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Using Blended Learning Technology in Foreign Language Communicative Competence Forming of Future International Relations Specialists

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Abstract: The successful development and strengthening of Ukraine's international and intercultural relations with other states leading to the global expansion of social and economic integration requires future International Relations specialists to communicate professionally in foreign language. In this context, there is a need to take new approach to foreign language teaching in institutions of higher education. The present study proves that one of the most promising directions in education development in the modern world is blended learning as it combines the strengths of traditional educational methods and benefits of online learning technologies. The article states that e-learning course is a major means of blended learning implementation in the process of foreign language communicative competence training for future International Relations specialists. The e-learning course structure for students of the first year in specialty 055 «International relations, public communications and regional studios» based on the MOODLE 3 platform has been described. The results of the experiment at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine demonstrate that using the MOODLE platform forms and improves the future International Relations specialists' foreign language communicative competence and ensures the main educational process requirements (openness, accessibility, interactivity, and instrumentality) have positive effects for both teachers and students.

Keywords: *blended learning technology; foreign language communicative competence; e-learning course; International Relation students; English as a second language.*

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of information technologies and globalization causes a change in the modern educational paradigm. Unlike the beginning of the century, when researchers clearly separated learning via information and communication technologies (distance, electronic) and traditional (classroom model learning), today there is no such differentiation. Leading institutions of higher education are implementing innovative technologies; therefore, more and more experts are talking about the expediency of blending theories, approaches and teaching methods.

In practice, blended learning as a tool for modernizing modern education requires new pedagogical techniques in order to transfer knowledge by means of e-learning technology (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010).

Blended learning technology is becoming more and more popular and effective in learning foreign language, since it provides the opportunity to apply a specific teacher – student learning platform, the possibility of ongoing cooperation between a student and groupmates and a teacher, as well as the student's responsibility for learning outcomes. Despite this popularity, there are still no practical steps in the professional world on how to implement this technology in the foreign language communicative competence forming of International Relations students. There is a lack of empirical research.

2. Literature Review

The concept of foreign language communicative competence in pedagogy and methodology for foreign languages study is not new and has been studied both by foreign and national scholars (L. Birkun, L. Brakhman, S. Brumfit, O. Volobuieva, R. Johnson, H. Kytaihorodska, S. Kozak, S. Melnyk, I. Nechaiuk, E. Passov, S. Savinon, M. Swain, D. Hyems, D. Sheels, T. Plachynda, L. Herasymenko, G. Pukhalska, K. Kryzhevska, etc.). I. Nechaiuk (2016) states that foreign language communicative competence is the synthesis of the language competences spectrum (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discursive) which makes it possible to solve professional issues while communicating internationally.

The contemporary scholars' concern in the issues of communicative competence, intercultural competence, and foreign language communicative competence emphasizes the relevance of the current study, which is determined by the growing requirements for the International Relations students' professional training. Foreign language fluency as well as foreign

language communicative competence forming is the guarantee of professional success (Kachmarchyk, 2018). It is evident that foreign language communicative competence of future diplomats requires ongoing study and improvement. We propose to develop and apply the e-learning course for International Relations students using the blended learning model. Thus, we have studies national and foreign researchers' works on blended learning in institutions of higher education. Currently, there are many approaches to define the blended learning concept. Most of these approaches are descriptive since this concept covers many components.

In contemporary scientific environment, the traditional definition of blended learning belongs to the foreign scholars M. Horn and H. Stacker (2015). Researchers interpret this form of learning as any formal educational program that is partially implemented in an educational institution, partly beyond its boundaries. "It enables students to determine time, place, path or pace of learning material, provides the teacher with support for an individual educational facility, and lists achievements of each student identified by the program" (Horn, & Staker, 2015, p. 4).

The Director of Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Education Innovation points out a lot of common features between the art of Kung Fu and blended learning. Some examples of this similarity are: blended learning is based on learning skills and gaining knowledge, and Kung Fu uses obtaining new belt levels and learning new physical skills. Blended learning also uses compulsory language warm-ups, while Kung Fu uses physical workouts and warm ups within the confines of the practice. Both forms also include the important role of the teacher or coach who directs the students. He or she not only helps master the knowledge, but also is a mentor or tutor for students. In addition, students are encouraged to work on the same team in both practices. The result in both blended learning and Kung Fu is that the students learn to interact in a group. The consequence of all these components in complex is a successful formation of linguistic competence (Horn, 2013).

