



SYNERGETIC APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT UNDERGRADUATE TECHNICAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Current dynamics in the labor market arises the need to organize appropriate undergraduate teaching. This has to be considered especially when teaching foreign languages since the subject is the acquisition of lifetime-learning competences. Teaching languages at undergraduate level has to mean interweaving already acquired general language competences and professional study competences, with intercultural, multidisciplinary skills, and competitive difference which will improve students' position in the labor market. Thus the teaching should be based on synergetic approach, whose components are dealt with in the paper, by using multimedia teaching resources and methods for proliferation of linguistic knowledge and the professional and intercultural skills which have to be mastered as a precondition for the successful activity of professional labor force in its globalised surroundings. To make it the paradigm of lifetime learning, the teaching has to be organized as consciousness-raising and as mediation of sources and ways to actualize the task.

Key Words: competences, labor market, synergetic effects, teaching foreign languages, undergraduate education

Topic Groups: humanities and arts and business, language in organizations

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS A PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

A bogey is moving round Europe, the bogey of lifelong learning. The notion itself, although it sounds somehow frightening and is not easily explicable in details at first sight, deals with

demands which are put in front of an individual whose goal, in the context of educational processes which are increasingly becoming the basic characteristic of modern society, is to acquire not just skills, knowledge and habits in the narrow field of work. Its foundations were formed as the part of primary, secondary and tertiary education, which is necessary to increase the ability of governments and the private sector, to deliver basic services, and to promote sustainable growth. The idea of lifelong learning is characterized by deeper sociological, ideological and cultural roots. In the east European surroundings, the idea is given significance in the 1990s with the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the restructuring of planned economies in the direction of west European integration pattern of national economies into modern globalization streams which impose the need for the mobility of labor force where consequently past formal forms of education seem insufficient since "economic success is dependent on the creation of a high-skilled workforce" (Brown et al., 2001). If the sudden technological advances are taken into consideration together with connected higher complexity of professional knowledge, the passive acquisition of existing knowledge seems insufficient because it becomes obsolete parallel to its progress. In the given context, "without adequately developed learning competence, a person is exposed to a higher risk of social and economic exclusion" (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – European Reference Framework). Moreover, the processes of recession, which in recent moments every now and then get hold of individual national economies which have been permeated by global bonds, are thinning 'the belly' of a social country, its social politics, which inevitably leads to the individual's uncertain position on the labor force market, thus to their being informed about their own personal abilities and skills in a range as broad as possible. The aforementioned is joined by the macroeconomic breakthrough of modern economies in the direction of society of knowledge as the paradigm of future community which is no longer based only on the flow of goods and services, but primarily of information which is necessary not only for planning and implementation, but also for controlling the decisions made by managers, especially those working in international markets which differ greatly "considering the level of their economic growth, culture, and conventions" (Kotler et al., 2006). Thus, as a result of modern restructuring of economies, of the inconstancy of labor force market, and of the efforts made around the establishing of society of knowledge, lifelong learning becomes a pivotal driving force in the development of educational processes within which foreign language learning above all appears as the perfect model.

Like with any other form of knowledge acquisition, the same happens with learning foreign languages – it is a process which is on one side completed unintentionally and unconsciously without previously determined purpose and under various life circumstances; on the other side, it is an organized process being completed in for that designed frameworks and is closely connected with educational system. Teaching spoken languages in European surroundings as a consequence of greater mobility of people, goods and services, gains importance in the 19th century (when French and German were part of the secondary education curriculum, in addition to Latin) so that teaching foreign languages in the 20th century becomes an inevitable part of national educational systems – from the 1950s foreign language learning was introduced in the fourth grade of primary school (Nikolov, 2009). Moreover, for the past few years the stress is put on the necessity of presence of foreign language teaching in all parts of person's life, even in preschool age, as the result of the "increasing awareness of the need for good competence in foreign languages in private and professional life" (Nikolov, 2009). According to that criterion, teaching foreign languages becomes a model paradigm of lifelong learning.

