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Interaction and Autonomy in Foreign Language and Culture Studies

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Abstract

The article focuses on the problem of developing interactive and autonomous skills of the future teachers of foreign language and culture within the university educational programme. The study evaluates the effectiveness of interactive activities in promoting learners' autonomy of pre-service teachers in the course of English language and culture studies at university and provides teaching tips for implementing the interactive model in language teachers' education. The research adopted a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental method design and the effectiveness of interactive language classroom model was measured against a traditionally taught class with the help of self-evaluation charts based on a Likert-type scale. The findings of the experimental teaching revealed a higher level of self-beliefs of respondents of the experimental group about the development of their autonomous skills and professional confidence in their education in foreign language and culture, which indicated the effectiveness of interactive activities in developing learners' autonomy and a correlation between interaction and autonomy in linguistic and cultural studies. It was concluded in the experimental study that autonomy as a personal characteristic can be developed through interactive practice in and outside the classroom, and the interactive model of teaching can be successfully integrated into the concept of autonomous language and culture studies.

Keywords: Interactive activities, Autonomy, Self-evaluation, Language and culture studies, Teachers' education.

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Introduction

The concept of autonomous learning in professional education has gained prominence in recent years all over the world. The relevance of the topic of developing learners' autonomy in foreign language and culture studies is revealed by the modern European standards and programs of education. Extensive researches have been conducted to define autonomy as a pedagogical, psychological or cultural phenomenon, to formulate the basic principles of developing learners' autonomy in foreign language and culture studies. Though despite a rapid rise of the topic in popularity, there are relatively few studies on the specifics of implementing the concept of autonomous learning in foreign language teachers' education. The problem of how autonomous language and culture learning can correlate with the development of such constituents of the professional competence of teachers as social interactive skills also requires more research. Moreover, many university teachers claim that "most students come to the university without having sufficient background in autonomous learning and wait to be spoon-fed by the teacher" (Gulbinskiene et al., 2017, p. 182). Thus improving pre-service teachers' autonomous experiences in foreign language and culture studies through interaction must be among the major concerns of higher pedagogical education.

This paper considers the problem of the correlation of the notions "interaction" and "autonomy" in foreign language acquisition and culture studies in one and the same teaching-learning environment within a pre-service English teacher academic program at university. The general purpose of this research is to find out if the use of interactive activities in foreign language and culture studies in teacher education can contribute to the development of learners' autonomy and language teachers' professional competence. The object of this research is the process of developing the language learning autonomy of future foreign language teachers through interaction in the frame of professional education. The specific objective of the research is to evaluate the effectiveness of interaction in foreign language and culture learning in terms of stimulating autonomy and contributing to the development of professional competence of future teachers. The treatment of the problem is dealt with by the use of such research methods as the content analysis of methodological references and the use of diagnostic methods (questionnaires, self-evaluation charts based on a Likert-type scale, experimental teaching and statistical data analysis. Therefore, the main hypothesis of this study is: the level of language learning autonomy of pre-service teachers is enhanced if a complex of interactive activities is used in the foreign language classroom in the course of the professional training program.

Review of literature

The literature review on the problem of developing learner autonomy through cooperation and interaction shows that the first attempts to treat this issue in pedagogics in Europe were made in the first half of the 20th century with the development of the individual humanistic approach in education. Célestin Freinet (1946) focused on the idea of inquiry-based and cooperative learning when at the same time children were taught to take responsibility for their own work and for the whole group. The idea was then developed by Roger Cousinet (1967) in the methods of active learning.

The concept of autonomy in foreign language learning got its development in the 1970s - 80s (Dam & Gabrielsen, 1988; Holec, 1981; Stern, 1975). A further development of the concept of autonomy in language learning was connected with the shift of teachers' and scholars' attention from the purposes of language teaching and learning to the methods of teaching and learning that would promote language autonomy in learners (Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 1990).

Many researchers have attempted to blend the concept of autonomy in language learning with the communicative approach (Littlewood, 2003) and cognitive approach (Koriakovtseva, 2002). There are also some researches that link the idea of autonomy in education to social-interactive views of cognition, learning and language (Van Lier, 1996) based on L. Vygotsky's theory (1962) and constructivist theory of

learning (Sjoberg, 2010; Strayer, 2012). According to these researches any knowledge is interiorized only if it is acquired by the person in the process of active involvement and interactive cooperation with others. Thus language and culture learning must also be regarded as the process requiring learners' active participation and engagement.

