

# On Learning via Skype vs Brick-and-Mortar Learning: The Experience of Teaching a Foreign Language to Gifted Children

Ashrapova A.Kh. Svirina L.O. Litvinenko E.V.\*

*Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University, Kazan 420000, Russia*

*\*Corresponding author. E-mail: lena2703@inbox.ru*

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on creating conditions for developing foreign language communicative skills in gifted children. The issue discussed here is especially relevant as children from places far away from university cities have limited access to the educational facilities offered by higher education institutions. Skype as a virtual learning platform makes it possible to arrange classes that provide in-depth learning experience. However, teaching via Skype requires certain adjustments to the regular classroom procedure on account of distance, separating children and their teacher, the tasks, set by the teacher, seem less imperative and, consequently, less motivating. Engagement problems, the content of foreign language communication, thorough planning of classroom activities and the role of the Skype teacher are discussed in this paper. A conclusion is made about creating pedagogical conditions that will enable gifted children to realize their abilities and aspirations important to them and improve their communicative skills.

**Keywords:** *learning via Skype, gifted children, educational facilities, engagement problems, thorough planning, improve communicative skills*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gifted children are the gem of every country. According to Academician V. Vernadsky “Talents are rare, they must be protected and preserved, they possess the real living power of the nation” [1]. However, for the most part, the system of traditional education is “average-oriented”, not taking into account the individual features of the child’s development. Unfortunately, the difficulties of planning a lesson and arranging classroom activities prevent teachers from devoting special attention to those who are ahead of their peers in intellectual development, or in other ways.

Russia has always been rich in gifted children. According to Eurotalent and UNESCO, in modern Russia there are gifted children in every age range from 8 to 10% (the highest rate on the planet!) [2]. We understand gifted children as a phenomenon of socio-pedagogical reality, possessing creative potential that is significant for the progress of society, manifesting itself in outstanding achievements in one or several types of activity and a steady pursuit of excellence.

An effective way to help these children realize and develop their abilities to the fullest is to arrange groups for in-depth classes in one of the areas of knowledge. Our task is to create a developing educational environment in which the intellectual and creative potential of gifted children is revealed in accordance with the level and type of their giftedness. These classes should arrange learning

activities, which enable them to pursue their interests. Moreover, such activities should be an incentive to raise the bar on their expectations.

To achieve this initiative of children, digital tools and approaches should be introduced in the classrooms as they are getting deeply integrated into our everyday lives from day to day; therefore, digitalisation is one of the key driving forces of competitiveness, growth and welfare. At the same time, it is important that education should provide ready-to-use knowledge: a real link to today’s everyday life. The web should be available and affordable to everyone, should provide assistance to education and youths.

Currently, Skype is one of the most widely used distance language learning tools. Google search for “English via Skype” yields millions results. This virtual learning platform makes it possible to arrange classes in situations where one of the users is an expert in a certain field of knowledge and the other participant or participants are the recipients of this information. In case of language learning we are more concerned with arranging learning activities and skills development. The learners are provided with the preliminary information, in accordance with their level of language competence, to enable them to understand the teacher and take part in the discussion of the suggested topic.

Can we see learning via Skype for gifted learners in order to meet their special needs more effectively? This is the research question which is addressed in the article devoted

to the discussion and evaluation of the experience of teaching a foreign language to gifted children. Emphasis is placed on the principles of e-learning education and the software to modify content, enhance the development of thinking skills, and enhance creativity.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Skype is a commercial product. It is being used for free with increasing frequency among teachers and students who are interested in global education projects [3]. Teachers use Skype in unique ways in order to fulfill educational goals. Moreover, Skype facilitates language exchange. The video-conference of the software provides a way of cooperation with students who would like to improve foreign languages, hold virtual field trips, and to gain new knowledge from experts in different fields of study. These experiences give students a chance to apply what they are learning in the classroom to real-life experiences. It also achieves further successful learning opportunities [4].