However, "it was blended learning (b-learning) that gained the most popularity: combining face-to-face instruction with online sessions has proved to have a stronger impact on individuals' performance and motivation, than e-learning alone" (Bersin, 2004, p. 43).

Arbaugh, Dessai, Rau and Sridhar (2010) offer the following definition for blended learning: it combines on-line learning with traditional classroom activities in an intended pedagogical-value manner; where from 20 % to 70 % of the content is delivered to the student through the Internet.

In terms of the present study, blended learning constitutes a training modality that involves different pedagogical methods and techniques, through a combination of classroom and online sessions aimed at achieving the best learning outcomes (Graham, 2006; Rosenberg, 2001).

The analysis of recent research on students' foreign language communicative skills formation shows that e-learning course development and application in higher education by means of blended learning has not been adequately covered in the scientific and methodological literature. Our study is aimed at filling this gap and making contributions towards investigating the impact of e-course and blended learning technology on students' foreign language communicative competence at the university level as a whole.

The purpose of the article is to establish the necessity of using blended learning technology in foreign language communicative competence forming for future International Relations specialists and demonstrate the efficacy of applying the e-learn course on MOODLE 3 platform at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine.

3. Methodology

To achieve this goal a set of research methods has been used, including: 1) theoretical analysis of national and foreign researchers' works. This is used to study and determine the essence of key concepts such as, comparative analysis, synthesis, comparison and generalization, for comparison of different scientists' views on issues of professional oriented foreign language communicative competence. 2) empirical questioning, testing and pedagogical experimenting. This method is used to determine the current state of foreign language communicative skills formation of future specialists in International Relations, and to verify the effectiveness of the e-learning course introduced in the educational process. 3) methods of mathematical statistics. This uses statistical data processing; graph-analytical methods for displaying information (diagrams) and for processing pedagogical experiment data and visual demonstration of experimental results. The pedagogical experiment has been conducted with the first-year students majored in «International relations, public communications and regional studios» of the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine. The total number of students involved in the pedagogical experiment is 98.

4. Results and Discussion

The International relations, public communications and regional studios specialty is acquainting students with the complex world of politics outside the Ukraine. It also provides necessary tools for its understanding and analysis, which is strategically important in the context of the growing nations – international organizations interdependence. Therefore, the International Relations specialists training is a response to a remarkable request for highly skilled professionals from public and business entities (Kryvonos, & Korotun, 2015). Currently, more than 89 educational institutions in Ukraine carry out training mostly in «International relations, public communications and regional studios», «International economic relations», «International law», including the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine.

Borrowing the advanced foreign countries' experience, to optimize the learning process in the Ukraine, transforms traditional teaching methods and implements information and communication technologies in the context of International Relations' experts training. The National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine pays considerable attention to foreign languages, the formation of International Relations students' foreign language communicative competence, by means of blended learning technology.

The mission of the NULES of Ukraine is to train qualified specialists in International Relations who will have skills of professional and personal communication in native and foreign languages. Nowadays, future experts' proficiency in foreign language is considered an attribute of intellectual development that a person with higher education possesses. Indeed, a specialist in International Relations should be professional and constructive while adhering to the norms of cultural and business ethics when in dialogue with foreign business partners.

The blended learning educational concept, as the most popular learning trends, is based on the optimal, flexible combination of traditional and innovative learning opportunities, the ability to combine classroom training with online training and self-study. "The blended learning purpose is to form students' self-planning skills and organize their educational activities with the focus on the final outcome" (Kryvonos, & Korotun, 2015, p. 18).

Therefore, the use of digital and multimedia information and communication technologies as the main elements of blended learning, contributes to broadening the students' outlook, deepening their knowledge,

developing speech, critical thinking, learning effectiveness and provides innovation, mobility and interactivity (Plachynda, Herasymenko, Pukhalska, & Kryzhevska, 2019). Among the blended learning benefits we have distinguished the following:

- accessibility, flexibility, convenience, effective use of time;
- increasing the educational efficiency and students' personal motivation, autonomy, social activity;
- the possibility to vary the learning componential elements;
- combining different training activities, the use of two or more different teaching methods, interactivity;
- use of various techniques and approaches;
- applying the teachers' control and students' self-control concepts;
- efficient feedback;
- improving the teacher – student communication and interaction quality;
- students' self-organizing in terms of planning their own educational activities, aimed at the outcome, identifying their own educational abilities, needs, interests, individualization of the learning process. Having interviewed International Relations students on the feasibility of using blended learning in the learning process, over 60 % of students have noticed that the blended learning environment was more effective than traditional one.

