Academic foreign-language communication environment in school textbooks

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Abstract

The active acquisition of foreign language communication in different types of activities in accordance with the spheres, topics, and language input outlined by the current curriculum. Its implementation in the content of school foreign languages textbooks allows improving the academic process and directing it to competency-based principles. The authors interpret this category at the level of complex and interrelating activities of two subjects of the academic process: a learner and a teacher. It is defined as a kind of academic space, which provides holistic acquisition of the academic content, allows learners to show their abilities, motivates their foreign language activities, enables them to learn the native speakers' culture, promotes their education, development, and upbringing. According to the results of the study, the authors create a model of the academic foreign-language communication environment and propose to implement it in the content of school foreign languages textbooks.

The results of conducted quantitative research prove that the academic foreign language communication environment created by the secondary school textbook content enhances the learners' progress motivates academic activities, allows the teacher to successfully implement the prognostic tasks, and shows his own professional experience.

Keywords: academic foreign-language communication environment; competence-based learning and teaching foreign languages.

1. Introduction

This paper includes the following parts:

1. Introduction: 1.1. Literature review;

2. Article structure: 2.1 Competence-based paradigm; 2.2. Research questions; 2.3. Academic foreign-language environment.

3 Method: 3.1. Participants; 3.2. Instrument; 3.3. Data collection and analysis.

4. Results;

5. Discussion;

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6. Conclusion.

The content of foreign languages teaching, upgraded in the last decade, is associated with some changes in the strategic directions of national institutions of general secondary education development — the orientation of academic activities to develop life competencies, which in the future would enable school graduates to successfully adapt to the modern multinational and polycultural space and feel comfortable in it. Accordingly, the new generation's curricula perform the tendency to competence-based teaching foreign language communication. Its content involves the fulfillment of academic actions by students related to the formation of key and subject competencies, which are manifested in their readiness to practically apply the acquired knowledge, the forming capabilities, and skills, the methods of work for the fulfillment of cognitive and communicative tasks (Martynova, 2004).

This problem is raised in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which clearly states the importance of constructing the academic content on the grounds of competence-based teaching. This direction has become a priority in some declarations and recommendations of the Council of Europe and, consequently, state educational documents of European countries.

1.1. Literature Review

The basis of competence-based teaching is explored in scientific publications of V. Red'ko (Red'ko, 2017) who focused on the learners' readiness to competency-based education. T. Polonska studied the didactic essence of competence-based learning in elementary school (Polonska, 2017). Competence-based teaching and its methodological grounds are explored by H. D. Brown (Brown, 2006), the peculiarities of education in the 21st century and the role of communicative competence are studied by J. Richards (Richards, 2005), S. Savignon (Savignon, 2001). K. Ananiadou, K. and M. Claro investigate the ways of competence development of new millennium learners in OECD countries (Ananiadou, Claro, 2009). J. K Gilbert and R. Justi research modeling-based teaching (Gilbert, Justi, 2016). A lot of scientific contributions are made in the field of foreign language textbook construction (Çakır, 2006). J. Aski, works out a new system of tasks for language practice at early stages in foreign language textbooks (Aski, 2005). P. Lyon investigates the issues connected with the selection of the academic material for textbooks (Lyon, 2003) and the presence of cultural aspect becomes in the center of K. M. Yuen's scientific attention (Yuen, 2011). M. Koutselini, explores the role of textbooks in teacher's professional activity (Koutselini, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to define and interpret the didactic essence of the academic foreign-language communication environment as the means of organizing competence-based teaching foreign languages in institutions of general secondary education and the peculiarities of its implementation in the content of school textbooks.

Hence, the context of conducted research requires the following overarching question: Will the competence-based content of foreign language textbooks for secondary schools enhance the didactically effective organization of the academic process and improve learners' language proficiency?

Bearing this in mind, we intend to investigate the main features of competence-based teaching and its realization in the context of secondary school foreign language textbooks by modeling the academic foreign-language communication environment. Accordingly, we plan to explore the component structure of the academic foreign-language communication environment and the peculiarities of its implementation into the learning process. Aside from this as a basic aim of the current study, we attempt to contribute to research on learners' foreign language proficiency, evaluate learners' and

teachers' attitudes to the secondary school foreign language textbooks content and suggest recommendations on the effective ways of organizing the academic process ensuring the massive improvement of learners foreign language proficiency.

