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Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

POLYCULTURAL LINGUISTIC PERSONALITY FORMATION IN A DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF A UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The formation of a polycultural personality and students' intercultural skills is of vital importance in modern educational environment. The processes of forming a polycultural linguistic personality and teaching a foreign language are interconnected, the efficiency of one being dependent on the other. At the same time, no educational process nowadays can be performed without information and communication technologies. The effective use of ICT tools in a foreign-language educational process contributes to the formation of a digital educational environment that is characterized by flexibility, multimodality of educational content, autonomous learning and interactive collaboration. Our strategic target was to identify and analyze the possibilities of electronic educational environment in the formation of polycultural linguistic personality. Taking the above mentioned into consideration, a multilevel foreign languages blended learning model was designed to develop students' intercultural skills and consequently their polycultural linguistic personality. In conclusion, this study confirms the effectiveness of the designed model resulting in a significant increase in students' foreign languages proficiency level; a tolerant attitude towards representatives of other cultures; development of communication skills that are necessary for efficient intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

Globalization, economy, industry and the widespread use of Internet brought people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds closer (Chen, 2012).

The formation of a polycultural personality and students' intercultural skills is of vital importance in modern educational environment that is characterized as multicultural. Representatives of different nationalities and cultures can study together in one students' group.

Thus, to modernize higher education one needs to form a polycultural linguistic personality being able to perform a successful intercultural communication based on one's knowledge of conceptual systems of representatives of different cultures and respectful attitude to them (Koryakina, 2016).

At the same time, the development of the information society opens up broad prospects for the application of information and communication technologies in higher professional education. Rapid development of information and communication technologies and their active use in the educational process also requires a review of the existing pedagogical paradigm. To improve the quality of education, it is necessary to introduce new approaches to learning that are more adapted to the needs of today's students, sometimes called "digital natives", whose life is significantly influenced by information technology.

It should be noted that the process of forming a polycultural linguistic personality is closely connected with the process of teaching a foreign language and the organization of productive independent work of students. The knowledge of foreign languages allows to communicate more efficiently and to build an effective cross-cultural dialogue.

The effective use of ICT tools in a foreign-language educational process in multicultural groups contributes to the formation of a digital educational environment, which has several advantages:

- flexibility of the educational process;
- multimodality of educational content - the ability to present information about a particular cultural phenomenon combining text, video and audio at the same time;
- interactive collaboration among participants of educational process;
- increase in motivation and level of independence among students.

Methodological and technological aspects of teaching a foreign language in groups with a multicultural composition suggest its modeling and implementation, taking into account the following features:

- personal characteristics and motivational sphere of students;
- adequacy of the use of linguistic and cultural concepts and facts;
- "friendliness" of the learning environment;
- formation of intercultural skills and autonomous learning skills.

The electronic educational environment creates the necessary conditions for the efficient students' studying process, relying on individual characteristics of students and adjusting it accordingly using various types of tasks.

Thus, the problem of modeling a multicultural educational process with the active involvement of an electronic learning environment is an urgent practical task of modern methodology.

The most promising direction of the application of ICT in the educational environment is the technology of blended learning.

2. Problem Statement

Both Russian and foreign researchers are interested in the issues of a polycultural linguistic personality formation.

Generally, a polycultural linguistic personality is understood as the combination of a person's abilities to interact with representatives of different cultures efficiently.

Even though the terms "polycultural personality", "polycultural competence" are frequently used, there is some ambiguity about their meaning.

A polycultural person is understood as a person who perceives himself as a subject of the polylogue of different cultures, and can be characterized as tolerant, inquisitive, and broad-minded (Agranat, 2009).

In Aguilar definition (2010), polycultural competence is the ability to interact with representatives of different cultures, relying on one's foreign language knowledge and communicative competence.

In this paper, we define a polycultural person as a subject of productive intercultural interaction relying on linguistic, cultural knowledge and open-mindedness.

Khalyapina (2006) defines the following issues that are crucial for a polycultural linguistic personality formation:

- studying, analysis and evaluation of concepts of different cultures;
- including real communication situations into the studying process;
- identifying "universal" and "individual" characteristics in a person;
- autonomy and independence of the studying process;
- problem-oriented studying.

