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# IMPROVING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE BY INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPING ASSIGNMENTS

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to investigate the combined effects of collaborative learning on the foreign language proficiency and cultural competence of linguistic majors. A long-term pedagogical experiment was conducted in six groups of linguistic majors. It was aimed at checking the effectiveness of the teaching technique which implied developing assignments by small subgroups of students and giving a fragment of the lesson on the basis of this assignment. The teaching technique was applied the pilot groups for half an hour in each class in, where small subgroups gave the other students vocabulary exercises as well as listening and reading comprehension tasks. In the control groups the students spent half an hour in each class doing and checking the assignments which had been developed by the teacher. The results of the multiple-choice final test, which was done by the students at the end of the experiment and checked their knowledge of the country's culture and history as well as the vocabulary related to national studies, were 17.5% better in the pilot groups than in the control groups. The study revealed that involving small groups in developing assignments for the classes in national studies resulted in greater improvement of the students' foreign language proficiency and cultural competence. The better results in the pilot groups can be explained by the students' greater involvement in the shared activities. The interaction between the team members was conducive to acquiring foreign language skills.

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**Keywords**: Active learning, collaborative learning, cognitive activities, control groups, foreign language proficiency, pilot groups.

# 1. Introduction

Nowadays more and more attention is paid to collaborative learning when knowledge and skills are acquired as a result of team efforts coordinated by the teacher. "Learning occurs within the community through the interaction of three core elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence" (Yang, Kinshuk, Chen, & Ronghuai, 2014, p.210). It means that it is necessary to arrange work in a community of learners in the most efficient ways by organizing effective collaboration.

### 1.1. The efficiency of collaborative learning illustrated by the classes in national studies

When small groups of students develop assignments for the classes in national studies, they interact with their peers. "Interaction with others leads to the active processing of information by the student, which can then, in turn, modify the student's cognitive structures" (Staarman, Krol, & van der Meijden, 2005, p.29). Collaborative activities make members of small subgroups exchange their views and perceptions, which leads to modifying their cognitive structures.

Entry-level repetitive tasks can be done individually, whereas the assignments that require extensive expertise should be performed in small groups. "There is a need to place students in various situations in which they can engage in effortful interactions in order to build a shared understanding" (Järvelä, Näykki, Laru, & Luokkanen, 2007, p.72). When students develop assignments which can be used in further classroom activities, they are involved in this kind of effortful interaction, which enables them to get deeper insights into the subject.

Group efforts are highly relevant when students have to cope with challenging and time-consuming tasks. "Dividing the processing of information across individuals is useful when the cognitive load is high because it allows information to be divided across a larger reservoir of cognitive capacity" (Kirschner, Paas, & Kirschner, 2009, p.31). Completing complex assignments involves processing large amounts of information, so it is vital for members of small groups to share the workload. When linguistic majors develop assignments for classes in national studies, working in small groups is justified because students combine their efforts in looking for and processing information about a particular country.

### 1.2. Employing the active learning methods in national studies

Active learning methods are widely employed in teaching because "individuals memorize 90% of what they do; 50% of what they see and just 10% of what they hear" (Alexeyenko & Shutkov, 2012, p.10). Instead of processing the information provided by the teacher, students produce their own learning materials such as presentations, brainstorming sessions, cases and games. Such cognitive activities can be regarded as the examples of active learning methods (Kudinov, 2017). Preparing a fragment of a lesson combines a few types of active learning methods. A fragment of a lesson given by students is a presentation developed through brainstorming.

All learners can benefit from active learning methods because they "offer supplemental support to the students who fail to grasp the course material from the traditional lectures" (Kvam, 2000, p. 139). In traditional lectures students with a low level of foreign language proficiency often fail to understand the

teacher's explanation, whereas participation in preparing a fragment of a lesson results in everyone's deep involvement in the cognitive process.

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite widespread availability of information related to national studies on the Internet, students do not show profound knowledge of the culture and history of the countries where the language they are studying is spoken. This means that teachers are confronted with the problem of increasing the linguistic majors' motivation for obtaining the information and acquiring the vocabulary essential for their profession.

