Е. В. Борзова, М. А. Шеманаева, Л. Чжао

Требования, предъявляемые к практическому занятию по иностранному языку в университете дидактами и практиками: анализ мнений преподавателей из России и Китая

Введение. Вследствие самой природы языка и его основных функций обучение студентов всех направлений подготовки имеет общие черты, присущие каждому занятию в любом формате. Учебный процесс имеет и специфические особенности, связанные с разными образовательными традициями, национальной культурой, образовательной средой и его субъектами (преподавателями и студентами) – участниками данного процесса.

Цель статьи – выявить идеи и рассмотреть практическое воплощение основных требований к практическим занятиям по иностранному языку в университетах в России и в Китае по оценке самих преподавателей.

Материалы и методы. В исследовании приняли участие 61 преподаватель иностранных языков российского и китайского университетов. В ходе исследования были использованы следующие методы: анализ научной литературы, разработка анкеты для преподавателей, анализ ответов преподавателей, статистическая обработка данных и визуализация данных.

Результаты. В исследовании обозначены основные тренды иноязычного образования в университете в любом формате. К ним относятся студенто- / личностно-ориентированный (60% преподавателей из Китая / 23% преподавателей из России); интерактивный / коммуникативный (15% преподавателей из Китая / 30% преподавателей из России) и создание условий для вовлеченности студентов (55% преподавателей из Китая / 25% преподавателей из России) с акцентом на общее развитие коммуникативных, социальных и мыслительных способностей обучающихся (100% преподавателей из Китая / 95% преподавателей из России). Дидактический инструментарий, используемый преподавателями иностранных языков совпадает в аспекте интерактивных заданий разных видов, их применяют 95% и 100% российских и китайских преподавателей.

Заключение. Выявленные в ходе исследования различия в ответах российских и китайских преподавателей требуют дальнейшего изучения в связи с ограниченным составом опрошенных. Тем не менее, предварительные выводы исследования помогут преподавателям иностранных языков в университетах осознать приоритетные тенденции современного иноязычного образования и выбирать подходящие практические решения с ориентацией как на общепринятые черты, так и на конкретные цели и содержание занятия.

Ключевые слова: практическое занятие по иностранному языку в университете, дистанционное и аудиторное занятие, анализ мнений преподавателей, характеристика практического занятия

Introduction. In the course of time and due to the development of science and technology, the understanding of the effective university foreign language classroom has changed. The most significant change took place during the pandemic when all the students had to attend online classes. Nevertheless, our assumption is that in view of the nature of the subject itself, teaching and learning languages either online or offline to science or humanitarian majors has common characteristics relevant to any type of the classroom. It has specific characteristics related to different educational traditions, ethnic cultures, learning environments, and primarily to the agents (both teachers and students) involved in the process. The purpose of this article is to explore what ideas are frequently proposed by researchers worldwide and their implementation in university foreign language classrooms in Russia and China both in online and offline types of teaching and learning.

Materials and methods. The study involved 61 university teachers of foreign languages from Russia and China who answered the questions of the questionnaire. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods of action research was used in the study. The methods included a literature review, the development of teacher questionnaires, a comparative study, data analysis and data visualization.

Results. The study has revealed the major trends that are apparent in university foreign language teaching and learning both online and offline. They are related to learner-centered (60% of Chinese teachers / 23% of Russian teachers), interactive (15% of Chinese teachers / 30% of Russian teachers) and fostering learners’ engagement (55% of Chinese teachers / 25% of Russian teachers) with an emphasis on the development of overall students’ communication, social and thinking abilities (100% of Chinese teachers / 95% of Russian teachers). Among the didactic tools used by foreign language teachers in both countries interactive tasks are prevalent with 95% и 100% of the Chinese and Russian teachers choosing them respectively.