2. Article Structure

2.1. Competence-based paradigm

The main directions of the content development of teaching foreign languages in secondary schools in accordance with the competence-based paradigm are defined the following:

a) didactic rethinking of the essence of academic input in terms of its feasibility, accessibility, compliance with foreign language communication needs of a certain learners' age category, optimality to ensure their communicative intentions;

b) determination of significance for learners, according to their potential capabilities, connections of the acquired language input with life practice, which is associated with the level of its pragmatism — spheres of use in real conditions of foreign-language communication;

c) ensuring effective and balanced activation of foreign language input in different types of communication through the motivated academic activities and the use of an optimal system of exercises and tasks as well as didactically efficient additional input;

d) promoting conscious and motivated acquiring of methods of work with academic foreign-language input within a certain range of concepts, phenomena, processes, objects, facts, in particular communication topics, linguistic and communicative content, gaining experience independently performing communication actions (Zimnyaya, 2004).

Competence-based teaching foreign languages in a secondary school are advisable to consider as the ability of learners according to age and potential abilities to consciously perform academic actions that ensure acquiring foreign-language communication in oral and written forms within the topics, situations and with the help of language tools outlined by the curriculum. Simultaneously, a competent personality should be able to demonstrate relevance to the curriculum ability to effectively use information in a foreign language outlined by its communicative needs and presented by the social environment, evaluate it and select the one that life practice needs, influence it, adapting its quantitative and qualitative characteristics to own foreign language communicative intentions (Red'ko, 2018).

The textbook as the main means of learning, in which the academic process is modeled, plays a vital role in this process. One of the conditions for ensuring the successful performance of the textbook functions can be a deliberately created academic environment, which by the basic parameters can have a positive impact on the academic results (Weninger, Kiss, 2013).

Thus, the concept of "competency-based content of the school foreign language textbook" is a kind of complex formation with didactically expediently selected structural components. Language and communication input is rationally methodically organized and thematically predetermined for conscious acquisition by learners in different types and forms of academic activities. Exercises and tasks aim to master foreign language communication in oral and written forms using new and previously gained knowledge. Texts for reading contain new linguistic topical information, which is planned to improve foreign language communication, and non-textual input, art illustrations, verbal samples/models as a relevant basis of activities, instructions. This input is directed to the formation of key and subject with its structural components competencies as strategic skills to communicate in a foreign language and observe appropriate communicative behavior in various situations of interaction, where tasks performed situationally imitate real life.

Considerable attention in the competence-based content of the textbook is paid to the problem of gaining foreign language communication experience in various social spheres of life (socio-domestic, cultural, academic) by learners, the main functions of which are consistent with the content of key competencies, which should be mastered by learners (Rychen, Salganik, 2003).

2.2. Research Questions

Thus, the present study offers the following hypothesis:

A competency-based academic foreign language communication environment created by the means of foreign language textbooks may yield an effective academic process in a secondary school. In order to (dis-)prove the foregoing hypothesis; the following research question needs to be posed: How to create a methodologically useful competence-based academic foreign-language communication environment for effective organization of the academic process? An answer to this general question entails posing two sub-questions related to the research data under analysis:

1) What is a competency-based academic foreign-language communication environment and what is its didactic value?

2) Will the constructed competence-based content of secondary school foreign language textbooks improve learners' language proficiency?

2.3. Academic foreign-language communication environment

We regard the academic foreign-language communication environment as a balanced set of methods, forms, and teaching tools, which promote learner's active acquisition of communication in accordance with spheres, themes, and language input determined by academic curriculum. This is a complex formation based on the interaction between two subjects of the academic process – a teacher and students whose activities are directed to fulfill the learning goals using didactically expedient tools. It can be interpreted as a kind of academic space that provides holistic acquisition of the academic content by learners, allows them to show and develop their abilities, enables them to learn the culture of the people where the language is spoken, as well as to share their own culture with others, promotes education and upbringing, activates cognitive interests, provides opportunities for self-improvement. Whereas the academic foreign language communication environment allows the teacher to implement the prognostic tasks, provides opportunities to show his professional experience that contribute to reaching the goals, stimulates active interaction, taking into account learners' potential abilities and acquired learning experience.