Usually, the aims of teaching foreign languages present acquiring foreign language competences, which means acquisition of a foreign language as a linguistic system. In this matter, at the level of primary education, special attention is given to the acquisition of grammar and lexical competences. These competences are on one side intensified on secondary level, and on the other side broadened by identifying different aspects of the culture of a foreign language. On tertiary level, this kind of foreign language teaching is followed by the teaching whose core mostly consists of 'the language of profession'. However, real evaluation of acquired foreign language competences is reached in practice, when the acquisition of skills is assessed in immediate communication with native speakers. Thus, we have to bear in mind that with finishing one's formal education the need for further learning does not diminish. On the contrary, especially in the area of learning foreign languages, inclination towards forgetting, typical for a man, acts destructively if we take into consideration what was pointed by Fagin et al.: "There are often scenarios of interest where we want to model the fact that certain information is discarded. In practice, for example, an agent may simply not have enough memory capacity to remember everything he has learned" (Fagin et al., 1995). That is why it seems utterly important to continually renew foreign language competences without which the individual would not be able to present broader range of his/her professional capabilities outside their own country, which becomes an important factor under the conditions of globalized society.

In the age of global mobility and inconstancy of labor force market speaking foreign languages becomes more and more important lever of reaching competitiveness on the labor force market, or its continuous employability. Moreover, learning a foreign language opens many doors: person can pursue more successful career whether it concerns business, study or living abroad; the company with its multilingual employees can be competitive both in the European and global market. What is important is that the individual or the management be aware of how important it is to acquire (foreign) language skills. Successful learning of a foreign language can be of influence both on the working quality and the individual and his/her surroundings since that is what opens new dimensions and offers opportunities for new beginnings for the economic subjects in these uncertain times. Thus, apart from the aims targeted in formal learning of foreign languages, special attention has to be given to the intention which person has when starting to learn, which makes motivation a key factor of the quality of learning¹. This makes it obvious that for the purpose of maximizing the effect of learning foreign languages at tertiary professional institutions it is necessary to develop such a model of teaching which would not only rely on formal reasons of learning, but would take into consideration specific economic/professional motifs of individuals included in foreign language teaching at undergraduate level. Thus in the article, basic glotodydactic determinants of synergetic approach to teaching foreign languages are outlined as the form of teaching which includes necessity of intertwining and mutual stimulation of certain factors of the teaching process; it also takes into consideration factual situation in foreign language teaching at tertiary level, which is primarily characterized by different levels of adopted foreign language skills and abilities and by specific demands which labor force market places before an individual.

SYNERGETIC APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Glottydydactic foundations of synergetic approach to teaching foreign languages

¹ At professional tertiary institutions, the main task that a teacher has gains additional importance because it is expected of him/her not only to teach professional language, but also to recognize actual foreign language needs of an individual on the professional field; for example, whether the need is the basic communication with the patient (Nursing), or everyday computer usage (Multimedia), or identifying new characteristics of a new electronic device (Electrical Engineering).

By looking at historical side of foreign language teaching, it is possible to notice the development of a range of methods used for mediating foreign language skills and abilities², where the critical factor of the development seems to be the concept of functionality of foreign language knowledge. Thus, for example, aiming at passive knowledge of a foreign language as the foundation for primarily written communication of business partners in the 19th century represents the basis of grammar-translation method of teaching foreign languages. In the 20th century, larger mobility of goods and people imposes the need for better active knowing of foreign languages – within that notion a range of methods was developed, whose peak is presented by audio-lingual/audio-visual method dominating teaching practice in the second half of the 20th century. However, at the beginning of the 1970s, cognitive-pragmatic method was developed, wherefrom communicative and intercultural approaches appear as a glotodydactic response to the challenges of modern foreign language teaching. All the above mentioned approaches have one thing that can be objected – they one-sidedly favor one of the foreign language teaching segments; for example, in grammar-translation method learning it is the teaching of abstract linguistic system, while in audio-lingual/audio-visual method it is the acquisition of linguistic patterns in the form of so called 'pattern drills'. Although the modern communicative and intercultural approach targets the students' needs, instead of general foreign language competences it mediates specific communication competences, it takes into consideration intercultural specifics of acquiring and using a foreign language, it can be objected that it neglects strategies of acquiring basic foreign language skills and abilities in the favor of intercultural sensibilization of a student. Moreover, as the historical development of glotodydactic models and approaches itself shows, it seems useless to search for the one and only method of foreign language learning and teaching. Thus the most appropriate approach seems to be the one which, in its usage, takes into consideration not only the basic components of foreign language educational process, but its broader anchoring in the whole of human teaching process and its deriving potentials. Synergetic approach to foreign language teaching seems to be just the one.