As mentioned above, the formation of a polycultural linguistic personality in the educational process of a university is closely connected with the effective organization of the educational process in the discipline "Foreign Language". A foreign language is an instrument of socialization of a person in a multicultural world, and a tool of adaptation in a professional context.

Sysoev (2003) underlines that a polycultural linguistic personality is formed by means of a native language and the studied foreign languages. The key characteristic of such personality is conscious self-determination in the spectrum of cultures of modern multicultural societies.

Brown (1994) stated that "a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p.165).

A linguistic competence formed in a foreign language lesson ensures the development of a polycultural personality and helps to expand the horizons, the need for studying and analyzing versatile information, the formation of independence of opinions and judgments (Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019; Ilie, 2019; Woods et al., 2020).

Thus, the development of a polycultural personality of students should be based on the need to involve each student in an active cognitive process at all levels of their studying; sufficient communicative practice; creative application of the studied linguistic and cultural information, which provides for the creation of a productive language environment close to real life situations.

A productive and well-planned foreign language educational process is a must to form polycultural linguistic personality skills. That is why the following aspects should be taken into consideration:

- *Cultural aspect* dealing with culture-oriented knowledge acquisition. Studying a foreign language students are presented with target culture concepts, customs and traditions when reading literary works, watching movies, listening to podcasts and joining social networks. The acquired knowledge destroys negative prejudices and cultural stereotypes giving a better understanding of a foreign and one's own culture.
- *Motivational aspect* aimed at creating incentives to explore new cultural concepts.
- *The development of autonomy* and productive independent studying process, since the successful formation of a polycultural linguistic personality is directly related to the ability to manage one's educational activities.
- *Reflective aspect* – the acquired knowledge give food for thought when comparing a foreign and one's own culture leading to the understanding of cultural diversity importance.

Thus, we are faced with the need to review approaches to teaching foreign languages in the light of the multicultural orientation of the formation of a linguistic personality. The formation of cognitive interest, improvement of cultural knowledge, autonomous learning process are possible only in a flexible, interactive, collaborative educational environment, focused on the essential characteristics of a modern student.

A digital educational environment that integrates face-to-face education and blended learning technologies, contributes to the implementation of these conditions.

Nowadays blended learning, traditionally understood as the integration of face-to-face and online instruction (Stein & Graham, 2020), is widely adopted across higher education.

Having analyzed different research papers (Abrosimova et al., 2019; Allan, 2018; Alrushiedat & Olfman, 2019; Blair et al., 2016; Bylieva et al., 2019; Cabı, 2018; Chen Hsieh et al., 2017; Dahlia et al, 2020; DeLozier & Rhodes, 2017; Hathaway & Mehdi, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2019; Krylova, 2020) we tend to believe that blended learning is a way to organize *a productive personally and culturally oriented educational process* (in and outside the classroom) with the help of information and communication technologies.

The technology of blended learning has great potential in the formation and development of a polycultural linguistic personality of students making the educational process in and outside the classroom flexible, interactive, autonomous and personality-oriented.

A number of research papers underline the fact that the successful blended learning implementation depends on the course design, teaching strategies, variety of methods and role of students (Aslam, 2015; Havemann et al., 2019). Therefore, a thorough organization of foreign languages culture oriented educational process is of vital importance (Figure 01).