### 2.1. Choosing effective methods of teaching national studies

The course in national studies allows linguistic majors to acquire specific vocabulary, improve their overall foreign language proficiency and understand cultural contexts. The teacher usually gives the students the main facts about the country in class, but narrower topics are not covered as the classroom time is limited. It is reasonable to explore efficient ways of involving students in research into the minor issues of each general topic and in various kinds of productive work, such as developing assignments.

### 2.2. Looking for efficient ways of improving the students' foreign language proficiency through doing the course in national studies

When students familiarize themselves with the culture and the history of the country, they simultaneously acquire the vocabulary related to different aspects of the national economy and lifestyle. National studies cover such subjects as geography, history, economics, art, literature, music, etc., so in the course of studies students have to acquire extensive vocabulary related to these subjects. As a result, they work with professionally-orientated content, which improves their foreign language competence (Kogan, Khalyapina, & Popova, 2017; Almazova, Eremin, & Rubtsova, 2016). By the end of the course students are supposed to speak fluently about local cultural issues using extensive vocabulary. Therefore, they need additional language practice which they can get by reading texts and watching videos about various aspects of life in the country. Besides, they should be given assignments directed at vocabulary acquisition. In order to comply with these requirements it is necessary to look for efficient ways of involving students both in communication in class and in cognitive activities at home.

## 3. Research Questions

The research questions are related to devising the ways in which students could acquire cultural competence and increase foreign language proficiency. In order to find effective methods of teaching national studies it is necessary to consider the advantages of students' collaboration and active learning.

### 3.1. The advantages of collaborative learning

Nowadays more and more attention is paid to collaborative learning as a way of generating students' motivation (Popova, Almazova, Khalyapina, & Tret'jakova, 2017; Almazova, Khalyapina, & Popova 2017;

Razinkina et al., 2018), and it has proved efficient in teaching different subjects. The first research question that has to be answered is whether collaborative learning gives better results than autonomous learning when it comes to national studies. It is necessary to compare the learning outcomes in the groups where the students shared the information with each other with the results in the groups where the work was done individually.

### 3.2. The advantages of active learning

The second research question is whether developing the assignments in regional studies by students gives better results than doing the tasks offered by the teacher. Collaborative cognitive activities may give the learners additional language practice. On the other hand, students might as well benefit from more reliable assignments developed by the teacher, who has expert knowledge of the subject.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was determining the effectiveness of the teaching technique which implied developing assignments by small groups of students, who give a fragment of a lesson on the basis of this assignment. The study focused on the ways of "turning the preparation for the classes into a creative process" (Kozlenkova, 2011, p.83) so that the students would be interested in the tangible results of their work.

### 4.1. The combined effect of the collaborative learning and active learning methods

The study researches the ways of "engaging small groups in communicative activities which involve each participant in looking for and choosing the solution to a problem" (Rogalyova, 2013, p.80). The research was aimed at determining whether the combination of active learning methods and collaboration in small groups contributes to students' professional development.

### 4.2. Checking the efficiency of developing assignments as a type of active learning methods

Most researchers agree that "the best way of learning something is explaining it to someone else" (Genike, 2015, p.57), so applying the mutual teaching strategy seems quite relevant in various educational contexts. However, scant attention has been paid to developing assignments by students and giving a fragment of a lesson to other learners. The efficiency of this technique is checked in the course of the present study.

## 5. Research Methods

### 5.1. Pedagogical experiment

The principal part of the present research project was the pedagogical experiment conducted in six groups of linguistic majors. It was directed at determining whether the involvement of small groups of students in developing assignments produced better results than traditional lectures combined with individually prepared home assignment.

The experiment involved three control groups and three pilot groups (48 and 51 students respectively). At the beginning of the experiment all the participants wrote a diagnostic test which included 50 tasks. The first 25 multiple choice tasks were aimed at finding out whether the students were familiar with basic vocabulary related to national studies. Here is one of the sentences from the first part of the test.

