

Competitive aspect in foreign language teaching of primary school pupils

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Abstract. The article surveys the method of competition at foreign language lessons in primary school in various forms of its realization, gives the advantages and disadvantages of its use in specific situations, takes into consideration the psycho-physiological characteristics and gender of pupils in making the decision to use this method when teaching primary school pupils.

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Introduction

In Russian pedagogics competitive method is traditionally considered to be a very effective method of stimulating activity and behavior [1]. Its application is available to anyone, even to a not very experienced teacher. In foreign language teaching competitive method is implemented in such forms as contests, quizzes, games, and some other practices, which are beyond the scope of one lesson, such as festivals, shows, olympiads. They also distinguish such a type of lesson as a lesson-competition (tournament lesson, lesson-contest), which is classified as a non-traditional form of a lesson [2]. All of these forms are widely used in the practical work of foreign language teachers [3].

For this reason, competitive method in various forms of its realization has long been an integral part of foreign language lessons including primary school. But is it applicable and effective in all situations? Is it necessary to avoid its use when teaching individual pupils? The article is devoted to answering These Questions.

Materials and methods

The problem was investigated through observations, interviews with foreign language teachers and primary school pupils, the analysis of publications and research projects on the studied topic. To collect the necessary data a questionnaire was completed by 53 foreign language teachers (in 20 schools of different cities in Tatarstan, Russia) and 258 primary school children (in 5 schools of 3 cities in Tatarstan, Russia).

Main part

School teachers often use competitive method in the classroom relying on its effectiveness. The vast majority (98%) of the interviewed foreign language teachers willingly and regularly use the method of competition in the classroom. Competitive

aspect is also present in many didactic games conducted by teachers at foreign language lessons. According to teachers, such lessons "develop pupils' communication skills, create conditions for the disclosure of the child's personality, greatly increase the creativity of pupils", and, moreover, create a situation for the pupils' success, help to relieve fatigue and overcome linguistic and psychological barriers [4]. Researchers have also noted that "competitiveness, change of occupations during didactic games animates perception and interest, promotes a stronger memorization of the teaching material, helps the teacher to alternate intensive work with relaxed breaks for games, change the tempo of activity and prevent pupils' fatigue" [5].

At the same time, teachers observe that using games and competitions in foreign language teaching should take into account many factors: the level of training of pupils, specific objectives and conditions of the lesson, the current mood of pupils, etc. [6].

In Western pedagogics competition as a teaching method is not distinguished, but it is an essential characteristic of some of the methods or the so-called learning strategies. According to some researchers, in Western pedagogics there is even no unity of opinions in the definition of a "teaching method" [7]. One of the interpretations suggested in the literature is still quite close to the accepted one in Russian pedagogics and didactics. The interpretation in question consists in determining the learning method as a way of practical implementation of theoretical knowledge of a specific teacher [8; 9; 10]. Depending on the nature of cognitive activity, E.M. Lemmer, in his classification, along with other methods, distinguishes group and discussion methods including quizzes, debates, group projects and discussion groups [11].

Some researchers note, however, that the method of competition is to some extent enforced, as

it is based on rivalry [12], and, according to G. Doman, generates aggressiveness [13]. According to our observations, the careless use of this method in work with pupils can sometimes lead to frustration, lowering of self-esteem and activity of these pupils. Thus, competitive method is not always applicable and recommended, for example, in the situation of reduced school performance.

There is a certain gap between the attitude of pupils to the method of competition at foreign language lessons and the ideas of teachers about this attitude. Almost 89% of teachers believe that children like classes containing a competitive aspect, some of them experience doubts, and less than 2% note the possibility of a negative attitude on the part of pupils. At the same time, according to the survey, almost 21% of the younger pupils for various reasons do not like competitive activities at foreign language lessons and games based on competition.

Some teachers realize that "the gap between expectation and result of primary school children can lead to psychological trauma and lack of interest in communication in general", and therefore "the control and review of the results should be done in a correct and soft manner" [14]. On the whole, class competitions should be used in moderation [15].

It is important to consider various forms of this method at foreign language lessons in Russian schools. In contemporary schools elements of competitiveness are present in the implicit form even in general questioning. In this situation, slow children, pupils with an inert type of nervous system, or insecure, anxious pupils continually experience negative feelings and find themselves in a situation of failure because they do not have time to answer the teacher's question in time or earlier than others. It has a destructive influence on all their activities. A regularly experienced sense of failure causes frustration, contributes to the formation and consolidation of motivation to avoid failures, leads some children to learned helplessness. Some children easily become discouraged when they give an incorrect answer in front of the whole class [16]. Meanwhile, primary school age is regarded by psychologists as the time of strengthening motivation for achieving success as a sustainable personal property [17]. Thus, in the above-mentioned situation this method of stimulating activity has the opposite effect and leads some pupils to passivity.

