Sociocultural competence as one of the core competencies of the individual

Competencia sociocultural como una de las competencias centrales del individuo

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Contents

ABSTRACT:

In present study the author examines the problem of development of social competence as a key competence of the person. There is a growing role of intercultural contacts, so the sociocultural problem becomes more urgent. In particular the article addresses to the problem of sociocultural knowledge formation and its cultural, linguacultural, socio-psychological, sociolinguistic, linguistic, informational and communicational aspects as maturity of sociocultural knowledge indicates the development of social competence. An experiment was conducted during the study. It was concluded that sociocultural knowledge makes the development of social competence possible.
Keywords Sociocultural knowledge, sociocultural competence, dialogue of cultures, linguistic identity

RESUMEN:

En el presente estudio el autor examina el problema del desarrollo de la competencia social como una competencia clave de la persona. Hay un papel cada vez mayor de los contactos interculturales, por lo que el problema sociocultural se vuelve más urgente. En particular, el artículo aborda el problema de la formación de conocimientos socioculturales y sus aspectos culturales, linguacultural, socio-psicológicos, sociolingüísticas, lingüísticos, informativos y comunicacionales como madurez de los conocimientos socioculturales indica el desarrollo de la competencia social. Durante el estudio se realizó un experimento. Se concluye que el conocimiento sociocultural hace posible el desarrollo de la competencia social.
Palabras clave conocimiento sociocultural, competencia sociocultural, diálogo de culturas, identidad lingüística

1. Introduction

In recent years the problem of integration of cultural components in the process of training and education with the help of foreign languages has attracted teachers' attention. The increasing

intensity of contacts between nations and countries determines the change in the sociocultural priorities of language education. The task is to teach a foreign language not only as a means of communication but also to shape linguistic identity. This fact causes the appearance of new concepts in the field of foreign language teaching. They are concepts of intercultural communication and sociocultural training.

Since the main objective of any interactive process is the desire to be understood by communication partner the efficiency of communication is directly related to the achieved level of mutual understanding between communicants. In order to achieve mutual understanding partners should have willingness and ability for communication and participation in the dialogue of cultures that implies the presence of their sociocultural competence. Sociocultural education and sociocultural competence gradually became an important aspect of modern educational concepts. This is especially true for foreign language classes. The problems of sociocultural competence were studied by E. Hexelschneider, V.V. Safonova, S.V. Serebryakova, J. Bolten, F. Herbrand and V.N. Dulganova.

The sociocultural concept of training and education comes from the fact that daily contact with foreign languages and cultures reflects people's everyday life around the world. Therefore a lesson of foreign language should encourage learners to have appropriate free communication in foreign languages and foreign cultures and make them capable of cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural communication provides a high level of knowledge about own culture and culture of the country of studied language. There is the following definition of language where it is understood as a mirror (reflection) of reality in the minds of certain linguistic and cultural community. Therefore the language cannot be taught and learned without studying the society where native speakers live. This means that trainees need information about natural environment and live of members of another culture and political system, economic and cultural development. Only discussions about cultural characteristics of the country where the language is spoken, as well as familiarity with the problems of everyday life can awaken interest to the unknown culture and language, and deeper understanding of it (Vartanov, 2003).

In general, there are two trends in contemporary sociocultural training:

First trend: the need to have knowledge that gives learners the opportunity to use a foreign language as a means of communication.

Second trend: lessons of foreign language and culture assist for deeper understanding of another country and its people. At the same time it is necessary to encourage learners to study their own language and their own culture.

Knowledge of a foreign language have some value only if it is associated with cultural knowledge, values, norms, behavior, perceptions and stereotypes of native speakers. Connection between the use of language and social relations plays a crucial role. Hence the important goal of foreign language classes is achieving language activity competence that is often described as the ability of discourse (Thomas, 2003).

The aim of foreign language classes is to achieve broad activity competence which is not limited to grammatical and lexical knowledge but is committed to an integrated language and cultural knowledge. Such competence cannot be monocultural i.e. cannot be directed to only one culture. It should have a cross-cultural expression. True interculturality embraces not only its own action in a foreign language and cultural society, but also the actions of representative of another culture in a foreign language and cultural society (Meijer, 1998).