When the first white ___ moved into the area they faced immense hardships.

    A. populators          B. settlers      C. invasions      D. species

In the second 25 tasks the students had to demonstrate whether they knew the most important facts relating to the country's culture. Below there is a task from the second part of the test.

____ is a public holiday celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November, which originated as a harvest festival.

A. Independence Day      B. Ground Hog Day      C. Thanksgiving Day      D. Memorial Day

The maximum score that each student could achieve was 50 (each assignment which was done correctly added one point). The average score was calculated in order to compare it later with the result of the final test. The results of the diagnostic test in the control and pilot groups were 20.81 and 20.65 respectively.

The pilot groups were divided into three small subgroups (5-6 people), whereas the students in the control groups worked individually. In the pilot groups the students prepared a thirty-minute fragment of a lesson, which included such assignments as a small text for reading comprehension, a short video for listening comprehension and a vocabulary task. Each team developed one type of the tasks.

The teacher made sure that all the members of the small subgroups did their share of work, because "the group product might, for example, be the result of the input of the most knowledgeable or diligent group member" (Kirschner, Paas, & Kirschner, 2009, p.33). The teacher found out whether each member of the small group developed assignments in collaboration by regularly checking the records of their communication in a written or audio form.

The table below shows the difference between the traditional ways of organizing classes in the control groups and the stages of work in the pilot groups, where the students' activities included "setting the problem and analyzing it; looking for creative ways of solving the problem; finding the solution and checking it by conducting an experiment, and making conclusions" (Chickov & Trushina, 2014, p. 24).

**Table 01.** The stages of work in the pilot and control groups

| № | Pilot groups | Control groups |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | The students select the information on the Internet and process it. | The teacher develops assignments for the students. |
| 2. | The students develop assignments on the basis of the information found on the Internet. | The students do the assignment in class for 27 minutes. |
| 3. | The assignments are checked by the students with a high level of foreign language proficiency. | The students revise the text, the video and the vocabulary from the previous class at home. |
| 4. | The assignments are given to the other students and done by them in class for 30 minutes. | The students answer the teacher's questions about the previous text, video and vocabulary for 3 minutes. |

In the pilot groups the tasks were collaboratively developed and presented by the students, whereas in the control groups the students did the assignments offered by the teacher. The texts that the small subgroups had to prepare were supposed to include about 2000 characters, and they had to cover a narrow topic. For example, when the students were studying the Great Depression, one of the groups prepared a text about Hoovervilles – shanty towns built by the homeless during the Depression. The subgroups prepared reading comprehension assignments in the form of true or false statements or multiple choice tasks. Here is an example of a multiple choice task:

The subgroups prepared reading comprehension assignments in the form of true or false statements or multiple choice tasks. Here is an example of a multiple choice task:

Hoovervilles in the big cities in the USA were   A. built by order of President Hoover.

B. shanty towns built by the homeless.

C. named after H. Hoover because the homeless were grateful to the

president.

The students also provided the translation of some difficult words so that the rest of the group could cope with the task more quickly. If the text contained proper names or words specific for a particular area or a certain period of time, the students provided their explanation.

The videos for listening comprehension were supposed to be short (3-5 minutes) and cover a narrow topic. The small subgroup prepared the list of the most difficult words from the video and provided the explanations for the culture-specific phenomena so that the other students could understand it after watching it only once. The listening comprehension tasks were in the form of true or false statements or multiple choice tasks. Here are a few tasks for the YouTube video "The Cuban Missile Crisis" (1962) at https://m.youtube.com :

Nikita Khrushchev A. reached the secret agreement with Fidel Castro to place Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba.

B. placed Soviet nuclear missiles without any permission from the Cuban government.

C. warned the US government about his plans to place Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba.

The third subgroup had to prepare multiple choice tasks vocabulary tasks so that the rest of the group could consolidate the vocabulary from the basic textbook or the key words and expressions given by the teacher. Here are two examples of the vocabulary tasks developed by the subgroups from the topics "the first colonies" and "the Civil War".

In Jamestown _____ servants were freed when their contract expired, and they were typically given land and money.