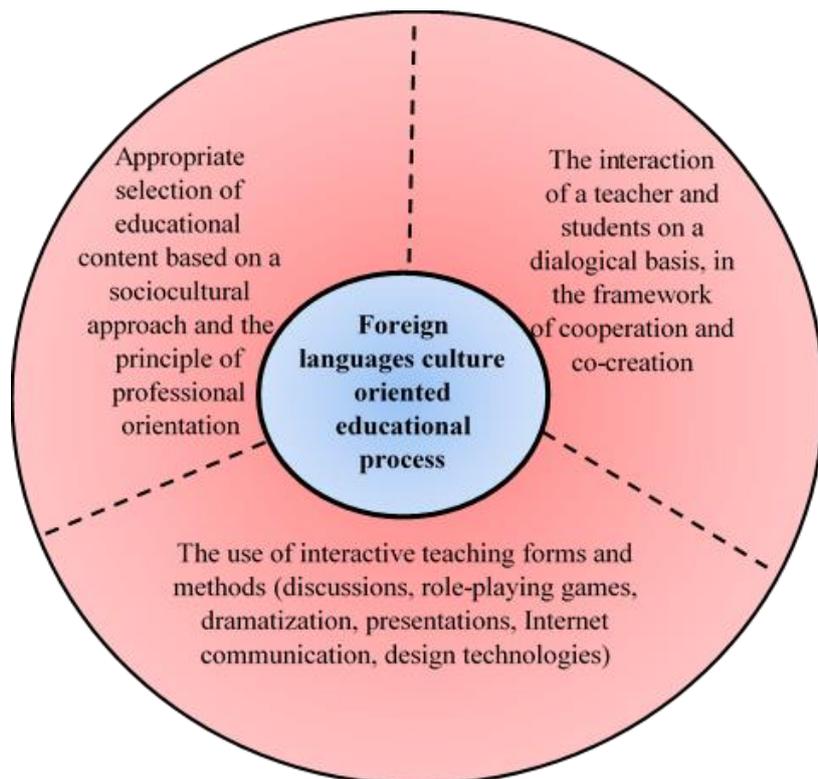


Figure 01. Foreign languages culture oriented educational process

3. Research Questions

Taking into account the necessity to review approaches to teaching foreign languages in the light of the multicultural orientation of educational process both face-to-face and on-line, the following issues were vital for understanding:

1. What is a polycultural linguistic personality and what most important elements can be defined in its structure?
2. What are the most effective ways to improve students' intercultural skills?
3. What is the impact of digital educational environment on students' polycultural linguistic personality formation?
4. How effective is blended learning model in developing students' intercultural skills?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to identify and analyze the possibilities of electronic educational environment in the formation of polycultural linguistic personality and the development of students' intercultural skills.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives were set:

- to study theoretical background and the experience of introducing blended learning into educational process;
- to consider the types and options for organizing blended learning to develop students' intercultural skills, selecting relevant types and forms of activities for students;

- to assess students' intercultural skills (control and experimental groups);
- to implement the designed model in English and Russian foreign languages educational process;
- to analyze the results of experimental work.

5. Research Methods

In this paper, we are going to propose and analyze a multilevel foreign languages blended learning model. The model was designed as a part of the digital educational environment of the university to enhance multicultural interactive educational process. The ultimate goal of the developed model is to help students to become intercultural speakers who can interact efficiently and appropriately with the representatives of different cultures (Figure 02).

