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Authentic Social-Cultural Reading in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract: The paper concerns the use of authentic social-cultural reading materials in foreign language learning and teaching of international students. The study was started from the assumption that authentic materials allow international students to link mastering a foreign language and the real world since they meet learners' needs and contribute to better social adaptation in a foreign country.
The purpose of the article is to characterize the place and role of work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in foreign language learning and teaching of international students.
The theoretical and mixed methods were used to achieve the purpose. The study was conducted with first-year international students of different faculties of SNAU. In the context of the mixed method both quantitative (numerical) data from questionnaire (in the middle of the semester) and qualitative (namely students' comments, observation and analysis of students' activity during foreign language classes, monitoring the students' reaction to the use of authentic reading materials from different sources (printed mass media, TV, Internet) throughout the semester were gathered and processed to bring the results together in the overall interpretation. Conclusions: the outcomes demonstrate that international students consider authentic social-cultural reading worthwhile and see more potential advantages in work with them than constraints. International students support using different thematic materials from personal contexts (family life and habits) to public ones (country's traditions and events). The benefits of using them also include a possibility for enhancing reading skills, acquisition of the language and reality of the foreign country, better students' social adaptation, and motivation to learning.

Keywords: *authentic materials, social-cultural reading, international students, foreign language, higher education institution (HEI).*

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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education is increasing because of the globalization of information processes and media (Knight & de Wit, 1997; Luchkevych, 2016) that, in turn, determines the current requirements for the level of foreign language acquisition and the need to modernize approaches to its training. Every year the number of students mastering their future speciality in different countries is growing. Ukraine is not an exception (Study in Ukraine, 2020).

According to the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education" (2014) (Law of Ukraine, 2014) and the National Strategy for Education Development in Ukraine for 2012-2021 (National Strategy for Education Development in Ukraine until 2021, 2013), international students obtaining professional training in Ukraine must master basic and highly-specialized competencies, that provides comprehensive development of the future specialist's personality and will contribute to the formation of the abilities for intercultural communication.

The training process in HEIs has transformed in accordance with the social order. At the current stage, the practical goal of training a foreign language is considered as training foreign language communication and interaction.

Each stage of the training process is characterized by the acquisition of new knowledge and overcoming additional difficulties. At the same time, the insufficient level of language proficiency creates a decrease in motivation for further training, complicates the process of socio-cultural adaptation in a foreign language environment in general and mastering the future profession in particular.

Traditionally, training foreigners in HEIs of Ukraine is conducted in Ukrainian and English. It should be mentioned that for many years the Council of Europe has provided the policy of supporting the more effective learning of foreign (local) languages within the European community (Council of Europe, 1969). Moreover, authenticity is the main requirement of the Council of Europe for training texts and materials. As stated in the Common European Recommendations on Language Education (CEFR), an authentic text is the centre of any act of communication, the external objective link between the producer and the perceiver, whether they communicate directly or at a distance (Council of Europe, n.d.).

The application of authentic materials in foreign language learning and teaching has been discussed for many years. The debates of the role of authenticity have become increasingly sophisticated and complex over the years and now embrace research from a wide variety of fields. Research in the use of authentic materials in a foreign language study, mostly English, focuses on several issues. For example,

- What it means to be authentic (Gilmore, 2007; Morrow, 1977; Peacock, 1997; Wallace, 1992).
- Interaction between participants (Van Lier, 1996).
- The social and cultural situation (Rost, 2002).
- Purposes of the communicative act (Kramsch, 1993).

But the problem of work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in the process of teaching and learning of foreign language in HEIs has not been a matter of thorough consideration. Also, the issue if such activity would meet learners' needs and if it could contribute to international students' better social adaptation in a foreign country needs to be called the scholars and practitioners' attention.

Although at present, methodologists and teachers of a foreign language note the need for text material that brings students to the situation of live communication as close as possible (Panova et al., 2010; Tarnopolskyi, 2006; Yeremenko et al., 2018).

Simultaneous appeal to the learned language and the socio-cultural environment through the work with authentic texts contributes to the reproduction of a broader and more figurative picture of the surrounding reality. Thus, we believe that through the work with authentic social-cultural reading materials international students are forming a holistic system of ideas about the realities of the country they study in, and the main national traditions.

