

Project-based Learning: Language and Culture

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Abstract. *The article is devoted to the issue of communicative language competence development. The authors are in favour of a greater emphasis on sociolinguistic component of above-mentioned competence. To carry out the experiment the researchers have implemented a project-based learning approach. The participants of the experiment were involved in the projects devoted to the English-speaking countries' cultural identity. The experiment demonstrates the efficiency of project-based learning for the enhancement of communicative language competence.*

Keywords – *project-based learning, communicative language competence, sociolinguistic component, cultural identity*¹.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the Council of Europe adopted the document “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment” [4]. The main content of the document is aimed at describing the strategies for the enhancement of general and communicative competences in order to solve communicative tasks in various situations. Communicative language competence is outlined in a separate block and includes a linguistic component, sociolinguistic component and pragmatic component. These components enable a speaker to carry out activities using language tools. There are a many works devoted to the formation of communicative competence, but the document's authors paid more attention to the formation of linguistic and pragmatic components. The authors believe that more attention should be paid to the formation of a sociolinguistic component since in the modern world, knowledge, skills and abilities are especially valuable. To form this component, it is most effective to use the project method. This method allows students to acquire knowledge independently by solving practical problems. We put forward the following hypothesis: the sociocultural component of foreign language competence will be formed more effectively with the implementation of project-based learning.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Acquisition of any language is inextricably linked with understanding a national culture, which involves not only the assimilation of cultural knowledge but also the formation of the ability to understand the mentality and to distinguish the characteristics of the communicative behaviour of native speakers.

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An important factor in the formation of sociolinguistic component is the use of new educational technologies. In this case, project-based learning (PBL) is considered to be a productive approach, since it creates a unique opportunity for students' personal growth through the development of their creative potential and encouragement of their cognitive interests. The PBL increases the productivity of training and ensures its practical orientation. According to Grahame [12], PBL is “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning essential knowledge and life-enhancing skills through an extended, student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks”. According to Harmer and Stokes [13], the key features of PBL are learning by doing, teamwork and group work.

Students benefit from the method increasing self-esteem and motivation [19], high-level cognitive skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking [25] and group work skills [9, 11]. Bell [2] stated that project-based learning involves students in real-life problems and forces them to ask their questions, plan their studies and use different strategies to achieve their goals. Learning by doing is at the core of this approach, which is recognised by many researchers [5, 1, 8, 20, 21, 26]. Learning occurs when students try to solve a problem by asking questions, researching, writing, speaking, protecting, arguing, analysing, and synthesising [27]. Students are expected to engage in real-life activities in order to use what they learn in the way they need outside the classroom, and this stimulates student learning [14]. PBL also promotes autonomy because it forces students to rely on their resources and becomes self-reliant.

According to Larmer et al. [16], some of the basic elements of PBL are a complex issue or problem, constant inquiry, authenticity, student's choice, reflection, criticism and revision, as well as a public product. One of the features that distinguishes project-based learning from the traditional approach is the high priority of the learning process over its results [16]. In PBL classes, students and teachers focus on such processes as developing language skills, discussing the content or competing with other project participants, rather than on the final product itself [15, 20].

The second characteristic of project-based learning is that students need to create material products [17, 22]. There are practically no restrictions on the forms of products and work on a project can be done using such forms as posters, mockups, newspapers, websites, video clips, wall displays and even mini-dramas. Successful project training includes the implementation of several products that provide students with constant feedback and learning opportunities. Working

on these tangible products in various forms is based on the experience of students' self-realisation and gives them a sense of achievement. Such features distinguish PBL outcomes from more traditional learning outcomes found in traditional classrooms [23]. In addition, since PBL achievements are visible and tangible, it is easier for the students to recognise the impact of their efforts in the learning process.

As for the teachers, in PBL, they perform the role of facilitators [16]. Teachers should monitor, advise, and ensure that all students take responsibility for the execution of projects, are motivated and interactive, and classes are active and collaborative [16]. Teachers should provide feedback and know how, when and to what extent they provide support to students [2, 6].

Thus, PBL is an active, student-oriented, didactic approach that can be implemented at a higher education level and emphasises the cooperative creation of a learning product [3, 7, 8, 10, 17, 18]. It includes autonomous learning, constructive research, goal setting, collaboration, communication and reflection in real-life practices [2]. The PBL methodology has been effectively used in several areas of education [24]; therefore, this approach is applicable to language education. It facilitates improving language skills because students are engaged in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities. They have the opportunity to use language in a relatively natural context and participate in meaningful activities which require target language use.

