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ACADEMIC TUTORING AS A FORM OF PERSONALIZED LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A PROJECT AND PRACTICE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GDAŃSK (POLAND)

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Abstract. *The current paper elaborates on the effects of introducing elements of personalized education in the academic tutoring programme realized at the University of Gdańsk (in short UG, Poland). It begins with an outline of the key objectives of the project called Ideal Quality in Good Quantity, which was introduced at the University of Gdansk in the years 2014–2016. The programme originally aimed at equipping academic teachers with tools suitable for implementing elements of individualized didactics. Moreover, the project assumed a practical application of the aforementioned tools in scholarly work of the tutors who realized their own tutoring sessions with students representing various fields of study (philological, pedagogical and culture studies, to mention some of them). The project's initial conception, i.e. Ideal quality in good quantity, is continued forward in the so-called Centrum Tutorów UG as well as in the form of faculties' internal initiatives. In the paper the reader will find a description of fragments of individualized didactic work implemented in teaching French and German as foreign languages and psychology.*

Keywords: *academic tutoring, personalized education, language teaching, University of Gdańsk*

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The purpose of this article is to present a project of academic tutoring as a supporting method of teaching subjects within the Applied Linguistics programme (University of Gdańsk). The article begins with a general characteristic of the method along with its main forms and goals, and then proceeds with the description of four types of application, and finally, it ends with an attempt to assess the project.

Definitions, aims, and forms of tutoring

As a form of personalised education, tutoring is extensively defined in the source literature. According to Czayka-Chełmińska, tutoring is “a planned process of development which occurs in an individual,

supporting relationship with the other person – a tutor” [1, p. 38]. A little wider definition is given by Czekierda [2, p. 20], according to whom tutoring is “a method based on a master-apprentice relationship in which a student is individually taken care of; the method seeks to fully develop the student’s potential thanks to its integral overview of human development”.

In a detailed characterization of tutoring, it can be said that it is a specific master-apprentice relationship that is aimed at completion of a certain research project, the success of which depends on the engagement of both parties and their willingness to receive something that Jendza [6, p. 40] calls “precariousness of scientific knowledge”. Yet tutoring is first and foremost a process of seeking knowledge and establishing meanings. By referring to processualism as a pedagogical paradigm, Jendza [ibid.] says:

“[A processual perspective] shifts the perspective completely on how to understand the sense of tutoring, or participation of the tutor and their student. By engaging in a tutorial, its participants give it unique, although partly intersubjective, senses. In this context, tutorial is not a means to achieve a goal – a synonym of which is here a priorly assumed effect, for example an essay – even when the tutee is allowed to speak seriously. Thinking of an authoring process, and at the same time of its participants, as a process which ends with a product, instrumentalizes the process and removes recognition for the sake of recognition. As a consequence, it abolishes the autotelic dimension of two people meeting in the face of important issues”.

The processual or constructivist character of tutoring can also be considered in the context-ecological perspective. As Grzegorzczyk says [5, p. 103]:

“Firstly, here we can see a process which engages two people in multidimensional relationship or interaction at several recognition levels: language, behaviour, thought process, emotions, etc. Secondly, although the tutor’s knowledge is required and indubitable, and the tutee’s knowledge within the area is smaller accordingly, throughout the process both of them gain new and continuously changing knowledge. This gives tutoring an ontogenetic and epistemological character (cf. Karpińska-Musiał 2015: 132). What is more, research and studies (e.g. Kowalczyk-Wałędziak 2015) of various cases, as well as interviews with tutors and their tutees (Czekierda et al. 2015) show a positive effect of this method on education and development”¹.

It is worth describing tutoring as an educational process in more detail. Czekierda [2, p. 24] lists the following stages of tutoring:

1. The construction of a tutorial relationship, joint definition of goals and understanding of the essence of tutoring, definition of rules and forms of cooperation (conclusion of contract).
2. Formulation of the aim of cooperation.
3. Realization of the aim, based on regular and methodical cooperation between the tutor and the tutee, with special emphasis on the tutee’s own work.
4. Assessment of the process, analysis of scientific and developmental achievements.

