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Research article

Teaching Students to Communicate in a Foreign Language through Teamwork on Virtual Communication Platforms

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Abstract

The article describes the advantages of organizing students' collaborative language practice sessions on virtual communication platforms and the results of the research which was aimed at identifying whether teamwork was more conducive to improving monologue or dialogue speech skills than each student's autonomous work. To this end, we conducted an experiment during the epidemic of COVID-19, in which all the participants were to analyze the quotations, following the scheme which was offered in the additional textbook. The exposure groups were given a home assignment to analyze the quotations in the form of monologues in the course of working in teams on a virtual communication platform. In class, they were asked discussion-generating questions, and they made dialogues in pairs to answer them. The students in the reference groups did the same home and classroom assignments individually. At the end of the experiment, the students were asked to prepare final monologues and dialogues related to one of the topics studied in the course of the experiment. The difference between the scores they got for the final and diagnostic monologues and dialogues was much higher in the exposure groups than in the reference ones because teamwork was mutually enriching for all the members of the small groups: their members contributed to each other's level of foreign-language proficiency by exchanging ideas, sharing their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, correcting their partners' mistakes and encouraging them to use new words, phrases and grammatical structures. The experiment allowed us to make an additional conclusion: the scores for the monologues increased in both the reference and exposure groups to a greater extent than the scores for the dialogues. Since the scores for the diagnostic dialogues were higher than those for the diagnostic monologues, the scope of improvement for the monologues was greater than that for the dialogues. The results of the research indicate that teamwork on virtual communication platforms is an indispensable tool which can be used in EFL classroom to teach the students to communicate in a foreign language.

Keywords: Dialogues and monologues; Quotations; Foreign-language proficiency; Grammar and vocabulary; Virtual communication platforms; Collaborative learning, Teamwork

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Научная статья

Обучение студентов общению на иностранном языке путем организации командной работы на виртуальных коммуникационных платформах

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Аннотация

В статье описываются преимущества организации совместной учебно-познавательной деятельности студентов на виртуальных коммуникационных платформах и результаты исследования, целью которого было определить, способствует ли командная работа улучшению навыков монологической или диалогической речи в большей степени, чем индивидуальная работа. С этой целью мы провели эксперимент во время эпидемии COVID-19, в ходе которого все участники должны были проанализировать цитаты, следуя схеме, предложенной в дополнительном авторском учебном пособии. Экспериментальные группы получали домашнее задание проанализировать цитаты в форме монологов в ходе работы в командах на виртуальной платформе. На занятиях им задавали вопросы для обсуждения, и они вели диалоги в парах, чтобы на них ответить. Учащиеся из контрольных групп выполняли те же самые аудиторные и домашние задания индивидуально. В конце эксперимента студентам было предложено подготовить заключительные монологи и диалоги, относящиеся к одной из тем, изученных в ходе эксперимента. Разница между баллами, которые они получили за финальные и диагностические монологи и диалоги, была намного выше в экспериментальных группах, чем в контрольных. Это можно объяснить тем фактом, что командная работа способствовала взаимообогащению всех членов малых групп: их участники обменивались идеями, делились своими знаниями грамматики и словарного запаса, исправляли ошибки своих партнеров и поощряли их использовать новые слова, словосочетания и грамматические структуры. Эксперимент позволил нам сделать дополнительный вывод: баллы за монологи увеличились как в контрольной, так и в экспериментальной группах в большей степени, чем баллы за диалоги. Поскольку изначально баллы за диагностические диалоги были выше, чем за диагностические монологи, масштабы для улучшения монологов были больше, чем для диалогов. Результаты исследования показывают, что командная работа на виртуальных коммуникационных платформах является незаменимым инструментом, который может быть использован на занятиях по иностранному языку для формирования коммуникативной компетенции студентов.

Ключевые слова: Диалоги и монологи; Цитаты; Владение иностранным языком; Грамматика и словарный запас; Виртуальные коммуникационные платформы; Совместное обучение; Командная работа

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching students to communicate in a foreign language has always been a challenging task. For one thing, some learners have difficulty using a language in the course of communication because they find it hard to break through the invisible barrier that prevents them from getting their message across when they have a conversation. Surprisingly, this applies not only to underachieving students, who cannot communicate in a foreign language just because they do not have enough controlled practice due to poor training attendance. This also concerns dutiful and efficient learners who gain high scores in any activities other than conversational practice: learning vocabulary, writing essays, reading and listening comprehension. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such students' passive vocabulary can be quite extensive, which allows them to understand other speakers' remarks in the flow of a conversation, but for them producing a quick response is a stumbling block. Students may feel inhibited by the presence of their peers, or probably they do not speak in class for fear of making a mistake. Being interrupted and corrected by the teacher in mid-flow is another reason for their failure to speak a foreign language fluently. Generally speaking, these obstacles can be removed if teachers and educationalists find new ways of organizing conversational practice, which can be conducive to involving learners in foreign-language communication.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEAMWORK IN DEVELOPING LEARNERS' FOREIGN-LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS

In the studies dedicated to language training methods, teamwork is described as an effective means of teaching learners to communicate in a foreign language. Learning processes and outcomes can be taken to a new level if students form communities, in which they collaboratively discuss various topics and brainstorm ideas. It helps create a favorable environment in which learners feel free to take risks and make mistakes (Uličná, 2021, p. 3). When a teacher supervises students while they speak a foreign language in front of the audience, they often feel too self-conscious and inhibited to freely discuss the topics they feel strongly about. However, by working in small teams with their peers, learners immerse themselves in foreign-language communication and overcome invisible barriers preventing them from speaking fluently.