Conclusion. The differences revealed during the study need further research due to a limited number of the teacher participants. The conclusions obtained in this study will help to understand the main trends in modern foreign language teaching and learning, and assist foreign language teachers in choosing appropriate classroom techniques for their practices in line with more specific aims and content.

Keywords: university foreign language classroom, online and offline classrooms, research approaches, teachers’ assumptions, a profile of a foreign language classroom

For Reference:
One of the oldest and deeply rooted educational traditions all over the world is that of foreign language teaching and learning. In a multilingual and intercultural world, it is a key to cultural and linguistic diversity, to mutual understanding and people overall development [1].

Foreign languages are taught in universities worldwide to the students in any professional area and a huge amount of research has been conducted in this field, related both to theory and teaching techniques. There are two distinctive lines in the description of the related methods: the first one is about teaching languages face-to-face or online. The other notable distinction concerns teaching and learning general or professional language. In this sphere, researchers suggest General Language, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) teaching and learning methodologies. Recently, a new trend “CLIL for STEAM” has appeared in foreign language education. It emphasizes integrated subject and language teaching and learning. ESP, CLIL and STEAM mostly focus on the student acquisition of professional vocabulary and content.

We believe that foreign language university classrooms worldwide have a lot in common. Due to the nature of the subject itself, teaching languages is based on some globally shared assumptions which hold true in any type of teaching – whether it is online or offline, and related to any content – whether we teach languages to science or humanitarian students, especially during the first year of university education when there is a weak connection between the content and the students’ future profession. From the very beginning of university foreign language education, all the students are expected to develop flexible, transferrable, and integrated general language skills and sub-skills which will later be adjusted to varied content and situations, being transferred and adapted to any communication environment as well as professional contexts.

In this study we set out to explore what assumptions concerning university foreign language teaching and learning are frequently proposed by researchers and if foreign language university teachers in Russia and China implement them in the classroom for both science and humanitarian students, regardless of the field of education. Our hypothesis is that the core features of any foreign language classroom remain the same, being grounded on basic laws and rules of foreign language acquisition. Thus, we focus on the process and its characteristics which result in the learner’s language competence enabling to perform a variety of activities by means of the language.

Nowadays, the majority of research outcomes in this field are published in English and are familiar to university teachers who have access to an enormous amount of materials and multi-media resources online that they can use in addition or instead of regular course-books. Moreover, foreign language education in different countries has practically similar aims: developing student communicative competence and soft skills, or key/universal competences, as well, adjusting both to professional contexts. The quality of soft skills affects the quality of student thinking strategies, communication and collaboration, project and team work, multicultural communication, and personal traits [2].

European countries elaborated The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) to facilitate quality in language education [1] which has served as a guide for the development of national curricula in
many countries. Its authors underline that “the CEFR is a tool to facilitate educational reform projects, not a standardization tool” [1, p. 26]. Their approach is based on the “can do” descriptors that demonstrate “what the users/learners need to be able to do in the language” [1, p. 28], “seeing learners as language users and social agents” [1, p. 29]. Researchers from all over the world, not only Europe found common grounds in their understanding of language education worldwide.

Starting our research, we addressed the teachers from Russia and China as representatives of the countries with strong adherence to traditional cultures, including education as well.

In Russian universities, foreign language teaching and learning curricula give priority to the interrelated development of students’ communicative, professional and universal competences. In the assessment of the outcomes, teachers are mostly guided by the criteria accepted in Europe and adjusted to the Russian context [3].

The aim of China’s education regardless of the specific field, is to promote the all-round student development, with an emphasis on nurturing their spiritual and moral qualities, their key competencies, as well as strengthening their physical and psychological health. Therefore, the objectives of teaching foreign languages are not only to develop students' overall language ability and consciousness of cross-cultural communication specifics, but also to lay a solid foundation for their all-round and life-long development.