Despite the willingness of both sides to communicate, cross-cultural misunderstandings can always happen, since the communication partners do not have certain knowledge about traditions, religious peculiarities, taboos, norms and values or extra-linguistic rules of another culture. It should be noted that the farther distant is from each other's culture the greater is the likelihood of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Thus, sociocultural competence covers the following aspects:

-achieving competence in a foreign culture and at the same time the formation of this competence;

-reflections of own culture and the ability to talk about it in a foreign language;

-achieving intercultural understanding, which leads to respect for others and tolerance (Thomas, 2003).

2. Methodology

During the study we used our traditional teaching methods: theoretical and empirical. We applied theoretical analysis of the literature, analysis of basic concepts and research terms of study, construction of experimental hypotheses as theoretical methods. Empirical methods are intended for creating, collecting and organizing empirical material. These include questioning, the method of measurement and control, pedagogical experiment.

Formation of social competence, by which we mean the complex knowledge of values, beliefs, behavioral patterns, customs, traditions, language and cultural achievements, characteristic of a particular society and its characteristics, occurs in the framework of sociocultural education and training, that is in the process of familiarizing the individual to cultural and national traditions of the country of studied language (Safonova, 1996).

It is impossible to form a socio-cultural competence without acquisition of sociocultural knowledge, since the sociocultural knowledge is necessary not only as a means of communication with representatives of the foreign language culture, but also as a means to enrich the spiritual world of the individual on the basis of the knowledge about the culture of the target language country. Sociocultural knowledge includes knowledge of social and cultural life, the knowledge and experience of own and foreign language culture, the possession of own and foreign language, the ability to recognize and analyze the situation, to give it an adequate assessment, to find ways of solving problems and achieve set goals (Herbrand, 2008).

Sociocultural competence makes cross-cultural communication possible in the context of socio-pedagogical foundations of civil peace and accordance that combines the idea of world globalization, humanization, cultural studies, social and ecological objectives and content of training. Therefore the presence of sociocultural competence is the paramount of socio-pedagogical concept of foreign language teaching in the spirit of the world, in the context of the dialogue of cultures. We agree with V.V. Safonova that the basic provisions of social competence are the following:

- The need for a preliminary study of the sociocultural situation in the country and national environment before learning foreign languages;

- Develop bicultural language education by changing its content, socialization, humanization, education, education for peace, and respect for human rights;

- Mandatory sociocultural components are linguacultural, regional studies, socio-linguistic and general cultural. This opens up opportunities for vocational training and humanitarian youth-participants in the dialogue of cultures. It should form the cultural and historical identity, able to combine the general cultural and communicative ability to use a foreign language as a means not only to cross-cultural communication, but also as an analysis and generalization of the achievements of co-studied cultures, the role of these cultures in the world heritage, multilingualism and multiculturalism, which is the main feature of the modern multicultural world;

- Sociocultural competence makes it possible to navigate in the authentic language environment, allowing you to anticipate and thus avoiding the possible sociocultural interference, resulting in a different sociocultural environment. It forms a sociocultural knowledge of the countries and nations of the target language and country (Dulganova, 2004).

- The basis for sociocultural competence is cultural studies, which give a true picture of the country's sociocultural portrait of the target language, including historical and cultural knowledge, values and peoples lifestyle. This suggests that learning foreign language as a means of intercultural communication directly related to the knowledge of the world and national culture, the interaction of the individual and society, various members of society to each other;

- For successful solution of problems aimed at forming social competence it is necessary to include various sociocultural tasks in pedagogical process. Among them are: cognitive retrieval, cognitive research, role-playing communication games, a variety of projects and discussions that have identity forming potential, promote the development of communication culture and cognition and most important a high level of formation of foreign language communicative competence. It is necessary to pay special attention to bicultural development of students as subjects of the dialogue of cultures;

- Sociocultural background of the native environment of students plays major role in the formation of the right sociocultural outlook of trainees who study foreign languages. It includes social and political life in their home country, historical, cultural, aesthetic, ethnic standards of own social and cultural environment, as well as the attitude towards country of foreign language (Safonova, 2008).

