Group Forms of Students' Activities in Classroom of Russian as a Foreign Language

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Keywords: For Russian as a foreign language, RFL, Grouped class activities, Interactive learning.

Abstract. The article is considering the peculiarities of instructing Russian as a foreign language (RFL) in large groups and the ways of overcoming learning challenges by providing instruction forms in small groups, which increases learning motivation, intensifies acquisition of the foreign language speech experience and develops students’ communication and collaboration skills.

Introduction

The concept of modern education proclaims the guiding competent approach, which suggests developing students' soft competencies that would promote their self-reliance and self-organization abilities.

Since the present educational mainstream aims at not just accumulation of specific knowledge and particular skills, but also at the acquiring basic knowledge and at the development of more complex universal academic skills, the main feature of a modern man becomes "the ability to enhance and improve on his own his education, in line with the changing environment of a fast-paced world" [1].

It is believed that in the contemporary instruction that group work provides the most efficient realization of the competency-based approach. Here it is necessary to add that along with the group forms of instruction the world pedagogics traditionally distinguishes individual and teacher-directed forms of learning. They all have benefits and drawbacks and, therefore, it is possible to accomplish high efficiency of instruction through their reasonable combination.

While addressing the group forms of activity, the teacher of Russian as a foreign language should keep in mind recommendations given by the RFL methodologists, the expertise in instructing languages in school and university practice, and researches of domestic and foreign psychologists and educators. The psychologists L.A. Karpenko and Ya.V. Goldstein, for instance, study in their works the impact of the size of students’ group on accelerating learning processes and on successfulness of joint cognitive activity [2] [3]. The peculiarities of psychological relationship in small groups, in the theoretical and applied context, are well reviewed by R.L. Krichevsky [4]. G.A. Kitaigorodskaya in her doctoral thesis focuses on the system of intensive short-term instruction [5].

The issues of development of grouped training activities at primary school, the didactic conditions of group work as a device of developing students' activities and managing collective relationships in the process of instruction at senior school can be found in thesis researches by I.M. Bitkovskaya, T.N. Ishchenko, V.V. Kotov and in the learning guide written by G. I. Vergeles [6] [7] [8] [9]. N.V. Matveyeva focuses her work on team-based learning activities as part of preparing and performing a role-play [10]. S.L. Boyarintseva offers in her thesis to consider the problem of teaching English in middle schools by small groups [11]. While E.S. Polat described the cooperative and project-based learning at foreign language courses; the technique of project-based learning at English courses can be found in the teaching material written by V.V. Kopylova [12] [13] [14].

Group assignments, such as a group interview in French classroom can be useful in instructing foreign language to university students (N.F. Oreshkina, Z.M. Stepanova); while training students’ verbal communication (L.I. Derevskaya) and also in a cooperative pedagogy in German classes (R.Kh. Aibetova) [15] [16] [17]. G. Liskevich in her theme considers the impact of teamwork efforts of Polish students-nonphilologists in the spoken language class on their motivation dynamics [18]. The
RFL methodology experts run webinars on arrangement of group work in classroom, including multilevel groups (Z.N. Ponomareva, T.P. Esmantova) [19] [20].

Specifics of Group Work Organization in Classroom Community

Classification of Training Groups

Regarding students' group work the well-known educator and linguist E.I. Passov has suggested the following definition: “A group presents a certain number of students, 3-5 people, temporary united by the instructor or on their own initiative for the purpose of fulfilment of class assignment and having common objective and functional structure” [21]. Thus, the group form of learning activities in the classroom involves its students' team-up in small groups for joint working on the instructor's assignments.

It is necessary to distinguish here the instruction in large and small groups as on permanent basis for a long period of time and different from the individual learning, from other various instructing methods that are temporarily applied for work with mobile groups. By the number of students in such mobile groups, we can denote the following groups: individual, pair, grouped, teacher-centred and team (wherein students are deemed to comprise one entity with its specifics of interaction).

For delivering an individual approach to each student studying Russian as a foreign language within the Russian university system, six persons are considered to make the optimum number of students in one group, which studies on a full-time basis (three pairs to practice dialogue speech in classroom under the instructor’s close control). It can be stated that the instruction here is delivered in quite small groups (mini-groups consist of 2-3 students). Groups consisting of 10-12 students are standard and groups of 15 students are called large. Here is the experience shared by Russian instructors regarding their experience abroad: “Language groups in Korea are usually very large: from 15 to 30 and over students of multilevel proficiency. Korean teachers feel comfortable with this since students back from their school-days are used to work in classroom chorally” [22].

