The Development of Ethnocultural Competence of University Students During COVID-19 Pandemic in Russia

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ABSTRACT

The paper concerns the importance of ethnocultural competence development of students in a polyethnic university environment. The study considers the value of ethnocultural competence from the point of view of creating conditions for positive ethnocultural interaction and forming students' ability to follow cross-cultural behavior standards. The purpose of the research was to define whether an online format is effective in providing for ethnocultural competence development, taking into account the students' opinions. The article analyzes the ways to improve the consequences caused by COVID-19 in the sphere of cross-cultural communication of students with a diverse ethnocultural background that study mostly online or have blended learning at Southern Federal University, Russia. The negative impact of the pandemic period on the process of ethnocultural competence development is observed considering technological and methodological drawbacks of online education. The research was based on the results of digital surveys, tests, questionnaires, and online class interviews, and involved 120 students of different majors. The study examines the attitude of students to the difficulties they have in the process of ethnocultural communication and takes into consideration their preferences concerning online and offline forms of education. The recommendations for improving the development of ethnocultural competence in online format are given.

Keywords: *ethnocultural competence, COVID-19 pandemic, online education, cross-cultural communication, polyethnic university environment, student-centered educational approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of intensive academic mobility, the number of foreign students at Russian universities is increasing. Globalization of modern society expands boundaries of international cooperation between the higher educational institutions and creates special demands for the process of cross-cultural communication. In this regard, the development of ethnocultural competence continues to be one of the most significant qualities for Higher School graduates, which will enable them to take an active part in professional communication and collaborate successfully with specialists from different countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable changes to the organization of the educational process. The transfer of students, especially the first and second-year bachelors, to intensive online education has reduced the duration and influenced the education forms of ethnocultural activity.

The modern multicultural environment of the university includes polyethnic interaction between the representatives of different nationalities based on mutual respect for cultural and historical characteristics, customs, traditions, and a tolerant attitude towards the ethical values of different peoples. The formation of a learning environment that is respectful to ethnic specifics is important for successful multinational academic and professional conflict-free cooperation between members of different nations worldwide.

The significance of ethnocultural competence development aimed at overcoming barriers of cross-cultural communication in the academic environment is beyond doubt. In this regard, the search for promising directions for the development of ethnocultural competence in online classroom is especially relevant during the pandemic.

2. PROBLEM

The pandemic period has negatively influenced the process of ethnocultural development, limiting the cross-cultural communication of students mainly to the online format. These education changes revealed that distant learning at Russian universities has some technological disadvantages and problems in the sphere of methodological support to assist the students in using the Internet education platforms and resources to the full extent. For example, a high

percentage of students have difficulties in maintaining communication via video calls and need help in information handling and processing. Poor level of technical support and the Internet connection failures forces a teacher to redistribute most of the time to academic issues, ignoring the importance of creating necessary pedagogical conditions for cross-cultural communication development in online classroom.

This mentioned factor is considered to be a valuable barrier for students to get acquainted with and to adopt different behavioral norms, cultural, and language diversity.

According to the Federal State Standards of Higher professional education in the Russian Federation [2], the formation of ethnocultural competence is considered to be a part of university education. The formation and development of ethnocultural competence will enable students to perceive the intercultural heterogeneity of the society and to communicate in a cross-cultural environment on the principles of tolerant and empathic behavior, having a respectful attitude towards the ethnocultural specifics of an individual [2].

In this regard, it is necessary to improve students' ethnocultural development to evolve respect for different nations and prevent interethnic conflicts.

However, the results of student surveys and questionnaires showed that the current level of ethnocultural education in online classroom is insufficient. Also, the practical experience of online teaching revealed the necessity to enhance information, technological, and technical support in online class to ensure the availability and smooth operation of the Internet and computer equipment. The proper methodological content and educational materials should be developed and productively used in distance learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers need to search for new educational guidelines to improve the organizational, methodological, and educational process of forming the ethnocultural competence of students during online teaching.

The purpose of the research consists of finding ways to make ethnocultural competence development more effective, taking into account the students' points of view.