Thus, the formation of sociocultural competence is aimed at the development of trainees' worldview and understanding of own country history and people and themselves as the bearer of national values. Formation of trainees' communicative culture for developing of their spiritual potential and development of self-education needs. To achieve this, you must follow the basic principles of sociocultural competence, which are: to teach foreign language communication in the context of the dialogue of cultures, preparation of students through intercultural dialogue to peacekeeping and humanization of educational environment. It is compliance with these principles that creates favorable conditions for the study of culture of the target language countries relying on world culture and redefining themselves and their own culture in the mirror of the world culture (Baumer, 2005).

The aim of the sociocultural learning is not only the knowledge own and other cultures but also an ability to estimate own culture critically.

Teaching foreign language in class is not just about language knowledge. Knowledge and skills in sociocultural sphere are essential in communicative competence. Many Western curricula for foreign language contain requirement that students should acquire sociocultural competence (Hexelschneider, 2010).

In this case we are talking about: 1) functional knowledge 2) information from everyday life 3) expansion of spiritual horizons 4) comparison of own and foreign cultures with the aim to know own (and foreign) culture as one of the many others.

This last condition that contributes to development of intercultural awareness is that trainees should be aware that alongside with differences there are many similarities between the cultures and the trainees learn how to express not only negative but also positive judgment. The consequence of such training should be an open attitude towards other cultures.

It is important to highlight the criteria of sociocultural competence:

- The functionality of the content. This means that knowledge which is important to students should be given. For example providing a large number of texts about countries of the target language. This type of providing regional geographic knowledge is called cognitive (Böhm, 2009);

- To be able to communicate effectively with native speakers, learners need to have knowledge of geography, politics, social sphere, culture and science. This criterion is based on the statement that sociocultural competence can be applied only in the context where it is offered. Under the context we mean the complex of political, socio-economic and cultural facts that are

critical to the production and reproduction of speech samples. This criterion is very important to ensure that learners can feel an authentic situation and thus they could respond to another foreign culture (Bolten, 2007).

Russian teachers highlight the following criteria for evaluation of regional studies content:

- Verity. Verity of information requires authentic texts and situational accuracy;
- Conception. Typical points which are essential to understand in the target language at the same time it is necessary to foster awareness of internal diversity and variety;
- Realistic image. A realistic image of target language culture should be provided this also includes the conflicts and problems that arise in a given society (Serebryakova, 2000);
- Compliance with the audience. The content should be age-appropriate, interesting and understandable; and should allow the opportunity to compare, evaluate, develop common features of culture;
- Interculturality. This criterion concerns sociocultural competence which we define as the ability to recognize common and different features between own and foreign culture, consciously and successfully treat it in the target language;
- An important tool for sociocultural competence is the comparison and understanding: cultural comparison always occurs on the background of own culture (Foldes, 2007).

Sociocultural training enables trainees to engage their own and other cultures, develop an understanding and take part in intercultural communication.

Thus, sociocultural competence is: 1) knowledge of universal cultural values system; 2) knowledge of native culture set of values and forms and methods of their manifestation in the institutions of society, behavior pattern of people, linguistic picture of the world, acceptable speech practices; 3) knowledge of cultural values system of the studied language, forms and methods of its implementation in the state system, media behaviors, their speech;

4) knowledge of interaction principles between cultural beliefs and norms in the meeting of different cultures; 5) the ability to isolate cultural values by observing other cultures and interact with them without referring to them in direct questions (Maletzke, 2013).

Thus, the definition of sociocultural competence is the following: knowledge of national and cultural characteristics of the countries of studied language, norms of verbal and non-verbal behavior and ability to regulate their conduct in accordance with this knowledge in real-life situations of communication.

The interaction of cultures gives rise to communication and dialogue. M. Bakhtin characterized it the following way: "The unity of culture is an open unity: alien culture reveals fully and deeply only in the eyes of another culture » (Thomas, 2003).