The notion 'synergy' generally implies "the ability of forces to optimize each other thus enriching one another" (Hampden-Turner, 1996), while in socially-economic context it is "the result of reciprocal care for human relations whose purpose is further creative development of concepts and products" (Scherer, 1998). The idea of synergetic effect of heterogeneous moments is the idea created by Igor Ansoff, the founder of strategic management (cf. Ansoff, 1998). The idea is that inside a system different moments make contact with each other in order to not only fecundate its own potential by reciprocal imbuing but to improve the potential of the whole, whose constituent part they are. In that case, the synergetic effect of that kind of organization of work can be expressed with the following formula: $2 + 2 = 5$, which means that within the system 'the surplus' emerges, which does not present mere sum of effects of constituent parts, but is the result of interaction of constituents which raise the processes in the system on a higher quality level where the system itself in feedback enriches and improves each of its constituents.

In case that kind of conception of synergetic effect is applied in the field of education, the basic aim of teaching process imposes the acquisition of 'educational surplus'. The subject here is the organization of teaching within which the students are referred to each other during their co-operation whose aim is to accomplish the educational result, which qualitatively surpasses the activity of each individual and therefore improves the whole

² In connection with the development of methodology of foreign language teaching and characteristics of certain methods mentioned later in the text cf. Neuner, Hunfeld 1993.

process of learning and teaching, by interweaving their activities. Should we begin with the fact that the basic constituents of educational process are the teacher, students and teaching materials or teaching media, then achieving the 'educational surplus' would mean the kind of interweaving of constituents within which the contributions to the teaching process of each and every one of them influence the proliferation of potentials from one constituent to the other to the point that eventually their interaction and imbuing fecundates not only each one of them but also the whole process of teaching, which arises it on a higher 'energetic level' from where in every further educational cycle the creation of new 'educational surplus' is reinitiated. Thus, the formation of 'educational surplus' does not present only one of the constituents of the educational process, but its central axis around whose realization the other factors involved in the teaching process are systematized.

The way to shaping the 'self-fecund educational surplus' in foreign language teaching

At tertiary level, learning and teaching foreign languages is oriented towards the improvement of knowledge, capabilities and skills of students – the age group which is supposed to have abilities and skills that enable them the so called 'cognitive' approach to learning (foreign) languages after finishing primary and secondary educational level. That means the students at undergraduate institution learning a foreign language are capable of following the analytic approach to learning the foreign language, the purpose of which is dichotomous: on one side, to reinforce the knowledge of patterns which make a foreign language utterance; on the other side, to raise the awareness of the foundation of any utterance on foreign language patterns³. Without knowing the basic foreign language structural rules, namely morphological and syntactical, the work on the acquisition of foreign language lexis, especially its specific qualities connected to the profession, is utterly made difficult. Thus, one of the first aims of foreign language teaching at undergraduate level, but not the only one, is the revision of basic linguistic knowledge, together with raising awareness of the linguistic system structure in general, in order to not only make the foreign language lexis interpretation easier with resulting effect, but to improve general linguistic literacy of a student as one of the prerequisites for including the professional labor force into the developing global society of knowledge which is, among others, based on commutability of its constituents.

