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MODELING ONLINE GROUPING FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AT UNIVERSITY

МОДЕЛИРОВАНИЕ ОНЛАЙН ГРУППОВОЙ РАБОТЫ ДЛЯ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОММУНИКАТИВНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ У СТУДЕНТОВ ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИХ СПЕЦИАЛЬНОСТЕЙ В ВУЗЕ

Abstract:

Intercultural communicative competence (hereafter ICC) means the ability to understand different cultures, believes, values, and is formed as the result of the language teaching and

culture of the target language. The objective of this study is to propose ways for organizing group-work in the context of online learning for modeling online grouping in order to develop ICC for pre-service teachers at university.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, grouping interaction, online teaching, breakout rooms.

Аннотация:

Межкультурная коммуникативная компетенция (далее МКК) включает в себя способность понимать различные культуры, убеждения, ценности и формируется в результате преподавания языка и культуры изучаемого языка. Цель данного исследования заключается в рассмотрении способов организации групповой работы в контексте онлайн обучения и преподавания для моделирования онлайн групповой работы, что позволяет выработку МКК у студентов педагогических специальностей в вузе.

Ключевые слова: Межкультурная коммуникативная компетенция, групповое взаимодействие, онлайн обучение, сессионные залы.

Introduction

The globally integrated world has been rapidly changing and has been requiring various skills and abilities that cause to reconsider the concept of foreign language education.

Owing to the changing demands in the modern labour market, foreign language education has received an increasing attention today. Teachers of foreign languages have become aware of the fact that teaching languages is not only about language proficiency. It is also about how socio and linguo-cultural dimensions become fundamental. In recent years, with the accelerated internationalization and globalization there has been an increased recognition in the need for the significance of ICC development in foreign language education.

Kazakhstan is not an exception as it has also been developing its policies and institutions in education with the aim of complying with international standards. Due to the latest reforms in the Kazakhstani educational system, particularly regarding multilingualism and the cultural project "Trinity of Languages" (MES, 2011), which was initially introduced by the First President N.A. Nazarbayev in 2007, the English language has received a significant role in the implementation of the State Language Policy in Kazakhstan. The strategic goals established in the cultural project "Trinity of Languages" and in the State Program on Education Development of Kazakhstan for the years 2011-2020 were aimed at mastering by all Kazakhstani citizens till 2020 (MES, 2010; MES, 2011) language proficiencies: of the Kazakh language – by 95%, the Russian language – by 25% and the English language – also by 25%.

Thus, the State Program and the project have triggered the necessity to promote the development of intercultural competence not only in higher education but also in secondary education. The state curriculum of *English As a Foreign Language* (hereafter EFL) lessons in Kazakhstani secondary education emphasizes the development of multilingual and multicultural citizens and contains culture-oriented topics with the focus on the foundation of the positive

attitudes, openness to value people's own and other cultures.

Considering the problem of the ICC formation of pre-service teachers at university should be highlighted as a multistage activity that is carried out in the form of a series of successive stages. They are organized to develop future activities from a general idea to clearly programmed actions. A predictable result is the functioning of ICC skills in communicative sphere and in acts of intercultural communication.

S.S. Kunanbayeva [1] determines that a person's competence is formed in the process of education and is a characteristic of the intellectual and professional development of a person. Competences as systemic qualitative new formations are a characteristic of the teaching quality and good level of specialist training.

The national professional standard of Kazakhstan "Teacher" [2], intended for the development of teacher education programs, defines the requirements for skills and abilities, knowledge and competences required from the teacher. Knowing the linguistic mechanisms of intercultural interaction and the paradigm of co-learning of languages, co-learning of languages and cultures, students of language specialties develop cultural awareness, and thus will be ready to meet students' cultural and linguistic needs in their future profession and form a tolerant attitude towards foreign culture and lifestyle.

Organizing the educational process for the ICC formation as the ability to communicate with native speakers in various communicative situations is a very problematic issue in the context of distance learning. In distance learning teachers should be able to create conditions for the development of communication skills and create artificial face-to-face communication.

