

# THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' GROUP PROJECT ACTIVITY WHILE LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## **Abstract**

*In this research the theoretical principles of psychological analysis of group project activity of students in the process of learning foreign language are defined on the basis of subject-activity, socio-psychological and cognitive paradigms. The approaches of different authors to the understanding of the concept of project and in particular group project activity are considered. The difficulties of the theoretical analysis of this specific notion are indicated due to the considerable variety of subjects, types and forms of the pedagogical activity, academic disciplines regarding which the researches are being carried out. Not disclosed aspects of organizing the group project activity of students are being determined, among them is a project group as an autonomous subject of joint activity for the realization students' project activity while learning a foreign language; forming psychological readiness of teacher and student to use project method; the role of metacognitive aspect in the surrounding, where the project activity is being carried out; group functioning through the project work as a subject of group examination. It has been indicated that the analysis of project activity as an innovative technology must include its assessment as a condition of student's developing as a subject of learning activity, his personal, socio-psychological, intellectual and professional self-perfection. Three levels of subjectivity in group project activity are being distinguished: teacher; each particular student; and student project group. Interaction between teacher and student is based on subject-subject relations. An organization of a project activity while learning a foreign language is considered as the one in which the student is moving in order to get the manager position and to master the basis of expert knowledge. Hereby, the main stress is on the group role as a subject of group examination, and also on metacognitive character of the surrounding. On the basis of conducted theoretical analysis, the new understanding of the notion of a group project activity is proposed. It is claimed, that the effectiveness of a group project activity is determined by the level of psychological readiness of students and teachers to implement it.*

**Key words:** group project activity, group dynamics, subject of a group activity, cognitive structures, expert knowledge, metacognitive skills, learning activity.

## **Introduction**

There are a lot of innovative methods of learning a foreign language, especially using modern technology and applications. Depending on the final goal, learners choose the way they learn a language. If to take into account that foreign language, unlike other subjects, is both a goal and a

linguistic resource, (Zimnia, 1991), group project activity may be one of the methods where apart from studying the linguistic resources (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics) there is a focus on meeting cognitive and communicative needs of a student.

The wide synonymic use of different terms along with the definition of project activity has been a special feature. For example, in Ukrainian dissertational researches the following definitions have been found: *student's educational project* – technologized way of purposeful organization of the students' independent activities under the flexible guidance of a teacher directed at solving the exploratory or socially significant life problems and involves receiving particular result in the form of materialized or ideal product of this activity (Martyniuk, 2009); *method of projects* as individually oriented technology (Nyshcheta, 2009); *individual educational project* as a means of organization of the students' independent cognitive activity resulting in development, formation, self-identification of a personality in educational activity (Genkal, 2008). *Group project activity* has been defined as specially organized joint activity of the subjects of education in small groups directed at solving a certain problem, the purpose of which is to receive professional knowledge and skills, and which is ended with the implementation of actual subjectively or objectively new practical result (Lovka, 2013); as limited in time complete cycle of activities directed at achievement of the stated purpose, solving a certain problem which is achieved by students jointly in cooperation with each other in project groups (Starkova, 2009).

Different terms are used in the above mentioned sphere. Among them: *professionally oriented project*, a system of communicative exercises and tasks in a foreign language focused on professional interests of graduates in studying a foreign language that includes solving a specific problem and are aimed at the creation of a distinguished final product (Kirshova, 2008); *interactive project*, a way of subject-subject, subject-object interaction involving formation and development of interpersonal communication skills on the basis of coordination of purposeful efforts for preparation of a joint or individual materialized product of verbal activity (Martyniuk 2009); *modular and project methodology of teaching* a foreign language (Titova, 2001) etc.

In the process of the project, methods of actions which students have to master should be relevant to the nature of project activity. The researches include the following: the inclusion in project activity; pre-project analysis; scheme conceptualization; project decisions modeling; heuristic forecasting; development of project documentation; constructing the designed object; expertise and reflection of processes and results of project work as a way of evaluating according to a particular system criteria (Skurychina, 2008) etc.. Obviously, students' mastering the methods of project activity should be systematically organized in accordance to the stages of its realization in the process of a foreign language learning. There is a series of difficulties related to mentioned above which are detailed described in the researches (Mutrofanova, 2011; Lovka, 2013; Fragoulis, 2009).