The Research questions: 1. "What are the students' preferences towards online vs. offline education concerning the process of ethnocultural competence development?" 2. Is online education more effective in relation to the level of cross-cultural communication development? 3. What are the main challenges that students face in online classroom during the process of ethnocultural interaction?

To analyze the peculiarities of ethnocultural competence development of students studying online in a multicultural university environment we put the following tasks to be solved:

- to identify the category of students experiencing difficulties in the process of ethnocultural competence development;
- to determine the attitude of students towards online vs. offline learning formats concerning the formation of ethnocultural competence;
- to define the main difficulties that university students experience in the process of cross-cultural communication;
- to propose recommendations for successful ethnocultural competence development by means of online learning during the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

The following research methods are used for the study: a systematic and comparative analysis of theoretical sources, regulatory documents, educational and methodological complexes of humanitarian disciplines, pedagogical experience on the problem under analysis, surveys, questionnaires, and testing.

The theoretical basis of the research included the works on ethnopedagogy and the development of ethnocultural competence by R.A. Alikhanova [3], T.V. Poshtareva [4], B.A. Takhakhov [5] as well as the studies related to the development of multicultural educational environment by the foreign authors: N. Ersoy [1], M. Milani [6], V.-P. Wu and R.-Z. Peng [7], F. Yilmas [8], and D.Y. Ford [9].

Special attention was given to a student-centered approach in online classroom [1, 6, 8].

The development of ethnocultural competence is to be viewed as an integrated interdisciplinary process in a polycultural university environment and a valuable component of the future graduate's personality. The knowledge about ethnic peculiarities, tolerant behavior, and empathy toward the norms of ethnic identity, respectful attitude to customs, traditions, and cultural diversity of different nations are considered to be the main characteristics of ethnocultural competence development of a university student. We suppose that cross-cultural communication is a valuable part of ethnocultural competence development. In order to avoid technological and methodological drawbacks of online education, the process of ethnocultural competence development in a multicultural university environment should include the following significant blocks: methodology, target, content, and technology.

The methodology block consists of:

- approaches applied to the process of ethnocultural competence development (student-centered, interdisciplinary, synergetic, value-oriented, case-study, information, and technological);
- factors that ensure the development of students' ethnocultural competence: information environment of the university (educational Internet platforms like TEAMS, MOODLE, ZOOM, SKYPE, etc.), ethnocultural adaptation and preservation of national identity, respect for family values, cross-cultural communication and activity, striving for knowledge of other cultures, studying customs and traditions, tolerance to other linguistic norms and religious beliefs, political correctness;
- principles (development of ethnocultural communication, creation of an ethnocultural educational environment);

• pedagogical conditions (methodological, organizational, didactic, psychological, etc.).

The target block consists of the following components:

• idea (the creation of ethnocultural educational environment at the university);

• goal (the development of ethnocultural competence in the polyethnic university environment using blended and online learning (based on educational Internet platforms);

• tasks (to carry out cross-cultural communication in the process of ethnocultural competence development, to provide sociocultural adaptation, on the one hand, and to preserve national identity, on the other, to foster ethnic tolerance, and empathy).

The content block takes into account the interdisciplinary approach to ethnocultural competence development, includes different kinds of materials and tasks for ethnocultural activities, and contains necessary sources of information.

The technology block is aimed at using advanced technologies for the development of students' ethnocultural competence in the polyethnic university environment. It contains a system of organizational forms, methods, means, educational and diagnostic criteria to determine the level of ethnocultural competence development in class and during the period of after-class activities.

The implementation of the above-mentioned blocks for ethnocultural competence development will help to successfully plan and develop cross-cultural communication in online class.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research involved 120 sophomore students of different majors at Southern Federal University (Russia). The study was conducted using TEAMS, SKYPE, and ZOOM Internet platforms in online classes during two academic semesters of 2019-2020. Students who participated in questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and testing were aged between 18 and 20 years. The foreign students from different countries, including the representatives of the former USSR republics took part in the research.