Theoretical Background

The interest in ICC development has widely been recognized, promoting a considerable shift of the goals in foreign language education, in which the focus is now on acquiring a complex of abilities needed to interact effectively and appropriately with people of other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Byram [3]; Deardorff [4]; Elizarova [5]; Fantini [6]; Samovar & Porter [7]; Ter-Minassova [8]; Serebryakova V.A., Kostikova V.A., Polyakova T.A. [9]; Kunanbayeva [10]; Baker [11]; Bennet [12]). A new paradigm shift in foreign language education in Kazakhstan has been highly promoted entailing contemporary teaching approaches and acknowledging the importance of a student-centered and communication-oriented approach as the groundwork for the teaching process and students' meaningful learning. It leads to the shift from teacher-centered classrooms where the teacher is believed to be an authority and a source of knowledge (Dollard & Christensen [13]; Garrett [14]) to highly encouraged learner-centeredness and facilitated methodology originated in constructivist developmental theory (Piaget [15]; Kolb [16]; Mascolo [17]). The role of schooling is aimed at training learners who will be able to think beyond the limits and own intercultural communicative competencies as well as essential skills, such as problem solving, synthesizing, creativity and critical thinking, collaboration and communication that will enable them to work with their peers and achieve productive team goals (Nunan [18]), (Richards, Rodgers [19]). The recent literature has acknowledged that educators and scholars have been searching for educational approaches to effectively align enriching linguistic and communicative competencies with promoting the appropriate interaction with people of cultural diversity (Gavin [20]), Habtamu [21], Zimnyaya [22]).

A person achieves ICC when they understand how their cultural norms affect their self-awareness and the situation they face. In fact, ICC is an integral part of communicative competence, defined as "the ability to act depending on the context, situation, and topic" (Mitrofanova, Kostomarov [23]). In accordance with this, ICC is knowledge about culture and the use of language in line with the inclusion of this knowledge in the meanings of linguistic units (Chomsky [24]).

Scientists V.V. Vorobyev [25], L.A. Koneva, D.I. Bashurin [26], I.V. Kharchenkova [27] identify that ICC is a system of knowledge about culture and cultural values embodied in a language. S.S.Kunanbaeva [10] noted that it is "a reflection of the national linguistic consciousness and mentality". She proposes a framework of "intercultural communicative competence" containing sub-competencies that reflect the teaching system shaping an intercultural communicative level of language proficiency, sufficient for everyday life and work in the modern interrelated world.

Finally, ICC can be defined as follows: the ability to define and challenge one's cultural ideas, values, and beliefs. It is about developing empathy and related knowledge, the ability to see the world through the eyes of others, or at least understand that others can perceive the world through different cultures.

Even though the significance of ICC is widely recognized around the world, the preliminary study in this research reveals that teaching and practicing ICC in EFL classes in Kazakhstani education encounter challenges despite any teaching experience. There were identified several important issues that create barriers to developing ICC.

EFL teachers recognize the lack of a real environment for learners to practice their ICC (Litvinov [28]). Other warning aspects of promoting students' ICC consider the teachers' lack of knowledge on how to promote students' ICC, how to teach ICC, how to assess ICC aspects, and how to maintain the balance in teaching and integrating language and cultural objectives. It is important to note that the assessment of learners' intercultural communicative competencies is one of the most challenging aspects in the research field of ICC and is still on the developmental stage (Dortman [29]). The methods of ICC assessment, how and what has to be assessed are among the most challenging issues that educators encounter today.

Group work in ICC developing

ICC is developed as the outcome of the student's skills of joint work for a specific purpose through interaction with others.

Interaction in the classroom is an experience that fosters language skills. It helps to construct students' critical thinking skills and the ability to share their views with peers. Classroom interaction is an important part of the learning process (Hymes [30]). Interaction, defined as student participation, requires a high level of interpersonal skills (Kudaibergen [31]). This means an exchange of information between teacher and students or among students.