Based on analysis of different approaches to the definition of sociocultural competence thesis about inseparability of language learning from simultaneous study of target language country culture by trainees its history and modern life is viewed both as a mirror of national culture and therefore we can conclude that sociocultural aspect should be a constant integral part of training process and education. This makes it possible to identify the main objectives of sociocultural competence formation:

- Upbringing educational objective is aimed at humanization of education, education in spirit of intercultural dialogue and raise of understanding and tolerance in relation to foreign culture ability to treat it with respect but at the same time in a critical manner; expression of interest into contact with a different culture perception of own and foreign cultural values. Upbringing by means of a foreign language and subjects of humanitarian cycle involves formation of trainees' understanding of language skills importance as a means of communication in modern world, tolerant attitude towards other cultures, evaluative attitude to themselves, other people and the world, and active life position (Minshawi, 2003);

- General educational aim facilitates the realization of sociocultural background in the process of interaction with the elements of other cultures, understanding and interpretation of cultural relations;

- Developing aim enables the use of sociocultural background for understanding and interpretation of sociocultural elements, a guide to value of their own and other categories of the society, to develop a willingness to make choices, to make decisions, to formulate their own point of view. Development and training of students is carried out in the process of involving them in design, research, search, creative work, significant both for trainees, as well as for other people speaking foreign language;

- Practical aim helps to communicate tolerant in different situations with respect to the communication partner, to use it in direct contact with appropriate speech means, to use knowledge of sociocultural background in professional activity (Serebryakova, 2000).

Russian scientists propose the following model of social competence by highlighting two aspects:

1. linguistic, which includes:

a) Foreign language training (learning a foreign language and culture of the target language through language);

b) Sociolinguistic (the use of language in different social situations);

2. Informational which includes:

a) Information about culture:

- Cultural achievements (music, literature, folklore, artifacts);

- Etiquette (accepted norms of behavior at home and in society, firstly, politeness strategies);

- Clothes;

- Traditions of national cuisine;

- Language of non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, etc.);

- Sounds issued when expressing surprise, indignation, joy;

- Values and customs, (committed daily deeds and actions that characterize life of a country);

- System of education, social institutions;

b) Regional geography (information about geographical position of the country, climate, political and economic systems, etc.).

Currently, there are the following methods of formation of sociocultural competence:

1) Comparative method includes various kinds of discussion. Traditions and customs are discussed at classes, which differ greatly from native culture.

2) Method of "critical incidents" aimed at identifying differences in verbal and nonverbal communication. Under this method the trainee is offered a description of the incident in communion, in which the interaction of different cultures is difficult because of cultural differences and lack of understanding of the situation by one of the partners.

3) The method of "culture capsules". It emphasizes one of the differences in culture, for example, the difference between the customers in Germany and Russia.

4) Role-playing game. The teacher gives the task to group to hold a party, which will be attended by representatives of another culture. Students must meet the guests, according to etiquette. They should not forget about the use of jokes, anecdotes, as very often unsuccessful communication caused by a lack of understanding of humor. The teacher and the rest of the trainees shall not only observe but also evaluate critically verbal and nonverbal communication of trainees. The increasing intensity of contacts between peoples and countries determines the change in sociocultural priorities of language education. The task of learning a foreign language is not only as a means of communication, but also as the formation of "cultural and linguistic identity" that determines the appearance of new concepts in the field of teaching foreign languages, namely the concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural learning.

Sociocultural competence includes three blocks of knowledge:

- Linguistic regional geography knowledge - the knowledge of lexical units with the national-cultural semantics and ability to apply them in situations of intercultural communication;

- Socio-psychological knowledge possession of sociocultural conditioned scenarios, national-specific behaviors using communication technology adopted in a given culture;

- Cultural knowledge - knowledge of sociocultural, historical, cultural, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the ability to use them to reach an understanding with representatives of this culture (Földes, 2007).