The content of the academic foreign-language communication environment is characterized by invariable and variable components. The non-variable components are the subjects of the academic process, the content of their activities, principles of the study, didactically expediently selected, and methodically rationally organized input. Variable components are the types, amount of exercises and tasks that make the academic content, which often depends on its conditions and goals, objects of activation and evaluating, the mechanisms of mastering the academic input, time limits for practice planned to acquire the new portion of language, communication techniques and certain types of communicative activities. It is worth noting that parallel and interrelated teaching speaking, listening, reading, writing does not mean pointing equally prolonged stages in time that aim to master each of them. The teacher has the right to solve this problem regarding the situational needs and available conditions of study (Richards, 2005).

The significant feature of the academic foreign-language communication environment promotes the modeling of communicatively directed learners' actions suggested by the textbook. Meanwhile, the

results of such activities depend on the academic content that optimally takes into account didactic, methodological, and psychological factors specific for a certain stage. This is primarily the psychological readiness of learners for the planned academic activities, motivational level, potential abilities, experience, the general proficiency level, appropriate methods, forms and means of study, expected results (Red'ko, 2017). Apparently, the variable components of the academic environment for each grade may differ in certain indicators, including the amount and types of exercises, objects of control, the volume of academic input. All these features should find a clear imprint in the textbook content.

Thereby, the content of a competency-based textbook is advisable to construct in accordance with the framework principle (Brown, 2006): it should contain the most typical language, speech, and thematic input, which can serve as an indicative basis for the academic activity of a teacher and students and, if necessary, be changed in quantitative and qualitative indicators depending on the conditions of the study. Thus, the textbook should be flexible and allow the teacher to guide the learning, vary its individual components. In addition, it also provides the possibility of modeling the content of its separate components in accordance with the lesson goals (Ellis, 2010).

Primarily it concerns exercises and tasks. Formation of foreign-language communication mechanisms is important to carry out situationally within those time limits and regarding academic activities performed by students at some stage of the lesson. If the task aims to form language skills, the relevant exercises will dominate. According to the acquired foreign language experience, there will be a tendency to diversify creative communicative tasks to intensify students' participation in order to master a certain type of communicative activity. In addition, the teacher has the opportunity to involve additional, situationally appropriate types of exercises and tasks and vary their amount according to the learners' outcome. The textbook should create conditions for the teacher to adhere to established didactic and methodical principles during the selection of the following tools. They are accessibility, succession, communicative and situational expediency.

Hence the process of modeling the academic content of a textbook requires considering various factors. Based on the above the academic content of a foreign language textbook includes components that characterize the foreign language communication acquisition: objective, contextual, procedural, and assessing.

The objective component provides the tasks, indicates potential levels of learners' academic achievements, determines a certain amount and level of development of their linguistic, sociocultural, and general educational knowledge, language skills, speaking skills, and attitudes to objects of communication, outlines the scope of thematic, linguistic, speaking and informational input, which should be acquired by the students to perform the tasks.

The contextual component offers methods, forms and types of academic activities aimed to form communication mechanisms, promotes students' awareness about the ways of acquiring foreign language input, allows evaluation, involves the organization of foreign language learning in connection with the culture of the people where the foreign language is spoken (Yuen, 2011); presents qualitative and quantitative characteristics of linguistic, speech and illustrative input, based on which intercultural foreign-language communication competence forms, directs it to the parallel and interrelated acquisition of speech activities, motivates learning, promotes the development of creative abilities, forms the ability of self-regulative actions aimed to satisfy their own foreign-language communication needs.

The procedural component defines the methods, forms, and means of effective academic process management, in particular learners' cognitive activity, offers a system of exercises and tasks as means that ensure the formation of oral and written speech skills and in this way contribute to the gain of

foreign-language communicative interaction experience in the conditions of multilingual and polycultural world, outlines the time limits and sequence of language operations aimed at intensifying and using academic input in real life foreign-language communication.

The assessing component indicates the objects of control, determines their types, forms and means and, if necessary, stimulates to adjust the results of learning, forms and ways of their use.

