Acquisition of Socio-Cultural Competence via Dynamic Learning Environment

Irina M. Solodkova[a]*, Liliya R. Ismagilova[b]

* Corresponding author: Irina M. Solodkova, irinamsolodkova@gmail.com

[a]*Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya Str., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russia, irinamsolodkova@gmail.com, +7(843)2911374*
[b]Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya Str., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russia, *Kazan, Russia, lilia.ismg@gmail.com, +7(843)2911374*

Abstract

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The global, political, and business processes raised the problem of socio-cultural competence and the formation of tolerance in cross-cultural communication. The issue gets its importance due to technological development and the necessity for specialists to be involved in constant relations. Foreign language skill is an integral component of the attractiveness of vocational specialist and the tool that helps one to move ahead quickly in today's business world. It is also a method to build professional culture, to develop a broad, holistic and encyclopedic viewpoint. The introduction of socio-cultural competence in teaching Business English will help students to have the idea about socio-cultural peculiarities in overseas business activities, thereby, providing opportunity to be fitted in the international business community. This paper aims to give a comprehensive account of dynamic learning environment (DLE) in teaching socio-cultural capabilities and its benefits to knowledge durability. DLE enables students to be immersed in the study material, and observe the situations of real business communication practices. The experiment was conducted with undergraduates (aged 18-19) of KFU within English language classes. The groups were taught with and without DLE involvement. Real groups observation, questionnaires, comparative analysis of Moodle and common classroom practices provided data for the research. The experiment proved that acquisition of socio-cultural capabilities is organized more efficiently via DLE. The authors also combine the results with the peculiarities of subjects who represent the new generation of computer and gadget literate community. Exploiting the specificity of new generation perception, the authors recommend to use the findings for the construction of syllabuses.

1. Introduction

High level of communicative skill is regarded nowadays as one of the most demanded characteristics of a graduate specified by many employers. Those graduates who demonstrate adequately formed communicative skill both in native and foreign languages are said to have potentially more career

development benefits and employability. So, foreign language skill is an integral component of the attractiveness of vocational specialist and the tool to achieve good work results, creativity and one of the methods of building professional culture, and developing a broad, holistic and encyclopedic viewpoint of the modern world.

Globalization has penetrated into every aspect of human life and institutions of higher education are not excluded from this process (Bagautdinova, Nailya G., et al, 2016). Its processes allow specialists to become more mobile, be headhunted worldwide, and enhance their personal and career prospects. English has become a unique foreign language used internationally. It is believed that 'communication between non-native speakers of English is far greater in frequency, amount, and significance as well as the number of speakers today' (Crystal, 1997, Graddol, 1997).

However, acquisition of a foreign language today doesn't mean the knowledge of grammar constructions or pronunciation theories and reading (writing) techniques alone. An EFL classroom is absolutely different from other classroom due to the aims it strives for. The main aim is to get communicative competences, and it can't be achieved without proper guidance, facilitation, motivation and collaboration (Zalyaeva E.O., Solodkova I.M., 2014). It is also about knowing the cultural aspects, social and behavioral norms of the country of origin, its traditions, ethics, etc. Cultural competence is generally defined as a combination of knowledge about certain cultural groups as well as attitudes towards and skills for dealing with cultural diversity (Betancourt JR, 2003). Socio-cultural competence being a part of communicative competence enables one to comprehend written text or oral speech fully. The special role of a foreign language is that it contributes to the development of our students' intellectual potential and it forms their intellectual abilities (Galishnikova, Elena M., 2014). ESP should be considered as a necessary tool for specialists to function properly in their professional field (Ismagilova, Liliya R., Polyakova, Oksana V., 2014). It is particularly true for those who will be employed in economics, business, finance and management spheres. The introduction of socio-cultural competence in teaching Business English will help students to have the idea about socio-cultural peculiarities in overseas business activities and so, provide opportunity to evidently reach win-win negotiations' outcome in the future, have certain attitude to timing and deadlines, know about etiquette, body languages and so on. International business community is to be treated as trend-setters of cultural social norms, customs and traditions, however, each country has its peculiarities.