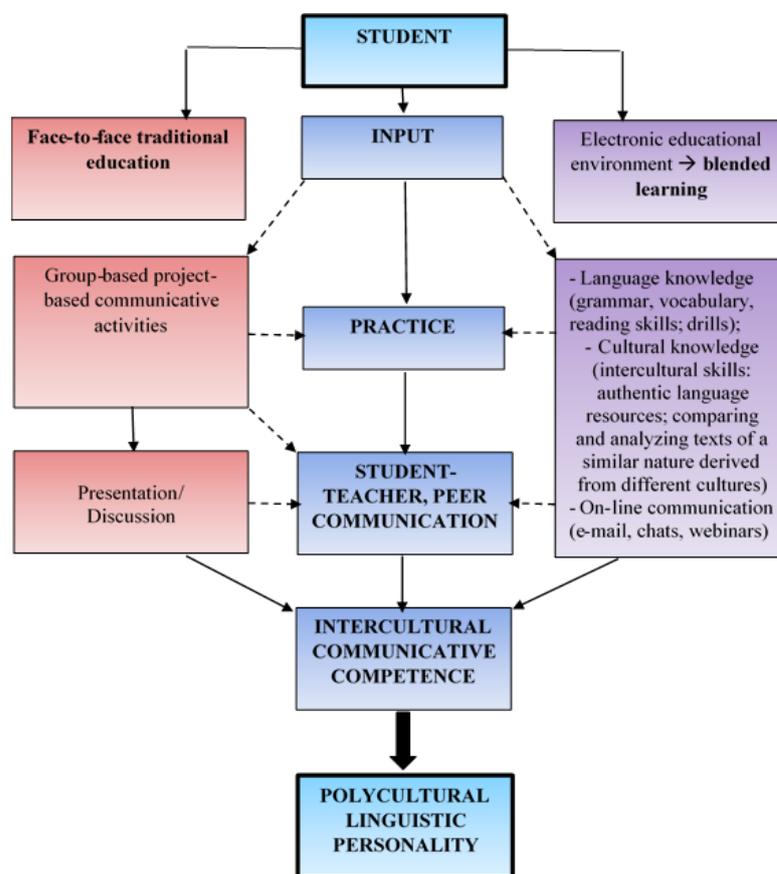


Figure 02. Multilevel foreign languages blended learning model

The study took place in Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, the study participants were 35 Russian and international 1st year students majoring in «Linguistics». Experimental training was carried out as part of the practical course “Practical Course of the First Foreign Language in the culture aspect” and “Practical Course of the Second Foreign Language in the culture aspect”, which integrated all types of productive and receptive activities: listening, reading, speaking, writing and polycultural aspect.

Methods of scientific and pedagogical research are widely used in this paper: systematic structural analysis, synthesis, work with papers, generalization of experience and experimental work, observation, surveys, etc.

Testing and implementation of multilevel foreign languages blended learning model included several stages of experimental research.

During the initial stage of the experiment, an analysis of the pedagogical context was carried out - the general level of Russian and English language proficiency of students and their intercultural skills were assessed.

We have selected and designed materials for polycultural linguistic personality skills assessment. Google forms were used to distribute the surveys among the students. Along with questionnaires and surveys, a program for monitoring students during the educational process and in the electronic educational environment was used to identify the state of their linguistic and intercultural skills development.

The next stage of research dealt with the planning of educational activities and the design of educational content and assignments in the electronic educational environment of the university. The main aim of this stage was to provide students with language and intercultural knowledge by exposing them to a number of authentic language resources in digital educational environment. The self-studied information was then discussed and applied in collaborative communicative activities during face-to-face traditional lessons.

The final stage of the experimental training dealt with the assessment of the effectiveness of the proposed multilevel foreign languages blended learning model.

6. Findings

6.1. The first stage of experimental training

At the initial stage of the experiment, several surveys were conducted. We got the information about the native languages of the respondents – Russian (25%), Chinese (50%), Arabic (25%). The students studied English and Russian as their first and second foreign languages respectively. Thus, we had polycultural students' groups. Students' level of language proficiency was assessed with the help of linguistic tests. They all had different level of language proficiency: the majority was at the intermediate level (65%) both in English and Russian, at the elementary level — 10%, upper-intermediate — 25%.

Numerous papers describing a polycultural personality/competence (Barrett, 2018; Byram, 1997) define the following most important elements it consists of, including *attitudes, knowledge, and skills*.

Intercultural attitudes deal with positive attitude to multilingual and multicultural reality in and outside the classroom; respectful, tolerant attitude to representatives of different cultures.

Intercultural knowledge deal with systematized knowledge about the intercultural features of the country, including models of speech behavior, norms and rules of interaction between people; accumulation of knowledge about the mentality, beliefs, opinions, customs, traditions of other people.

Intercultural skills deal with deep cognition and evaluation of different cultures, the ability to see, understand, interpret cultural phenomena, models of speech and non-speech behavior, the ability to critically interpret and integrate cultural and linguistic orientations into one's own picture of the world.

Thus, defining students' polycultural competence we assessed the above-mentioned elements. Intercultural knowledge survey included questions dealing with cultural and regional knowledge of the students. Moreover, to assess intercultural skills and attitudes, a self-report instrument was designed on the basis of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993) and the

Intercultural Sensitivity Index (Olson & Kroeger, 2001). The participants were asked to respond to a number of questions (ex. “It is appropriate that people from other cultures do not necessarily have the same values and goals as people from my culture”, “I question my own prejudices as well as national and cultural stereotypes”, etc.) using the scale with the following descriptors: 1 = very strongly agree, 2 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 4 = not decided, 5 = disagree, 6 = strongly disagree, and 7 = very strongly disagree.

According to the survey results, 3 students’ groups with high, middle and low level of intercultural skills development were defined (Table 01).

