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Experimental Learning of Foreign Language with the Socio-cultural Skills Development Method by Means of Modern Internet Technologies

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Abstract

This paper considers the effectiveness of a methodological system, designed in experimental teaching, of developing the socio-cultural skills of students studying German by means of modern Internet technologies. The authors explore the problem of experimental learning, describe the participants and the stages of experimental learning, and conduct a statistical analysis of the data of the experimental learning of the control and experimental groups.

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1. Introduction

Today the Russian educational system is undergoing a period of reformation. The recent introduction of new educational standards in higher education in Russia and the conversion into a 2-level higher education system require a reorganization of educational process with a new orientation. In the current situation the competence-based approach becomes significant. According to this approach the result of the educational process should be not the

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knowledge and skills in a specific area, but the basic competencies which reflect the practical ability of a specialist in their professional activity.

In the framework of foreign language learning this goal-setting includes the ability of students to realize intercultural communication, the effectiveness of which depends on their level of sociocultural competence. This competence ensures a high cultural level of students as well as effective communication among the representatives of different cultures (Mymrina, & Abdrashitova, 2015). Sociocultural competence is necessary for a translator because they are mediators who contribute to the cooperation of different nations. They know all the spheres of life, politics and economy of a nation that speaks this language. The level of sociocultural competence is what success in translation and interpretation mainly depends on. Many modern scientists emphasize this fact (Sysoev, 2002), (Safina, 2014), (Rasmussen, & Sieck, 2015), (Belyukova, Grishaeva, & Karataeva, 2014).

Despite the existing body of studies dedicated to the usage of modern information and communication technologies in the development of students' sociocultural skills, however, one needs to recognize the fact that there are many undeveloped or insufficiently studied problems. They include the absence of a nomenclature of sociocultural skills that can be developed by means of modern Internet technologies (blog-technology, wiki-technology, podcasts). It's also necessary to elaborate a methodological system of developing students' sociocultural skills by means of modern Internet technologies for the major "Linguistics and Translation Studies".

2. Applied research task

In the framework of this survey a methodological system of developing sociocultural skills by means of modern Internet technologies for the major "Linguistics and Translation Studies" was worked out. The methodological system is a hierarchical combination of structural components which consists of four blocks: target, theory (approach and principles of training), technology (organization forms, methods, training techniques, levels of training, methodological conditions) and assessment (assessment criteria and training results). A detailed description of the methodological system introduced and its relevance are given in the article by I. Zabrodina (Zabrodina, 2013).

The effectiveness and relevance of this system, as well as the legitimate character of the methodological conditions taken (Zabrodina, & Abdrashitova, 2014), were defined during the experimental learning. The aim of learning was the development of sociocultural skills of students studying German by means of modern Internet technologies (blog technologies, wiki-technologies, podcast).

The task of the experimental learning was the development of the following sociocultural skills including the ability:

- To gather, generalize, classify, systematize and interpret cultural information using different sources, including the Internet (1).
- To prepare materials of cultural studies that reflect cultural and actual social aspects of German-speaking and Russian-speaking countries in one's native and foreign languages using different sources, including the Internet, online mass media, and multimedia materials (2).
- To draw analogies, contrasts, and generalizations while comparing facts, cultural phenomena, and events in the cultural life of communities under study (3).
- To discuss the cultural aspects of countries under study in their languages (4).
- To choose the socio-culturally acceptable language register (5).
- To identify and interpret the socio-culturally marked word and discourse (6).
- To act as a cultural agent between Russians and representatives of the countries under study, to help in setting up cultural contacts, to explain cultural peculiarities of communication in the Russian-speaking as well as German-speaking milieus, to foresee possible misunderstanding and conflicts and to prevent them (7).
- To act as a representative of one's native country (8).
- To use politically-correct language in relation to various sociocultural aspects while speaking against cultural discrimination, cultural aggression, and cultural vandalism (9).

3. Description of the experimental learning

The experimental learning took place over one academic year from September, 2014 to May, 2015, at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University.

The participants of this experiment were 3rd year students of the Institute for International Education and Language Communication with the major “Linguistics and Translation Studies”. Their level of German corresponded with the European level B1-B2 (Common European Framework of Reference: Language, Testing and Assessment, 2001).