Certainly, parallel with that, the immediate work on foreign language linguistic competences is essential; especially considering the needs of a profession the individual will take up one day. Taken that into consideration, it is necessary to mention the fact that demographically, the age of so called echo-boomers or the net-generation has begun (cf. Kotler, 2006), the generation which is growing up surrounded by digital media; for that generation, digital technology and other forms of new literacy make normal, constituent part of its surroundings. Thus, in foreign language teaching, it is also necessary to reach for multimedia resources and contents, where we mean using different computer programs or virtual platforms within foreign language teaching. They, with their modular structure, contribute to diversity of the teaching process, which immediately attracts more attention from the part of the students to the content being taught; thus it directly affects their motivation. That effect is achieved by using multimedia resources and contents mostly because of their dynamic structure since it is about the combination of textual, visual and audio recordings, which

³ For that purpose, it seems most appropriate to reach for so called 'contrastive approach' to teaching foreign languages where one starts with similarity or difference in the context of native and foreign language, on the basis of which the awareness of structure patterns of any kind of language utterance raises.

offers various possibilities for the introduction of foreign language lexis, its revision or reinforcement⁴.

It is necessary to emphasize as another advantage of using multimedia resources and contents in foreign language teaching that by their adequate usage in glotodydactic sense introducing the students with simulated language situations becomes easier since, for example, with working on foreign language virtual platforms or platforms for online cooperation, chats or forums, the students are immersed in their 'natural' foreign language surroundings where utterances in foreign language they meet are situated in their 'authentic' environment, and are interwoven with social or value specifics of the 'foreign' culture. Here we talk about using the potential of multimedia resources and contents with the purpose of making the most immediate contact possible with a foreign language during which the students for a moment – by virtually transcending barriers of time and space – become direct participants in a foreign language speaking community.

By the above mentioned usage of multimedia resources and contents, the students do not only improve their knowledge in the field of foreign language lexis, but also acquire both skills and capabilities which are indispensable in the society of knowledge. Taking that into consideration, the crucial factor seems to be 'the cosmic dimension' of new literacy forms which are created as the consequence of computer technology development and is characterized by information saturation which makes students faced with immense abundance of data. Thus it seems essential to introduce the students, while covering the lexis, to the strategies of finding, analyzing, evaluating, and summarizing the information as the basic cognitive tools for orientation in the modern, nearly limitless universe of information.

Activating the students goes hand in hand with the acquisition of the above mentioned strategies because without their active and creative participation the acquisition itself is not possible. In this way, using multimedia resources and contents, actually mastering the strategies of their usage, synergetically affect both the students' activation and deepening not only their foreign language skills and capabilities, but also much further than that. In this regard, mastering the strategies of coping in the virtual computer world, the foundations for lifelong learning, or 'self-teaching', are laid; they are important distinctive features of professional labor force which is faced with the challenges of the society of knowledge and therefore the consequent positive and negative effects, like the fluctuation in the labor market. Having examined the indispensability of acquiring the strategies of 'self-teaching' already at tertiary level, the professional labor force not only ensures itself future survival on the (professional) knowledge market, but with later lifelong development contributes to the development of the whole society, which retroactively influences the quality of life of all individuals.

Normally, this as the third important moment arises the need for better and deeper familiarizing with the 'professional language'. Foreign language teaching at undergraduate professional institutions should not represent only the continuation of familiarization of a foreign language, which was specific at general educational level and which is, when it comes to glotodydactics and content, not different from teaching foreign languages at primary and secondary level. However, the students should not be satisfied with being introduced only to general patterns of foreign language system or general foreign language idioms, but in cooperation with the foreign language teacher and the teachers of professional subjects they should identify those lexical units or topics which are interwoven into their

⁴ In connection with definition of multimedia resources and content, and their glotodydactically adequate usage in foreign language teaching cf. Engler/Mikulan 2006, 31-47, especially 32-33.

professional studies in an interdisciplinary way in order for them to acquire lexis which would later serve them as the foundation for further lifelong recognizing of the specifics of the professional foreign language utterance. Thus, especially at tertiary level, this calls for interdisciplinary approach to teaching foreign languages in the context of which the students should be able to articulate not only the general needs regarding the mastering of professional foreign language lexis, but also to identify those lexical areas which overlap with their personal (professional) interests so that they would be able, starting from that point, to go ahead with the improvement of their own foreign language skills and capabilities.