Based on the analysis of the college English syllabuses (the flagship document guiding college English education in China) over the past 40 years, the first ones dating back to 1986 [4; 5] as well as those implemented since the beginning of the millennium [6; 7], it can be noted that the focus of teaching foreign languages has been shifted from acquiring knowledge to improving students’ abilities, such as communicative and pragmatic competencies. Although the word "soft skills" is not used in the document, it can be seen that the essence of this comprehensive ability partially coincides with this concept.

On the other hand, teachers as agents of any classroom are influenced by the educational traditions of their countries. First, they often transfer their personal experiences as language learners into the classrooms using the techniques and aids that their teachers applied [7, p. 17]. Polyakov has proved that in mass practices nearly 70% of the teachers in general apply “traditional techniques” [9, p. 17].

Secondly, teachers are also influenced by their own ethnic cultures that shape the way they communicate and build their relationships with the students in the classroom which really matters in foreign language teaching. Therefore, as some Chinese researchers found out, teaching Russian as a foreign language to Chinese students is effective in case it takes into account some national students’ characteristics [10; 11].

At this point, we need to note that whichever type of foreign language teaching and learning is applied, either offline, online, or blended, or whether we teach humanitarian or science students, the learners are to achieve the levels suggested in the state and university curricula in accordance with the descriptors for how well a learner performs in a language.

In the current study, we did not plan to conduct a large scale research. Our first step was to explore the issue of compliance of classroom management techniques in two national universities with the guidelines that methodologists identify in their research papers worldwide. Our major research questions were 1) what trends in foreign language education are obvious in the related research papers? 2) are university foreign language teachers in the two regional universities from the two countries aware of these trends and do they try to implement them in their classrooms aimed at both humanitarian and science students? We believe that answers to these questions can identify the core characteristics of
university foreign language classrooms which need special attention in in-service university teacher education.

Based on the related literature review, we made an attempt to single out a few dominant tendencies that underlie any type of modern foreign language teaching and learning. Then, we questioned university foreign language teachers from Russia and China who agreed to participate in the study to find out if they implement these assumptions in their practices.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is not easy to create a profile of a foreign language classroom in compliance with modern approaches and principles. Researchers mostly focus on analyzing tasks, not lessons. A foreign language classroom can be described from two perspectives: as an ideal theoretical concept based on research findings which set certain guidelines to follow and as an actual form of teacher-student online or face-to-face interaction for educational purposes. First, we focused on theoretical aspects to generate a cumulative overview of didactic and methodological assumptions that lay the foundation for the foreign language classroom profile today. The outline for this stage of the study includes the consideration of the following factors: who learns, what constitutes the learning environment, what activities students are engaged in [12] and on how all these factors interact.

According to the authors worldwide, the foreign language classroom today is to be learner-dominated, or learner-centered, with the focus to the real needs and interests of the students [13; 14]. It suggests learners’ personal investment in content relating “directly to learners’ own ideas, talents, or previous experience”, reflecting “something learners want to talk about in the specific classroom context” and which will be interesting to hear by other students in the classroom [15; 16, p. 393]. Thus, in the learner-centered classroom, students gradually become agents of their learning and interaction.

Being focused on the learner, effective education strives to provide the whole person development [17; 18], facilitating the formation of both subject-specific and key (soft skills) competences as well as of positive personality traits and values [1; 19]. As a review of university curricula in many countries reveals [2], there is a general agreement among educators that “soft skills should be thought of as part of cradle-to-grave learning, insofar as they need to be developed at every stage of curricula and beyond” [20, p. 23]. Every university graduate is to be capable of effective communication, collaboration, thinking, emotional management, information management, and PC application which underlie decision-making and problem-solving in any sphere of life. This approach holds true in regard to modern foreign language education as well.

Schulz [21] highlights educators’ major influence on the development of their students’ soft skills, shaping students' personalities through embedding soft skills into hard skills. In his opinion, soft skills complement hard skills, being an essential perquisite of a job. His research shows that among the soft skills lacked by the graduates are communication and team-working.