The said can be also attributed to the instruction of students in China. As it is known, the foreign languages instructors in China are circumstanced differently than those in Russia. In Chinese universities, student groups can comprise one hundred people. Therefore, the groups where Chinese students study foreign languages can be made up of 25 to 50 persons.

It should be noted that today there are not enough studies and recommendations on working with large groups while instructing Russian as a foreign language. Special mention can be made in this context to the work of O.V. Nefyodov “Outlook on writing a textbook for large multilevel groups of students of a nonlinguistic university”, in which the scholar marks the difficulty in provision of a precise definition of a large group, since “the answer to this question may vary from country to country”, and how “instructing a foreign language in large, multilevel groups creates difficulties” [23]. Another scholar, G.D. Tkachuk, writes about the special aspects of teaching in groups [24].

In such situation, the implementation of an individual approach to each student becomes much more difficult the topic, which a student did not understand risks to stay unstudied. At this stage of the instruction, some students can start simulating their foreign language study activities or spend time ‘inactively’.

The group work in the foreign language classroom relates to interactive methods, which takes the educative process to a more efficient level (L.K. Geikhman). Promotion of students’ learning activities and the higher learning motivation, the maximum reach of the target audience blocking off any passive attendance, the need to show to a group the achieved result—"to be highly visible"; the development of personal sociability, teamwork ability and efforts to gain understanding, preventing conflict situations—such are the benefits of students' group work in the process of their foreign language studies [25].

It is common to classify groups by the number of their participants as large and small; by duration – regular, temporary and one-time; by composition – regular and mobile; by proficiency – homogeneous and mixed; by place in the lesson structure – for revision of the delivered knowledge,
its drilling or check; and by the lesson objective – for acquisition of knowledge or development of learning skills.

As for group work assignments, they are expected to create a certain cognitive complication, give an opportunity to actively use current knowledge; each student’s involvement, his/her role should factor in the group's special composition; any task should facilitate communication between peers in a group and groups; students also should be able to analyse their activities and evaluate them [26].

The Instructor’s Role in Organization of Group Learning Activities

Arrangement of a group work requires from the instructor her/his special skills and a certain amount of effort. Much depends on the instructor’s expertise. To attain an effective group work, the instructor must spend time explaining rules and requirements to an assignment, and the specifics of students' teamwork. Grouping students by the instructor should factor in many aspects, so that inactive students could not avail of their higher-level peers’ work results.

The instructor should pay attention to assigning group's leader and to the place of participants of the communication with regard to their personality and proficiency. Certain students will prefer to work individually. They should be given such opportunity. All of this creates certain challenges for the instructor.

In the process of his/her interaction with the classroom the instructor has to deliver the functions of a consultant, a coordinator, a manager of inside and outside interactions, an originator and an equal participant of the communication.

Types of Group Work Assignments on Different Subjects in the Foreign Language Course

There a various group work assignments. For instance, students are tasked to write parts of a composition about nature. Each group is given reference words and the type of composition: discourse, description or narration. Consequently, the composition parts will be joined together into one logical story. The group structure should be arranged under the following principle: the group leader, speaker, secretary, controller and critic. Alternatively, it might be a lexical assignment something like to find an extra word in the list— which group does the assignment faster. Besides, the instructor can set different grammar tasks, applying certain element of competitiveness.

Of prime importance is the group work in speech development classes, since their proper organization gives each student an opportunity of speech practice, regardless of the class time issue. A teacher-directed work provides no such opportunity. It can be performance of dialogues and polylogues, or role games, dramatization elements—performance of any domestic scene (visiting a cafe or a restaurant, visiting doctor, a conversation with a receptionist and such) or scenes out of a movie, a tale or a play.

With a good level of language skills, the instructor’s tasks may also include class in a form of a conference, when each group prepares report on a given topic. Someone gathers information, someone selects supporting information, others draw up the report, still others review, check and edit it. Such assignments are beneficial not only for the course of Russian, but literature, geography, history, for the study of customs and traditions of the countries where the studied language is spoken. The most effective forms of group work, given students’ good proficiency, include discussions, debates, conferences, panel games and project-based learning.