For the purpose of achieving this aim, it seems adequate to organize foreign language teaching so that it is based on project work; its realization is interwoven with the students' interest and the aim of the whole teaching process in the sense that the student, by doing the project, is motivated to a deeper foreign language familiarization of a certain segment of profession in order to introduce the rest of the students with the results of the work by presenting it to them, which encourages them to work further.

In this way, the circulation of synergetic effect among the constituents of the teaching process is achieved: synergetic potential of multimedia resources and contents is activated by doing the project task or by using these resources and contents by the teacher and individual students so that the fulfilled effect could influence the other students, too. Moreover, their complete involvement does not influence the working atmosphere only, but it transforms the teaching process into teamwork where the teacher works as a referentially-evaluative point – a kind of focal point which manages the circulation of synergetic effect within the teaching process with aim to continually produce 'self-fecund educational surplus' as the basic motivational factor of teaching at undergraduate level. It is the 'surplus' in educational process which is achieved by continually active overlapping of constituents of the teaching process with the purpose of making the students aware that without being involved in the strategies of independent, responsible and deliberate learning – in the foundations of lifelong learning – it is not possible to survive among turbulences of the society of knowledge.

However, in order for that 'self-fecund educational surplus' to achieve its functional foundation, the structure of foreign language teaching or the foreign language itself must not be observed as isolated from its context. The wider context of foreign language teaching presents both its own and foreign language cultural surroundings within which the language interwoven with other forms of communication obtains its specific meaning. As it is known in the marketing field, every product has to be in accordance not only with the needs and expectations of the consumer, but also with different aspects of certain community. Every country has its own tradition, its own cultural and business norms, and its taboos (cf. Kotler, 2006), which in the foreign language teaching means that knowing the foreign language cultural surroundings is of equal importance as knowing how the foreign language functions.

This fact is becoming more important in the globalization age which imposes going to the markets outside the mother country with the purpose of accomplishing better and broader communication among the companies. Then simply knowing grammar and lexis patterns of a foreign language does not grant success; without being involved into the specifics of a foreign language culture, even a well-intentioned business activity can lead to failure⁵. Thus, teacher's task of equal importance when teaching a foreign language would be to raise the cultural awareness of students, whose goal is to become familiar with a large number of

⁵ For example, while exchanging business cards, an English manager will just take a quick glance at the card and put it in the pocket, while a Japanese manager will carefully look at it, read the background and the status of the company. Failure to respect the Japanese tradition could mean disrespect towards the culture itself and could lead to the situation in which one of the parties (in this case the Japanese one) feels unaccepted.

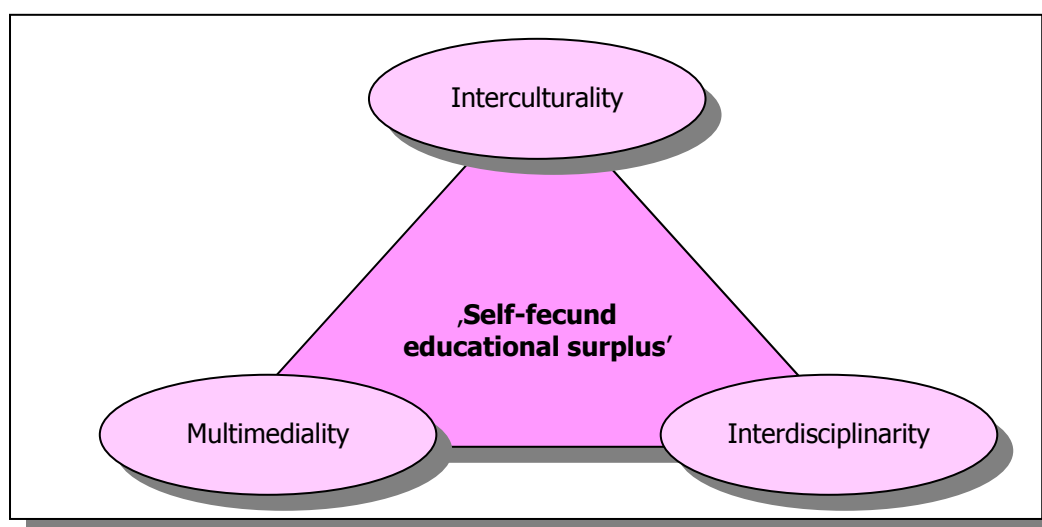
foreign language cultural patterns and norms, which implies raising awareness and challenging one's own cultural norms by comparing one's 'own' and 'foreign' in order to crystallize the attitude of intercultural empathy as the basis of the impact in the globalized business environment. By developing sensitivity towards cultural differences, the students, among other things, are prepared to avoid communicational misunderstandings because of not knowing the 'foreign culture' so that they could within lifelong learning and future practical use find their own way in order to optimize their own foreign language capabilities and skills⁶. The adaption to a certain working culture in the modern time of globalization is necessary and without it the individual cannot be competitive in the international labor market, let alone achieve satisfying results there. Thus, we can call teaching a foreign language successful when, apart from basic grammar rules and lexis, it mediates the awareness of the indispensability of identifying with foreign language cultural patterns and norms.