Collaborative learning can be perceived as hands-on experience in foreign language communication. In this way, learners acquire topic-oriented vocabulary more successfully since freedom and autonomy, which are inherent to teamwork, make learning more interesting and enjoyable for them (Palea & Mihăilă-Lică, 2016). However, even though teamwork gives students freedom and turns practicing a foreign language into an exciting activity, it does not necessarily mean that new words and sophisticated grammatical structures will be used. Generally, learners tend to stay in the "comfort zone" and use the vocabulary and structures that they are already familiar with. When a teacher wants to have learners internalize new vocabulary, minimum requirements should be laid



down so that the new lexical and grammatical material is included in the dialogues and monologues.

Preparing task-based collaborative dialogues in an EFL class is instrumental in developing foreign-language skills. Opinion polls indicate that learners get a chance to reflect on their own accuracy and fluency as well as to detect and correct their own errors by getting feedback from the other team members (Shirazifard, et al., 2022). If some of the team members have remarkable foreign-language skills, they can serve as a benchmark for the other students whose level of language proficiency is lower. On the other hand, the students with the highest level of the language skills can also benefit from correcting the other students' mistakes and providing them with the detailed explanations of the learning material.

Teamwork is instrumental in developing learners' foreign-language speaking skills not only when it comes to collaborative out-of-class work, but also in the course of free classroom discussions. Students are more interested in discussing the topics that will enable them to communicate in the real world than in those that they generally come across in their course books (Paulikova, 2018). This applies in particular to senior students majoring in linguistics because their high level of foreign-language proficiency allows them to speak about any subject without being inhibited by its complexity. To this end, discussion points should appeal to the learners and get them to talk spontaneously.

All team members should contribute to achieving the common goal regardless of their level of foreign-language proficiency. Any utterance has a social function since the interlocutor expects feedback and response from the listener. By making dialogues, students learn to recognize different types of functional language (request, command, refusal, apology, etc.) (Christianto, 2020). Christianto dedicated his article to classroom communication between a teacher and students, in which the foreign language serves practical purposes. When EFL students do an assignment in the course of collaborative out-of-class work, the requirement to speak a foreign language should extend not only to the task itself, but to any other discussions, regardless of the fact whether or not they are directly related to the assignment in question. The teacher can use such technologies as speech recording or teleconferencing facilities to check if it is the case when students work autonomously and to ensure that they do not switch to their native language under any circumstances. Without such regular checkpoints, learners' foreign-language skills may not develop, and teamwork will not make any sense.

Checking learners' conversational activities in small teams is absolutely essential because it is often argued that when students speak a foreign language in small teams without being corrected, such an activity cannot be regarded as controlled practice. However, it is recommendable that errors should not be corrected in the course of discussion: all mistakes should be recorded and corrected later (Azimova, 2019). That is why before students embark on working in teams, they should be instructed to record each other's mistakes and correct them later. Moreover, if learners collaborate on communication platforms, such as MS Teams, their conversation is recorded, so the mistakes that go unnoticed can be corrected later.

Apart from establishing the minimum lexical and grammatical requirements, the teacher needs to ensure that they are complied with, especially when it comes to out-of-



class work. Since computer-mediated communication has synchronous and asynchronous modes, it is possible for students and learners to communicate both in a delayed fashion using offline modes, and in a synchronous environment, by contacting via chat discussion software (Farahian and Ebadi, 2023). Such computer-mediated communication is crucial for the EFL teacher because without regular supervision some students are reluctant to join in when a group discussion is held, whereas others, on the contrary, speak too much, not letting the other team members get a word in edgewise. Thus, the teacher can check each student's performance by using either synchronous or asynchronous communication modes.

Technologies have provided more opportunities for collaborative learning. Both learners and teachers can use Stixy (an online whiteboard space), Google groups or Mikogo (Rao, 2019). By applying technologies like the ones mentioned above students can collaborate both in class and in the course of doing home assignments. When students work on online platforms like MS Teams, their performance can be monitored by the instructor directly in the course of the communication session or indirectly, by listening to its record.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS BY ORGANIZING TEAMWORK IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS VS. FACE-TO-FACE TEAMWORK

The only option for students in some situations, such as COVID-19, when they do not have access to face-to-face contact with peers and teachers, is to work in virtual environments (Klisowska et al., 2020). Even though interpersonal communication in MS Teams is sometimes interrupted by technical failures, it still allows learners to work in small groups and acquire foreign-language communicative skills. Moreover, the functions that this platform features make it more convenient in some situations than face-to-face communication, and at times students feel more confident when they contact each other online because for Gen-Z it recreates their familiar environment.

E-learning enables students to study in accordance with their individual learning styles, which makes the learning process more personalized. By using hyperlinks, learners can find information in accordance with their personal needs and interests. On top of that, by working in virtual environments, students broaden their knowledge about the internet, which is essential for their future careers (Nevada & Dimova, 2010). Learners can contribute to teamwork in accordance with their individual preferences and interests. Even if their level of foreign-language proficiency is lower than that of their groupmates, they still feel less inhibited when they come up with their ideas than when they have to speak in front of the whole group. Moreover, whenever they have something valuable to contribute to teamwork, but they have difficulty getting their idea across in English, they can find supporting arguments on the internet and either use the chat function to send the hyperlink to their partners, or just share the screen to show them a text or a video spot to illustrate the point. In this way, students learn to use internet resources not only for entertainment, but for educational purposes.