In order to determine the current state of students' foreign language communicative culture, a pre-experimental stage (2017 – 2018) was conducted at the National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine (Kyiv). During the preliminary stage of the experiment, we have analysed the normative documentation; curricula and programs for students of specialty 055 «International relations, public communications and regional studios», content of lectures, practical and laboratory classes themes. In accordance with the curriculum for Bachelor's degree in International relations, public communications and regional studios, students do some compulsory disciplines such as «Foreign Language for Specific Purposes (English)» during 3 – 4 years of study with a total volume of 420 hours (14 ECTS credits), «Second Foreign Language» – 210 hours (7 ECTS credits) per year, «Practical Course of Vocational Translation» during 3 – 4 years of study with the total volume of 540 hours (18 ECTS credits) as well as optional university discipline «Foreign Language (English)» during 1 – 2 years of study totalling 570 hours (19 ECTS credits). The course of «Foreign Language» allows to deal with professional authentic literature, namely; to

understand the content; to be able to obtain necessary information; to translate or refer the necessary material; to have the skills of dialogic and coherent monologue speech; to understand dialogic and monologue speech within a certain specialization. Future International Relations specialists must also have skills in both oral and written translation from foreign language to their native language and vice versa; know the basics of business documentation in foreign language; conduct business correspondence, negotiations; have basic skills in bilateral translation; know the specifics cultural specifies; use dictionaries and reference material during the translation; be able to summarize and accurately express thoughts in native and foreign languages; have a recording technique for more accurate translation; to know computer equipment at the user level; be able to use electronic translators and dictionaries, and be able to use the means of modern information technology for communicating and transmitting information.

Questioning and testing of students' and teachers' vision of the given problem has been conducted. A questionnaire has been developed to identify the lecturers' readiness for innovation and determine the professional oriented foreign language communicative competence position among future International Relations experts in institutions of higher education.

The questionnaire has revealed traditional teaching methods; some of the answers were categorical in terms of changing the outdated teaching methods to more modern and innovative. This is especially true for teachers with a great experience of conservative teaching, who have internal contradictions preventing the creation of a new phenomenon, such as: "I am disturbed by doubts, whether I can be successful in innovation and experimental work", "I have no confidence that the "new" will be better than the "old". Only 40 % of the respondents said that they use innovative methods of professional training, technologies, pedagogical techniques, and technical means for stimulating intellectual abilities and creative potential of students in their classes. In addition, even teachers who showed interest and desire to learn interactive learning methods admitted that the learning of these methods requires extraordinary efforts and time.

We have developed a questionnaire to identify the significance of foreign language learning for students in institution of higher education.

80 % of respondents said that studying foreign language at the university is very necessary, 15 % believe that it is not necessary, and 5 % could not answer this question by choosing the answer "Difficult to answer".

To the question "In what areas do you need the knowledge of foreign language today?" 61 % of respondents answered that in foreign language classes, for communication, for traveling abroad, 25 % – for self-development, for work on the Internet, for listening to music, 14 % – for job search, when working with equipment, for reading foreign literature. The opinions of respondents were different.

We asked students to assess objectively their level of foreign language and we got the following results: 20 % of students believe that they know language at a high level, 59 % speak the language at an average level, and 21 % confessed that they do not know language at all.

Analyzing the responses of students, we came to the conclusion that they are motivated to learn foreign language intensively, because they understand clearly that it is necessary for employment and it will be useful in further professional practices. 15 % of the respondents said that they have a great desire to know foreign language for personal growth, 10 % plan to continue their studies abroad, 20 % study language because they want to have an unlimited access to information and want to climb up a career ladder successfully, 12 % have a dream to travel abroad without having language barriers. The rest of the students mention relatives and friends who live abroad and they have a desire to communicate with them freely, and in the future they want to help their children to learn foreign language. However, only 25 % of the respondents said that they use linguistic dictionaries and reference books in the educational process, while 40 % use authentic information from the Internet during training, which is not an optimistic fact.