Table 01. Intercultural skills level (1st stage)

Groups	Intercultural skills level, %		
	High	Middle	Low
Experimental group – 18 students	15	55	30
Control group – 17 students	10	50	40

6.2. The second stage of experimental training

The second stage of the experimental work was a formative experiment on the implementation of a designed multilevel foreign languages blended learning model in the educational process. Flipped Classroom seems to us to be the most acceptable BL model when developing students’ intercultural skills in Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University.

When using Flipped Classroom model, the educational process is divided into several stages (Horizon Report for Higher Education in 2015, 2015):

1. The first stage includes independent work of students to study new information (presentations, video lectures, texts in a textbook), completing assignments according to instructions (making questions, drawing up mind maps, collaborative assignments, self-check tests, etc.).

2. The second stage deals with productive studying process in class based on the principles of cooperation and interaction.

3. Post-class activities are done to summarize the information studied. They are a logical continuation of the class work and are creative in nature. They may include drawing up flowcharts, making thematic glossaries, preparing presentations, writing essays, articles, blogging, conducting research, etc. Such educational activities are aimed at developing reflective and evaluative skills of students.

The above mentioned determined our approach to the selection of electronic content and tools for the implementation of Flipped Classroom model to develop students’ intercultural skills.

Electronic and face-to-face educational content was designed according to principles of Intercultural Language Teaching defined by Newton et al. (2010). So that it:

- combines linguistic and cultural aspects;
- makes the educational process collaborative;
- encourages and develops a reflective approach to culture;
- fosters explicit comparisons and connections between cultures;
- relies on personality-oriented approach.

The following electronic resources and activities were offered:

- tasks and educational materials in the learning management system Moodle for students' independent work;
- taking part in an online project "Cultural diversity";
- taking part in webinars conducted on a weekly basis.

Students' independent work in Moodle was of vital importance. Students were offered different authentic resources (surveys, films, websites, literature, images, video, etc.) They were asked not only to study the information but to compare and analyze texts of a similar nature derived from different cultures. The types of the analyzed cultures varied in each of the topics studied (Russian and Chinese, Chinese and American, Russian and Arabic, etc.). Thus, students could be asked to study two surveys describing a typical family in Russia and the United States. This activity helps the students to master skills in comparing and contrasting two target cultures.

One more electronic activity should be mentioned here. When starting a new topic, for example "Cultural values for Russians" or "How much do you know about China?" students are asked to share their ideas about China or Russia and to create a collaborative mind map. At the end of the topic students study their initial beliefs and discuss if any changes took place. The ultimate aim of this activity is to show that our perceptions and beliefs maybe misleading and based on false stereotypes. This activity provides an opportunity to counter cultural stereotypes.

While working independently, students had an opportunity to ask teachers/peers questions in an electronic chat/blog.

The second face-to-face stage included group-based speaking activities that fostered spoken language production and gave an opportunity to develop intercultural skills. Moloney and Harbon (2010) note that within the context of language classrooms intercultural practice "asks students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language".

The following in-class activities were offered:

- Discussion of the self-studied information.
- Creative project-based activities, including discussions, role-plays, preparation of presentations, etc.

The teacher monitors students' work, making sure the independently studied information is used correctly and efficiently, giving some help when necessary.

We would like to describe one tool that seems to be the most promising when developing intercultural skills in a language classroom; the so-called *OSEE tool* (Deardorff & Deardorff, 2000) (Figure 3).