Educational process is organized means of project activity as a transition from working alone to working in a group. Is there any connection between emotional and psychological group relations and effectiveness of group project activity? It is known that the empirical results presented in various works of both domestic and foreign scientists are vague and even contradictory. On this matter R. Weissman noted that all these data cannot be adequately interpreted without taking into account the content (goals and objectives) of group activity. The scientist proposed to take into consideration the level of group development as the most important variable which mediates group effectiveness and an interpersonal relationship in a group, and also received empirical results, which demonstrated dynamic tendency of changing the nature of interconnection – from negative in insufficiently developed groups to positive in the groups with high level of development (Weissman, 1977). By analogy, it could be assumed that in the project groups with high level of development (collective type) the process of mastering the methods of a project activity will have qualitative differences comparing to the groups with low level of development, where the interpersonal relationships are not mediated by the content of joint project activity, its goals, values and importance.

## Methodology of Research

The purpose of this research is theoretical and methodological substantiation of experimental verification of the efficiency of project activity as a means of formation of the students' language

competence in learning a foreign language (English). The objective of this article is a group project activity, essential characteristics of the project activities, the main approaches to understanding this notion.

The methods of teaching foreign languages combining communicative and cognitive goals are increasingly used. The psychological problems of organization of alternative teaching of the foreign languages are specifically developed (Beliavska, 2013). The issue of use of modern informational and communicational internet-technologies and mobile technologies is becoming more relevant (Sysoiev, Ievstyhnieiev, 2010; Titova, 2013). Moreover, they are seen as those that are based on new approaches to language learning and teaching based on learning autonomy, the development and sound theoretical and practical principles of teaching (ed. Chambers and Davies, 2001). The psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language by means of project activities are being studied. E.S. Polat states about the latter that "the use of method of projects while teaching foreign languages transfers the accents from different exercises on the active cognitive activity of students, which requires possession of certain linguistic resources... creates linguistic environment and on its basis the need in use of a foreign language in practice" (Polat, 2000).

Different possibilities of projecting in various forms and kinds of pedagogical activities and spheres of teaching have been considered in the Ukrainian psychological and pedagogical science. The idea of projecting the educational space as one of the possible means of education management has been asserted (Tkach, 2010). Project education has been considered as a methodological means of new knowledge acquisition (Smulson, 2002). It is said to provide rich language experience that builds on students' natural curiosity, imaginative powers and creative skills (Luongo-Orlando, 2001). A definition of psychological and pedagogical projecting of educational process in secondary schools has been substantiated (Kobernyk, 2000). The use of individual educational projects as a means of students' independent cognitive activity has been researched (Genkal, 2008).

There are not many scientific works in the field of project method use in general education in the sphere of teaching English as a foreign language. It is necessary to mention that project-based learning in the field of second language learning process started about 20 years ago while using the student-centered principle of teaching (Hedge, 1993). Project activity in the sphere of teaching a foreign language has been researched by such Ukrainian and Russian scientists as I. Zymnia, T. Sakharova (1991), Y. Polat (2000), O. Kirshova (2008), V. Martyniuk (2009), I. Stepanova (2002), D. Starkova (2009), V. Titova (2001), L. Uraieva (2014) and others. Different aspects related to the organization of project activities have been studied. General didactic typology of the projects has been proposed (Polat, 2000); the educational interaction of the students during learning English on the basis of the project methodology has been described (Torunova, 1995); the problems of modular and project methodology of teaching English for the students of higher vocational schools have been studied (Titova, 2001); development of professionally oriented projects on the basis of German texts has been described (Kirshova, 2008); project activity as a means of formation of sociocultural competence in the process of studying a foreign language has been researched (Uraieva, 2011); development of managerial skills of the future teacher of a foreign language in a group project activity has been studied (Starkova, 2014) etc.