Classroom interaction aimed at teaching the target language comes from different types of communication, for example, when a teacher talks to an individual, group members and the whole class, a student talks to the teacher, with another student, with group members and with the whole class (Pic.1).
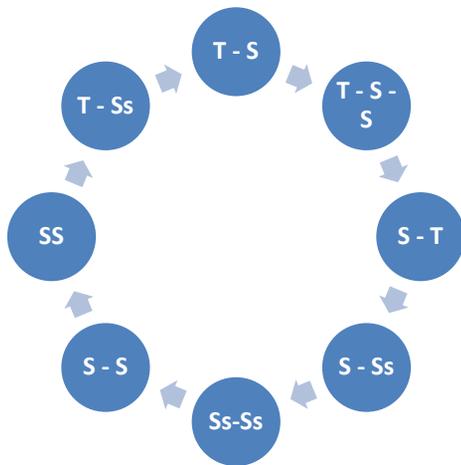
Pic.1 – Common Interaction Patterns in the Classroom

Scrivener J. [32] suggested that the teacher's most important role is to create learning environment for students with suitable conditions in which learners can interact with their peers. Teachers cultivate interaction (divide into small groups, give tasks), create a classroom environment; act as a role model, a mentor, foresee situations causing poor interaction (Pic.2).
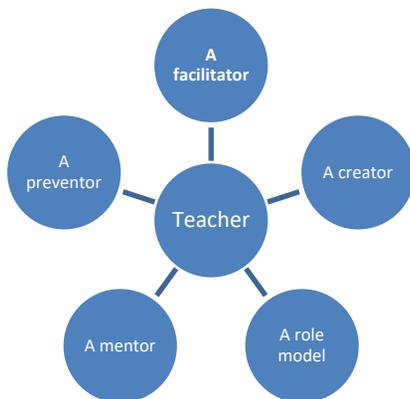
Pic.2 – Teachers' Roles in the Classroom Interaction

Cohen E.G. [33] proposes to split the group into small enough subgroups so that everyone has a chance to be engaged on an assigned task. Group work should be carefully planned, well executed, monitored throughout, and followed up on in some way.

Collaborative learning refers to several processes where students are divided into groups and interact together to achieve a certain objective or find a solution to a specific learning problem (Khutorskoy [34]). It is distinguished from traditional teaching approaches because learners are encouraged to work together and share ideas rather than work alone and compete individually.

Research shows (Storch [35]) that group work and pair work activities are motivating and enlightening to students and teachers. Learners discover points of weakness and receive instant response from group members and their teachers. According to Kagan S. [36], learners' capabilities should be channeled into positive and more meaningful directions. Kagan points out

that cooperative learning would encourage learners to have higher achievement than competitive or individualistic learning. The researcher adds that cooperative learning offers learners opportunities that enable them to increase their self-esteem and become more intrinsically motivated.

Collaborative learning is deeply rooted in a few learning theories such as those of cognitivism, constructivism, and those concerning motivation. Dewey J. [37] emphasizes the social nature of learning where learners both work in groups and have individual responsibility for their work. He believes that group-learning experiences have the potential to promote meaningful learning that is most effective when learners are actively engaged with the content thus increasing their motivation. This is in a line with the motivational and cognitive theorists (Slavin, Swortzel [38]) who deem that the inherent organization of collaborative learning forms a mutually friendly atmosphere that is conducive to learning and motivating. Learners become ready to discuss and negotiate, thus becoming collaborative. In this approach to language learning, learners are viewed as problem solvers where cognitive skills are stressed. Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner advocate this type of learning where learners study together and negotiate meaning to develop shared knowledge of the world. Collaborative work enables them to think at higher intellectual levels than when they work individually. Students' different background in terms of level, language proficiency and learning style and experience contributes positively to the learning process and improves their problem-solving strategies as they are confronted with various interpretations for a problem-solving activity (Rothstein [39]). Collaborative learning is also based on psycholinguistic-cognitive views Korotayeva E.V. [40]). In psycholinguistic-cognitive classrooms, learners plan, organize, revise, rethink, and edit themselves.