That is why it is considered appropriate to use authentic materials in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. This facilitates equal partnership of representatives of different nations in socio-cultural dialogue.

We consider that an important motivating factor for the development of communicative competence is the inclusion of socio-cultural authentic texts with a national-cultural component of semantics in the training process, as they significantly increase interest in learning, stimulate thinking, affect emotions and feelings.

The issues of using the above-mentioned texts in the practice of teaching and learning a foreign (Ukrainian) language in the training of

international students in HEIs have not been covered in the educational research yet. This determines the relevance of the theme of our research.

Concerning the study of work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in the process of teaching and learning of foreign language in HEIs, the topic is timely because the results can be used for scientific and practical purposes. It should input into theory and methods of teaching foreign languages to international students.

Regarding the practical value of the research, it demonstrates the possibility of using its results in developing programs of foreign languages, selecting topics and materials for reading.

The study *hypothesized* that work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in foreign language teaching and learning meets the needs of international students and has several important benefits in higher education and social adaptation in a foreign country.

The research aimed to characterize the place and role of work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in foreign language learning and teaching of international students.

The objectives of the article were: to determine the attitude of international students to the use of authentic materials in foreign language classes (research focuses on work with authentic social-cultural reading materials); to highlight the role (positive and negative arguments) of authentic social-cultural reading materials.

2.Materials and methods

2.1. General characteristics

It is important to note that currently the study of international students in Ukraine and the study of a foreign (Ukrainian) language in HEIs takes place in the following contexts: group classes, monolingual/polylingual groups; mononational / multinational groups. They can choose between English and Ukrainian (their language choice depends on students' earlier experience) (SNAU, 2020).

34 first-year international students of different faculties of SNAU agreed to participate in the study. Besides the following features of the group taking part in the survey should be mentioned: 1) the students are about of the same age (from 19 to 24 years old); 2) having the opportunity of choosing the language of higher education between English and Ukrainian the participants of the research have chosen Ukrainian as they had at least 1 year of previous training and language learning at the preparatory courses at

Ukraine's HEIs before entering the principle course of the University; 3) they are getting the full-time higher education (bachelor's degree) in a foreign country (Ukraine) in a foreign language (Ukrainian). We remark that the gender specification of participants is not a decisive factor for the matter of the study. The specific selection criterion was students' previous foreign (Ukrainian) language learning background and obtaining higher education in the foreign (Ukrainian) language.

74% of students have A-2 language level (according to CEFR), though B-1 level is desirable for entering HEI. Generally speaking, oral communicative skills are better than reading and writing ones. However, the students have the level that allows them to take part in simple day-to-day and studying communication and participate in our research.

All international students taking part in the research agreed to participate in the study in the written form. They also permitted including their comments in the paper. They were informed that they had an opportunity to recuse themselves from participation without any consequences on their status. The research was conducted in October-December, 2019.

The research had several stages: filling in the questionnaire in which the students were supposed to retrace their attitude to work with authentic materials during foreign language classes; observing, identifying and tracing students' approaches to social-cultural content during the course throughout the semester; highlighting the positive and negative arguments of working with authentic social-cultural reading materials.

2.2. Methods

The theoretical and mixed methods were used to achieve the purpose and the tasks of the research.

So, analysis and synthesis of scientific and pedagogical literature were chosen among general theoretical methods. They served to study and highlight the problem of authentic social-cultural reading in foreign language learning, as well as to find out positive and negative arguments of using the above-mentioned texts in the practice of teaching and learning a foreign (Ukrainian) language in the training of international students.

This study was grounded on the mixed method which was characterized as the blending of at least one qualitative and at least one quantitative aspect in one research project (Bergman, 2008). We understand that there are a lot of definitions for what quantitative and qualitative data

are. For the purpose of this study numerical data in nature were referred to as quantitative one (obtained from the students' questionnaire) and non-numerical data (notably students' comments, observation and analysis of students' activity during foreign language classes, monitoring the students' reaction to the use of authentic reading materials) as qualitative ones.

To conduct the research, we followed Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) typology and Convergent parallel design ("parallels Design"). According to this approach, the researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data independently and then brings the results together in the overall interpretation.

