European Research Studies Journal
Volume XX, Issue 4B, 2017

pp. 82 - 98

Blended Learning Russian as a Foreign Language: The Principles of Organization and Implementation Experience

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Abstract:

This article reveals the benefits of implementing "blended learning" in the practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language at the initial stage. The paper presents a brief analysis of the current state of the problem, describes the reasons for insufficient dissemination of blended learning in the Russian educational space and in the sphere of learning Russian as a foreign language.

Then the article presents a complex model of blended learning Russian as a foreign language covering the levels of proficiency from A1 to B1 and describes in detail the components of this model, namely its three components: the stage of independent work with electronic resources, the stage of communication work in a group and the control stage.

Special attention is paid to the principles of organization of independent work of students in the electronic environment, among which the principle of sustaining the motivation in independent learning, the principle of providing comprehensive assistance in the learning process, the principles of maximum variation and filling variability of electronic tasks, etc. play the important role.

The article describes also a component of the classroom communication activities of students under the guidance of a teacher, which is based on the plotted and grammaticalized author's texts. The basic theoretical principles that constitute the description of the developed by the authors blended learning model are illustrated in the article with examples of the tasks, the texts and the presentation material.

Keywords: *blended learning, Russian as a foreign language, learning model, individual work, electronic environment, communication work.*

JEL Classification: *D80, D83*

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1. Introduction

Blended learning (BL) in the modern pedagogy cannot be called an innovation. Originating from distance learning (DL), by 2010, blended learning, compared to its "parent", has become even more widespread. The founders of the development in this direction (Thorne, 2003; Graham, 2006; Picciano, 2009) are convinced that in the future BL will become so commonplace that it will lose its special status, and the term "blended learning" will disappear at all, as it will strongly associate with learning in general. Such a belief is not in vain and is due to the high performance of students mastering the material in any of the subjects, as evidenced by numerous experimental studies in this field (Stein and Graham, 2014; Medvedeva, 2015; Johansen and Cherry-Paul, 2016; Gorina, 2016; Borovin *et. al.*, 2015; Medvedeva *et. al.*, 2015; Sazhin and Saraikin, 2016; Vovchenko *et al.*, 2017; Guskova *et al.*, 2016).

The versatility of BL using separates it from distance learning, which may not be effective in studying every academic discipline. For example, in learning a foreign language, when the success of mastering the material heavily depends on many communication trainings with native speakers, distance learning is noticeably inferior to blended learning by the performance indicators, despite the use of various means of Internet communication (Skype, Viber, etc.) in DL. This is dictated by active use in modern methods of the BL principles in the practice of teaching foreign languages.

Nevertheless, in the Russian educational space, the system of blended learning a language, in particular, Russian as a foreign language (RFL) maintains the status of the experimental one and at the present time is only at the stage of introduction in the educational activities of higher and secondary educational institutions, even in spite of active state policy for informatization of the education sector (Federal Target Program of Education Development for 2016-2020, 2015; State Program of the Russian Federation "Development of Education" for 2013-2020, 2013). This is largely due to lack of experience in using computer technologies in the learning process: teachers of RFL do not see the declared advantages and understand intuitively that work in the classroom allows them to achieve more things, especially at the initial stage of learning. They understand that in this period, when students still do not have work experience with an unfamiliar language material, face constantly with challenges and need the continued assistance of a teacher, it is extremely difficult to organize an effective independent educational activity. To convince teachers of the need to include in their teaching practices modern teaching tools of independent work, without which BL is impossible, one needs serious arguments.

Such arguments can be adduced through the development of a theoretically grounded BL RFL technology and the construction of complex learning models, integrating the independent learning activities and classroom communication work into a single whole. In addition, practical steps are also necessary towards the

creation of innovative learning and teaching tools, both electronic and printed ones, providing functioning of BL RFL models. This problem has determined the relevance of our research, the goal of which is to develop a BL technology at the initial stage of learning RFL (A1-B1) in the pre-university education system, to ensure its work with didactic and methodical materials and to approbate it in the learning process.

Approbation has shown high performance of the learning model we have developed: it allowed teachers to switch over to the BL format rather quickly and painlessly, and new learning tools fully ensured good quality of mastering the subject. Interestingly, it is independent work with the language material that helped foreign students to overcome specific difficulties of Russian grammar quickly and efficiently and to break the established stereotype of the extreme complexity of the Russian language.