The interest to the concept of developing autonomy in foreign language learning through interaction has increased over the recent years due to the spread of virtual environment (Gulbinskiene et al., 2017) and blended learning environment (Hwang et al., 2009) in professional education. Still the research of the concept of autonomy, its efficiency and application in pedagogical education is insufficient. Kurt (2017) showed how the foundations of constructivist theory of collaboration, interaction and engagement of learners encourage student teachers (pre-service teachers) to take care of their own learning and become more active and interactive in class within the flipped approach to teaching. However, the findings are inconclusive in terms of how classroom interaction can contribute to developing students' autonomy and their professional competence in a foreign language teacher education program. Moreover, there are still only few researches (Van Lier, 1996; Putistina, 2015) on how the concept of autonomy embraces the idea of interaction and how to make interactive language studying autonomous.

The present paper contributes to the researches on the problem of integrating interactive activities in the process of developing pre-service teachers' language learner autonomy and their professional competence in the course of English teacher education program.

Methodology

One of the objectives of the research was to conduct a quasi-experimental study to test the effectiveness of the complex of interactive activities in terms of stimulating language learner autonomy and develop professional competence of pre-service teachers of the English teacher education program.

The study resorted to such theoretical research method as the content analysis of the methodological concepts of autonomy and interaction in language acquisition and such empirical methods as a questionnaire and a pre-test-posttest quasi-experimental method design with the use of the charts of self-evaluation based on a Likert-type scale.

The experiment was conducted over two 19-week semesters. 49 pre-service teachers of English studies enrolled in the 5-year English Language Teaching program at the Murmansk Arctic State University (Murmansk, Russia) participated in the experiment. The control group comprised 24 participants ($N=24$) and the experimental group comprised 25 participants ($N=25$). The selection of the control and experimental groups was done at random. All students studied an 8-credit English course which lasted for one academic year and was obligatory according to the curriculum of that teacher training educational program. They had 6 academic hours of English studies per week. The two groups of students consequently were provided with the control and experimental pedagogical conditions: while the control group was given traditional instructions only, the model of teaching in the experimental group was based on interactive instructions. More specifically an English course with the adopted interactive model was conducted and the study was to investigate whether there would be significant difference between the pre-service teachers enrolled in the interactive classroom model and those enrolled in the traditional face-to-face classroom model in terms of their self-beliefs about the level of their autonomous skills. Students' perceptions of the interactive model classroom were also analysed.

The experimental group was taught with a specially designed complex of interactive activities used at every lesson within an academic year, the control group was given traditional direct instructions in the complex of exercises. Both complexes were based on the same academic topics and required a lot of autonomous/independent work. But the activities for the experimental group required a lot of peer interaction (working in closed, open and flexible pair, small groups), while the exercises for the control

group required individual work followed by the teacher control (front classroom interaction). The groups that were involved in the experiment were taught by the same associate professor, who was among the scholars conducting the present research.

As for the gender-demographic description of the groups, it must be noted that there was a much higher proportion of female students in both groups (87 % in the control group, 84 % in the experimental group). The participants of both groups were aged from 19 to 22.

Findings and Discussions

The idea that any learner autonomy, including that of language and culture learning, must be promoted and supported by intra-action, interaction and outeraction is rooted in the theory of distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995), the constructivist theory of learning (Strayer, 2012) and Social Development Theory (Vygotskii, 1962). L.S. Vygotskii (1962) concluded that human higher cognitive functions develop in social or interpersonal context, thus learning is internalized from social interaction. Language learning is first of all connected with communication. Any communication requires a certain feedback in order to be effective. And it is through interaction that a person can get an effective feedback in communication and then by means of intra-action internalize and interpret some knowledge. D. Little once stated: “Because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence. Total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism” (2000, p.16).

Moreover, the skills that constitute learner autonomy can be developed only through action. The pivotal type of activity in language learning is communication. In the context of teacher education program this communication must be mostly interactive, as interaction is an essential part of any teaching. Interactive skills are among the skills that make up the professional competence of a language teacher.

To find out whether the pre-service teachers were familiar with the idea of autonomy and diagnose their theoretical background knowledge on the concept of autonomy in language education at the initial stage of the study that was conducted the students of the English teacher education program at the Murmansk Arctic State University (Russia) were given a questionnaire. The students were asked if they know the meaning of such notions as “independence”, “self-dependence” and “autonomy” in terms of language learning. The distribution of students’ answers is shown in Fig.1. As it can be seen, the majority of students were not sure of the meaning of autonomy in language learning or had not heard about the term prior to the study.

