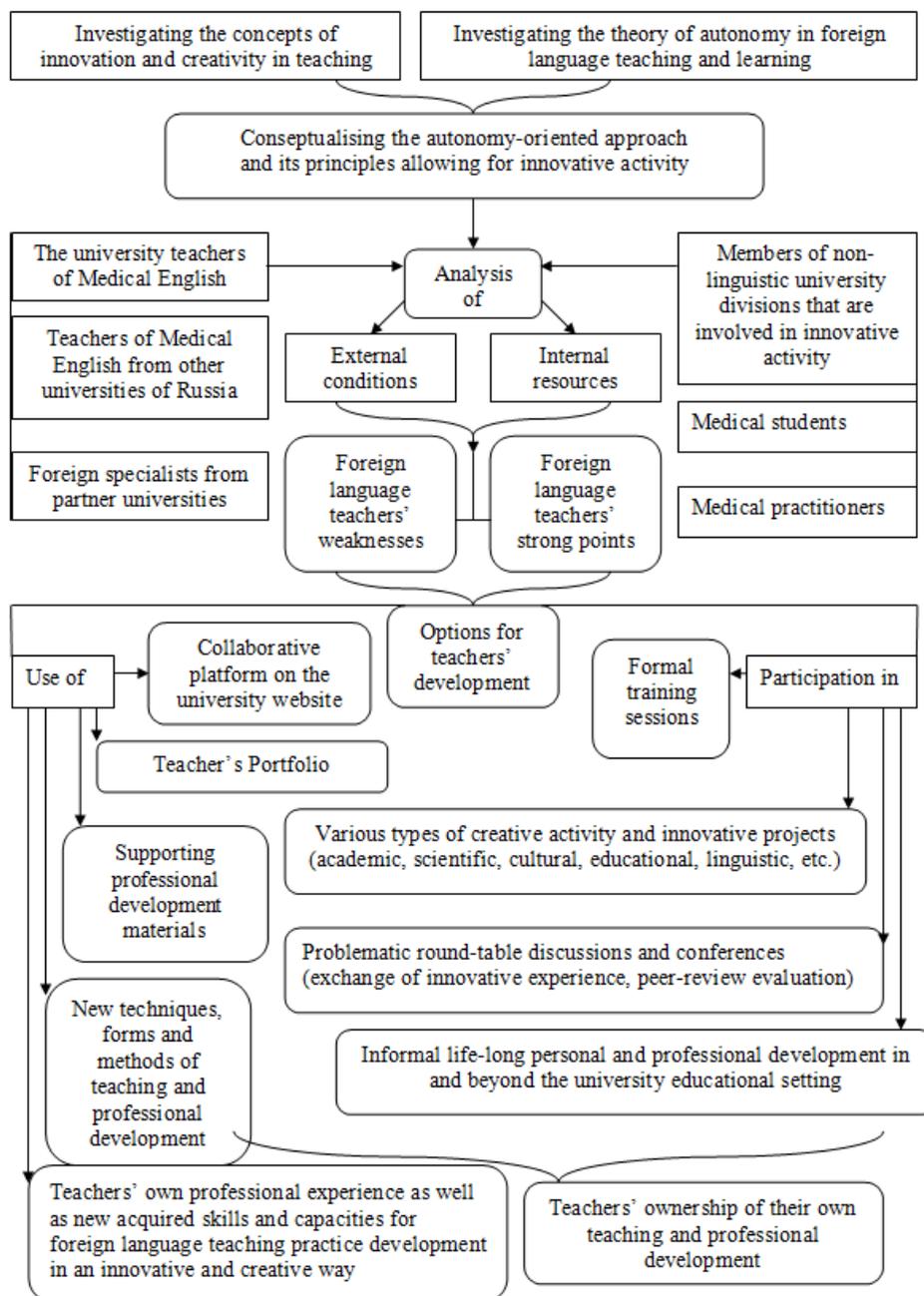


Figure 1: The study design

RESULTS

The results of the study suggest that transition to a new, creative and innovative model of higher education requires high level of autonomy on the part of the university teachers. It is autonomy that makes university teachers capable of developing new skills and competencies, as well as being able to act in an innovative and creative way. From this perspective, introducing innovations in education in general and in a foreign language classroom in particular is reported to require the autonomy-oriented approach to teaching and teachers' personal and professional development (Aviram, 2000).