Collaborative learning is used to describe a situation when learners are organized in groups to discuss issues and work on problem-solving activities. Collaborative learning activities vary widely but most of them center on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it. In his study, the researcher uses the term "collaborative learning" to refer to any activity that is done in groups (Hofstede G. [41]).

Research Objectives

This study is aimed at proposing ways to organize group work in the context of online learning for the ICC formation for pre-service teachers at university.

Research Methods

As above-mentioned, this study represents an attempt to consider why ICC can be the constituent part of professional competence and how to manage teaching process in distant teaching. For this purpose, the following investigative techniques were used in this study: study and analysis of scientific and methodological sources on the problem, analysis and generalization of the accumulated domestic and foreign experience on the research topic, observation of the educational process, questionnaire, and pre-post experiential teaching method.

Participant Profile and Research Design

The subject of this study is the teaching process of the course "Fundamentals of Intercultural Communication" to 60 pre-service teachers at the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. All students study English as a first foreign language.

The group was split up into 2 groups according to experimental teaching.

In case of practical approbation, we conducted 15 lessons during the first term of the 2020/2021 academic year.

There were 60 4-year undergraduate students, aged between 20-21, with upper intermediate level in the English language.

Findings and Discussions

Along with teaching a foreign language, students of foreign language majors take a course in the fundamentals of intercultural communication, the result of which is the ICC formation. The aim of this course is to improve the capacity to interpret various types of communicative behavior in different cultures correctly, master the basic concepts and terminology of the culture of the target language for further interaction with representatives of the target culture. To achieve this goal, the teacher creates necessary conditions for all students to be involved in the process of understanding and interaction.

At the moment, in the context of distance learning, organizing an educational process that will involve all students in communication is a very acute problem. To achieve this goal, we use the ZOOM platform, where we can split up students into several breakout rooms. Breakout rooms can be created automatically or manually, distributing students according to various characteristics (according to personal interests, according to levels, at the request of students, etc.).

Splitting of the groups will create the following conditions:

1) all students will be involved in the learning process;

2) when teaching English, we consider two cultures: English and American. Using the obtained linguocultural knowledge, students discuss norms of behavior, manifestation of national traits in specific situations of intercultural communication in three different cultures (Kazakh, American and English) simultaneously.

3) by discussing certain topics in their breakout rooms, students will not interfere with students from other groups.

4) after discussing questions, students return to the main meeting session to discuss the results.

Breakout rooms provide teachers with a function to connect with students and for them to connect with one another in a way that is possible in a smaller setting.

As a part of the process of being aware of students' perceptions on ICC, students had to reflect on the impact of cultural issues on their language learning and their grouping experience. Students were asked if they had experienced any misunderstandings with people of different cultural backgrounds and how that experience changed their attitude to learning a foreign language. 21 students (it is 84%) out of 25 had been abroad and 16 of them experienced different kinds of misunderstandings. Most students who had been involved in any misunderstandings listed the examples of aspects of communicative skills occurred in intercultural communicative

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contexts, such as pronunciation, accent, and the fluent and fast speech of interlocutors. Moreover, the students provided examples of false friends and cultural differences practiced in students' everyday life but unfamiliar to foreigners. The most cited aspect of communicative skill was pronunciation (Table 1). Two more students mentioned that they had experienced misunderstanding but did not give any examples of them.