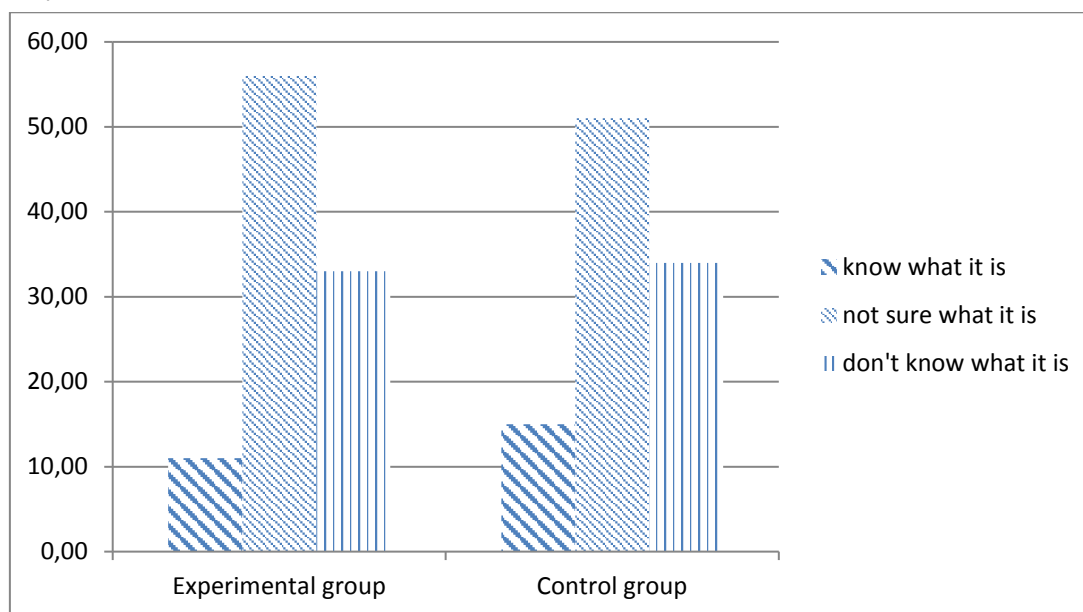


Fig. 1. Students’ awareness of the concept of autonomy in language learning

It must be stated though, that the students were aware of the terms “independence” or “self-dependence” that are more common in the Russian scientific pedagogical thesaurus and have been traditionally used in reference to the education issues where learners study on their own or perform tasks without any direct teacher’s guidance.

The respondents were then asked to think of the possible meanings of the notion autonomy in language learning and note down their ideas on what autonomy in language education is. The results are presented in Figure 2.