Project-Based Learning

One of the group work forms suggests a cooperative learning, which is thought of as the most successful alternative to traditional methods. This method has been developed by three groups of American educators from the John Hopkins University (R. Slavin), Minnesota State University (Roger Johnson and David Johnson), by the group of J. Aronson, California State University, and by the group of Shlomo Sharan from Tel Aviv University, Israel. This group work form suggests grouping together the lower-level and above-level students, so that the above-level students help others reach their mastery. Further, the teamwork does not downplay a student’s individual
responsibility and permits a lower-level student to bring extra credit in favour of his group (Student Team Learning). In the team-playing activities, students are reporting in a competition match between the groups, not in a personal testing.

E.S. Polat has dedicated her research to the project-based method, wherein she specifies the increase in students’ proficiency, motivation and working efficiency. A project presents a complex creative assignment that requires some expertise and is achieved by groups of three to six students. Learning in cooperation has a focus on the development of certain skills and competence, on mastering concepts and academic knowledge provided by the education program. The project-based learning method introduces a creative approach to problem solution, shows how to analyse information, to align oneself to informational space and identify the essentials, to think critically. It also contributes to the learning motivation. This method promotes the development of students' linguistic, communicative and cross-cultural competence.

**Group Work Forms in Classes of Speech Development**

S.S. Kuklina is addressing her work to mastering the foreign language communication collectively, wherein she identifies a group of students as a collective body and stresses the importance of shared objective and common motivation to its achievement. Group members should understand how to solve the set assignment according to their roles and the vision on what educational and subject actions are required for their collaborative conduct. Specifically this is the generation of a plan, the breakdown of individual actions, their adjustment and coordination, final control and evaluation of the attained results. A special role in students’ joint activity is played by their interaction in a) delivering actions, b) explaining the technique, c) monitoring the accuracy of operations’ delivery. The joint cooperative activities require such cooperative interactions at the stage of involvement as the selection of the means and methods of teamwork and their realization [1].

Kuklina distinguished the following group work forms.

1) *Same–Different*. The instructor describes to students a certain speech-imitative situation and pronounces a sentence. The instructor names a group, whose members answer simultaneously if the sentence corresponds the situation.

2) *Think–Pair–Square–Share*, when the instructor sets some speaking task of transformational or reproductive nature. Students in a group discuss their reply, which is first thought over individually, by pairs, and in groups after. One student replies.

3) *Numbered Heads Together*, when all students receive numbers. The instructor describes a situation, sets the speaking task for staging and poses a question. Members of all groups prepare a common reply. The answer is given by the student of the called number.

4) *Fact or Guess-the-Fib*. The instructor sets a speaking task of substituting or reproductive nature. During the task performance each member of a group pronounces certain sentence and if it does not reflect reality, it is repeated.

5) *Three-Step Interview and Outside–Inside Circle*. The instructor sets a speaking task of reproductive or transformational nature. Such structure is designed to master questions and is achieved in the form of an interview. The first and third students interview the second and the fourth, and then they reverse their roles. Students form new pairs.

6) *Outside–Inside Circle*. The instructor sets an assignment that suggests combining the earlier learned material with the new by two groups. Students get into two circles (one inside the other) and turn face to face. Students pose questions trying to remember answers, change partners.

7) *Pairs Check*. This form is usually used as a tool to control students’ understanding of grammar material. The instructor explains to students certain rule and asks the class to use it in their exercising. The first and third students make the first sentence of the exercise, the second and fourth students control the accuracy of their peers’ exercising. Then the pairs swap over. Suchwise the group goes through the exercise [28].

At the final stage there must be time left for evaluation of groups' work.
Conclusion

In this way, the group work in the RFL classroom constitutes a part of instruction overall, herewith it provides many advantages and proves to be very effective.

As E.I. Passov notes, the group work develops students’ aptitude for communication, increases their level of sociability in its specific form of group communication. Additionally, the teamwork enhances interpersonal relationships, teaches better understanding of each other and contributes to sound classroom community. This form of work also serves the ability to adequately assess both oneself and others, provides knowledge sharing, good environment for the development of one’s proficiency and quick aid during the teamwork; it increases motivation, uplifts a student’s popularity and practical status in the team, diversifies the classroom work forms [20].

The use of group work in the learning activity increases students’ acquisition of foreign language speech experience. They start to feel more confident, learn new material quicker and do speaking exercises with lesser mistakes as they have more time to practice speaking Russian with their peers. Working in a group fosters their personal human creativity.

The teamwork makes students more active, boosts their motivation to study and get interested in collective success. Students become more self-reliant and proactive, their teamwork with peers in groups promote the sense of community, responsibility and mutual supportiveness.

References


[27] E.S. Polat, The project-based learning in foreign language classes // Foreign Languages at School, No.2, pp. 3-10.