Figure 1 illustrates the model of academic foreign language communication environment, which outlines the essential characteristics of its main components.
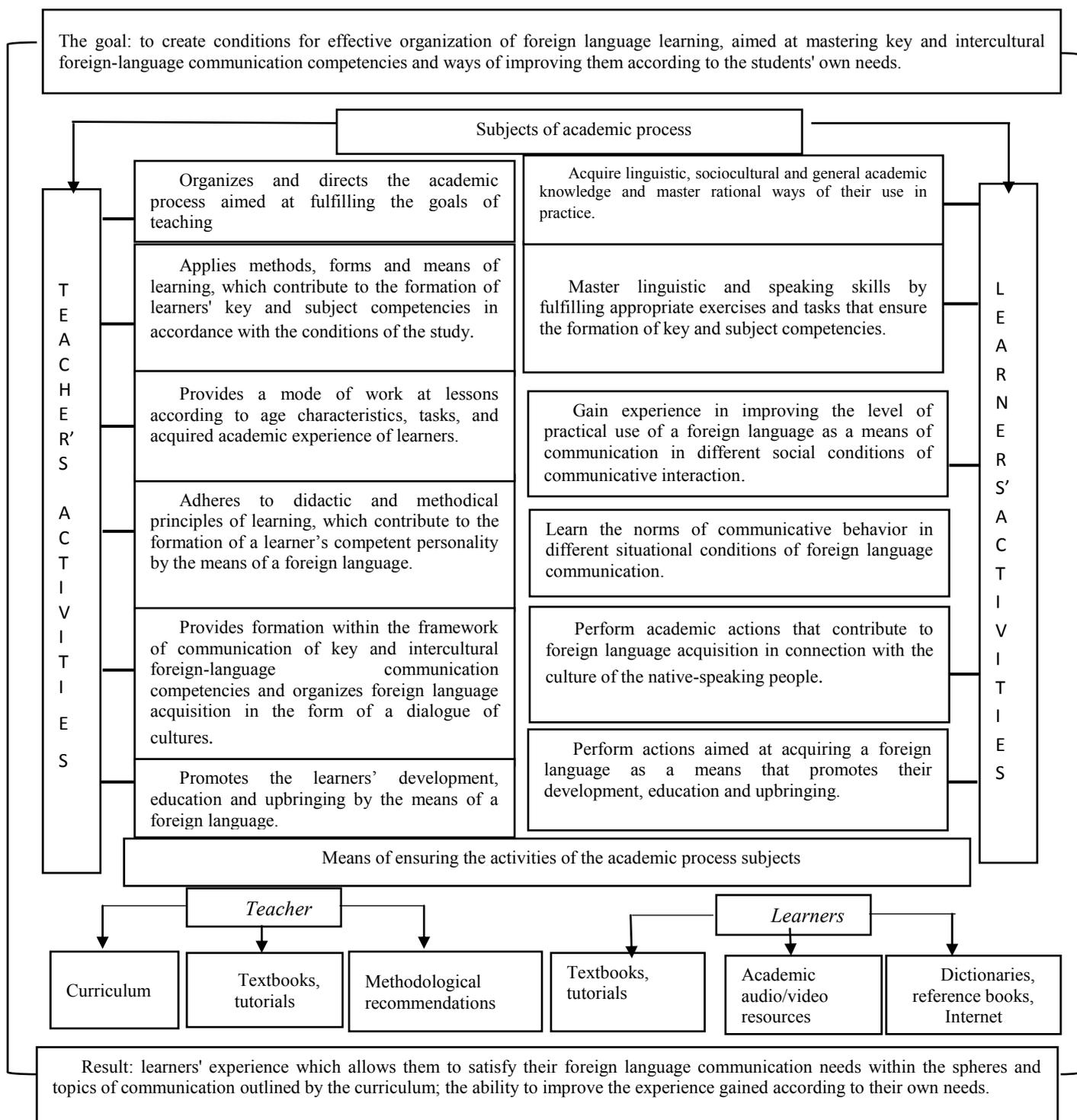

The goal: to create conditions for effective organization of foreign language learning, aimed at mastering key and intercultural foreign-language communication competencies and ways of improving them according to the students' own needs.

Subjects of academic process

TEACHER'S ACTIVITIES

Organizes and directs the academic process aimed at fulfilling the goals of teaching

Applies methods, forms and means of learning, which contribute to the formation of learners' key and subject competencies in accordance with the conditions of the study.

Provides a mode of work at lessons according to age characteristics, tasks, and acquired academic experience of learners.

Adheres to didactic and methodical principles of learning, which contribute to the formation of a learner's competent personality by the means of a foreign language.

Provides formation within the framework of communication of key and intercultural foreign-language communication competencies and organizes foreign language acquisition in the form of a dialogue of cultures.

Promotes the learners' development, education and upbringing by the means of a foreign language.

LEARNERS' ACTIVITIES

Acquire linguistic, sociocultural and general academic knowledge and master rational ways of their use in practice.

Master linguistic and speaking skills by fulfilling appropriate exercises and tasks that ensure the formation of key and subject competencies.

