

# Digitalisation and challenges of the education system: project work in formation of foreign language communicative competence

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## Abstract

The paper deals with some aspects of project-based learning application in the formation of students' communicative competence as a new model of digital transformation of the education system. The authors focus on the development and dissemination of the project-based learning method within frameworks of the discipline "Foreign language" as a new model of the work of educational organisations. The methods used in the research conducted for this article represent a combination of modern information resources use and online technologies in teaching foreign languages in a non-linguistic university. Thus, project work becomes a learning technology that allows modelling communication within the educational process to obtain the required educational results in a digital educational environment, and for increasing motivation for learning.

## Keywords

English for specific purposes, digitalisation, project work, communicative competence, motivation

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# Цифровизация и вызовы системы образования: проектная работа по формированию иноязычной коммуникативной компетенции

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## Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются некоторые аспекты применения проектного обучения для формирования коммуникативной компетенции у студентов в качестве новой инновационной модели цифровой трансформации системы образования. Авторы акцентируют внимание на разработке и распространении проектного метода обучения в рамках дисциплины «Иностранный язык» как современной формы работы образовательных организаций, отвечающей на запросы как со стороны обучающихся, так и со стороны работодателей. Методы, использованные в исследовании, проведенном для данной статьи, представляют собой сочетание использования современных информационных ресурсов и онлайн-технологий при обучении иностранным языкам в неязыковом вузе для получения требуемых образовательных результатов в виде сформированной коммуникативной компетенции на иностранном языке в цифровой образовательной среде, а также для повышения мотивации к обучению.

## Ключевые слова

Английский язык для специальных целей, цифровизация, проектная работа, коммуникативная компетенция, мотивация

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## INTRODUCTION

The modern world of technologies and digital development in almost all spheres of human activity represents a huge potential for the educational system. The Fourth Industrial Revolution [1] is a synthesis of accumulated material and digital technologies that allow mass dissemination of information and educational products. A qualitative change in the work culture requires from a modern specialist in almost any field and qualification a high level of mathematical literacy and humanitarian training, possession of the XXI century competencies and, of course, the ability and necessary skills to use technologies properly (project thinking; digital literacy; etc.).

The process of digital transformation of the educational system does not mean the creation of more computer classes only, but also deals with the elaboration and dissemination of new models of work within educational organisations [2–5].

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Digitalisation, or digital transformation of education, can be defined as a systematic update in a rapidly developing digital educational environment of the required educational results, educational content, organisational forms and methods of educational work, evaluation of educational results, aimed at preparing students for life and activity in a digital civilization; using the potential of digital technologies to increase the potency of the educational process.

Project work is a learning technology that allows participants to model communication within the educational process. Professor G. Thomas [6] indicates that the project work is built around a given problem, encouraging students to creatively approach its solution, which allows them to work both individually and in mini-groups, stimulates research activities and provides an opportunity to demonstrate the results of the project in a given form.

Currently, a number of Russian and foreign specialists are researching project activities in foreign language classes [7–9]. Most recent works explain the surge of interest as a result of the widespread transition to remote educational technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic [10–13]. Fried-Booth [14] proposed three main stages of project work while Stoller [15] decomposed the division into more specific components. Russian methodologists focused their attention on two main types of projects – mono-projects (dedicated to one topic) and interdisciplinary projects [16].

Project technology contributes to the formation of students' research and creative skills, adaptive skills, the ability to navigate in a variety of situations, work in different teams, showing their individuality in a group. Being engaged in project tasks, students use their cognitive ability, social activity, and demonstrate interest in training. Project activity is an opportunity to maximise the creative potential of students.

Project-based learning is one of the current directions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) current teaching methods and is aimed at developing cognitive, creative skills of students, their ability to select and structure material using critical thinking. Any of these types of project work can be effectively used in EFL training to increase students' motivation.