Thus, the first stage of the experiment has shown the problem of foreign language communicative competence forming is relevant nowadays. Successful training of future skillful specialists in International Relations is possible only in an appropriate communication environment in institutions of higher education.

The results of the questioning and testing gave us confidence in the correct way of solving the problem of training International Relations experts – the need for blended learning implementation in the process of foreign language communicative competence formation.

In order to provide objective and reliable information we have formed an experimental and control groups. The total number of students was 98 persons: in the experimental group – 48 persons, in the control group – 40 persons. It should be noted that the greater reliability of the results of the study ensures the relative homogeneity of students in groups by quantitative and qualitative indicators. Thus, when forming groups, two

indicators were taken into account, namely: the average score for students' progress for the first semester of study and their gender. Before the experimental study started and in order to determine students' professional skills and abilities in the English language we have conducted a comprehensive testing, which contained four parts, each of which corresponded to a certain type of activity – reading, writing, listening and speaking. According to the obtained results, four levels of foreign language mastering were defined: creative – 65 – 70 points, high – 54 – 64 points, average 43 – 53 points, low – below 42 points. Students from two groups have revealed relatively similar results. The pre-test on English showed the foreign language communicative competence formation among first-year students of the specialty "International relations, social communications and regional studios" in experimental and control groups was mostly on the medium and low levels.

For the experiment implementation, all participants of the educational process have been under the same learning conditions. In the control group, the training and extracurricular activities took place according to the traditional scheme.

The purpose of the experiment was the development of foreign language communicative competence of International Relations students in accordance with the principles of foreign language education based on intensive and modern innovative techniques, in particular, blended learning, which has been actively used in the learning process in Western Europe and the USA for almost 20 years. The development and actualization of practical knowledge and skills occurred via a variety of activities by means of correct combination of fundamental linguistic, socio-cultural, and communicative methods of teaching foreign languages. Thus, to implement the foreign language training, we have developed a series of trainings on foreign language business communication, as well as e-learning course-resource named English for International Relations (Part II) certified on the Moodle 3 online learning platform for students of the first year of study (2 semester) and tested by 98 students.

The trainings were aimed at familiarizing students with the following topics: "Stereotypes and generalization", "Situations in business life", "Phone calls", "Development of a practical vocabulary", "Promote from intercultural competence", "Business communication skills", "Small talk", "Cultural dimensions", "Non-verbal communication across cultures", "Culture shock", "Cross-cultural conflicts in business", "Strategies for managing professional cross-cultural communication", etc (Kachmarchyk, 2016). The theoretical aspects of training for professional foreign language

communication and the tasks on the above-mentioned topics are aimed at developing the motivational-reflexive, cognitive, and communicative areas of future specialists in International Relations. Aims and tasks of the trainings:

- to increase students' motivation in forming professional foreign language competence;
- to create the background for the students' foreign language competence, personal qualities necessary for effective foreign language communication in professional activities such as empathy, tolerance, reflection, etc.;
- to form a systematic understanding of the essence of intercultural communication process.

The e-learning course-resource is designed for 120 hours of classroom training and 30 hours of independent work and corresponds to 5 ECTS credits (Khrystiuk, 2019). General information is summarised in Course Annotation (Fig. 1).