Table 1 – Students' Depiction of Misunderstandings

Aspects	Number of Entries	Selected Quotes
Pronunciation	3	*"Not that I met many foreigners, but I have talked to some, and sometimes they might have a different pronunciation from me, but I try to improve that by listening to music and watching something in English, so next time I will be better at understanding them."*
False friends	2	*"There are some words which mean different things in our mother tongue. For example, a classmate means a schoolmate in Kazakhstan, but in other countries it means current university classmate, which in Kazakhstan we call group mate."*
Accent	2	*"Usually, it happens due to the accent. We, Kazakh students, are more used to a specific manner of speaking, and when we hear someone talking with the British accent misunderstanding can happen at the beginning."*
Fear to speak	2	*"I have met lots of foreigners, and it was an amazing experience, it made me feel in trouble for a minute, but then I started to talk and felt better."*
Cultural differences	2	*"They cannot understand why we eat horse meat, and why we call a taxi standing by the sidewalk with a stretching hand."*
Functions	1	*"Couldn't explain the direction."*
Fast speech	1	*"Yeah, they speak fast."*
Comprehension	1	*"I can't understand sometimes what they are saying."*

(data from Pre-experiment Questionnaire)

The students, who were involved in those misunderstandings, had become more motivated, encouraged, and interested in learning a foreign language and other cultural differences; some selected quotations were as follows:

- *Made me more open-minded. (Anonymous)*
- *It was funny, and thanks to this fact I made useful acquaintances, so I decided to learn English harder, to have an opportunity to make an even better communication. (Anonymous)*
- *It affected me only in a positive way. (Anonymous)*
- *It got me motivated to learn English. (Anonymous)*

Students were also asked to reflect if they had practiced any culture-related activities in their classrooms. Culture-related activities or group projects were not very frequent in the lessons of the students-respondents. Of the 25 students who responded to this question, most indicated that they either "sometimes" (40 %) or "once in a while" (24 %) do culture-related activities, and 20% indicated "never do exercises concerning culture". However, there were 12 % of the students (3 students) who claimed they do such activities "often", and one student expressed uncertainty by choosing "do not know" whether they do culture-related activities or don't (Pic.3). The data indicates that the respondent group does not hold a stable position in identifying culture-related activities.
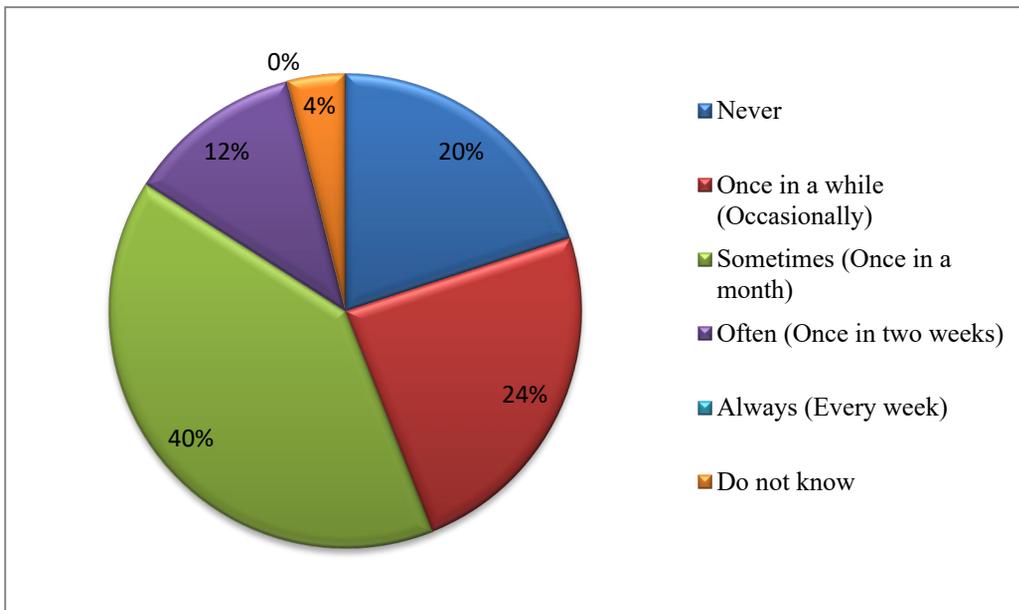