One group of students has previously studied offline and now is studying online. Another group of students has been having online classes since the beginning of their studies. Limitations of the research take into account the fact that due to the restricted use of online format at Southern Federal University before the pandemic nearly all disciplines at the university were taught offline. According to the purpose of the research, online learning format was introduced in the group which was planned to study online for two years, but some disciplines in this group remained offline due to the program demands, so this group had partially blended learning during the first year of studies before the pandemic. It was also planned to examine the third group of students who would study offline only but the obligatory distance learning at the university during the pandemic period made this impossible.

Fig. 1 shows the results of the survey and questionnaire that expressed the students' opinions regarding the difficulties of ethnocultural competence development in offline and online learning formats.

The survey revealed that the greatest percentage of difficulties (87%) in the process of intercultural communication is experienced by students who rent housing and live with their compatriots. In the process of ethnocultural communication, these students are more likely to give strictly individual answers in the classroom, and they do not actively participate in group work. 73% of students who are experiencing difficulties in ethnocultural communication are living at home or have left for their hometown to be self-isolated in the pandemic period: the percentage is lower since these students practically are not interested in cross-cultural communication in class and are not motivated to collaborate with their mates during after-class activities. Finally, only 24% of students who live in dormitories are experiencing significant communication difficulties. The students living in dormitories and having there intense offline ethnocultural interaction are more successful in cross-cultural communication in online class as well. According to the survey results, it is easier for students to cope with the language barriers and face the difficulties of verbal and non-verbal communication when they are studying in offline format.
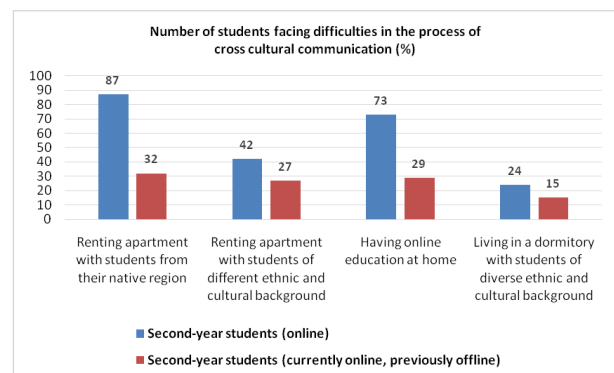

Figure 1. Number of students facing difficulties in the process of cross-cultural communication (%)

Fig. 2 shows the results of the survey related to different students' preferences towards online and offline formats of education. The survey also proves that students consider offline format to be more effective in terms of the process of ethnocultural competence development.

Students who studied only online had a sufficient number of preferences for the online format, as they consider it safer during the pandemic and saving students' commuting time (48%). However, the process of forming ethnocultural competence is still considered by a greater number of students of both groups to be the most effective in the offline format (52 and 61%). As for the forms of non-classroom activities, both groups considered the proposed activities to be interesting, but students who had the experience in offline learning preferred the offline format as the most successful, in their opinion (61%), for holding conferences, seminars, etc. Students who studied both online and offline had the same percent of preferences for classroom and non-classroom activities.
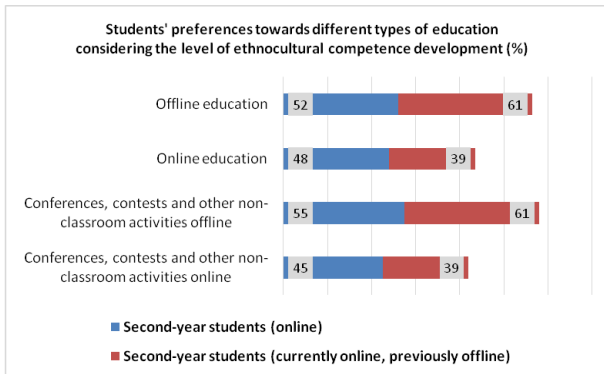
Figure 2. Students' preferences towards different types of education considering the level of ethnocultural competence development (%)