Another advantage of teamwork in virtual environments is that even the shiest students have their voice. When they study face-to-face, such learners do not share their ideas with the rest of the group because more self-confident students do all the talking and do not allow anyone to get a word in edgeways. If students are too shy, they can use the chat function, jot down their ideas and share them with their teammates. The teacher can listen to the recording of the communication session in an asynchronous mode to check whether all the members of a small group joined in and contributed to achieving the common goal when the discussion was going on. On top of that, the chat function available in MS Teams allows users to save time: while one person is talking, someone else can contribute their ideas in a written form. A participant of the communication session may also want to share such content as short videos, texts and vocabulary lists. All the learning materials are brought together on one single platform, which enables the students to resort to them whenever it is relevant.

However, apart from all the conveniences provided by MS Teams, it has a significant disadvantage when it comes to acquiring foreign-language speaking skills. When learners work in small groups on this platform, they do not see their partners' facial expression, posture and body language, which inhibits the natural flow of communication.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA OF STUDENTS' FOREIGN-LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS

Formative assessment of students' foreign-language speaking skills is part and parcel of the learning process. Students should be allowed to participate in the process of tracking their own progress since they need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning outcomes (Hatipoğlu, 2021). To this end, teachers should develop assignments that could help them thoroughly evaluate learners' conversational skills by having them deliver monologues and engage in dialogues. Teachers can also give a voice to learners by getting them to undertake peer assessment. However, students should be provided with a set of criteria that could assist them in measuring their peers' skills.

Assessment of speaking skills is probably a more complicated task than assessing skills in grammar or listening and reading comprehension because they cannot be measured by having students write tests and by calculating their test scores. In order to evaluate students' speaking performance in an ESL / EFL classroom, a teacher needs to draw on a list of assessment criteria.

In a study by Valoojerdy (2022), the assessment criteria are divided into four groups: voice control, which includes loudness, pace, intonation and legibility; body language (posture, gestures, eye contact); the content of a presentation (whether the verbal message has an introduction, a body and a conclusion), and the fourth criterion, effectiveness, which comprises the choice of the topic, language use, vocabulary and achieving the goal of the speaking assignment. The list includes some criteria that are difficult to assess objectively, such as loudness and legibility, as well as some extralinguistic criteria that do not indicate the command of English, like posture, gestures and the choice of the topic.



The comprehensive list which was made by B. Knight comprised grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, conversational skills, sociolinguistic skills, non-verbal clues and the relevance of the content (Knight, 1992). Six out of eight criteria on this list were used as a basis of evaluating the students' speaking skills in the experiment that was conducted in this study. The sociolinguistic skills, which comprised distinguishing the register and style, was not included since the conversations that were to be evaluated in this study were all in the same style. Non-verbal clues were also excluded from the assessment criteria because evaluating them was irrelevant to this research. The maximum score the students could achieve was 24 (4 for each of these criteria).

In order to get the highest score in grammar it was not enough to use the grammar constructions correctly. The range of constructions was also taken into consideration: the use of a wide variety of tenses; infinitive, participial constructions, gerund and subordinate clauses. Meticulous attention was paid to the correct usage of articles and prepositions. On top of that, the way the learners used the vocabulary was of paramount importance. Apart from the word accuracy, lexical co-occurrence was considered. The range of vocabulary was to correspond to C2 (proficiency level): to get the highest score for this criterion the students had to show the teacher that they had mastered English vocabulary to an exceptional level. The students' phonetic skills were evaluated along with grammar and vocabulary. The pronunciation of individual sounds, their clusters, linking consonants and assimilation, as well as the stress, intonation and rhythm were assessed.

The other three criteria that were on the checklist referred to the process of speaking as a whole rather than to its individual components. Fluency, which was the first of these criteria, included such components as the speed at which the students were speaking. Apart from speed, it was important to determine whether the learners hesitated before they started speaking, and whether they paused so as to reflect upon what to say next. When it came to the assessment of the conversational skills, it was considered if the students fully developed the topic, whether their remarks were relevant and if they understood the interlocutor's utterances. The other components of this criterion included the way the learners filled the pauses in the conversation as well as their ability to clarify the unclear issues and to digress in order to give additional information. The content of the speech was also assessed: to achieve the highest score, the students were to adhere to the topic; they had to put forward coherent and relevant arguments. If they were unable to support their arguments, or if their ideas were irrelevant to the topic, their score was lower.