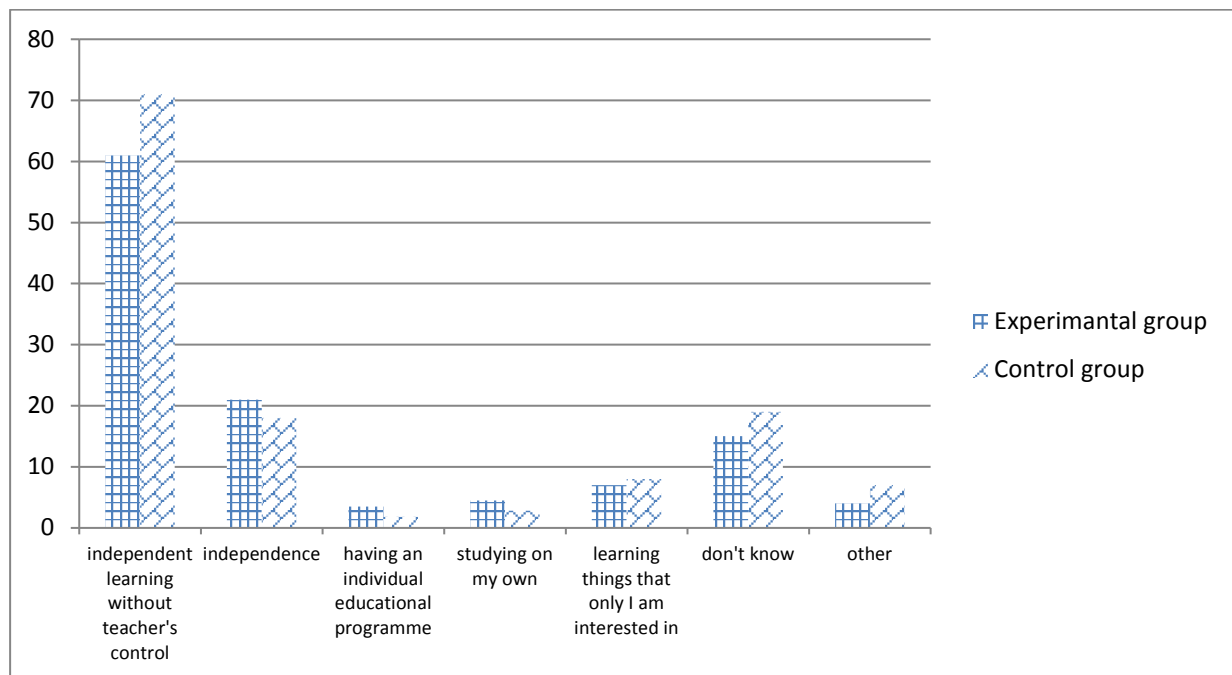


Fig. 2. Students’ beliefs of the meaning of “autonomy”

The findings of the questionnaire convinced us that the realization of the experiment required a preliminary stage where the students had to be informed of the concept of autonomy in language learning. Consequently, a seminar on the topic was organized with the students where the basic issues on autonomous studies in language learning were discussed with them.

The next stage of the experimental study involved the evaluation of the students’ level of autonomy in language learning. As autonomy in language learning is something for the learners themselves to get, evaluating the process when learning to be more autonomous must also be for the learner themselves to do. That is the reason why we chose a self-evaluation chart as the main instrument for diagnosing students’ level of autonomy. In the research we have concluded that autonomy is composed of a complex of skills and we outlined the basic components and skills that constitute the autonomy in language learning. The experts conducting the research created an ad hoc self-evaluation chart based on the theoretical conclusions on the constituting components of language learning autonomy. As a result, the students had to self-evaluate *organization, information, cognitive and communicative skills*, that constitute the *psychological, technological, action-related, evaluative and professional components*.

The self-evaluation chart was divided into 5 sections (equivalent to the number of autonomy components) and was composed of 70 variables related to the skills that constitute each component of the language learner autonomy. Example items for the 5 sections of the scale were as follows: “Can you initiate and organize a communicative act in English in accordance with the indicated communicative task?” (organization skill/psychological component), “Can you select and transform the information to solve the

communicative task? (information skill/technological component), “Can you predict and mentally act out the possible scenario of the anticipated communication? (cognitive skill/action-related component), “Can you analyse and evaluate the factors that contributed to/hindered communication?” (communicative skill/evaluative component), “Can you explain things in English to others and organize a feedback reaction?” (communicative skill/professional component). The scale was used to measure students’ self-efficacy in autonomous language learning

The students were asked to evaluate the development of the given skill on the self-evaluation chart where they had to rank the skills that constitute autonomy using 3-points Likert-type scale (Figure 3):

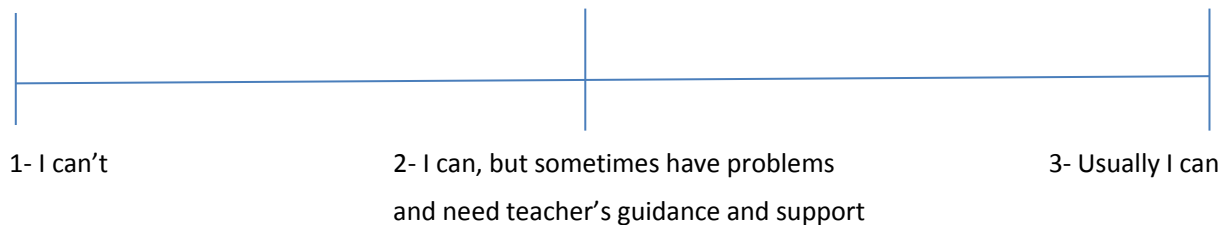


Fig. 3. Evaluation scale for the skills of language autonomy

The students’ answers were correlated with the levels of autonomy distinguished in this study as:

- 1 - *low level* (students have problems with exercising indicated skills);
- 2 - *average level* (students sometimes need teacher’s guidance and support to exercise the indicated skills);
- 3 – *high level* (students are capable of exercising the indicated skills without any extra support).