Tevdovska [22] explored the role of soft skills in the context of foreign language education and concluded that these skills are rarely taught and assessed in higher education though they are as vital as hard abilities in the current employment environment. The author adopted a position that these can be acquired through education and training [21] and consequently suggested different innovative ways of embedding soft skills in the foreign language classroom.
Researchers believe that foreign languages is “the most efficient discipline to nurture soft skills” [23, p. 223]. We can find models of soft skills oriented language teaching focused on the development of communication skills as the basis for developing some other soft skills [24].

Personal features and values motivation and attitudes which all together comprise the concept of personality, are also regarded as essential components of language education aims [25]. The personality oriented approach to foreign language teaching and learning is inseparable from the ideas of recognizing learner agency in respect of learning, communicating and relating to others [26]. Learner agency contributes to enhancing student experiences which form the basis for personal literacy, competency and culture.

Ideally, the role in eliciting culture learning in the foreign language classrooms significantly broadens the student picture of the world and fosters personality traits. The learner is expected to be gradually moving “towards greater understanding of otherness and, simultaneously, deepening self-understanding” [27 p. 22], promoting a deeper insight into their own culture and themselves [28], thus becoming interculturally competent.

Constructivist theories view learners as 'constructors' of knowledge and skills in a variety of forms who take an active role in forming new understandings and are not just passive receptors [29]. The co-construction of meaning in interaction is placed at the centre of the learning and teaching process because interpersonal interaction is considered to be the origin of language, with interpersonal, collaborative, and transactional functions [1, p. 27]. These ideas are based on Sociocultural Theory proposed by Vygotsky [30;31] and imply student active engagement in social dialogue [32, p. 328]. Interaction-as-dialogue [33], or communication as a form of interaction [34], unfolds as an exchange / discourse with someone while implementing major language functions (interpersonal, collaborative, and transactional). Among different forms of interaction [35], learner-content and mainly learner–learner interaction must prevail in foreign language classrooms because in this case students are focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages [34, p. 25-27].

The assumptions above highlight the ideas of “learning by doing” which, in case of foreign language education, is specific, relating to diverse activities performed by means of the target language. Through active engagement in social interaction with others, learners become readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers in the classroom [36]. They develop a great variety of abilities to inform, consult, negotiate, and discuss using the foreign language while processing speech acts [37; 38].

In view of the Interactive Hypothesis, conversational interaction "facilitates language acquisition because it connects input (what learners hear and read); internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output (what learners produce) in productive ways" [39, p. 451-452]. In this case, interaction serves as a form of mediation, enabling learners to construct new forms and perform new functions collaboratively [40; 41]. The construction processes based on internalization of language and speech, according to Vygotsky, occur through active reception and interaction with language through texts and with the teacher who introduces material and provides scaffolding. Intake based on understanding the content is about building cognitive systems. Output which takes the form of producing utterances addressed to others suggests interaction with these others. This cycle underlies a chain of interactive activities that a student has to complete to develop foreign language skills and competences in any educational context [42; 43] and through any type of teacher-learner/peer- interaction.
Consequently, learning through interaction and communication involves the processing of information, its analysis and synthesis, resulting in a constant creation and evolution of knowledge structures. By means of language, people make visible thinking and reasoning processes [29]. Therefore, we can conclude that foreign language classrooms are supposed to encourage learners to think, express and discuss their ideas addressing others.

According to the task-based approach [44; 45] which exists in multiple versions [46] communicative tasks are the major didactic tool “providing students with opportunities to acquire and practice the foreign language in contextualized and meaningful ways” [32, p. 330]. Moore summarized the most prominent aspects of this approach in foreign language teaching, focusing on task definitions, features, and classifications [47]. In tasks, learning is carried out by doing which, in the context of foreign language classrooms, suggests a variety of activities where the foreign language can be used for reception, interaction, production and mediation [1] which take the forms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Student communicative interaction can also be based on gamification design principles [48]. There is evidence that games have a positive impact on learning outcomes due to the student engagement, immersion, and flow by increasing levels of challenges and skill [49]. A study of numerous publications devoted to game-based elements in language education confirms that they “turn the learning and teaching of a new language into an enjoyable process” [50, p. 570].