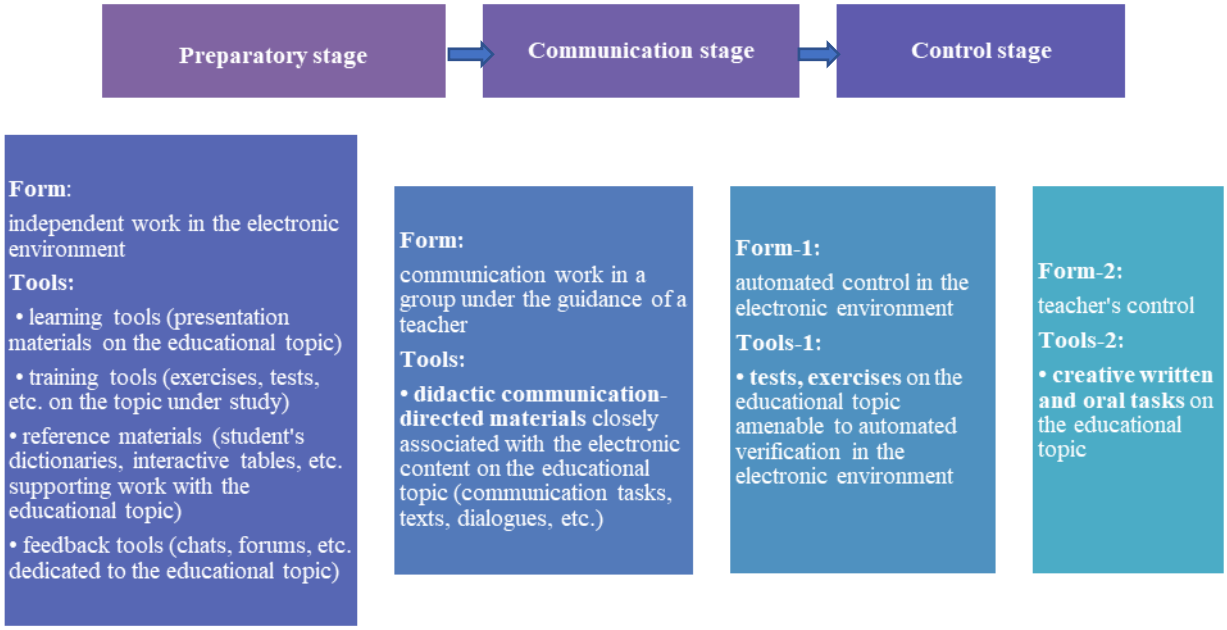
2. The model of blended learning Russian as a foreign language (A1-B1 levels): general principles and stages of learning.

The model of blended learning Russian at A1-B1 levels (from the initial level to the first certificate one) is based on the close relationship of two components: independent and classroom work of students. Independent work takes place in the electronic environment with the support of a tutor-teacher. Classroom work involves communication activities of students in the group under the guidance of a teacher (based on the knowledge obtained during independent work and on the material, closely related to the content of the electronic environment).

In our proposed BL model (Figure 1), the model of studying an educational topic in the system of blended learning RFL), at studying one of the educational topics there are three key stages: preparatory (independent), communication (classroom) and control (Rudenko-Morgun *et al*., 2017). The preparatory stage precedes the classroom communication activities of students and suggests their independent work with the electronic interactive multimedia content. In the methods of learning RFL (and other subject areas), training via electronic means is considered as support of classroom learning activities: after seminars or lectures, students are encouraged to work with electronic practicums or do creative tasks using Internet resources. We do not deny the possibility of such an approach to BL organization. But when we were building our BL model we proceeded from the specifics of the Russian language and the needs of the initial stage of learning RFL.

The specifics of the Russian language are primarily manifested in its inflection (variety of forms). It is this feature that requires many pre-communication training exercises, which are traditionally done at the lesson under the guidance of a teacher. It has so far been impossible to avoid this "routine" work, because only on its basis it was possible to implement learning communication. At the same time, the organization of a full-fledged independent work at the initial stage of learning RFL

Figure 1. *The model of studying an educational topic in the system of blended learning RFL*



has always seemed problematic. The researchers found the causes for it in the fact that the foreigners starting to learn the language are unaware of the new language system, the more so as for some of them (students from developing countries) the Russian language became the first non-native mastered language. In the process of independent work, controlled in a delayed way (in case of checking homework), the students experienced discomfort: they faced with intractable problems, made incorrect conclusions and errors, which unconsciously fixed in their minds and memory. The result was an established opinion that independent work (both the training and the creative one) should be done after similar work in the class. This view was facilitated by the introduction of the communication approach into methods of teaching RFL in the 1980s. As a result, the nationally-directed textbooks, in which the grammatical phenomena were commented in the language of students, were replaced by the communication-directed textbooks "for all" (or rather they could be called "textbooks for teachers"). They were focused on work in the classroom under the guidance of a teacher and could be used independently only after the topic was studied in the class.