Despite the large number of scientific publications reflecting the relevance of the project method, in our opinion, the least developed to date is the question of using project activities as a tool for the formation of foreign language communicative competence. The article substantiates the actualization of project activities within the framework of the Federal project "Digital Educational Environment", and also analyses its use in order to form students' communicative competence.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods used in the research conducted for this article represent a combination of modern information resources use and online technologies in teaching foreign languages in a non-linguistic university and are aimed at providing the necessary foundations for achieving a common goal. The main goal is to make sure that students' understanding of the language of business and professional communication improves, and their command of the language used becomes more solid and fundamental.

Thus, the study focuses on the following methods:

- competence approach, which allows to evaluate the effectiveness of educational results in the form of professional foreign language communicative competence;
- a network approach, which regards the electronic and educational environment as necessary prerequisite and means of professional activity and growth within the educational process;
- an activity-based approach based primarily on the project activities of students in a constantly changing linguistic and socio-cultural environment, as well as the ability to apply the results obtained in practice.

## RESULTS

Teaching foreign languages in non-language higher educational organisation has certain peculiarities and what is more challenging, the process is application-oriented. As it was mentioned earlier, Russian higher education should provide certain competencies necessary for the subsequent effective work of our graduates. While teaching a foreign language the most important objective is to develop students' communication competence. The common European scale of foreign language proficiency CEFR for Languages defines communication competence as the development of proper linguistic knowledge, skills and abilities, and their application in a specific sociolinguistic situation with a specific pragmatic goal to achieve effective communication. As educational process should be mainly focused on students' future professional activities, the focus moves to formation and development of communication competence. Acquiring this competence gives our graduates competitive advantage in the labour market.

There is a strong demand for new innovative educational methods motivating students to study while engaging them in tasks that incorporate skills they can face up in future working place. Using project learning method in studying foreign languages implements these much-needed skills.

Globalisation influences all the spheres of our life. Surely education is not an exception. Studying and communication in a foreign language, especially for non-linguistic university students, is a way to grow up in career and successfully do their professional activities. On the one hand, it seems impossible to describe the full set of new cultural information tools that are formed on the basis of digital tools, since they constantly appear and are updated in response to the complication of the social and production environment. On the other hand, spreading of digital technologies causes profound changes in the education sector.

That is why the implementation of project activities in English language discipline can solve this problem as students should refer to authentic materials. As a rule, existing textbooks do not cover the whole range of topics and problems that a future specialist in a foreign language may encounter.

This article presents the experience of using the project-based method in foreign languages classes. Every communication project should be focused on fostering communication skills and empowering students as they're engaging in this process. The project theme incorporates the topics relevant to students. By design, the project should simulate the situation of real professional activity. It should have a clear goal, procedure and visible outcomes presenting at the end. While doing a project students have got the practice of employing knowledge, abilities, tools, and methods to finish a project based on specific needs.

The project work experience with 1st year bachelors at the State University of Management is presented as an example. Students need to create a communication project connecting with the topic "Employing for the job". The project consists of several stages:

1. Planning:
  - setting up goals and tasks of the project;
  - building a project team;
  - distribution of tasks among project team members;
  - determining the means of implementing the project;
  - clarification of the thematic field of the project;
  - search and study literature in the thematic area of the project.
2. Design and project activities:
  - analysis of available information;
  - selection of necessary language material;
  - detailed analysis of communicative component of the project;
  - prediction of various variants of verbal behavior.
3. Conducting the project activities:
  - defining the final product of the project;
  - role-playing games and case situations.
4. Analysis and evaluation:
  - analysis of project outcomes by the team members and curator.

While working under this project, the second and third stages include:

- drawing up a job advertisement (announcement of a vacant position) depending on the learners' educational programme;
- writing CV (resume) and covering letter;
- job interview.

The students are divided into groups of their choice. For optimal work on a communicative project the number of students in a group should not exceed 5–6 people. The students should determine their roles.

At final stage of the project students conduct a job interview with a candidate, analyse and decide to what extent a particular candidate meets the requirements for the position.

Preliminary preparation for the project on the topic "Employing for the job" begins with an analysis of the process of applying for a job: finding a suitable advertisement for a vacancy in a management company, compiling a resume and cover letter in response to this advertisement, taking an interview in the form of a role-play game. This step-by-step process of getting a job determines the core of the students' communication project. Students get their own experience of how this process goes and responsibility for every written or spoken word.