Implementation of tasks can be focused on increasing cognitive challenges as well involving learners in problem solving and decision making through project work [51] and case studies which encourage critical thinking while speaking [52] and reading [53]. The greatest benefit of problem-based tasks is that they promote “the integration of real-world problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-regulated active learning via group discussion and peer collaboration” [54] thus implementing the ideas of inquiry and discovery learning.

On the whole, the involvement in and completion of the task by the student result in a positive change in the student’s overall experiences (cognitive, affective, attitudinal, psychomotor, behavioral). Researchers list the following characteristics of tasks and activities which are relevant to any classroom type: adequate, varied, graded, student centered, authentic, communicative, interactive; productive, creative, and engaging [55].

Tasks, materials as well as all those present in the classroom, either it is virtual or physical, constitute a learning environment which is interpreted as a combination of all the elements that affect a system or its inputs and outputs [42]. The learning environment comes about “as part of a communicatively rich human social environment” [56, p. 577], creating opportunities for the student development. A potential (personal learning) environment for a particular learning activity is made of all the resources (artifacts, natural objects, people) that an individual is aware of and has access to at a given point in time and that s/he can turn into instruments to mediate their actions [57]. Learning environments have both a direct and indirect impact on student learning, including their engagement in what is being taught, their motivation to learn and participate, their expectations, and their sense of well-being, belonging, and personal safety. A Rich Environment for Active Learning (REAL) is a set of instructional methods founded on the activities and processes that encourage thinking and reasoning [29]. A Rich Environment is a learning community that 'includes the content taught, the pedagogical methods employed, the sequencing of learning activities, and the sociology of learning' [57, p. 6], placing learning in broad, realistic contexts.
It is obvious that a rich environment designed in the classroom focuses learners on “exploration, thinking, reasoning, articulating ideas and arguing, using visual representations, discussing core concepts as a community” [58, p. 35]. Thus, the more intensive interaction that involves cognitive and social domains, the better the language performance and the closer to second language acquisition our students are [41, p. 51].

Reeves identified eight critical factors impacting the success of a learning environment, including e-learning: 1) goals, 2) content, 3) instructional design, 4) learner tasks, 5) instructor roles, 6) student roles, 7) technological affordances, and 8) assessment [59, p. 303].

In case of online classrooms as a multimodal phenomenon, it is generally recognized that the communication mediated through a machine “is unlikely ever to be exactly the same as face-to-face interaction” [1, p. 84]. Therefore, the experiences gained during the pandemic evoked heated debates concerning the pros and cons of each type. Admitting that online foreign language lessons allow for the immediate exploitation of different online media and tools, we nevertheless assume that the dominant ideas that underlie effective classroom environments are mostly common. The differences may be evident in a few particular tactics and techniques applied by teachers in each case.

Summing up, we can conclude that a theoretical profile of an ideal university foreign language classroom in the context of both online and offline teaching and learning can be described as:

• a rich learning environment created by teachers through integration of varied teaching and learning tools and resources in line with integrated goals;
• the classroom environment that provides a whole student engagement in diverse interactions with all those present as well as with the engaging content, enhancing the student foreign language proficiency level and simultaneously activating their soft skills;
• the classroom that emphasizes communication, collaboration and thinking in the foreign language as the major activities while completing a variety of tasks to construct meaning;
• the classroom characterized by a reasonable balance among foreign language content input, intake and output with the dominance of meaningful production for communicative purposes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to explore the issue of compliance of teaching classroom management techniques, both online and offline, with the guidelines that methodologists identify in their research papers, we questioned Russian and Chinese foreign language teachers to find out if they implement the widely described assumptions in their practices.