In advocating the autonomy-oriented approach in higher education, our research revealed a number of justifications that can be classified under the headings of philosophical, pedagogical and psychological reasons:

- *philosophical reasons*: the need to prepare teachers and learners for effective functioning in a rapidly changing society through overcoming various obstacles and making choices based on "positive freedom" (or freedom "for") (Mishra, 2000);
- *pedagogical reasons*: students are known to learn more effectively when they are involved in making choices and decisions about different aspects of their learning (Gavrilyuk, 2013);
- *psychological reasons*: being very closely related to the process of self-determination, in keeping with the notion that autonomy makes the process of learning/teaching inner-directed, and, consequently, desirable and enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2006); and leading to better performance, increasing self-esteem, self-efficacy and helping to prevent burnout (Varatharaj, Abdullah & Ismail, 2015).

The overall literature review results allowed us to claim that the autonomy-oriented approach makes both teachers and students more involved in intensive innovative activity. In addition, this as based on the triangulation of data through analysing and reviewing not only a wide educational context but the teachers' personal learning and professional experience.

Starting from the ideas outlined above, we tried to reveal the benefits teachers' professional autonomy has concerning particular aspects of foreign language teaching. Specifically, autonomy-oriented language training implies the extension of the language teaching content both qualitatively and quantitatively. It means that a foreign language teacher should be ready for continuous personal and professional development through learning of new technology, information search and constant evaluation of the content and quality of the professional information in the foreign language teaching context. It must be reliable, relevant and functional and fit in with their cultural and professional learning (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007).

In the context of teaching ESP teachers' professional autonomy contributes to ensuring interdisciplinarity together with a focus on the profession, which are important conditions for creativity and innovation in language training. Autonomous teachers are reported to be able to promote autonomy in students (Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000). This can be done through getting students involved in discovery-based learning, which implies exploring new learning contexts, testing their own ideas and creating knowledge (Brown, 2000; Tochon, 2014). Accordingly, students will become more autonomous, and, therefore, more responsible and critical members of the community they live in (Han, 2014).

Different learners are reported to have different learning styles (Hatami, 2013), which affect the learners' preferences and approaches to studies as well as the choice of learning strategies. Taking into account each student's personality and providing more learner-centered activities through choosing relevant forms, tools and strategies for effective language teaching, an autonomous teacher makes the process of foreign language learning

interesting and creative. Moreover, teachers' professional autonomy is able to intensify interaction and ensure a successful intercultural communication in the classroom through the creation of a special self-actualization and autonomy-supportive environment where the teacher takes on the role of a facilitator, cooperater, counselor, inspirator and supporter, stimulating students' empowerment and creativity (Han, 2014).

In summary, applying the ideas outlined above to the foreign language teaching practice at the medical university in this research and based on the literature, we formulated the core characteristics of the autonomy-oriented approach compared to the traditional approach to teaching Medical English as shown in Table 1.

The principle of personal involvement in the innovation processes is based on teachers' perception of educational problems as personally valuable issues. This principle also means using teachers' personal and professional experience that is reported to be an important resource allowing teachers to innovate (Artyukhina, 2015) and fostering teachers' intrinsic motivation through the promotion of confidence, persistence and risk taking. The principle of self-realization in the innovation processes implies teachers' considering innovative activity as an effective means for their personal and professional self-development. The principle of critical awareness and self-reflection means that every teacher's innovative activity should be based on critical analysis of the given means, methods and strategies in education with the aim to identify the most appropriate ones for a certain situation. This principle emphasizes a meaningful re-evaluation of a teacher's personal experience as the basis for improvements in management of innovations.

Analysing the presented characteristics of the autonomy-oriented approach in the innovative educational context allowed us to assume that using the autonomy-oriented approach facilitates introduction of innovations in the university educational environment. In view of the multiple challenges facing the implementation of innovations in modern higher education, we tried to specify the principles of the autonomy-oriented approach that could act as facilitating factors while introducing innovations in the university educational environment. Among these principles there is a principle of complexness in innovation management, which should involve creation, introduction, application and distribution of pedagogical novelties at the level of aims, management strategies and techniques. There is also a principle of self-change in innovation, which implies that teachers understand the necessity of innovative self-change as a mainspring of innovation their teaching practice. Teachers acting according to the principle of problematisation of the educational process and readiness to face challenges prevents their conventional behaviour and their following of stereotypes because of their readiness to identify the problem and deal with non-standard tasks in new situations. Following this principle also involves an increase in the usage of problem- and project-based learning in the classroom (Tochon, 2014).