Taking into consideration the abstract nature of created conditions (business environment) for learning a foreign language in Russian HEEs, we can conclude that there is a necessity for the usage of resources that will enable students to get immersed in the study material, and observe the situations of real business communication and socio-cultural peculiarities. The specific aim we have is to investigate the opportunities offered by Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) and especially, video-based activities in acquiring socio-cultural competences.

2. Problem statement

Moodle has recently become very popular among HEEs 'due to its pedagogical basis and adaptiveness to the academic environment' (Bošković V., et al, 2014). The advantages provided by the platform are the following:

- time adaptive pace. Students can go back to the studied material as many times as they need, working at their own pace;

- instant feedback. Error correction might be done either by teachers or by peers, e.g. in a students' forum;

- remote accessibility;

- flexible schedule of sessions;

- cost-effectiveness (Bošković V., et al, 2014);

- easy to be used.

Moodle has been chosen as a tool to acquire socio-cultural competence because it allows to collect different resources and activities relating to one topic, in one storage, as well as monitoring the track records and revision of the materials studied. Furthermore, students can use a lot of 'multimedia tools and applications, such as images, sounds, animation' (Kovacevic, D., 2008) It is of critical importance in acquiring socio-cultural competence as it is better perceived while watching and observing how other cultures behave in different situations rather than reading about them. Video materials contain the situations of real business life like meeting, interviews, negotiations, telephone calls. TV news and lectures by famous business people and training schools are available as well.

Digital technologies, used in language education, suit generation z, which is characterized as being computer and gadget literate, having ability to grasp information quicker and profoundly by using different gadgets. The generation that has grown up using computer games, e-mails, Internet, demonstrate a better understanding of images and sounds. These students are also called 'Digital natives', who are said to be the 'native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet' (Prensky, 2001). In teaching English as a foreign language, this peculiarity of modern generation students should be turned into an advantage and actively exploited by language teachers. Students' screen literacy advocate for the quality of language education (Grigorieva, Elena V., et al, 2016). Following this idea, English language teachers must construct the syllabus and a concrete lesson plan on those teaching strategies which appeal to the discussed generation of students. These include: a) learning environment that is student focused, customized and collaborative; b) learning experiences that emphasize student co-operation and reduced lecturing, c) student empowerment and choice; d) a focus on life-long learning, not teaching to the test; e) technology as a tool to get to know each student (Tapscott, 2009, p.148); f) tasks instructions that are clear and precise; g) technologies that appeal to their usual way of getting, understanding, and acting upon the information.

However, we should admit that the usage of dynamic learning environment has some downsides. The main ones are: absence of speaking activities; no opportunity for students to have immediate response from teachers if they misunderstand the task; technical problems; quality of video clips and listening tracks; lack of intrinsic motives to work on a Lesson. The main recommendation on this matter is to provide students with high quality courses on Moodle platform, combining them with common classroom activities. The combination of educational tools encourages students to study the foreign language profoundly, which leads to high proficiency levels in the long run. Moreover, it enriches students with a set of multicultural knowledge allowing them to participate in inter-cultural communication.

3. Research methods

The study and investigation of progressive pedagogical experience, theoretical and practical analysis, real groups observation, questionnaires, comparative analysis of Moodle and common classroom practices were used in this research.

4. Findings

The subjects of the study were 44 undergraduates aged 18-19 (15 males, 29 females) of Kazan Federal University, Institute of management, economics and finance. The experiment was conducted within English language classes and lasted for 6 months of academic year. The undergraduates were divided into control and sample groups of merely equal numbers. The students from each studied groups were given the same topics containing similar information but presented and studied in different forms. The control group was taught without the Dynamic language environment, while the sample group employed the technology in full: the sample group had opportunities to read about sociocultural information and watch video on it while the control group mostly engaged in listening and reading activities. For this purpose, we used Lessons on Moodle platform created by both the researches and the teachers from the department of foreign languages in the sphere of economics, business and finance. The topics included: "USA", "Britain", "Canada", "Family life (English-speaking countries)", "Management", "Marketing", "Finances: banking, accounting, investment".