A. debt          B. contracted          C. indentured          D. slave-owned

A person who holds an opinion that slavery should be banned and slaves should be freed.

A. an outcast          B. a hangdog          C. an Orangeman          D. an abolitionist

The students in the pilot groups worked in small subgroups, which had a captain, an "expert", and "team players". After the teacher explained the general topic to the students, they used search engines to find some additional information about the details of the topic which they considered to be of interest. The "captains" were responsible for the coordination of work and were appointed by the teacher on the basis of their leadership qualities. Each of the three groups developed a reading comprehension task for one class, a listening comprehension task for the next class and a vocabulary development assignment for the class after that. So, each subgroup developed one of the three types of assignments five times during the semester.

When a subgroup was developing a reading comprehension assignment, the captain got the ideas from the members of his team about the narrow topic of the text. For example, when the students were

studying the colonization of America, the team members came up with the topic "witchcraft in Salem". Then the captain asked the team members to look for relevant information on the Internet, compile a 2000-character text and provide the translations of the difficult lexical units as well as the explanations to the culture-specific words in it.

After each team member prepared an abstract of the texts about the topic which had been chosen by the team, they sent them to the "experts" whose foreign language competence was greater than theirs, who selected the best version of the text and corrected the mistakes if necessary. After that all the students in the subgroup developed a reading comprehension task, which was sent to the "experts", who chose the best ten alternatives, corrected the mistakes if necessary and used them to compose the assignment. The resulting 2000-character text and the reading comprehension task were given to the rest of the group in the next class. It took the students ten minutes to skim through the text and do the assignment. Their performance was checked both by the teacher and by the members of the group who had developed it.

The second small subgroup prepared a listening comprehension task. First the "captain" of the team chose the best narrow topic from the list made by the members of the subgroup. The students used YouTube to look for a short video which would cover this topic. It could not be longer than 5 minutes, because the students had only ten minutes in class to look through the necessary vocabulary, watch the video and do the assignment. The following criteria were taken into account: the length of the video, the distinctness of the speech and the availability of the visual aids used by the speaker.

After that the video was sent to all the team members, and the "captain" specified the part of the video for which they had to write a transcript. The team members with rudimentary knowledge of English asked the "experts" for help if they could not understand a certain part of the video. Besides, team members made a list of the most difficult words from the video and translated them into Russian. Then the students developed the listening comprehension assignments for their parts of the video and had them checked and corrected by the "experts" (the "captain" and the "experts" developed their part of the assignments). In the next class the new words were studied, the video was watched and the task was done by the rest of the students and checked by the teacher and the "developing" team. The whole listening comprehension assignment took 10 minutes.

The "captain" of the third small subgroup, which developed vocabulary tasks, distributed all the words offered by the teacher between himself / herself and the team members. After that some of the students in the subgroup found definitions for their portion of words and gave one correct answer and three incorrect ones for their definition. They found definitions on the Internet, simplified them and gave the translations of some difficult words in parentheses.

The other members of the team developing vocabulary exercises had to use such Internet resources as sentencedict.com, sentence.yourdictionary.com, British National Corpus, and context.reverso.net to find the sentences with their portion of words. After that they left the gaps in the sentences instead of the words in question and below they gave four versions of the answer, only one of which was correct. Then they sent the resulting sentences to the captain, who redistributed them between the "experts" to have them checked. In the next class the rest of the students did the vocabulary tasks for ten minutes.

In the control groups the teacher gave the students a 2000-character reading comprehension text, a three-minute video with a listening comprehension task and a vocabulary exercise. It took the students 27

minutes to complete these assignments, all of which contained additional information about the topic which was being studied. After doing these assignments in class the students had to read the text and watch the video at home again in order to be able to retell them and discuss them with the teacher in the next class. They also had to learn the list of words which coincided with the ones that the students of the pilot groups included in the assignments that they developed. In the next class the teacher spent three minutes asking the questions about the previous text and the video and checking the vocabulary knowledge. So working with the additional learning materials both in the control and in the pilot groups took 30 minutes in each class. In all the groups participating in the experiment the teacher spent the rest of the class introducing a new topic in the form of a presentation accompanied by videos, and handouts with vocabulary exercises.