41 foreign language teacher from a Russian university and 20 foreign language teachers from a Chinese university agreed to take part in the study. All of them teach foreign languages to university science and humanitarian students. The Russian teachers answered the questions in October, 2022, that is several months after returning to physical classrooms. The Chinese teachers filled out the questionnaires in February, 2023, when the pandemic in their country was over. We assume that in their responses all the teachers relied on their cumulative experiences gained from both offline and online classrooms, not separating one from the other.
We realize that the discrepancy in the samples is a weakness of the study. Nevertheless, its outcomes can uncover the compliance of theory and teaching practices in the field of university foreign language education. Based on the answers, we can preliminarily conclude how some common theoretical assumptions are understood and interpreted by teachers in practical activities in different countries.

The questionnaire included the following questions:
1. What learning materials do you use while teaching?
   (A coursebook/ extra materials/ a combination of a coursebook and extra materials)
   If you use extra materials, give reasons for doing so.
2. What is the modern students’ attitude to learning foreign languages? (positive, negative, they have to learn it)
3. Could you please, name 3 factors contributing to an effective foreign language lesson?
4. Could you please name 3 factors which influence the foreign language lesson outcomes negatively?
5. Is it necessary in your opinion to pay attention to integrative learning outcomes?
   (soft skills development / key competences formation, i.e. problem-solving skills etc.)
6. Could you please name 3 techniques, methods, or tasks you regularly use in the classroom?

Results

The results of the answers to the questionnaire are presented in Figures 1-6. Question 1 answers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ preferences in choosing language classroom materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Russia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use only the coursebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly use extra materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combine the coursebook and extra materials</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Table reveals two different approaches typical of university foreign language teachers in Russia and in China. The Russian teachers tend to use a wider range of materials as only 2% of the respondents rely exceptionally on the coursebook, whereas the overwhelming majority of the Chinese teachers focus on using the coursebook only. The Russians interviewed explain their choice by the fact that the coursebooks available for university foreign language teaching do not meet the demands of the curriculum and of the students. Thus, the teachers look for ways to both diversify and update materials, tasks, and techniques used. Meanwhile, those 10% of the Chinese university teachers who use extra materials in addition to the coursebook, note flexibility, diversity and higher effectiveness of teaching as benefits of this choice.

The answers to question 2 are presented in Figure 1.
As can be inferred from Figure 1, the attitudes to learning foreign languages in the two countries are quite different. Russian students tend to have a positive attitude while the majority of the Chinese students according to their teachers’ opinions have to study foreign languages. Other opinions included the following answers: depends on the students / cannot say / do not know.

The characteristics inherent in an effective language classroom the teachers named can be seen in Figure 2.

The figures show that the features of an effective language classroom vary from country to country. Such traits as interaction/communication, structure/system, student engagement / motivation, relationships, time-management, diversity of materials,
methods, tasks and techniques, teacher’s professional competence, an interesting
topic are inherent properties in an effective language classroom in both countries with
some variations in the teachers’ priorities. Meanwhile, some of the characteristics were
mentioned only by the Russian teachers (individual approach, focus on integral outcomes,
soft skills development) or the Chinese teachers (innovative methods and techniques),
though, we can suppose that the individual approach mentioned only by the Russian
teachers and “meeting the students’ needs” emphasized by the Chinese teachers may be
synonymous in the context of our research.

The answers to Question 4 on the factors which can impede the effective language
classroom are shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3 Factors inhibiting the efficiency of a language classroom](image)

The answers to Question 4 to some extent are opposites to Question 3. The Chinese
teachers attribute the ineffectiveness of classrooms to low students’ motivation and
engagement which can be accounted for by low teachers’ professional competence.
We can also infer that among the external factors affecting classroom deficiencies,
the quality of the coursebooks can also be implied. These deficiencies can be related
to content and tasks.