Another principle is the interdisciplinary character of innovations. Autonomous teachers could increase the use of interdisciplinary learning through stimulating students to discover new ideas at the intersection of fields. The practical focus of innovations is also of importance. This principle follows the idea of contextually grounded approaches to pedagogical innovation, emphasized by Carless (2011) and Wedell (2009). Implementation of this principle may lead, for example, to organizational innovation in case of students' team work where diverse professional skills, abilities, attitudes, interests and working styles are represented.

Table 1: Comparison of characteristics of the traditional and the autonomy-oriented approach to teaching Medical English (ESP)

TRADITIONAL TEACHING	AUTONOMY-ORIENTED TEACHING
Theorised syllabus	Practice-oriented syllabus Content reflecting both modern medical and foreign language teaching practices
Overview of some language phenomena	Emphasis on profession, interdisciplinarity, and on students' ability to apply new knowledge to their actual contexts of learning
Emphasis on transmission of information to the audience	Emphasis on students' involvement into the educational process, their active participation in making sense of a new practice using their own metacognitive skills to create their multi-dimensional awareness of the educational context Teacher functioning as a facilitator Provided opportunity for experiential, collaborative learning
Beaming down of a generic course content Adherence to a fixed curriculum	Provided opportunity to select what students would like to learn. Critical review and use of students' personal experience
Emphasis on quantitative equipment of students with new learning techniques	Emphasis on both qualitative innovational self-development of learners and their creativity
Token approach to teaching	Teaching as a stimulus for students' lifelong personal and professional development Provided opportunities for students to coach one another and work together to analyse new learning techniques
Summative evaluation of students by teachers	Multi-dimensional evaluation (fostering self-evaluation and peer-evaluation practices)
Use of old (or new) methods that may be not relevant for the students and may not relate to their specific demands	Relevant content, reflecting actual challenges faced by students in their learning (professional) activity
Non- problematic, non-diversified content Providing basic knowledge	Content construction on the basis of interdisciplinary problems topical in the in the broad context of a medical profession

Applying the described principles and the theory of the autonomy-oriented approach to the context of teacher development, we specified the changes that should guide the implementation of the autonomy-focused approach and promote teachers' innovative and creative activity within the framework of the system of teachers' personal and professional development. This is shown in Table 2.

The literature review allowed us to argue that innovative and creative type of teacher development requires the creation of a system of teachers' personal and professional development in the university educational environment. On this basis we argue that this system should involve various components to provide organisational, methodological, psychological and resource support for teachers' innovative and creative activity.

To support these theoretical ideas by evidence from practice, the system of foreign language teachers' personal and professional development was implemented as noted earlier at KrasSMU. Implementation of this novel type of teacher development system required a complete rethink of traditional teacher development goals and strategies in order to foster teachers' innovative and creative activity. The system aimed at promotion of foreign language teachers' personal and professional development by means of their involvement into the process of solution of case problems and creative tasks designed on the basis of the autonomy-oriented approach to organisation of teachers' personal and professional development.

The objectives of the system included:

- providing teachers with the opportunity to perform self-analysis and self-assessment of their professional activity in order to reveal their personal and professional potential;
- developing teachers' analytical and critical thinking skills as well as their skills of making choice in the context of uncertainty or incomplete information;
- promoting the "positive" types of motivation in teachers including motivation for success achievement in professional activity and for autonomous professional activity;
- offering teachers possible ways of their professional autonomy realisation in different sorts of professional activity; and
- giving teachers guidelines for development of their professional autonomy.

Specially organized training sessions with participation of specialists from different Russian and foreign universities allowed us to stimulate the Centre members' self-development activity. A collaborative platform that was created on the website of KrasSMU facilitated exchange of ideas and resources between foreign language teachers. A series of interuniversity round-table discussions and conferences allowed foreign language teachers to share ideas with one another as well as to expand their collaborative networks and the range of resources they could use in their professional activity. The Centre members reported that their work with their portfolios allowed them to get ownership of their own personal and professional development. Their personal learning networks expanded.

Providing various challenges for teachers through their involvement in a series of innovative projects caused them to be placed in more fruitful environments where they needed to act autonomously through planning, making choices and taking responsible decisions. As a result, they reported experiencing more recognition in the university community and beyond. Taken together, the results of the system implementation (based both on the university rating system data, the results of the survey among foreign language teachers and open discussions with university teachers of Medical English) allowed us to prove our theoretical ideas concerning the role of teachers' professional autonomy in teachers' innovative potential development.

Specifically, it was revealed that professional autonomy allows foreign language teachers to stay competent in the field of new methods of training, as well as to develop a critical consciousness and media literacy while dealing with social media and new information communication technology (ICT). Our results suggest that autonomous teachers do not simply use digital video in teaching foreign language; they understand how it can be best utilized to teach different students. In teaching written communication autonomous teachers focus on the aspects that are the most relevant for modern medical students, such as the features of e-mail correspondence and the requirements for the preparation of scientific papers in foreign medical journals.