Fig. 3 presents the difficulties that students are facing in the process of ethnocultural development in online class. The results of the survey prove that alongside with overcoming language barriers as the most challenging ones, decreasing the lack of effective cross-cultural communication is of great importance. The process of ethnocultural competence development also revealed that students have difficulties not only with applying electronic means but with methodological support using educational Internet platforms as well.
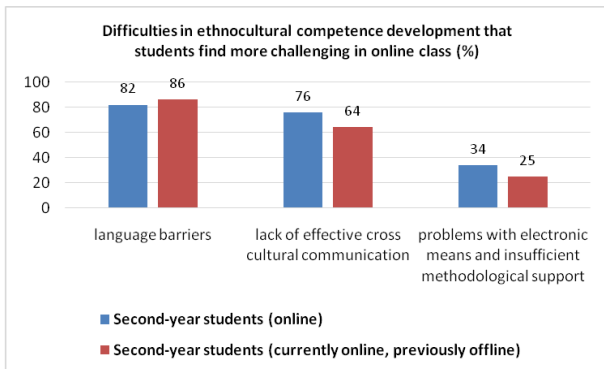

Figure 3. Difficulties in ethnocultural competence development that students find more challenging in online class (%)

The group of "second-year students (online)" can compare the process of communication offline with the online format based on their High School experience. Since this category of students is not at all familiar with the specifics of learning offline at the university, their opinion about overcoming difficulties in ethnocultural competence development during offline learning is positive. The level of adaptation of "second-year students (online)" in the process of cross-cultural communication in online class is lower compared to another group of "second-year students (currently online, previously offline)". The second-year students who have had the experience of ethnocultural adaptation when studying offline during their first year

have many friends to communicate with. This is one of the reasons that this group has a high percent of opinion towards the lack of cross-cultural communication online because they have already acquired cross-cultural communication experience and skills being in offline class. Considering the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the following recommendations can be proposed for enhancing the development of cross-cultural communication: 1) to transfer some educational activities hold offline in online class; 2) to organize, activate, and redirect the attention of teachers and supervisors to an interdisciplinary basis to reveal the ethnic characteristics of students and help in ethnocultural adaption.

First of all, it is necessary to involve the disciplines of the humanitarian block, for example, Russian and foreign languages, history, cultural studies, philosophy, and sociology. Many issues discussed in the process of studying these disciplines are often directly connected with sociocultural aspects, for example, "Getting to know you," "My Motherland," "My family," "Traditions and customs of peoples of different countries," "Education in different countries," etc. Students can be motivated to write a story, make a video to share their interests, to tell about their hobbies, family traditions, values, hometown, etc.

All students can participate in ethnocultural events and teamwork discussions aimed at cross-cultural communication development and knowledge enrichment about the cultural peculiarities of their homeland. For example, the Russian students can deal with specifics of the life and culture of the Cossacks of the Don region, the traditions of the peoples of Chukotka, the history and local traditions of Kamchatka region, etc. These activities will help to build up a stronger acquisition of ethnocultural communication experience.

A valuable instrument to solve the problem of ethnocultural competence development is to apply the experience of other universities, which have created research laboratories in the field of ethnopedagogy to have a high level of integration of ethnocultural component in the educational process of the university [3].

Significant measures to increase the level of cross-cultural communication are participation in national and international student conferences, which can be organized online with an appropriate level of educational and methodological preparation. However, the success of conferences and other events listed above as well as the effectiveness of student participation depends on the technical conditions and support: the functioning of the online educational platform, the quality of the Internet connection, the provision of students with computer means, and the ability to use them. Online quizzes, lectures, workshops, seminars dedicated to the art and history of the nations of the world, reading contests, online round tables, etc. can also contribute to the development of students' ethnocultural competence.

5. CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the online format is becoming a valuable instrument of ethnocultural competence development of university students. The conducted research identified the students' preferences towards the online and offline process of ethnocultural competence development and revealed that many students experienced difficulties in cross-cultural communication online. The study proved that from the students' point of view the lack of cross-cultural communication is the most challenging factor in online learning compared to the offline format.

The difficulties students had in a cross-cultural environment were analyzed to search for helpful ways to preserve students' national identity and increase positive attitudes towards their native culture, customs, and values.

Planning educational process in class and during after-class activities such as conducting scientific conferences, methodological seminars, reading contests, online round tables to develop ethnocultural competence is necessary for future graduates' successful academic and professional collaboration in a global polyethnic environment.

The obtained results based on the students' attitude towards ethnocultural competence development can be used for effective ethnocultural adaptation as well as for finding new ways for providing cross-cultural communication in online class.

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