According to the theory of sociocultural training mastering foreign language means deep entering into the individual and collective mentality and culture of another nation and assumes familiarity with views, estimates and experience of cultural community, since every national language is cultural identity image of the world, consisting of elements and phenomena, inherent and essential for people. That is why optimally organized process of foreign language teaching can prepare a person to tolerant perception of other cultures, to empathy and the "blurring" of inappropriate stereotypes. Overall that means to prepare the person ready to adequate intercultural communication.

The concept of sociocultural competence considers:

1) features of social communication, national and cultural norms of sociocultural behavior and knowledge of speech etiquette and ritual of communication;

2) features of national heritage: art and cultural values;

3) features of national character of people.

Formation of social competence can be achieved not only by means of foreign languages, original literature, media, Internet; movies can also be a significant addition. Solution of sociocultural challenges requires new ways, means and methods of training the choice of which depends on the defined objectives and subject content training.

The new concept of sociocultural education requires development of new generation of textbooks, taking into account the cultural identity of everyday and professional communication of own country and countries of the target language. The most important condition for the development of sociocultural competence is to provide students relevant didactic material on the cross-cultural basis (Lewis, 2007).

3. Results

Development of sociocultural competence is impossible without mastering sociocultural knowledge that is necessary not only as a means of communication with representatives of foreign language culture, but also as a means to enrich spiritual world of individual on the basis of knowledge about the culture of the country. Sociocultural knowledge includes aspects such as cultural, linguistic and regional studies, socio-psychological, sociolinguistic, linguistic, informational and communicational aspects. It is impossible to acquire knowledge of social and cultural life without them. Knowledge and experience of trainees' own and foreign language culture the ability to recognize and analyze the situation, to give it an adequate assessment, to find ways to solve problems and achieve goals is impossible without mastering these aspects.

The basis of our study was to conduct pedagogical experiment, which consisted of two steps: ascertaining and forming. As part of pedagogical experiment, we considered the whole complex of research methods both theoretical and empirical allowing providing evidence-based, scientific and objective validation of the hypothesis, which was stated at the beginning of the study. Experimental work was carried out on the basis of Kazan (Volga region) Federal University.

The experiment was conducted to study the problem of the formation of sociocultural knowledge in foreign language classes. During the experiment students performed design work involved in linguistic and regional study research in contact with their peers from Germany via

forums.

The objectives of pedagogical research were the following:

1) Identification of the level of sociocultural knowledge development of students in all seven aspects;

2) Verification of pedagogical conditions effectiveness in sociocultural knowledge formation as a necessary factor in the development of sociocultural competence of students in the foreign language classroom.

We formulated goals which determined the nature of specific tasks that need to be resolved during the development of experimental activity:

1) To identify the basic level of students sociocultural knowledge for further diagnostics;

2) To develop criteria for assessing the level of sociocultural knowledge development at foreign language classes.

The aim of ascertaining stage was to determine the initial level of knowledge of sociocultural competence of students.

During the forming stages analysis and processing of experimental data: comparison of the analytical material for purpose, objectives and research hypothesis, static processing of experimental results, final diagnosis of the level of development of sociocultural knowledge in foreign language classes, interpretation and presentation of analytical materials and conclusions were carried out.

To determine the level of trainees' sociocultural knowledge a special questionnaire was developed and survey was conducted among students of two groups: control and experimental. The questionnaire contained the following questions: 1) Do you consider it necessary to know the culture of other nations? 2) How young German trainees spend their free time? 3) What German dishes do you know? 4) Which German festivals do you know? 5) What holidays are popular among German youth? 6) Write down some facts from the history of modern Germany? 7) What can you say about the features of religions that practice in Germany? 8) Do you know anything in the areas of literature, music, art, theatre and cinema of Germany? 9) Do you know anything about education in Germany? 10) Which German sportsmen do you know? 11) What are the main features of German, Russian, Tatar origin people (your opinion)?

Such survey was carried out with students in the control and experimental groups before the experiment and after its completion. The establishing stage in our study was of particular importance, since the reliability of the results is largely dependent on the source data. One of the reasons for importance of ascertaining stage was the need to determine the confidence level of sociocultural knowledge, and hence the sociocultural competence.