METHODS: THE EXPERIMENT MEASURING THE EFFICACY OF TEAMWORK IN ACQUIRING FOREIGN-LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS

The experiment aimed at identifying whether teamwork was more conducive to improving monologue or dialogue speech skills than each student's individual work was carried out at Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University during the outbreak



of COVID-19 (in the seventh semester of 2020 and 2021). It involved 82 senior students majoring in linguistics. There were 42 participants (22 in 2020 and 20 in 2021) in the reference groups and 40 participants (19 in 2020 and 21 in 2021) in the exposure groups. In the seventh and eighth semesters the students worked with the core course book *Upstream Proficiency* and an additional textbook which trained them to analyze quotations. The words of wisdom (adages and quotations) covered in the additional textbook were relevant to the topics in *Upstream Proficiency*, and in the course of the experiment the students in both the exposure and reference groups were assigned to make a dialogue and prepare a monologue on the basis of quotations. At the beginning of the experiment all the participants were given a diagnostic assignment to analyze a quotation related to one of the topics from *Straightforward Advanced* that were studied in the previous semester. The purpose of the assignment was to determine the students' initial speaking skills. The quotation related to the topic "Success and Failure" and the problems that the participants were to discuss in a dialogue are given below:

Quotation: "The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when it comes." (Benjamin Disraeli, 1804-1881, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom)

Questions to discuss in a dialogue: 1. Do you agree that happiness is a measure of success? 2. What part does luck play in success? 3. Why can a person be successful in one part of life and a total failure in another?

The students were already familiar with the algorithm of quotation analysis because they had been taught to interpret words of wisdom before, and it was even one of their assignments in the exam at the end of the previous semester. The first step was to give some background information about the author and to suggest why he might have expressed such an opinion. The next step involved reiterating the quotation and explaining its idea in the student's own words. Then the learners were expected to agree, disagree or partly agree with the quotation and to justify their viewpoint by giving supporting arguments and telling a story illustrating their opinion. The story supporting the arguments could be just the students' anecdotal evidence, or it could be taken from a film or a book, which was more preferable because it indicated the learner's erudition. Finally, the students were to summarize all their points in a comprehensive conclusion. The learners were given 15 minutes to prepare a monologue and one minute to deliver it. While they were speaking in turns, the teacher assessed each of them and wrote down the results of the assessment. After the students analyzed the quotation, they were given another 15 minutes to prepare a two-minute dialogue in pairs on the basis of the three additional questions related to the quotation.

The teacher listened to the diagnostic monologues and dialogues, which were then assessed on the basis of the 6 criteria proposed by Knight (1992). Their results are given in the table below.



Table 1. The results of the diagnostic dialogues and monologues in the reference and exposure groups in 2020-2021 (maximum score – 24)

Partici- pants	Scores, (24 max.)							
	Reference groups				Exposure groups			
	Dialogue		Monologue		Dialogue		Monologue	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
1	14	13	12	10	12	14	11	12
2	12	14	9	12	14	12	12	11
3	15	17	13	15	10	14	10	12
4	10	11	10	10	12	13	11	11
5	13	12	11	10	11	13	11	10
6	10	13	11	13	15	15	14	13
7	16	14	14	13	14	12	12	11
8	11	11	13	9	13	13	11	12
9	15	16	14	13	12	12	11	10
10	14	12	14	10	12	15	10	13
11	10	12	11	10	11	14	10	13
12	11	13	9	11	13	12	12	10
13	11	10	8	9	14	14	13	12
14	17	13	14	12	12	13	11	12
15	15	12	14	10	10	12	10	10
16	13	15	12	12	11	12	11	10
17	15	12	13	11	13	13	11	12
18	10	10	9	9	12	12	11	11
19	9	11	9	10	13	13	12	13
20	17	14	15	13		14		11
21	13		12			15		13
22	12		12					
<i>Average score</i>	12,86 53,6%	12,75 53,1%	11,77 49,1%	11,10 46,3%	12,32 51,3%	13,19 55,0%	11,26 46,9%	11,52 48,0%
<i>Average for 2 years</i>	12,81 53,4%		11,44 47,7%		12,75 53,1%		11,39 47,5%	

Table 1 illustrates the results of the diagnostic dialogues and monologues in the reference and exposure groups in 2020 and 2021. In the reference groups, the average score for the dialogues was 12.86 (53.6%) in 2020 and 12.75 (53.1%) in 2021, and the average score for the monologues was 11.77 (49.1%) in 2020 and 11.1 (46.3%) in 2021.



In the exposure groups, the average score for the dialogues was 12.32 (51.3%) in 2020 and 13.19 (55%) in 2021, and the average score for the monologues was 11.26 (46.9%) in 2020 and 11.52 (48%) in 2021. Interestingly, in all the groups the scores for the dialogues were higher than the scores for the monologues. It can probably be explained by the prevalence of dialogues in regular ESL classroom activities, whereas monologues accompanied by presentations are less frequent at most primary and secondary schools, so students get more controlled practice of making dialogues before they go to university. In general, the average scores in the reference and exposure groups were approximately the same, which indicates that their foreign-language speaking skills did not show considerable difference at the initial stage of the research.

At the next stage of the research, both the exposure and reference groups worked with Units 1-5 of their basic course book *Upstream proficiency* and with an additional textbook “Acquiring discursive skills by senior linguistic majors via explaining maxims and catchphrases: teaching manual” (Dashkina and Sosnina, 2021), which describes the structure of quotation analysis and contains additional questions that help learners generate ideas, topic-oriented glossary and biographical entries that carry information about the authors of the quotations. The topics covered in the additional textbook correspond to the ones in *Upstream Proficiency*. Each unit includes one quotation with the questions that are aimed at giving learners deeper insights into its gist and text extracts related to the topic under consideration. At the end of the unit students are given another three quotations for independent analysis, this time without any leading questions.