We, as the curators of the project, directed and coordinated the cognitive and research activities of the project groups, evaluate the degree of students' implementation during the project. We especially focus on students' linguistic competence, adjusting, when necessary, all language aspects such as speaking, listening, reading, translation and writing.

The synthesis of communication competence and professional activity in the chosen field of a project allows to achieve excellent results in teaching, complements and updates the tasks of the project, and also serves to increase the motivation of students in learning English, which ultimately leads to an improvement in the quality of education.

As part of the project task, the students carried out independent work on compiling the text of a vacant position announcement a local management company, which we relied on when implementing the project and role-playing an interview.

Each student should write a job advertisement for a vacant position. In this announcement they have to indicate the job responsibilities and requirements of a company for a candidate. To complete this stage, students have to conduct search and analytical work. After checking for linguistic correspondence, the students in groups discuss the announcements they had written. The best one is being chosen for further project activity, then all team members compiled a resume which meet the project goals. It is also checked for compliance with grammatical and lexical norms. Of course, a first-year student is not able to indicate his education and work experience. They put "incomplete higher education" in the column "Education" and "lack of experience" in the column "Work experience" or offer their own invented version. However, students can and should describe their skills in the "Key Skills" column required for a candidate.

The next point is to discuss the job interview process. Future managers search, analyze and discuss information on how to prepare in advance, how to behave during an interview and what questions can be asked. As part of this task, the students collect information, and also compile lists of typical questions and difficult questions, or, so-called killer questions.

The last stage of our communication project presents an interview role-play. The students within their project team chose the applicant. During the "interview" the applicant is asked questions of different levels and varying degrees of complexity. Moreover, the entire group of students participate in this, regardless of the division into teams. Finally, students make a conclusion whether this candidate meets the requirements.

The role of a teacher at this stage is to monitor and evaluate the project progress. The final stage involves the analysis and evaluation of project results by the team members.

Thus, as a part of communication projects implementation all types of foreign language speech activities including listening, reading, writing and speaking are updated. Students always show high motivation and interest to the project. During the work on the project, the students become more united, study to cooperate with each other and begin to work as a team. Also they need to show search, cognitive and research activity in finding additional relevant information on designated project topic. Thus, the final project outcomes are students' oral presentations in a group and written papers in the form of announcement and summary.

## DISCUSSION

The higher education system is forced to respond to numerous challenges of the time. One of the urgent problems was the transition to activity-based, practice-oriented learning, the constant increase in the extent of information and versatility demonstrate that there is a need to form a personality ready to solve problems from the position of personal involvement. Project technology occurs to be one of the most efficient tool that allow a high-flyer specialist development.

Currently, we can state the growth in the number of project work activities in universities. This trend is gaining massive sale and can be regarded as a consequence of mandatory educational requirements for this activity. The active extension of project works in the education system actualizes the portfolio – a reflection of the individual educational vector of the student's development.

The demand for project activities is due to psychological, pedagogical and methodological effects, expressed in the formation of metasubject educational results – universal educational actions.

In the process of conducting project activities at the State University of Management, we were able to note that the active use of Internet resources and online technologies, the possibilities of the electronic information and educational environment of the university motivates students to apply the acquired professional foreign language communication skills in situations of professional foreign language communication.



## CONCLUSION

To date, the number of projects and research works has increased. This trend is explained by the introduction of project activities into the student portfolio system as part of the individual educational trajectory.

Summing up, we would like to emphasize the educational value and importance of using project activities in teaching students. The undoubted advantage is the increase of student's motivation. Each discipline has its own characteristics and brings certain nuances to the creation of projects. Speaking about the discipline "Foreign Language", we would like to highlight that the projects have an interdisciplinary nature. When completing a project, students must use their professional expertise and skills and be able to present the result of their research in foreign language. Thus, students develop stable correlation between disciplines; linguistic and other competencies are formed, consequently increasing students' motivation for learning, increasing their satisfaction and, ultimately, improving the quality of higher educational process. For many educators, this is the main reason for teaching, and this feeling inspires us to continue searching for new ways to achieve the goal and seek for new adventures in our classrooms.

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