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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Svetlana Mandzhieva (a)*, Svetlana Mandzhieva (b), Tatiana Basanova (c),
Dolores Khalgaeva (d)
*Corresponding author

- (a) Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov, 11, Pushkin Str., Elista, Russia
sve-mandzhieva@yandex.ru, 89054099470.
- (b) Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov, 11, Pushkin Str., Elista, Russia
evsheeva@yandex.ru, 89615475757.
- (c) Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov, 11, Pushkin Str., Elista, Russia
tatianabasanova@yandex.ru, 89054003103
- (d) Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov, 11, Pushkin Str., Elista, Russia
namgil@rambler.ru, 89093954464

Abstract

The paper is devoted to the problem of content modernization in relation to foreign language training in modern conditions of coexistence of various cultures in the republics of the Russian Federation. The transition to student-centered paradigm of education and change of the sociocultural context of foreign language training caused the change of language learning objectives and content thus giving an impetus to various approaches to foreign language training. The efficiency of these approaches does not raise doubts, nevertheless the issue of modernizing the content of foreign language training still remains relevant since in modern conditions it is intended to develop the abilities of younger school students to participate in cross-cultural communication and to raise his status as the subject of native culture. This study raises the question of foreign language training to school students through the polylogue of linguocultures and considers such training in terms of basic provisions of polycultural language education where the content of education shall reflect the culture of the target-language country. To solve the above tasks of foreign language training, the authors identify the polycultural aspect (PCA), which “marks” the content of each component (topics, situations, speech and language material, speech abilities, knowledge of national and cultural features and realities of the target-language country) at the same time being its (content) component. The authors of the study describe the implementation of the European Language Portfolio technology into the educational process alongside with learning and teaching materials for foreign language training.

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1. Introduction

In modern conditions the success of communication between the representatives of different cultures depends on their ability to engage in a dialogue in a multicultural society thus developing and fully building relations between the participants of cross-cultural contact contributing to new patterns, value orientations, criteria of respect for their and other cultures.

In our study we understand “*culture*” as a set of transformative achievements of the mankind passed down through generations, production and spiritual life including social and personal system of values, experience and norms regulating human life, customs and beliefs, way of life, objects of art and literature, history and life of the people, etc. Within the foreign language training in the conditions of multiculturalness in the Russian Federation such understanding of culture seems the most efficient since it opens the doors for the study of cultural derivation during the interaction of a student’s personality, his native culture, culture of Russian language that he uses with his peers and adults and the studied foreign culture.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of this study is the modernization of the content of foreign language training at the elementary school in the republics of the Russian Federation on the basis of its polycultural aspect (PCA) and conditions for polycultural educational environment.

3. Research Questions

In the current language situation in the republics of the Russian Federation the problem of modernizing the content of foreign language training may be solved within a polylogue of cultures: a culture of the target-language country, the Russian culture and the national culture. We consider the polylogue of cultures not just as the interaction of three cultures, but analyze the images of different behavior, different perception of the surrounding world. The concept “*linguoculture*” is understood as the interaction of languages, language consciousness and cultures (Mandzhieva, 2015).

Since foreign language training of school students through a polylogue of linguocultures triggers a new approach to the content of training, then traditional components of the training content become not fully sufficient. The task of modernizing the content of foreign language training is solved through the polycultural aspect, which is considered as

a set of abilities of culturological observation, particularly culturological and linguoculturological abilities and knowledge on the cultures of the target-language country, Russia and the republic, where a school student lives, thus allowing him to build verbal and nonverbal behavior with foreign peers, raising his status as a subject of native culture. (Passov, 2007, p. 52)

Since the development of abilities to successfully participate in a polylogue of linguocultures is based on the knowledge of different cultures, then the content of the polycultural aspect shall be connected with the units of cultural universals, i.e. forms and proposition (beliefs, values, rules and customs), being those parameters according to which different cultures are compared (Elizarova, 2005). The content and

proportions of these universal models in each single culture are unique, specific for each culture and promote the understanding of other cultures by children. The polycultural aspect within the content of foreign language training in any republic of the Russian Federation may create an opportunity for education to go beyond narrow and specific information on countries, people and their cultures and create conditions for the perception of a polycultural surrounding world and polycultural development of school students. In turn, the promotion of a polycultural context of foreign language training at elementary school in the republics of the Russian Federation dictates the need to create the polycultural educational environment designed to perform a vital function – the function to help and support students to enter upon the world of social experience.

The polycultural educational environment, which is understood as everything that surrounds a teacher and a student as the subjects of teaching and learning that form the image of student's personality as a subject of culture and a subject of learning and cognitive communication activity aimed at school-aged children, shall be particularly favorable in psychological, physical and emotional perspective to attract the interest to a new language and respect for another culture (Nikitenko, 2008). The polycultural educational environment is designed to create conditions for spiritual growth (development) of school students and cultivate their interest in a new language. From the early age children shall know that all languages (Russian, Kalmyk, English and so forth) are equally important and that each nationality and every single person is unique.