Thus, in the control groups the students' home assignment involved learning the information given by the teacher in the previous class. The classroom activities included listening to the information, taking notes and answering the teacher's questions. The students did not participate in any kind of collaborative work, and they did not produce any results in the form of an assignment for other students. The teacher introduced the learning material in a traditional way and provided the students with readily available information.

### 5.2. Monitoring and interviews

The research methods also included monitoring and analysis of the students' communication on the Internet, which allowed the teacher to see each student's contribution to the team efforts. In order to access individual track records, the teacher asked the students to record their conversations related to developing the assignments on a voice recorder or show the teacher the printout of their messages on the Internet. The research methods also included informal interviews, conducted at the end of the experiment and aimed at getting the students' general reaction to the suggested teaching technique.

## 6. Findings

The findings of the study emerged from comparing the results of the diagnostic and final tests in the pilot and control groups. Both tests checked the students' foreign language proficiency and cultural competence.

### 6.1. The final test

The same final test was conducted both in the pilot and the experimental groups. Its format was similar to the diagnostic test, but it checked the knowledge of the information and the vocabulary which the students had learned from the course in the national studies. Like the diagnostic test, it included 50 multiple choice tasks. Here are two example sentences from the test: the first one checks the vocabulary, whereas the second one checks the knowledge of the information related to regional studies:

The _____ – whom many in the South viewed as opportunists looking to exploit and profit from the region's misfortunes – supported the Republican Party.

A. assassins    B. radicals C.  carpetbaggers    D. collaborationists

In the 19th century, manifest destiny was ____ .

A. the support of active federal intervention to promote social justice and the economic welfare

B. a widely held belief that the US settlers were supposed to expend across North America

C. the foreign policy of the US administration towards Latin America

D. the argument that American democracy was formed by the American frontier

The average results in all the pilot groups and in all the control groups were calculated and compared with the results of the diagnostic test.

### 6.2. The results of the final test

The results of the final test and the difference between them and the results of the diagnostic test are given in the table below.

**Table 02.** The results of the final test

| Groups | The results of the final test | The difference between the final and diagnostic tests |
|---|---|---|
| Control groups | 32.13 (64.26%) | 11.32 (22.64%) |
| Pilot groups | 40.88 (81.76%) | 20.23 (40.46%) |

It can be seen from the table that the pilot groups did 17.5% better in the final test and made 17.82% more progress than the control groups. Such a considerable difference in the results clearly demonstrates the efficiency of the suggested teaching technique.

## 7. Conclusion

The experiment clearly demonstrates that active learning combined with the students' collaboration gives better results than traditional learning. When the suggested technique was applied in class, the students appeared to "analyze their own activities as well as those of their partner, change their pattern of behaviour, and consciously acquire skills and knowledge" (Lapygin, 2014, p. 88). The students in the pilot groups were active participants of the cognitive process, responsible for the results of their team's work, so the suggested technique yielded better results.

### 7.1. The explanation for the better performance in the pilot groups

The better results of the final test in the pilot groups can be explained by the students' greater involvement in shared activities. The students built relationships with others as they struggled, handled failure, and eventually worked to master the problem presented. "Throughout this process, students were not only critically thinking about their strategies but also developing their cognitive abilities" (Chen, Wang, & Lin, 2015, p.244). The students whose level of knowledge was higher critically assessed the information found by the other members of their small subgroup. They corrected the mistakes both in the materials from the Internet and in the parts of the assignments developed by the students with a lower level of knowledge.

The second reason for better performance in the pilot groups can be explained by the students' involvement in active learning. "Learning occurs in the midst of practice and is, indeed, a concurrent by-product of practice. We learn as we attempt to coordinate our activities with others in our work environment" (Raelin, 2006, p.157). By developing assignments the students in the pilot groups practiced different aspects of English: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar. They accepted responsibility for explaining the learning material to the other students, so they had

additional foreign language practice when they looked for information, summarized and corrected it, exchanged ideas with their partners and got the other learners to do the assignments in class.