With the advent of new information technologies, the situation has changed. There was an opportunity to create electronic interactive multimedia didactic materials explaining linguistic phenomena with the help of translation into the native language of the student, visualizing them with the help of drawings, animations, sound; to

develop the systems of pre-communication exercises, equipped with the feedback and the variable assistance functions (general and contextual), making it possible not only to control the correctness of doing the tasks in a prompt manner, but also to prevent the possibility of making a mistake (and thus not to demonstrate the wrong option of word spelling, sentence and text writing). Such training materials, of course, help to organize a full-fledged independent work of students at the stage preceding the communication, creative work of a teacher, and the platforms with the administration system enable a tutor-teacher to supervise the individual work of students. According to our proposed concept, at the preparatory stage students acquire grammatical knowledge on one of the studied topics and master the essential lexical items and grammatical constructions while doing electronic training tasks.

This approach allows a teacher, bypassing the pre-communication stage, to organize the learning communication activities in the classroom, during which students answer the questions and participate in dialogues and discussions. This work should be based on didactic materials closely related to the content of electronic resources for independent work. It is important to stress that the interconnection of the learning stages in BL RFL model motivates students in the process of independent work. They do it with the attitude that the formed competence will help them to express themselves in the collective best of all.

The final stage of work with the educational topic is the control of learning quality, which in turn is divided into two types: 1) automated control in the electronic environment, checking the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; 2) control exercised by a teacher. Such organization of checking the knowledge of students allows implementing comprehensive control of mastering the topic, diagnosing the level of the achieved competence in all kinds of speech activity, and simultaneously prepares students for the state examination TRKI-1.

3. The organization of the content for independent work in the system of blended learning RFL.

The requirements for the contents and organization of the content of BL RFL model are determined, firstly, by the specificity of learning content at various levels of learning the language, secondly, by the peculiarities of the Russian language and thirdly, by the forms and conditions of learning. Note (without dwelling on it in detail) that the lexico-grammatical filling of the content of the BL RFL course of Russian for students-foreigners (and that is our enrolment), starting to learn Russian, was developed in line with the "Educational Program on Russian as a Foreign Language. Pre-University Training".

Particularly important, complicated and interesting, from our point of view, was the task of organizing the content for the preparatory stage – independent work. Never in terms of full-time learning RFL, the task of doing independent work as

fundamental has not been set. Let us outline and describe the principles that we took as a basis for our research.

The principle of access to necessary information to achieve learning objectives was considered defining because, according to our concept, after the preparatory stage, a student should be ready to switch over to communication work, i.e. the lexico-grammatical material of the topic is to be mastered in independent work mode in full. This implies, in addition to the training exercises system, a detailed grammatical comment in the learner's language (or language-intermediary), dictionaries, grammar tables and other reference material, as well as the ability to access it. To implement this principle, the possibilities of hypertext were maximally used.

The principle of providing comprehensive assistance in the learning process is extremely important for beginners in studying a foreign language independently, especially, if it is characterized by such features as inflection, indirect word order and specific constructions, which are uncharacteristic of the native language or the language intermediary. For this purpose, on the basis of forecasting possible errors and difficulties, we developed a system of variable general and contextual assistance enabling a student to do training exercises successfully. The general assistance is given to the whole task, as a rule, in a grammar comment or a grammar table. If the individual positions of an exercise can be difficult, a student is offered contextual assistance: it can be an excerpt from a grammar comment, translation of a word that cannot be understood, cultural background information and sometimes a drawing or animation.

In the development of the electronic content, we also believe it is necessary to use multimedia for visualization of the linguistic phenomena. In printed educational media for obvious reasons there are practically no illustrations disclosing the meaning of certain grammatical constructions and lexical items. Multimedia technology has opened new unique opportunities for teachers of Russian, providing them with sound, graphics, color, video, but, unfortunately, we cannot say that methods mastered them fully. The development of visual supports as an effective aid in the comprehension of new linguistic phenomena was a priority for us in the creation of electronic content of our BL model. It demonstrates the possibility of inverting direct word order in the Russian sentence depending on the meaning of the utterance.

The first example shows that direct word order (subject first, then object) informs of a regular event: that the stronger opponent defeated the weaker one. However, the second example illustrates unique, unexpected new information: the strong participant was defeated by the weak in appearance opponent. This meaning of an unexpected turn is conveyed by indirect word order (the subject is at the very end of the sentence). The images and inscriptions on the picture are a bright example for the development of visual supports when learning the language.

The principle of sustaining the motivation in independent learning plays an important role. It is known that independent language learning requires a fair amount of effort, patience and ability for self-organization. Therefore, even though at the beginning of learning by BL model the students are given an attitude that their subsequent collective communication learning activities depend on the success of independent work, in spite of self-sufficiency of the electronic content in terms of assistance, we provided constant support for students by a teacher-tutor through forums and chats.