Pupils with an active type of nervous system, as a rule, do not experience any discomfort during the general questioning in the classroom, as they always have time to give the teacher an answer to the question. Even if the answer is incomplete or incorrect, this group of pupils experiences a sense of success in the activities they undertake.

Such typological properties of the pupils' nervous system, as strength – weakness, also affect the result of applying the method of competition in teaching. The winners are pupils with a strong nervous system, capable of long time endurance of heavy loads, better coping with stressful situations. They can work effectively at the stages of the lesson following the competition, or in other classes. Pupils with a weak nervous system quickly get exhausted, stress produces on them not so much mobilizing, as tiring and distorting effects, they need time to restore their energy and efficiency. As a consequence, their performance after the competition may decline significantly.

In a situation of competing teams the result is the obligatory presence of a group of losers. If the teacher is trying to alleviate the situation and not to identify the winner, the pupils usually protest because internally they still have built a hierarchy of "winner – loser" and wait for the confirmation of their correctness from a significant adult – a teacher.

According to researchers, boys and girls in varying degrees display their desire for competition, competition in the group. Girls are disposed to cooperate; they lack a competitive spirit. Boys begin competition, aim to establish rules and hierarchy in the group [18]. At the same time, especially boys' peculiarities in schooling are taken into consideration to a minimal degree, since the forms and methods of work in the classroom are designed mostly for girls and require diligence, focused attention, discipline and perseverance [19]. The matter is that "an academic environment that focuses on quiet, sit-down learning can be off-putting for many boys" [20].

In overseas studies it is indicated that "excellent education – education that meets high standards – requires equitable teaching" [21]. It is emphasized that the success of boys and girls in school, and beyond, depends on gender equity in education, which provides equal educational opportunities and enables each pupil to reach his or her potential [22]. In this case, equality does not imply the use of identical methods and forms of education for pupils of different genders, but instead requires the differentiation of ways to interact with schoolboys and schoolgirls. Russian scientists support this opinion pointing to the necessity to develop educational technologies which would be concerned with gender characteristics of children at the initial stage of learning [23].

There are differences in the attitude of pupils to the subject of "Foreign Language" due to the gender of pupils. Boys tend to dislike this subject, because of the need to talk a lot during the lesson about themselves, express their feelings and opinions; besides, there are no hard and fast rules that allow

pupils to assess the answer as right or wrong. At the same time, girls often like foreign language lessons exactly for the opportunity to express their opinion on the topic verbally, to justify their position without feeling fear of negative evaluation of their work, as each pupil's observation is important [24].

The use of competitions at foreign language lessons meets mainly boys' interests, as they need more activity, incentives, risk, challenge, and clear instructions than girls [25]. It is especially important to consider these features knowing that boys often study more poorly than girls, particularly in such subjects as native language, humanities and foreign languages. Apparently, this is due to the fact that it is more difficult for boys to transfer thoughts and feelings from the right hemisphere to the left to express them in words [26].

In general, it is necessary to use competitive method with due consideration of the mentioned features and in some cases replace it by equally effective but less enforced techniques and methods of teaching and stimulating of activity and behavior. Current personality-oriented conception, according to which the educational system focuses on the pupils' interests and needs, involves the evaluation of pupil's achievement not only in comparison with the achievements of other pupils or with the generally accepted standards. Particularly important is the use of subjective (individual) standards to assess the achievements implementing the principle of "today you have become better than yesterday" (instead of "... better than others!") [27].

Conclusion

Our research makes it possible to identify the following situations at foreign language lessons in which the use of the method under study is undesirable:

- tense relations in the group or clearly manifested competitive rivalry in micro-groups – it is better to use project techniques excluding comparison of the results on the principle "better-worse", but providing a qualitative analysis of the completed assignment;
- the presence or predominance in the group of obviously sluggish children (for forms involving the fulfillment of tasks for speed) – in this case the organization of school work, when each pupil can work at his own pace, is preferable;
- increased anxiety, tension of individual pupils or the whole group, especially after stressful or traumatic situations (conflicts, etc.) – it is recommended to conduct exercises for relaxation, apply forms and methods in which each pupil is in a situation of success (for example, mini-projects);

- pupils are very tired – applicable are forms and methods that require minimal cost of physical and mental forces from schoolchildren.

At the same time there are a number of situations at foreign language lessons when the use of competition is possible and advisable:

- to encourage the active work in class with friendly relations between pupils and psychologically comfortable atmosphere in the group;
- in teaching a foreign language to boys;
- in a situation where it is necessary to rally the team to achieve a goal (e.g., competition between classes) or activate the mental activity of pupils to solve a problem (in this case the technique of "brainstorming" is applicable);
- if it is necessary to diversify activity with the aim of revitalizing the perception of the teaching material;
- at the stage of the consolidation of the material to encourage children to use the acquired knowledge and skills effectively.

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