In the Russian teachers’ opinions, as we can conclude, repetitive and boring tasks in
the classroom result in low students’ motivation and engagement. As Russian teachers
are inclined to use extra materials and tasks (see Table 1), it follows that the classroom
effectiveness relies on the teachers’ professional skills which enable her/him to choose
more diverse, engaging and effective tools for classroom management.

Answering Question 5 about the necessity to develop students’ soft skills, the teachers
from both countries tend to be unanimous. 95% and 100% of the Russian and Chinese
teachers respectively admit the need for soft skill / key competences development.

The techniques, tasks, methods and approaches regularly applied in the language
classroom both online and offline are presented in Table 2 and Figure 4.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Didactic tools</th>
<th>Russian teachers</th>
<th>Chinese teachers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive tasks / mingle, discussion, debates, answer-question sessions</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio/video-based tasks</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multifunctional tasks</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flipped classroom technique</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recycling techniques</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contests</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational learning/tasks</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intuitive demonstration</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecture techniques</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-study tasks</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imitation tasks</td>
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<td>Contests</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational learning/tasks</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td>Intuitive demonstration</td>
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<td>Lecture techniques</td>
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<td>Self-study tasks</td>
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<td>Imitation tasks</td>
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</table>

Figure 3 Didactic tools used by country

The data show that didactic tools (tasks, techniques, methods, etc) applied in the two countries differ significantly. Interactive tasks appeared to be the only task type used in both countries. The second similarity which can be inferred from the data is that the teachers in both countries give preference to the use of audio/video-based tasks.
The study has revealed both similarities and differences in the university foreign language classrooms both online and offline in Russia and China.

The use of extra materials is typical of the Russian foreign language teachers while the Chinese teachers tend to massively rely on the coursebook use in the classroom. Those Chinese foreign language teachers who do use extra materials mention their positive effect on the classroom as they offer more diversity and bring about higher efficiency. The Russian teachers share the same point of view when they decide to apply materials and tasks beyond the coursebook both online and offline.

The university students’ attitudes to learning a foreign language also appear to be different. In the Chinese teachers’ opinion, the majority of the students (65%) have no choice but to learn a foreign language while 61% of the Russian students seem to be intrinsically motivated and have a positive attitude to this subject as their teachers see it. This result might partly be connected with the use of extra materials in the classroom though it requires further research.

The analysis of the didactic tools widely used in the foreign language classroom in Russia and China both online and offline has shown that the set of tools differs significantly from country to country. The only task type which is common for both countries is interactive tasks. Bearing in mind that according to the task-based approach [55], communicative tasks are the major didactic tool “providing students with opportunities to acquire and practice the foreign language in contextualized and meaningful ways” [32, p. 330], we can witness that this task type is valued by university language teacher in both countries. Thus, the results of the study correlate with the contemporary research interest.

Researchers [32; 33] emphasise the importance of interaction in the language classroom both online and offline. The study results also reflect the Russian and Chinese university teachers’ awareness of the role of interaction and communication in the language classroom as this factor is widely mentioned by the respondents as a significant one. The study findings argue that communication, collaboration and thinking in the foreign language have proved to be the major activities that lead learners to success in this field [58]. Effective communication, collaboration, thinking, emotional management, information management, and PC application which underlie decision-making and problem-solving are vital to succeed in any sphere so the aim of modern foreign language education is to ensure these soft skill and integrative outcomes are achieved through language classroom communication and interaction [22; 24]. This idea is omnipresent in modern language education both online and offline as the overwhelming majority of the teachers admit the need for developing soft skills and focus on the integrative outcomes of the language education.

The factors enhancing the language classroom can be virtually classified into external (environmental) ones which can be influenced by the language teachers and internal ones which are not easily influenced and are not always vivid. Among the external factors the most often cited by the Chinese teachers were the teacher’s professional competence and meeting students’ needs whereas the Russian teachers mentioned lesson system/structure, diversity of materials and tools as well as an individual approach to learners. The unanimously common factors regardless of the classroom type were interaction and communication during the lesson, diversity of didactic tools and materials and an interesting topic. The
internal factors highlighted by the teachers of both countries were students’ engagement and motivation as well as relationships in the classroom.