Teachers can collaborate with gifted students making their learning English online more interactive and interesting, including conceptions of giftedness, educational provisions for gifted students and creativity. One of the advantages is time saving, especially it is a real salvation for students of large cities where it takes a lot of time to get the place of study. The other advantage is an interaction with of talented and experienced teachers, who follow the new methods of language teaching and are able to practice modern materials in a foreign language. It is very convenient for students who are from the small towns and countryside. In this case, Skype has opened the boundaries and enables to learn with teachers from other countries, including native speakers.

It is necessary to mention that teachers can use modern technical capabilities via Skype, for example, a text document, spreadsheet, and an audio file to link to a video or presentation on the topic being studied. It is a great opportunity for teachers to create personal vocabularies, presentations and to record audio pronunciations of words. Audio recordings, made with the teacher, help students not to forget the pronunciation of new words and phrases. Besides, learning English via Skype, it is possible quickly to find the information on the Internet, which will always be at fingertips. Students and teachers equally appreciate it. Consequently, all these factors affect the success of students in foreign language learning via Skype.

Obviously, the using of Skype largely depends on an internet connection and the proper operation of equipment. Effective classes are impossible without it. Generally, the main factors of successful learning English via Skype are purposefulness, a great desire to get knowledge and show skills and abilities in teacher's tasks without which students cannot succeed in improving a foreign language.

All in all, it can be concluded that ICT technology brings benefits which are never seen before and decreasing general communication barriers. When ICT technology use aligns with authentic or "real-world" applications, students' motivation can be enhanced [5]. As pedagogical

tool ICT helps to build modern options to the second language learning which allows that the use of these technologies develops language abilities, listening and speaking skills [6].

## 3. METHODS

This article focuses on the factors, affecting the success of this type of activity based on the experience of teaching a foreign language to gifted children from high school in the settlement of B. Saby in Tatarstan. The issue discussed here is especially relevant as children from places far away from university cities have limited access to the educational facilities offered by higher education institutions. The Department of Language and Intercultural Communication (Kazan Federal University) developed and conducted a Skype English course for gifted children from B. Saby school. Students from the sixth, seventh and eighth forms were included in the group. The reason for choosing this age range was:

this is the time of intensive improvement of communicative skills when children, having acquired basic foreign language skills, make attempts to generate their own meaningful utterances, so they need more extensive vocabulary to verbalize their communicative intentions; in senior grades children are more motivated towards learning a foreign language if their future career (as they see it) requires its fluent knowledge; in this respect seven-eight formers are less motivated, so the use of Skype, and new educational environment in general, raises their interest in class activities giving additional impetus to their efforts to master the target language.

The curriculum of the course aimed to improve the foreign language (English) communicative competence in students at the level of Intermediate – Upper Intermediate (B1) in classes of 120 - 140 minutes per week (two classes of 60 - 70 minutes).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main focus was the development of foreign language speaking skills, since the framework of school lessons does not usually allow the regular teacher to devote enough time to gifted children, as less successful children require the bulk of their time and effort. In a group, consisting of children from different forms and years, an important factor affecting students' utterances is communication with peers who are not only non-inferior, but also superior to them in terms of their language and speech competence. The progress of the six formers was more appreciable due to verbal interactions with seven and eight formers with better linguistic and speech experience. These interactions of gifted individuals with different cognitive styles and learning strategies allowed them to enrich their individual experiences with new elements necessary for their development. In particular, it helped them to overcome the negative experience of studying in a classroom with an authoritarian style of teaching, when the fear of erring was stronger than the desire to express their

opinion. It could be suggested that extroverted learners dominated in the conversation. Although the opposite was noticed that introverted learners were generally more successful in online threaded discussions. "Utilizing Skype allows to achieve a better balance among learners, changing their basic motivation and overcoming irrational fears" [7]. The success of communication participants via Skype who were more relaxed in speech, who were not shy of making a mistake helped them to cope with the psychological barriers of fear and uncertainty. With unconditional reliance on the positive communication and subject-subject nature of the relationships between teachers and students, the desire for perfection, inherent in gifted individuals, stimulated their gradual involvement in solving the issues discussed.