It shall be noted that during the creation of a polycultural educational environment at schools in the republics of the Russian Federation the use of the European Language Portfolio technology developing qualities and abilities of younger school students necessary to interact with the representatives of other cultures seems quite efficient (Galskova & Nikitenko, 1999). The European Language Portfolio as a tool of self-control and simultaneously the control over the process of acquiring knowledge and learning outcomes is intended for continuous use in the course of foreign language training at all levels of education (Little, 2002; Schärer, 2001). The polycultural content of foreign language training shall consider the ideas of the Language Portfolio since this technology helps a student to increase the motivation in studying both foreign and native languages and to understand the value of cross-cultural communication at class, school, the republic, the country and beyond its borders.

In 2008-2010 the foreign language teachers of the Republic of Kalmykia made attempts to use the European Language Portfolio at the elementary school. As teachers and parents note, filling of pages of the first section undoubtedly increased the awareness of younger school students of Kalmykia of the surrounding polyculturalness and multilingualism. Specifying languages which their grandparents speak in the Language Portfolio, the children realized their daily experience of using nonnative languages and experience of familiarizing with the culture of the countries whose language they learn. Since the content of the Language Portfolio requires data on all nonnative or regional languages a student shall address not only foreign language teachers, but also teachers of other nonnative languages. All this in general created a favorable and unique situation for collaboration between all experts in the field of language training.

At the same time, along with obviously positive effect of using the portfolio during foreign language lessons we shall note the fragmentariness and superficiality of this work. The European Language Portfolio was used rather as an additional manual, a portfolio, a “master file”, but not an educational developmental

technology able to help a student to become the subject of assessment of his activities related to foreign language acquisition.

One of the meaningful results of our study is the development of methods to integrate the European Language Portfolio into the educational process and design of various learning packages (further – LP) for further development of learning and cognitive abilities of school students and their ability for reflexive self-assessment (Table 01).

Method 1

Prior to preparing a lesson, a topic or section of a textbook it is necessary to study its material, to develop self-assessment tables for each lesson through the correlation of descriptors of the European Language Portfolio with a certain set exercise or tasks from the LP, to include those communicative abilities from European Language Portfolio, which development reflects the content of each separate lesson. The above shall be developed in strict compliance with tasks to exercises from the textbook (Nikitenko & Dolgova, 2013) and the table of lesson plans of the LP Teacher’s Book (Nikitenko, 2011). It shall be noted that when the LP is used in the regions of the Russian Federation, i.e. in the conditions of polyculturalness and polylinguality (for example, in the Republic of Kalmykia), the content of the textbook may lack culturological material necessary to develop the culture-focused ability of a younger school student. In this case there is a need to develop personal or select such in other manuals. Thus, Nikitenko (2012) refers to the enrichment of a textbook and its filling with the necessary content.

Table 01. Model table of self-assessment

Communication modes/levels	Listening/Speaking	Reading/Writing	Culturological abilities
A1	I understand an oral text containing names of different professions / I can greet and express delight when meeting a friend	I can read and understand the text about a girl Jane Bell. I can find information about her and members of her family in the text / I can write sentences with words containing blocked vowels	I can say the name of my country (Russia), my republic (Kalmykia) and the target-language country (Britain, the USA)

Further work on the use of descriptors of the European Language Portfolio to develop the ability of goal-setting and planning of educational activity implies independent work of students aimed to define their individual learning objective in terms of descriptors “I can” (Nikitenko, 2011). Students can add new descriptors. For example:

- a) “I can tell about animals”;
- b) “I can tell about rules of conduct at school”;
- c) “I can tell about famous people”, etc.

A teacher collects exercises created by students thus developing a bank of such learning activities. In such a manner, a school student accepts the idea that he can and shall learn to assess himself and this assessment is the most important (Koryakovtseva, 2002).

Method 2

The performance of tasks connected with such types of activity as drawing and coloring allows children seeing the result of their new culturological and social experience of the surrounding world. A visual nonverbal material as the carrier of culturological information performs a special role in the course of children "immersion" into the culture and has the potential to boggle the mind of the younger school student with its brightness, singularity, new information and ability to advance the cognitive activity of a 7-10 years-old child. Hence, particular attention was given to the content of foreign language training taking into account the specified PCA of figurative activity of younger school students. The students were given tasks aimed to enrich their understanding of objects and phenomena of the surrounding world and on ways of interaction with them.

The integration of elementary school children into project-based activity was the most effective. With the purpose to ensure correct management of the educational process during projects performed by younger school students in various subject domains, we addressed to the study by Romashina (2005) devoted to the development of culture of didactic communicative influence of a teacher. The didactic communicative influence is means of organization and management of the educational process through communication. By realizing the training influence throughout the educational process, a foreign language teacher organizes, stimulates, controls, adjusts and assesses the educational activity of students. Thus, for example, the results of the National Holidays project were reflected in greeting cards, thematic albums, collages, class newspapers designed by the children.