The principle of communication importance of units of language helps to avoid a formal approach to the training exercises. It does not only sustain the motivation, but also facilitates the transition to the collective communication learning activities at the lesson, as it allows students to master grammatical constructions and provides them with speech patterns that are relevant for communication. Here is an example of one of the tasks as it is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *The task with speech patterns*

Exercise 4. Read the replicas from the right. Complete the sentences from the left. Put the conjunction or the conjunction-words in the sentences with the indirect speech. Take note of verbs in bold. How do you think why these verbs are used?	
1. "Young man, the Bolshoi Theatre is situated in the centre on the Theatre Square. This is metro station "Teatralnaya"	*A policeman **explained** to a foreigner,… the Bolshoi Theatre is situated*
2. "John, the exam will be next month, in January"	*The teacher **told** the student, ... the exam will be in January*
3. "Vera! I had a good rest on Sunday. This morning I slept long, then went shopping and bought a very beautiful dress. And in the evening, I went to the disco"	*A friend **told** Vera, … she had a good rest on Sunday*
4. "Carlos, why do you ask when you can call me? Call me anytime. I'm always happy to hear from you"	*Anna **answered** Carlos, … he could call her at any time*
5. "Mary, I'm always glad to help you. But today I can't. I'm very busy. I'll have control work tomorrow. I should be preparing"	*A friend **explained** to Mary, ... he could not help her*

The principle of maximum variation of electronic tasks types, which, unfortunately, is often neglected by the developers of language electronic trainers limiting themselves to the most common ones (selection and typing-in), certainly increases the interest in the training work. Thanks to it, the uniformity of the operations is overcome, and, most importantly, it is possible to solve different didactic tasks considering the specificity of the language material and the requirements of ergonomics.

When we talk about the specificity of the language material, we have the following. At the stage of the introductory-phonetic course (A1 level), the students primarily work on such small units of language as a sound, a syllable, a word. Therefore, when developing electronic resources for this stage we used, together with others, the

types of tasks on single and multiple choice, selection from the drop-down list, move items around and keyboard input more actively. At the next stages, the tasks enabling to work with a text were the first; they are mostly on restoration (replacement) text fragments or highlighting them by one (or more) colors.

The didactic task has also a significant impact on the choice of the electronic task type. Naturally, learning search tasks are solved by tasks for selection: mark the check-boxes, select the object from the drop-down list, move the object to the text (or picture), select the object in the text (or picture). If we set the task of the phenomena classification before the students, we should pay attention to the tasks, allowing them to find common or distinguishing features of units of language. This is connection of the objects with arrows (for example, when establishing the letter-sound ties), the distribution of the objects in the table (for example, when working with antonyms), marking the objects with different colors (for example, when searching for the imperfective and perfective verbs in the text).

It is also necessary to remember the requirements of ergonomics, i.e. when choosing a certain type of the task, one should think of how easy it will be for a student to work with: does the task locate on the screen or, vice versa, leaves most of the screen unused. For example, the distribution of the objects in the table, when working with a text of considerable size, is better to replace with a task on marking them with a different color in the text.

The principle of filling variability of tasks enables to do one exercise several times thanks to the variety of the lexical items that fill it. It is well known that the study of grammar and vocabulary of any language requires, in addition to acquaintance with the material, its continuous repetition and consolidation in the process of doing numerous exercises, formation of a skill of competent using lexical items in speech, and in the end, mastering this skill to automatism. The principle of alternativeness and filling variability of tasks is one of the most important for the formation of such skills. By following this principle, one and the same grammatical phenomenon can be demonstrated and trained in numerous variants of the same model. For example, as shown in Figure "The task with options for filling", the formation of finite verb forms with suffix *ova* is trained by several examples of this task filling. With this approach, students can do one exercise repeatedly without losing interest in it.

4. Classroom communication work in blended learning RFL

After independent work with a certain grammatical topic in the electronic environment, with all the knowledge acquired while such work (grammar constructions, vocabulary, endings, verbs, etc.), students will be prepared (and this is proved by the experiment – see below) to switch over to communication work in the classroom under the guidance of a teacher. This work, according to our model, is based on working with texts for reading and a special task system to them.

All texts are plotted, and it is very important for communication. A pivotal role is played by naturalness of recreated real-life situations and the use of a given collision for dialogue. The need to teach based on situations is recognized by all teachers, but is understood differently. It is important to know that the description of the situation is not the situation itself, because it is not able to motivate statements, and, therefore, cannot develop speech skills. A desire to participate in communication appears only in the real or recreated situation affecting the interests of the speakers (Passov, 1991). That is why it was important for us that the plot of the educational text should be natural and, most importantly, could interest students in a current life problem. The plotted texts enabled us to eliminate the formal approach to work with the learning material: to recreate situations close to reality and simulate the immersion in the language environment.