The effects of synergetic approach to teaching foreign languages at undergraduate professional institutions

To conclude, on the basis of the previously shown developmental way of 'self-fecund educational surplus' in foreign language teaching at tertiary level, it is necessary to point out the glotodydactic frame of organizing that kind of teaching, the competences which are developed at the same time, and the final aim of synergetic effect circulation within the foreign language educational process.

Pivotal points of glotodydactical frame within which foreign language teaching at undergraduate institutions should not only move around, but also accomplish its 'educational surplus', in the first place present multimediality of the teaching process, which means the use of multimedia resources and contents with the purpose of a successful simulation of authentic foreign language spoken situations; interdisciplinarity, as the only real anchor of foreign language teaching at the crossroads of more narrow, subdivided professional areas; and interculturality, as the only possible attitude of a modern man within the globalized leveling of cultural standards.

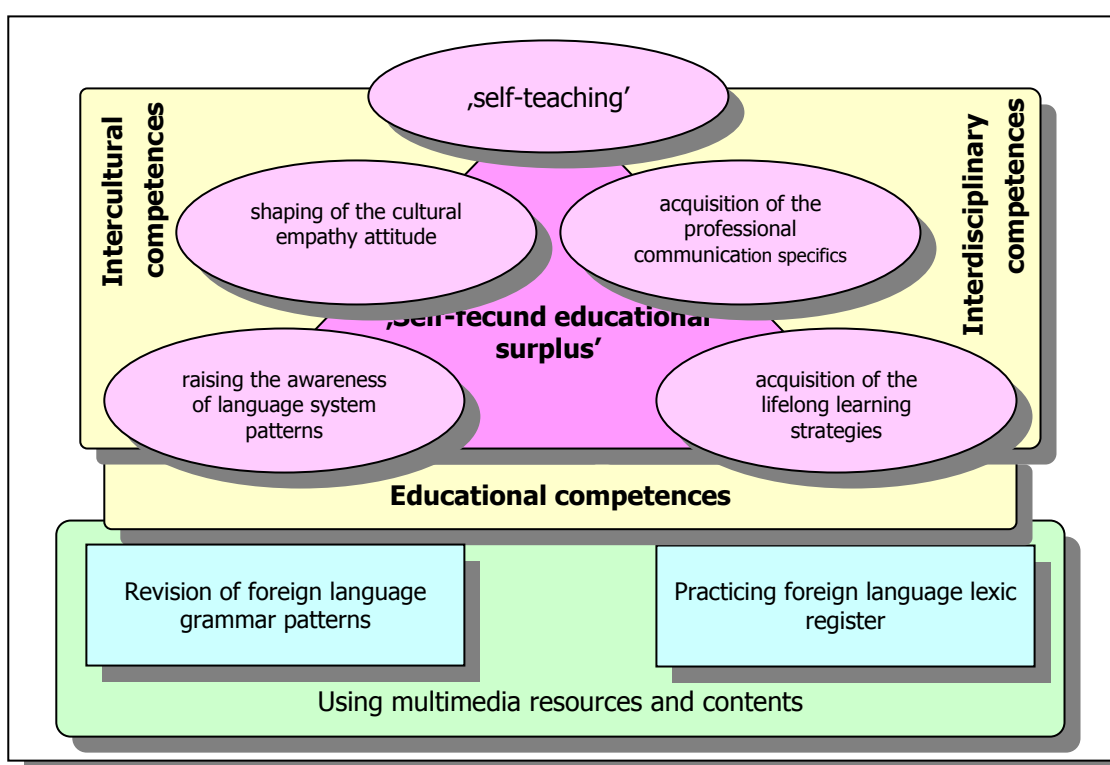
Figure 1: Glotodydactical frame of foreign language teaching at undergraduate institutions