Table 2: Comparison of characteristics of the traditional and the autonomy-oriented approach to foreign language teacher development (evidence from a medical university ESP)

TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT	AUTONOMY-ORIENTED APPROACH TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT
Focus on formal training courses organisation	Focus on informal personal and professional teacher development Training courses as a stimulus for teachers' lifelong development
Emphasis on quantitative equipment of teachers with new methods of teaching.	Emphasis on both qualitative innovational self-development of teachers and their creativity
Theorised syllabus	Practice-oriented training Content reflecting both modern medical and foreign language teaching practices Emphasis on teachers' ability to apply new knowledge to their actual contexts of teaching
Overview of some language phenomena	Emphasis on interdisciplinarity, on a practical use of a foreign language in a medical profession
Emphasis on transmission of information to the audience	Emphasis on students' involvement into the educational process, their active participation in making sense of a new practice using their own metacognitive skills to create their multi-dimensional awareness of the educational context Provided opportunities for teachers to coach one another and work together to analyse new teaching techniques
Beaming down of a generic course content	Cooperative development of course content with due consideration of regional necessities and opportunities to make the course grounded in a particular teachers' practice. Provided opportunity to select what teachers would like to learn from a variety of research-based ideas about improving students' learning.
Learning of generalised experience of other specialists	Critical review of teachers' personal experience Exchange of experience Learning is experiential, collaborative, and connected to students
Summative evaluation of student teachers by trainers	Multi-dimensional evaluation (fostering self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and learner-evaluation practices)
Review of new methods that may be not relevant for the participants and may not relate to their specific demands	Relevant content, reflecting actual challenges faced by teachers in their professional activity
Non- problematic, non-diversified content Providing basic knowledge about a teaching methodology	Content construction on the basis of interdisciplinary problems not only topical in the framework of the institution's educational environment but in the broad context of a medical profession

In developing reading skills we found autonomous teachers pay special attention to the structure and strategy of working with a wide range of professional texts in the foreign

language, including search strategies in electronic scientific databases. As for oral communication, it is professional autonomy that allows the teachers to choose the most required skills to be developed (for example, presentation skills with the focus on mastering presentation language, discussing scientific issues in a multicultural and multilingual audience).

Therefore, the results of this part of our research, even though based on a very modest sample size of Russian teachers of Medical English, supported our hypothesis that innovation and creativity in foreign language teaching can be promoted by teacher's professional autonomy. Our overall findings suggest that autonomous teachers can successfully develop and implement innovations in their teaching, can choose the best methods for particular educational contexts and understand how students learn efficiently to promote optimal learning within an autonomy-oriented, information rich, educational environment. Such an autonomy-oriented information rich, educational environment comprises intellectual, cultural, methodological, technological resources and communication technology tools that provide access to a wide range of educational resources and allow for creative and innovative teaching.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is crucial to understand that educational innovation is not only about generating creative ideas and using new technology. Although technology is a tool that a teacher should use to promote students' creative thinking, innovative skills development and individualization in foreign language training based on a clear identification of students' learning needs the teacher's role is of paramount importance. It is teachers' professional autonomy that contributes to the development of their readiness for effective use of ICT and their ability to critically assess the language teaching content and the possibilities existing in our information rich educational environment. Many scientists have associated readiness for professional autonomy with an individual's rational behaviour. This supports the assumption that an autonomous teacher is able to prevent following patterns and provide a rational approach to introduction of innovations. In particular, this approach can prevent a massive, not always rational use of tests as a form of control in foreign language teaching through the teachers' critical awareness of their applicability taking into account national and cultural identity and the specific context.

The benefits teachers' professional autonomy has concerning innovations become more evident in the framework of the idea about useful distinction between primary innovations (changes to teaching materials or pedagogy) and secondary innovations (organizational changes which provide support for primary innovations), proposed by Markee (1997). Providing a rational approach to the introduction of innovations through professional autonomy will allow teachers to focus on both primary and secondary innovations, therefore ensuring success in implementing change.