The plot also helps to sustain the attention of students. Attention is a necessary condition of conscious human activity, and its role is particularly great if we are talking about the learning activities. Attention is inextricably linked with interest, because in such a state of consciousness the emotional and intellectual impulses are combined (Rubinshtein, 2002). One of the main objectives of the foreign language course is to induce and control a learner's attention, to interest him or her, to captivate, thereby increasing his/her motivation in the mastery of the studied subject. The plotted educational texts, which we considered as a basis for communication activities in the classroom, are one of the means to do it.

If the communication tasks are based on the plot of the interesting text, students are convinced of the continuity of the connection between the grammatical and semantic meanings and realize that they need to master them if they want to understand an interlocutor and to be understood by him/her as in Table 2. Communication tasks to the text there are some tasks that accompany one of the plotted texts of our aid.

Table 2. *Communication tasks to the text*

1. a) Read the replicas. Say (write) what mom, dad, brother and grandma advised Oleg. ***b) Advise Oleg to do something.***	***2. Give advice to your friends. Use the imperatives of verbs "speak", "get acquainted", "quarrel", "date" and "pay attention to".***
1. Mom: "Now you can't get involved with girls. You need to engage in learning". Mother advised Oleg .... 2. Dad: "Talk to your elder brother". Dad advised Oleg .... 3. Elder brother: "Tell your girlfriend that you like her, kiss her". The elder brother advised Oleg .... 4. Grandma: "You must get acquainted with her parents and introduce father, mother and me to them". The grandmother advised Oleg …	1. Your boyfriend (girlfriend) wants to prematurely take the exams. The dean may allow it. 2. Your boyfriend (girlfriend) likes the girl (young man) very much. 3. Your boyfriend (girlfriend) is telling his (her) parents something unpleasant all the time. Then they don't talk to him (her) for long. 4. Your boyfriend (girlfriend) has a new girl (young man). You don't like this new girl (this young man) very much.

3. Answer the questions. 1. What began to get involved in Oleg's friends in high school? 2. What was Oleg engaged in, interested in, fond of? 3. What was Maya interested in? 4. What, in mom's opinion, should her son be interested in? What shouldn't he be interested in? 5. What are you engaged in, interested in, fond of?	***4. Choose the answers to the questions, justify your decision.*** 1) Who is the main character (heroine) of the story? a. mom b. dad c. elder brother d. Oleg e. Maya 2) What about / whom about is this story? a. first love b. adults and young people c. children and parents d. other 3) What about did the author of the story want to tell? a. you need to be a resolute man. b. it is not always useful to listen to advice. c. parents often do not understand young people. d. other

As you can see, each task relying on the text, allows a teacher to organize a dialogue, a discussion with the students appealing to their needs and interests. The educational texts, despite the lexico-grammatical limitations (each is designed for a specific grammar topic) are written in a lively and natural language. At the same time, they are grammaticalized, i.e. include all the studied grammar constructions and practically do not use unfamiliar to students forms and lexical items. Saturation with the studied grammatical forms gives the texts high linguo-didactic value.

As an example, here is a text fragment included in the section of prepositional case, studied by students in full at A2 level (basic level). Students are not yet familiar with plural forms and diverse meanings of other cases. They (according to A1 level) are only familiar with singular forms of nouns in all cases and with their base meanings. So, the fragment is presented in Table 3.

Table 4. *The text fragment for the prepositional case*

"This is a story about me, my younger brother Anton, his friend Victor and my latest January winter school holidays. Of the winter holidays I began to dream in November. First, I decided that I would go in for sports: I would ski in the winter snowy forest. But we lived in a big city, in the center, and the forest was very far away. "I shall go to the forest by bus, I thought. The bus stop is in the next street". Then I decided that I would go to the rink and skate as there are ice rinks in every park and square in winter. In January holidays began. My plans changed..."

Please note how functioning of various meanings of the prepositional case is shown in this small fragment. The meaning of the object of thought and speech ("Of the winter holidays I began to dream...") and the attributive meaning of the prepositional case ("the story about me, my younger brother Anton...") are realized in it. Both the

function of time ("in November") and the meaning of the scene ("we lived in a big city, in the center...") and the meaning of the vehicle ("go... by bus") are also demonstrated. There are the forms of nouns, pronouns and adjectives in the fragment. So many meanings and forms are reflected in the small extract, which on top of that is interesting to read, as there is the beginning of the intrigue in it. This extract is written in the "real" (not emasculated) Russian language, and at the same time accessible to students of this level, without much new and unfamiliar words. It is important to note that all texts are supplied with lexico-grammatical comments and references to the educational dictionaries (in places where students meet unfamiliar names, place-names or names of famous personalities of Russia and the world). These assistance tools enable to explain culturally significant units of language and form the Russian cultural background in consciousness of students.