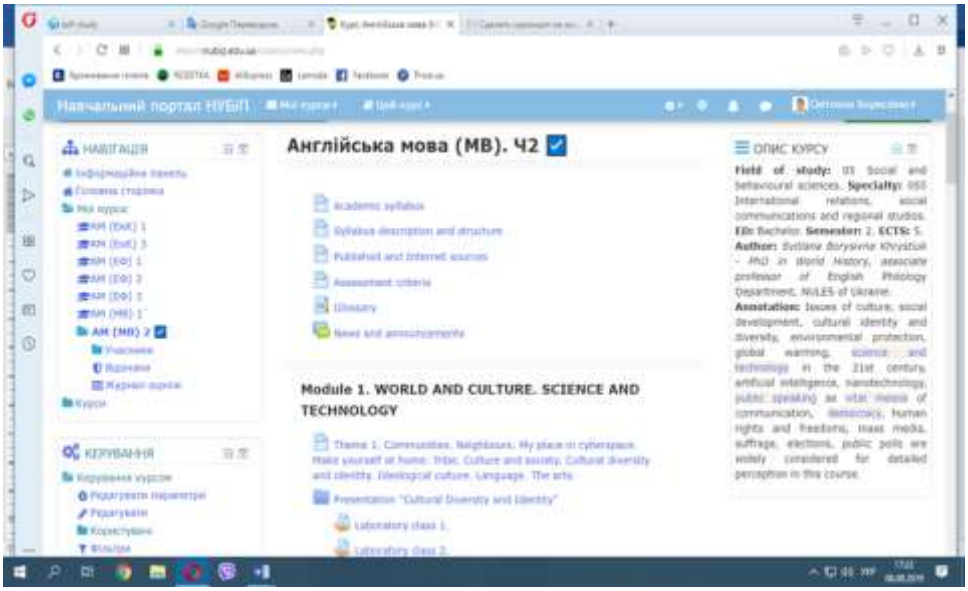


Fig. 1. E-learning course annotation

The discipline teaching material has been considered structurally, consistently, and logically. During the semester it has been traced: 1) the teacher – student interactive system and interaction among students; 2) control system for all types of learning activities; 3) assessment of the

practical material mastering; 4) an opportunity to assess the students' retained knowledge at any time in the context of Rector's or Dean's knowledge control. All core components of the e-learning course are available online. This creates a positive atmosphere of confidence and trust and stimulates students' learning motivation.

Course materials take into account training needs and features of the current audience – International Relations students. Materials are well structured, interactive, promote the communication skills development in the remote mode, stimulate the students' motivation and initiatives, and focused on achieving learning goals. Materials are grouped by themes and divided into three blocks such as informational, contextual, and final attestation.

I. Informational block

1) academic syllabus;

2) syllabus description and structure;

3) a list of published and Internet sources;

4) assessment criteria in accordance with the Bologna modular rating system;

5) categorized glossary;

6) news and announcements.

II. Contextual block

1) module name;

2) training theme name, theoretical training material;

3) educational video on training subject, multimedia PowerPoint presentation of lecture;

4) tasks and methodical recommendations to implement laboratory class;

5) tasks and self-study;

6) modular control questions;

7) educational (trial) modular test;

8) modular test.

III. Final attestation

1) final control questions;

2) educational (trial) final test;

3) final test.

E-learning English course for International Relations (Part II) consists of 2 modules: module 1 «World and Culture. Science and Technology», module 2 «New Things. Public Speaking. Democracy. Public Relations». Module 1 includes three training themes: Theme 1 – Communities. Neighbours. My place in cyberspace. Make yourself at home.

Tribe. Culture and society. Cultural diversity and identity. Ideological culture. Language. The arts; Theme 2 – History and world. Giant leaps. In our time. I have no idea! Michelangelo. Ethnical man. World food. When you travel. The great melt; Theme 3 – Environmental issues (Environmental pollution, Global warming, Disaster), Science and technology. Technology: 21th century. Artificial intelligence. Internet. Genetic engineering. Nuclear power. Nanotechnology; 29 laboratory classes and 2 self-studies. Module 2 covers the study of four training themes: Theme 4 – New things. Time for a chat. Try something new. I'd like to enquire. Great experiences. Issues. Making a difference. You're being watched. Good point. A quiet revolution. Stories. And the moral is ... A life in six words. It's a great read. Tess; Theme 5 – Public speaking as a vital means of communication. The power of public speaking. Public speaking and you. Communication. Communication is a process. How to be an effective communicator. Public speaking; Theme 6 – Downtime. Out of time. Great getaways. How does it work? The happiness formula. Ideas. Bright ideas? Consumer crazy. What do you think? Genius; Theme 7 – Democracy. Human rights. Freedom of speech. The mass media. Suffrage. Election. Public relations; 29 laboratory classes and 2 self-studies. Each laboratory class has a unified structure: the goal is clearly formulated, methodical recommendations are given, the course of study and the submission form of the work performed, the assessment criteria and the implementation deadline are determined (presented in Fig. 2).