In Russia today there is a serious problem of the so-called "falsification and simulation of education", which is reported as an imitation of reforms, and imitation of development management. This is evident in "Administrators pretend to direct the modernisation; teachers pretend to upgrade research, educational process, etc." (Yefimov, 2012, p.19). Although often undertaken innovations "are reduced to the appearance of additional regulations, records, without affecting the actual quality of learning outcomes" (ibid, p. 20). A similar threat coming from educational reforms is evident in the work of Giroux (1988) who concluded that the more educational reforms are implemented, the less confidence we have in the ability of teachers to provide intellectual and moral leadership for

the youth (p. 125). He noted how tension from educational reforms forces teachers to work in a situation of “contradiction between being theoretically or ideologically correct and pedagogically wrong” (Giroux, 1997, p. 160). In this case it is teachers’ autonomy that can help them overcome this contradiction and not to reduce teaching to training. As an integrative component of teachers’ autonomy, teachers’ critical perception of the educational context allows for rethinking and reforming “the traditions and conditions that have prevented teachers from assuming their full potential as active, reflective scholars and practitioners” (Giroux, 1988, p. 126).

Thus, teachers’ professional autonomy will allow them to carry out an independent and responsible choice, being guided by expediency of this choice in a particular educational context. Teacher autonomy is crucial for foreign language teaching practice development in an innovative and creative way. In turn, development of teachers’ professional autonomy requires special training, as this is essential for acquiring new skills and implementing innovative and creative techniques and methods (Ellis & Barr, 2008; Esquivel, 1995).

The autonomy-oriented approach to language teaching and foreign language teachers’ professional development proved to be potentially valuable in a number of ways. First, it makes both students and teachers active, reflective and critical actors in the educational environment who try to understand, rather than memorise the educational content. This benefit of the autonomy-oriented approach makes it close to the ideas of social constructivist philosophy and constructivist-based teaching, as emphasised in the work of Aviram (2000), Dagar and Yadav (2016), Mayer (2009) and Temiz (2013).

Second, it involves creation of autonomy-oriented, informational educational environments that comprise intellectual, cultural, methodological, technological resources and communication technology tools that provide access to a wide range of educational resources and allow for both students’ and teachers’ innovative and creative activity and engagement. Third, it allows foreign language teachers to:

- stay current in their fields through constant reflective development in and beyond the university educational environment,
- take ownership of their own professional development,
- perceive themselves and act not as trainers, but as free educational professionals.

From this perspective, the continuing efforts to emphasize teachers’ autonomy to develop their potential has also been found by most recently by Hyungshim and Reeve (2016) and Wermke and Höstfält (2014). Thus, we consider it to be a critical tool that can transform the way teachers act and are perceived in the 21st century. However, with regards to the results of this research, that is based on a very modest sample size of Russian teachers of Medical English, we note that they cannot simply be generalized to other contexts. Therefore, we emphasize that future investigations with larger sample sizes would seem to be necessary.

Nevertheless, our overall findings, based on the literature review results and the results of the practical part of our investigation, allowed us to prove our theoretical ideas concerning the role of teachers’ professional autonomy in teachers’ innovative potential development. Summarizing the research results presented in the article it is noted that innovative university teachers’ development is possible in the framework of the autonomy-oriented approach that encourages their involvement in intensive analytical and project activity. This is based on analysing and reviewing both the wider educational context and the participating teachers’ personal learning and professional experience.

Following the ideas presented in this paper, we consider an autonomous foreign language teacher to be a key figure ensuring innovation and creativity in foreign language teaching and learning. Being a core value of the paradigm of innovative and creative teaching,

teachers' professional autonomy allows them to stay current in their fields, to think and act as proactive, reflective professionals who take ownership of their own professional development and go beyond the traditional approaches and stereotypes. This makes teacher's professional autonomy fundamental for both creativity and innovation in education.

The research contribution to knowledge involves:

- specification of the potential of teachers' autonomy and the autonomy-oriented approach in education concerning teachers' creativity and their ability to innovate;
- definition of a set of principles of the autonomy-oriented approach that are suggested to guide the introduction of innovations in foreign language teaching.

Therefore, in the context of education, it is argued that it is teachers' autonomy that advances the fostering of innovation and creativity, changing it from being an abstract goal through transformation from external to internal locus of control to include promoting teachers' responsibility for educational results. Consequently, by revealing and taking into account the level of university teachers' professional autonomy there can be benefits for successful implementation of new creativity and an innovation-oriented educational approach.

We also note the practical relevance of the study in that it has been ensured through specifying the autonomy-oriented approach in higher education and defining a set of principles, which are suggested to guide the introduction of innovations in foreign language teaching. By outlining the range of autonomous activities that may foster foreign language teachers' innovative and creative teaching skills and lifelong personal and professional development, the study allows for possible application of the autonomy-oriented approach in other educational contexts.

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