Here, we should especially dwell on the content of foreign language communication, namely, the topics and problems that are offered for classroom discussions. For example, according to P. Gurvich, the topic "Hobbies" popular in tests, at language competitions and in textbooks, is boring for students, because everyone wants to speak in detail and to listen to only his or her hobby [8]. Interest is usually aroused by moral and ethical, sometimes paradoxical topics, judgments that run counter to generally accepted opinions. "I'm ready to argue," writes Daniel Sokol, "that a correctly chosen ethical topic can stimulate the statements of even shy students, removing unnecessary attention directed to form and the fear of making a mistake, prompting them to express a sore point" [9].

Generally, speaking skills are developed in discussions, where the teacher is assigned the role of a facilitator who motivates and organizes the students' speech activity. At the end of the discussion, language errors are analyzed and included in the training exercises in the next lesson. As classes in our course were conducted by different teachers, children had the opportunity to participate in discussions with people having different accents, which was of particular importance for developing listening comprehension skills. Traditional follow up activities were the writing of essays on the topic under discussion, which were supplemented by language tests that allowed students to assess their level of language competence and improve their language skills. Relatively little time was devoted to listening comprehension due to the fact that this type of learning activity is time-consuming. Nevertheless, the formation of auditory skills occurred naturally in the course of classroom discussions and perception of their teachers' speech.

The main difficulty for the teacher in this situation was the impossibility to use any textbook due to the multilevel composition of the group. Therefore, teachers spent a lot of time on searching for training materials and inventing suitable methods for class work. The second difficulty was that every time a third of the group would be new students, which also required updating both the technology and the content of the material studied. The studied grammar patterns and lexical chunks had to be revised time and again; however, it had a positive effect on the strength of the skills being formed. The main condition was the variability of repetition, the use of new techniques and

methods in the presentation and training of the studied linguistic material. At the same time, the fact that teachers were strangers, people who were not familiar either with the children's immediate environment, or the place where they lived, provided additional opportunities for developing real life communication situations.

One of the main conditions for developing children's potential abilities and their personality as a whole was the creation of a favorable psychological climate in the group, when the atmosphere of the lessons resembled not so much a school lesson as a forum on the Internet familiar to children, where everyone had equal opportunities to express their opinions, and high school students, as well as the teacher, might make mistakes or disagree with the younger minority, where they tolerated the most unusual, sometimes paradoxical ideas.

However, in comparison to traditional classroom activities the teacher's role in learning through Skype is more of the type of the teacher-instructor than of the teacher-facilitator and teacher-counselor for he/she is the one responsible for issuing comments, setting the models of how to speak and how to respond to his/her statements. With children, distance works in a way that makes immediate teacher's response less imperative and less effective. As soon as young learners get used to the new educational environment, they feel free to do whatever suits them at the moment, most often resorting to their mother tongue to discuss "pressing local issues". Initially, it was planned to organize the monitoring of the learning process by introducing the role of a supervising controller. It was to be the learners' regular teacher. However, in this case, Skype seemed to be an unnecessary device in a traditional classroom. The whole atmosphere of virtual learning was ruined. The lesson reminded of the children's regular learning procedure with a video presentation commented by their regular teacher. Consequently, a decision was made to cope with engagement problems by means of more intensive learning activities based on local everyday life realia. Teaching was meant to be more culturally-oriented, vocabulary should be closer to local living conditions, describing the things children were familiar with.