Acquaintance with the texts can take place both in the classroom and in the independent work mode in the electronic environment. In some cases, independent work with the text is more efficient, since each student has time for careful reading, translation, listening, memorizing the new vocabulary and acquaintance with the comments. After reviewing the text, students are encouraged to do the tasks, which are divided into two types: 1) grammar tasks and 2) communication tasks. A teacher can proceed from his/her personal experience and the needs of the audience of students. Strong groups of students can read the text in the electronic environment independently and do grammar tasks. When working in weak groups, a teacher can transfer acquaintance with the text and doing all tasks into the audience to prevent possible misunderstandings of the material or errors and to verify the degree of mastering grammar topics.

However, the second type of the tasks to the text – the communication tasks – involves only one form of working with them: group communication in the classroom under the guidance of a teacher. Such tasks were developed with only one purpose – organization of many communication situations in the classroom on the texts materials as much as possible.

The communication tasks include various types of exercises, among which we can mention the following most common ones: 1) "true or not true" (where it is necessary to read the judgments and determine whether they are true; and if not, to formulate a truthful statement); 2) work with dialogues (where it is necessary to complete, add replicas, to construct a dialogue and so on); 3) doing the test on understanding the main idea of the text and explanation of his/her own choice, participation in the discussion of the main idea; 4) answers to the problem questions on the text; 5) conversation with a teacher about his/her personal experience close to the theme of the text.

Work with the communication tasks becomes the final stage in the study of one of the topical sections of our model. This is the stage that provides access to the speech of students after independent work with grammar material and doing exercises. This

stage helps to form the ability of students to participate in spontaneous communication, create own utterances and texts and overcome the language barrier. This is communication work in the classroom that has a key and decisive role in achieving success when learning the language by blended learning model. The main classroom time with a teacher in the group is dedicated to communication when learning the topic. Moreover, a teacher should have a creative approach to the organization of this work, transforming this learning activity into real intensive communication training.

Note that the classroom work also includes one of the kinds of control – doing control work (see above "Model of blended learning Russian as a foreign language (A1-B1 levels): general principles and stages of learning"). This activity completes the classroom work with the topic, according to the proposed model.

The control materials we developed to test knowledge in the classroom include five tasks. The first task is theoretical and invites students to find in the spoken or printed text (depending on the desired degree of complexity) examples of the required units of language and write them in, spreading over the table. The second and third tasks are grammar ones and offer students various types of actions (e.g., ask the correct grammatical question to the selected units of language or put the selected units of language in the correct (required by the context) form and much more). The fourth task is lexico-grammatical and is focused on work with the vocabulary in the same degree as grammar (for example, replace the highlighted units of language by the synonymous ones or convert direct speech into indirect, etc.). Finally, the fifth task is oral: students are offered to retell the text and answer the teacher's questions after that.

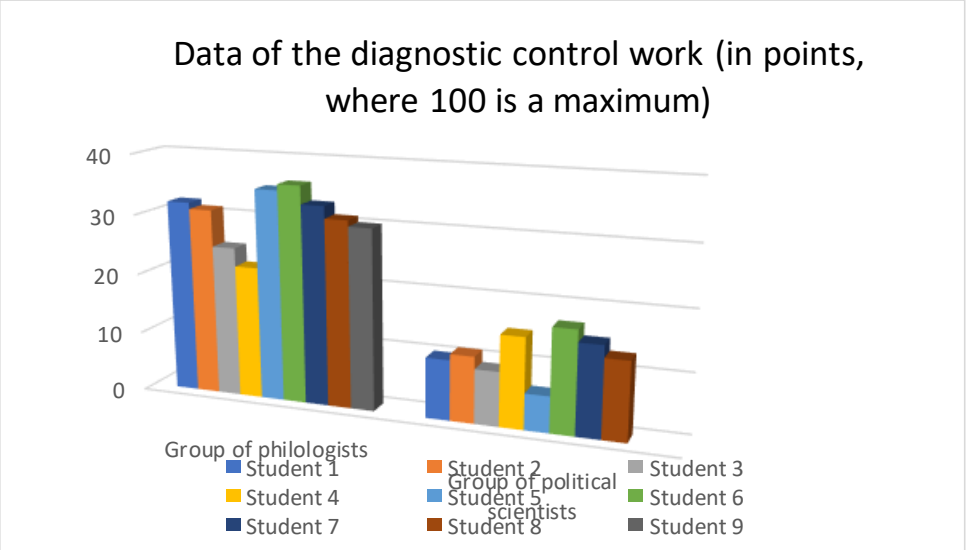
As one can see, the control works offered to the students to do in the classroom are complex and test the ability of students to listen, write, read and speak in Russian. Such organization of checking the quality of training students allows teachers to fully control mastering the theme, and test the development of skills in all kinds of speech activity. This in turn helps to prepare students for the state exam on the possession of the first certificate level (TRKI-1).