However, despite the great interest of scientists and practicing teachers to the issue of organization of project activity of the students, it is necessary to describe in psychological literature the possibilities of the use of group dynamics effects for intensification of the project activity of the students in the process of learning foreign languages; formation of the teachers and students' psychological readiness to the use of the method of project. Moreover, considerable number of student participants of the previous researches aimed at revealing the efficacy of the method application did not endorse project-based English as a second language learning, leaving their teachers frustrated and doubtful (Ed. Beckett and Miller, 2006). Thus, the issues of the role of metacognitive character of the environment in which the project activities happen require further research (metacognitive control and monitoring, metacognitive skills etc.). The issue of a group functioning in the project activities as a subject of the group expertise has not been sufficiently researched.

Innovative, searching, scientific and research, creative aspects of a project activity and its realization in terms of joint activity (group aspect) indicates the expediency to conduct a research on a group project activity of students while learning a foreign language using theoretical and

methodological principles of integration a personal-activity (approach, socio-psychological and cognitive paradigms.

Personal-activity aspect of a project activity in a process of learning a foreign language is disclosed through the study of such key questions as: teacher and student interaction which creates a real learning situation, student's needs and interests, change of motivational level, involvement in a particular activity, enjoyment of an activity; psychological characteristics of a teacher and a student as the subjects according to the pedagogical, learning and cognitive activities; psychological peculiarities of a project activity by itself. Working on a project concerns students' interests, change in their motivational level, their involvement in the project and feeling of contentment by doing project activity.

According to socio-psychological paradigm, group aspect of the project activity done by the students means firstly, that the surrounding is projected as such where the group (joint) activity occurs within the smaller groups and secondly, in its activation the effects of group dynamics are being used. It appears directly in acts of interpersonal relationships, empirical referents which are values and orientation unity, active emotional group identification, interpersonal choice motivation, presence or absence of a reference, group cohesion etc.

So far as the project activity has cognitive and research, problem and searching nature, the cognitive paradigm to the analysis of the students' cognitive structures as the subjects of learning is being applied. An approach to understanding the meaning of 'cognitive structure' introduced by I. Arshavina, E. Nosenko, M. Saliuk (2013) is being used. Researches describe this notion in terms of knowledge base, metacognitive skills of building representations of oneself as the subject of cognitive activity.

Therefore, the solution may be offered as such: group project activity is understood as an instructional tool, which can alter the vector of psycho-social development of a student. Hereby, the use of group project activity in the process of learning a foreign language not only forms students' language competency but also develops their personal qualities which are necessarily important in their future professional activity.

## Results and Discussion

Examining the results of a conducted research compared to the results obtained by other authors, the following ideas have been outlined: followed by other authors (Matiash, 2000; Lovka, 2013; Polat, 2000 etc.) an integrative, creative, research, practical oriented character of a project activity which has significant innovative potential for the organization of learning different academic disciplines including foreign languages has been pointed out. Despite the considerable amount of researches on project activity as pedagogical technology of developing problem oriented teaching, it is quite difficult to correlate their empirical results, since the studies concern different age categories, levels of education (junior, high school pupils, students), various subjects and academic disciplines. What is common in considerable data files is their evidence of developing aspect of project activity, successful organization which will help pupils and students see the point of self-determination, self-developing, students' move from learning to self-teaching, from evaluation to self-evaluation, from control to self-control, from management to self-management and co-management, etc. This research accepts promising approaches of domestic and foreign authors who indicate teacher's management function in organization of project activity and also the role of the latter to provide students with the opportunities to act as equal subjects of learning management, starting with settings of goals and finish with the reflexive analysis of the received results (Starkova, 2009; I. Fragoulis, 2009, etc). In the researches, carried out by Starkova, group activity is considered as limited in time, complete, orderly process aimed at achieving planned combined result, taking part in which develops students' management skills. As a part of these skills, researches (Karpov, 2004 and others) rightly assign an important role to reflection. In relation to the group project activity it lies in an interpretation and in reinterpretation (Pasichnyk, 2008) of individual and group participation peculiarities, group dynamics, awareness of attitude and roles by specific subjects, and in mechanisms of individual and professional development et cetera.