Subject project work has a sociocultural and cultural sound in the aspect of contrast-comparative nature. In the process of performing design work, students collect, systematise and summarise rich, authentic material. In this case, students examine various printed and online sources in a foreign language. Subjects of projects may have a sociocultural orientation and reflect a diverse range of students' interests.

III. METHOD

The study was conducted from 2012 to 2017 at the Department of English language of the Northern (Arctic) Federal University. The main group of subjects consisted of students from the 1st to the 2nd course of the direction of training 03.03.04 "State and Municipal Administration". The procedure for the experimental proof of the hypothesis was focused on the analysis of sociolinguistic component. The formation of the component was compared in two student groups. The control group studied according to the standard curriculum. The experimental group studied with the use of the project method. For the analysed period we held different projects with the students of the experimental group. In this article, we present our experience of the project "Language and Culture", which was devoted to the understanding of the term "cultural identity". Carrying out the project students had to find answers to the questions: *What is it cultural identity? What elements define the cultural identity of each nation? Is language a part of cultural identity?*

The project "Language and Culture" had four stages:

1. Students made groups and chose English speaking countries for their project. After that, they selected the key points that had to be studied for the illustration of the cultural identity of the chosen country. For example, languages, population, historical facts, weather conditions, traditions, architectural features, interesting facts and others.

2. The second stage involved training of lexical and grammatical material on the project topic, as well as the creation of communicative situations that stimulated speaking in the English language. In our case, students were asked to play a board game-quiz on pre-prepared cards which depicted various facts about English-speaking countries.

3. The third stage was associated with the creative activity, the result of which had to be a certain product, the project result. At this stage, students analysed collected information, studied online tools for presentation (a piktochart, a mind map), prepared questions for a quiz about the chosen country.

4. The fourth stage included the presentation and joint evaluation of the project. The presentation of the projects was organised in the form of a game. At first, each group presented infographics of their chosen country, pointing out and describing each picture shown on the poster, and then the poster was removed. The speakers took out the cards with questions by numbers. The rest of the students pulled out the cards and answered questions about the country they had heard about. Thus, each group was evaluated not only for the presentation of the project but also for the number of correct answers to the questions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The level of the sociolinguistic component development is determined in accordance with the criterion of the knowledge of the English-speaking national and cultural characteristics. To diagnose the level of the sociolinguistic component development, we conducted the same test for the knowledge of cultural and linguistic features of English-speaking countries in the control and experimental groups (Table 1).

TABLE 1 THE LEVEL OF FORMATION OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPONENT

| The level of development of component | Control group | Experimental group |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Basic(less than 10 scores) | 18 | 5 |
| Elevated (from 10 to 15 scores) | 7 | 11 |
| High (from 15 to 20 scores) | 0 | 9 |

To determine the significance of the results obtained, we apply the U-Mann-Whitney statistical test. We put forward two hypotheses. H0: the differences in the level of formation of the sociolinguistic component in the control and experimental groups are insignificant. H1: differences in the level of formation of the sociolinguistic component in the control and experimental groups are significant. We carried out statistical processing of the data (Table 2).

TABLE 2 RANKS

| | Group | N | Mean Rank | Sum of ranks |
|----|--------------------|----|-----------|--------------|
| DV | Control group | 25 | 16,20 | 405,00 |
| | Experimental Group | 25 | 34,80 | 870,00 |
| | Total | 50 | | |

In Table 3 “Test Statistics” the value of asymmetric significance (p-level) is equal to 0.000. Compare this with the level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$

TABLE 3. TEST STATISTICS

| | DV |
|----------------------|---------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 80,000 |
| Wilcoxon W | 405,000 |
| Z | -5,094 |
| Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed) | ,000 |

0.000 < 0.05

If $p < \alpha$, then we accept the hypothesis H1 with the probability of 0.95. Conclusion: the differences in the formation of the sociolinguistic component in the control and experimental groups are significant. The level of the sociolinguistic component development in the experimental group is much higher.

After the conducted work, the students were asked to share additional comments on what they liked and what they felt like changing in the project-based lesson. The majority of the students’ comments were positive. Students appreciated the topic, the teaching style, the opportunity to work in a group, and chance not only to improve their English language skills but to discover new facts about different countries, their people and traditions.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The value of this paper lies in the study of project-based learning for the development of the sociolinguistic component of communicative language competence. The results indicate that project-based learning positively effect the development of sociolinguistic component of communicative language competence. Using game elements stimulated students to be interested in the process more than in the results. Positive emotions created the base for sociolinguistics knowledge acquisition. We strongly feel that this project is adaptable and appropriate for a large number of English-language learners.

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