5. Results and discussion

Our proposed blended learning model and materials that support it were experimentally tested in the process of teaching foreign students-philologists and students-political scientists at the faculty of the Russian Language and General Educational Disciplines, from October to January of 2015 and 2016 academic years. Because of testing the model, we obtained the performance indicators, which, in comparison with the indicators of the groups that studied the material by the traditional learning system, indicate a better, faster and more qualitative mastery of the subject through using the BL model, as well as materials and means supporting it.

For pilot learning, we deliberately selected the profile study groups of philologists and political scientists, namely experts in the field of the language and non-specialists. The performance indicators of both groups were different at the beginning of the study (see "Figure 2. Data of the diagnostic control work"): it is obvious that philologists have demonstrated the best knowledge of the Russian language compared to the political scientists. However, at the end of pilot learning, both groups showed almost the same high indicators of achievement (see "Figure 3. Data of the final control work") on the subject which cannot but indicate the effectiveness of the proposed BL model.

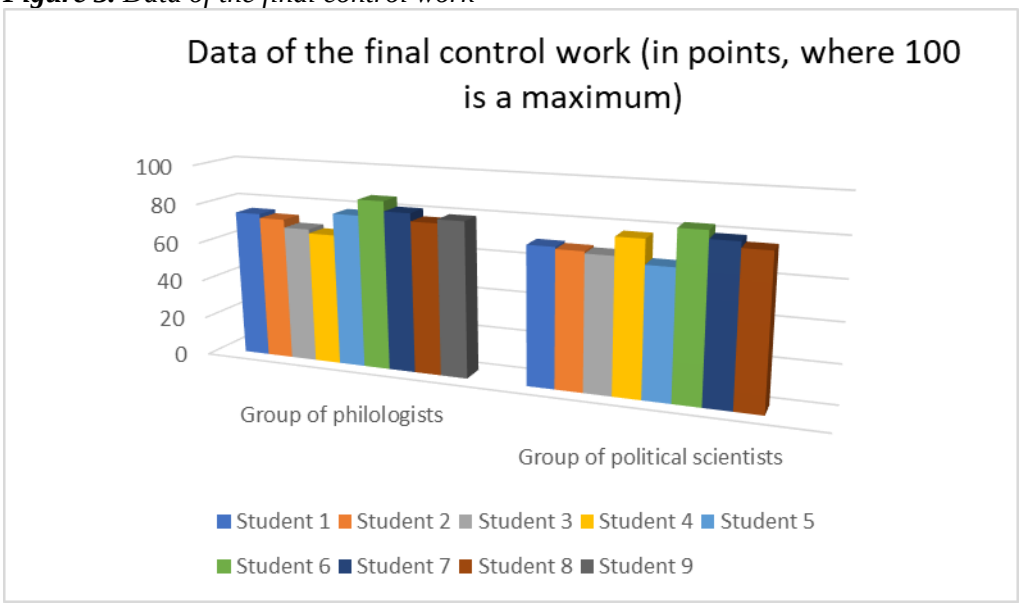
Figure 2. *Data of the diagnostic control work*



For comparison, we note that the final control work, ending the course of the basic level of language proficiency (A2), was also done in the non-experimental group of foreign students-journalists who studied the language by the conventional learning model using the traditional printed educational tools during independent work. The average academic performance of these students was 57 points out of 100. This figure can hardly be called testifying of the successful mastery of the topics.

Upon completion of training, an anonymous survey on the degree of complexity of the Russian language was carried out in the experimental groups. The data, which was obtained in the survey, cannot but joy – see "Figure 4. The results of the survey of foreigners on the complexity of the Russian language". The idea that the Russian language is equal in complexity to other foreign languages was the most popular (voted for by 88% of the respondents). The students were also asked to describe the