One of the first areas the researchers we wanted to explore was 'students perception of sociocultural competence' thus they were asked four questions before and after the experiment: Q1 - Is sociocultural knowledge important? Q2. How would you prefer to acquire sociocultural information? Q3 - Do you agree that video-based tasks give you better understanding of sociocultural knowledge? Q4 -Do you agree that reading tasks give you better understanding of sociocultural knowledge?

Half of the respondents believed that sociocultural awareness was important (50%), 31.8% of students thought this competence to be inessential and 18.2 % were indifferent to the matter. By the end of the experiment, 43.2% of respondents changed their opinion toward the importance of sociocultural competence with few (6.8%) keeping their negative position. Therefore the students of generation z tend to appreciate social norms, traditions and cultural values of different nations, when special attention is paid to these topics, which should be considered when designing the syllabus.

The answers to the Q2 showed that initially 40.9% of respondents preferred to acquire the knowledge through video materials, 31,8% through personal contacts and 27.2 through reading, so they had nearly equal percentage of preferences. After the experiment, 63.6% of students were in favour of video of any kind, while the number of inclinations toward personal contacts and reading decreased to 18.2 in both cases. Students think that video can give them more information about relationship between people, working practices, ritual behavior and social diversity than reading and personal contacts.

The answers to Q3 and Q4 at the first stage were the criteria used in dividing the students into the sample and control groups: those taught with video content in the syllabus and those without it accordingly (24 students in sample group and 20 students in control group). 54.5 % of respondents chose video tasks over reading activities (43.2%) at that stage. We should note that approximately the

same number of students presumed video-based tasks (41%) and reading activities (45.5%) as an insignificant factor in acquiring sociocultural knowledge. At the second stage, the attitude changed dramatically: majority of students (79.5%) thought that video-based tasks played crucial role in their understanding of alternative cultures realities with few (18.2%) indifferent to the issue. Thus, the popularity of reading among the respondents fell. By the end of experiment as much as 34.1% of respondents admitted the necessity of reading vs 61,3% of those who considered this form as irrelevant for acquiring social conventions, living conditions and interpersonal relations knowledge. Some students taught through the reading approach admitted it was rather monotonous and less attractive, as reading required concentration and they were easily distracted. Overall these results suggest that the students of generation z are more inclined to video form of presenting learning material, as this provides them with 'real' business environment, takes less efforts and gives additional information on cultural differences.
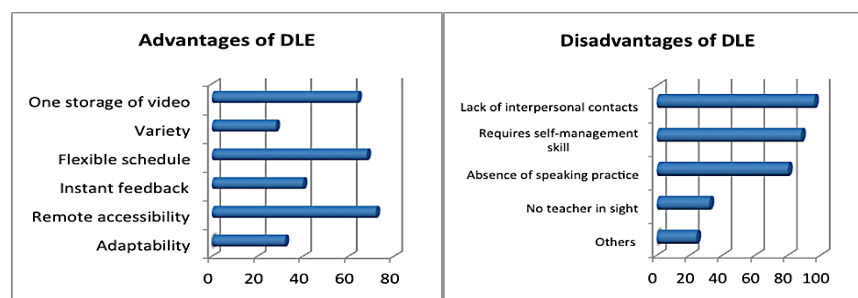

Fig. 1. The advantages and disadvantages of DLE (%).

At the end of the research period students from sample group were asked additional questions to assess video-based tasks in DLE as a tool to obtain inter-cultural awareness. (Fig.1) Majority of respondents mentioned; remote accessibility (72%), flexible schedule (68%), and one storage (64%) as compelling argument in favour DLE, and lack of interpersonal relations (96%), self-management skills (88%) and absence of speaking practice as a discouraging factor. A few responses demonstrated positive stance toward diversity task bank and flexibility (28% and 32% correspondingly), and some (32%) required teachers support, several (23%) recognized others factors preventing them from DLE: the necessity of computer literacy, slow internet connection and time consumption.
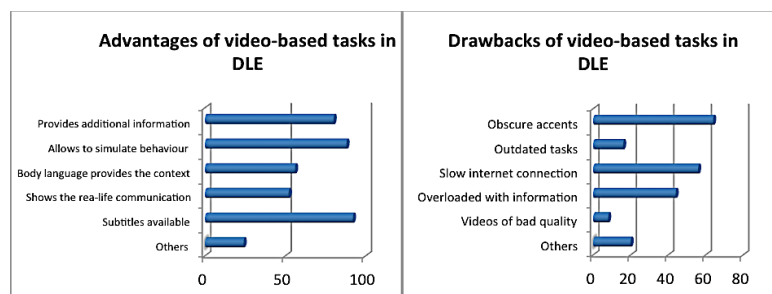