Besides its primary purpose, the teacher's control at lessons is intended for adequate realization of all functions of didactic communicative influence. Students began making their greeting cards. On a board a teacher drew cards saying "Merry Christmas", "Happy New Year", "Zul – Happy Kalmyk New Year" and inside a card "To ..." and a signature "With love from ...". The teacher asked pupils how do they understand these phrases, whether they know their meaning. The students gave their answers. The teacher explained where they shall put the names of the sender and the recipient. Each student was given an empty card where he was supposed to rewrite a form of a card from a board. The students chose the recipient of the card themselves. Once the students completed their cards, they gave them to the addressees. Children exchanged cards and congratulated each other on a holiday.

The participation in the project could not but trigger verbal and cogitative activity of students. Children showed creativity that, in turn, promoted their culturological awareness, developed their culturological and communicative abilities. The project-based activity under flexible management of a teacher in the form of didactic communicative influence also positively affected the development of students' ability for cooperation. The children were extremely interested in their participation in holidays, morning performances and concerts in a foreign language since it was fostering the atmosphere of a polylogue of cultures (during such holidays children represented different cultures).

Method 3

Considering a student as the subject of educational activity, as a student-creator, a student-coauthor, it was important for us to learn and see how children assess the abilities they thus develop. Let us give some examples of descriptors compiled by us:

1. *I can write the names of the countries of Britain, Russia and Kalmykia and say them in English.*

2. *I can write the names of the capitals of Britain, Russia and Kalmykia in English and say them in English.*

3. *I can tell how the flag of Kalmykia, Russia and Britain looks like and say in English what colors it is painted in.*

4. *I can call and write in English the names of some animals and plants living in Britain, Russia and Kalmykia.*

5. *I can find a national costume of each of these countries on the picture.*

Such type of self-assessment helps children not only to understand their achievements in perceiving different cultures, but also shows what else they shall learn to communicate successfully with their foreign peers. Besides self-assessment, the younger school students had to prove their level of proficiency either during the conversation with a teacher, or while performing tasks in a Workbook designed by us.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to reveal the specifics of foreign language training at elementary school in the context of a polylogue of linguocultures, to introduce the concept of “polycultural aspect of the content of foreign language training”; to define the main units of cultural universals for elementary school and to propose methods of integration of the European Language Portfolio into the educational process and the learning packages on foreign languages.

5. Research Methods

The following **research methods** were used to address the tasks of the study:

- theoretical: study and analysis of psychological, pedagogical, linguistic and methodical literature regarding the problem of the study, main concepts and normative documents connected with the modernization of the system of foreign language training; systematization of existing theoretical and practical studies in the field of polycultural education;

- practical: monitoring of foreign language training at elementary school in the Republic of Kalmykia; questionnaire and conversations with students, foreign language teachers, elementary school teachers, project teachers; pilot training based on theoretical study.

6. Findings

Foreign language training at elementary school in the republics of the Russian Federation shall be both bicultural and polycultural. Considering the current language situation in the conditions of multilingualism and polyculturalness the problem of interaction of cultures cannot only be solved through the dialogue between the culture of the target-language country and the native national culture. The specifics of the current situation in the republics of the Russian Federation generates the need to modernize the content of foreign language training and to revise the requirements to its selection. Since it is impossible to achieve the modern objective of language education on the basis of material included into the content of sociocultural competence and regional (national and regional) component of school education, we believe

that the content of foreign language training shall be selected within the framework of the basic provisions of polycultural language education formulated in our work, namely:

- 1) polycultural language training shall make a younger school student understand the variety of languages and cultures, their equivalence as a norm of coexistence and mutual development in modern polycultural communities;
- 2) polycultural language training shall ensure close interrelation of the language of study, i.e. Russian, foreign and national languages, as well as Russian, foreign and national cultures;
- 3) polycultural language training shall be carried out from the first steps of foreign language training at elementary school since it is the period that lays the foundation for study of any language;
- 4) strong interrelation of cultures dictates the need for polycultural educational environment designed to help and support cross-cultural communication.

7. Conclusion

In terms of its pedagogical function the technology of self-assessment being part of the Language Portfolio can be defined as the innovative technology of reflexive foreign language acquisition and development of students' self-assessment, and the educational means – as the tool of independent educational activity of a student ensuring targeted development of learning and cognitive ability. Thus, the functions of the European Language Portfolio are quite specific and seem relevant for the development of the ability of a school student to reflexive self-assessment, his full-fledged educational involvement and for the formation of qualities necessary for cross-cultural communication. All the above will benefit the development of a child as a personality, increase his interest and maintain motivation for continuity of primary and secondary education. The use of the Language Portfolio in the polycultural content of foreign language training is a necessary condition since this technology helps as student to increase his motivation to study both foreign and native languages and to realize the value of cross-cultural communication at class, school, the republic, the country and beyond its borders.

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