As an educational process, tutoring can be conducted in two forms. The first of them is the developmental tutoring, concerned with the development of personality, attitude and values of the participant; as well as with the recognition of their, often unconscious, preferences and skills. The second one is the scientific tutoring, which aims mostly at the development of knowledge and interests of the tutee. In practice, both forms are closely connected, as Czekierda [2, p. 25] points out: “they share a common spirit, integral perspective on a person, and are both based on a master-apprentice relationship...”

This article focuses on the scientific tutoring. It can be described by a list of the elements, the most essential of which are:

- compliance between interests of the tutor and the tutee;

¹ The parenthetical references in this quotation relate to sources [7], [10] and [15] respectively (*editor’s note*).

- definition of the aim of tutoring (preparation for exams, acquiring knowledge, preparation of an experiment, etc.);
- definition of a work plan (a balance between work discipline and scientific exploration);
- emphasis on the processual character of work (supporting tutee's independent thinking and decision-making);
- intellectual satisfaction from realization of the project, cf. [2, p. 26].

Academic tutoring: IQ project at the University of Gdańsk

All aspects of the tutor-tutee relationship are significant in academic tutoring, which has already found its place in Western Europe universities and in the Polish higher education². A widely known attempt to apply tutoring in higher education is "Ideal Quality in Good Quantity – an interdisciplinary programme of foreign language student support basing on academic tutoring at University of Gdańsk (IQ project)"³. As its author underlines, the basis of the IQ project was inspired by the educational activities of the Academic Tutors School at Collegium Wratislaviense, which refers to the Oxford tutoring conception. In the project description, Karpińska-Musiał [9, p. 95–96] says among others:

"In times of mass higher education and visible decrease of education quality, activities offered within the project aim at bottom-up steps in order to increase the quality, extract as much intellectual potential as possible of ambitious and skilled students".

The IQ project relied on individual work of an academic teacher – i.e. a tutor, with five students. A series of meetings in a single term covered seven tutorials with each student. In practice, the project was executed as follows:

1. 64 hours of training for academic teachers – future tutors, with an external internationally experienced coach and tutor expert.
2. Student enrolment (online enrolment, based on the analysis of a cover letter).
3. The arrangement of two series of tutorials – in winter and summer term 2014/2015.
4. The arrangement of assessment meetings after the first and the second series of tutorials.
5. The preparation of two summary co-authored monographs which covered the experiences of tutors and tutees.
6. A conference to summarize the IQ project – April 2016.

The completion of the IQ project was not equal to the end of tutoring at the University of Gdańsk. Thanks to teachers-tutors, a Centrum Tutorów UG (Tutor Centre) was established. Its activities are focused on the promotion and realization of various forms of personalized education⁴.

Tutoring at the University of Gdańsk: examples of application

All examples of tutoring application that are presented herein compose a report from a project executed with the first-year students of the first-cycle Applied Linguistics studies (University of Gdańsk) with English and German as the main languages. The project was conducted in the summer term 2017/2018. The enrolment for the project consisted of the information on the University website and direct conversations of teachers-tutors with the first-year students, during which the teachers showed the idea, aims and methods of tutoring. In the Institute of Applied Linguistics and Translation, 11 students applied for the project. During the enrolment, each of five tutors presented their general scope of subjects for the

² On the role of tutoring in Western Europe, see [12, p. 255–265]; [13, p. 18–32]; on academic tutoring in Poland, see among others: [3, p. 224–243]; [11, p. 232–238]; [14, p. 239–243]; [8, p. 244–254]; [4, p. 128–175]. For news about current attempts to use tutoring in higher education, see among others: http://www.projektiq.ug.edu.pl/?page_id=422.

³ Information about the project can be found in Karpińska-Musiał [9, p. 93–242] and at <http://www.projektiq.ug.edu.pl>.