All the factors combined show a clear correlation with the idea of a learner-centered classroom, either it is online or offline. According to the authors worldwide, a learner-dominated, or learner-centered classroom, with the focus to the real needs and interests of the students [13; 14], suggests among other factors, learners’ personal investment in content, relating “directly to learners’ own ideas, talents, or previous experience”, reflecting “something learners want to talk about in the specific classroom context” and which will be interesting to hear by other students in the classroom [15; 16, p. 393]. The teachers in both countries agree that the students’ diverse activities performed in the target language appear to be of primary importance for successful learning, though some characteristics and the list of such activities significantly differ. Meanwhile, the application of digital resources does not seem to be an innovation for the teachers. It has become standard practice for them.

The study has also revealed that both the Russian and Chinese language teachers consider low professional competence level, lack of motivation in both teachers and students, and lack of diversity in the classroom (i.e. boring and repetitive tasks) as the major factors which impede the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning. Thus, it is evident that though multimodality is a key feature in the online foreign language classroom, it does not make sense to make a rigid separation between online and offline classrooms. Whichever type is used, they both rely on the basic ideas of successful foreign language teaching and learning, enhancing their effectiveness.

In the end, we can propose a preliminary core profile of an effective foreign language classroom that can be applied to any university context regardless of the student professional field: motivated and actively engaged learners involved in a variety of activities through completing diverse communicative interactive tasks related to interesting content in line with the students’ needs. Such classrooms are conducted by competent foreign language teachers who create rich environments promoting learners’ engagement and progress in language use.

The profile summarizes the major similarities mentioned by the respondents from Russia and China. The differences in the answers may partly be explained by culture-specific teaching methods, learning strategies and classroom interaction patterns as well as by inconsistencies in the use of methodological terms. Therefore, it needs further research and analysis. We also admit that the study has some limitations as the number of the participants accounted for 61. However, on the whole, the findings correlate to the current research interest in pedagogy and teaching and learning foreign languages.

CONCLUSION

The study implemented by Russian and Chinese researchers has shown both similarities and differences connected to teaching practices both online or offline in the university foreign language classroom. The findings have proved that the major trends related to learner-centered and task-based interactive approaches find their practical application in both countries’ classrooms regardless of their format and student major. It is possible to conclude that the university language teachers in both countries share the assumptions that the student motivation and engagement in classroom activities to a great extent are affected by the university language teacher’s professional competence.
which manifests itself in the application of appropriate and diverse didactic tools in line with the learners` characteristics as well as the educational goals. The core profile of the university foreign language classroom is to be further adjusted to specific professional content and work situations.

However, the differences revealed during the study need longer research as looking for practices online or offline which can be applied widely in the era of inter-cultural communication and education is a challenging goal to achieve.

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### Information about the authors

**Elena V. Borzova**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Professor, Dr. Sci. (Educ.)  
Petrozavodsk State University  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5006-1480

**Maria A. Shemanaeva**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Associate Professor, Cand. Sci. (Educ.)  
Petrozavodsk State University  
E-mail: indy2002@mail.ru  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2847-4000

**Linlin Zhao**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Postgraduate student  
Petrozavodsk State University  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8721-3812

**Information about the authors**

**Elena V. Borzova**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Professor, Dr. Sci. (Educ.)  
Petrozavodsk State University  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5006-1480

**Maria A. Shemanaeva**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Associate Professor, Cand. Sci. (Educ.)  
Petrozavodsk State University  
E-mail: indy2002@mail.ru  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2847-4000

**Linlin Zhao**  
(Russia, Petrozavodsk)  
Postgraduate student  
Petrozavodsk State University  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8721-3812