Gain experience in improving the level of practical use of a foreign language as a means of communication in different social conditions of communicative interaction.

Learn the norms of communicative behavior in different situational conditions of foreign language communication.

Perform academic actions that contribute to foreign language acquisition in connection with the culture of the native-speaking people.

Perform actions aimed at acquiring a foreign language as a means that promotes their development, education and upbringing.

Means of ensuring the activities of the academic process subjects

Teacher

Curriculum | Textbooks, tutorials | Methodological recommendations

Learners

Textbooks, tutorials | Academic audio/video resources | Dictionaries, reference books, Internet

Result: learners' experience which allows them to satisfy their foreign language communication needs within the spheres and topics of communication outlined by the curriculum; the ability to improve the experience gained according to their own needs.

Figure 1. Model of the academic foreign-language communication environment

3. Method

This scientific query is based on quantitative research (Mackey, Gass, 2005) employing an experimental post-test model to determine the effectiveness of the competency-based academic communication environment created in the content of school foreign language textbooks and survey-based research (Porte, 2002) to study the learners' and teachers' attitude towards the experimental content of the textbooks.

3.1. Participants

An experimental study was conducted with 74 secondary school learners of the 10th grade studying Spanish as a second foreign language in Cherkasy First City Gimnasium, Novovolynsk Specialised Secondary School, Ivankiv Liceum and Kyiv Gimnasium #176 (Ukraine) during the 2018-2019 academic year. The competency-based teaching of a foreign language by means of the academic foreign-language communication environment was introduced into the content of experimental textbooks of the Spanish language. (Red'ko, Bereslavska, 2018).

Since we aimed to reveal learners' and teachers' attitudes to the content of textbooks, 25 secondary school teachers were incorporated into the study.

3.2. Instrument

A formative test is designed to check the level of learners' language proficiency and coherently has four sections: speaking, writing, listening and speaking (McNamara, 2000). The answers are evaluated in accordance with the criteria worked out specifically for each test section (Weir, 1990). The result is considered positive if the learning rate is 70% and more.

The questionnaire for students contains 9 multiple choice questions and aims to study the attitude to the textbook structure and quality of its language, communicative and illustrative input.

Another questionnaire comprises 18 questions and is designed for teachers to evaluate professionally the competence-based content of the textbook as well as the quality of its linguistic, communicative and illustrative input. The results of the survey allowed calculating the satisfaction index by the textbook content with learners and teachers separately. The index is counted with the formula used by Martynova (Martynova, 2004):

$$I = \frac{(A+1) + B\ (+0{,}5) + C\ (-0{,}5) + D\ (-1) + E\ (0)}{N},$$

where A – maximum satisfaction rate, B- medium satisfaction rate, C – negative attitude rate, D- maximun unsatisfaction rate, E – indifferent attitude to the problem.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The research procedure consisted of two stages.

Stage 1: The researchers met with participants in their classes, and the goals of the study were explained to participants. All learners were offered to complete the test based on the new textbook they studied. Afterward, the completed answer sheets were collected and assessed in accordance with the developed criteria scale. The scale included the following:

Speaking and Writing: relevance to the topic; volume to reveal the topic; language appropriacy.

Reading and listening: x% - the amount of incorrect answers /100%- correct answers.

Stage 2: The scholars met with teachers and learners separately, explanations about the objectives of the survey were given. Following this, the questionnaire was carried out to examine the learners' and teachers' attitudes about the textbook content. The results were then analyzed and the satisfaction index was calculated by the mentioned above formula.