Quantitative data came from both groups: control and experimental. The simple average results are presented in Figure 4.

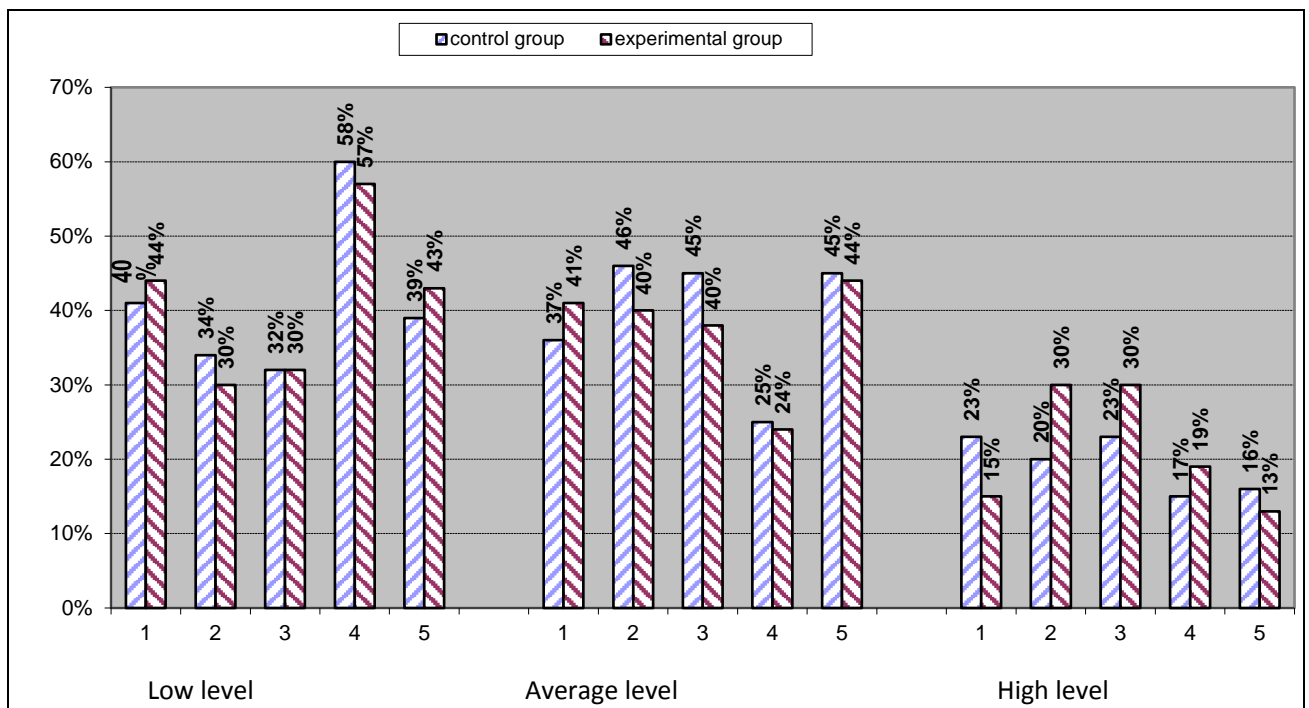


Fig. 4. The level of learners’ autonomy at the pre-experimental stage (data from self-evaluation charts).

Components: 1-psychological 2 – technological 3 – action-related 4 – evaluative 5 – professional

As a result, the quantitative analysis and calculation of the data that came from the self-evaluation charts made it possible to define the average distribution of the level of learners' autonomy and grade it into 3 levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Data on the level of learners' autonomy at the pre-experimental stage

Level of learners' autonomy	Group	
	control (G _{cr} =N=24) %	experimental (G _{exp} =N=25) %
Low	40,6	40,8
Average	39,4	37,8
High	19,8	21,4

At the next stage of the research the complex of interactive activities was carried out to teach the key topics of the English course in the experimental group, while the control group was given traditional direct instructions in the complex of exercises to cover the same topics.