Figure 3. *Data of the final control work*

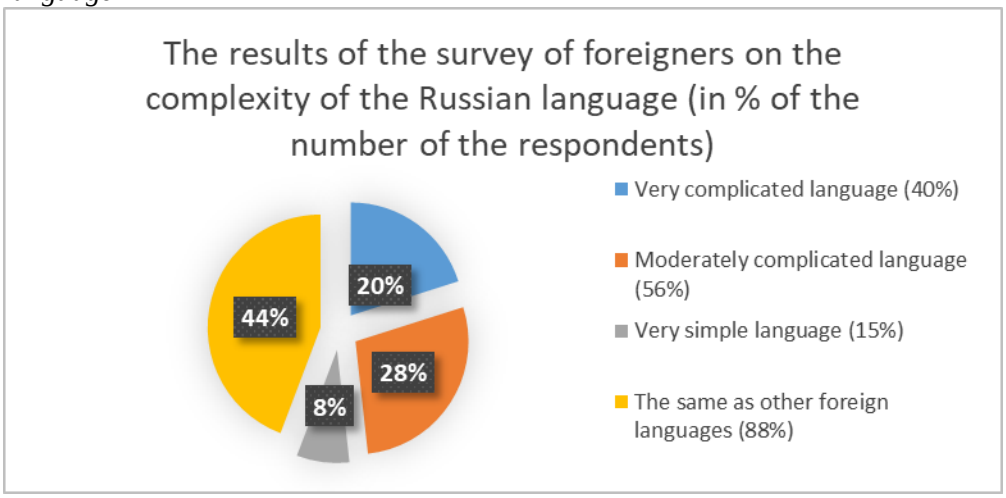


Russian language in several of the proposed items ("chaotic", "logical", "harmonious", "illogical", "incomprehensible", etc.). Thus, 75% of the respondents selected the "logic" and "orderly" nature of the grammatical system of the Russian language; 83% marked "flexibility" and "expressiveness" of the language compared to only 13% who noted the "chaotic" and “illogical” character of the target language. These results convince us of the opinion about the extreme importance of the effective methods of teaching the Russian language, among which blended learning is rightly in one of the first places.

The results of experimental testing of the blended learning model, described in the paper, not without reason can be called successful and positive. In addition to the increased rate of students' achievement, our proposed BL model, materials and tools that fill it also helped greatly to enhance the learning process for teachers; they noted the orderliness of the elements in the model content, accessibility and effectiveness of the used learning tools and operational efficiency of solving the set pedagogical tasks.

Further developments of such learning models, covering all levels of learning Russian – from the elementary (A1) to the advanced one (C1-C2) – remain an urgent task for modern methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language, which is waiting for a speedy solution, as the Russian language by right and not by chance remains in demand in the sphere of international contacts and relations.

Figure 4. *The results of the survey of foreigners on the complexity of the Russian language*



6. Conclusion

Blended learning the Russian language in the Russian educational space maintains the status of the pilot one, as there are no theoretically justified complex models of blended learning RFL in the Russian methods;

Foreigners who begin to study the Russian language, for objective reasons (the communicative approach of teaching materials, the history of the Russian language development) face with many difficulties, overcoming of which is possible only at continuous repetition and consolidation of the material in the process of doing numerous exercises.

A computer is a tool to develop skill in students of competent use of lexical items in speech, and, finally, bring the skill to automatism. However, the use of this powerful tool must be closely associated with the classroom communication trainings.

There is a long overdue need for the development of the model of blended learning the Russian language contributing to the formation of students' understanding of our language as a harmonious, logical and orderly system of linguistic phenomena. In our research, we took a successful, as shown by the results of experimental learning, shot to create such a model, the content of which now covers all educational topics of A1-B1 levels.

Our proposed blended learning model includes three stages of acquaintance with one grammar topic: 1) preparatory stage (stage of independent work with electronic resources, with the support of a tutor-teacher); 2) communication stage (work in the classroom under the guidance of a tutor-teacher); 3) control stage, which includes both electronic and classroom control.

The electronic resources for independent work are organized according to six key principles: 1) the principle of access to necessary information to achieve learning objectives; 2) the principle of providing comprehensive assistance in the learning process; 3) the principle of maintaining motivation during independent work; 4) the principle of communicative importance of units of language; 5) the principle of maximum variation of electronic tasks types; 6) the principle of filling variability of tasks.

Classroom communication work involves students' work with plotted and grammaticalized texts, as well as a special system of tasks to them, including grammar exercises and communication tasks. Upon completion of work on the topic, students pass two forms of control: electronic and classroom.

Experimental testing of the model was carried out from October to January 2015 and 2016 in the study groups of foreign students-philologists and students-political scientists at the faculty of the Russian Language and General Educational Disciplines of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. The experimental results show the effectiveness of the proposed model of blended learning the Russian language for all students, regardless of their initial language proficiency level and profile (philologists, political scientists, etc.). Also, according to the surveys of students in the experimental groups, the used blended learning model contributes to changing the established stereotype of the Russian language as one of the most difficult languages in the world. Instead of students' old stereotype using special tools and a new learning model a view of the Russian language as the orderly, harmonious, logically and historically conditioned, flexible and very expressive language is formed. The experimental results show the need for further developments in the field of blended learning Russian as a foreign language creating new blended learning models and tools to support them.

7. Acknowledgement

The publication was prepared with the support of the "RUDN University Program 5-100".

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