The experimental learning was conducted according to the author’s algorithm of the development of students’ sociocultural skills by means of modern Internet technologies (Zabrodina, 2012). The students of the control and the experimental groups used the following German textbooks in their studies: «Berliner Platz 2», «Berliner Platz 3» by Ch. Lemcke & L. Rohrmann (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 2003) and «Themen neu 3» (Berlin: Max Hueber Verlag, 2005).

In addition, the students of the experimental group did Internet project work at their lessons and in their spare time. This activity was oriented toward building sociocultural skills by means of modern Internet technologies (blog technologies, wiki-technologies, podcast). Within each theme students took part in three projects and used each of three Internet technologies. A description of their didactic characteristics is given below.

Blogs –this is a modern technology of the new generation of Internet services. This is the personal page of a user in the form of a diary or an Internet journal. In view of the fact that the content of a particular blog can be open to any participant of an Internet project regardless of where they are, this technology can be used to organize net communication in a foreign language among students as well as to organize extracurricular group and individual educational activities oriented toward language development (vocabulary, grammar), development of reading and writing skills, and development of sociocultural and intercultural competencies.

Wiki technology is a modern Web 2.0 Internet technology on the basis of which one can form students’ foreign communicative competence with a variety of its components. Wiki allows an individual or a group of people to work on the creation of a common document, to change it and to add to it despite being in different geographical locations. If necessary, each participant of the project can return to the previous version of the document and check who made the latest changes and when.

The social podcast service allows net users to listen, watch, create, and spread audios and videos. Training podcasts are created by students in the foreign language. The contents of a podcast are defined by the subject scope of the educational program. The length, type of record and format of a podcast are defined by the teacher. Students can create training podcasts and place them on a podcast server. While preparing and recording the podcast materials students can work on developing all types of speech activities, especially speaking.

The completion of one project (cycle) in learning and discussing cultural material by means of Internet technologies was conducted in students’ spare time within two weeks.

Table 1 presents the themes of the Internet projects.

Table 1. Themes for Internet projects in the experimental group.

Deadlines for project completion	Themes for the course	Themes for Internet projects
September – October 2014 (1-8 weeks)	Character and appearance. Temperament and traits of character. Influence of upbringing and surroundings on a person’s character. Typical Russians and typical Germans.	<i>Blog-project</i> : «What is national character»; <i>Wiki-project</i> : «Traits of Russian national character» and «Traits of German national character»; <i>Podcast</i> : «How I imagine a typical German»
November – December 2014 (9-16 weeks)	Health. Healthy way of life. Visiting a doctor. Illnesses and their symptoms. Modern illnesses (AIDS, hepatitis, flu etc.). Bad habits. Smoking. Alcoholism. Drugs.	<i>Blog-project</i> : «Smoking and drinking prohibition laws: a panacea? »; <i>Wiki-project</i> : «Insurance medicine: Pros and Cons»; <i>Podcast</i> : «Healthy way of life: fashion or life style»

February – March 2015 (1-8 weeks)	Problems of modern family	<i>Blog-project:</i> «One-parent family: modern norm or problem?»; <i>Wiki-project:</i> «Problems of modern family life in Russia and Germany»; <i>Podcast:</i> «Family values of the XXI century: preserved or changed?»
April – May 2015 (9-16 weeks)	A person in the modern world.	<i>Blog-project:</i> «Male and female social roles: the same or different»; <i>Wiki-project:</i> «The role of the individual in modern society»; <i>Podcast:</i> «Gender stereotypes and ways of defeating them»

In the experimental learning we used two types of control:

- The first type of control is regular monitoring. It is done by a teacher during the experimental learning in the form of oral comments during lectures. These comments include remarks and recommendations to each student. After the experimental learning, monitoring is conducted in the form of collective discussion
- The second type is a teacher's test of each sociocultural skill before the experimental learning (control entry test) and after it (experimental final test).

To assess the development of sociocultural skills, the students of both the control and experimental groups were asked to take part in the Internet projects while studying the first and the last theme of the course and to use blog-technology as well as the podcasts (Table 1). The students in the experimental group performed Internet projects throughout the whole period of the experimental learning.