More precisely, to collect the data and to accumulate factual material on the research problem we used observation of students' activity during foreign language classes throughout the semester and questionnaire in the middle of the semester. Questionnaire was used to find out international students' attitudes towards applying authentic reading materials on the whole and socio-cultural ones in particular during foreign language classes. The questionnaire consisted of 6 multiple-choice questions. Participants could choose more than one answer according to their attitudes. In addition, they could add their comments regarding any question.

The questionnaire provided quantitative data. After respondents had filled in the questionnaire, the result was transferred into the percentage of answer. The following formula was used: $p = \frac{f}{F}$ 100% (p – percentage; f – frequency of answers of each question; F – the whole number of respondents). The calculation results were rounded to integers following the rounding rules.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were supplemented by information from observations and international students' comments. We took into consideration quantitative and qualitative aspects.

3. Results

To determine if the international students are interested in authentic social-cultural reading the authors conducted questionnaire, meetings and discussions.

The students were asked to answer the set of questions. The outcomes of international students' responses to the questionnaire are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of international students' responses to the Questionnaire
Source: authors' own contribution

Questions	Answers	Frequency	%
1. Would you like to work with authentic reading materials at the foreign language classes?	– Yes	34	100.0
	– No	0	0
2. What type of authentic reading materials would you like to work on?	– Social-cultural	32	94.1
	– Professional	14	41.2
	– Political	3	8.2
	– Business and commerce	9	26.5
3. What benefits can you see from work with authentic social-cultural reading materials?	– Improve reading skills	33	97.0
	– Exposure the language of real communication	32	94.1
	– Facilitate social adaptation in a foreign country	34	100.0
	– Internalize the reality and culture of the foreign country	33	97.0
	– Increase motivation to study	28	82.4
4. What kind of sources of authentic social-cultural materials would you like to work?	– Newspapers/magazines	16	47.0
	– TV	33	97.0
	– Internet	34	100
5. What challenges do you suppose to meet while working with authentic social-cultural materials?	– Too difficult vocabulary	32	94.1
	– Too difficult grammar and sentence structures	32	94.1
	– Difficult to understand outside the communicative situation	25	73.5
	– The content is not in line with students' needs and interests	29	85.3

6.	What thematic areas of authentic social-cultural reading materials would you like to work with?	– Family habits, customs, and traditions	34	100.0
		– The way of life (the city and the countryside)	34	100.0
		– Travelling around the country (Ukraine) and sightseeing	34	100.0
		– Country's holidays and traditions	26	76.5
		– Historical events	14	41.2
		– Outstanding personalities	22	64.7

As indicated in Table 1, the analysis of the data showed a general international students' support of using authentic reading materials in foreign language classes. In their answers to the first question, all 34 students pointed out that they would like to work with such materials.

By answers to the second question, 94.1 % of the respondents demonstrated that they would rather work with authentic reading materials of the social-cultural sphere than professional (14%), political (8.8%), and business and commerce (26.5%) ones.

Dealing with the third question, we found out that all international students considered the main benefit of work with authentic social-cultural reading materials in making it easier to be adapted to each social or cultural situation (100%). 97% of respondents see a great potential of work with social-cultural reading materials in improving reading skills. The majority (94.1%) indicates that they would work with authentic social-cultural materials as provision with the language used for real communication in real society. Students wrote that they were interested in working with social-cultural materials because in such a way they could solve their everyday problems easier and quicker as they would become true participants in communicative social situations. In addition, 82.4% of students believe that work with authentic social-cultural reading materials would contribute to internalizing the reality and culture of the foreign country. One of the students indicated "I became closer to the real world and society of the country of studying". Another important opinion was "I like reading about customs and traditions because it helps to understand people around me and adapt better in a foreign country". Moreover, 79.4% pointed out about

becoming more self-motivated in learning the foreign language using social-cultural reading materials. One of the students specified "I feel more inspired for foreign language learning while reading original social-cultural materials".

The results show that students prefer to use the Internet (100%) and TV (97.0%) as the main source of authentic social-cultural reading materials.