In the course of the experiment the students in both the exposure and reference groups were given the same home assignments based on the material from the additional textbook. The learners were to use at least 5 grammatical structures and 10 words and expressions from either *Upstream Proficiency* or the topic-oriented glossary in the book “Acquiring discursive skills by senior linguistic majors via explaining maxims and catchphrases: teaching manual”. In the reference groups, the students did the home assignment on their own. They were to answer all the leading questions and analyze the other three quotations. In the next class the teacher checked the home assignment: the students took turns to answer the questions related to the first quotation from the unit, and then five students were asked to deliver a monologue in which they analyzed one of the quotations prepared by them at home.

The exposure groups were divided into 5 teams that were to do their homework together. Each of the teams created their own MS Teams channel with the teacher’s name added to it. All the communication sessions were recorded so that the teacher could listen to either the students’ conversations directly or their records. It was vitally important since the teacher had an opportunity to assess how active the team members were in the course of the communication sessions. The learners contributed to teamwork in accordance with their individual level of foreign-language proficiency and their interests. When they looked for supporting arguments, they selected examples from the films and fiction in their favorite genre and shared the hyperlinks with the other team members. The main guideline that the students were supposed to adhere to was to speak English in the course of their communication on MS Teams platform. In the next class, the home assignment



was checked in the same way as in the reference groups. The students from different teams answered the questions from the additional textbook and delivered the monologues.

The students also made dialogues in each class in the course of the experiment. In all the groups that participated in the experiment the teacher asked one provocative question related to the topic but not included in the additional textbook. For example, when the students were analyzing the quotation by Marcus Tullius Cicero “The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn”, the teacher asked the following provocative question: “If learners always question the authority of those who teach and never believe anything they say, what possible consequences can such an attitude have?” In the reference groups, the students were given 5 minutes to think about the question, and then the teacher initiated the discussion, in which everyone was expected to participate and to come up with their own opinions. In the exposure groups, the teams were seated together so that they could discuss the provocative question in English for five minutes. Afterwards the whole group was involved in the discussion, in which the students exchanged their opinions. In both the reference and the exposure groups, the teacher assessed the monologues and dialogues in accordance with the criteria introduced by B. Knight. It is necessary to emphasize once again that in the course of the experiment the reference and the exposure groups did exactly the same assignments and in the same volume. The only difference was that in the reference groups the students prepared dialogues and monologues on their own, whereas in the exposure groups they worked in small teams.

RESULTS

At the end of the experiment, all the respondents were given a final assignment to analyze a quotation related to one of the topics from Upstream Proficiency that were studied in the course of the experiment. The final assignment was in the same format as the diagnostic one, and its purpose was to determine the students’ progress. The quotation the students were to analyze was related to the topic “Communication”. The quotation itself and the problems that the participants were to discuss in a dialogue are given below:

Quotation: “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” (Epictetus – a Greek Stoic philosopher)

Questions to discuss in a dialogue: 1. According to the quotation, people should listen rather than speak. If everyone listened and nobody spoke, would the world plunge into silence?

2. How could we benefit from listening both to other people and to everything that happens around us?

3. Why should a good communicator listen rather than speak?

By the same token as in the diagnostic dialogue, the learners prepared a monologue for 15 minutes and delivered it for a minute. After analyzing the quotation, they were given another 15 minutes to prepare a two-minute dialogue in pairs on the basis of the three additional questions given above, which were related to the quotation. While the students were speaking in turns, the teacher assessed each of them on the basis of the



criteria proposed by Knight (1992). and recorded the results of the assessment. The results of the final monologues and dialogues are given in the table below.

Table 2. The results of the final dialogues and monologues in the reference and exposure groups in 2020-2021 (maximum score – 24)

Parti- cipants	Scores, (24 max.)							
	Reference groups				Exposure groups			
	Dialogue		Monologue		Dialogue		Monologue	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
1	15	15	15	13	18	22	20	21
2	14	15	11	14	20	18	22	19
3	16	18	15	19	17	21	21	22
4	13	13	14	13	19	19	20	20
5	14	14	12	13	18	20	19	19
6	12	15	14	14	20	23	23	24
7	18	16	19	15	21	19	22	19
8	14	14	15	12	23	21	20	22
9	16	16	16	17	18	18	19	19
10	16	14	15	13	19	21	18	22
11	13	15	14	14	17	18	20	20
12	13	15	12	14	21	17	23	18
13	13	13	11	11	23	22	23	22
14	18	16	16	15	20	20	20	21
15	17	14	16	14	17	18	19	20
16	14	17	14	16	17	19	20	20
17	18	14	16	14	21	21	21	22
18	13	12	12	12	20	18	20	21
19	11	13	12	12	21	19	23	21
20	17	17	17	18		20		19
21	16		15			23		22
22	13		14					
Average score	14,73 61,4%	14,80 61,7%	14,32 59,7%	14,15 59,0%	19,47 81,1%	19,86 82,7%	20,68 86,2%	20,62 85,9%
Average for 2 years	14,76 61,5%		14,23 59,3%		19,67 81,9%		20,65 86,0%	

Table 2 illustrates the results of the final dialogues and monologues in the reference and exposure groups in 2020 and 2021. In the reference groups, the average score for the



dialogues was 14.73 (61.4%) in 2020 and 14.8 (61.7%) in 2021, and the average score for the monologues was 14.32 (59.7%) in 2020 and 14.15 (59%) in 2021. In the exposure groups, the average score for the dialogues was 19.47 (81.1%) in 2020 and 19.86 (82.7%) in 2021, and the average score for the monologues was 20.68 (86.2%) in 2020 and 20.62 (85.9%) in 2021.