The results of experimental learning were coded for statistical processing, which was done with the Minitab program. The rates of each sociocultural skill were coded along a four-point scale: «1», «0,75», «0,5» or «0». To assess the significance of results, a Student's t-criterion was used. A student's t-criterion estimates the difference in scale for average X_{avg} and Y_{avg} of two X and Y samples. The main advantage of this criterion is the variety of its applications. It can be applied to compare average values of dependent and independent samples. The samples are considered independent if the procedure of experiment and the results after measuring a characteristic of one sample don't have any influence on the process of the experiment or on the results after measuring the same characteristic in the group of respondents from the other sample. And vice versa, the samples are called dependent if the experiment and its results obtained after the measurement of one characteristic in one sample have some influence on the other one.

In our case we deal with dependent samples because assessment of the development of sociocultural skills of students studying German was conducted in the control and experimental groups before and after experimental learning.

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the control test analysis for the control and experimental groups.

Table 2. Results of the control test analysis for the control group (with the usage of unpaired t-test).

Controlled skill (N = 22)	Student's t-criterion	p-value
1	10,15	$\leq 0,05$
2	12,55	$\leq 0,05$
3	8,20	$\leq 0,05$
4	12,80	$\leq 0,05$
5	6,90	$> 0,05$
6	7,60	$\leq 0,05$
7	5,76	$> 0,05$
8	6,12	$> 0,05$
9	1,46	$> 0,05$

N – number of students, p – preselected significance level

Table 3. Results of the control test analysis for the experimental group (with the usage of unpaired t-test).

Controlled skill (N = 22)	Student's t-criterion	p-value
1	10,75	$\leq 0,05$
2	12,10	$\leq 0,05$
3	8,63	$\leq 0,05$
4	13,01	$\leq 0,05$
5	5,86	$> 0,05$
6	7,12	$\leq 0,05$
7	5,48	$> 0,05$
8	7,06	$> 0,05$
9	2,12	$> 0,05$

N – number of students, p - preselected significance level

The statistical analysis of the results of the experimental test in the control and experimental groups is significant enough to reveal the effectiveness of the proposed method (Slesarenko, & Zabrodina, 2014).

The statistical analysis shows that in the framework of experimental learning the students of the experimental group had better results in the 1st ($t = 20,65$), 3rd ($t = 12,72$), 5th ($t = 10,47$), 6th ($t = 25,74$), 7th ($t = 14,63$), 8th ($t = 13,16$) и 9th ($t = 18,43$) aspects. In the 2nd and 4th aspects the students of experimental group had insignificant improvement: $t = 5,02$ and $t = 3,17$ respectively.

The analysis of t-test statistical data shows that in both groups students have already developed some sociocultural skills before experimental learning.

Similar results in the control and experimental groups can be explained by the fact that:

- During the educational process at the university within the major “Linguistics and Translation Studies” students already had some sociocultural skills.
- Socio-cultural skills are universal regardless of the subject within which students are educated and their sociocultural competence is developed.

Moreover, in the framework of the competence-based approach to education the interdisciplinary basis for forming competencies is preemptive in modern school and higher education institutions. The students' ability to work with cultural information and the ability to present the results of their culture study projects have already been formed to a certain degree while learning other subjects. These abilities were simply transferred from one educational context into another one. The ability to identify and to interpret the socio-culturally marked words and discourse has been developed in courses of the main subjects of the major.

4. Conclusions

The results of the analysis testify to the fact that after experimental learning, both groups demonstrated an increase in each of the aspects under study. The only exception was the ability to be correct in the sociocultural aspects while speaking against cultural discrimination, cultural aggression, and cultural vandalism in the control group ($t=2,46$ by $p = >0,05$).

The statistical analysis confirms that the development of students' socio-cultural skills within the speciality “Linguistics and Translation Studies” by means of modern Internet technologies is an achievable goal. At the same time different results of student's t-test criterion confirm the complexity of this process.

The statistical analysis shows that according to the training results, the students of the experimental group had better results in each skill tested. This fact verifies the hypothesis of the survey and proves the effectiveness of developing socio-cultural skills by means of modern Internet technologies (blog, wiki, podcast).

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