4. Results

All the test answer sheets were collected and checked in accordance with the worked-out scale. The scope of the received results may be illustrated in the following diagram which indicates the learning rate (it rises up to 81% in certain aspects and doesn't fall lower than 70%) of the participants in specified secondary schools:
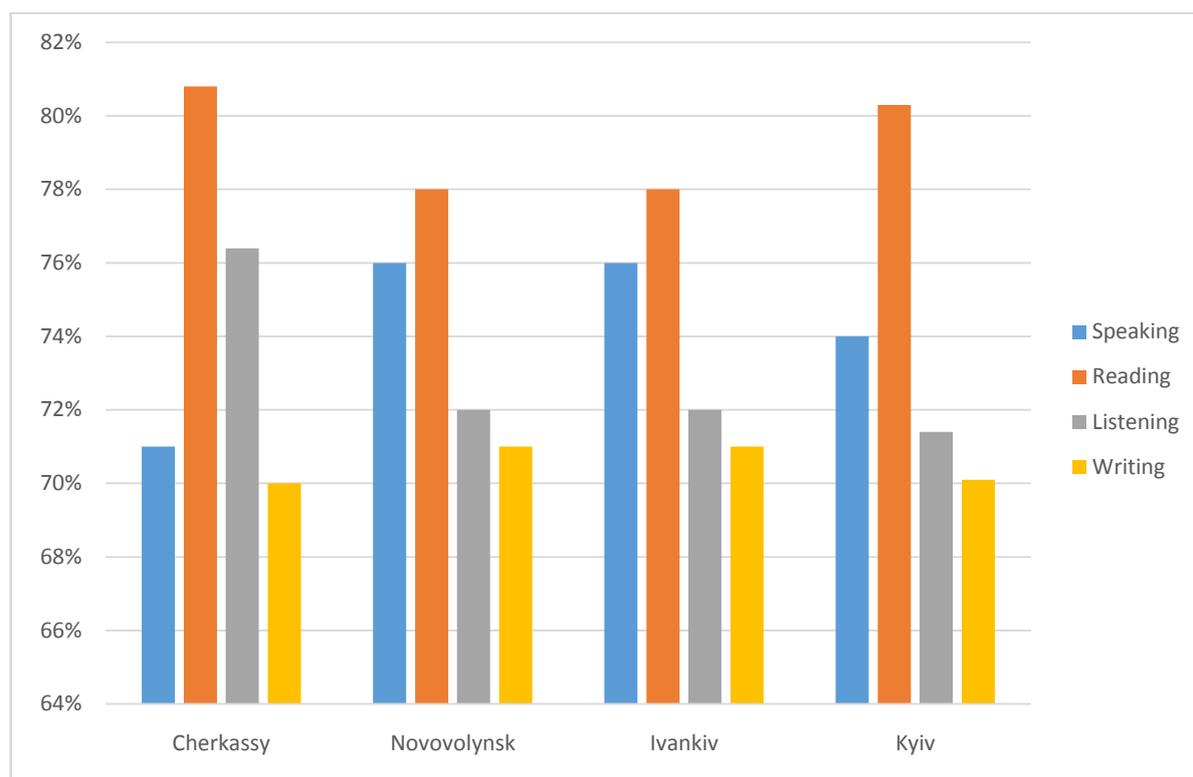
Figure 2. The distribution of students' learning rate

The received results give us the possibility to assume that in all schools where the academic foreign-language communicative environment was introduced into the content of textbooks the level of learners' proficiency has reached the planned rates and has not failed in any aspect separately.

The questionnaires in a printed form were offered to students and teachers. Before answering the question, respondents were instructed to select one response from among the three ones (―yes", "no", ―partly") that best explains their preference for each question. The full questionnaire forms are attached in Appendix A. The forms were collected, responses analyzed scrupulously and illustrated in charts:
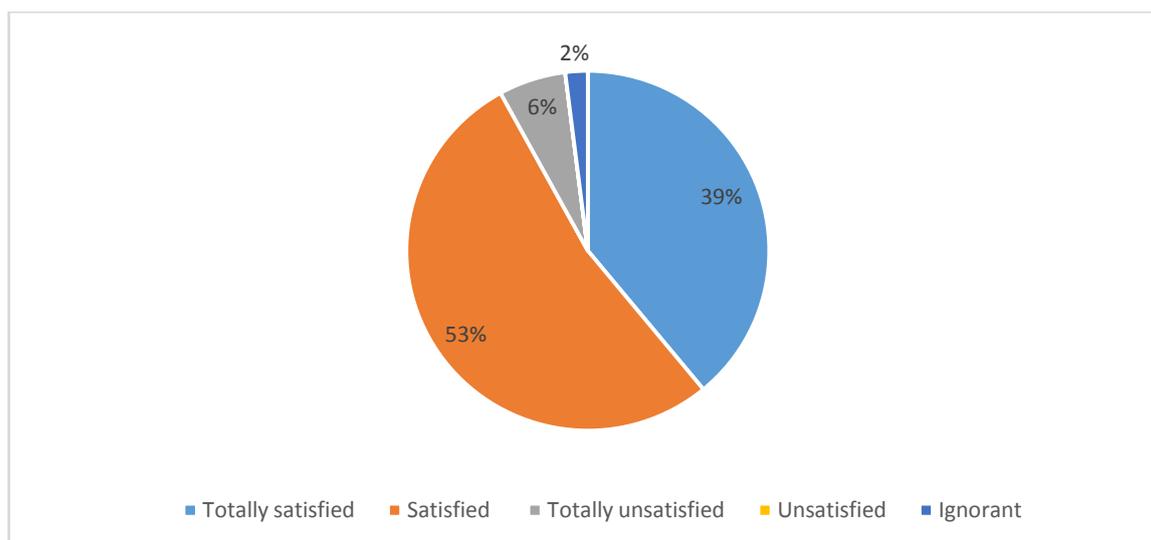
Chart 1. Summarized distribution of teachers' attitudes