Pic.3 – The Frequency of Culture-Related Activities

Furthermore, students' perceptions of organizing group-work in the context of online learning and their awareness of this approach of distance studying were also investigated. Students were asked to indicate if they had ever participated in grouping project works and to what extent they enjoyed performing joint projects. The students' experience with grouping project works was reasonably satisfactory (Pic.4): 20 students (80 %) stated that they participated in the grouping project works and only three students (12 %) reported "no." Two students "do not know" if they did group projects or never did.
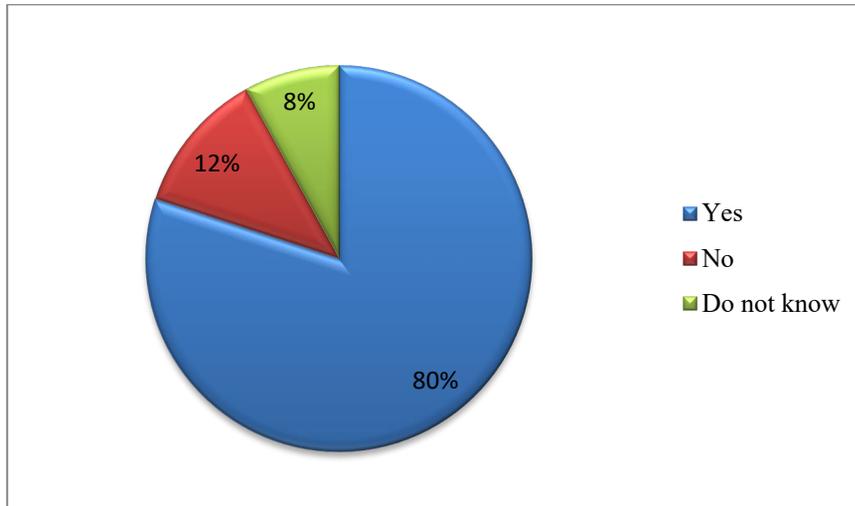
Pic. 4 – Students' Experience in Doing Grouping Project Works
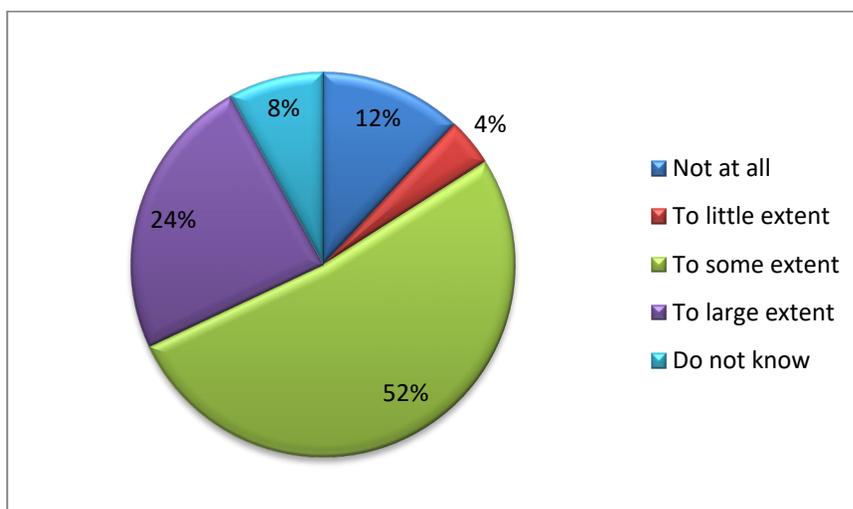
Pic. 5 – Students' Satisfaction on Doing Grouping Projects

Regarding the satisfaction on doing the group projects, 13 students (52 %) agreed to "some extent" and six students (24 %) "to a large extent" that they liked doing projects. Also, two students (8 %) preferred "do not know", and three students (12 %) answered that they "not at all" liked doing the projects (Pic.5).