Bar chart (fig. 1) below illustrates the general outcome of the experiment.

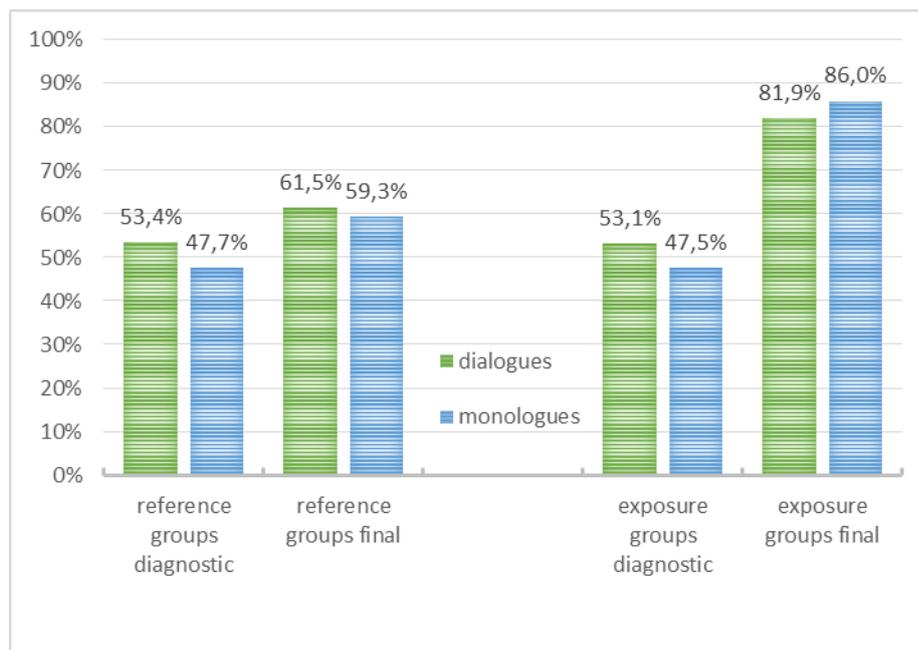


Figure 1. The results of the research

The bar chart shows that on average (in 2020 and 2021) in the reference groups the score for the dialogues increased by 1.95 (8.1%), whereas the score for the monologues increased by 2.79 (11.6%). In the exposure groups, the difference between the diagnostic monologues and dialogues and the final ones was far more considerable. On average (in 2020 and 2021), the score for the dialogues increased by 6.92 (28.8%) whilst the score for the monologues increased by 9.26 (38.6%).

The increase in the average score in the exposure groups was 4.97 (20.7%) larger for the dialogues and 6.47 (27%) larger for the monologues than in the reference groups. Such a substantial difference between the results can be attributed to the fact that exposure groups participated in teamwork on virtual communication platforms on a regular basis. On top of that, when the exposure groups were given discussion-generating questions by the teacher, they prepared the dialogues on their basis in pairs. In the course of teamwork, they exchanged ideas, corrected each other's mistakes and spent more time speaking English. Even though the students in the reference groups spent as much time preparing the dialogues as their peers in the exposure groups, they just jotted down what they were going to say without speaking aloud. Useful as self-talk might be, it is nowhere as conducive to acquiring foreign-language communicative skills as a conversation with a partner. Besides, the students in the reference groups analyzed quotations at home by



writing down the main ideas and doing research into the topic related to the quotation on the internet.

Each component which constituted foreign-language speaking skills improved to a greater extent in the exposure groups than in the reference ones. While the students in the exposure groups were preparing dialogues and monologues in teams, they encouraged each other to use more sophisticated grammatical structures and a wider variety of vocabulary. It can be explained by the fact that everyone has their own individual preferences when choosing grammatical constructions, words and phrases in the course of holding a conversation. Therefore, while learners make dialogues and monologues in teams or pairs, their collaboration is mutually reinforcing: they weave their vocabulary and structures into the texture of the conversation, contributing to each other's level of foreign-language proficiency.

At the end of the experiment, the students of the exposure groups were asked a number of questions about their progress in mastering each of the components that constitute remarkable speaking skills. Among the grammatical structures that they started using in the course of their collaborative work, they mentioned Complex Subject, Mixed Conditionals and different kinds of emphatic structures, including inversion. They also pointed out that they exchanged valuable lexical information, such as idiomatic expressions (on the same wavelength, to talk at cross purposes); collocations (push the agenda, vested interest) and individual words (commuter, tailback, provost, tutorial). Some members of the teams might not have been familiar with these vocabulary units for some reasons, and collaboration with their partners helped them fill these knowledge gaps. The third criterion – pronunciation – improves when students work in teams. After the experiments some learners reported that they had frequently argued with their partners about the pronunciation of some words while they were making dialogues and monologues together. Eventually, they ended up checking the pronunciation in an online dictionary, which helped them consolidate their knowledge. They claimed that if it had not been for teamwork, they would not have had second thoughts about the pronunciation of these words, and they would still be unaware about it.