The questionnaire designed for the teachers comprised questions to examine their attitude to the textbook content as the means of their methodological support in professional activities. Therefore, the questions comprised the didactic, methodological, psychological and psycholinguistic aspects of the problem. In our opinion, they can provide a complex characteristic of the competence-based communicative environment created by the textbook content.
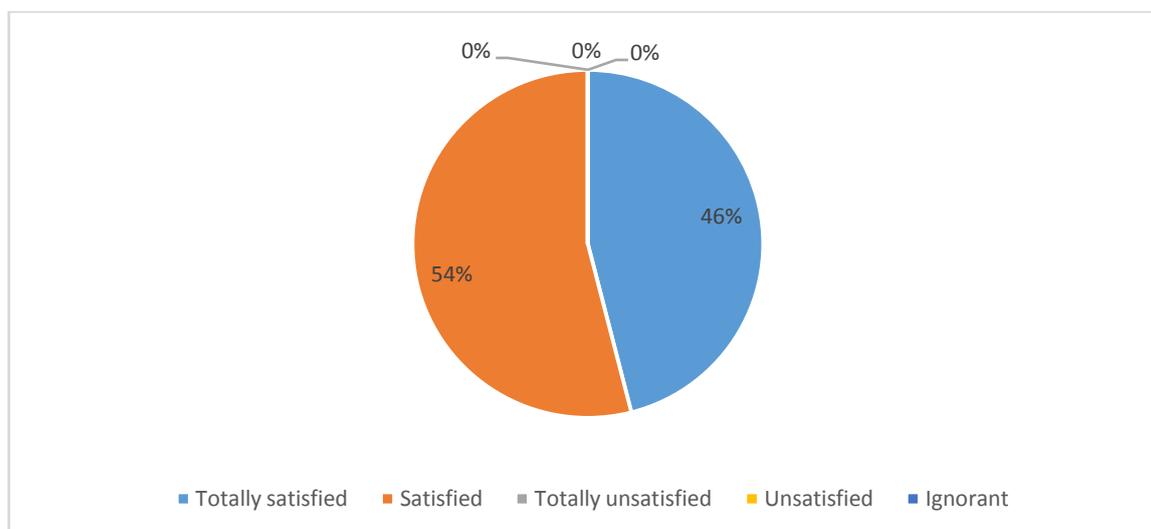
Chart 2. Distribution of learners' attitudes

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the majority of teachers (53%) and learners (54%) expressed a positive attitude to the competence-based content of foreign language textbooks for secondary schools. However, in some answer sheets, the respondents had questions, which caused the reviewing and some improvement of the proposed content construction methodology. Thus, the findings of this study demonstrate clearly that the distribution of learning style preferences between students of different majors was not the same. Consequently, they cannot be taught with the same instructional strategies and styles. The efficiency of the content was proved by the test results which

demonstrate the positive (70% and more) learning rate in all speech aspects with the majority of learners.

5. Discussion

Considering the present study results and recommendations expressed by teachers during the survey we have to outline the didactic values of competence-based teaching and created an academic foreign language communication environment in the content of secondary school textbooks.

Competence-based teaching foreign languages are advisable to consider from several positions: a) the goals of school foreign language education, in general, and at some stage (grade) of study, in particular, b) the selection and organization of the content of foreign language teaching, c) the selection and use of methods, forms and means of study in accordance with its conditions, d) organization of the academic process, e) objects, forms and types of control of learners' academic progress.

The results of the experimental study and survey outcome prove that methods, forms, teaching tools should be chosen in accordance with the competency-based teaching framework. This reflects the tendencies of the modern school foreign language education: a) communicative direction of the academic process; b) active learning technology; b) learner-centered paradigm and its correspondence to the learner's age characteristics; d) cultural direction of academic activity. This means that the methods, forms, types of academic activity and means of their implementation should optimally ensure the effectiveness of methods of presentation and activation of the selected language and speech units and enable to carry out independent evaluation /self-evaluation of learners' academic progress.