100 students of Kazan Federal University took part in the experiment. 55 were in control group and 45 in experimental group. Diagnosis of basic level of sociocultural knowledge in the control and experimental groups was performed using a questionnaire containing open-ended questions. The evaluation criteria of sociocultural competence of students have been accepted as follows: very low, low, average, high, very high level of sociocultural competence. The same criteria were used in the diagnosis of the level of sociocultural competence development after completion of the experiment.

Students' answers to the questions showed that before the experiment, students had rather narrow idea about people, history, traditions and customs and cultures of other countries. This knowledge was based mainly on traditional, worldwide accepted representations.
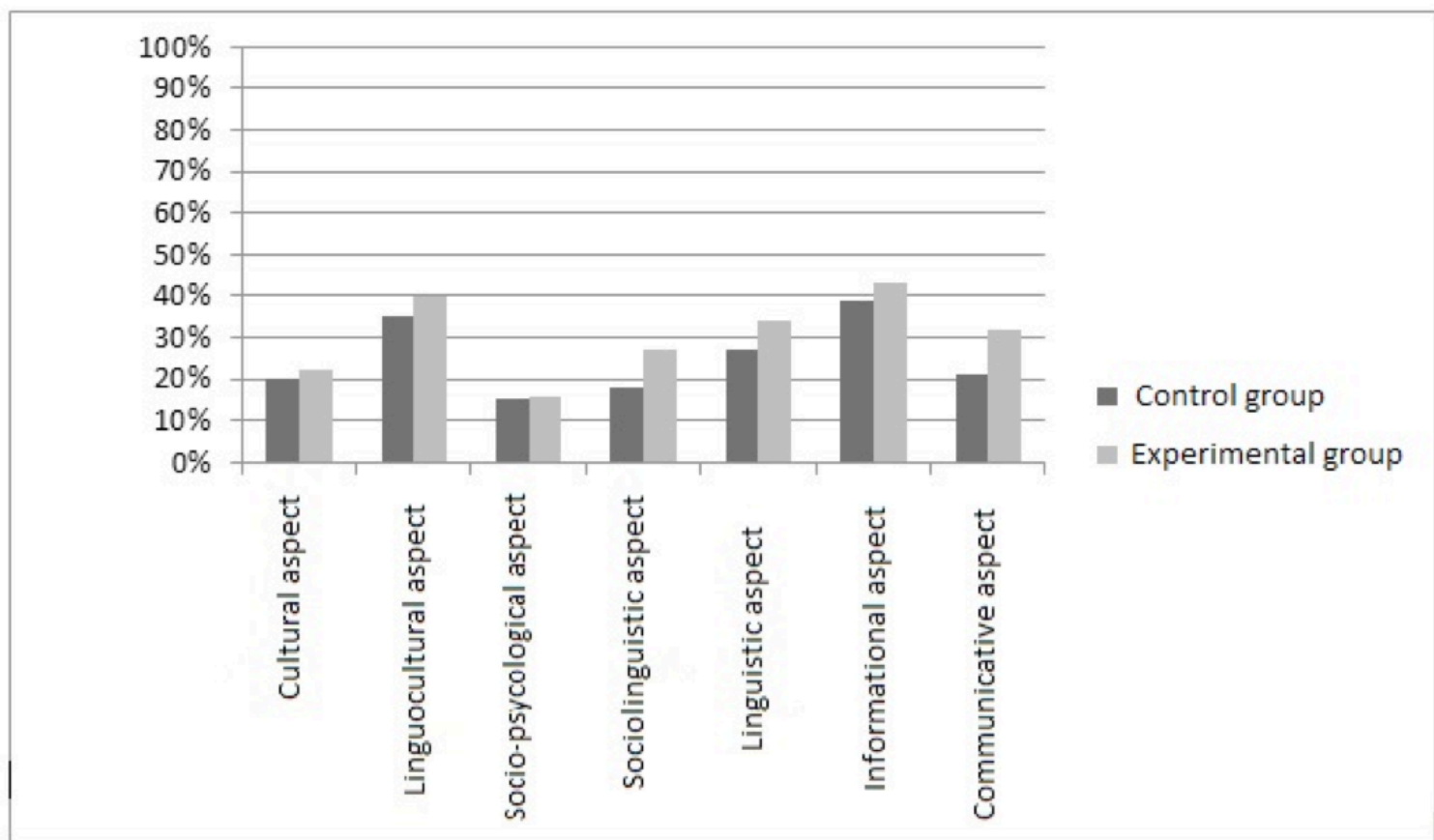
Fig. 1. The basic level of sociocultural knowledge at the beginning of experiment