Regarding the question of challenges, students meet while working with authentic social-cultural reading materials, the following concerns take place. The students worry about too difficult vocabulary, grammar and sentence structures (94.1%). Several students noted that they felt a little confused working with authentic social-cultural reading materials because they met a lot of unknown words and grammar constructions.

The divergence of the authentic social-cultural reading materials' content and students' needs and interests (85.3%) is one more challenge that learners are worried about. For instance, there were such comments as "I like reading about universally shared human matters but I am not keen on history"; "Work with social-cultural reading materials helps me to solve everyday household problems, but I don't like reading too much about some historical events and outstanding people".

The students are highly interested in thematic areas covering family habits, customs, and traditions; the way of life in the city and the countryside; travelling around the country (Ukraine) and sightseeing (100%). They are interested a bit less in learning about the country's holidays and traditions (76.5%) and outstanding personalities (64.7 %). Learning about historical events is out of their priorities. This thematic area was supported only by 41.2 % of respondents.

Using authentic materials in foreign languages classes play an important role. First of all, reading authentic texts provides students with access not only to information but to the real language of native speakers for their interactions. Foreign language learners make a choice to follow native speakers in terms of behaviour in situations of social and cultural communication, pronunciation, idioms use, etc.

We believe that reading authentic texts contributes to the development of communicative foreign language competence at the following levels: linguistic, speech, socio-cultural, compensatory, training-cognitive.

The linguistic level includes phonetic, lexical, semantic, orthoepic, orthographic, phonological, grammatical, stylistic knowledge. Thus, the

linguistic level covers linguistic knowledge, where special attention is paid to the study of authentic linguistic material (realities, background vocabulary) and thematic knowledge of everyday and socio-cultural content.

Speech level that presupposes the development of communicative skills is in the unity of the linguistic level because the ability to speak is based on knowledge of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar of the language being studied. At the same time, reading skills are formed through the development of appropriate phonetic, lexical, and grammatical knowledge and skills.

Socio-cultural level of communicative foreign language competence of international students is realized in the knowledge of everyday realities, national and cultural specifics of language behaviour of the people whose language is studied within the topics, areas and situations of communication that correspond to the psychological characteristics of students; in the development of abilities to select and implement elements of the socio-cultural context for communicative action, to represent their country in an environment of foreign language intercultural communication; in compliance with the rules and norms of speech behaviour in a social situation of native speakers.

The compensatory level is realized through the development of students' ability to find a way out of a shortage of language in the process of transferring or receiving information.

The training-cognitive level contributes to the further development of general and special knowledge, skills and abilities, the use of available effective ways of individual study of a foreign language.

We believe that authentic materials motivate students because they are more interesting and more stimulating for learning than artificial or non-authentic materials. Authentic materials bring the students closer to the target language culture, making the learning of a foreign language more enjoyable and, hence motivating.

Reading authentic texts in foreign language learning plays the primary role. The motivation of reading is based on awareness of the usefulness and necessity of cognition broadening of knowledge through mastering reading in a foreign language.

As practice shows, students are especially interested in the use of authentic domestic, socio-domestic, socio-cultural materials for learning. This is caused by a number of factors. First, reading is a more favourable activity at this stage of training, as it allows students to regulate the pace of

information perception independently. Thus, the processing of information by a student becomes more accessible, easier and learning is better.

Secondly, in everyday life and the training process, students often deal with authentic dialogical materials. This facilitates the learning of new information through more structured questions on presentation, the possibility of paraphrasing, explanations, clarifications etc. Third, the student becomes an accomplice in interpersonal communication not with a virtual author, but with a real person, gets the opportunity to draw their conclusions based on oral speech, by nature more expressive, emotional, which has a strong impact on the recipient.

Reading authentic materials serves as a basis for three complementary aspects: language context, situational context, and the real context. The student processing and learning information only perceives the language context but does not participate in the communication. Situational context is considered as a specially organized form of communication in which the student performs the act of speech activity in a foreign language. The student uses the acquired knowledge to participate in the proposed training situation and can act on his behalf or another person, depending on the language task. The real context is realized in a situation of real communication with native speakers.