⁶ In modern times, for that purpose students have many possibilities offered – TV shows, presentations, video conferences on the Internet, or other forms of computer recordings about how to work with foreign partners when it comes to professional and/or business cooperation.

In accordance with the above mentioned glotodydactic aims of undergraduate foreign language teaching there are competences which are mediated to students by the means of teaching. By using multimedia resources and contents as the means of successful revision of grammar patterns of a foreign language and by practicing lexical register, the students are mediated educational competences in the form of raising awareness of linguistic patterns and acquiring analytical strategies which are used as the basis for students' lifelong learning so that after finishing their formal education they would be able not only to apply their own educational competences in a responsible, individual, and quality way, but also to keep improving them continuously. Together with these competences, within acquiring the specifics of foreign language professional utterance and the connected communication, the students are also mediated interdisciplinary competences which allow them to leave their narrow, professional teaching environment, but they broaden and deepen their horizons of knowledge, skills, and capabilities in order to achieve (foreign language) professional competence as thoroughly as possible. Analyzing the lexis is accompanied by mediation of intercultural competences, on the basis of which the students shape their cultural empathy attitude whose acquisition makes them able to estimate not only their own position within and in comparison with the narrow professional field, but also a much wider context – social and political. The acquisition of all the above mentioned competences will eventually result in the creation of 'self-fecund educational surplus' in the form of empathy of the students when it comes to 'self-teaching' as a never finished and never ending process of self-formation.

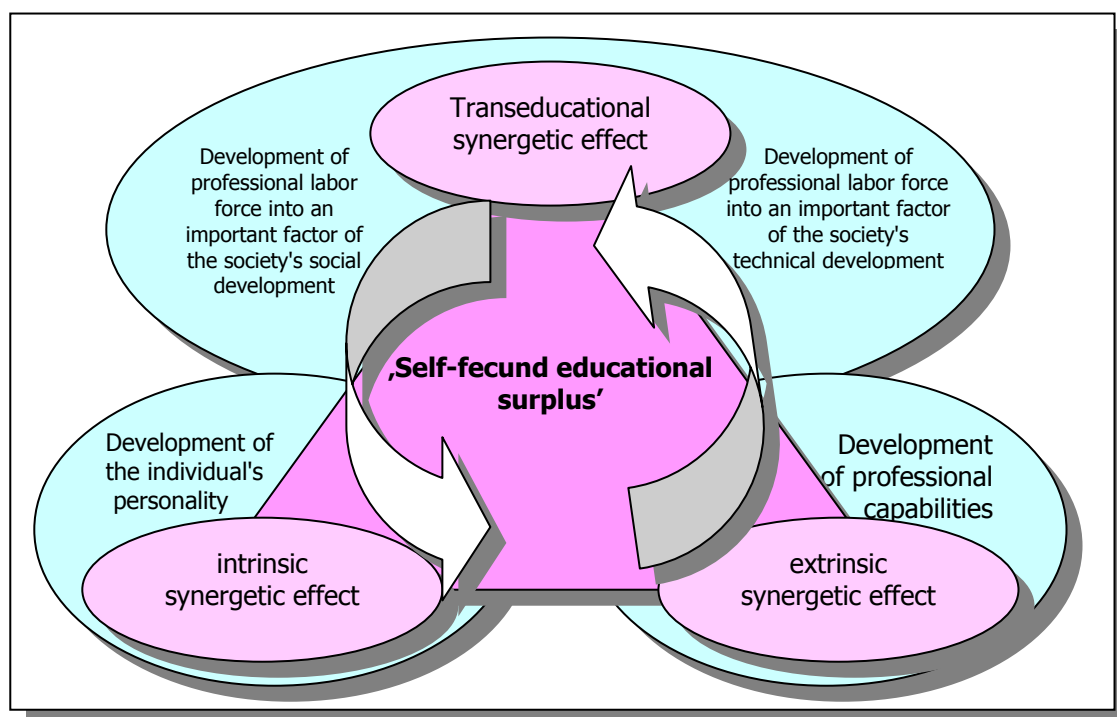
Figure 2: The overview of the competences which are mediated within the foreign language teaching at undergraduate institutions