It should be emphasized that the trainees showed a relatively low level of knowledge of culture and history of German traditions and customs. In general we assessed the basic level of sociocultural knowledge in control group, as very low, while in experimental group, the level of social competence corresponded to a low level (Fig. 1).

Test at the end of experiment showed a positive trend in control group. The level of sociocultural knowledge in control group changed from a very low and low to medium level. However it is primarily sociocultural knowledge which was obtained as a result of training and education.

In experimental group there was strongly pronounced trend to acquire sociocultural knowledge which contributes to enrichment of personality its creative and intellectual development mutual understanding among peoples, (Fig. 2).
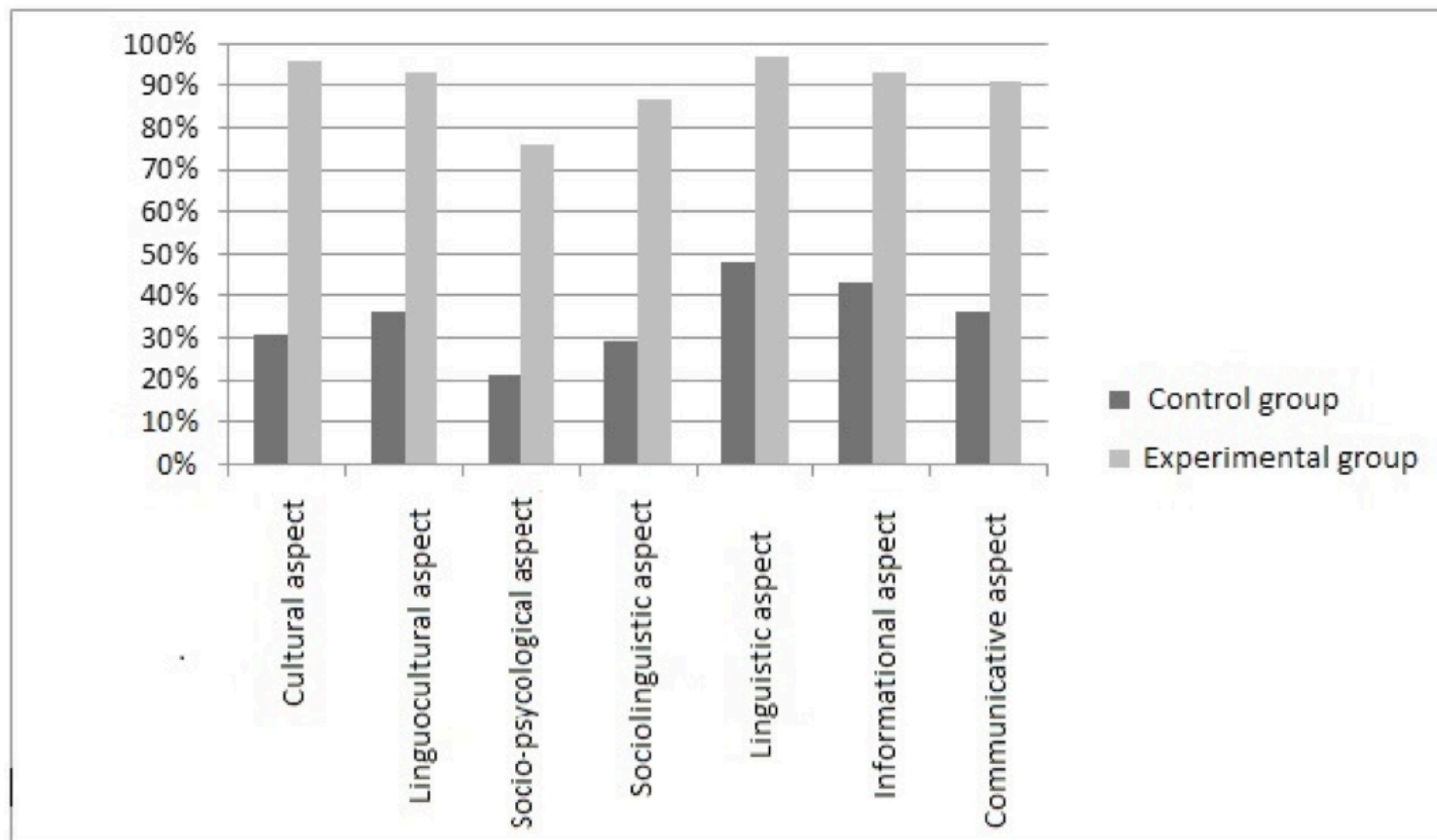
Fig. 2. The level of sociocultural knowledge at the end of experiment