The findings of the present study demonstrate how the academic process should be organized effectively. It is assumed that the studying is based on the principle of parallel and interconnected learners' acquisition of speech activities, and with the help of means of a foreign language the acquaintance with sociocultural, sociolinguistic, linguistic aspects of the culture of the country, where language is spoken, takes place (Weninger, C., Kiss, T.). In this regard, the whole process of learning takes the form of a dialogue of cultures, which is carried out through a foreign language. Communicative tasks, in particular, interactive methods and academic communicative situations, which make the content of the textbook were appreciated by the learners and teachers.

The positive results of the research highlights on using a new approach to assessing students' progress. The worked-out scale for assessing learners' proficiency proved its validity. Attention is focused on the results of training, in particular the levels of forming language and speech skills, as well as the quality of the acquired general academic experience. At the same time, the types and forms of evaluation learners' speech capabilities are the priority rather than the level of learners' formed language skills (although they are also objects of assessment). Hence, the results of testing (learning rate goes up to 81% in reading and 76% in speaking) demonstrate the effectiveness of the declared approach.

At the same time, it should be noted that the learners' general academic experience is not left out, which allows them to use non-verbal means of communication, to carry out their own needs of communication in a foreign language that situationally emerges. This becomes important in the conditions of competence-based learning when the attention of students and teachers should be directed to the results of education as objective indicators of didactic and methodical feasibility and effectiveness of modeling the academic process in the textbook content.

6. Conclusion

The results of the conducted research clearly demonstrate the didactic feasibility of the proposed academic foreign language communication environment, including the effectiveness of the tools employed. It provides for the learners a possibility to holistically combine the acquired knowledge, developed abilities and skills, acquired academic experience, worldview values, attitudes and beliefs with active creative autonomous inquiry activities within the curriculum outlined in the process of selection and use of language tools and information input for the production of oral and written texts, as well as to identify foreign language statements when perceiving them.

The findings of the study prove that the symbiosis of these characteristics determines the basic level of forming learners' key and intercultural foreign language communicative competencies in a secondary school. They agree with the conditions of study, potential psychophysiological capabilities of learners of all ages. They should be directed to the activities of the teacher and the textbook. It is their effective interaction that can provide a specially created academic foreign-language communication environment as a didactic phenomenon of methodically expedient organization of the academic process, accumulated in the content of the textbook. Due to the received positive results of the research, the possibility of mass implementation of the model in the content of c school textbooks of foreign languages may become the subject of the next study.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire form for learners

Question	Responds		
	Yes	No	Partly
Do you like the textbook?			
Are the topics clearly presented (notions, rules, terms)?			
Are the texts, tasks and illustrations interesting for you?			
Are the new words, terms, or notions explained?			
Can you learn a new topic and prepare for the class autonomously using the textbook?			
Does the textbook contain the self—check, self-assessing, revision exercises?			
Do you like the illustrations in the textbook?			
Do you fancy the textbook design?			
Do you think the textbook is interesting to learn a foreign language with?			

Appendix B

Questionnaire form for teachers

Question	Responds		
	Yes	No	Partly
Can the textbook fulfill complexly the communicative, upbringing and developing goals of teaching?			
Do you think the textbook contains enough language input to realize the formation of learners' communicative skills?			
Do you consider the language input is structured rationally within units, lessons?			
Can the language input motivate learners' activity?			
Does the methodological structure of the textbook content enhance learner's language proficiency?			
Can the textbooks be used as the means of monitoring learner's academic activity?			
Is the system of exercises and tasks effective?			
Is the linguistic, illustrative input intelligible?			
Do you think the textbook is interesting to learn a foreign language with?			
Are the texts informative and of optimal volume to provide forming reading skills?			
Can the textbooks provide the possibility to form foreign language communicative competence autonomously?			
Is the illustrative input didactically appropriate?			

Are the tables and schemes reliable?			
Do the textbooks realize the individual and differential approaches?			
Do the quality and quantity of illustrative and textual academic input develop learners' sociocultural competence?			
Do the textbooks provide the possibility of teaching in the form of a dialogue of cultures?			
Is the revision system effective?			
Are the tasks and exercises appropriate to realize learners' assessment and self-assessment?			
Are the kinds and number of exercises for homework selected rationally?			

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