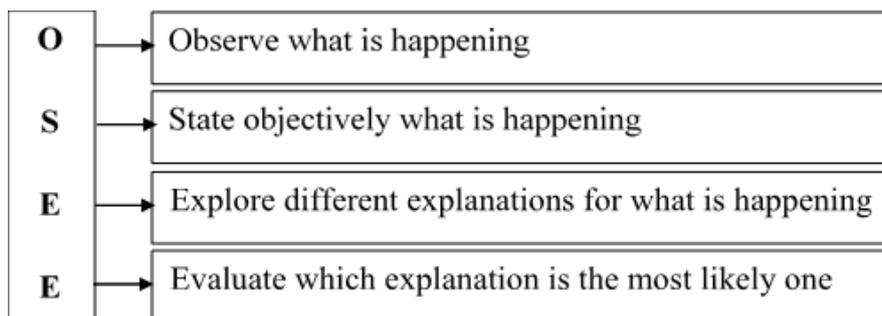


Figure 03. The OSEE tool

During the face-to-face classroom stage students were presented with a video connected with some cultural issues. For example, a video clip representing baptism or christening of a child in an Orthodox church. The students are asked to observe what is happening with the sound muted. After watching the students describe or state objectively what they have watched. During the next step students are asked to work together in small groups discussing the video and the explanations/reasons of the actions in the video. To do the task students are supposed to have some background cultural experience to explain what was going on in the video (Deardorff, 2011). The final stage deals with evaluating of different explanations presented by students and choosing the most plausible and true to life.

In such a way, a special environment in which the concepts of intercultural communicative competence can be practiced is designed.

Thus, the dialogue of cultures takes place in students' collaborative activities in a foreign language classroom. Coping with different tasks with a multicultural focus, students learn to understand that there are no "bad" and "good" cultures. Each has its own characteristics that should be accepted and respected.

6.3. The third stage of experimental training

Summarizing the results of the study, we turn to the original goal, which was to identify and test the possibilities of developing intercultural skills in a university in the format of blended learning. Thus, the results of the study were evaluated on the basis of the following criteria:

- English and Russian proficiency level;
- intercultural skills level;
- the students' involvement in the proposed activities during the experimental training.

The analysis of the test results during the control phase of the pedagogical experiment allowed us to conclude that language and intercultural skills significantly improved among the students of the experimental group (Table 02, 03).

Table 02. Language proficiency level (3rd stage)

Groups	Language proficiency level, %					
	English			Russian		
	Inter- mediate	Upper- Intermediate	Advanced	Inter- mediate	Upper- Intermediate	Advanced
Experimental group – 18 students	45	45	10	45	45	10
Control group – 17 students	50	40	10	65	25	10

Table 03. Intercultural skills level (3rd stage)

Groups	Intercultural skills level, %		
	High	Middle	Low
Experimental group – 18 students	35	65	-
Control group – 17 students	15	60	25

As for the third criterion, several interviews were conducted with students to find out their attitude to the proposed model. Generally, students were positive about the educational process model and emphasized the intercultural skills orientation of the tasks proposed, as it gave them an opportunity “to discover new things about other cultures through learning English and Russian”. Students underlined the necessity of intercultural component in foreign languages lessons, as “we all live in a multicultural world”.

It should be also mentioned, that during the experimental training students were involved in different types of electronic activities. Obligatory work in Moodle was combined with the opportunity to take part in webinars, as well as in an on-line project “Cultural diversity” to get extra points. This allowed each student to build his individual educational pathway.

All of the above mentioned indicates that the process of forming a polycultural personality of a student in a digital educational environment using the designed multilevel foreign languages blended learning model is effective.

7. Conclusion

The formation of the students’ polycultural linguistic personality was possible due to several pedagogical conditions, identified and implemented by us, which ensure the effective development of students’ intercultural skills in the digital educational environment of the university based on blended learning technology. These include:

- taking into account students’ individual characteristics;
- students’ technical and information skills that insure their productive work in BL environment;
- collaborative activities in the process of developing intercultural skills both on-line and face-to-face;
- creation of a positive “emotional climate” when working on-line and face-to-face.

As a result, the use of various forms, methods and tools in electronic and face-to-face educational environment contributed to the personal changes of students:

- increased motivation to learn not only the language, but also the intercultural component;
- a significant increase in students’ foreign languages proficiency level;
- a tolerant attitude towards representatives of other cultures;
- development of communication skills that are necessary for efficient intercultural communication.

The results of the study prove the development of students’ readiness for intercultural communication including their cultural knowledge, motivation levels and reflection skills.

The study opens up new prospects for studying the problems of formation and development of a polycultural linguistic personality of a student: studying, analyzing and evaluating theoretical and practical issues of the formation of polycultural competence as one of the key competencies in the educational process of a university; a deeper study of the psychological, pedagogical and technical aspects of the development and implementation of blended learning technology in the polycultural educational process.

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