When our aim is to develop the production of meaningful utterances, the children should have the means to verbalize their communicative intentions. If the learner's family business is manure trade and the learner would like to say that all the day yesterday he/she was busy dumping manure on fields, we should provide the vocabulary, which will enable the speaker to discuss the topics concerning his/her everyday life and his/her immediate surroundings. Knowing children's backgrounds is of primary importance for successful communication via Skype. This knowledge can be based on short introduction speeches, made by learners during their first Skype class (I'm good at.../ I hate.../ I'm looking forward to....). Another topic may be devoted to friends and family members, when learners give answers to the questions: What is he/she like? What does he/she like? What does he/she look like?

For self-assessment it is worth developing a numeric criterion: the number of utterances. To make the task more complicated, the use of certain phrases, recommended by the teacher, may be taken into account. Moreover, it is important whether the other learners' attention was given to what was being said

Thus, language learning through Skype requires thorough lesson planning and preparation of learning aid materials, which can guide learners' discussion throughout classroom activities. The topics and problems offered for classroom discussions should be based on local everyday life realia. The atmosphere of the lessons should resemble not so much a school lesson as a forum on the Internet familiar to children. So that Skype will be not only a mere learning platform, but also a learning community that will bring users together and build relationships [10]. Of crucial importance is technical assistance. If the internet connection is poor, no educational strategies will be of use.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the development of gifted children is possible when pedagogical conditions enable them to realize their abilities and aspirations important to them. That is, it is necessary to promote their self-realization via Skype classes in order to make up for the lack of progress in the traditional classroom. By gaining individual experience of foreign language communication in the joint activity of gifted peers, children get the opportunity to analyze the real results of their learning activities, comparing their verbal product with the product of a student of equal ability and adequately assess their own success by means of a single criterion for all participants.

In other words, the educational needs of gifted students must be met at each stage of their study. Learning languages via Skype provides an overview of curricular and instructional strategies designed to enhance the optimal development of gifted learners. It is important to remember that special consideration should be given to modifications in general curricular, management techniques, instructional strategies, individual learning opportunities, and outcomes and assessments.

## REFERENCES

- [1] V. I. Vernadsky, *Scientific worldview, Philosophy and Worldview*, Nauka, 1990.
- [2] O. S. Parts, *Future teachers' preparation to work with gifted children in the context of the implementation of the Bologna agreements, Actual problems of modern professional education: materials of the conference held within the framework of the International Congress 'V Slavic pedagogical readings' (Lomonosov Moscow State University, November 2006)*, Pedagogy, 2006, pp. 82–86. DOI: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/mir-odarennogo->

[rebenka-cherez-opyt-tvorcheskoy-deyatelnosti-k-samorealizatsii](#)

- [3] J. Branzburg, *Talk is cheap: Skype can make VoIP a very real communication option for your school*, *Technology & Learning*. 27(8) (2007) 36. DOI: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ763085>

- [4] K. Messner, *An author in every classroom*, *School Library Journal*, 56(9) (2010) 42. DOI: <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=an-author-in-every-classroom-kids-connecting-with-authors-via-skype>

- [5] B. C. Housand, A. M. Housand, *The role of technology in gifted students' motivation*, *Psychology in the Schools*. 49 (2012) 706–715. DOI: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pits.21629>

- [6] M. N. Lamy, R. Hampel, *Online communication in language learning and teaching*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

- [7] R. Palloff, K. Pratt, *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

- [8] P. B. Gurvich, *About five norms' blocks and recommendations of foreign language teaching methods*, *Foreign Languages at School*. 6 (2005) 34–40. DOI: <http://naukarus.com/o-pyati-blokah-norm-i-rekomendatsiy-metodiki-obucheniya-inostrannym-yazykam>

- [9] D. Sokol, *The use of ethics in the EFL classroom*, *English Teaching Forum*, 2004, pp. 2–5. DOI: <https://books.google.ru/books?id=ab1SNiQCzQ8C&pg=RA3-PA55&lpg=RA3-A55&>

- [10] E.L. Cohen, *What makes good games go viral? The role of technology use, efficacy, emotion and enjoyment in players' decision to share a prosocial digital game*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2014.