Fig. 2. The advantages and drawbacks of video-based tasks in DLE (%).

In relation to video-based tasks in DLE (Fig.2) most participants found that availability of subtitles (92%) and possibility to simulate behavior (88%) as well as provision of additional information (80%)

encouraged them to accomplish the tasks, still, about a half of them mentioned information overload (44%) as a disadvantage. Though approximately 50% liked the real-life communication and body-language assistance in understanding the context, they were disappointed with obscure accents and slow internet connection preventing them from executing the task quickly and at once. One fifth of the respondents, meanwhile, referred to unwanted sounds distraction, fast speech rate, further reproduction difficulty that did not allow them to succeed in full as down parts of the system, but they enumerated such factors as 'vocabulary is remembered better', 'it helps me to act accordingly' and 'it develops my audibility' in favour of these tasks.

The results indicate that students of generation z go for collaborative learning environment: interacting with classmates, discussing difficulties, sharing experience, but appealing to teacher's help when possible. This willingness to work in groups and to work through examples could be insightful for applying sociocultural framework to educational needs, and reaching a level of mutual understanding and less ambiguity in communication.

To enable the authors gain understanding of the students' level of socio-cultural competence acquisition, they got throughout the period using different teaching strategies: with and without DLE. As sociocultural competence is inextricably connected with communication (M. Byram, G. Zarate, G. Neuner, 1998) both groups (sample and control) were to act out the roles in simulating real-life situations. Assessment criteria for communication skills: vocabulary accuracy, grammar accuracy, fluency, interaction and presentation based on criteria grid graded from 5 (high degree) to 0 (absence) allowed to convey qualitative assessment of sociocultural competence.

The results showed that the sample group had better presentation skills, fluency and interaction: they were more initiative and collaborative, some students imitated gestures and mimic from the videos, tried to reproduce intonations and pronunciation. They acted more 'naturally' living-out the situations: made eye contact, simulated diversified culture behavior (American sociability, Canadian tolerance, British politeness), used interjections (Ah, Mmm, Eh) to take a pause. They were emotionally more open: smiled more, and used open gestures. Although everyone wanted to express their 'unique' point of view, they asked questions to engage the participants in the communication process, they validated their feelings and expressed their opinion more clearly than the participants of control group.

As for average grades of grammar and vocabulary accuracy they are nearly the same within the groups though the sample group used more informal types of words, both groups used professional vocabulary when required.

Overall, the sample group displayed higher results in acquiring social norms and cultural values. This indicates that video-based task in DLE enables students to immerse into socio-cultural diversity, possess knowledge durability due to the ability of studying information at one's own space, not limited by classroom time framework; get better understanding in digital and screen literacy and an unlimited amount of time to revise the study material; and finally, psychological confidence, that is students act on the material remotely, not having the stress of making mistakes, being taught at by peers and to interact in simulated reality of contemporary communicative environment.

5. Conclusion

The experiment proved that acquisition of socio-cultural competence is organized more efficiently via dynamic learning environment. The authors also combine the results with the peculiarities of subjects who represent new generation of computer literate community.

Generation z found video as an effective tool for acquiring socio-cultural knowledge. The findings showed the preference of students toward the video based materials as a form of socio-cultural development as they can mirror the actions, vocabulary, intonation, body language and even mimic.

Exploiting the specificity of new generation of digital natives and their perception, the authors recommend to use the findings in constructing the syllabus.

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