The students' fluency also improved significantly in the course of group work. When they were asked to give reasons what aspects of teamwork contributed to their ability to speak fluently, they gave such reasons as competitiveness (their desire to speak better than their partners), favorable and stimulating environment as well as the fact that having a conversation in a foreign language encourages the interlocutors to retrieve grammar and vocabulary from their long-term memory. On top of that, the students of the exposure groups claimed that teamwork was mutually enriching when it came to producing relevant content. The members of the groups who tend to organize and systemize the information prevented their partners from getting carried away by getting them to stay focused on the topic. On the other hand, the participants who pay attention to details without seeing the whole picture also contributed to achieving the common goal by correcting minor mistakes. In addition, the learners believed that teamwork had helped them practice conversational skills: by speaking with their peers, they learned to understand the interlocutor's utterances and respond to them much better than when they worked individually in the previous semesters.



It is also worth noting that the scores for the monologues increased in both reference and exposure groups to a greater extent than the scores for the dialogues. First and foremost, it can be attributed to the fact that the scores for the diagnostic dialogues were higher than those for the diagnostic monologues. That is why, the scope of improvement for monologues was greater than that for dialogues: over the years the students had already had numerous classroom activities which involved making dialogues, whereas they had only had an opportunity to practice monologue skills when they prepared exam topics or presentations. The students also made such remarkable progress in making monologues since they worked with the additional textbook “Acquiring discursive skills by senior linguistic majors via explaining maxims and catchphrases: teaching manual”, in which all the assignments were aimed at teaching learners to analyze the statement from different perspectives and come up with a reasoned opinion expressed as a monologue. Previously, they only worked with the quotations from their basic coursebook, Upstream Proficiency, which were not supported by any explanations or leading questions. Such a format was clearly insufficient for the students, who needed to get deeper insights into the quotation analysis.

Apart from conventional statistical methods, we used a neural network to trace the trends that could have gone unnoticed if we had only compared the average score. The figure below shows the graph built by the neural network which illustrates the relationship between the results of the diagnostic and final dialogues in the reference and exposure groups.

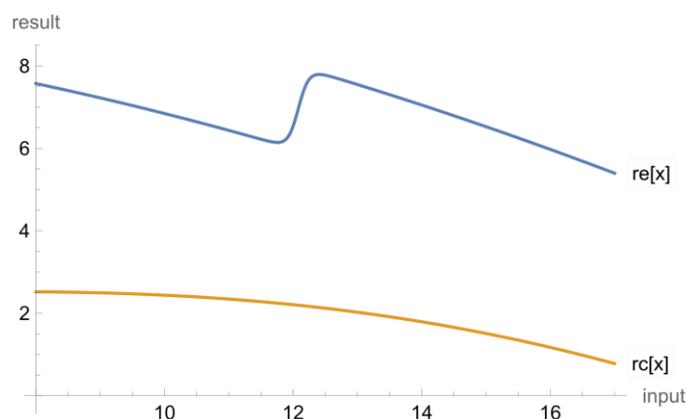


Figure 2. The relationship between the results of the diagnostic and final dialogues (the blue curve – the exposure groups; the orange curve – the reference groups)

Generally, a graph built by a neural network provides more accurate information about specific trends that may be overlooked if only statistical analysis of average results is performed. The graph (fig. 2), which was produced by a neural network illustrates the specificities within the groups that participated in the experiment. It shows the results of the diagnostic dialogues on the horizontal axis and the difference between the results of the final and the diagnostic dialogues on the vertical axis. The blue curve shows how the top-performing, average and weak learners in the exposure groups improved their performance in the course of the experiment. The right section of the graph indicates that



the top performers' results did not show a significant growth. It can be explained by the fact that they already produced good results in the diagnostic dialogues, and for them there was not enough room for growth. They may not have produced as impressive results as average students because they had been working in small teams with the learners whose degree of foreign-language proficiency was lower than theirs. However, even though the top performers' increase in the results was not as considerable, it was still bigger than in the reference groups (the orange curve).

The middle section of the blue graph illustrates that the average students' performance shows the most remarkable improvement. On the one hand, they acquired foreign-language skills because they received help from the top-performing students. On the other hand, they offered help to the weakest team members, and, in so doing, they consolidated the learning material. The middle section of the graph also indicates that the average students can be divided into two distinct groups. It depended on whether their team-mates were mainly top performers or weak students. If they collaborated with someone whose level of foreign-language proficiency was higher than theirs, they benefited from such cooperation; if most of their partners' skills were not as good as theirs, they made less progress. Nevertheless, in both cases their progress was more substantial than that in the reference groups (the orange curve), in which the results of the final dialogues were also higher than those of the diagnostic ones. It is also worth mentioning that, just like in the exposure groups, the top performers in the reference groups made less progress than average and weak learners because, again, there was little room for improvement.

Even though the assignments that students did in MS Teams were quite similar to the tasks that are done in face-to-face environments, the students who worked in MS Teams in small groups took advantage of various tools available on the communication platform.

1. They used OneNote to plan their discussions and to record the most relevant ideas which the team members came up with in the course of brainstorming sessions.
2. If a team member suddenly had an idea he wanted to share with everyone while someone else was talking, he used the chat function, so he did not need to interrupt the speaker.
3. Since MS Teams allows teachers and learners to share their screen, students sometimes supported their arguments by sharing video spots and creolized texts with their team mates. Figure 3 below is an example of a creolized text demonstrated on the screen by one of the students in the course of discussing the quotation by Robert Collier "People blame their environment. There is only one person to blame – and only one – themselves."