As the autonomous learning is not simply a five-minute activity, but a complex process, it requires a gradual development of the skills constituting autonomy. The phases of developing and stimulating learners autonomy can vary from one lesson to several lessons. So, the practice-based interactive activities that learners were involved in during our experiment ranged from teacher initiated and directed, to the activities that were initiated and directed together with some or all the students, and finally developed into the tasks and activities that were planned, organized, conducted, analysed, controlled and evaluated by the learners themselves.

Moreover, the concept of autonomous language learning through interaction in the English classroom for future language teachers was built on the principle of the three-phase framework of the activities (Table 2):

Table 2. Framework of interactive activities

<i>Phase</i>	Pre-activity	While-activity	Post-activity
<i>Form of work</i>	Individual work	Interaction	Group work/Individual work (reflection)

The complex of interactive activities that was used in the experimental classroom included the activities based on different types of peer(s)-to-peer(s) interaction, distribution of information among the participants of communication and different patterns of grouping students. Table 3 shows the types of interactive activities that were used in the experiment.

Table 3. Complex of interactive activities for language learning classroom

Type of interactive communication	Distribution of information	Activities	Grouping
cooperation	learners have an equal access	ranking	Closed/Open Pairs, Group work, Pairs→Groups
		guided discussion	Group work, Pairs→Groups
		problem solving	Closed/Open Pairs, Group work
combination		jigsaw	Closed Pairs, Flexible pairs

	learners have access to different information	questionnaires	Closed/Open Pairs, Group work
		controlled role-play	Group work
		information gap	Closed Pairs
		information transfer	Closed Pairs
transmission	one (or more) learner has the information that the others do not	reports with follow-up activities	Open Pairs→Groups, Groups
		instruction following	Closed Pairs, Flexible pairs
		interview	Closed Pairs, Flexible pairs, Pairs→Groups, Group Work
individualisation	all learners have the an equal access to the same information but interpret it according to individual experience	associations	Closed Pairs, Flexible pairs, Pairs→Groups, Group Work
		free role-play	Closed/Open Pairs, Group work
		free discussion	Group work

Before each activity the students of the experimental group were encouraged to think of the strategies that they will have to resort to in order to complete the task successfully. More than that, each activity ensued the reflective stage where learners together with the teacher analysed the process and the outcome of the activity and reflected on that.

The control group was given traditional exercises that did not involve any pair or small group work. The instruction was built around teacher-student(s) communication. The typical instructions that they were given were as follows: “Read (listen to) the text and answer the questions in the class”, “Retell the text”, “Read (listen to) the text and fill in the gaps in the sentences”, “Read and translate the text”, “Prepare and present the monologue in front of the class”, “Make a dialogue and act it out”, “Write an essay according to the given plan” etc. All the activities were done by the students individually with the further teacher’s control in front of the class.

At the post-experimental stage the students of both groups were again given the charts of self-evaluation to complete. The same procedure of collecting and analysing the quantitative data as at the pre-experimental stage was used. The results are shown in Figure 5.