Research of Ukrainian and foreign educators shows that the use of authentic materials to develop reading skills has undoubted benefits. Language in authentic materials is a means of real communication, it reflects a real linguistic reality, reveals the peculiarities of the language functioning as a tool of communication in the natural environment. The use of authentic materials prevents the distortion of students' perception of foreign reality, as these materials reflect the realities of the country of learning, the ideas, the thinking, the judgments, all the wealth of knowledge of a foreign culture.

In contrast to authentic texts, adapted (processed in a special way) training ones lose the characteristic features of the text as a special unit of communication, are deprived of the author's individuality, national specificity, and colour. The most important thing is that authentic materials representing daily and socio-cultural topics arouse the students' cognitive interest, a willingness to discuss problems of universal human, social, cultural nature, and, therefore, increases motivation to learn a foreign language for effective communication in a foreign language environment and culture.

Information in authentic materials in the language environment of the country of learning has a high level of credibility due to the lack of artificially created didactic orientation. The naturalness of these materials develops a great cognitive activity, in contrast to the usual learning materials based on fictitious situations, which can rarely be found outside the classroom. At the same time, the use of social-cultural authentic reading materials focuses on the learning process not only on its difficulties but on real potentially resourceful experiences.

However, in addition to the positive aspects of the use of authentic materials, there are several disadvantages but rather challenges in their use in learning a foreign language, even in a language environment. For instance, the following ones should be mentioned.

The range of vocabulary can go beyond the students' current needs.

Authentic materials can be too culturally biased. They can be excessively difficult to perceive and understand, contain unnecessary information that is difficult to learn within a particular topic of the lesson.

Thematic diversity of authentic material can make it difficult to learn information during the lesson.

Some materials (news releases, magazine and newspaper articles, social media blogs, etc.) can quickly lose their relevance, and therefore require the teacher to carefully plan, prepare, and update the materials.

4. Discussion

The study carried out complying with ethics and participants' informed consent for participating in it gave us broad material for discussion. Also, the analysis of studies addressing work with authentic materials demonstrates a significant interest of modern educationalists in the matter.

We share the opinion that different activities with authentic materials in foreign languages classes contribute a lot to students' acquisition of foreign language (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Castillo Losada, et al., 2017). *Using authentic materials represents a relatively easy and convenient way to improve not only pupils' communicative competencies but also their confidence in real-life situations* (Nădrag & Buzarna-Tihenea Gălbează, 2017, p. 137).

Authentic reading materials are of great importance as they not only develop language intuition and determine academic success (Apsari, 2014), but they can be the source of enjoyable, intense activity and pleasure (Alderson, 2000).

At the same time, there is no consensus on which text can be considered methodologically authentic, and there is a discussion on different types of authenticity.

However, our approach to understanding the authentic text is confirmed by the ideas of national and international scientists. According to them, such a text is an authentic discourse (a text taken in the event aspect), which is characterized by the naturalness of lexical content and grammatical forms, the situational adequacy of the linguistic means used, and illustrates cases of authentic word use (Nosonovych & Mylrud, 1999; Suresh & Srinivasa, 2019; Wallace, 1998).

Scholars considered that authentic materials on the whole and reading ones, in particular, provide students with different layers of learning potential. For instance, at least there are three of them: language (vocabulary and structures), cultural input (cultural norms and values of the community in which the language is used for interaction) and practical application (using them in the way it was intended) (Nădrag & Buzarna-Tihenea Gălbeazǎ, 2017).

There is a consensus among researchers in foreign language teaching that the application of social-cultural authentic reading materials is beneficial to the learning process. And we also hold their view. The scholars consider that these materials due to their accessibility and everyday use are quite meaningful for creating the illusion of a natural language environment (Krychevskaia, 1996; Richard, 2004). The social-cultural area is important for international students not only as a mean for solving their primary social problems but also, most importantly, as the language of the socio-cultural environment (Lushcyk et al., 2020). So authentic social-cultural reading is in line with students' needs and interests.

However, single studies show that *the use of authentic reading text in comparison to created materials (non-authentic reading text) did not produce significantly better learning outcomes* (Apsari, 2014, p. 93). The author explained such results not only by the authenticity or non-authenticity of reading materials but also by other factors. Nevertheless, it is recommended to use authentic reading materials for a change (Apsari, 2014).