⁴ Information about establishment of the centre and its current activities can be obtained at <http://www.centrum-tutorow.ug.edu.pl>.

planned tutorial. A detailed schedule, plan and work methods were individually established during the first meetings of a tutor with the student. This article presents four examples of the method applied. Three of them are concerned with learning a foreign language – German, French, and Spanish. The fourth one is focused on general psychology.

The assessment of the project was conducted with a questionnaire that consisted of closed and open questions. Considering a small number of respondents, the gathered data was analysed and interpreted with a qualitative method of individual case analysis of the students who participated in the project. Data verification is concerned with three main aspects, which are: the level of achievement of the assumed goal, the characterization of differences between tutoring and regular language classes, and general assessment of tutoring as a work method.

Application example 1

The first example applies to learning German. A student was motivated to enrol in the project by her low level of language skills, which was expressed in a subjective low self-assessment and confirmed by test results. An additional motivation was provided by the open attitude and readiness of the said student for extra-curricular work; she was also aware that only her effort can give her a chance to improve her language fluency. The aim of tutoring was then to work on language skills, mainly productive ones, speaking and writing. Tutoring differed from a regular language exercises programme by the scope of material and an individualized form of classes, the purpose of which was to help the student to break the barrier and start speaking German.

The arrangement of the tutorial was concerned with problem discussion, the topic of which depended on a text (press articles chosen by the student) or a film (chosen by the student). The discussed materials provided a lexical basis, which was then used in a conversation with the tutor and in writing (an essay).

The framework of meetings can be described as a sequence of the following phases:

- phase one – the student works on the source material (an article or a film), presents its contents to the tutor and defines the problem as a basis for further discussion;
- phase two – discussion and presentation of opinions by reference to life experience or examples from literature, film and art;
- phase three – writing an essay, basing it on the analysed material and the discussion between the student and the tutor.

The role of the tutor in the discussion was mainly to provide a friendly atmosphere for the conversation, support the student to boost her language confidence, inspire her to look for the material which reflects the discussed issue, and pose questions which provoke thinking. Being an active participant in the conversation who uses experience and providing a natural rhythm for the discussion, the tutor presented his own opinions about the discussed subjects and issues, and at the same time asked questions so that the student was encouraged to say what she thought. The scope of subjects was a direct result of the dialogue between the student and the tutor; it was related to the examples and arguments used to illustrate the discussed issue. Among the discussed issues, the following can be listed: voluntary work, economic migration and friendship. Excluding the first meeting, each tutorial began with the summary of the previous discussion and the analysis of the student's written homework.

The data collected in the assessment questionnaire shows that according to this student, the most significant value of tutoring is the opportunity to overcome her fear of speaking, which during the first year of studies is a stress factor, especially for students with low language competences. When asked about the achievement of the goal defined at the beginning of the session cycle, the student noticed that "meetings allowed her to improve her speaking fluency in German"⁵, and the atmosphere of the speaking training itself was entirely different from the one of regular classes. Among the differences between tutorials and

⁵ All quoted phrases in description of tutoring application come from assessment questionnaires, and in the case of the last tutorial – from the student's essay.

regular language classes, the student underlined different subjects, her engagement in work, and a good relationship with her tutor, including a friendly atmosphere of classes. She also emphasised individualization of learning, which can be seen in the autonomy of learning (choosing materials) and the adjustment of topics and work methods to the language level and needs of the student. When assessing the method, the student noticed that the significant personal contribution made in order to conduct particular tasks was, in fact, an important motivating factor. Preparation of home exercises, including searching for examples that can illustrate the discussed issue, positively impacted memorization of the lexical material. For this student, extending her vocabulary was especially important.

Application example 2

The second case is an attempt to apply tutoring to the practical teaching of French as a foreign language on the basic level. Several students were interested in tutoring because of French and Spanish foreign language courses, which begin in the second year of University studies. Recruiters chose one student who was particularly motivated to master the basics of French. The choice of materials was limited to the basic grammatical structures and vocabulary, which could give the student the basis for simple communication.