This leads us to the final result of synergetic effect circulation within the foreign language teaching which is possible to be looked at in the form of shaping of the 'self-fecund educational surplus' as the ultimate purpose of teaching at undergraduate level institutions.

By using the adequate glotodydactic organization of foreign language teaching and by gradually developing certain competences with students, 'the intrinsic synergetic effect' is tried to be achieved in the form of inner need to continually improve one's own foreign language utterance, and general need to develop one's own potentials. This effect, once started, encourages the 'extrinsic synergetic effect' of foreign language teaching: based on the model of finding, analyzing, evaluating, and summarizing the foreign language lexis, the students are given strategies of data collection, processing, and presentation form direct and natural, but also from virtual environment. In that way, for the students, the world becomes a board on which they not only write down already accepted facts, but they can inscribe themselves into that world. This again enables the accomplishment of 'transeducational synergetic effect', which presents itself when students do not stop at the lead model of shaping their own knowledge, skills, and capabilities, but based on the acquired matter they individually, responsibly, and in a fecund way broaden their personal horizon on the other side of formal process of education.

Figure 3: The overview of circulation of synergetic effect and development of adequate competences of professional labor force



Here it is dealt with the development of professional labor force as an important factor of not only technical progress of society in the narrow professional field, but of a factor with risen awareness of social development of the society as a whole. Insofar, the central synergetic effect of foreign language teaching seems to be the diffusion of the work potential on acquisition of foreign language competences in several directions: in the direction of student's personality, his/her professional competences, and social competences which are essential for his/her inclusion in broader social moving as the personality which knows – since it is able to differ the pattern of the found social state – and which on the basis of that knowledge can and knows how to act in the surrounding environment because it has skills which are indispensable for constructive, advancing, and above all humanistic introduction of changes into the world around it. That kind of understanding of 'professional foreign language' teaching will contribute to the fading of the bogey mentioned in the introduction,

the bogey of lifelong learning, and the individual will find his/her active and true existence in those regions of society of knowledge which, while being caught in the discursive practices of realization of 'self-fecund educational surplus', will contribute to humanization of interpersonal relations.

Certainly, the introduction of synergetic approach into the foreign language teaching should be followed by theoretical evaluation of practical effects of such an approach, by elaboration of its concrete models, as well as by further elaboration of using the synergetic approach in other fields of acquiring professional and general competences. For that purpose, it would be advisable, by starting from the above mentioned postulates about the synergetic approach to foreign language teaching, to conceptualize specific researches at the institutions at tertiary level, especially if we take into consideration the insufficient exploration in that field. Thus the field of scientific analysis of the aforementioned approach seems as broad as the notion of 'humanitas' itself – the person's contact with the Other, no matter whether the Other be a social network, a technical invention, or a corporate system of a company. In each of these cases, the learned skills of achieving the synergetic effect shall have to be able to contribute to enlarging the potential of both the individual and the society as a whole, which should anyway be the basic function of educational institutions in the modern society.

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