The students in the pilot group also appeared to have achieved better results because they did not only focus on their own cognitive activities but had to be aware of the other students' performance. "Each group member must keep track of one another's progress in order to coordinate collaborative activities. To summarize, the aim of co-regulation is regulating one another's self-regulation so as to provide services for the whole group" (Zheng, Li, & Huang, 2017, p.36). At the end of the experiment, when the students of the pilot groups were asked about the benefits of collaborative learning, they claimed that it had improved their time management as well as their organizational and interpersonal skills. When they were responsible for keeping track of their partners' progress, their own self-regulation also improved. The "captains", who set goals, directed cognitive activities and monitored the learning processes, also contributed to better performance in the pilot groups. "Leaders with outstanding communication competence get strong support from members, which enables the leaders to exert leadership effectively and, ultimately, contribute to organizational performance results" (Jo, Kang, & Yoon, 2014, p.110). The leaders in the pilot groups chose the most suitable team members for particular tasks and made sure that all the team members participated in the group's efforts.

The fact that the students in the small subgroups shared their skills and knowledge with each other also contributed to better results in the pilot groups. "The student interactions are characterized by questioning and by a give-and-take that involves creating, refining, and improving their collaborative explanation". (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2008, p.91). The analysis of the students' communication on the Internet allowed the teacher to ascertain that even the students with poor foreign language skills managed to develop quite interesting fragments of assignments. If they had worked autonomously, they would not have been able to acquire such extensive expertise.

The results of the experiment suggested that in the pilot groups the synergy effect was brought about by knowledge convergence which can be "defined as an increase in common knowledge where common knowledge referred to the knowledge that all collaborating partners had" (Jeong & Chi, 2007, p. 287). Some students in the subgroups, especially the ones who traveled widely, often demonstrated extensive knowledge of the local culture, which enabled them to make a substantial contribution to the fragment of the lesson developed by their subgroup. They shared the knowledge with their subgroups, which resulted in an increase in the common knowledge.

### 7.2. The additional benefits of the suggested learning technique for students

The students in the pilot groups benefited from the opportunity to communicate in English while they were working collaboratively. When the teacher is no longer the only source of information, the students gain more control over their own cognitive activities, and "more in-class time can be devoted to practice, to good effect, without losing learning quality" (le Roux & Nagel, 2018, p.28). In the pilot groups the students were involved in foreign language communication both in class and on the Internet outside the classroom, whereas in the control groups the teacher acted as a lecturer, which left less time for conversational activities.

Another advantage of collaborative cognitive activities was greater learners' satisfaction reported by the students of the pilot groups. When all the participants of the experiment were asked whether the course in regional studies gave them a sense of satisfaction, the students of the pilot groups expressed more positive feelings than the ones in the control groups. Learners' satisfaction "can have repercussions on whether learners like to use systems or not, how learners work together and whether there is a good working atmosphere among learners" (Zhu, 2018, p.127). The students in the pilot groups were more satisfied with the learning process because the development of assignments was a creative process which enabled them to produce tangible results. They were also satisfied with working in teams, because group discussion was conducive to knowledge sharing and memorizing the information.

Another reason why the students in the pilot groups did better in the final test was frequent repetition of the same information in the process of the team activities. "In the case of collaborative activities, performing a task well implies not only having the skills to execute the task, but also collaborating well with teammates to do it" (Collazos, Guerrero, Pino, Renzi, Klobas, Ortega, Redondo, & Bravo, 2007, p.259). Constant repetition resulting from collaboration helped the students memorize the culture-specific information and expand topic-orientated vocabulary. Consequently, they developed cultural competence and acquired considerable language proficiency.

The results of the research illustrate that "faculty can and should intentionally and deliberately craft collaborative spaces to accentuate and heighten collaborative learning" (Emerson & Gerlak, 2016, p.338). Active learning combined with collaborative cognitive activities can improve students' performance in different subjects.

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