Our scientific opinion and the results of the study above are in line with the following ideas of internationally recognized scientists. Scholars claim that authentic social-cultural reading materials promote learner's motivation (Berardo, 2006; Glazyrina, 2015; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Ivanova, 2014; Savinova & Mykhaleva, 2007). For instance, Guariento &

Morley (2001) state that authentic materials are rather valuable as they are *a way of maintaining or increasing students' motivation for learning as they give the learner the feeling that they are in touch with a living entity and the target language as it is used in the community which speaks it* (Guariento & Morley, 2001, p. 347).

National and foreign scholars share the view that working with authentic social-cultural reading materials has both significant benefits and challenges (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Coroama, 2016; Belkina et al., 2014; Levina et al., 2007; Martinez, 2002; Senior, 2005; Suresh & Srinivasa, 2019).

The recognized benefits are considered the following:

-encouraging students' motivation to foreign language learning;

- enabling the implementation of communicative approach efficiently;

- providing authentic cultural information and environment;

- enriching students experience with real language;

- involving students' needs and interests;

- assisting distinctive artistic contribution to teaching and learning.

The authors have the general idea that, if selected carefully, authentic reading materials can help to give a course structure and direction, in foreign language teaching and learning.

The most spread difficulties are considered the following:

- because of surplus cultural influence the social-cultural background it may be difficult for students to understand some of the contents;

- the vocabulary may not correlate, in many instances, to the students' needs and interests;

- a great mixture of structures may be difficult to decode by students and be too time-consuming.

As learners are the active participants and subjects of the learning process it is crucial to study their needs, interests and attitudes. The social-cultural area is regarded as an essential one for international students obtaining higher education in a foreign country, especially during the first years at the university (Lushcyk et al., 2020).

Thus, the analysis of data obtained from questionnaire and students' comments shows that work with social-cultural reading materials in the process of foreign (Ukrainian) language learning by international students meets their learning goals. The learners look at social-cultural reading materials as a way of improving reading skills, mastering "real language", assimilating the social and cultural experience of a foreign country and a source for inspiration and motivation. So, the foreign (Ukrainian) language is

not only the language of study but also a means of communication and a guide for efficient and effective cross-cultural cooperation.

In other words, our study proves the approaches and views of recognized educationalists about the benefits of using authentic reading materials on the whole and social-cultural ones in particular. Moreover, the authors' contribution brought by this research to the new knowledge to this context is that it is first in Ukrainian pedagogical science the study concerning the application of authentic social-cultural reading materials in practice of foreign (Ukrainian) language teaching and learning was carried out. The results show that international students are rather interested in work with authentic social-cultural reading materials. They also can see more potential benefits of such activity than possible challenges.

The results of the study can be implied by other HEIs dealing with teaching foreign languages in the process of training international students in Ukraine and abroad.

Since learning at HEIs involves not only the acquisition of professional skills and abilities but also the development of a comprehensive personality the inclusion of authentic socio-cultural reading materials in the learning process of international students facilitates this.

Conclusion

The analyzed issues of the study above give us the opportunity to generalize the following conclusions.

1) International students studying foreign (Ukrainian) language in HEI see significant potential in work with authentic reading materials from different sources (printed mass media, TV, Internet) in the educational process. They attitude positively to including authentic social-cultural reading materials of different thematic areas from personal contexts (family life and habits) to public ones (country's traditions and events), etc. into the process of learning and teaching. 2) There are both positive aspects and challenges of using authentic social-cultural reading materials in foreign (Ukrainian) language learning.

The authors think that the benefits cover facilitation of social adaptation, mastering the reading skills, acquisition of the language and reality of the foreign country as well as increasing personal students' motivation to learning. International learners understand that if they want to become an equal participant in social-cultural activities and cross-cultural communication they have to learn, know and accept principles and

tendencies of social functioning in the country of their living and training. And the work with authentic social-cultural reading materials is considered an important way to achieve it.

However, a set of challenges is worth taking into account: linguistic difficulties referring to vocabulary and grammar; non-linguistic ones regarding to social-cultural environment and discrepancy between the contents of learning and students' needs and interests.

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