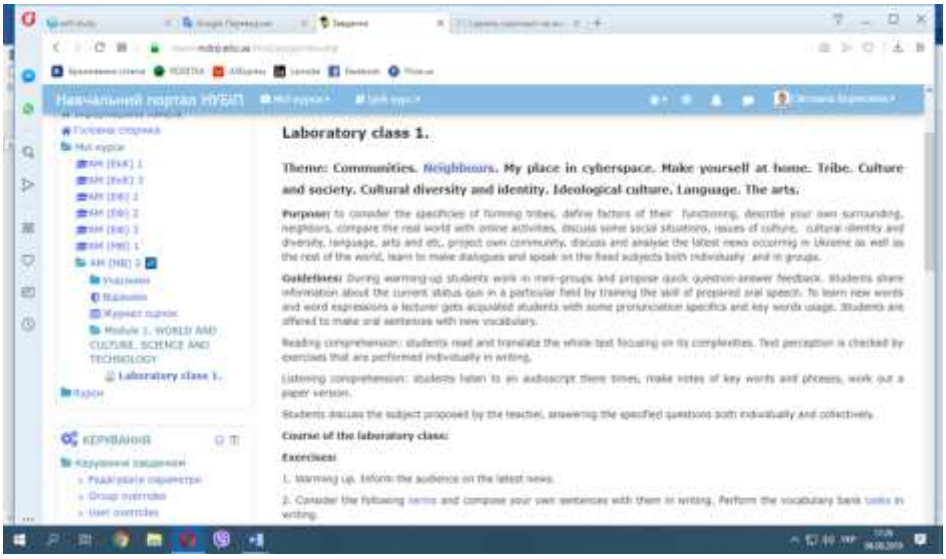


Fig. 2. Pattern of the laboratory class 1

The assessment provides a systematic way to measure students' progress and can help to determine the overall score. Each module is estimated at 100 points. For successful completion of laboratory tasks any student can get 58 points (each laboratory class is estimated at 2 points), tasks for self-study – 12 points (each self-study – 6 points) and modular control – 30 points. Assessment table is presented in Fig. 3.

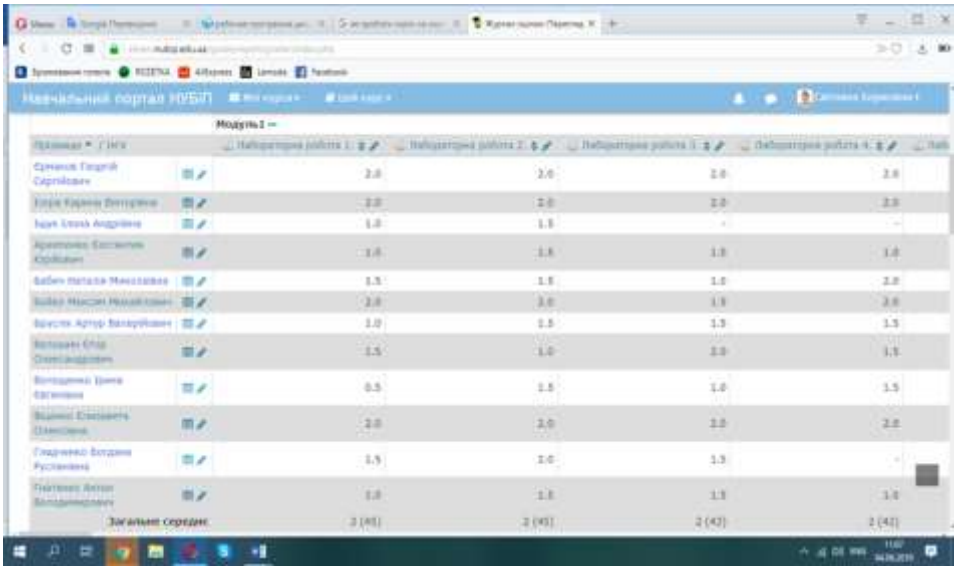


Fig. 3. Students' academic achievement assessment table

At the end of semester two groups had the same Complex Test in English as they had before the experiment. In order to determine the dynamics of International Relations students' foreign language communicative competence forming during the study, the data of pre-experiment and post-experimental stages have been analysed (summarised in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 below).