Tutorials were based on textbooks and the tutor's own materials. Each meeting consisted of the following stages:

- the presentation of the new grammatical and vocabulary material, including the elements of an academic lecture;
- the practical use of the gained skills (grammar and lexical exercises, understanding of written text, listening);
- the attempts at spontaneous communication and the elements of simple translations of easy texts and sentences.

The tutorials were based on textbooks and the tutor's own materials.

In her assessment questionnaire, the student emphasised that the basic goal of the tutorial was achieved, and its permanent effect is that she can “introduce herself in French and construct simple sentences”. When comparing the tutorials to her regular language classes, the student noticed that the tutorials had a better work pace, relationship with the tutor and work atmosphere, and the didactic process was personalized (these questions were given the highest possible grades in the questionnaire). The personalized tutor-student contact in foreign language teaching provided an opportunity to be corrected during spontaneous communication, when writing, and when translating. In comparison to traditional classes, tutoring “focuses more on pronunciation errors, and the student-teacher relationship is better”. The additional value of the tutorial cycle according to the student was that she learnt basic information about the culture of the target country.

Application example 3

Another example shows an attempt to use tutoring in the practical learning of basic Spanish as a foreign language. Similarly to French, the interest in this tutoring was shown by several students, out of which one was finally chosen. Considering a small number of the planned tutorials, it was assumed that the meetings would cover the following topics:

- self-introduction and description;
- the place of residence;
- the university, studies, the field of studies and the infrastructure of educational institutes.

The organization of the tutorial was similar to the one presented in the description of the French one. The assessment leads to believe that the basic goal of the tutorial was achieved, as, in the words of the student, it provided her with “the basics, so she can continue learning Spanish in the future”. In her comparison of regular academic classes to tutoring, the student emphasised personalization of the didactic process and adjustment of the work pace to the student's individual expectations, saying among others: “in tutoring, the tutor gives the student 100% of their attention, the work pace is properly adjusted; this

cannot be done when the group has more than 10 people". According to the student, tutoring is an interesting teaching form as it allows to "develop one's interests and gain additional knowledge, which is not always possible during classes".

Application example 4

The last case shows the implementation of tutoring to share knowledge of widely understood psychology. Recruiters chose one student who was interested in the offered subject. The rules of the tutor contract were also defined, according to which:

- the main psychological fields were chosen to be discussed during tutorials (atomism and association psychology, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, cultural psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology);
- both sides agreed that tutoring shall be academic in its character – not developmental, so it cannot be treated as an individual therapy or a consultation for ethical reasons.

Each tutorial had the following phases:

- student's own work on a chosen psychology field (the analysis of sources, notes, reading given text fragments, the Internet, others);
- the presentation of the signalized issue, including an academic lecture and a discussion.

The assessment procedure (the questionnaire and the essay which summarized the series) allowed to state that the defined goal, which was to share the basic knowledge about the main fields of modern psychology, was achieved. In the essay, the student emphasised the development value of the tutorial saying that it was "an interesting experience in self-development and a way to get to know myself". The student also referred to two issues of tutoring which were mentioned in the theoretical part of this paper (the acquisition of scientific knowledge and its provisional status) by saying, "I acquired knowledge about the basic terms of modern psychology and psychology as a whole by using my preferred method, i.e. a discussion with an expert. Discussions made me analyse new terms, and *re-think values and thought schemes...*⁶ I am glad that I had a chance to be part of this project. I think that this form of education is an attractive point in the offer of the university. I would certainly use it again, concerning psychology, a foreign language as well as any other fields related to personal, intellectual, or cultural development".

Summary

The academic scientific tutoring as an individualized form of work gives wide opportunities to activate students, as shown by the four abovementioned application examples. It can be used to present knowledge and train language skills, it supports motivation and stimulates cognitive activity. As a method, it requires engagement, regularity and thought, so it works best for students who are aware of their educational needs. The essential part of tutoring, which impacts all aims and functions of the methods, is undoubtedly the unique relationship between the tutor and the tutee, which constructs the in-depth dialogue. Thanks to this relationship, academic tutoring can be a work method also for those who cannot obtain personalized substantive support in a large group of students.

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⁶ Underlined by the author of the text.

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