However, due to the great importance of intellectual component in a group project activity,

methodological principles formulated by M. Smulson (2002) with regard to projecting intellectually rich environment as such that is of metacognitive character have been referred to. Therefore, the stress is on metacognitive aspects of analysis of a group project activity of students learning a foreign language (it foresees metacognitive monitoring, metacognitive control and self-control of intellectual or group subject of one's own cognitive activity). The need to single out definite aspect is related to the problem with student's transition from a single doer position to taking expert positions and mastering expert knowledge while doing a group project work. The latter has strongly pronounced metacognitive character (Arshava, Nosenko, Saliuk, 2013; Shvalb, 2013). As it can be seen, in the semantic field the concept "expert" is placed closely to the similar terms – professional, master, et al., which have completely opposed concepts, such as beginner, amateur, etc. It may be assumed that the student awareness of their position is closely related to their self-image and self-concept. Particularly important in this context is the relationship between the different representations of the Self (real-self, ideal-self, and appropriate-self), with the help of which the awareness of their experiences and themselves is possible resulting into further life strategies and self-improvement directions.

In this research the analysis of the management potential roles and positions in a group project activity is on focus. Today, the management position and potential of roles connected to accomplishment of manager functions by students and teachers in a group project activity are significantly disclosed, (Starkova, 2009; Matiash, 2000; Beckett, 2002; Fragoulis, 2009), yet the characteristic of expert position in a project activity needs to be specified. In particular, this is related to understanding of the meaning of expertise as a way of evaluating the results of project activity and its correlation with control and self-control processes, peculiarities of expert knowledge as a model for the formation of cognitive structures of the subjects of project activity etc.

Unlike the traditional approach to the vision of the role of a project group as one of the conditions for the effective project activity mainly due to the group cohesion and positive psychological atmosphere (Lovka, 2013 and others), the level of group development as an important variable which mediates the effectiveness of group project activity and an interpersonal relationship in a group has been suggested to examine according to the researches (Weissman, 1977; Petrovskiy, 1977) together with examining students' project group as *group subject expertise* (Shvalb, 2013). In the latter aspect the focus is on the importance of orientation on knowledge sharing.

Based on the results of the theoretical analysis, the further research is needed to substantiate the model of organization of group project activity of students, to define the structure and contents of psychological readiness to its implementation and to propose the methodology of empirical research of the effectiveness of a foreign language competence in the process of group project activity and the peculiarities of the latter in the sphere of English language learning.

## Conclusions

Group project activity provides significant potential for the formation of foreign language communicative competence and students' development in such directions as personal, socio-psychological, intellectual, professional and the ability to self-learning.

In this research, a group project activity is determined as specially organized joint activity of students, aimed at solving particular problem and achieving set goals which finish with new practical result during which students master methods of project work and self-develop on the base of external and internal control-evaluation mechanisms. Control functions provide operational-procedural part of the actions, and the assessment – their result based on correlation between an obtained real object with the target image. Moreover, expert assessment is one of the possible forms of evaluation, adequate for basic nature of a project activity.

This research defines organization of group project activity as interaction of external (psychological peculiarities of English language as academic discipline; status of language at the same time as a means and object of learning; managing group project activity by teacher and so on) and internal factors (individual and psychological characteristics of students, socio-psychological characteristics of a project group). The effectiveness of managing group project activity is determined by the level of psychological readiness of teacher and student to complete a project work, which is defined in

this article as a system of motives, knowledge, skills, practice experience, ways of project actions, personal characteristics which provide successful interaction of its subjects.

Taking into account the results of theoretical analysis of research project and theoretical and methodological principles of the pedagogical innovation expertise, it is considered that the organization of the project during foreign language study should be focused on promoting students from the position of a simple doer to a manager and an expert, and on mastering the system management skills (being transformed into self-government skills because of the project activity) and the features of expert knowledge. The nature of the teacher subjectivity in the project is marked by the change of the taken position into organizationally managed and expert one.

Overcoming the problematic aspects of students group project activity which can appear on each of the stages of GPA, is related to the teacher's consistent embodiment of methodological principles to its organization, which are united on the basis of personal-active, socio-psychological and cognitive paradigms.

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Received: February 06, 2015

Accepted: April 28, 2016