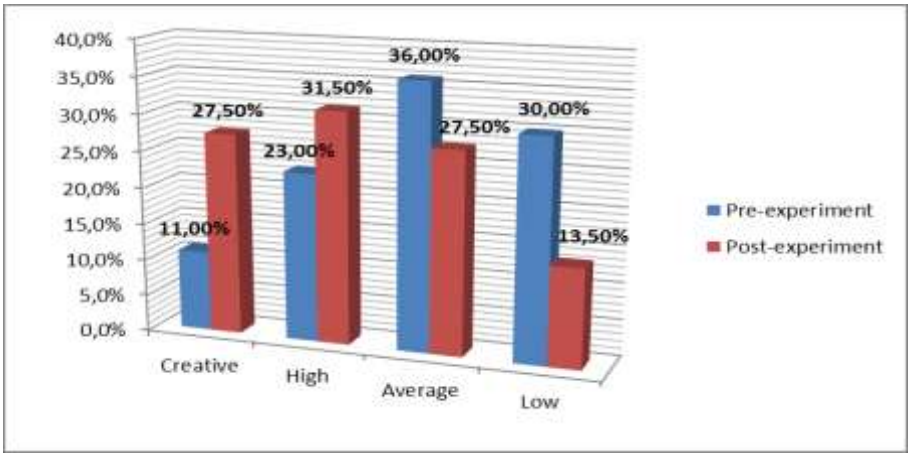


Fig. 4. Outcomes of the complex English test in experimental group in pre- and post- experimental stages

Thus, the chart has shown that the percentage of experimental group students of specialty «International relations, social communications and regional studios», who has the creative level of foreign language communicative competence formation has increased by 16.5 %, the high level – by 8.5 %, the average level has decreased by 8.5 %, the low level – by 16.5 %.

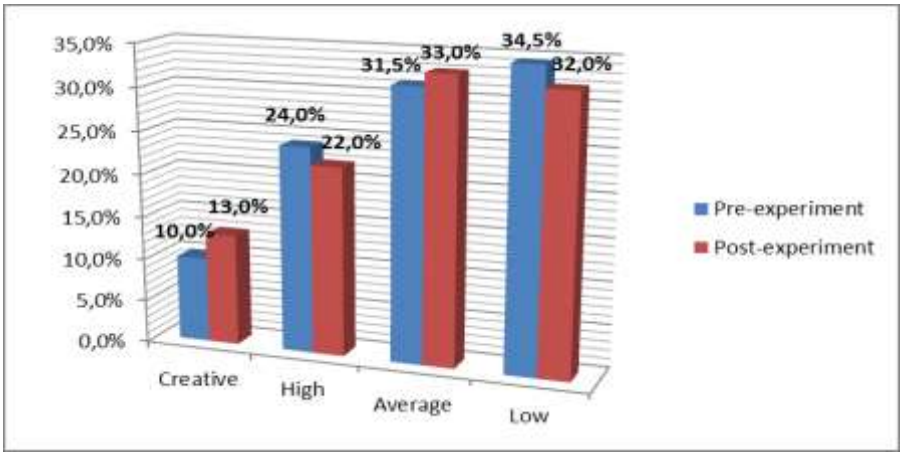


Fig. 5. Outcomes of the complex English test in control group in pre- and post- experimental stages

The diagram of the levels of foreign language communicative competence formation of future specialists in International Relations in the control group after the pedagogical experiment has showed that the percentage of students who have the creative level of foreign language communicative competence has increased by 3 %, the average level – by 1.5 %, the high level has decreased by 2 %, and the low level – by 2.5 %.

The control stage data have shown significant positive changes in the experimental group and minor changes in the control group.

Our experimental study has confirmed the scientific hypothesis about the expediency of foreign language communicative competence formation in institution of higher education by means of blended learning technology. Consequently, the purpose of the study has been achieved; confirmed hypothesis and performed tasks make it possible to formulate general conclusions.

5. Conclusions

Numerous studies on blended learning technology reviewed in this paper make it clear that blended learning application is more effective than using traditional forms of studying and claim that blended learning implementation can improve students' activity, increase motivation, and promote self-study. The problem of forming foreign language communicative competence of future specialists in International Relations is complex and multifaceted; therefore, the study does not exhaust all aspects of this process. Prospects for further scientific researches are advisable to direct teachers of institutions of higher education to the use of educational dialogue, to improve the methodical tools of pedagogical diagnostics of communicative culture, to study thoroughly the issue of improving the foreign language communicative competence of future specialists in International Relations in self-study as well as personal development.

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