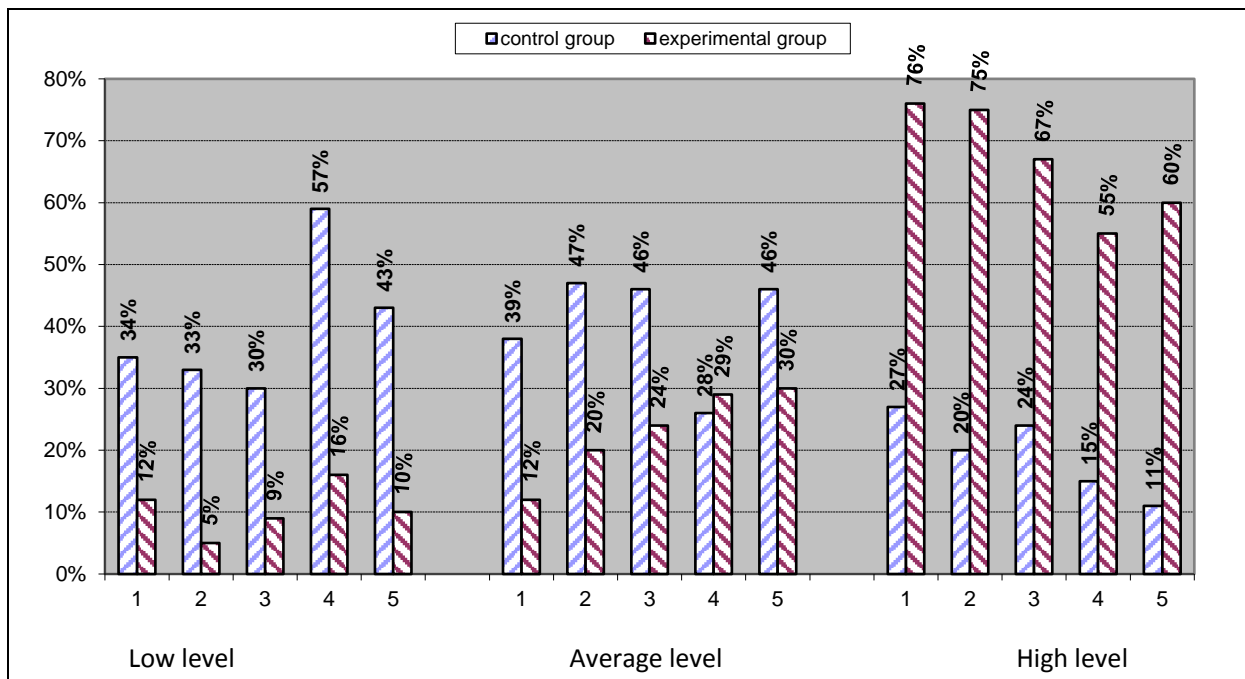


Fig. 5. The level of learners' autonomy at the post-experimental stage (data from self-evaluation charts).

Components: 1 - psychological 2 – technological 3 – action-related 4 – evaluative 5 – professional

The quantitative analysis of the data that came from the self-evaluation charts at the post-experimental stage of the experiment showed an evident positive shift of the evaluated skills among the students of the experimental group. In all measurements G_{exp} was compared to G_{cr} . It should be noted that the experimental group showed significant predominance of a positive trend, i.e. revealed a positive trend in increasing the self-awareness of a high level of the development of skills in autonomy. The control group did not reveal the same positive trend. Compared to the pre-experimental stage the number of students that were ranked with a high level of language learner autonomy in the experimental group increased. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Data on the level of learners' autonomy at the post-experimental stage

Level of learners' autonomy	Group	
	control ($G_{cr}=N=24$) %	experimental ($G_{exp}=N=25$) %
Low	40	11
Average	40,5	24,5
High	19,5	64,5

The current research was conducted to evaluate the efficiency of the interactive English classroom for pre-service teachers in terms of developing their autonomy in language and culture studies. The interactive teaching model was contrasted to a traditional exercise-based teaching model to study and analyse its impact on learners self-beliefs about the level of their autonomy. The results of the study showed that the students in the interactive classroom self-evaluated their level of autonomy higher and were more self-confident at the post-experimental stage about the development of the skills that were required to perform communicative professional tasks in comparison with the students in the traditional classroom.

Moreover, qualitative data were obtained from a focus group interview. A focus group interview was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the experimental group students' perception and experience with the interactive instruction in terms of developing their autonomy in language acquisition in professional terms. The learners' answers demonstrated that the students of the experimental group felt motivated and confident about autonomous issues in their language studies and future occupation. Besides, they showed positive reactions about the use of interactive classroom, mentioning that the classroom environment was less stressful and more comfortable.

The study and the findings made it possible to formulate some basic teaching tips for implementing interactive learning into an English course for pre-service teachers in order to develop learners' autonomy:

1. Before getting a new class engaged into the model of interactive language and culture learning it is important to discuss/ elicit the purpose of interactive and autonomous learning.

If the class is not familiar with this type of a learning model and is more comfortable with the traditional teacher-front approach the students may be reluctant to participate and may have a feeling that a teacher neglects his/her duties and simply shifts all the responsibility onto them. With the class of student teachers it is essential to discuss how interactive learning can contribute to the development of their professional skills and why it is important, how interactive activities can stimulate their autonomy in language learning and culture studies.

2. Learners must be engaged into interactive English learning with the gradual increase of the free practice of the language use.

If the students' experience in interactive learning is limited, and they are not used to working in cooperation and collaboration the interaction must first take place in the form of controlled language practice. For instance, a teacher can suggest the organization of the controlled role-play (with strictly distributed roles and provided prompt cards). Then the teacher's control must be loosened and the learners must be encouraged to participate in free practice activities with the opportunity to plan, organize, control, correct, evaluate and assess their own work. A teacher can coordinate/facilitate the students' work and provide the necessary assistance until the students are familiar with the procedure.