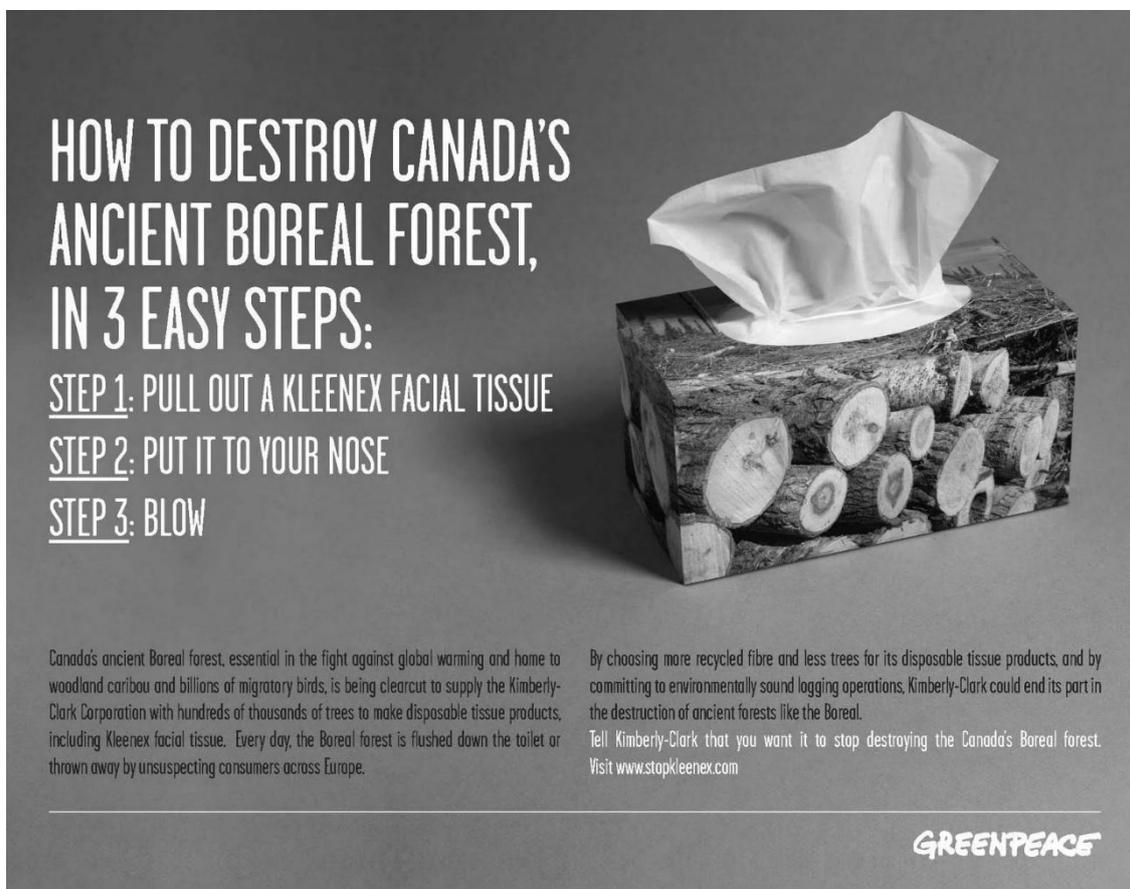


Figure 3. Creolized text (Source <https://cpb-use1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/e/952/files/2012/09/Rhetorical-Analysis.jpeg>)

Sharing video spots and creolized texts enabled team members to produce creative ideas if the discussion came to a halt for some reason. Thus, learning content in the form of videos, texts and presentations was unified on one platform, so that all the learners could access it instantly. Thus, in the exposure groups conversational practice was supported by additional resources available on the internet.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In general, organizing teamwork on virtual communication platforms is instrumental in teaching the students majoring in linguistics to communicate in a foreign language, especially when, for some reasons, their face-to-face contact is limited. By doing their home assignments in small groups and making dialogues in class, learners brainstorm and exchange ideas, enrich each other's vocabulary, correct their partners' mistakes and encourage them to use new words, phrases and grammatical structures. Teamwork creates a friendly and favorable environment which lifts the barriers to foreign-language communication.



Virtual communication platforms like MS Teams make the learning process more inclusive since even students who are too self-conscious to participate in group discussions, can still share their ideas with the teammates by writing them in the chat. In addition, students who have difficulty conveying their ideas because of a low level of foreign-language proficiency can resort to various resources available on the internet whenever that is relevant.

Another distinct advantage of teamwork on virtual platforms over face-to-face foreign-language practice is the possibility for the teacher to check the students' degree of involvement either asynchronously, by checking the records of the teams' communication sessions, or synchronously, by meddling with their work and correcting their mistakes, if necessary. In that respect, teamwork on virtual communication platforms can be regarded as controlled practice with the teacher acting as a supervisor, whereas when learners work face-to-face, many mistakes go unnoticed since no one oversees their foreign-language communication.

Having students do their home assignment collaboratively by using teleconferencing facilities proved to be good practice, which can be adopted not only by educators teaching foreign languages, but also by instructors teaching other subjects. Further research should be done into developing new forms of students' teamwork on distance learning platforms.

To be sure, there remains an ambiguity that needs to be resolved in future research: the findings offer support to the notion that students' teamwork is good but it does not allow us to measure the contribution of the MS online platform. Our observations indicate that the technical tool affords certain forms of interaction which are not available in personal team-working. Also, the online platform might lower the threshold and add to the fun of teamwork. In order to ascertain this more precisely, another comparative study might consider the effect of personal group-learning on monologue and dialogue construction.

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