Besides expressing their opinion on whether they had experienced project works and whether they enjoyed doing them, students were asked to define how they perceive project works and give a comparison between project-based and non-project-based lessons.

Out of 60 students who participated in this questionnaire, 53 students praised the characteristics of group works and listed the examples of different features of breakout rooms in the ZOOM platform. The feature that was mentioned the most was the fact that appropriate grouping provides collaboration and thereby enables students to express respect and tolerance towards each other, share the responsibility and gain a broader perspective on the topic discussed. Students also appreciated the research-based skills to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as giving them an access to real-world issues.

Furthermore, online grouping makes it possible to acquire the content more motivating and interesting. It is also interesting that students did not mention any shortcomings or disadvantages of group-based lessons. Students' responds to this question were wide-ranging, so the responds were summarized in the following table.

Table 2 – The Summary of Characteristics of Grouping Project-Based Lessons

Characteristics	Selected Quotes
Collaboration	*"I think we learn many things during any kind of projects. For example: how to work together, you learn something from that project's topic. In addition we learn responsibility."* *"Group work, responsibility and respect others' ideas."*
Research-based skills	*"First of all, you do research, you start analyzing everything you read, after that you come to a conclusion or add your own opinion and finally present it to others."*
Authenticity	*"Project-based lessons are easy to follow as they encourage to be involved constantly, without giving a chance to procrastinate, and gives a taste of real life problems you have to deal with in the future."*
Content-based learning	*"Project-based lessons are more interesting and give much more knowledge and experience than non-project-based ones."*
Interdisciplinary	*"By doing a project I learn not only English, but also gain additional knowledge in other fields."* *"Acquire knowledge from various fields."*
Motivating and interesting	*"During project based lessons students can be involved in the whole process, it actually […] increases student's interest in the subject. It is quite better that non-project-based-lessons."*
Life-long learning	*"[…] information will stay longer and usually more interesting."*
Communication skills	*"First of all, if it is a pair-work or team project, we are having fun with friends by doing it. It improves our communication skills. With different topics for our projects we learn many different things."*
Soft skills	*"Soft skills are really important, maybe more important than your knowledge."*

(data from Post-experiment Questionnaire)

The moments when students were proud of themselves most of all were demonstrated in different stages throughout the experimental teaching. However, the most frequent was the stage of presenting the final product to the public. Students expressed their opinions on how much they were satisfied with their achievements and how much they valued feedback from the peers. The feedback was addressed to all participants overall and did not point out any student to avoid indictment.

Besides, students repeatedly pointed out the fact that doing group work enabled them to learn researching skills, including the searching for the appropriate information, analysis of the gathered data, and the design of brochures. The students listed examples of specific skills acquired in the project, such as public speaking skills and senses of responsibility and management.

Conclusion

The ICC formation of pre-service teachers in the context of online learning is possible through the interaction of students on various platforms. When organizing and planning group work, the teacher involves all students in the discussion of the issue. Upon completion of the course, students develop the ability to work in a team, to tolerate social, cultural and personal differences between their native and target cultures. The student becomes a bearer of language and target culture, who has background knowledge about nation-specific and behavioral norms of the foreign language.

Following the participants' viewpoints on all studies and experiments conducted for this research, this final section of this article presents our perspective on the data analysis with the aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the whole research.

The purpose of the present research in line with the research questions is threefold: first, it is aimed to investigate how Kazakhstani EFL teachers view foreign language teaching objectives, to explore the teachers' awareness and beliefs regarding ICC, to identify challenges the teachers experience with ICC in their lessons, to define the level of administrative support for teachers who want to implement grouping works and to determine the extent to which they integrate ICC into their English classes.

Second, to identify and describe the students' experience and perceptions of culture-related group project conducted as a pilot study to identify any shortcomings to be improved for further research regarding the content, project process, and data collection tools due to online teaching.

Third, to explore the students' experience and perceptions of culture-related project conducted as a main study, and to identify the extent to which the elaborated framework of grouping contributed to the development of students' ICC.

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