4. Discussion

Thus, according to the sociocultural concept of learning a foreign language involves the study of individual and collective mentality of people, formation of system thinking, ability to percept two cultural dimensions simultaneously and combine linguistic and cultural facts in a single system of linguacultural phenomena. Each change in the structure of language reflects the emergence of new socially significant formations that affect the formation of the inner life of the people. When considering linguistic culture of time section it may be noted that specifics of modern language is largely determined by extralinguistic factors: socio-economic, political, historical state of the country, as well as linguistic, ethnic and religious composition of the territory.

That projection data of cultural and linguistic universals on foreign language learning system provides a new concept of social and cultural education, the most important element of which is the development of sociocultural competence.

The concept of "sociocultural competence" involves the ability to use specific information about nation, speech etiquette knowledge and communication technology in order to achieve mutual understanding with other culture bearers.

A condition of new concept of social and cultural education is to make additions to the content of language education. Filling the content of language course sociocultural component may serve as a means of motivation of trainees' foreign language speech activity and sociocultural development of their educational needs. Optimally organized process of foreign language teaching can prepare a person to adequate perception of other cultures, conscious attitude towards the existing stereotypes. It can help to develop its own line of behavior in different situations of intercultural contacts (Hofstede, 2001).

However in determining significance of sociocultural competence is appropriate to consider this concept in relation to communicative, linguistic, strategic and other competencies.

5. Conclusions

Formation of sociocultural competence can be achieved by learning not only the rules of

sentence structure and system of word, but by the principles of operation of ambiguous words and grammatical structures in real communicative situations. These communicants should be able to cope with potential difficulties by using verbal and non-verbal types of communication estimating emotional level and assessing interaction style, purpose and communication conditions. Thus, there is a certain trend to switch to predominantly structural aspects of language in its pragmatic aspects in the field of language teaching. You receive a new look at language as a means of gaining social communication skills. In other words, there appears a secondary objective of foreign language study - learning culture of the country of studied language.

However, we should highlight another important aspect of activities to promote a culture of interpersonal relations with representatives of foreign-language communities, namely, consideration of studied society from the perspective of the global multicultural situation. This means that experience of a real intercultural communication is a complex process of interaction between participants and representatives of linguistic and cultural diversity of a country. In our opinion the study of cultural diversity that exists within the framework of one nation should be an integral part of training program for intercultural communication. An idea of "political correctness", tolerance should become familiar for students so that they can warn mini-conflicts and ensure successful achievement of communicative goals without prejudice to the feelings and dignity of the interlocutors (Herbrand, 2002).

In summary, we can say that culture and intercultural communication problems should be presented in educational process as global education objectives. However the new concept of sociocultural education requires serious didactic thinking, choice of approach to learning a foreign language which can provide socialization of training foreign language communication and connection of communicative activity of students with cognitive research to the study of sociocultural portrait of native speakers.

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[Índice]

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