3. Every lesson of English practice must include the elements of interaction.

The idea is rooted in the theory of social constructivism, as any speech development of a person is socially situated and culture studies as well as language learning and use are all about interaction with others. The learners must feel that they are learning and using a foreign language not for the sake of learning but for the sake of communication, exchange of ideas and experience. Student teachers must realize that their future professional occupation will involve all kinds and forms of interaction.

4. Interactive activities must be used systematically and regularly.

The regular use of interactive tasks and forms of work in and outside the classroom will get the learners feel comfortable working on their own and will develop the sense of responsibility for their language studies. The systematic involvement of the students in the interactive activities lets save time in the classroom on explaining the instructions, interaction patterns and procedures.

5. Encourage the student teachers to create interactive activities on their own.

To stimulate students' professional thinking and develop their organizational and social skills student teachers must learn to create and organize in-class interactive activities on their own. Once they try themselves in it they get to understand the essence of interactive teaching better, they get more involved in doing interactive activities in the classroom and they develop a higher self-esteem in terms of developing professional competence. By organizing on their own interactive activities in the classroom learners also get involved in peer-teaching which stimulates the development of autonomy and professional competence.

6. Take into account the differentiated approach in organizing interactive learning.

In organizing the interactive work in the classroom it's important to consider the psychological characteristics of the learners. At the same time with the group of student teachers gradually involve introvert-type students into extrovert-type patterns of behaviour, because their future profession will often require them to act so. Also, interactive activities must be based on different types of modality and satisfy the needs of different types of learners: visual, auditory, reading/writing (digitals), kinesthetic. Moreover, in the class of student teachers it's a good idea to discuss with the students the types of learners each activity is preferable for. It will also contribute to the development of their professional thinking and a better understanding of their own learning style.

7. Every case of peer-to-peer interaction must be followed by reflection.

After having performed some interactive task the students must always be encouraged to reflect on what they have done and how it has contributed to their knowledge or skills/experience. This reflective work can be done in small groups with further report to the whole class, or individually. At the initial stage a teacher can make a conclusion on his/her own after some interactive activities, but then should encourage the learners to make reflective conclusions on their own. For the groups of student teachers it's important to stimulate learners' professional thinking and encourage students to reflect on the professional qualities that an interactive task contributed to.

Conclusion

The present study provided the feedback on the role of interaction in the concept of language learner autonomy in terms of developing future teachers' professional competence. This paper reports the idea that interaction and autonomy as the learners' abilities must be integral constituents of the professional competence of a teacher of foreign languages. In order to progress in the teaching career autonomous and interactive learning must take place all the time in the course of language studies during the training program. The study is grounded on the social-interactive and constructivist views on cognition, learning, communication and language acquisition.

Autonomy as a personal characteristic can be developed through interactive practice in and outside the classroom. New levels of autonomy in language learning are achieved only through interaction with others in the real process of communication when the language is not just learned but used as well. Interactive activities must be structured according to the principle of the gradual increase of the free language practice and must let students move from the stage of dependence to the stage of interdependence and responsible independence. Stimulating autonomous learning through interaction also creates the ground for the socialization of a person and developing the qualities that are useful for the future professional advancement and active adult life when the students find themselves beyond the limits of their immediate educational environment and teacher's support.

The findings of this study may have implications when preparing the curricular design of foreign language and culture teaching for the student or pre-service teachers at universities or any other educational institutions. In a wider context, the results suggest that university teachers should reconsider their practices and put emphasis on offering more interaction (in the form of interactive activities) to students in the foreign language classroom to stimulate their autonomous language learning and thus contribute to the development of their professional competence.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the study has its methodological limitations related to the study design. Firstly, the objective educational circumstances did not let the researchers make the sample size of the experiment bigger than 49 participants. The second limitation may be connected with the possible subjective influence of the teacher that was conducting the English course to the participants of the experiment on some of the results of the study. Taking into account the mentioned limitations, the results

of this research should be viewed with caution. However, we consider that the data and findings contained in the study could serve as a ground on which to conduct other more complex researches that will contribute to a better understanding of the link between interaction and autonomy in professional education and will lead to the gradual improvements in professional language and culture education.

To conclude, the interactive model of language teaching can be applied to other teacher education courses as a viable pedagogical model to contribute to the development of learners' autonomy and professional competence, enhance student teachers' learning experiences and their future teaching practices.

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